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PHENOMENOLOGY, DECONSTRUCTION, AND CRITIQUE: A DERRIDEAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT. Critical phenomenology is gaining currency as a progressive philosophy of emancipation, but there is no consensus on what its "criticality" entails. From a Derridean perspective, critique can be said to involve radical self-interrogation; a philosophy that questions its own conditions of possibility or grounds is one that opens itself to its auto-deconstruction. Deconstruction produces undecidability, however, which means that the philosophy in question can no longer account for its political claims or its normative force. This is the predicament in which critical phenomenology, like any other critical theory, will find itself when it takes its critical injunction to heart.

Keywords: *Critical theory, Derrida, Gödel, Kant, politics, post-phenomenology, undecidability*

Introduction

One might well ask, as Gayle Salamon does in the inaugural issue of *Puncta*, "What's Critical about Critical Phenomenology?"[1] The question obviously echoes one that Nancy Fraser had asked many years earlier, namely, "What's Critical about Critical Theory?"[2] The answer, however, will depend on just what one means by the terms "criticality" and "critique." In Fraser's view, for example, a "critical theory," unlike an "uncritical" one, is avowedly partisan; it satisfies Marx's criterion of contributing to the "self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age." As Fraser puts it, "A critical social theory frames its research program and its conceptual

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1 Gayle Salamon, "What's Critical about Critical Phenomenology?" *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology*, 1(1), 2018, 8.

2 Nancy Fraser, "What's Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender," *New German Critique*, 35, 1985, 97.

framework with an eye to the aims and activities of those oppositional social movements with which it has a partisan though not uncritical identification."[3] This definition underlies Fraser's inquiry into the relationship between Jürgen Habermas's critical theory of society and the contemporary women's movement, and it allows her to demonstrate how and where his theory falls short.

If Fraser's definition is viable, then questions about the relationship between a philosophical description of the nature of experience and various oppositional social movements can be asked with respect to phenomenology as well. Salamon mobilizes this particular perspective herself, for instance, when she notes that recent developments in so-called "critical phenomenology" investigate its relation to issues of queerness, feminism, traumatic violence, and colonialism.[4] But the issue is not nearly so straightforward. First, how is one to decide between oppositional social movements that are emancipatory and progressive, and those that are regressive or reactionary? White supremacist and anti-immigration groups also embody contemporary struggles. But it is highly unlikely that anyone working in the areas of critical theory or critical phenomenology will encourage the inclusion of these oppositional social movements in their research programs in the way that Fraser proposes. Second, even if a criterion for distinguishing between progressive and regressive social movements could be delineated clearly, how would one impose a limit on the number and variety of social or political issues that must be addressed before a theory can qualify as "critical"? By what additional criterion, in turn, would this limit be set?

To be sure, Fraser undertakes a persuasive, immanent critique of Habermas's theory of communicative action to show that it is blind to its gendered subtext.[5] This is evidenced by the way in which his theory falsely bifurcates the distinctions between the public and private spheres, and between paid and unpaid labour, among others. The theory thereby obscures rather than illuminates "the situation and the prospects of the feminist movement."[6] Of course, Habermas's social-theoretical framework also obscures rather than illuminates many other struggles

[3] Ibid.

[4] Salamon, "What's Critical about Critical Phenomenology?" 15. This is not the only definition of "criticality" which she and others provide. I address the different understandings of the term "critical" in the literature on "critical phenomenology" below.

[5] The fact that contemporary forms of gender identification such as trans, gender queer, non-binary, and so on were not commonly invoked or understood by critical theorists writing in 1985 does not necessarily limit the power of Fraser's analysis. Her strictly binary understanding of gender could (arguably) be extended or modified to address other oppositional struggles. But this is not decisive with respect to the argument I develop here.

[6] Fraser, "What's Critical about Critical Theory?" 97.

as well, including those related to ecological crises, violence against animals, queer and trans issues, Indigenous rights, race relations, and so on. If these particular movements were all encompassed by the theory, would it then be definitively "critical"? Would a social theoretical framework have to include every issue ever raised by every marginalized group before it would qualify as sufficiently partisan? Could it do so, even in principle? Or, would it only have to support some of these issues, in identification with only some of these groups? How would this be determined?

These questions suggest there is a problem, but it does not lie with Fraser's immanent critique of the theory of communicative action. On the contrary, her analysis is careful, perspicacious, and important, particularly given that it was published during the height of Habermas's influence in the broad field of social and political thought. The problem, rather, stems from the definition of "criticality" itself, which is too vague to be of use, notwithstanding the effectiveness of the article's title or the compelling reference to Marx which appears to support it. Indeed, when the meaning of "critique" has been refined, as I undertake to do below, it becomes evident that Fraser does not show that Habermas's theory of society is insufficiently critical. She shows that it is not empirically adequate as a description of social reality with respect to the particular issue of "male dominance and female subordination."[7] As a result of this inadequacy, Habermas's descriptive framework arguably reinforces certain hegemonic, asymmetrical, and unequal social relations between women and men, rather than egalitarian ones, notwithstanding the theory's own normative claims. But this demonstrable *political* failing does not make it any less *critical*.

As far as its criticality is concerned, rather, the limitation of Habermas's theory of communicative action (and the theory of communicative ethics associated with it) concerns his attempt to legitimize a principle of normative judgement – a standard of critique in the narrow, ethical-political sense – on the basis of his inquiry into its philosophical grounds (a "critique" in the broader, philosophical sense). For, like any other theory that involves a philosophical inquiry into the conditions of possibility for judgement, whether theoretical, practical (as in this case), or reflective, the theory will be vulnerable to deconstruction. That is to say, the theory will be open to a quasi-critical interrogation of its own claim to critical responsibility. This means, essentially, that a theory can be critical or it can be prescriptive, but it cannot simultaneously be both. Consequently, the relationship between philosophy and politics must be differently construed. A critical theory or

[7] Ibid.

critical phenomenology *can* intervene politically, I will venture, not because it provides a truer or better description, but on the contrary, to the extent that it undoes or disrupts the assumptions and norms that constitute our descriptions of the social order at any given time or place. This disruption, I conclude, is the opening in which political struggle takes place.

