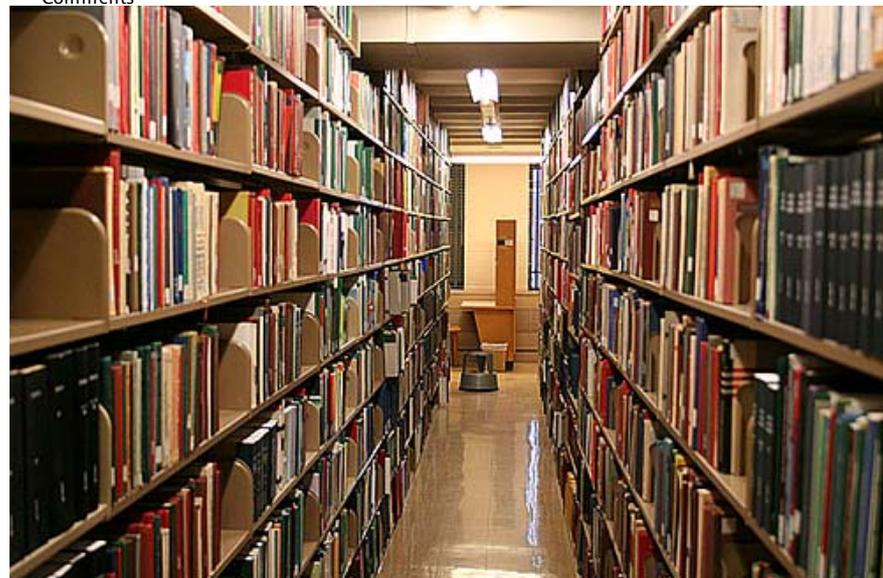


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Post Humanism

Not life, but bad literature

No Comments by Dimitris Vardoulakis on May 27, 2013



In *Shame and Necessity*, Bernard Williams recounts that colleagues often ask why he analyses literary texts – why can't he use examples from "real life"? He responds that "it is a perfectly good question, and it has a short answer: what philosophers will lay before themselves and their readers as an alternative to literature will not be life, but bad literature." This anecdote contains an argument that would be readily embraced by any proponent of "post-structuralism." Namely, it suggests that no theory can solely be based on reason. Any rational account needs an – acknowledged or repressed – fictional support. We do not rely on pure concepts but rather on conceptual fictions.

However, it would be too easy to stop at the idea of a conceptual fiction. We also need to ask what is presupposed in demanding an example from "real life." I contend that the such a demand is Kantian because of the operation within it of the concept of immediacy as it is found in Kant's moral philosophy.

In order to clarify my point, it would be best to preempt some confusion. The notion of immediacy has been dominated by Hegel's use of the term. Immediacy or life experience in Hegel is the first step of the dialectic. This enables the link of the particular (the immediate) to the universal through mediation. This means that the immediate or "real life" is sublated into a higher order. From this perspective, immediacy is deficient. To call for examples from immediate experience or "real life" does not make sense from a Hegelian perspective unless these examples are accompanied by the mediation that sets in motion the dialectical machine.

Conversely, the notion of immediacy plays a crucial and positive role in Kant's moral philosophy. There are at least two, closely linked notions of

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immediacy in Kant's idea of morality. On the one hand, the human can only ever become conscious of the moral immediately. This means that humans can never come to know the content of the moral law as such. The moral law in Kant is formal. On the other hand, the moral law dictates actions immediately: "The practical rule is ... unconditional and so is represented a priori as a categorical practical proposition by which the will is objectively determined absolutely and immediately. ... For, pure reason, practical of itself, is here immediately lawgiving." In other words, it is not a matter of choice to be determined by the moral law, since it is "practical of itself" and hence determines us "immediately."

Both in Hegel and in Kant, we can understand immediacy in terms of the relation between the particular and the universal, and yet the meaning and implications of immediacy are radically different. In Hegel the particular is the immediate and hence immediacy also requires mediation, whereas in Kant the immediate is both that which enables the human in its particularity to become conscious of morality's universality and also allows the universal moral law to influence particular human actions. Thus, immediacy for Hegel is prior to the connecting the particular and the universal, whereas immediacy for Kant forges that connection itself.

