

My reading of John Phillips' *Contested Knowledge: A Guide to Critical Theory* infers that critical theory is concerned with addressing problems that arose in, and out of, modernity due to a worldview which was almost constantly focused upon what was (or was perceived to be) *present*. The problems have arisen, according to critical theory, because a narrow focus upon what is present always leaves the observer blind to the more fundamental issue: that which is absent from—or within—his or her perception. Phillips speaks of *absence* explicitly only when he is two-thirds of the way into his work, yet there is little doubt that absence is what he has been talking about all along and is that to which he continually returns. At times Phillips speaks of *the other*, but notes "...it is that which is noticeable only ever by its absence" (82). Similarly, he refers to the *transcendental*, noting it as a realm that is "radically absent" (146). This overarching theme runs through Phillips' work from the shadows upon the wall of Plato's cave to the linguistics of Saussure and onward, as Phillips refers to things "perpetually undetermined" and to the "absent insignificant trace [being] the mark of a difference a priori" (156, 160).

Phillips begins to note concrete implications of absence by speaking early of traditional views of theory. The rational, modern world—it is now charged—was grand on creating theories in which it placed great satisfaction and trust, without realizing that such theories were formed within a reference frame that was not stable enough to provide absolute validation of conclusions reached via those theories. Judgments based in empirical Earth-bound observations of the heavens, for example, lacked any awareness of the fact that the Earth itself was hurtling along madly within those heavens. As Phillips notes more generally, "...no theory, however systematic we try to make it, can escape its own foundations in the shifting, often quite vague sphere of everyday understanding and common sense" (33). If my understanding of critical theory and of Phillips is correct, then both claim that this shortcoming exists in everything; that there is always something absent in any discourse. The point is that the problem is not so much

one of *what* is absent, but in an historical failure to recognize that *something* is absent. Once we realize that something is absolutely and unavoidably absent, and that it is vitally important to what we perceive as present, we can begin to approach the world via critical theory.

A second problem Phillips notes is played out in discussions of the empirical and the transcendental. Phillips begins his talk of the empirical and the transcendental by setting them in opposition to one another: "If [the notion of bare fact] were possible it would be called the empirical. Empirical experience concerns the experience of the here and now... things like these chairs and tables and these other people... Opposed to the empirical is the transcendental. The transcendental refers to any form or pattern of being or thinking which stands outside and exists independently of the empirical, but which conditions and determines it" (29-30).

Yet things become far more interesting once Phillips has discussed difference and deconstruction, offering that "My finite empirical knowledge is deficient in what I cannot know of the infinite. My transcendental concepts are deficient in terms of what they cannot make into objects of empirical knowledge... It will turn out that these two deficiencies are the same" (154). The most intriguing claim in this discussion is that "An experience of the infinitely other is what causes the metaphysics of presence... to crack wide open... If you are serious about calling the experience of difference an experience, you have to go beyond both empiricism and metaphysics... There is now a different concept of experience altogether..." (155). What is it that Phillips may be saying here? It seems to me, and perhaps this is precisely a point one might expect from critical theory, that the foundational definitions of empiricism and transcendentalism can rightly be called into question. I will offer a practical example that supports this idea as I perceive it.

Consider the statement, "The mystics see God. Everybody else just talks about him." The pejorative implication here is that mystics have some knowledge *of* God (albeit as God's *unknowability*) whereas everyone else possesses (merely) accepted knowledge *about* God. This latter group spends its time analyzing sacred books, religious doctrine and the like, conforming them into a modernist framework and attempting to deduce what is True. In this sense and given that with which they choose to work, they are empiricists. (One might even say the latter group believes so strongly in the idea of empiricism that it must first prove the infallibility of its doctrinal data in order for its theories to claim any correctness.) The mystics, on the other hand, choose over and against this a metaphysical route to God. They recognize (or more correctly, intuit) the failure of a purely intellectual approach to God, seeing it as a blindness caused by Man's belief in the infallibility of his own reasoning abilities. In this view, religious fundamentalists are more scientists than anything else, doomed to fail in finding their empirical proofs, inventing them where necessary, whereas the mystics are (and always have been) those who acknowledge the ineffability of the other.

However, Phillips alludes to the possibility of inverting this claim via the simple observation that what the mystics are claiming (and have always claimed) is a privileged "direct" experience of God. In other words the mystics are the *real* empiricists, satisfied with a knowledge that is no less than direct experience of That which they seek. The experience of the mystics is not one born of the traditional five senses, and the empirical data of the mystic is more correctly viewed as non-data, but it is empirical data none the less: it is an experience, even if a decidedly incomprehensible non-experience. We are left to ask, therefore, what is the empirical and what is the transcendental? Do traditional opinions hold any longer? In terms of critical theory, perhaps we need to ask how to define "experience."

In attempting to tie the issues of absence and experience together, and to tie them into race, I thought of two famous bits of writing. Martin Luther King, Junior's *Letter From Birmingham City Jail* presents a compelling account of what is missing in the framework of those who admonish King to "wait" upon the coming of civil rights for blacks (292-3). Thomas Merton's recounting of a spiritual experience at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, Kentucky gestures toward a vision of God and humanity that "would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely" (158). The trick at all levels, it seems to me, is in coming to understand not only the "existence" of the absent, but to gain an intuition of its essentially unlimited scope and, most importantly, to *value* it. Furthermore it is possible, Merton would say, to form an awareness keen enough that the absent becomes—in a non-sensual way—present. How important this remains in areas from physics to linguistics I do not know, but in the area of race it seems ultimately essential.

Phillips remains hopeful in his own field, implying that if a cabbie can reach the impressive height of navigating London unaided by maps, then humanity may be able to reach a place of understanding in critical theory (219). My optimism is more grand. Like Phillips and many he notes, I believe in the necessity of the absent; the *other*. But more than this, I remain convinced that we can touch enough of the other to know that while it will always remain in some sense missing, it is never truly absent.

Works Cited

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