

Affirmation versus Vulnerability: On Contemporary Ethical Debates

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At the end of postmodernism politics is in decline, whereas ethics triumphs in the public debate. This is not in itself a progressive move as once again the charge of moral and cognitive relativism is moved against any project that shows a concerted effort at displacing or decentering the traditional, humanistic view of the moral subject. This attitude asserts the belief in the necessity of strong foundations, such as those that a liberal view of the subject can guarantee. Doxic consensus is set: without steady identities resting on firm grounds, basic elements of human decency, moral and political agency and ethical probity are threatened. In opposition to this belief, which has little more than longstanding habits and the inertia of tradition on its side, I want to argue in this essay that a post-humanistic and nomadic vision of the subject can provide an alternative foundation for ethical and political subjectivity.

This argument is framed by a larger dispute, which I will not explore here—that of the thorny relationship between poststructuralist ethics in Continental philosophy, on the one hand, and the dominant, mostly Anglo-American traditions of moral philosophy on the other. Todd May (1995) argued persuasively that moral philosophy as a discipline does not score highly in poststructuralist philosophy or in French philosophy as a whole. This is no reason, however, to move against it the lazy charges of moral relativism and nihilism. One only has to look across the field of French philosophy—Deleuze’s ethics of immanence (1972; 1980), Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference (1984), Foucault’s attempt to self-style the ethical relationship, Derrida’s and Lévinas’ emphasis on the receding horizons of alterity—to be fully immersed in ethical concerns. It is the case that ethics in poststructuralist philosophy is not confined to the realm of rights, distributive justice, or the law; it rather bears close links with the notion of political agency, freedom, and the management of power and power-relations. Issues of responsibility are dealt with in terms of alterity or the relationship to others. This implies accountability, situatedness, and cartographic accuracy. A poststructuralist position, therefore, far from thinking that a liberal individual definition of the subject is the necessary precondition for ethics, argues that liberalism at present hinders the development of new modes of ethical behavior.

The proper object of ethical enquiry is not the subject’s moral intentionality, or rational consciousness, as much as the effects of truth

and power that his/her actions are likely to have upon others in the world. This is a kind of ethical pragmatism, which is conceptually linked to the notion of embodied materialism and to a non-unitary vision of the subject. Ethics is therefore the discourse about forces, desires, and values that act as empowering modes of being, whereas morality is the established sets of rules. Philosophical nomadism shares Nietzsche's distaste for morality as sets of negative, resentful emotions and life-denying reactive passions. Deleuze joins this up with Spinoza's ethics of affirmation to produce a very accountable and concrete ethical line about joyful affirmation.

There is no logical reason why Kantians should have a monopoly on moral thinking. In moral philosophy, however, one touches Kantian moral universalism at one's peril. From the Habermasian school and its American branch—Benhabib (2002), Young and Fraser (1996)—to the hardcore Kantianism of Martha Nussbaum (1999), a general rejection of poststructuralist theories in general and ethics in particular has taken place.¹ Lovibond (1994) expresses her concern with the loss of moral authority that is entailed by a non-unitary vision of the subject and reasserts the necessity of a Kantian agenda as the only source of salvation after the debacle of postmodernism.

I want to take the opposite road and attempt to read poststructuralist philosophy in its own terms rather than reduce it to the standards of a system of thought—in this case the Kantian tradition—that shares so few of its premises. There are serious advantages to the anti-representational slant of contemporary poststructuralist philosophy, in that it entails the critique of liberal individualism and its replacement by an intensive view of subjectivity. The ethics of nomadic subjectivity rejects moral universalism and works towards a different idea of ethical accountability in the sense of a fundamental reconfiguration of our being in a world that is technologically and globally mediated. One of the most pointed paradoxes of our era is precisely the clash between the urgency of finding new and alternative modes of political and ethical agency, on the one hand, and the inertia or self-interest of neoconservatism on the other. It is urgent to explore and experiment with more adequate forms of non-unitary, nomadic, and yet accountable modes of envisaging both subjectivity and democratic, ethical interaction. Two crucial issues arise: the first is that, contrary to the panic-stricken universalists, an ethics worthy of the complexities of our times requires a fundamental redefinition of our understanding of the subject in his/her contemporary location and not a mere return to a more or less invented philosophical tradition. Second, an alternative ethical stance based on radical immanence and becomings is capable of a universalistic reach, if not a universalistic aspiration. It just so happens to be a grounded, partial form of

accountability, based on a strong sense of collectivity and community building. In what follows I want to argue for the relevance of a Deleuzian approach to this urgent ethical project.

