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A REVIEW OF SIMON CRITCHLEY'S *INFINITELY DEMANDING:  
ETHICS OF COMMITMENT, POLITICS OF RESISTANCE*

A Review of Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*. London: Verso, 2007. viii + 168 pp. \$ 26.95 (cloth); \$ 16.95 (paper). ISBN: 9781844671212.

Critchley orients his treatment of ethics in a way that is fresh and largely avoids academic sterility. He writes, "What is required...is a conception of ethics that begins by accepting the motivational deficit in the institutions of liberal democracy, but without embracing either passive or active nihilism." He continues, "How does a self bind itself to whatever it determines as its good? In my view, this is the fundamental question of ethics" (8). Unpacking these statements is the focus of the book.

Critchley begins his exploration of these matters by describing philosophical activity as "the free movement of thought and critical reflection...defined by militant resistance to nihilism. That is, philosophy is defined by the thinking through of the fact that the basis of meaning has become meaningless" (2). Entailed by this meaninglessness and what Critchley describes as the fundamental question of ethics is the issue of moral motivation: How/why do we behave morally? For Critchley, this relates back to his description that "philosophy begins in disappointment" (1) and as resistance to nihilism. Nihilism is a source of such disappointment in that it "is the breakdown of the order of meaning, where all that we previously imagined as a divine, transcendent basis for moral valuation has become meaningless. Nihilism is this declaration of meaninglessness..." (2). Critchley breaks this down into "passive nihilism" which is scorn for "the pretensions of liberal humanism with its metaphysical faith in progress..." The passive nihilist

focuses on himself and his particular pleasures and projects for perfecting himself, whether through discovering the inner child, manipulating pyramids, writing pessimistic-sounding literary essays...In a world that is all too rapidly blowing itself to pieces, the passive nihilist closes his eyes and makes himself into an island (4-5).

Critchley then characterizes the active nihilist as also finding "everything meaningless, but instead of sitting back and contemplating, he tries to destroy this world and bring another into being" (5). Critchley then cites al-Qaeda as "the quintessence of active nihilism" (5). Critchley rejects passive and active nihilism, but suggests

that each of them expresses a deep truth; namely, their identification of a motivational deficit at the heart of liberal democracy...In the drift of this deficit, we experience the moral claims of our societies as externally compulsory, but not internally compelling...What we need to start thinking about in order to begin to make up that deficit is a motivating theory of the ethical subject...an ethical subject is the name for the way in which a self binds itself to some conception of the good...At the core of ethical subjectivity is a theory of what I call ethical experience, which is based in two concepts: approval and demand. My basic claim is that ethical experience begins with the approval of a demand, a demand that demands approval (39).

Treating the matter of moral motivation, we could view the history of ethics on this matter as varying schools of thought regarding how we respond to what each school held to be the highest good. To this end, Critchley offers a very compelling summary of *Summum Bonum* in the history of ethics (39-40).

Further placing his work within historical context, Critchley cites the influences on his overall argument. From Alain Badiou, Critchley draws the idea that the subject commits "itself in fidelity to the universality of a demand that opens in a singular situation but which exceeds that situation" (40). He adds that "Badiou's ethics goes some way to making up on the motivational deficit in morality discussed above" (49). From the 20<sup>th</sup> century Danish theologian Knud Ejler Logstrup, Critchley draws the idea that the relation between the ethical subject and the demand placed on it is asymmetrical. From Emmanuel Levinas, Critchley draws the idea that this asymmetry gives rise to a split in the ethical subject (40). Critchley draws from psychoanalytic theory to be critical of Levinas in two important regards. First, Critchley writes, "using Freudian categories to offer a reconstruction of Levinas's work as a theory of the subject minimizes some of the metaphysical residua and religious pietism present in Levinas's texts...", and second, "Levinas risks producing an ethics without sublimation, which risks being disastrously self-destructive to the subject" (67). From these three authors Critchley synthesizes a conception of the ethical subject: the subject "is constitutively *split* between itself and a demand that it cannot meet, but which is that by virtue of which it becomes a subject. The ethical subject is a split subject" (pp. 62-63). This, combined with Critchley's normative claim that "the basis of any ethics should be a conception of ethical experience based on the exorbitant demand of infinite responsibility" (40), brings us closer to his fully developed argument as follows. He writes, "there should be a conception of ethical experience at the heart of morality based on the exorbitant demand of infinite responsibility...this unfulfillable demand of which I approve is that in relation to which the ethical subject should form itself"; the final step in the argument is expressed in Critchley's goal to undertake "the passage from ethics to politics, or, more precisely, from an ethics of infinitely demanding commitment to a politics of resistance" (69).

Before assessing Critchley's presentation of his argument, I offer some general observations about Critchley's book. He provides insightful commentary on how various luminaries within the history of moral philosophy such as Kant, Rawls, Onora O'Neill, Christine Korsgaard, Fichte, Hegel, Marx and Heidegger have weighed in on the matter of ethical motivation. For this reviewer, *Infinitely Demanding* was worth reading for this portion alone. Also, I found chapter four to contain especially good Marx commentary. Additionally, the chapter summaries Critchley provides throughout the book show consistent regard for the reader often absent in many of the authors he cites.

