

Infinitely Demanding Anarchism: An Interview with Simon Critchley

Simon Critchley is Professor of Philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York. He received his Doctorate from the University of Essex in 1988 for the thesis published as *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (1992). He has published numerous books including: *Very Little, Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (1997), *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas, and Contemporary French Thought* (1999), *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (2001), *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (2007) and *On Heidegger's Being and Time* (2008). His research interests include continental philosophy, phenomenology, philosophy and literature, psychoanalysis, the ethical and the political.

Seferin James: Your landmark work *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* faced the difficult task of coming to terms with the ethical significance of Jacques Derrida's work. With your more recent book, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*, you continue to work with ethical insights derived from Emmanuel Levinas but the only reference to Derrida is a single footnote. In your 2008 paper "Derrida the Reader" you discuss some of your reservations about Derrida's philosophy. Some of your reservations, such as those over the term "post-structuralism" and the popular idea of deconstruction, seem likely to have been shared by Derrida himself but you also claim to set aside *différance* and this is another matter. If you have substantially abandoned Derrida's philosophy could you shed some light on what has motivated this departure?

Simon Critchley: I've had this question before. It's a difficult one to answer because Derrida was for me *the* philosopher. I was educated in England in the 1980s and in France in a very Heideggerian context. When the question of Heidegger's politics really came up, which was in 1986, I was just a first year graduate student. It was a revelation. There were things that we didn't really know, things that we hadn't been told. The attack on Heidegger was ferocious but it's difficult to reconstruct that context. The best way of getting at it is in Badiou's *Manifesto for Philosophy*. What he spends the first five

or six chapters of that book attacking is a sort of Heideggerian orthodoxy. I taught that text last year and students don't really see that because it doesn't really exist in at all the same way. It really was that every major thinker was a modulation, modification, of what Heidegger was up to, a different way of hearing it and in particular Derrida. The attack on Heidegger and Heidegger's politics in 1986, around the book by Fariás, then raised this issue of ethics in a particularly powerful way. That sort of got me into this topic of ethics at a very early level. There seemed to be no ethical resources in Heidegger's thought for resisting national socialism.

SJ: So it was the question over Heidegger's politics that gave you an impetus towards ethics as a primary concern in your philosophy?

SC: I had different Phd projects. One of the first projects was going to be on the idea of memory in Hegel, which at some point I will go back to, another was on Husserl; I was looking into the nature of transcendental argumentation in Derrida and Husserl and I just decided that I couldn't really organise the material. Then this political issue exploded and the figure that everyone who taught me seemed to revere, Heidegger, seemed to have, if not blood on his hands, at least the stains of something unpleasant. I'd read Levinas quite carefully before in another context, I read all that in French because he wasn't really available, and I began to try and formulate a response to that.

Derrida was very much the philosophical avant garde, the highest expression of the philosophical avant garde in that period. The text of his that was really very important to me was *Of Spirit* where he responds to Heidegger. Implicitly responds to the issue of politics and responds to the fact that the attack on Heidegger was implicitly an attack on Derrida, which is how it was: it was an attack on deconstruction. He formulated this idea of the pledge and of responsibility and the rest. I've always seen Derrida's thought as shifting between two poles, a Heideggerian pole and a Levinasian pole, and it shifts much more closely to the Levinasian pole after the political debacle of 1986-1987. So it is a question of trying to work out – as Derrida was *the* philosopher, the philosopher's philosopher, in the sense that he was someone that people interested in philosophy were watching – there was a question of defending him at a certain level and trying to clarify and defend what I saw as the basic gesture of his thinking, which had this ethical orientation. Now that seems entirely banal, it's peculiar the way history works, I mean that there are people who will accept that, well there are people who don't accept it like Martin Hagglund,

there's a sort of vague consensus that there was a shift in Derrida's work in that period, but it wasn't evident at the time. It required an enormous amount of work to excavate that. There was an enormous initial skepticism and then the politics, which was something that had always been on my mind.

The question you ask is why that is sort of absent from *Ininitely Demanding*. The answer is I don't really know. It's peculiar the way Derrida dropped from my attention at a certain point and I don't fully understand why that happened. Partly it has to do with a sort of frustration that I think I felt and a lot of people felt with what was happening with his thought in the 1990s. It seemed to be the wrong discourse. The last time I really taught Derrida at Essex was *Politics of Friendship* and *Spectres of Marx* and it somehow seemed irrelevant to the students I was teaching it to and this really struck me. It was maybe the wrong moment for Derrida's work, that scrupulousness and care and patience and whatever just seemed to be...the time required something different, and there was an enormous impatience with that. I suppose some of that impatience infected me. I wrote something after his death but in the last ten or fifteen years I haven't been engaged with Derrida in the way in which I was.

