

Which Anarchism? On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Infinity for (Political) Life: A Response to Simon Critchley's *Infinitely Demanding*

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Abstract: This paper questions whether Critchley's ethical project can adequately talk about anarchism without acknowledging the critiques that political position has of philosophy. It argues that Critchley is too quick to dismiss "philosophical anthropology" as a way of understanding the link between politics and a certain notion of infinity. By a comparison of Noam Chomsky and Emmanuel Levinas, it attempts to show that there is a way of conceiving politics that does not give philosophy the final say.

Keywords: anarchism, infinity, Critchley, Chomsky, Levinas

What is philosophy's relationship to other disciplines? What obligation, if any, does it have? In many ways, philosophy is and always has been parasitic on the subjects whose insights and language it freely borrows: science, anthropology, politics, mathematics, literature and so on. But how to articulate this dynamic? Philosophy at the same time as it borrows gives back perpetually, trying to both go beyond and deepen the subjects it discusses (think of phenomenology's relationship to anthropology, for example). In recent years, Alain Badiou has spoken of philosophy's relationship to its "conditions" and that, while producing no truths of its own, philosophy's task is to "shelter" the truths produced by art, science, politics and love. In *Infinitely Demanding*, although building on Badiou's notion of fidelity, Simon Critchley takes a different approach, attempting to outline a theory of ethical subjectivity that has implications for politics: not just "politics" or "the political" – terms so often used now as to be meaningless – but a specific politics, that of what he calls "anarchic metapolitics". Philosophy's task, according to Critchley, then, is to develop an ethical theory that is both worthy of and helpful to this particular kind of political practice.

But which practice? Critchley has in mind the "direct democratic action" of protestors at WTO summits in Seattle and against the various wars waged by the USA and its allies. The "ethical energy" generated by these movements reveals for

Critchley a new kind of politics in a period in which “the revolutionary proletarian subject has decidedly broken down”.¹ Critchley’s ethics then seeks to be compatible with this wave of action, both descriptively and normatively. For Critchley anarchism is the preferred term (rather than communism, as Badiou and others would have it) because “[t]he idea of communism remains suspect because of the essentialist idealist metaphysics of species-being (*Gattungswesen*) that determines the concept in Marx’s work”.² The “anarchic metapolitics” Critchley proposes in its place must contain no trace of this supposedly “idealist” theory of human nature. Several questions are raised by these claims. First, how does Critchley’s anarchism (which he takes in large part from Levinas, a thinker not generally associated with anarchism as a political tradition) avoid being overdetermined by a theory of human nature, if this is what must be avoided? Can philosophy, or the philosopher, simply take political terms such as anarchism and mobilize them in new ways without paying attention to the historical vicissitudes of such terminology within the political domain itself?

This paper questions whether philosophy, and specifically Critchley’s explicitly ethical approach, can adequately talk about political tendencies such as anarchism without paying attention to what these tendencies themselves have said about philosophy, in theory and in practice. It begins with a discussion of different kinds of anarchism and the role that “infinity” plays in these conceptions, before moving on to make broader claims about the role of philosophical anthropology in politics, and how Critchley is too quick to dismiss such elements as “idealistic” or “essentialist”. The paper finishes with a counter-argument involving Heidegger and the notion of “community”, which attempts to show the risks philosophy runs when it attempts to bring politics in through the back door. The paper attempts to reflect on the uses of concepts of the infinite, the human, the Other and community in a simultaneously philosophical and political way, ultimately concluding that Critchley’s ethical approach misunderstands and misrepresents the politics he claims to be enhancing. What Critchley ultimately misses in his account of “classical” anarchism, which he claims is characterized by “freedom and struggles for liberation”³ as opposed to his call for an anarchic ethics of “infinite responsibility”, is two things: one, that many anarchist theories precisely incorporate a theory of responsibility; and that two, the political critique often made by anarchism of philosophy itself makes it problematic to simply assert or assume that philosophy can take over the term without reflecting on the reasons why anarchism so often has a problem with the discipline in the first place. Critchley’s assumption of the term “anarchism”

1. Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (New York/London: Verso, 2007), 112.

2. *Ibid.*, 118.

3. *Ibid.*, 93.

without reflecting on the often vexed relation between it and philosophy renders his definition somewhat hollow.

