

**IMPOSSIBLE  
OBJECTS  
INTERVIEWS**  
SIMON  
CRITCHLEY



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# Impossible Objects

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## *Interviews*

Simon Critchley

Edited by Carl Cederström and Todd Kesselman

polity

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# Contents

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[Introduction](#)

- 1 [Early Bedfellows](#)  
[Levinas, Derrida, and the Ethics of Deconstruction](#)
- 2 [Keep Your Mind in Hell and Despair Not](#)  
[Nietzsche and the Question of Nihilism](#)
- 3 [The State is a Limitation on Human Existence](#)  
[Gramsci and Hegemony](#)
- 4 [Infinitely Demanding Anarchism](#)  
[Marxism and the Political](#)
- 5 [Action in a World of Recuperation](#)  
[Cynicism and the Slovenian Hamlet](#)
- 6 [Language and Murder](#)  
[Blanchot, Stevens, and the Literary](#)
- 7 [Confessions of a Punk Rocker](#)  
[Can, Rhythm, and Transient Joy](#)
- 8 [Art and Ethics](#)  
[Transgression, Visibility, and Collective Resistance](#)
- 9 [Tragedy and Modernity](#)  
[The Logic of Affect](#)

[List of Works](#)

[Index](#)

# Introduction

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In the time that it takes the word “philosophy” to leap off the written page, onto the glassy surface of your eye, and down that astonishingly complex and dark tunnel that we call the mind, most of us have already conjured up a few definite associations: timeless, absolute, true without qualification. Philosophy is *supposed to be* about those things we need to be most certain about, those categories and concepts where the stakes are the highest, and which determine what it means to be human, to be alive, to be on this planet. For this reason, and understandably so, most philosophers are intellectual constipated: they are more than reluctant to say anything out loud unless they are sure that they want to ring eternally in the hallowed halls of the academy. For the philosopher, to speak is a great risk; to speak is to risk everything, insofar as once one has spoken, one puts in jeopardy everything that one has already said, and everything that one will say. To risk error is to risk eternity. And what could be more frightening than that.

The interview, one might say then, is for the philosopher a battlefield of anxiety, where one forgoes the right to retreat into one’s quiet study of peaceful contemplation, where one is forced to speak before one knows the real consequences of one’s words, where one’s mouth might threaten to betray one’s mind, or even one’s system of thought. It is the place where opinion muddles the clarity of ‘pure’ thinking – whatever that might be – and where one is forced to take a stance on the world in one’s own time. There should be nothing more terrifying to the philosopher, and indeed, nothing more important.

It is in this spirit that the interviews presented here have been gathered and collated. They aim to trace the risk of thinking out loud and with others, within the process of developing ideas and perspectives, for better or worse, until death do us part. This process exemplifies the meaning of what philosophy, for some of us, might be about: our stake in the world, our exchange with others, the movement and praxis of thinking itself.

We originally intended this collection as an appendix to the work of Simon Critchley, but it could also be read in another way. What the written word often tries to conceal is that philosophy does not descend upon us from up on high but, rather, develops, undergoes modifications, and takes its time in doing so. This activity, this struggle in thought, in its time, constitutes the very essence of the activity that is philosophy. As surprising as this may be, its resistance to setting down a final, permanent encampment is intrinsic to it, even if this has been something that has been historically resisted, rejected, denied, and suppressed. The idea that philosophy should only appear in print, when all accounts have been settled and when all debates have been resolved, is itself nothing more than the perverse fantasy of a certain erroneous vision of philosophy that holds onto certainty like a petulant child. In this light, the interview can hardly be a *mere* appendix.

If the tired old cliché of philosophical withholding could be called analytic, the interviews collected here are unapologetically – to use a Heideggerian trope – diarrhetic. They are playful, at times provocative, at times entertaining, but in each case oriented towards the task of genuine thinking, by which we mean thinking that does not simply rest upon what has been said before, but aims to open up new territories, and agitate outdated philosophical platitudes. In this sense, the interviews represent thinking as a form of labor; an intellectual *work*, or working-through. This is, we submit, another possibility to consider, the next time the word philosophy should pass through the digestive tract of your psyche.

As Simon Critchley has been interviewed frequently over the last two decades, we were faced with

an over-brimming collection of material in bringing this volume to fruition. The selections we have made were based primarily on two criteria; that they cover a reasonably diverse span with Critchley's work, both topically and temporally. The present volume consists in nine interviews, six of which have been published elsewhere in various mediums, and three of which appear here for the first time. With regard to those interviews that have appeared elsewhere, we have taken the liberty of occasionally removing certain passages solely for the purpose of avoiding repetition amongst the different interviews. We have tried, as much as possible, to preserve the original character and flow of each interview in order to maintain the spirit in which it took place.

With the intention of providing some context for the material, each of the interviews is preceded by a short introduction, interspersed with Critchley's own comments and reflections. More than ten years separate the first interview from the last, and, in this respect, the reader will find a shift in philosophical interests: the most recent interview on tragedy concerns material that is still being thought through, while the earliest (from 2000) deals with questions that are no longer as central to his current perspective.

We should also say something about the title, *Impossible Objects*. The term comes from an abandoned project, at the bottom of one of those drawers that most of us have, and in this case happens to have been from Simon's. The book was to have been called *Paraphilosophy*, and it was to have been a catalogue of those themes that stubbornly resist definition and simple appropriation. At the time, three paradigmatic domains presented themselves: poetry, humor, and music. Along with these, the themes presented in this collection – art, deconstruction, political resistance, and tragedy – just to name a few – seem to partake of this same stubborn quality, and for this reason they seem to be appropriate amendments in the field of impossibility. To quote from Simon's deserted introduction: "These paraphilosophical fragments were meant to be a collection of tiny ladders that should be kicked away in order to look directly at those things of which it is not possible to speak. The point was to let things speak for themselves. Sadly, this is easier said than done." Since the objects tend to remain quiet, it is fortunate that Critchley has not.

Finally, we would like to thank Liam Gillick for his visual genius in general, and, more specifically, for designing the cover of the book, along with Emma Hutchinson at Polity for her help in culling the vast amounts of textual material, and, moreover, for her infinite patience with us. We would also like to thank each interviewer for making this project possible, and for allowing us to include their work in this volume. And last but not least, a thank you to Simon for his openness in this collaboration, and for giving us so many words to choose from.

