

# **Deleuze's Differential Ontology and the Problem of Ethics**

**Hannah Stark**

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Discipline of English  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences  
University of Adelaide  
November 2010

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Declaration.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: <b>The Turn to Ethics</b> .....	10
Ethics and Poststructuralism.....	11
Hegelian Recognition.....	17
Levinas' Ethics of Absolute Alterity.....	37
Chapter Two: <b>Lineage</b> .....	51
Spinoza.....	56
Nietzsche.....	66
Bergson.....	74
Chapter Three: <b>Ontology</b> .....	85
The Infinitely Large and the Infinitely Small.....	86
The Image of Thought.....	98
Individuation.....	115
Chapter Four: <b>Subjectivity</b> .....	131
From Hume to the Fold.....	132
Passive Selves and Larval Subjects.....	142
Embodiment.....	154
Politics without Identity.....	166
Chapter Five: <b>Ethics</b> .....	175
Differential Ontology.....	176
The Otherwise Other.....	188
Love.....	202
Conclusion: <b>Ethics beyond Recognition</b> .....	211
Works Cited.....	217

## Abstract

This thesis is centrally concerned with difference and its place in ethical theory, particularly as it is influenced by the continental tradition. It takes ethical theory — and philosophy more generally — not to be a reflection of the world but a constructed, and therefore ideologically invested, system of meaning. Because philosophy is a form of representation with a world-making function, the political impetus of this thesis is to interrogate the frameworks through which ethical theory is currently being asserted, and the meanings which they both enable and constrain.

To this end, I begin by mapping the trajectory of the turn to ethics in literary theory in order to examine how “recognition” is gaining considerable currency in debates about the structures of relation between the subject and its surroundings. Locating recognition as part of the legacy of Hegel, I question the ways in which this system theorises the relation to alterity. I take Judith Butler’s work to be exemplary of the recognition-paradigm in ethical theory, and critically examine the impact of this framework on the model of alterity she proposes. I then look to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, whose ethics of absolute alterity at first would appear to move beyond this problem of recognition that haunts poststructuralist discourse. However, I do not find in Levinas’ work a viable alternative to Hegelian recognition. These philosophers, I argue, offer a version of difference which limits its conceptual potential as alterity. For this reason my thesis focuses in detail on the philosophy of difference proposed by Gilles Deleuze.

In Deleuze’s work I find an alternative to the recognition-based ethics that has become so prevalent in contemporary critical theory. I trace his rejection of Hegel through his early works on the history of philosophy, and claim that his differential method of reading enables him to develop his own ontology. While I examine Deleuze’s revision of Plato, Spinoza, Kant, Nietzsche and Bergson, I am particularly interested in the potential that his revision of Leibniz’s work has for ethical theory. This concern permeates the last three chapters of my thesis, which focus on *Difference and Repetition*. My interest is in the metaphysical primacy which Deleuze affords to both difference and the differential relation. I claim that because Deleuze’s notion of difference is premised on a fundamental relationality, his ontology is foundationally differential. My final chapter specifies the difference between Deleuze and Hegel as something which emerges through their differing interpretations of differential calculus. Although this interpretive divergence is concerned with things that are minuscule in scale, it is important because it determines their respective theorisations of ontology. My concluding chapter argues that the difference between Deleuze and Hegel enables the coopting of Deleuze’s work to theorise the ethical relation of the subject to alterity and thereby situate ethics beyond recognition.

## **Declaration**

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University of Adelaide Library, being available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

I also give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library catalogue, the Australian Digital Theses Program (ADTP) and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

Signed

Hannah Stark  
19 November 2010

## Acknowledgements

There are numerous people who have made the writing of this thesis possible.

I would like to thank Mandy Treagus, my primary supervisor, who took a risk with this project and gave me the space to develop my own ideas. I would also like to thank her for being so calm at the moments at which I was “beside myself”, and for convincing me to keep going when submission seemed a very distant prospect. I am greatly indebted to Ken Ruthven, who supervised this thesis in his retirement. I would like to thank him for seeming to believe in this project (and in me) before I did, for changing the way that I write (forever), and for an excellent piece of advice: just do good work and let the rest take care of itself. I would also like to acknowledge Amanda Nettelbeck, who supervised my Honours thesis, and who has shown an interest in my academic progress.

I would like to recognise the research and travel funding I have received from the University of Adelaide. Thanks go out to two friends who provided me with accommodation for conference and research travel and whose moral support has been invaluable: Roanna McClelland in London and Melanie O’Grady in Sydney.

Thanks are due to several of my fellow postgraduates at the University of Adelaide. In particular, I would like to thank Michelle Phillipov and Jon Dale, both of whom have actively created opportunities for me, and also Keryl Howie, who was an affirming and energetic influence in the final stages of the writing process. I would like to acknowledge Tim Laurie at the University of Sydney, whose seemingly endless capacity to discuss Deleuze has pushed me to extend my own thinking.

I feel enormous gratitude to Jessica Murrell, without whom this thesis would not have been completed. Jess has been the first and last reader of all the work I have produced over the last five years, and her input has been so invaluable that she may be doomed to this role for life. I would also like to thank her for the generosity of her friendship.

I am indebted, of course, to my family (particularly my father Jeff Stark) who have shown such good humour and resilience during a difficult five years.

And a special thanks to Anne Romeo, who created the conditions under which this work was possible.