From the de-centred subject to relationality

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Abstract

The poststructuralist concept of the de-centred subject has been central to the deconstruction of the desire for mastery, self-sameness and identity. Through a deconstruction of the desirous logic of binary oppositions such as subject-object, I-You, self-other, masculine-feminine, poststructuralists bring to light the subversive possibilities in the negated term. This term is based on principles of meaning that displace the sameness and separation of oppositional logic: what is repressed is difference and relation. We argue that difference and relationality cannot be deduced through a deconstruction of binary oppositions and the centred subject. Relations are based on an alternative ontology, time and space, and on an inclusive rather than an exclusive or oppositional logic. The key to this different logic is a distinction between finitude and infinitude. Whereas oppositions presume the existence of finite terms, relationality presumes the reality of infinitude. In an experience of relationality, subjecthood is suspended; there are no finite terms, but, rather, the undefinable non-oppositional difference of wholeness.

Key words: desire, difference, infinitude, relation, subject, whole

From the de-centred subject to relationality

Over the last forty years, the subject and subjectivity have been central concepts in social and cultural theory. In a diversity of traditions, a focus on the subject arose from a critique of the abstractions and determinism of structuralist thinking. Structuralism, it was argued, ignored concrete social practices, concentrating instead on the abstract rules and principles that governed systems of signification, kinship, economy, morality and so on: in arguing that the social order was determined by underlying rules, structuralists gave insufficient attention to subjects and the possibility of social change. Thus, the subject introduced a dynamic element to social and cultural theory: the socially constituted subject was not only capable of change but was itself the source of resistance and social change (Henriques et al 1984, pp. 219-225).

While the subject has been significant in both mainstream social theory and poststructuralism, in this article we will focus on the latter's concept of the de-centred subject. Since poststructuralism has been a major influence on our

work (Game 1991; Game and Metcalfe 1996), this is a sympathetic critique through which we hope to develop the central concerns in this field, including the relation to the other, difference, presence, the gift and the divine. Our intuition is that we are attempting to theorise the same phenomena, but that certain unquestioned assumptions in poststructuralism make it impossible for this tradition to directly address the life of relation.

Poststructuralism

As Silverman suggests, poststructuralism has developed through the combination of semiotics and the subject: 'signification cannot be isolated from the human subject who uses it and is defined by means of it' (Silverman 1984, p.3). She quotes Benveniste:

> What then is the reality to which *I* or *you* refers? It is solely a 'reality of discourse', and this is a very strange thing. *I* cannot be defined except in terms of 'locution', not in terms of objects as a nominal sign is. *I* signifies 'the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing *I*. (Silverman 1984, p.46; see also Benveniste 1966, p 252)

The linguistic system provides the conditions by which subjects are called into being: there is no extra-discursive reality for the subject. One of the important implications of this is that, in contrast to humanist presumptions, the subject of knowledge cannot make claims to the truth of such a reality.

In their critique of the conscious, rational and knowing subject of humanism, poststructuralists highlight the psychoanalytic idea of a split between consciousness and the unconscious. Consciousness and the unconscious are created simultaneously as the subject is produced. The repressions of the unconscious create a split world of meaning: '[t]he subject inhabits one psychic space consciously but another unconsciously.' In both form and content, these spaces often operate 'in startling opposition to each other' (Silverman 1984, p.51). Conscious knowledge is always shadowed and potentially undermined by the unconscious, which, by definition is the unknown on which knowing relies. The unconscious, then, is the mark of the impossibility of a conscious, complete self-knowledge. Thus, the idea of the split subject has been crucial to a project of deconstructing totalizing knowledge claims. It is important to understand, though, that poststructuralists are not seeking to deny the importance of the subject, but rather to displace the centred knowing subject. 'Neither consciousness nor the ego is any longer in the position of principle or origin' (Ricoeur, quoted in Krupnick 1987, p. 6).

Lacan brought together these two fields, the semiotic and a Hegelian reading of the psychoanalytic, arguing that both operate through binary oppositions. In structuralist analyses of oppositions such as subject-object, I-you, self-other, the identity of the privileged term is produced by its negation of the second term. The negated term stabilizes the order. Lacan, for example, saw no political significance in the opposition between masculinity and femininity that he regarded as basic to the symbolic order. For poststructuralists like Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous, however, the negated term of the feminine is the site of subversion of the phallic symbolic order and the undoing of the centred patriarchal subject. The unconscious of the symbolic order, the negated term contains the repressed possibilities of a subversion of that order.

