Rethinking the Dialectic: Hegel with Derrida, Lacan with Foucault, and the Question of Dialectical Ethics

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Introductory Remarks

How might we begin a genealogy of 'negativity' as a concept in metaphysical philosophy? What, furthermore, might the aim of such a project be? It is worth, as a preliminary gesture, to define what is not meant by negativity in this context, to remove any ambiguity for the potential of the 'negative' to be construed as a value-laden category. Negativity, in this sense, exists to explain a form of ontological constitution: it is a way of thinking that privileges the radical role of the Other, or that which is alterior, to explain the formation of that which is already known, but which will inevitably change with the expression of a new negation. Second, it is worth laying out the questions that we will ask of these divergent philosophers and their engagement with dialectical thinking; what, precisely, is the ethical content of the 'negative' in their philosophy, presuming we exclude a commonsensical definition of the negative as simply opposed to the positive, and, furthermore, can we trace a coming together, a potentially traumatic but nonetheless foundational space of symbiosis, between the ontological and ethical forms that a notion of philosophical negativity may take? To what end might a reinvigoration of dialectical reasoning, an investment of instability in the linear, smooth logic of the dialectical process, be implicated in a renewal of progressive politics as embodied in the rethinking of the logic of political philosophy of Ernesto Laclau, Alain Badiou, Slavoj Zizek, Judith Butler and others (Badiou, 1988;

Butler, 1997; Laclau, 1996; Zizek, 2000)? The following remarks lay the ground, through an exploration of some of the thornier questions surrounding the logic of dialectical thinking, for a more thorough delineation of negativity and dialectic in the work of Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, with a final conclusive section devoted to exploring the ethical character of a renewed dialectical structure. These are questions that, I contend, animate for us works which have, in the archive of the modern scholarly world, been set in stone as either 'classics' of Western philosophy or, in a flipside of the same coin, works of anti-philosophy, out to disturb the smooth logical contours of logocentric metaphysical thought. My appropriation of the specifically non-Hegelian language of 'thesis', 'antithesis', and 'synthesis' is an attempt to formalise the bastardisation of a philosophy that, I hope, lends itself to further disruption.

The opposition of canonicity and philosophical deviance excludes and denatures the very link that conjoins works artificially (re)represented in the archive as being at odds with each other. Their very representation in what we might increasingly see as a 'commonsensical" version of the scholarly archive – with the 'classics' of Western continental thought, including that of Hegel, on one side, and the destabilising, Nietzsche-inspired 'sophistry' of Lacan, Derrida and Foucault on the other – itself comes to represent one of the fundamental principles of negativity as a force of metaphysical or, in this case, representational constitution; their arrangement in a quasi-dialectic is not one of the simple opposition and engagement of content but, rather, a structural relationship of reliance: a question of form, not content. As Derrida might have characterised it, the representational status of post-structuralism as 'anti-philosophy' is both an act of exclusion by the formal structural logic of the institution of canonical works of Western philosophy and the crucial constituent variable for the very closure of a notion of 'canonicity' itself.

In Lacanian terms, the so-called 'anti-philosophy' of the post-structuralists is the excess, or transgression, that the injunction or law of canonicity – the self-conscious recognition of certain 'classic' texts of philosophy as classics *in themselves* as opposed to that which is anti-philosophical or driven by charlatanism – *creates itself as the very condition of its existence.* Just as, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, entry into the Symbolic demands the production of a remainder that resists the potential for symbolisation even while constituting the very frame by which signification can occur (Lacan, 1977), so the bifurcation

of twentieth century philosophy obscures the extent to which that which is rendered as 'marginal' *produces* that which might be seen as 'central' or 'canonical'. Just as, in Foucault, the production of sexual transgression is the very condition for the perpetuation of biopolitical normativity (Foucault, 1998), so the archival normativity of canonical philosophy requires, paradoxically, both the expulsion and centering of a form of nominally 'transgressive' philosophical action. This has the effect of both taming the very possibility of a genuine philosophical act, one that might arise from the nominally 'unthinkable', and conferring radical chic to 'anti-philosophy' which, upon its reinscription in the architecture of the canon and its negative opposite, is divested of much of its transgressive potential.