The following main discursive alignments can be seen at present in poststructuralist ethical thought. Besides the classical Kantians (see Habermas' recent work on human nature, 2003), we have a Kantian-Foucauldian coalition that stresses the role of moral accountability as a form of bio-political citizenship. Best represented by Nicholas Rose (2001) and Paul Rabinow (2003), this group works with the notion of "Life" as *bios*, that is to say as an instance of governmentality that is as empowering as it is confining. This school of thought locates the ethical moment in the rational and self-regulating accountability of a bio-ethical subject and results in the radicalization of the project of modernity.

A second grouping takes its lead from Heidegger and is best exemplified by Agamben (1998). It defines *bios* as the result of the intervention of sovereign power, as that which is capable of reducing the subject to "bare life," that is to say *zoe*. The latter is, however, contiguous with Thanatos or death. The being-alive-ness of the subject (*zoe*) is identified with its perishability, its propensity and vulnerability to death and extinction. Bio-power here means Thanatos-politics and results in the indictment of the project of modernity.

Another important cluster in this brief cartography of new ethical discourses includes the Lévinas-Derrida tradition of ethics, which is centered on the relationship between the subject and Otherness in the mode of indebtedness, vulnerability, and mourning (Critchley, 1992). I have enormous respect for this school of thought, but the project I want to pursue takes as the point of reference *bios-zoe* power defined as the non-human, vitalistic, or post-anthropocentric dimension of subjectivity. This is an affirmative project that stresses positivity and not mourning.

The last discursive coalition, to which this project belongs, is inspired by the neo-vitalism of Deleuze, with reference to Nietzsche and Spinoza (Ansell-Pearson 1997, 1999). Bio-power is only the starting point of a reflection about the politics of life itself as a relentlessly generative force. Contrary to the Heideggerians, the emphasis here is on generation, vital forces, and natality. Contrary to the Kantians, the ethical instance is not located within the confines of a self-regulating subject of moral agency, but rather in a set of interrelations with both human and inhuman forces. These forces can be rendered in terms of relationality (Spinoza), duration (Bergson), immanence (Deleuze), and, in my own terms, ethical sustainability. The notion of the non-human, in-human, or post-human emerges therefore as the defining trait of this new kind of ethical subjectivity. This project moves altogether beyond the postmodern critique of modernity

and is especially opposed to the hegemony gained by linguistic mediation within postmodernist theory.

Transformative Ethics

At the core of this ethical project is a positive vision of the subject as a radically immanent, intensive body, that is, an assemblage of forces or flows, intensities, and passions that solidify in space and consolidate in time, within the singular configuration commonly known as an "individual" self. This intensive and dynamic entity is rather a portion of forces that is stable enough to sustain and undergo constant though non-destructive fluxes of transformation. It is the body's degrees and levels of affectivity that determine the modes of differentiation. Joyful or positive passions and the transcendence of reactive affects are the desirable mode. The emphasis on "existence" implies a commitment to duration and conversely a rejection of self-destruction. Positivity is built into this program through the idea of thresholds of sustainability. Thus, an ethically empowering option increases one's *potentia* and creates joyful energy in the process. The conditions that can encourage such a quest are not only historical; they concern processes of transformation or self-fashioning in the direction of affirming positivity. Because all subjects share in this common nature, there is a common ground on which to negotiate the interests and the eventual conflicts.

It is important to see that this fundamentally positive vision of the ethical subject does not deny conflicts, tension, or even violent disagreements between different subjects. The legacy of Hegel's critique of Spinoza is still looming large here, notably the criticism that a Spinozist approach lacks a theory of negativity, which may adequately account for the complex logistics of interaction with others. It is simply not the case that the positivity of desire cancels or denies the tensions of conflicting interests. It merely displaces the grounds on which the negotiations take place. The Kantian imperative of not doing to others what you would not want done to you is not rejected as much as enlarged. In terms of the ethics of *conatus*, in fact, the harm that you do to others is immediately reflected in the harm you do to yourself, in terms of loss of *potentia*, positivity, self-awareness, and inner freedom. Moreover, the "others" in question are non-anthropomorphic and include planetary forces. This move away from the Kantian vision of an ethics that obliges people, and especially women, natives, and others to act morally in the name of a transcendent standard or universal rule is not a simple one. I defend it as a forceful answer to the complexities of our historical situation; it is a move towards radical immanence against all Platonizing and classical humanistic denials of embodiment, *mater*, and the flesh.

What is at risk, however, in nomadic ethics is the notion of containment of the other. This is expressed by a number of moral thinkers in the Continental tradition, such as Jessica Benjamin (1988) in her radicalization of Irigaray's horizontal transcendence, Lyotard in the "differend" (1983) and his notion of the "unattuned," and Butler (2004) in her emphasis on "precarious life." They stress that moral reasoning locates the constitution of subjectivity in the interrelation to others, which is a form of exposure, availability, and vulnerability. This recognition entails the necessity of containing the other, the suffering and the enjoyment of others in the expression of the intensity of our affective streams. An embodied and connecting containment as a moral category could emerge from this, over and against the hierarchical forms of containment implied by Kantian forms of universal morality.

