

The Human

Posthuman liberalism

In the contemporary 'critical' humanities, the privileging of the human has become as suspect as every other sort of privilege. Human exceptionalism is viewed as of a piece with the exclusionary logics of racism and sexism. Far from being the uncircumventable horizon for emancipatory politics, humanism is denounced as integral to a logic of domination that proceeds from the subjugation of nature to the enslavement of all those deemed less than human. Speaking on behalf of what she calls 'the critical post-humanities', Rosi Braidotti writes: "Appeals to the 'human' are always discriminatory: they create structural distinctions and inequalities among different categories of humans, let alone between humans and non-humans."¹

One could retort, with Alain Badiou, that this indictment of humanism follows from conflating the restrictive specification of the human (as white, male, heterosexual, European etc.) with its generic de-specification – the human as

¹ Rosi Braidotti, 'A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities' in *Theory Culture & Society* 0(0) 2018: 5. Braidotti defines 'the critical posthumanities' as "a supra-disciplinary, rhizomic field of contemporary knowledge production that is contiguous with, but not identical to, the epistemic accelerationism of cognitive capitalism." (2018: 22) See also Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (Polity Press, 2013) and her *Posthuman Glossary* (co-edited with Maria Hlavajova, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018). For representative surveys see Cary Wolfe (ed.) *What Is Posthumanism?* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009) and Richard Grusin (ed.) *The Nonhuman Turn* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015). The University of Minnesota Press's *Posthumanities* series (of which Wolfe is editor) has published fifty volumes since 2007.

what Badiou calls 'the voided animal',² an exception that includes the unspecified part of everything: neither white nor black, neither male nor female, neither heterosexual nor homosexual, etc. On Badiou's account, universalization proceeds not by generalizing specific predicates but by subtracting them. Yet subtraction unfolds within an extant predicative framework, which it must presuppose to subvert from within. It is a logic of exception, rather than a movement turning up the ground upon which such predicative frameworks stand. This may be why it has failed to dent the prevalent Nietzschean consensus that equates universalization with domination, which is materially as well as discursively enforced. Once the inference from exception to exclusion is made, an all-inclusive post-humanism supplants exclusionary humanism as the politically 'progressive' optic consonant with the liberal ideal of inclusiveness that has become the humanities' critical lodestone. Emancipation is no longer *of* the human; it is *from* the human as exclusionary category. What is humanism deemed guilty of excluding? Alterity: racial, sexual, biological, etc. But racism, sexism, and species-ism remain partial indexes of a more fundamental xenophobia, whose foundation is ontological. It begins with the demarcation of the animate from the inanimate and of the minded from the mindless. In this regard, posthumanism proceeds from the metaphysical subversion of humanism, or what I will call its subversion from below (which I will later contrast to its decapitation from above, exemplified by deconstruction.) The metaphysical subversion of humanism consists in undermining any attempt to *specify* the difference between humans and other animals, whether in terms of the capacity

² See Alain Badiou *Logics of Worlds*, Tr. Alberto Toscano (London and New York: Continuum 2009) p. 114.

for language (the human is the talking animal), for reason (the human is the rational animal), or for politics (the human is the political animal). That language is a species of signalling, reasoning a species of reckoning, and politics a species of cooperation, reintegrates the differences that were taken to be constitutive of the human back into the continuum of biological capacities. The specificity of human difference reduces to specific capacities that humans share with other animals. But this re-naturalisation of the human assumes two very different forms in contemporary philosophical discourse. In mainstream Anglo-American philosophy, it follows from acknowledging the evolved nature of all the cognitive prowesses taken to be characteristically human.³ In the posthumanist current of Anglophone critical theory, by way of contrast, it proceeds from an animist metaphysics that conceives of all of nature as living.⁴ Thus we have two reductions of the human, one positivist, one animist. Although it is customary to contrast positivism to naturalism, I use the term here to characterise all those varieties of philosophical naturalism for which current science delimits the scope of knowledge and culture is continuous with nature. Animism is also a variety of naturalism, but one that proceeds from a straightforwardly metaphysical conception of nature. The contrast between positivism and

³ For an exemplary statement of this brand of philosophical naturalism, see Daniel C. Dennett *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds* (W. W. Norton and Co., 2017).

⁴ See for instance Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press 2010). See also Braidotti: "All matter or substance being one and immanent to itself, it is intelligent and self-organizing in both human and non-human organisms [...] Vital matter is driven by the ontological desire for the expression of its innermost freedom (conatus)." (Braidotti 2018: 4)

animism is not between naturalism and anti-naturalism but between scientific and speculative naturalism. Both concur in stipulating an underlying continuity between culture and nature. Where the former seeks to explain how human mindedness arises from mindless but scientifically tractable processes, the latter rejects modern scientific 'reductionism' and seeks instead to reunite culture and nature by attributing mindedness to everything. For those who embrace this second option, the ubiquity of mindedness (understood as sentience rather than sapience) follows from post-structuralism's 'decentering of the subject'. The destitution of the subject as "the I that is we and the we that is I",⁵ which lies at the heart of philosophical modernity as elaborated by Kant and Hegel, entails the dissolution of anthropocentrism and the inception of a postmodern animism for which anthropomorphism is no longer an error but an enabling commitment.⁶

Scientific naturalism is more audacious: it rejects anthropomorphism as well as anthropocentrism. Subjectivity is a cognitively tractable natural phenomenon: it

⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Tr. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2018) §177, p. 108.

