

# The singular and the specific

## Recent French philosophy

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Not so long ago, theoretical insight was usually defended in terms of its universal inclusiveness or powers of generalization. It used to be that any theory worth the name – a theory of evolution or class conflict, a theory of the unconscious or of signification – shared something of the ambition and scope associated with the theories that marked the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. Today, by contrast, perhaps the most striking characteristic of many theoretical initiatives in the humanities is their equation of hermeneutic legitimacy with an almost paranoid sensitivity to the specific or unique. Contemporary theoretical insight is couched in terms of adequation to the radically particular. Recent keywords include ‘context’, ‘situation’, ‘difference’, ‘subject position’, ‘pluralism’, ‘pragmatism’, ‘affiliation’, and a whole slew of terms drawn from a composite of cultural geography and cartography – mappings, itineraries, borders, trajectories. If it is not uncommon, today, to hear muted calls for the recognition of some sort of ‘universal’ register or domain, this universality is generally identified with the medium required for the recognition of the greatest possible diversity of particularities.

The more or less unquestioned assumption in much recent cultural theory or analysis is that what qualifies as *specific* is essentially a matter of context and scale. The ‘specific’ seems to be what you get when you narrow the scope of an investigation to the apparently irreducible component units of a problem. One of the most consistent forms of reproach or counter-argument thrown at yesterday’s theoretical initiatives (Derrida, Lyotard, Jameson...) is that they are indifferent to particular contextual constraints. They are not ‘situated’ enough – the assumption being that a fully and self-consciously situated theory is almost by definition adequate to the tasks of interpretation. This kind of argument is regularly made by critics like Said, West, Spivak, and many others working on issues of gender, ethnicity or community.

It should be obvious, however, that the mere insistence on particularity (on the ‘this-ness’ of things) is unable to resolve any theoretical question whatsoever. Hegel’s famous analysis of the insufficiency of sense certainty is as conclusive on this point as is Lévi-Strauss’s well-known retort to Sartre, regarding the endless divisibility of any given moment or event.<sup>1</sup> Any particularity can be broken down into an innumerable succession of constituent particularities, or integrated into ever larger planes of intelligibility and coherence: personal, temporal, semantic, biological, cosmological... Radical nominalism is no more sustainable a theory than Leibniz’s hypothesis, in the face of Zeno’s ancient paradoxes, of an *actually* infinite division of things. Taken together, Leibniz and Hegel confirm that the simple notion of the ‘particular’ affords no stable position between the infinitely small and the infinitely large.

The recently contested utility of postmodern theories provides exemplary corroboration of this point – a point worth making with some insistence. From the start, the story of postmodern theory is a narrative driven by pursuit of the particular and contingent as opposed to the universal and the necessary. Postmodernism is precisely a theory of *pure* particularity or radical fragmentation. It embraces the ‘set of cultural projects united by a self-proclaimed commitment to heterogeneity, fragmentation and difference’.<sup>2</sup> From the supposed subversion of universals and the asserted contingency of identities, the postmodern derives a properly ‘*irreducible* pluralism’, a ‘plurality without norms’, a ‘boundless pluralism’ in which ‘cultures are being pluralised to the degree of total particularisation’.<sup>3</sup> As Anthony Appiah writes, ‘a definition of postmodernism follows from the fact that in each domain [its] rejection of [modernist] exclusivity assumes a particular shape, one that reflects the specificities of its setting’.<sup>4</sup> Cornel West’s description of our ‘postmodern politics of cultural difference’ pushes all the familiar buttons: it moves

to trash the monolithic and homogeneous in the name of diversity, multiplicity and heterogeneity; to reject the abstract, general and universal in light of the concrete, specific and particular; and to historicise, contextualise and pluralise by highlighting the contingent, provisional, variable, tentative, shifting and changing.<sup>5</sup>

The postmodern emphasis on fragmentation was supposed to lead, in short, to a newly sensitive attention to 'context', understood as the conditions governing the 'construction of a plurality of subject positions' and 'multiple, specific and heterogeneous ways of life'.<sup>6</sup>

But as a number of critics were quick to realize, things are not quite so simple. Nelly Richard points out that however much postmodern theory stresses 'specificity' and 'plurality',

the fact is that no sooner are these differences posited and valued than they become subsumed into the metacategory of the 'undifferentiated', which means that all singularities immediately become indistinguishable and interchangeable in a new, sophisticated economy of 'sameness'.<sup>7</sup>

Not long after the term was first invented, critics who used (or attacked) the notion of the postmodern warned against a 'homogenising pluralism', and listed the ways in which postmodernity implies 'cultural "de-differentiation"'.<sup>8</sup> As Hans Bertens knows, 'fragmentarization may very well be a symptom of a less clearly visible homogenisation rather than the autonomous process that it is often taken to be'.<sup>9</sup> Hence the ever more insistent calls for a greater attention to context and historical particularity, for 'an ever more complex understanding of difference and "margin-ality"' as located in a 'multiplicity of contexts'.<sup>10</sup> If the heyday of 'fully' postmodern readings – that is, readings explicitly allied to the postmodernity preached by Lyotard and Baudrillard – appears by now to have come and gone, it is because such readings have had real trouble meeting the challenge posed by this call to particularization. Pure contingency, incommensurability or fragmentation do not lend themselves to anything but an ad hoc specification.

In general, however, what has guided the move to a position 'beyond postmodernism' is simply a *still more* emphatic insistence on the particular, communal, situated, embedded, embodied, and so on.<sup>11</sup> The supremely theoretical bias of what might be called 'high postmodernism' has, in critical practice, converged almost to the point of indistinction with what was once the explicitly anti-theoretical bias of empiricism, pragmatism and conventional historiography ('what really happened') – the two fused precisely as a *theory* of the particular and the contingent.

The recent boom in postcolonial studies is perhaps the most obvious sign of the trend. In the wake of Edward Said's work, many critics set out from a pre-occupation with circumstances in which the explicitly 'situated' character of theory and agency is unavoidable (if not *enforced*). However defined, postcoloniality seems to connote an apparently intrinsic specification of position. Nothing is more orthodox in the domain of postcolonial studies than an insistence on the multiple, specific, heterogeneous nature of contexts and subject positions. But even here, how exactly this theoretical insistence is to be turned into critical practice remains a matter of vigorous debate. Some of the most widely read versions of postcolonial theory – Homi Bhabha's most obviously – go some way towards identifying the particular quandaries of the postcolonial condition with the more properly universal qualities of articulation or 'enunciation' itself, the 'vicissitudes of the movement of the signifier' in Derrida's sense.<sup>12</sup> Questions linger as to how much postcolonial theory remains at least implicitly committed to a discourse so disruptive, so fragmented, so hybrid – so 'deterritorialized' – as to deny its constituent elements any real particularity at all. The risk is that we are left with an awkward choice between fully 'particularized', more or less essentialist accounts of culture and identity, on the one hand, and, on the other, what Fanon called 'people without an anchor, without a horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless – angels'.<sup>13</sup> As Aijaz Ahmad observes,

the tendency in cultural criticism is to waver constantly between the opposing polarities of cultural differentialism and cultural hybridity. We have, on the one hand, so extreme a rhetoric against Reason and Universality, and such finalist ideas of cultural difference that each culture is said to be so discrete and self-referential, so autonomous in its own authority, as to be unavailable for cognition or criticism from a space outside itself.... At the other end of the spectrum, we have so vacuous a notion of cultural hybridity as to replace all historicity with mere contingency; to lose all sense of specificity in favour of the hyper-reality of an eternal and globalized present.<sup>14</sup>

