Focusing on the in-between: the necessary impossible and hybrid ethics at work

Dr. Patricia MacCormack

Anglia Ruskin University, UK

What is a majoritarian and a minoritarian? What is isomorphism? Isomorphism elucidates the phantasy of the binary or opposite as not a relation between two but as a subjugation of all others by a dominant one. One could be tempted to say that this alone aligns the subjugated terms –woman, children, racial others, the diffabled and so forth – as necessarily sympathetic to each others' conditions through various mechanisms of power, oppression and resistance. This concept has been suggested by many animal rights activists, feminists, children's rights activists and queer theorists. The category of human was always the mythical zenith of an equally mythical arboreal structure which systematised human subjectivity through religious, metaphysical and evolutionary discourses. Instead of God making man, secular scientists now make their own possibility of dominance through discourses that demarcate the hu-Man as a hermeneutic and given 'natural' phenomenon. Deleuze and Guattari emphasise that 'between the two there is threshold and fiber, symbiosis or passage between heterogeneities' (1987: 250) not relation but production.In order to think a hybrid ethics it is the subject's responsibility and accountability to give up the category of human. 'The responsibility with which I am charged is not mine, and because of it I am no longer myself.' (Blanchot 1995, 13) When we think about everyday examples of the oppressed other in the workplace these are often configured as hybrid already – mixed race, effeminate men or masculine women, the ambiguity of sexuality homophobia fears, the facilitation for some diffabled workers by machines such as wheelchairs are all examples of humans who are both in excess of and less than the idea of the 'regular everyday' human. These others are abject precisely because they emerge through ambiguity, the breakdown of binaries and thus relations with them as 'equal' is seen as impossible because they are not 'the same'. Indeed this shows us that the very notion of the everyday human is a myth and the utopian idea of equality perpetuates this myth. This paper will then demand the repudiation of the most important category of 'life' itself, that is, understanding ourselves as being human. This must be the most abject, but also the most important, way of thinking ourselves. When we lose the category of human all becomes abject. By human what I mean is that which demarcates itself from all other 'life' through the very process of demarcation it enacts. Saying one is dominant, one is human, is saying one is right. So how can we think of the terrain of the workplace as one which mediates with the less-than-dominant?

Concepts come from incommensurable problems and so thought can only exist from disagreement. The 'speaking as' compulsion bases politics on resonance and resemblance, requiring an 'I' that chooses and knows its responsibility, often caring only for the validation of that 'I'. Problems occur – those who cannot be heard in the language of the majoritarian do not exist and those who are heard through speaking the majoritarian language are forced to conform with each other even thought they are never the same. Equal opportunity forces equal humanity, affirmative action fetishises alterity by making us 'pretend' we are 'like everyone else' rather than acknowledging specific differences. The most important problem is that elements which do not speak from their own discourse cannot exist as self-authored. These elements are found not emitting from speaking subjects but from the space between those subjects, be they speaking within themselves or between subjects which may not agree, understand or care. In the workplace legislation and codes of conduct insinuate sympathy for (speaking for) or repudiation of (not listening to) difference. Rancière writes:

> In this way the bringing into relationship of two unconnected
> things becomes the measure of what is incommensurable between
> two orders: between the order of the inegalitarian distribution of
> social bodies in a partition of the perceptible and the order of the
> equal capacity of speaking beings in general. It is indeed a
> question of incommensurables. But these incommensurables are
> well gauged in regard to each other, and this gauge reconfigures
> the relationships of parts and parties, of objects likely to give rise
> to dispute, of subjects able to articulate it. It produces both new
> inscriptions of equality within liberty and a fresh sphere of
> visibility for further demonstrations. Politics is not made up of
> power relationships; it is made up of relationships between worlds
> (1995, 42).

Rancière offers a new idea of equality as the point of the collision of occupants of each world of difference to create new concepts, rather than one disagreement mastering the

other. Production is the natural contract, which is the creation of a fluid relation between two elements Production-relation not only produces new affects but also changes the nature of the initial elements. The space of problem, the point of incommensurability is precisely the catalyst for a shift in the office terrain, not something which needs to be fixed but what shouldn't be fixed – it should create.

Revolution is impossible to find in equality as sameness and agreement or the office space as a 'plane of equivalence' (2000, 29). Three elements of the system which maintains majoritarian subjectivity are serial, structure and sign.

