

Continental philosophy? Oh, yes! (talk from the launch of the Scottish Centre for Continental Philosophy)

There have been many recent studies about the identity of continental philosophy and about its connections and differences with other traditions and, in particular, analytic philosophy. These include detailed and enlightening works by Simon Glendinning, Simon Critchley, Andrew Cutrofello, Michael Rosen, and Jack Reynolds and James Chase.

I do not want to take a position with respect to these studies here, other than to make two changes in direction. I do not want to *look* backwards or even around to find out what continental philosophy is. I want to *divine* forward to where it might be going. Nor do I want to look from above, to seek to give an overview of past and present scenes, but rather attend to what my immediate friends, colleagues and students are beginning to say and do with continental philosophy.

Like Scotland and Dundee, when viewed through work and achievement, this notion of immediacy does not have restricted geographical boundaries. It is a closeness of shared adventure, enquiry and progress which has taken us far away and brought friends back to Dundee from many continents. As much as it is absurd to think of Scotland as defined by its borders, it is nonsensical to think of continental philosophy as trapped within old Europe.

To select friends and colleagues is of course a rude imposition on them, and I shall name no one. These remarks claim neither historical legitimacy, nor a general contemporary basis. They are deliberately contingent and speculative, but once that's known they might serve as a prompt to thought rather than as a claim to truth.

We chose a passage from Nietzsche as the first for our new website for the Scottish Centre for Continental Philosophy in Dundee. There are more to come and many more definitions of terms from Kant, Hegel, Derrida, Heidegger, Bergson, Plato, Marx, Lyotard, Habermas, Wittgenstein and countless others. We intend to be an anarchist group, certainly with no leaders or written credo, so expect shocks and surprises. It is not impossible that the next passage will be from Quine and the next word 'object'.

Here is another passage from Deleuze explaining why the question in my title is followed by a pure 'yes' and nothing more, no ifs and no buts, but also what is meant by this 'yes':

Nietzsche says that beneath great noisy events there are small silent ones that are like the formation of new worlds; there, again, is the presence of the poetic under the historical. In France itself we have few noisy events. They are far away, and terrible, in Vietnam. But small imperceptible events remain for us. Perhaps they foretell ways out from our current desert. Maybe Nietzsche's return is one such 'small event' and already a reinterpretation of the world. (Deleuze, 'L'éclat de rire de Nietzsche' – 'Nietzsche's burst of laughter')

Deleuze's reading is a departure from the overly simple thought that Nietzsche asks us to affirm everything, to say yes to everything as it is, and thereby to transform life by refusing to deny its baseness and horrors as belonging to its joys. Instead, Deleuze's thought is new worlds affirm old ones

through discrete and creative novelty, by almost imperceptible changes and unexpected directions in construction. Yes is said of everything, but not of everything *as it is*, rather, as it might become in our creative and haphazard responses to new potential.

One of the paradoxes of reading those words in Scotland today is in the contrast between the new potential and imperceptible changes made possible by the referendum - Scotland's paths to genuine difference - and the false unities and oppositions, the backward looking stance, of some the rhetoric and cultural manipulation deployed by both sides of the debate. The danger is this old language will be strengthened, whatever the outcome, thereby silencing the innovative and rebellious voices that Scotland is generating around ideas of environment, law, community, education, health, art, protection and fairness.

So what are the small events in continental philosophy we can detect on the banks of the Tay but brought to us also from the banks of the Seine, Rhine, Yarra, Indus, Mississippi, Tiber... and taken to them as well? There is no natural order to 'small events'. That's the point of them: they lay claim neither to hierarchies nor to judgements of importance. They can, though, form constellations and networks – rhizomes, if you like. Again, with an eye to a new Scotland, I have organised and named these events in terms of what a new country might find value in.

**Economic fairness:** Most, perhaps even all, the continental philosophers I have worked with in Dundee are concerned with how global capitalism can be resisted by giving alternative voices, ideas and possibilities to its constitutive and necessary production of unfairness and misery. The way this is done is exceptionally varied, from new Marxism, ideas of ethical resistance, anarchist creativity, new concepts of debt and economy, new concepts of will, ideas around the event as political, new ways of living with technologies and information. Indeed, this leads to plenty of quarrels. Despite this, however, continental philosophy is perhaps one of the most promising sources of counter-capitalist thought.

**An inflection of the sciences:** No contemporary continental philosopher I know of is anti-science. We fall ill and die just like everyone else, though perhaps more stoically than some. We seek to understand through the sciences. However, many of those working in continental philosophy today seek to inflect the path of sciences by drawing them near to other ideas and phenomena. What's distinctive about this is that these ideas are themselves innovations. They do not argue for established notions of what it means to be human, or for religious grounds for the opposition to the sciences, but rather seek to bring new ways of understanding matter and mind alongside specific sciences, in order to temper their confidence in exclusive access to truth.

**The immanent value of the arts:** It is common to divide the value of art between an intrinsic value, where art has its own measure, this takes its most hackneyed form in the idea of art for art's sake, and an external value for art, where its point or worth is justified extrinsically through ideas as varied and mutually hostile as cultural education, ergonomics, the moral value of beauty and economic contribution. Continental philosophers today work with an idea of immanent value which overcomes this distinction. On the one hand, the arts are aesthetic and technical constructs. They have values and ways all of their own. On the other hand, despite this independence from other disciplines and

practices, the arts have essential but also essentially varied roles to play in the ways we make and understand our worlds and how we practice other disciplines. For instance, film makes us think and feel in new and important ways. It reveals truths we cannot access in other ways, yet it is also impervious to simple control and analysis from external sources.

**Existential guidance:** This point should begin by discounting the specificity of continental philosophy and talk about philosophy *tout court*. There is no domain of thoughtful endeavour able to match the depth and richness of philosophy for resources for guidance for existence. Well over two thousand years of the best writers and thinkers have left us with the most wonderful of problems. How can we bring this wisdom of ages to bear on our contemporary existential problems? In recent years Dundee philosophers have done just that with Spinoza, Foucault, Irigaray, Gadamer, Arendt, Ricoeur, Lyotard, Bergson, and a lesser-known hybrid called D&G.

**Transforming power in and between groups:** There is a crucial counter-point to this concern with existence and an essential addition to the critique of capital. Our current situation is one of vast differences between the actual powers of different groups, simply on the grounds of violently reductionist images of their members. These reductions can be based on gender, race, sex, class, identity, wealth, education or incarceration. The important thing philosophers do is invite us to question and change both facets of this structure of power. We need to criticise and destroy the reductions. We must reverse the relations of power, and not blithely assume we could have a world free of them altogether.

**Theory, real theory:** This point is more closely about academia though it has far-reaching consequences for the effect of intellectual work. I have used words like 'idea', 'thought', 'creation', 'knowledge' and 'wisdom' here. Philosophy is today in a small minority not sacrificing these ideas to crude positivism, by which I mean a naïve and self-serving commitment to objective observation. If there's one thing that all the continental philosophers I know share, a thing that makes them an endangered but also deeply valuable movement, it's the awareness that without theory there is no real thought. So what is theory in a positive sense, other than the critique of naïve objectivity?

James Williams, March 2014