This concern with the repressed possibilities in hierarchical oppositions is a concern with difference. Binary oppositions are based on the principle of sameness, identity and coherence. In reducing the feminine other to no more than a not-masculine, and the you to a not-I, the oppositional order negates difference. The poststructuralist strategy is to bring to light the principles of meaning in the negated term that disrupt the sameness of oppositional logic. In contrast to the stability of oppositional logic, the unconscious and the feminine, for example, are based on principles of movement, process and multiplicity.

The emphasis on these other principles of meaning is, therefore, not simply a reversal of an opposition: it involves a deconstructive *shift* in logic. As Freud said, the unconscious is exempt from a logic of contradiction, it doesn't say 'no' (Freud 1984, pp.190, 442). There is an undefinable displacement that cannot be recuperated within the logic of binary oppositions:

> After the deconstructive reversal, 'which brings low what was high', there is the displacement that brings about 'the eruptive emergence of a new "concept"'…. [T]his concept that is not a concept, is outside the previous binary opposition and cannot be recuperated in a dialectic. (Krupnick 1987, p.12)

In this displacement lies the political significance of poststructuralism.

A poststructuralist politics is not utopian, heroic or revolutionary. Grounded in the tensions existing here and now, it is a politics which insists that tensions are inescapable: the deconstruction of binary oppositions is not their destruction. Rather than being external to the order, the source of transformation is the very condition of that order. In contrast to totalizing knowledges, then, where the analyst is positioned outside the order, and given an Archimedean point from which to overturn it, the poststructuralist analyst is implicated in the

order they deconstruct. It is out of a concern to emphasise this implication that poststructuralists insist that deconstructive displacement is never arriving (see, eg, Krupnick 1987, p. 16; Kearney 2001, p. 73; Cixous 1986, pp. 87-97). For them, to settle would be to presume a certainty in knowledge.

While we are sympathetic to the poststructuralist concerns with difference, implication and process, we think that these are undermined by a strategy that takes oppositions and splits as its starting point. While poststructuralists acknowledge that these oppositions rely on a relation between the terms that claim to be separate, they can only sense this relationality retrospectively. They start with separate identities and, then, through showing their impossibility, reveal that there must have already been a relation which cannot, however, ever be experienced. To experience the presence of relation would, in their terms, amount to a recuperation of the same.

Impossibility is a key term in deconstructive thought. Caputo and Scanlon, for example, define deconstruction as the experience of the impossible, 'a dream and a desire of something *tout autre*, of something that utterly shatters the present horizons of possibility' (Caputo and Scanlon 1999, p. 3). Because they start with alienation and separation, deconstructionists assume that any claim to direct connection and relation is nostalgic, fantastic or metaphysical, a political

attempt to reinstate oneness or sameness: without oppositions, there is no difference. Poststructuralists claim that implication can only be understood via oppositions, and that it is metaphysical to talk of direct relations; we will argue that a richer sense of implication reveals the alienation of opposition and the reality of relation.

The inability to imagine the direct experience of relation means that poststructuralists retain an ontology of subjects, albeit de-centred subjects. Relations, they say, can only be understood through subjects. In this article, we will argue the contrary case, that relations cannot be understood as the logical outcome of oppositions. Relations are based on an alternative ontology, time and space, on an inclusive rather than an exclusive or oppositional logic.

The key to this different logic is a distinction between finitude and infinitude. Whereas oppositions presume the existence of finite terms, relationality presumes the reality of infinitude. In a meeting, the direct experience of relation, there are no finite terms, and yet there is the undefinable non-oppositional difference of wholeness or potential. Connection is not unity or oneness but no-thing-ness. As an inclusive logic, this wholeness does not negate identities, but nor does it fix upon them.

Because poststructuralists rely on oppositional logic, they presume that difference can never be met; it exists only in the never-arriving future of deferral. Accordingly, they cannot appreciate sociality that involves meetings with difference. In their attempt to preserve the possibility of difference, they defer it; in their desire for difference, they obstruct relationality with subjectivity.

Desire

Hegel's account of desire and the master/slave struggle underpins the poststructuralist project of deconstructing binary oppositions, the centred knowing subject and identity. His theory accounts for both the construction and deconstruction of identity, by focussing on the workings of desire. According to Hegel, 'self-consciousness is *Desire*' (Hegel 1977, p. 105). By this, he means that there is no self prior to an other: there are always two terms, self and other. Desire refers to the structure of interaction that generates these terms.