⁶ See for instance Eduardo Kohn *How Forests Think: Towards an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013) and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's *Cannibal Metaphysics* (Tr. Peter Skafish, Minneapolis: Univocal/University of Minnesota Press, 2017). Bruno Latour is perhaps the most significant precursor of this strand of posthumanist thought. See his *We Have Never Been Modern* (Tr. Catherine Porter. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993). I have criticized Latour's philosophical claims elsewhere ('Concepts and Objects' in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Realism and Materialism*, edited by Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman (Melbourne: Re-Press, 2011) pp. 47-65.)

is (for example) the embedding of a transparent self-model within a representational system's world-model.⁷ Nevertheless, positivists and animists concur in rejecting Kant's transcendental correlation of cognizing subject and cognizable object. But Kant's critical demarcation of causation from justification entails that the knowing subject is neither a substance (Descartes) nor a bundle of experiences (Hume) but an epistemic function that cannot be located within the world whose experience it renders possible. Thus Kant de-substantializes the subject, subtracting it from the reality it conditions. Rejecting Kant's demarcation of causation from justification, positivism and animism both re-inscribe subjectivity within reality, thereby re-substantializing it. Animism does so directly by embracing panpsychism, understood as the claim that all things think. Positivism does so in a less direct but ultimately no less metaphysical fashion by re-integrating the scientific perspective into the reality it seeks to describe and explain. Science is not a 'view from nowhere' but a particular perspective on reality embodied by organisms with specific biological histories and cognitive defaults. By collapsing Kant's distinction between the causal etiology of knowledge and its normative justification, both positivism and animism relativize their own cognitive claims in a manner that oscillates between

⁷ See for instance Thomas Metzinger's *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* (MIT Bradford Books, 2003). See also Metzinger (ed.) *Conscious Experience* (Paderborn: Imprint Academic, Thorverton und mentis, 1995). My point here is not to endorse Metzinger's account unconditionally (it too quickly glosses over the problem of the reality of appearances) but to flag its significance as an attempt to account for the phenomenon of first-personal subjective consciousness using the explanatory resources of contemporary natural science (specifically, neurobiology and cognitive neuroscience).

empiricist scepticism and metaphysical perspectivism. The sceptical tendency is exhibited in the pessimistic meta-induction and the claim that science can no longer lay claim to overarching unity. The perspectivist corollary is the suggestion that reality may have as many different facets as there are vocabularies for describing it. Both tendencies are discernible in recent philosophy of science.⁸ In either case, subjectivity is reified as both conditioning of and conditioned by the reality it knows.

The ethics of affirmation

Posthumanism embraces this reification by affirming the continuity between human and non-human. This continuity is codified in the tropes of hybridity, entanglement, and assemblage, which are ubiquitous in posthumanist writing. Through them, the nature-culture divide is bridged, but at the cost of naturalizing and eternalizing historically specific social forms, such as the network for instance. This naturalization is meant to compensate the ontological imbalance introduced by Kant's elevation of the human subject above the nature to which it legislates; an elevation which simultaneously demotes God to the status of regulative Idea of reason. Kant's promotion of humanity and demotion of divinity paves the way for Marx's declaration that "[t]he criticism of religion ends with the doctrine that man is the highest being for man, that is, with the categorical imperative to overthrow all circumstances in which man is

⁸ See for instance John Dupré, *The Disorder of Things: Metaphysical Foundations of the Disunity of Science* (Harvard University Press, 1995), or Nancy Cartwright, *The Dappled World: A Study of the Boundaries of Science* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

humiliated, enslaved, abandoned, and despised.”⁹ The insistence that man is the highest being for man follows from the insight that value does not have a transcendent source, that it arises from human subjectivity, not from things-in-themselves. The subject is an activity, not a substance; an activity whose cognitive aspects, privileged by Kant, are entwined with social and historical factors revealed by Hegel and Marx. It is because it reifies the subject as one pole of the self-relation that posthumanism is able to accuse the anthropocentrism espoused by Kant, Hegel, and Marx of promoting an illegitimate ontological hierarchy. Thus where humanism sought to negate humanity’s subjugation by the non-human, post-humanism affirms non-human alterity to redress its subjugation by the human. I use the term ‘redress’ advisedly here. The subordination of negation to affirmation – codified in Deleuze’s reading of Nietzsche¹⁰ – signals the subordination of politics to ethics, and of history to ontology. The result is at once the ontologizing of ethics and the ‘ethicizing’ of ontology, ratified in Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza. It is this double movement that explains why posthumanism can affirm alterity and denounce subjugation while rejecting any human-centred rationale for the rightness of alterity or the wrongness of its subjugation. Difference as being and difference as ethos are fused together in affirmation. But if, as Deleuze insists, difference is the unequal-

⁹ Karl Marx ‘Towards a Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction’ in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 2nd edition, edited by David McLellan (Oxford University Press: 2000), p. 77.

¹⁰ See Gilles Deleuze *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Tr. Hugh Tomlinson (London: Athlone Press 1983).

in-itself, then to affirm difference is to affirm inequality.¹¹ Deleuze could not be more explicit: “God makes the world by calculating, but his calculations never work out exactly [*juste*], and this inexactitude or injustice in the result, this irreducible inequality, forms the condition of the world.”¹² To affirm difference is to free it from the yoke of equality. By the same token, the ethos of difference separates justice from equality. Justice is the separation of irreducible differences in obeisance to what Nietzsche called ‘the pathos of distance’. Aligning the pathos of distance with a politics of emancipation requires embracing differences up to and including all the differences generated by capitalism. This is why, as Braidotti puts it:

[P]osthuman scholarship [...] is contiguous and resonates with biogenetic and technologically-mediated advanced capitalism. What prevents it from being just an epistemic form of accelerationism? The answer is affirmative ethics, and the political praxis is collective counter-actualization of the virtual. The barrier against the negative, entropic frenzy of capitalist axiomatic is provided by the politics that ensue from the ethic of affirmation. The political starts with de-acceleration, through the composition of transversal subject assemblages that actualize the unrealized or virtual potential of what Deleuze calls ‘a missing people’. In the old language: de-accelerate and contribute to the collective construction of social horizons of hope. (Braidotti 2018: 11)

¹¹ See Gilles Deleuze *Difference and Repetition*, Tr. Paul Patton (London: Athlone Press 1994) p. 90, p. 232 and *passim*.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 222.