Carl Cederström and Todd Kesselman

# 1 Early Bedfellows

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*Levinas, Derrida, and the Ethics of Deconstruction*

**Joshua Mullan and David Hannigan**

SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA, APRIL 2000

*This is one of the earliest recorded interviews with Simon Critchley. David Hannigan and Joshua Mullan were two PhD students at the University of Sydney whom Critchley had met on a couple of occasions, and were “serious about having a philosophical conversation.” The interview took place in April of 2000, while Critchley was a visiting scholar in the philosophy department at the University of Sydney. The setting was idyllic.*

*It took place in the office of Moira Gatens, which I was borrowing for the semester, in the Old Building, which is this beautiful mid-nineteenth century imitation of an Oxford college, on a hill just to the north of Sydney, but on the edge of the city. There was this Jacaranda tree in the quad outside, and these birds would screech and hop around out there.*

*The discussion focuses on Critchley’s first published book, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, which had been based upon his PhD thesis. The great achievement of that book was that it had, for the first time, opened up an ethical reading of Derrida and deconstruction through the work of Levinas. This ethical reading was a significant contribution in that Derrida was routinely dismissed as an empty formalist or perhaps even a nihilist. In this interview, we find a detailed account of the shaping of these early thoughts. “It is a very accurate overview of what I was thinking in the context of the *Ethics of Deconstruction*.” But it also extends the original arguments, relating them to key themes of the Frankfurt School, especially the work of Jürgen Habermas. A few years prior to the interview, in 1999, Critchley had spent a full year in Frankfurt, debating and working with Axel Honneth. “You can see to the extent of the influence the Frankfurt School debates had on me at the time.” Honneth’s inheritance of Habermas is explored here as a means to bridge the gap between ethical subjectivity and political formalism – a line of thought that also appeared in Critchley’s *Continental Philosophy* but later receded within his work. “I recall that the conversation was very intense and focused, but I couldn’t even do this interview now. The material isn’t present in my mind any longer. It’s interesting to see how the interview is a kind of slice of time, what one was thinking about at a certain period, and the way that the themes accumulate and pile up.” The interview is here published for the first time, and it had not been carried out with the intention of publication. “I am very pleased that something is finally happening with it. David and Josh spoke with me for their own curiosity, but they were extremely professional, and the result is a good portrait of some of my early obsessions.”*

DAVID HANNIGAN: Given that much of your work to date has revolved around the writings

Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, can you please tell us when, and in what circumstances, you first encountered their work?

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SIMON CRITCHLEY: I purchased a copy of *Totality and Infinity* at a book sale in 1983, which cost almost nothing. I remember reading the preface on the train from Colchester to London and thinking, “This is amazing.” I knew Buber’s work at the time and had been very persuaded by *I and Thou* and so I fitted Levinas into the context of Buber and the Jewish tradition straight away. Derrida, I can remember on this day, I read in a launderette in the University of Essex. Again that was in 1983. We were reading “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Human Sciences” in the Communist Society reading group at Essex University, which seems faintly comical now. We were very serious. I read that essay and hadn’t really understood it. Then I read the opening page of “Violence and Metaphysics” on Levinas and I thought that the first paragraph, where Derrida is talking about the question, the community of the question and all that, was simply extraordinary. Derrida was the avant-garde in continental philosophy and therefore I wanted to understand it. Also, the assumption we shared, without knowing much, was that Derrida was somebody on the left; we read his work in the Communist Society reading group after reading Althusser and Foucault and therefore his works would have had obvious ethical and political relevance. So that’s how I came to them.

JOSHUA MULLAN: And it was out of that context that your initial thesis emerged?

SC: Yes. The problem for me in Derrida’s work was, what prevents this form of reading from simply being a textual formalism without any relevance to contextual questions of ethics, culture, society, politics? I tried to show that the basic operation in his thought is ethical. That deconstruction as a practice of reading is ethical, which was also a claim being advanced by Hillis Miller at about the same time. But I was always a long, long way from the preoccupations of the Yale School. I wanted to make the more substantive claim that there was a phenomenology of moral experience – well, almost – in Derrida’s work, provided you read it in relationship to Levinas. So the idea was that we can save Derrida’s work from what looked like an empty formalism, which was the Hegelian critique of Derrida by people like Jay Bernstein and Gillian Rose at that time in the UK. And we can do this by showing that there was an ethical motivation to his work, with possible political consequences. So that was the specific agenda for writing *The Ethics of Deconstruction* and that was there from very early on. And it is interesting how differently Derrida’s work appears now than it did in the 1980s.

DH: More recently, you have stated that you are more doubtful about the persuasive force of Levinasian ethics. Why?

SC: In many ways the context changed. In the late 1980s, if you were interested in Levinas, you felt that you were part of a tiny clique who read these texts with an almost religious fervor. It seemed as if there were maybe ten people in the world who really took Levinas seriously. The way in which Levinas came into focus for many people was through the success of Derrida’s work. And people like me and my supervisor Robert Bernasconi and others were trying to present Levinas’s thought and defend it to the hilt against ignorance of his work. I think the key experience here was the Heidegger affair in 1986–7 and the Paul de Man affair in 1987. The claim was that deconstruction in its Heideggerian or De Manian forms was morally vacuous. In that context, and for people who were accused of that, Levinas became a very useful way of showing that there was a post-Heideggerian ethics or a deconstructive ethics. So that was the context, and what changed for me was that the

consensus changed. Levinas became available, even trendy, as a philosopher and the critical philosophical task became one of trying to think through what could and could not be philosophical defended in Levinas's work.

JM: What do you think about the increased interest in Levinasian ethics?

SC: It both delights and worries me. I am pleased that people are reading Levinas and not merely philosophy but in law and in international relations, literary theory, aesthetic theory, all over the place. But there is a sense in which there is a piety that has grown up around Levinas. People are using Levinas as an intellectual crutch to stop them from doing a lot more difficult thinking. That worries me; I'm enough of a Habermasian, finally enough of a Kantian, to realize that ethics and normativity require a lot more rational discursive work than just appealing to some notion of experience of the other as immediately given. Even more worrying for me is that the category of ethics in Levinas is dependent on the category of the religious. And the way in which Levinas is picked up, particularly in the United States, as an ethical thinker is also fundamentally as a religious thinker, even in people as sophisticated as John Caputo. I think in a sense they are right that the face-to-face relation opens on to the relation of the divine in Levinas. However, as an atheist I find that unintelligible. So I want to defend Levinas in terms that show that his thought is not reliant on some type of implicit religiosity.

JM: Taking account of how your views have been modified in relation to Levinasian ethics, what do you consider to be the most significant difference between the work of Derrida and Levinas today?

