On Doubt and Objectivity

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> Archimedes used to demand just one firm and immovable point in order to shift the entire earth; so I too can hope for great things if I manage to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakeable.[1]

So wrote Descartes in his second Meditation, *Of the Nature of the Human Mind.* Those versed in the history of European philosophy will know the outcome of Descartes's wager to himself, his claim to have discovered just the slight thing he had hoped to discover, a truth that cannot be doubted: *cogito*, "I think."

The wager of the *Meditations* is not the first appearance of the *cogito, ergo sum* in Descartes's work (which is to say it is a false wager, its outcome having been decided, for Descartes at least, four years prior, when he first published the phrase in his *Discourse on the Method*). Thus, the curiosity of this statement, and its novel component, is not so much the claim as the manner in which Descartes illustrates it: by coining a metaphor in reference to Archimedes. The *cogito* belongs unforgettably to Descartes, having been made by centuries of tortuous metaphysical

[1] René Descartes, "Second Meditation," in *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies*, trans. John Cottingham, 2nd ed., Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 16.

dissection practically synonymous with the name; but the *Archimedean point*, despite bearing another name, is also of Cartesian blood.

What we mean nowadays by "Archimedean point"—a point from which we may, in theory, stand entirely outside of what we wish to observe, and therefore observe it wholly, objectively, free of error or bias—is owed to Descartes, not Archimedes. Of course, Descartes is alluding in the second Meditation to an older statement referred apocryphally to Archimedes; the Ancient Greek mathematician and engineer is said to have declared, "give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the world." Descartes certainly seizes on the spirit of the declaration—give me what I need, and I shall do wondrous things. But if Archimedes really said this (or, even more so, if it were only attributed to that archetype of practicality), one must imagine he meant to make a point about mechanical laws and not actually to demand of his listener that they produce a suitable lever and fulcrum; and, in any case, a firm and immovable point is not on the list of demands. It is only Descartes who comes to assure us that such a point, in the realm of philosophical truth if not in that of mechanics, exists—and that, furthermore, we may actually find it.

Apparently, then, not only Descartes's wager is contrived, but also the analogy used to explain it. The "Archimedean point" as Descartes refashioned it—and as its meaning survives in today's common usage—really has nothing to do with Archimedes. *It came into existence as a metaphor used to summarize Descartes's method of philosophical inquiry.* Had Descartes not first popularized coordinate geometry, one might have called it the "Cartesian point."

I have taken the time to trace this rather arcane etymology because, while not much ink is spilled in social and cultural theory these days over Cartesian metaphysics, the

metaphor of the Archimedean point—sometimes by name, but also by aliases like the "God's-eye-view" and the "objective perspective," as well as in certain avatars, like the "neutral" or "rational" subject or, more to the point, White or male or otherwise "normative" or "unmarked" subjects[2]—is alive and kicking. Or rather, it is alive and being kicked, critiqued roundly for its pretension to exist and give credence to structures of domination when, on the contrary, it is an illusion.

My point is not that these critiques ought to take place in the language of Cartesian metaphysics. Nor is it that all of the critical terms above are actually equivalent and certainly not that they are all "really about Descartes." Terms like "rational" and "neutral" are, after all, not much alike on close inspection, and the subject positions (such as "unmarked subject") are especially distinct from the abstract spatial terms (such as "unbiased perspective") in terms of their implications.

Nevertheless, as a rule, what turns out in social theory to be problematic about such perspectives or subject positions is that they purport to stand outside of where they really are and that they therefore generate false knowledge or false claims of authority—false insofar as they claim a totalizing or self-certifying quality which can never really hold. That is, they are problematic because they depend

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[2] See, e.g., *The View from Nowhere* (Thomas Nagel), *The Embodied Mind* (Varela et al.), Gayatri Spivak, Foucault, Richard Rorty, Derrida *passim*. Donna Haraway is exemplary: "I would like to...reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere. This is the gaze that mythically inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation. This gaze signifies the unmarked positions of Man and White, one of the many nasty tones of the word 'objectivity' to feminist ears...". Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 581, https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066.

on the existence of *something* with the qualities of an Archimedean point, with which they identify themselves, and which does not really exist.

