Specters of Badiou: The Deconstructive Immortal

An Honors Comparative History of Ideas Thesis

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Preface and Introduction

> "I mistrust all systematizers and avoid them. The will to a system is a lack of integrity."
> —Friedrich Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols.[1]

In the case of ethics wiser words are hard to find. Nietzsche's condemnation of all attempts to systematize, to totalize, is something I hold close to my heart. Such a notion is hardly revolutionary; in reality, it verges more on cliché. From all around our culture didactically bombards us with the idea that one must ever remain open to new ideas and different perspectives. Different cultures and people can offer us innovative and refreshing insights into so many things; we must cherish this and so respect their difference. Never must we be so incorrigible and pig-headed in our own point of view as to eclipse the possibility of others. In this way, it has become moral to avoid systematization.

Ironically, though, this imperative against the totalizing power of systems functions as a sort of ethical arche-system. In the same stroke it both condemns systematization even while becoming a system itself. Such an action is contradiction and hypocrisy par excellence. Ultimately, though, such a system fails to actually value and appreciate real difference. That which is truly dissimilar from it, the incorrigible, has no place in it. It is blind enough, however, to obscure the reality of its situation: that it too must be condemned. Admittedly, these are superficial points. Despite the cheap legitimacy of this quandary, Nietzsche's advice still possesses real value in my eyes. It is precisely because I value his words, though, that am forced to confront the greater aporia latent within.

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[1] Nietzsche, Friedrich. Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin Books, 1990, p. 35.

This predicament, though deceptively simple at first, proves itself more complicated upon reflection. More than this, deliberation reveals that this aporia is common to all such truth claims: Is there a way to genuinely affirm thoughts and ideas heterogeneous to my own in such a way that is free of contradiction? Ultimately, such questioning has at its heart a concern for ethical behavior. Indeed, this is my primary concern, age-old questions regarding the nature of the ethical: What is the place of ethics in our world today? Are the current day manifestations of the ethical truly just? If not, what form should the ethical take? And, perhaps most importantly, must the ethical always and inevitably be systematic?

Naturally, this questioning spills out into other territory: The issue of agency and the nature of responsibility, for example, become two important factors that must be weighed in before anything decisive can be said of ethics. Further still, the intricate relationship between ethics and politics must be explored. To exclude one of the primary executors of justice (as well as injustice) throughout history, the state, is to commit, frankly, a grievous injustice. Thus, a comprehensive reflection on the ethical requires that one address the complexities of its relationship with the political.

Finally, any deliberation on what ethics means requires that one engage with the notion of justice itself. What exactly does justice represent? What is its origin and where does its allegiance lie? These questions are nothing new, of course, they are same old hat worn by countless philosophers the world over. However, they must be addressed if a genuine account of the ethical is to be presented.

Today, our culture is abuzz with notions of admiring difference and cherishing diversity. The dominant mode of discourse, and thus the preeminent ethical system, is

the model of universal human rights. Supporters of these rights claim that an emancipatory and interventionist practice of ethics is possible when one recognizes that all humans are innately imbued with fundamental rights, unique prerogatives that ultimately bind all individuals to a universal morality. Thus, people from all cultures, regardless of the degree of disparity, are capable of some level of communication. As such respect necessarily forms the foundational pillar of all our actions; and in this way it has become synonymous with justice. To not respect difference is to act unjustly; disparaging others who do not meet a certain criteria is the highest capital offense. But it is precisely a disrespect for and incompatibility with difference that lies at heart of this system.

I do not believe the ethics of contemporary thought, human rights, is a sufficient manifestation of the ethical. It is ultimately self-stultifying and unworthy of all claims to universality. In concerning itself totally with differences it cannot transcend beyond cultural diversity and so make a generic, universal proclamation regarding ethics. Moreover, human rights relegates the role of the political to the point of insignificance. As a result it is ineffective in providing a means of emancipation in all situations. Any ethical system incapable of directly challenging political structures cannot provide emancipation in all circumstances. A genuine ethics must be capable of defying more than the mere ethical statutes of a state; it must have the capacity to challenge the state itself.

Let it be known: I do not make these critiques lightly; this is not merely a fastidious protest against a doctrine that is, more or less, acceptable. I take the notion of respecting difference seriously, and it is for this reason that I must scrutinize our

contemporary ethical beliefs. I do not believe we can continue to support these views, if we do indeed profess to revere genuine difference. Indeed, we must ask ourselves if we are truly willing to respect difference, at any cost.

This paper, at its heart, is a fight to reclaim both justice and ethics from something unworthy of bearing their names. Justice must be salvaged from the morass of contemporary ethics and so be restored to its former self: the universal equality of all peoples. So too ethics must be recovered from its modern-day conceptualization. What its final form shall take, however, requires first that we critique the contemporary ethical schema.

Before we can explore the complexities of all these questions, however, this thesis must begin with a reclamation of terminology often utilized in the contemporary discourse of the humanities and social sciences. Specifically, I hope to salvage the term "Other" from the discourse of these disciplines. So often this philosophically charged term is thrown around, used nonchalantly—and incorrectly—to denote people that are foreign to us, people that, culturally, we fail to understand. However, this term has connotations far beyond this restrictive definition. The Other, as conceived from a philosophical point of view, is that which denotes the possibility of the otherwise. The Other is more than simply difference, it is radical alterity. It is something that escapes all possible conceptualization, and recognition; the Other is unfathomable. Our customs, traditions and instituted knowledges are incapable of comprehending this Other; it is something truly new, truly radical. And it is this radical alterity that I am concerned with. Is there a way to remain open to the possibility of the Otherwise and yet inaugurate something new into the world? How is it that something new, something Other, can be

inaugurated into the dominion of customs, traditions and pre-prescribed knowledge even as we respect its absolute alterity?

By contrast, traditions, languages, and epistemologies comprise what is already all too familiar to us. Since our births we have been cultivated by these structures, grown to reflect their realities in our lives. These structures, and everything that comes to replicate their principles, is known as the Same. The Same, then, is juxtaposed directly opposite the Other, as that which makes an entity definable and recognizable. For now, it will suffice to conceive of the Same as synonymous with the instituted knowledges and languages that formulate self-identity.[2] In other words, everything that is conceivable is Same.

As an additional side note to those with less exposure to philosophical writings, allow me to explicate what exactly a "subject" is. Philosophically, "subject" simply pertains to a being that has subjective experiences. Specifically these experiences entail a relationship with another entity, something to actually be experienced. These entities that are experienced are known as objects. For example, you are a subject that is currently experiencing an object: this paper. The exact dynamic of the subject-object relationship is one that has preoccupied philosophers for centuries.[3]

Further, in this analysis it is assumed that the process of enculturation spoken of above (e.g. socialization into a culture) produces the subject. A human animal is indoctrinated into the systems of language and culture and so obtains self-reflexivity as well as the ability to communicate with others. This process is needed for the very

[2] Self-identity can be seen as the mental and conceptual awareness that sentient beings hold with regard their own being, their self-consciousness.
[3] Indeed, there have been innumerable iterations of this dynamic. Examples include the doctrine of idealism, which maintains that objects perceived by the subject consist entirely of ideas; and its antithesis, realism, which holds that these objects exist independently of their being perceived.

possibility of an individual to occur; without such a process humans are forever ensnared in the quagmire of proto-subjectivity, incapable of even entering into the subject-object duality.

Historical Origins Of Human Rights

In order to accurately understand the contemporary philosophy of human rights, we must first delve into the some of the sources it draws from. While it would be impossible to trace an exhaustive genealogy of such a complex set of ideas, by emphasizing certain significant historical instances that contributed to its genesis, one is capable of distinguishing its more outstanding characteristics with greater ease.

One of its most prominent forerunners is natural law theory. This ideology, which has seen iterations as far back as the Stoics of Greece, states that there exists certain laws which are fundamental to human nature and are discoverable solely by human reason, without an appeal to any other authority. Thus humans are capable of deriving certain principles about reality through their mental faculties alone, including particular truths about themselves.

While there have been many natural law theorists throughout the ages, the works of the 17th century philosopher, John Locke, have had an enormous impact upon both the historical and contemporary understanding of the rights of man. Locke's greatest contribution to the notion of human rights is his notion of property. In his *Second Treatise of Government* Locke explicates the need for civil society and governmental organizations: the protection of property.[4] Property (that is, the life, liberty and estate of

[4] Locke, John. "Second Treatise of Government." Morality and Moral Controversies. Ed. John Arthur. 5th ed. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1999. p. 243.

an individual) in his schema precedes the establishment of society. That property is antecedent to the onset of law and government means that it exists outside the realm of the civilized; property has become an innate aspect of the laws of nature. The human is innately in possession of himself at the very least, and consequently his own labor. Further, an individual might apply this labor to the bounty of nature, and in doing so that which is produced also becomes his own. For example, one might harvest wheat or pick apples from a tree, and with that labor the wheat or apples are recognized as distinct from nature, insofar as human hands have appropriated them. In this way they become an individual's private right.[5]

The establishment of governmental systems then, is to ensure that these prerogatives are safeguarded from violation on the part other individuals. Without set laws to protect these rights, there exists the possibility that one could infringe upon the rights of another. These rights, instantiated concretely in law, protect individuals from evils that threaten them. If the said government fails to uphold those rights, then it has failed in its purpose and has thus lost legitimacy. The people are then free to erect a new government and revolt against those who would uphold the old regime's power. It is thus with Locke that one begins to see the development of the modern notion of rights to property, not just in the form of material possession, but also with respect to our labor and even ourselves. Moreover, one should take note of the primacy of these rights, even over the very systems of government themselves.

Kant, it goes without saying, is another figure who has heavily influenced the modern day conception of ethics. Indeed, to ignore Kant in our discussion is not merely to disregard a great thinker who has forever shaped all discourse on ethics in the West,

[5] *Ibid*., p. 242.

but also to risk returning to him and his theories without our willing consent.[6] Kant rejects access to an objective reality purported by the Rationalists, claiming it to be blind dogmatism, while simultaneously rebuking Hume and the other Empiricists for their radical skepticism. Kant, in challenging the skepticism of Hume—and thus reclaiming the *a priori* for philosophical discourse—restructured the entire system of metaphysics, reestablishing it as an *a priori* synthetic structure.

There is no direct access to the noumenal[7] realm; however experience of the phenomenal realm is universally the same due to the *a priori* organization inherent in rational minds. For Kant, in order to have intuition, that is, a direct apprehension of the world, one needs some underlying structure by which to experience it. The raw, unmediated content of experience must be ordered by an *a priori* form. Space and time fulfill that role, acting as the basis for a universal, inter-subjective reality, one that we can base all our experience of the world upon, including moral declarations. That is, although one cannot truly experience the "pure" objectivity—the noumenal realm—it is still possible for experience to be universal. Because everyone is shaped *a priori* by the structures of time and space one can infer that all experience, though subjective, is universally the same subjectivity. In this sense, all experience is inter-subjective. Extrapolating from this, one can conclude that all moral dictums must also have universal connotations, insofar as all people have the same experience within the folds of space and time.[8]

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[6] Derrida, Jacques. *Du droit à la philosophie*, Paris: Galilée, 1988. p. 83; quoted in Davis, After Poststructuralism: Readings, Stories, and Theory, p. 54.

[7] The noumenal realm might be seen as "objective" reality; the world how it actually exists. By contrast, the phenomenal realm is how we as subjects come to perceive it.

[8] From mutually shared experience one can infer that there too must be commonly shared principles by which to live.

Kant's most prominent contribution to the contemporary model of human rights is the concept of the moral autonomy of rational agents and their subsequent equality. The unconditional and universal nature of Kant's categorical imperative—which remains invariable, regardless of the particularity of a given circumstance—is of key importance in the modern conceptions of ethics. The categorical imperative, as an all-inclusive and inter-subjective fact, obligates all rational agents to obey it, regardless of ones will. Doing what is right, then, is the mandatory duty of all rational beings demanded from the imperative, rather than fidelity to one's particular interests or desires.

At this point a distinction should be made between duty-based ethics and rights-based ethics. Both of these forms of ethics are deontological—that is, each assume that when making decisions the ends never justify the means. Even if the goal is exemplary and will result in much good, the actions necessary must not be immoral. Despite their closely linked origins and history, they still differ in certain aspects worth noting. Duty-based ethics asserts that one act entirely out of duty to *a priori* and universal moral laws, regardless of the outcome a given situation. One's duty is not contingent upon the outcome of a situation. Although one might not want to obey these moral laws, one must, for nothing can justify ignoring one's duty.

Rights-based ethics, on the other hand, is based on rights that are defined as entitlements. These moral rights are universal in scope and thus disregard the laws and regulations of legal institutions (assuming there is a discrepancy, of course). Unlike duty-based ethics—which concerns itself with the obligations of individuals—rights-based ethics assumes the inherit value or worth of individuals based upon these *a priori*

prerogatives and determines correct action based on those. Thus, they determine primarily what should not be done against peoples.

More specifically—and for that matter, pertinent to our inquiry— the philosophy of human rights has inherited the transcendental and normative aspects of Kant's ethical imperatives. Put another way, what is essentially retained from Kant in our contemporary mode of ethical thought is the idea that there are principles or rules which exist *a priori* and are applicable to all individuals who possess the faculty of reason. As such, these general principles should be observed in all situations, regardless of contextual nuances.

Another key moment for the history of human rights was the formation of the International Bill of Rights (IBR) in the mid-20th century; a set of documents of exceptional importance due the magnitude of its influence in the dissemination of the ethics of human rights. The IBR is composed of three separate documents: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and its sister document, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The latter two documents are the legally binding human rights concordats of the United Nations, originally having been adopted in 1966 and finally being put into force in 1976.

Both covenants stem from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a document initially embraced in 1948 by the UN that outlined a basic understanding of human rights. This original text, however, contained both first-generation civil and political rights and second-generation social, cultural, and economic rights. First-generation rights, or negative rights, deal with the issue of liberty and serve to protect the

individual from the excesses of the State. Second-generation rights, by contrast, ensure that individuals are provided certain things by the State (e.g. the rights to work and receive appropriate recompense) and are known as positive rights. Consequently problems regarding the doctrine arose during the Cold War era as capitalist countries—which favored the civil and political rights—and communist countries—favoring economic, social and cultural rights—failed to reach consensus on the treaty. As a result the ICCPR and ICESCR were created to appease each of the divided nations. The ICESCR was developed to appease socialist and communist countries during the Cold War era and the ICCPR was designed with capitalist countries in mind.

These documents have played a pivotal role both in the evolution of human rights and as well as their propagation. Today, these three documents that constitute the IBR have become the mainstay of nearly all human rights advocates. As one of the major cruxes of contemporary ethical principles, this triumvirate has influenced literally hundreds of nations in their policymaking and legislation.

General Characteristics of Human Rights-Based Ethics

The above philosophical ideas, though by no means a comprehensive list, constitute several key influences on today's human rights. Given our brief insight into the historical origins of human rights, what sort of general tendencies can we deduce from these theorists?[9] First, we notice the production of a universal human subject, one that is marked by its rationality and autonomy. At its inception this subject is imbued with fundamental freedoms and liberties that particular quality of life. Further, this

[9] I am indebted greatly to the work of Alain Badiou for many of these ideas. See his book, Ethics for a summation of many of these trends.

subject, imbued with a universally shared inter-subjectivity, is capable of recognizing all forms of Evil[10] that befall individuals, whether herself or another. Thus, Evil is itself a universally identifiable reality that one relates to either as a victim or spectator. As victim, this subject is capable of realizing their own unjust suffering, their victimization. As spectator, this subject is indignant at the inhumane situation at hand and is obligated to act against the barbarous violations of others' rights.

Another element worth underscoring in our deductions is the reactive nature of the ethics of human rights. "Human rights are the rights to non-Evil;"[11] they are preventative of harm, protecting that which "should be," but never affirmative of anything that *could be*. There are numerous examples of this principle: Each has the rights to their own property and possessions, which are not to be infringed upon by other people (i.e. one should not steal from another). People deserve humane working conditions, and appropriate compensation for their labor. Likewise, there are the rights to one's own body; that is, one should not be subjected to bodily harm, whether it consists of exceedingly long working hours, cruel and unusual punishment, or torture. This can be extended further in that one possesses the right to life, the right to not be threatened with execution or murder. So too one is to be respected for her or his cultural differences, no one can disparage or derogate another individual's identity.[12]

But how is it that the above-mentioned characteristics are detrimental in-and-of-themselves? Certainly the ethics of human rights has a great value to it; these laws seem

[10] Evil, here, might be defined simply as the violation of any of the universal rights inherent to an individual. So too the terms "unjust" and "inhumane" relate to the infringement of these rights. An unjust or inhumane situation is simply one where human rights are either ignored or violated.
[11] Badiou, Alain. Ethics. Translated by Peter Hallward. New York: Verso 2001, p. 9.
[12] As will be seen soon, the ethics of human rights assumes an identity of its own and ultimately subjugates others. It is this assumption of an identity that is at the heart of the problem for the ethics of human rights.

to enjoy a sort of self-evident merit and have proven to be emancipatory in numerous circumstances. Is the aspiration for something other than this model merely an embittered dissatisfaction with the status quo for its own sake, or does it contain legitimate grounds for its discontent?