SC: Well, Derrida famously says, in a 1986 discussion in Paris, that there are no differences between himself and Levinas. So in that sense there are no differences and one way of looking at Derrida's work since 1986 is in terms of making good on that statement. Also, one fairly conventional but very powerful way of looking at Derrida's work is that it moves between two poles of attraction. One pole of attraction is Heideggerian and the other pole is Levinasian. I'm thinking about Levinas's skepticism concerning the place where Heidegger's movement of thought ends up – particularly with regard to ethics and politics. So, when Derrida says something like “deconstruction is justice and justice is undeconstructible” and that what justice means really is the relation to the other, then it seems to be fairly clear where he is speaking from – and that cannot be from a Heideggerian place. Heidegger would never have said anything like that. But the way Derrida gets to that statement is often still by employing Heideggerian methods or habits of thought. Derrida will still make Heideggerian moves in the argumentation but then the conclusion of the argument has a much more Levinasian feel. On the other hand, there are significant differences between Derrida and Levinas. As I see it, there are a number of problem areas in Levinas's work, specifically the question of “monotheism,” the question of “sexual difference,” the question of the “family” and the question of “Israel.” In many ways the name “Israel” is the culmination of all those many questions. “Israel” is the name for a monotheistic political community based upon a certain conception of the family, and a very traditional understanding of sexual difference. In the face of those worries about Levinas, Derrida can be thought of as being simply critical of Levinas. However, the way he makes that critique in *Adieu: Emmanuel Levinas*, the 1997 text, is that he will say that the form of the ethical relation is right but the political content in Levinas's work is misguided. Of course, he doesn't say it as brutally as that but that's clearly what is on his mind. For me that is the significant difference between them.

DH: How do you account for what you've referred to as Levinas's political blind spot in relation

Israel? How does this relate to his views on Marxism?

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SC: For Levinas, Marxism is the absorption of the ethical into the socioeconomic, and so it is the disappearance of the face-to-face relation and the privileging of relations of solidarity and anonymous sociality – what he calls, in *Time and the Other*, “socialism.” And he would want to criticize Marxism from that point of view. In Levinas’s own theory the name of the blind spot is “Israel.” Levinas is absolutely clear from very early on that the form of the ethical relation has to be concretized and contextualized in politics, in a workable conception of justice. This is the core of his disagreement with Buber. And the name for the community that would instantiate justice informed by the ethical relation has to be “Israel” for Levinas. “Israel” means the ethically informed community of the people of the Bible. The basic message of the Bible for Levinas is the ethical relation; infinite responsibility which leads to a certain conception of justice. And that’s a conception of justice that was binding on Israel, Jewish and non-Jewish. So far, so good. “Israel” is the name for an idea of justice, a utopian idea of justice, which it was before 1948. Israel as an *actually existing state* leads Levinas into all sorts of problems, I think. He cannot criticize Israel because Israel has to be the ethical instantiation of justice in the world. Therefore when Israel commits acts of political murder, even by proxy (as it did in Sabra and Chatila in 1982, and as it has done against the Palestinians systematically since the establishment of the state of Israel), Levinas cannot criticize Israel, he doesn’t have the resources for criticizing Israel. So the blind spot is structural in Levinas; it is a consequence of his movement of thought. Therefore to reveal that blind spot, to call it into question, is to call Levinas into question in a certain way.

DH: What is it that stops Derrida from having the same blind spot? Is it his ability to hesitate about political content?

SC: Not just that. To go back to what I was saying before, the accusation of formalism against Derrida, which people like me try to defend him against, is, in a sense, true. He is a formalist. There is an ethical formalism in Derrida and what is formal a priori, it is universal, it is not context specific so that Derrida can say that deconstruction is justice and, at all times and all places in the earth, there is this injustice which requires us to think of what justice means and to instantiate justice in the world. So there is a context-transcendent basis, in Habermasian terms, for political and social thought in Derrida. For Derrida, the question of politics becomes a question of a form of political action that would not be instantiated in some sort of organic notion of community or some existing notion of the state. The way that I have tried to think about this is to think of Derrida’s notion of “democracy to come” as an ethical criterion for politicization, a movement of politicization that would be consistently challenging any notion of the state apparatus, or any notion of the community. So deconstruction in that sense becomes a form of ethical aggravation within a social context. And it is inconceivable for me that Derrida would end up endorsing any particular name like “Israel” or the way that Heidegger endorses Hölderlin’s word *Germanien*. This leads Derrida into what he calls the “New International”: a new form of alliance that would not be a form of alliance, or would not be specific to any particular community. So his formalism leads to a form of “political internationalism.”

JM: On this point, you argued in the first edition of *The Ethics of Deconstruction* that there was an impasse of the political in Derrida’s work, and that deconstruction fails to offer a coherent account of the passage from ethical responsibility to the question of the political and critique. In the second edition, you state that, based upon Derrida’s work since 1992, you are more positive about the

political possibilities of deconstruction. Do you remain as optimistic today?

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SC: Yes I do. As other people seem to like Derrida less and become increasingly bored with him, I like him more and more. I think Derrida is simply the most intelligent philosopher that I have ever read or heard; his capacity to develop thinking, improvise thinking, assimilate concepts, and generate new ideas is absolutely extraordinary. I think he is exemplary as a philosopher. He's a bit like Miles Davis in the 1960s. On the basis of a very simple theme, he manages to elaborate an enormous complex and interesting structure and no one else can do that. No one else for me comes close to him in terms of his intellectual brilliance. The problem is that he writes too much. The worry that I had in my first book was that there was no way of getting from ethics to politics in his work. He was content to raise the question of the "question of the question" as it were, the question of responsibility prior to questioning, but failed to ask the question of politics, of what justice is, i.e., what should be done in this particular context in this particular time? He appeared to be shy of concrete political questions. But that was before the "Force of Law," *Specters of Marx*, *Politics of Friendship*, and a whole range of other texts. I think that in those texts he has gone an enormous way to answering some of the worries that I had.

DH: In terms of the ethical relationship to the other, the experience of the undecidable, and the legal and political decisions that are still required to be taken, could you clarify what you mean by the expression "the other's decision in me"?