Without now passing any judgment on its validity, it is thus possible to identify a schema constituting the whole, or at least an important part, of many contemporary arguments about the particularity of culture, society, and identity. Demonstrate that a certain assertion, social structure, state of affairs, or what have you, is identified with an Archimedean point (e.g., calls its properties self-evident, its propositions objective, its claims necessary and universal, etc.); but such a point, together with its properties, does not really exist; thus, the initial identification is in fact vacuous and, by rights, ought to be given up (even though it may persist as a social phenomenon because of self-serving or compulsory belief in that really non-existent thing). To give a case, theorists as different in their positions and legacies as Judith Butler and bell hooks have argued that the identification of the feminist movement with an abstract, objective condition of "womanhood" has failed, and will continue to fail, not for particular reasons that might be avoided, but *necessarily, because in fact there does not exist such an abstract, objective condition of womanhood with which to identify*. The two authors argue the latter claim from very different foundations (Butler, from a post-structuralist argument about the non-closure of linguistic categories; hooks, from personal and historical attestation to the irreconcilability of White and Black womanhood), but the shared, syllogistic logic is what permits them both to reject the identification of "woman" with an Archimedean point *necessarily*.[3]

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[3] This is not a work of analytic philosophy, and my overall intent is not to reduce this class of arguments in gender studies, racial theory, etc., to a syllogism to be refuted on merely logical grounds. Very many such arguments do, unfortunately, open themselves to being reduced in such a way; some, of course, are highly original in form, and have nothing to do with the above discussion. In between these poles, there exist somewhat

Many commentators have already pointed out the key difficulty with this argument: how can I claim that I am certain, or that it is necessary, that there exists no point from which I can pronounce certain or necessary truths? How can I argue that I am certain there is no Archimedean point without myself occupying an Archimedean point? If I pronounce that all subjects violate the universal, am I not myself pronouncing a truth I hold to be universally true of all subjects; or, what is the same thing, am I not declaring that I know for certain something about subjectivity itself, abstracted as it is from any particular identity?

It is no use claiming that universal negation is not the same as universal affirmation; certainly they are different in many respects, but not in respect of their universality. If it is true that I can only make a claim to necessity or universality from an Archimedean point, then I cannot also proclaim as a law that no such point exists, for I presuppose just that point in making my proclamation of law. Dogmatic arguments against objectivity, those which oppose an axiomatic truth merely with another—and more obviously self-contradictory—axiomatic truth, therefore fall inescapably into this trap. It is, in fact, the trap of the alternative form of Descartes's formula: *dubito, ergo sum.* If I wish to doubt the necessity of some truth or the universality of some property, I may do so, but at the same time I create a truth I cannot doubt, namely *that I am doubting*, and a property I cannot negate, namely *my being as doubting;* for I presuppose these in the very act of doubting. There-

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stronger and weaker variants of the argument. For example, a stronger argument might claim that a given social phenomenon depends on an Archimedean point not just for its unity of content (as with the feminist arguments above) but for its very existence; critiques of ideas of racial supremacy might fall into this category. A weaker argument might claim only that a given phenomenon *ought not* to identify itself with an Archimedean point, not that it cannot; for example, an argument against societies constructed around the abstract liberal subject, on the basis that they are *more harmful than they otherwise might be*, would fall into this category.

fore, at the moment when I pronounce my law of universal negation, I contradict myself.

That Descartes's four-hundred year old "gotcha" still functions in contemporary philosophy is bizarre and somewhat unfortunate, but it should not come to us as a surprise. After all, as we saw, *the Archimedean point stands for the Cartesian method.* If we challenge it on its own terms—that is, the terms of its formal structure; it matters relatively little whether we use contemporary terminology to identify it—then it will defend itself on its own terms, which is to say, Cartesian terms.

What, then, is the Cartesian method, the method embedded in that hated, immovable point? Let us not confuse the method itself with the notorious result of Descartes's own application of it, mind-body dualism and the lofty relegation of all physical existence to the realm of the uncertain. The method has nothing intrinsically to do with this; it is a more elemental technique with which we have already met in contemporary critiques, as the object of their contempt: first *find something that is self-certain*—that is, which does not depend on anything else for the certainty of its truth, or which cannot be doubted—and then *use it to ground other things that we might know for certain.* Particularly the first step of this method has become known as the *skeptical method*, because, although it wishes to proceed towards self-certainty, it does so by doubting, by attempting to disprove the self-certainty and necessity of every possible truth. If it had succeeded in finding a complete universe of uncertainties, Descartes would have lost his wager. It is only because doubt finds something that it cannot doubt—that is, *that it finds that the law of doubt is itself not universal*—that Descartes concludes something must lie without doubt, namely the Archimedean point, more specifically the "I think."