Under greater scrutiny I believe the universality and tolerance of human rights erodes, revealing instead a historically contingent enterprise that is ultimately incapable of respecting difference. The doctrine of human rights, in promoting a particular identity, has formed a symbiotic relationship with both the liberal democratic state and, to a lesser extent, capitalism. In doing so, it has aided in proliferation of Western values at the expense of assimilating of other cultures. What's more, multiculturalism, an ideology that commonly makes use of such rights, rather than respecting the manifold of cultural identities present in the world, actually propagates a singular one. In a tragic twist of fate, multiculturalism comes to abolish the very differences it professes to respect. The ethics of human rights, in prescribing certain innate liberties and freedoms,[13] fails to generate a truly universal forum by which all can be represented. This prescription, in effect, annihilates all genuine difference.

Indeed, the relationship between human rights and liberal democracy is hard to deny. At its heart liberal democracy emphasizes protection of the rights and freedoms of individuals from all forms of encroachment. Further, it seeks to provide a platform in which every individual can practice his or her own beliefs and traditions equally. As a final measure of good faith it pushes to minimize its own necessity. By restricting and regulating its own intervention in political, economic and moral issues related to the

[13] Freedom, in this sense, should be distinguished from emancipation. Emancipation is a movement towards a genuine egalitarianism regardless of means and ends. By contrast, freedom is the entitlement to certain liberties within the confines of a particular system.

citizenry it gives the power back to the people. In this way liberal democracy appears to be the natural and ideal conclusion of all doctrines of human rights.

But what exactly is this identity that human rights prescribes? And how does the prescription of freedom fail to emancipate? Admittedly, these are not easy tasks to undertake. In regards to identity, there are many subtle variations that emerge, each dependent upon the particular niceties of any given doctrine of human rights. However, there are a few overarching tendencies that must be pointed out. One incredibly common characteristic shared by different doctrines is an emphasis, to varying degrees, on the individual and her or his freedoms. Freedom is the crux of all human rights doctrines, and as such all individuals under this paradigm hold this to be a central tenet of human life. Freedom becomes an important precept for the subject of human rights, and situations in which such freedom is absent demands recourse. In this way, the identity constructed by human rights is also evangelistic.

As mentioned above, however, these freedoms are contingent upon a particular paradigm. One cannot with good conscience, for example, affirm the universal nature of land property and personal possessions. Though an admittedly cliché example, for centuries many Native American tribes maintained a very relaxed view of personal belongings (this, of course, being a deliberate understatement), and nearly a non-existent concept of land ownership. Their societies, void of an economic system that necessitated an exponential growth of capital, had no need to develop extravagant philosophical doctrines on property rights. In this fashion, the notion of property rights better corresponds to a society in which there is a valorization of commodities and capital. Accordingly, a subject with an inherent right to personal property is more likely the

production of a culture with a capitalist economy. So too the freedom to property is provisional, dependent upon a certain cultural paradigm.

Many of these rights, though appealing in themselves—and so making a compelling case for the validity contemporary ethical ideals—are ultimately reactive to the materialization of Evil in the world. Ethics is an effect of Evil, the response to an injustice rather than an affirmative action of justice. In this way Evil is given primacy over the Good. The Good is merely what steps in to ward off Evil when it afflicts harm upon a particular individual or group. Given that the ethics of human rights safeguards liberty and freedom, one cannot affirm anything beyond what these moral dictums command us to do; they become our lot in life. If freedom is the mandate of ethics then one can do nothing but ensure that freedom is preserved.

But what is the problem with freedom in and of itself? Surely, liberty is a precious thing and something that must be fought for at all costs. In response to this I would emphasize that these freedoms are contingent upon particular cultural values, they are ideological. People are confined to what these rights describe, there can be no alternative to them. While this might not necessarily be bad, what happens when these rights encounter something truly different? How is this model of ethics capable of overcoming such an aporia?

An excellent example can be seen in the desire of many Muslims for the establishment of an Islamic Republic. The realization of a theocratic state is one such reality that cannot and should not occur, if human rights are to be upheld. A theocracy entails the implosion of state and religion, and this involves the blatant privileging of particular beliefs within the political system. An individual has the right to believe in this

reality, so long as it never comes to fruition. So too the practice of female circumcision is customarily seen to be a gross violation of women's rights. Such cultural differences are not tolerated by human rights, and as such human rights cannot accept them. While I do not mean to take a stance for or against these particular cases, I believe they demonstrate effectively the fundamental intolerance human rights harbors. Anything that would attempt to violate the model of human rights itself comes under harsh reprimand. In this way human rights cannot claim to truly respect radical differences.

At this point we might note another characteristic of this model of ethics: a subordination of the political to the ethical. That is, all political systems and endeavors must correspond with the ethical values demanded of it by the universal and intrinsic—and therefore sovereign—rights of individuals and/or communities. All political enterprises, if they are to be manifestations of a moral ideology, must incorporate these rights into their schema, utilizing them as the basis for action in the world. The privileging of ethics above politics, however, ensures political systems are seen as derivative—ancillary systems established to uphold justice, to maintain the order demanded by the ethical. With the notion of a timeless and transcendent ethics, political structures act as conduits of truth rather than its manufacturers. In this way the correlation between human rights and the liberal democratic state is obfuscated, or rather, naturalized.

However, the ostensible innocence of these institutions is ungrounded; they are participants in the production of these ethical truths. Under closer scrutiny the International Bill of Rights, for example, reveals the political workings behind the establishment of universal rights. One cannot escape the aporia presented by this

situation: Two separate documents, the ICESCR and ICCPR, each containing different generations of rights, and appealing to two separate political orientations comprise a singular and universal ethical dogma. One document, addressed to socialist and communist countries, emphasizes the social, cultural and economic rights of peoples. The other, directed towards capitalist countries, concerns itself with the preservation of civil and political liberties. How can this be if these rights, professed to be universal, are indeed that? This aporia certainly seems to call the universality of these rights into question. They more readily appear contingent upon the political institutions in power, existing as an effect of politics. Considered in this light, ethics is a reflection of the state rather than the purpose of its establishment.

While one cannot necessarily equate universal morality with the laws enacted in any given society, at the very least these insights cast a more dubious light on the traditional relationship between politics and ethics. Ethics cannot automatically be given preeminence over the political; to do so is a naïve gesture, one that turns a blind eye to compelling evidence and interpretations to the counter wise.[14] Indeed, when the ethical is predominate over the political there can be no alternatives to the here and now; the end of history is at hand with the last man in tow. The liberal democratic state latently implied in human rights becomes the final culmination of all ideological contestation, prevailing over and against all opposition. Fukuyama's prediction proves true, tolling the death knell of what could be Otherwise in its wake. The liberal democratic state becomes the final form of government for human society, with all states eventually conforming to this supposed zenith of political systems.

[14] I would cite Michel Foucault as the most prominent example of this evidence, although there are obviously many other intellectuals involved in such work.

The negative terms through which this model of ethics defines itself (i.e. the rights to non-Evil) ensures that there can be no innovative discourse that occurs. Liberal democracy crystallizes as the ultimate form of human government. Indeed, the ethics of human rights guarantees a very deliberate unwillingness to actually challenge any institutions; except for those establishments that fall out of line with the identity construed by these rights. By subjugating politics to the realm of ethics, the reigning political ideology obtains immunity from criticism. Radical discourse is annihilated, truly emancipatory politics are abolished, and one is left with no alternative to the liberal democratic ideals implicated by human rights. The doctrine of human rights, in an unconscious alliance with liberal democracy, produces a particularized identity. Human rights, ultimately and tragically, paralyzes any true resistance or alternatives to this identity by prescribing a universal human subject with innate prerogatives that necessitate the existence of a liberal democracy for their realization. That is, these innate human "freedoms" only make complete sense—and are entirely actualized—within the parameters of a liberal democratic society.

Further still, the ethics of human rights has at its core a spirit of denigration. Returning to the duality of benefactor/victim implicit in this ethics, one might notice the disparagement and cultural superiority latent within its dynamic. An integral aspect of these rights is human dignity: all violations of rights are humiliating and dehumanizing for victims. The benefactor, as one already in possession of human rights, looks upon the victim's situation in disgust. The benefactor's contempt for the lack of civility present in the situation divulges a belief in his own cultural superiority as well as an exaggerated estimation of his own importance in remedying the situation. Such pity, when

acknowledge by the victim, only further alienates her from any means through which to reassert herself. Under this paradigm, the victim becomes snared in a reality that is subhuman, her only means of deliverance from it being the salvific arm of a benefactor that can restore order to the situation. This idea is exemplified very clearly in the overarching ideology of Western thought. Western civilization, as the warden of human rights, insists upon redeeming the less fortunate Third World;[15] saving it from such a savage existence—one devoid of human rights.

Between reinforcing conceptions of savagery and ignorance, and propagating Western cultural ideals the ethics of human rights loses much of its former credence. By imposing a particular identity in the guise of innate and universal privileges accorded to humans the ethics of human rights fails to transcend all identities, as an authentically universal set of principles would. Identity is necessarily linked to difference and so there can be no true universality from such a system, merely a desire to have worldwide influence. Difference might be global, but it is certainly not generic. It does not possess universal characteristics; it is merely a widespread phenomenon. This distinction must be made. Indeed, these rights appear more akin to cultural neocolonialism than any genuine form of emancipatory politics. The liberal democratic ideals human rights ultimately espouses, in concerning itself with the establishment of freedoms, fails to instantiate genuine justice[16] in the world.

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[15] The term "Third World," ironically, originally had positive connotations, distinguishing countries that aligned themselves neither with the West nor the Soviet Bloc during the Cold War. Today, the term is used frequently to denote those nations that have a low UN human development index; that is, those countries with a below average life expectancy, poorly educated people, and a low GDP. In this way the term Third World has become derogatory, insofar as it denotes "less advanced" countries.

[16] Justice is being used here in a traditional philosophical manner, referring to the realization of equality for peoples on a universal scale.

In order to better elucidate how human rights promotes liberal democratic ideals, an examination of a major contemporary theory of human rights is in order: multiculturalism. As one of the predominant models of identity politics—and a primary employer of human rights, it provides an excellent case study for this phenomenon.

Multiculturalism and Nussbaum's Empathy

Although the term is somewhat ambiguous, multiculturalism, broadly speaking, attempts to realize the coexistence of numerous cultural identities within the confines of a single society, whether that society is demarcated as a nation, country, or even the world. In essence, multiculturalism encourages different cultures within a society to maintain their beliefs and traditions while simultaneously interacting peacefully with others. It has often been described as a "cultural mosaic" of different ethnic groups. In the world today Canada, the UK and Australia have all adopted this as their official policy with many others in tow.

At its heart, though, a multicultural society must assume the equality and rights of all peoples; if it didn't, for what other legitimate reason would it grant its people permission to maintain their diverse beliefs. Indeed, peoples are to be respected for their religion, race, ethnicity, political views, class, sex, sexual orientation, etc. They have the right to practice these differences within society and to celebrate them. Implied, of course, is that in practicing their differences a group must not violate the rights of another.

The preservation of different ethnic groups and cultures within a society, however, often leads to the emergence of identity politics. Different groups, each with

their own agendas, vie for the power necessary to change their situations. While this is not necessarily malignant in and of itself, it can tend towards different difference being affirmed to the point of divisiveness. The predilection towards highlighting difference can lead to a latent form of xenophobia in peoples, a partitioning rather than an understanding. Despite the good that has come from multiculturalism, this partitioning is clearly a dilemma that affects our society today. Though not the sole factor, the valorization of differences has helped augment the rift between different cultures within our society; and it is clear that today we stand more divided than ever.

This is precisely what Martha Nussbaum, a professor of law and ethics at the University of Chicago, is opposed to. Although she is an ardent defender of multiculturalism, she believes that it alone is not enough to truly respect difference. Nussbaum is an advocate of an empathy-based engagement with people of other cultures; arguing that through a lens of compassion one can better understand and accommodate for the differences between societies. Indeed, her multiculturalism is incredibly receptive in its engagement with the other. It is her hope that via an increased empathy for difference particular cultures might be capable of maintaining their uniqueness while simultaneously respecting the differences other cultures. But can this remarkably hospitable and inviting form multiculturalism separate itself from the problems of hegemony inherent in human rights? Can it truly transcend identity in order to grasp at something universal?

Specifically, in Cultivating Humanity Nussbaum discusses the pedagogy of liberal education, and how it can better produce what she calls "world-citizens." This world-citizen, which is of primary concern throughout the book, is an individual instilled with

the appropriate training and knowledge required to truly empathize with people of different cultures, in such a way that genuine understanding is achieved, while concurrently preserving one's own beliefs. A world-citizen is one that is capable of engaging in dialogue outside of one's own group, while simultaneously maintaining their distinct identity as a part of that group. Boldly Nussbaum claims that her model of understanding difference, particularly with the aid of literature as a means of manifesting compassion and empathy, is what the whole world needs in order for differing cultures to better come into harmony with one another. In this way her world citizenship model claims that people need not be part of a particular group in order to understand their distinctive history and struggles.

Indeed, for Nussbaum, "one proper and urgent goal" of literature is to produce a fertile ground for intercultural discourse, so that there can be a better understanding between cultures. Literature becomes a universal medium through which understanding can occur between different cultures. By writing stories about the history and struggles of different groups, others can come to understand their trials and tribulations, thus obtaining a greater sense of global empathy. While this is in and of itself benign, her didactic enterprise quickly steps far outside of its own boundaries and into a realm of totalizing universality.

Her position is juxtaposed to the "identity-politics" view of multiculturalism. According to her, this view "depicts the citizen body as a marketplace of identity-based interest groups jockeying for power, and views difference as something to be affirmed rather than understood."[17] While the world-citizenship model attempts to unite diverse

[17] Nussbaum, Martha. "The Narrative Imagination," in Cultivating Humanity. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 110.

groups through understanding and empathy—and in doing so strives for the common good; the identity-politics model preserves difference to the point of division and segregation within even a single society. These different identities, incapable of empathizing with one another, then squabble over power in order to ensure what is best for their particular group.

However, the so-called "world-citizen" version, shares similarities to the identity-politics model that Nussbaum rejects. Ultimately the world-citizen model, like identity politics, is incapable of accommodating genuine difference within its fold. Though she is quick to point out the covert superiority often found when engaging with the other, particularly when it comes in the form of a sort of residual religious superiority complex, she cannot help but fall victim to her own presuppositions. Her gross assumptions regarding morality (e.g. the need to be empathetic in relation to the other, or the need for pedagogical "enrichment" through the appropriate teaching of diversity) only serve to highlight this fact. Nussbaum's world-citizen model is ultimately a contingent and historicized ideology attempting to play the role of the Universal Principle.

The beliefs purported by Nussbaum ultimately seem more concerned with the spread and preservation of her democratic ideals than it does with a multicultural empathy and understanding. For one, the very nomenclature utilized in her discourse exposes a penchant for global institutionalization. The use of "world-citizen," for example, implies that the world, properly considered, is a nation, a partitioned group with its own distinct identity. In assuming the world is a nation, one can infer that there exists some form of commonality between all peoples, a globalized identity that binds. In Nussbaum's particular case, it is the need to empathize with other cultures and so affirm

their value, while vehemently decrying all claims that would attempt to divide peoples rather than unite them.

Nussbaum designates that the genuine world citizen be one who "should vigorously criticize these ideas [the incongruity of different cultures] wherever they occur, insisting that they lead to an impoverished view of democracy."[18] It would appear that the well being of democracy is at the fore of her concerns. Clearly this view carries with it a particularized political ideology, one that masquerades in the guise of "world-citizenry." The world citizen is one that ardently defends democratic ideals—and the identity inextricably entangled in these values—at all costs. Thus the world-citizen model unconsciously espouses an identity that attempts to be worldwide in scope; however, identity is such that it cannot be dissociated from difference and hence can never get beyond the petty squabbling of different factions.

Both the "identity politics" and "world-citizen" models of multiculturalism, then, are different sides of the same coin. Each is engaged in the same power struggles,[19] two species of a common descent that cannot envision something outside of their liberal democratic heritage. Her model of multiculturalism, like nearly all other versions, cannot step beyond itself and accept that which might constitute truly radical difference.

Nussbaum's ardent support of democratic ideals on the one hand, and her desire for all people to empathize and have compassion for distinctly different cultures on the other causes serious contentions in her line of argumentation. Her aspiration to promote liberal democratic ideals inherently carries with it a value judgment, one that is

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[18] *Ibid*., p. 111.