Deleuze and Guattari's critique of serial and structure address the grammar of ethics, subjectivity, perception and affect involves each term to both be a discrete signifier and capable of limited relations with other appropriate signs. Seriality, the analogy of proportion, relates signs to each other, always in a power relation – man and/not woman, white and/not black, able bodied and/not abled, heterosexual and/not heterosexual, man and/not animal and so forth. Seriality affirms what each term, particularly the dominant term, is not. Structure, the analogy of proportionality, makes proportion relations mirror each other, so each example of a proportional relation resonate with other established relations – man is to woman as white is to black as able bodied is to diffabled as human is to animal. Seriality is the narrative, structure the repetition of narratives from one instance to the next, and signs the reified occupants of these narratives. Traditionally rule maker is to rule follower as majoritarian is to minoritarian. Object and subject therefore must be regulated signs, and their differences from each other emphasized. Thus differences between the specificities of the needs of women, diffabled workers and such are ignored, they are lumped together as not-dominant, and themselves become the problem – the sign (issue, thing we need to fix etc) – rather than the discourse creating concepts from the incommensurability of the speech of each. It is clear these three techniques of perceiving the world directly oppose the ethics which will break down proportion, *from* man to woman, or create hybrid proportionalities, underpaid woman is to woman as underpaid racial 'other' is to racial other, so the signs change and proportionality is found in shared intensity not equivalent signification of form. Women, racial others and diffabled may share issues (such as pay) but they also have unique issues. Thus each should be understood as constellation.

Multiplicity of self has always been associated with abjection – from daemonic possession to schizophrenia to simply people who are 'not like themselves'. But in good practice if a subject experiences an intensity incommensurable with itself, becomings change the self rather than cure the intensity. *Both* parties change. Ethics exploits incommensurability between people. Proportionality disappears when events of relation are apprehended as singularities. The breakdown of proportionality is particularly important.

Ethics becomes a problem when global political issues are reduced to items for consumption – today I am green, tomorrow I give to starving children and I make sure to tell my other 'equals' how I give to the unequal. Today I fight for the women in the office, tomorrow I will recycle paper. This breaks issues up into bits of office politics. But the workplace is an ecological-political terrain, and it is openness to difference and multiplicity which changes the terrain. In terms of abjection, an issue as a wound will get a band-aid on its human body (because we can here see the workplace itself as proportional to the human dominant subject). But abject hybrid ethics will transform the whole creature in continual metamorphosis, because everything is connected. This is a welcomed ethical abjection.

Ecology as an environmental issue, whatever environment we are speaking of, is the space which subjects occupy that structures those subjects as belonging or not that environment, able to speak and be heard but also the silences which are that environment such as an environment populated by both unresponsive and affective/affected. Animals, the natural environment but also the unresponsive silent oppressed within the workplace, all territories where the relations between humans can alter based in the human relations with the multi-human, or with life itself – because minoritarians are usually understood as fallen away from the human. These are isomorphisms. A rethinking of power is rethinking of human subjectivity According to many philosophers – Ranciere, Serres, Deleuze, Guattari, Lyotard, Blanchot the first and easiest minor revolution comes from the human subject and specifically the empowered subject because without a reconfiguration of this ecology relation and environmental contextualisation cannot be thought. Without the subject as occupant of an environment reconfigured, the environment remains external and observed *by* the subject.

Guattari sees traversal as a necessary choice which explodes the myth of transference where all worlds are commensurable and keeping each discrete keeps the powers of production of meaning safe. An oppression at work is not the same as an oppression elsewhere. Both are important but shouldn't be collapsed so someone 'is' the nature of their oppression. The forsaking of self required in ethics is even more abject in that the other is not known at all but simply any element which may need to create a relation with the elements within ourselves of which we are unaware. This perhaps is the abject crisis in ethical relations. Of course at work we need to think of codes to put in place. So the question is how can we redistribute power and access without creating codes that oppress and atrophy rather than which shift the workplace territory. Equality is about the terrain being equal, not everyone being the same. Grace is the opening of the self toward multi-relations within the terrain, rather than changing the self from something to something else. Grace, according to Lyotard, is 'the freeing of the mind from all diachrony, from all tasks of synthesis' (1991, 163). Synthesis resolves entities with signified possibilities of being, converting entities as event to signs. Diachrony requires knowledge of present and possible future relations of signs. Grace demands loss of both, yet the entities and the relation are still there. There emerges a seemingly impossible situation. What can be more abject than enacting an ethic we cannot know in advance?