This is why merely forbidding the existence of the Archimedean point not only never escapes the Cartesian orbit, but actually reenacts it. The act of trying to undermine the self-certainty of every possible truth—to deny every possible point the status of Archimedean—*is the imperative of the skeptical method*. Either it will succeed, in which case it will have no ground to call even its own judgments universal, necessary, or applicable in any given circumstance; or it will fail, and it will encounter something whose self-certainty cannot be denied.

Those familiar with the terrain of such debates might spy the issues of modernism and postmodernism embedded in it. The post-modern critique of the Enlightenment subject is practically synonymous with the critique of the self-certain point.[4] This idea is connected indelibly with the name of Foucault, almost as much as the *cogito* is with Descartes. To give one example, here he is in an interview of the 1970s, addressing his genealogical method in contrast with the ahistorical methodologies of Marxist phenomenology:

> One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that's to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework. And this is what I would call genealogy, that is, a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects etc., *without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history.*[5]

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[4] Cf. Haraway, above.

[5] Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 117, emphasis mine. One can see from this passage that Foucault himself was not liable to a

Let us bracket for now, with a promise to refind it, the black hole of the taxonomy of modern thought, so that we can return to the Archimedean point. We began by noting that, while this metaphor is still an object of prolific discussion and attack in contemporary social theory, direct references to Descartes, who endowed it with the skeptical method as its substrate, are scarce. By contrast, references to the much later thinkers of the Enlightenment period, whether implicitly or by name, are legion, it being almost customary to mention these thinkers whenever discussing the possibility or impossibility of objective knowledge. Certainly the most powerful figurehead in this context is Kant, his personage having itself become a symbol for the proclamation of the new era that, guided by its sure grasp of Reason, might forever exorcise the old demons of superstition and falsehood.

Kant does in fact dedicate his great and massive work, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, to the defense of reasoning *a priori*, from principles that, because they come prior to all experience or empirical knowledge, cannot be placed by them into doubt. To that end, he defines himself as an enemy of "*skepticism*, a principle of artful and scientific ignorance that undermines the foundations of all cognition, in order, if possible, to leave no reliability or certainty

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dogmatic system of historicism, and he keeps separate the transcendental subject, and the continuous subject of "empty sameness." A few lines earlier in the same interview (pp. 111–112), Foucault responds to his interviewer's probe about the theme of "discontinuity" in his work: "This business about discontinuity has always rather bewildered me. In the new edition of the *Petit Larousse* it says: 'Foucault, a philosopher who founds his theory of history on discontinuity.' That leaves me flabbergasted.... My problem was not at all to say, '*Voilà,* long live discontinuity, we are in the discontinuous and a good thing too', but to pose the question, 'How is it that at certain moments and in certain orders of knowledge, there are these sudden take-offs, these hastenings of evolution, these transformations which fail to respond to the calm, continuist image that is normally accredited?'"

anywhere."[6] But he contrasts skepticism with the *skeptical method*, which meets with his approval:

> This method of watching or even occasioning a contest between assertions, not in order to decide it to the advantage of one party of the other, but to investigate whether the object of the dispute is not perhaps a mere mirage at which each would snatch in vain without being able to gain anything even if he met with no resistance—this procedure, I say, can be called the *skeptical method*.... *For the skeptical method aims at certainty*...in order to do as wise legislators do when from the embarrassment of judges in cases of litigation they draw instruction concerning that which is defective and imprecisely determined in their laws.[7]

Kant is referring here mainly to the philosophy of David Hume, but one can detect in the description more than a shadow of the skeptical method we called "Cartesian": the occasion of the wager to prove that any object of truth "is not perhaps a mere mirage," and the aim at certainty which can be derived from the embarrassment of this attempt, which proves the defectiveness of an otherwise seamless law of doubt. Really, it is the same skeptical method at hand in all of these cases; even Kant—a legendary antagonist to Hume and certainly to Descartes—can find no fault in the need and the utility of the method itself, for either it achieves its aim or it discredits itself immediately, though not always obviously. The argument, then, is not about *whether* to seek an Archimedean point, but how to determine correctly its nature and, thus, the conclusions that may be drawn from it. In this, Kant angles himself against his predecessors, armed with a purpose that,

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[6] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A424/B451, emphasis original.