In the work of Noam Chomsky, to take one notable example, we can see precisely these two things at work. For Chomsky there is an immediate demand for responsibility. There is also a worry about philosophy. As a way of exploring the concept of anarchism, the next section will directly compare Levinas, from whom Critchley gets his own concept of anarchism, and Chomsky's own, where, perhaps surprisingly, some of the same ideas appear, although the *order* in which they appear makes all the difference, as we shall see.

I. Levinas and Chomsky: two competing conceptions of anarchism

In *Infinitely Demanding* Critchley tries to give both a historically situated and a transcendently justified argument as to why “anarchic metapolitics” is the most appropriate response to the “disappointments” of the contemporary world. As a philosopher, as noted above, there is an assumption that terms such as “anarchism” easily belong to philosophy, and can simply be appropriated by it in the name of a particular type of ethics. While this can be seen as an act of transcendental arrogance on the part of the philosopher, it also causes more serious problems by creating blind spots in the philosophy–politics being presented. There is a long tradition in various strands of anarchism of being extremely suspicious of philosophy, of various attempts to theorize politics, and Critchley's argument would be no exception to this rule. Philosophy when it attempts to justify the status quo, or provides just another way of shackling man to a system, is precisely one of the structures to be resisted. Admittedly, Critchley gets his anarchism from an unlikely source, the work of Emmanuel Levinas, but the lack of historical concern (other than the dismissal of mid-twentieth-century anarchism as primarily concerned with “sexual liberation from bourgeois morality”⁴) does his attempt at a political intervention little good. After all, why would anarchism have a suspicion of philosophy? Is “classical anarchism” really to be reduced to nothing more than demands for sexual liberation? Why does Critchley privilege the “ludic” and carnivalesque aspects of contemporary anarchist movements without reflecting on anarchism as a historical tradition? This section compares the Levinasian conception of anarchism that gets taken up by Critchley and elements of the political work of Chomsky as a way of demonstrating both what Critchley misses in his account of anarchism and how we might think “responsibility” in a different way.

4. *Ibid.*, 93.

In *Humanism of the Other*, in a section entitled “Humanism and An-Archy”, Levinas argues that “[t]he crisis of humanism in our times undoubtedly originates in an experience of human inefficacy accentuated by the very abundance of our means of action and the scope of our ambitions”.⁵ In other words, we feel impotent in the face of the overwhelming possibility of our actions. The humanist is the one who naively believes that progress is still possible, even in the face of “[t]he unburied dead of wars and death camps”, which for Levinas “accredit the idea of a death with no future, making tragicomic the care for one’s self and illusory the pretensions of the *rational animal* to a privileged place in the cosmos, capable of dominating and integrating the totality of being in a consciousness of self”.⁶ So far, so depressing. Critchley’s entire approach in *Infinitely Demanding* is shaped by this argument: philosophy begins in disappointment; pretensions to absolute knowledge or a “direct ontology of things as they are” are fantasies of an Enlightenment mindset that leads primarily to large-scale misery and horror and small-scale depression. Indeed, this is more or less the situation Critchley argues we are in now: a state of despondency that sees its truth in the extremes of the reaction to it, the acts of passive and active nihilism that Critchley thinks characterize our response to “religious” and “political” disappointment – the lack of an experience of faith and the feeling of injustice. So what remains? While Critchley attempts to temper Levinas with humour, his fundamental assertions about the current context and the status of the ethical subject are basically the same. It should be noted, too, that Levinas does indeed already talk about humour, or at least the “comic” (“It pertains to the same man to be tragic and comic”), although it is clear that this comedy is predicated on tragedy, which lends weight to Critchley’s idea that we need to temper heroic ethical authenticity with some light relief: “Death renders senseless all care the Ego would like to have for its existence and destiny. An enterprise with no outcome and always ridiculous; nothing is more comical than the care for itself taken by a being doomed to destruction ... Nothing is more comical or nothing is more tragic”.⁸

When Levinas asks, “to seek subjectivity in radical passivity – is this not surrender to the fatality or determination that is the very abolition of the subject?”⁹ we understand that the subject in question is not the active subject of history, a collective subject, but a minimal, perhaps diminished subject who barely moves at all. The question that follows for Critchley on this point is the following: “if the proletariat is no longer the revolutionary subject, then it raises a deep ques-

5. Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, N. Poller (trans.) (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, [1972] 2003), 45.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, 56.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, 50.

tion as to the nature of political subjectivity".¹⁰ This is indeed a very serious and pressing question but it is not clear that the response to this should be some kind of ethics, rather than a rethinking of politics. Of course, for Critchley, and for Levinas too, there is no real separation between politics and ethics – Critchley switches between the two terms without much comment, pausing only to note that "politics is an ethical practice that arises in a situation of injustice which exerts a demand for responsibility"¹¹ or to state that "if ethics without politics is empty, then politics without ethics is blind".¹² Politics is thus something like the injunction to behave in an ethical way in the face of injustice. Critchley describes the change in mood of his subject as that between disappointment and anger (the latter being "the first political emotion").¹³ It is ethical being that somehow overcomes the "motivational deficit" triggered by contemporary life. But if Critchley takes his clue from Levinas he has to be able to distinguish between the passivity that is a kind of nihilism and the passivity that is the potential site of the most meaningful ethical transformation. This is what Levinas says: "Starting from a radical passivity of subjectivity [ethics] reached the notion of a 'responsibility overflowing freedom', an obedience prior to the reception of orders; from this anarchic situation of responsibility, the analysis – undoubtedly by abuse of language – named the Good".¹⁴ In other words, "[t]he subjectivity of the in-itself is like obedience to an order accomplished before the order makes itself heard: anarchy itself".¹⁵ This is what the Levinasian notion of anarchism taken up by Critchley means: before even a specific ethical demand has been made, one is responsible. Because the demand is inarticulate and non-specific the call is an-archic, literally without a principle or rule. It is thus infinite in the sense of being unlimited, boundless. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas again turns to the question of anarchy: "Proximity is ... *anarchically* a relationship with a singularity without the mediation of any principle, any idealist ... the subject is affected without the source of the affection becoming a theme of representation".¹⁶ Levinas poses the question of whether this unlimited demand might indeed become unbearable or unfree, just as Critchley worries that it might lead to a kind of "self-lacerating masochism":¹⁷ "But isn't this servitude? *Not being able* to get out of responsibility? How can this passivity place the subject 'beyond freedom and non-freedom'? ... if determination by the Other is to be called ser-

10. Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 12.

11. *Ibid.*, 92.

12. *Ibid.*, 13.

13. *Ibid.*, 94.

14. Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, 53.

15. *Ibid.*, 54.

16. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, A. Lingis (trans.) (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, [1974] 1991), 101.

17. Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 84.

virtude the determined must remain *other* with regard to that which determines it".¹⁸ Furthermore:

But anarchy is not disorder as opposed to order ... Disorder is but another order, ... Anarchy troubles being over and beyond these alternatives. It brings to a halt the ontological play which, precisely qua play, is consciousness, where being is lost and found again, and thus illuminated ... Anarchy is persecution.¹⁹

Here anarchy is felt much more obviously painfully ("persecution"). The subject is split and tortured by an element of itself that obliges it to an other. Thus the demand for political action in Critchley's terms is heteronymous with regard to the subject who bears it. In his own words, it is an ethical demand that is "one-sided, radical and unfulfillable".²⁰ But it is not clear that this is a useful way of thinking about political struggle. Political struggle is primarily constituted by a series of often mundane local demands that clarify themselves into larger political ambitions. In this sense, demands for higher wages or better conditions at work are radically fulfillable, which is precisely why they are being made. If the ethical aspect of the political for Critchley concerns the abstract demand for justice, a kind of infinite justice we might say, or rather, "an infinite responsibility that arises in relation to a situation of injustice",²¹ then it is not clear how one moves between the practical, local demand for such and such fulfillable justice, and the second justice, which is constitutively unfulfillable. It is not clear, further, that localized politics requires this second demand. Levinas and Critchley's constitutively split subject seems diametrically opposed to the collective subject that might organize to protest, or strike. Of course this model of the collective subject is the very thing Critchley (and no doubt Levinas too) believes is historically outdated. How then can we move from ethical passivity – if that is all we have – to action? It is not clear that this is possible from Levinas's account of ethical responsibility: "the impossibility of choice is not the result of violence ... it is unimpugnable election by the Good that, for the elected, is always already accomplished. Election by the Good that is, precisely, not *action*".²² Apart from the strangeness of the terminology – who, exactly, is elected? – the anarchic demand seems to be unable to produce action on its own terms. Indeed, there is nothing about responsibility *per se* that does necessarily relate to action. One can feel responsible for all manner of things without it causing any action in

18. Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, 52.

19. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 101.

20. Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 40, 53–4.

21. *Ibid.*, 93.

22. Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, 53.

relation to such a feeling. Levinas only states that the responsibility is linked to pure passivity, not that it is the precondition for action: “Pure passivity preceding freedom is responsibility. But the responsibility that owes nothing to my freedom is my responsibility for the freedom of others”.²³ Responsibility becomes so generalized that it is not clear how it could ever be adapted to a specific situation, ethical, political or anything else. For Levinas it is indeed the most general feeling of responsibility: “I am man holding up the universe ‘full of all things.’ Responsibility or saying prior to being and beings, not saying itself in ontological categories”.²⁴

We might want to say that there is a slippage in the term anarchism between its philosophical use (without a principle/rule) and its political use (without a ruler). This significant difference is rather elided by Critchley’s moving from Levinas to actual anarchist social practice (what Critchley calls “actually existing anarchism”). We might ultimately want to say that Levinas’s conception of anarchism has nothing in common at all but what we mean by the term in a political context. If this is the case, then Critchley’s slide from a modified Levinasian ethics to certain kinds of political organization seems unjustified, contingent, even. So what of the anarchism we usually mean when we speak about those actively committed to certain kinds of non-hierarchical political behaviour and anti-statist, and not just those who Critchley identifies as “performing their powerlessness in the face of power in a profoundly powerful way”?²⁵ In Chomsky’s “Notes on Anarchism” (1970), anarchism is presented, via Bakunin, as:

the only kind of liberty that is worthy of the name, liberty that consists in the full development of all the material, intellectual and moral powers that are latent in each person; liberty that recognises no restrictions other than those determined by the laws of our own individual nature ... they do not limit us but are the real and immediate conditions of our freedom.²⁶

Anarchism in practice for Chomsky is the libertarian wing of socialism that owes its existence and continued strength to the claims of romantic and rationalist Enlightenment.

Chomsky is, however, often very critical of much philosophy, past and present, believing it to be obfuscatory, on the side of power or anti-scientific. However, for Chomsky, this idea of capacities is the guiding insight of Enlightenment thinking about human being, the radical humanist claim that what is shared are precisely these “powers” to think, create and act. For Levinas and for Critchley, these

23. *Ibid.*, 55.

24. *Ibid.*, 57.

25. Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 124.

26. Bakunin, quoted in Noam Chomsky, *For Reasons of State* (New York: New Press, 1970), 375.

kinds of claims about human nature are over-determined, not infinite enough, too metaphysical, have already decided on the structure of human being, and so forth. But, as we have seen, the infinite demand that Levinas proposes is wholly on the side of passivity. It might be the most “radical” kind of responsibility but it is also the one that seems most likely to lead to total inaction, where the subject is stymied by the unbearable weight of the nameless obligation it feels to the other (even if you do throw in a couple of jokes). It may well be truer to say that freedom can only come out of constraint, rather than the other way around. But what might this potentially dubious-sounding claim mean?

In “Language and Freedom” (1970), Chomsky poses the question: “in what way are language and freedom to be connected?”²⁷ Chomsky suggests that “we might develop an interesting connection between language and freedom”²⁸ if we combine the rationalist universalism of certain Enlightenment claims about human nature and the formal study of language use and the generation of sentences. This might seem like a strange way of going about it. How do we get from language to ethics or politics? Nevertheless, it is in the relationship between constraint and infinity that Chomsky’s solution lies: “Language is a process of free creation; its laws and principles are fixed, but the manner in which the principles of generation are used is free and infinitely varied”.²⁹ In other words, it is on the basis of a fixed set of “laws and principles” that creativity (the free and infinitely varied generation of words) that freedom lies. Clearly Chomsky has a quite different notion of infinity here than either Critchley or Levinas, because for them infinity comes first and is the pre-condition of any ethical behaviour whatsoever, whereas for Chomsky the infinite creativity of language follows restriction. However, it is paradoxically precisely only because of constraint that we can consider man to be free, to be properly moral and political.

