

Howie's *Between Feminism and Materialism* and the Critical History of Religions

There are few benefits to the UK REF exercise and particularly few to the system of internally reviewing outputs now developing in UK universities, but having the opportunity to read the work of colleagues is at least one silver lining. It was such an exercise that provoked the last, cherished philosophical conversation I had with Gillian Howie on the various guises of abstraction in the history of philosophy – as insult, epistemic virtue or amphibolous operation. A future research project on abstraction crossed both our minds. The following cannot easily be read as a prolegomenon to such a project, a thank you or even a way of doing justice to Gill's legacy. But in spirit at least, it is indeed meant as an act of remembrance.

Introduction: Which Critique?

Critique can destroy, ground or delimit; it can attack from without or undermine from within; it can open up new vistas, sciences and truths or close them down just as quickly. The history of philosophy itself consists in part in a proliferating series of critiques. To think philosophically is often to experience the vertigo of critique.

Contemporary philosophy of religion has a sometimes charmed but often frustrating relation to the critical enterprise. Born from, and indelibly marked by, the Enlightenment critique of religion, which often took the form of a hostile, external attack on the value and even actuality of religious phenomena¹, philosophy of religion has also been quick to shield its subject matter (and thereby prolong its own existence – as dependent on this subject

¹ On the genesis of philosophy of religion in the Enlightenment, see Goodchild 2002.

matter) by appropriating the twentieth-century critique of the Enlightenment. It uneasily critiques that critique on which it is grounded, and out of such a convoluted dialectic emerges a key question for philosophy of religion: in what way is it and should it be critical?² The problem is even more acute with respect to two marginal forms within the contemporary practice of philosophy of religion: feminist philosophy of religion and Marxist philosophy of religion. From a feminist standpoint, there is much that is pernicious in religious traditions of all varieties. Similarly, of course, for Marxists: ‘The criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism.’ (Marx 1977 131) The feminist and Marxist critiques of religion are thus direct heirs to the Enlightenment distrust of the religious. And yet, both feminism and Marxist critical theory have been among the disciplines most receptive to the more recent and prevalent suspicion of Enlightenment values. The convolution in philosophy of religion’s relation to critique is performed most distinctly in these fields by means of a continual oscillation between critique and the critique of critique.

It is into this context that I propose to insert Gillian Howie’s ‘recovery of emancipatory critique’ (2010 3) in her late work. It must be emphasised from the outset that Howie has little to say directly about religion (with the exception of *Women and the Divine* (2009)), and my attempt here to appropriate *Between Feminism and Materialism* for philosophy of religion may well have met with a wry smile or even a critical ‘shudder’ (2008 103). Nevertheless, Howie’s work is pertinent precisely because it is so much more attentive than most to the convolutions outlined above in both feminism and Marxism generally. For example, here is her articulation of this ‘paradox at the heart of feminism’:

Feminism is fundamentally an Enlightenment or modernist project; it concerns the emancipation of morally valuable individual subjects. Yet recent feminist theory rails against the principal tenets of Enlightenment thought: reason, autonomy, identity,

² On the above, see Vroom 2006.

universals, science and – in the end – freedom itself. As a consequence, unable to articulate common grounds of oppression, the rug seems whipped from under our feet – leaving feminism struggling to articulate its relevance and purpose. (2010 12)

Howie, then, is both aware of and sympathetic to the critique of the Enlightenment categories of reason, universality and identity, but simultaneously wishes to rescue these categories (no matter how partially) in order to retain feminism's critical edge: to critique the critique of critique, as it were. Hence, she brackets 'Nietzsche, Bergson, Freud and Foucault' (2010 7) in favour of 'a refreshed and revised engagement with Marxism' (2010 26). This involves using dialectical materialism to illuminate the practical, economic and socially-specific bases of concept-use so as to distinguish a theoretically-productive form of reason or universality from those forms that are patriarchally pernicious. The task is, as Howie puts it, 'to disaggregate objectivism from objectivity' (2010 37); or more fully,

The task before us then is to locate a critique of ideology within Enlightenment, rather than totalising a historical critique of ideology. More particularly, the task is to demarcate the specificity of a cognitive orientation that works through abstraction, quantification and substitutability as a feature of commodity production rather than as a general anthropological principle. (2010 85)

'Specificity' is here key: if the critique of Enlightenment critique is contextualised to a local domain, then this opens up other domains in which a reinvigorated form of critique becomes legitimate. Critique (as contextualisation) is here deployed to rescue a form of (Enlightenment) critique from (anti-Enlightenment) critical attack.