Undecidability or *différance*

The problematic concerning "criticality" that I outline above can be spelled out as follows. On one hand, the demand for the foundational conditions of possibility (the imperative associated with the principle of reason), is the philosophical demand itself. As Derrida elaborates,

> To respond to the call of the principle of reason is to "render reason," to explain effects through their causes, rationally; it is also to ground, to justify, to account for on the basis of principles or roots. Keeping in mind that Leibnizian moment whose originality should not be underestimated, the response to the call of the principle of reason is thus a response to the Aristotelian requirements, those of metaphysics, of primary philosophy, of the search for "roots," "principles," and "causes." At this point, scientific and technoscientific requirements lead back to a common origin. And one of the most insistent questions in Heidegger's meditation is indeed that of the long "incubation" time that separated this origin from the emergence of the principle of reason in the seventeenth century. Not only does that principle constitute the verbal formulation of a requirement present since the dawn of Western science and philosophy, it provides the impetus for a new era of purportedly "modern" reason, metaphysics and technoscience.[8]

This is why Kant undertook the critique of pure reason, why Habermas developed the theory of communicative reason, and why Husserl, for his part, insisted that he could not call himself a "philosopher" unless he was prepared to take on the general task "of the critique of logical and practical reason, [as well as] of axiological reason in general."[9] Husserl's project, as is well known, involved the

[8] Jacques Derrida, "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils," transl. Catherine Porter and Edward P. Morris, *diacritics* 13(3), 1983, 8.

[9] Edmund Husserl, diary entry, September 25, 1906, cited in the "Introduction" to *Die Idee der Phänomenologie. Fünf Vorlesungen*, ed. W. Biemel (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1950), vii, quoted and translated by Michael Marder in *Phenomena–Critique–Logos: The Project of Critical Phenomenology* (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 15.

attempt to identify the subjective conditions of possibility for experience. His intent was to produce knowledge that can be qualified as apodictic – "both necessary and certain"[10] – and thereby to overcome the "crisis of the sciences" by sending logos back to "the things themselves."[11] Husserl's later turn to the question of genesis further reflects his recognition of the same requirement. As Michael Marder reminds us, Husserl mobilizes the arguments of Aristotle and Kant to justify phenomenology as "*prima philosophia*," insofar as it "reunites under one roof all questions of possibility."[12] But this is not surprising, given that the need to respond to the demand for grounds is the philosophical imperative as such.

On the other hand, however, when this call is answered rigorously in any particular case, without compromise, one finds that "roots, principles, and causes" cannot be determined without an ideological move that closes or halts the critical investigation. This is because, as deconstruction shows, the difference between logic and rhetoric is strictly undecidable. The rhetorical, figurative, or literary dimensions of language cannot be finally separated from its logical and grammatical functions, and this undecidability must be covered over ideologically. In reading after deconstructive reading, the fundamental logical oppositions through which various philosophical arguments are constructed are shown to come undone. This outcome is evident throughout Derrida's oeuvre, whether one considers his deconstruction of the logical distinctions between law and violence in Walter Benjamin texts, or between politics and friendship in those of Carl Schmitt, or whether one turns to Derrida's consideration of the fraught relation between ethics and ontology in his reading of Levinas, or of the difference between expression and indication in his reading of Husserl's analysis of the sign.[13] In these and countless other cases, we find that the logical condition of possibility for the fundamental *difference* on which the argument rests is a spatial and temporal "movement," an irreducible spacing and deferral within meaning as it were, which Derrida calls *différance*.

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[10] Duane Davis, "The Phenomenological Method," in Gail Weiss, Ann Murphy, and Gayle Salamon (eds.), *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 6.

[11] Marder, *Phenomena–Critique–Logos*, 24.

[12] Ibid., 19.

[13] The works by Derrida to which I refer are, respectively, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson (eds.), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 3–67; "The Politics of Friendship," transl. Gabriel Motzkin, *The Journal of Philosophy* 85(11), 1988, 632–644; "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing and Difference*, transl. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); and *Voice and Phenomenon: Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl's Phenomenology*, transl. Leonard Lawlor (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011). The list of possible examples is immense.

This notorious neologism, *différance*, expresses the Gödelian idea of "undecidability" to which I have just alluded. Kurt Gödel, it will be recalled, demonstrated in 1931 that for any formal axiomatic mathematical system (or calculus) whose consistency is given, it is possible to derive a mathematical proposition that belongs to the calculus, but which cannot be determined as either true or false on its basis. This is referred to as the "undecidability" theorem, because it states that "if the calculus is consistent, neither G nor ~G [not G] is formally derivable from the axioms of arithmetic."[14] Gödel then showed that although formula G is literally "undecidable" in formal terms, it *is* a true arithmetical statement.[15] This second theorem formulates the condition of consistency itself *as* a mathematical proposition, and states that the proposition can be proven as both true *and* false within any formal axiomatic system. Thus Gödel showed (through a recursive move) that one of the key conditions for any calculus, namely, its internal consistency as reflected in its capacity to exclude contradictions, cannot be established mathematically. In this sense, the second theorem also demonstrates the structural incompleteness of every calculus. Together these theorems show why the fundamental conditions of possibility *for* formal mathematical systematization, namely consistency and completeness, must necessarily escape the possibility *of* arithmetical proof (that is, they are logically impossible), notwithstanding that they nonetheless must be assumed for the calculus in question.

Derrida's readings demonstrate that the Gödelian insight applies to philosophical systems too. An unremitting investigation into a philosophy's own conditions of possibility, namely, the demand for decidable, logical grounds, will result in the inevitable discovery of its conditions of *im*possibility; that is, it will reveal the undecidability (and, hence, the inconsistency and incompleteness) on which the philosophy is based. *Différance* is thus closely related to Gödel's formula G because, like the Gödelian theorems, it discloses what is neither an intrinsic feature of, nor external to, the closed philosophical system. *Différance* is what is undecidable by the system or claim, and yet logically inseparable from it.

Once revealed, *différance* thus undoes (or deconstructs) the logical *differences* on which the system depends. And, insofar as deconstruction exposes the irreducibly undecidable dimensions of logical, philosophical thought, it reveals that a certain dogmatic quality must attend the determination of any principled judgement, including an ethical one. This dogmatism will have to be covered over if a principle of judgement is to stand. In other words, whenever principles or causes are determined for particular forms of judgement, they will (have to) have been

[14] Ernest Nagel and James R. Newman, *Gödel's Proof* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), 86.
[15] Ibid., 85, 86.

established illegitimately. As a result, the *critical* demand for grounds, the very imperative by virtue of which normative legitimacy is established, will not have been fulfilled.

The Kantian paradigm: Critique and/or critique

This paradox, whereby the conditions of possibility for criticality are necessary and yet impossible due to the ineradicability of logical undecidability, comes into its sharpest relief in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Kant's critical project provides not only a paradigmatic example of the undecidability that conditions the possibility of systematic knowledge in general. Beyond this, Kant designed the original blueprint for the logical structure and reach of ethical-political "critique" in particular. Thus, his critical architectonic is the quintessential test case regarding the question of how critical judgement is possible.

