

Simon Critchley with Carl Cederström

How to Stop Living and Start Worrying.

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It might be argued that the recent popular resurgence of philosophy is, when it comes down to it, only a resurgence of a particular kind of philosophy. Over recent years, philosophy has started to assert, or perhaps to reassert, its claim not just as a technical discipline, but also as a guide to life; and many popular philosophers are dusting off their volumes of Marcus Aurelius, or the Epicureans, or Michel de Montaigne, to attempt to see how these philosophers may provide us with practical guidance that may help us in the business of living, here and now. Philosophy, that is to say—or at least a certain kind of philosophy—has become an adjunct of the self-help industry.

Simon Critchley's *How to Stop Living and Start Worrying*, according to the cover blurb, is a book that sets itself against the 'new age sophistries' of self-help gurus, 'who frantically champion the individual's quest for self-expression, self-realization and well-being.' On the strength of the blurb and the title, one might expect that this is a penetrating critique of this whole world of philosophy-as-self-help; and readers coming to the book with this expectation might well be disappointed. The strength of this curious collection of interviews lies elsewhere: not so much in its direct critique of philosophy-as-self-help, as in the way it holds out for an alternative approach to philosophy, one that is more unsettling, disruptive, critical and fractious.

Leaving aside the excesses of the blurb-writers and marketing department, what this book is, is a series of six interviews with Critchley, conducted by Carl Cederström, spanning most of Critchley's life and career, and covering a range of loosely-stitched topics: life, philosophy, death, love, humour, and authenticity.

Critchley is an engaging, vigorous and often very funny interlocutor, and Cederström's intelligent questioning lends this book a real sense of pace and verve. As such, this is not only an invigorating introduction to Critchley's work, but also, in its scattershot richness, a book that throws up a substantial number of intriguing questions that are worthy of reflection.

The opening chapter, 'Life,' situates Critchley's thinking within the context of his biography. Philosophers are often afraid of biography, as if to speak in the first person might betray a lack of rigour; and the candour here is refreshing. Critchley argues cogently for the relationship between biography and philosophy, and as he traces his itinerary as a philosopher (pointing out more than once that much of his success can be put down to 'sheer good luck') from Letchworth Garden City to a full-blown, although uneasy, philosopher-brand. This is bracing and sometimes courageous stuff, and when Critchley writes towards the end of the chapter that 'I still have this extraordinary curiosity about things. And I can still be completely blown away by reading a book, listening to a talk or something that a student says,' it is hard not to think that this quality of curiosity is one of the hallmarks that makes him such a compelling conversationalist.

The second, relatively short, chapter continues by arguing that philosophy is not so much a thing as an activity. Critchley's focus here is on the continental tradition as a tradition that recognises the historical nature of philosophy, in the double sense that philosophy is always situated within history, and that it also seeks to effect change within history. Philosophy on this view is both critical and emancipatory.

Chapter three turns to death, navigating once more between biography and philosophy to argue—against Heidegger, and along with Levinas and Derrida—that my relationship with death is not fundamentally a matter of my relationship with my own death (the death that, according to the Epicureans, I will not experience, and that therefore should not trouble me), but it is instead a matter of my relationship to the death of others. For Critchley, death is 'something we never get over': instead it persists whilst we still live, haunting us. This thought leads to an extended riff on literature, tinnitus and melancholia. The chapter ends with a pungent critique of the notion of the 'philosopher's way of dying,' the perhaps dishonest notion that philosophy is a way of somehow overcoming death, rather than a way of tussling with the death that cannot be overcome.

From death to love: in the fourth chapter, Critchley draws on an extraordinary range of sources, from the *Song of Songs* to the fourteenth century mystic Marguerite Porete, to Lacan, in order to explore the way that love, or acts of love, can serve to transform the self. Here Critchley is very much in free-wheeling mode, and whilst the conversation crackles with intensity, perhaps the arguments here are less than convincing. Love, Critchley claims, 'is the attempt to eviscerate oneself in relationship to another.' Well, perhaps. Parts of Critchley's argument here feel as if they owe something to Levinas's later work, with its language of evisceration, obsession, shaking and struggle; but perhaps Critchley is guilty of a certain coyness here, as his reflections on love float free of the biographical strain that has animated much of his thinking in the rest of the book.

With humour, in the fifth chapter, Critchley is more convincing. It is hard to write about humour, as Critchley himself acknowledges, whilst still maintaining an element of humour; but by and large he succeeds, telling in passing some passable jokes (including an unrepeatable story about a bear and a hunter). Much of this chapter reprises the arguments in Critchley's short book *On Humour*, and this is typically stimulating stuff. The material on the boundaries between the human and the animal (hence the bear) is particularly suggestive.

In the last chapter, where novelist Tom McCarthy joins the fray for a three-way conversation, Critchley's centrifugal tendencies finally get the better of him. The ostensible topic here is that of 'authenticity'; but the conversation is all over the place. Moving from the workings of the 'International Necronautical Society' (INS) founded by McCarthy and Critchley, a society that is 'already a fiction,' to the films of Terrence Malick, to the Futurist Manifesto, here at the end of the book the conversation begins to resemble a drunken bar-room ramble at two in the morning, in which the speakers have forgotten, or else have ceased caring, that their audience are not in on their jokes. Despite flashes of humour and insight, the conversation here turns in on itself, where before it has been marked by a kind of urgent desire to communicate.

So what is one to make of this curious collection? On the one hand, it is rare to read a philosophy book that is imbued with such a sense of omnivorous curiosity, that spits out so many provocative ideas and invitations to thinking; on the other hand, as a whole, this feels curiously unsatisfying. But then, perhaps this is asking too much from a brief collections of interviews. It may even be that the slapdash feel of the book as a whole is a necessary element in its ability to provoke fresh thought, and that when it comes to the writing of philosophy, *tidiness* can only achieve so much. Besides, for those who are intrigued by the questions that are thrown up here but frustrated by the way the argument is always slipping away from one topic to another, there are always Critchley's other works in which many of the themes raised in these interviews are more systematically discussed.

Finally, I want to return to the title of the book. This is a book that the publishers seem to want to present as a kind of anti-self-help book, a book that is a full-out assault on the conventions of the genre of 'philosophy-for-life'; but in the end, *How to Stop Living and Start Worrying* does something rather different. By raising important questions about the relationship between philosophy and biography, by situating philosophy back within concerns that we perhaps all recognise—life, death, love, authenticity—whilst at the same time injecting a degree of much needed anarchy and unease into proceedings, this is perhaps much closer to a certain kind of old-fashioned philosophy-for-life than the blurb-writers might wish to admit. It is only that for Critchley, the role that philosophy plays within life is more a matter of churning up the soil and goading us towards further curiosity than it is of stilling down the waves of the passions, quietism and acceptance; and this, I think, is to be welcomed.

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