My task in what follows is to translate this approach into the terms of philosophy of religion and test its viability in this domain. In particular, my concern is with the fate of the

concept of abstraction in Howie's work (and in Marxist theory generally), for it is out of theoretical discussions of abstraction, I contend, that a modality of critique specific to, and productive within, philosophy of religion emerges.³ That is, the emergence of a critical philosophy of religion is premised on the identification of religions as 'real abstractions', and therefore on the consequent materialist attitude appropriate to such an act of identification.

The Attack on Abstraction in Howie's Early Work

As a way-in to the problematic of abstraction as it crosses Marxism, feminism and philosophy of religion, in the initial two sections of this essay I wish to trace the development of Howie's theory of abstraction through her output. And to put it bluntly, prior to *Between Feminism and Materialism*, Howie's attitude to this concept is hostile.

The paradigmatic example of Howie's early attack on abstractions is to be found in her critique of the significance of Deleuzian 'becoming-woman' for feminist theory. According to Howie, becoming-woman has so little value because it forever remains a generalised, disembodied category, removed from the concrete particularities of female lived experience. It is, in short, *abstract* – where 'abstraction' here functions as an insult. Howie writes,

The idea of 'becoming-woman' is an attempt to transform embodied experience but, because it is unable to concern itself with mechanisms, structures and processes of sexual differentiations, fails in this task... Working in the abstract, 'becoming-woman' stands with 'becoming-animal' and 'becoming-imperceptible' as a form of minoritarian becoming. But there seems little to say about the peculiarities of becoming-*woman* rather than, say, becoming-insect. (2008 83-4)

³ This is, of course, to occupy myself only with a small fragment of Howie's output and to neglect much that is significant, such as her final articles on non-identity and philosophical therapy (e.g. Howie 2012).

She continues, turning particularly to the grounding of Deleuze and Guattari's invocation of becoming-woman on the conceptual motif of the body-without-organs,

The body-without-organs is the virtual dimension of the body, with all the potential connections, affects and movements. In order to reconstruct the physical body in this way we are encouraged to abstract relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness and emission of particles from the body. Abstraction here is not supposed to be the work of reason but, instead, to indicate a material process. And this is the point of contention. While becoming-woman may focus critical attention on the historical and socially structured quality of bodies, this move into abstraction could equally well be described as *disembodiment*, and disembodiment is arguably at odds with any productive and beneficial social critique of invested desire. It certainly seems a long way from feminist phenomenology. (2008 85)⁴

What the abstract concept of becoming-woman lacks is any reference to 'the historical and epistemological specificity of the female feminist standpoint' (2008 85), and therefore any means to take on a fine-grained critical function. This is crucial: Howie is arguing that deployments of abstractions can never serve a critical function, presumably because abstractions fail to locate and delimit the particular, situated bases of a concept (and this is something all critique – according to Howie – must be capable of). For Howie in 2008, there is only ever a critique of abstraction, never critique with abstraction.⁵

Howie thus concludes with a wholesale rejection of becoming-woman as a conceptual tool for feminist theory, and this rejection is founded directly on an interpretation of

⁴ Howie's critique of Deleuze is further developed in her first monograph, *Deleuze and Spinoza: An Aura of Expressionism* (2002).

⁵ Howie is here flirting with the sorts of feminist discussions of standpoint theory well documented in philosophy of religion (see Anderson 2012).

abstractions as obstacles to good feminist theory. To abstract is to efface the contextual peculiarities and textured singularities of the unique particular. To abstract is to withdraw from the standpoint that matters – the embodied, concrete vision of the subject (whether individual or communal). This is of course a pervasive theoretical position, valuing the concrete over the general. In what follows, however, I want to show how, within a broadly Marxist perspective, abstraction can become a theoretically-productive category.

The Ambiguity of Abstraction in *Between Feminism and Materialism*

Howie's attitude to abstraction a few years later in *Between Feminism and Materialism* shares much with this critique of Deleuze, and yet it has in the meantime been enriched by a realisation of the importance of the Marxist notion of real abstraction. The following key passage from *Between Feminism and Materialism* makes the evolution of her views on the subject clear:

Because we suffer through the machinations of the universalising mechanism of exchange, it is quite reasonable to be suspicious, even reject, reason and universals. It may or may not be the case that social criticism needs to begin in exaggeration, but hyperbole speaks to this anxiety in a rather unhelpful way. Despite the dangers of abstraction, it is only through a process of cognitive abstraction that the particular can be revealed within its relations. This is not to ape an epistemological view-from-nowhere but to begin from a particular place and then to uncover social relations of construction, organisation and distribution. (2010 83)

In other words, abstraction cannot be avoided. Thus, in addition to a continual insistence on abstraction as 'erroneous' (2010 6), 'ideological' (6) and a 'falsification' (67), there is now a

counter-emphasis, no matter how begrudging, on abstraction as a necessary and productive component of dialectical materialist method. That is, Howie is now far more ambivalent towards the idea of theoretical abstraction – and this, I want to show, is owing to a newly acquired appreciation for the mechanics of the labour theory of value as the ultimate criterion for evaluating theory.

