

ON DIFFERENCE WITHOUT SEPARABILITY

Denise Ferreira da Silva

Following European states' responses to the "refugee crisis" resulting from the latest wars of Global Capital – that is, local and regional conflicts about control of natural resources – it is evident how effectively the racial grammar and lexicon work as ethical descriptors. Without their citizens' assertions of fear of the new, incoming wave of "strangers," it would have been more difficult for them to justify the building of walls and deportation programs to contain the hundreds of thousands fleeing armed conflicts in the Middle East and throughout the African continent.¹ For in the tale of the dangerous and undeserving "Other" – the "Muslim Terrorist" disguised as (Syrian) refugee and the "starving African" disguised as asylum seeker – cultural difference sustains statements of uncertainty that effectively undermine claims for protection under the human rights framework, thereby supporting the deployment of the EU security apparatus.²

Fear and uncertainty, to be sure, have been the staples of the modern racial grammar. Since the early 20th century, articulations of cultural difference in the modern text added a social scientific signifier designed to delimit the reach of the ethical notion of humanity. Precisely because they too are specimens of modern thought, the available critical tools cannot support an ethico-political intervention capable of undermining cultural difference's capacity to produce an unbridgeable ethical divide. That is, they cannot effectively interrupt deployments of otherwise unacceptable total violence onto those placed on "the Other" (cultural) side of humanity. Why? Because they also rehearse the modern text's scientific imaging of The World as an

¹ Read, for instance, Slavoj Žižek's comments available at: inthesetimes.com/article/18385/slavoj-zizek-european-refugee-crisis-and-global-capitalism. Accessed on 3 June 2016.

² See the European Commission plan for dealing with the crisis released on September 2015, available at: europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-15-5700_en.htm. Accessed on 3 June 2016.

3 This is inspired by Leibniz's notion of the plenum. See, for instance, G.W. F. Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics and Other Essays*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991.

ordered whole composed of separate parts relating through the mediation of constant units of measurement and/or a limiting violent force. When deployed for thinking about the social, this imaging renders sociality as being contingent upon the inhabiting of the same (juridical, spatial, or temporal) parts.

An ethico-political program that does not reproduce the violence of modern thought requires re-thinking sociality from without the modern text. Because only the end of the world as we *know* it, I am convinced, can dissolve cultural differences' production of human collectives as "strangers" with fixed and irreconcilable moral attributes. This requires that we release thinking from the grip of certainty and embrace the imagination's power to create with unclear and confused, or uncertain impressions, which Kant (1724-1804) postulated are inferior to what is produced by the formal tools of the Understanding. A figuring of The World nourished by the imagination would inspire us to rethink sociality without the abstract fixities produced by the Understanding and the partial and total violence they authorize – against humanity's cultural (non-white/non-European) and physical (more-than-human) "Others."

THE THINKING OF THE WORLD

After breaking through the glassy, formal fixed walls of the Understanding, released from the grip of certainty, the imagination may wonder about reassembling the fundamental components of everything to refigure the World as a complex whole without order. Let me consider a possibility: What if, instead of The Ordered World, we could image The World as a Plenum, an infinite composition³ in which each existant's singularity is contingent upon its becoming one possible expression of all the other existants, with which it is entangled beyond space and time. For decades now, experiments in particle physics have astonished scientists and laypeople with findings that suggest that the fundamental components of everything, every thing, could be just such, namely the virtual's (subatomic particles) becoming actual (in space-time), which is also a recomposition of everything

else.⁴ For decades now, the counter-intuitive results of experiments in particle physics have been yielding descriptions of the World with features – *uncertainty*⁵ and *non-locality*⁶ – that violate the parameters of certainty. Experiments that, I propose, invite us to image the social without the Understanding's deadly distinctions and lethal (re)ordering devices.