Specifically, Kant set out to establish the a priori principles underlying all the interests of human reason. These interests were embodied in three critical questions: what may one know (the conditions of theoretical reason); what ought one to do (the conditions of practical reason); and for what may one hope (the conditions of reflective, teleological judgement).[16] His intention was to produce a doctrinal account of the conditions of possibility for knowledge in general, based on his principled answer to each question. And, indeed, his critical project (the "critique of pure reason" as a whole) culminates in a set of principles that are said to determine the legitimacy – the scope and limitations – of each of the forms of knowledge under investigation. Taken together, these would then constitute an architectonic plan of the transcendental conditions for knowledge in general. From this perspective, in other words, critique is none other than the radical interrogation of philosophical grounds or conditions; it entails the interrogation of the claim to "science" in the philosophical sense of systematicity. The Kantian undertaking was aimed, accordingly, at producing a "scientific" account of reason, an epistemological doctrine of knowledge in all its essential forms, in order to fulfill the modern project of replacing ideology, dogma, and opinion with enlightenment.

Now, this "critical" project writ large is what I will call "Critique" in the meta-sense; it is designated by a capital "C." It is what Habermas was up to when he undertook his analysis of communicative action, an analysis that is similarly intended as a part of a systematic account of how different forms of rationality are possible. This project bears directly on "critical theory" in the narrow, political

[16] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. Norman Kemp Smith (London: MacMillan, 1929), 635.

sense of the term, because a Critical inquiry into the conditions of practical reason, in particular, is needed to establish a standard of ethical-political critique. A standard of judgement is the basis for "critique" in Fraser's sense (lower case "c"); it allows one to *criticize*, that is, to decide what one ought and ought not to do. Put briefly, a Critique establishes the conditions of possibility for (ethical-political) critique (for *krinein*) by determining its governing principle. Thus, just as Kant's Critique of pure reason is said to authorize the principle of the moral law in terms of "freedom" or "autonomy," so Habermas's theory of communicative action is intended to authorize the moral principles of solidarity and dialogical reciprocity. Such normative principles, in turn, can then be mobilized by a particular critical theory (such as one based on feminism or anti-racism, for example) which is aimed at the eradication of a particular form of injustice. This is how a critical theory, as such, is typically thought to intervene.

From a structural or logical point of view, then, the criterion that is specified is not what matters. Nor, for that matter, does it matter which philosophical approach one adopts for the broader Critique. What matters is their logical relationship. Unless a particular standard of moral judgement is justified by its connection to a larger conceptual framework (whether epistemological, ontological, phenomenological, or pragmatic, for example), one cannot lay claim to a legitimate, ethical-political critique. For, in this case, one will not have escaped the possibility that one's values are merely relative. For the modern era, in other words, what is at issue as far as criticality is concerned is not any particular moral value or approach, but rather the structural connection (designed by Kant) between a philosophical justification in general (a consistent, systematic Critique), and a logical principle of normative judgement in particular (the moral lever for critique).

When deconstruction is brought to bear on the relationship between "Critique" and "critique" within the Kantian architectonic, therefore, it will have significant implications for any theory that purports to be "critical," including those associated with the burgeoning field of critical phenomenology. For deconstruction shows that the principle of moral action that is needed to qualify a *critical* conception of reason cannot be transcendentally established, because the distinction between Critique and critique cannot be logically sustained. Consequently, the system is neither consistent nor complete.[17]

As I elaborate below with respect to phenomenology, this structural relationship between Critique and critique holds regardless of the partisanship of the conceptual framework; the problematic thus displaces Fraser's definition of

[17] The discussion of Kant here and in what follows is the schematic of an argument I have elaborated at length elsewhere. For the full account see, *The Lucid Vigil: Deconstruction, Desire and the Politics of Critique* (New York and London: Routledge, 2019), esp. 59-69, 70-81.

"critique." It is important to see, therefore, how the system comes undone. Specifically, this outcome becomes evident when one attends to three significant moments of argumentative slippage that occur at various levels of Kant's analysis. The first of these concerns the difference between a "doctrine" of knowledge and its propaedeutic (or preparatory) "Critique."[18] The doctrine refers to "metaphysics" or "pure philosophy," according to Kant. It is said to encompass "everything that can ever be known a priori as well as the exposition of that which constitutes a system of the pure philosophical modes of knowledge of this type."[19] This is the "idea of science," or "transcendental philosophy."[20] The purpose of the Critical project as a whole, accordingly, is to lay down an architectonic plan *for* that "idea of science" by systematically establishing its a priori conditions of possibility.[21] "As such," Kant insists, "it should be called a [C]ritique, not a doctrine, of pure reason."[22]

Yet, despite the fact that these two terms are not identical, their meanings are effectively collapsed. On one hand, the metaphysical doctrine is said to be "inclusive of criticism" and thus all-encompassing.[23] On the other hand, Kant says that, together with metaphysics, it is "especially that criticism" of reason (the "introduction or propaedeutic to metaphysics") which "alone properly constitutes what may be entitled philosophy."[24] Moreover, he also specifies that the intended result of the Critical investigation – the architectonic plan for the scientific doctrine – is itself "the *doctrine* of the scientific in our knowledge," precisely because *systematic* unity is what "first raises ordinary knowledge to the rank of science."[25] It would thus appear that the propaedeutic Critique itself, when complete, constitutes a "scientific doctrine" of pure philosophy, insofar as it provides a systematic, unified plan of knowledge as a whole, which (when understood as pure philosophy) includes its propaedeutic Critique. Critique is, thus, impossibly, the philosophical doctrine of a doctrine of philosophy that includes it.

The slippage between the terms "doctrine" and "Critique" serves an important purpose, because Kant actually needs to have it both ways. On one hand, the Critique (of pure reason) has to be identified with the doctrine (of philosophy) as a whole because, as the transcendental investigation into the conditions of possibility

[18] I use the upper case throughout to distinguish this meta-level of logical analysis from an ethical-political critique, as per the previous explanation.
[19] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 659.
[20] Ibid., 60.
[21] Ibid., 20.
[22] Ibid., 58-59.
[23] Ibid., 659.
[24] Ibid., 665.
[25] Ibid., 653, emphasis added.

of knowledge, it is what establishes the *scientific* quality of each of reason's interests, including, most importantly, the preeminent, moral interest of pure practical reason.[26] Moral knowledge is verified scientifically by virtue of its qualification for placement within the Critical (doctrinal) framework. Within this framework the critical form of reason that Kant calls "practical" is governed by a distinct logical principle. On the other hand, the Critique also has to be distinguished from the doctrine, because moral (practical) knowledge can only be established as critical in the narrow, ethical-political sense insofar as reason is explained in moral rather than in strictly logical terms. For this purpose, a normative rather than an epistemological mode of Critical inquiry is required.