The question of the ethics of relations is the most difficult. Creating an abject relation is the most crucial of creative points because it is the moment we may most be tempted to say 'too hard' and give up. It is only experienced as limit because there is no pay off or new signpost, one must be created and so with grace comes the new thinking of relation, direction without aim, another task which may be unbearably difficult. This is the ecosophical contract we make with the world through forsaking the power and safety of the category of human as always majoritarian, a contract 'at once natural and human. Together these laws ask each of us to pass from the local to the global, a difficult and badly marked trail but one that we must blaze. Never forget the place from which you depart, but leave it behind and join the universal' (Serres 2003, 50). We must think of all collegues as friends. But not in the traditional sense: Friends not through our established relationship with them but because they are – their potentiality to be. Friendship has no

friends or objects or issues which are constant. Ethics must attach itself to finite realities while being pure potentiality. Ethics is not found in what *we* are and what *they* are, but *that* we are and *that* they are, the beings which are but cannot be known. The human is an essential practice of unification and maintenance of relations of proportion and proportionality. The human is always majoritarian. This kind of amorphous ethics is not nothing but voluminous everything, without binaries (1 or 2), serialization (1 then 2) or causality (1+1=2). Workplace structuring of ethics is thus defined as everything as potentiality and possibility through negotiation with signifying systems. All signifying systems are is human – created, maintained and enforced by humans. When becoming ethical in certain spaces we both acknowledge and repudiate the dominant elements of ourselves as a form of parasite.

> History hides the fact that man [shall we say here the dominant] is
> the universal parasite, that everything and everyone around him is
> a hospitable space. Plants and animals are always his hosts; man
> is always necessarily their guest. Always taking, never giving. He
> bends the logic of exchange and of giving in his favour when he
> is dealing with nature as a whole (Serres 2007, 24).

Humans create all without giving, just as the majoritarian owes a debt to the minoritarian he is parasite of in his creation of others. Those who make the rules, those who are dominant in the workplace, can only be so through the oppression of the other. It is neither natural or given, but is context specific. Making the oppressed act like the dominant to be liberated simply makes them learn to parasite.

How can we be ethical parasites? The oppressed's only transgression is not being the same. In forming laws and practices based on the same we become parasites of the ambiguous elements of the other, what in majoritarian terms would be considered abject. They our hosts rather than forming an ecosophical terrain which produces and creates new ideas from the incommensurabilities of which the parasite is so afraid. Powers of humanity are not volitional or conspiratorial of course; they are enforced by our many bosses, grand and small – totalizing machines of state, army, church and government and

are internalized and self–regulated in individuals through family structures and capitalism. These systems rely on their very emergence through parasiting the transgressive. the other. Wilfully non-dominant humans are counted as mad, creative but not functional, animalistic, feminine and other terms which manage to safely subsume the radical elements without acknowledging them but nonetheless parasite of them. Think of derogatory names used in the workplace. They are always to do with femininity, animals, sexual ambiguity, physical and mental illness and racial alterity. But we miss the point. It is not that it is bad to say someone is 'girly'. It is bad that the intensity or quality of girliness is derogated and seen as abject. So it is the quality not the thing which is the issue. If girliness (and I use a very trite example because most are so brusque/vulgar) is simply considered an intensity which is more or less present in all people it emphasises all people as always teeming with incommensurable and disparate qualities. No such thing as this 'kind' of human or that kind of less-than-human. Thus ethics are not human and grace a beyond-human act, interrogating the myth of 'humane' acts. Technically the more human an act the more oppressive and parasitic.

Guattari writes:

> At the heart of all ecological praxes there is an a–signifying rupture, in which the catalysts of existential change are close at hand, but lack expressive support from the assemblage of enunciation; they therefore remain passive and are in danger of losing their consistency – here are to be found the roots of anxiety, guilt and more generally psychopathological repetitions (2000, 45).