If desire, for Hegel, is the basis of self, it is also the basis of knowledge. Knowledge is presumed to revolve around the self, always motivated by a

desire for self-knowledge and self-certainty. Although apparently focussed on an other, desire is always seeking to confirm a self that stands alone as a self-same, independent, finite identity. Yet, since the world *is* comprised of others and differences, the self is compelled to go out of itself, to make the other known and familiar, to master and assimilate otherness in order to return to a self more self-certain in its self-sameness. The logic of desire, and a masterful knowledge, therefore, involves the negation or supersession of difference:

> The simple 'I' is this genus … for which the differences are *not* differences only by its being the *negative essence* of the shaped independent moments; and self-consciousness is thus certain of itself only by superseding this other that presents itself to self-consciousness as an independent life… . [I]t destroys the independent object and thereby gives itself the certainty of itself as a *true* certainty, a certainty which has become explicit for self-consciousness itself *in an objective manner.* (Hegel 1977, p. 109)

In desire, then, the other's difference is negated through an objectification which gives the subject an objective proof of the independence of their selfhood: I am not-you.

The problem is that, as Hegel recognises, desire depends on the existence of the other that it would negate. If otherness is negated, desire dies, taking with it the sense of self: there is no sense of motivation, of will, of action in the world. Only desire makes things happen and motivates knowledge. So while desire apparently seeks satisfaction, through negation and destruction, it also depends upon the endless discovery of new otherness to negate. Self-consciousness needs the other in order to continually consume the other. It becomes apparent, then, that what is truly desired is desire itself: the excess of more, elsewhere, without end.

The famous struggle that Hegel identified, the master/slave struggle, occurs with the encounter of two self-consciousnesses, an encounter that is the necessary step towards the achievement of the Truth of self-certainty. In this situation, however, simple negation will no longer work. Self-consciousness is now dependent on the recognition offered by the other's independent self-consciousness. Both self-consciousnesses want their independence confirmed, but to attain this they depend on the other's recognition, which in turn relies on the other's independent capacity to offer or withhold this recognition. Self and other are thus caught in an infernal struggle: each wants to master the other, negating any difference, but neither can afford to do so. The Hegelian vision of

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sociality is of an endless process of resolution and re-establishment of oppositions.

Hegel is particularly important for poststructuralism because of the deconstructive possibilities in his thought: within his own terms, mastery and self-sameness are impossible. The fantasised independence of the self is always undone by the self's dependence on the other, the desire for immediacy undone by mediation. Hegel highlights this deconstructive moment when arguing that 'each is for itself, and for the other, an immediate being on its own account, which at the same time is such only through this mediation [of self by self and other]' (Hegel 1977, p. 112).

It is in the denial of this dependency that poststructuralists see the possibility of an alternative - a positive, rather than negative structure of desire, in which the relation and difference could be acknowledged. Cixous, for example, speaks of a desire which 'would keep the *other* alive and different' (Cixous 1986, p. 79), and of a movement towards the other in a proximity that avoids merger or appropriation. She imagines an other that cannot be defined: refusing questions such as 'What is woman?', she says, 'There is nothing to say'. Any objectification is a recuperation of the same (Cixous 1986, p. 71-72). Her alternative involves recognition, rather than fear, of otherness: a desire which

goes into the unknown (Cixous 1986, p. 78). Cixous' desire is for a desire that 'doesn't settle down', that escapes, is elsewhere, a desire for an absolutely other. Thus, meeting this other is impossible: 'I move toward something that only exists in an elsewhere' (Cixous 1986, p. 97).

Cixous' attempt to find a positive structure of desire leaves desire intact, saving difference only by endlessly deferring it. Despite her interest in transformations now, difference is impossible in the present. Indeed, her emphasis on the endlessness of desire means that change becomes a constant rather than the source of difference: change is, inadvertently, reduced to the novelty of the next, to a number in a series. Because of her fear of falling into the backward-looking orientation of nostalgia, she insists on a future orientated movement that reduces time to a line. Thus, Cixous cannot appreciate the logics of the eternal, of the timeless, of circular time, of the momentary. For her, the eternal is no more than ever more time (Cixous 1986, p. 93). Our understanding of the eternal is, by contrast, a stillness characterised by infinite difference.

Because of the central role of desire in her work, Cixous presupposes the existence of a subject of desire. She cannot imagine a source of energy, or of change, other than the subject's desire. Her desire for a different desire is still desire, based on oscillations between two terms – self and other – that cannot

meet. If we are right, then, that meeting *is* possible, and that it is based on a non-subjective ontology and on non-linear time, this is a possibility that Cixous could not recognise. From a perspective of desire, such a meeting would be impossible.