The second moment of equivocation reflects this paradox. The Critical inquiry can be distinguished from the encompassing doctrine of pure philosophy, it turns out, but only insofar as its sense slides from the broad epistemological into the narrower, normative meaning of "critique." This becomes clear when we examine Kant's investigation into the conditions of practical reason in particular. Here the intent is to provide the ground for moral knowledge in the form of a logical principle that governs this specific form of judgement. On Kant's view, moral knowledge is governed by the law of "freedom"; this moral principle is contrasted to the theoretical laws of nature and also (subsequently) to the subjective principle of reflective (or axiological) judgement. But, unlike his determination of the laws of nature, Kant's Critical evidence for our knowledge of the law of freedom rests on an ungrounded moral claim rather than on a logically definitive one. Specifically, his answer to the question of how moral knowledge is possible is essentially that the moral law of freedom *is*, itself, a subjective motive; it is a "drive" that takes the form of a "purely nonsensuous interest" in "obedience to the law."[27]

This moral "feeling" of respect for the moral law – which is what "autonomy" as self-legislation in its positive sense means – is the only feeling "we can know completely a priori and the necessity of which we can discern."[28] It is therefore the real ground of practical reason on Kant's account. Hence, as I have put it elsewhere,

[26] For Kant's claims about the superiority of practical reason among reason's occupations, see the *Critique of Pure Reason*, esp. 653-658, and *Critique of Practical Reason*, third edition, transl. Lewis White Beck (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1993), 3, 128.

[27] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 83.

[28] Ibid., 77

> the "apodictic law of practical reason" through which the reality of freedom is "proved" turns out to be not the principle of freedom as such, not the moral law which expresses it, and not even the mere consciousness of the moral law. What alone is "apodictic," rather, is the specific experience of the "sublime" feeling of "respect" for the law.[29]

What is most important, then, is that the a priori law of freedom can only be established as a logical principle insofar as the subject is restricted, dogmatically, to its capacity to respond to the moral law. What characterizes the rational subject as such, in other words, is our responsibility (our response-ability) to the moral law. Respect is simply given as the "mysterious and wonderful, but frequent, regard which human judgement *does have* for the moral law."[30] It is because of what is sublime about *us*, in short, that the moral good can be logically established as such.

On one hand, it thus emerges, the moral feeling of respect is needed to establish the logical principle of freedom; indeed, as far as Kant is concerned, respect for the law "is morality itself."[31] We cannot establish the principle of moral knowledge as freedom, in other words, unless we are already able to determine the difference between what we ought and ought not to do, and it is only our *feeling* of respect for, our subjective response to, the law of morality that makes this possible. To this extent, criticality in its narrow, moral sense, that is, the possibility of a judgement based on an ethical principle, precedes the epistemological Critique in the case of practical reason, and provides *its* ground.

On the other hand, however, it nonetheless remains that Critique is also the epistemological condition for "critique." For, by virtue of a Critical inquiry into the conditions of possibility for practical reason, the principle of moral knowledge can be placed among the others within the architectonic of pure philosophy, and thereby legitimated scientifically. Reason in its pure practicality qualifies for such inclusion, in other words, because its a priori principle has actually been established; this principle is specified by the Critical inquiry as "freedom," that is, as autonomy in its positive sense, as we have seen. Thus, just as the moral feeling of respect grounds the possibility of moral knowledge, so the Critique of moral knowledge grounds the principle of respect for the law, a principle that takes the form of freedom, as expressed in the categorical imperative.

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[29] Gaon, *The Lucid Vigil*, 77. The internal quotations are from Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 3, 8.
[30] Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 85n, emphasis added.
[31] Ibid., 79.

Importantly, this second equivocation – whereby the Critique is essentially collapsed into the narrowly critical form of knowledge (i.e., into reason in its pure practicality) – makes it possible to assert that the Critique and the doctrine are *not* the same. For in this case the Critique establishes reason as normative (as critical), not as scientific. And, once again, the slippage serves an important argumentative end. It allows Kant to argue that, despite the fact that the Critique was initially aimed at systematizing what is scientific in our knowledge, including the knowledge of morality, Critique can also be called in, ultimately, to provide the normative legitimation of reason in its scientificity. In particular, Kant writes towards the end of the *Critique of Pure Reason* that, in addition to the "scholastic concept of a system of knowledge which is sought solely in its character as a science," there is also "another concept of philosophy"; it is "the science of the relation of all knowledge to the essential ends of human reason (*teleologia rationis humanae*)."[32] In other words, the conception of philosophy with which Kant is most concerned does not, finally, have to do with its character as science, but rather with its relation to our ultimate moral vocation as human beings. This telos is reflected only in the question of practical reason, namely, "what ought I to do?" It is precisely because a Critique differs from a doctrine of pure philosophy that this ultimate conception of philosophy can prevail.

Thus a third moment of logical undecidability actually underwrites the other two: by virtue of the way in which the Critique becomes critical, reason can be said to provide the moral justification for the very doctrine of philosophy that was supposed to provide moral knowledge with *its* scientific legitimacy. While the identity of the doctrine and the Critique establishes reason's scientificity, so to speak, their difference is necessary to establish reason's normativity.

The argument is therefore bought at the cost of its logical consistency. For it is only when "critique" is mobilized in both senses at once that Kant actually instantiates the ethical-political ideal of *critical* reason; that is, an ideal of reason that is simultaneously scientifically legitimate *and* practically normative. This simultaneity is the logical condition of possibility for such an ideal. When they are taken together, these distinctions entail a play on the term "Critique," whereby it oscillates between the meaning of "doctrine" and that of (lower case) "critique." This equivocation is not immediately apparent as long as only one of the distinctions is being put to work at a time. But when they are mobilized simultaneously, it emerges that "Critique" is *both-neither* "doctrine" *and-nor* "critique."

[32] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 657, 658.

And this means that what is strictly inside the critical system, and what constitutes the system itself, is literally undecidable in the Gödelian sense. In play at the heart of the Kantian architectonic, one finds, is what Derrida calls *différance*: an undecidable movement between, in this case, the inside and the outside of the conceptual system. For here "Critique" signifies not only a unified "doctrine" of pure philosophy, or the frame of the Kantian architectonic, but also its "inside"; as "critique," Critique also indicates the standard for moral legitimacy in particular. A *différantial* movement that one can designate as "C/critique," therefore, seems to be the logical condition of possibility for the fixed *difference* between "doctrine" and "critique." And this means, in turn, that the system cannot be complete.

What's critical? ... redux

If the Kantian problematic is generalizable, I have suggested, it is because what matters is not the specific principle of moral (or critical) judgement that Kant finds out. Rather, it is the logical structure by virtue of which what is normatively "critical" can be established at all. Like any theory that attempts to determine the conditions of possibility for judgement in general, a critical theory that determines the grounds for ethical-political judgement in particular will be vulnerable to deconstruction, because (ironically) it will be insufficiently Critical. This does not mean the theory fails to illuminate a particular political struggle (i.e., that it is not sufficiently partisan or not empirically adequate), but rather that it fails to acknowledge its own implication in political and social forces (i.e., that it is already partisan, in ways that are not avowed).