What sort of conception of the specific can offer a viable path between these two extremes? How are we to answer Peter Dews's 'plea for a style of thinking which would be bold enough to offer interpretation of the world expansive enough to frame all specific contexts of meaning, but [which] would at the same time inscribe within itself the cautionary distance of a critical reflection on its own procedures'?<sup>15</sup>

One way of approaching the question is to ask whether the fragmented plurality of subject positions are to be conceived as so many perspectives defined

in some sense through their relations *with* each other, or rather as the *singular* derivation of one absolute, self-differing force – fragments, that is, of a single immanent unity, *without* constituent relations among themselves. Is our postmodern heterogeneity the space of a *specific* plurality, or of what, after Spinoza, Deleuze would call one self-modifying substance, one singularity–multiplicity in which ‘everything divides, but into itself’?<sup>16</sup> The alternatives are poles apart, but often confused. If a *specific* individual is one which exists as part of a relationship to an environment and to other individuals, a *singular* individual is fundamentally self-individuating, beyond relationality as such. In the absence of others, the singular properly creates the medium of its own existence (its own *expression*, in Spinoza’s sense). The singular is aspecific.<sup>17</sup> Much of what passes for ‘specific’ in recent philosophy and literary criticism – most notably in certain fields of French philosophy – should rather be understood and evaluated as singular or singularizing. What is at stake is our whole conception of individuality and relationship, along with the sorts of authority invoked to interpret or transcend relations with others in the broadest sense.

We know that the particularity of a given event or individual cannot be grasped simply by reducing the scale of inquiry towards the infinitely small, nor merely by intensifying the deictic register of analysis. It is essential, then, to distinguish general *modes* of particularization or individuation. I propose a three-term typology: *singular*, *specific* and *specified*. These modes have nothing to do with the size or scale of the particularity in question, and each presumes a distinct configuration of the universal. Briefly: the *specified* reduces the universal to the status of the general or normal; the *singular* creates its own universe, its own universal criteria as immanent to its operation; the *specific* presupposes an empty, transcendental universal as the necessary medium of its open-ended relational field. The terms are familiar and the differences involved are easily explained. Some of the comparative groupings and evaluations this typology enables, however, may be less immediately obvious and perhaps more useful than the enthusiastic celebrations of pure difference associated with ‘high’ postmodernism, on the one hand, or the ultimately reactionary assertions of communal identity associated with some strands of cultural studies on the other. It becomes possible, for example, to compare thinkers as different as Montaigne, Camus, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Ricoeur and Bourdieu, in terms of their insistence on the essentially *relational* or *specific* nature of human reality. More

importantly, it becomes possible to group together, as so many (*almost* incomparable) forms of a singular conception of individuation: various mysticisms (Zen, Sufism, Ishraq, Saint John of the Cross, Mallarmé, Blanchot, Bataille), some forms of monotheism (Islam in particular), certain rationalisms (Spinoza, Leibniz), political doctrines of absolute sovereignty (Bossuet, Le Bret, Rousseau, Schmitt), some Marxist-Leninisms, and some theories of contemporary global capitalism. The concept of the singular, as distinct from the specific, makes it possible to compare and assess the workings of these otherwise incommensurable logics: regardless of context, each posits a movement from specific to singular, and each privileges one unique power or force that creates, more or less exclusively, the medium of its existence and the criteria of its operation – God, reason, the sovereign, the proletariat, the market. Many of the most influential of recent French thinkers, including Sartre, Deleuze, Levinas, Baudrillard and Badiou, may be read as contributions to a similarly singular orientation.

### The specified

Perhaps the most obvious way of thinking about individuals is to think of them as individuated by certain intrinsic, invariant and thus characteristic properties, innate or acquired, racial or sexual, national or cultural, physical or spiritual. The *specified* defines the realm of essence, where the demarcation of an individual (subject, object or culture) follows from its accordance with recognized classifications. The specified, as the participle suggests, is a result. It is the realm of the passive or the objectified, the realm of what Bourdieu calls ‘the substantialist mode of thought.’<sup>18</sup> It embraces the sphere of allegedly inherent instinct as much as of entrenched habit: either way, it is ultimately a matter of an almost automatic or unconscious conformity. Whether what is specified is identified as ‘narrowly’ nativist and particularist, or on the contrary as humanist and universalist, makes little difference here. In both cases, what counts is the conformity of actors to a presumed nature, and the consequent supervision of the relative *authenticity* of this conformity.

The discourse of cultural authenticity and historical attachment, the *Volkgeist* elaborated by Herder and German Romanticism and later adopted by French counter-revolutionary thinkers and nationalist prophets like de Maistre and Barrès, must not be confused with a notion of the specific as such. No more than an assumed *historical* unity or *substantial* universality, the mere celebration of a specified cultural particularity cannot provide adequate ground for emancipatory

political claims *per se*. We must remember that it was the professed respect for specified cultural (rather than racial) differences which provided the guiding logic for initiatives like the apartheid Bantu Education Act.<sup>19</sup> Mere appreciation of the fact that ‘everyone is different and special in their own way’ belongs to such sophisticated institutions as *Sesame Street* and McDonald’s as much as to some recent postcolonial theories.<sup>20</sup> Inasmuch as ‘the main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning’,<sup>21</sup> the first task of a concept of the specific is to escape a specified determination – what Burroughs calls ‘the hopeless dead-end horror of being just who and where you are’.<sup>22</sup>

### The specific

By contrast with the objectifying passivity of the specified, the specific introduces an irreducibly subjective element, the dimension of the *practical* in Kant’s sense. The specific as distinct from the specified is a function of what we *do* rather than what we *are*; it is a matter of *how* we see, rather than *who* sees or *what* is seen, and of what something means, rather than what it is or commands. For example: a signifier is specific to a signified, but not specified by a referent; an *I* is specific to a *you*, without being specified as a particular person with particular attributes; a historical account is specific to but not specified by the events it relates. Individuals are more specific than specified if their individuality is primarily maintained through certain ways of relating to situations and to other individuals. They are more specific than singular if their individuality is conceived not as immediate and self-constituent but as in some sense ‘evolving’ or under way, as part of a wider process of mediation and diversification. Some such specificity is assumed, for instance, albeit in very different ways, by notions of aesthetic defamiliarization (an emphasis on perception as such), existentialism (relations of existence before demonstrations of essence), and psychoanalysis (the development of character or neurosis based less on innate disposition than on distinct histories or ‘relations of desire’).

