



Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance

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Infinitely Demanding is the clearest, boldest and most systematic of Simon Critchley's influential views on philosophy, ethics and politics. Part diagnosis of the times, part theoretical analysis of the impasses and possibilities of ethics and politics, part manifesto Infinitely Demanding identifies a massive political disappointment at the heart of liberal democracy and argues that what is called for is an ethics of commitment that can inform a radical politics. Exploring the problem of ethics in Kant, Levinas, Badiou and Lacan that leads to a conception of subjectivity based on the infinite responsibility of an ethical demand, Critchley considers the possibility of political subjectivity and action after Marx and Marxism. Infinitely Demanding culminates in an argument for anarchism as an ethical practice and a renovating means of political organization.

Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance Details

Date : Published May 17th 2007 by Verso (first published 2007)

ISBN : 9781844671212

Author : Simon Critchley

Format : Hardcover 168 pages

Genre : Philosophy, Politics, Nonfiction, Theory

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Peter N. says

I enjoyed reading most parts of this book, especially the section on humour, and it's clear and pleasantly written. But to be honest the "neo-anarchism" section felt a bit tacked-on and not very well thought-out and definitely not well-researched. He kinda just took Graeber to be representative of contemporary anarchism and then wildly simplified his work to a description of modern protest (he only cites *Fragments* and one essay from the New Left Review) and then tried to paint him as a classic American liberal. Which is weird, because elsewhere Graeber gets busy on a whole raft of really explicitly critical and detailed deconstructions of liberalism (in *Toward an anthropological theory of value*, for instance). And then he acknowledges the (pretty spot-on) objections that Graeber made to him in conversation *in a footnote* without actually bothering to revise his reading. Pretty dishonest, I thought.

In the end I wasn't really sure what his position was - attack the state at its interstices but in the end the state is here to stay? I really wanted to find a convincing attempt to work anarchist strains of thought into ethical philosophy but instead I felt like I was reading an ad-hoc attempt to make chin-scratching look hard-edged and relevant. I don't care how rough his stubble is.

I'd like to read more of his work sometime though.

Sarah says

"Despite Nietzschean claims about conscience culminating in self-hatred or Freudian claims about the cruelty of the super-ego, I am proposing an ethics of discomfort, a hyperbolic ethics based on the internalization of an unfulfillable ethical demand." pg. 11

"care of the self as a practice of freedom." pg.41

"Responsibility for the other person never consists in our assuming the responsibility which is his or hers. Responsibility does not here imply reciprocity. On the contrary, the other person always stands higher than oneself." pg. 53

"That which exceeds the bounds of my knowledge demands acknowledgment." pg. 66

"The conception of anarchism that I seek to defend, and which I think is what we find on the ground in activist practice, is not so much organized around freedom as around responsibility, an infinite responsibility that arises in relation to a situation of injustice. This is an anarchism of infinite responsibility rather than unlimited freedom, even though the goal of responsible action might be the cultivation of the other's freedom." pg. 93

"We are on our own and what we do we have to do for ourselves. Politics requires subjective invention, imagination, and endurance, not to mention tenacity and cunning. No ontology or eschatological philosophy of history is going to do it for us. Working at an interstitial distance from the state, a distance that I have tried to describe as democratic, we need to construct political subjectivities that are not arbitrary or relativistic, but

which are articulations of an ethical demand whose scope is universal and whose evidence is faced in a concrete situation. This is dirty, detailed, local, practical and largely unthrilling work. It is time we made a start." pg. 132

Will says

I could barely bring myself to finish this book. It's not that Critchley is a bad writer, nor even a 'bad' philosopher. It's just that this whole book, which is supposedly a statement of his major philosophical framework, is hopelessly narrow and tied down in the niceties of Continental tradition and to the fleeting particularities of the early 2000s.

The image I couldn't shake while reading this book is that Critchley is a perfectly competent baker using extremely inappropriate ingredients. He's baking a cake (his theory of a moral self) using cloves, cornmeal, black pepper corns and feta cheese (his various 'rescued' nuggets from the depths of Kant, Lacan, Badiou, Gramsci, Marx, Fichte, Levinas and an obscure Danish theologian named Logstrup).

Critchley's ideas are interesting, if overwhelmingly simple. The moral self and the good are mutually reinforcing (indeed mutually self-creating). The demands of the good are only meaningful, for Critchley, if those demands are accepted and taken on by the self. He illustrates this and other concepts with a few simplistic diagrams sprinkled throughout the book.