Specifically, I have argued that a philosophical doctrine or social-theoretical framework that provides a logical criterion for a moral decision (for *krinein*) – which is what a critical political theory always needs – will do so at the cost of obscuring its own constitutive undecidability. In this case, the theory will have betrayed the classic philosophical imperative, because it will have covered over the theory's own ungrounded ground – namely, the undecidable *difference* between Critique and critique – on which the determination of what is progressive and emancipatory, as contrasted to what is regressive or oppressive, depends. If, as deconstruction persuasively shows, the rhetorical, ideological, or dogmatic dimensions of Critical inquiry are irreducible, then we cannot get to the principle, fundament, or root. Consequently, a logically-determined ethical norm, unsullied

by any unavowed ethical, political, or social interests, is strictly impossible.[33] This is the result of the recursive (Gödelian) move, whereby the conditions of possibility of the Critical inquiry itself are subjected to interrogation. When a theory is made hyperbolically "critical" in this way, by being turned back upon itself, it deconstructs itself.

If the foregoing discussion is correct, it will have implications for a wide assortment of critical theories, not just those based on Kantian ethics. For, I have argued, no critical theory can do without a determinable standard of critique, and such a standard must be grounded (the reason for it must be rendered) through a Critical analysis of its conditions of possibility, regardless of the political agenda it supports. On the view that I have presented here, a critical theory does not merely identify with a given set of purportedly laudable political movements. It offers a philosophical account of why those movements are laudatory, emancipatory, or progressive to begin with. It specifies and justifies, in order to mobilize, a particular criterion of ethical-political critique. Now, this understanding of the structural requirements of "critique," which is both gained from and problematized by a deconstructive reading of Kant, is enormously useful. First, it makes it possible to sort through the many ways in which "criticality" is defined in current phenomenological research. And, second, it allows us to understand what is "critical" about phenomenology and what is not. In other words, the deconstruction of the Kantian paradigm allows us to recast the political limitations and possibilities of "criticality" in the wake of its undecidability.

Before I outline those conclusions, however, it is necessary to review some of the recent developments in critical phenomenology to illustrate the first point. For, just as in critical theory more broadly, so too in phenomenology; scholars working in this field are questioning some of its basic tenets with a view to making phenomenology more relevant with respect to the social and political struggles of the times. The question is, however, to what specific end?

[33] Levinas's phenomenological account of the ethical relation (as prior to or beyond being) appears to bypass the demand for a logically-determined ethical norm, because the ethical relation is said to precede cognition. A key question here is whether the argument can stand on strictly phenomenological grounds, or whether it depends upon a phenomenologically unwarranted religious belief. But in any case, Levinas develops a theory of ethics, not a critical political theory of society. For my discussion of some of the difficulties associated with Levinasian ethics and with its relation to political critique, see *The Lucid Vigil*, esp. 180-190.

Within the literature there is no solid consensus about what criticality can accomplish. One finds instead a wide variety of claims about how a revised form of phenomenology can contribute to, explain, or itself take the form of social and political critique. For example, Duane Davis and Laura McMahon distinguish critical phenomenology from its classic forms by virtue of its capacity to produce descriptions that are themselves normatively prescriptive[34] or, in Johanna Oksala and Lisa Guenther's terminology, politically transformative.[35] For Marder and Salamon, in contrast, what is specifically critical about phenomenological descriptions is that they shore up new principles for political judgement, such as rupture, wonder, openness, or affirmation.[36] Davis also invokes this version of "criticality" when he claims that phenomenology's "paraxial promise" lies in its capacity to reveal "instability" rather than "unshakeable truths."[37] Finally, the editors of the new journal *Puncta* explain critical phenomenology differently again; they say (among other things) that it offers descriptions that (themselves) participate in "the ethical becoming of the social structures or essences" under investigation, which therefore demand "responsible critique."[38] As McMahon expresses this idea, critical phenomenological descriptions can "help us to articulate more honest forms of cultural identity and more just forms of cross-cultural engagement" because they offer more expansive accounts of the cultural differences that constitute our "dynamic, historical world."[39]

The plethora of definitions may seem confusing, but if one maps them onto the Kantian blueprint, the variations start to make sense. Broadly speaking, critical phenomenology is portrayed either as **a)** a philosophical description of experience that can *contribute* to a critical theory of society once it has been adequately "Criticized"; **b)** a meta-theoretical account of the conditions of possibility for

[34] See Davis, "The Phenomenological Method," esp. 4, 9n2; and Laura McMahon, "Religion, Multiculturalism, and Phenomenology as a Critical Practice: Lessons from the Algerian War of Independence," *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology*, 3(1), 2020, 19.

[35] Johanna Oksala, "Reply to Beata Stawarska," *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology*, 2(1), 2019, 42; and Lisa Guenther, "Critical Phenomenology," in Gail Weiss, Ann Murphy, and Gayle Salamon, (eds.), *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 14.

[36] See Marder, *Phenomena–Critique–Logos*, 12, 77, 83, 127; and Salamon, "What's Critical about Critical Phenomenology?" 11, 12, 15.

[37] Davis, "The Phenomenological Method," 7-8.

[38] Martina Ferrari et al., "Editors' Introduction: Reflections on the First Issue," *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology*, 1(1), 2018, 5, 7.

[39] McMahon, "Religion, Multiculturalism, and Phenomenology," 3, 21.

theoretical knowledge which, when properly undertaken, can *explain* how a standard of ethical political critique is possible; or **c)** a normative, prescriptive, or transformative description *itself*, so to speak, in its own right.

Consider the first definition, for example, which is that a "critical" form of phenomenology is one which offers a better "Critical framework" (in my terminology) because it is more expansive, dynamic, or inclusive. Guenther takes this approach when she interrogates the methodological condition of possibility *for* a rigorous account of experience (in the apodictic sense of Husserlian "rigour"), namely, the perspective of first-person, singular consciousness, upon which Husserl insists.[40] Through a ground-breaking analysis of the consequences of extended periods of solitary confinement, Guenther shows that,

> if one is deprived for long enough of the experience of other concrete persons in a shared or common space, it is possible for one's own sense of personhood to diminish or even collapse, while the transcendental ego, or the pure capacity for experience, remains, now unhinged from a shared world in which its perpetual flow of impressions could receive the bodily validation of others. Without the concrete experience of other embodied egos oriented toward common objects in a shared world, my own experience of the boundaries of those perceptual objects begins to waver.[41]

Unless intersubjectivity is seen as an essential condition for experience, Guenther argues, the phenomenological description will be "insufficiently critical." That is, it will have failed to account for the ways in which "historical and social structures also shape our experience, not just empirically or in a piecemeal fashion, but in what we might call a transcendental way."[42] An immanent Critique of its own conditions of possibility thus reveals that Husserl's own phenomenological Critique of experience, no less than Habermas's social-theoretical Critique of communicative action, is empirically and conceptually impoverished.