By definition, a philosophy of the specific can only be a philosophy of the subject. The specific subject, if it exists at all, stands *apart* from (relative to) the specified – that is, the objectified. But far from a return to the singular Cartesian or phenomenological subject, the specific implies a philosophy of the irreducibly social subject, the subject-with-others. Marx’s familiar insight remains valid: ‘the human being is in the most literal sense a political animal ..., an animal that can

individuate itself only in the midst of society’.<sup>23</sup> The specific is itself the relation between universal and particular understood *as* subject – that is, this relation understood as specific to a position or lived from an interested point of view, however fluid or shifting.<sup>24</sup> Specific individuals exist only in their relations to other individuals: these relations cannot themselves be the product of this specificity, but are its condition of possibility. In other words, the specific subject maintains a relation that is neither orientated toward fundamental consensus (Habermas), nor destined for dialectical absorption in a third and higher term (Hegel), nor reduced to the status of a contingent construct awaiting imminent deconstruction (Derrida, Bhabha, Spivak). The specific sustains itself as ongoing relation, in the refusal of a definitive specification, on the one hand, or an apocalyptic singularization, on the other. When any cultural ‘identity’ ceases to be configured in a relation that is emancipatory *as a relation*, it can indeed become a prison. The varied configuration of nationalism provides paradigmatic illustration: the critique of nationalism as a general *concept* is less important than an evaluation of its *positioned* inflection (oppressive or resistant). It is not cultural identity or subjectivity in general that are repressive; rather, repressive *relations-with* others and with ourselves make them so.

The subject, then, is inevitably partial, interested: ‘he [*il*] is necessarily for one side or the other; he is in the thick of the battle, he has adversaries...’<sup>25</sup> The *specific* subject is not, however, specified by an interest. As Marx knew, we are forever co-implied with our own history, made by us in specified circumstances beyond our control, and even the most ‘dispossessed’ subjects are not determined or silenced by history.<sup>26</sup> We might say that subjects *become specific* – that is, become subjects as opposed to objects – to the degree that they actively transcend the specified or objectified. To move from the specified to the specific, without yielding to the temptations of the singular: such is the only general goal of a critical theory of the particular as such.

To be sure, the equally specified approaches of an exclusive nativism and a vapid humanism have so long presented their conflict as one of global significance that there has sometimes seemed to be no real alternative position available. Today, however, there are clear signs that some such alternative is emerging with new vigour. Important if uneven contributions to such an alternative link, for instance, include the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Judith Butler, Edward Said, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, to



mention only a few of the more obvious names. All share in the effort to demolish notions of human behaviour as specified by an intrinsic essence (class, race, gender or nation), so as to privilege the relations that make different groups specific to each other and to the situation in which they come to exist. For instance, Said's long-standing commitment to the Palestinian cause makes a point of distinguishing between the automatic adoption of nationalist positions and a no less partisan but far more 'distanced' argument with the nativist (Zionist) opponent, an argument that tries to balance some degree of *territorial* sovereignty with a genuinely oecumenical state. Butler's militant critique refuses any kind of specified bodily identity, so as to insist on the situated performance of gender. Gilroy eschews a corresponding racial essentialism, so as to analyse the political investment of cultural routes across shared, permeable spaces. Again, it is the implicit distinction of specific from specified that distinguishes Stuart Hall's revaluation of the term 'ethnicity' from older essentialist versions, which allows him to conceive of 'a society of positions', 'composite' yet distinct, relative to each other. 'We all speak from a particular place ..., without being contained by that position', and identities are nothing more (nor less) than 'the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.'<sup>27</sup>

Whether these various projects fully succeed is not my concern here. But what any specific approach must eventually address is the question of just what it is specific *to*, and how. For at a certain point of abstraction from the specified, the minimally specific risks becoming something qualitatively different – something properly *singular*; that is, one of a kind, unique.

## The singular

If a specific individual is one which relates to others, to itself, and to some kind of environment (symbolic as much as 'natural'), a singular individual is one which transcends all such relations. Singular is precisely that which does not relate. As the great Sufi metaphysician Ibn' Arabî put it: 'plurality consists of relations, which are non-existent things. There is really nothing except the [one] Essence, [which is] not in relation to anything.'<sup>28</sup> The singular 'subject' is that which overcomes the distinction of subject and object. The singular is without others, and is subject to no criteria external to or transcendent of its operation. The singular collapses (specific) subject and (specified)

object together in one force, one creative power that generates the medium of its existence.

This singular mode of individuation can take many forms. The singularity of a creator-god provides the concept with its exemplary incarnation. Likewise, the Big Bang assumed by most contemporary cosmologists is a singularity in the strict or technical sense: rather than an explosion occurring within an already unfolded field of time and space, it takes place as an 'inflation' creative of its own ongoing space of expansion.<sup>29</sup> The global market of multinational capital is singular in the sense that it is neither specific to any particular part of the planet nor constrained by any logic outside the immanent criteria of its own operation; it asserts a univocal sphere of exchange value (the sole medium of its existence), abstracted from and unlimited by all other values – its purely financial criteria are entirely immanent to its operation. Diverse historical examples of the concept of the singular might include the one-beyond-being of Plotinus and Proclus; the God of the Qur'an, of Suhrawardî, or Ibn' Arabî; Buddha's void or absolute plenitude [*sunyata*]; the king of Absolutist political theory; Spinoza's absolute substance; the internally consistent rationality of the *Encyclopédie*; the sovereign of Rousseau or Robespierre; Hegel's absolute spirit; the idea of modern art promoted by Mallarmé and Blanchot; the proletariat according to Lenin and Mao; Heidegger's conception of Being.<sup>30</sup> The singular, in each case, is constituent of itself, expressive of itself, immediate to itself.