SJ: Would you like to comment on your general relationship to phenomenology at the moment?

SC: I still think of myself as a phenomenologist. I'm teaching *Being and Time* for fourteen weeks this semester. It is the sort of thing that you can do here that you can't do with the English term system where you are teaching nine week courses and it tends to be very superficial. We're really going through the text very carefully for the next fourteen weeks and it reminds me how committed I am to Heidegger's conception of phenomenology. I try to show in the book that came out last year *On Heidegger's Being and Time* that Heidegger's conception of phenomenology is really derived from a certain reading of Husserl with other things along the way. I try to show how Heidegger's phenomenology is a radicalisation of things that are already there in Husserl. You can say that it is all in Husserl but it is Heidegger that synthesises those things into a new chemistry, blending them also with elements from Dilthey and a certain reading of Aristotle and a certain Christian, radical Christian, orientation: Paul, Augustine, and Luther.

Heidegger's conception of phenomenology, which is this idea of attempting in philosophical discourse to get close to that which shows itself

and that language is that power of articulation, that power of intelligibility, which allows you to attend to that which shows itself. How Heidegger defines the phenomenon is something that I still relish and subscribe to. The issue is then whether that means you have to subscribe to the sort of narrative of Heidegger's work in *Being and Time* as he describes it or not.

Levinas says that the task is leaving the climate of Heidegger's thinking without leaving for a climate that would be pre-Heideggerian. That's very much how I situate what I'm up to. I think that there are problems with the climate or the ethos of Heidegger's work, particularly around the question of authenticity for me, but there is no step back behind Heidegger to some pre-Heideggerian metaphysics or whatever. The step that Heidegger makes is a decisive step, therefore it's a question of how one negotiates philosophically on the ground layed out by Heidegger and use different emphases than the ones that Heidegger himself gave. So I think it's a question of reading *Being and Time* and also much of the later work with Heidegger against Heidegger. That's nothing new, Habermas' first published paper was called "With Heidegger, Against Heidegger," as I recall, which is a reading of the 1935 *Introduction to Metaphysics*. So I still think of myself as a phenomenologist because for me the overwhelming threat or worry is the worry of what Husserl called objectivism; what we call now naturalism or scientism. Phenomenology still has a lot to offer and I subscribe wholeheartedly to that.

SJ: It's very interesting the narrative that you suggest. You begin with the question that Heidegger's politics cast over his philosophy. This leads you to your PhD thesis *The Ethics of Deconstruction* that considers the ethical resources available through Levinas to a Heideggerian tradition of thought. Then in your recent work, *Infinitely Demanding*, you seem to continue this trajectory inspired by the question of fascism towards a kind of pacifist anarchism.

SC: A bit of background here is that my political trajectory has been through a number of changes in the last ten or fifteen years. To a great extent this has been dependent on what has been going on in the outside world and also who I'm talking to. What you find in *Infinitely Demanding* is that I begin with this engagement with Marx that comes out of a whole series of encounters I was having at reading groups in 2000 and 2001 where people wanted to go back to Marx. I've got an implicit trust in what people are interested in. I tend to listen very carefully to what graduate students are talking about and reading. The reading of Marx really came out of a long

term engagement I've had with Marx but also out of a sense of urgency. An urgency to go back to Marx and to address what resources his thinking had and did not have. While the critique of political economy is incredibly germane descriptively and interesting. Everything that has happened over the last six, seven, eight, months has confirmed that Marx's remarks on credit in volume three of *Capital* is tremendously prescient. The issue for me, the problem with Marx, is that the issue of the political agent and the political subject in Marx has always been for me an open question. That began under the influence of someone like Ernesto Laclau who was trying to accept a Marxian analysis of the state of the world but then to rethink the nature of political subjectivity and collective will formation in Marx by using Gramsci. Gramsci has always been a huge influence on me. He always seemed to be the most intelligent and reasonable Marxist.

SJ: You are still working with the concept of hegemony in *Infinitely Demanding*.