SC: The "other's decision in me" is a phrase lifted from *The Politics of Friendship*. The question is very simple, namely that the traditional conception of the political in Carl Schmitt is the capacity to decide, and the fundamental decision is the decision of who is my friend and who is my enemy. Derrida's claim in *The Politics of Friendship* is that this notion of the political presupposes a conception of the subject as an active, willful, masculine actor. So the traditional conception of the political presupposes a masculine social actor who can decide who is my friend, who is my enemy. What Derrida is trying to do is criticize that notion of the political through an ethical criterion. So the activity of politics becomes conditioned by a fundamental passivity that is unconditional, which as it were is there before me and despite me. Fundamentally, there is a powerlessness, an impotence, a lack of virility that defines the subject. The subject is defined, not by the capacity to decide, but by the other's decision, which was already in me, in a way that traumatizes me. I want to link that notion of Derrida to the theme of the traumatized subject in Levinas and in psychoanalysis. To do so is to try to come up with a different picture of the subject and then to link that notion of the "other's decision in me" to a conception of political action. So political action would be invention on the basis of the "other's decision in me" – acts of invention or imagination where I create a norm, or I bring about a norm that is not necessarily foundationally deduced from a normative framework as it would be in Habermas. Here, the notion of invention or political imagination is rooted in some ethical criterion that leads me into making that decision.

JM: How might Derrida's account of the "moment of madness" in the decision be understood in relation to your understanding of Badiou's Event and the psychoanalytical account of subjectivity that you offer?

SC: My interest in Badiou's work is sort of a troublemaking interest because Badiou and Derrida have not been the best of friends in the past. Insofar as one can apply the friend/enemy distinction, they are

political enemies. What is fascinating in Badiou is the way in which he gives us a theory of the event and the way in which the subject assumes the event and acts on the basis of the event. My critique of Badiou is that the notion of politics still remains locked up in a heroic and arguably masculinist model. But I think that what Badiou can provide is, in a sense, a way out of the impasse of Derrida's work in terms of the theory of the event.

DH: Recalling that Badiou is so dismissive of Levinas and the theological aspect in his work, I'm wondering about Derrida's use of the term, the "messianic." Given the word's obvious religious associations, do you think it is a strategically useful notion to be used in relation to political decision-making, to "democracy to come," to the "New International," etc.?

SC: Maybe it isn't the right word to use. I have tried to argue in an essay on Badiou that there's structural Judaism at work in thinkers like Levinas and Derrida. And what I mean by that is that the notion of the "messianic" is the idea of the subject being constituted in relationship to an event that overwhelms it. So the subject comes to itself, finds itself, in relationship to an event in which it is already inscribed – always already. Judaism is this binding oneself to a law, to that with which you are already contracted or covenanted in some way. The trauma has already taken place and the subject is, as Freud says, *nachträglich*. Derrida claims that his use of the "messianic" is in terms of a weak messianic power in Benjamin's sense or is a "messianism without messianism." As though there is no content, as if it is an entirely formal a priori claim. However, I want to claim that the experience of transcendence, which Derrida wants to evoke with the notion of the messianic, does draw on religious experience – a specifically Judaic religious experience. So Badiou is right in suspecting that there's arguably a religious motivation to the work of Levinas and Derrida. But I think that there is also a religious motivation to Badiou's own work. There is a structural Christianity at work.

JM: So, is the category of the political thinkable apart from the religious?

SC: Paradoxically, I think it has to be and it is not. For me, as an old-fashioned sort of modernist philosopher, philosophy can neither continue with religion nor without religion. We require religious categories in order to think through certain issues, political issues. Yet these categories are ones that we can no longer use, so we are in an *aporia*, or simply in a mess. This means that the project of secularism is, yet unachieved, as I see it. The currently fashionable notion of the "post-secular" has no meaning. We are still decidedly pre-secular and that is the problem.

JM: And is this then why you have chosen to adopt the term "austere messianism"?

SC: I want to have my cake and eat it. I'm committed to a paradox, which is that when philosophy becomes divorced from religious categories and from religious passion, it simply becomes an exercise in technically improving common sense. Philosophy, without religion, risks becoming a technical sharpened common sense or the application of logical procedure and method to thinking. So, on the one hand, I want to say that philosophy finds the basis for passionate commitment in religious categories, but those religious categories are ones that have no content for us because we know too much. It is just too late for us.

DH: You have suggested that "The New International" can be seen as a reactivation or rearticulation of the emancipatory promise of modernity. Could you clarify what you mean by this?

SC: If there was a consensus around *Specters of Marx*, then it was that it was a good thing that Derrida was talking about Marx and about time too: “thanks for making the effort, Jacques.” However, the notion of “The New International” was treated with a lot of suspicion. It was seen as a vague posture. Now I’m less persuaded of that. I think that “The New International” is Derrida’s attempt to give political content to these formal claims about justice and ethics. And he’s in a quandary, namely that political content cannot be guaranteed at the level of the state, the nation, or the community. That’s probably uncontroversial. Further, there is a critique of the notion of the party. So “The New International” becomes a formal device for thinking about a collectivity – a transnational collectivity – that would not be reducible to a traditional notion of the party form. I have a problem with that. I think that the notion of party form is both more malleable than Derrida imagines, for good and ill, and it is also a necessity when we think about political action within a state, which is still, for good or ill, the current horizon for politics, even within the European Union. So I wouldn’t be as skeptical about the party form as Derrida would. What I have come to think about recently in relationship to “The New International” is that there are two movements of politicization for me. There is politicization at the level of civil society, new social movements and forms of protest internal to civil society that we can think of as micro-political movements, and on the other hand the macro-political, transnational movements of identification, democratization. And what I am thinking about politically is how those two movements might come together, how transnational movements of protest or resistance might be embedded in forms of local civil protest. The basis for those two axes of politicization, it seems to me, is an ethical basis, which can be expressed in the rather nebulous and vague thought that there is simply something *wrong* about multinational capitalism. And this is said without being identified with a specific political ideology, which it would have been 20 years ago when the Marxist framework still prevailed. That seems to have disappeared, and what seems to have taken its place are creative forms of political invention, micro-political and macro-political invention, which seems to be rooted in forms of ethical conviction, ethical commitment. This state of affairs is something to be wished; it is also a good description of an emerging political reality. In that sense, emancipation would still be conceivable. And for me it is a question of hanging on to the notion of emancipation. Again, that’s what I like in both Derrida and Habermas.

DH: And in fact you have suggested that what Derrida is attempting in his recent work is nothing less than a “repoliticization of Marxism.” This led you to speculate about the potential links between deconstruction and other attempts to repoliticize Marxism. Reflecting on the Gramscian tradition that inspires Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, you make the claim that the infinite ethical demand of deconstruction requires a theory of hegemonization.