Consider briefly Žižek's much discussed rereading of the Hegelian dialectic. The conventional reading turns, of course, on the ultimate singularity of the Absolute, as realized through 'the self-mediation of the inner Notion, [whereby] all differences are "sublated" in advance in so far as they are posited as ideal moments of the Notion's mediated identity with itself'. The contemporary resistance to Hegel, then, is easily explained as a 'fear of "absolute knowledge," as a monster threatening to suppress all particular, contingent knowledge'. And Žižek's alternative? Following Lacan's reading of *Athalie*, he assuages this fear in the spectacle of something far *more* fearsome, a reading of Hegel as an 'even more radical "monist" than his critics dare to imagine: in the course of the dialectical process, difference is not "overcome", its very existence is retroactively cancelled.' The Notion does not come to realize itself as a positive plenitude; rather, it exposes the radical 'impossibility of accordance between knowledge and being'. Žižek thus flips the conventional reading on its head: the "'One" of Hegel's "monism" is not the One of an Identity

encompassing all differences, but rather a paradoxical “One” of radical negativity which forever blocks the fulfilment of any positive identity’.<sup>31</sup>

The point is that Žižek’s reading, for all its post-deconstructive verve, is no less *singular* than the more traditional reading; both interpretations of Hegel’s ‘substance becomes subject’ conform to the paradigm whereby the singular creates the medium of its own existence – and whether this be conceived as Absolutely full, as pure realization, or as Absolutely void, as pure contradiction, makes no properly *specific* difference.<sup>32</sup> The way in which Žižek argues for ‘the ultimate identity of the I and the Notion’ provides a paradigmatic illustration of the singular paradigm as a whole:

On the one hand, subject is pure negative universality: an identity-with-itself which ‘repels’, makes abstraction of, all its determinate [i.e., specified] content ...; yet on the other hand, ‘I’ is this abstract power of negativity which has come into existence in the very domain of its determinations; which has acquired ‘determinate-being.’ As such, it is ... a vanishing point, the ‘other-of-itself’ eluding every determination – in other words, a point of pure singularity. It is precisely this oscillation between abstract-negative universality (abstraction of all determinate content) and the vanishing point of pure singularity, this ‘absolute universality which is also immediately an absolute individualisation’, that constitutes, according to Hegel, ‘the nature of the I as well as of the Notion.’<sup>33</sup>

There is no more characteristically Žižekian a move than that singular ‘inversion by means of which the moment which negates the point of departure coincides with this point of departure brought to its extreme’. For instance, merely ‘external opposition of particular crimes and universal law has to be dissolved in the “inner” antagonism of crime; what we call “law” is nothing but universalised crime.’ Again, borrowing Derrida’s familiar example, “truth” as opposed to “mere rhetoric” is nothing but rhetoric brought to its extreme, to the point of its self-negation ...; the difference between rhetoric and truth *falls within the very field of rhetoric...*’

In each of Žižek’s many illustrations, the specific binary is resolved into a singular self-distinction



or self-differentiation: ‘the difference between the “higher” and the “lower” moment – [here,] between law and crime, between thought and example – is contained within the “lower” moment itself; is generated through its self-differentiation, through its negative self-relationship.’<sup>34</sup> It should come as no real surprise, incidentally, to find that a similarly singularizing strategy (the resolution of apparent binaries into virtual ‘monisms’: the molar as a mode of the molecular, the striated as a mode of the smooth, the reactive as a mode of the active...) informs much of the work of that most eminent contemporary champion of an infra-differential univocity, Gilles Deleuze – his notoriously anti-Hegelian thematics, again, makes for no ‘specific’ difference here.<sup>35</sup>

As a rule, any fully singular conception of things is always ‘equally’ singular on both ends of the spectrum, large and small. What is established through the singular is *unlimited*. The singular itself, then, can be indifferently described as infinitely compressed (singular because punctual, without extension), or as

infinitely extended (singular because all inclusive, without horizon). As Deleuze puts it, 'the whole ought to belong to a single moment'; 'the smallest becomes the equal of the largest once it is not separated from what it can do'.<sup>36</sup> And Žižek: 'the Whole is always-already part of itself, comprised within its own elements.'<sup>37</sup> This whole, of course, is no more of a 'closed totality' than is its 'smallest' element; the singular must never be confused with mere *uniformity*, which it negates at every point. To individuate any one 'small' unit as radically unique (as either 'identity-with-itself' or as pure 'other-of-itself') is simultaneously to refer it back, via some kind of more or less immediate derivation, to one creative movement, be it Reason (D'Alembert/Spinoza), Vitality (Deleuze/Bergson) or Spirit (Žižek/Hegel). (It is precisely this 'more or less', of course, that distinguishes Deleuze from Žižek, and Spinoza from Hegel). For instance: the radical particularity of Spinoza's modes, like that of Leibniz's monads, refers directly back to the univocity of their substance and cause, as so many 'degrees' of a divine intensity. A singularity in the technical sense of contemporary physics implies an environment of *unqualified* (as opposed to relative) chaos. The singularity of any one commodity *qua* commodity implies – according to the prevailing logic of neo-classical economics – the eventual singularity of the market mechanism that commodifies it: the particular 'oneness' of one dollar is a function, ultimately, of the oneness of the market itself.

Now the singular *is* immediate to itself (as self-affirming or self-negating), but its initial *appearing* is typically obscured by some kind of interference or mediation. Its immediacy is perceived, tautologically, to the degree that it is *actively freed* of mediation (social, ideological, psychological, figural), actively dis-covered, 'unfettered' or proclaimed. (Žižek would say, following the later Lacan, to the degree that its subject 'traverses the fantasy'.) Genuine or appropriate perception of the singular can only be literal or real. It is seen for what it is only when the perceiver perceives herself as a direct participant in its singularity, its 'drive'. This is what distinguishes the 'creatively' singular from the mere universality of creation itself: while the singular properly creates its own universe, the conventionally 'universal' is rather an empty presumption of the specific. The singular obtains *as* singular only in the active transcendence of the specific, its 'singularisation'.<sup>38</sup> Which is to say that if, in each case, the singular is posited *as* original (as divine, rational, primordial, essential...), its *realization* as singular *is* (i.e. will be) always an end or result.

This is why the temporal mode proper to the singular is the future anterior: it will have been.

In most contexts, singularity is a fundamentally redemptive outcome. The singular *is* always immediate to the real (first cause, vital energy, self-sufficient totality), but the singular as such is never given *to us*. Our given condition is, variously: sinful, warring, ignorant, passionate, superstitious, partial, personal, worldly. The real *is* immediate, but is given *as* mediated, as 'covered up', as framed by fantasy and delusion. The creator transcends and precedes creation, whereas creatures begin as specified, as 'ignorant' in Spinoza's sense.<sup>39</sup> The distinction of specific and specified is of no importance from a singular perspective. The singular *creature* exists as singular only in its *becoming-singular*, and ultimately through what Deleuze calls its 'becoming-imperceptible' – imperceptible, that is, according to specified or given criteria.

Any singular conception of individuation, then, must include at least four components: (a) an idea of the real, (b) an account of the given, (c) some means to dissolve the given, and (d) an affirmation of this dissolution as redemptive rather than destructive. If a generic concept of the singular is to have any force, this formal arrangement should apply across otherwise incommensurable differences of context, thematics and purpose. The singular creates the medium of its own existence; it comes to be in the absence of relations-with others (i.e. beyond the given); it operates without transcendent criteria. What it lacks is simply any constituent place for the in-between as such (as *relative to* its terms, rather than external to or subversive of them).