I won't bother critiquing his individual assertions about the many philosophers he leans upon throughout this book. I wouldn't know where to begin, frankly.

However, I will say this: The tangled mess of excerpted, revitalized philosophical chunks that allegedly support Critchley's very basic arguments are typical of the Continental Tradition. The style and approach are convoluted and make no room for any empirical or scientific points. The reader can either accept the validity of psychoanalysis or not. If not, well, happy slogging through nonsense!

In short, Critchley has written a highly parochial, highly historical account of a much broader, much more complex series of human and natural phenomena. He has not done justice to his subjects and unfortunately I think he will fail to do justice to most of his readers as well.

Cattle Class says

I was with this book until the final section on anarchic action. Critchley didn't make clear how individuals coming together for group action differs from the development of party-based liberal democracy. Anarchic utopianism often forgets that people argue frequently, sometimes violently. Aside from that grumble I enjoyed this book deeply.

Adam says

What do I like about this book? Well, for one, it's probably one of the few philosophical contributions to the global justice movement, or the "movement of movements" of my generation. I also think that it fits nicely alongside the work of Rebecca Solnit and David Graeber in reflecting on the "new anarchism" (as it's been called). Indeed, Critchley uses Graeber's definition of anarchism (in distinction from Marxism) as a building block in his own theory, by emphasizing the the ethics of political practice. The book's weakness? The break between the philosophical and political sections is a bit abrupt and the connection between the two could be more thoroughly explained.

I got into this through a reading group. We only met once, and most people hadn't read the book much. I was disappointed, because I believe I would have gotten much more out of it had I been able to benefit from a group discussion. No matter, here are my thoughts and notes so I can remember what was interesting and useful from the book (as a warning, the long-winded summary below is more intended for my own sake than for an audience):

Critchley notes that U.S. is stuck in "disappointment." Along the lines of "Bowling Alone," sociologists have been tracking the steady decline in our civic and especially electoral participation. Critchley defines political disappointment is the realization that we inhabit an unjust world. Religious disappointment is experienced by the breakdown of the order of meaning. The problem in the latter is the threat of nihilism; the threat in the former is a need for ethics. Critchley's theory of philosophy is that it is a response to disappointment--when an effort has failed, when a desire is unfulfilled, the task of philosophy is to ask what is meaning and what is justice?

The way Critchley sees it, the problem of nihilism can take passive and active forms. The passive nihilist does not act up on the world, but instead looks upon it from a scornful distance. The passive nihilist focuses inward and acts upon his/herself, descending into some sort of new-ageism. The active nihilist, on the other hand, so disillusioned with society, seeks to destroy the world and replace it with another. Active nihilism, Critchley contends, is the motivating force of both Jihadist Islam and Fundamentalist Christianity. What unites these two forms of nihilism is a metaphysical or ideological critique of secular democracy. This thinking is similar to that of a professor of mine who sees the rise of extremism, both left and right, as a response to crisis of the failure of modernity—the collapse of modernist institutions, from marriage to the sovereignty of the national state.

Much of the book develops a unique philosophy, building in large part from ideas from Badiou, Logstrup, Levinas, Laclau, Freud and Nietzsche, parts of which I followed to varying degrees. Roughly, this is a summary as I understand it: Ethical experience is a structure in which a demand is made upon a subject, and which the subject may "approve:" "The moral self affirms that demand, assents to finding it good, binds itself to that good and shapes its subjectivity in relation to that good" (17). An ethical subject is a self that is constituted in a relation to its good—it is organized around a certain core values or commitments. What is good is therefore determined subjectively, but also in accordance to one's values. Ethics can be approached as "a process of the formation of ethical subjectivity, where a self commits itself with fidelity to a concrete situation, a singular experience that places a demand on the self" (49). The demand is infinitely demanding—to be able to fully be responsive to the demand would be impossible; god-like. The demand is "one-sided" because the subject is not equal to it. And the demand is "radical," because it is applicable to all. The demand pledges the subject to the other.

Critchley goes to pains to demonstrate how ethics can be both generalizable and subjectively felt; both universalizable and rooted in our moral selfhood. He believes that ethics can be approached as a process of the formation of ethical subjectivity, where a self commits itself with fidelity to a concrete situation, a singular occurrence that places a demand on the self. The result is not relativism, but rather a “situated universalism” (48). The universalism means that the demand causes one to pledge to all; to the other.

