The Spirit of Contradiction

An Encounter with:

[Boris Groys. *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*. Trans. David Fernbach. London and New York: Verso, 2012. 272 pages.](#)

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I. Philosophy and Antiphilosophy: An Introduction

Art theorist Boris Groys prefaces his recent essay collection, *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*, by distinguishing his authorial intentions from those of Alain Badiou in *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy* (also published by Verso, but in 2011). Groys' distinctive use of the term "antiphilosophy" is essential for us to understand if we are to encounter Groys' unique antiphilosophy on its own terms, apart from the spirit of Badiou's antiphilosophy.

Introduction to Antiphilosophy reads like a contemporary version of Max Horkheimer's *Critique of Instrumental Reason*. The preface to the English edition of the work appropriately sees Groys admit to the fragmented and disparate nature of the collected essays, with the caveat that each essay comments on authors who question philosophical practice in a similar way. Each philosopher dealt with in Groys' text is in some way a "readymade" philosopher, proclaiming the end of philosophy much like Duchamp calling for the end of art with his exhibition of everyday objects as works of art, a point which Groys makes in the book's preface. Understanding Groys' definition of philosophy as the "production, distribution and consumption of the discourses that generate an effect of universal self-evidence, or a 'truth-effect'" (viii) is essential if we are to

understand if or how antiphilosophy negates or contradicts traditional philosophy. Groys defines philosophical truth in terms of its own self-evident and self-sustaining activity, always open to the accusation of sophism. He points out that discourses which rely upon self-evidence do so within the context of particular cultural identities, and even more specifically, within the shared horizon of writer and audience. Self-evident discourses, for Groys, take up the presumptuous posture of universality by an act of transcendence into the realm of “meta-discourse,” in which the philosopher is distanced from their own particular culture and situation (ix).

This leads Groys to the primary impasse of antiphilosophy: either one acknowledges the popular notion that it is impossible to truly escape subjectivity (leading to a sort of cultural relativism), or one turns to the readymade philosophers who present and re-present antiphilosophy. Antiphilosophy, in Groys’ context, is understood as ascribing “universal philosophical value to certain already-existing ordinary practices, in the same way in which practices of the artistic readymade ascribe artistic value to ordinary objects” (xi). The antiphilosopher “looks for ordinary experiences and practices that can be interpreted as being universal—as transcending one’s own cultural identity” (xi). Examples of this sort of antiphilosophical tendency abound:

Thus, one can show that the modern economy transcends any cultural borders (Marx), that the rites of giving and returning the gift are similar for different cultures (Mauss), that the will to live (or to die) moves everybody in the same manner (Nietzsche), that angst (Kierkegaard) or boredom (Heidegger) are able to relieve a subject from any cultural determinations, that we all share tears and laughter (Bataille, Bakhtin) and that we are all united by the electronic media. (xi)

These examples, while cursory, are edifying ways of pointing to the spirit of antiphilosophy and its refusal to submit to the idea that it is impossible to change one’s mind—with this positive change of mind being called *metanoia* by Groys, a term that can be translated as transformation

or metamorphosis (x). Most notably, antiphilosophy dignifies the mundane quotidian “practices of ordinary life” above the hubris of universal assertion (xi).

The epistemic key to antiphilosophy is the dissociation of “the production of evidence from the production of philosophical discourses” (xi). Evidence, therefore, can be produced from any experience or discourse, rather than being restricted to the empirical realm, or the conditions of scientific realism. Groys writes that “the truth of philosophical texts is, unlike the truth of scientific texts, not dependent on any empirical verification” (viii-ix), and furthermore, that “Philosophical discourses also irradiate evidence because they are produced in a way that (unlike scientific theories) cannot be formalized and reproduced” (x). This distinction is helpful when we consider Groys’ analogical treatment of the artist and the philosopher, which he extends at the end of his preface, stating: “A traditional philosopher is like a traditional artist: an artisan producing texts. An antiphilosopher is like a contemporary art curator: he contextualizes objects and texts instead of producing them” (xiii). Groys sees antiphilosophy as a more democratic mode of thinking and discursivity than the elitist tendencies of philosophy proper. This means that evidence does not bear up the work of the antiphilosopher, but rather reveals itself as a result of contextualization and recontextualization.