SC: Yes, I just think that politics is about hegemony. It's about the formation of a collective will or a common sense, the formation of what Laclau would call a chain of equivalences. You can link up different interest groups with very different conceptions of the good, around a common struggle. That's a kind of value neutral remark. It's as true, in fact it's more true, on the right as on the left. Until the rise of Obama in the US, it was the right that was using that technique in politics particularly well. Hegemony is just the logic of politics for me.

The drift towards anarchism has just been an increasing frustration with certain forms of Marxism. I've always been very persuaded by Bakunin's critique of Marx. In the sense that Marxists are crypto-Bismarckian: they're secret lovers of the state form and they crave new forms of authority. It seems to me that the political sequence that emerges into media visibility with the Seattle protests in November 1999 is best captured with an idea of anarchism. So it's a question of trying, with activist groups and friends and different people, to try and rethink the nature of anarchism. This has led me towards the position you find in *Infinitely Demanding*. A book that is very much a first statement.

Academically it's interesting that Marxism has always been such a success in the academy. It works incredibly well because you've got an elaborate theory which you can discuss the nature of, Marxist theory and its relationships to developments. There's a series of very difficult books to read so it works well in seminars.

SJ: It offers a model of analysis that can be applied endlessly and discussed in these applications with considerable nuance.

SC: Yes, and it's very amenable to theorisation whereas anarchism has always been suspicious of that. That goes back to the Bakunin Marx relation. Bakunin never really gets it together. His writings are interventions: letters and occasional texts. Nothing adds up to the sort of theoretical edifice that Marx produced. There is a reluctance among many anarchist groups to theorise their activity or practice. For them the practice is the thing and the theorisation is to miss it. I think that's why there are less anarchists in the academy. It's a contextual discourse in the sense in which anarchism as a theory of politics based on mutual aid, co-operation, and the rest. The idea of direct democracy is inherently much more plausible in the context I am in now than forms of academified Marxism. There's a certain self-consciousness within American political and religious discourse around ideas of small scale communities, usually religious communities, which are implicitly anarchist. It works. It seems more plausible here. It's also closer to the way in which activist groups actually function in terms of a disparate range of groups with often very different interests, often connected with single issues or often connected with religious commitments. So the heart of anarchism for me is not a set of theoretical commitments, as with Marxism, but a set of ethical concerns with practice.

SJ: I'm interested in discussing your relation to the wider anarchist tradition. Could you consider yourself a kind of mutualist because the ethical demand you are concerned with in *Infinitely Demanding* draws us away from individualism towards a more mutual experience of society?

SC: Yes. I'm happy to be described as a mutualist, though the recent work that I've been doing is on mystical anarchism. This material is a strange new departure for me but my implicit prejudice or assumption is that human beings are not inherently wicked. Human beings in the right circumstances – and they are not in the right circumstances – are capable of behaving mutually, co-operatively, and on the basis of trust if they are allowed to. It's the states law, bureaucracy, and the rest which hinders that. I see human wickedness as a socio-historical outcome rather than a natural fact. This is what takes me back to the importance of original sin and the relationship between original sin and politics. It seems to me that all forms of authoritarianism rely on some idea of original sin. If you believe in some idea of essential human defectiveness then you are going to be led towards

some form of authoritarianism as a way of rectifying that defectiveness through the institutions of the church and the state and all the rest.

So I am implicitly a mutualist, the question is what's possible at the present moment. I have got different views on that. I think we're stuck with the state form, more or less, it's a pity that we're stuck with it but I think that we are stuck with it for the foreseeable future. Anarchism is about federalism. It's about a federalistic politics. There are times when I could imagine the European Union going over to a radical form of federalism if it decided to abandon its commitment to the nation state. You could imagine a radically decentralised European area based on a federation of cities, villages, and all the rest where the economy would be returned to localities in a very dramatic way.

SJ: Irish Politics has traditionally defined itself in relation to the question of land and nationalism because of the colonial history with England and perhaps with the rising influence of the European Union, with the Euro and the constant treaties, it would certainly seem to make questions of nationalism less relevant, but surely there is a serious problem with the constitutionalism of the European Union?