Thus laying his groundwork for an Ethics of Commitment, Critchley turns to a Politics of Resistance. Uniting his commitment and resistance is the anarchic nature of both. The self is not a stable unified whole, as apparently believed by many in philosophy, but rather a divided self, being redefined in different situations and by encounters with others. So, too, is the politics that Critchley advances is anarchic. This politics arises when disappointment results not in nihilism, but non-electoral engagement and activism, forms of which Critchley observes in some detail.

Marx believed that the “accelerating dislocatory power” of capitalism leads to the emergence of a unique political subject (the proletariat). However, Critchley argues that instead, capitalism has led to the multiplication of social actors (defined by locality, language, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.). Therefore, we cannot fall victim to economic reductionism and reduce politics to the socioeconomic. Instead, the reactivation of politics will happen through the articulation of new political subjectivities. How will this happen? Critchley relies on Marx's early idea of “true democracy” and Gramsci's idea of hegemony. Marx means “true,” in the sense of “faithful,” not in the sense of “authentic,” and “democracy” refers to “an association of free human beings,” organized in numerous affinity groups (this sounds a lot like the standard idea of anarchist federation).

Hegemony is the forming of a collective will and political associations out of divergent groupings that make up civil society. In other words, subject formation does not come out of some predeterminate category (ie: proletariat), but rather, must be invented or aggregated from the various social struggles of the present. The political task is to identify a determinate particularity in society and then hegemonically construct that particularity into a generality that exerts a universal claim. In simple terms, a new political subject arises in a situation, against the repression of the state, through the articulation of a new universal name.

Having rejected the reduction of social class to proletarianism, Critchley consequently rejects the Marxist-Leninist objective of seizing state power. Instead, he believes that politics should be conceived at a distance from the state, working independently of the state, and working “in a situation” (112). This space is interstitial: an internal distance that has to be opened from the inside. An example of this is the pro-immigrant French slogan that “If one works in France, one is French.” This exemplifies how one may work within the state against the state in order to open a space of opposition.

To summarize his political theory, Critchley argues:

- (1) resistance to state power is to take place in small affinity groups, responding to their respective situations.
- (2) the art of politics is waving cells together into a common front, or shared political subjectivity
- (3) the appeal to universality is what allows the formation of a shared political subjectivity (the appeal to universality is the “hegemonic glue” holding the common front together) (114).

The best example Critchley offers is of the Zapatistas. Facing the concrete threat of the state (motivated by transnational investment) encroaching on their traditional lands. From this specific threat they articulated a new political subject that is universal in nature: the indigenous. By appealing to this identity, they were able to draw support from all corners of the globe.

Diego says

En este libro Simon Critchley presenta su interpretación del horizonte ético dentro de la política contemporánea, presenta su visión del nihilismo pasivo y activo y como ambos se encuentran presentes en el panorama político.

Explora las ideas de Nietzsche, Levinas, Badiou, Marcuse, Habermas, Mouffe y Marx haciendo una fuerte crítica al neo-liberalismo con algunos casos interesantes como el de México en el gobierno de Carlos Salinas, el de Australia en los años setenta y en Estados Unidos durante el gobierno de George W. Bush.

Burak says

To keep it as brief as possible:

Great first half, where Critchley builds a theory of ethics and the ethical subject by synthesizing Kant, Badiou, Levinas, Freud, and others. The notion of humor as a tool for sublimation is a good and interesting idea, and the book is sure to be revisited in the future for this articulation, as well as the entirety of its philosophy of ethics. The "turn to ethics" is a relevant and well-timed move as well at the dawn of postmodernism.

This is followed by a terrible second half, during which Critchley tries to find the political implications of his theory, for a defense of a type of neo-anarchism. The switch from the theory to the politics is extremely problematic, so much so that my laziness gets the best of me from further articulation. Overall, though, my impression is that Critchley neither feels sufficient "disappointment" (that he deems the source of philosophy) for the status quo to hassle through a significant radical political theory, nor he fully thinks about the political implications of his own understanding of ethics.

The good thing about the book, on the other hand, is its rendering visible the difficulty in this switch, from the philosophical to the political, which I also find symptomatic of many modern thinkers. The failure here shines through as an honest one, and it is precisely this failure of the book that opens up very interesting avenues of thought and future attempts to bridge it. My initial idea is that the gap is due to the personal/subjective content of the western philosophical tradition, and the necessarily collective nature of political action. Still, the two halves could have been stitched together in a much better and coherent way, but I think the current political standing of Critchley simply gets the best of him (again symptomatic of many current political philosophers).