At the limit, of course, the *purely* singular eludes philosophical articulation altogether: an unqualified singularization results only in what Badiou calls an 'anti-philosophical' veneration of the Beyond, a mystical communion with the One beyond being. Proclus and Wittgenstein could agree that of this One, as such, nothing can be said. The ultimately asymptotic character of the singular, however, in no way limits its philosophical inspiration. Becoming-singular has been a fundamental, though far from exclusive, orientation for much of Western philosophy from Plato to Spinoza and Schelling to Heidegger. What is Spinoza's ethics other than a move from specified to singular, without 'stopping' at the specific? What is Hegel's dialectic, if not the singularization of relationality itself – relationality or negativity as creative of its own medium of existence, in the absence of any 'transcendent' criteria external to its operation? And Kant: as the limited, constituent subjects of knowledge, we are indeed for-

ever specific to what we perceive, forever at a distance from the unknowably specified-in-itself – but what is Kant’s *practical* affirmation of the transcendental realm, of our noumenal freedom, if not a singularization of the specific?<sup>40</sup> We cannot know the Good as a phenomenon, as ‘content’; the only medium for moral action is thus the form in which it creates its own dimension (i.e. law). No sooner does Kant move from the impossibility of a noumenal knowledge to the affirmation of a noumenal practice than he turns it into the basis for a properly singular, self-grounding imperative, an ethics in which distinct positions are properly interchangeable.

### Singular philosophies

The singular-immediate mode of individuation, with its quasi-mystical associations and ‘old-fashioned’ metaphysical assumptions, might seem at first sight to have little relevance to our contemporary preoccupations. The most complex and insightful of its philosophical articulations are no doubt to be found among the early Buddhist sutras and the various strands of Neoplatonism, from Plotinus to Spinoza and Molla Sadrâ. A fundamentally singular orientation, however, is no less characteristic of the high modernist projects of the later Heidegger (Being beyond beings), Blanchot (‘essential solitude’), Bataille (‘sovereignty’) and Althusser (singular ‘science’ as opposed to ideologies of the specific). This orientation, I would argue, is one of the most striking continuities across much of French philosophy from Bergson to Badiou, regardless of chronological classifications. Deleuze, who is perhaps the most significant single example of (and influence upon) this more general orientation, sees the philosophy of his generation as governed primarily by the recognition that ‘the function of singularity is replacing that of universality’.<sup>41</sup> For his part, Badiou sees in the widespread commitment to a singular difference without specificity, to a ‘subject without vis-à-vis’, ‘a possible regrouping of Lacan, Sartre and myself, on the one hand, and on the other, of the Heideggerians and, in some ways, Deleuze and Lyotard ... – a somewhat unexpected formal regrouping of the philosophy of these last thirty years’.<sup>42</sup>

Consider a few examples. Deleuze himself begins with a critique of ‘specific difference’ (Aristotle, Hegel). His ‘singularities’ figure as the anonymous, asubjective modes or ‘affects’ of a single vital power or force (difference, desire, *puissance*); they exist only in the absence of all forms of relation, representation, equivocity, and introspection, in what he calls ‘a world without others’.<sup>43</sup> Clément Rosset and François

Laruelle provide paradoxical, rigorously idiosyncratic profiles of a singular ‘*en-tant-qu’Un*’, presented as ‘without double’ or ‘idiotic’ in the etymological sense.<sup>44</sup> Henri Corbin devoted his life to the explication of the singular orientation of Iranian theosophy. Michel Henry’s ‘ideal phenomenology’ posits one oecumenical life force, where to be alive is to participate in the vital, all-inclusive ‘auto-affection’.<sup>45</sup> Lyotard posits a world governed by pure multiplicity without any coordination, a world composed of ‘incommensurable differences’ or differences without relations between the differed; the role of philosophy is thus restricted to an essentially passive respect for the sublime or ‘unpresentable’ experience of this incommensurability. In various domains, Christian Jambet and Guy Lardreau strive to think, after Lacan, the dimensions of the One beyond being, the legacy of Proclus adapted to a rigorously negative *vérité* beyond worldly or phenomenal coherence.<sup>46</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy presumes a ‘singular-plural being’, where all individuals are both essentially singular and sustained in a pure ‘being-with’ beyond all specification, a communion beyond relations with specific others as such. For Nancy, real community can only be revealed, uncovered, in a state of *dés-oeuvrement*.<sup>47</sup> Suspicion of community runs deep in contemporary French philosophy.<sup>48</sup> Like Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe explores the disastrous consequences of specifying communal ‘myths’ in Romantic literature, Heidegger’s philosophy, and Nazi Germany. Lacoue-Labarthe’s subject is originally ek-static or ‘mimetic’, where ‘the essence of mimesis is not imitation, but production ‘in its broadest sense’;<sup>49</sup> this production must be preserved as unlimited or self-constituent, without specificity or constraint. Politico-aesthetic *mediation* of mimesis is, according to Lacoue-Labarthe, the very form of catastrophe.<sup>50</sup>

Consider the most apparently incommensurable representatives of the trend: Deleuze, Sartre, Baudrillard, Badiou and Levinas. As Levinas writes, after Plotinus, ‘the One, which every philosophy would like to express, [is] beyond being’.<sup>51</sup> Such a One corresponds here, respectively, to the One as the purely virtual or intensive (Deleuze); the One of consciousness, nothingness, or freedom (Sartre); the One as pure simulation, beyond all specifying production-consumption (Baudrillard); the One as Event and subtraction (Badiou); the One as illeity, altogether Other, or ‘Most High’ (Levinas).

(1) With **Deleuze**, what is given is specific difference, the ‘shackles of mediation’, subjective interiority, equivocity, signification, territoriality, desire-as-lack,



transcendence, Oedipus, the ‘long error’ of representation. The real is a vitalist, self-differing force of pure creation, absolute intensity or virtuality. The real is one cosmic desire that creates the infinite multiplicity of its objects (or modes). The real coheres in a ‘world without others’; its singular modes or actualizations are no more related ‘to’ each other than Leibniz’s windowless monads. These actualizations exist as so many ‘degrees’ of reality, arranged along a single, purely quantitative ontological scale. The singular nature of this reality is obscured in its very actualization in particular situations; fluid, univocal reality tends toward a given or equivocal stasis. The great purpose of Deleuze’s philosophy is thus to describe the various mechanisms whereby the given can be counter-actualized, deterritorialized or otherwise realized. One becomes real, naturally, precisely by abandoning the equivocal, the territorial, the relative, mediate, the figural, the significant, the perceptible, and so on. All of the otherwise incompatible ‘conceptual personae’ that populate Deleuze’s work (Spinoza, Nietzsche, Masoch, Proust, Kafka, Beckett, Bacon, Artaud, the nomad, the schizo, the dice-thrower) pursue a similarly singularizing itinerary. The obvious problem that arises is how to explain the individuation of these self-singularizing beings in a wholly deterritorialized space, without recourse to some kind of intrinsic and determining – that is, ultimately specified – essence, thought or Idea, more or less on the Platonic model.