As the brief preface concludes, the reader is left with a troubled distinction between philosophy and antiphilosophy. However, as if by surprise, Groys takes one further step: rather than philosophy being temporarily afflicted by antiphilosophy, it is antiphilosophy that will become the “final, absolute stage of philosophy” (xiii). Although the idea that philosophy is defined by universal assertion is posited strongly by Groys, it seems to me that there is also an important element of weakness in the assertion, a positive weakness that is in keeping with the critique of philosophy offered by antiphilosophy. Although the connection to “weak thought” is

not made explicit in Groys' book, the critique of philosophy by antiphilosophy seems to be underwritten by a logic of weakness that sees the imposture of power-discourses and reacts with a critique that avoids this imposture. In this way it is evident that antiphilosophy could serve well as a conversation partner with voices ranging from Gianni Vattimo's weak ontology, to John D. Caputo's weak God, to the critique of retributive approaches to justice offered by Anabaptist Mennonite theologians like John Howard Yoder.

Appropriately, for Groys the absolutization of antiphilosophy as the end of philosophy is not an assertion from evidence, but rather an unverifiable and baseless assertion which "cannot be relativized" by any act of recognition or even comparison (xiii). Being the end of philosophy, antiphilosophy is purposed with the changing of minds, and more specifically with the task of bringing about *metanoia*—transformations which Groys argues can assure the survival of philosophy itself.

II. The Commodification of Truth

While the preface of the *Introduction to Antiphilosophy* establishes the distinctiveness of antiphilosophy, the prologue outlines its methodological approach. Linking philosophy with the pursuit of truth, Groys echoes the Frankfurt School by pointing out just how saturated the present truth-market is, and the superfluity of the truth-market itself. Groys writes that "the search for truth is not good business," citing the dual problem of there being too much and too little truth in contemporary society and discourse (xvi). A multiplicity of available truths might see philosophers become like sophists, and too little truth would place philosophers alongside the likes of Socrates and his love of the truth that he knew he did not possess. Groys points out that the Sophist produces truth and the philosopher consumes it, positioning Socrates as a picture of

the disgruntled and quarrelsome consumer of truth. If it is true that “any truth that appears as a commodity is no truth” then all discourses are reduced via commodification (xviii). This reduction, as Groys points out, is often opposed by,

“weak messianic hope” for the advent of truth beyond truth—an absolutely other truth, which would not even appear as truth, as doctrine, book, theory or method, not even consciously or unconsciously, and which would therefore fundamentally escape commercialization. But clearly this hope is only postulated in order to be repeatedly disappointed. (xviii)

While we may think that this disappointment is a result of the solvent quality of the capitalist economy, Groys suggests instead that it is philosophy itself that “transforms every truth into a commodity” (xix). Against this tendency stands antiphilosophy, which approaches ideas in order to practice them in everyday life, rather than to assess their worthiness in the market of ideas.

Groys locates the beginning of antiphilosophy in the commanding (rather than critical) modalities of Marx and Kierkegaard. He also links the *consumptive* attitude of philosophy to the *critical* attitude of philosophy, and shows how the commanding voice of antiphilosophy escapes the cycle of commodification: “truth only shows itself if the command is followed” (xx). Antiphilosophy asks that its adherents make the decision to be transformed by truth before criticizing it, and furthermore posits that the object of criticism is not even available to one who has not made that “decision in the dark” or “life decision” to obey, to follow, or to make the Kierkegaardian leap of faith (xx).

Where the book itself is concerned, the link to antiphilosophy is clear: Groys does not give instruction to the reader, but rather writes about thinkers who give commands, and does so without criticizing them in the consumptive mode of traditional philosophy. The collection is typically but not frustratingly diverse. The first chapter of *Introduction to Antiphilosophy* takes the reader on a paradoxical journey through the hills and valleys of Kierkegaard’s thought,

touching on the leap of faith and situating Kierkegaard *contra* Hegel. The second chapter explores the mysterious figure of Russian existentialist Leo Shestov, his odd writing style, and the repetitive quotations that dot the landscape of his oeuvre. The third chapter examines Heidegger's essay "The Origin of the Work of Art," stressing openness to the future as an imperative for thinkers and artists alike. Chapter Four leverages Derrida to explore the postmodern idea of the apocalyptic, and the modern idea of the *Aufklärer*, in the context of textuality and the archive. While Groys' engagement with theology (or perhaps with the relationship between philosophy and theology) runs throughout the book, it is in Chapter Five, on Benjamin that Groys addresses theology head-on. Chapter Six is a lengthy meditation on Lessing and Judaism, while the seventh chapter discusses technology, labour, and totalitarianism, and Jünger's work *Der Arbeiter*. The eighth chapter, on Kojève's reading of Solovyov, addresses the end of history as Kojève locates it in Hegel's *Phenomenology* and Absolute Spirit. Nietzsche's influence on the Russian thinkers Gustav Shpet, A.A. Meier, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Mikhail Bulgakov is the subject of Chapter Nine, while the tenth chapter on participatory art ranges from commentary on Wagner and Bataille, to McLuhan. Finally, McLuhan is again the subject of the final chapter, alongside Lessing and Greenburg.