So, this is a good philosophical move that drastically fails in its practical implication. Good read for anyone who is interested in the future of radical philosophy and radical politics, and a must read for anyone who wants to think for himself/herself, and be part of this future.

Betsy says

I don't generally seek philosophy for reading, but I read this for my conflict management class and LOVED it. Critchley offers a timely discussion of the future of the state and political organization, urging a shift from the tragic hero frame to a comic frame. Sounds goofy, but his treatise explaining humor's function, constructs

and value are spot on. If you want to really consider the future of change, this book is a great thought generator.

Chris says

Critchley is known for his critical appropriation of Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy. Critchley articulates and defends a kind of levinasian anarchism in *Ininitely Demanding*. Those more familiar with analytic moral theory should approach Critchley's views as offering an ethics of self-formation based on the encounter with "the Other." It's about cultivating a particular ethical attitude or form of life.

jensen says

my only experience with critchley before this text was his 2013 book "stay illusion: the hamlet doctrine". i liked it --it was provocative, contemporary, and effective. maybe a bit too much psychoanalysis, but i liked how critchley was able to encapsulate his ideas. he has a clarity and grace uncharacteristic of academic philosophy. "infinitely demanding" is intellectually provocative, urgently contemporary, and logically effective. critchley integrates so many disparate thinkers into his response to the problem of nihilism, in a smart and reasoned way. this is an accessibly modern-day manifesto on what it means to be an ethical subject in this postindustrial world and our need for an anarchist meta-ethics.

Lukáš says

Clear, accessible and quite formal for continental thought, Critchley gives a nice outline of his approach to politics and ethics. While I don't feel it's that much new for those who know his work, I enjoyed the way how the ideas were outlined and some of the intuitions were brought into a more explicit sense. I think the weakest is the latter part of the book formulating a more explicit stand on neo-anarchist politics through an interesting, though not sure if that-well situated (in a topological sense, that is, choosing sites of textual engagement) discussion of certain texts by Marx and Gramsci. To give an example, Critchley states that much of Marx' economic diagnoses were prophetic, but leaves rather vague references to concrete concepts (besides the state-society question). Then he goes even further, arguing that this is a reduction of politics into a socio-economic model, which is a correct observation, but the harder it seems - to my eyes - to neutralize the political dimension of Marx' concepts, such as surplus value. While the mentioned discussion is placed certainly in order to square the circle and settle the differences with Badiou, Žižek, Laclau and to a lesser degree Mouffe and Hardt & Negri, I find in particular his critique of the latter two folks to be rather oversimplifying (especially given their debt to Deleuze who has complex ties with Derrida, one of Critchley's allies). I think Critchley should have done some more *zeitdiagnosing* on his own. The first three chapters on ethics and its relation to political theology do however make this book rightly an instant classic.

Benjamin says

First, he sketches out a philosophy of ethics that borrows great hunks from Lacan and Levinas, two dudes who did not see eye to eye. This ethics of infinite duty is only bearable, according to Critchley, if you can

laugh at yourself. That bit is probably the most interesting, actually. Because this ethics demands political action, he seeks a form of political action that would fit with it, settles on anarchism, but thinks contemporary movements place too much emphasis on consensus instead we should strive for 'dissensus.' I'm not sure how that works, but it requires or grows from the Levinasian ethics that laughs at itself. He seems especially impressed with the Zapatistas (although he just refers generally to indigenous movements in Mexico), Clown Army, and groups like "Billionaires for Bush." I loved it. Critchley is a great writer with a wicked sense of humor. I hope he develops some of the ideas in here further. I'm not sure I would agree completely, as I'm not ready to give up on utopia or the idea that the state can be overcome.

Nate says

Love this guy. Deftly handles a string of complicated theory to formulate an insightful perspective on ethics in modern societies. If you are a Shakespeare nerd and you like thinking about morality and money, check out his essay "Universal Shylockery: Money and Morality in the Merchant of Venice." I believe it was co-authored with Tom McCarthy.

0 says

uh

Liza says

Kind of interesting and problematic. Žižek wrote this interesting and problematic response: "The lesson here is that the truly subversive thing is not to insist on 'infinite' demands we know those in power cannot fulfil. Since they know that we know it, such an 'infinitely demanding' attitude presents no problem for those in power: 'So wonderful that, with your critical demands, you remind us what kind of world we would all like to live in. Unfortunately, we live in the real world, where we have to make do with what is possible.' The thing to do is, on the contrary, to bombard those in power with strategically well-selected, precise, finite demands, which can't be met with the same excuse."
