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Critical Cross-Tradition Theorizing: Analytic and Continental Philosophy as Components of Social Critique

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Just when I was about to start writing this review, my Facebook feed told me that

analytic philosophy is an attempt to construct a building that others can see, use and live in. Continental philosophers are like hobos who wander the city looking for things they might be able to steal or break into. [...] Continental philosophy is like a graffiti. It's a form of communication, but not one that has any use to the law-abiding public.

This wonderful wisdom was created by an AI and shared and cherished by my virtual philosophical community. The great divide between analytic and continental philosophy and political theory is everywhere, structuring philosophical thinking and its materialization in departments and hirings so thoroughly that it is even a matter of such digital folklore. It creates boundaries and blockages that prevent the full potential of political theory to unbind. Jeremy Arnold's project, to overcome this divide, is a timely and necessary one.

Arnold calls his proposition to overcome the great divide 'aporetic cross-tradition theorizing' (17). Cross-tradition theorizing is necessary, according to Arnold, because political phenomena are 'dense' (14) and complex, and therefore cannot be captured by either the analytic or the continental tradition alone. Furthermore, both traditions respond to different pressing political and theoretical needs: the need for normative justification of the (very real and dangerous) coercive power of political institutions in analytic theory, and the need for radical critique of 'the contingent, historical, constructed, reified, and thus often ideological character of our political worlds' in (critical) continental theory, hand in hand with demanding 'a different, often radically different, political life' (16). To engage in tradition crossing in an aporetic rather than a synthetic mode follows from the assumptions that the phenomena are *so* dense, that they cannot be captured in a single theory that combines the strengths of both traditions, and that the different needs 'truly are incompatible' (17). In fact, according to Arnold, the dense phenomena of political theory, such as state violence, freedom, and justice, cannot be theorized sufficiently at all: there is only productive failure, on both sides, analytic and continental, and theorists can only 'muddle through, drawing on as many traditions as we can', ultimately fail, but maybe get a somewhat 'deeper understanding of dense political phenomena' (170). To 'simply let the difficulty remain' (174) and "fail better" is the motto of aporetic cross-tradition theorizing' (178), as this difficulty, that arises when we analyze multi-perspectively, is the 'truth' of dense phenomena (174).

This is a praiseworthy stoic and realist position. After all, it is true that there is no universal theory of the dense phenomena of our political world, and none to expect. As an appeal to an 'ethic of responsiveness and openness' (179) in scholarship, pointing out the failures of intra-tradition thinking, academic monocultures and *Fachidiotismus* ('craft-idiocy', in

Marx's words) is important. The question, however, is whether this aporetic approach is the most productive way to maneuver through the great divide. I have my doubts, as 'failing better' might be achieved better by a modified, that is, explicitly critical synthetic approach that combines continental and analytic questions and methods. To make this claim I will first criticize the approach Arnold takes in *Across the Great Divide*, namely to perform aporetic cross-tradition theorizing by discussing a number of authors. This takes up most of the book, besides the introductory and concluding remarks. In fact, the book is less a theoretical construction of the meta-theoretical position than a performance of its practice. Second, I will sketch my proposal for critical synthetic cross-tradition theorizing.

Arnold acknowledges that the aporetic approach 'doesn't itself teach us something new about' (21) the dense political phenomena, but only sheds light on the density to support the ethical demand of openness. While this is true, the limitation is due to Arnold's practice of aporetic theorizing, and not inherent to cross-tradition theorizing. There are three main issues here.

- (1) The choice of approaches – Political Realism, Cavell, Pettit, Arendt, Rawls, and Derrida – is questionable. To argue that the synthetic mode is bound to fail by discussing problems of specific approaches is a problematic induction in itself, but to do that without acknowledging the synthetic theorizing in contemporary critical theory in both the continental and the analytic tradition makes that claim even less plausible. Without a discussion of thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas (1996), Axel Honneth (2013), or, from the analytic side, Miranda Fricker (2007), and Sally Haslanger (2012), the synthetic approach should not be dismissed.
- (2) The mission to present theoretical failures – the failures of the synthetic approaches arguing for the dismissal of synthetic theorizing (27–75), and the failures of the individual components of aporetic theorizing, to show the need to aporetically alternate between the traditions (76–170) – commits Arnold to an unproductive reading strategy. The book is a performance of a hermeneutics of defeat. Each chapter ends with why the approach in question fails, instead of what we can productively learn from it. For example, the discussion of the realist's attempt to justify state violence is bound to fail, as Arnold starts with the 'Hobbesian Principle' that 'no justification of the violence of the state to the actual or potential object of that violence must succeed' (43). If that is the premise, the failure is unavoidable. A more nuanced discussion could follow from engaging with the lineage of Rousseau-Kant-Habermas, which allows a conceptual difference between the role of the individual *bourgeois* and the reasonable *citoyen*.
- (3) The two arguments for the aporetic approach, namely that freedom and justice are inherently contradictory, implicitly rely on a problematic method that stems from the analytic tradition: conceptual reduction to create clear logical relations. Claiming that freedom 'cannot require control and not require control' (78) is a remarkable simplification of Pettit and Arendt. Searching for their contradiction in this way prevents analyzing, for example, how they could be read together to ask how specific forms of control might make non-hegemonic spontaneity possible. 'We cannot dispense with metaphysics, nor can we rely on it' (170) is the conclusion of the chapter about Rawls and Derrida on justice. The insightful discussion of the two authors could be fruitfully connected to the contemporary debate on

post-foundationalism (Marchart 2018) that is making this claim systematically, but as a simple contradiction between the aporetic traditions, it does not add to our understanding of the contemporary political world.