More specifically, this book deserves our attention for Critchley's willingness to tackle thorny issues associated with ethical action. He provides the following recommendation for how ethics should be approached: "[E]thical experience furnishes an account of the motivational force to act morally, of that by virtue of which a self decides to pledge itself to some conception of the good" (9). In contrast, I have witnessed the disillusionment many students experience when ethics is treated with the academic sterility Critchley describes. "[W]ithout a plausible account of motivational force, that is, without a conception of the ethical subject, moral reflection is reduced to the empty manipulation of the standard justificatory frameworks: deontology, utilitarianism and virtue ethics" (9). Students often complain that despite learning all of these various ethical schools of thought, they still feel paralyzed regarding what they ought to do. Because of this paralysis, I find Critchley's approach to moral motivation very promising. He writes, "without the experience of a demand to which I am prepared to bind myself, to commit myself, the whole business of morality would either not get started or would be a mere manipulation of empty formulae" (23), that is, the kind of empty formulae that might be associated with the standard schools of ethical thought.

Critchley invigorates the discussion of what we ought to do in a number of ways. For example, Critchley cites Francis Hutcheson's

useful distinction between *justifying reasons* and *exciting reasons*...For Hutcheson, and for the tradition of moral sense theory that he inspires, namely Adam Smith and Hume, but also Rousseau and Schopenhauer, there can be no account of exciting reasons, and hence no motivating moral theory, without a theory of moral sentiments, affections or passions. (24)

Putting a finer point on this, Critchley raises the compelling question: "can ethics be both generalizable and subjectively felt...?" (25). This is a compelling way of putting Critchley's concern since generalizability implies the normative force associated with ethics and being subjectively felt speaks to the issue of moral motivation. Critchley thus explores the matter of conceiving of an ethical sensibility that provides both normative force that can be generalized and the motivation for individuals to act with an eye toward addressing the motivational deficit he has diagnosed. Pursuing the issue of the motivational deficit in morality, Critchley explores the relation of ethics to politics with the following

adaptation of Kant's famous dictum from the first *Critique*: "ethics without politics is empty...politics without ethics is blind...My view is that we need ethics in order to see what to do in a political situation" (120). More specifically, Critchley relates ethics and politics as follows: "Democratization is a dissensual praxis that works against the consensual horizon of the state... the final claim I would like to make is that democratization is action based on an ethical demand" (119). This effort to connect ethics to politics, though, is where Critchley loses me. This characterization of democratization is representative of the way ideas are presented throughout the book. It contains unjustified idiosyncratic use of terms and unsubstantiated (seemingly empirical) claims.

On the matter of the idiosyncratic use of terms, recall Critchley's assertion that philosophy begins as a reaction to disappointment. It does? Not once have I witnessed such a characterization. Without an explanation for such a novel use of a well-established term, Critchley's employment of his conception of the term is distracting to the reader. Critchley offers a revised, qualified version of his view that philosophy begins with disappointment that is an improvement. He writes, "philosophy, modern post-Kantian philosophy, begins not in an experience of wonder at what is, but from an experience of failure and lack" (38). I see this description of philosophy as an improvement because it is qualified and is situated within the context of Kant's proscription concerning the limits of reason. Though this description of philosophy strikes me as an improvement, "philosophy" is still among the term Critchley uses idiosyncratically. "Nihilism" is another. That he cites al-Qaeda as quintessential active nihilists exemplifies why his idiosyncratic use of terms is problematic. Osama bin Laden does not promote or espouse belief in nothing. He definitely believes in something. That is not nihilism. I don't see how the discourse is furthered by this move. Add "subjectivity" to the list of terms he uses idiosyncratically. His association of subjectivity with an ethical demand is plainly external to the self and thus it is not subjective. Anticipating the move that we are deluded if we think there is a natural, neutral, non-subjective way to employ terminology, I counter that it is not as though using terms in a way that is not idiosyncratic requires metaphysical assertions. To see how these terms are used in a non-idiosyncratic way all we have to do is to look at their use; there is nothing "Platonic" nor subjective (in the strict sense) about this. It is not as though Critchley is indifferent to using terms carefully or precisely, as he offers a thoughtful corrective to the use of the term "communism" (118).

The idiosyncratic use of terms is symptomatic of a larger issue, though, and speaks to the broader theoretical significance of this work. Admirably, a component of Critchley's broader intellectual project is to transcend the differences associated with Continental and Anglo-American analytic philosophy. An attraction of the former style is the willingness to take on issues that the latter might hold as meaningless (e.g., that of moral motivation which Critchley handles deftly). An attraction of the latter style is the concern for transparency of argumentation. That is, when a claim is made, warrant is brought to bear to justify that claim such that the conclusion is sound if the premises are true and the inferences are valid. Though often softened with the

qualification “in my view,” Critchley routinely makes assertions and there is no such argument to support the assertion. In the absence of (transparent) argumentation, why should we accept his view except that he has a platform with which to express it? The same concern arises in his use of other authors: that an author has merely expressed an idea, without having argued for it, evidently should be enough to satisfy the reader! This combined with idiosyncratic use of terms taxed my patience as a reader and, more substantively, undermines Critchley’s larger purpose.