[7] Kant, A423-4/B451-2, first emphasis original, second emphasis mine.

perhaps unexpectedly, sounds much like the purpose that drives contemporary critiques of the Archimedean point: to guard us from being deceived by the "illusion which itself rests on subjective principles and passes them off as objective".[8]

Kant, of course, is wise to the Cartesian trap that would befall any dogmatic attempt to reject the Archimedean point by fiat. Addressing Hume, whose famous "empiricist" philosophy centered around denying the possibility of knowing any truths *a priori*, he notes dryly the irony that should by now be apparent: "the same thing happens to him that always brings down skepticism, namely, *he is himself doubted*, for his objections rest only on *facta* [empirical facts], which are contingent, *but not on principles that could effect a necessary renunciation of the right to dogmatic assertions*."[9] Nevertheless, Kant acknowledges that Hume's skeptical instinct was aimed in the right direction. We cannot follow Descartes in placing some immaterial "thinking substance" in the place of the Archimedean point, because its *existence*, as myriads of perplexed later readers have no doubt noted, is very far from self-certain; it comes with a host of assumptions about the nature of reality, and, to begin with, we cannot in any way have *experience* of it. Hume meets with Kant's full agreement in insisting that, if some *necessarily existing thing* is supposed to be out there, and we are supposed to know of it, then it must be at least possible to have experienced it, for experience, after all, means everything we can learn from. Extending this argument, Hume adds that, in fact, we cannot come to know of any necessarily existing thing, including the "thinking substance," since empirical facts never add up to a necessary law; the best we can learn from observation is that something is very, very likely. All

[8] Kant, A298/B354.

[9] Kant, A767-8/B795-6, emphases mine.

of the steps so far have merely turned Descartes's skeptical method against him and thus meet with no methodological complaint from Kant.

Then Hume takes one further step, which is the transformation from *skeptical method* to *skepticism:* because I cannot know *a priori* of any necessarily existing thing, I know nothing at all *a priori* to be necessarily true.[10] The former statement, which we just derived above, is relatively uncontroversial even now (ask any scientist); the latter, however, by denying that we cannot know not only *necessary things* but *necessity itself*, makes a distinct, dogmatic claim, and thereby slips and falls into the Cartesian trap, from whence it shall never convince us why its proclamation that all truth is to be doubted should not, itself, be doubted. One can see in this subtle, single misstep from skeptical method to (negative) dogmatism a kind of mirror image of Descartes's misstep from skeptical method to (positive) dogmatism: the conclusion that there is something that escapes universal doubt, that is therefore necessary, may seem sound; but that it *necessarily also exists as a thing* is a dogmatic addition that is clearly not self-certain.

To return, finally, to our Archimedean point, we see that Kant is stricter with himself than Descartes was in describing its nature. Agreeing with Hume's properly skeptical

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[10] Actually, Hume does admit mathematics, or at least certain parts of it, to have certainty. Much can be debated about this topic—to consider, for instance, the discrepancies some have noticed between Hume's treatments of mathematics in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* and in his other works, as well as the apparent inferiority of geometry with respect to this mathematical certainty compared to arithmetic and algebra—but this exceeds our scope. Briefly, in Hume as in Kant, the source of mathematical certainty is said to be *intuition;* that is, mathematical propositions can be confirmed or denied instantly and with necessity simply by our intuitions of them, without requiring any kind of judgment or argumentation. Thus, to be more precise, the skeptic conclusion is that I know nothing *a priori* to be necessarily true *except that for which I have a faculty which immediately tells me that it is true*. Here, of course, we are not concerned with truths of this very limited kind.

conclusion that there is nothing *in existence* which is self-certifying and necessary, he nevertheless observes that there are features of our consciousness—most importantly its unity, its representation of the manifold of my perception as *one* manifold that defines *my* experience—which it presupposes for its very nature, and which it therefore cannot undermine. Thus, our experience of existence compels us to posit an Archimedean point, but at the same time it prohibits us from coming to learn anything about it, for we shall never find it, a necessary thing, in experience. This is the famed *noumenon*, also known as the *transcendental object*. It has, as Kant explains, a merely negative meaning: it stands simply for the fact that I cannot *not* posit a ground for necessity if I perceive or argue about necessity at all (else I would fall, as a dogmatist, into the Cartesian trap)[11]—and yet, not willing to perpetuate the illusion of identifying it with some really existing thing, meekly I have

