

## Philosophy and Theory

### Jon Erickson

A certain amount of what I say in the following is exaggerated for effect, but my experiences with the dynamics of theoretical fashion in academia that informs what I say is often less exaggerated than it would seem.

In a conventional sense, the words philosophy and theory are entirely compatible, from Plato's theory of forms down to John Rawls's theory of justice. But this is not what we're talking about when we refer to theory as synonym for "critical theory." Critical theory is an offshoot of Continental philosophy, starting with Hegel, radically reshaped by the suspicions of Marx and Nietzsche, abetted by the Freudian unconscious and removed from rational human will by the linguistic turn of structuralism and poststructuralism. In this process it can become a disavowal of its philosophical beginnings, at times even an attack on them, and ultimately a forgetting (as is the most widespread use of "theory" in humanistic disciplines that maintain only perfunctory and often antagonistic relations to philosophy or philosophy departments).

In terms of its philosophical origins, one could say that critical theory must go back to Kant for his development of a critical philosophy, that is, his concept of "critique," which in his sense meant a careful logical separation of the wheat from the chaff in any particular conception of the world or experience. After Marx and Nietzsche, "critique" seems to imply the demolition of that which stands in your way.<sup>1</sup> This may be a bit simplistic, but that's how the word seems to be used for the most part today. The purifying or refining concept of critique may still be operative in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but it practically refines Enlightenment reason out of existence, conflating it with myth, and giving rise, along with Foucault, to a simplistic anti-Enlightenment position prevalent in theory today. (Presumably Foucault made a "return" to Kant, as did Derrida and Lyotard—although in each case whether it is a reconsideration or a travesty needs to be examined carefully).<sup>2</sup>

A further attack of theory on philosophical reason came with Derrida's attack on "logocentrism" which appeared to claim that logic was always undermined by the implicit rhetoricity of its terms. Despite the fact that Derrida's argument had to be a logical one to be convincing, and that his own position in this regard is not unequivocal, people in the humanities rejoiced in the sense of mastery they could now have over their competitors in philosophy and the social sciences. Everything became ideology-oriented rhetorical analysis of the logical arguments of the

sciences, human and natural, and the bad old Sophists were revived over the now bad old Plato and Socrates. No one had to be worried about logic anymore—especially since “logocentrism” (“linearity” in argument, etc.) was typified as patriarchal oppression—but need only be suspicious about everything, and name the enemy where he be found (which was everywhere, of course). The persuasive force of logical argument became equated, through association with rhetorical regimes, with force *per se*, and the ad hominem guilt-by-association nature of identity politics was affirmed by this process.

Philosophy has always reflected upon limits: the conditions of possibility for cognition, reason, judgment (Kant) as well as the limits of our experience and understanding. The phrase “one must be philosophical about it” represents just this knowing acceptance of finitude, a modesty and graciousness to adapt to what, *to our understanding*, cannot be changed, while recognizing and acting upon, along the lines of moral consistency, what *must* be changed (reflecting the history of moral and political philosophy). Theory often appears to refuse these limits, wanting to believe that *all* of human existence and even the unconscious structures of one’s own beliefs can be changed if the right material mode of analysis and method of application can be found. (This has given rise to the erroneous notion within some Marxist theory that there is no such thing as “human nature,” a position, according to Norman Geras, Marx himself never held). Hence theory really begins with Marx’s Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach: “Philosophy has only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.”

The presumption of many contemporary political academics is that to interpret the world in the right way *is* to change it. This may not be so far off, but it depends upon your overestimation of what academic discourse can do (in relation to the level of mass-cultural discourse of the media)—especially the rather phantasmatic appropriations of speech-act theory that are current. On the most mediated level, the world is changed by interpretations that gain mass appeal. Which is why the theatre, taken in its broadest sense, from resistant small performance in oppressive countries, to independent filmmaking to performance actions on the world wide web, can be seen as a locus for this question. The *nature* of the interpretation of the world, however, is another matter, for that is where the distinction between philosophy and theory returns. For theory will draw from philosophy (as Marx did from Hegel, or Foucault from Nietzsche) for its methodological and epistemological basis, but it must simplify it for common understanding in order to make it pragmatically and politically useful. The less capable it is of putting into comprehensible everyday language, the less useful it is politically: starkly evident in the contrast between the arcane locutions of poststructuralist political discourse and the ordinary language of Anglo-American political philosophy. In the process of refinement there is the danger of losing philosophy’s sense of conceptual limits regarding the things made pragmatic. While much overly-refined

analysis has been made of Brecht's analytical method in the theatre (irrespective of real audiences), few ever comment on his notion of *Plumpedenken*, or "crude thinking," which he understands is necessary for political provocation; anything more refined would seem to work against the spectator's capacity for willed action through an inevitable process of aestheticization of complexity. At the same time the danger is that too crude a form of thinking can reduce the work to mere propaganda, in which critical thinking wouldn't have much of a role for either performers or spectators.