[19] Ironically, her desire to recognize the other, while simultaneously rejecting identitarian politics, might be conceived in itself as a contradiction of terms. Any attempt to conceive of difference automatically entails an invocation of identity. The two are necessarily linked.

discriminating against particular cultures and refuses to cooperate or respect any truly significant differences. Indeed, this might be seen as the greater portion of the problem with the so-called ethics of human rights. In her attempt to accommodate difference, she inadvertently presumes her own moral schema to be universal—and with it the socioeconomic and political systems it implies. Thus her endeavor ultimately marginalizes (or worse yet, co-opts) the very cultures she hoped to converse with.

How might Nussbaum's democratic ideals mesh with, say, a patriarchal society's beliefs? Can there be a non-superficial respect for difference that simultaneously maintains a call to her democratic ideals? Can women be granted an equal democratic status in such a society? How is reconciliation and empathy possible with something g that is diametrically opposed to democracy? Today, more than ever, we must face these challenges and question whether we are truly willing to uphold the value of difference, and at what cost. Perhaps, more importantly, we must consider if it is even possible. The possibility of empathy in this particular situation appears unfeasible. Likewise, in the case of the Islamic state or the infamous debate over the appropriateness of female circumcision there is a harsh reaction against their acceptability within a multicultural society. Indeed, the Islamic state stands in direct opposition to the ideals of human rights, and certainly it stands opposed to the democratic state.

Nussbaum's multiculturalism, like its "identity-politics" brother, cannot overcome its own inability to actually encounter difference and accept it. Indeed, multiculturalism's aspirations are aptly surmised by this incisive adage: "Become like me and I will respect your difference."[20] The problem is that this respect and understanding

[20] Badiou, Ethics, p. 25.

of differences seems to define an *identity*.[21] Indeed, this problem is what plagues our contemporary understanding of ethics: "human rights" is prescriptive of an identity, not descriptive of what actually is. The end result is that any respect for differences is confined to that which is not entirely offensive to that particular identity, to the identity of a world citizen. Can a *world* citizen truly be one that is so socio-historically contingent and particular in its ideological suppositions?

There is ultimately an assumption latent within this pattern of thought that people must exist in a certain way before respecting their difference can occur. Likewise, human rights is incapable of accepting people as they are, it always assumes difference must exist in some form first, rather than accepting it as it comes and for whatever it might be. Even Nussbaum's incredibly benevolent form of multiculturalism is ultimately flawed, incapable of genuinely respecting difference. Therefore, it is devoid of conjuring any real justice, instead offering up liberty as a consolation: the freedom to do X or Y, but to exclude even the possibility of Z.

The ethics of human rights has proven ultimately to be a self-stultifying enterprise, incapable of sustaining a tolerance of genuine difference. The human subject it advocated, once thought to be a universal reality, was instead the condition of certain historical circumstances. The concept of human rights is ineffective in rendering present true justice: the universal equality of all peoples. Its claim to speak for all is unfounded; instead it is a particularized ideology that claims universality on the basis of a (faux) universal subject. Though this particular philosophy has proven itself incapable of sustaining difference, could there be another avenue through which the Kantian subject—as the basis of universality—can reestablish an ethical framework capable of

[21] *Ibid*., p. 24.

transcending difference? The content of human rights may have been void, but the form through which it was transmitted, the universal subject, might still be valid. Can the subject be reformulated on different grounds? Or is the autonomous subject itself an illusion? Oddly enough, these questions require this examination to change course and delve into the realm of language.

Saussurean Linguistics

Ferdinand de Saussure, a 19th century Swiss linguist, is considered by many to be the father of modern linguistics, laying down a foundation for many linguistic theories and development in the 20th century. In 1916 he published his *Course on General Linguistics*, a book that restructured the face of linguistic theory from that point onwards. Prior to the advent of Saussurean thought words had been thought of as labels, a naming process whereby each individual sign corresponds, in a one to one ratio, with the particular object that it represents. Preexisting concepts were given unique labels; signs that acted as a stand-in for the real objects, the representation of a presence that existed behind the word.[22] Signs possessed referential—or representational—power.

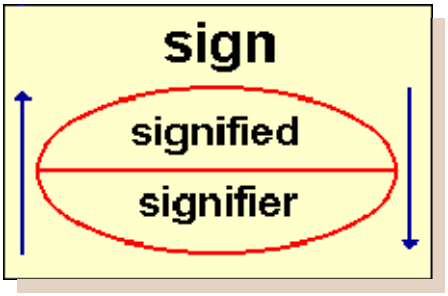
Saussure challenged this notion, asserting that language was not a nomenclature, a system of naming things that already exist. Rather language is a system of differences. Specifically, Saussure claimed that the sign does not unite an object and a label but rather a concept and a sound-image[23] (which he later coins as the signified and signifier

[22] Belsey, Catherine. Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction. New York: Oxford University Press Inc, 2002, p. 10.

[23] By a "sound-image" Saussure explains that it is not a physical sound wave but rather the effect of a given sound wave upon our psychology. He gives the example of being able to recite things mentally—while there exists no physical sound, we can still recall it. Hence there is no need of a physical sound, but only the image of it.

respectively). The sign then—on a purely abstract level—consists of two distinct parts: the signifier and the signified.[24] The former term, for the sake of simplicity, refers to the sound (or, though not emphasized, the written shape) of a given sign. The signified on the other hand is the concept or idea of a particular sign. In order to better illustrate this idea let us utilize the example Saussure himself gives concerning this notion: the sign "tree." In the case of this sign the signifier would be the word "tree" itself and the signified would the mental concept of a tree.

Language's function is to create a link between thought and sound, between signifier and signified, not to create phonic ways of expressing pre-linguistic concepts. Indeed, language is comparable to a sheet of paper; as the front of the sheet cannot be cut without cutting the back simultaneously, so too one cannot, in practice, divide thought from sound or sound from thought.[25] Thought apart from language is chaotic and formless, and that there can be no preexisting ideas or distinctness in it before the appearance of language; no concepts exist *a priori*. As Saussure puts it, "without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula."[26] The sign, rather than serving as a representation of objective realities, is the site of union between signifier and signified.



Furthermore, Saussure asserted that "the linguistic sign is arbitrary;"[27] that is, there exists no innate relationship between any particular set of signifier and signified. There is no special connection that any given sound/word has with a particular concept;

[24] De Saussure, Ferdinand. Course in General Linguistics. Translated by Wade Baskin. New York: Philosophical Library, 1959, p. 67
[25] *Ibid*., p. 113.
[26] *Ibid*., p. 112.
[27] *Ibid*., p. 67.

the decision to call a tree by the signifier "tree" possesses no legitimacy over any other possibility. Likewise, the concept of a tree in no way corresponds to the sound utterance "tree" (tr$\bar{e}$). To claim otherwise assumes that the notion of value is determined by an external element, a pre-linguistic concept.[28] Indeed, there is nothing especially "treeish" about the word "tree;" any other word could be used with just as much ease (assuming of course, there is a general adoption of a new term by a community; a language possessed by only one individual is incapable of conveying meaning).

But what sort of evidence exists for this theory? We need look no further than the fact that different languages exist in the world. More than merely having different words for the same concept (e.g. Dog is "perro" in Spanish, "Hund" in German, and "□ " [inu] in Japanese), different languages regulate different conceptual frameworks. Saussure states this brilliantly when he says: "If words stood for pre-existing concepts, they would all have exact equivalents in meaning from one language to the next; but this is not true."[29] For example, in Welsh the color spectrum is divided up differently than English. The color *glas*, though primarily "blue," also includes elements native English speakers would associate with gray or green.[30] The natural correlation between signifier and signified, so often overlooked in the humdrum of everyday life, is now seen to be contingent and relative.

This arbitrariness of the sign has a significant effect upon the structure of language. The combination of the signifier and signified produces a form, not a substance.[31] That is to say, the sign has no absolute value outside of its context within a

[28] *Ibid*., p. 113.
[29] *Ibid*., p. 116.
[30] Belsey, p. 37.
[31] Saussure, p. 113.

system of signification (specifically in Saussure's case: language). Value cannot be garnered simply from the signifier/signified relationship; it is hollow. Without an objective referent by which value [32] can be established, words must rely upon each other for their relative meaning. Value is determined by a word's relation to other words within that system of language. Therefore, the value of a signifier is fixed relative to others.[33]

In other words, the signifier "dog" is only "dog" because it is not "cat." Likewise "cat" is only "cat" because it's not "bat;" "bat" is "bat" because it's not "glove," etc. A signifier's meaning is thus determined by its position relative to other signifiers within the system of signification. This leads Saussure to his most radical claim: In language (and—implicitly—all systems of meaning) "there are only differences *without positive terms*."[34] Signifiers within structures of meaning—and there are none outside of these structures—gain their value only through their participation in the totality of the system. Moreover, there can be no unmediated access to reality if meaning is an effect of language, and language is differential. If meaning is only generated by a system of signification then there can be no purely idealized concepts; for example, there can be no pure concept "blue," if what one considers blue is merely the effect of the English

[32] "Signification," as Saussure uses it, might be seen as the signifier's relation to its signified, and "value" as the relative position of signifiers to one another. An example would be the dollar bill: its signification is that it can be exchanged for something of categorical difference, a bagel perhaps, and its value is found in its relation to things of a similar nature, say, the five-dollar bill or the penny.

[33] It's important to note that although Saussure was a linguist—and as such his propositions were made primarily with language in mind—signifiers are not exclusively spoken words. We must diverge from his thought by incorporating other possibilities into its definition. Body gestures, traffic lights, smoke signals, paintings; all of these signify. A signifier is something (an image, a noise, an action, a non-action, etc.) that may be interpreted and thus convey meaning. Consequently, this means that nearly anything can be a signifier.

[34] *Ibid*., p. 120.

language. The concept "blue" cannot somehow transcend language and so be considered a quality of nature.

Reformulating our understanding of the origin of meaning in this light has drastic ramifications on one's conception of subjectivity. If the origin of meaning is found within the system of language rather than deriving from subjectivity itself, then is not the autonomy of the subject called into question? The intentions and thoughts (indeed, even the consciousness) conveyed by subjects are not fully their own, but a product of structures of signification. Subjectivity then, is not the bastion of autonomy and *a priori* ideas; rather they are a consequence of language. The "I" often used in communicating is a signifier like any other. Thus, it is through language that subjects arise; language breathes life into the individual, differentiating them from one another. In doing so the newly emerged subject (falsely) affirms a self and a sovereign consciousness. The subject then is able to say "I," insofar as it is distinguished from "you."

Given this it seems the subject has certainly lost a foothold on what was once assumed to be its rightful domain. The individual's autonomy has been compromised and its access to meaning is determined and delimited by the structure of language. Our subjectivity vacillates, ultimately grounded within the confines of a linguistic structure and therefore we are stripped of volition. Pure autonomy has evaporated; the Kantian subject is drained of all autonomy. The possibility of responsibility and the ability to make decisions is rendered void; agency is ultimately the consequence of one's constitution within a structure of signification. In this way the subject is fractured, incapable of acting by its own volition because it has be predetermined by something other than itself. So too the possibility to mean is made impossible, one cannot actually

mean something when their very being originates outside of themselves. Anything one could possibly envision has been predestined by the systems of signification it was birthed into. One cannot genuinely "think for oneself" if their very selfhood is heterogeneous, a byproduct of a system of signification.

But is the problem of meaning—and the fractured subject—something that is unavoidable? Are we condemned from the start to a predetermined reality that is void of agency? In short, I do not believe that we are. Indeed, this understanding of subjectivity has come under harsh criticism from numerous individuals, originating predominantly from those within the French intellectual tradition of the 1960's. These scholars, ranging across numerous disciplines, have been at the fore of this assault while simultaneously leveling critiques against traditional metaphysical assumptions. It is to one of those philosophers, Jacques Derrida, that this analysis shall now turn to. Before his unique approach to agency and ethics can be addressed however, a brief summary of Derrida's philosophical project is in order.

Derrida's Deconstruction[35]

One of the most difficult aspects when engaging with Derrida is his opulent prose. This, compounded with the equivocal, and fundamentally radical, nature of deconstruction, leads many to be turned off to his erudite writings, or worse yet, reject him completely. His desire for exactitude—which, ironically, he uses for the purpose of generating ambiguity—often comes at the price of gross misunderstandings, ridicule, and

[35] I am much indebted to my friend Dan Miller for his insight on Derrida, as well as his help with quotes for in this section.

the occasional accusation of charlatanism.[36] Without a proper understanding of Derrida's intellectual objective, one quickly finds her or himself neck-deep in a quagmire of intellectual incoherence.

One of Derrida's central aims is to unearth and undermine the metaphysical presuppositions and oppressions found within the Western philosophical tradition—indeed, within the whole of Western metaphysics. Western metaphysics, Derrida claims, has been obsessed with the creation of binary oppositions, continuously generating dualisms through which to understand the world. This penchant for duality is not benign however; it results in the inevitable subjugation of one opposing term beneath the other. This hierarchical structuring acts as the fundamental mode of operation in Western thought. Examples of this phenomenon including the favoring of male over female, light over dark, pure/impure, positive/negative, speech/writing, presence/absence, original/derivative, etc.

Derrida calls this hierarchical privileging of one term against the other the "metaphysics of presence." But what exactly does this oblique term mean? Derrida sums it up nicely in the afterward of his book, *Limited Inc.*:

> The enterprise of returning 'strategically', 'ideally', to an origin or to a priority thought to be simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order then to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc. All metaphysicians, from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. And this is not just one

[36] The most famous incident occurred in 1992, when Derrida received an honorary doctorate from Cambridge University. Numerous philosophers from the analytical tradition signed a petition protesting this.

> metaphysical gesture among others, it is the metaphysical exigency, that which has been the most constant, most profound and most potent.[37]

In the lineage of Heidegger, Derrida "insists that Western philosophy has consistently privileged that which *is*, or that which appears, and has forgotten to pay any attention to the condition of its appearance."[38] The metaphysics of presence is concerned with giving preference to that which appears simple and pure, that which is original and essential. It focuses on that which seems to manifest as unadulterated and pure. From these points of "pureness" all other things emanate; the accidental derives from the essential, for instance.[39]

Derrida's major philosophical "strategy" for critiquing the metaphysics of presence "functions by engaging in sustained analyses of particular texts,"[40] something he calls deconstruction.[41] Through meticulous exegesis deconstruction seeks to locate points of equivocation in a text; sites that enable for alternative readings of the text and, in doing so, disrupt the stability of meaning found within. This has the effect of upsetting the self-presence often assumed of texts. Deconstruction capitalizes on the binary oppositions assumed within these texts, exploiting the vulnerabilities of these oppositions and highlighting the text's own intrinsic aporias. Deconstruction is a parasitic enterprise by nature, feeding off of the oppositions found within texts; indeed, its very vitality is dependent upon them. Thus, deconstruction simultaneously seeks to be faithful to a text

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[37] Derrida, Jacques. Limited Inc. Translated by Samuel Weber. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1982, p. 236.
[38] Reynolds, Jack. Jacques Derrida [Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 26th Jan. 2006. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/d/derrida.htm>
[39] An example of this sort of thinking can be seen quite easily in Neoplatonism. From the One all other things originate. As such these derivatives are increasingly tainted, progressively worsening in quality and essential worth the further away they exist from the source that is the One. Thus matter, at the bottom of this chain of derivatives, is seen as impure, and by contrast the spiritual obtains a sanctimonious status.
[40] *Ibid*., <http://www.iep.utm.edu/d/derrida.htm>
[41] Referring to deconstruction as a process or strategy is a misnomer of sorts, this shall be elucidated upon shortly.

through careful exegesis and yet maintains a destructive agenda, exposing inherent contradictions within the text. Rather than simply overthrowing the favored term and reversing the hierarchy however, deconstruction seeks to demonstrate how each term needs the other in order to assure its own sustainability. By locating a trace of the other in the self-same it has the affect of imploding the duality, rendering all possible hierarchical schemas impotent.

This brings us to another unique feature of deconstruction; it is not another philosophy or strategy, but rather a sort of aconceptual concept.[42] Its goal is to highlight, and in a sense, "get beyond" the logic of the metaphysics of presence; something that all of philosophy has utilized thus far. At the same time it realizes the impossibility of truly circumventing the quagmire of philosophical discourse. Insofar as it is obligated to utilize the signs of philosophical language, it *must* participate in the structure of metaphysics. There is no escape from it, all things—the subject, or philosophy for example—are contingent upon this metaphysics. It is the very condition of their existence.