The concept of the impossible is important to deconstruction because it guarantees the undoing of mastery: the excess of the unknown, located elsewhere, in an endlessly receding end, frustrates attempts at totalisation. Just as this logic precludes the possibility of a meeting with difference, it precludes the possibility of meeting the unknown here and now. By contrast, a relational logic of infinitude allows us to appreciate a knowing that is not based on subjects or desire. The *I* does not need to negate the *you* because, through the relation with *you*, the *I* has changed ontological form. The infinitude of this form means that a meeting is a meeting with the undefinable, the unknowable. We will return to the ontology of this *I* and *You* in the final section.

Displacement

Hegel shows that the self desires the immediacy of identity, but relies upon the mediations of the other. Mediations have, within poststructuralism, a similarly

crucial role in the deconstruction of mastery, identity, self-sameness, or what Derrida calls self-presence. No term can be present to itself in an identifiable present. Just as Hegel linked knowledge with the self, this poststructuralist critique of the metaphysics of presence relates as much to knowledge claims as it does to centred subjects: certainty is displaced through the demonstration that arrival is impossibly deferred. Deconstruction is, then, not offered as another total theory but as a method, aware of its own implication in the desire for mastery.

The mediations of signification are particularly important for poststructuralists, and displacement is crucial to their understanding of these processes. Displacement is a term drawn from Freud, for whom it referred to unconscious meaning processes, as evident in the dreamwork. Dreamwork was not simply a transcription of the dream's latent content into its manifest content, but was a 'distortion': '[t]he dream is, as it were, *differently centred* from the dream thoughts' (Freud 1976, p. 414). Poststructuralists highlight the deconstructive implication that, given this necessary process of displacement, it is impossible to access a latent content as a point of origin. Thus they emphasise Freud's interest in endless chains of association, arguing that they have no beginning or end.

There are, however, two different ways of understanding the temporality of chains. One uses a logic of eternity, the other a logic of more time, which is implicitly linear time. According to the former, associational chains consist of memory traces, which have no identifiable content that could be recovered. There is no time in the unconscious, as Freud noted (Freud 1984, pp. 191, 299-300). There are also no things, for traces are arrangements of facilitations without any correspondence to an object (see Laplanche and Pontalis 1973, pp. 247-8). Derrida is using this understanding of memory trace when he says,

> The alterity of the 'unconscious' makes us concerned not with horizons of modified – past or future – presence, but with a 'past' that has never been present… . Therefore the concept of trace is incompatible with the concept of retention, of the becoming past of what has been present. (Derrida 1982, p. 21)

The second temporal logic, however, is displayed in Derrida's concept of *différance*, which combines his interest in Freud with an interest in the deconstructive possibilities of Saussurian linguisitics. The *a* of *différance* refers to the process of deferral in a system, the deferral and referral of elements in a chain: an element signifies 'only by referring to another past or future element

in an economy of traces' (Derrida 1987, p. 29). Thus deferral highlights the displacement rather than the stability of terms in a system. Using the temporal concept of deferral to undo the spatial distances that characterize opposition, Derrida's *différance* is an attempt to develop a concept of difference that is not simply oppositional (which wouldn't be difference at all, only a negative mirroring).

We want to highlight this tension in Derrida's account of the trace. Whereas he implies a logic of infinitude or no-thing-ness in his insistence on the impossibility of a present identifiable term, in his account of deferral he presumes the prior existence of elements that refer to each other, in linear chain-like manner. The logic of infinitude that Derrida gestures toward, when he talks of a past that never was, is lost when he insists on the centrality of deferral. Thus, by retaining the logic of oppositions and their deconstruction, Derrida can't avoid engaging in the repression of this timeless tracing process. Because, for him, traces come in a sequence of past and future elements there turns out to be an originary separation of terms, a separation that is subsequently undone by the tracing. Tracing, in this account, depends on the fantasy of an untraced. With the logic of infinitude, on the contrary, traces are not added: the primacy of relation makes them always already there.