What is at stake? What will have to be relinquished for us to unleash the imagination's radical creative capacity and draw from it what is needed for the task of thinking The World otherwise? Nothing short of a radical shift in how we approach matter and form. Early Natural Philosophy (Galileo, 1564-1642 and Descartes, 1596-1650) and Classical Physics (Newton, 1643-1727) have inherited the Ancient view of matter – in the notion of body which comprehends it in abstract notions, such as solidity, extension, weight, gravity, and motion in space, in time, which are said to be present in thought. In any event, the claim that the human mind could know the properties of the bodies with certainty, without the mediation of the divine ruler and author of the Book of Nature, would rely on two departures from Scholastic philosophy: first, the 17th century philosophers who called themselves "modern" devised a knowledge program that was concerned with what they called the "secondary (efficient) causes" of motion, which cause change in the appearance of things in nature, and not with the "primary (final) causes" of things, or the purpose (end) of their existence; second, instead of relying on Aristotle's (384-322 a.C) logical necessity for the assurance of the correctness of their findings, philosophers such as Galileo relied on the necessity characteristic of mathematics, more precisely, on geometrical demonstration as the basis for certainty. Unquestionably, these philosophers inherited earlier writings of Man's exceptionality – his soul, free will, capacity for reasoning, etc. What Descartes introduced in the 17th century is a separation of mind and body in which the human mind, due to its formal nature, also acquires the power to determine the truth about the human body as well as anything that shares its formal attributes, like solidity, extension, and weight.

This separation is precisely what is consolidated in Kant's modeling of his philosophical system after Newton's program, particularly

4 The actual (atomic and supra-atomic level) and the virtual (subatomic) refer to different material moments – atomic and supra-atomic and subatomic, respectively – of everything that exists.

5 Heisenberg's *uncertainty* principle accounts for experiments that violate the view that measurements of property correspond to events in reality, which cannot be altered by human intervention; see Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1999.

6 The principle of nonlocality refers to measurements of a property of a particle (such as position) that instantaneously provide the measurement of a related property (such as momentum) of another particle regardless of the distance between the two; see Robert Nadeau and Menas Kafatos, *The Non-Local Universe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

7 See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

the idea that knowledge consists in the identification of the limiting forces, or laws that determine what happens to observed things and events (phenomena).⁷ Kant's accomplishment, which was the design of a system that relied primarily on the determining powers of reason and not on a divine creator, troubled his contemporaries, who saw the possibility that formal determination would also become a descriptor of human conditions, constituting a deadly threat to the ideal of human freedom. Yet, two interrelated elements of the Kantian program continue to influence contemporary epistemological and ethical projects: (a) *separability*, that is, the view that all that can be known about the things of the world is what is gathered by the forms (space and time) of the intuition and the categories of the Understanding (quantity, quality, relation, modality) – everything else about them remains inaccessible and irrelevant to knowledge; and consequently (b) *determinacy*, the view that knowledge results from the Understanding's ability to produce formal constructs, which it can use to determine (i.e. decide) the true nature of the sense impressions gathered by the forms of intuition.

A few decades after the publication of Kant's major works, Hegel (1777-1831) addresses this threat to freedom with a philosophical system that inverts the Kantian program with a dialectical method that accomplishes two things: (a) a notion of *actualization*, which presents body and mind, space and time, Nature and Reason, as two manifestations of the same entity, namely Spirit, or Reason as Freedom and (b) the notion of *sequentiality*, which describes Spirit as movement in time, a process of self-development, and describes History as the trajectory of Spirit. With these moves, he introduces a temporal figuring of cultural difference as the actualization of Spirit's different moments of development and postulates that post-Enlightenment European social configurations represented the fullest development of Spirit.

THE THINKING OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

Ever since the post-Enlightenment consolidation of the Kantian program, physics has provided models for scientific studies of human con-

ditions – a task facilitated by Hegel's account of time as the productive force and theater of knowledge and morality. Unfortunately, however, these models have been successful precisely because of how these writings on the human as a social thing rely on the same departures from Medieval philosophy that supported modern philosophers' claim of knowledge with certainty, namely, efficient causes and mathematical demonstration, which ground the modern text. The racial grammar activated in reactions to the flow of refugees to Europe is but an iteration of the modern text. Not only does it carry over into the claim of certainty, its claims of truth rest on the same pillars – namely *separability*, *determinacy*, and *sequentiality* – modern philosophers have assembled to support their knowledge program.