Instead of promoting another ontology, another philosophical schema, deconstruction co-opts the logic of a text and attempts to turn it back on itself in order to demonstrate its instability. The problem of defining deconstruction as "just another philosophy" lies in that it disavows any transcendental or ontological position. This is why Derrida claims it resides in the margins of philosophy rather than simply being

[42] That is, a concept that is unthinkable by nature. Fully conceiving it is not truly possible, as to do so would violate its principle of existence; it can never arrive fully present but always defers and differs from any attempted conception of it. For an additional example see the discussion of "differance" below, another example of an aconceptual concept.

another philosophy.[43] As such, deconstruction cannot be fully conceptualized; any attempt to layout "what it is" is impossible precisely because it is (or must be), in a sense, nothing. More accurately, deconstruction might be seen as operating between the realms of the Same and the Other,[44] thus it is neither fully conceptual nor wholly unfathomable. Indeed, nothing could be more antithetical to deconstruction's intentions than attempting to define it; such an undertaking is metaphysical by default.

It must be noted that a "text" for Derrida is "limited neither to the graphic, nor to the book, nor even to discourse, and even less to the semantic, representational, symbolic, ideal or ideological sphere."[45] Derrida echoes this in one of his most infamous—and misunderstood—statements: "there is nothing outside the text."[46] By this Derrida is not claiming that everything is linguistic or semantic and that there is no "reality," but rather that everything suffers from the same plight of deferral and differing that language does.[47] All things are suspended from arriving at their exact meanings; there is no pure or unadulterated reality that is truly objective. Just as the signifiers of any language must be in relation to others for meaning to be posited, so too all non-linguistic signifiers must necessarily be related to one another in such a fashion. It is in this sense that Derrida can say, "there is nothing outside the text," implying simply that the predicament of meaning is universal, afflicting all signifiers.[48] In other words, for Derrida, everything possesses a context. Even recalling the "plain and simple" meaning of something is impossible, as

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[43] *Ibid*., <http://www.iep.utm.edu/d/derrida.htm>
[44] See the introduction for an elucidation on the exact meaning of these terms.
[45] Derrida. Limited Inc. p. 136.
[46] *Ibid*., p. 118.
[47] The exact meaning of this for Derrida will be elucidated on in the next section. For now, however, it will suffice to consider this deferral and differing to be the relationship of signifiers to one another in an attempt to finalize meaning.
[48] This, of course, assumes the definition of signifier is expanded to include more than simply linguistic categories, as noted above.

the process of recollection itself is posited within particular contexts, all of which are irreducibly political. There is no neutrality, no access to anything "objective," and no truly descriptive discourse. "Pure idealization"—or presence—is unattainable.

Reexamining Saussure

Given this brief, and admittedly inadequate, background on Derrida's philosophy, let us return to Saussure's works and revisit his model of signification. In Saussure's view, meaning is made possible by the interplay of signifiers within the totality of a structure. Though each individual signifier is rendered meaningless without reference to others, there exists a center to the structure; a singular point that holds it together and in doing so imbues it with meaning. This center, or organizing principle, has the role of limiting the "play" of the structure by rendering present a signified.[49]

Play, in this context, simply refers to the deferral of meaning between signifiers, based upon their differential nature. In other words, because these signifiers are defined negatively (i.e. what they are *not*) meaning is displaced and constantly "leaps" between them. With meaning constantly differing and deferring, the center, as the grounding principle of the structure, acts as "the point at which the substitution of contents, elements, or terms is no longer possible."[50] That is, the differing and deferral of signifiers cease at this point; a signified is reached and process ceases. In Derrida's terminology; a transcendental signified[51] is made present. The realm of representation

[49] Derrida, Jacques. "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in Writing and Difference. ed. Jacques Derrida. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p. 278-9.
[50] *Ibid*., p. 279.
[51] A "transcendental signified" is another term for a center. It is the fundamental principle of a structure, one that unites all its elements and saturates it with meaning. In this way it transcends all signifiers, and acts as the basis for all meaning within a structure.

and the realm of presence meet; in one tremendous instant the whole system is infused with meaning.

The center, or transcendental signified, "is the determination of Being *as presence* in all senses of this word."[52] The center acts as the finality of all ambiguity, the justification of all action, and the access point to the noumenal realm—the realm of presence. The center ensures the arrival of pure idealization (presence), the end of play and the solidification of meaning within the structure. Throughout the history of Western metaphysics the center has taken on many different forms and names. Derrida lists some of the names by which it has gone by: "*eidos, arche, telos, energeia, ousia, aletheia,* transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth."[53] Each of these has acted as the final link in the chain of meaning, the anchor upon which the rest of its given system is reliant.

In Writing and Difference Derrida astutely calls attention to the paradoxical nature of the center. As the foundation of the structure itself, the center is the one element in which there can be no variability or transmutation. The center is the singular element that cannot partake in the play of the structure. Thus a contradiction is born: The center, though a necessary component in the constitution and stability of a structure, is impervious to play, the essential characteristic that defines an element's inclusion within the structure. Derrida latches onto the implications of this contradiction and exploits it, claiming: "The center is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside* it. The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not

[52] *Ibid*., p. 279.
[53] *Ibid*., p. 279-80.

part of the totality), the totality *has its center elsewhere*. The center is not the center (emphasis original)."[54]

This non-central center has, traditionally, been the abolisher of all ambiguity and the guarantor of certitude. Now however, it is revealed as

> a central presence which has never been itself, [and] has always already been exiled from itself into its own substitute. The substitute does not substitute itself for anything which has somehow existed before it. Henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of site-substitutions came into play.[55]

The center is thus an illusion; it never existed. The organizing principle of the structure has collapsed, and with it the stability of the structure. It comes as no surprise however, as "the absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely."[56] Full presence is never realizable, and fullness of meaning is forever delayed in its arrival[57] when the limitations placed upon the play of a structure's elements dissolve. All that is left then is an infinite differing and deferral of signifiers. Pure idealization is perpetually on the horizon, but is never made manifest here and now. It is this infinite difference and deferral that is captured in Derrida's neologism, *differance*. The play of differences found within the all structures of signification is none other than differance itself.

At this point another aporia arises: without the constant differing and deferring of meaning between different signifiers there is no possibility of apprehending our sensory perception. One cannot conceptualize and differentiate, or indeed, even exist as a

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[54] *Ibid*., p. 279.
[55] *Ibid*., p. 280.
[56] *Ibid*., p. 280.
[57] Meaning, here, suffers from an infinite regression and can never be fully actualized given that there is no end to the play of signification within a centerless structure.

subject, without it. Yet it is this very process of infinite difference and deferral that renders both the idealization of concepts and total conceptualization impossible. Differance is what makes possible conceptuality, but in the same stroke it makes the pure idealization of concepts unattainable. Without the differing of signs, there could be no ability to conceive of reality, things would just be a mishmash of sensory input. With no differentiation our perception is muddled, and thus we are unable to fully conceptualize any specific thing. At the same time, however, it is this partitioning that prevents a "pure" perception. Presence is never fully present, but always lingering like a shadow on the horizon.

Further, the use of signs ensures that there can be no way out of this quandary, as "the simple practice of language ceaselessly reinstates the new terrain on the oldest ground."[58] There can be no special appeal to an archeology or eschatology that would hope to somehow step "outside" of this problem. Both of these appeals are merely disguised attempts to reaffirm a different transcendental signified. Such a practice is the very strategy of the whole of Western metaphysics *par excellence*: to critique the current center, abolish it, and replace it with another system that professes to be a truly "radical break" from the tired tradition of metaphysics.

Drawing from these insights it seems then that Derrida has not simply affirmed the split nature of the subject, but radicalized it as well. The nature of deconstruction attests to this fact: if the Other is always to be found within the Same, then it only makes sense that a trace of the Other would be found within the Self. The fully autonomous subject exists only because a trace of otherness—in this instance language—has founded

[58] Derrida, Jacques. "The Ends of Man," in Margins of Philosophy. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 135.

it. The self-contained subject is anything but self-contained. But more than this Derrida is proclaiming, with the non-central center, that there is an unbounded delay and variation to meaning.

What does this mean then? In light of this schema the subject is surely robbed of its autonomy as it was before, arguably even more so now given the infinite deferral of meaning. Differance assures that presence is forever delayed, and with it the subject's attempt to produce its own meaning within the discourse of the structure. Consequently, volition is compromised. Not only is the subject founded outside of itself, but also it cannot participate in meaningful dialogue within the confines of the structure. This is precisely because the structure is no longer a structure, but rather an infinite play of signifiers, devoid of any hope that a center might intervene to suffuse meaning back into the system. It would appear all hope of reestablishing autonomy is lost and we are left staring into the maw of infinite ambiguity. If no direct access to a transcendental signified is possible, then how can there be any truth? Is there any means of affirming one possible option over another in any given situation? It appears, given the loss of the transcendental signified, that there can be no final justification for actions, no appeal to objectivity that would determine the right and wrong path to choose. What, then, is left except radical relativism?

Undecidability and the Decision

Though many have concluded that the logic of Derridean thought leads to relativism, he is in fact opposed to it. For Derrida the inability to fully establish a context—and hence reach the finality of meaning—enables the power of decision. But

how is this so? The undecidability of meaning ensures that there can be no completeness, however "*this particular* undecidability opens the field of decision or of decidability (emphasis original)."[59] What is it about this undecidability that cultivates decision? Derrida elucidates on this matter: if there exists a predetermined, *finalized* account of reality, then how might one affirm something counter to the grain of this totalized reality? If subjects are already predetermined entities with preprogrammed scripts, then one's actions are the result of an intrinsic algorithm. How can one choose something counter to this? If presence *is*,[60] then the world is crystallized, capable only of performing predetermined functions like a machine—or perhaps a clockwork universe. Likewise, individuals are but automatons carrying out preprogrammed tasks. Ironically, responsibility then is devoid of any real meaning.

The only place decidability can occur is "in a space that exceeds the calculable program that would destroy all responsibility by transforming it into a programmable effect of determinate causes."[61] The singular location capable of accommodating decidability is the realm of the undecidable. Derrida goes so far as to claim: "there can be no moral or political responsibility without this trial and this passage by way of the undecidable. Even if a decision seems to take only a second and not to be preceded by any deliberation, it is structured by this *experience and experiment of the undecidable* (emphasis original)."[62] Undecidability is the very condition of the subject's ability to affirm things as good or bad; to claim *X* is superior to *Y*. Without undecidability individuals would run like programs.

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[59] Derrida. Limited Inc, p. 116.
[60] That is, if presence has finally come and instills reality with meaning.
[61] *Ibid*., p. 116.
[62] *Ibid*., p. 116.

Undecidability may form the basis of decision for Derrida, but how does this address the rupturing of the subject? A subject originating beyond itself—and hence denied the possibility of free will—is surely incapable of participating in the process that decision-making requires. In fact, Derrida affirms the need to step beyond the cold, mechanistic computations of decisions. Such decision-making is more an expression of underlying behavioral characteristics of a subject (or rather the idiosyncrasies of their culture) than real choice. Like Kierkegaard before him, Derrida suggests that the decision cannot be sensible or wise; in truth "the instant of the decision is madness."[63] Sagaciousness is impossible in the realm of the decision; it cannot be grasped through rationality or calculative reasoning, but requires a leap of faith into the unknowable. All who make choices must bear the weight of this insufferable trauma: "He decides, but his absolute decision is neither guided nor controlled by knowledge. Such, in fact, is the paradoxical condition of every decision: it cannot be deduced from a form of knowledge of which it would simple be the effect, conclusion, or explicitation."[64]

The self-contained subject, though requisite in one respect, is simultaneously detrimental to the possibility of decision-making. A decision cannot truly be a decision if it remains purely and simply "mine;" it must extend beyond itself into the realm of the unknowable, the incalculable, the Other. As Reynolds astutely notes, "a theory of the subject is incapable of accounting for the slightest decision (PF 68-9)."[65] A "decision" from such an entity is autonomic, stemming from inveterate idiosyncrasies and devoid of the slightest agency; in truth, it is more accurately described as the predictable

[63] Derrida, Jacques. The Gift of Death. Translated by David Wills. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 65.
[64] *Ibid*., p. 77.
[65] Reynolds, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/d/derrida.htm>

consequence of a causal relation. Despite this though, one cannot entirely discount the subject's existence as necessary to the actualization of choices in the world.

The Gift of Death as the Birth of Responsibility

Given this understanding of the decision, what shape does the concept of responsibility, a notion intimately and inextricably intertwined with the decision, take? The question of responsibility is one that Derrida takes up in great detail in The Gift of Death. Indeed, the book might be seen more as detailing the intricacies and aporias of responsibility than a deconstructive reading of religion. The concept of responsibility is incredibly complex for Derrida; as such however it is incredibly insightful and divulges much about his views on the ethical.

In a similar fashion to the decision, "the concept of responsibility has…always implied involvement in action, doing, a *praxis*, a *decision* that exceeds simple conscience or simple theoretical understanding."[66] It too requires that one leap beyond the calculative, hyper-rational mentality so characteristic of today's philosophy. The subordination of responsibility to objective knowledge is at one and the same time a necessary and yet stultifying gesture. The condition of responsibility requires that there exist a form of sentience, an understanding of the circumstances of the situation at hand. Conversely, however, this knowledge eliminates responsibility, reducing decisions to "the technical deployment of a cognitive apparatus, the simple mechanistic deployment of a theorem."[67] Such is the paradox of responsibility.

[66] Derrida, The Gift of Death, p. 25.
[67] *Ibid*., p. 24.

Continuing with his examination of responsibility, Derrida turns his attention to the conditions of its origin. As one might assume based on deconstruction's "methodology," he does not credit the self with responsibility's genesis, but recognizes the Other as its progenitor. Specifically, the source of responsibility can stem only from a gift given by the unknowable Other: the gift of death. This gift is given by "God as he holds me in his gaze and in his hand while remaining inaccessible to me, the terribly dissymmetrical gift of the *mysterium tremendum* only allows me to respond and only rouses me to the responsibility it gives me by making a gift of death, giving the secret of death, a new experience of death."[68] What does this esoteric passage mean? How can death bring about responsibility? Moreover, what is role of God in this equation?

When Derrida uses the term "God" what does he mean? Is he not stepping beyond his work in the margins of philosophy and into the grounds of theology? In this context Derrida is using the term "God" to refer to what he elsewhere calls the messianic, or "the wholly other to come."[69] Thus God is not a particular entity but the concept of absolute Otherness. This "wholly Other" is such that it cannot ever be fixed or identifiable; it is forever "to come" insofar as it must perpetually remain utterly alien and indeterminable. To truly comprehend the Other would be to subsume it into the realm of the Same, annihilating its very otherness. Thus it must forever remain elusive to knowledge and the possibility of conceptualization.

According to Derrida all participate in a similar relationship with this alterity, even if one has chosen not to describe that otherness with the terminology of a religious or philosophical system (e.g. God as the wholly Other). Thus the supernatural bears no

[68] *Ibid*., p. 33.
[69] Reynolds, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/d/derrida.htm>

relevance to Derrida's point. Indeed, Derrida claims, "The origin of responsibility does not in any way reduce, originally, to a supreme being."[70] Rather, responsibility derives itself from the mystery enshrouded by the gift.

How is it then that the Other bestows this gift upon an individual? Recalling the genesis of the subject in Saussurean terms is helpful here. The subject, rather than being the source of itself, is engendered by structures of language and culture. Consequently its volition, and thus the very possibility of responsibility, originates from outside of itself in structures that cannot be fully conceived of. This is the essence of Derrida's argument here as well. Responsibility is breathed into the human animal at the same time its subjectivity[71] is by the Other. The gift of death is an encounter that occurs outside oneself, beyond the realm of the Same. It is an ultimately unknowable experience, death cannot be fully comprehended by any living mortal and as such it remains forever within the domain of the Other.

More than this though, the gaze of the Other is not reciprocal; the face of the Other remains unseen. It is a dissymmetrical relationship wherein one cannot gaze back, one can only receive the gift, having no chance either to thank or offer recompense. As such one is forever indebted to the Other, one can never be responsible enough towards it. What's more, there can be no choice about the receiving the gift, since the ability to decide—and for that matter the subject—only emerges after the gift's presentation. But how exactly does this "subjectivization," this imbuing of responsibility, occur?

Ultimately this gift of death enables the recognition of one's irreplaceability. Death, as the demarcation of the finite, draws the self out from the miasma of "proto-

[70] Derrida, The Gift of Death, p. 32.
[71] That is, the Self.

subjectivity." Indeed, "only death or rather the apprehension of death can give this irreplaceability, and it is only on the basis of it that one can speak of a responsible subject, of the soul as conscience of self, of myself, etc."[72] The boundary that death represents to an individual necessarily invokes their irreplaceability. *No one* can take another's place in death; it remains entirely an individual's own. As such each death is unique and exclusive. So too no one is capable of truly dying for another, one may only delay the inevitable death that awaits another. An act of dying for another is "a nonexhaustive exchange or sacrifice, an economy of sacrifice."[73] Ultimately it is a disproportionate act, one that cannot offer to another the immortality required to overcome death, hence giving one's life for another is a sacrifice. Moreover, it is a sacrifice made to death, not a sacrifice to another. One may sacrifice herself for the sake of another, but never in their stead.

