

BOOK REVIEW

Simon Critchley (auth.). Bald: 35 Philosophical Short Cuts. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2021, p. 264.

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Simon Critchley's thought can be understood as a counterpoint in the world of philosophy. In the context of his oeuvre, the same characterization can also be applied to the book that we are presenting here, considering that each of his new books can be labelled as a kind of the Copernican turn in relation to previously published works. Going back to the beginnings of his philosophical activity, in the late 80's, we will see that this is not a matter of mere speculation. For example, his PhD thesis from 1988, which focuses on the consideration of the ethical dimensions of deconstruction in the works of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, in relation to his master's thesis written a year earlier in French on the debate between Carnap and Heidegger, which for Critchley represents a turning point in relationship between philosophical traditions in the 20th century, best exemplifies the previously stated claim. In the same way, we can compare his probably most important work *Very Little... Almost Nothing* (1997), which is preoccupied with the problems of nihilism and the meaning of life, with his first book, *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (1992), mainly based on the ideas and argumentation from the already mentioned PhD thesis.

To this day, Critchley will continue to make these radical turns in his works with the same intensity. This in no way means that there is no inner logic in Critchley's thinking that points to the coherence of his thought. On the contrary, it is possible to show clearly the line of thought that Critchley follows in his works, and equally

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to identify the influences that ultimately shaped his philosophy. Drawing strongly on the most important thinkers of the continental philosophical tradition, such as Kant, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Derrida and Levinas, we can see in Critchley's works a constant emphasis on the importance of the historical nature of philosophy.

The book with symbolic title *Bald* consists of 35 essays derived from the philosophy column *The Stone* published in *The New York Times*, which Critchley started in 2010 together with his editor Peter Catapan. Although they are partly thematically related to each other through loosely indicated chapters, these essays can be read like a newspaper column characterized by a certain degree of freedom from academic rigor. What also gives freedom to the reader in the approach of reading them is the fact that they are not chronologically ordered even though they are dated. The headings of the eight chapters (Happiness?, I Believe, What are Philosophers for?, The Tragedy of Violence?, Athens in Pieces, Others, Philip K. Dick, Garage Philosopher, Covid Coda) are determined by the topic-and motive-related content of the essays whereby the indirect aim is to focus on philosophical questions and problems which, according to Critchley, essentially determine the context of the time when the essays were written.

Without going into details due to space limitations, here we will single out a few of Critchley's most important reflections from the book, which best show his relationship and approach to the key issues of the time we are witnessing. For example, in the essay *The Gospel According to Me*, Simon Critchley and Jamieson Webster problematize the concept of authenticity in the context of the pervasive self-help industry and New Age spirituality. One should be cautious in understanding the meaning and use of this concept. Namely, as they point out, in the secular age the God of monotheistic religions has been replaced by a weak but omnipresent idea of spirituality that is connected to the personal ethic of authenticity and some vague emphasis on the inner self that excludes the moral requirements of traditional religions. It seems that in such a context anything is possible. Therefore, everything can be an object of worship and belief or, on the contrary, nothing. Every card is a winning ticket. Beneath the surface is actually a selfish conformity that is obscured by a story of personal growth and success. Critchley and Webster express this through the imperatives: Be authentic! Be connected! Live fully! Achieve well-being! Be different! People are so devoted to making projects out of themselves or those around them in the form of little gods or infallible geniuses that they will eventually worship. New age forms of spirituality do not require obedience or faith, or guilt. We will agree with the authors that from the concept of authenticity understood in this way, it follows that any belief is not necessary, especially it is not desirable to believe in what goes beyond the authentic life of an individual. Ironically and authentically, we live inauthentic lives. Therefore, we shouldn't be surprised by the question from

this essay: "Is the prosperous self the only God in which we believe in a radically inauthentic world?" (p. 19).

