

THE DEMON OF ANALOGY: SIMON O’SULLIVAN, *ON THE PRODUCTION OF SUBJECTIVITY: FIVE DIAGRAMS OF THE FINITE-INFINITE RELATION* (PALGRAVE, 2012)

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This book proposes itself as a kind of non-commodity commodity, the record of an effort to think one’s way out of capitalist neoliberalism—with its allegedly ‘alienated, atomized and homogenized individual[s]’ (4)—and, moreover, ‘in aid of my desire to *reconnect* with life’ (4; my emphasis). O’Sullivan, in the name of reconnecting with this immanent life, wants to counter the ‘gap between phenomena and noumena, subject and object—again, [the] gap between the finite and infinite’ (5). That none of these terms can map onto any of the others without analogizing is indicative of what I see here as the book’s fundamental if inadvertent project of suturing gaps to infinitist continuism. Indeed, the title of the first chapter places Spinoza, Nietzsche and Bergson together under precisely this heading ‘From Joy to the Gap.’ As such a title insinuates, we find that this fearful gap is rather a portal to otherness, a torsion of indeterminacy, that, far from introducing an irreparable discontinuity in our thought and being, genially announces the promise of our finite opening onto the infinite. My problem (actually, one of my problems) is that such claims are effected primarily by what Stéphane Mallarmé nominated ‘the demon of analogy.’ Listen to this:

the content of this Bergsonian cone might also be understood in Lacanian terms as the Real insofar as it ‘contains’ everything not part of the sensori-motor schema (habit) which here can be understood—in its most expanded sense—as the realm of the symbolic (language, as it is typically employed, consisting of a certain adaptation, however complex this might be, to the concerns of the plane of matter). In Badiou’s terms...we might understand the ‘content’ of the cone as ‘inconsistent multiplicity’ in that it ‘contains’ everything not counted in the situation/world as it is... (49)

Although I can’t fathom all of this, an analogy-drive seems clearly at work. Why try to ‘understand’ the ‘content’ of the ‘cone’ in Lacanian terms at all? And why add the Badiouan terms immediately thereafter? Is O’Sullivan saying that the cone is to habit what the real is to the symbolic is what inconsistent multiplicity is to a situation? Or are the—ahem—‘content’ and ‘structure’ of these concepts more deeply intricated still? If so, what are the consequences for the differences? Yet the analogies are further pursued, to the point of (my) frustration: I

simply cannot see how ‘Badiou’s militant’ can be reinscribed in the Bergsonian terms of the actualization of a past event in the present (56), without missing everything specifically Badiouian about Badiou.

This is therefore not so much a machination of encounters of difference as O’Sullivan claims, as an accreting of connections through analogies effected by certain master-words. Let me concentrate on a single example, focusing upon one of the thinkers I’m most familiar with. Chapter 2 stages a confrontation between Foucault and Lacan under the heading of ‘The Care of the Self versus the Ethics of Desire.’ First, maybe surprisingly, some simple praise. It’s a nice confrontation to set up and take seriously, and usefully and didactically phrased as such: ‘If it is Lacan more than any other post-Freudian who sharpens and accelerates the challenge implied by psychoanalysis for ethics, then it is Foucault who takes up the further critical project of excavating an alternative tradition of ethics’ (60). But O’Sullivan can’t help himself: despite admitting that there are ‘major differences,’ he’s already readying us for the ‘important resonances.’ These include: the oral nature of Lacan and Foucault’s seminars; both are concerned with contemporary ethics; they are centrally concerned with the self’s relation to the outside; they both offer ethical programs.

Yet it’s really not certain to me that Lacan in fact does offer an ethical program. Despite the extraordinary enthusiasm that has seized ‘continental philosophers’ since the ‘ethical turn’ of the early 1990s, sweeping along any number of cultural Lacanians in its wake—of whom Slavoj Žižek would of course be the foremost representative—it’s not clear that ‘ethics’ is a word appropriate to psychoanalysis at all. Although people routinely invoke ‘don’t give way on your desire’ as the maxim of a specifically psychoanalytic ethics, a brief check of what Lacan actually says complicates this presumption.

In the third division of the final seminar of *Ethics*, Lacan begins: ‘It is an experimental form that I advance the following propositions here. Let’s formulate them as paradoxes.’¹ Please note immediately two features: 1) the *experimental* nature of the propositions, i.e., they are not apodictic announcements, they are not indices of proven theorems, etc.; 2) they are formulated *paradoxically*, i.e., they cannot be imperatives, maxims for action, or anything else resembling traditional moral precepts or counsels. In fact, this means they are neither epistemic nor ethical announcements, at least not according to received acceptations. In the context, the anti-Kantianism couldn’t be more pronounced.