The inimitability of an individual facing death is an epiphany revealing their singularity, for "death is the place of one's irreplaceability."[74] For Derrida "to have an experience of one's absolute singularity and apprehend one's own death, amounts to the same thing."[75] It is only through the realization of one's radical singularity, a cognizance of one's uniqueness, that one becomes open to the possibility of responsibility. If no one else is capable of adopting this particular death, my own, then I alone am called to take it upon myself, to give it to myself. I must assume my death in order to affirm the one thing that is absolutely mine, that which I possess an absolute responsibility for. No one

[72] *Ibid*., p. 51.
[73] *Ibid*., p. 43.
[74] *Ibid*., p. 41.
[75] *Ibid*., p. 41.

else is capable of utilizing my death for the sake of another, sacrificing myself to delay their death; I alone possess that power and must choose to wield it.

Absolute singularity evokes another aspect of Derrida's analysis: the necessarily secretive nature of absolute responsibility. The secret is critical to Derrida's conception of responsibility as there can be no absolute responsibility without it. The secretive is the condition of ethics. Why is this the case though? How can keeping a secret from another be ethics?

The notion of a secret involves an inability or unwillingness to speak of the said topic. To speak of it would be to betray the secret and render it public knowledge, invalidating it as a secret. Further, speaking invokes the system of signification that has engendered the subject. The act of speaking instantiates the system of signification necessary for speaking; it renders present the entirety of the system. At the same time however, it has the effect of drowning out the singularity of the individual who invokes it. Utilizing a common language restricts the radical singularity of the individual to that language, to the realm of the Same. [76] Any form of communication necessarily constrains a subject to a shared discourse, and in doing so effaces a person's uniqueness. If one's singularity vanishes then so too does their absolute responsibility, as one's responsibility is contingent upon the emergence of this singularity. Thus absolute responsibility is necessarily secretive; it cannot be otherwise.

It is this secretiveness that plays an essential role in the schism of responsibility. If one cannot speak of their responsibility to another, if one cannot present an account of

[76] Indeed, how could language (or any form of communication) do otherwise? A language known only by one is meaningless, it cannot be communicative without another to receive it. Thus language necessarily requires two or more subjects to share in it, thus creating bonds of shared experience, and delimiting their singularity. Language is necessarily relegated to the realm of the Same.

their actions, then one is perpetually unjustified in their deeds. But why is this so? Responsibility and the decision are acts of faith; they demand allegiance without vindication before the realm of objective knowledge. An attempt to justify one's actions is to speak and present an account before public knowledge, thus breaking the secret and invalidating one's responsibility. In this manner responsibility and the decision cannot yield to the constraints of the Same: "His nonknowledge doesn't in any way suspend his own decision, which remains resolute. The knight of faith must not hesitate. He accepts his responsibility by heading off towards the absolute request of the other, beyond knowledge."[77] An individual must bear responsibility totally own their own, one can never account for their actions. Ethics requires that one go beyond a universal concept of duty (of the Kantian persuasion) to others, in order to respond to an "absolute duty" before the Other.

Insofar as one is eternally indebted to the Other for their subjectivity—and hence, responsibility—one is forever bound by duty to it. For the sake of this absolute duty one must act beyond the boundaries of knowledge and justification; that is, to be irresponsible, while "still recognizing, confirming, and reaffirming the very thing one sacrifices, namely, the order of human ethics and responsibility. In a word, ethics must be sacrificed in the name of duty."[78] One must give up the ethical values of the society around them in order to remain faithful to one's absolute duty before the Other. Thus, it is one's duty to not respect ethical duty, although one is still forced to recognize value of society's ethics.

[77] *Ibid*., p. 77.
[78] *Ibid*., p. 67.

Absolute singularity has another interesting ramification. Namely, if each subject is absolutely singular and irreplaceable then each possesses some degree of infinite alterity. I am incapable of piercing into the absolute singularity of another insofar as this singularity must remain secret, inaccessible to communal discourse and knowledge. The other is inviolable and autonomous in their own right. As such, that "aspect" of the other remains just that: wholly Other. For this reason the infinitely Other can be found in all others, not merely in God or some transcendent unknowable. All people, in their singularity, are totally Other to some degree. Thus one is indebted and responsible before all others. This has serious consequences for the nature of responsibility, implications that shall be explored in the next section.

Abraham's Aporia: The Dual Demands of Responsibility

Drawing from these observations Derrida continues to problematize the concept of responsibility. As he states early in The Gift of Death, responsibility "requires a decision or responsible action to answer for itself *consciously*, that is, with knowledge of a thematics of what is done, of what action signifies, it causes, ends, etc."[79] Responsibility must be capable of accounting for itself, and justifying the actions done on its behalf; indeed, failure to provide such a defense would be irresponsible.

However, responsibility by nature is incapable of giving such an account for two reasons. The first pertains to the condition of its existence: Necessary to the genesis of responsibility, Derrida explains, is a foundation of irresponsibility; a foundation that it suppresses from birth onwards. In speaking of the development of responsibility, Derrida states: "The secret of responsibility would consist of keeping secret, or "incorporated,"

[79] *Ibid*., p. 25.

the secret of the demonic[80] and thus of preserving within itself a nucleus of irresponsibility or of absolute unconsciousness."[81] In the same manner that the subject is originally composed of something not subjective (i.e. "proto-subjectivity") so too responsibility originates from something Other. Thus it rests upon the grounds of a sort of non-responsibility.

In order to elucidate this idea an examination of the second cause of responsibility's "breakdown" is necessary. Throughout The Gift of Death Derrida repeatedly underscores the incommensurability between the particular and the universal, a theme that, until now, has only been hinted at. An individual who possesses accountability cannot be classified as either "responsible" or "irresponsible;" such an understanding is far too simplistic (as all binary oppositions are). Derrida astutely calls attention to the dual demands placed upon a "responsible" individual. There exists an irreconcilable tension between particular and universal responsibility, a tension that demands one be sacrificed to the other. The paradox of responsible behavior is such that on the one hand, an individual feels compelled to act responsibly toward a singular other (e.g. a loved one, God, etc.), while on other the hand they must act responsibly and be accountable to the general populace. Unfortunately these two poles of responsibility often have irreconcilable allegiances, which complicates the coherence of a truly "responsible" subject.

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[80] The "demonic" that Derrida refers to here is a reference to Jan Patočka's *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History*. The "orgiastic mystery," or the demonic, is a sort of proto-Platonic stage of thought in which the sacred is shrouded in mystery. For simplicity's sake, it might be seen as the other that becomes suppressed within the Same (in this case Platonic, and eventually Christian, thought). Responsibility has yet to emerge from this quagmire of the indistinguishable. It is only with the inception of Platonic thought (the emergence of the self) that responsibility manifests. For more on this specific topic see the first chapter of Derrida's The Gift of Death.

[81] *Ibid*., p. 20.

Derrida focuses on the case of Abraham to illustrate his point.[82] Abraham, as the founder of three of the world's most prominent religions, has been regarded as one of the greatest figures of faith and loyalty for thousands of years, the quintessence of a responsible human being. Ironically, it is to this paragon of faith that God demands the "most cruel, impossible, and untenable gesture: to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice."[83] God, as the wholly other, does not have to share his reasoning or intentions, he does not give an account for why Abraham must give up Isaac. Likewise God is required to provide Abraham with nothing after the fact, no consolation, and no promise of vindication should he so choose.

Abraham is left with a choice, a choice between betraying the ethical order of the human domain—and more than mere infidelity to an impersonal tribunal, he must betray the wife he loves and the son he cherishes—or forsaking God. Here he must choose between his devotion to God and loyalty to his family. In the end Abraham chooses to give up his son, to sacrifice him for God. In order to carry out this task he does not speak to anyone of what God has ordered him alone to do. Through his silence Abraham affirms his irreplaceability and thus his responsibility, which is always a solitary endeavor. To speak would be to betray the absolute singularity he is, and thus his ability to decide. In failing to speak though, he denies the ethics of the generality and his family, renouncing all hope of justifying his actions. He sacrifices all of this in exchange for his absolute responsibility before God. For Abraham the *ethics of generality is a temptation*. Derrida fleshes out Abraham's internal struggle:

> "He keeps quiet in order to avoid the moral temptation which, under the pretext of calling him to responsibility, to self-justification, would make him lose his

[82] More accurately, Derrida is drawing on Kierkegaard's discourse and deconstructing it.
[83] *Ibid*., p. 58. Also see Genesis 22:1-18

> ultimate responsibility along with his singularity, make him lose his unjustifiable, secret, and absolute responsibility before God. This is ethics as 'irresponsibilization,' as an insoluble and paradoxical contradiction between responsibility *in general* and *absolute* responsibility."[84]

Abraham's actions are unjustifiable. In choosing to remain loyal to God—choosing absolute responsibility—he betrayed his general responsibility towards society. It is no surprise then when Derrida concludes, "Abraham is thus at the same time the most moral and the most immoral, the most responsible and the most irresponsible of men."[85]

Recalling that all others possess a degree of infinite alterity as a result of their absolute singularity, the possibility of a responsible subject is further problematized. There exists an "innumerable generality of others to whom I should be bound by the same responsibility;"[86] yet it is impossible for one to respond to each of their cries. One cannot satisfy all obligations and requests asked of them; our finitude ensures this impossibility. Derrida states it eloquently: "I am responsible to any one (that is to say any other) only by failing in my responsibilities to all the others, to the ethical or political generality. And I can never justify this sacrifice, I must always hold my peace about it."[87] In choosing to aid one over another, favoring one to another, there is an inevitable sacrifice. In anything one does (or doesn't do) there is a sacrifice of all other possibilities, of all other peoples. Opting to care for your dog, for example, inexorably means an abandonment of all other dogs. Negligence before all things is not a possible solution either: the sacrifice is continuous and ubiquitous regardless of action. Responsibility, along with the decision, is subject *a priori* to paradox.

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[84] *Ibid*., p. 61.
[85] *Ibid*., p. 72.
[86] *Ibid*., p. 68.
[87] *Ibid*., p. 70.

Deconstruction as Ethics

This irreconcilable tension between the particular and general might be seen as characterizing the relationship between the Other and the Same; indeed, they are synonymous. Every individual is obligated to obey these demands: allegiance to the mandates of the general consensus is requisite for successful participation in a given society, and yet one must remain faithful to the mystery[88] innate to all others, to the Other within the others. By envisioning the ethics of generality—that is, the ethics of the Same—as a form of morality,[89] a useful distinction can be made in the realm of the ethical. This morality, though important, is nonetheless an effect of culture. Consequently, it is devoid of any transcendent ethical value.

Only reverence for the Other, an eternal indebtedness to the Gaze that breathes subjectivity into the human animal, can qualify as something that is truly ethical for Derrida. Ethics then, is possessing an openness to the Other; remaining receptive to its calling even while recognizing its absolute alterity and inapproachability. One must go beyond their subjectivity, even as they affirm its absolute necessity.

This dynamic pull between the Same and Other; the desire to recognize each without assimilating one into the other, is at the very heart of deconstruction itself. In this light deconstruction might be seen as the ethical, as the desire and the drive to truly respect that which is alien to the Same, to remain open to the calling of the Other and yet never assert control over it. Deconstruction concerns itself with maintaining a non-

[88] By mystery it is simply meant the absolute singularity of another individual, a singularity that, by definition, is inaccessible to other individuals. Hence within all there exists this mystery that is unfathomable.
[89] By morality I mean a culturally contingent set of norms and values.

invasive faithfulness towards the other; it does not seek to subsume it within what is known. To do so would be to obliterate its Otherness. For Derrida, the elusive Other can never be tamed; one must remain open to it and never force themselves upon it. Likewise, one should be steadfast in guarding against attempts to fully conceive of it, to fully incorporate it into the field of the Same. This ethics is both active and passive. Deconstruction resides in the insoluble tension between action and non-action; it must remain open to the possibilities of the Otherwise, rather than adopt any singular moral doctrine, as the ethics of human rights would seek to do.[90] In this way deconstruction sincerely respects difference. The price though, is that it must forever vacillate within the ethical and the philosophical, never fully finalized or demarcated.

Regardless of this indecisiveness, deconstruction is forced to acknowledge that choices are *still* made in life and decisions are *still* acted upon in the world. One cannot hesitate indefinitely; indeed the very possibility of hesitation (as a sort of neutral, non-action) is itself unattainable. Hesitation must then be seen as the tension between action and non-action and ethics as the endurance of this undecidability. Within this very hesitation the possibility of ethics as deconstruction is opened. Decisions must be made and responsibility carried out, but they always neglect, always sacrifice something else. In remaining loyal to one, another is betrayed. As such one can never be justified before any arbiter or tribunal or indeed, even before the self. Yet one *must* act. Abandoning calculative reasoning, a subject must step outside of its very subjectivity in order to preserve the sanctity of the Other. Such is the impossible task of the ethics of deconstruction, of ethics as deconstruction.

[90] In this sense it becomes clear that deconstruction works on the margins of philosophy; it cannot merely affirm another doctrine, another dogma by which to adhere. In doing so it would become just another philosophical schema.

The Question of the Political

Deconstruction unquestionably reorganizes the way one thinks about ethical responsibility. Restructuring ethics as a proto-subjective fidelity it differs strikingly from culturally contingent moralities. Likewise deconstruction has a decidedly political nature to it, problematizing hierarchies and systemic inequalities. But what does it offer in the realm of political responsibility? If decisions are ultimately unjustifiable at some level, how is political action capable of manifestation within deconstruction? How can political criticism function if the notion of justice has no real place within ethics as deconstruction?

This is not to say though, that Derrida is guilty of political quietism. His corpus of writings, and in particular his later works, are dominated by the question of politics and the innate relationship between philosophy and politics.[91] Many critics accuse Derrida of faltering in this regard, not due to his avoidance of the question of politics, but rather due to the way in which deconstruction approaches the political. For many, it fails to make an adequate transition into political critique and criticism insofar as it is incapable of recognizing anything new or positive through which a given situation might be altered. Put more succinctly: deconstruction cannot traverse from the ethical to the political; it is impotent in proceeding from responsibility to questioning.[92] The undecidability that imbues a deconstructive reading with its unique ethical schema

[91] Critchley, Simon. The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992, p. 189.
[92] *Ibid*., p. 189.

simultaneously "fails to account for the activity of political judgement, political critique, and the political decision."[93]

However, even this allegation is debatable. In Specters of Marx, Derrida directly addresses the possibility of something politically otherwise haunting us in the form of a specter. The specter is Derrida's essential term throughout the book; an apparition that, in good deconstructive fashion, is both present and absent to our contemporary situation. The greatest specter of our time is the specter of Marx, a spirit that haunts us, driving us to new ways of thinking; a truly radical essence that lays bare before us the possibility of the Otherwise. As specter, however, it can never be actualized or fully manifest itself before us; it is forever "to come" even when it sits before us.

Fukuyama's heralding of the end of history, according to Derrida, for example, is the attempt to exorcize the spirit represented by Marxism, to expunge the world of what provides it with the possibility of the otherwise, a radically alternative conception of reality and the political. But surely communism has proven itself an inept and inviable alternative to liberal democracy. In a sense, yes: Marxism is dead, and certainly so in the wake of the fall of the communist states. Indeed, the very notion of specter implies that it must have died, and so it should be mourned. However, the true death of Marxism occurred not with the fall of the Berlin wall, but rather some 40 years prior, at the height of "communist" totalitarianism. Ironically, however, it is the death of these communist states that enables the path to be cleared so we might once again hear the original injunctions of Marx. As such, Marxism has been freed from all ties with real-world instantiations of "communism." Both the Soviet experiment and the reality of China today have no relation to this specter; it is a spirit that has, by passage into death,

[93] *Ibid*., p. 190.

overcome the malformation of institutionalization. In this way, Marxism once again lives; however, it must remain truly radical and so elude all frameworks that would attempt to totalize reality. The call of this specter is decidedly ethical, forever haunting us, and beckoning us to recall the challenges its levels against the here and now. In this way Derrida concerns himself with what could be Otherwise. However, if the specter is something that can never fully appear, is it capable of instantiating that newness it presents into our world?

While this question is certainly up for debate, I believe that it can drive us to something new. I believe deconstruction can ultimately press us towards new things, even when faced with the necessary aporia of undecidability. However, I will give the above critique of deconstruction, spearheaded by Critchley, the benefit of the doubt. Accordingly then, deconstruction, despite presenting an insightful adaptation of ethical responsibility, does not provide an adequate account of political responsibility by failing to recognize it "as a place of contestation, antagonism, struggle, conflict, and dissension on a factical or empirical terrain."[94] If deconstruction is incapable of producing a legitimate account of political responsibility then what possible alternatives exist that resonates at some level with Derrida's insights?

