

Nothing Else Matters: Dialetheism and the Event of Sovereignty

Simon Clarke

 10.58048/2263-7664/3691

Derrida 2021 - Biopolitique et déconstruction

Si nous devons dire que parler de souveraineté est une possibilité impossible, que dirions-nous ? Que voudrions-nous dire et le sens serait-il l'enjeu ultime ? La souveraineté ainsi comprise serait-elle un événement ? La souveraineté, en particulier le droit de décider, en tant que possibilité impossible, apparaîtrait comme une contradiction, et nous pourrions même aller jusqu'à dire une véritable contradiction. Les vraies contradictions suggèrent à leur tour le dialéthéisme, un terme inventé par Priest et Routley pour une logique parallèle qui insiste sur le fait que dans certains cas, mais pas tous, la vérité et la fausseté ne sont pas exclusives. Dans cet article, je soutiens que les événements derridiens en général, et la souveraineté en particulier, ne sont pas seulement des contradictions vraies, mais qu'ils le sont dans la réalité et pas simplement sur le plan sémantique. La réalité est contradictoire en elle-même et les énoncés à son sujet, énoncés souverains et non souverains, portant ou non sur la souveraineté, peuvent donc aussi être contradictoires.

Abstract

If we were to say that to speak of sovereignty is an impossible possibility, what would we be saying? What would we mean and would meaning be what was ultimately at stake? Would sovereignty thus understood be an event? Sovereignty, in particular the right to decide, as an impossible possibility, would appear to be a contradiction, and we might go so far indeed as to say a true contradiction. True contradictions in turn thus suggest dialetheism, a term coined by Priest and Routley for a paraconsistent logic that insists that in some, though not all, cases truth and falsity are not exclusive. In this paper I argue that Derridean events in general, and sovereignty in particular, are not only true contradictions, but are so in reality and not simply semantically. Reality is contradictory in itself and statements about it, sovereign and not, and about sovereignty and not, may therefore also be contradictory.

Introduction

Despite biopolitics being the principal theme of this conference, with particular reference beyond Derrida to Agamben and Foucault, it was something quite specific to the problematic as outlined that drew my attention (and apologies in advance for going a little off-piste, or off-pestle – if the reference isn't too obscure – in what follows). On reading that “the present undifferentiation of the two notions [βίος and ζωή] would not at all be an event” and that if “bio-power is undergoing unheard-of developments and transformations today, this bio-power, for Derrida, will always already have been there”, a more tangential but no less crucial issue demanded attention. Whilst we may read both terms in classical Greek as simply “life” or “mode of life”, and join Derrida in wondering precisely why Heidegger, eclipsed perhaps, hadn't figured in this debate to the extent that he should have, we might still ask what any such or similar event might in fact look like, and what its relation to the always-already would mean for it. And this raises multiple questions about Derrida's work in general, across a great many themes, and its relation to the continental tradition beyond.

More specifically, it is the impossible possibility of an event worthy of the name that is at stake, as we'll see, and particularly here of the event of sovereignty. But what would we be saying were we to insist that to speak of sovereignty is an impossible possibility? And, were we to go further, we might ask what we mean precisely, and whether meaning is what's really at issue. The implications of these questions may or may not be immediately apparent, but in the limited time available I will seek to outline a dialectic¹ reading of the Derridean event and assess the extent to which the contradictions that this entails may be understood to be metaphysical (as opposed to simply semantic). Ultimately, I will argue that sovereignty is exemplary and perhaps even paradigmatic in this respect.

Knowledge “at the height of death”

Rather than trace something like a history of the concept of sovereignty via, e.g., Bodin, Hobbes or Rousseau, or emphasise the zoopolitical in various guises as Derrida so often does – though nothing is unrelated here – let's begin with Derrida's reading of Bataille in

“From Restricted to General Economy”. Familiarly, we find a problematic distinction between the sovereignty of which Bataille speaks in contrast to the sovereignty that he accords to Hegel’s “lordship”. Though the lord is seemingly prepared to risk death in the name of sovereignty, in contrast to the slave (“man is the beast for man”, so Derrida reads in Hobbes), this is only a “ruse of life [...] making it work for the constitution of self-consciousness, truth, and meaning”. The stakes are thus “preserved and control of the play maintained in an economy of life which restricts itself to conservation, to circulation and self-reproduction as the reproduction of meaning” (Derrida, 1978, p. 323). Such a sovereignty would be enslaved, subject to relation and repetition. A sovereignty worthy of the name, then, would thus be “totally other” in its withdrawal from dialectics – Bataille’s laughter in the face of lordship “bursts out only on the basis of an absolute renunciation of meaning [...] it exceeds phenomenality in general, the absolute possibility of meaning.”