The politics of deceleration sit uneasily with the ethics of affirmation. Braidotti espouses Deleuze and Guattari's metaphysical definition of capitalism, according to which capitalist reterritorialization is the entropic residue of a primary deterritorialization synonymous with creative Life. But because it jettisons the crux of Marx's analysis whereby capital as 'moving contradiction' is compelled to extract ever-increasing magnitudes of surplus-value from ever-diminishing quantities of necessary labour, this yields an equally metaphysical anti-capitalism, wherein the premium on creative affirmation obviates the need to abolish the social forms shoring up this moving contradiction: commodity, class, wage-labour, etc. Isabelle Garo has shown how, in *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari brandish the name 'Marx' as a signifier of radicalism the better to camouflage their emphatic rejection of his analysis of capitalism. This rejection can be boiled down to three cardinal points:

- 1) Even after it has overthrown feudal hierarchy and ushered in the rule of capital, the bourgeoisie, not the proletariat, remains the sole revolutionary class: "To reread history through the class struggle is to read it in terms of the bourgeoisie as the decoding and decoded class. It is the only class as such, inasmuch as it leads the struggle against codes, and merges with the generalized decoding of flows."¹³
- 2) The essential function of the state is not to maintain the interests of the dominant class but to overcode desire: "Overcoding is the operation that constitutes the essence of the State, and that measures both its continuity

¹³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Tr. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) p. 254.

and its break with the previous formations: the dread of flows of desire that would resist coding [...]"¹⁴

- 3) The fundamental antagonism is not the class struggle between capitalists and proletarians but the ontological schism between coded and decoded flows, or between the social machine and desiring machines: "In short, the theoretical opposition is not between two classes, for it is the very notion of class, insofar as it designates the 'negative' of codes, that implies there is only one class. The theoretical opposition lies elsewhere: it is between, on the one hand, the decoded flows that enter into a class axiomatic on the full body of capital, and on the other hand, the decoded flows that free themselves from this axiomatic just as they free themselves from the despotic signifier [...] The opposition is between class and those who are outside class."¹⁵

Thus, instead of class struggle, the struggle of codes; instead of class domination, code domination; instead of the contradiction between human reproduction and capital reproduction, the schism between human sociality and nature's "decoded flows".¹⁶ Marx's denaturalisation of social antagonism was a prelude to the transformation of humanity's relation to its inorganic body, nature. Deleuze and

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 199.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 254, translation modified.

¹⁶ As Garo observes, while the terms of these substitutions may be peculiar to Deleuze and Guattari, their conclusions are not: they can be found among a host of their contemporaries, including Alain Touraine, André Gorz, Serge Mallet, Cornelius Castoriadis, and Michel Foucault. See Isabelle Garo *Foucault, Deleuze, Althusser, Marx. La politique dans la philosophie*. (Paris: Demopolis, 2011) pp. 224-225.

Guattari re-naturalise social antagonism in order to liberate nature's decoded flows from the fetters of human sociality, whose despotic avatars are the state, the signifier, and the subject.

Thus, even as it calls for deceleration, Braidotti's posthumanism shares with its accelerationist sibling Deleuze and Guattari's metaphysical premium on creativity over reactivity, or decoding over coding. What makes it 'critical' is its wish to palliate rather than celebrate the social consequences of capital's creative destruction. But Braidotti's appeal to "unrealised or virtual potential" jars with her Deleuzean commitments. Deleuze pits virtual and actual against Aristotle's potentiality and actuality. Where the latter are equal halves of equivocal being, the former constitute the unequal halves of univocal being. Thus where potentiality is not yet present, virtuality is unrepresentable. This equivocation underwrites Braidotti's invocation of "hope" in an as yet unrealised but present potential; a hope which supplants the imperative to abolish the social relations shoring up the boundary between the presentable and unrepresentable. Because it is wholly immanent to the logic of capital, the counter-actualization of virtual potencies required by Braidotti's hope is effectively the cultivation of empowerment within existing social relations. This becomes clearer when we remember that Deleuze uses the concept of a "missing people" to signal the disintegration of proletarian unity and the destitution of revolutionary transformation: "If the people are missing, if there is no longer consciousness, evolution or revolution, it is the scheme of reversal which itself becomes impossible. There will no longer be conquest of power by a proletariat,

or by a united or unified people.”¹⁷ Deleuze’s alignment of revolution with reversal is as tendentious as his reduction of proletarian unity to ‘consciousness’ – it is better and more materialistically defined in terms of the labourer’s reduction to their labour-power. In the case of Braidotti, it is telling that the categories in terms of which she nominates the ‘missing’ – i.e., indigenous, feminist, queer, otherwise enabled, et al. – are identifications of the excluded already acknowledged by capitalist neoliberalism, rather than indices of the unrepresentable capable of destroying its logic of incorporation (i.e. subsumption under value). What is ‘missing’ for Braidotti is simply whatever is not yet included. And since capitalism has already subverted bourgeois humanism by personifying things (including corporations), the ‘social horizon of hope’ for ‘a people to come’ under capitalism reduces to the claim that the indigenous, feminist, queer, otherwise enabled, etc., are ‘people’ just as much as things are.