What Foucault's quasi-dialectical investigation of the constituent potential of the Law misses, however, is the paradoxical enjoyment of prohibition itself; that is, in instituting an injunction, the Law not only produces its transgressive, dialectical antithesis in the form of a resistance coded in the language of that resisted, and thus constitutive of that language, but a new form of enjoyment itself, an enjoyment or transgression predicated entirely on the perverse fact that it is *demanded*, framed by an injunction, revelling in the originary prohibition of the Symbolic. As Slavoj Zizek has argued, this investment of jouissance in the very letter of a prohibition, over and above the 'safe' dialectical opposite produced by the institution of the law, transcends any simple or quasi-dialectics merely recognising the role of the 'Other' in creating the 'Self', or the role of 'resistance' in reinforcing that that is being 'resisted' (2000). Instead, it demands a thorough theorisation of the fourth dialectical variable, the excess or remainder ironically proper to the demand of the Law, but which, in that very demand, contains a kernel of constantly deferred *satisfaction* at being told 'no!' In Lacanian terms, this unstable remainder is the "objet petit a", the object-cause of desire that I will explore in depth later as a possible corrective to Foucault's reduction of dialectical reasoning, an exploration that will, I hope, highlight the more general philosophical potential of a reinvigoration, or perhaps a complication, of the contours of dialectical structure, one that recognises a troubling 'outside edge' to the dialectic itself.

What has this discussion of the scholarly representation of different strands of twentieth century philosophy to do with a wider critique of the bastardised, regimented, tripartite dialectic? It is relevant precisely because it illuminates the mutually constitutive character of the 'thesis' (that which is

canonical) and its 'antithesis' (that which claims to reject the canon), a recognition that is itself a problematisation of certain temporal/ spatial understandings of the dialectic. The temporal/ spatial arrangement of the dialectic, with the 'antithesis' emerging from (and, crucially, after) the 'thesis' even while attacking its logic from outside its bounds, becomes problematic when the very production of a transgressive Other is seen as constitutive of that 'thesis' itself, bound up in its very closure as a positively defined entity. If this is so, how can we suggest that the 'antithesis' arrives "after" the 'thesis'? Surely, in this formulation, the 'thesis' is dependent on the 'antithesis' for its very existence? Where, in this formulation, lies the movement of the dialectic, its very productive quality, the site of its ethical progression? This, then, is but one example of the way that 'negative constitution' – the production of an opposite that, in an act of self-protective elision, has its constituent character hidden from view – haunts the writing of philosophers who, we are told, had only contempt for the institution or examination of metaphysical reasoning. Despite the rhetorical posturing surrounding these claims, however, I demonstrate the extent to which Lacan, Derrida and Foucault continue the work of metaphysical dialectics, even as they question the divisions between the 'inside' or 'outside', the ambiguous spatio-temporal logic of dialectical production discussed above, that define Hegel's work. Furthermore, I will argue that a properly 'post-modern' dialectics must theorise the inherent instability of the productive nature of negativity, the potential for a remainder, or a dialectical 'fourth term', that both extends the dialectic beyond 'thesis', 'antithesis' and 'synthesis' and problematises the spatial or temporal quality of dialectical reasoning itself. It is a form of dialectical ethics that rejects an overly linear explanation of dialectical progression, opening its structure to disturbance from 'outside'.

It is worth, at this juncture, to make clear exactly how the concepts of negativity and negative constitution elucidated above relate more generally to the dialectic itself. For Plato, dialectical reasoning negated its own negativity: that is, the element of negativity in the production of dialectical reasoning existed solely for the production of a positive systemic outcome. For Hegel, too, the dialectic contains negation at the very service of the positive: for the creation of a positive Absolute that, in its marshalling of dialectically produced singularities, produces an ethical consensus always-already made contingent by the creation of a new antithesis (Hegel, 1979). Crucially, however, this perpetual motion of the dialectic is, in and of itself, ethical for Hegel: the creation of an antithesis is the movement towards the full realisation of the

Spirit, a recognition of its true ethical nature, its 'becoming what it is'.[1] The architecture of the Hegelian dialectic is, thus, fundamentally spatial: it implies domains of 'inside' and 'outside', and its temporal movements, the forms that comprise the whole of the dialectic, are imbued with a precisely ethical content, that of a fundamental moral and ethical betterment, a sense of inevitable progress. This spatial character of dialectical reasoning, exploited by Henri Lefebvre in a rather different vein (1991), leads us to question the relationship an 'antithesis' has to the implied 'inside' or 'outside' of the dialectical system itself.

