

11: The Finite-Infinite Relation *A Conversation with Simon O'Sullivan*

In this conversation, Simon O'Sullivan explores the aesthetic (as opposed to epistemic) 'catastrophe' touched on in the introduction via a longstanding philosophical tradition that he unites under the title 'production of subjectivity' which resists the strong Kantian separation of phenomena and noumena, positing instead a continuum between the finite and the infinite. Kant may have kept the noumenon at arm's length from reason, but O'Sullivan explores the other philosophical resources that have been utilized to access it, and in doing so questions the very idea of neatly definable limits to philosophical enquiry.

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You wrote a book called *On the Production of Subjectivity*. I was hoping you could give an outline of what you mean by the production of subjectivity.

The phrase itself comes from Félix Guattari, a psychoanalyst and writer who collaborated extensively with Gilles Deleuze. For him the 'production of subjectivity' concerns,

in part at least, the question of how we live our lives and, indeed, produce who and what we are. This was part of his larger interest in ‘ethico-aesthetics’, which is best understood as a kind of paradigm outside the more scientific and narrowly technological one, and related to this practice of self-creation. In my book, I took the framework that Guattari offers and developed it alongside some of the late writings of Michel Foucault on technologies of the self, as well as other thinkers who I felt fitted within this paradigm, very broadly speaking. The book, then, is really to do with how we might produce ourselves *differently* or, you might say, how we can move from subjection – or being subject-to – to what Deleuze and Guattari would call subjectivation. For me this is all intimately related to the ways in which capitalism, for want of a better word, goes ‘all the way down.’ It struck me that the terrain, if you like, of any struggle against dominating forces wasn’t just out there, it was in here too; in our bodies, forming and shaping our desires, our values, and so on. So the book was an attempt to draw together a whole archive of theoretical resources that I thought might be useful for excavating/inventing another way of being. I was keen not to be partisan, and not necessarily to follow already existing camps, but to try out some creative couplings, force some encounters between these different resources and then diagram some of the compatibilities and syntheses. I mean diagramming quite concretely; there are quite a few of my own diagrams in the book (alongside those from other thinkers) that themselves arose from drawings done in a pedagogical setting.

So all the philosophers I do engage with in the book, whether it’s Spinoza, Nietzsche, Bergson, Foucault, or Deleuze are, I think, attending to concrete problems related to the subject or subjectivity. Deleuze and Guattari especially seemed to offer up a kind of philosophy that was about life – a pragmatics of sorts for actually living life otherwise. These philosophers are also involved in thinking about time

and temporality, and I became interested in the question of how to get out of time, if I can put it like that, how to live against a certain standardised, homogenised experience of time. There is a sense in which each of these figures I just mentioned had found a way of exploring or experimenting with temporality, or, at least, re-conceptualising it. I figured this, very broadly, as a kind of 'accessing' of the infinite, for example via the gap between stimulus and response in Bergson, Spinoza's progression through the three forms of knowledge, or the eternal return in Nietzsche. It was as if each of these thinkers had a secret, something important to say about all this, and what I wanted to do was bring some of these insights together, try and produce something composite – a composite diagram – between them all.

You mention Foucault. A lot of people find his shift from questions of power and its relation to knowledge to his later writings on technologies of the self to be a bit bizarre, like a kind of dandyism or even narcissism disconnected from anything beyond the self. Could you say a bit about this trajectory in his thought?

For me, one of the interesting things about Foucault was the way in which in his later writing he attended to a particular relation to force, and, indeed, the possibility of a kind of 'folding-in' of external forces – a folding-in of the outside. He felt that despite the problems we faced in being subject to the forces of neo-liberalism there were ways of producing a certain space of freedom by making autonomous decisions about how one lives one's life. As you say, this was the substance of Foucault's interest in the Ancients and their various 'spiritual exercises,' but also Baudelaire and dandyism – the whole 'life as a work of art' attitude and orientation. But, again, in interview especially, Foucault also related this to our own contemporary moment and the impasses we are in, politically speaking. I found this incredibly powerful, and, in fact, was also drawn to Jacques Lacan's work in this

area – despite the more obvious differences from Foucault – about the goal of psychoanalysis being about becoming a cause of yourself (you find this in his seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*). It seemed to me that this was also a crucial factor in Spinoza's *Ethics* in which he describes a kind of retroactive claiming of those forces that had caused you. To bring this down to earth a little, these were all questions that, I felt, were also related to my own life as it was then. I had basically reached a sort of impasse myself and so this question of freedom was very much a lived problem for me. So it wasn't abstract or, at least, not abstract in one sense anyway – it was about how to start producing my life differently, or what is my own production of subjectivity.