People and things

Of course, the distinction between people and things is precisely what posthumanism rejects as the basis for humanism’s exclusionary exceptionalism. So it is important to point out that the ‘humanism’ implied by Marx’s critique of commodity fetishism is generic rather than specific, which is to say that its *unlikeness* cannot be specified by any determinable difference (we will return to this below). Thus Marx’s critique is not reducible to the complaint that capitalism obliterates the fundamental difference between people and things, or subjects and objects. Capitalist commodity production is founded upon the expropriation

¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, Tr. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galetta (London: Athlone Press, 2000), pp. 219-220.

of the common means of production; an expropriation in which both those means and the labour they absorb in the production process are privatized. The result of this privatizing expropriation is the capitalist class relation, in which the ratification of personhood as a proprietary relation pits capitalist against proletarian. Persons are proprietors, either of capital or of labour-power. But this personification is enforced by an impersonal social relation whose concomitant is reification, the transposition of relations between producers (wage-labourers) into relations between their products (commodities). Reification is the apparent socialization of relations between commodities, but a socialization that blots out the privatization of the labour and instruments through which those commodities have been produced. Far from presupposing a metaphysical difference between people and things, Marx's critique of commodity fetishism reveals how personification and reification go hand in hand in capitalist culture. The reification of persons is entailed by a ratification of personhood predicated upon dispossession: not of some specifiable human essence (derided by Marx in his sixth thesis on Feuerbach as the 'dumb generality' naturally uniting the individuals of a species), but of a collective social capacity (harboured by 'the ensemble of social relations'). It is this dispossession of collective capacity that reduces the labourer to her labour-power and the capitalist to an executive of valorization. The dualism of person and thing, or subject and object, is a result of this dispossession, not its presupposition. What is dispossessed is the externalizing activity of collective reproduction. It is the expropriation of collectivity as externalization, not of some proper essence.

What constitutes the exception of the human for Marx – or better, what de-naturalises the human – does not depend upon a positively specifiable difference. Humans *make* the difference through their historically mutable forms of social reproduction. The traits in terms of which we try to specify this difference, such as the proprietary relation used to define ‘personhood’, reflect social forms generated by what we do without knowing we are doing it. It is this practical unknowing that is indexed by Marx’s invocation of collective social capacity. ‘Human’ does not name a specifiable way of being – the self, the sovereign individual, or even ‘that being which is in each case mine’.¹⁸ It indexes the blindspot between historically specific determinations of the human (as political animal, rational animal, economic animal, but also as soul, subject, existence, etc.) and social production as the generic activity through which such determinations are generated. Posthumanism denounces these determinations as exclusionary while dissolving the determining activity that underlies them into a nature governed by fluxes and refluxes. It subordinates social production to natural law in the name of an ideal of inclusiveness subservient to the logic of commodification. This is of a piece with the logic of liberalism, which culminates with the ontological ratification of capitalism’s personification of things and reification of people in the formal equivalence of human and non-human – formal because it cannot but abstract from material differences in functional capacity. Hence the appeal to a single quality like sentience as the medium of equivalence; hence also the congruence between posthumanism and panpsychism. The ideological corollary of this equivalence is an ‘ethics of

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962) pp. 67-68.

affirmation' that not only masks but consolidates capital's sub-division of class into the ramifying fractures of race, gender, ethnicity, culture, etc.

However, it is not enough to expose the conservative kernel beneath post-humanism's radical veneer, or to abstractly oppose the generic de-specification of the human to its restrictive specification. What should be shown rather is how both this specification and de-specification are conjoined in capitalism as a historically specific mode of production; or more precisely, how the interplay between social reproduction on one hand, and value reproduction on the other, dissolves and reshapes the contours of the human. I cannot explore this issue further here. But I want to consider another critique of humanism; one that does not presume to usher in the era of the posthuman by metaphysical fiat, but seeks rather to show how humanism itself programs the end of the human. This is the signal philosophical virtue of Derrida's 'The Ends of Man'.¹⁹

The ends of Man

The 'ends' in question are not just twofold but antinomic: the end as annulment, closure, limit; but also the end as accomplishment, opening, purpose. Derrida's argument is that the former *supplements* the latter: the annulment of the human is necessary for its accomplishment. More precisely, annulment is at once the

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida 'The Ends of Man' in *Margins of Philosophy*, Translated by Alan Bass (Brighton: The Harvester Press Ltd., 1982) pp. 109-136.

making and unmaking of accomplishment.²⁰ Humanism achieves its metaphysical coherence by intricating annulment and accomplishment in the figure of death. This intrication is exemplified by Hegel's *Geist* ('the I that is We') as well as Heidegger's *Dasein* ('that being which is in each case mine'). In Derrida's account, Hegelian *Geist* is the still too metaphysical pre-figuration of Heidegger's *Dasein*, which, as the ultimate metaphysical configuration of the human, lives off its own death precisely because dying is what is most proper to it. The exception of the human is actualised as the exposure to the possibility of its annulment.

Derrida proceeds in two steps. First, with the claim that Hegel's articulation of natural and philosophical consciousness in the coincidence of 'I' and 'We' (individual and generic consciousness) presupposes the achieved *parousia* of 'absolute spirit'²¹:

The 'we', which articulates natural and philosophical consciousness with each other in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, assures the proximity to itself of the fixed and central being for which this circular re-appropriation is

²⁰ This logic of supplementation remains deconstructive to the extent that it must prevent the antinomy of annulment and accomplishment from burgeoning into a contradiction that might be determinately negated.

²¹ Which Derrida defines as follows in another essay from the same book ('The Pit and the Pyramid'): "Absolute spirit: the unity, that is in itself and for itself, of the objectivity of the spirit and of its ideality or its concept, the unity producing itself eternally, spirit in its absolute truth—absolute spirit." Derrida 1982, p. 74.

produced. The 'we' is the unity of absolute knowledge and anthropology, of God and man, of onto-theo-teleology and humanism.²²

Needless to say, this characterization of Hegelian *Geist* as the "fixed and central being" uniting God and Man is not peculiar to Derrida; it is a recurring (not to say obsessive) trope common to the generation of French philosophers to which Derrida belonged (Althusser, Deleuze, Foucault, Lyotard). We will examine it more critically below. The second step of Derrida's argument is the claim that Heidegger's own desubstantialization of subjectivity in *Being and Time* perpetuates its metaphysical privilege precisely insofar as *Dasein's* self-understanding remains a form of self-presence:

It is this self-presence, this absolute proximity of the (questioning) being to itself, this familiarity with itself of the being ready to understand Being, that intervenes in the determination of the *factum*, and which motivates the choice of the exemplary being, of the text, the good text for the hermeneutic of the meaning of Being. It is the proximity to itself of the questioning being which leads it to be chosen as the privileged interrogated being.²³

On Derrida's account, the radicality of Heidegger's deconstruction of subjectivity is belied by the assumption that *Dasein* is endowed with a pre-understanding of being. Heidegger assumes that the pre-understanding implicit in *Dasein's* practical comportment towards beings (including itself) can be made ontologically explicit. But the premise of the meaningfulness of being vitiates the deconstruction of subjectivity because meaning (at least according to Derrida's

²² Derrida 'The Ends of Man', p.121

²³ Ibid., p. 125-6.

reading of Husserl) presupposes the fusion of intending and intended (*noesis* and *noema* or meaning and meant) in consciousness. Of course, Heidegger rejects the immediate transparency of intended to intending, or of what is meant to meaning (*vouloir dire*). He introduces a distance into this phenomenological proximity by insisting that what is pre-understood in practical comportment is not transparently accessible to self-consciousness. It cannot be simply deduced or described; it must be brought to light, excavated, exposed, which is to say, interpreted. Interpretation as the rendering explicit of what is implicit unfolds in the hiatus between near and far. As Derrida notes, the relation of implicit to explicit replaces the dialectic of mediate and immediate: explicitation supplants mediation.²⁴ Dasein's understanding of itself and other beings implies its understanding of being as such. Even its 'average everyday' self-understanding as a thing among other things presupposes an understanding of thingliness whose provenance is ontological. But this interval between what is ontically proximate and what is ontologically distant (which is ultimately the nexus of immanence and transcendence) provides no leverage for mediation. The articulation of implicit and explicit relays the phenomenological unity of intending and intended (meaning and meant) because the ontic and the ontological are already entwined *within* the pre-ontological. Thus Heidegger writes: "Dasein is ontically 'closest' (*an nächsten*) to itself and ontologically

²⁴ Derrida makes this point in a footnote not included in the English translation of the text: see *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1972) p. 152, footnote 14.

farthest; but pre-ontologically it is surely not a stranger (*nich fremd*).”²⁵

Proximity and distance are articulated within the ambit of *Dasein*’s intimacy with *Sein*; in the inseparability of projection and projected. This is what allows Heidegger to insist: “*Dasein* must “show itself in itself and from itself.”²⁶ *Dasein*’s self-showing is a mode of being’s unconcealment. Consequently, as Derrida puts it:

[I]f “Being is farther than all beings and is yet nearer to man than every being”, if “Being is the nearest”, then one must be able to say that Being is what is near to man, and that man is what is near to Being. The near is the proper, the proper is the nearest (*propre, proprius*). Man is the proper of Being which right near to him whispers in his ear; Being is the proper of man, such is the truth that speaks, such is the proposition which gives the there of the truth of Being and the truth of man.²⁷

This originary propriety, binding man to being and being to man, allows Heidegger to articulate the meaning of being to human finitude, or ideality to mortality. By relating to itself in and through the resolute anticipation of death as its ‘ownmost possibility’, *Dasein* understands itself in its difference from other beings (whether ready-to-hand or present-at-hand) and projects the meaning of its own being in relation to being in general. But this projection is metaphysics. Thus Heidegger’s delimitation of the bounds of metaphysics in what he calls ‘fundamental ontology’ – which establishes being’s irreducibility to representation, or presence-at-hand – also opens up its possibility. It is this

²⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962) pp. 36-37.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 37

²⁷ Derrida ‘The Ends of Man’, p. 133.

entwinement of limit and purpose, or closure and opening, in Heidegger's attempted overcoming of the metaphysical substantialization (and therefore reduction) of human being that Derrida alludes to when he writes:

The end of man (as a factual anthropological limit) is announced to thought from the vantage of the end of man (as a determined opening or the infinity of a *telos*). Man is that which is in relation to his end, in the fundamentally equivocal sense of the word. Since always. The transcendental end can appear to itself and be unfolded only on the condition of mortality, of a relation to finitude as the origin of ideality. The name of man has always been inscribed in metaphysics between these two ends. It has meaning only in this eschato-teleological situation.²⁸

Humanism cannot but be metaphysical because it is in relation to death as limit that the human accomplishes its transcendence as the properly metaphysical being. And because metaphysics is properly human, every attempt to overcome humanism metaphysically yields only a degraded humanism, which is to say, anthropomorphism. Thus for Derrida, the proclamation that we are already in a post-metaphysical or post-human era sustains the complicity whereby the two ends, of metaphysics and the human, perpetuate each other. The end of metaphysics is the perpetuation of the human; the end of the human is the perpetuation of metaphysics. Faced with the choice between the explicitation of the implicit, which risks preserving "the autism of closure", and the brute affirmation of exteriority, which threatens to "reinstall the new terrain on the oldest ground", Derrida proposes first, against phenomenology's "reduction to

²⁸ Derrida 'The Ends of Man', p.123.

meaning”, still discernible in Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, a “reduction of meaning”, which would determine its possibility on the basis of a meaningless “formal organisation”; second, a “new writing” ushering in a “change of style” that would “weave and interlace” explicitation and affirmation;²⁹ a writing that would inscribe “a difference still more unthought than the difference between Being and beings”; beyond the difference between presence and the present (Heidegger’s *Anwesen/Anwesend*);³⁰ a writing “without presence and without absence, without history, without cause, without *archia*, without *telos*, a writing that absolutely upsets all dialectics, all theology, all teleology, all ontology.”³¹