This interrogation of the conceptual framework (the overarching Critique) is the form that "criticality" takes in a number of recent discussions. Salamon says this explicitly, for example, when she submits that a "critical phenomenology" is one which "reflects on the structural conditions of its own emergence, and in this it is following an imperative that is both critical in its reflexivity and phenomenological in its taking-up of the imperative to describe what it sees in order to see it

[40] Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), xxviii.

[41] Ibid., 34-35.

[42] Guenther, "Critical Phenomenology," 12.

anew."[43] The editors of *Puncta* make the same point. They write, "If phenomenology is a descriptive practice, then critical phenomenology questions the conditions of the possibility of a phenomenological description and, in so doing, modifies the scope, content, and method of said description."[44] In a similar vein, Beata Stawarska agrees with Oksala that classic phenomenology is insufficiently attentive to gender and thus "needs to be transformed"; she merely contests Oksala's assertion that an "immanent critique" of the phenomenological method will result in a radical break between phenomenology and what one might variously call "critical," "political," "transformative," or "post-phenomenology."[45]

Whether the break between classic and critical phenomenology that the immanent critique produces is definitive or not, however, does not alter the structural point. For what is in question in all of these cases is the descriptive framework itself, the Critical inquiry into the conditions of possibility for (in this case) experience, not the critical standard of judgement by virtue of which a critique can be said to intervene. In other words, while a duly Critical (i.e., a self-Critical) framework might be more "honest" or more "encompassing," it could not be considered more "just." For that purpose, it would have to be coupled with a critical theoretical standard of judgement, which is to say, it would have to establish the conditions of possibility for "critique" in its ethical-political sense. Merely modifying or transforming the framework itself cannot accomplish that end. Thus, when McMahon asserts, for instance, that "the epistemological commitment" to the recognition of different cultural horizons "must also be an ethical-political commitment to the value of multiculturalism," we must underline that there is no immediate reason why it should.[46]

In fact, as Salamon explains, when philosophy directs "toward itself the very same interrogation that it directs toward all forms of knowledge" as Merleau-Ponty commends, the result is not "verification but strangeness."[47] This is why, as she says, critical theory should not be dismissed: it is needed as a "supplement to phenomenology," because (unlike phenomenology) critical theory is engaged with issues of violence, power, injustice, and inequality.[48] Guenther tacitly admits as much as well. In the conclusion to her book on *Solitary Confinement*, she writes that not only is "phenomenology not enough," but, "even critical phenomenology is not enough. We must also build a social movement of

[43] Salamon, "What's Critical about Critical Phenomenology?" 12.
[44] Ferrari et al., "Editors' Introduction," 3.
[45] Beata Stawarska, "Feminist Experiences: Foucauldian and Phenomenological Investigations by Johanna Oksala," *Puncta: Journal of Critical Phenomenology*, 2(1), 2019, 39; and Oksala, "Reply to Beata Stawarska," 42.
[46] McMahon, "Religion, Multiculturalism, and Phenomenology," 21.
[47] Salamon, "What's Critical about Critical Phenomenology," 11.
[48] Ibid., 13.

resistance to social death – a movement that makes good on the insights of critical phenomenology with ethical responsibility and political solidarity."[49] As Guenther puts it elsewhere, "critical phenomenology must go beyond a description of oppression [by] developing concrete strategies for dismantling oppressive structures."[50]

Taken on its own, neither an epistemological nor a phenomenological Critique of the conditions of possibility for knowledge can help to explain the meaning of justice or the nature of the "responsibility" for which one calls, unless the Critique discloses the a priori conditions for ethical-political judgement in particular. For this purpose, the Critical doctrine must be separable from, so that it can authorize, a normative standard of critique. If the philosophical framework is subjected to an interrogation of its own conditions, however, this becomes impossible. For what we find when phenomenology is subjected to Critique is that, as in the case of Kant, it deconstructs itself. The values to which it purportedly gives rise are thus destabilized too.

This problem is evident when one adopts the second approach identified earlier, namely, the attempt to explain how a standard of ethical political critique is possible, especially in the wake of a phenomenological philosophy that already has come undone. In other words, among those who take the Critical interrogation of the conditions of possibility for phenomenology as read, we find the further assertion that what is "critical" about this development is precisely that a new criterion of critique is thereby revealed. For Salamon, for instance, the result of the reflective and reflexive turns that Merleau-Ponty advocates is the recognition that the *goal* of phenomenology is "an opening."[51] Marder develops the same point at length. He writes,

> There is – despite the persistent philosophical dream of a seamless integration of judgement and experience, signification and perception, language and things – a cut in the fabric of phenomenology in which phenomena are kept apart from *logos*, even as they are intrinsically articulated with it. The name of the cut, signalling this basic division, is, precisely, "critique" (derived, as the reader will recall, from the Greek *krinein*: to separate, to distinguish, to discern), which thwarts the closure of phenomenology in a self-validating circle of ratiocination and sends the first cracks through the façade built around a way of thinking that was never meant to achieve doctrinal stability.[52]

[49] Guenther, *Solitary Confinement*, 255.
[50] Guenther, "Critical Phenomenology," 16.
[51] Salamon, "What's Critical about Critical Phenomenology," 11.
[52] Marder, *Phenomena–Critique–Logos*, 10, 12, 18, 77, 83, 127.

For Marder, accordingly, what gains critical force in this context is precisely the power of the break, rather than the synthesis of the system, contrary to traditional assumptions. Indeed, he asserts, phenomenologists have tended to suffer from a "*déformation professionnelle*"; they "have grown allergic to splits, fissures and caesurae of all sorts" and so, instead of acknowledging "the excessive plentitude of givenness, they have left unconsidered the positive potential of rupture and negativity."[53] Davis underlines the same potential when he submits that "new ways to appreciate the phenomenological method might open up just where it bespeaks instability and generates awe and wonder about the ever-shifting, trembling ground."[54] Specifically, Davis continues, we need to recognize "the encroachment and overlapping of differences both among us all and as the intersectionality of differences *which we are*. In order to achieve a critical phenomenology, phenomenology must be seen as a philosophy of difference rather than identity."[55]

What Salamon, Marder, and Davis fail to appreciate, however, is that *différance* does not equal difference, because it does not signify *this* thing or *that*. As I have explained, *différance* is the spatial and temporal movement within meaning – or, one might say, the opening, the rupture, or the irrecoverable affirmation – that makes discernable *differences* possible. Thus, quite apart from the point that (contra Marder) *krinein* signifies the latter (the cut or the decision), rather than the former (the undecidable conditions of its possibility), what is important is that *différance* is not an identity but a "trace." It does not signify any determinable *thing*. As soon as *différance* is determined as a concept (as in the phrase, "differences *which we are*"), therefore, even as an ambiguous one, it is no longer an undecidable trace. As Derrida explains,

> Henceforth, it must be recognized that all the determinations of such a trace – all the names it is given – belong as such to the text of metaphysics that shelters the trace, and not to the trace itself. There is no trace *itself*, no *proper* trace. Heidegger indeed says the difference could not appear as such. ("Illumination of the distinction therefore cannot mean that the distinction appears as a distinction.") The trace of the trace which (is) difference above all could not appear or be named *as such*, that is, in its presence. It is the *as such* which precisely, and as such, evades us forever. Thereby the determinations which name difference always come from the metaphysical order.[56]

[53] Ibid., 12.