From where, precisely, does an antithesis or negative arise? While the conditions for its emergence lies 'inside', as part of the 'thesis', its final move comes from 'outside' or from without, as a disruptive force which, inevitably, asserts an ambiguous relationship to the significatory logic of the 'inside' itself. While it could not have existed without the institution of the Law of a thesis, its disruptive force comes from its disavowal of the symbolic logic of the thesis itself, its movement from 'outside' fundamentally disturbing the thesis and leading to the eventual production of a 'synthesis'. Here, again, we are confronted with the fundamentally ambivalent status of the institution of the Law and its relationship to a theory of negative constitution; while Hegel never theorised this ambiguity, this tension between the 'outside' or 'inside' of a negatively definitional antithesis, preferring instead to draw absolute temporal lines in the progress to synthesis with the potential of the negative always-already emergent, it is a secret of the dialectic exploited fully by Lacan: for what is the ambivalent 'extra' that returns to disturb the thesis – 'returns' being the correct term precisely because it had always-already been present as a potentiality within the terms of the thesis itself – if not an expression of the Lacanian Real, the third term which both defines and threatens the Symbolic and Imaginary registers, that outer edge of the Symbolic that is fundamentally inexpressible in the terms of the Symbolic itself but which exists as its very condition of possibility? The Real, and the 'antithesis', are both 'inside' and 'outside' the logic of the system of dialectics itself; they threaten from 'outside' as much as they define, and emerge, from 'inside'. This complicates somewhat my assertion as to the importance of a dialectical 'fourth term', expressed in Lacan in the figure of the "objet petit a": it seems that even the second term in the dialectic, the 'antithesis', itself contains within its logic the potential to disturb the smooth, temporal linearity of Hegel's formulation. We might conclude, therefore, that a 'fourth term' is only conceivable as an adjunct to dialectical reasoning precisely because of the poten-

tial for disturbance in the already existing system; the fourth term is invited by the ambiguity of the relationship between the 'thesis' and the 'antithesis', by the excess inevitably produced by their movements. In Derridian terms, the deconstruction is always-already at work in the dialectic itself.

These truncated reflections on the fundamental spatial and temporal ambivalence at the heart of the dialectic bring us back to the question of negativity, and the conditions through which an artificially 'positive' system can be established. To recap, we have seen the extent to which the 'antithesis' does not have a simple or unambiguous relationship to the 'thesis'; it cannot be said to exist 'inside' or 'outside' precisely because it has a foot in both camps (just as, in our previous discussion, "anti-philosophy" is neither 'inside' nor 'outside' canonical philosophy; it is both constitutive, and threatening). It has its genesis in the 'thesis' itself, and yet comes to threaten the 'thesis' from outside the bounds of its logic. Here, again, we see the same structural process implicated in Foucault's discussion of sexual normativity: the institution of a sexual Law creates, as a condition of its existence, a resistance that inevitably re-reifies the Law itself (Foucault, 1998). Ostensibly, this is the 'antithesis', that which appears to be 'outside' the logic of the Law but is ultimately created by it. Here again, however, we come up against Foucault's truncation of the dialectic; for where, in this formula, is the synthesis? For Foucault, the thesis and antithesis of sexual normativity play against each other in a perpetual re-reification of a particular, historical norm, but, as Lacan informs us, the production of this Law of behaviour must produce something "genuinely" alterior (not conceivable through its own symbolic codes) to it, if it is to subsist as a stable system of belief: where, in Foucault, is the "objet petit a", that object of a genuine limit of a plane of signification, the hole in the centre of signification that drives it to function? Buried in this reflection is a fundamentally ethical concern; that of the potential for resistance, for the theorisation of change, for the potential of something to arise from outside the point at which we can currently symbolise, a point to which I return in more detail in the following discussion.

Michel Foucault as Dialectician, Lacan as Transgressor, and the Dialectical Production of Subjectivity

The broad consensus among Foucault scholars suggests that his work represents a decisive rejection of Hegelian orthodoxy (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983): Foucault, we are told, strived to move beyond what he saw as a restric-

tive, ahistorical, Idealist schema in favour of an attention to specific, historically located movements of power and knowledge. In this sense, Foucault found an ally in Gilles Deleuze, whose commitment to a theorisation of desire as pure, multitudinous ontological positivity was at odds with Lacan's dialectically-oriented theory of desire as the effect of a constitutive lack in the Symbolic and Imaginary registers. And yet, in interviews towards the end of his life, Foucault informs us that Jean Hyppolite, a mentor at the Ecole Normale Superieur and an eminent Hegelian, had proved a huge influence on his intellectual life, and that a move away from Hegel must, necessarily, account for his influence first (Foucault, 2000). If Foucault forms part of the 'antithesis' to Hegelian orthodoxy, he can only lay such a claim through an active engagement with the 'thesis' itself, a structural relationship that mirrors the ambivalence at the heart of any thesis/ antithesis, positive/ negative relationship, as elaborated above.