SC: The first thing to say is about the phrase the “repoliticization of Marxism.” It is a cheeky phrase because was there ever a *politicization* of Marxism? In a sense, Marx did not provide a political theory. He gave us a socioeconomic theory based upon an analysis of capital in its historical development and its actuality. Various sundry remarks about the state apparatus and perhaps unhelpful metaphors like the “base-super-structure” distinction simply make the issue worse. So in that sense what Marxism requires is a political theory. One way of re-reading Marx in that light is to look to the notion of antagonism or class struggle as being the expression of a conception of the political, or at least the possibility of a political theory. So on the one hand within Marxism there is a socioeconomic determinism and on the other hand we could say that, in key texts like the *Communist Manifesto* and

the more political texts of Marx, there is the recognition that history is something that has to be constituted politically. It is not simply going to be the outcome of social and economic development. That tradition of a political Marxism is picked up after the First World War in Italy. If the Marxism of the Second International wasn't going to produce the outcome or revolution, then politics had to be the moment that intervened into the bringing about of socialism. That is obviously the moment of Gramsci. So the politicization of Marxism happens potentially for me in Gramsci. And the central category here is the category of "hegemony," and how the left is to produce a politics that would bring about its aims, to articulate itself hegemonically because no historical theodicy is going to do that work. So what I am trying to do is to link Derrida's work (which as I see it is informed by an ethical criterion which he calls the "messianic" or "justice") with a notion of political action that I'm thinking about in relation to Laclau's notion of hegemony. What I think is lacking in Derrida is an adequate thinking of the relationship between deconstruction and hegemony, and the relationship between ethics and politics. And what I think is lacking in Laclau and Mouffe's work is an adequate thinking of the relationship between the category of hegemony and the normative basis for hegemony in some notion of ethics.

JM: In the same essay, you draw upon William Connolly's notion of deterritorialized democracy and offer some examples of new social movements like Greenpeace and Amnesty International that seem to be useful in momentarily "concretizing" Derrida's notion of "democracy to come."

SC: Bill Connolly's work interests me for all sorts of reasons, but particularly for the way in which he has tried to think the notion of democracy outside of the notion of territory. Democracy is thinkable geographically as a movement of democratization across a whole number of territorial spaces and Derrida's notion of "The New International" can be tied to such a thought of deterritorialized democratization.

DH: Elsewhere you have even proposed the marriage of Derrida and Habermas. Given the differing orientations at work in these relationships – namely, agonistic versus consensual – where do the "politics of friendship" go from here?

SC: The question of Habermas is a separate question. I spent all of 1997 and some of 1998 in Frankfurt. I went there because I was awarded a Humboldt Fellowship and because I am very curious about the Frankfurt School. I still am. One of the projects that I developed with Axel Honneth was to try to think about the possibility of a debate between a Derridean and a Habermasian paradigm. There is an interesting way of linking Derrida to Habermas and I have tried to pursue that in some of my own work. Could deconstruction provide a sort of ethical supplement to Habermasian discourse ethics? And could Habermas provide a theory of normativity that would give deconstructive ethics some grip in actual social life? So one way of pursuing the relationship between ethics and politics is in a Habermasian direction and Axel Honneth has written an article on that topic which is very interesting. But I don't think that is the most profitable way of pursuing the connection between ethics and politics. I'd pursue a much more Gramscian direction of the kind I have already sketched. However, I am interested in the conflictual space of European philosophy and how it is defined around these two gigantic figures of Derrida and Habermas. And it seems they have much more in common with each other than they imagined. In many ways, they differ most significantly on the question of politics: Habermas remains a social democrat committed to a notion of the state as a necessary horizon for political activity, whereas Derrida's ethical criterion produces a notion of democracy

against the state, what he calls “democracy to come.”

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JM: So you now believe that the Habermasian framework can provide deconstruction with a rational procedure for legitimating and testing decisions and judgments?

SC: I think Habermas is one way of supplementing deconstruction. On my reading, Derrida’s work is motivated by an ethical concern that can be understood in Levinas’s sense of the word, the relation to the other. And Axel Honneth has tried to argue that Habermas’s theory of justice requires, as a precondition, a notion of the ethical relation in order to be more than a mere abstraction of some sort. So the way I understand that now is, that for Honneth, Habermas’s theory of justice must be connected to a conception of the good and what Levinas offers is a conception of the good, thought in terms of the ethical relation to the other. So, if – and it’s a big ‘if’ – you can insert that conception of the good as a supplement to Habermas’s theory of justice, then Honneth can claim that the goal of Habermas’s discourse ethics – which is a notion of social solidarity, what he calls “the other of justice” – will be achieved. In that sense, I’m extremely sympathetic to what Honneth’s up to. And for me, Derrida needs something like Habermas insofar as he needs a much more procedural notion of normativity for a theory of political action, in my terms. There is something lacking in Derrida’s work. So Habermas is one way of answering that lack. It is not my preferred way of answering that lack. As I have said, I tend to deal with that in terms of Laclau’s theory of hegemony. However, structurally at least, I think you can imagine an interesting marriage between Derrida and Habermas.

JM: And how do you see the terms of engagement at the moment?

SC: The terms of engagement really turn, for me, on the question of intersubjectivity. For Habermas’s philosophy has to make an intersubjective turn, which it has not made in the last 200 years. Rather, it has been governed by the paradigm of individual consciousness. But intersubjectivity for Habermas is always conceived of as a relation of equality between persons who are the same. Therefore, the relation between subjects for Habermas is a relation of symmetry and reciprocity. If there is another conception of intersubjectivity in Derrida, then it is a Levinasian conception of intersubjectivity which has to be thought of in terms of a model of asymmetry and a fundamental lack of reciprocity that defines the ethical relation. So both Derrida and Habermas are thinkers who have made the intersubjective turn but those conceptions of intersubjectivity are radically different. The way Honneth would argue it, and I tend to agree, is that if we think about intersubjectivity as equality, as a juridical or a legal relation, and we also think about intersubjectivity as asymmetry, as an ethical relation, then we have to put the ethical and the juridical together.

DH: So they can at least supplement each other around this question of intersubjectivity and justice/law and politics?

SC: Yes. The Habermasian conception of justice seems to require a notion of the good if we are not going to end up with a gap between universal pragmatics and everyday experience. This is the gap that Habermas has always wanted to bridge; in his early work, it is expressed as the relation between knowledge and human interests. On the other hand, if Derrida’s conception of justice isn’t simply going to remain a form of goodwill or good conscience, or a certain empty ethical universalism, then it needs to be anchored in a much more workable notion of law or politics. Again though, there may be other philosophies of law that could do that job. There is no privilege for the Habermasian one. In the

respect, Derrida could be married to lots of people, not just Habermas!

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JM: Your own discussions with Axel Honneth, and the role you are both playing in this debate between Derrida and Habermas, seem to suggest that there is much to be gained from keeping open dialog between French and German contemporary philosophy.

