

Investigating the non-dichotomous possibility of thinking unity for a non-unitary subject

Brief Introduction

One should sometimes grant oneself the privilege of an occasion of writing, without assuming the scholarly responsible and erudite approach to the act of "textual production", but allow oneself the infantile audacity of daring to ask some of the itching fundamental questions. These are precisely the questions about the fundamental ideological-theoretical presuppositions of the line/lineage of Thought appropriated by the author herself, which virtually situate themselves as a given for a certain discourse, or as its (approximation of) an axiom. The very asking of these questions should be, to a certain, consciously established extent - irresponsible, or rather childishly inquisitive, produced in the naïve state of wonder; persistent, but with an adult expectation of neither definite nor illuminative answers. The expectation is reduced to the awakening of thought from the rigidity of doctrine, and the emancipatory move of the stepping out, even for an instant, from the enclosure of the discourse one conceives in. This theoretical scratching on the surface of the deep down placed ideational fundament (pace post-structuralism, and - still) can result in at least hinting a critically different positioning of thought, in moving toward something more radically different.

In this vein, and indeed - for the sake of some genuine meditation, let us tackle the widely accepted presupposition by the post-structuralist theory of gender of the essentially (sic!) non-unitary nature of the Subject. In doing so, I will be departing, and thus - stepping out, from the discourse that I have appropriated and have been appropriated by, from the tradition of thinking that has formed me, namely from that conglomerate of concepts and theories called - post-structuralism. Therefore, I can assume - and I invite you to follow me - that I am not criticizing from a position that can be labeled as "reactionary" and I expect, and hope, that it will prove itself to be such through the text itself.

Rather, I shall speak more from the position of somebody who has already begun to feel the malaise of her post-structurally ideologically constituted existence. And it all rests within the horizon of preoccupations of the feminist philosophical/theoretical thinking.

Section 1

So here is the question: Is the idea of a non-stability or instability of the Subject (always)

already stabilized as a theoretical position? Moreover is it possible that the stabilizing factor is contained in the very theoretical presuppositions of the post-structuralist, constructivist or/and deconstructive doctrine of the non-unitary, unfixed, non-metaphysical or post-metaphysical Subject? Let us put it in other words that will announce the hypothesis of this paper. Are there any underlying conceptual structures -- obscured by the very regulations of the discourse they exist in/through -- that remain beyond the reach of deconstruction contained in the concept of non-unitary Subject that are themselves constitutive of the latter, precisely in its deconstructive nature?

The motive of asking such a question, for granting it relevance - and therefore, legitimacy - is the binary nature (or dualism) of thought it both maintains and imposes. Namely the (relentlessly self-declaring) post-metaphysical position on the possible conceptualizations of the Subject as non-unitary only, allows but one other possible different position -- by way of constituting it as opposition -- which is that of the metaphysical unitary, stable and fixed Subject. In spite of the inherently post-structuralist striving for non-monolithic thinking, in all significant feminist writing professing the idea of the non-unitary Subject, every other position, one allowing the possibility of a Subject residing upon (any sort) of unifying principle is automatically, by definition proclaimed as metaphysical, oppressively stabilizing and totalizing. The problem lies precisely in that "automatically and by definition" logic.

However, I shall not argue against the post-structuralist readings and deconstructive critiques of subjectivity as unitary, from Cartesian legacy to positivism. First and foremost, because -- let me now declare my already given position, without entering into scholastic polemics -- I find them all convincing. My thinking has been formed -- just like so many of my generation, I've been "intellectually raised" - in accordance with the post-structuralist academic and intellectual tradition. Therefore, what I would like to problematize in this paper is solely and precisely that very situation of dualism, the binary and oppositional self-positing of the feminist (and/or) post-structuralist thought arguing for the non-unitary nature of the Subject. I will argue that the dichotomy of exclusively metaphysical or non-metaphysical possibility of thinking the Subject creates the vicious circle of the mutual production of its Other, by each of the two "authorized" possibilities.