With this whirlwind over, the reader is left with very little solidity regarding Groys' concept of antiphilosophy—apart from what is articulated in the preface and prologue—although this seems to be in keeping with the antiphilosophical spirit, which is not a system or a manifesto, but a series of exemplary plateaus or what Adorno might call "constellations" (see Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*). Rather than critique the particulars of Groys' examples and give way to the forces which commodify criticism, in what follows I will offer a few ways in which

philosophy might become transformed by the antiphilosophical spirit that Groys unveils in the *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*.

III. *Metanoia* and Criticism

The figure of *metanoia* features heavily in Groys' description of antiphilosophy, but also appears elsewhere in his work. As far as I can tell, the goal of antiphilosophy is not simply to negate philosophy nor to contradict it, but rather to become a constructive counterpart or a transformative agent in the present philosophical atmosphere. (Negation and contradiction are important, however, to the discursive ontology upon which Groys' antiphilosophy rests.) In addition to being featured in the *Introduction to Antiphilosophy*, the concept of *metanoia* is also a prominent figure in *The Communist Postscript* (most notably in Chapter Four, "The Kingdom of Philosophy: The Administration of *Metanoia*").¹ The theological root of the word appears in Biblical passages such as Mark 1:15, which states: "'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent [*metanoia*] and believe the good news!'" (New International Version). Groys' explanation is not altogether incompatible with the Gospel text judging from his explanation of Husserl's eidetic reduction as a secular analogue to the religious conversion experience (ix). Like conversion, Groys sees *metanoia* in terms of a change in perspective or worldview, one that takes up a "metaposition" or is involved with a meta-discourse (see Groys, *Communist Postscript*, 106).

However, Groys does not clearly distinguish between the descriptive claim that philosophy is metacognitive and absolutist, and the prescriptive critique offered by antiphilosophy, which itself includes the metacognitive position and some degree of absolutization. This may well be because of the inability of antiphilosophy to make strong

critical assertions given its opposition to the absolutist tendencies of contemporary philosophy. What Groys does state clearly is that scepticism regarding the possibility of *metanoia* and metaposition has resulted in a dilemma between the stasis of cultural relativism, and the antiphilosophical elevation of ordinary practices. The idea of antiphilosophy is not to be original or even creative, but to contextualize and recontextualize texts outside of the sphere of production, thereby avoiding the commodification of truth.

The *metanoia* offered by antiphilosophy requires a rethinking of not only the concept of *context* but also the concept and practice of *criticism*. However, if we want to encounter Groys' antiphilosophy and its claims about philosophical discourse we must begin with the tenets of an earlier work: the small but mighty *Communist Postscript*. While focused on the nature of communism and its treatment of society in linguistic rather than monetary terms, the book also serves as an introduction to dialectics and all of its contradiction and negation. Similar to Henri Lefebvre's short work *Dialectical Materialism*, Groys' *Communist Postscript* provides a running commentary on the inexplicable mystery of the dialectic, a concept which begins with the Ancients, finds voice in Hegel, and more recently in the work of Adorno, Kristeva, and Jameson.²

IV. Discourse and Dialectics: Paradox, Negation, and Contradiction

In perhaps the most profound lines of *The Communist Postscript* Groys writes,

If we understand philosophical thinking to be the exposure of the inner logical structure of a discourse, then from the perspective of genuine thinking, the logical composition of any discourse can be described in no other way than as self-contradiction, as paradox. *Logos* is paradox. (7)

As the passage indicates, Groys thinks discourse (*Logos*) is defined by paradox and the political and democratic freedom to contradict the other without repercussion, oppression, or violence—not by practices of agreement or exchange. Groys defends communism insofar as it allows society to function on the level of language rather than on the level of money and finance, and as a part of this linguistification (*Versprachlichung*) of society the vocabulary of dialectical materialism also returns. If the discursive *Logos* has paradox as its defining feature then it follows that the inner contradictions—negations and affirmations—are sustained in the whole of discourse. If discourse contains within it the spirit of contradiction, then the imperative is not to police the boundaries and limits of identity (particularly the identities of persons linked with ideological positions), but rather to see that the dialectic can become a figure for discourse—and also a figure for the *metanoia* of philosophy itself. Groys argues that identity must be given its due, apart from difference, because “it always remains contentious” (*Introduction* 103), and that identity is always troubled by contradiction (36-37). This attitude is similar to that of Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “language expresses the contradiction that something is itself and at one and at the same time something other than itself, identical and not identical” (15).