[11] Theoretically I could, as a third option, fall into the Cartesian trap and simply consent to its gnawing off my leg to stand on: "yes, my statement about radical doubt is itself in doubt, and that is in fact how I intended it; I never did mean, nor does my method require me to make a claim to necessity or universality." Sometimes statements of this kind rest on the idea that one can, as a method, challenge the self-certainty of whatever proposition happens to come around without oneself propounding any explicitly opposing dogma. It happens that we have already addressed this case above: this is just the skeptical method, whose imperative is to subject all things to doubt, which must therefore, if it is applied honestly, be turned eventually onto its own assumption—and then it will either fail (and thus reveal an Archimedean point) or succeed (and thus conclude that its negative law holds for any possible object, that is, universally and necessarily). In other cases, the intent is more that the argument at hand is not itself of a logical or philosophical nature, and that it therefore functions as an exemplar that casts doubt on the philosophical concept of certainty as such, while not itself being susceptible to critique on those grounds. Often what is held up as this domain with a one-way influence is poetics, but any manner of championing the irrational or unruly—some famous examples are schizophrenia (Deleuze and Guattari, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*) and the "tentacular" (Haraway, "Tentacular Thinking")—can serve this purpose. This class of argument is really mostly tangential to the issue at hand, but given its prolific and enthusiastic use in the contemporary literature, I will address the place of the poetic method towards the end of this text.

admitted that I know nothing of where it is except that I cannot find it. In other words, *I need the Archimedean point to explain my subject, but any claim to represent it or speak for it as an objective thing is impossible.*[12]

The curiosity, then, is that the contemporary desire to affirm my certainty of myself as a subject, but also to deny that the source of such certainty can be taken as an object or instrument or perspective, should have no bone to pick on these grounds with the "Enlightenment subject"; we may even find, in the skeptical method used to establish it, a key with which to escape the Cartesian nightmare. Ideas alone, then, do not fully explain why the inquisitorial ritual persists to this day of resurrecting the so-called Enlightenment spirit, admonishing it for having succumbed to the Archimedean heresy, and banishing it again. No doubt we could have a long and fruitful historical discussion on whether the politics of the "Enlightened" states, in sanctioning aggressive colonial expansion and capitalist industrialization, really was determined on the basis of its, or any

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[12] This is, of course, an extremely condensed account of certain arguments from the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant's response to Descartes is mostly found in his discussion of the "paralogisms of pure reason," where he argues that we must posit the "I think" for transcendental reasons (that is, because we could not have any experience at all without such an external source of necessity), in which case it is not licit for us to hypostatize the "I think" as a really existing substance, that is, the "thinking substance," or the "soul." His response to Hume in particular, and skepticism more generally, is more profuse and scattered throughout the volume; this is not the place to elaborate further on it. Moreover, when we go beyond the first *Critique* and append the argument of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, it becomes more obvious that Kant's concept of the noumenon, having apparently been tucked innocuously away in a realm of indeterminacy to shelter it from contradiction, in fact is made to work in a determinate way too. And if we further add Hegel to our reading list, it turns out that even the pure concept, improved as it is from the Cartesian one, is not free of difficulty. We shall have cause to examine this difficulty later, in another place; our purpose here was only to expose a certain variability in the meaning of the Archimedean point.

other, philosophical spirit—but this would take us too far afield.[13]

We are concerned here with method: with skepticism and certainty, with subjectivity and objectivity. We cannot avoid invoking method; it is what defines the field of our interest, even if only as shifting, even if only negatively, as a rejection of something else. We have been focused on an invocation of the latter, negative type, the conjuration of the Archimedean point and the pretense to speak or act from its place, and the declaration that we shall, ourselves, be sure commit no such error. That is all very well in spirit. But what has hopefully become clear is that simply to forbid the certainty of the Archimedean point—or any of its avatars—is no mere guiding metaphor. It is, if you like, a performative utterance, a statement with immediate effect, that is, the immediate effect of consigning its own meaning, and thus the meaning of the field it meant to open for exploration, to doubt and disbelief. Not, to be sure, a doubt that cannot be overcome from another perspective, but—and this is the irony of all performativity—a doubt that cannot be overcome *from its own perspective*, because it pronounced the law.