By way of positing itself in our "world of ideas", i.e. with respect to all other possible discourses, solely and exclusively according to the logic of binarism, the Thought/s of the non-unitary Subject situates itself politically as: agonistic, oppositionary and exclusive. Is it possible to preserve the gains of the post-structuralist, deconstructive critique of the -- primarily but not exclusively Cartesian -- unitary Subject, and yet allow the possibility of conceiving a Subject residing upon some form or mode of immanent unity and stability that would not be constraining, restricting and exclusive? Is it possible to conceptualize a unitary Subject that

would not be a totalitarian one, Subject of unity that would be auto-transformative, of identitarian mobility, in one word – multiple yet still of immanent unity? Methodologically and politically -- inasmuch as we can think of a certain politics/distribution of power of knowledge -- it should be permitted and pertinence should be ascribed to this possibility. However the grave difficulty to think of this unity in terms that are not metaphysical or totalizing, even, paradoxically, in terms of the post-structuralist argument favoring the multiple, unfixed Subject, remains.

Section 2

(Conceptualizing Unity after Its Deconstruction)

It represents a true synecdoche where the notion of “unity” is identified with its traditional attributions of “totality”, “fixity” and “exclusiveness”, such as in our post-structuralist, deconstructive and constructivist legacy of the critique of unitary Subject. These pars pro toto identifications, or rather misidentifications, do appear as a rule in the form of a totality of a concept, indebted entirely to the Derridean deconstruction, that refuses itself any deconstruction. Thus, the structure of the concept of the fragmented, unstable, multiple Subject itself has not been subjected to a more radical deconstruction itself since the only position it conceives of as the standpoint of its radical critique is its perennial Other – the metaphysical position which in itself excludes the possibility. However, let us suppose a deconstructive look upon this conceptual conglomerate that will reside upon the immanently deconstructive epistemic presuppositions, and will therefore engage into an analysis of the language economy of the discourse. Namely, the power distribution in the key (discursive) acts of naming among the crucial concepts constituting the non-unitary Subject position and its discourse of post-structuralist critique of subjectivity is what needs to be addressed. In other words, is there a term/s that hold/s a hegemonic position among the other key words of the concept of the “disrupted” Subject? I will argue that there is such term, and it is the notion of the (dismantled) One that presides over the subsidiary concepts of (again, dismantled, deconstructed, dismissed...) totality, stability, autonomy, exclusiveness, etc., which are normally reduced to the sinister consequences of the “reign” of the One. And inversely, the One is normally identified, conflated with its own bad produce, most of all with the act of totalizing, thus universalizing, and with the autonomy inasmuch as the individualistic modernist self-exclusion, and exclusiveness, with respect to the Other. I will try to explain this.

Defending our discussion against any ambition – at this point -- for ontological discussion over the One and the Multiple, and the dichotomy they form, I would like to address the question of the discursive exclusion of, and censorship over, the-Name-of-the-One. More precisely, it seems that, in the entire post- and anti-metaphysical philosophico-ideological legacy, there is a tacit aprioristic expulsion and moral condemnation of any position from the perspective-of-the-One, and thus of-the-Unity, automatically reduced – and degraded -- to the notions of Totality (and totalitarian repressiveness) and Universality (and hegemonic universalization). There seems to be an implicit self-censorship with respect to the notion/name of the One with all of the critics of the metaphysical and the Cartesian, prohibiting almost any argument in favor of any sort of Logic-of-the-One, inasmuch as always already -- that is, a-priori, -- universalistic, totalitarian, exclusive, etc. Thus, the legitimacy of the place of the “One” within the signifying chain or/and discursive, or rather of the name – or just and simply the “word” – of the One within the up-to-date politico-theoretical language, is something that needs to be retrieved. This retrieval, moreover, should be accompanied – or even enabled – by the simultaneous reclaiming of the “right” for the notion (of the One) not to be automatically identified with the “universalistic” and the “totalitarian”.