It is therefore no denial of man’s capacity for infinite creativity (and responsibility, as we shall see) to hold that there are intrinsic properties of mind that constrain his development. Without a system of formal constraints there are no creative acts, ethical or otherwise. If the “infinite demand” is crippling for Levinas and Critchley, it is because it is constitutively so. An infinite demand lacks structure by definition (just as the war on terror is inherently endless because it is so loosely defined).

Furthermore, and this is crucial if we are to refute Critchley’s claim that anarchism is simply about liberation and not about ethics in his sense, Chomsky’s conception of human nature (material constraint allows infinite creativity) has serious ethical implications. In fact, it precisely affects the very way in which we conceive the “other”:

27. Chomsky, *For Reasons of State*, 387.

28. *Ibid.*, 394.

29. *Ibid.*, 402.

Language, in its essential properties and the manner of its use, provides the basic criterion for determining that another organism is a being with a human mind and the human capacity for free thought and self-expression, and with the essential human need for freedom from the external constraints of repressive authority.³⁰

We can, by analogy, but without arrogance, make a direct link between our own capacities for language use to the way in which we can conceive of others. It may not be too much to suggest at this point that Chomsky has a superior conception of the other than Levinas, and one that provokes a serious immediate ethical task – to establish and ensure the essential human name for freedom precisely on the basis of our essential properties. Of course, we know that nothing necessarily follows from this way of conceiving human beings, and that human beings have spent an awful lot of time precisely not ensuring the freedom of one another, but Chomsky's point is normative in some sense. If one conceives of human beings in this way (and this does indeed look like the best assumption we have for investigating language use) then it follows that we should not treat human beings in a way that betrays this insight into their natures. Our ethical imperative is precisely to attack those who deny this human capacity in others (racists, imperialists). The anarchist project is thus a universalist project.

With reference to Rousseau, Chomsky pursues precisely this line of reasoning. What follows from this idea about human nature? After Rousseau, Chomsky states that: "It is from the nature of man that the principles of natural right and the foundations of social existence must be deduced",³¹ and further that "proceeding on this model, we might further attempt to study other aspects of that human nature which, as Rousseau rightly observes, must be correctly conceived if we are to be able to develop, in theory, the foundations for a rational social order".³² The ethical implications of Chomsky's position are clear. If they seem problematic, it is interesting to consider what our theory would look like *without* a theory of human nature, if we really did think that infinity came first, as it were:

A vision of a future social order is ... based on a concept of human nature. If in fact man is an indefinitely malleable, completely plastic being, with no innate structures of mind and no intrinsic needs of a cultural or social character, then he is a fit subject for the "shaping of behaviour" by the

30. *Ibid.*, 394.

31. *Ibid.*, 390.

32. *Ibid.*

state authority, the corporate manager, the technocrat, or the central committee.³³

It is unfair, perhaps, to accuse Critchley and Levinas of leaving their systems open to such behaviourist abuses, especially when they are so serious about their ethical projects (even, especially, in the midst of stressing the role of comedy in the human lot), but for a properly political project that has an ethical dimension, as Critchley notes is so often missing in “Marxist” theories, we can see the strengths of Chomsky’s claim. Both positions (Chomsky’s and Levinas/Critchley’s) are claims about the relationship between the finite and the infinite and both positions are claims about the status of the other and of one’s responsibility towards that other. The serious difference comes in the location and order of this relation between the infinite and the finite: for Critchley and Levinas the infinite “consists in grasping the ungraspable while nevertheless guaranteeing its status as ungraspable”,³⁴ and is the description of the kind of responsibility brought about by the anarchic demand of the other. This in turn leads to problematic, troubled reflection on the unfortunate finite subject called to bear such responsibility, hence Critchley’s call for the supplement of humour and sublimation: “It is in our endless inauthenticity, failure and lack of self-mastery that our ethical dignity consists.”³⁵ In Chomsky, however, the way in which infinity (the infinite creativity of language) follows from constraint, and not the other way round, paradoxically presents a far more immediate notion of freedom, one that translates easily and profoundly into claims about ethical and political life. Language as an infinite use of finite means indicates the freedom of human beings *qua* language users. This is certainly a claim about human nature, the kind that Critchley attacks, in fact, but cannot but be seen as a much more effective model for direct politics than Critchley’s disappointment-anger-demand-humour conception. The role of human nature in the kind of anarchism that Chomsky represents is very far from being a question of mere “liberation” or carnival mockery of the state.