Where, then, does Foucault sit in relation to the dialectic? As I have already argued, it might be more fruitful to understand Foucault's work as a truncated form of dialectical reasoning, a reduction that is, at one and the same time, something of a progression from the ahistorical limits of abstract dialectical reasoning. Take, for instance, Foucault's work on the history of crime and punishment (Foucault, 1991): the historical architecture of that work – the move from a form of monarchical, sovereign authority that turned subjects into the potential objects of direct punishment and death to a form of 'governmentality' which worked from 'within' to create compliant, power-laden subjectivities through micro-political territorialisation of the body – is anti-dialectical. That is, the movement from one form of punishment to the other is not predicated on a synthesis of two opposing positions but rather on the polyvalent movements of power itself, by the different ways in which power/ knowledge is produced by specific historical and temporal conditions. Power, for Foucault, and the concomitant changes in how the State as both object and idea 'creates' the subjects it purports to merely govern, is something best understood away from the notion of dialectical compromise or synthesis; power, it seems, has a logic that cannot be corralled into neat blocks of transcendent dialectical progression, over and above the discursive and linguistic frame that inevitably constitutes historical memory.

This is, aside from anything else, a comment on the ethics of dialectic; for Foucault, Hegel's Idealist belief in a movement to an ethical Absolute takes too literally the claims of the Enlightenment, the claim of inevitable progress,

of the onward march of reason. To the contrary, claims Foucault, the movement toward that which is discursively presented as a more rational, humane world of punishment and responsibility is, at least in some ways, precisely less ethical, in that the productive, constitutive micro-movements of power remain systematically hidden from view even as they constitute the very frame through which social life can occur. Despite this, I caution against ascribing too general a politico-ethical principle, in either direction, to the abstract form of the dialectic: Hegel's notion of the Absolute is not a claim about Enlightenment democracy, nor is it an attempt to sell the emergent "rational" State as the end-game of dialectical progression (this is not to suggest, of course, that Foucault directly ascribed such a status to Hegel, but his (partial) rejection of it has since been interpreted as a comment on its political implications). Instead, the dialectic in its Hegelian form is an abstract template, useful for understanding certain historical and political movements, a usefulness compounded by a recognition of its central ambivalence and theoretical malleability (a recognition that this article, in its small way, is attempting).

It is, then, in the historicisation of the architecture of *Discipline and Punish*, its establishment of a positive narrative arc of definitive, structural shifts in the relationship between power and the subject/product of power, that we see a fundamental rejection of Hegel and the establishment of his bastardised 'antithesis'. For Foucault, the movement of history is governed not by the transcendental schema of the movement of opposites, but by extant, contingent, historical conditions of power. However, this fundamental break with the dialectic occurs, paradoxically, at a moment of fundamental *engagement* with it, in the positing of the excess of the Law. To return to *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that the establishment of normative behaviour, through the constitution of subjectivities that are self-checking, quite literally infected with authoritative discourse, necessarily involves the establishment of a constitutive excess, a transgression that is always-already framed by the movements of constitutive power (this, of course, is the figure of the madman in *Madness and Civilisation* or the criminal in *Discipline and Punish*). Thus, resistance to dominant forms of sexual or juridical authority is constrained by the discursive frame through which it inevitably has to operate. Any 'antithesis' in this schema is always-already the condition for the 'thesis' itself; it is only conceivable through the discursive horizons of that being resisted. To an extent, this is a dialectical schema, if we accept that buried within the terms of any structural form of dialectical thinking is exactly this temporal/

spatial constitutive ambivalence in the relationship between 'thesis' and 'antithesis'. Clearly, the movement from the Law to its transgression in Foucault is not, precisely, a movement at all: rather, the two poles exist, opposed, in a relationship of simultaneous metaphysical constitution. As I have already noted, this lies at the heart of the ambiguity of the 'antithesis', its sense of being neither 'outside' nor 'inside', 'after' or 'before'. But this ambiguity is not particular to a rejection of the dialectic in Foucault; it is, as I have already explained, intrinsic to the dialectic itself. As such, Foucault's ostensible rejection of the dialectic and his acceptance of a notion of power that is both productive (producing discourses of acceptability and discourses of transgression) and limiting (of any "genuine" act of transgression)[2] conforms precisely to the dialectical ambiguity we detected previously: it makes systematic and obvious the temporal disturbance at the heart of what is, according to what it tells us about itself, a spatially/ temporally differentiated system of logic, one that privileges a certain movement or progression inherent to its structure.