My claim is, thus, that in the (not only) feminist discourses of deconstructive critique of the unitary subject, the use of the term “unitary”, inasmuch as (deconstructively) unexamined in its oppositional relation to the favored “non-unitary”, is in a way formulaic. In other words, it sometimes seems to be functioning as almost a magic utterance of condemnation (sort of anathema of/for the non-absolutistic era), since, in the discourse to which it pertains, the “unitary” automatically - or with no critical stance, no intellectual pausing - entails also the notions of stability, totality, fixity, etc.

Feminist critique of the unitary subject, traditionally defined (also, by itself) as marginal in the landscape of the intellectual power-network, is already rigidified within its own position that can only produce the pure opposition of its own constructed Other, which is always already fixed. This theoretical Other is fixed, a priori assumed for, always already diagnosed as one pertaining to the “mainstream autonomy theories.”

Feminist philosophers have criticized mainstream conceptions of autonomy... those conceptions ignore the social nature of the self ... Mainstream autonomy theories assume that we should each be as independent and self-sufficient as possible.” (Friedman, 1997: 41).

In opposition to this, according to Friedman, we find Judith Butlers conception of subjectivity

presented as follows: "... feminist criticism of mainstream theories of autonomy is that they presume a coherent, unified subject with a stable identity who endures over time and who can 'own its choices. This presumption is challenged by postmodern notions of the subject as an unstable, fragmented, incoherent assortment of positions in discourse" [the underlining is mine] (1997: 42)

Here one sees an example of that reductionist identification of several predicates. It is detectable in the next quotation as well, where one can also notice the inhibiting effect of this package of attributes that all must go together, as one. Namely, the following lines, taken from Rosi Braidotti's *Metamorphoses*, display the aporic and inhibiting situation in which the argument for a non-unitary subject puts itself by way of excluding the possibility for – perhaps, some other, new form of – unity and coherence of the subject. It is precisely the exclusion and the suppression of the thinkable One that creates this situation. Braidotti embarks upon a courageous project to transcend this aporia, to establish the substance and the ways of the "glue" that holds together that Subject-which-is-not-One, without abandoning her post-structuralist theoretical positioning. She is attempting to accomplish this by resorting to the psychoanalytical means of critique and the notion of the unconscious, in particular.

"Sexuality is crucial to this way of thinking about the subject, but unless it is coupled with some practice of the unconscious, ..., it cannot produce a workable vision of a non-unitary subject which, however complex, still hangs somehow together... I would like to point out, however, that whereas in the psychoanalytic tradition these internal crevices are often the stuff that nightmares and neuroses are made of, they need not to be so. I would like to take the risk of arguing that the internal or other contradictions and idiosyncrasies are indeed a constituent element of the subject, but they are not such a tragedy after all. " [Italic underlining is mine] (Braidotti, 2002: 39)

Further on, just one paragraph bellow, Rosi Braidotti is taking all precautions not to betray the vision of the non-unitary subject, while she actually continues with her search for that which holds together that "bundle" called subject.

"I take the unconscious as the guarantee of the non-closure in the practice of subjectivity. It undoes the stability of the unitary subject by constantly changing and redefining his or her foundations." (39-40)

However:

"Non-unitary identity implies a large degree of internal dissonance, that is to say, contradictions and paradoxes. Unconscious identifications play the role of magnets, building blocks or glue." (40), which leads her to the following statement:

"Following Irigaray, the most adequate strategy consists in working through the stock of cumulated images, concepts, and representations of women... If 'essence means the historical sedimentation of many-layered discursive products, this stock of culturally coded definitions, requirements and expectations about women or female identity – this repertoire of regulatory fictions that are tattooed on our skins – then it would be false to deny that such an essence not only exists, but is also powerfully operational." (41)

Following the argumentative line linking these several citations together, we can see that Braidotti not only pursues that which "glues" together that "bundle" called Subject, i.e. some "unity" - or, more accurately, its unifying "forces", "principle" - but also grants legitimacy to the notion of "essence". Thus, by re-inventing the notion of the "essence", she takes the argument even further in the direction of some idiosyncratic reclaiming of the instance of unity.