The objection that a Spinozist ethics fails to account for the interaction with the Other is predictable, and it is connected, on the one hand, to the issue of the negotiations of boundaries, limits, and costs and, on the other, to affectivity and compassion. The nomadic view of ethics takes place within a monistic ontology that sees subjects as modes of individuation within a common flow of *zoe*. Consequently there is no self-other distinction in the traditional mode, but variations of intensities, assemblages set by affinities and complex synchronizations. Bio-centered egalitarianism breaks the expectation of mutual reciprocity that is central to liberal individualism. Accepting the impossibility of mutual recognition and replacing it with one of mutual specification and mutual codependence is what is at stake in nomadic ethics of sustainability. This is against both the moral philosophy of rights and the humanistic tradition of making the anthropocentric Other into the privileged site and inescapable horizon of otherness.

If the point of ethics is to explore how much a body can do, in the pursuit of active modes of empowerment through experimentation, how do we know when we have gone too far? How does the negotiation of boundaries actually take place? This is where the non-individualistic vision of the subject as embodied and hence affective and interrelational, but also fundamentally social, is of major consequence. Your body will thus tell you if and when you have reached a threshold or a limit. The warning can take the form of opposing resistance, falling ill, feeling nauseous, or it can take other somatic manifestations, like fear, anxiety, or a sense of insecurity. Whereas the semiotic-linguistic frame of psychoanalysis reduces these to symptoms awaiting interpretation, I see them as corporeal warning signals or boundary markers that express a clear message: "too much!" One of the reasons why Deleuze and Guattari are so interested in studying self-destructive or pathological modes of behavior, such as schizophrenia, masochism, anorexia, various forms

of addiction, and the black hole of murderous violence, is precisely in order to explore their function as thresholds or boundary-markers. This assumes a qualitative distinction between, on the one hand, the desire that propels the subject's expression of his/her *conatus*—a neo-Spinozist perspective is implicitly positive in that it expresses the essential best of the subject—and, on the other hand, the constraints imposed by society. The specific, contextually determined conditions are the forms in which the desire is actualized or actually expressed.

Bodily entities are not passive, but rather dynamic and sensitive forces forever in motion, which "form unities only through fragile synchronization of forces" (Lloyd 1994, 23). This fragility concerns mostly the pitch of the synchronization efforts, the lines of demarcation between the different bodily boundaries, the borders that are the thresholds of encounter and connection with other forces, the standard term for which is "limits." Because of his monistic understanding of the subject, Spinoza sees bodily limits as the limits of our awareness as well, which means that his theory of affectivity is connected to the physics of motion. Another word for Spinoza's *conatus* is therefore self-preservation, not in the liberal individualistic sense of the term, but rather as the actualization of one's essence, that is to say, of one's ontological drive to become. This is neither an automatic nor an intrinsically harmonious process, insofar as it involves interconnection with other forces and consequently also conflicts and clashes. Negotiations have to occur as stepping-stones to sustainable flows of becoming. The bodily self's interaction with his/her environment can either increase or decrease that body's *conatus* or *potentia*. The mind as a sensor that prompts understanding can assist by helping to discern and choose those forces that increase its power of acting and its activity in both physical and mental terms. A higher form of self-knowledge by understanding the nature of one's affectivity is the key to a Spinozist ethics of empowerment. It includes a more adequate understanding of the interconnections between the self and a multitude of other forces, and it thus undermines the liberal individual understanding of the subject. It also implies, however, the body's ability to comprehend and to sustain physically a greater number of complex interconnections, and to deal with complexity without being overburdened. Thus, only an appreciation of complexity and of increasing degrees of complexity can guarantee the freedom of the mind in the awareness of its true, affective, and dynamic nature.

This is expressed by Spinoza in terms of achieving freedom through an adequate understanding of our passions and consequently of our bondage. Coming into possession of freedom requires the understanding of affects or passions by a mind that is always already embodied. The desire to reach an adequate understanding of one's *potentia* is the

human being's fundamental desire or *conatus*. An error of judgment is a form of misunderstanding (the true nature of the subject) that results in decreasing the power, positivity, and activity of the subject. By extension, reason is affective, embodied, dynamic; understanding the passions is our way of experiencing them and making them work in our favor. In this respect, Spinoza argues that desires arise from our passions. Because of this, they can never be excessive, given that affectivity is the power that activates our body and makes it want to act. The human being's built-in tendency is towards joy and self-expression, not towards implosion. This fundamental positivity is the key to Deleuze's attachment to Spinoza.