But where, then, is the synthesis in Foucault's work? Or, to frame the question slightly differently and without the overt simplification that the term 'synthesis' implies, how can we theorise a point of ethical resistance, a resistance perhaps born in the confines of discursive and linguistic determinism but, simultaneously, consisting at its edges, one that might affect a genuine break with prevailing hegemony? This contingent 'outside', contingent in the sense that it can only be represented from a specific 'inside', bears the disturbance of the dialectic, its uncertainty as to the temporal and spatial genesis of its 'movements'. In other words, the expression of a genuinely disturbing 'outside' that comes to threaten Symbolic orthodoxy cannot be understood without appreciating, too, its production from a form of dialectical, negative thinking. Take, for instance, Lacan's notion of the Real, the third register in his tripartite schema that represents the totality of experience in Lacanian psychoanalysis (Lacan, 1993). It is both an expression of the dialectic and a correlate theory of negative constitution (the dialectical remainder that frames the potential for signification) and a strange inversion of it: a kind of dialectical misnomer that stubbornly refuses corralling into a form of compromise or synthesis, precisely because its rhetorical claim, to be outside the very potential for signification, seems to contradict its place within the logic of the Symbolic itself. It is a hole, a void in signification that must at least have the potential to intimate objective form: we must believe it is there, if only subconsciously, for signification to occur.[3] It quite literally

haunts that edge between 'outside' and 'inside', an edge which cannot be 'in between' precisely because its arrival is signposted from 'outside' the bounds of what is symbolically conceivable.[4]

To add further complexity to this model, Lacan introduces the figure of the "objet petit a", a contingent object, contingent because it can only be defined by a *retroactive* association with a circuit of desire, a desire formed initially through the constitutive loss of the pure expression of the Other in the Imaginary register, that comes to fill in for the void at the heart of the Symbolic, the hole (perhaps best explained as a figure for the impossibility of a total, positive, non-deferred signification in language), associated with the Real, around which the content of the Symbolic register circulates. This object cannot be said to exist positively, it is not defined by a particular content, by a substantive place in the Symbolic that never changes; it is, rather, an empty vessel, a pure form. It matters little what actually existing object assumes its bounds, be it a sudden burst of rain, or an object that falls onto someone's head seemingly from nowhere. What matters is precisely the structural link it forges with both the Real and the Void (the Freudian 'das Ding') at the heart of the Symbolic: it comes to represent, in negative-object form, precisely that which both animates us as Symbolic agents and threatens us from 'without'. Taken in its totality, this is a forbiddingly obscure formulation which can, nonetheless, be revealed to have fundamental roots in Hegelian dialectics, even as it fully exploits the temporal and spatial ambiguity explored at length above. Lacan's schema is perhaps best understood as an opening out of the dialectic, a theoretical recognition of its temporal/spatial disturbance; it makes unstintingly clear what had previously only been intimated at the edges of dialectical structure: the dialectic moves outward as well as forward and is always troubled by its 'edge'.

In *Gender Trouble* and elsewhere, Judith Butler argues that Lacanian psychoanalysis provides a uniquely pessimistic account of the potential for resistance (Butler, 1999). For Butler, the Lacanian notion that all attempts at 'resistance' are predicated on a misrecognition of the nature of the Symbolic bars the potential for a theory of ethical political subjectivity, a theory that might form the basis for attacks on hegemonic orthodoxy. It is, she claims, within the bounds of Foucauldian and post-Marxist Feminist theory that the platform for progressive political action forms, a formation that is contingent on the augmentation of Foucault's deterministic account of the production of subjectivities. The addition of a notion of 'performativity', a notion that