Which is all to say that, although I am wholly sympathetic to the battle against the illusions of objectivity, I cannot

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[13] We can note as an aside how two important later thinkers advanced critiques of the Kantian subject, whose transcendental object is derived by means of the skeptical method from the unity of consciousness, without reverting to Cartesian terms. Both Marxist theory and Freudian psychoanalysis challenge the nineteenth century subject by doubting that the unity of consciousness is itself necessary. Marx does so by demonstrating material-economic conditions of that unity, Freud by asserting the hypothesis of the unconscious. It should be clear at this point that since both thinkers claimed the necessity of their conclusions, they were obliged to posit transcendental conditions—Archimedean points—of their own, in the hopes that these themselves would not (as of course they would) fall later into doubt.

simply declare myself free of its domain without creating another illusion. I cannot simply state, or act as if I have stated, that I take to be self-evident the non-objectivity, non-certainty, and non-universality of all argument. Otherwise, I will not be convincing, even to myself. Of course, my position here is not novel, and also can be specified in different directions. One example of this is given in the Lacanian doctrine of the "Other," which is just a transcendental point that is needed to account for my self-certainty while being protected, à la Kant, from any attempt at defining it or giving it concrete substance. The many articles of contemporary queer theory, anthropology, and so on, which have absorbed the Lacanian Other as a key concept, are also reckoning with the conflict into which it puts us, between our sympathies and our beliefs.

Perhaps the best statement I know of concerning this problem of method is given, fittingly, by a poet. Here is Louise Glück, who would later win a Nobel Prize for her poetry, and who has been anthologized as a "feminist poet," writing in the early '90s:

> I'm puzzled, not emotionally but logically, by the contemporary determination of women to write as women. Puzzled because this seems an ambition limited by the existing conception of what, exactly, differentiates the sexes. If there are such differences, it seems to me reasonable to suppose that literature reveals them, and that it will do so more interestingly, more subtly, in the absence of intention. In a similar way, all art is historical: in both its confrontations and evasions, it speaks of its period. The dream of art is not to assert what is already known but to illuminate what has been hidden, and the path to the hidden world is not inscribed by will.[14]

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[14] Louise Glück, "Education of the Poet," in *Proofs & Theories: Essays on Poetry* (New Jersey: The Ecco Press, 1994), 7.

Much can be gleaned from this passage, but I will limit myself to just two things. First, we, ourselves, may be puzzled by Glück's puzzlement about the "contemporary determination of women to write as women"—that is, as women in particular, as distinct from any presumed neutral, universal, Archimedean subject. Certainly this determination is today the received method of feminist praxis, as much as its theoretical counterpart, "the personal is political,"[15] is the received axiom of feminist theory; one challenges false universalisms by writing out one's particular essence, by writing *as* something, as woman. But such a method, especially if it is the dogma of a whole age of authors, is too limited by the existing conceptions, too burdened by intention, too ambitious. It presumes to know not only the certainty of its own subjectivity, but *the certainty that that subjectivity is identified with its real existence as woman, with womanhood as such*—in other words, it has conjured up a kind of self-certain "woman substance," itself identified with an Archimedean point, which contradicts its own intentions, let alone facing up to the objections of a David Hume or a Judith Butler. Glück *is* a feminist poet, interested in the materials of her life as a daughter, sister, mother, lover—but she censures us against securing their meaning by inscribing them by will, which, since it must know something for sure of itself, cannot but reproduce the illusion it meant to overcome.

The second point is that the method of poetry, indeed of all art, does not escape the problem at hand. Many contemporary commentators, usually earmarked by the names of Deleuze, Latour, Haraway,[16] or a handful of others, try to sidestep the crippling snares in the critique of objectivity

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[15] Popularized by Carol Hanisch in the 1969 essay of the same name.

[16] While these particular theorists are not entirely free of fault in encouraging such uses, I mean here only to say that later interpreters frequently use them to make a certain, predictable point about the value of art in relation to science—not that original theorists all employ the same methods.

by proclaiming that there exists a realm from which one may pronounce about philosophical knowledge without itself being subject to its snares: the realm of irrational production, or, therefore, of art. Perhaps it is even possible for philosophy to assimilate this *poetic method* (or *wild* or *schizoid* or *anti-rigorous* or, in this particular sense, *queer*, etc.), thus acquiring, as it were, a sort of regulatory faculty that stands apart from disciplinary thought and shakes its foundations.

