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Laruelle: A Stranger Thought
Anthony Paul Smith

François Laruelle is a radical thinker, to say the least. He started the non-philosophy project several decades ago and developed it in five stages. Now, he prefers to call it non-standard philosophy. Laruelle’s thought and the treatment meted out to it by the academia brings to light the fact that even philosophy, which is supposed to be the voice of the marginalised, can create a new marginalisation. Serious engagement with Laruelle’s thought is less, though the situation is becoming better, because he attempts to question the very roots of philosophy. However, Laruelle does not claim to destroy philosophy itself, but he ventures to rethink and restructure how philosophy is done.

This book is divided two parts. The first part gives a generic introduction to Laruelle’s thought and the second part focusses on his treatment of politics, science, ethics, fiction, and religion. The author, Anthony Paul Smith, starts the book with a note on the urgent cry for finding the end to philosophy. He informs us that philosophy is undergoing an identity crisis, which is not a new phenomenon in philosophy. Smith says that according to Laruelle, the right question to ask is not whether philosophy has ended, not “Are we done with philosophy”, but “What is to be done with philosophy?” This book explores the answer to this question that Laruelle provides in his non-philosophy. Smith says that according to Laruelle, the right question to ask is not whether philosophy has ended, not “Are we done with philosophy”, but “What is to be done with philosophy?”

Smith elaborates that non-philosophy does not add yet another voice to interminable debates, but at its best aims for something different, something strange and alien to standard philosophy. Non-Philosophy is stranger than philosophy. And this hitherto untold strangeness lies behind the two-fold purpose of this book. The first part of the book provides a generic introduction to non-philosophy, tracing its most general structures....

Part II is organized into five chapters to evoke the five waves of non-philosophy. These waves are Laruelle's own division of his work into five distinct periods that remain largely consistent over time, but with new materials and focus in each period. However, I do not present here a simple history of non-philosophy, as I have elsewhere presented such a history by focusing on either the change in axioms that guide each wave or the history of the conjugation of science and philosophy. Instead I have picked five significant thematics running throughout each of the five waves and show how these thematics are engaged with from his early work to his most contemporary, and in turn how they help to develop the practice of non-philosophy (2–3).

Smith also addresses Ray Brassier’s criticism of non-philosophy, who feels that ‘non-philosophy has not delivered on any of its perceived promises’ (4). Smith clarifies:

Laruelle does not want to provide us with another philosophical analysis. Instead he wants to use the different philosophical analyses to do something with philosophy, without making any claim about the Real that conditions every theoretical project. To show how Laruelle does this, I engage with his corpus generically (or synthetically in the standard philosophical idiom) rather than linearly. This means that I do not present a developmental reading of non-philosophy. Laruelle himself says that such a reading
of non-philosophy as a linear evolution would be artificial. ...

This also means that I really do aim here at a general introduction to non-philosophy. While at times I mark certain differences in my understanding of non-philosophy from others who have engaged with Laruelle’s large body of work, this is not a book aiming to mark out a certain space or assuming major familiarity with the specific debates amongst Francophone and Anglophone non-philosophers. Instead, I firstly hope to help new readers of Laruelle to gain a foothold in his own texts, rather than this text alone, by explicating some of the main concepts and questions that non-philosophy engages with. I then turn to helping new readers situate non-philosophy in relation to some other debates in various areas of philosophy and theory more generally, through creative readings of those concepts and questions alongside other forms of thought that I take to be radical. The radical nature of these other discourses is assessed on the basis of their incisiveness and rigor in their understanding of the world as well as their strangeness according to the norms of the standard model of philosophy and various forms of theory produced by that model (4–5).

Confident about the non-philosophy project, Smith explains that from his ‘limited perspective, analytic philosophy appears to still be conditioned largely by a hegemonic Liberal political project and is in many ways moribund as it works out increasingly self-referential and self-limiting problems. At the same time, Continental philosophy has largely continued to focus on explicating its own history or moving toward new forms of metaphysics’ (7). About the possibilities of non-philosophy, Smith says:

Non-Philosophy provides resources for carrying out radically creative work that can take traditional tropes in standard philosophical discourse and combine them with exciting forms of thought taking place without regard for that tradition. In being stranger than philosophy, it allows one steeped in the history of philosophy to radically refuse the borders of philosophy and other forms of human knowledge. More importantly, it breaks down the frame imposed by that history of philosophy when considering questions of identity, universality, ethics, knowledge, science, faith, art, and other traditional themes of philosophy. ...

The two-fold purpose of this book really flows from one underlying drive: to show what can be done with non-philosophy and let that doing speak for itself (7–8).

He says this about the future of non-philosophy: Non-philosophy’s fruitlessness may have something useful about it, at least when the sense of usefulness is radically changed under the conditions of the radical immanence of the One. Non-philosophy models a way of thinking that is open to the construction of a radically different world and a radically different philosophy from those that structure our world. ...

In the face of the constant harassment that comes from media friendly images of the future, dystopian visions, and even everyday demands to constantly be worried about one’s own future, non-philosophy joins with other forms of thought that demand a future to the measure of the human. A humane future is no future at all, but rather a kind of proliferation of the whyless now. In this way there is no future for non-philosophy because non-philosophy seeks to make meaning in a way that is strange to the norms of the philosophy-world. It is the very fruitlessness, the whylessness, that others accuse Laruelle of that is the good news of non-philosophy in the face of the failure of the world. ... This is a strange thought. It may even be the strangest thought to emerge from French philosophy to date (173–4).

This book is so far the best introduction to Laruelle. It makes it much easier to understand this thought of a person, who is a new ray of hope in philosophy. Smith successfully argues against the critiques of Laruelle, showing that in almost all cases, the critics have not properly understood the very basics of Laruelle’s thought. This book is a valuable addition to the library of all interested in Laruelle in particular and Continental thought in general. It would be a great toolkit in the armoury of not only the Anglophone readers of Laruelle, but also those, who can read him in the language in which he writes, French.

Editor
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