Salvaging the Subject

It is in the work of Alain Badiou, a contemporary French analytical philosopher, that such an alternative might be found. Badiou, like Derrida and numerous other contemporaries, is incredibly critical of humanist approaches to ethics—in particular those that uphold the belief in a fully autonomous individual and of universal human

[94] *Ibid*., p. 190.

rights inherent in "Man." He believes this form of ethics to ultimately be a conservative enterprise, "characterized…by the unrestrained pursuit of self-interest, the disappearance or extreme fragility of emancipatory politics, the multiplication of 'ethnic' conflicts, and the universality of unbridled competition."[95] In this sense he is very much in league with many of the French theorists from the 1960's, such as Foucault and Lacan; insofar as he is antihumanist in his approach to ethics. Indeed, he has been at the fore in defense of their attempts to rethink the human subject, supporting them in their dissatisfaction with the banality of contemporary philosophical meditations.

Badiou has primarily concerned himself with the relationship between philosophy and politics. His central question is clear: How is it that philosophy can do more than merely reflect on politics? As a former radical Maoist, he is motivated by strong egalitarian and democratic[96] ideals, and Marxist nomenclature is often latent within his writings. Trained as a mathematician prior to taking up philosophy, Badiou provides unique insights into often tired philosophical concepts. His background in mathematics shapes his paradigm such that he assumes an equality of minds, insofar as math is seen to be intuitive and exist *a priori*. Given this, all individuals possess the same rational faculties and thus all are capable of philosophy. Indeed, there exists no philosopher kings in his eyes; such restriction is contrary to the very spirit of philosophical discourse. Rather, all people can and must be philosophers. However, it is not the customary conception of philosophy Badiou has in mind, one of reflexivity and reflection. Rather,

[95] Badiou, Ethics, p. 10.
[96] The term democracy, here, denotes a more original meaning than a colloquial understanding as a form of government. Rather, democracy is dynamic; it is a movement in which large numbers of peoples affirm their equality through action.

Badiou sees philosophy as the means of challenging politics[97] and driving it to new destinations, new realities. To a great extent his work can be seen as attempting to link political responsibility with ethics. Much like Derrida, however, he too calls for a rethinking of what is considered ethical.

Though Badiou and Derrida share several important insights regarding the nature of ethical and political responsibility, they also differ radically in some fundamental ways. One of the most significant points of contention between Badiou and Derrida is their definition of the subject. For Derrida the subject is birthed from interaction with others within the systems of language and culture; subjectivity is a product of this contact. As a consequence the subject is never fully present unto itself but always an entity contingent upon a given culture or situation. Badiou, by contrast, totally overhauls the conception of subjectivity and in doing so inverts the relationship between the subject and agency.

Rather than maintain that a subject is created by the workings of language or culture, Badiou claims that the subject is produced through the human animal's[98] response and fidelity to an "event."[99] The human animal, or "someone," becomes a subject that acts as a conduit for truth, introducing into the status quo a new way of thinking that was formerly unimaginable. Subjectivity, thus redefined, is founded on

[97] Though this analysis primarily concerns itself with politics, it should be noted that there are actually four fields of philosophy for Badiou: Politics, Love, Art, and Science.

[98] By human animal Badiou means a wholly self-interested creature, incapable of relating to truth. Badiou also makes frequent use of the term "some-one," to refer to the human animal. These notions, however, should not evoke imagery of a creature lacking cognition and self-reflexivity. This someone is fully sentient and cognizant; having been drawn into the institutions of language and culture and is therefore in possession of an identity.

[99] The exact notion of an "event" is explicated below, for now however it will suffice to understand it in colloquial terms.

response to an event, by means of recognition—not enculturation, which has been the traditional approach of both humanists and poststructuralists.

Furthermore, Badiou's notion of a subject is not restricted to a singular someone, rather a singular subject might be composed of multiple human animals. In the case of love[100] for example, two individuals, in recognizing and devoting themselves to the event of their mutual amorousness, become one subject. The subject is *created* through this someone's adherence to a truth-process. Thus a subject is the result of faithfulness towards an event rather than the fractured site of agency.

For Badiou there can be no ethics in general "because there is no abstract subject, who would adopt it as his shield."[101] Like Derrida, he too rejects both contemporary moral paradigms masquerading as genuine ethics and the classical position of an autonomous subject. Consequently, without a universal subject there can exist no universal, systematic ethics. Likewise, the subject is not created by adoption into a certain form of discourse, a certain language. There is rather only a certain kind of animal that, given its encounter or participation in particular circumstances, is called to enable the passing of a truth through everything that it is.[102] Its employment as a medium for this truth-process is what Badiou defines as a subject. In this sense the subject in no way exists within the situation prior to the event that invokes it; the subject cannot exist prior to the circumstances that call it into being. There is no preexisting rational agent, only a human animal or someone concerned with its own survival and interests. That which is produced within the confines of language and culture is merely a someone, a

[100] Love, in Badiou's terminology, is much more specific than vernacular usage. Specifically love is what it means to be two rather than one, what it means to be in relation with others, rather than a singular entity.
[101] Badiou, Ethics. p. 40.
[102] *Ibid*., p. 40.

creature concerned solely with its own survival. Thus identity, as necessarily intertwined with and restricted to difference, belongs to the "someone" rather than the subject. The someone, as a creature ensnared in the realm of culture and language, is capable of possessing an identity. As such this creature cannot participate in any truly ethical or political endeavors, it is bound to the discourse of opinion.[103] By contrast the subject, who has gone beyond culture and language, and therefore beyond identity, is capable of taking on both political and ethical truths.

Set Theory

On what grounds does Badiou make these claims though? Better still, what do these terms mean exactly? And upon what ontology does he rest? Like Derrida, he affirms the fundamental incommensurability of reality. That is, both philosophers believe in a "multiplicity that is ontologically withdrawn from or inaccessible to every process of unification, every counting-as-one."[104] This multiplicity, roughly, might be seen as the category of Otherness in Derrida's works, insofar as it exists as an unthinkable and infinite realm of dissemination, the thinkable possibility of the otherwise. Derrida, for example, attempts to "conceptualize" this radical multiplicity with notions like differance—the infinite deferral and differing of meaning—and the Other—as experienced via a realization of one's death. These a/concepts are and must remain ontologically unthinkable in order to preserve their radical otherness, and thus maintain their pure—or inconsistent—multiplicity.

[103] The exact definition of "opinion" will be elucidated upon shortly.
[104] Hallward, Peter. "Badiou's Ontology," in Badiou: A Subject to Truth. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p. 81.

In a similar fashion to Derrida, Badiou attempts to avoid all appeals to what he calls an "ontology of the One."[105] That is, he attempts to avoid making reference to a unifying principle, something that would attempt to ontologically define and categorize the multiple. Consequently, Badiou's philosophical project, like Derrida's, attempts to avoid the pitfalls of limiting pure multiplicity. In order for such a multiplicity to exist—a genuinely inconsistent multiplicity—it must be a multiple without any other predicate than itself. Such a multiplicity must subtract all reference to unity and be founded upon a void, "a none rather than a one."[106] It must have no limit in order for it to be a pure multiplicity, as "any such limit would reintroduce a kind of One beyond the multiple, or reduce the sphere of the multiple itself to a kind of bounded unity. Pure multiplicity must not itself be made to consist."[107]

In order to understand Badiou's position one must examine the mathematical notion of contemporary set theory, a theory that forms the basis of Badiou's philosophy.[108] Set theory provides Badiou with "a way of describing terms whose only distinguishing principle is distinction itself—the distinction inscribed by an arbitrary letter or proper name."[109] The only distinction is found in the signifier itself; it is the sole basis of difference. This allows Badiou to sidestep the quagmire of a philosophy of the One and achieve pure multiplicity predicated upon itself alone.

Further, set theory posits that the very being of being itself is pure or inconsistent multiplicity. That is, the ground of existence is raw, unfiltered, and unorganized;

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[105] *Ibid*., p. 81.
[106] *Ibid*., p. 82.
[107] *Ibid*., p. 82.
[108] Although the theory has its origins in mathematics—and as such it might be initially easier to conceive of it in those terms—it has become an ontological tool for Badiou. As such, its rules have been expanded upon to include all things.
[109] *Ibid*., p. 83.

existence is founded on a void or nothingness. Through a series of axioms set theory postulates, "the existence of an actually infinite multiplicity of distinct numerical elements."[110] Elements can range from numbers to concepts to tangible entities (e.g. stars, atoms, humans) to purely random entities. Indeed, they can be anything. These elements are capable of be organized into individual sets. [111] A set, simply put, is a collection of certain elements within the inconsistent multiplicity considered as a completed whole. [112] Thus, if a set is "to be considered as a selection made from this endless expanse" [113] of inconsistent multiplicity, then a set, or situation, can be theoretically anything. As such, sets can be infinite in size, not simply limited to large finite groupings. This ordering or unification of pure multiplicity into particular sets is what set theory refers to as organizing a "consistent multiplicity."

Establishing inconsistent multiplicity as the basis of being is crucial to Badiou's philosophy, as it eliminates the transcendental connotations of infinity. By abolishing any "Outside," or, borrowing Derridean terminology, eliminating any transcendental signified, "being simply multiplies in an open, infinite dissemination."[114] This has the effect of establishing an immanent infinity, which instills "this unpresentable inconsistency or no-thing with the very be-ing of every consistent situation."[115] Hence all sets, all situations, though they are themselves consistent multiplicity, have as their base inconsistent multiplicity

[110] *Ibid*., p. 83.
[111] The term set can be used interchangeably with "situation" and even a "multiple," though the last term will be used much less frequently and as such it will be used rarely in this analysis.
[112] *Ibid*., p. 83.
[113] *Ibid*., p. 83.
[114] *Ibid*., p. 92.
[115] *Ibid*., p. 85.

The example of mathematics might better illustrate the distinction between inconsistent and consistent multiplicity. Mathematics itself is a form of consistent multiplicity insofar as it arranges, or "counts as One" particular elements. That is, by introducing signifers such as "one," "two," and "three" to a pure multiplicity it is structured and unified into a consistent multiplicity, a representable entity. What mathematics organizes however, is itself a stream of inconsistency. Consistent multiplicity is the ordering and/or presentation of inconsistent multiplicity *as* a multiplicity, a coherent unity or one. Any form of presentation or ordering is a form of consistent multiplicity, insofar as it organizes the raw and unorganized inconsistent multiplicity. Therefore it can be said that all sets, as a means of classification, are forms of consistent multiplicity. As raw, unorganized and unclassifiable, inconsistent multiplicity can never be represented, as all forms of presentation are a "counting as One,"[116] a unification.

This becomes an important aspect of Badiou's philosophy. If any set, any situation, is *a priori* a consistent multiplicity then access to its foundation, inconsistent multiplicity, is impossible by way of that situation's institutions of knowledge. In other words, inconsistent multiplicity is inaccessible to the realm of objective knowledge constructed by any given situation or set. Ontology is incapable of comprehending this inconsistency. This ensures that inconsistent multiplicity cannot be grasped as an object of knowledge, or comprehended via objective speculation.

It is important to note, however, that the elements given within any particular set do not have any intrinsic value in themselves; they are void of any ontological value or

[116] By "counting as One" I mean something is considered as a completed whole, and thus is comprehensible. Inconsistent multiplicity, by contrast, is inconsistent; it cannot be comprehended because it is by definition incomprehensible.

essence. Elements within set theory are "pure bundles of multiplicity,"[117] devoid of any identity other than their belonging to a particular set and being a part of pure multiplicity. Thus the elements of a given set themselves are merely other sets of consistent multiplicity. They provide the groundwork for other sets, themselves existing insofar as they different sets. As an example, consider the set of all galaxies.[118] Every galaxy exists within this set. Yet a galaxy itself is constituted by innumerable other things (stars, planets, etc.), each of which can be seen as different sets. These sets themselves can further be broken down into different sets, etc.

Within set theory, however, these differentiated realities are inconsequential: everything is considered part of the multiplicity; everything is a set. If it exists it is already within the multiple. Badiou argues that "to exist as a multiple is always to belong to a multiplicity. To exist is to be an element *of*. There is no other possible predicate of existence as such."[119] An element's oneness should not be seen as an intrinsic attribute of it, but rather a result of its belonging to a given set. This position is such that Badiou recognizes no difference between elements; there is nothing unique to them in and of themselves except for their signifier.

In this way Badiou acknowledges no criteria or constraints as to how particular elements might be grouped. What a set consists of is defined by a purely extensional principle of selection.[120] That is, a set is determined solely by its members; it ignores all other factors, such as organization within the set.[121] Only the members that exist within

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[117] *Ibid*., p. 84.
[118] *Ibid*., p. 84.
[119] Quoted in "Badiou's Ontology," p. 84.
[120] *Ibid*., p. 86.
[121] This might be contrasted with an intensional principle of selection wherein a set is determined by a particular concept or principle. For example, sets of prime numbers or of red things are intensional insofar

it determine a set, no other concept is required. In the case of people for example, there is nothing that would presume one particular criterion for grouping over another (e.g. race, age, class, sex, etc.). In this sense Badiou is positing a philosophy that has both equalizing and universal connotations: all people are capable of recognizing it and capable of being recognized by it, regardless of differences. Everyone can be incorporated into his philosophy, and everyone can participate in it.

One other important characteristic of sets is the possibility of subdivisions within them. Each set is comprised of any number of elements with any given motivation—or lack thereof—behind that particular grouping, and in this sense an element is said either to belong or not belong within a set; there can be no partial belonging. The only requisite of belonging to a set is to be within it. However, within sets themselves there can be subsets, certain elements that belong to a set that have been organized or ordered into a unique grouping. These distinct groups of belonging are said to be *included* within their set.[122] Thus a distinction can be drawn between belonging and including, between plain elements and organized subsets.

On the basis of such organization, some subsets might be established that marginalize certain elements within the situation while favoring others. In the case of the Roman Empire, for example, a distinction was made between peoples within the borders of the empire and its citizens. Citizens, as distinct from regular members of Roman society, were granted a full range of benefits, including the right to vote. In this way the Roman citizen can be seen as a subset of elements, distinct from the pure elements themselves. While they remain elements themselves, and so belong to the situation like

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as they have a certain concept that determines the members of the set (e.g. only things that are red can be in the set of red things; red is the principle that determines membership).

[122] *Ibid*., p. 93.

all peoples within the geographical borders of Rome, they are also distinct. Citizens are included in the Roman Empire; they are represented by the state. By contrast, the peoples who merely belong are presented by the situation but are in no way represented. In this way, ideology is accounted for within the framework of set theory, functioning in the space between a mere collection of elements (simply belonging) and the sets one can form with them (inclusion). This might also be seen as the difference between a situation itself and the "state of the situation," insofar as the state organizes the reality of that situation in a particular way and in doing so generates ideology. Drawing upon the example above, the Roman Empire altered reality—and, concomitantly, the instituted knowledge and opinions of the situation by organizing the elements of that situation in a particular manner.

These subsets also serve another important function in Badiou's philosophical schema. Within any particular set there exists an immanent excess of subsets (or parts) over elements. That is, there will inevitably be more possible combinations of elements than the number of elements themselves. For example, the alphabet, as a limited set, contains only 26 letters, yet these letters can be arranged in a near infinite number of combinations. This renders present immanent and infinite excess derived solely from within the situation. Thus Badiou's ontology can remain subtractive; affirming a none rather than needing a "One" to guarantee the presence of infinity.

The Void, and the Event: Inauguration of the Otherwise

At this point it is crucial to note that for any particular set to be founded, it must have at least one element that belongs to the set but "has no members that can be

discerned from within that set—the empty set, or 'urelement.'"[123] In other words, within any set there must exist one element that has no recognizable place within the set or situation. At the same time though, this element must have no elements of its own that are not members of the set; it must be entirely contained within the set. This element acts as the foundational point for the set; it is the void upon which all things are established. This non-element is the one trait common to all sets insofar as all sets require a null to be founded. Thus, a situation may be infinite in scope—and it often is—but is always limited in depth. An example taken from biology will help further explicate the notion of the "urelement" (or the void, as it will referred to from this point on for simplicity's sake). In case of cellular organization, for example,

> "there are elements (mitochondria, say) whose own elements (proteins, membranes, biochemical structures) are not themselves elements of the set of living things. Such biochemical structures are *fundamental* to the set of living things—they are that upon which living elements are built, but are not themselves living (NN, 92-93)."[124]

In other words, when the elements of a biological set are broken down, eventually one reaches a point wherein non-living things are necessary for the composition of living things. Although the elements might be infinite within the set of a cell, there comes a point at which it one cannot proceed further into the "depth" of a cell without it becoming non-cellular (e.g. molecular). In this sense non-living elements are a part of the set of living things, yet they are clearly not representable within the set of living things itself. In this way non-life acts as the void of life. So it is with all other sets.