Lloyd argues that Spinoza's treatment of the mind as part of nature is a source of inspiration for contemporary ethics. Spinozist monism acts "as a basis for developing a broader concept of ethology, a study of relations of individual and collective and being affected" (Lloyd 1996, 18). Clearly, it is a very non-moralistic understanding of ethics that focuses on the subject's powers to act and to express their dynamic and positive essence. An ethology stresses the field of composition of forces and affects, speed and transformation. In this perspective, ethics is the pursuit of self-preservation, which assumes the dissolution of the self: what is good is what increases our power of acting, and this is what we must strive for. This results not in egoism but in mutually embedded nests of shared interests. Lloyd calls this "a collaborative morality" (Lloyd 1996, 74). Because the starting point for Spinoza is not the isolated individual, but complex and mutually depended co-realities, the self-other interaction also follows a different model. To be an individual means to be open to being affected by and through others, thus undergoing transformations in such a way as to be able to sustain them and make them work towards growth. The distinction activity/passivity is far more important than that between self and other, good and bad. What binds the two is the idea of interconnection and affectivity as the defining features of the subject. An ethical life pursues that which enhances and strengthens the subject without reference to transcendental values, but rather in the awareness of one's interconnection with others.

About Pain and Vulnerability

This vision of ethics involves a radical repositioning or internal transformation on the part of subjects who want to become-minoritarian in a productive and affirmative manner. It is clear that this shift requires changes that are neither simple nor self-evident. They mobilize the affectivity of the subjects involved and can be seen as a process of transformation of negative into positive passions. Fear, anxiety, and

nostalgia are clear examples of the negative emotions involved in the project of detaching ourselves from familiar and cherished forms of identity. To achieve a post-identity or non-unitary vision of the self requires the dis-identification from established references. Such an enterprise involves a sense of loss of cherished habits of thought and representation, and thus is not free of pain. No process of consciousness-raising ever is.

The beneficial side effects of this process are unquestionable and in some way they compensate for the pain of loss. Thus, the feminist questioning and in some cases rejection of gender roles triggers a process of dis-identification with established forms of masculinity and femininity, which has fuelled the political quest for alternative ways of inhabiting gender and embodying sexuality (Braidotti, 2002). In race discourse, the awareness of the persistence of racial discrimination and of white privilege has led, on the one hand, to the critical reappraisal of blackness (Gilroy, 200; Hill Collins, 1991) and, on the other, to radical relocation of whiteness (Griffin and Braidotti, 2002).

In a Spinozist vein, these are transformative processes that not only rework the consciousness of social injustice and discrimination but also produce a more adequate cartography of our real-life condition, free of delusions of grandeur. It is an enriching and positive experience which, however, includes pain as an integral element. Migrants, exiles, refugees have first-hand experience of the extent to which the process of dis-identification from familiar identities is linked to the pain of loss and uprooting. Diasporic subjects of all kinds express the same sense of wound. Multi-locality is the affirmative translation of this negative sense of loss. Following Glissant (1990), the becoming-nomadic marks the process of positive transformation of the pain of loss into the active production of multiple forms of belonging and complex allegiances. What is lost in the sense of fixed origins is gained in an increased desire to belong, in a multiple rhizomic manner which transcends the classical bilateralism of binary identity formations.

The qualitative leap through pain, across the mournful landscapes of nostalgic yearning, is the gesture of active creation of affirmative ways of belonging. It is a fundamental reconfiguration of our way of being in the world, which acknowledges the pain of loss but moves further. This is the defining moment for the process of becoming-ethical: the move across and beyond pain, loss, and negative passions. Taking suffering into account is the starting point; the real aim of the process, however, is the quest for ways of overcoming the stultifying effects of passivity, brought about by pain. The internal disarray, fracture, and pain are the conditions of possibility for ethical transformation. Clearly, this is an antithesis of the Kantian moral imperative to avoid pain or to view pain

as the obstacle to moral behavior. Nomadic ethics is not about the avoidance of pain; rather it is about transcending the resignation and passivity that ensue from being hurt, lost, and dispossessed. One has to become ethical, as opposed to applying moral rules and protocols as a form of self-protection. Transformations express the affirmative power of Life as the vitalism of *bios-zoe*, which is the opposite of morality as a form of life insurance.

The awakening of ethical and political consciousness through the pain of loss has been acknowledged by Edgar Morin (1987) in his account of how he relinquished Marxist universalism to embrace a more "situated perspective" (Haraway, 1997) as a European. He describes his "becoming-European" as a double affect. The first concerns the disappointment with unfulfilled promises of Marxism. The second is compassion for the uneasy, struggling, and marginal position of post-war Europe, squashed between the USA and the USSR. The pain of this awareness that Europe was ill loved and a castaway results in a new kind of bonding, and a renewed sense of care and accountability. This produces a post-nationalistic redefinition of being a European in a minoritarian mode, which defines the European space-time location as a zone of mediation and transformation (Balibar, 2002).

