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## Review of Amanda Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory.*

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**Amanda Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. x + 202 pp. ISBN 9780691114033.**

**Reviewed by Robert J. Dostal, Bryn Mawr College**

This aptly titled book considers three related sets of debates in contemporary theory, debates about feminism, cosmopolitanism, and reason and the Enlightenment. The book is a collection of seven previously published essays (from 1998 to 2005) and like many volumes composed of separate essays, this collection suffers from a certain lack of coherence. Though the author's distinctive voice and several themes tie the essays together, there is little development of argument or position, and there is some repetition. Anderson presents succinctly and well the terms of each debate and sympathetically gives voice to the various participants in the debates. She adjudicates the debates with suggestions as to how one might get beyond the particular impasse of the debate. Her own position, about which the reader would like to hear more, is liberal and proceduralist--in short, Habermasian. In the introduction she writes that she "is concerned to make a case for Habermasian discourse ethics and democratic proceduralism, which means making the case for a conception of critical rationality underwritten by communicative action" (13). She asserts "the superior explanatory power of the neo-Kantian position" over poststructuralism (13). Late in the book she acknowledges that "the name 'Habermas' often continues to provoke a knowing weariness in the literary field, one that defines a certain consensus about what Habermas signifies--plodding style, an embarrassing optimism of the intellect, and dangerous complicity with the Enlightenment" (141). With this comment she clearly registers the American literary world's reaction not only to Habermas but to her own work as well. Her writing is not plodding, and she is keen to show that it is inappropriate to characterize her Habermasian position as naively optimistic, for it recognizes shortcomings in the Enlightenment project. These shortcomings render the work of the Enlightenment unfinished. Anderson not only argues that Habermas views communicative action as an open conversation in which all have a voice, but she also tries to demonstrate it by her recognition of the strengths and virtues of the variety of poststructuralist and anti-Enlightenment voices. The aspect of poststructuralist literary theory that concerns Anderson most in *The Way We Argue Now* is the commitment to identity. Her attempt to show the limits of the poststructuralist position leads her not so much to a defense of the Enlightenment but to an anti-anti-Enlightenment view.

Clearly Anderson considers the Habermas-Foucault debate the most important of the debates in and about poststructuralism. She characterizes the most prominent recent debate among feminist philosophers--the debate among Judith Butler, Seyla Benhabib, and Nancy Fraser--as a "rerouting of the Habermas-Foucault debate" (21). The essay is a response to the 1995 book, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. Anderson ignores the fourth party to the debate, Drucilla Cornell, as offbeat and idiosyncratic. If there is a Derridean among them, it is Cornell, but Derrida receives only passing mention in this collection. Anderson argues that Butler distorts Benhabib's and Habermas's position and by providing "a trumped-up version of normative critical theory" she secures "the pedigree of her politics" (23). At the same time, Anderson contends that Benhabib needs "a more capacious model of dialogue, one that can accommodate different forms of political practice" (23). Anderson sees no reason that the "disidentification" which Butler advocates cannot be reconciled with the communicative ethics of Benhabib, Habermas, and Anderson. Benhabib, according to Anderson, rests on an

"unexamined privileging of stable, if embodied and situated, identity" (28). The example Anderson gives is Benhabib's assertion of the immorality of sadomasochism. According to Anderson we should not be condemning S/M in "absolute terms" but rather fostering debate about it. Anderson's more fundamental critique of Butler rests on the claim that Butler evades the task of confronting her own normative assumptions. This is a version of Habermas's critique of Foucault. The essay concludes with the injunction that "we . . . begin the difficult task of thinking beyond this impasse" (44). This reader wishes more assistance from the author here. Anderson acknowledges that her goals in this debate are somewhat like those of Nancy Fraser, but she dismisses Fraser for her "privileging of 'deconstructive' recognition politics" (44).

The second essay on feminist debates centers on Anderson's charge that some feminists, in the effort to reclaim women's agency, go too far in their historical claims about the women they study. They unjustifiably ascribe "superagency" to the women they study. These feminists are "governed . . . by the trope of metalepsis, the transformation of an effect into a cause" (49). The feminists Anderson considers here are Mary Poovey, Nancy Armstrong, and Elizabeth Langland. Anderson contrasts the work of these three literary theorists with the work of feminist historians who also study the Victorian period. Here she considers Leonore Davidoff, Catherine Hall, and Judith Walkowitz. The latter avoid the exaggerated claims of the former, suggests Anderson, because of their concern for material culture and "the more theoretically modest tendencies of history as a discipline" (49). Yet they are insufficiently theoretical. Here Anderson turns to Rita Felski as someone whose work "enables us to further pursue the effects of a troubling disjunction between participatory agency and critical reflection" (61). Anderson concludes this essay with the assertion that the ironic detachment valorized in poststructuralist theory should not be opposed to "postconventional critical reflection"--a phrase indicating her own Habermasian position.