Unfortunately, in Russellian terms, most people today have an immediate acquaintance of violence. It seems that violence has become substantial in our relationship with others and the world in which live. Therefore, Critchley's understanding of violence is inseparable from our insight into the history of violence. It is a two-way street and vicious circle. Violence is inherent in our world and far from being something imaginary that transcends it. Like power in Foucault philosophy or liquid mean in Bauman works, for Critchley violence is a living reality that always includes counter-violence: "Rather, violence is best understood as a historical cycle of violence and counterviolence. In other words, violence is not one but two. It is a double act that traps human beings in a repetitive pattern from which it is very hard to escape." (p. 113). It is also important to point out here that for Critchley, violence is inseparable from revenge, which implies the same logic that gives us the right to retaliate in the same manner. However, then some questions arise naturally due to our justification of the act of revenge by referring to the originally committed evil: "Does that wrong really make it right for me to hit back? Once we act out of revenge, don't we become mired in a cycle of violence and counterviolence with no apparent end?" (p. 108). Through these questions, Critchley wants to go a step further to unveil the background of the revenge, while emphasizing that it is almost always unclear who started first. His intention is not to deepen the already existing and detailed explanations of violence and revenge, but on contrary to try to get out of this historical trap. How? – Through no revenge and no retribution! Here, Critchley suggestion is to foster nonviolent ethics of compassion rather than a violent politics of revenge and retribution (p. 111).

Another very interesting point, which is certainly worth mentioning here, is Critchley's appreciation of the relationship between certainty and tolerance. Paradoxically, as beings whose life is fundamentally imbued with absolute uncertainty, we persistently do not give up the demand to provide certainty to our knowledge, especially by means of a theory of everything. Critchley warns us here, referring to Jacob Bronowski, that the Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty should be called the principle of tolerance. This demand stems from the fact that the principle of uncertainty gives the wrong impression that we are always uncertain in everything. However, according to Critchley, knowledge is precise, and this precision actually includes a certain tolerance of uncertainty: "Heisenberg's insight was that the electron is a particle that yields only limited information; its speed and position are confined by the tolerance of Max Planck's quantum, the basic element of matter." (p. 192). Critchley transposes these reflections of Bronowski into the sphere of our everyday life and relationship with other people, emphasizing that these relationships also require the principle of tolerance. This is of crucial importance if one wants to avoid treating others on the

basis of an established matrix that implies exclusivity based on the principle of absolute certainty. Unfortunately, resorting to such a worldview, according to Critchley, inevitably leads us to arrogance and dogma burdened by ignorance. Regardless of which aspect of human life we are talking about, Critchley sees the way out of this vicious circle in what Bronowski calls “a play of tolerance”. For Critchley, it is precisely “the play of tolerance” what becomes our powerful tool in opposition to “monstrous absolute certainty” as the main disposition of all forms of totalitarianism: “When we think we have certainty, when we aspire to the knowledge of the gods, Auschwitz can happen and can repeat itself. Arguably, it has repeated itself in the genocidal certainties of past decades.” (p. 194).

The content of book *Bald* consistently demonstrates the main feature of Critchley’s philosophical insight. Like Heraclitus who was dissatisfied with his fellow citizens because of their mediocrity and inability to perceive the logos, or Thales who no longer wanted to accept the mythical explanations of natural phenomena, Critchley convinces us with his philosophizing that in addition to the views that philosophy has its origin in wonder or worry, it can also begin in disappointment with the already existing answers. Once again, Critchley has shown in these essays that it is possible to overcome nihilism and meaninglessness that essentially pervade our world. How? The answer is in ourselves, in insisting and not giving up on philosophy. Through the experience of disappointment in the context of understanding the key problems of our time, we are invited and obliged to ask philosophical questions again and again, but also to devise new ones in order to expand, but not soften, our horizons of relationships towards the others and the world in which we live. This is the greatest value of this book, which is not only intended for readers with refined philosophical taste, but also for all those who do not agree to the conformity and status quo.