Guilt and anxiety are the atrophic responses of an atrophied subject, asking not 'what can I do' but 'I cannot do anything because a relation cannot be made with the rupturing event'. Bleeding heart guilt, anxiety as 'I'll do nothing' and even transgression which does the opposite are reiterative not creative. I do not wish here to suggest we thinkers are heroes not plagued by these feelings. Quite the opposite is so. Ruptures present an almost impossible scenario and certainly one for which no prescription or plan of action

can be made. Like abject wounds themselves not only must we be able to sense a rupture but also accept it through the grace of altering ourselves without aim and consequently use it in an ethical way. We are compelled to ask 'what's this, what's happening, what's next' without the 'what' or the responses being available in current territories of language and knowledge. An active but attentive passivity is required and a deep inevitable dissatisfaction that this new relation or friend asks of us without giving us suggestions or solutions. From this also comes the risk of wanting to be ethical giving way to melancholy and the deep sadness which is inevitable (but not all) in doing without knowing, in never being able to be the friend one wishes to be. Resisting this trap itself, which comes after sensing the imperceptible rupture, shows that the selection of active passivity over ignorance is far from an either/or turn. Revolution is difficult for these reasons. It is easier to plan a new finite territory to overlay this one – matriarchy instead of patriarchy etc – than to exploit the ruptures within this to alter the ecology as a whole; molecular, viral and infective revolutions rather than molar replacements.

There may come the critique of this kind of turn to formulate workplace ethics as being disordered because it is so abstract. Serres states 'to say disorder is to say one is both unwilling and unable to conceive it' (Serres 1995, 109). Serres' use of the word 'conceive' is vital, because it emphasises the active nature of addressing the space of the office as a kind of chaos. So abjection here, far from being destructive or corrosive, is creative. Rather than chaos being a kind of base level beneath our regulating or ordering of it, all orders are various configurations of chaos. The one with which we are most familiar is where we communicate with language, signifying systems and knowledge with our interaction with real people in the everyday office situation, rather than incommensurable speech, asignification and asemiosis, unthought and imperceptible sensing. As ethical workers at all levels we must remember without historicizing, see without recognizing, speak in silence, act and affect upon the unthinkable and encounter without knowing. We must create incommensurable and illogical alliances while acknowledging all alliances are essential based not on their commensurability but urgency, and the greater the alterity of the other, the more is at risk and the more ruthlessly the myth of human subjectivity is interrogated. Serres urges love is 'the spot between knowledge and ignorance' (2007, 246). Ethics is the undifferentiated flow

connecting bodies, power, society and ecosophical territories, within the folds and between all relations. Grace is the impossible ethical turn, the creative and crucial sacrifice of the human when, encountered with desire, compels us toward infinite multi and beyond human difference – opening up toward the differences of others and their and our differences to come.

Selected Bibliography

Artaud, Antonin. (1988), <u>Selected Writings,</u> trans. Helen Weaver. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Canguilhem, Georges. (1991) 'The death of man, or exhaustion of cogito?', trans. Catherine Porter, in Gary Gutting (ed), <u>The Cambridge Companion to Foucault.</u> Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 71-91.

Deleuze, Gilles. (1988), <u>Spinoza: Practical Philosophy,</u> trans. Robert Hurley. San Francisco: City Lights Books.

Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Fèlix. (1987), <u>A Thousand Plateaus,</u> trans. Brian Massumi. London: Athlone.

Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Fèlix. (1996), <u>Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,</u> trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen Lane. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Fèlix. (1999), <u>What is Philosophy?</u> trans. Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson. London and New York: Verso.

Guattari, Fèlix. (1995), <u>Chaosmosis: An Ethico Aesthetic Paradigm</u>, trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis. Sydney: Powerhouse.

Guattari, Fèlix. (1996) <u>Soft Subversions,</u> trans. David L. Sweet and Chet Weiner. New York: Semiotext(e).

Guattari, Felix. (2000), <u>The Three Ecologies</u>, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton. London: Athlone.

Hockenghem, Guy. (1981), 'To Destroy Sexuality', trans. Tom Gora. In Sylvère Lotringer, (ed.) <u>Polysexuality,</u> 260-264. New York: Semiotext(e).

Lyotard, Jean Francoise (1991), *The Inhuman* trans. Geffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowby (Cambridge: Polity).

Serres, Michel. (2000), <u>The Birth of Physics.</u> Trans Jack Hawkes. Manchester: Clinamen Press.

Serres, Michel. (2007), <u>The Parasite.</u> Trans. Lawrence R. Schehr. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.