But we know all too well that this “point of nonreserve”, expenditure and negativity, as a Hegelianism without reserve, cannot be what it appears exactly. Such a negativity can no longer be negative as such certainly, as the underside of positivity, any more than there can be ‘sovereignty’ itself as a *meaningful* concept. But the sacrifice of lordship cannot simply escape dialectics without “consolidating ontologies”; sovereignty becomes the “milieu” and “unlimiting boundaries of non-sense”, a sacrifice of meaning within which the “movement of meaning” is inscribed. It could not be “another discourse” alongside the significative since, in order “to reserve the possibility not of its meaning but of its non-meaning”, we would need to “find a speech that maintains silence. Necessity of the impossible: to say in language – the language of servility – that which is not servile” (p. 332). And as Bataille himself puts it, he must “give a meaning to that which does not have one: in the end, being is given to us as impossible” (cited in *ibid.*, p. 332).² We thus have a curiously non-sensical figure, it must be said – a sovereign to which nothing could be subject, sovereign over nothing and as nothing, without persistence in time (and thus relation) and therefore constitutionally incapable and incognisant of survival. A nothingness, indeed, that in coming into being, would come never to have been.

It hasn’t taken us long, then, to arrive at a sovereignty that in its very possibility is impossible.

In the event of an event

Impossible possibilities, of course, range across Derrida's work as aporias, emerging decisively in his reading of Heidegger's *Sein-zum-Tode* and *Jemeinigkeit* in *Aporias* (the impossible possibility – in various problematised permutations – of death for *Dasein*), in addition to his own plural logic of the aporia (the figures of which don't oppose so much as "haunt" each other). Much could be said regarding the following in accordance with this logic and these figures, but it is the impossible possibility of or as an "event" so-called that I have in mind on this occasion.

We might, then, immediately be put in mind of Heidegger once again and *Ereignis* in particular (as opposed to *Vorgang*), though its purchase varies across Heidegger's work as a whole. Perhaps most familiarly in his later work, and especially after the putative "turn", the sense of *Ereignisse* being very rare in the history of Being is important, where the essencing or revelation of Being is at stake – one is handed over to *Ereignis* or, better, beyond animals and even rational animals (and that *trousse* or *trousseau* of concepts convoking λόγος with ζωή, metaphysics, Christianity, biologism etc.), Man is appropriated by the event as *Dasein*. (We recall in passing the "troubling affinity" that Derrida notes between the *bêtise* of "people who don't ask themselves any questions" and, conversely, of not knowing "how to leave Being to be what it really is, but to rush excitably towards the question" [Derrida, 2009, p. 306].)

Badiou also springs to mind as a philosopher of the event, perhaps primarily and pre-eminently, since the possibility of momentous transformations of given situations or worlds is the primary motivation of his work. Such rare, evanescent and illegal evental incursions on the edge of the void that allow for such change disappear as soon as they appear, and their status for the situation/world in which they occur is thus undecidable (though not contradictory – a distinction that will prove important in what follows). One way or another, it is constructivism that Badiou has in his sights, which is to say the encyclopaedia of a given situation or world, the rules, conditions, heuristics and variables available to, and constituting it.

An event for Derrida, meanwhile, is no less rare or illegal (in a certain sense), elusive or chimeric. It must in a similar sense be unanticipatable, irruptive, irreducible and

inapprehensible. Situated within this “plural logic of the aporia” in which Derrida never “ceased to struggle” (1993, p. 15), invoking an “interminable list of all the so-called undecidable quasi-concepts that are so many aporetic places or dislocations”, the event for Derrida is an impossible possibility.

For Derrida, indeed, the event as gift, decision, invention (or forgiveness, confession, hospitality) cannot and must not be reduced to the logics or economies of exchange and restitution, calculability and potentiality. It must be something radically singular that one can't “see coming”. Thus, in “A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event”, he insists that to develop a possibility that is already present is not an event: The event's eventfulness depends upon an “experience of the impossible. What comes to pass, as an event, can only come to pass if it's impossible. If it's possible, if it's foreseeable, then it doesn't come to pass’, adding that even though ‘it may have taken place [...] it's still impossible” (Derrida, 2007, p. 451) since an event must itself be inescapably iterable and thus “neutralised” in advance. In this sense, then, repetition is in fact anterior to the event as a sort of prior trace – temporal pre-annihilation as becoming-no-longer in coming-never-to-have-been.

And just as an event for Badiou cannot be reduced to veridical knowledge as the encyclopaedia of a situation or world, an event for Derrida exceeds the “dimension of information, knowledge and cognition”. We enter the “night of non-knowledge”, “something that's not merely ignorance, but that no longer pertains to the realm of knowledge” (Ibid., 448). In both cases, then, we have a “phantom-like element” (Badiou, 2009, p. 342), something both there and not there, unknowable, indiscernible and inexistent in the sense that its irruptive singularity is evental.