SC: In my view, there needs to be a new approach to dialog between French and German philosophy. There is a peculiar hostility in Germany to French philosophy that has to do with the way French post-structuralism was received in Germany, that is, as a critique of what was seen as a dominant Frankfurt School or social democratic framework. For instance, Habermas says that the risk of post-structuralism is the risk of neoconservatism, which to us in the English-speaking world doesn't seem to make any sense, but it does make sense in the German context. A lot of proponents of French post-structuralism were neoconservatives. So Habermas is simply right, but we need to move beyond that.

DH: In your essay "Remarks on Derrida and Habermas" you point out that it was not until 2000 that Derrida thought it possible to have a discussion with Habermas on the question of formal pragmatics of performativity. This is particularly interesting, given that Derrida also states that he is more and more suspicious of the theory of performativity in his written response to you.

SC: Derrida in that response makes a distinction between performativity and facticity. He argued that the emphasis or the privilege of the performative in different theoretical discourses in the West was a luxury that risked neutralizing the fact of responsibility. So he is making a distinction between performativity and facticity, where facticity is linked to responsibility. Derrida's thought is that there is an irreducible facticity to responsibility, an infinite responsibility, which is there despite me, in spite of me. So what Derrida is doing is an interesting argumentative move. He is saying we can discuss this notion of the performative but the performative has to be massively qualified; it has to be subsumed under a more radical notion of facticity, what I call in my work on Heidegger "original facticity." And this notion of facticity produces a notion of responsibility that is overwhelming. From a Habermasian point of view, the response to this infinite responsibility is to say that it gives rise to a chronic ethical overload. This is demanding far too much of human beings, which is the way Habermas criticizes civic republicanism as a model of democracy. However, Derrida will say "well, forget that," ethics is about overload. Responsibility is either infinite or it is not responsible.

JM: Turning more closely to your work on subjectivity, why did you feel it necessary to offer a psychoanalytic account of the subject who not only experiences a Levinasian ethical relation to the other but also makes, or is made by, political decisions that take account of the third party? That is, what is the third party that is said to appear in the face of the other.

SC: Firstly, the move towards psychoanalysis is in a sense independent of my reading of Levinas. In about 1994, Peter Dews, a colleague of mine who normally taught a course on psychoanalysis, went on sabbatical. As a result, I asked, or was asked, to teach the course and became more and more convinced of psychoanalysis as a framework for thinking about philosophical issues, particularly in relation to the problematics of affectivity, desire, and sexual difference. Then, in a way, I wanted to see whether I could make sense of a thinker like Levinas in those terms. What is interesting is that Levinas has absolutely no sympathy for psychoanalysis and has only scorn for Freud's notion of the unconscious and the Lacanian notion of desire. For Levinas, it is all just pornography; he hates it.

However, if Levinasian ethics and politics presuppose a notion of God, so that there is monotheism at the basis of his notion of community, and you don't want to go along with that, as I don't, then psychoanalysis can be a critical theoretical discourse for undermining that. So I am using psychoanalysis to try to think about the source of the ethical relation in ways that criticize what Levinas is explicitly up to and what a lot of his followers seem to be up to as well. So the objective of my use of psychoanalysis is to show that what is at the basis of Levinas's ethics is not a conception of God; it doesn't entail that sort of metaphysical presupposition. And furthermore, if I can make that argument, then I can show that the notion of God is not at the basis of a Levinasian politics, or a Levinasian notion of community. So for me it is terribly important to be able to redescribe the notion of the third party in Levinas – community and justice, relations between equals – in secular terms. Again that is why Habermas is interesting, because it is a rigorously secular account of community, of normativity. So that's why I made that move.

DH: You seem to have a complex, even tense, relation to Derrida's work.

SC: Absolutely. I have always been interested in making Derrida's work a lot more determinate than he wants to be. Derrida thrives on his indeterminacy. That's what is good about him, and what he teaches us is the productivity of notions of hesitation, *aporia*, undecidability, or whatever. But at a certain level that doesn't interest me; what interests me is determination, decision and coming up with a theoretical framework that can actually do something in the world. So, to that extent, the picture that I'm offering is not really deconstructive; it is constructive. It is a construction, my construction. And in my discussions with Derrida over the years, he has been very polite and tolerant of some of the moves that I have wanted to make. Yet, it seems clear that he is involved in something that I am not really involved in. So, at that point, it is a question of just speaking for myself, philosophically, and not just doing commentary or scholarship.

DH: In that regard, you have suggested that Levinasian ethics, at least after it has been disrupted by the Derridean problem of closure, is a certain practice of language, perhaps ultimately a practice of the self in Foucault's sense. If we view Levinasian ethics as a practice of self, then might the account of "the ethical relation to the other" amount to a governing rationality of the self? That is, a governing rationality that is capable of producing a certain kind of Levinasian ethical subject rather than actually describing the ethical experience of the face-to-face?

SC: Good question. The problem of closure in Derrida's "Violence and Metaphysics" is the claim that Levinas does not adequately think through the issue of language; the ethical relation is a relationship that takes place in silence, it is a pre-linguistic relationship. Derrida rightly criticizes that. Then the reading I try to give of the later Levinas is to try to show how that notion of language becomes the basis of the ethical relationship. So, is it a practice of the self? The answer is yes. And is Levinasian ethics a practice of the self that is capable of producing a notion of the subject rather than merely describing the relationship of the face-to-face? This is where it becomes a sort of tricky question, and an interesting question nonetheless. On the one hand, if Levinas is a phenomenologist then he has to be describing existing structures. The face-to-face relationship has to be something I read off of the phenomena. This is one way of reading Levinas, particularly *Totality and Infinity*. However, it might be more persuasive to read Levinas as *exhorting* us to become selves of a certain sort. So there is a normative demand. In Foucauldian terms, there is a demand for a cultivation of the self in Levinas. That would also seem to be a strand of Levinas's work. But, if that is the case, if the ethical subject is

as it were, constituted through certain techniques, which can be cultivated, then this isn't phenomenological, it is something else. It is a technology of the self that is being described philosophically. Now, I tend towards the second position. I think that what Levinas is doing is not phenomenology in an obvious way; what he is exhorting us to do is to become subjects in a certain way. His work is marked by a more or less confused blurring of descriptive and normative claims.

DH: If so, then wouldn't this raise questions in relation to what you have claimed elsewhere regarding the distinction between the Kantian "fact of reason" and what you call Levinas's "fact of the other?"