Part II consists of two essays on the theme of cosmopolitanism, the theme of an earlier book by Anderson: *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton UP, 2001). The second of these essays is a review of Satya Mohanty's book, *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics* (Cornell UP, 1997). Anderson finds that Mohanty's project unfortunately subordinates the normative dimension to the theoretical one. For Anderson, ethics has priority over epistemology. The first essay charts the discussion of universalism and cosmopolitanism among theoreticians in the 1990s. Perhaps Anderson is critical of the suspicion of many poststructuralists that cosmopolitanism remains universalist and elitist. Anderson takes up Nussbaum's distinction between exclusionary and inclusionary cosmopolitanism. She argues for an inclusionary cosmopolitanism that is egalitarian. She endorses Gramsci's critique of an empty, gray, formalist and universalist cosmopolitanism, acknowledging that this critique has some footing against Habermas's formalism. She concludes by asserting that "continuing refinement of communicative ethics avoids many of the problems plaguing strict Habermasian formalism." Yet we do not see this refinement offered aside from the claim that the "new" cosmopolitanism is a "deliberately mannered transformation of universalism; refined by tact, phronesis, sensibility, cosmopolitanism infuses universalism with an authenticating ethos" (172).

Curiously, in a footnote Anderson criticizes Kristeva's straightforward affirmation of her own cosmopolitanism. Anderson refers to this as indicative of "Kristeva's own lack of self-

reflexivity." Such an avowal, writes Anderson, "is strikingly absent from the current instances" since cosmopolitanism is an "advocated ideal," and not a "fully assumable identity" (92). She seems to be criticizing Kristeva for lacking the ironical detachment of the poststructuralists which Anderson elsewhere criticizes.

The last part of the book, Part III, entitled "Ethos and Argument," includes three chapters that center on the Habermas-Foucault debate. It is a debate that never took place. A public meeting of the two philosophers was scheduled in 1984 but Foucault died before the meeting. Habermas has written quite critically of Foucault's work, and Foucault made only passing references to Habermas in his published work. Anderson attempts to make sense of their differences and, ultimately, to defend Habermas. Important to this task is the triangulation of the Aristotelian trinity of ethos, logos, and pathos--ethics, argument, and affect. In the introduction to the book Anderson tells us that she is arguing for "the analytical distinctiveness and value of ethos as over against pathos (affect)" (9). Here she further asserts that contemporary theory would "do well to use ethos to disrupt the conceptual dynamic frequently set into play by opposing pathos to logos." In short, setting up emotion and affect against reason is a dead end which we can escape by recognizing the primacy of the ethical. The relatively thin formalist ethics of Habermas is, however, to be thickened by adopting something like an Aristotelian ethics of character. The trick is to combine Kant and Aristotle and not to find them inimical. Anderson acknowledges that her reading owes much to Richard Bernstein, who has pointed out that Habermas's communicative ethics rely on certain "classic virtues." Though Habermas himself rejected this interpretation of his work, Anderson argues that at the heart of Habermas's procedural-universalist project lie "the aspiration to impartiality, the constant attempt to break free of the horizon(s) of one's ethical life, and the dedication to the right over the good" (177). This "intimation of ethos," writes Anderson, exists "in a tension with any affirmation of a substantive ethos." Impartiality, openness, and ethical objectivity are themselves a kind of virtue. They provide us with a "postconventional *Sittlichkeit*" (176). This last phrase is an oxymoron indicative of the tension at the core of Habermas's communicative ethics.

In the first of these three essays in Part III, "Pragmatism and Character," Anderson engages Barbara Herrnstein Smith and Richard Rorty in relation to Habermas. She would have us accept the importance of character in a pragmatic way, as shown by Smith and Rorty. Yet she defends Habermas against their criticisms. She finds them in a performative contradiction and decries Rorty's appeal to the private/public distinction. For Anderson, Rorty is a Nietzsche in private and a Millian in public.

In the second essay Anderson directly addresses the opposition of Foucault and Habermas. Foucault's and his followers' appeal to ethos is found to be an attempt to evade and trump the moves of the rationalist. They create an unnecessary opposition between logos (reason) and ethos. Anderson endorses Habermas's critique of Foucault's "cryptonormativism." On this account Foucault appeals implicitly to certain norms, while at the same time criticizing Enlightenment thinkers, including Habermas, for participating in "normalization."

The last essay takes up Lionel Trilling's distinction between sincerity and authenticity. Anderson accepts Trilling's account of how in much of twentieth-century theory authenticity has supplanted sincerity. Authenticity, according to Trilling, refuses to accept the social as a limit on

the individual and allies itself with the aesthetic, especially an aesthetic of irony and the sublime. The tradition of sincerity, rather, interrogates society on its own terms with a view to possible reformist action. It is importantly linked to a notion of integrity. Anderson argues that Habermas's proceduralism, which she endorses, constitutes an extension of the sincerity paradigm, while poststructuralism is an extension of the authenticity paradigm. Truthfulness is an important value for sincerity. Anderson ties this tradition to the "new" cosmopolitanism and to democracy. This concluding discussion helps the reader see the unity of these collected essays in their critique of poststructuralism and their defense of a slightly modified Habermasian project in which logos is not trumped by pathos and ethos has priority.

In a kind of self-critique in the introduction, Anderson gives voice to this reader's concerns about her project. She identifies a fundamental tension in this work--that between her defense of Habermas and her countervailing claim that "critical theory should expand to embrace a wider range of political practices, expressions, modes, and moods" (14). But the level of discourse in this book forecloses on any consideration of specific political practices. If Habermas's position is as "open" as she asserts, what does it mean to claim that it should expand to embrace a wider range of practices? Late in the book she makes a gesture that occurs several times in the book. After criticizing severely the poststructuralists for, among other things, attempting to replace logos and ethos with pathos, she writes that "I have no quarrel with those critics of Habermas who seek to emphasize affective or aesthetic modes" (184). Sometimes in the book Anderson quarrels with his critics and at other times she does not seem to have the courage of her convictions.