Thus the situation, as a particular set, contains within it—indeed, as the very foundation of its being—a situated void or empty set. It is around this void which the

[123] *Ibid*., p. 88.
[124] *Ibid*., p. 88.

whole of the situation is organized.[125] In order for a collection of elements to transform into a totality, a "situation," it requires as one of those elements something that embodies its opposite. A set therefore can never have itself as an element. Recalling the example of the Roman citizen, it requires for its existence peoples who simply belong to the Roman Empire, the commoners, in order for it to function properly. Without this element, the situation cannot sustain itself; it is the cornerstone upon which the whole of the system is constructed. The commoner acts as the element absolutely necessary to the structure of the situation—indeed, how else could a citizen exist if it was not firstly someone who fell within the borders of Rome? Yet this void clearly has no representable place within that situation, the commoner is not given rights to vote, or have a trial, etc. It is this internal stumbling block that prevents the situation from ever become "fully itself;" it can never achieve self-identity and thus become a truly universal, totalizing situation. In this manner Badiou's schema is similar to Derrida's insofar as no element can achieve self-identity, or be fully present to itself.

The void, then, consists of the unrecognizable and marginalized element of the set, the voiceless ones within a given situation. While it does not provide direct access to the inconsistent multiplicity upon which the situation rests, it is the point that comes closest to it. The void provides access to a realm that is beyond the ordering of the state of the situation—and hence outside of the instituted knowledge and opinions of the state. This means, in effect, that the void is distinctly separate from all ontological attempts to name it, as ontology is always a product of the ideology given by the structure of the

[125] Badiou, Ethics, p. 68.

situation. It is Other than the situation, yet it remains distinct from inconsistent multiplicity.[126]

It is around the notion of the void that Badiou's philosophical aspirations begin to congeal into a more tangible form, including his account of the ethical. The void, since it is wholly unknown by the situation, is the key element to overcoming the status quo and shaping the political terrain. But how does the void become recognized if it is inexorably foreign to the situation? Unlike Derrida, who maintains such a breach into Otherness is impossible, or rather a form of violence;[127] Badiou believes that the inauguration of something genuinely new in the realm of the Same is possible. Moreover, such an encounter with the otherwise is anything but a violation, since the void—and the event that inaugurates it, is universal in scope. In stark contrast to deconstruction's emphasis of singular responsibility to an Other, Badiou's is a philosophy of the Same par excellence. By rendering alterity accessible, Badiou's philosophy subsumes Otherness into the realm of the Same, into what is knowable. In doing so he brings about something new into the structures and institutions of knowledge of a given situation. In this sense Badiou gives priority to the Same and affirms the necessity of naming the Other, the void, in order to propel philosophy. Indeed, Badiou completely abolishes the wholly Other, believing it to be a form of anti-philosophy or theology, insofar as it is totally immune to philosophical speculation and scrutiny.[128]

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[126] This curious aporia is reminiscent of Derrida's notion of the specter.

[127] Insofar as deconstruction maintains an openness to the Other, accepting it while never allowing the Same to subsume it. Any attempt to name the Other is to render it not-Other, and thus posit it within the Same.

[128] In my personal opinion I do not believe this to be entirely true. Rather I would assert that Badiou establishing a "negative" absolute Other, insofar as inconsistent multiplicity is utterly inaccessible, yet devoid of reference to unification.

Revelation of the void, however, is only possible by means of an encounter with it from within the situation, something Badiou refers to as an "event," or "truth-process." An event, in order to link both the situation at hand and the inconsistent multiplicity in which the void is located, requires that it be both situated within and a supplement to the situation. An event must be immanent to a situation in order to avoid the possibility of it being seen as a form of transcendence, a sort of miracle, for lack of a better word. It is crucial to understand though that "an event is nothing but a part of a given situation, nothing but a *fragment of being*."[129] Yet an event is, in a sense, distinct from the situation, insofar as it invokes something beyond the status quo, something new to situation. Thus it can be said that an event occurs within a given situation, but at the edge of the void.

An event can only transpire at a site that is located within a situation adjacent to the urelement. Drawing on the example of cellular biology from above, an event can occur only in space where life meets non-life, where the elements of a set are no longer capable of being said to be included within it. The gap between the cellular structures, and the biochemical molecules that constitute cells is the only place capable of containing an event.

At this point one might begin to see the function of an event within Badiou's philosophical project, but what, precisely, is the event an event to? To what or whom does an event occur? Objective knowledge, as derived wholly from within a situation, is an inadequate means of accessing the void; it cannot step beyond the reality presented by a situation. Given this fact, it is subjectivity alone that is capable of tapping into the void.

[129] Badiou, Alain. "The Event as Trans-Being," in Theoretical Writings. Translated by Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano. New York: Continuum, 2005, p. 98.

An event, then, might be seen as that which is the very possibility of subjectivity, that which exposes the reality of the void and in doing so calls upon the "someones" of a situation to respond to it. An event is a shining moment of revelation within a situation, fading as quickly as it appears and calling the someone to the newness it presents, the truth residing within it. Thus a more appropriate question might be: "What type of audience does the event generate?"

And it is precisely this rupturing of a situation by a truth[130] where the subject[131] is founded. This break is what enables the human animal to go beyond itself and become the immortal subject. The event compels one to decide on a new way of being[132] by invoking the void of the situation and challenging the human animal to be faithful to an event, through a truth-process. The newly materialized subject becomes the bearer of a truth by means of fidelity to it, to the possibility of newness presented by the event.

A truth, then, for Badiou, is "that which this fidelity *produces* in the situation."[133] A truth is an "immanent break." It is immanent insofar as it is wholly within the situation, the status quo. There is no higher realm where Truth resides, a la Plato's Forms. A truth develops and resides completely within the situation at hand; it possesses no universal or transcendent nature. On the other hand a truth-process is also a break from the norm; it ruptures the status quo in the sense that all the established language and knowledge of the situation are incapable of defining the event that caused it. For Badiou a truth expresses the contingency of the situation, a contingency that is connected to the

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[130] Truth, here, can only be seen as *a* truth, not *the* Truth. As should be obvious given his philosophical schema, for Badiou a truth is immanent to the situation, not a transcendent category.
[131] It is crucial to note that this subject is not synonymous with the psychological subject, the reflexive subject (in Descartes' sense) or even the transcendental subject (in Kant's sense). This is a total reconstitution of the term "subject."
[132] Badiou, Ethics, p. 41.
[133] *Ibid*., p. 42.

central ontological void of the situation. Essentially, a truth reveals the contingent nature of the situation, and ruptures the standard modes of discourse, by identifying the void of the situation; thus enabling new modes of thinking to become definable and available for adoption. Only by accessing the void of a situation, the point that connects the subject with the inconsistent multiplicity beyond the situation, beyond the counted-as-One, can something new be generated.

An event, as a naming of void, fulminates the situation it arises from. An event challenges the systems of knowledge and language within a given situation, ultimately exposing the power relations of the state of the situation. Prior to an event, the state's control is absolute and thus immeasurable in scope, but an event "brings to pass 'something other' than the situation, opinions, [and] instituted knowledges,"[134] enabling an assessment of the situation by forcing the void.

The event, then, highlights this marginalized cornerstone—the void—and makes its presence known; challenging the instituted knowledge and opinions that are espoused by the state of the situation. In doing so it restructures the situation and the regime of opinions advocated by it. It is important to note, though, that the newly fashioned situation and opinions do not become any "truer" than they were before. The realm of opinions is incapable of truth; opinions can never access it. However, at the onset of a truth into a situation these opinions do become other[135] than what they once were. In this way the Other—that which was formerly inaccessible—is found rupturing into the Same; a key difference in the thought of Badiou and Derrida.

[134] *Ibid*., p. 67.
[135] *Ibid*., p. 80.

In the case of anti-Semitism,[136] for example, an event names the void of the situation, the Jew, and in doing so gives the repressed void a voice, an avenue to be expressed, thus altering the landscape of the situation (provided there are those who will remain faithful to the event). Badiou states, "The fundamental ontological characteristic of an event is to inscribe, to name, the situated void, of that for which it is an event."[137]

There are numerous examples of such truth-processes: The French Revolution, Einstein's theory of general relativity, Haydn's invention of classical music, etc. It is one's fidelity to this event; one's choosing to adopt its manner of thinking and perceiving the "situation" that produces a truth. Since the void expressed in event was excluded from all the regular ways of thinking in the situation it compels the subject to conceive of a new way of thinking, a new way of being. In order to be truly faithful to an event one must completely change one's conception of reality, the way one conceives of the normal situation. To be faithful to Einstein's theory of general relativity, for example, one must forgo Newtonian physics, and completely change the manner in which physics is done.

But how is all of this relevant to the question of the political, and moreover, the relationship between the ethical and the political? The void is fundamental to the inauguration of something new into the world. Only by revealing that which is subjugated to the point of obliteration by the state of the situation can something new, something liberating be introduced into the world. It is only the naming, the forcing of this void that can forge the way to new avenues of discourse, new possibilities that, up until that point, have been inconceivable. Philosophy, in a Badiouian framework,

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[136] While this particular example is a form of Evil in Badiou's thought, a new truth can alter the landscape of even that which has been corrupted and lost its original truth. The exact definitions of what constitutes Evil will be explored shortly.
[137] *Ibid*., p. 69.

challenges the politics of a situation, rather than simply providing a reflection on politics. Philosophy is in *competition* with politics. In this way, Badiou has very much reincorporated the question of the political into relationship with the ethical. What exact form the ethical takes, however, has yet to be fully explicated.

The Ethical

Given that cultural morality is an element of different situations, and as such is partitioned off into the realm of opinions, what shape does the ethical take in Badiou's philosophy? Ethics is a fidelity to the truths produced by philosophical discourse. Ethics is that which gives consistency to the presence of a someone in the composition of a subject induced by this process of truth.[138] Ethics is the very possibility of the impossible in a situation, to invoke the Immortal.[139] In other words, ethics is what enables a human animal to continue to bear this truth, to remain faithful to the event that sparked the revelation of the void, to remain the Immortal subject of that truth. Ethics, in this sense, is also what Badiou comes to name the Good. The Good becomes "the internal norm of a prolonged disorganization of life,"[140] a discontinuation of the normalcy of a situation within a subject and a fidelity to the advent of something new, something Other. A subject is ethical insofar as it does not falter in its faithfulness to the truth of an event—however, there are numerous ways in which one might fail. Such failure is what Badiou identifies as Evil.

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[138] *Ibid*., p. 44.
[139] The someone becomes an Immortal to the degree that they participate in a truth process. A truth, as something beyond the normalcy of the situation, something radically new, requires a subject that, likewise, is beyond normalcy. Consequently, the subject must be beyond the mortal animal that houses it; subjectivity is a calling beyond the self-interested ambitions of the someone. It is in this sense that a subject might be seen as Immortal.
[140] *Ibid*., p. 60.

The someone and the realm of opinions are both *beneath* Good and Evil;[141] they bear no weight on truth and as such they are irrelevant. It is only the Immortal subject that can participate in either Good or Evil, because it alone has access to the realm of truth. The Good, in Badiou's philosophy—and juxtaposed against a doctrine of human rights—is given preeminence over Evil. Evil is thus "an unruly effect of the power of truth."[142] All truths always and inevitably run the risk of being corrupting through a distorted fidelity towards them: Evil is a possible effect of a truth-process.[143] Through a failure in one's fidelity to the truth of an event Evil is birthed.[144]

In what ways might a subject fail in their fidelity to a truth though? The first means of failure is via fidelity to a false truth, a simulacrum. What distinguishes a genuine truth from a simulacrum though? At first glance they share the same formal properties, and therein lay the danger of a simulacrum. What sets a genuine event apart from a simulacrum is the fact that an event "relates to the particularity of a situation only from the bias of its void."[145] A real event, and hence a real truth, derives from the void. By contrast "when a radical break in a situation, under names borrowed from real truth-processes, convokes not the void but the 'full' particularity or presumed substance of that situation, we are dealing with a *simulacrum of truth*."[146] An event is an immanent break within a singular situation; it carries a universal message precisely because it is derived from the absolute neutrality of the void.[147] The void is a non-particular multiple within a

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[141] *Ibid*., p. 59.
[142] *Ibid*., p. 61.
[143] *Ibid*., p. 61.
[144] This is not entirely accurate; the first form of Evil, the simulacrum, appears when a circumstance or occurrence is misinterpreted as a truth-event. It is dependent upon the Good insofar as it relies upon mimicking the structure of a truth.
[145] *Ibid*., p. 73.
[146] *Ibid*., p. 73. Emphasis original.
[147] *Ibid*., p. 73.

situation; it possesses no particular characteristics and hence it is impossible for it to be anything but universal and equalizing for a situation. By contrast a simulacrum of an event presents "the absolute particularity of a community, itself rooted in the characteristics of its soil, its blood, and its race."[148] A simulacrum draws upon what is already present in the situation—indeed, the fullness of that situation—and necessarily marginalizes other elements. Likewise, a simulacrum can only be successful because it borrows its formal structure from genuine truth-processes.

Nazism, for example, drew its revolutionary momentum from the notion of the ideal "German." Its simulacrum attempted to realize the "true destiny" of the *German* people. In this way the "truth" of Nazism is founded only in that which it considers to genuinely "German," thus negating all hope universal scope. By necessity a simulacrum, as a loyal to only one particular situation, must also void that which surrounds it: the Jewish people in case of Germany.[149]

The second type of Evil comes in the form of betrayal. This struggle occurs at the intersection between the human animal and the Immortal subject. In maintaining fidelity to a truth, a subject is always tempted, in innumerable ways, to give up in favor benefiting oneself. At the moment of temptation a subject is "confronted with a pure choice between the 'Keep going!' proposed by the ethic of this truth, and the logic of the 'perseverance in being' of the mere mortal that"[150] comprises it. The human animal is concerned with only itself and its survival, but the subject has, in a sense, transcended its concern with self-subsistence in favor of something greater. Betrayal, however, is more

[148] *Ibid*., p. 73.
[149] There were certainly other groups oppressed by the Nazi regime, however, the "Jew" came to be seen as the primary void of that situation.
[150] *Ibid*., p. 78.

than mere cessation of one's subject-hood; it connotes a denial of the reality of an event, a truth. Betrayal is the denial of the existence as an Immortal subject at all; there never existed a subject because there never was a truth event. One opts instead to side with the opinions of the situation, whose whole purpose is the negation of such a truth.[151] One must become the very enemy of their former subjectivity.

The final form of evil is related to a truth's ability to restructure the opinions of a given situation. This ability is what Badiou refers to as the power of truths.[152] This final evil is the totalization of a truth's perspective within the framework of the realm of opinions. That is, when a truth attempts to replace the situation completely, and become a completely totalized Truth, it simple becomes another situation, but one that is charged with a precarious zealotry and blind dogmatism.

Prior to a truth's onset, the realm of opinions possesses a language that is capable of speaking about the elements within the situation. Elements are capable of being discussed within a situation (i.e. "It's cold out today", or "This thesis is inane").[153] Insofar as anything is capable of being communicated within a situation, it possesses a name bestowed upon them by opinion.[154] A truth-process, however, restructures the realm of opinions from the perspective of the event by changing the names of elements within the situation. In doing so a truth introduces alternative possibilities into the newly reorganized situation.

When a truth attempts to become total, however, it is foolishly believed to be capable of completely replacing the realm of opinions. In this way the Immortal subject

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[151] *Ibid*., p. 79.
[152] *Ibid*., p. 80.
[153] *Ibid*., p. 81.
[154] The only thing having yet to be named, of course, is the void.

attempts to utterly annihilate the human animal that acts as its foundation. By necessity, however, every truth-process is dependent upon the human animal to act as the basis of subjectivity. There must exist the duality of subject and "some-one" in order for a truth to be founded. As Badiou clearly states, "the Immortal exists only in and by the mortal animal. Truths make their singular penetration only through the fabric of opinions… the world is, and will remain, beneath Good and Evil."[155] Thus, one cannot attempt to eradicate opinion; to do so is to ultimately stultify the possibility of truth-processes. As Badiou shrewdly warns us: "The Good is Good only to the extent that it does not aspire to render the world good."[156] Further, it can be said, "the production of a truth-process, does not have the power to name all the elements of the situation. At least one real element must exist, one multiple existing in the situation, which remains inaccessible to truthful nominations, and is exclusively reserved to opinion, to the language of a situation."[157] This is what Badiou refers to as the "unnamable of a truth."