The sobering experience—the humble and productive recognition of loss, limitations, and shortcomings—has to do with self-representations. Established mental habits, images, and terminology railroad us back towards established ways of thinking about ourselves. Traditional modes of representation are legal forms of addiction. To change them is not unlike undertaking a disintoxication cure. A great deal of courage and creativity is needed to develop forms of representation that do justice to the complexities of the kind of subjects we have already become. We already live and inhabit social reality in ways that surpass tradition: we move about, in the flow of current social transformations, in hybrid, multicultural, polyglot, post-identity spaces of becoming (Braidotti, 2002). We fail, however, to bring them into adequate representation. There is a shortage on the part of our social imaginary, a deficit of representational power, which underscores the political timidity of our times.

The real issue is conceptual: how do we develop a new post-unitary vision of the subject, of ourselves, and how do we adopt a social imaginary that does justice to the complexity? How does one work through the pain of dis-identification and loss? Given that identifications constitute an inner scaffolding that supports one's sense of identity, how do changes of this magnitude take place? Shifting an imaginary is not like casting away a used garment, but more like shedding an old skin. It happens often enough at the molecular level, but in the social it is a painful experience. Part of the answer lies in the formulation of the

question: “we” are in this together. This is a collective activity, a group project that connects active, conscious, and desiring citizens. It points towards a virtual destination: post-unitary nomadic identities, floating foundations, etc. but it is not utopian. As a project it is historically grounded, socially embedded, and already partly actualized in the joint endeavor, that is, the community, of those who are actively working toward it. If this be utopian it is only in the sense of the positive affects that are mobilized in the process: the necessary dose of imagination, dreamlike vision, and bonding without which no social project can take off.

Steps Towards an Ethics of Affirmation

The ethics of affirmation, with its emphasis on moving across the pain and transforming it into activity, may seem counter-intuitive. In our culture people go to great lengths to ease all pain, but especially the pain of uncertainty about identity, origin, and belonging. Great distress follows from not knowing or not being able to articulate the source of one’s suffering, or from knowing it all too well, all the time. People who have been confronted by the irreparable, the unbearable, the insurmountable, the traumatic and inhuman event will do anything to find solace, resolution, and also compensation. The yearning for these measures—solace, closure, justice—is all too understandable and worthy of respect. Nowadays, this longing is both supported and commercially exploited by genetics and its application to tracking of racial and territorial origins.²

The ethical dilemma was already posed by Jean-François Lyotard in *Le Differend* and, much earlier, by Primo Levi about the survivors of Nazi concentration camps: the kind of vulnerability human beings experience in face of events on the scale of high horror is something for which no adequate compensation is even thinkable, let alone applicable. There is an incommensurability of the suffering involved for which no measure of compensation is possible—a hurt or wound beyond repair. This means that the notion of justice in the sense of a logic of rights and reparation is not applicable in a quantifiable manner. For Lyotard, in keeping with the poststructuralist emphasis on the ethical dimension on the problem, ethics consists in accepting the impossibility of adequate compensation, and living with the open wound. On the contrary, contemporary culture has taken the opposite direction: it has favored, encouraged, and rewarded a public morality based on the twin principles of claims and compensation, as if financial settlements could provide the answer to the injury suffered, the pain endured, and the long-lasting effects of the injustice. Cases that exemplify this trend are the compensation for the

Shoah in the sense of restitution of stolen property, artworks, and bank deposits. Similar claims have been made by the descendants of slaves forcefully removed from Africa to North America (Gilroy, 2000), and more recently compensation for damages caused by Soviet communism, notably the confiscation of properties across eastern Europe, from Jewish and other former citizens.

The ethics of affirmation is about suspending the quest for both claims and compensation, resisting the logic of retribution of rights and taking instead a different road. In order to understand this move it is important to de-psychologize the discussion of affirmation. Affectivity is intrinsically understood as positive: it is the force that aims at fulfilling the subject's capacity for interaction and freedom. It is Spinoza's *conatus*, or the notion of *potentia* as the affirmative aspect of power. It is joyful and pleasure-prone, and it is immanent in that it coincides with the terms and modes of its expression. This means concretely that ethical behavior confirms, facilitates, and enhances the subject's *potentia*, as the capacity to express his/her freedom. The positivity of this desire to express one's innermost and constitutive freedom (*conatus*, *potentia*, or becoming) is conducive to ethical behavior, however, only if the subject is capable of making it endure, thus allowing it to sustain its own impetus. Unethical behavior achieves the opposite: it denies, hinders, and diminishes that impetus or is unable to sustain it. Affirmation is therefore not naive optimism or Candide-like unrealism. It is about endurance and transformation. Endurance is self-affirmation. It is also an ethical principle of affirmation of the positivity of the intensive subject—its joyful affirmation as *potentia*. The subject is a spatio-temporal compound which frames the boundaries of processes of becoming. This works by transforming negative into positive passions through the power of an understanding that is no longer indexed upon a phallogocentric set of standards, but is rather unhinged and therefore affective.