Marx's dichotomy between interpreting and changing, of course, depends upon his own interpretation of change. That is, his replacement of implacably eternally repeating Nature with History, but also turning History into a kind of progressive Nature (his own self-identification with Darwin in this regard ironically makes him the first "Social Darwinist"! ). This is the basis of so called "scientific Marxism" or historical materialism (which Brecht adhered to until the end, despite critical desires to turn him into a postmodernist). This is in contrast to Western "critical Marxism," such as that of the Frankfurt School, which rejected such teleological, if not eschatological views of history (see Alvin Gouldner, *The Two Marxisms*).<sup>3</sup> But such a rejection instigated a deep crisis in Marxist views of social history and revolution, and various compromise positions have tried to patch up this rift (such as Benjamin's concept of a "weak Messianic force"). Despite this conceptual crisis, whereby it is not really clear anymore what anyone in critical theory really means by "history" once it is seen as merely a chaotic concatenation of discontinuities, the consideration of historical contexts in their relative specificity has been a useful tool in critical theory's critique of philosophical discursive norms understood as universal and metaphysical. Thus one can always place philosophical theories within the material determinants of their historical context, (although it is highly presumptuous to believe one can reduce the theories to those determinants). But the irony is that in order to begin to "historicize" philosophy, one has to have a philosophy of history to start with. Which only demonstrates that you can historicize everything except the bases of your own thinking. Thus any "historicization" by theory is no defeat of philosophy, or even metaphysics, which is where we always start.

I find it unfortunate that critical theory as it is generally applied to performance and cultural issues so often follows its own unreflected-upon rhetorical patterns and dogmatic appeals to authorities who everyone simply agrees with—the magic of invoking a relatively small number of the right names interminably repeated, with minor variations. I am sometimes tempted to say that the difference between philosophers and theorists is that philosophers make arguments, while theorists make assertions and call them arguments. (Mainly because no one requires them to make arguments, and now "performative writing" actually encourages the evasion of arguments). This is best seen in bad writing when someone says, "I am going to

argue that—”, or “I am arguing that—” followed by his or her assertion, with no further demonstration forthcoming: *saying* you are arguing is a substitute for actual argument. When this happens, and especially in conference environments and publishing series, where the political line is predictable, arguments are replaced by interestingly-framed pieties, and suddenly we’re in church. This is no more apparent than in titles like “Towards a Materialist Critique of . . .” Just the invocation of the term “materialist” inspires a kind of moralistic fervor, despite its political rejection of moral discourse. In fact I find that a theory that simply dismisses all moral questions as mere effects of political or ideological structures ends up expressing itself moralistically.<sup>4</sup> And I’m always wondering who this materialist critique is aimed at: is its audience supposed to be idealists to be converted? fundamentalists? Where does one find an idealist in academia today? Who *isn’t* a materialist? (besides myself—but I stand philosophically opposed to the binary no one wants to deconstruct: idealism/materialism). The audience is the already converted, and the argument is always “more anti-essentialist than thou,” so the moralism of the more complex of materialist critiques is the doctrinal one of weeding out the less antimetaphysically committed, as well as advancing oneself careerwise (is *this* a materialist analysis?). Despite this tone that accompanies theorists’ demands for a rigorous “materialist analysis of (fill in the blank),” materialism *in and of itself* cannot be the basis of any moral judgments or the moral basis of any politics whatsoever. Clearly some materialist *methods* give us a clearer sense of context from which we draw our evidence for judgments, but it does nothing to specify why our judgments should be one way or another. And this is a philosophical issue. Let me be clear: none of this is to deny the value, especially in regard to our analysis of the past, of materialist methods, which I myself have engaged, and are essential to the study of history. It is rather to ask: is the method being put to use because, in a given context, it can be pragmatically beneficial to human lives, or is it being used primarily to prove (actually: to assert) that something called “materialism” (and my version of it) is the only necessary and true approach to reality? I tend to think that the latter is the main concern in much theory today, even as it attempts to use demonstrations of the former to that end. In that sense it is less a *critical* theory than the refinement of a dogma disguised as one. Perhaps this signals the real difference: a critical philosophy is always ready to question its own assumptions: a critical theory is always ready to question everyone else’s.