links Derrida's insistence on the importance of a significatory act being iterable with Althusser's insistence on the 'hailing', interpellative character of dominant ideologies (Althusser, 1977) , provides the ground for a critically informed theory of action: it is, thus, in the specific act of the enunciation of hegemonic codes, Butler argues, that the potential for a movement away from dominant ideological/ hegemonic codes arises, precisely because authoritative discourses must be endlessly repeated, or 'iterated'. In this repetition, which necessarily engages the distance between the code itself and the contingent 'performance' or enunciation of it (more of which later), a space opens whereby each performance might start to differ, might start to exploit the potential for the misrecognition of the code itself. To explain this in Althusserian terms, the subject or subject-position created by the 'hailing' of a dominant ideology is, by the very nature of signification itself, continually recreated/ repeated by the call of ideology, recreated in the act of ideological repetition. In this incessant repetition lies the potential for the call of ideology to be misheard, and, thus, for the act of enunciating this call of ideology to differ from the strictures of the ideology itself: it is precisely within this gap (between the 'ideology' or 'discourse' itself and the position by which an always-already interpellated subject enunciates or performs it) that the potential for political challenge lies.

How might we assess Butler's claims here? First, it is worth underlining the extent to which her position, while loosely based on an ontology rooted in Foucault's discursive determinism, moves away from the uncomfortable historical truths of Foucault's philosophy: for if we are to accept, as Foucault and Althusser both suggest, that the subject is always-already produced by acts of power/ knowledge/ ideology, wherein lies the performative space that Butler is attempting to theorise? Surely this space between the code of ideology itself and the act of performing it, is ontologically impossible if we accept, as Foucault seems to, that power in modern Western societies is all-pervasive, entirely pre-existent to subjectivity as such, and taken up, re-reified in the move towards language in an incessant and unbreakable process of re-embodiment? Butler would argue that an overly-deterministic account of Foucault's theory of discourse misses the potential for its iterative dissolution (Butler, 1997), but this allows, through the backdoor, a modified Cartesianism, one that assumes that the structure of the 'act' of speaking can be wrenched, temporally, from the ideological matter being spoken. This is not, one should add, an attack on the notion of historical context (it is, of course, true that the position from which one speaks defines, to an extent, the

meaning imparted) but Butler's argument is predicated not on an aphilosophical historical determinism but, rather, on a critique of Cartesian ontology which, ironically, allows a kind of masked Cartesianism to prevail, one that relies too heavily on a metaphor already implicated in the belief in a non-ideological space of reflection between the reception of ideological code and its performance. Butler under-theorises this tension, a tension that seems intrinsic to Foucauldian determinism, to both its closing off of a theory of non-discursive subjectivity and the attempt, within the bounds of discursive determinism, to account for political and historical change. In Foucault's later work this tension manifested itself in the notion of 'limit experiences', attempts to work on the body, to push it to the discursive limit which it is always-already caught up in (Foucault, 1990). Again, however, Foucault's move toward agency relies on a modified Cartesianism which, despite its claims to theoretical novelty and its caution in reifying a transcendental subject per se, risks buying into precisely the claims of authoritative discourse itself: namely, that a separated body and mind are the privelaged sites of identity and subjective experience. One is pushed, inexorably, to a theoretically high-minded version of 'identity politics', and a consequent theoretical ignorance of exactly those movements of power/ knowledge that Foucault so scrupulously detailed in his earlier work.

Given these antagonisms, Lacan's schema – which asserts the potential for something contingently 'outside' the dialectical production of the Symbolic to intervene even as it exists, simultaneously, within the dialectical law of negative constitution – proves attractive. For both Foucault and Butler, the ethic of the (truncated Foucauldian) dialectic lies in the potential for cracks in its operation, for subversion inevitably within its bounds. But what if the very condition for signification lies in the production of an outside that is, so to speak, "genuinely" alterior? This, of course, manifests itself as the "objet petit a", the negative-object remainder of the procession to the Symbolic that transcends dialectical negativity, forming an edge to the dialectic itself, an 'outside' that the Symbolic can never, quite, divide into its logic. This outside does not *fully* exist outside the logic of the Symbolic order: it is, rather, the very condition of signification itself. Yet the Symbolic can only function precisely because of its belief in the potential for something to arrive *genuinely* from outside its own codes, in its incessant, circuitous positing of a form filled by contingent and transient Symbolic content, retroactively defined as a sign of this genuine alterior. It does not exist, as such, but ex-sists – neither inside, nor outside, not real – but Real. This is not the kind of dialectical

