

Melanie Sehgal

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Speculation

Melanie Sehgal

Philosophically, speculation seems to be the antidote to critical thinking - striving for absolutes, for truths beyond the realm of experience, beyond historicity and finite perspectives. Thus, with the birth of critique, speculative thought became subject to critique. One could say that speculation was the first object of critique – if one understands speculation as metaphysical speculation about objects beyond experience, beyond what one can safely know and critique in the sense inaugurated by Immanuel Kant. In this perspective, critique historically *replaced* speculation. This replacement of metaphysical speculation by the Kantian reversion to the conditions of possibility of knowledge marks the beginning of modern thought, it even mark its modernity. Even if the Kantian conditions of the possibility of knowledge have now been replaced by linguistic or cultural conditions, the movement of critique, its practice, still follows the Kantian turn: It is a move away from what is given in experience to its conditions. Thus, if we stick to the classical philosophical understandings of both terms, the relation between critique and speculation has been a difficult, even antagonistic one. However, rethinking both terms, critique and speculation, enables a different perspective.

From this perspective, speculation becomes a new form of critique, a method of critical thinking. Speculation then is not

174 defined by its objects – objects beyond experience pertaining to the absolute as it has been the case throughout the history of philosophy as well as in current re-actualizations of speculation (for example within the context of so-called speculative realism). Instead, speculation is to be defined by its practice and to be understood as a method. How does this method work? And in what way is this focus on the practice of theory exhibiting speculation as a critical method?

This question reverberates with the crucial stake of rethinking critique today. Why critique matters is not because it enables judgment. Taking sides has in some cases become impossible, while in others it is simply redundant, because every one agrees in theory anyways. The crucial aspect in rethinking critique today seems to be about method, about the practice of theory itself: How do we do theory? How does theory position itself towards experience, including its present and its past, its predecessors? If the desire to relate to the **world** we live in, to be relevant to it, is at the core of critical thinking, then how do we conceive of the mode of functioning, the efficacy, or performativity of theory towards its outside? In other words, how do we think of the relation of theory to practice, given that theory itself is a form of practice? What does it mean practically to think critically?

Bruno Latour famously concluded that “critique has run out of steam” (Latour 2004) as traditionally critique is leading *away* from experience, away from the world towards its conditions. But Latour also emphasized the necessity to renew, to reconstruct the notion and, above all, the very practice of critique. For him, rather than a “critique of critique” there is “[t]he practical problem ... to associate the word criticism with a whole set of new positive metaphors, gestures, attitudes, knee-jerk reactions, habits of thoughts” (Latour 2004, 247). What might these new critical metaphors, gestures, attitudes, and habits of thought look like?

In the first place, as Latour says, they are positive, they are **affirmative** – and this is a point in method concerning the situated practice of theory itself. New critical gestures start out from the simple observation that whatever becomes subject to critique is repeated, given space, time and weight and thus is affirmed – simply by means of one's own theoretical practice. From this perspective, even the most judgmental and negative critique implicitly starts out from an affirmation. A reconstructed form of critical thinking thus begins with a simple gesture: it takes this primary affirmation into account *methodologically*. It forms the necessary starting point for speculation insofar as it *posits* its factual starting point in its theoretical practice rather than taking it as a given. And such a reconstructed practice of critical thinking lets this unavoidable affirmation guide its choice of subject, its way of constructing a problem.

This leads to the second aspect of a speculative practice of critical thinking: It is engaged in the very construction of the problem. As Henri Bergson emphasized, the task of philosophy at large is not simply to find solutions for given problems. Its first task is to *find* the problem and challenge its current formulations, and to eventually recompose it.¹ A speculative approach to a problem is to start out from a particular issue, this issue being what situates thinking, what pertains to the world and forces to think. But this does not imply taking the formulation of the problem for granted according to the immediate way in which the problem seems to present itself. Rather, a speculative practice of critical thinking actively creates an indetermination, so that a solution doesn't necessarily follow from the way the problem has been posed. Thus, as Isabelle Stengers puts it, actively creating an indetermination "requires the transformation of what announced itself as a foundation, authorizing a position and providing its banner to a cause, into a constraint, which the solution will have

1 "But the truth is that in philosophy and even elsewhere it is a question of finding the problem and consequently of positing it, even more than of solving it" (Bergson 2007, 36).