Form and presence

Derrida’s injunction to carry out the reduction of meaning, against all attempts to ventriloquize being, retains all its relevance today. Being does not whisper its meaning in our ear. But how are we to determine what has been withdrawn from a writing without principle or purpose, which is to say, without conceptual form? How could a wholly formless writing manifest the meaningless yet formal “organisation” that determines the possibility of meaning? The reduction that determines the difference between meaning and meaninglessness, or form and formlessness, can only be carried out by deploying another kind of form. The distinction between syntax and semantics is a consequence of such a reduction, but while Derrida might see in it another iteration of the metaphysical

²⁹ Ibid., pp.134-5

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Derrida ‘*Ousia and Grammê: Note on a Note from Being and Time*’ in *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 67.

opposition of form to content, it is better understood as articulating two varieties of form. Thus for instance Carnap reduces meaning to logical syntax in order to dissolve metaphysical perplexity.³² But the autonomization of syntactic form risks reinvesting the latter with all the privileges of ideality. This is why the reduction *to* form must also involve a reduction *of* form that roots the latter in formless function.³³

The resort to style deformalizes the organisation that would mark the difference between meaning and meaninglessness. Rhetorical form blurs the difference between syntax and semantics; it is the semanticization of form, rather than its reduction. Derrida's attempt to inscribe the unrepresentable through style is symptomatic of his uncritical acceptance of Heidegger's claim that being's withdrawal (its unrepresentability) is not a negation. Similarly, Derrida's fidelity to Heidegger's claim that dialectical negativity is determined on the basis of the present leaves him with no recourse but to gesture towards an unrepresentable alterity – a beyond of humanism and metaphysics – whose absolute exteriority his own critical vigilance compels him to temper with a relation to interiority

³² See in particular Carnap's *Logical Syntax of Language*, Translated by Amethe Smeaton (London: Routledge 2001).

³³ This twofold reduction is discernible in the work of Wilfrid Sellars, a philosopher in whose writings the influence of Carnap is balanced by that of Wittgenstein, such that syntactic form is shaped by socially inculcated practice. The outstanding question concerns the articulation of ideal form and social function, and it is upon this question that we can bring to bear resources from Hegel and Marx. The beginnings of an answer can be glimpsed in Hegel's critique of representation, which paves the way for Marx's immanent critique of social form.

that partially re-inscribes it within what he calls “the text” or system of metaphysics. Hence Derrida’s otherwise perplexing suggestion that the hesitation between explicitation and affirmation could solicit the unrepresentable. But Derrida’s fidelity to Heidegger on this score is puzzling precisely because he himself points out how Hegel’s account of the relation between time and eternity proposes a concept of presence that cannot be taken as representative of the ‘vulgar’, ‘inauthentic’ understanding of time to which Heidegger opposes his own ‘authentic’, ‘originary’ interpretation. Consider the following passage from Hegel’s *Philosophy of Nature*:

Absolute timelessness is distinct from duration; the former is eternity, from which natural time is absent. But in its Notion, time itself is eternal; for time as such –not any particular time, nor Now – is its Notion, and this, like every Notion generally, is eternal, and therefore also absolute Presence. Eternity will not come to be, nor was it, but it is. The difference therefore between eternity and duration is that the latter is only a relative sublation of time, whereas eternity is infinite, i.e., not relative, duration but duration reflected into self.³⁴

Noting Hegel’s distinction between the infinity of presence and the temporal present, Derrida remarks:

Everything in Hegelianism that receives the predicate of eternity (the Idea, Spirit, the True) therefore must not be thought outside of time (any more than in time). Eternity as presence is neither temporal nor

³⁴ *Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature: Part Two of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, Translated by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), §258 ‘Remark’, p. 36.

intemporal. Presence is intemporality in time or time in intemporality: this, perhaps, is what makes anything like an originary temporality impossible. Eternity is another name of the presence of the present. Hegel also distinguishes this presence from the present as now. A distinction analogous, but not identical, to the one proposed by Heidegger, because it calls upon the difference between the finite and the infinite. An intra-ontic difference, Heidegger would say. And in effect this is where the entire question would have to reside.³⁵

What is the fundamental difference between the finitude of being and the infinity of the Notion? Finitude is presence's withdrawing from the present. Infinity is the present's elevation (*Aufhebung, relève*) into presence through the Notion. The withdrawal of presence blocks the mediation of the Notion and delimits conceptual comprehension. This is why *Dasein's* proximity to *Sein*, the proximity within which being is always already pre-understood, is refractory to social and historical mediation. As origin of historicity and sociality, it cannot be historically or socially conditioned. But this appeal to the difference between the ontologically originary and the ontically derivative begs the question. Why accept that presence withdraws? We can imagine Heidegger responding: Because although it is not something, it is not nothing either, and its not being nothing is precisely not assignable to the negation of negation, but to the phenomenon of presence, its self-showing. Being is not given, but it is the implicitly understood meaningfulness of givenness as such. Despite Heidegger's precautions against the lure of phenomenological immediacy, the appeal to the *phenomenon* (i.e. *the self-showing*) of presence as source of the question of the

³⁵ Derrida 'Ousia and Grammé: Note on a Note from *Being and Time*', pp. 45-46.

meaning of being institutes the proprietary intimacy between *Sein* and *Dasein*; a proximity of which Derrida is rightly suspicious, even as he embraces the unrepresentability which is its corollary. Yet propriety and unrepresentability go together.