What does philosophy or theory have to do with theatre or performance? Over the centuries, the idea of a *theatrum mundi* has informed not only western but some eastern conceptions of human existence. In the twentieth century a number of important sociologists, ethnologists, psychologists have found theatricality an important model for understanding human behavior in a wide variety of cultural contexts. But if we were to go back and consider the relation of Western theatre to its Greek beginnings, we could see where it might also fall between philosophy

and theory.

If we make once more the connection between contemporary forms of theory and sophism (as *techné*, as the intellectual means to change the world through rhetoric) we know that sophism's rhetorical style and innovation of dialectics indeed had a large impact on the theatre, especially that of Euripides. On the other hand, insofar as tragedy is a cogitation on the limits of human rationality and will, and the social and personal dilemmas that arise therefrom, it is philosophical, especially in refusing to pretend to see any particular *techné* as adequate to all human situations.

There is also another strain within theatre that reflects its philosophical beginnings as well, but also that carries within it the seeds of its own antitheatrical impulse, all the way up to Brecht, and that is a kind of irreducible Platonism of mimetic effects, both too real for some and not real enough for others. This remains with us despite all the various attempts to circumvent them practically or explain them away theoretically.

The following are some arguments and problems bequeathed to us by the Greeks and their theatres (of Dionysos, of politics, of philosophy) that remain embedded—whether acknowledged or not—in our own discourses: political, moral, or theatrical:

- the tension between Being and Non-Being
- the tension between Being and Becoming
- the tension between the One and the Many
- the relation of and conflict between rhetorical effect and logical truth
- the relation or tensions between monologue and dialogue
- the question of mimesis and the real
- the relation and conflict between the passions and reason
- the question of self-knowledge and its limits with regard to will or agency

So as not to appear entirely eurocentric in this, but with less confidence, I can point to philosophical questions worth considering from the East:

- in Madhyamika Buddhism, the tetralemma of Nagarjuna, which makes the Western dialectic of Being and Non-Being, the real and unreal, look like child's play. Frame indeterminacy surpassing Pirandello.<sup>5</sup>
- in the Hindu scriptures, the very theatrical question of appearance and reality tied to the question of the One and the Many.
- in Zen Buddhism the relation between desire (craving), illusion

and suffering, evident in the expressions of the Noh theatre.

While it is no doubt clear that my preferences in this question, whose formative split may be problematic, is largely with philosophy, I also believe that a critical theory or more exactly, theories, are practical necessities in working toward social justice and the improvement of human life in society. Theories in this sense are the tools of certain philosophical positions, and are legitimated by them. Theories that try to disavow this practical relationship and attempt to escape it and make their own strategic formulations into an end-in-itself lose their own legitimating power provided by their philosophical grounds, and their key terms begin to ring hollow. (So my above criticisms of how I see “theory” being deployed today is not an attack on theory per se). As Gregory Vlastos put it in commenting on Democritus’s ethics: “‘Wisdom’ is the understanding of what is possible within the limits of what is necessary.” Theory will always remain naive and disaster-bound insofar as it is philosophically deficient (that is, having some understanding about what its limits are: both as conditions of possibility and what it cannot change). Philosophy, even if it calls itself moral philosophy, will always remain moribund and acquiescent insofar as it never leads to practical theoretical solutions—however provisional—that alter the nature of reality insofar as it can and should be altered.

## Notes

1. Nietzsche makes this entirely negative use of the term clear in *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* when he denotes “critical history” as “dragging [the past] to the bar of judgement, interrogating it meticulously and finally condemning it” (trans. Peter Preuss, Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett, 1980, 21).

2. See Christopher Norris’ critique of Foucault’s and Lyotard’s use of Kant, and his defense of Derrida’s use in *The Truth About Postmodernism*.

3. Alvin Gouldner, *The Two Marxisms: Contradictions and Anomalies in the Development of Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1980).

4. See Steven Lukes, *Marxism and Morality*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985).

5. “Everything is real and is not real./ Both real and not real./ Neither real nor not real./ This is Lord Buddha’s teaching.” *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna’s Mulamadhyamakakarika*, trans. Jay L. Garfield. New York, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995) 250.