II. Philosophical anthropology and the subject of politics

If we continue now to think about the role of human nature within philosophy and the use made of philosophical anthropology in relation to politics, then we can perhaps see the usefulness of retaining a certain concept of human nature in our thinking of politics. Critchley mentions philosophical anthropology briefly in relation to Plessner, and states that “the working out of the consequences of

33. *Ibid.*, 404.

34. Levinas, “Transcendence and Height”, quoted in Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 58.

35. Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 89.

the eccentric position of the human is the main task of a philosophical anthropology".³⁶ But this is to presuppose that the subject of philosophical anthropology is closer to the psychoanalytic subject than to the collective subject of politics: just as the ethical obligation seems to posit an infinite demand on the individual ethical subject. Critchley wants to avoid ontologizing politics, preferring to focus on political action itself, but breaking the link between politics and the material of that politics is harder than it seems at first glance; theories of *Gattungswesen* are not necessarily idealist or essentialist as Critchley claims. Indeed, there can very well be a notion of *Gattungswesen* at work in the midst of action, which is what we see in Chomsky's description of language use and the ethical responsibility and infinite creativity that it generates. As we have also seen from the argument concerning Chomsky, there are strong links between a theory of linguistic capacity and political behaviour that we can trace from Rousseau and through what we might call, after Jonathan Israel, the radical enlightenment. Far from being static or essentialist, claims about the structure of human nature and potentialities provide a more flexible and politically useful concept of the possibilities of human action.

We know how the phenomenological tradition after Heidegger responds to the question of humanism. Humanism presupposes its object, it does not allow man to properly think through the question of being, it remains metaphysical and so on. Reiner Schürmann, in his extremely interesting reading of Heidegger, also makes the following claim: "philosophical humanism is ... the product of a prior decision which is economic, not human".³⁷ Humanism is thus concerned with measurement, which Levinas's and Critchley's anarchism tries to undermine: if the ethical demand is infinite it is because it is beyond measure, an-archic in the sense of having no principle or rule to structure it. This is very close to what Schürmann sees as Heidegger's political project: "Just as thrownness precedes every project, so an essential, disjunctive, historical-destinal, economic, aletheological, non-human, systemic decision precedes all human or voluntary decisions, all comportment".³⁸ And:

The displacements from one metaphysical epoch to another are principal. But if metaphysics is the ensemble of economies each governed by the shape of arche, then the displacements from the metaphysical to the post-metaphysical era are anarchic. Only with those do Holderlin's words apply: "Is there a measure on earth? There is none".³⁹

36. *Ibid.*, 86.

37. Reiner Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy*, Christine-Marie Gros (trans.) (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 247.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*, 253.

Schürmann makes very clear the historical dimension to this post-metaphysical conception of anarchism. Further, like Levinas and Critchley he claims that “[g]iven our place at the end of epochal history, non-willing and releasement turn out to be more powerful than willing and hubris”.⁴⁰ The passivity of post-metaphysical anarchism again highlights the problem of how to turn this lack of will into a positive mode of political action. Critchley’s switch from disappointment (the mode of being in the metaphysical age, we might say) to anger (the first political emotion) makes sense in terms of how he needs to change his passive account of ethical obligation into a template for action, but it does not explain how this transition is possible. Aside from Levinas’s and Schürmann’s discussions of anarchism, it is revealing to try to understand how phenomenology has previously attempted to link itself to a certain kind of politics and to certain kinds of collectives. This section will focus on Heidegger’s invocation of “community”.

