

Mark Fisher and the Inquiry into Rationality - Postliterate - Medium

By Postliterate

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One of the most vexing writings of Mark Fisher which has haunted me now for a period of years, is a single short blogpost from his *k-punk* blog dated to February 17, 2005, entitled: *WE DOGMATISTS* ([link → http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/005025.html](http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/005025.html)). It is a bizarre mix of damning wisdom, unhinged madness, and utter confusion missing context — and in a strange sort of way it has presented itself as a unique challenge to my conceptions of philosophy and the nature of critique. In this piece I want to analyze it, as I believe this to have potentially significant theoretical utility. The blogpost begins with two damning insights:

1. Despite their bold philosophical differences, the political implications of the work of Derrida, Habermas, and Lyotard are essentially identical ([as Žižek puts it → https://www.lacan.com/zizek-human.htm](https://www.lacan.com/zizek-human.htm): “Both [Derrida and Habermas] occupy the same Left-of-center place.”)
2. The notions of *differends*, incommensurability, language games, and forms-of-life, as the philosophical upshots of postmodern theory, pose no real threat to the status quo. In fact, they may be welcomed, as “*difference is not suppressed by the established order, it is its banal currency.*”

The general understanding that Fisher wants to make clear here is that post-modern theory and its derivatives are not radical and lack the capability to overcome global capitalism — they are instead incorporated into it and possibly even promoted by it. Fair enough.

But he goes further — and herein lies the difficulty. Fisher claims that the only effective alternative to the above two problems is the implementation of “dogmatism”: a “*commitment to the view that there are Truths [... and] the view that there is a Good.*” Fisher wants a revival of rationalism post-Kant (Kant he sees as the beginning of the end for rationalism), and a “*ruthless subordination to an impersonal system*” of such rationalism. This is how “*his majesty the Ego can be crushed,*” and authoritarianism can finally effectively be opposed.

There are two further problematic claims Fisher makes in relation to that point. Beginning with the first:

- Philosophy that consists “*solely in the **negative** claim that consciousness cannot be explained by either science or philosophy*” is “*religion in the worst sense.*”

This claim would be correct if it applied to the philosophers he is talking about, but it does not. Fisher attempts to decry Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Lyotard and Heidegger all at once, claiming that they all fell victim to the “*qualia cult of consciousness.*” This is absurd — the entire point of Nietzsche’s (and especially Heidegger’s) writing was to *philosophically* articulate what science could not. Heidegger’s attempt to articulate *Vorwissenschaft* (“pre-science”) and Nietzsche and Habermas’s attempt to articulate the practical interests beneath the sciences cannot simply be denied as a “*qualia cult of consciousness.*” Marx’s work also belongs very clearly to this lineage, even if his materialist outlook forces him to stand largely alone.

The particularly strange thing about this claim is that it makes Fisher appear to be something of an advocate for analytic philosophy — of which he is certainly not. He does not even refer to Heidegger in his bogpost, but

rather to “*Heideggerian Nazi poetico-mysticism*,” unconsciously mimicking the comment made by Bertrand Russell in regards to the members of the Vienna Circle rejecting Nazism:

“The severe logical training to which these men submitted themselves had, it appeared, rendered them immune to the infection of passionate dogma...”

Russell’s remark applied to individuals who became known as the first of the truly demarcated “analytic” tradition. Heidegger became the “Continental” tradition, which completely fell for the deceit of Nazism and joined its ranks. By the looks of his article, Fisher would have lauded Russell’s comment — yet Fisher is no analytic philosopher.

The second claim Fisher then makes is this:

- “*The Kantian turn is away from dogma and into critique. Reason is not so much surpassed as arrested.*” Therefore “dogmatism” must surpass the limitations imposed by the logic of critique in order to avoid “*laying the groundwork for the aporetic pathos-poetics.*”

This claim is more difficult, and it lays out clearly Fisher’s Spinozism. Fisher believes he can exorcise all limitations imposed on reason because his Spinozism allows him to see a rationally derived capital-T Truth and a capital-G Good. Thus, sobering rationalism (“dogmatism”) allows one to reach those two, and therefore no substitute can suffice.

Of course, there is no way to believe any of this without an irrationally derived commitment to anti-authoritarianism. There is nothing inherently wrong with attempting to explain the world through science and philosophy, and most would not disagree, but problem arises when Fisher attempts to combat religion with another religion. Fisher claims dogmatism is “*religion in the best sense*” whereas his opponents exhibit “*religion in the worst sense.*” Why is this the case? Only because of a set of personal convictions which in fact require for their analysis the very non-rationalist tools which Fisher decries. He attempts to fight everyone with his religion

in a way regresses into faith in God-like Truth and Good. The previous work of excavating the nature of these values and their practical realities is discarded — only absent rationalism may remain. But of course Fisher claims he cannot be in the wrong because his opponents, as alleged worshippers of consciousness, are the actual purveyors of “*religion in the worst sense.*”

In the final analysis, critique as limitation to reasoning poses no actual problem for the acquisition of truths — rather, it places it in definite context. Nietzsche, for example, despite being characterized by Fisher as “*aporetic pathos-poetics,*” sought not to destroy the notion of truth so much as make our knowledge of it clearer through an understanding of perspectivity. The acquisition of truth ceases to be either a process of religious absolutism (Truth as singular and objective as God), and it ceases to be a purely scientific affair (inevitably instrumental and thus victim to the biases and material conditions of the times.) The acquisition of truth, rather, becomes bound to its human source — in the corporeal, material, and historical sense — and is forced to be viewed in relation to that source. In that way it is prevented from becoming abstracted metaphysical faith, as it is in Fisher’s case.

If Fisher is a Spinozist-Marxism, I wish for a Nietzschean-Marxism.