

Sam Gillespie, "PLACING THE VOID: Badiou on Spinoza." In: *Angelaki*, Journal of the Theoretical Humanities, Volume 6, 2001 - Issue 3, Pages 63-77

Notes

Many thanks to Nina Power and to *Angelaki's* reviewers Peter Hallward and Daniel W. Smith for their invaluable efforts in reading different versions of this article. I would also like to [74] acknowledge Oliver Feltham's help with my translations from *L'être et l'événement*.

1 Alain Badiou, *L'être et l'événement* (Paris: Seuil, 1988) 130. Hereafter cited in the text as EE. Translations are mine.

2 The most succinct presentation of Cantor's belief in an actual infinite is given in chapter six of Joseph Warren Dauben's *George Cantor* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979) 120–48. In particular, see 132.

3 Consistency for Badiou seems analogous to a principle of well-ordering whereby a set can have every element presented. As defined by Shaughan Lavine: "Cantor regarded the process of ordering a set, thereby specifying a definite succession of the elements of the set, as giving a way of counting the members of a set." Lavine, *Understanding the Infinite* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1994) 53.

4 Well-ordering, or consistency, is the backbone of nature for Badiou. Well-ordered situations are those that subscribe to a unified presentation of discrete elements that are collected with an aim towards completion. In the genesis of *L'être et l'événement*, it is Spinoza who provides the leeway between ontology proper and nature.

5 I borrow this formulation from Joan Copjec.

6 The principle of well-ordering thus displaces the question of size or quantity from that of forming a set without paradoxes. In particular, the limitations introduced by Russell's paradox are not, strictly speaking, limitations of size. As Lavine writes: "it is not at all clear how size could be relevant to the question whether a multiplicity forms a set – the elements, after all, are not gathered, they simply obey a rule." *Understanding the Infinite* 97. At a certain point in his career, Cantor was forced to abandon well-ordering as a principle established prior to the fact of forming a set, thus introducing the theory that sets could be wellordered *because they were sets*, and not vice versa. For Badiou, the question of ordering multiples that are not subsumed by the operations of the count emerges only at a meta-ontological level of fidelity to an event.

7 Proposition 3 of Book II of "Descartes's 'Principles of Philosophy'" in vol. I of *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985) vol. I, 268. Hereafter cited in the text as DPP.

8 Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Book I, Proposition 15. Hereafter all citations from the *Ethics* will be given in the text, with book and proposition numbers.

9 On one hand, if corporeal substance is infinite and divisible, it could be divided into two parts, which could either be infinite or finite. If both parts are finite, one would have an infinity composed of two finite parts. If both are infinite, one would have more than one infinity, which is absurd. Or one could be infinite, and the other finite, and thus it would be the case that infinity is missing a part, which is equally absurd. Either one must conclude that

corporeal substance is finite, or that it is not divisible into parts. Spinoza clearly opted for the latter position.

10 Deleuze is not far from this approach when he writes: “substance, by virtue of its power, exists only in its relation to modes.” It should be noted that, for Deleuze, substance exists only as the *puissance* that enables the existence of modes. *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone, 1991) 95.

11 Again, even Deleuze is close to this interpretation when he writes that for Spinoza “to exist is to actually possess a very great number of parts.” See *Expressionism in Philosophy* 201.

12 Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy* 95: “[substance] has an absolutely infinite power of existence only by exercising in an infinity of things, in an infinity of ways or modes, the capacity to be affected corresponding to that power.” 13 Ibid. 39.

14 This, of course, acknowledges the serious limitations of the example I have given of actually existing people in the world, since the present example would almost certainly require formal limitations to prevent various random absurdities (such as “set of all people with orange skin”) which depend upon descriptive characteristics of the original elements involved.

15 Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy* 32.

16 Simont, “Le Pur et l’impur (sur deux questions de l’histoire de la philosophie dans *L’être et l’événement*).” *Les Temps modernes* 526 (May 1990): 32. Simont sees Badiou’s reading of Spinoza as an argument for infinite modes’ lack of existence, [76] which is not the case at all. Infinite modes for Badiou are simply not consistently presented in experience as modes.

17 See “Spinoza’s letter 10 to Simon de Vries” in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. I, 196.

18 *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 1993) 71.

19 Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy* 205.

20 Ibid. 205.

21 Ibid. 236.

22 Ibid. 235.

23 “L’ontologie implicite de Spinoza,” *Spinoza: puissance et ontologie*, ed. Myriam Revault d’Allones (Paris: Kimé, 1994). Reprinted in Badiou’s *Court trait d’ontologie transitoire* (Paris: Seuil, 1998). Hereafter cited in the text as CT. Translations are mine.

24 See Spinoza’s March 1663 letter to Simon de Vries: “By substance, I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, that is, whose concept does not involve the concept of another thing. I understand the same by attribute, except that it is called attribute in relation to the intellect, which attributes such and such a definite nature to substance.” *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. I, 195.

25 Pierre Macherey, “The Problem of the Attributes,” *The New Spinoza*, eds. Warren Montag and Ted Stolze (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997) 65.

26 This almost certainly bears resemblance to Deleuze’s interpretation of parallelism in Spinoza. See *Expressionism in Philosophy* 99–111.

27 Badiou's interpretation of Spinoza departs significantly from that of Deleuze, for whom the geometrical method served precisely as a method of invention. As Deleuze writes, "the geometrical method ceases to be a method of intellectual exposition; it is no longer a means of professional presentation but rather a method of *invention*. It becomes a method of vital and optical rectification. If man is somehow distorted, this torsion effect will be rectified by connecting it to its cause *more geometrico*." Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights, 1988) 13.

28 Badiou here distinguishes historic situations (which contain a site for an event) from natural situations (where no such site is present). The site of the event could be said to be presented in a historic situation, but its elements are not. It is thus a site "on the edge of the void." See EE 193–98. Badiou is slightly ambiguous on this point. On one hand, he firmly maintains that "at the heart of every situation, as the foundation of its being, there is a 'situated' void, around which is organized the plenitude (or the stable multiples) of the situation in question." Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001) 68. It would seem that every situation could contain the possibility for an event insofar as an event names the void of the situation. On the other hand, Badiou firmly maintains a distinction between historic and natural situations (in which events do not or cannot occur).

29 Ray Brassier, "Stellar Void or Cosmic Animal: Badiou and Deleuze on the Dice-Throw," *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 10 (2000).

30 See Badiou's *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, trans. Louise Burchill (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000) 91: As for myself [Badiou], however, I cannot bring myself to think that the new is a fold of the past, or that thinking can be reduced to philosophy or a single configuration of its act. This is why I conceptualize absolute beginnings (which require a theory of the void) and singularities of thought that are incomparable in their constitutive gestures (which require a theory – Cantorian to be precise – of the plurality of the types of infinity)...

31 Mary Tiles has suggested that the presupposition of a continuous whole poses problems for a philosophy of becoming. For it would follow from such a perspective that "time too would have to be actually, not potentially, infinite and thus in some sense wholly actual even though not simultaneously present. It is from this point of view that the reality of time as associated with change and becoming is questionable." *The Philosophy of Set Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) 29–30.

32 Martin Joughin's Introduction to *Expressionism in Philosophy* 11. I thank Daniel W. Smith for bringing this quote to my attention. Deleuze continues: [77] "the hope of making substance turn on finite modes, or at least of seeing in substance a *plane of immanence* in which finite modes operate, already appears in this book [*Ethics*]."