If antiphilosophical *metanoia* is the end of philosophy, as Groys claims, then it could very well be the beginning of true discourse and communication among disciplines in the academy. It would be refreshing to see the non-supremacist worldview of antiphilosophy blur the edges of disciplines and schools of thought in order that collaboration may abound. Before this opening can occur, however, given that the context of criticism is discourse *and* the concept of discourse is a dialogue determined by the freedom to contradict the other, then contradiction must come to be seen as vital rather than crippling. Despite the nature of criticism (critical

discourse) being an exercise in distinctive contradiction and/or negation, it is the goal of criticism that will need to change most drastically if philosophy is to be transformed by the antiphilosophical spirit.

Groys writes often of the uses and misuses of evidence, and criticism is no exception to the transformative task of antiphilosophy. Instead of seeing philosophical criticism as an exercise in refutation or as an antagonism between evidences, the antagonisms and divisions between positions must be affirmed as dialectically constitutive of the whole of discourse. For Groys, and hopefully for us, contradiction is an essential and healthy aspect of theoretical and philosophical discourse. Without the distinction offered by contradiction, identities (ideological or otherwise) cannot be individuated, and meaningful discourses cannot be sustained. Groys writes that “What needs to be established instead [of the existence of true and untrue ideas] is that every *doxa* is paradoxical” (*Postscript* 8). Every practice—theoretical philosophy in particular—has a disrupted core and a nonidentical identity (in keeping with Adorno’s negative dialectics).

If this antiphilosophical transformation of the everyday practice of discourse into paradox is to be taken seriously, then the relationship between identity and totality must be clarified. The identities of particular positions within the context of the discursive totality are not compromised by their subjectivity. If this is not acknowledged then the consequence is that the subjective positions within discourses assert themselves as the whole of the discourse, and as the truth of the discourse. As was explained above, antiphilosophy distinguishes itself from the traditional philosophical posture of absolutization, and this distance allows it to remain immune to the hubris of universality while asserting a mild sort of universality through the elevation of ordinary practices, one example of which is discourse. Given that this concerning hubris so often shows itself in opposing disciplines, I hope that the antiphilosophical impetus could come to condition

interdisciplinarity and bring those in the humanities to a greater appreciation of the concerns which unify the too-often separate fields of philosophy, theology, literary criticism, and sociology (to name a few).

V. Conclusion

In the last instance, the call of antiphilosophy is a weak one that opposes the strength of reason. Groys writes in his *Communist Postscript* that,

Reason is too almighty. Rational calculation is too unavoidable. To be sure, the revolt against reason is necessary, but it is also impossible because the rule of reason cannot be broken. That is who those who speak in paradoxes today as *philosophes maudits* who—traumatized by life, driven by the forces of desire, and hopelessly gone astray in the obscurity of language—explode or deconstruct rational discourse with paradox. (21-22)

Both in his introduction and in his chapter on Shestov, Groys points out that the true spirit of philosophy is that of real life, made apparent by the antiphilosophical sentiment and its emphasis on ordinary practices. A philosopher is someone who elevates their own subjective context to that of the total or the whole, regardless of whether others share in his or her context. Groys writes that “the philosopher transfers his own situation onto other people who may well be in a completely different situation” (39). Rather than this decontextualized discursive practice, it is my understanding that antiphilosophy uncovers, once again, the idea that philosophy is a discipline of *life*: “In other words, what is involved is not a purely philosophical decision, but rather a life decision, which cannot be postponed because life is too brief” (xx).

Our being-towards-death, being one motivator among many, drives philosophical thinking towards the immanence of life-decisions, rather than the transcendence of so-called philosophical decisions. And for those philosophical decisions asked of the human subject, the convicted adherent to antiphilosophy always has recourse to non-decisive paradox which, like

Kierkegaard, “constantly swings between corresponding alternatives, [and] delays decision or makes it paradoxical and impossible,” a practice which seems very dialectical indeed (19-20). It is this emphasis on life and vitality that provides philosophy with a vision for discourse beyond the reduction of the world of thought to a marketplace of ideas.

Notes

¹ As a treatise on the nature of discourse and politics, Groys’ *Communist Postscript* (Verso, 2009) comes to mind as being a key to the underpinnings of his antiphilosophy. His other books, from *The Total Art of Stalinism* (Verso, 1992), to *Art Power* (MIT Press, 2008), to the recent *Under Suspicion* (CUP, 2012), stand alongside his many essays, some collected in *Going Public* (Sternberg Press, 2010), and some still uncollected such as “The Loneliness of the Project,” written for the *New York Magazine of Contemporary Art and Theory*.

² For more on this see my *Dialectics Unbound: On the Possibility of Total Writing*. Brooklyn, New York: Punctum Books, Forthcoming 2013.

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