It is a re-inventive and idiosyncratic arguing for unity, since it is embedded in a position, which is that of a defender of the notion of “non-unitary” subject. Some might find Braidotti's position contradictory. However, it is not – her line of argumentation and inference is impeccably logical and highly convincing: she is arguing for the existence of some unifying processes within an instance that is ultimately non-unitary, and which is the Subject. Moreover, her claim might not even be paradoxical, since it seems to be perfectly compliant with the norms of the formal logic. Namely, Braidotti's argument, sublimated in the way I just proposed, consists in the claim that the coexistence of unity and non-unity is made possible by the simple fact that the existence of each of the two rests on a different ontological level, and represents a different, distinct epistemological moment.

Section 3

What is that, in Braidotti's text, which produces those rhetorical swings of overly alert vigilance over the possibility of being misread as someone who does not propound the idea of the non-unitary subject? In other words, we can trace an overt intention for identification with a certain theoretical position. The open self-declaration of belonging to a certain “line” of thinking about a particular issue, within a single discursive/textual act (on virtually the same page) where a claim that is in opposition with this position is purported, is but an ideological identification. The repetition of this statement of self-identification is a performative act of self-subjection to a certain ideology – the post-structuralist tradition of thinking the question of subjectivity. The defensive language of Braidotti's argument for certain unity of the Subject, reflected most saliently in those repetitive self-declarations, speaks of the importance attributed to the question of theoretical-ideological belonging. This cautious language is voiced most loudly in the little words such as conjunctions, adverbs, etc. For example, in “however” and “still” from “it cannot produce a workable vision of a non-unitary subject which, however complex, still hangs somehow together”. (Braidotti, 2002: 39)

But it also speaks of its inhibiting powers towards the potentially free course of argumentation, movement of thought.

On the occasion of a seminar devoted to her work and aimed for the younger feminist scholars from Eastern and Central Europe, Judith Butler was asked by one of the students if the non-unitary Subject, through its constant inconstancy, is not always already facing the question of “survival”, the possibility of its death. At one point in this dialogue, Butler says:

“And I do think that certain forms of social transformation do involve passing through the fear of death. And I don't think it's a bad thing. And what's of course interesting about the fear of death is about who I am. I could say at a certain point in time, that this is who I am and I cannot imagine myself any other way. I will dissolve if I do x, y and z. I will become undone fundamentally if I do x, y and z. And then it turns out you do x, y and z, hopefully within a community in which others are doing the same, and indeed something in you is undone, or even dies. But there is some new possibility that also emerges in its place...” [Italic underlining is mine] (Kolozova, 2001: 29)

In this quotation, the same tone of cautious rhetoric can be detected that is preventing the speaker (i.e., Butler) from falling into the (metaphysical) “pit” of allowing any possibility whatsoever for a unity of the Subject. In a word, the transformative subject is but a social one, and this subject is called “I” when it is spoken about its possibility to “die”, to be “undone”, in other words – when it undergoes a social change and, thus, expresses political engagement. When the existential lacuna appears out of the absence of any (new) position (assumed), what re-emerges in the place of the old “I” is not, in the discourse of Butler, some new “I”, or different state or nature of the “I”, but “some new possibility.” Thus, in the lacuna of crisis, it seems that there is no “I”. As if there is no “I”-of-Crisis, no “I”-of-the-space-between, no “I” without the awareness of its social (political) position. Because if there were any, it would be that thing which, in Braidotti's words, “glues” the subject together, there should be some unifying principle presupposed. The a priori exclusion of any possibility of allowing any mode of unity within a concept of a subject that is in its ultimate instance non-unitary, is, through its dichotomous restrictiveness, thought-inhibiting and pushes the discourse into the clench of aporia.

This is how even Judith Butler could find herself claiming something that might have the overtone of oppressive and even discriminative speech:

“[...] think of the many years of Turkish migrate workers in Germany, for instance. A population that is not a citizen, that are not citizens, that are also not effaced from the view. Not absolutely absent, there, but spectrally human. They do not form part of the figure of what is human [Sic!]” [Cursive underlining is mine] (Kolozova, 2001: 27-28).