[54] Davis, "The Phenomenological Method," 7.

[55] Ibid., 8.

[56] Jacques Derrida, "*Ousia and Grammē*: Note on a Note from *Being and Time*," in *Margins of Philosophy*, transl. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 66, internal reference omitted.

What the acknowledgement of *différance*, "rupture," or "opening" entails for phenomenology, rather, is that neither the first-person perspective, nor the pure description, nor the complete reduction, are methodologically sound. On the contrary, just as the first-person, singular standpoint is made possible through prior, intersubjective, embodied and concrete relations, so the eidetic reduction depends upon the contingency of lived experience. As a result, neither the border of phenomenological knowledge, nor its phenomenological objects, can be decisively confirmed.

In an important respect, then, the deconstruction of the conditions of possibility for Critique – the recursive, Gödelian move whereby one attempts to systematize the very conditions for systematicity, as it were – is not a "critical operation" in any ordinary sense. It does not endorse any particular social movement, nor does it supply a critical standard of judgement (a foundational principle), by virtue of which one can take a determinate, political stand. It cannot do so, as Derrida says, precisely because "the instance of *krinein* or of *krisis* (decision, choice, judgment, discernment) is itself, as is all the apparatus of transcendental critique, one of the essential 'themes' or 'objects' of deconstruction."[57] Similarly, Derrida writes elsewhere, deconstruction "always aims at the trust confided in the critical, critico-theoretical agency, that is, the deciding agency, the ultimate possibility of the decidable; deconstruction is a deconstruction of critical dogmatics."[58] Kant establishes the possibility of the decidable dogmatically when he appeals to the subject's sublime responsibility to the law of reason as the ground of the moral law, as we have seen. Scholars of phenomenology appear to be doing something similar today when they identify the subject's capacity for exposure, or wonder, or awe as the basis for moral critique. Deconstruction thus disrupts the critical operation itself, insofar as it reveals the particular, contingent, political interests that are conveyed by those rhetorical figures, and which are not acknowledged, as such, within the theories themselves. It effectively reveals the limits, harms, occlusions, or violence of the philosophical inquiry or the critical theory itself.

One can show, for example, that the phenomenological description of pure experience, or the bracketing that it calls for, is irreducibly entwined with norms and suppositions that are socially-constituted.[59] That demonstration is itself "critical" in a certain way – it is quasi-critical, so to speak – but it does not make the philosophy

[57] Jacques Derrida, "Letter to a Japanese Friend," in David Wood and Robert Bernasconi (eds.), *Derrida and Différance* (Evanston, Il.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 3.

[58] Jacques Derrida, "*Ja*, or the *Faux-Bond* II," in *Points...: Interviews, 1974-1994*, transl. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 54.

[59] See, for example, Ferrari et al., "Editor's Introduction," 3.

under investigation more *critical* as a result. It cannot do so, because the demonstration of a philosophy's inconsistencies or incompleteness does not legitimate any particular political claim. Such a quasi-critical interrogation of a Critique may, arguably, support a particular political struggle, insofar as one could approach the philosophical text from a given position in order to contest it. But this would merely show how the philosophy in question is complicit in oppression in ways that were not previously seen – as, for example, Fraser shows when she argues that the theory of communicative action is blind to the oppression of women, or Guenther shows when she argues that phenomenology is blind to the violence of solitary, penitentiary confinement. Such an interrogation of a given Critical doctrine does not give rise to any particular standard of critique, however, nor does it transform the philosophical account into a transformative practice.

This is why the third version of criticality listed above is not tenable either. This is the idea that what is "critical" about phenomenology is its capacity to stand *as* a normative or prescriptive description on its own. In its very capacity *as* descriptive, it is claimed, phenomenology can produce social change. McMahon invokes this notion, for example, when she suggests that, insofar as "phenomenology can help us to bracket common prejudices regarding both the neutrality of our own cultures and the monolithic simplicity of other cultures," it can enable "more honest and just visions of multicultural human existence and political transformation to come to the fore."[60] Indeed, she concludes, "by descriptively attending to the nature of such change, we can arrive at some normative prescriptions for how we should approach intercultural criticism and dialogue going forward."[61] As the editors of *Puncta* put the same point,

> Critical phenomenology is an ongoing process of exposing the structures of structures, and of challenging exhaustive understanding through a commitment to tailor methodology to the shape-shifting objects of inquiry. In critiquing phenomenology, then, we can say that critical phenomenology takes up the task of social critique.[62]

From this third perspective, phenomenology is not said to be critical because it provides a truer account of human experience that can *contribute* to a critical theory, nor is it considered critical because it *explains* how a criterion for social critique is possible. In this case, rather, it is the Critical doctrine as such, the descriptive

[60] McMahon, "Religion, Multiculturalism, and Phenomenology," 3.
[61] Ibid, 19.
[62] Ferrari et al., "Editor's Introduction," 3.

framework *itself*, which is said to be normatively imbued. On Davis's view, even Husserl's phenomenology can be qualified as critical in this sense, "insofar as it offers descriptions that reveal truths, thus which are at once prescriptive."[63]

As I argued earlier, however, the collapse of the scientific Critique into the ethical-political critique is logically unsound. In Kant, we saw, it involves the paradoxical claim that even while an epistemological inquiry into grounds (a Critique) is needed to establish the principle of moral judgement on a "scientific" basis, so too is a moral inquiry into epistemology (a critique) needed to establish the normative status of the science. Kant can only establish reason as both scientifically *and* normatively legitimate – that is, as "critical" – by obscuring the tautology behind his appeal to the intrinsic moral value of the transcendental subject. The same must hold for phenomenology too: descriptions can constitute prescriptions only to the extent that they are (transcendentally) true, which is precisely what cannot be confirmed in the wake of phenomenology's Critique. To say that a description constitutes a prescription is to say, essentially, that whatever is, *ought* to be the case, that what is more honest is, by definition, more just.