SC: It is complicated. You could say that to become a Levinasian subject is, if you like, a certain rationalization of the self that is done in relation to the fact of the other. It is not as if the fact of the other simply produces me. It isn't like I see the other suffering and I become a Levinasian. Rather, it is that there is an awareness of the other's suffering individually, globally, and then, after the fact, after the experience, it leads me to try to develop a form of subjectivity that would deal with that fact, respond to that fact, to be responsive to it. So, in that sense, you could see Levinas in much more Foucauldian terms than he is usually taken. Then the difference between Foucault and Levinas would be around the question of "what do I become a subject in the face of?" As Foucault says, in late antiquity you have techniques for becoming a self, or as it were cultivating forms of autonomy or autarchy, which are not mediated through notions of divine law in the Judaic sense or in relation to an event like the resurrected Christ. So you could say that Levinasian ethical subjectivity is a practice of the self but it is a practice of the self that would not interest Foucault because it seems to fall back into a Judeo-Christian messianism. And he is not wrong! But that doesn't mean that Foucault's position is right.

DH: How would this, if at all, connect back through to the ethical relation to the other and the decision when it comes to aesthetic judgments?

SC: Well, I am prepared to admit that maybe aesthetic judgment is like ethical judgment but I don't want to subsume ethical judgment under aesthetic judgment too readily because there are differences between artworks and human beings, even when those artworks are about human beings. There is a difference between the fact of Tricky's first album and the fact of an individual suffering. There has been a tendency in a lot of theoretical discourse to make that distinction more slippery than it needs to be. A lot of the discourse around postmodernism suffers from that fate. The other human being that suffers before me and demands my attention is not an artwork. In that sense, I would be against an ethics based upon an aesthetic cultivation. I think that leads to either a West Coast Foucauldianism or to Richard Rorty's idea of cultivating your private sphere, cultivating your sphere of private autonomy. That disgusts me. The world is full of injustice, the world is full of demands for justice and these should be rectified. These are not understandable aesthetically. People are being slaughtered in the merriest ways. Right now in Chechnya "Blood is running in the streets as if it were champagne" as Dostoyevsky would say. And that for me imposes a very clear demand, which is a normative demand, which should be met by institutional arrangements – right down to questions of international law and military intervention, for example.

## 2 Keep Your Mind in Hell and Despair Not

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### *Nietzsche and the Question of Nihilism*

**Jill Stauffer**

SAN FRANCISCO, NEW YORK, REYKJAVIK, AUGUST 2003

*“Philosophy begins in disappointment” – an inversion of Aristotle’s claim that philosophy begins in wonder – is perhaps Critchley’s most well-known credo. In this interview, Critchley unpacks the meaning of this claim. He connects it to the basis of modern philosophical motivation, the question of nihilism, the experience of the loss of meaning, and the confrontation with finitude and death. In his second book, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing*, published in 1997, Critchley addressed these irresistible yet overpowering questions, arguing that in the wake of Nietzsche’s declaration that we have murdered God, we have to cultivate alternative sources in the search for meaning – the common, the near, and the ordinary.*

*In the following interview, we find an overview of these arguments. “This is the best account of what is going on in *Very Little ... Almost Nothing*.” But the discussion also leads into other kinds of responses to disappointment, which are taken up in *Infinitely Demanding*. Such responses to the contemporary crisis in meaning are wide-ranging and diverse: from Al-Qaeda’s violent religious extremism to the emancipatory potential of the anti-globalization movement, and so on. The interviewer, Jill Stauffer, was at the time a PhD student at Berkeley. They met in New York and Iceland, but for the most part, that’s not where the actual interview took place. “It was a sort of far interview,” Critchley confesses. “Jill had sent me a number of questions in writing, and I did all the answers sitting in my kitchen in Essex, speaking into a cassette recorder. I was just sitting there at the kitchen table, it was dark, and I was just speaking into one of those old-fashioned cassette recorders. I imagined she was there as I spoke.”*

**JILL STAUFFER:** You have said that philosophy begins in disappointment. What does that mean for philosophers, for human beings, for philosophy?

**SIMON CRITCHLEY:** There are lots of stories about how philosophy begins. Some people claim it begins in wonder; some people claim it begins in worry. I claim it begins in disappointment. And there are two forms of disappointment that interest me: religious and political disappointment. Religious disappointment flows from the realization that religious belief is not an option for us. Political disappointment flows from the fact that there is injustice – that we live in a world that is radically unjust and violent, where might seems to equal right, where the poor are exploited by the rich, etc. So for me philosophy begins with these experiences of disappointment: a disappointment at the level of what I would think of as “meaning,” namely that, given that there is no God, what is the meaning

life? And, given that we live in an unjust world, how are we to bring about justice?

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JS: I suspect that you will encounter little resistance with regard to the assertion that the world is unjust, but some might find the “given” that there is no God displeasing, or at least *un-“given.”*

SC: Haven’t you heard? God is dead.

JS: Oh, I’ve heard. But tell me what you mean.

SC: Nietzsche writes that nihilism is the experience where the highest values have devalued themselves. Where the question “why?” finds no answer. This can also be linked in Nietzsche to the problematic of the death of God. The thought in Nietzsche is not that the highest values have been devalued through some sort of general skepticism. No, Nietzsche’s thought is much deeper. It is that the highest values have devalued themselves – it is a reflexive verb he uses. This is what he means by the death of God. It is not the fact that God has somehow been killed or has popped his clogs and slipped off behind the scenery, but rather that we have killed him. That’s Nietzsche’s full remark: “God is dead. We have killed him.” The way history has worked out, Nietzsche tells us, is that the highest values in which we believed – namely, God, immortality of the soul, and whatever – have become incredible to us. We cannot believe in them. Why? Because Christianity, for Nietzsche, is driven by a will to truth. What I mean is that Christianity is not a fable for a Christian. It is not just a nice story about the creation of the world and some rabbi who got murdered by the occupying Roman authorities a couple of thousand years ago. No, for the Christian, the Christian story is true. There is a will to truth at the heart of Christianity. What the Christian realizes, in Nietzsche’s account, is that the “true” world, the world of heaven, immortality, God, is untrue. It has been disproved by reason itself, by science, the will to truth. What is nihilistic for Nietzsche is the following situation: The Christian realizes that what he or she has taken to be true is in fact untrue. God is dead. And we have killed him. That drives people to declarations of meaninglessness, radical meaninglessness. It is the position that is expressed philosophically, for Nietzsche, in the work of his onetime favorite philosopher, Schopenhauer. The point of Nietzsche’s work is to refuse the nihilism of the present – his late nineteenth-century present.

JS: So nihilism reigns if human beings think that there is no answer to the question of meaninglessness. And Nietzsche’s point, as I see it, is that human beings are the answer. The human possibilities of thought and action defeat nihilism. If we take them on.