When one looks closely at the racial grammar, it is possible to identify two discrete moments. First, George Cuvier's (1769-1832) initial framing of the science of life, even if modeled after Newton's *Natural Philosophy*, still relied on the descriptive mode of early *Natural History*, and introduced Life as both the efficient and final cause of living things. Later, in the 19th century, after Darwin (1809-1882) released his descriptions of living Nature, in which differentiation emerges as the result of rational principle, an efficient cause, which operates in time through force, namely Natural Selection, or as the result of a struggle for existence, the science of life would guide a program for the knowledge of human existence, namely 19th century anthropology, or the science of man. In addition to external traits, which were used in *Natural History's* mapping of Nature, the self-named scientists of man developed their own formal tools, mathematical tools such as the facial index for measuring human bodies, which became the basis for the description and classification of human mental attributes, both moral and intellectual, on a scale said to register their degree of cultural development.

Second, in the 20th century, not surprisingly, the physicist-turned anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942) performs a major shift in the knowledge of the human condition with the claim that social, rather than biological aspects account for the variation of mental (moral and intellectual) contents. With this he assembles a notion of cultural difference, which has both a temporal and a spatial aspect. According to

8 Alfred Kroeber. *Anthropology*. New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1948, p1.

9 See, for instance, Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Vintage Books, 1977.

10 Today's New Materialists also draw from insights from particle physics, see Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

Boas, the study of mental contents should address the cultural “forms,” or “patterns of thought” which emerged in the early moments of a collective’s existence and were expressed in its members’ beliefs and practices. Emerging and consolidating in time, he argues, cultural, not physical “forms” account for noticeable mental (moral and intellectual) differences. The anthropological school his work inaugurated, namely cultural anthropology, marked a methodological shift, that is, a departure from ethnocentric views of human difference, which resonates with a major shift in physics, namely Einstein’s principle of relativity. For Kroeber, Boas’ student,

From that, they commenced to envisage it as a totality, as no historian of one period or of a single people was likely to do, nor any analyst of his own type of civilization alone. They became aware of culture as a “universe,” or vast field in which we of today and our own civilization occupy only one place of many. The result was a widening of a fundamental point of view, a departure from unconscious ethnocentricity toward relativity.⁸

In the second half of the century, in the mid-1970s, we find particle physics, in the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault, opening new venues for critical thinking. For instance, Foucault establishes a distinction between a mode of operation of juridico-political power that resembles the events involving larger bodies as expressed in Newton’s laws of motion and what he called the microphysics of power, which work primarily through language, or discourse, and institutions.⁹ This second view describes power/knowledge as productive of its subjects and objects, and operating at the level of desire – much like experiments in quantum mechanics, which inspired Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, show how the apparatus determines the attributes of the particles under observation.

For centuries, as these examples indicate, developments in post-classical physics, relativity and quantum mechanics, have been crucial in the development of theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of economic, juridical, ethical and political issues, which both produced and rehearsed human difference.¹⁰ Unfortunately, however, they have not yet inspired imagings of difference without

separability, whether spatio-temporal, as in Boas’ cultural collectives, or formal, as in Foucault’s discursively produced subject. Not surprisingly, they have further reinforced the idea of culture and the mental contents to which it refers as expressing a fundamental separation between human collectives, in terms of nationality, ethnicity and social (gender, sexual, racial) identity.

