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Affirmation

Kathrin Thiele

Affirmation is not the opposite of negation. If merely seen as the opposite of negation, that is as the negation of negation, affirmation is not taken seriously in respect to what it has the potential for. As a critical tool, affirmation offers a different register for thought and practice “before” or “in advance of” the opposition of our habit of saying “yes” and “no.”¹ The “no” that instigates the statement “affirmation is *not* the opposite of negation,” is thus not to be read as a contradiction in terms. Rather, it is what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe in *What is Philosophy?* as a pedagogy keeping “an essential relationship *with* the No that *concerns* it” (1994, 218). If we speak of affirmation as a critical tool, it is this emphasis on concern and relationality as giving direction to the whole undertaking that makes all the difference.

In the history of continental philosophy, Baruch de Spinoza’s and Friedrich Nietzsche’s legacies figure prominently for this kind of different register of thought and practice. And, if one continues to follow the Deleuzian (and Guattarian) line, it can also be read

1 I use “before” as an alternative to “beyond” (the German (immanent) *dies-seits*, instead of (transcendent) *jenseits*). “In advance of” is the formulation Rodolphe Gasché finds for this different register of thought in his *Geophilosophy: On Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s What is Philosophy?* (2014, 102).

26 in certain strands of the pragmatist tradition (linked to William James's and Alfred Whitehead's "radical empiricism," and thereby also keeping Henri Bergson in the loop) where an affirmative "believing in this world" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 75) is what concerns "mature" philosophizing. Currently, an emphasis on "affirmation" as a critical tool can be found most explicitly in feminist traditions, where a "we are in *this* mess all together" (Braidotti 2013, 141) or an endurance "to stay with the trouble" (Haraway 2013, 137) provocatively reinstate affirmation as critical engagement. Instead of limiting the practice of critique and the development of critical knowledges to a merely reflexive move – distancing and dissecting, whereby the critical position claims superiority – feminist thinking "at its best" (and certainly in all its plurality) "is about generation of new thought, new concepts, as much as if not more than it is about the critique of existing knowledges" (Grosz 2011, 77). Affirmative critique, therefore, is for sure about diagnosing precisely "what is," with an eye schooled in detecting inequalities, asymmetries, and the never innocent differentiations we live in. And yet, it also always needs to do the **work** of envisioning **transformation** and change. The **risks** that such an affirmative critical approach implies are manifold, but they cannot be avoided. Otherwise we would succumb to those "beautiful souls" – "cultivat[ing] goodness in solitary isolation from the actual social world" (Baille in Hegel 2014) – for which Georg W. F. Hegel already felt so much contempt.

In a bit more detail then, what does affirmation as a register of thought *do* in the practice of critique? Why emphasize "affirmative critique," why turn away from critique as negation? The following aims to explicate this specific potential in keeping with a feminist Deleuzian approach that has already given guidance here: Affirmation both adds to thought a *concern* from which it emerges and *with* which it stays related, and it initiates a *belief*. A worldly belief, one that "becomes belief in the world, as it is" (Deleuze 2000, 172); a belief for the "here and now," radically immanent, **terran**, and earthly. Only thus does affirmative critique initiate

transformation in the here and now, without the messianic promise or need for a “beyond” – another world supposedly escaping “this mess” we are in “all together.”

Spinoza’s entire philosophizing already expresses such an affirmative approach *in* and *of* this world, and in this sense it can be read as a critical, interventionist practice. His ontology as ethics departs from the vertical Cartesian categorical separation of transcendence (perfection) and worldliness (imperfection). For him every-thing, every mode, *is* nothing but the expression of substance itself, i.e. the “all there is.” With this, Spinoza elaborates a horizontal or at least flattened ontology, according to which there is no given (moral) hierarchy between “what is” and “what should be.” This utter affirmation of “what is” leads to his famous monist formula that “no one has so far determined what [a] body can do” (Spinoza 2000, 167 [EIIIP2]) as well as to his harsh judgment in *A Political Treatise* ([1677] 1951), where he shares his great discontent that “[the philosophers] conceive of men, not as they are, but as they themselves would like them to be” (Spinoza 1951, 287). Differing from idealist traditions in philosophy, Spinoza suggests in his work a radically **immanent** onto-ethology of which Deleuze once said: “There is only Spinoza who has managed to pull off an ontology” (Deleuze 2007).

After having grounded affirmation as critical tool in such onto-ethological manner with Spinoza, Nietzsche’s philosophy can specify affirmation further, as a task – as an issue of “will” or “power.” His affirmation thereby links life and thought. But it also becomes the “heaviest weight” of all, as he writes in *The Gay Science* ([1882] 2006). For, affirmation is to will “[t]he life as you now live it and have lived it ... to live once again and innumerable times again” (Nietzsche 2006, 194); or as Deleuze’s even more imperative interpretation of the “eternal return of the same” is phrased: “[W]hatever you will, will it in such a way that you also will its eternal return” (Deleuze 1983, 68). The critical task is such enduring (indifferent) affirmation which, however, in its doing has the potential to release a difference, or better still, it cannot

28 but be released *in difference*. The formula of “difference and repetition” (Deleuze 1994) is therefore the modus of affirmative critical praxis. Nietzsche’s *amor fati* as affirmation, in which even nihilism is affirmed and can no longer escape the (radically indifferent) affirmation, allows things to return “in difference.” It instigates the *transvaluation* that critical endeavors aim for – in philosophy, but also in politics, and therefore in life and thought.

If today’s “world, as it is” is one in which systemic destruction, exploitation, and ecological catastrophes are our everyday news, the question of critique as affirmation poses itself in all its urgency, but also in all its difficulty. What to do in the face of the violent realities shaping our today? How to approach them so as to avoid the return of the same – once again hatred and violence, further exclusion and destruction – instead another opening becomes imaginable? How to address the current fortressing of categories, borders, and boundaries in a non-negative manner, yet without losing the radical critical edge of saying “no” in such a way that this “no” keeps us concerned and related to what we refuse? These are urgent questions of the affirmative critical endeavors that no longer have the luxury of withdrawing from “what is happening to us” (Nancy 2014; Wynter 2015). There is no outside to this world – as there is no outside of power (Foucault) and no outside of text (Derrida). To instigate a *concern for*, a *relationality with* the situation we are always already participating in and **entangled** with, and thereby to instigate a *belief* “in this world, as it is” – this is the critical mantra of affirmation through which life and thought (thought as life and *a life* as thought) become so intertwined that a different attitude as *ethos* (Foucault 1997) and maybe even a different “humanness as praxis” (Wynter 2015) can be enabled. It means believing in this possibility without making a program of it. Attitude and *ethos* as praxis imply, or even better, they live from ontological in/determinacy: The condition that things are bound to be determined, yet never once and for all and always anew at every turn of the world’s differential becoming (Barad 2007). What affirmation as critique

and critique as affirmation suggest is to endure the turns things take, without ever letting go of the (critical) potential of “what our bodies can do” (radical immanence). It means continuing the work of critique “in-differently,” because other realities and relations *are* always already with-in that which actually *is*.

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