(2) So often thought to be at the opposite end of the philosophical spectrum from Deleuze and his contemporaries, **Sartre** is of course concerned with the anguished freedom of the individual consciousness. The real, here, is the spontaneous, self-constituent sovereignty of this consciousness (or praxis): given illusions begin with the alienation of this subjective freedom in some sort of objectifying identification (*mauvaise foi* or practico-inert). Consciousness ‘determines its existence at each moment ...; each moment of our conscious life reveals to us a creation ex nihilo’.<sup>52</sup> This creation is realized as the anguished assumption of freedom, in the absence of all ethical criteria for action.<sup>53</sup> Consciousness is freedom as such – that is, a purely aspecific indetermination or ‘nothingness’, a pure opening onto the world without mediation. By definition, this singular immediacy of consciousness can exist only in a world without others; the other, as conceived in *L’Être et le néant*, is literally extra-mundane, it erupts all at once, as ‘primary absence of relation’, as a ‘drain-hole [*trou de vidange*] in the world’. The Other as subject and the other as subjected (object) are

mutually exclusive; intersubjective *relations* are not a sustainable option. It is impossible, in other words, to *relate to a néant* (a consciousness). And a similar assumption of essential or primordial conflict, a mutual exclusion of self and other, holds in the later *Critique de la raison dialectique*.<sup>54</sup> The sole possibility of an escape from such conflict or indifference lies in the fragile and ephemeral constitution of a ‘group in fusion’, a group that comes to be precisely through the transcendence of its constituents’ particular interests and relations: in this redemptive ‘*praxis* there is no Other, there are only several myselfs [*il y a des moi-même*]’.<sup>55</sup> The problem again arises, therefore, of how to maintain, in the absence of relation, the specific individuality of a consciousness as such.

(3) **Baudrillard** promotes one omnipotent though amorphous power of the simulacrum or image, a single pull of ‘seduction’ that transcends the *production* of discrete objects and identities. After once reflecting, masking or suggesting a reality, the sign in our post-modern moment now bears no *relation to* any ‘external’ reality whatsoever. The sign is self-creative, source of its own simulacrum.<sup>56</sup> Such ‘simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation of models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it.’<sup>57</sup> The map or model itself creates the univocity of a newly ‘one dimensional system’ – ‘all secrets, spaces and scenes abolished in a single dimension of information’.<sup>58</sup> Liberated in a wholly smooth space, movement ‘concentrates itself in a single fixed point, in an immobility which is no longer that of non-movement, but of a potential ubiquity, that of an absolute mobility which, by traversing it ceaselessly and effortlessly, annuls its own space’. The result is a virtuality without others: as ‘each individual is condensed in a hyper-potential point, others virtually no longer exist [*les autres n’existent virtuellement plus*]’.<sup>59</sup> We live in an ‘obscene’ immediacy, without criteria for reflection or critique.<sup>60</sup>

(4) **Badiou** follows Sartre (and Lacan) in pursuit of a philosophy of the subject without others, *un sujet sans vis-à-vis*,<sup>61</sup> understood as a ‘subtraction’ from all established knowledges and communal norms. Badiou’s subject is a kind of radically self-constituent nonconformist. What is given here is the realm of commerce and communication, the rule of language and opinion, the status quo which aligns particularist identity politics as so many positions within global capital;<sup>62</sup> Badiou’s real is a function of unqualified subjective ‘truth’. Where Baudrillard asserts ‘an object without subject’, Badiou defends ‘a doctrine of the

subject without object, of the subject as the vanishing point of a procedure that originates in an eventmental supplement without purpose or pattern'.<sup>63</sup> An individual becomes-subject in its militant fidelity to a unique event, itself wholly without objective substance – for example, St Paul as the apostle of a Christ proclaimed risen, Robespierre or Lenin as the subjects of a revolution declared to have ended the *ancien régime*.<sup>64</sup> Subjects remain subject in so far as they *hold true* to an event (a *cause*) in the name of which they can act in the interests of all. Badiou's truths, deployed in a number of different fields (politics, art, science, love), are more 'generic' than specific. They persist in the sovereignty of their self-proclamation, on the model of a mathematical axiom.<sup>65</sup> The subject, like the truth it proclaims, is wholly without other and devoid of external criteria: it is 'pure', 'unrelated', the very form of *déliation*.<sup>66</sup>

(5) **Levinas** provides what is in a sense a limit case for the field in general: his ethical philosophy is built entirely upon a responsibility for the Other (*Autrui*), but this 'pre-ontological' responsibility is conceived to be so absolute and so primordial as to transcend any possible relation or negotiation *with* the other (with a specific other). To be responsible is to be created, and the creature cannot 'relate' to a creator whose infinite reality lies beyond and prior to the realm of finitude and ontology itself. Given are: ontology, epistemology, sameness, essence, 'interestedness', cultural pluralism, and the war of 'allergic egoisms'.<sup>67</sup> Real, then, are those paradoxical traces of the One beyond Being, or pure infinity: 'the idea of Infinity [i.e. of God] (which is not a representation of infinity) sustains activity itself'.<sup>68</sup> The infinite Other is wholly aspecific, pure 'beyond', and my responsibility for the Other is absolute, immediate and without appeal, without criteria (as 'hostage', 'substitution', 'unconditional obedience', 'trauma', 'obsession', 'persecution', etc.). Responsibility is a 'relation without relation': 'the I *qua* I is absolutely unique', and in my 'relation with' the Other, 'the Other remains absolute and absolves itself from the relation which it enters into'.<sup>69</sup> In other words, the alterity of the Other is simultaneously 'the alterity of the human other [*Autrui*] and of the Most High [*Très Haut*]'. I am responsible for my (singular) neighbour because my neighbour is an immediate reflection of her (equally singular) creator: 'there is responsibility and a Self because the trace of the Infinite ... is inscribed in proximity'.<sup>70</sup> Like Lyotard, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, Levinas pre-empts all specific conflicts of interest by assuming a pre-conflictual ethical orientation that ensures their just resolution 'before' they could ever

take place. It is as if these thinkers, appalled by the violence of contemporary political conflict, retreat to a pre-political ethical realm in which conflict could not arise at all, a realm in which the very '*substance* of the I is made of saintliness'.<sup>71</sup> There is a precedent for this, I would suggest, in the political philosophy of the seventeenth century.

### Specific alternatives

It should go without saying that in perhaps *all* other respects, the philosophers mentioned here are effectively impossible. Nevertheless, the fundamental adherence to a single orientation, despite such obvious divergences, is striking and suggestive. They all refuse what I have described as a specific mode of relation and mediation, and they all share a *comparably* self-constituent first principle, a sovereign reality without others and without external criteria. This is not the place to hazard an explanation for this convergence of perspectives. It may be that, as in the decades before Absolutism, the 'specific' wars of position that mark the years between 1914 and 1945 seemed too disastrous, too costly, to permit anything other than a singular resolution transcendent of the very idea of position itself.