THE ENTANGLED WORLD

Following the recent European responses to the “refugee crisis,” we find how cultural difference describes a global present mired in fear and uncertainty: Ethnic identity does this by means of statements that name the threatening “Other,” that is, those seeking refuge in Europe from wars in the Middle East, political unrest in East and North Africa, and conflicts fuelled by the exploitation of natural resources in West Africa. Meanwhile, in Brazil, it manifests itself by those attempting to impeach President Dilma Rousseff by unleashing moral attacks on those who recently had their rights recognized on the basis of their social (gender, sexual, racial, and religious) identity. In both cases, cultural difference sustains a moral discourse, which rests on the principle of *separability*. This principle considers the social as a whole constituted of formally separate parts. Each of these parts constitutes a social form, as well as geographically-historically separate units, and, as such, stands differentially before the ethical notion of humanity, which is identified with the particularities of white European collectives.

What if, instead of the Ordered World, we imaged each existant (human and more-than-human) not as separate forms relating through the mediation of forces, but rather as singular expressions of each and every other existant as well as of the entangled whole in/ as which they exist? What if, instead of looking to particle physics for models of devising more scientific or critical analysis of the social we turned to its most disturbing findings – such as nonlocality (as an epistemological principle) and virtuality (as an ontological descriptor) – as poetical descriptors, that is, as indicators of the impossibility of comprehending existence with the thinking tools that

cannot but reproduce separability and its aids, namely determinacy and sequentiality?

I close this essay with a contemplation of what can become available to the imagination, what sort of ethical opening can be envisioned with the dissolution of the grip of the Understanding and the releasing of The World to the imagination.

Towards re-imagining sociality, the principle of nonlocality supports a kind of thinking that does not reproduce the methodological and ontological grounds of the modern subject, namely linear temporality and spatial separation. Because it violates these framings of time and space, nonlocality allows us to imagine sociality, in such a way that attending to difference does not presuppose *separability*, *determinacy*, and *sequentiality*, the three ontological pillars that sustain modern thought. In the nonlocal universe, neither dislocation (movement in space) nor relation (connection between spatially separate things) describes what happens because entangled particles (that is, every existing particle) exist with each other, without space-time. Though Kant's comments on that which in The Thing is irrelevant to knowledge dismiss metaphysical concerns, they also suggest that the reality described in Newton's (and later Einstein's, 1879-1995) physics consists in a limited picture of The World because it refers only to phenomena, in other words, things as they are accessible to the senses, that is, in spacetime. What nonlocality exposes is a more complex reality in which everything has both actual (spacetime) and a virtual (nonlocal) existence. If so, then why not conceive of human existence in the same manner? Why not assume that beyond their physical (bodily and geographic) conditions of existence, in their fundamental constitution, at the subatomic level, humans exist entangled with everything else (animate and in-animate) in the universe. Why not conceive of human differences – the ones 19th and 20th century anthropologists and sociologists selected as fundamental human descriptors – as effects of both spacetime conditions and a knowledge program modeled after Newtonian (19th century anthropology) and Einsteinian (20th century social scientific knowledge) physics, in which separability is the privileged ontological principle. Without *separability*, difference among human groups and between human and nonhuman entities,

has very limited explanatory purchase and ethical significance. For, as nonlocality assumes, beyond the surfaces onto which the prevailing notion of difference is inscribed, everything in the universe co-exists in the manner Leibniz (1646-1716) describes, that is, as a singular expression of everything else in the universe. Without *separability*, knowing and thinking can no longer be reduced to *determinacy* in the Cartesian distinction of mind/body (in which the latter has the power of determination) or the Kantian formal reduction of knowing to a kind of efficient causality. Without *separability*, *sequentiality* (Hegel's ontoepistemological pillar) can no longer account for the many ways in which humans exist in the world, because self-determination has a very limited region (spacetime) for its operation. When nonlocality guides our imaging of the universe, difference is not a manifestation of an unresolvable *estrangement*, but the expression of an elementary *entanglement*. That is, when the social reflects The Entangled World, sociality becomes neither the cause nor the effect of relations involving separate existants, but the uncertain condition under which everything that exists is a singular expression of each and every actual-virtual other existant.