The concept of interval, upon which Derrida relies in his account of the trace, underscores his presumption of the time and space of oppositions. *Différance*, he says, is a matter of both time and space: there are 'two apparently different values of *différance* … to differ as discernibility, distinction, separation, diastem, *spacing*; and to defer as detour, relay, reserve, *temporization*' (Derrida 1982, p. 18). In this understanding of space-time, it is the interval that proves that presence, be it temporal or spatial, must be metaphysical:

> An interval must separate the present from what it is not in order for the present to be itself, but this interval that constitutes it as present must, by the same token, divide the present in and of itself, thereby also dividing, along with the present, everything that is thought on the basis of the present, that is, in our metaphysical language, every being, and singularly substance or the subject. (Derrida 1982, p. 13)

Derrida is undoing self-presence by showing that any attempt to identify a present fails: the interval that separates the present from what it is not can always be split, and split again. In arguing that the present is undone by the interval, Derrida is repeating the familiar argument about the impossibility of a chronological present. This argument only works, however, if space is taken to be Euclidean and time linear. In making this presumption, Derrida is also

presuming an originary separation that is subsequently undone by the deferral

of time. Since this divisible time and space is the basis of difference in Derrida's

account, this is a difference that can never be met, can never be present. Such a

meeting is possible, however, in an order that is based on a non-oppositional

temporal and spatial principle of connection-and-separation. This is the logic of

no-thing-ness, which is the real logic of the trace.

Given his reliance on Hegelian oppositional logic, it is not surprising that

Derrida presumes an ontology of subjecthood. Basing his account of the

subject on the concept of *différance*, he argues

> that the subject … depends upon the system of differences and the
>
> movement of *différance*, that the subject is not present, … that the subject
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> is constituted only in being divided from itself, in becoming space, in
>
> temporizing, in deferral. (Derrida 1987, p. 29)

Derrida points out that this confirms the Saussurian claim that language is not a

function of the speaking subject. The same observation is made by Lacan

(1977), in his classic mirror stage story, where he gives a psychoanalytic account

of the inauguration of the subject. Just as meaning cannot be identified, the

subject cannot be identified: subjects are divided within and between

themselves, as shown in the logic of the mirror. The fantasy of the mirror image is that signifier and signified coalesce. There is a direct correspondence: *that image is me.* The subject, in other words, arises from the desire for identity, the desire for the signified that would stabilize the subject. This identification with the mirror image provides the Hegelian fantasy of a coherent autonomous subject, but this subject is constituted in a split: the image splits the child between the see-er and the seen. Since identity depends on the mediations of an other, the subject's desire can never be realized: the separated subject desires a return to self-sameness that never was.

For Lacan and poststructuralists, the mediations of the symbolic order undo the desire for identity, the desire which is, nevertheless, the basis of that order. One of the consequences of this understanding of mediation is that alienation is inevitable; any claims to presence (always equated with self-presence) can only be nostalgia for an originary unity. Thus Derrida's famous account of the always already written of reality is analogous to Lacan's account of the split subject. Norris' commentary on Derrida's deconstruction of 'the natural' makes the point succinctly:

> Lévi-Strauss gives expression, like Rousseau, to an eloquent longing for the lost primordial unity of speech-before-writing…. The 'nature' which

Rousseau identifies with a pure, unmediated speech, and Lévi-Strauss

with the dawn of tribal awareness, betrays a nostalgic mystique of

presence which ignores the self-alienating character of *all* social

existence. (Norris 1982, pp. 38-40)

Suspicious that face to face speech is always a mirroring, Derrida insists on the

primacy of alienation. The alienations of mediation guarantee, for Derrida, that

no term can claim to be original, prior to mediation. Rather than being

understood as a loss of connection and sense of belonging, alienation is, for

Derrida, the basis of subjectivity and *all* social existence. Mediations produce

the intervals (the spacing and timing) that undo identity, and inaugurate the

symbolic order and the de-centred subject. Alienation, thus, *presumes* the

ontology of subjects, and can only derive the necessity of relation as a logical

consequence of the deconstruction of oppositions and the centred subject.

Intertwining

Concerned with the alienating implications of mediation, thinkers such as

Cixous and Irigaray seek a logic of desire and signification that allows for

proximity. Whilst close to connection, proximity avoids the metaphysics of presence that, they fear, accompanies connection. Accordingly, when Irigaray offers an account of a difference in femininity that disrupts the masculine economy of the same, her argument turns on a formulation of mediation and immediacy. In this there is closeness that doesn't get so close as to become the same.

This formulation is evident in Irigaray's interest in touch as a contrast to sight. The latter, she says, invites the fantasy of a correspondence between subject and object. Her critique of Lacan, for example, is based on his privileging of sight, for, while he does highlight the fantastic nature of the mirror phase, he nevertheless accepts the mirror's alienating effects. Touch, on the other hand, undoes the fantasy of correspondence through the proximity of contiguity. The immediacy of touch *is* the mediation: 'What she says is never identical with anything, moreover; rather it is contiguous. It touches (upon)' (Irigaray 1985, p. 29; see also Irigaray 1993, p. 161).