176 to respect but to which it may, if necessary, confer a somewhat unexpected signification" (2011, 15). Defining a problem does not determine its solution, rather the problem is a constraint for constructing a solution critically and speculatively.

Thirdly, a speculative practice of critique constructs responses to a problem with regard to their consequences. In view of sketching out speculation as a form of critical thinking, I have implicitly been drawing on a lineage of thought that ranges from Deleuze and Stengers to the early pragmatists. For William James or Charles Sanders Peirce pragmatism was "a method only" (James 1975, 31) and – despite of the prejudices against pragmatism that have been predominant within critical theory – I would like to argue that pragmatism is essentially a critical method. In the first place, the pragmatic method is a method of evaluation: The meaning of a concept is to be searched for in its consequences in experience, not in its reference to some idea or abstract truth. Thus, while critique in a classical, Kantian or even post-Kantian sense implies a movement backwards towards conditions, be they understood as a priori or linguistic or cultural, speculation leaps forward. It evaluates a concept, an idea, a response to a problem in terms of its imagined consequences in future experience, in terms of what the idea might *lead* to.² These consequences lie in the future and can thus only be imagined they are inherently speculative. And because this speculation

2 This implies or presupposes a certain idea of knowledge, one that builds on the changes within physics from a Newtonian framework to one of relativity and quantum physics and on enquiries into the physiology and psychology of knowledge processes. From this perspective, knowledge can never be certain. If one looks at the way knowledge is constructed concretely, in a scientific experiment, for example, knowledge, partly because of its time-bound nature, is inherently speculative. There first is a hypothesis, an idea, that *then* needs to be verified. In addition, constructing the solution to a problem implies the belief that some solution is actually possible. Without this belief no solution can be found – thus *this* or more generally: *a* belief *precedes* the verification. In this way, from a pragmatic point of view, which builds on twentieth century physics and psychology, knowledge is per force inherently speculative.

is grounded in the experience it starts out from, it isn't "mere speculation." The pragmatic method combines speculation with immanence – remaining within the flat ontology of a philosophy of immanence and radical experience –, and it does so methodologically: It avoids a representationalist, dualist stance in its own method, its own practice. There is no transcendent viewpoint from which a claim to absolute truth can be made; instead, there is only the stream of radical experience to follow, through the consequences a hypothesis generates.

This is why the pragmatic method is not restricted to evaluating already existing ideas and concepts. It can also be used as a method of constructing new ideas, new concepts (see Lapoujade 1997, 10). It can be put to work in the construction of different kinds of concepts, putting ideas to the test in view of possible outcomes and effects in experience. What would this idea, this response to a problem lead to? How could this concept guide our experience, our action in this particular situation? How does this idea address its recipients? Who is included by it, who is excluded? Could this idea change the way a situation is taking its course? What if we would think about this situation, or that problem in other terms? These are pragmatic questions and pragmatic questions can only be answered speculatively: by imagining future outcomes and consequences. Thus, speculation pragmatically understood is an art of consequences, of effects and such speculation is never certain, but always situated. It is grounded in its claims without creating new foundations. It starts out from what is given in experience, a problem, a situation that forces one to think, then tries to actively change the terms of this problem or situation, in order to change the course of its consequences: What if this problem was answered in this way? What would this lead to?

Critical thinking understood speculatively thus involves three dimensions: it implies starting out from a practical, methodological affirmation of what is given in experience, simply by means of one's own theoretical practice. It implies actively

178 constructing the problem and only then formulating responses, constructing new ideas, or putting forth concepts that are then to be evaluated by their consequences, by what they might lead to in experience. Borrowing a term from Alfred North Whitehead, critical speculation formulates, constructs “propositions”. Propositions, understood pragmatically and speculatively, are not judgments or statements about what is; they are “lures for feeling” *this* world – otherwise.

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