To see why Derrida's suspicion stops short of the pathos of the unrepresentable, we must remember that Heidegger de-substantialises the phenomenon by teasing out the fissure between the apparent and its appearing. This fissure constitutes the ontic-ontological difference. But as Derrida shows, it is this difference as hiatus between near and far that remains circumscribed by *Dasein's* proximity to *Sein* and the propriety of pre-understanding. And it is within the space of this propriety that understanding unfolds into interpretation. This space, which Heidegger calls "the clearing" (*Lichtung*) of being, is a relation without separation; a relation whose poles can be distinguished but not separated. Thus the immediation of intending to intended, which Heidegger otherwise eschews, is reinstated in the indivisibility of the relation of *Sein* to *Dasein*. What Heidegger calls 'presence' (*Anwesen*) is this indivisible division, which he will later also call 'the Same' (*das Selbe*). But what Hegel calls 'presence' is the division of the indivisible; better, it is division *as* indivision. For Hegel, sameness is riven by its own alterity: the self-same is self-estranging. This is the subversive core of Hegel's conception of essence, as crystallised in a famous passage from the 'Force and Understanding' section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

This self-identical essence is therefore related only to itself; 'to itself' implies relationship to an 'other', and the relation-to-self is rather a self-

sundering; or, in other words, that very self-identicalness is an inner difference. These sundered moments are thus in and for themselves each an opposite-of-an other; thus in each moment the 'other' is at the same time expressed; or each is not the opposite of an 'other' but only a pure opposite; and so each is therefore in its own self the opposite of itself. In other words, it is not an opposite at all, but is purely for itself, a pure, self-identical essence that has no difference in it.³⁶

Self-identity is self-sundering or self-opposing and what opposes itself to itself is self-identical. Identity is constituted by a self-relating negativity that splits each pole of the relation into a pure opposite that is at once a pure identity. Presence as self-relating negativity is precisely the splitting that cannot be integrated into the present; it is the splitting of time that prevents the end from reinstating the origin. Thus the death that is the life of Spirit does not render Spirit *present* to itself; it raises the present to the presence of Spirit. Consequently, while the difference between presence and the present is not representable; it is presentable in and through the movement of the Notion. This is the crux of what separates Hegel from Heidegger. Heidegger suspends the positivity of what is present to the withdrawal of presence, which is to say that he suspends the positivity of the presented to the unrepresentable. But he does so while positivizing the inseparability of the presented and the unrepresentable in the phenomenon, construed as the *datum* whereby presence shows itself through what it is not, i.e., the present, which is also to say, the object. Thus where

³⁶ *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, Translated by A. V. Miller (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), §162, p. 100. Miller's rendering of this difficult passage seems to me to be sharper than Pinkard's.

Heidegger's phenomenology is a science of the phenomenon as self-showing, in which what shows itself is not what is shown, Hegel's phenomenology is a science of consciousness's knowing of showing itself, where the difference between what shows itself and what is shown (essence and appearance), is a negation that is comprehended in the concept of what shows itself. That what shows itself is not what is shown is a negation that demands to be comprehended, rather than a withdrawal that commands interpretation.

In the final analysis, Hegel's logical determination of being as a nothing that neither presents nor withdraws itself extirpates ontological transcendence and delivers us from the temptation to endow being with a voice that could compel us to listen to its meaning. The meaninglessness of "being, pure being, without further determination", prevents transcendence from being reconstituted as the internal limit of immanence. For Heidegger, it is being as sheer transcendence, or withdrawal, that secures the 'belonging together' of the farthest and nearest, of exteriority and interiority, and it is because being's saying can only be said through ontic metaphors that its irreducible otherness also entails its inextricable familiarity. Thus the 'we' interpellated and called to itself in and through the voice of being cannot but assume the familiarity of a people, culture, nation, or race. This is the price to be paid for the ineradicability of the ontic in Heidegger's thinking of being.

Spirit's desire

Noting how *Dasein's* proprietary relation to *Sein* compels Heidegger to voice the ontological difference through ontic metaphors (of neighboring, shelter, house,

service, guard, voice, listening), Derrida casts doubt on Heidegger's insistence that explicitation supplants mediation.³⁷ Yet the subtilization of self-presence that Derrida traces in the movement from Hegel to Heidegger seems to project Heidegger's metaphors of proximity back onto Hegel. This projection underwrites Derrida's claim that the identity of the singular "I" and the generic "We" in Hegelian Spirit merely assures "the proximity to itself of the fixed and central being"; i.e., absolute presence. But this is to elide the fundamental divergence between the presence of the Notion and the presence of being, and to elide everything that separates self-consciousness's desire for recognition from *Dasein's* 'being-with' as a mode of its 'mineness'. Let us quickly summarize Hegel's account of the transition from consciousness to self-consciousness.

Consciousness is consciousness of a thing; but self-consciousness first appears to itself as consciousness of "the whole expanse of the sensuous world." This is its first moment, in which it comprises a difference between appearance and essence, but one that is not in-itself or substantial. The truth of self-consciousness is its re-unification with itself from out of its own appearance, i.e., from the sensuous world. This is its second moment as the essence of the first. Self-consciousness is this movement of self-unification (the removal of its antithesis); it is the *desire* for self-unification. But it does not yet know itself as this movement, or as this desire. Its object is "reflected into itself" because it is now also a movement of self-relation, and not just the thing of sense-certainty or perception. Desire renders self-consciousness dependent upon the desired object. But self-consciousness is the desire for self-unification in and through its

³⁷ Derrida 'The Ends of Man', p.130.

other; thus, it is the desire for independence. This desire cannot be satisfied by any object of desire; if it did, independence would be dependent. What is required to satisfy the desire for independence is neither a living thing, nor the desire of a living thing (the satisfaction of animal needs). Only the desire for another desiring self-consciousness can satisfy self-consciousness's desire for independence in and through its other. What it desires to satisfy it is another desire that relates to its desire as its negation. Thus self-consciousness relates to itself as the other which it itself is; it is the relation of an 'I' to another 'I' such that each 'I' is at the same time a 'We':

A self-consciousness is for a self-consciousness. Only thereby is there in fact self-consciousness, for it is only therein that the unity of itself in its otherness comes to be for it. The I, which is the object of its concept, is in fact not an object. But the object of desire is only self-sufficient, for it is the universal, inerasable substance, the fluid self-equal essence. While a self-consciousness is the object, the object is just as well an I as it is an object. – The concept of spirit is thereby present and available for us. What will later come to be for consciousness will be the experience of what spirit is, this absolute substance which constitutes the unity of its oppositions in their complete freedom and self-sufficiency, namely, in the oppositions of the various self-consciousnesses existing for themselves: The I that is we and the we that is I. Consciousness has its turning point in self-consciousness, as the concept of spirit, where, leaving behind the colorful semblance of the this-worldly sensuous, and leaving behind the empty night of the supersensible other-worldly beyond, it steps into the

spiritual daylight of the present [*Gegenwart einschreitet*, literally
“presence intervenes”].³⁸