SC: Sure, but what I'm saying is that to get from here to something better that would be one way to move. You could imagine a genuine commitment to the overcoming of the nation state which was the founding principle of the European Union. All the problems of constitutionalism, absolutely, but if people took that seriously then you could imagine a much more developed form of federalism. The nation is a thing that appears at a certain point in European history, in moments of national romanticism which arise as an anti-colonial moment: Ireland, Finland. There's a book by Declan Kiberd on *Inventing Ireland*. Ireland is a very good example of the invention of a national myth. The nation was important at a certain point in political history but I would be interested in bringing about an end to that. That would be one way, a sort of real world actual politics way of thinking about forms of federalism which we could actually get to from where we are even though there would be lots of problems with that. The anarchist tradition has always been this slightly impoverished, invisible, sort of underbelly to political thinking which is always feeling misrepresented. It's a great pity.

SJ: To return a little towards Derrida and a question of theorising what it means to be human. I accept that if we are to consider individuals to be bad then this implies an authoritarian social politics – and Thomas Hobbes is

a case in point – but if on the other hand you can find it in your heart to be a little bit more optimistic about what it is to be a person alive today then you can find yourself much more sympathetic to anarchist politics. Do you take seriously this question of the nature of humanity or would you still be working within a more Derridean framework that would be suspicious of such essentialist questions?

SC: I take seriously the anthropological question. I don't think you can simply separate questions of politics from questions of humanity or, indeed, the nature of religion. These things are part and parcel. I also think that there is obviously an implicit humanistic prejudice in the way in which that question is posed - it's about the question of the human, the nature of the human, and we're still stuck with a humanistic metaphysics. One of the things that Derrida's work has persistently pointed out, or attempted to question, that limit or frontier between the human and the animal or the human and the divine and I take that seriously. In as much as Derrida is problematising the question of the essence of the human, he is still asking that question: what are "The Ends of Man"? It is not simply an issue of setting to one side all issues of human nature. It's a question of rethinking those categories in an essential way. That's one of the things that I take from Derrida's work. You can't simply say – well it's all discursively articulated and questions of nature needn't be considered. This is one sort of academic doxa you find. Another is 'well it's all nature and it's all genetically coded in some way.' These are obviously wrong.

It seems that anarchism has the capaciousness for thinking about forms of mutuality and co-operation that would question the limits of the human which goes back to deep spiritual traditions like the Franciscans and people like that. The idea of the human as the be all and end all of human existence or why this universe was made is a humanist assumption that I think anarchism has always been out to question, in my opinion.

SJ: You've already said that you can be considered sympathetic to mutualism and your discussion of co-operative federalism suggests a sympathy towards anarcha-syndicalism to a certain extent as well. Do you consider trade unions to be important?

SC: Trade unions are great for the most part. I used to be a union organiser in the 80s in England when I was still working there. I think that unions are absolutely essential. I was a labour party activist for many years in the 80s and early 90s. I left before Blair became leader. It still seems to me that

unions are hugely important.

SJ: Perhaps the question is whether you consider activity through trade unions as a possibility for achieving social change? In *Infinitely Demanding* you talk of political action in the interstices of the state – would trade union activity be something that you have in mind or would you be thinking more about the summit protests? Where are these interstices?

SC: The interstices have to be created. I would begin from the idea that at the present moment in history the state saturates more and more areas of society. We live in societies of surveillance and control, to an extent that would have been unimaginable a hundred years ago. It truly is a dystopian vision. To that extent, there is no space in the state. That's how the state works, it is by saturating the visibility of what takes place in the social terrain, controlling it. The political system, the political machine, is what gives the impression of change within that state form. Forms of genuine resistance have to go about creating new spaces of visibility. I take the idea of 'interstice' from Epicurus who says that the gods live in the interstices of space. There was an idea of god, a strange idea of god, that god was almost non-existent but existing in the interstices and these interstices are ones which had to be articulated and created, they don't exist, they're not pre-given.

The examples I give in the book of indigenous rights protests is one that works very well. There was no space for indigenous rights in Mexico in the 1980s. The space for indigenous rights had to be articulated around a struggle which was organised around a right that the Mexican government had unwittingly signed up to a labour convention that protected the rights of indigenous peoples. It's around that that the movement can take form and emerge into visibility. What happened with Seattle and after that was the emergence into visibility of a new form of resistance. That then becomes an interstice or a series of interstices. These are not pre-given, they have to be articulated. It becomes a question of how these interstices find a hook onto which they can attach themselves to the existing political system. It's a politics of protest.