In order to safeguard against the presumed dangers of connection, Irigaray's feminine principle is characterized by restless movement: 'She herself enters into a ceaseless exchange of herself with the other without any possibility of identifying either' (Irigaray 1985, p. 31). Thus touch is based on the principle of

referral and deferral, a back and forth movement between self and other, who are in a constant state of never quite meeting, and forever moving on. 'Keep on going, without getting out of breath. Your body is not the same today as yesterday. … Be what you are becoming, without clinging to what you might have been, what you might be. Never settle.' (Irigaray 1985, p. 214). Any stillness, it is assumed, will lead to merger and sameness.

Interestingly, the indeterminacy of borders between self and other in touch encourages Irigaray to question the common assumptions of subject-based ontology. This is evident in her critique of counting, alluded to in the title of the book *This Sex Which is Not One*. Counting, she says, is based on spatialisation and specularization, the assumption that elements are identifiable units: 'She is neither one nor two. Rigorously speaking, she cannot be identified either as one person, or as two. She resists all adequate definition' (Irigaray 1985, p. 26). Irigaray's alternative to the finite logic of counting, however, is the concept of multiplicity, based on the polymorphous nature of desire. This understanding of multiplicity in terms of the logic of desire presumes, then, the infinitude of more (rather than the infinitude of no-thing-ness).

The problem with Irigaray's account of touch is that it retains the presumption that connection and immediacy involve a desire for identity. She overlooks the

questions: 'Why desire? Why the subject? Why assume that connection precludes difference? Why assume that stillness is a settling on a one?' The only alternative available to her, then, is the excess of the logic of desire, with the temporal and spatial assumptions that that involves. Nearness, ceaseless exchange, and moving on all presume Euclidean-linear space-time. Although Irigaray is dissatisfied with the logic of subjects and objects, she cannot derive an alternative ontology, space and time from her Hegelian starting point.

Irigaray's critique of Merleau-Ponty is a very clear example of the way in which Hegelian ontology frustrates her sense of another possibility. Merleau-Ponty's famous essay on touch, 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm', is a phenomenological study of relational logic. He uses the term 'flesh' to describe a world of differences and potential, in contrast to the ontology of subjects in their bodies in a world of other objects:

> The world scene is not 'in' my body, and my body is not 'in' the visible world ultimately: as flesh applied to a flesh, the world neither surrounds it nor is surrounded by it. A participation in and kinship with the visible, the vision neither envelopes it nor is enveloped by it definitively. (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 138).

Irigaray's reading of this essay cannot hear the difference in Merleau-Ponty's participatory logic because she simply presumes that the body belongs to a subject located in Euclidean space. For her, there must be a subject, a toucher, and, thus, she accuses Merleau-Ponty of solipsism, implying that this form of touch is appropriation:

> The subtlety of what is said of the visible and of its relation to the flesh does not rule out the solipsistic character of this touch(ing) between the world and the subject, of this touch(ing) of the visible and the seer in the subject itself. (Irigaray 1993, p. 157)

While it is true that Merleau-Ponty's language is not consistently relational (especially his term 'reversibility' to describe intertwining), it is nonetheless clear that he is arguing that it is impossible to understand relation, or flesh, or participation, by taking the logic of identities and oppositions as a starting point. It is necessary to start, he says, with differentiations in the whole of Being (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 270), with an ontology of possibility. In contrast to Irigaray's logic of infinitude as endless, unsettled exchange, this is a logic of infinitude as no-thing-ness, participation and wholeness: 'It is the same thing to be nothing and to inhabit the world. … [T]o be is not to remain in identity'

(Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 57). From the perspective of identity logic and Hegelian negation, it is impossible to understand the world of differences, 'density, depth, the plurality of planes, the background worlds' (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 68). For Merleau-Ponty, this relational world of differences is experienced directly.

The centre is everywhere and nowhere

Turning now to the infinite logic of meeting, we will also address understandings of the divine, an idea implicit in the notion of infinitude. As we have seen, poststructuralists assume that meeting necessarily involves a presence that is seen as identification and self-sameness. Accordingly their model of infinitude is based on a more – on deferral; on never arriving; on an elsewhere; on never meeting. Thus Caputo, for example, refers to Derrida's avoidance of the terms 'community' and 'gathering' on the grounds that they necessarily imply unity. He says that it is for this reason that Derrida speaks of 'a community *without* community' (Caputo 2004, p. 47). This avoidance of community and communion is what is at stake in the term de-centred, the centre being associated with an identity, a stable point of reference. The deconstructive strategy is to demonstrate that centring involves a desire for

impossible identity, and that difference relies on being de-centred, on the alienated condition of being out of place and in the wrong time.