In “The Age of the World Picture”, Heidegger definitively aligns metaphysics and “the modern” with certain innovations of Descartes: “The whole of modern metaphysics taken together, Nietzsche included, maintains itself within the interpretation of what it is to be and of truth that was prepared by Descartes”.⁴¹ “With the interpretation of man as *subjectum*”, Descartes, Heidegger argues, consummates the era of anthropocentrism and creates the preconditions for the construction of every kind of anthropology.⁴² He does so by inaugurating a relationship between representation and the subject as man. In the modern world picture, Heidegger describes man as precisely having, for the first time, a position, such that man himself expressly takes up this position as one constituted by himself: “Man makes depend upon himself the way in which he must take his stand in relation to whatever is as the objective”.⁴³ Man is the measure of all things because he represents the world to himself from the standpoint of himself. Levinas and Critchley would surely concur with this attack on humanism and measurement.

But this humanization of thought obscures a certain kind of questioning: “Anthropology is that interpretation of man that already knows fundamentally what man is and hence can never ask who he may be”.⁴⁴ As Ricoeur puts it: “With objectivity comes subjectivity, in the sense that this being-certain of the object is the counterpart of the positing of a subject. So we have both the *posit-*

40. *Ibid.*, 250.

41. Martin Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture”, in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, W. Lovitt (trans.) (San Francisco, CA: Harper Torchbooks, 1977), 126.

42. “With the interpretation of man as *subjectum*, Descartes creates the metaphysical presupposition for future anthropology of every kind and tendency” (*ibid.*, 139).

43. *Ibid.*, 131.

44. *Ibid.*, 152. Similarly, “Humanism ... in the strict historiographical sense, is nothing but a moral-aesthetic anthropology”.

ing of the subject and the *proposition* of the representation".⁴⁵ When Descartes, according to Heidegger, makes the move to limit the more open elements of "subjectness", its distribution across passivity and activity, that move allows Descartes not only to centralize the position of man in thought, history and the world, but also to come down heavily on the side of activity. It is this last point that allows Heidegger to make the claim that the freneticism of modern life is "Cartesian".

The co-presence of representation with humanized subjectivity is key. It is not that there really was an ancient world picture, or a medieval world picture, but it is the fact that the world becomes a picture at all that distinguishes "the essence of the modern age [*der Neuzeit*]"⁴⁶ The capacity to objectify, to technologize and measure are incorporated, according to Heidegger, in a total picture of the world that places man at its centre and makes the world and everything in it instrumental. He traces the origins of the term subject from the Greek *hypokeimenon*, which he translates as "that-which-lies-before, which, as ground, gathers everything onto itself"⁴⁷ He contends, too, that this metaphysical meaning of the concept of subject "has first of all no special relationship to man and none at all to the 'I'"⁴⁸ And yet man has become the primary "and only real" *subjectum* in the "modern world picture" (*Weltbild*).⁴⁹ Nevertheless, if the Cartesian cogito is too enmeshed in a logic of representation and humanism from the very beginning, Heidegger does not simply advise abandoning it or refusing its centrality. As Ricoeur puts it:

the kind of ontology developed by Heidegger in 'The Age of the World Picture' gives ground to ... a *hermeneutics of the "I am"*, which is a refutation of the *cogito* conceived of as a simple epistemological principle and at the same time is an indication of a foundation of Being which is necessarily spoken of as grounding the *cogito*.⁵⁰

By shifting the focus away from the thinking activity of the "I" and back towards that of the "am", the "foundation of Being", Heidegger attempts to destroy and reconstruct both the conception of man and the ontological aspects of the subject.

Nevertheless, Heidegger, in one brief comment, does provide us with an interesting clue as to the nature of the *political* subject in the modern world picture:

45. *Ibid.*, 224.

46. *Ibid.*, 116.

47. *Ibid.*, 127.

48. *Ibid.*

49. *Ibid.*

50. Paul Ricoeur, "Heidegger and the Question of the Subject", in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, D. Ihde (ed.), 223–35 (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 219.