This unnamable is by no means easy to identify in the realm of opinion; however, it must exist in order for a truth to be possible at all. In the case of political truth this unnamable can be seen as the community or the collective: "Every attempt 'politically' to name a community induces a disastrous Evil."[158] Every attempt to name a community through the language of a truth leads to catastrophe. In short, identity is the unnamable of every political truth. Once again, Nazism, by utilizing the term "German" attempted to totalize its truth and annihilate all things that were not within that name. The attempt, by any group, to rally behind a communal idea, to harbor nationalist tendencies, is a

[155] *Ibid*., p. 84-5.
[156] *Ibid*., p. 85.
[157] *Ibid*., p. 85.
[158] *Ibid*., p. 86.

distortion of a truth, whether it be the case of the Nazi's idea of a "true German," or something as seemingly benign as advocating "genuinely American" values as a means of warding off "foreign" ones. Thus the nature of identity in Badiou's works is such that it can never be associated with truth, the two remain wholly separated from one another.

The Political Conclusion of Badiou

Ethics, then, is merely fidelity to a truth stemming from an event.[159] It is perseverance against the ever-present pitfalls of Evil. Given this reality, it is easy to see how Badiou's philosophical project manages to unite the political and the ethical in an affirmative manner. In giving the political priority over the ethical, and redefining philosophy as a competitor with politics—as opposed to a passive reflection upon it—Badiou manages to salvage ethics from the quagmire of hesitation that Derrida faced.

Where Derrida advocates a philosophy of the Other, Badiou's becomes a philosophy of the Same in the fullest sense. That is, in assuming an equality of minds in the capacity to do philosophy, and the universality of an event's message, Badiou has abolished the possibility of something wholly Other.[160] Something that is entirely inaccessible cannot exist—or rather it is a form of anti-philosophy, something that cannot be critically engaged, and hence is useless. Indeed, in Badiouian thought the very impetus of philosophy, as the generator of new ideas, is driven by an encounter with a namable Other, with the void. Thus, contact between Otherness and Sameness is critical for his philosophy to function properly. More accurately, Sameness is what matters for philosophy and Otherness is ultimately subsumed into it in order to propel it.

[159] A truth can manifest in one of the four different fields according to Badiou: Love, science, art, and politics.
[160] At least the possibility of something wholly Other considered in positive terms.

This ensures the affirmative nature of both ethics and politics. For Badiou philosophy itself is not a reflexive operation; it is not the case that there are philosophies *of*. That is, there is no philosophy *of* science, or philosophy *of* ethics; rather philosophy is that which propels those fields into new territory. A reflexive philosophy is one in which reflection and inquiry is possible, but ultimately it is rendered impotent in generating change. Rather, philosophy, for Badiou, is the production of concepts and ideas. In this manner philosophy acts in such a way that it can challenge political discourse and alter it. Philosophy is in competition with politics. Through an event something new is exposed that can challenge the current political structure. In Badiouian thought, philosophy is not a normative reflection about the reality of the political; it is an active engagement in it. In this way philosophy provides us with an impetus for political action while simultaneously incorporating the ethical.

But how is it that an event comes about? What are the conditions of its arrival? Badiou is clear in stating that there is no decisionism within his philosophy.[161] The decision—if one can still call it a decision—is "pure," insofar as one is caught up in the moment, the momentum, of an event and is seized by the truth it heralds. An event is not something that can be forced and controlled; it arrives on its own terms. Human animals cannot decide to generate an event; such a task is impossible. An event emerges from the within the conditions of a situation, and eventually is nominated by those who experience it. That is to say, a realization occurs amongst certain individuals that a particular happening is somehow different from the situation at hand; it's not calculable by means of objective knowledge. Rather one is compelled simply to participate in it, and by doing

[161] Badiou, Alain. "Ontology and Politics," in Infinite Thought. Translated and edited by Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens. New York: Continuum, 2003, p. 172.

so the subject begins to take shape. One begins to realize that the event is something more than the just the status quo and eventually, if they choose to side with the truth that an event brings, becomes the Immortal subject.

If the event is beyond the calculable realm of objective knowledge, beyond the instituted language and knowledge of a given situation, then it is clear that it remains unjustifiable before the state the situation. Subjects, in their fidelity to an event, rest solely on the merit of that truth-process. There can be no external justification, for everything external to the process of naming the void is derived from the situation, and thus a part of the contingent institutions of language, opinion and knowledge. Thus a subject is vindicated in their actions only by the truth-process it adheres to, by its fidelity to the event; it can never justify itself before even the someone that constitutes its foundation.

Here one sees a striking resemblance to Derrida's work regarding responsibility. A subject can never justify their convictions within the calculable realm of knowledge; the majority will always condemn it precisely because they are incapable of recognizing it. A decision, in order for it to truly be a decision, must necessarily occur outside of the realm of objective knowledge. Truth, as the essence of the Otherwise, must separate itself from ontology. A subject must always remain faithful to newness, to the possibility of Otherwise, on the basis of faith; there is no justification before the general masses. Indeed, a vindicated truth is a contradiction of terms. The blatant irony involved in this equation speaks for itself: truth is unjustifiable. That which is the very foundation of justice, in the end, cannot be justified. It is precisely because truth comes *before* justice, as the very possibility of justice, that it cannot be validated.

However, it is the very notion of justice that both theorists are attempting to revitalize. Derrida is attempting to problematize the simplistic notion of justice that he perceives as rampantly infecting ethical discourse today in the hope that it might begin to be rethought. Justice, for Derrida, cannot be so simple, serving as the impartial tribunal of reality; it is *a priori* subject to paradox. Similarly, Badiou, in affirming the concurrence of equality and universality characteristic of a truth, is invoking an ancient conception of justice; one that, rather than stabilizing social bonds, is capable only of highlighting their most extreme moments of inconsistency. Justice is not a descriptive entity capable of ordering a situation through its objective perspective. Rather, it is prescriptive, manifesting in different forms based upon the particular circumstances at hand, and restructuring the reality presented by that situation. Justice, then, is the cause of social turmoil and strife, rather than its panacea. In a way, both theorists are claiming that justice can exist only as that which is Other.

By contrast with the above conceptions of justice, today's ethics of human rights is more concerned with the establishment of liberty and freedom. Liberty, in the manner implied by human rights, would attempt to inscribe in an individual the freedom of a *particular* system—and, hence, act as a sort of constraint. Justice, by contrast, is indefinable and cannot be inhibited by any specific paradigm. Rather it strives for equality by any means necessary, rather than seeking to establish a particular ends. Thus, it is the power of true emancipation. Moreover, liberty is *not* synonymous equality; it has no direct relation to justice.

The goal of human rights is the establishment of freedoms, of liberty, for all people. The ideal means of transmission comes in the form of the liberal democratic

state. In this way, the democracy that human rights implicitly presumes in its logic comes in the form of a state, as an ends rather than a means. Thus, the ethical schema of human rights attempts to generate an identity, to particularize, while masquerading as a universal truth.

Rather, for Badiou, liberal democracy should be seen as one possible means to establishing political truth. Democracy, as an idea connoting equality, should then be redefined as an event, a happening, as opposed to a state. The notion of democracy can no longer be constrained to fit within only a singular identity, it become a means rather than an ends. Only as the mass action of a people (e.g. demonstrations, meetings, protests, etc.) can democracy be seen as the manifestation of a movement towards equality. In this manner democracy, though striving for universal equality, is not necessarily linked to a particular political system. Given this reconceptualization of democracy,[162] even a dictatorship can be another potential means of instantiating justice. This is something that must be accepted in Badiouian philosophy. One must disregard personal feelings towards such a totalitarian governmental system, for to reject that system as possible means of emancipation is to fall again into another form of intolerance. When the full ramifications of this concept of justice are explored, a plethora of new possible routes to universal equality—to justice—is revealed. The goal of any struggle for justice is not, by definition, the establishment of a liberal democratic state or its ideals; rather it is the establishment of this reconceptualized democracy, of genuine equality on a universal scale. In this way the term democracy has been once again been instilled with connotations of equality, equality independent of a particular form of

[162] Ironically, however, this concept is quite ancient, dating as far back as Plato's time.

manifestation. So too, democracy as a movement, rather than establishment, is capable of actively and continuously shaping the world.

The Price of True Ethics: Derrida and Badiou Juxtaposed

Badiou has successfully united the political with the ethical while simultaneously revivifying philosophical discourse from the depths of passive contemplation. However, this has come at the cost of the absolutely Other. Despite his being a philosophy of the Same, though, Badiou can still be seen as ultimately concerned with the Other; however, this Other is, perhaps, more complex than Derrida's. Indeed, in Badiou's framework it can be said that there are two forms of the Other. There is, first and foremost, the "negative" absolute Other, that is, inconsistent multiplicity. It is negative insofar as Badiou's ontology is subtractive, based on a none rather than a One.[163] Secondly, there is the Other that is subsumed into the Same by means of the revelation of the void. This Other is unique, it is neither absolutely Other, nor totally Same but rather like a specter. In this way Badiou's philosophy can be in terms of the Same/Other duality.

He, like Derrida before him, completely redefines what it means to be ethical, realizing the need to move beyond the structures of objective knowledge when heralding something truly ethical. The point of divergence between their theories lies in their conception of the dynamic between the Same and the Other. While both theorists orient their ethics around something which is to come, an event,[164] for Derrida the Other is unnamable to the Same—it is absolutely Other. Derrida's event remains perpetually on the horizon, never actualizing. Conversely, Badiou holds that this Otherness—the void in

[163] Hallward, p. 82.
[164] That is, the inauguration of the Other into the Same

his terminology—can be named. Consequently it is capable of invading and modifying the realm of the Same. Thus, Badiou's event is the advent of newness into the situation. One might say that Derrida grasps at a supra-subjective ethical responsibility, but for the sake of philosophical consistency, doesn't name it. He doesn't bring the Otherness of decision-making into the Sameness of knowledge. A responsible decision must not only be unknown, but it must evade conceptualization all together. Badiou, by contrast, unites the Other and the Same through the event of the void. At that moment a being is instantiated that, up until that point, had been unfathomable: the Immortal subject. While Derrida seeks to be consistent to the ethics of deconstruction, vacillating between Otherness and Sameness, Badiou has dismissed difference as something ultimately inconsequential; difference just is. As such there can be no alterity that is genuinely other, absolutely Other.

Despite some very important similarities between Derrida and Badiou—most notably in their discontent with the traditional approaches to ethics, and in distinguishing the realm of the decision from the realm of knowledge—they nonetheless differ in several key aspects. One significant difference in their thought pertains to the generality—the realm of opinion. Certainly, both theorists are attempting to locate responsibility and the moment of decision outside of this public sphere, beyond common knowledge. But where Derrida is reticent to discount the, at least partial, validity of the generality (insofar as it is the realm of objective knowledge), Badiou has no qualms about doing so: the situation bears no weight in the realm of truth, and as such it has no legitimate footing to critique the subject of a truth-process. The realm of opinions has validity insofar as it is necessary for the manifestation of a truth-process, but a subject in

no way should bend before the will of a situation when a truth says otherwise. Thus a subject ultimately remains immune to criticism by the situation. In Derrida, by contrast, the subject remains responsible before all, and can never be responsible enough; finitude ensures that one necessarily fails in their duty to some other, regardless of actions.

Another important difference between Derrida and Badiou pertains to the question of the universality of responsible decision-making. While both theorists agree on the necessarily singular nature of responsibility, for Badiou, this responsibility is accessible on a universal scale via a truth-process. A truth can be recognized by anyone and as such all are capable of becoming a subject to the same truth, even if in practice very few people actually attain that subjectivity. Technically every individual that belongs to the generality can participate in a truth-process; only the state remains incapable of doing so. The universality of a truth is the key difference between Badiou and Derrida's ethics, insofar as in Badiouian thought there is no secrecy involved. For truth to be secret would be to restrict the breadth of its influence, thus invalidating its universality.

By contrast, Derrida ensures the responsibility of the individual through an experience of the absolutely Other, specifically an encounter with death, and in doing so entwines an individual's radical singularity with responsibility. Further, this singularity that makes possible responsibility has as its basis an encounter with the absolutely Other, which interlocks an individual's singularity with absolute alterity. This, in effect, means that responsibility is a necessarily secretive operation; for to betray the secret is to invalidate one's responsibility. Thus, in order to be truly responsible, one must necessarily betray the generality, failing in responsibility even as one strives towards its zenith.

While Badiou would agree with the necessarily singular nature of responsibility, insofar as it is only the Immortal subject that can wield responsibility; a subject can only be induced through adherence to a strictly universal criteria, a truth. For Badiou, Derrida's appeal to an absolutely Other, as something residing outside of philosophical scrutiny, is ultimately an appeal to theology. If there can be no basis for criticism of it, then it becomes useless to philosophical discourse. Indeed, Badiou harbors no love for such concepts, describing them as a sort of "anti-philosophy."

The Deconstructive Immortal

Certainly, Derrida's philosophy has been seen to have some limitations, predominantly seen in deconstruction's inability to—at least in direct terms—address the question of the political, but is it right to completely discount his endeavors? At the very least one must recognize that his incredibly powerful insights on responsibility and the decision. It should not be taken for granted, as his deconstruction displays a sensitivity towards the Otherwise unparalleled by any other philosopher. One cannot overlook Derrida's work on responsibility; it is clear that simply disregarding the inherent aporias involved in a responsible decision is to repeat the folly of so many "ethical" theorists. The decision always and inevitably sacrifices one thing for another; there can be no absolute justification for actions.

Likewise, Badiou's philosophical schema leaves some potential questions unresolved. The notion of difference plays a negligible role in his philosophy; difference simply is. But can one simply disregard difference so nonchalantly? Isn't downplaying the significance of difference an ultimately naïve gesture? His unique form of

universalism provides a truly innovative approach to the relationship between ethics and politics, but in doing so does it fail to account for potential discrepancies or disagreement on the basis of difference? Moreover, must we sit idly, awaiting the arrival of an event to trigger us to action against injustice? Or is it that events take place all around us constantly, occurring even now and beckoning us to follow in their wake?

I don't claim to have the definitive answers for these questions; they are another research paper in themselves. Regardless of these qualms, however, I believe both Derrida and Badiou's discontent with contemporary ethical discourse is legitimate and its subsequent reformation is necessary. Ethics, the political, justice, the decision, responsibility, and even philosophy: All of these categories must be rethought and redefined. In their conventional formulation they are naïve and impotent concepts, ultimately devoid of any relevance in the world today. The reformulation of these traditional concepts by both theorists is incredibly compelling and refreshing in a world altogether preoccupied with the establishment of a systematic ethical system. In particular, Badiou's reconceptualization of philosophy enables us to definitively reclaim true democratic ideals, and propel politics forward into new and uncharted realms.

Regardless of one's final stance in relation to these theorists, I hope, if anything, that this single truth might be taken from our expedition: To be truly ethical is to be engaged in a war. Ethics does not invoke harmony, but struggle and contestation. Justice does not always stand in accord with the general consensus; indeed, more often than not it stands in direct opposition to it. Ethics is a dynamic force, not a passive reflection; it is as much visceral as it is intellectual, ethical decisions incorporate a person's whole being.

Further still, ethics necessarily entails betrayal; something must be sacrificed for the sake of another.

But does this inevitable conflict necessitate the onset of eternal warfare and hatred? Are we doomed to warring and embittered struggles forever? Difference just is; we must be willing to accept that fact and the conflict it inevitably necessitates. However, I don't believe that violence is inevitable; conflict is not synonymous with hatred, and warfare is certainly not a necessary consequence of conflict. To be in conflict is to disagree; holding ardently to a truth does not necessitate violence, although it can certainly lead to such recourse. Truth, if it is indeed universal in scope, at least guarantees us the possibility of peace.

I simply mean to imply that truly ethical action calls for someone that would step beyond him or herself, sacrificing their very being for the sake of inaugurating new possibilities. Ethics is moving beyond ourselves, into something greater, something that, though we fail in our attempts to describe it, believe to be worth fighting for, worth sacrificing for. In the end, wise words are meaningless; indeed, it is precisely wisdom that would restrain us. Ironically, Nietzsche's axiom ultimately means nothing; its insight is at once its downfall, like a house of cards the ever-present threat of collapse is the only thing that sustains it. So too we must be.

To be ethical I must risk rejection by the Same, even as the Other refuses to acknowledge my openness to it; I must risk rejection by those closest to me, even if the Other I seek to welcome fails to recognize me. I must become a specter, one that is located neither here nor there; a link that simultaneously unites and obliterates the two poles of this dichotomy. I must become a deconstructive Immortal, even if that reality

lasts only an instant. To inaugurate a new existence I have to become something that is accepted neither by the traditions and institutions that have fostered me nor by that which is foreign on all accounts to my being; in short, I must become a specter. I am called to endure the insufferable trauma of this reality, becoming neither Same nor Other so that they might generate the New.

This is the calling of the ethical, this is the beseechment of the political, and this is the task of the philosopher—of all peoples. Make no mistake though, for those who walk this path—the course of the ethical—persecution is an ever-present threat, on the heels of those who would tread this dangerous ground. I beckon you: Go forth into spectrality.

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