I genuinely believe that Critchley’s desire to articulate a theory of ethics that can “face and face down” the hard realities of our times, which include the brute exercise of hegemonic force on the part of actors on the world stage, is admirable and that the book is important for this effort. However, without accessible (and assessable) arguments to support the assertions he makes (and the assertions of others whom he cites) this book is also an exercise in hegemony. Absent these arguments we have no reason to believe his assertions except that he has the power and authority to make them. Granted, authors who try to provide transparent reasoning are also exercising power, maybe even more subtly since it is naturalized under the guise of a neutral logic. Fair enough, but when I disagree with such authors I am able to locate the source of disagreement (e.g., we might disagree over whether a particular inference is valid). However, when I am left with saying something like, “I find your usage of ‘nihilism’ dissatisfying” I feel that my own scholarship suffers thereby. Moreover, the general discourse is not enriched.

Perhaps my criticisms regarding his idiosyncratic use of terms can be dismissed as a matter of taste. However, there are other terms that I argue he simply uses improperly. Specifically, these are terms that presume that conveying knowledge is what is in play. In fact, though, these terms mask that Critchley is rather asserting conjectures. The three terms I will focus on are theory, argument, and hypothesis. The following is a representative passage that includes such a presumably veridical term. Critchley writes, “The central philosophical task in my approach to ethics is developing a *theory* (my emphasis) of ethical subjectivity. A subject is the name for the way in which a self binds itself to some conception of the good and shapes its subjectivity in relation to that good” (10). Rather than saying “developing a theory...” something more along the lines of “exhorting readers to consider a certain description...” seems to convey Critchley’s meaning here more accurately.<sup>1</sup> On “argument,” Critchley writes,

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<sup>1</sup> Denis Dutton states his problem with profligate use of words like theory better than I could, so I will just cite him: “The humanities have gone through the rise of Theory in the 1960s...Of course, Theory never operated as a proper research program in any scientific sense – with hypotheses validated or falsified by experiment or accrued evidence. Theory [is] a series of intellectual fashion statements, clever slogans, and postures, imported from France in the 1960s...The academic work that Theory spawned [is] noted more for its chosen jargons, which functioned like secret codes, than for any concern to establish truth or advance knowledge” *What Is Your Dangerous Idea?* John Brockman, ed. New York: Harper, 2007, p. 55).

Ethical argument is neither like logic, which is deductively true, nor science, which is inductively true. There is a point at which the rationality of moral argumentation gives way to moral recommendation, even exhortation, an appeal to the individual reader from an individual writer (10).

Critchley and I must disagree regarding what constitutes philosophical (which includes ethical) argument. For me, such argument consists of premises (which are either true or false) and inferences (which are either valid or invalid) which lead to a conclusion which entails either the soundness or unsoundness of the overall argument. For Critchley, an argument seems to consist in showing how his assertions and notions (his word) connect to the relevant scholarly literature. That is, that an established author has said something seems to constitute its warrant. Fair enough, situating oneself with the intellectual landscape is good scholarly practice. However, an irony arises. For all his concern for “true democracy” (cf. especially Chapter four), what could be less democratic than deriving warrant for one’s claims from authors who are largely inaccessible to most people? The terms “argue,” “theory” and “hypothesis” appear throughout the book. Though I understand the desire to use terms that give one’s work the appearance of veridicality, his use of these terms makes the conjectural nature of the book stand out even more. Consider the following passage:

The hypothesis here is that there is a motivational deficit at the heart of secular liberal democracy and that what unites active and passive nihilists is a metaphysical or theological critique of secular democracy, whether, in terms of a Jihadist or Christian fundamentalist activism or a Buddhistic passivity (pp. 7-8).

As stated, the warrant for this statement would need to be empirical (e.g., data regarding what active and passive nihilists have in common). Clearly, Critchley is not undertaking empirical work (nor need he; good analytical or normative ethical work can be done via sound argumentation). What I am calling attention to here is that we could substitute the word “hypothesis” with a word that does not have the epistemic baggage (nor credentials), such as “assumption,” “guess” or “surmise,” etc. and it would make Critchley’s sentence ring even more true. That he (mis)appropriates this kind of terminology throughout the book merely highlights the lack of warrant for his claims.

This book is a discussion of an author’s thoughts and impressions about an important topic: the question of moral motivation. That he grounds this discussion in the extant literature does not add to the warrant for these thoughts and impressions. If one is not already convinced by the work of, e.g., Lacan, Critchley offers nothing by way of an effort to bring the reader into the fold. Whatever the merits of this reviewer’s concerns, Critchley illuminates a pressing, and historically vexing, ethical question and thus has set the agenda for future discussion of these matters. *Infinitely Demanding* is a well worth reading for his treatment of these issues alone.

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