Beyond the dichotomy of sensible and supersensible, or phenomenon and noumenon, self-consciousness raises the present (the object) into the eternity of presence (the Notion). Yet this supersession of the object does not immediately institute the reign of intersubjectivity, posited as the ideal sphere of mutually recognizing self-consciousnesses, because the desire that animates Spirit must work through inequality and misrecognition. Misrecognizing its other as an object, Spirit splits into recognizer and recognized. Thus the first moment immediately succeeding the emergence of self-consciousness is the struggle to the death between lord and bondsman. The lord refuses to recognize death’s sovereignty. But the bondsman does and consequently exchanges his independence for life. Yet the bondsman’s relinquishment of independence renders the lord dependent on his dependence. Thus the independence of the lord resides in the dependence of the bondsman; more precisely, the lord’s independence depends on the bondsman’s work. Consequently, the truth of sovereignty is “the servile consciousness of the bondsman.” Just as the truth of the lord’s independence turned out to be dependence, the truth of the bondsman’s dependence turns out to be independence, estranged in the sovereignty of the lord, which he can reclaim by re-appropriating his work. Thus it is through the confrontation with death as “absolute lord” that self-consciousness experiences its own essential nature. Death is the ultimate limit of the desire for independence so long as this desire is tethered to the life of the

³⁸ Hegel *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Translated by Terry Pinkard (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), §177, p. 108.

organism. The lord asserts his sovereignty over death immediately, by refusing to fear it. But the independence he acquires is not independence from life; he surrenders the work required to stay alive to another, the bondsman, who by working for the life of the lord also keeps himself alive. Thus the lord has not truly mastered death or life because he has delegated his life's independence to the work of the bondsman. Conversely, it is by fearing death and surrendering the independence of his life in working for the lord that the bondsman acquires power over life, and ultimately independence from it. Once he recognizes that the lord's independence depends on his dependence, the bondsman must risk re-appropriating his work to achieve a power over life (his own and others') that renders it truly independent of death (the "must" here follows from the fact that the bondsman is self-conscious and hence compelled by his desire for independence.) In mastering death through work, the bondsman frees his desire for independence from the desire for life. In doing so, he frees life from its subordination to death (this is part of what Hegel means by overcoming finitude). The determinate negation of the fear of death is the obverse of natural existence's desire for life as independence without negativity. Through work as what Hegel calls "universal formative activity", self-consciousness recognizes itself as the independence of absolute negativity; it recognizes its own absolute freedom as exerting mastery over the universal power, death, but also over the life hemmed in by death.

Negativity and history

Spirit is not mastery but mastery of mastery; it is not the power to dominate but to dominate domination (one of Marx's conditions for communism) and thereby

to abolish it (since it will not abolish itself). To condemn this too quickly as intolerable hubris is also to abandon the possibility of abolishing domination (whose other name is transcendence) in the name of an ontology ratifying what is. Derrida's account of the complicity between humanism and metaphysics equivocates between two different 'presences': the presence that withdraws from the present, as the source of finitude, and the presence that supersedes the present, raising it to infinity. But the infinity of presence is not its subordination to the present. Thus in response to Derrida's insistence that "the name of man has always been inscribed in metaphysics between these two ends [annulment and accomplishment]", we must insist that, beyond its metaphysical determination as the intrication of limit and purpose, the human is the name of absolute negativity, which, because it is not corralled by this intrication, has no proprietary relation to itself or being. Thus the freedom proper to the human (the independence of absolute negativity) realises itself in what first appears as improper or unfree (as intimated in the reversibility of the positions of lord and bondsman). But *pace* Heidegger, this negativity is not rooted in the metaphysical difference between actuality and potentiality. It is not a pure potentiality-to-be from whence ontic determinations, whether social or historical, derive as accidents. Rather, this negativity manifests the impropriety (or accidentality) of the human, upon which its determinability depends. This is to say that it does not pre-exist its estrangement in social forms such as money and exchange; it becomes possible through them. The determinable is un-determined through its estrangement. Thus the determinate does not precede its determination through negation and estrangement; it only acquires determinacy as the result of an

estrangement that has already taken place. This is the subversive core of Hegel's logic of estrangement.

Human history unfolds from the work of desire. But it is also the differential element within which the work of desire unfolds. As such, history is not the linear accretion of determination but a recurring loop through which absolute negativity un-determines whatever has become actually determinable. This is why the human is not only mutable but the source of a mutability that is *sui generis*. But where Hegel ties this negativity to self-consciousness, Marx and Freud extend it to the compulsions of social reproduction and libidinal repetition, both of which operate 'behind the back of' self-consciousness. The "tremendous power of the negative" that Hegel attributes to "the pure I"³⁹ is also rooted in a 'thing' that is not any recognizably human subject or self, precisely because it is neither a monad nor a dyad: it is the inhuman offspring of repetition and reproduction. But it is precisely the error of idealism to view what is unconscious, understood as that which is structurally inaccessible from the vantage of individual experience, as extrinsic or foreign to conceptual self-consciousness. Only by grasping its structural heteronomy, which is to say, the constitutive role played by the unconscious within it, can self-consciousness, or what Hegel calls Spirit, comprehend itself and thereby satisfy its desire for independence.⁴⁰ In other words, only by recognizing itself in the compulsion of the inhuman can the human become free.

³⁹ Ibid., p.20, §32.

⁴⁰ I owe the concept of 'structural heteronomy' to Tuomo Tiisala, who uses it in a distinct but related sense.