This sort of turning of the tide of negativity is the transformative process of achieving freedom of understanding through the awareness of our limits, of our bondage. This results in the freedom to affirm one's essence as joy, through encounters and minglings with other bodies, entities, beings, and forces. Ethics means faithfulness to this *potentia*, or the desire to become. Deleuze defines the latter with reference to Bergson's concept of "duration," thus proposing the notion of the subject as an entity that lasts, that endures sustainable changes and transformation and enacts them around him/herself in a community or collectivity. Affirmative ethics rests on the idea of sustainability as a principle of containment and tolerable development of a subject's resources, understood environmentally, affectively, and cognitively. A subject thus constituted inhabits a time that is the active tense of

continuous "becoming." Endurance has therefore a temporal dimension: it has to do with lasting in time—hence duration and self-perpetuation. But it also has a spatial side to do with the space of the body as an enfleshed field of actualization of passions or forces. It evolves affectivity and joy, as in the capacity for being affected by these forces, to the point of pain or extreme pleasure, which come to the same; it means putting up with hardship and physical pain.

The point, however, is that extreme pleasure or extreme pain—which may score the same on a Spinozist scale of ethology of affects—are of course not the same. On the reactive side of the equation, endurance points to the struggle to sustain the pain without being annihilated by it. It also introduces a temporal dimension about duration in time. This is linked to memory: intense pain, a wrong, a betrayal, a wound are hard to forget. The traumatic impact of painful events fixes them in a rigid, eternal present tense out of which it is difficult to emerge. This is the eternal return of that which precisely cannot be endured and returns in the mode of the unwanted, the untimely, the un-assimilated or in-appropriate/d. They are also, however, paradoxically difficult to remember, insofar as re-membling entails retrieval and repetition of the pain itself.

Psychoanalysis, of course, has been here before (Laplanche, 1976). The notion of the return of the repressed is the key to the logic of unconscious remembrance, but it is a secret and somewhat invisible key which condenses space into the spasm of the symptom and time into a short-circuit that mines the very thinkability of the present. Kristeva's notion of the abject (1980) expresses clearly the temporality involved in psychoanalysis—by stressing the structural function played by the negative, the incomprehensible, the unthinkable, the other of understandable knowledge. Deleuze calls this alterity "Chaos" and defines it ontologically as the virtual formation of all possible form. Lacan, on the other hand—and Derrida with him, I would argue—defines Chaos epistemologically as that which precedes form, structure, and language. This makes for two radically divergent conceptions of time and negativity. That which is incomprehensible for Lacan, following Hegel, is the virtual for Deleuze, following Spinoza, Bergson, and Leibnitz.

This produces a number of significant shifts: from negative to affirmative; from entropic to generative; from incomprehensible, meaningless, and crazy to virtual waiting to be actualized; from constituting constitutive outsides to a geometry of affects that require mutual synchronization; from a melancholy and split to an open-ended web-like subject; from the epistemological to the ontological turn in post-structuralist philosophy.

This introduces a temporal dimension into the discussion that leads to the very conditions of possibility of the future, to futurity as such. For an

ethics of sustainability, the expression of positive affects is that which makes the subject last or endure. It is like a source of long-term energy at the affective core of subjectivity (Grosz, 2004). Nietzsche has also been here before, of course. The eternal return in Nietzsche is the repetition, yet neither in the compulsive mode of neurosis nor in the negative erasure that marks the traumatic event. It is the eternal return of and as positivity (Ansell-Pearson, 1999). This kind of ethics addresses the affective structure of pain and suffering but does not locate the ethical instance within it, be it in the mode of compassionate witnessing (Bauman 1993; 1998) or empathic co-presence. In a nomadic, Deleuzian-Nietzschean perspective, ethics is essentially about transformation of negative into positive passions, that is, about moving beyond the pain. This does not mean denying the pain but rather activating it, working it through. Again, the positivity here is not supposed to indicate a facile optimism or a careless dismissal of human suffering.

What is positive in the ethics of affirmation is the belief that negative affects can be transformed. This implies a dynamic view of all affects, even those that freeze us in pain, horror, or mourning. Affirmative nomadic ethics puts the motion back into e-motion and the active back into activism, introducing movement, process, and becoming. This shift makes all the difference to the patterns of repetition of negative emotions.