It is the Kantian assumption of such a connection that justifies the question: "why do you choose examples from real life?" From the Kantian perspectives, this question essentially asks: "Since morality relies on its immediate connection to real life, turning to literature robs philosophical inquiry from any moral valence." And Bernard Williams's response means: "The connection between the particular and the universal is always mediated by literature, which means that interpretation is always necessary. Immediacy cannot do away from the necessity of reading." Thus, the post-structuralist insight about the fictional ballast in concepts also requires the activity of reading and interpretation in order to counter Kantian immediacy.

The countering of the Kantian assumption about immediacy can be expressed in positive terms as well. Reading and interpretation are never possible in isolation. They are, rather, activities – they are labour – that connects the subject in relations with others. An interpretation does not contain a hidden message for the interpreter. A reading practice is political in the sense that it links at least two people, the person who generates a text and the person who reads and interprets that text. From this perspective, countering immediacy opens up a conception of the political that relies on praxis. Praxis here does not simply mean the engagement in political parties, activism, and so on. Rather, it denotes the labour to show the impossibility of the direct link between particularity and universality. We can delineate this praxis by focussing on four registers.

First, there is a political register. The entire discourse of sovereignty as exceptional requires an immediate connection between the particular circumstances that pose a threat to the state and the extralegal prerogative of the sovereign, which is justified beyond particularity. The sovereign decides on the exception, as Carl Schmitt avers, because of this immediate connection. In this discourse, the sovereign is the figure that denotes the immediate connection between the situation and the transcendent qualities of order, peace and stability that regulate the discourse that affords the sovereign extralegal powers. How can we construct a politics that resists sovereignty? As I have argued in *Sovereignty and Its Other*, this is possible by developing a notion of

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democracy that is not deceived by the narratives of emergency and exceptionality – in other words, a democratic praxis that is attuned to the necessity of interpretation.

Second, there is a linguistic register. The invitation to counter immediacy does not mean that every action or thought is ipso facto political. Rather, it means that they contain the potential to counter the force of immediacy. Differently put, every action or thought can be understood in terms of language and thus to be subjected to the mediacy of interpretation. Nietzsche suggests in the third essay of the *Genealogy of Morality* that religion thrives because it can console through the generation of meaning. But this meaning always refers to a transcendent register that is itself beyond language. How can we generate meaning without recourse to such a beyond? The figure of Nietzsche's dancing Zarathustra suggests that it is possible by constructing a language of joy.

Third, there is an ethical register. If immediacy for Kant describes the connection to the moral realm, and if the dispensation of morality is one's duty, then duty becomes the spectre that haunts any human action. How can one counter this conception of duty that links immediately a universal moral law to experience? This question designates a task that is ethical in the sense that Deleuze distinguishes ethics from morality, namely, as a praxis that does not justify itself with recourse to something that is transcendent.

Finally, we can identify an ontological register. This register can be approached by focussing on the subject's experience. Experience is linked immediately to morality that in turn opens up a moral kingdom that refers not to the human in their particularity, but to humanity in general. This intrusion into the subject's experience places the identity of the questioner in peril, since it challenges the extent to which one can say that they own their experience. This threat shows that being and transcendence are not simply separated in order to be immediately re-connected. Instead of immediacy, we can think of experience in terms of singularity. What matters in singularity is not to secure a stable identity but rather the operative presence of subjectivity in the continuous and undecidable interplay between particularity and universality.

We need literature in order to be able to pose the question: immediacy or praxis? The stakes are clear. We can either leave unquestioned the immediate link between particularity and universality. Or we can insist on interpretation as the praxis that aspires to a democratic politics. Taking sides in this dilemma is not simply a matter of choosing between good and bad literature, as Williams suggests to tease his interlocutors. Moreover, it signifies a choice about our political commitments, which determines who we live our lives.

This is an article from issue one of New Philosopher magazine. To read all the articles grab a copy of the 132-page launch issue [by subscribing now](#).

[1] Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: U. of California P., 1993), p. 13.

[2] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, in Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1999), p. 163 and p. 164.

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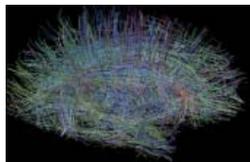
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