Just the cadence of this statement should strike our ears by now as itself suspiciously Archimedean. There are good reasons not to maintain a metaphysical gap between the rational and the irrational; and there are good reasons to posit that a relation, and moreover an asymmetrical one, must exist in some way between them—psychoanalytic theory is practically unavoidable on this point. But one must wonder if it is not too hasty to identify the rational and irrational respectively with scientific and with artistic method, and then to posit that the function of art is to *guarantee the uncertainty of science, while not itself falling under such considerations.* It is hard to avoid the sense that some aesthetic substance with primacy of being is conjured up here. After all, the intention to do poetic philosophy—that is, philosophy *as* poetry—runs into just the same problem of intending to write women *as* women: eventually, to make its point, it must convince us to be free of doubt in doubting that its object is free of doubt; and then it catches its own tail.

In a different essay, provocatively titled "Against Sincerity," Glück moves towards a conclusion:

> I want to say, finally, something more about truth, or about that art which is "indistinguishable" from it… the premise being that certain materials arranged in certain ways will always yield the same result. Which is

> to say, something inherent in the combination has been perceived.
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> I think the great poets work this way. That is, *I think the materials are subjective, but the methods are not*. I think this is so whether or not detachment is evident in the finished work.[17]

To a possible final objection that "subjective" material must be matched with a "subjective" method,[18] the final remark on detachment is a fine corrective. An argument may deal with the personal, particular, ungeneralizable experience of a given person or class; the author may feel, and express, a fierce attachment to that experience. If the goal is to produce the most subtle and informative representation possible of that experience, so that future readers may "illuminate what has been hidden" in it, then, as we already know, Glück's advice is not to smooth it over with our own certitudes. But if the goal *is to derive a truth from experience*, however attached we may be to it, then we must be bold to declare something sure of it—not entrusting our certainty to some external point, but asserting that "something inherent in the combination has been perceived." The materials are subjective, but the methods are not.

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[17] Louise Glück, "Against Sincerity," in *Proofs & Theories: Essays on Poetry* (New Jersey: The Ecco Press, 1994), 45, emphasis mine.

[18] Or, if an equivalence is assumed between objectivity and masculine or androcentric reasoning—as, for example, legal scholars Catharine MacKinnon (e.g., *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*) and Kimberlé Crenshaw (e.g., "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex") do, in different ways—then the objection could be restated, "women's material must be matched with a feminist method." I agree entirely that a method must suit both its aim and its content, and that such abstract first principles as have produced some of the absurdities of antidiscrimination law are to be challenged on behalf of feminism's interest in women's particularity. My contention is only that feminist method, or any method that deals with particular experience, can divest itself only of the *illusory* use of certainty; it cannot, nor should it, renounce self-certainty altogether.

I promised, earlier, to return to the thorny issues prompted by the frequent use of historicist analysis, particularly Foucault's flavour of it, to justify postmodern positions that deny an Archimedean point. Let me conclude by doing so, although it will lead us somewhat away from our focus thus far. I will admit, again, my sympathy to the thinking prompted by this injunction, that *all material is historical*; it is not far at all from Glück's contention, regarding works of art, that *the materials are subjective*. Of course, the question then is whether the limitation—*but the methods are not*—also applies to historicist critique.

The root, linguistic and conceptual, of historicist critique is the action of historicizing, that is, *making historical*. This is what distinguishes it from "historical" critique. The latter applies the methods of historians upon the objects of history. Historicist critique, on the other hand, has its eyes mostly on theory, and theory cannot be made available to historical method without a demonstration that, in fact, it is itself historical material. The trouble is that the demonstration is usually lacking. It is supplanted by a statement of law: all theory is historical material *a priori*, fully susceptible without any loss of meaning or need for proof to a historical method of analysis. But such a statement of law, as a dogmatic statement, suffers all the afflictions we have already discussed.

Let us play the case out. If I accept the historicizing law, I may apply it without much care to any theory I encounter—but the question will eventually face me whether my own theory, which I have been using to explain all of these others, must itself submit to the law. Probably, my first response will be that my theory, as *the historicizing theory*, is a special case; because it starts from the right assumption, it is not merely historical content, but it can *have* and *explain* historical material as content. But this is merely to say that the law that all theories are historical material has an Archimedean point: an exception that both guarantees

its function and yet itself, as an ahistorical theory, prohibits its own justification.[19]