What is negative about negative affects is not a value judgment (any more than it is for the positivity of difference), but rather the effect of arrest, blockage, and rigidification that comes as a result of an act of violence, betrayal, a trauma—or which can be self-perpetuated through practices that our culture simultaneously chastises as self-destructive and cultivates as a mode of discipline and punishment: all forms of mild and extreme addictions, differing degrees of abusive practices that mortify and glorify the bodily matter, from bingeing to bodily modifications. Abusive, addictive, or destructive practices do not merely destroy the self but harm the self's capacity to relate to others, both human and non-human others. Thus they harm the capacity to grow in and through others and become others. Negative passions diminish our capacity to express the high levels of interdependence, the vital reliance on others, which is the key to a non-unitary and dynamic vision of the subject. What is negated by negative passions is the power of life itself, as the dynamic force, vital flows of connections and becomings. This is why they should not be encouraged, nor should we be rewarded for lingering around them too long. Negative passions are black holes.

An ethics of affirmation involves the transformation of negative into positive passions: resentment into affirmation, as Nietzsche put it. The practice of transforming negative into positive passions is the process of

reintroducing time, movement, and transformation into a stifling enclosure saturated with unprocessed pain. It is a gesture of affirmation of hope in the sense of affirming the possibility of moving beyond the stultifying effects of the pain, the injury, the injustice. This is a gesture of displacement of the hurt, which fully contradicts the twin logic of claims and compensation. This is achieved through a sort of de-personalization of the event, which is the ultimate ethical challenge. The displacement of the ego-indexed negative passions or affects reveals the fundamental senselessness of the hurt, the injustice, or injury one has suffered. "Why me?" is the refrain most commonly heard in situations of extreme distress. This expresses rage as well as anguish at one's ill fate. The answer is plain: for no reason at all. Examples of this are the banality of evil in large-scale genocides like the Holocaust (Arendt, 1963), and the randomness of surviving them (think of Primo Levi who could/not endure his own survival). There is something intrinsically senseless about the pain or injustice: lives are lost or saved for all and no reason at all. Why did some go to work in the WTC on 9/11 while others missed the train? Why did Frida Kahlo take that tram which crashed so that she was impaled by a metal rod, and not the next one? For no reason at all. Reason has nothing to do with it. That is precisely the point.

Contrary to the traditional morality that follows a rationalist and legalistic model of possible interpretation of the wrongs one suffered to a logic of responsibility, claim, and compensation, affirmative ethics rests on the notion of the random access to the phenomena that cause pain (or pleasure). This is not fatalism, and even less resignation, but rather *amor fati*. This is a crucial difference: we have to be worthy of what happens to us and rework it within an ethics of relation. Of course, repugnant and unbearable events do happen. Ethics consists, however, in reworking these events in the direction of positive relations. This is not carelessness or lack of compassion, but rather a form of lucidity that acknowledges the impossibility of finding an adequate answer to the question about the source, the origin, the cause of the ill fate, the painful event, the violence suffered. Acknowledging the futility of even trying to answer that question is a starting point.

Edouard Glissant (1991) provides a perfect example of this productive ethics in his work on race and racism. An ethical relation cannot be based on resentment or resignation, but rather on the affirmation of positivity. Every event contains within it the potential for being overcome and overtaken; its negative charge can be transposed. The moment of the actualization is also the moment of its neutralization. "Every event is like death, double and impersonal in its double," argues Deleuze (1990, 152). The free subject, the ethical subject is the one with the ability to grasp the freedom to depersonalize the event and transform its negative

charge. The focus thus shifts to asking the adequate questions. Adequateness, both the logic of claim and compensation, lies at the heart of the ethical stance. This requires a double shift: of the pain itself—from the frozen or reactive effect to proactive affirmation—and of the line of questioning—from the quest for the origin or source to a process of elaboration of the kind of questions that express and enhance a subject's capacity to achieve freedom through the understanding of its limitations.

What is an adequate ethical question? One that is capable of sustaining the subject in his/her quest for more interrelations with others, that is, more Life, motion, change, transformation, and *potentia*. The adequate ethical question provides the subject with a frame for interaction and change, growth and movement. It affirms life as difference-at-work. An ethical question had to be adequate in relation to how much a body can take, which is the notion of sustainability. How much can an embodied entity take in the mode of interrelations and connections, that is, how much freedom of action can we endure? That is the question. It assumes, following Nietzsche, that humanity does not stem from freedom, but rather that freedom is extracted out of the awareness of limitations.