opposite we see as 'resistance' in Foucauldian terms (that which, in its simple inversion of the terms of a thesis, is easily reinscribed within the bounds of normativity); this, instead, carries a different dialectical structure and is infinitely more troubling to the 'inside' of Symbolic normativity. If we are to accept that this 'outside' is actually intrinsic to signification itself, could it be possible that a new kind of dialectics might emerge, one in constant, full awareness of the temporal/ spatial complexity of its metaphysical formation and perpetuation, aware of the inevitable partiality in assigning definite 'inside' or 'outside' status to that which arrives from the Real? Lacan, I suggest, asks us to recognise a new dialectical synthesis; that between the ontology of an opened-out dialectics and the dialectical mapping out of Symbolic life, which might increasingly be taken as the site for political action - the disturbing arrival of the political Real, perhaps the true site of political change, of where the 'ethical' can consist.[5] For Lacan, the Hegelian struggle for recognition from the Other, expressed in the dialectics of master and slave, forms the core of desire, with a foundational lack or negativity as the universal motor of its movements, and yet this movement of desire is not situated at the level of the 'individual' as such; rather, it is the expression of a seeming 'totality' made contingent by the particular Symbolic context in which it occurs. This is not a return to Idealism or an expression of transcendental universality precisely because that which arrives from 'outside' remains, viz a viz the dialectic, the province of the 'inside' too, by the Symbolic context in which it occurs; the very structure of the 'inside', the condition of its existence, requires this form of instability, of temporal and spatial disturbance. It is worth noting again the radical coming-together here of domains previously separate in discussions of dialectical reason; on the one hand, Lacan and Badiou are describing ostensibly psychical processes, the incessant contingency of a subject riven by desires, structured by the instability of language, that are never quite in place, and yet there is a fundamental, and constitutive, ambiguity or conflation in this schema between what occurs at the level of the 'individual' and what occurs 'outside', at the level of what Lacan frequently called the 'big Other', taken to mean the Symbolic per se. Indeed, the two domains (the domain of the subject and the domain of Symbolic political action) are dialectically interchangeable in Lacanian psychoanalysis. This is not an argument as to the importance of reframing the 'individual' as a condition of social and political action; to the contrary, Lacan is asking us to abandon precisely that distinction, arguing instead that the dialectical condition for the very existence of a notion of the 'individual' is the Symbolic, Imaginary and Real; the 'individual' is merely the

excess of their temporally ambiguous dialectical play. Whether or not one is prepared to accept the radical ambiguity of Lacan, I would suggest that an attention to his ideas presents, at least, an uncompromising re-imagining and re-iteration of dialectical uncertainty, an uncertainty previously hidden, but constitutive of, the belief in inexorable, temporal progress.

The Ethics of Dialectical Subjectivity: Toward a Conclusion

An engagement with Lacan allows for both the reconstitution of the temporal and spatial metaphors at the heart of the Hegelian dialectic, and a way of fusing ostensibly 'ontological' and Symbolic/ political forms of dialectical thinking. What is implied here, is a fundamental shift in the metaphors at the centre of the dialectic: through his notion of the Real, and his theory of the negative-object of desire, Lacan offers us a way of moving to the 'edge' of the dialectic, to the always-existing 'outside' that allows the inside to function. This is distinguished from previous dialectical thinking by recognising the extent to which this 'edge' refuses to be purely an expression of negative definition, or an expression of the negative 'Other' of resistance in the Foucauldian model, but rather a new kind of 'outside', one that is perhaps best expressed as having a form similar to that of a Borromean knot; that is, simultaneously, 'genuinely' outside, and constitutively inside; temporally present, and permanently absent. In some ways, this notion mirrors recent politico-philosophical scholarship on the constitutive presence of antagonism in political/ symbolic contexts. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001) have insisted, after Lacan, that the metaphysical consistency of the Real, its never-quite presence, is a metaphor for the ways in which modern democratic societies function, for the antagonisms that remain forever partial, rooted in the constantly deferred dialectical movements of any Self/ Other configuration or any act of Symbolic communication:

> In so far as there is antagonism, I cannot be a full presence for myself. But nor is the force that antagonizes me such a presence: its objective being is a symbol of my non-being and, in this way, it is overflowed by a plurality of meanings which prevent its being fixed as pure positivity (2001: 125).

While their objective here is to understand the way in which the ontological condition of a post-structuralist dialectic might also be the condition for the arena of political action, their conclusions mirror the approach to the dialec-

tic itself explored here. The impact of the Lacanian Real on the dialectic is to recognise both its partiality, its not-quite presence, its refusal to sit among temporally or spatially differentiated bounds, and the fact, rather more importantly, that this is precisely the condition of its existence. It is, precisely, 'over-flowed', or over-determined to use Althusser's appropriation of psychoanalytic terminology, and this over-determination, far from being a sign of its redundancy or a sign that it cannot account for post-modern complexity, is in fact the analytical space through which ontological and ethical forms of dialectic can merge. Broadly speaking, this point of symbiosis, referred to at the very beginning of this paper, is the point at which the dialectic emerges as a theory of subjectivity, at least in the Lacanian sense: as a theory of subjectivity with an explicit, dialectical awareness of the impossibility of separating the subject from the Symbolic conditions through which it emerges as an ambiguously located effect – the subject from its constitutive Object, or Other.