The latter of course being unacceptable, I may then pass on to argue the alternative: that even my own theory, from which I draw justification to historicize all theories, is itself merely historical content. Even putting aside the difficulties I might have in explaining what exactly I mean by this (how, for example, I can draw a methodological imperative simply from historical data), the result would be that even the command to historicize becomes itself historicized, so that we have no *a priori* reason to keep it around. This auto-cannibalistic end is not a mere hypothetical or caricature: hear from Jack Halberstam, a well-respected contemporary queer and feminist theorist, arguing in a book published in 2011 that the correct interpretation of Foucault's injunction is to *leave history in the past*:

> While it seems commonsensical to produce new vaults of memory about homophobia or racism, many contemporary texts, literary and theoretical, actually argue against memorialization.... [They] advocate for certain forms of erasure over memory precisely because memorialization has a tendency to tidy up disorderly histories (of slavery, the Holocaust, wars, etc.). Memory is itself a disciplinary mechanism that Foucault calls a "ritual of power"; it selects for what is important (the histories

[19] One also cannot avoid the problem by saying that the historicist method only considers the *component of theorization which functions as historical phenomenon*, delimiting itself from considering the theoretical claims as claims to truth. If this were true, the historicist method would degenerate into merely historical method, which takes only objects that are in no need of justification as to their status as historical objects—that is, it would not do any historicizing. In fact, however, historicists do make claims as to the truth-values of theories, and so some mechanism of historicizing is always required. I am only here discussing the case in which this mechanism is accomplished by dogmatic means; the identification of historical material can, however, be accomplished by other, less problematic means, such as those referred to as "materialist" rather than "historicist."

> of triumph), it reads a continuous narrative into one full of ruptures and contradictions, and it sets precedents for other "memorializations." In this book forgetting becomes a way of resisting the heroic and grand logics of recall and unleashes new forms of memory that relate to spectrality than to hard evidence, to lost genealogies than to inheritance, to erasure than to inscription.[20]

Witness the dogma of historicism. Its logical and rarely stated conclusion—which Halberstam, to his credit, states—is to confront an abominable past not by learning from its material but by rendering it spectral, lost, and finally, if possible, erased. The horizon of such thinking is that of an eternal, tragically invariable present.

All this is not to say that historical analysis is to be given up; certainly not. As I said, I agree fully that all material is historical—I only contend that to declare all theory to be historical material *a priori* falls into the familiar Archimedean trap. As always, we must be bold enough not to try to derive our certainty from an external axiom, but to figure out for ourselves when *something we can perceive as inherent to a theory* gives us the right to declare that it must be analyzed at a historical level.

Helpfully, the word "historical," applied to a text we might study, functions as a euphemism that might point us in the right direction. The more straightforward term is "dead." A theory, together with its texts, is a living theory so long as it has something to tell us about its content. If, however, a theory becomes so systematic—that is, so dogmatic and, at the same time, so non-specific that it may say just the same thing about anything—then this theory *ceases to speak about its material*. It becomes, at that point, a dead theory, whose only content is its thoughtless repetition of its

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[20] Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, A John Hope Franklin Center Book (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 11.

invariant structure of knowledge. This is precisely the value of studying the texts we call "historical"; they are relics of arguments that have now ceased to animate thought. In the moments of their fall from insight into dogmatic repetition, they achieve that collapse of form and content, becoming for future readers no longer useful explanations but examples of a form of thinking, data of the shape of consciousness known to a given time and place. But this value exists only for future readers. In the instant the decay is sensed, the text can have a place only in the past, only as "historical." Thus, the criterion of a theory's historical analysis *as* material is exactly the same of the criterion of its obsolescence and critique: when, having become an invariant system, it has ceased to speak *about* material.

If, then, we know that a theory has become historical material, that it is now susceptible to historical analysis as a datum of a shape of consciousness, then we also know by the same criterion that it is open to critique as a dogmatic invariant. Similarly, then, a critical method cannot be applied indiscriminately or universally upon all theories. It must establish, not by axiom but by thorough argument, that a theory can be taken as *critical material*—namely, that it has devolved from theory to historical phenomenon. This is not to say that critique has no scope for contemporary theories; these, of course, are its most ethically important targets. Only, the onus is greater and more obvious, when authors are living, to prove the legitimacy of our claim that we can, as future readers, assess their work as *already in the past*—for that is just what we are doing when we claim their theories as material for our own. To deliver such a proof, without recourse to a lever with which to move the world into our playing field, is difficult. But it is, in the end, the only really critical part of the method. The rest is just persuasion.