SC: Yes. But our present is still nihilistic. Nietzsche claimed he would be born posthumously. People are acutely aware of the meaninglessness of their existence, and they try to cover this up in a number of ways. By returning to forms of traditional religion such as fundamentalist Christianity. Or by engaging in new forms of religion – New Age belief, whether that be yoga or sitting with crystals on your hands, finding your inner child, sitting under a pyramid, or whatever. All of these are examples of passive nihilism. You might also try what Nietzsche calls active nihilism, engaging in acts of terrorism or whatever. The idea here is that, given that nothing means anything, we might as well blow the whole place up. I would recommend neither passive nor active nihilism, both of which seek to escape from the “meaning gap” in our lives. The point – the point of Nietzsche’s philosophy, and of philosophy as such, in my view – is to think within that gap and work against nihilism. To use thought against the nihilism of the present.

JS: ~~So God — or other universal or absolute ideas — cannot offer answers to the question of the meaning of life, and thus any answer has to come from within human life, which is finite and capable of error. What kind of answer can that be?~~

SC: Well, the answer is given in the question. The only answer to the question of the meaning of life has to begin from the fact of our human finitude, of our vulnerability and our fallibility. My personal belief that I've tried to argue for in my book *Very Little ... Almost Nothing* — a winning title if ever there was one — is that we have to, in a sense, give up the question of the meaning of life, or at least hear it in a particular way. The formulation that I use in that book is “the acceptance of meaninglessness as the achievement of the everyday or the ordinary.” What I mean by that is that once we've accepted that the meaning of life is ours to make, we make meaning. Then we accept that we live in a situation, or, rather, that we inherit a situation of meaninglessness, and out of that meaninglessness we create meaning in relationship to the ordinariness of our common existence. I try to argue for a cultivation of the low, the common and the near — the everyday — as that in relationship to which we can make a meaning out of the meaninglessness of our existence.

JS: Law is often unjust. History and the present world are full of violence and unspeakable cruelty on one hand, and mass apathy with regard to the suffering of others on the other. If we make our own meanings, that means we are entirely free not to do so. Which also means that our connection to meaning — and to ethics — is minimal, fragile, and refusable. Is there reason to hope that good can emerge out of human affairs? Where is that hope of justice and meaning that philosophy at times can provide?

SC: A huge and very difficult question. And the answer that I will give will be unsatisfactory. We have to begin from the melancholy acceptance, at least as a possibility, that perhaps nothing good comes out of human affairs. The story that I was brought up with as a kid and which was implicitly the justification for mutually assured destruction — in the nuclear standoff between the United States and the former Soviet Union — is that we had got beyond the nastiness of war. Somehow the madness of mutually assured destruction at least had the virtue of not allowing for a repeat of the Second World War. That was arguably true. But if there is a feature that dominates the present, I would say there is the fact of war, and the horror and cruelty of war. I think that the activity of thinking is and always has been, and is now increasingly, a response to political horror. We live in dark times. The people who govern us are out of touch and act in accordance with agendas that I find increasingly dispiriting. So I'm deeply pessimistic about the present situation.

JS: But you are not luxuriating in a dispirited bath of nihilism.

SC: No. Far from wanting to give up, on the contrary — this goes back to your first question — philosophy begins in the experience of political disappointment, the fact of injustice. In the face of that fact, one can create. Ethically, legally. One can try and do something. I see the work of the antiwar movement or the antiglobalization movement as huge and powerful examples of the ways in which things can be done in the face of the horror of the present. I also see these actions as processes of thought, that is, as worthy of the name “philosophy.” So, although we live in dark times, and I'm pessimistic about the present situation, I'm still fantastically optimistic about what human beings can do in the face of that. But I'm talking about what human beings can do in groups, small or large.

collectively. Not what governments can do. I am increasingly suspicious of the whole framework of the state and institutions such as political parties, and the whole apparatus of representative democracy, and I am more and more drawn toward more anarchistic tendencies, where politics would be focused upon the manifestation of the people against the intervention of the state. In relation to the question of hope, I think the only hope we have is hope against hope. We hope for a better world. But of course we can do better than just hope. We can act in the world. We can act ethically, we can act well. We can try to construct laws, constitutions, which are just. We can engage in political activity, and in the activity of teaching and instruction. These are tremendous activities of hope. But that's hope against hope, insofar as there is no metaphysical basis for my hope. I can't root it in religious belief. There's a lovely phrase of Gillian Rose's, which she borrowed from somebody else, which goes, "keep your mind in hell and despair not." I think of that a lot. Philosophy is keeping one's mind in hell, in the violence and cruelty of the present, and not despairing, but going on, making, creating, affirming.

JS: So if we are not to be nihilists we must recognize that philosophy is atheism, a willing embrace of a world without a higher or outside order. But somehow that doesn't consign us to a world that can only be as it is, without hope of something better.

SC: Yes. For me, there is a radical separation between philosophy – the activity of being a philosopher, someone who reflects – and a religious point of view. The philosopher is someone who doesn't know, but who wants to find out. This is why Socrates was declared the wisest man in Greece. The inscription over the oracle at Delphi reads: "Know Thyself." The truth is we do not know ourselves. The wisest of us accept that we do not know ourselves. Philosophy is the inquiry into the situation. But the religious person knows what the meaning of life is.

JS: Religion or faith is a situation into which inquiry is not necessary.

SC: Yes. The religious person knows that God is in his heaven, or that everything will turn out well in the end, or that redemption will be possible, or that if they kill themselves in a suicide-bombing incident, then they'll get to sleep with 70 virgins or whatever. I do not feel entitled to such knowledge. I suppose I still hold out the possibility of religious experience. I've just never had one. Maybe one day everything will change. I'll turn to Jesus, or Allah, or the Torah. And we'll see. But for now, in the situation I'm in at the moment, all I can do is philosophize – in the absence of anything like God. If I had a religious experience, what I know for sure is that I would stop doing philosophy and would start doing religion, teaching classes in religion, preaching in a local church. That is a fine and noble activity. But I do not feel entitled to engage in it. So for me philosophy is my fate.

JS: The philosopher doesn't "know," or she knows that she doesn't "know herself." The religious person trusts in something higher than human life, and so has a guarantee of something good in the end. So the philosopher's ethics, hopes, or values are more fragile than a religious person's. They are fragile and possibly will fail. But that is what we have if we are to change the world now instead of later. Only humans can act and change the world. But they might not do so.

SC: In your first question, you asked me what the assertion that philosophy begins in disappointment would mean for philosophers and for human beings. I want to state that, at the level of method, I don't want to make a huge distinction between philosophers and human beings. I think philosophy is the

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