Much of the early work in *Between Feminism and Materialism* is spent setting out the theory of value and demonstrating its significance not only for theory in general, but for feminism in particular.⁶ Indeed, Howie claims that ‘the vocabulary of critical theory’ has lost much of its meaning and value because of the tendency to ‘obfuscat[e] the centrality of the theory of value.’ (2010 13) For our purposes, what is central is Howie’s account of the emergence of abstraction – as *real* abstraction – out of the process of valuation. She concludes at the end of her exposition of the theory of value,

We have now encountered abstraction in three main places. First, exchange value – the socially necessary time taken to produce a commodity – is an abstraction from particular productive endeavours. In exchange value, concrete labour presents itself as abstract labour. Second, exchange-value – through its abstraction of labour – places qualitatively distinct commodities in a ratio. By abstracting from use-value we can compare and exchange different goods... Third, we encountered abstraction in the wage-form. Obviously, workers receive wages in the form of money. This mediation helps to disguise the fact that the value of labour is equivalent to that consumed by the worker and his/her family, but this, too, is an abstraction. (2010 20)

Valuation abstracts, universalises and identifies, giving rise to a thinking oriented around the categories of identity, universality and abstraction. Hence, ‘Abstraction, quantification and

⁶ See Howie 2010 11-13, 16-26.

standardisation – the hallmarks of a particular cognitive orientation integral to commodity production – are now detected in philosophy, language and scientific practice.’ (2010 72)

This is the birth, for Howie following Adorno and Horkheimer, of instrumental reason: ‘Subjects are compelled to behave as detached observers rather than active participants in life and... the demand to calculate oneself and others for profit leads to an attempt to regard the world from a purely rational and emotionless stance – a view-from-nowhere.’ (2010 47)

We can now see writ large in this narrative of the origins of abstraction much of the theoretical justification for Howie’s hostility to the concept both in ‘Becoming-Woman’ and in *Between Feminism and Materialism* itself. Yet, we can still glimpse something like abstraction’s necessity as well. This becomes particularly clear in Howie’s discussion of her own use of theoretical abstractions in the book. In a surprising passage that qualifies somewhat her earlier critique of Deleuze, she invokes the Deleuzian plane of immanence positively as a conceptual abstraction that is in fact helpful to the thinking of feminist theory:

I suggest that we think about feminist theory in terms of a plane, similar to that expressed by Deleuze and Guattari as a plane of immanence: an intellectual heuristic through which we can create critical distance to pursue and reflect upon the problems of sexual difference, hierarchies and related imaginaries.... We approach this plane tentatively. As an abstraction it risks folding reification back in on itself... [It is] only one explanatory model amongst many and it should be considered alongside other models. Different contexts may call upon different explanatory models. (2010 58-9)

Abstractions are to be employed, but only tentatively, with a great deal of suspicion. There is no absolute or a priori justification for the use of a theoretical abstraction; rather, they are to be deployed strategically, according to local conditions and contexts. Howie is here advocating a form of metaphilosophical pragmatism with respect to abstractions: they are to

be legitimated on account of their *in situ* productivity. It is what they do that counts. As Howie puts it more generally, ‘Every philosophy is practical, even when it seems at its most contemplative: its method a social and political weapon.’ (2010 9)

This move to localise and contextualise concepts on Howie’s part should now be familiar. It is her default critical tool: critique consists in the localisation of the particular and historically-specific practices on which abstractions depend. However, new to *Between Feminism and Materialism* is an acknowledgement that this critical process of specification and historicisation (i.e. the creation of ‘critical distance’) is itself *dependent on* abstractions. Abstraction is a condition of the possibility of critique, even when critique functions as the critique of abstraction. Such critique *with* abstractions, then, delimits the possible domain of effectiveness of an abstraction. In other words, it is the abstract production of critical histories of local abstractions – identifying the various extra-conceptual trajectories of conceptual identities. The critical question *par excellence* is thus for Howie: which abstraction and where? In the final section of this essay, I will turn to the significance of this form of critique for philosophy of religion.