It seems that in the postmodernist/poststructuralist discourse there is some tacit, yet highly sturdy prohibition against thinking - let alone granting any legitimacy to the instance of – the unity and the One. The background of this prohibition is constituted by the unquestioned/unquestionable synecdoche of the unity with attributions such “domination”, “repression”, etc. Highly illustrative of this theoretical practice is the following citation from Jane Flax:

“The postmodernists regard all such wishes for unity with suspicion. Unity appears as an effect of domination, repression, and the temporary success of rhetorical strategies.” [*Italic is mine.*] (Flax, 1992: 454)

The final section

In order to enable that Exit of thought from the grasp of (unitary/non-unitary Subject) dichotomy, one should perhaps grant oneself the right to disloyalty to the school of thinking one adheres to.

One of the possible approaches to such re-positioning of the thinker is François Laruelles non-philosophical critical situating of thought: of radical stepping outside of any sort of discursive auto-referentiality, that is, the enclosure of thought within the tradition of a certain discourse and the (epistemological, ideological) obligations of adherence. This, however, is not possible without a radical step-back with respect to the narcissistic idea of the self-sufficiency of philosophy, or, as Laruelle puts it, more precisely – Principle of the sufficient philosophy (Principe de philosophie suffisante: PPS).

This is an attempt to undermine philosophys auto-positioning based on “its being animated and entangled by a certain faith or belief in itself as the absolute reality, intentionality or reference to the real that it pretends to describe or even constitute, or to itself as the real itself.” (Laruelle, 1989: 17). Therefore, Laruelle concludes:

“This is its fundamental auto-positioning; that which one could also call its auto-factualization or its auto-fetishization – all that we assemble under the Principle of the sufficient philosophy (PPS)”. (17)

Without going any further into an explication of the non-philosophical method of suspension of the PPS, let us only suppose that there is this phenomenon of “discursive/ideological” loyalty that might be inhibiting for the authentically investigative thought, and move forward. In this vein, let us allow the possibility that there might be a “good” One, “good” Unity and that it does not necessarily has to exclude the non-unitarity, nor should they be considered as mutually exclusive.

Thus, where is this position of an outside of the dichotomy to be located, and what is that which constitutes it? The position of non-dichotomy is located and constituted by precisely – the One. Nevertheless, this is a One that is liberated from its debts to the philosophical and metaphysical constitutions, according to which it would be totalizing, universalizing, or even particularizing. Let us conceive of this One as the instance of the singular – emphatically, but within that very instance of singularity, uniqueness and “phenomenological” solitude – relieved from any responsibility to be relative (to), from any historical = discursive responsibility. That is, to be relational, to establish relations – since, it is always already, in its minimal instance, establishing a couple with another notion, concept, instance, etc. Coupling is binarism, binarism entails dichotomy. Therefore, let us permit ourselves an utterly different possibility, described by Laruelle as follows:

“The One is a non-thetic [non-thetique] Identity in general; that is to say, at the same time non-decisional (of) itself and non-positional (of) itself: without will for essence [sans volonté pour essence], without topology for existence; without contest for movement forth [sans combat pour moteur], without space or figure for manifestation... The One is the transcendental minimum, the minimal petition of reality – that is to say, the reality presupposed by any petition in general.” (Laruelle, 1989: 42)

Thus, let us suppose a unity within the Subject that would be neither in an exclusive, nor in a binary, nor in an oppositional relation to the Subjects instance of non-unity. Moreover, let us permit ourselves to conceive of that instance of unity that would be in no relation what so ever with that of the non-unity.

In other words let us permit an instance where we would allow ourselves to thematize the unity without being obliged to simultaneously think its relation to the (ultimate, or some other) instance of non-unity, that is – in its irrevocable singularity. Let us, conclude these few pages with an invitation to allow ourselves such a consideration with the minimum ambition of a mere over-coming of the self-inhibition of the ideological loyalty of thought, accompanied by the intellectual desire for transcending the logic of dichotomy. And to go only one step further – to identify the permeability of the post-structuralist feminist discourse that might allow an opening for the curious glance at that which “glues” together that incoherent “bundle” called Subject.

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