The key proposition immediately follows: ‘I propose then that, from an analytical point of view, the only thing of which one can be guilty of is having given ground relative to one’s desire.’² The curliness of the syntax should be enough to alert readers not to think of this as simply the organisation of a specifically psychoanalytic ethics per se, but as a delimitation of the status of ethics from a psychoanalytic perspective. The tragic hero of whom Lacan has been speaking with reference to the scintillating figure of Antigone, and Lacan immediately goes onto note that the relation between the good and the heroic, law and desire, power and resistance is internal to each subject. There is no question of simply finding a way to unleash desire, as if that were a good in itself, a technical or technological matter, or an epistemological issue.

In fact, if one returns to the opening of the final seminar, we find that Lacan has set things up very clearly, perhaps a little too clearly for anybody to bother reading it properly:

an ethics essentially consists in a judgement of our action, with the proviso that it is only significant if the action implied by it also contains within it, or is supposed to contain, a judgement, even if it is only implicit. The presence of judgment on both sides is essential to the structure.

If there is an ethics of psychoanalysis—the question is an open one—it is to the extent that analysis in some way or other, no matter how minimally, offers something that is presented as a measure of our action...³

THE DEMON OF ANALOGY

Lacan's is therefore not an 'ethical' injunction; it is a delimitation of the field of ethics per se. It gives no program, nor directives, nor advice, merely a 'prosaic' (Lacan's word) analysis. The 'ethics of psychoanalysis' is not really a seminar *about* the ethics of psychoanalysis at all, but a seminar about how to conceive of, demarcate, the domain of ethics from the point of view of psychoanalysis. At best, psychoanalysis opens the question of its own ethics as a conditional on the basis of—not 'the infinite' as such—but the problem of *measure*. In a word, not simply the finite nor the infinite is at stake, but the *void*. This 'structure' is irreducible to the Foucauldian 'program' of 'care for the self,' despite O'Sullivan's attempts. And to insist on the void, as Lacan does, is in any case to immediately come a cropper with the idealists. At this point, every Deleuzian on the planet is liable to start quacking 'lack! lack!'

Leaving aside the problem that the void, the Thing and *jouissance* are not really equivalent to each other nor, indeed, to 'lack,' such lack-quacking is liable—as is the case here—to find a Spinozan alibi for its abolition. You may find Lacan's definition of ethics otiose insofar as it essentially links ethics to the problem of judgement of an action, but then you're departing from the Lacanian frame in contesting this definition. If you do so, then it's incumbent on you to demonstrate—rather than just assert—how another style of ethics is available at all, conceptually or no. For it's also to some extent missing the point to think that ethics can take place without *some* reference to judgement, even or especially if it's the case that ethics is meant to take place against, without or despite judgement itself.

Spinoza and Synthesis are the twin angels of O'Sullivan's search for diagrammatic reconciliation for an ethics-without-judgement. Yet the direct bibliographical references to Lacan here are significantly minimal: the two Seminars VII and XX, two essays from the *Ecrits*, and the plumped-up translation of *Television*. If you're going to use Spinoza with or against Lacan, however, you should probably also look at Seminar XI, where the problem of Spinoza is foregrounded explicitly by Lacan.⁴ But even if one sticks to Seminar VII, the real differend shouldn't be missed: in Spinoza, the positivity of ethics is linked directly to the infinite totality of God-Nature via the increase of power, which precisely provides the measure by which activity is to be 'judged' (to speak like Lacan); in Lacan, this position, delightful as it is, can only really be made sense of if we recognise that Spinoza conceived of nature as a system of signifiers.

I have comparable difficulties with O'Sullivan's other chapters: 3 on Guattari (with short addenda on Negri, Virno and Berardi), 4 on Deleuze against Badiou, 5 on Deleuze & Guattari, as well as a Conclusion, in which the little diagrams of the finite-infinite relation that O'Sullivan has sketched throughout the book all come to be lined up in a little row. The Conclusion also briefly invokes the work of Iain Hamilton Grant, Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, Ray Brassier and Reza Negarastani, before itself concluding: 'what seems to have been at stake...is an attempt at thinking the production of subjectivity as speculative, but also as a pragmatic and creative practice.' (221) This is probably right as a self-description, but it's just the sort of thing I find it difficult to come at. If it's probably heartening to see somebody struggling to bring together incommensurable singularities in a big family reconciliation, it's also infuriating insofar as disavowed analogy comes to trump difference again and again.

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NOTES

1. J. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. with notes D. Porter. London: Routledge, 1992, 319. For an excellent close introduction to this seminar, see M. de Kesel, *Eros and Ethics: Reading Seminar VII*, trans. S. Jottkandt. Albany: SUNY, 2009, esp. 261-268.
2. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 319.
3. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 311.
4. Or, indeed, at the major commentary available in English, e.g., A. Kiarina Kordela, *Surplus: Spinoza, Lacan* (Albany: SUNY, 2007).