SJ: It's interesting to hear that you derive the term interstice from Epicurus because I assumed it was from Hakim Bey's account of *Temporary Autonomous Zones*.

SC: That's something that I re-read about five or six years ago. It's on my mind as well. We tried to make a temporary autonomous zone in the New School in December with some of the students we had an occupation which we declared to be a temporary autonomous zone. It was interesting. It was all about a fight over visibility. We had cameras in there and they were threatening to send the police in and whatever – it would have been bad publicity for the school – but there you go.

Politics is about the creation of these spaces. What you do with these spaces then becomes...there are different options. One tradition would be secession where you move away from the state as far as possible and set up your zone in the countryside or whatever. Another tradition would be to form that group into an organised political force that could exert pressure on the political system and the state, the way the greens did in the 70s, 80s, and 90s. Say in Germany where they became part of the government in 98 was it? There are different strategies you can adopt at that point.

For me there is a question mark about the nature of resistance and protest. I think that the political sequence that emerges into political visibility with Seattle, through to the G7 protests, has come to an end or is coming to an end. Strategically, tactically, there was the element of surprise in Seattle. People didn't know how to deal with these new tactics and now they do. What one does next – I think I mentioned this in Dublin recently – I was talking about an activist group in France...

SJ: Yes, you mentioned them, *The Call* is the name of their text isn't it?

SC: Yes, Yes. They've got this idea of zones of opacity. In many ways, this is just a question for me, that the Seattle sequence was all about the emergence into more and more powerful forms of visibility. The use of spectacular, huge, protests to make a political point. Maybe different tactics are necessary at this point. I don't really know what to suggest but I'm talking to people and listening to people and reading things and I'm just curious.

SJ: Isn't the spectacle to which you have just referred a threatening kind of logic. To conceive of political action within this spectacular sphere risks creating news reports but no change. The problem I'm gesturing towards is the problem of direct action and whether direct action is actually possible or are we trapped within the symbolic creation of identity and of news rather than political change?

SC: I think that there is an absolute risk of that. One risks replicating the spectacle in and through forms of resistance and successful resistance is resistance that gets the right publicity, that creates the right effect. A few students of mine unfurled a free Tibet banner outside one of the olympic areas in Beijing last year. It took months of coordinated action and they had to build the thing there and the thing was only up for thirty seconds before the police tore it down and they were all arrested but they got a picture in the *New York Times* and elsewhere. Now that's effective protest at a certain level but at another level it's just the creation of news.

I think that this is always a difficult thing to think about. The politics of resistance shouldn't exhaust itself by trying to appeal to a news agenda, there's no question about that, but it can't afford to ignore it. It's a really tricky one. What interests me a lot more is the fact that you get a bunch of people in a room who have thought carefully about these issues and you can come to interesting forms of consensus and thoughtfulness about what should be done. I think that direct action is essential but over the means of direct action there is a question mark for me. A certain sequence has come to an end, I think. It's a question mark as to what is going to happen in the immediate future. The issue is what happens on the ground. It's about people organising quasi-institutions for themselves that they have autonomy over, whether that's a food co-op or some sort of medical co-operative or some kind of free school or whatever it might be. Those are the important things. While I think that it's something that has been much more a part of the anarchist movement I feel that it is something that has often remained below the level of visibility. It's great successes have often been less than visible. Anarchism has been rising and forming ways in political history over the last 170 years, well longer than that if you go back to Godwin, and its had a huge about of small successes that it doesn't really celebrate as much as it perhaps should do. The image of anarchism as violent crazy protest, which goes back to the end of the 19th century, is still one that people very much struggle with. That disappoints me. Changing the image of anarchism would be one thing that could be done – go on CNN and say that anarchists are nice people.

SJ: It can be difficult to create these freer spaces of activity in society and maybe this is something about the difficulty of the state.

SC: Yes, I think so.

SJ: One of the key aspects of the Levinasian understanding of anarchy is the overcoming of individual autonomy. Does it make sense to theoretically conceptualise the end of individual autonomy – which is quite convincing on a number of levels – in the context of a political situation in which surveillance is often individual surveillance, where you are individualised by the forces and operations of the state? Does this individualisation simply become part of what is rejected?