Real Abstraction in Contemporary Theory

In *Between Feminism and Materialism*, Howie thus recovers a productive conception of abstraction which tempers her earlier attack on Deleuzian conceptual abstraction. In this section, I now argue that such a recovery is mirrored in more general trends in contemporary Marxist theory. The concept of real abstraction has recently returned to the forefront of Marxist analyses of the structures of capitalism.

While this recovery has its roots in the work of Virno (2004) as well as Žižek’s critique of Althusser (1989), its classic English-language articulation is to be found in Peter

Osborne's 2004 'The Reproach of Abstraction'. Osborne here launches a polemic against the implicit – if often lazily-held – theoretical presupposition that abstraction is constitutively inadequate. The presupposition (i.e. the reproach of abstraction) runs, in Osborne's own words, 'there is some inadequacy inherent to abstraction per se, which is both *cognitive* and *practical* (ethico-political) in character.' (2004 21) The abstract, it is assumed, is something that a theorist should be ashamed of:

There is a paradoxical position, more or less explicit in a great deal of contemporary theory, which holds that, not merely *despite* but precisely *because of* the necessity of abstraction to thought... there is something both cognitively and politically inadequate about knowledge itself: not only existing knowledge, but all possible knowledge. (2004 21)

Osborne identifies the prevalence of this 'reproach of abstraction' in the self-evidence of an anti-philosophical impulse manifest in contemporary theory's reverence for singularities – an impulse that is heir to Humean empiricism and ultimately medieval nominalism. And, in opposition to this trend, pitting Marx against nominalism, empiricism and theories of the singular, he invokes the 'paradoxical concreteness' (2004 24) of abstractions within capitalism, calling thereby for a new incorporation of abstraction into theory that takes this concrete reality of the abstract seriously:

A certain pervasive political discourse requires a new conception of the relationship between emancipation and actual abstraction – some conception of appropriation *within* abstraction... What new possibilities of the human are produced by the mediating force of actual abstractions? (2004 27)

Some sense of what this new discourse would look like is provided by Toscano's recent explorations (2008a, 2008b) of the theory of real abstraction. Recovering the insights of Sohn-Rethel (1978), Toscano demonstrates how radically Marx's doctrine of real abstraction separates his thinking from the philosophical tradition. For Toscano, the task confronting contemporary Marxist theory is the construction of an 'ontology of real abstraction' (2008a 276) which must take seriously abstraction 'as a force operative in the world' (2008a 274). Paradigmatic of this incorporation of real abstraction into theory is Paci's insistence, 'The fundamental character of capitalism is revealed in the tendency to make abstract categories live as though they were concrete. Categories become subjects... The abstract, in capitalist society, *functions concretely*.'⁷ Abstraction here becomes conceptualised as a transindividual, historically material condition of the possibility of capitalist life.

In particular, Toscano is interested in how 'a truly materialist investigation into real abstraction comes to unsettle our very image of thought' (2008a 280) and, additionally, how this gives rise to the aforementioned break between Marxist and traditional accounts of abstraction within philosophy. As Toscano (citing Sohn-Rethel) claims, 'Abstraction precedes thought... Marx's discovery stands in irreconcilable contradiction to the entire tradition of theoretical philosophy.' (2008a 281)⁸ From the point of view of real abstraction, not only are abstractions divorced from any epistemic procedure or from ideational status, they *condition* thinking. Hence, to quote Toscano once more, 'Under the conditions of capitalism, thought is, in the final analysis, external to thought' (2008a 284), or as Žižek has

⁷ Quoted in Toscano 2008a 273. Or, in Žižek's words, 'Before thought could arrive at pure *abstraction*, the abstraction was already at work in the social effectivity of the market.' (1989 10) Money provides the classic example of efficacious abstractions in a capitalist system.

⁸ Toscano is here drawing on Sohn-Rethel 1978 21. Žižek develops this tension as follows, 'We are now able to formulate the "scandalous" nature of Sohn-Rethel's undertaking for philosophical reflection: he has confronted philosophical reflection with an external place where its form is already "staged". Philosophical reflection is thus subjected to an uncanny experience similar to the one summarized in the old oriental formula "thou art there"... There is the theatre in which your truth was performed before you took cognizance of it.' (1989 14)

put it, real abstraction ‘introduces a third element which subverts the very field of this distinction: the form of the thought previous and external to the thought – in short: the symbolic object.’ (1989 19)⁹ Abstractions must be taken theoretically seriously as constitutive and generative, but crucially what is at stake is that such constitution and generation result from the anomalous status of abstractions as the material of thinking that subsists external to it – as *thought without thought*.