To be sure, recent French thought offers some well-known alternatives to the singular paradigm. Merleau-Ponty, Camus, early Lacan, Ricoeur, Bourdieu all insist, in different ways, on the essentially 'relational' nature of experience, desire or reality. Foucault's work provides an especially suggestive 'specific' counterpoint to the singularizing logic of his friend Deleuze (with whom he is so often aligned). Against Deleuze's own very influential reading of his work,<sup>72</sup> Foucault might be read as moving away from an impossibly literal or immediate experience of the real 'limit' or *dehors* (madness, death, language-in-itself), toward the composition of specific histories of how our experience has been specified and confined. Foucault's early fascination with the limits of experience is less a form of suicidal mysticism than an interest in the limits of our specification (the pure, ultimately abstract limit of that *to which* we remain, though minimally specified, forever specific). His eventual understanding of philosophy as ethical self-fashioning, the ongoing *relation* of self to self and self to other, would thus be less the betrayal of an earlier intransigence than the culmination of a fully specific programme: the isolation of a subjective experience from *all* specified conformity, be it disciplinary, humanist or 'alternative'. Where Deleuze tries to articulate a field of pure or immediate difference, a deterritorializing difference whose

(virtual) relations are external to their (actual) terms, Foucault explores the necessarily historical *territory* in which people are ‘made subject’, so as to ask the eventual question: ‘what is or is no longer indispensable for the constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects?’<sup>73</sup> Foucault’s enduring goal is to alter ‘one’s way of seeing, to modify the horizon of what one knows’,<sup>74</sup> ‘in order to be other than what we are’.<sup>75</sup> Although Foucault uses different terminology, what he calls ‘the critical ontology of ourselves’ is very much in keeping with the general effort to move from the specified to the specific, without recourse to a singular authority or plenitude:

The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, not even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be considered as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment [épreuve] with the possibility of going beyond them.<sup>76</sup>

The specific is not something to be attained at some future point of theoretical sophistication, or pending some further restriction of perspective. The specific must not be confused with the merely particular, nor swept away in a singular conflagration. Specificity is the very medium of our existence, the exclusive, indifferent space for our unending work upon ourselves – our interminable awakening and our fragile despecification.

## Notes

I would like to thank Simon Gaunt and Peter Osborne for their careful readings of this article.

1. Hegel, ‘Sense Certainty’, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977; pp. 58–66; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*, Plon, Agora edn, Paris, 1962/*The Savage Mind*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1966, p. 306/257.
2. Roy Boyne and Ali Rattansi, ‘Introduction’, *Postmodernism and Society*, Macmillan, London, 1990, pp. 9, 24. This diagnosis of fragmentation is broadly consistent regardless of the (often very different) values it is assigned. Cf. Alex Callinicos, ‘Reactionary Postmodernism?’, *ibid.*, p. 110; Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory*, Verso, London, 1992, p. 137; Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1987, pp. 336–41; Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 1992, p. 14.
3. Stephen White, *Political Theory and Postmodernism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 11; Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p. 122; Agnes Heller, ‘Existentialism, Alienation, Postmodernism’, in Andrew Milner, ed., *Postmodern Conditions*, Berg, New York, 1990, p. 11.
4. Anthony Appiah, ‘Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonialism?’, in Padmini Mongia, ed., *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory*, Arnold, London, 1996, p. 58.
5. Cornel West, *Keeping Faith*, Routledge, London, 1993, p. 3.
6. Henry Giroux, ‘Postmodernism as Border Pedagogy’, in Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon, eds, *A Postmodern Reader*, SUNY Press, Albany NY, 1993, pp. 464–5, 479.
7. Nelly Richard, ‘Postmodernism and Periphery’ [1987], in Thomas Docherty, ed., *Postmodernism: A Reader*, Harvester, New York, 1993, p. 468.
8. Charles Russell, *Poets, Prophets and Revolutionaries*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985, p. 239; Scott Lash, *Sociology of Postmodernism*, Routledge, London, 1990, p. ix.
9. Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, Routledge, London, 1995, p. 246.
10. Françoise Lionnet, *Postcolonial Representations*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 1995, p. ix.
11. Honi Fern Haber’s *Beyond Postmodern Politics: Lyotard, Rorty, Foucault* (Routledge, London, 1994), is a good example of the trend.
12. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 24. Like Lyotard or Deleuze, Bhabha conceives of ‘difference’ as *pure* ‘incommensurability’ or ‘untranslatability’ (pp. 207, 224); ‘what is at issue on the discourse of minorities is the creation of agency through incommensurable (not simply multiple) positions’ (p. 231). Rather than relations between distinct cultures, Bhabha’s difference relates to the creative vitality of ‘the arbitrariness of the sign, the indeterminacy of writing, [and] the splitting of the subject of enunciation’ (p. 176). Bhabha’s major concept, hybridity, is ‘a difference “within”’ (p. 13), a difference without ‘binary terms’ (p. 14).
13. Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre*, Gallimard, Folio, Paris, 1991/*The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, Grove Press, New York, 1991 edn, p. 264/218 (translation modified).
14. Aijaz Ahmad, ‘The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality’ [1995], in Mongia, ed., *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory*, p. 289.
15. Peter Dews, *The Limits of Disenchantment*, Verso, London, 1995, p. 13; cf. Dews, ‘The Truth of the Subject’, in S. Critchley and P. Dews, eds, *Deconstructive Subjectivities*, SUNY Press, Albany NY, 1998, p. 166.
16. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *L’Anti-Oedipe: Capitalisme et schizophrénie*, Minuit, Paris, 1972/*Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley et al., University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1983, p. 91/76.
17. ‘In-difference with respect to properties is what individuates and disseminates singularities’ (Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* [1990], trans. Michael Hardt, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1993, p. 19).
18. Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, trans. Randal Johnson et al., Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1998, p. 4.
19. Cf. Adam Kuper, *South Africa and the Anthropologists*, Routledge, London, 1987.
20. ‘Let’s Be Friends’, *Sesame Street Live*, at Madison Square Garden, New York, 7–23 February 1997, sponsored by McDonald’s.

21. Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, Gallimard, Paris, 1994, vol. 4, p. 777.
22. William Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*, Grove Press, New York, 1967, p. 151.
23. Karl Marx, '1857 Introduction', *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973, p. 84.
24. As Laclau points out, the essential task of a contemporary theory of the subject begins with a 'redefinition of the existing relation between universality and particularity' (Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, Verso, London, 1996, p. vii). Cf. Brian Martine, *Individuals and Individuality*, SUNY Press, Albany NY, 1984, pp. xv, 1, 75.
25. Michel Foucault, 'Cours de 14 janvier, 1976', *Dits et écrits*, vol. 3, p. 127.
26. 'I am not the prisoner of History.... The density of History determines none of my actions' (Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Seuil, Paris, 1952, pp. 186–7).
27. Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities' [1989], in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 447.
28. Ibn' Arabi, *Fusus*, in Reynold A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978, p. 152.
29. A singularity is 'a state of infinite curvature of space-time. In a singularity, all places and times are the same. Hence the big bang did not take place in a preexisting space; all space was embroiled in the big bang' (Timothy Ferris, *The Whole Shebang: A State-of-the-Universe(s) Report*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1997, p. 17).
30. I provide a much more detailed though still preliminary survey of these and other examples in my doctoral dissertation, 'Writing in the Singular Immediate', Department of French and African-American Studies, Yale University, New Haven CT, 1997.
31. Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, Verso, London, 1991, pp. 61, 66, 68, 69.
32. Žižek takes his argument to its logical conclusion: the radical implication of Hegel's dialectic is not merely the 'sublation of the [particular] difference' but 'the experience of how the difference was always-already sublated; of how, in a way, it never effectively existed' (p. 62).
33. Žižek, *For They Know Not*, p. 47 (referring to Hegel's *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller, Allen & Unwin, London, 1969, p. 583).
34. Žižek, *For They Know Not*, pp. 32, 41.
35. See my 'Deleuze and the Singular Immediate', forthcoming in *Angelaki*, vol. 5, no. 2, Summer 2000.
36. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, PUF, Paris, 1962/*Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson, Columbia University Press, New York, 1983, p. 81/72; *Différence et répétition*, PUF, Paris, 1968/*Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994, p. 55/37. Singular 'auto-affectation [is the] conversion of far and near' (*Cinéma 2, L'image-temps*, Minuit, Paris, 1985/*Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 111/83).
37. Žižek, *For They Know Not*, p. 46.
38. Examples include the alignment of particular wills in Spinoza's 'reasonable' polity and Rousseau's *volonté générale*, and the fusion of particular interests in the univocity of One proletarian disinterest.
39. In Spinoza's terms, we begin our ethical journey as the plaything of our passive affects, in 'impotence and slavery' (Spinoza, *Ethics*, part IV). Spinoza's disciple Deleuze concurs: 'we are born cut off from our power of action or understanding' (Deleuze, *L'Idée d'expression dans la philosophie de Spinoza*, Minuit, Paris, 1968/*Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin, Zone, New York, 1990, p. 286/307. '[T]hinking is not innate, but must be engendered in thought' (*Différence et répétition*, p. 192/147).
40. As Žižek rightly points out, Hegel simply goes further in this direction than Kant himself (Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 1993, pp. 20–21).
41. Gilles Deleuze, 'Un concept philosophique', in *Cahiers Confrontations*, no. 20, 1989, p. 90.
42. Badiou, 'L'Entretien de Bruxelles', *Les Temps modernes*, no. 526, 1990, p. 23. As Levinas notes, 'the overcoming of the subject-object structure [is] the idée fixe of the whole of contemporary thought' ('Meaning and Sense', in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak et al., University of Indiana Press, Bloomington, 1996, p. 41; cf. Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980, p. 216). This perspective runs counter to the general view of recent French theory (here, Lyotard and Deleuze) as 'favour[ing] the supervention of a micropolitics which will attend to the local and the specific without recourse to some grand programme' (Docherty, 'Introduction', *Postmodernism*, p. 4). Endorsements of such assumptions are too numerous to cite.
43. Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, Minuit, Paris, 1969, pp. 355–61.
44. See in particular Clement Rosset, *Le Réel: Traité de l'idiotie*, Minuit, Paris, 1977; *L'Objet singulier*, Minuit, Paris, 1979; François Laruelle, *En tant qu'un*, Aubier, Paris, 1992; *Principes de la non-philosophie*, PUF, Paris, 1996.
45. Michel Henry, *L'Essence de la manifestation* [1963], PUF, Paris, 1990; *C'est moi la vérité*, Seuil, Paris, 1996.
46. Guy Lardreau and Christian Jambet, *L'Ange*, Grasset, Paris, 1976; Guy Lardreau, *La Véracité: Essai d'ontologie négative*, Verdier, Paris, 1993; *Discours philosophique et discours spirituel*, Seuil, Paris, 1985; *Fiction philosophique et science-fiction*, Actes Sud, Arles, 1988; Christian Jambet, *La Logique des orientaux*, Seuil, Paris, 1983; *La Grande Résurrection d'Azamuth*, Verdier, Paris, 1991.
47. Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'Être singulier pluriel*, Galilée, Paris, 1996; *Le Sens du monde*, Galilée, Paris, 1993; *La Communauté désœuvrée*, Christian Bourgois, Paris, 1986.
48. In Blanchot's tortured version, real community must be experienced through and as 'the absence of community'; through the dissolution of relationships in a communion-in-death, we must 'make the final silence resound' (Maurice Blanchot, *La Communauté inavouable*, Minuit, Paris, 1983/*The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris, Station Hill Press, Barrytown NY, 1988, pp. 12/3, 38/19. Cf. Todd May, 'The Community's Absence in Lyotard, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe', *Philosophy Today*, vol. 37, no. 3, Fall 1993).
49. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 'Typography', in *Typography, Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. Christopher Fynsk, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1989, p. 80.
50. See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *La Fiction du politique*, Christian Bourgois, Paris, 1987; *Musica Ficta*, Chris-



- tian Bourgeois, Paris, 1991. Derrida is the most obvious omission from this discussion. Space does not permit an adequate assessment of his position. Suffice it to say, tentatively, that he straddles in some sense the two modes of the singular and the specific. On the one hand, he posits a range of concepts whose integrity is rigorously sovereign, pre-ontological or pre-relative: *différance*, iterability, supplementarity, the trace, writing, textuality, and so on. These concepts are not co-implied with specific (differed) elements, but productive of them. On the other hand, Derrida always insists that any particular 'expression' of *différance* is always specific to a particular situation or text. Deconstruction is nothing if not reading-specific, and in his insistence that the pre-ontological concepts of *différance*, iterability and so forth are always necessarily co-implied with the language of presence inherited from metaphysics, Derrida sometimes grants this specificity an effectively transcendental status (as indeed he must).
51. Levinas, 'Enigma and Phenomenon', in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, p. 77.
  52. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Transcendence de l'ego* [1937], Vrin, Paris, 1988/*The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness*, trans. Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick, Noonday Press, New York, 1957, pp. 79/98–9.
  53. Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*, Gallimard, Folio edn, Paris, 1996/*Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. Philip Mariet, Methuen, London, 1948, pp. 40–43/36–8; cf. *L'Être et le néant*, Gallimard, Paris, 1943/*Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes, Philosophical Library, New York, 1956, pp. 70–71/33.
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