Your book is built around what you term the finite-infinite relation. This suggests that it could be read as a response to Kant's famous barrier separating the finite from the infinite or the phenomenal from the noumenal. Is there a sense in which you were reacting against this barrier?

I think that's right. The gambit of the book, at least in one sense, was to look at what you call the barrier or the curtain between phenomena and noumena, and then look at ways to rethink this relationship. It's a philosophical investigation into this other tradition that resists the strong Kantian separation of phenomena and noumena, and that instead posits a continuum between the finite and the infinite. This relates to what I just said about temporality, but also to the production of subjectivity insofar as the typical subject only comes into being because it raises these shutters against the infinite (or, indeed, is defined by these shutters). I was interested in another model where these shutters were less fixed, where we might 'open up' further to the world or universe. We could take as an example of this kind of framework Deleuze's famous description of the tick: its world is composed of three coordination points – heat, light, and smell.

So in the vast universe the tick only has these three coordination points related to its survival needs. The tick's world is, as it were, subtracted from this vastness. But thinking about this in relation to us, as we are, these coordination points are mutable. Our capacities for being affected, and to affect, can be increased to the point where we further and further approximate the infinite. This more or less Spinozist/Bergsonian idea was particularly attractive to me and became one of the key bases for the book, alongside the more explicitly Guattarian angle.

At one point in the book you write that you were seeking a non-theological approach to what you term 'the problem of finitude'. Could you say a bit about what you mean by finitude here as it can be used in quite a few different ways?

Yes, I use finitude in different ways, but, generally, I was concerned with finite existence, and also the alienated subject split off from the world. So the way in which I work with this problem is, I think, different from the way certain other contemporary thinkers (associated with Speculative Realism) are currently working with it. I'll give a couple of examples. So the 'new' Promethean philosophers like Ray Brassier and (though less so) Reza Negarestani would see finitude as an accident of sorts that can be overcome by a kind of project of remaking ourselves (utilising technology for example). Basically they refuse a sanctity of the given over the made, which would be at least one definition of religion, and, in its place, accentuate and affirm the human capacity for invention and construction. Another prominent thinker who is addressing this problem is Quentin Meillassoux, but for him the way beyond finitude lies in mathematics and the possibility of thinking the absolute in a manner that breaks with the finitude of the subject. So both the Promethean philosophers and Meillassoux think that a particular kind of abstract intelligence is the way to overcome the problem

of finitude, whereas my starting point in the book was that we always already *are* in the great outdoors, part of the infinite; and yet for some reason we don't quite see that, for some reason our consciousness occludes that. So there is a sense in which what I call the 'subject-as-is', in other words the subject that is basically an accumulation of habit (and reactivity), is condemned to finitude, and the challenge is to find a way round this for the subject, the possibility of a subject-to-come, as it were.

In your book you use a lot of terms like pre-human, post-human, trans-human, in-human, a-personal, non-corporeal to describe this subject-to-come. What do you mean by these kinds of terms?

In general the human is a particular configuration or itself a diagram of a mode of being, a habitual way of being in the world, and I am interested in what other diagrams or configurations there might be. This goes beyond the philosophers I write about to other thinkers and practices that I also look to. At the moment I'm working on a book on fiction and what I call 'fictioning' which is partly about these other models for other ways of life (especially as they are incarnated and embodied in different art practices and performance). But there are others. Take Buddhism for example. One of the key fetters in Buddhism is the habitual fixed sense of self that operates as an anchoring fiction. But this fiction can be loosened and one can begin to see the edges of the self, and then explore certain terrains beyond the self, and, with that, other patterns of being. This idea that there might be another way of being outside the subject-as-is has also been explored to a certain extent in neuroscientific accounts of the illusion of the self, for example in Thomas Metzinger's work on the ego tunnel and Ray Brassier's work on what he calls the 'nemocentric' subject. So although the terms you list have specific functions in my book, they are all pointing to the question of whether there's another way

of being beyond the typical, the habitual, the normal – basically beyond the finite which is constraining and produces so many problems.

Where does philosophy itself fit into all of this? Once you're in the realm of Spinoza's third kind of knowledge or Bergson's intuition, there's a sense in which we have gone beyond concepts and the limits of what we typically call philosophy.