SC: It's a good question. The point I'm trying to make in *Infinitely Demanding* and in the work I've done around that topic subsequently is to try and replace an idea of anarchism based around the idea of freedom, a humanist idea of individual freedom, with an anarchism of responsibility. To show the anarchic form of organisation in protests, like the antiwar protests or the antiglobalisation protests, that is not based around a claim for emancipation as much as the identification of a wrong. A grievance in relation to a wrong. It's to try and show that the core of anarchism is not so much an idea of freedom but an idea of responsibility. If you read people like David Graeber, who is a good friend of mine and brilliant on the issue of direct action, he has got an incredibly simple minded idea of freedom and autonomy. The Levinasian dimension is that what anarchism is about is an experience of responsibility, infinite responsibility. What my argument against autonomy, a certain model of autonomy, is about is an idea of conscience. The *dividual*, in my parlance, is a way of thinking about the way that conscience structures and breaks apart what it means to be an individual. So in many ways, and this is a point that maybe could be made in relation to Derrida and Levinas, that I'm not giving up individual autonomy. I'm trying to sort of radicalise it, deepen it, through an experience of heteronomy being called into question. If you like the Levinasian and Derridian subject is more responsible than its individualistic, autonomous, predecessor and autonomy is not a question of giving up...it becomes, as it were, exacerbated, radicalised, in a way. There are elements in thinkers like Levinas that could be very useful to anarchist groups.

SJ: You say that this ethical experience of the infinite demand is about an infinite responsibility requiring infinite commitment and an experience of conscience. Would you be able to expand on the experience of conscience in relation to this idea of the infinite demand. Is the infinite demand to act against something that is wrong, against injustice in society, or could it include acting in a way that isn't terribly ethical. In order to have responsibility for your actions you have to bear the weight of them

regardless of whether they are ethical or unethical.

SC: What do you mean by that? Well yes, absolutely, you have to take responsibility both ways. The infinite demand, the way that the argument is structured, is that there is a motivational deficit in contemporary liberal democracy and this deficit is something that has to be supplemented at the level of subjectivity. I then try to tell a story about how all notions of ethics had to go back to the idea of demand and approval and then I try to construct a particular model of the ethical subject through Badiou, Levinas, Løgstrup, and Lacan. The ethical demand is something that arises in relation to the particular other person that I am faced with. The demand that they exert on me is a demand that I could never meet. That's the basic intuition. That demand splits me so the relationship to the neighbour is anarchic, in the sense in which the relationship to the neighbour is one where I cannot possibly meet the claim that is made upon me. It is that *not being able to meet that claim* that is the condition for, not paralysis, but action in the world. That's the thought. Then there are questions about who makes that demand, what the limits are, what the nature of that coercion is like, but that's the basic thought.

SJ: Is the ethical demand meta-ethical, what makes ethics in general possible, or does it have a normative content?

SC: Both. The claim I make is that, meta-ethically, every conception of ethics has to derive from an idea of ethical experience and ethical subjectivity. Otherwise it's empty and doesn't address itself to the subject for whom it is intended, it becomes some kind of mechanism or procedure and fails to address the problem of motivation – the moral psychological question. Meta-ethically all conceptions of morality have to be linked back to the idea of ethical demand and the approval of that demand. Then normatively, in Chapter 2 of *Ininitely Demanding*, I try to offer a particular picture of ethical subjectivity which I recommend as a normative picture but there might be others. I don't think that moral argumentation has a coercive force.

SJ: Ethical opinions and judgements inform struggles for hegemony over the ethical sphere in society. For example, if you come to an issue like abortion from a certain anarchist perspective then it is a question of whether the state is entitled to exercise its authority over a woman's body. What happens when you approach an issue such as abortion from the point

of view of the ethical demand? Does the ethical demand suggest a different position on abortion?

SC: No, it doesn't. That would be a political question for me. The way in which this works is that the level of ethics is about picking out a structure of ethical subjectivity and trying to show how that works. To fill that with specific judgements or views is more of a political task for me. Perversely, I can imagine both a pro-lifer and a pro-choicer having an overwhelming sense of a demand. There are billboards with anti-abortion adverts all over this part of Florida with 'Life begins at conception' and 'If you're pregnant, you have a choice.' Now that's a certain ethical demand based on a certain set of metaphysical presumptions about the nature of life and its relation to the divine. The infinite ethical demand at its most abstract level is neutral with regard to that. It's a question of building in particular judgements.