Where, then, might we identify the ethical properties of this conflation of dialectical forms? Jacques Derrida, discussing Emmanuel Levinas in 1967, suggested the following:

> Every reduction of the other to a *real* moment of *my* life, its reduction
> to the state of empirical alter-ego, is an empirical possibility, or rather
> eventuality, which is called violence (Derrida, 2001: 159).

In other words, the suggestion of an Other within the bounds of the architecture of Self, its pre-ethical placing within an a priori form of ontology, is an act of violent foreclosure, an act which forces the Self's antithesis out of existence and excludes an unflinching attention to its constitutive antagonism, even as it claims to welcome it, to 'place' it, within previously prescribed bounds. More importantly, Derrida is suggesting that to institute such a theory of ontology is to rhetorically evade the constitutive place of the Other in the Self, the excess in the logic of the Law. This is where dialectical ontology meets dialectical ethics; where the claims for "our Self" directly implicate an ethical claim to the Other, a claim to self-presence that 'is' violence. This is not, one should make clear, a simple, multiculturalist plea for a mere "recognition" of the Other and its role in defining 'Us', a charge occasionally invoked by Slavoj Zizek (2000); it is, precisely, in opposition to such a language of political neutrality. For what Derrida is arguing is that it is through the central *antagonism* of the Self-in-the-Other that ethical engagement

occurs; the choice of the word 'violence' is not purely metaphorical, and does not refer purely to the erasure of ambiguity in the dichotomous arrangement of Self and Other. It designates precisely the troubling quality of the political antagonism described by Laclau and Mouffe, a recognition of the Real of the dialectical constitution of subjectivity, which cannot be easily assimilated into a logic of 'synthesis'; instead, the central antagonism of the Other in the Self is a mirror of the ambiguity, highlighted above, in the spatial and temporal situation of 'thesis', 'antithesis', and 'synthesis', it is the not-quite stability in the architecture of the dialectic, and it is precisely through a revelation of this instability that a truly ethical dialectic might emerge, one that is true to the Real, even as it bows to its foundational inscrutability from the perspective of any 'present' Symbolic context. This fidelity to a truly polyvalent dialectic, I suggest, allows a theorisation of subjectivity and its relation to the political/ Symbolic that avoids the determinism of Foucault, the incessant re-reification of two dialectical poles. Instead, the concept of a genuine and foundational 'outside' to the dialectic, in the figure of the Real and expressed in the language of ambiguous antagonism, leaves open a space for the theorisation of change that comes, at least ostensibly, from beyond our comprehension, and which forms an animating, troubling edge along which we engage one another as ethical subjects.

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Endnotes

1. As such, the Hegelian dialectic can never be said to infinite, it is completed at the point at which an outcome becomes what it always had the potential to be, that which was always contained within it but never properly synthesised and expressed. For Marx, of course, this end product of a specifically historical version of the dialectic is Communism itself, the first truly 'ethical' epoch.

2. My definition here is derived, in part, from Alain Badiou's notion of an Act that arrives discursively from the far horizon of that which can be conceived by any presently existing symbolic matrix (Badiou, 1988).

3. It is also, thus, the very definition of a paradox: it seems to circumnavigate away from its own logic, even as it approaches it again in a kind of Moebius movement. First, it arises from the procession to Symbolic life and is fundamentally constitutive of it while, second, it operates as the remainder of signification, that which, by the logic of originary exclusion, can never find a home within its bounds.

4. For a challenging, and enlightening, discussion of the problematic notion of 'edge' in a myriad of theoretical contexts, see Alenka Zupancic (2003).

5. A thesis explored at length by Alain Badiou, who suggests that ethical life is defined by fidelity to a Truth-Event that, at least according to present Symbolic logic, arises from outside the bounds of acceptability, both as an expression of 'true' dialectical antithesis and as an expression of the Lacanian Real, that which we might now begin to see as the dialectically produced 'outside' of the dialectic itself (Badiou, 2004).

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