Review

Radical philosophy: An introduction

Chad Kautzer

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Popular discourse about race in America is increasingly fraught. The #BlackLivesMatter movement and its offshoots are driven by rage at the seemingly endless announcement of the death of African Americans at the hands of policemen. And yet there is, as Salahmisah Tillet pointed out in a recent piece on the #SayHerName campaign, also a rage *within* this movement – a rage that black women feel at the tendency among black men to imagine violent acts of racism as ‘patrilineal’, even though no fewer than six black women died in or as a result of police custody in the first 8 months of 2015. How can activists address both of these patterns of injustice without compromising the central message of each cause? How, in other words, can radical activists appreciate the insights of intersectionality while maintaining the urgency of specific calls for change?

It is with problems such as these in mind that Chad Kautzer asks what it might mean to define a discipline not by its method, its discourse or its key texts, but rather by the sensibility that unites its practitioners. The spirit of righteous anger, argues Kautzer in this impressively thorough little book, unites a number of diverse methodologies, from critical theory to jurisprudence, under the banner of what he calls radical philosophy (before we balk at this seemingly scattered approach, Kautzer asks that we recall that the spirit of wonder has long united other kinds of philosophical projects). Resistance, critique and committed political engagement are often productive conduits for rage in the face of systematic social injustice. Harnessing the insight that accompanies anger (to paraphrase Audre Lorde) into ‘a social theory of the structures and material conditions of one’s lived experiences, which can identify possibilities for their transformation [and] collective emancipatory struggles to enact such transformation’ is the task of Kautzer’s radical philosophy, broadly understood (p. 3). To this end (which we might sum up as the articulation of praxis), he offers brief but meticulously annotated reconstructions of Marxism, Feminism, Queer Theory and Critical Race Theory.

A number of brief introductory texts about each of these subjects have been written for popular audiences, but Kautzer’s combined approach allows him to do a couple of innovative things. First, it allows him to argue that all radical philosophy is the result

of the same basic epistemological wrong turn in the history of philosophy: the increasing tendency to privilege scientific knowledge (*poēsis*) and its associated skills (*technē*) over practical knowledge (*phronēsis*). Second, it allows him to claim that all radical philosophies, though methodologically distinct, nonetheless pursue the same praxis that, put colloquially, is to speak truth to power.

This first line of argument allows Kautzer to marshal forces as diverse as Heidegger and Habermas, Foucault and Arendt, MacIntyre and Adorno, behind the idea that an overemphasis on scientific knowledge in the fields of politics and ethics impoverishes praxis (Kautzer traces this technocratic tendency back through Hobbes and Descartes to the scientific revolution). This shift in the way we think about the political is also responsible, in Kautzer's argument, for the rise of an abstract individualism, wherein the person is 'knowable apart from and antecedent to social relations and thus socialization' (p. 9). Kautzer does not limit himself to one particular critique of modernity's scientific bent but, instead, offers a kind of meta-critique of the Enlightenment (drawing on an enormous body of literature), which suggests that the scientific turn is the root cause of a tradition in political science to rely on positivistic methods, which 'objectify human activity into "facts" and marginalize problems of interpretation, questions of social justice, and generally isolate theory from lived, subjective experience' (p. 14). Kautzer offers a pithy summary of several complex problematics of modernity over the course of a few pages and argues, in addition, that the marginalization of *phronēsis* remains a problem to this day across various disciplines in the social sciences, the natural sciences and economics. This is, of course, a very sinister problem because (as Foucault so definitively argued) the privileging of certain forms of knowledge, so often masquerading as disinterested and scientific forms of knowledge, consolidates power among those who possess such knowledge.

The praxis of a radical philosophy – any radical philosophy – thus involves the angry realization, and the attempted righting, of this basic (radical, root) wrong. All of the articulable wrongs of radical philosophy – ableism, sexism, racism, colonialism, heteronormativity and so on – fall out from this wrong. In each specific case, supposedly universal or objective knowledge has been deployed in order to reinforce or maintain privilege. 'Radical philosophies', writes Kautzer, 'push back against these tendencies, historicizing subjects and social relations, uncovering the interests and relations of power operating in the politics of truth, and challenging the methods, discourses, practices and structures of oppression and domination' (p. 16). The basic practical challenge here, achievable through a number of methodologies (from the dialectical to the hermeneutical to the phenomenological), is to use a shared sense of social justice to unseat privilege, wherever it may reign (even, as in the #SayHerName campaign, when it reigns inside a movement).

Kautzer's two-pronged thesis about the impetus for and basic purpose of radical philosophy is appealing, even energizing. The idea that the problems of intersectionality can be ameliorated by admitting our common commitment to anger and its

insights is an invigorating one. Whether Kautzer is successful in providing students and activists with a systematic ‘guide’ to radical philosophy as a discipline – the kind of book he writes he wishes he had had when he was ‘new to philosophy and ... animated by anger at injustice’ (p. 2), however, is less clear. Certainly, the breadth of this study alone (it includes 47 pages of notes and a 22 pages of bibliography) is enough to introduce the reader to the myriad ways in which thinkers and activists, from Sojourner Truth to Slavoj Žižek, have taken up Marx’s call to change the world they interpret. Kautzer’s inclusion of so many different portraits of praxis in the same small volume often, perhaps inevitably considering the scope of the work and the ambition of its author, feels a little bit frenetic.

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