SJ: Lets take into account the particular forms that the ethical demand can take in society, or the forms that the ethical demands have taken historically. An example would be the demand to be a good housewife and obey patriarchal institutions. That is clearly a demand for hierarchy, a social pressure placed on people in the form of an "ethical" demand. In *Infinitely Demanding* you claim that there is something intrinsically democratising about the ethical demand, or that it necessarily leads to a radical politics...

SC: Not necessarily. The claim I make is that democratisation is action based on an ethical demand. There's no necessity to that, it's a question of construction at that point. Nothing flows deductively from the fact of the ethical demand right the way down to real world politics.

SJ: That's both good and bad.

SC: Yes, this is the error of a Habermasian position that if you can get the right transcendental picture you can go all the way from that to democratic deliberation. The ethical demand is something that can be repressive and has been repressive. My meta-ethical claim is that all conceptions of morality flow from an idea of the ethical demand. That demand has for the most part been a repressive demand for the most part, there is no question about that, but it's not a question of being liberated from that but an issue of how one can think about restructuring that demand and making it ones own. Then it becomes a question of linking that constructively to forms of political action. There's no deduction there from one thing to another. It's a

constructive task, if you like.

You could say that there is something democratising about the ethical demand in so far as its a commitment to equality. You could say that but how it would actually work in practice would be a political issue.

SJ: Yes, because there is a tension between the general philosophical notion of equality and the specific question of what that would actually mean in a given social situation.

SC: Sure, and the strength of the anarchist tradition for me has always been its commitment to locality. Politics is not a top down business and that, for me, is the problem with Marxism. It's always the other way around. It's a question of looking at forms of local activity, local processes and local defeats and victories. These becomes sites for the emergence of a demand that has a much more general function than that, instead of the other way around.

What interests me in the history of anarchism is that you can go back to the diggers in the English revolution. The action they take is the possession of the land and they engage in planting vegetables and trying to cultivate the land. That's an actual practice that develops and at the heart of that is a demand that is being articulated. They say that things will not go right in England until goods are held in common.

I take the point very seriously. Particularly when you're reading a philosophical text on ethics and politics it can look as if it's the other way around. I'm not interested in that. I'm interested in – and this is a phenomenological commitment – actual forms of life and existence and pull out structures from them.

SJ: A question about terminology. You use the term 'demand' and it suggests a way of getting motivation back into the description of how ethics actually works because the demand draws the individual out of themselves and into social and political action on an ethical basis. Why is it a demand at all and what is the authority that makes this demand possible as a demand? It suggests that the individual makes no gift of themselves to ethics.

SC: There is no demand without the approval of the demand. If a demand does not have approval then it is coercion. So it's a delicate operation and there are forms of demand which are...think of it in terms of christianity. Most people who are christians believe that there is an ethical demand which the fact of christ conveys upon human beings.

SJ: That they are convicted by the bible.

SC: Yes, there are people for whom the demand flows from the commandments of god, there's a higher authority to that demand, the demand is exercised upon the christian by the fact of christ's death and resurrection. People would say that that demand flows from a command which is the whole theology of christianity. Then there are people who would say, like Alasdair MacIntyre, that the command doesn't matter and I'm very sympathetic to MacIntyre on this point. The essential element of christianity is the fact that there is a demand that one imposes on oneself. Whether that demand flows from the fact that there was this god man on a mission or not is neither here nor there. Then you get very close to the idea that the demand is the demand for the person who approves of that demand and freely accepts it. The coercion that is exerted is a kind of self coercion. I put myself under a demand, freely, and that's what conscience would be in that sense.

SJ: It still seems to me that this notion of motivation linked to a demand is operating within a structure of thought that sets up the ability to approve of something, as a kind of individual action, against a demand for someone to act that is necessarily authoritarian. It does not seem very far away from the conceptual structure at work in the legal system where you have a conception of individuals acting freely while simultaneously subject to imposed legal demands. You seem to be operating with some kind of autonomy and some kind of authority in a problematic way in your conception of the *dividual*. Problematic in the sense that you are interested in going beyond the autonomy orthodoxy of the individual and interested in anarchism with the implied move away from authoritarian ways of being together as people.