There's no clear-cut answer to a question like that for me; certainly it would seem, ultimately, that concepts give way to something else in the two cases you mention. But I am also a Deleuzian, and go along with his definition of philosophy as a form of concept creation. So for Deleuze concept creation is not to be understood as simply approximating more and more of the real but is rather experimental and inventive; a kind of construction of the real as it were. It's an undertaking that results in more and more expansive ways of being in the world. This is not to say that there is no limit to conceptual thought; this is where affect, intuition, and other kinds of practices come in. Concepts can certainly build platforms and be incredibly creative, but at the same time any philosophy that emphasises only concepts, just like any philosophy that emphasises only discourse, neglects vast panoramas of experience. So one of the central ideas of the book is that as subjects or as thinking bodies we're *far* more complex than conceptual thought. To paraphrase Deleuze's book on Spinoza, the body surpasses the knowledge we have of it and thought surpasses our consciousness of it. Nietzsche says something similar with his idea that consciousness is like this little figure riding on this *massive* unconscious knowledge which isn't some sort of mysterious Freudian thing below the bar, but is simply what else is going on (in the body) that your consciousness thinks it knows but which actually outstrips this knowledge. This is where you get the Spinozist injunction that we don't even

know what a body is, we don't know what thought is. This is really what Spinoza means by ethics. It's not about morality, about right and wrong or good and bad, but, rather, concerns the question: what am I capable of becoming?

There is a sense in which joy in Spinoza is a kind of 'inhuman' affect that lies right at the heart of his ethical project. Joy or affirmation is a central topic in your book so I was hoping you could say something about this.

For Spinoza, joy is not a kind of ego-state like happiness, or not only this anyway. Rather it is a kind of ethico-ontological principle through which one can increase one's knowledge, when this is both conceptual and bodily. In other words one can only acquire knowledge through *agreement*, through certain things coming together and agreeing. These joyful encounters increase my capacity to act and, with that, also produce a certain kind of knowledge. This can't be separated from Spinoza's monistic ontology insofar as joy arises from agreement and an overcoming of separation. You may find dualists disagreeing with him on this, but this isn't just about what philosophical coat you happen to be wearing; rather you can test it in your experience. Does joy come from these productive encounters? Does it take you somewhere? This idea also has a place in Nietzsche and his idea of the eternal return, this sudden inhuman affirmation that takes us beyond ourselves, beyond nihilism and into a sense of cosmic communion, albeit one that 'we' don't experience.

Thinkers like Spinoza and Deleuze bring the body back in, bring affect back in, bring the passions back in, focusing on these kind of bodily forms of intelligence, whereas philosophy *per se* is quite often seen as involving an intelligence contra the body. Anyone who has ever engaged in any kind of work on themselves understands this: that the intelligence that does all the reasoning is a very small part of the process. Having said that, there is no point in pitting affect,

the body, the libidinal and so on *against* reason or concepts. In Spinoza, for example, we find concepts (understanding what things have in common) built off the back of affects which in turn produce affects, and so on. It's a circular relationship, or perhaps that should be spiral as this knowledge certainly develops incrementally.

We've discussed Kant's dualism of phenomena and noumena, and ways to break down or overcome this dualism. But it's very difficult to let go of the idea of the noumenon or the transcendent as something separate from the world around us. Could you say something about how we can move beyond this longstanding philosophical split between two worlds?

One of the things that attracted me to Deleuze was his re-configuration of these splits like transcendent-immanent, noumenon-phenomenon, finite-infinite, and so on through his distinction between the actual and the virtual. So the idea – very simply and reductively – is that we are surrounded by virtualities only some of which we actualise due to our perceptual mechanisms and habits, but crucially this virtual realm is not some other transcendent place, it's here all around us. As Deleuze might put it, the virtual is 'folded' into the actual and vice versa. So the actual-virtual distinction does not relate to other worlds or insurmountable barriers but to differences in perspective (when this is very broadly construed). So these aren't really dualisms at all. The tendency to split one world off from another, whether it's this world versus the world of pure forms or the next life or whatever it may be, is, for me, religious thinking, and this is what thinkers like Deleuze are challenging. This is what immanence means to me. So these thinkers, philosophers of immanence we might call them, are all suggesting that the potential for life comes from where we are now, and this was a very exciting thought for me.

You mentioned earlier that questions of temporality were closely linked to questions of subjectivity, and to overcoming the finitude of the subject. In your book you mention Nietzsche praising the creativity of idleness and Walter Benjamin extolling the virtues of boredom, and obviously boredom was a mood that Heidegger wrote about as having huge transformative potential. But these kinds of contemplative states seem opposed to the more political goals of resistance that motivated you in writing your book. Have I made a false dichotomy here?

