

Johannes Wankhammer "After Cosmos and Chaos: Reason in an Age of Contingency"

This essay probes possibilities for a new conception of reason by rejecting the classical alternative between 'cosmos' and 'chaos': between a type of view that sees the world as a well-ordered system intelligible through the natural light of reason, and the opposite type that locates order exclusively in the mind's impositions onto an outside devoid of inherent (or intelligible) structure. A close reading of two pivotal passages from Nietzsche and Foucault shows that the version of the latter view that has strongly influenced literary theory in the past few decades rests on a conflation of contingency with arbitrariness. The fact that knowledge of an object 'could as well be otherwise' (the definition of contingency) is taken to imply that it could equally well (be made to) be any other way (i.e., that it is arbitrary). Against this conflation, the essay suggests reinterpreting the defining modern experience of the contingency of relations – whether social, ontological, or epistemic – as a modality weaker than necessity but stronger than arbitrariness. This also entails breaking up the reified opposition between constructivist and naturalist accounts of knowledge. With the parallel rejection of naturalist exclusivity and constructive arbitrariness, artificial 'additions' to knowledge production come into view as enabling rather than foreclosing the engagement with an outside that at the same time exceeds these additions. The essay concludes by suggesting that rethinking knowledge along the lines of such 'revealing construction' may promise a more durable reconception of reason than recent swings of the pendulum back from 'chaos' to 'cosmos,' which try to counter postmodern nominalism with scientific or speculative realisms.