SC: The demand is self authorising. The demand without an approval is sheer coercion. Autonomy would be the thought that the approval and the demand are equal to each other. Classically in Kant's moral philosophy that's freedom and the moral law are mirrors of each other. All legitimate conceptions of morality have to be self authorising. I begin from that, but the authority that the ethical demand lays upon me is not something that I'm equal to. If I were equal to it, then that would be a classical form of autonomy. The Levinasian thought is that I put myself under a demand that I could never meet. So rather than being a way of contradicting autonomy it's a way of deepening autonomy. Of showing its hetero-affective constitution

of self authorisation. This is very close to Derrida, it's an exacerbation of the experience of responsibility or unconditional hospitality.

SJ: There's this idea of the intentionality of ethics out towards the world, the demand of the world to have ethical attention payed to it by the individual, and you talk a little in *Infinitely Demanding* about how this doesn't necessarily lead to action and you give the example of someone sitting on a couch when someone calls around collecting for charity.

SC: Yes, Michael Smith's example from *The Moral Problem*.

SJ: So there is an ethical demand there that the individual doesn't rise to. The day to day experience of urbanism in the first world often involves encountering people who are homeless and the infinite demand that these people present us with in a way that is often not recognised as a call for action but merely as a cause for despair.

SC: Or indifference. It could be indifference, you could simply be indifferent to them.

SJ: Sure. This brings us to your discussion of passive and active nihilism and the role you recognise for humour in trying to navigate a path between these two things. Humour is what overcomes the tragedy of the infinite demand and makes it bearable. Laughter can no doubt be a solace to those who can laugh but – to paraphrase Ernesto Laclau's challenge to Richard Rorty on the political sufficiency of irony – humour seems inadequate for those who find themselves confronted with Auschwitz (Laclau, *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, 64).

SC: It makes it worse, it doesn't alleviate it, it makes it worse. As Woody Allen says 'Comedy is tragedy plus time.' For me comedy is much more tragic than tragedy. What comedy gives you is a momentary alleviation of that tragedy but without that tragedy actually going away. There is no catharsis, no purification, no expelling of that affect as you find in classical theories of tragedy – it just goes on. So humour is more tragic than tragedy.

Auschwitz doesn't go away, there is no way of releasing ourselves from that. Humour is a very good way of showing that. The infinite demand of this ethical overload that I try and put at the heart of ethics, the way that that can be maintained and momentarily alleviated is through humour

as a practice. That's what I try and show using Beckett's example of the *risus purus*: the pure laugh, the laugh that laughs at the laugh, the laugh that laughs at that which is unhappy. It doesn't mean that you stop being unhappy, it just means that you can laugh at it. It's a very dark idea of humour. It's not that we can overcome that.

Back to passive nihilism and active nihilism. Morality has to be a freely chosen activity. There is no way over the free rider problem. There's no way over the idea that there are going to be wicked human beings that simply pass by, ignoring the demands that are made upon them, pass by the homeless and feel nothing. There is no way of deductively, a-priori, getting around that. What one has to cultivate is an ethos where that becomes the less likely moral response. There are different traditions that have attempted to do that. There are people who are simply going to feel indifference when they walk by someone in need. One hopes that that doesn't happen and there are ways of preventing that happening but philosophy can't guarantee it at that point.

SJ: You describe yourself as a phenomenologist and your book is concerned with an ethical experience but if we begin phenomenologically from the phenomena of experience then we can't prejudice that experience by stating 'to experience the world in this way is wicked, to experience the world in that way is not to be wicked.' From a christian point of view, with the presupposition of a universal human compassion informed by god, you could condemn walking by a homeless person as wicked but it does not seem so straightforward for a phenomenologist.

SC: I condemn it. I think that, phenomenologically, if you look into the deep structure of that experience of the other passing by indifferently is not our fundamental orientation towards the other as an other. Our orientation towards the other at the level of deep subjective experience is one of something like compassion or something like being affectively moved by their presence. Phenomenology is a way of relearning to see the world and relearning to see other people in that world. It is not just descriptive, it's shot through with normative assumptions. It's not just value free description, it never was.

SJ: So what you're saying is that even when we walk by a homeless person in the street we still have a fundamentally ethical experience of them as an other.

SC: The other person is a person, even in ignoring the other person I'm still ignoring another person.

SJ: So it's always an ethical experience, even if you're not acting in an ethical way.

SC: Yes, even negatively. Levinas describes this in terms of situations of war. Even in situations of war and conflict. When I murder the other, the other human being is the only thing I could murder. Even in murdering the other, putting them to death, there is a recognition of them as a human being. As perverse as that might sound.

Seferin James, University College Dublin, 17th March 2009.