In *Two Sources of Religion and Morality*, Bergson writes about the Christian mystic, and what he says is that the Christian mystic goes off into his mystical states, breaks habits, experiences cosmic memory and all the rest of it, but then *returns* to the world and is active within it, and that it is in fact this superabundant activity that characterizes them. I think this is important: introspection and action in the world are not, it seems to me, incompatible. Far from it. I also think contemplation or introspective technologies can be a strategic retreat, but one that involves a confrontation with one's own habitual reactive mechanisms, so it's like retreating to a laboratory to work out what that reality really is. To come back to Foucault, there is the sense in which insight or knowledge gained through technologies of the self reveal the world to you very intimately insofar as its desires and values are incarnated in your body and mind. This knowledge can give you a greater freedom to act in the world precisely through being able to resist it more effectively. So being able to resist certain stimuli that ask you to be productive on one level (I'm thinking of TV, 9-5 living, careers, and the rest of it) allows you to access much richer depths of productivity and creativity.

My own experience is, and in this sense I agree with Bergson's point about the mystic, that people who are involved

seriously with inquiry into the self and introspective technologies tend to be the ones who are most active. So I don't really go along with the idea of contemplation as a retreat in the sense of a disengagement from the world. As far as boredom goes, I was interested in the idea that slowing down or 'stopping the world' allows other things to come to the fore – and with that the possibility of another mode of being. I should also say that this was what I found especially inspiring in Deleuze and Guattari's books: they offered a whole selection of different modes of organization, alongside a different account of how subjectivity was actually produced (as itself a kind of side effect of what they call 'desiring production').

So where do you feel that something like production of subjectivity is actually being practised?

If the production of subjectivity is used as a banner to talk about people who are really working on themselves, trying to work on their habits, trying to explore other modes of being, all these kinds of things, then it would be fair to say that it's not necessarily happening in religion, it's not necessarily happening in academia, it's not really happening in the art world. When I was writing that book it was only in certain forms of western Buddhism that I found it (I first read Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life* – another important inspiration for my book – in a reading group on a Buddhist retreat), but there are always certain kinds of art scenes, and certain sub-cultural scenes where something like this is going on, to say nothing of political groups and activist collectives. So it's always going on but you don't find it necessarily in professional or academic philosophy departments. I think this partly has to do with what Foucault identified as the Cartesian moment and the paradigm of knowledge and thinking in the West that defers to science and objectivity, so spirituality (which is a term Foucault actually uses in his later work) or other forms of introspective

or ethico-aesthetic knowledge come to be seen as a bit soft or wishy-washy. But of course it's not. To take meditation as the most obvious example, it's not about drifting off; it's hard, in fact, it can be very hard. It's also very precise, like a science – or technology anyway.

To return to the question of finitude, there is a strong sense in which the finite-infinite relation touches upon questions of death or mortality. People say that death is something of a taboo subject, that it's not something we really talk about, so do you have anything to say about its place in modern society?

While Kantian finitude is primarily related to the limits of our knowledge, I was interested in something more basic about our existential situation. Looking back on the book from where I am now I think it's pretty obvious that I was attempting to address the issue of death, or at least this was part of my motivation, albeit not entirely conscious at the time. Put bluntly, was there a way around this brute fact of our existence? I think Spinoza himself said something similar about his motivation for writing the *Ethics* – that he wanted to see if he could find something in life that was eternal. I've mentioned Buddhism a couple of times and this was also, of course, a key motivation for the Buddha-to-be, whose path to enlightenment was set in motion by his realisation about old age, sickness, and death. In fact, for me, there's something profoundly similar about these two – Spinoza and the Buddha – almost as if they arrive at the same place but via different directions.

More generally I would agree with what you said: death is the one thing that's certain, it surrounds us, but no one talks about it. Looking around you, you'd think no one was going to die, but it's the horizon of everything. For me there's something important about facing that reality and seeing what follows from it. This relates to what we discussed ear-

lier about philosophy often being in the head, being about concepts, being about discourse, as this can, of course, be just another way – albeit a very sophisticated one – of avoiding all that kind of stuff. But it's also true that thinkers like Spinoza really do open up a different take on the problem of our finitude, they offer a different ethics for life which is also a kind of experimentation with life. In particular with Spinoza's third kind of knowledge there's a sense in which the boundaries between self and world dissolve, or, rather, as if we identify with the world rather than our limited sense of self (and thus our finitude). It's in this sense also that Spinoza suggests a kind of eternity that can be experienced *within* finitude – not immortality, as Spinoza wasn't interested in life after death, but a certain sense of the eternal that is here and now, but needs to be actualised.