Histories of Religious Technology

Abstractions have real powers and real effects; these powers and effects are not necessarily epistemic in nature, but exist as thought ‘prior’ and ‘external’ to all thought. Religions take their place among these abstractions, and therefore, like all such abstractions, they must – in the name of critique – be subject to an extra-conceptual history, a history famously proposed by Marx in the following footnote to *Capital*:

A critical history of technology would show how little any of the inventions of the eighteenth century are the work of a single individual. As yet such a book does not exist. Darwin had directed attention to the history of natural technology, i.e. the formation of the organs of plants and animals which serve as the instruments for sustaining their life. Does not the history of the productive organs of man in society, of organs that are the material basis of every particular organisation of society, deserve equal attention?... Technology reveals the active relation of man to nature, the direct process of the production of his life, and thereby it also lays bare the process of the production of the social relations of his life, and of the mental conceptions that flow from these relations. Even a history of religion that is written in

⁹ See the discussion of this passage in Toscano 2008a 279.

abstraction from this material basis is uncritical. It is, in reality, much easier to discover by analysis the earthly kernel of the misty creations of religion than to do the opposite, i.e. to develop from the actual, given relations of life the forms in which these have been apotheosized. The latter method is the only materialist, and therefore the only scientific one. The weaknesses of the abstract materialism of natural science, a materialism which excludes the historical process, are immediately evident from the abstract and ideological conceptions expressed by its spokesmen whenever they venture beyond the bounds of their own speciality. (2003 494-5)

The task for a critical philosophy of religion is therefore a history of the constitution of religion in ‘the actions of man’, in ‘the direct process of the production of his life’, in ‘the process of the production of the social relations of his life’ and only ultimately in ‘the mental conception *that flows from* these relations’. A history of the *technē* of religion prior and external to religious thought is, according to Marx in this passage, the genuinely dialectical materialist approach. As Toscano puts it in his landmark essay on Marx’s critique of the critique of religion, ‘In order to tackle the endurance of religious abstractions we are to confront the social logic into which they are inscribed, and the dependence of these abstractions on given modes of production and social intercourse.’ (2010 9) This confrontation involves localising religion and tracing its efficacy – its real effects and real powers.¹⁰ Religion for the mature Marx is constitutive (just as it is for the Spinoza of the *Theologico-Political Treatise*; moreover, just as for the Spinoza of the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, the means of evaluating this constitution is through critical history).¹¹

As we have seen, it is precisely such a mode of critique that Howie advocates for feminist philosophy and, I contend, it can serve as method for feminist philosophy of religion

¹⁰ Roland Boer’s *Marxism and Theology* series (2007, 2009, 2010, 2012) provides a crucial background to such claims. Indeed, this conclusion should serve as a call to finally take up Boer’s work substantially within philosophy of religion.

¹¹ On a productive comparison of Marx with Spinoza on these points, see Bertrand 1979.

too. One must cast a sceptical eye over abstractions by incessantly localising and contextualising them in their social history. Again, what results for feminist philosophy of religion is a history of religious abstractions prior and external to their thinking, or more specifically, a history of religious oppressions prior and external to religious conceptualisation.¹²

To end with a briefly sketched example: this externalising approach to belief can suggest reasons for the inefficacy and even redundancy of the new atheist critique and even of vast swathes of philosophy of religion. In short, the form of critique employed here is misguided. Thus, Toscano contends that a Marxist form of critique as the identification of forms of thought external to thought presents a challenge to the contemporary resurgence of a naïve strain of Enlightenment critique of religion as caricatured in the new atheist movement. He writes,

It would be difficult to underestimate the relevance of this gesture today, when we are confronted with anti-religious arguments which, whatever the sincerity or nobility of their motivations, often rely on the idealist, asocial view that the sway of religious representations and ideologies over human affairs can be terminated by a mere change of consciousness. (2010 10)

New atheism takes religion on its own terms by attempting to refute it on epistemic grounds. What is at stake is the truth or falsity of religions, irrespective of the fact that even the false has real powers and real effects. From the perspective developed in this paper, the fact that this critique neglects the extra-conceptual status of religious abstractions (i.e. the real powers and real effects of the false) ensures that it can never be effective. Moreover, it seems evident that Toscano's criticisms can be further extended to cover almost the whole contemporary

¹² See further Žižek 1989 31-3.

practice of philosophy of religion itself. Philosophers of religion argue incessantly over the epistemic grounds and epistemic content of religion. The Marxist and feminist ideal of providing histories of religions as real abstractions provides a provocation to this orthodoxy, a genuinely materialist alternative in which religion is not merely reduced to a thought, but becomes a thought prior and external to thought. This is a challenge to both the universalising and ahistoricising tendencies of contemporary philosophy of religion – the challenge to conceive religion as *real abstraction*.

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