The poststructuralist critique of meeting fails to understand that, while meetings *are* impossible, in Euclidean-linear space-time, meetings with difference are nonetheless possible, in the other times and spaces that cannot be recognised within Hegelian terms. Meetings are not subject-based, but, rather, occur through the logic of the fleshy no-thingness of participation. The centre of such meetings is not a stable point of reference, and nor does it occur in a chronological present. Rather, the centre is everywhere, the circumference no-where; it is an experience of boundlessness in the eternal present. Far from having a basis in sameness, meetings are only meetings if they involve both difference and sameness: the chiasm or intertwining *is* the meeting.

Our understanding of meetings with difference rests upon Buber's account of ethics. Buber uses the term 'I-It' to describe the desirous logic of the Hegelian world of finite subjects and objects. The world of the 'I-You' relation (sometimes translated as I-Thou) is different, based on the infinitude of nothingness:

The life of human beings is not passed in the sphere of transitive verbs alone. It does not exist in virtue of activities alone which have some *thing* for their object.

I perceive something. I am sensible of something…. This and the like together establish the realm of *It*.

But the realm of the *Thou* has a different basis.

When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object…. *Thou* has no bounds….

The relation to the *Thou* is direct. No system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between *I* and *Thou*…. No aim, no lust, and no anticipation intervene between *I* and *Thou*…. (Buber 1958, pp. 4, 11)

When in an I-It relation, a subject in a world of objects, Buber can see a tree for example, as picturesque, he can admire its vitality, he can classify it as a species and study it as a type, or see it as an example of a scientific law, or can turn it into a number, but in all of these cases 'the tree remains my object, occupies space and time'.

> *It can, however, also come about* … that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. …

To effect this it is not necessary for me to give up any of the ways in which I consider the tree. There is nothing from which I would have to turn my eyes away in order to see, and no knowledge that I would have to forget. Rather is everything, picture and movement, species and type, law and number, indivisibly united in this event.

Everything belonging to the tree is in this: its form and structure, its colours and chemical composition, its intercourse with the elements and the stars are all present in a single whole. (Buber 1958, pp. 7-8 emphasis added)

When the I becomes bound up in relation to the tree, a relation that comes about but is not brought about by any one, Buber is talking of an I-You relation. This does not involve the negation of the I-It form, but indicates the necessary relation between I-You and I-It. Thus, for example, in the moment of I-You, the tree is simultaneously locatable and not reducible to location. There is seeing, but no see-er or seen. When the tree is present as a whole, the I-You sees no *thing*, and therefore needs to exclude nothing from what is seen. This is infinitude, but rather than the poststructuralist sense of infinitude as

endless deferral and displacement, this is infinitude that is wholly here and now, present in the meeting.

Although some theorists interpret Buber's I-You as a meeting of subjects (eg. Sidorkin 1996), this is not our understanding. Whereas Benveniste argues that I and You are subjects in a binary opposition, Buber's I-You involves the suspension of subjectivity. When the speaker has no thing for their object, they cannot be a subject because they lack the mirroring that would turn them into one. They are no-thing, open in an accepting unintegrated state where there is difference and stillness. In the meeting, participants have found being in losing their selves. Only if a finite identity logic is presumed would this loss of self be taken as merger or unity. In the non-locational logic of infinitude, where there are no intervals to establish identity, there are, instead, particularities. As Merleau-Ponty insisted, the trace should be understood, not in terms of positive or negative terms, but rather as different possibilities in the whole of Being (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 270).

Merleau-Ponty's use of the term 'flesh of the world' describes this experience of participation in a whole. Since 'we are in the world', part of the 'closely woven fabric' of 'reality', seeing happens within this weave (Merleau-Ponty 1962, pp. x-xii). 'Immersed in the visible by his body … the see-er does not appropriate what he

sees … he opens himself to the world … my body is caught in the fabric of the world' (Merleau-Ponty 1964, pp. 162-3). Because I am in the world and the world is in me, '[t]hings arouse in me a carnal formula of their presence' (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 164; see also Shotter 2003). For Merleau-Ponty, it is only through being of the world that we can know the world, and yet, never know it as a total. Merleau-Ponty's understanding of participatory knowing highlights the alienation involved in a knowledge based on endless desire for the impossible, the unknown. It thus provides a richer understanding of implication: we are implicated through participation in a whole, through belonging.