Certainly the modern age has, as a consequence of the liberation of man, introduced subjectivism and individualism. But it remains just as certain that no age before this one has produced a comparable objectivism and that in no age before this has the non-individual, in the form of the collective, come to acceptance as having worth.⁵¹

Heidegger here opposes the “non-individual”, namely, the collective, to the interiorization of man *qua* subject, but *not* to the liberation of man itself. He indicates, rather, that the question of the liberation of the collective is implicated in the reformulation of the terms subject and subjectivity. Ultimately, for Heidegger, this political “liberation” of man is ultimately no liberation at all, but rather a disguising of man’s ontological possibilities and, furthermore, “the modern freedom of subjectivity vanishes totally in the objectivity commensurate with it”.⁵² Nevertheless, Heidegger does acknowledge that in the “modern age”, “the collective” also takes on a qualitatively different nature and evaluation, and that this question precisely concerns the liberation of man in his very essence. He notes that the very essence of (modern) man changes when he becomes subject, and, we must therefore extrapolate, also when he or she becomes “collective”. It is this revealing, if brief, linkage that indicates to us the full consequences and radicality of the very thing that Heidegger most opposes, namely, the privileging of humanity in the historico-philosophical gaze: “Being subject as humanity has not always been the sole possibility belonging to the essence of historical man, which is always beginning in a primal way, nor will it always be”.⁵³

Paradoxically, Heidegger views the oppositional pairing of the subject–object, individual–collective, as that which both permits access “back to events more profound” and as the modern problematic that philosophy must think beyond (or before):

Only because and in so far as man actually and essentially has become subject is it necessary for him, as a consequence, to confront the explicit question: Is it as an “I” confined to its own preferences and freed into its own arbitrary choosing or as the “we” of society; is it as an individual or as a community; is it as a personality within the community or as a mere group member in the corporate body; is it as a state and nation and as a people or as the common humanity of modern man, that man will and ought to be the subject that in his modern essence he *already is*? Only where man is essentially already subject does there exist the possibility of his slipping into the aberration of subjectivism in the sense of individualism. But also, only

51. Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture”, 127.

52. *Ibid.*, 152.

53. *Ibid.*

where man *remains* subject does the positive struggle against individualism and for the community as the sphere of those goals that govern all achievement and usefulness have any meaning.⁵⁴

This positive struggle for the community can only take place from within the logic of an anthropocentric and representational world picture. As Schürmann notes, “the term *Dasein*, in Heidegger’s writings after the turn, designates a people or community rather than the self”.⁵⁵ But why does “community” become the privileged term here? If the “collective” is previously positioned (negatively) on the side of the “objective”, why, if we cannot escape the modern world picture, is “community” the term worth fighting for instead? The shift in registers between the philosophical and the historically possible indicates a distinct and under-acknowledged slippage between the political and philosophical registers. Unless Heidegger can argue why community should be the ontologically privileged term, we must acknowledge that this term is a deeply problematic insertion, itself political, into a dialogue that purports to be less concerned with the “ontically” political than it really is.

This excursus into Heidegger demonstrates the problematic nature of trying to extract a politics from the critique of metaphysics. The feeling of disappointment that characterizes the modern world, and the infinite ethical responsibility generated by the Other, do not generate a useful template for collective activity, but merely generate reactionary political terms that fall well short of describing the practice of various progressive organizations, which would probably do just fine without philosophy trying to provide them with an ethical supplement that bases itself on passivity and inadequacy.

Conclusion

Although Critchley wants to assist in anarchism’s self-conception, he does so on the basis of a limited understanding of the term that neglects its anti-philosophical history and its strong interest in theories of human nature. Even if Critchley is taking his concept of anarchism solely from Levinas, it is not clear how the passivity and apolitical nature of this conception can relate to the various anarchist movements that Critchley privileges. As the comparison of Levinas with Chomsky showed, there are quite different ways of conceiving of the relationship between infinity and responsibility that avoid generating a form of ethical obligation that is so vast one can only fail to achieve it. Finally,

54. *Ibid.*, 132.

55. Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting*, 240.

the example of Heidegger indicates the trouble philosophy gets itself into if it both tries to talk about politics and wants to do so in such a way that it ignores (or actively loathes) the history of collectives that strive for equality, universality and freedom on the basis of a conception of human nature. The phenomenological approach to the question of the human will never be able to address politics without first admitting that politics has much to teach it. It is the phenomenologists who see universalist, egalitarian claims about human nature as restrictive, not anarchists who act on the basis of this paradoxically emancipatory stance towards the being of being human. If ethics precedes ontology, then perhaps political practice precedes even ethics and is capable of understanding it better than it understands itself.

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