In conclusion, the aporetic approach leads to an additive reading technique, pointing out the failures of the individual approaches one after the other, without connecting them in a theoretical learning process – or *Aufhebung*, if you like Hegel – that would allow us to develop better theorizing. While I agree that the world is too dense to arrive at one master theory, we should still aim to develop better theories, and critical synthetic cross-tradition theorizing is a promising way to go.

Arnold is right to differentiate the two goals of the analytic and continental traditions: legitimization and critique. Critical synthetic theorizing means that critique should come first. We need to take the critique of the ideological effects of legitimization projects seriously. As Arnold himself points out, the social function of normative justifications is often to justify the status quo, and with it, albeit mostly implicitly, the current systems of power – capitalist exploitation, gender normalization, and racial privilege, to just name some of the pressing problems of contemporary political thought. If we agree with Arnold, as I do, that despite these problems, normative questions of justification are relevant, we should start from the most radical critiques of justificatory projects and work our way up to the reconstruction of normative ideas. To engage in plausible normative (analytic) theory today, it is necessary to shift the starting position and construct it from the most radically critical (continental) thought. Only this reduction to power helps to construct the normative approach as robustly non-ideological as possible. Following this theoretical commitment, I developed a new normative concept of freedom from the works of the most radical critic of normative theories of freedom: Foucault (Schubert 2018, 2021). Foucauldian analysis shows that the traditional approaches of negative, positive, and social freedom fail, as they have no understanding of subjectification, the subject's constitution through power. A radical theory of freedom thus asks how we can understand freedom in Foucault's framework of power and subjectification. Asking this normative question in an analytic, that is, systematic way that aims at conceptual clarity shows how productive critical synthetic cross-tradition theorizing is, as new insights are generated. Freedom should be understood as the capacity to critically reflect one's own subjectification, which can be the result of critical subjectification in political institutions. Institutions should be set up to foster this continuous critique of social power. This approach helps to draw out the consequences of Foucault's thinking on freedom for the analytic-normative project of democratic theory: freedom as critique is the last universalism possible after the continental critiques of universalistic thinking (Schubert 2021). And it allows seeing that a normative approach to state power and institutions lies already *within* the continental tradition.

Despite my interest in answering justificatory questions in ever more theoretically elegant ways, this need seems less pressing to me than to Arnold. He argues that the justificatory project answers to the immediate need to justify state violence to a prisoner (22) and therefore has direct political consequences. However, this seems to miss the social function of justificatory practices, as even the most convincing justification will not ease the sorrows of the individual prisoner. Arnold is right, though, that violence is key.

Political theory needs to understand and criticize hegemonic structures of power and state violence, especially the post-slavery regime of racial exploitation upheld by police brutality and murders. The main need political theory should answer is critique. By developing

theoretical means for social criticism, political theory can and should contribute to processes of social transformation, and the resources for this mainly lie in the critical approaches of the continental tradition. While many continental approaches do this job pretty well without import from the analytic side – for example, Critical Race Theory – and some even rely on a certain opaqueness that generates the critical effect – such as genealogical critique (Saar 2008) – there are merits in cross-tradition theorizing for the critical project. The systematic method of analytic reasoning helps to make critical thought more intelligible and to reflect on its normative foundations. Many works in contemporary critical theory and social critique implicitly or explicitly rely on logical clarity and the systematic development of concepts, for example, the debates on the normativity of critique, the tradition of analytic Marxism, or the works of feminist epistemology. This critical cross-tradition theorizing helps to develop clear critical analysis and robust normative demands, which becomes even more necessary as the liberal-democratic consensus in Western societies is attacked by authoritarian and right-wing forces.

The boundary between critique and justification turns out to be fuzzy. Questions of democracy and legitimacy of state practices also play a major role in critical cross-tradition theorizing that serves the need for social critique, with the central question how institutions can serve to foster critique and social change, for example in Étienne Balibar's work (2014) on democratizing democracy or Robin Celikates' work (2016) on civil disobedience. The potential tension of critique and justification is itself an object of critical cross-tradition theorizing, for example when Honneth's Hegelian theory of socialism is criticized for merely justifying the basic institutions of the current capitalistic welfare state instead of radically criticizing it (Honneth 2018) – a similar critique is, of course, put forward by some Foucauldians against my project of institutionalizing freedom as critique (Schubert 2018, 2021).

Speaking in the tongues of the AI whose interpretation of the great divide was posted on Facebook, one could say that critical cross-tradition theorizing is organizing the hobos that wander the city, to enable them to not just randomly steal things, but to systematically expropriate, and then even to build a better city. This certainly does not have 'any use to the law-abiding public' but helps to overcome today's law and build a more just and free one, being aware of how dense these concepts are and how violent their enactment can be.

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