The subjectlessness of Buber's I-You relation is based on its desirelessness ('no aim, no lust, and no anticipation'). Meeting is an acceptance of what is given by the world in the particularity of *this* encounter. As Buber says 'The *Thou* meets me through grace – it is not found by seeking' (Buber 1958, p. 11). In contrast to the desirous 'world of mirrors and mirroring', the relational world of acceptance has 'the simplicity of fullness' (Buber 2002, pp. 34-5). This fullness isn't a oneness or satiation, but is an emptiness; it is a sense of acceptance and connection, of gift and grace, that suspends the restless time of desire. Whereas the future orientation of desirous time takes us away from the present moment,

the time of an I-You meeting is the eternity of the present. The present is not for Buber 'the conclusion of "finished" time'. It is

> the real, filled present, [that] exists only in so far as actual presentness, meeting and relation exist. The present arises only in virtue of the fact that the *Thou* becomes present. (Buber 1958, p. 12)

The unfolding present is creative because it holds within it the possibilities of all time. The past here is not passed and the future is neither anticipation nor deferral: past and future co-exist as phenomena of the present. This is the time of fullness that allows the 'already and the not-yet' of potential (Steindl-Rast 1984, p. 133). It is in the present, rather than through the deferral of time, that difference exists.

When Buber says of the wholeness of an I-You meeting, 'Concentration and fusion into the whole being can never take place through my agency, nor can it ever take place without me', he is referring to an experience of the sacred. It involves a time, space and being that recalls the famous twelfth century account of God. As Bonaventure put it:

Because God is eternal and absolutely actual, He enfolds all durations

and exists simultaneously in all their moments as their centre and

circumference. And because He is infinitely simple and infinitely great,

He is wholly within all and without all; and it is for this reason that He is

an intelligible sphere of which the centre is everywhere and the

circumference nowhere. (quoted in Poulet 1966, pp. xvii)

God is not a thing, an identity. God is no-thing, the meeting involved in 'all real

living' (Buber 1958, pp. 11). Not transcendental or metaphysical, God is

associated with the shock of fleshy reality, here and now.

In some ways Buber's account is very close to the poststructuralist

understanding of relations. Both are interested in challenging identity logic, in

the possibility of infinitude, in that which the subject cannot bring about, and

in understandings of the divine which are not idolatrous. At the same time,

however, the accounts can scarcely be more different. Buber takes infinitude as

his starting point, demonstrating that this is inclusive of oppositional, finite

logic. Poststructuralists, on the other hand, take the finite logic of desire as

their starting point, deducing infinitude through a deconstruction. While they,

like Buber, would say that the logics of infinitude and finitude imply each other,

they can only imagine the infinite as excess, as more, elsewhere, later, as the

impossible. Thus the infinite is what cannot be experienced; difference is what cannot be met. Because there is always desire, and there are always subjects and objects (Derrida in Caputo and Scanlon 1999, pp. 64, 71), relations are impossible.

The difference between these two understandings of infinitude is highlighted in their different accounts of the divine. The divine, for Buber, is where you are, because you are part of a whole that is everywhere and nowhere. In the state of no-thingness you *experience* the divine. This possibility is not available to poststructuralism because it presumes the existence of the subject. As Caputo and Scanlon say:

> For Derrida, the impossible is the stuff of a faith or a desire with which we *begin,* which sets us in motion…. The impossible is like a Messiah whose very structure is never to appear in the present and who, by thus deferring his appearance, keeps the future open… . The non-appearing of the Messiah… is for Derrida a way to protect us against idols, to protect us from the Hegelian *aigle,* from divinizing something that presents itself here and now, in the present, as God's form on earth. (Caputo and Scanlon 1999, p. 8)

In this account, God has to be protected from idolatry because 'he' has been turned into a subject, an identity. The only way to keep the difference in God is to keep him at bay, thereby keeping desire alive (Derrida quoted in Caputo 2004, p. 42; see also Caputo 2001, p. 24; Kearney 2001, pp. 23, 73).

The subject in the poststructuralist account exists in the wasteland of an alienated world, in a de-centred everywhere and no-where. Faith is based in the endless renewal of desire for the impossible, for god beyond the circumference. With the ontology of relations, participation in the world is an experience of the divine, the centre.

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