If one is to avoid the risk of dogmatism – whereby criticality will have been illegitimately foreclosed for the sake of the political claim – one must confront exactly the questions with which we began. Which struggles, which crises, which experiences, or which particular political perspectives have to be encompassed before the description can be said to be "true"? When will we have adequately described them all? In the absence of a critical standard that is separable from the Critique, there is no way to answer this question. Conversely, the presence of a criterion for judgement is problematic too. For, insofar as the "critique" of Critique reveals the impossibility of grounding an ethical-political standard of judgement on apodictic foundations, it undermines the authority of any so-called "critical theory" that calls itself legitimate. On one hand, if the Critical inquiry is taken all the way down, it emerges that the principles, origins, or roots are not there to be found. The grounds for ethical-political decision will have been rendered undecidable. On the other hand, if a standard of ethical-political critique is established, the claim to Criticality is foregone. In order to see what limits and possibilities "criticality" may be said to entail, one therefore would have to recast the relationship between theory and practice significantly. By way of conclusion, I venture some initial remarks.

[63] Davis, "The Phenomenological Method," 9n2.

Concluding reflections on critique

I have been arguing that a theory does not become "critical" when it is added to, intermixed with, or supplemented by a particular political issue or selection of issues, such as feminism, racism, environmentalism, or colonialism, for example. Instead, on my view, a theory can be said to be "critical" when it takes itself, recursively, as its own object of critique. From a classical perspective, in other words, critique involves the radical interrogation of philosophical grounds or conditions – that is, an interrogation of the claim to "science" in the philosophical sense – and, as we have seen, such an interrogation opens the theory to its own (its auto-) deconstruction. This is because the recursive, critical turn exposes a theory's conditions of *im*possibility; the theory's imbrication in social and political conditions, and thus the impossibility of its scientificity, is thereby revealed. A theory becomes (hyperbolically) "critical," paradoxically, only when it deconstructs (itself).

The first and most obvious consequence of this claim is that a theory cannot be said to be "critical" by virtue of being able to contribute to political struggles on the basis of an ethical-political standard, because the legitimacy of the standard cannot be established non-dogmatically. Insofar as the relation between Critique and critique is undecidable, the subject has to be ideologically given. This is the "dogmatism" to which deconstruction relentlessly attends: insofar as the trace of C/critique that this involves has to be covered over, certain *political* interests will always be in play. To be sure, one must always hold to a particular standard or political position in order to intervene. My point is merely that the position cannot be authorized in the way that critical theories attempt, which means that theory cannot intervene in political struggles on that basis. The occlusion of this problem is what was inadequately "critical" about Habermas's social-theoretical framework all along: the theory of communicative action could not have established a political good unless it was driven by a particular normative stance in the first place.[64]

The second corollary of the analysis is that the normativity of the philosophical demand to provide grounds and so to reveal the political stakes – that is the demand for "philosophical responsibility" – is no longer authorized either. This is because, just as in Kant, the investigation into grounds is impelled by a demand (for reason) that cannot ultimately be met (by reason). Again, in other words, because the relation between Critique and critique is tautological, philosophical responsibility cannot be directly explained. Nonetheless, it remains that one cannot expose the imbrication of philosophy and politics at the deepest level of the philosophy's conditions of possibility unless one adheres even more strictly to the

[64] For an extended discussion of the limitations of Habermas's theory, see my "Pluralizing Universal 'Man': The Legacy of Transcendentalism and Teleology in Habermas's Discourse Ethics," *The Review of Politics* 60(4), 1998, 685-718.

demand for grounds than does the philosophical attempt to establish them in the first place. In this respect, deconstruction is not "a critique, in a general or in a Kantian sense,"[65] but it might nonetheless be characterized as a radical or hyperbolic, and paradoxical, form of (quasi) criticality. This is why deconstruction might be said to qualify as a *certain* form of critique: it both is and is not critical, as is a phenomenology that puts its own methodological conditions into question.

This suggests, in the third place, that a hyperbolic, critical move actually opens the political field, rather than closes it. In other words, to the extent that deconstruction in particular, or hyper-criticality more generally, reveals the imbrication of philosophical conceptuality in language, in politics, and in social and cultural life, there is clearly something critical and something political about this mode of critique. Perhaps the political force of critical phenomenology, no less than that of critical theory more generally, can be correspondingly revised. One possible approach is Guenther's suggestion that critical phenomenology can contribute to the remaking or reshaping of the world through a "collective practice of critical interrogation and social change."[66] Guenther's invocation of Audre Lorde's insight, which concerns the political importance of poetry as both "illumination and transformation," is compelling in this context, but it does not quite get at the point.

For Guenther, as she reads Lorde, poetry is illuminating because it allows one to cast new light on one's experiences, thereby giving voice to what had hitherto been felt but not known, and simultaneously creating and changing its meanings. I want to suggest instead, however, that if "poetry is not a luxury," it is not so much because it reveals the "truth" of previously mute experience, but because new descriptions can puncture the given, just as radical, deconstructive critiques can break into, and break open, the always-contestable, *différantial* interpretations that structure the world. Such a form of disruptive critique is what one can call "politics" from an entirely different perspective. On this view, as João Pedro Capocho explains (drawing on Rancière), "politics is not primarily the exercise of power or the deciding of common affairs," but,

> an interruption, a precarious disruption of the "police order," which is construed as a well-ordered "distribution of the sensible" [*partage du sensible*] – that is to say, a system of coordinates that defines modes of being, doing, communicating and thinking, and so establishes borders between visible and invisible, audible and inaudible, thinkable and unthinkable.[67]

[65] Derrida, "Letter to a Japanese Friend," 3.

[66] Guenther, "Critical Phenomenology," 15.

[67] João Pedro Capocho, "Disagreeing before Acting: The Paradoxes of Critique and Politics from Adorno to Rancière," *Theoria and Praxis* 1(1), 2013, 67. The internal quotation is from Jacques Rancière, "Introducing Disagreement," transl. Steven Corcoran, *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 9(3), 2004, 6.

So conceived, Capocho continues, the "radicality" of politics is close to "the 'radicality' of critique, when it conceives of reason as susceptible of being criticized," which is exactly how I have described "critique" here.[68] The quasi-critical intervention, as I understand it, disrupts what constitutes what is thinkable, sayable, or visible, thereby opening the field of politics to contestation or transformation. Deconstruction, or radical critique more generally, is thus "political" insofar as it is the breaking into, and the breaking up of, the philosophical-empirical order. Note, however, that critique so understood is not directly transformative; it intervenes by opening the political field at the heart of the given, and by showing that there is space for contestation. Perhaps phenomenology, like deconstruction in its radical, quasi-critical mode, can be "critical" in this political sense too. Not by revealing what is true, but on the contrary, by challenging the givenness of experience relentlessly, without telos, without closure, and without respite.

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[68] Capocho, "Disagreeing before Acting," 67-68.

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