

CONFERENCE REPORT

As if

'Philosophy As...' Philosophy Programme of the School of Advanced Studies, University of London, and the Centre for Theoretical Studies, University of Essex, Senate House, University of London, 28–30 November 2002

With five plenary speakers – Simon Critchley, Manuel DeLanda, Michael Friedman, Hilary Lawson and Christoph Menke – and a somewhat daunting fifty-four professionals and postgraduates giving papers in parallel sessions, 'Philosophy As...' promised a comprehensive exploration of 'the nature and state of philosophy'. The ambition of this aim was tempered a little by the specificity of the task given to the speakers: each was asked to finish the phrase 'Philosophy As...' as the title of their paper. This may bring to mind the competitions found on the back of cereal packets ('in no more than twelve words, complete the sentence...'), but it did provide a semblance of the breadth and diversity to the proceedings.

Christoph Menke kicked off with 'Philosophy as Deconstruction: Is it Possible?' This took the form of a reading of Derrida's 1990 'Force of Law' essay, making a rather general case for the work of deconstruction in relation to philosophical questioning, conceived here in Aristotelian terms as that which occurs between 'wonder' and 'insight'. The 'practical faith' needed simultaneously to relinquish and to hold onto the belief in the possibility of justice, and its relationship to the problem of sovereignty, was read as a transformed type of mysticism which puts Derrida's position intriguingly close to Walter Benjamin's. However, persuasive as Menke was, this point was somewhat lost on an audience that forced him to defend deconstruction in terms so general as to be almost meaningless, as if it were still some passing theoretical fad. This hinted at the absence of anything like a common ground at this gathering of diverse thinkers.

Whilst the titles of the papers in the parallel sessions ranged from the apparently self-evident ('Philosophy as Understanding Philosophy', 'Philosophy as Critical Reflection') to the wilfully quirky ('Philosophy as Parenting'), others came unintentionally close to pastiche ('Philosophy as an Argumentation Technique which Allows Us to Immunize Any Arbitrary Opinions

Being Held and to Criticize any Counter-opinions'). Unsurprisingly, many research students and academics – particularly those who still described themselves as analytic – bemoaned crises of one sort or another within their field. More intriguing was the opinion, voiced in separate papers, that the way forward for analytic philosophy was to turn to Hegel. This is perhaps a more palpable progression than simply relabelling oneself as 'post-analytic', as some did. The need to 'return' to the foundational problems of the analytic tradition as they were determined in early twentieth-century scientific philosophy formed the basis of Michael Friedman's paper 'Scientific Philosophy and the Dynamics of Reason'. Whilst its ambitious historical sweep inevitably raised more questions than it could possibly answer about the relationship between logic and science, it did prompt a genuine dialogue between the more scientifically literate members of the audience (Manuel DeLanda notable among them) and the speaker, which was something of a rarity at the conference.

However, crises within philosophical methodology are not always so apparent, and Hilary Lawson's paper ('Philosophy as Saying the Unsayable') unwittingly went some way to showing why. Many philosophers like to think they work in a sort of non-denominational space in which neither the analytic nor the continental approaches are effective on their own, and the (real or imagined) conflict between the two can be comfortably left behind. Described optimistically as a 'new diversity', this approach often veers closer to something like a weak pluralism, where the distances between traditions of thought are underplayed so that philosophically useful 'tools' can be picked up from different places – in this case, Heidegger and Wittgenstein. In practice, this means one can approach abstract categories (for example, 'the unsayable' for Hilary Lawson) or even straightforwardly proclaim oneself a certain type of philosopher (e.g. 'a realist' – Lawson again) whilst sidestepping many of the

difficulties of their particular philosophical formation. Lawson's ambitious and persuasive attempt to conjure a new form of epistemological realism out of his theory of 'closure' (all our form-making is the result of a 'closing-off' of other possible combinations of forms – seeing animal shapes in the constellations of stars being the *Ur*-example) seemed pretty typical in this regard, at least as presented here.

The possibility of a more genuine move 'beyond' the old analytic/continental divide was provided by Manuel DeLanda. His paper, 'A New Ontology for the Physical Sciences', reiterated his 'ontological realism', unashamedly indebted to the 'radical empiricism' of Gilles Deleuze. Here the Deleuzian 'nest set' or 'Chinese doll' model of expansive consciousness provided a tidy way of avoiding the old metaphysical leaps into abstract categories (such as 'species', 'state', or even, more problematically, 'society') by analysing the ways in which intensive differences drive corporeal processes into the world 'beyond' the body as traditionally perceived. As expected, the sheer breadth of multi-disciplinary knowledge demonstrated here was impressive – philosophy of science, computer technology, evolutionary theory and quantum mechanics came under discussion. However, the problem – and for DeLanda it is a self-avowed problem – is that this Deleuzian break from idealist, phenomenological and analytic methodologies almost always returns too quickly to empirical examples. This may be the reason for its popularity and success (for example, to architecture students interested in both theoretical and scientific avant-gardes), but it is also a mark of failure,

of a contradictory circularity, to critical epistemologists of all persuasions.

The conference concluded with Simon Critchley's 'The Intricate Evasions of As – Poetry as Philosophy'. This was the first paper to pick up on the problem of the 'as' itself as the common linguistic ground of philosophy and poetry and also one of the very few papers to deal with art in any way. Whilst 'as' can be understood as the carrier of metaphor in the traditional poetical sense, for Critchley it is also the exemplary form of what we may call a hybrid poetical–philosophical epistemology found in certain types of self-reflective literary practice (such as Wallace Stevens's 'Things *as* they are' and 'Poetry is the subject of the poem', both from 'The Man with the Blue Guitar'). As the Romantics knew well, here lies the problem of demarcating the apparently infinite abyss of the imagination itself, and Critchley followed Novalis and Schlegel by delivering the first half of his paper as a series of fragments, flirting with poetic inscrutability in a way that could not have been better designed to alienate half the audience. However, the critical and mimetic potential of this Romantic approach was left largely undeveloped, and instead poetry was left to stand as a mark of the failure of philosophy, almost as if this was in itself something to be celebrated rather than mourned.

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