Ethics is about freedom from the weight of negativity, freedom through the understanding of our bondage. A certain amount of pain, the knowledge about vulnerability and pain, is actually useful. It forces one to think about the actual material conditions of being interconnected and thus being in the world. It frees one from the stupidity of perfect health, and the full-blown sense of existential entitlement that comes with it. Paradoxically, it is those who have already cracked up a bit, those who have suffered pain and injury, who are better placed to take the lead in the process of ethical transformation. Because they are already on the other side of some existential divide, they are anomalous in some way—but in a positive way, for Deleuze (1969, 1988). Their anomaly deterritorializes the force of habit and introduces a powerful element of productive difference. They know about endurance, adequate forces, and the importance of Relations.

Marxist epistemology and feminist standpoint theory have always acknowledged the privileged knowing position of those in the "margins." Postcolonial theory displaces the dialectics of center-margin and locates the force of discursive production. Affirmative ethics is on the same wavelength: only those who have been hurt are in a position not to return the violence and hence make a positive difference. In order to do so, however, they have to become-minoritarian, that is, transcend the logic of negativity (claim and compensation) and transform the negative affect into something active and productive. The center being dead and

empty of active force, it is on the margins that the processes of becoming can be initiated. It is also crowded on the margins.

The figure of Nelson Mandela—a contemporary secular saint—comes to mind, as does the world-historical phenomenon that is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa. This is a case of repetition that engenders difference and does not install the eternal return of revenge and negative affects, a massive exercise in transformation of negativity into something more livable, more life-enhancing. Christianity has tried to be here before. It has had an important input in the work of Cornell West, bell hooks, and other spiritually-minded activists today, especially in reconstituting a sense of community and mutual responsibility in places devastated by hatred and mutual suspicion. Affirmative nomadic ethics is profoundly secular and it refuses simply to turn the other cheek. It proclaims the need to construct collectively positions of active, positive interconnections and relations that can sustain a web of mutual dependence, an ecology of multiple belongings.

It is a case of extracting freedom from the awareness of limits. For the affirmative ethics of sustainability, it is always already a question of life and death. Being on the edge of too-muchness, or of unsustainability, surfing on the borders of the intolerable is another way of describing the process of becoming. Becoming marks a qualitative leap in the transformation of subjectivity and of its constitutive affects. It is a trip across different fields of perception, different spatio-temporal coordinates. Mostly it transforms negativity into affirmative affects: pain into compassion, loss into a sense of bonding, isolation into care. It is simultaneously a slowing down of the rhythm of daily frenzy and an acceleration of awareness, connection to others, self-knowledge and sensorial perception.

Ethics includes the acknowledgment of and compassion for pain, as well as the activity of working through it. Any process of change must do some sort of violence to deeply engrained habits and dispositions which got consolidated in time. Overcoming these engrained habits is a necessary disruption, without which there is no ethical awakening. Consciousness-raising is not free of pain. The utterance: "I can't take it anymore!" far from being an admission of defeat, marks the threshold and hence the condition of possibility for creative encounters and productive changes. This is how the ethical dimension appears through the mass of fragments and shreds of discarded habits that are characteristic of our times. The ethical project is not the same as the implementation of ruling standards of morality. It rather concerns the norms and values, the standards and criteria that can be applied to the quest for sustainable, that is to say for newly negotiated limits. Limits are to be rethought in terms of an ethics of becoming, through a non-Hegelian

notion of "limits" as thresholds, that is to say points of encounter and not of closure, living boundaries and not fixed walls.

The joint necessity for both the pursuit of social change and in-depth transformation, as well as for an ethics of endurance and sustainability, is important to stress because critical and creative thinkers and activists who pursue change have often experienced the limits or the boundaries like open wounds or scars. The generation that came of age politically in the seventies has taken enormous risks and has enjoyed the challenges they entailed. A lot was demanded and expected from life and most ended up getting it, but it was not only a joy ride. An ethical evaluation of the costs involved in pursuing alternative visions, norms, and values is important in the present context where the alleged "end of ideology" is used as a pretext for neoliberal restoration that terminates all social experiments. It is necessary to find a way to combine transformative politics with affirmative ethics so as to confront the conceptual and social contradictions of our times. Sustainable affirmative ethics allows us to contain the risks while pursuing the original project of transformation. This is a way to resist the dominant ethos of our conservative times that idolizes the new as a consumerist trend while thundering against those who believe in change. Cultivating the ethics of living intensely in the pursuit of change is a political act.

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Notes

1. For a pertinent critique of Nussbaum's "provincial" brand of universalism, see Homi Bhabha (1996).
2. See, for instance, Oprah Winfrey's assertion of her Zulu ancestry, determined by DNA testing, in *Vanity Fair*, October 2005, 124. See also the documentary on genetic tracking of descendants of slave populations.