Most illogical, Captain ...

If we were, then, to situate our conception of sovereignty amongst these other impossible possibilities, if we were to include acts or instances of sovereignty amongst our inventory of Derridean events, what would the implications be? How, furthermore, would we adequately represent this “strange alogical logic”, and would it in fact be a matter of representation at all, adequate or otherwise? Certainly, Bataille's sovereignty withdraws itself from the “horizon of meaning and knowledge” (Derrida, 1978, p. 323),

enters the “night of non-knowledge” indeed, and yet cannot escape significative discourse in its falling back into the neutralisation of iterability. Its condition is that it must be irreducibly singular and unrepeatable, and yet it constitutively cannot be so, and this is an outright contradiction. But yet, we might (and do) hold both statements to be true.

Now, it isn't unprecedented, certainly, to suggest that there may be a certain correspondence or coextension between aspects of Derrida's work and dialetheism (e.g., in the work of Purcell [2012] and Livingston [2012]), despite marked and manifest methodological differences. Indeed, Graham Priest himself, who coined the term dialetheism in 1981 (with Richard Routley), makes just such a claim (albeit admitting that he's uncertain whether he's understood Derrida at all!).³ But let's take a moment to recap before assessing its purchase here.

Dialetheism is a trivalent logic; where for classical logics sentences, statements or propositions (or whatever one takes as one's truth bearers) must be exclusively either true or false, trivalent logics may allow for truth gaps or truth gluts. In the former case, statements may be neither true nor false (because they're meaningless, ill-defined or indeterminate), whilst in the latter they may be both true and false (the liar paradox being a case in point - i.e., “this sentence is false”). In both cases, various complications are likely to follow, including the failure of either modus ponens or the material conditional (the former for *LP*, the latter for *RM3*).⁴

In fact, dialetheism is a strong form of paraconsistency (i.e., reasoning given inconsistency/contradictions), though, as we'll see, there are various degrees of dialethic commitment, too. Paraconsistency only requires that contradictions not be explosive, explosion being the classical entailment assumption that *ex contradictione quodlibet* (ECQ) - anything (or everything) follows from a contradiction. This poses a problem for dialetheism since it leads to trivialism whereby everything, including all contradictions, is true. By definition, a trivalent logic need not be explosive, of course, but this is a circular argument (just as, it should be said, are classical defences of the law of non-contradiction and explosion). Nevertheless, as Ficara (2013, p. 38) observes,

entailment is paraconsistent if and only if it is not explosive. This is basically obtained by assuming that disjunctive syllogism (which is a capital rule for the ECQ) works in classical cases, but it does not work when a contradiction is involved. As a matter of fact, you may have that α is true and false, and β is false, so: $\alpha \vee \beta$, $\neg\alpha + \beta$ fails, as $\alpha \vee \beta$ will be true, $\neg\alpha$ will be true as well, but β , the conclusion, will not be true.⁵⁶

As a strong paraconsistent logic, then, dialetheism insists that some contradictions are true, though we should also note the status of contraries here. Contraries may be distinguished from exclusive and exhaustive contradictions in that it may be impossible that two statements both be true, yet they may still both be false (e.g., “all S is P” and “no S is P”). Sub-contraries, meanwhile, can’t both be false, but they may yet both be true (e.g., “some S is P” and “some S is not-P”).⁷

What’s the meaning of this?

This begins to raise more difficult questions, however, since there’s relatively little consensus across history (ancient and modern) as to what precisely a contradiction is (see Grim 2004, Priest 2006). Worse still, the far more contentious “incredulous-stare”-inducing related problem of *what* precisely is contradictory rears its ugly head. Taking Grim’s 2004 typology as an example, we might distinguish the following:

1. Semantic contradictions. A contradiction is semantic if it’s couched in natural language, i.e., both “true” and “false”, with all the attendant problems (not least deconstructive) of natural languages and natural language use.
2. Formal contradictions. Pairs of formulae in which one is the negation of the other (i.e., by virtue of form) though, precise as this may appear, it still relies on the metalogical interpretation of its primitive vocabulary.
3. Pragmatic contradictions. Here, it’s the act of a given agent that is at issue, since one would need both to affirm and deny something in order for this act to be contradictory. This is thus neither a matter of content nor of form per se since it

only matters what an agent *believes* or doesn't (or professes to).

4. Ontological contradictions. In this case, truth bearers such as statements or propositions aren't primarily at issue, only actual circumstances or states of affairs. Some contradictions may obtain in reality, though this may extend from legal statuses (after a fashion, since these are created by the social world and are thus perhaps better understood as pragmatic) to physical states (created by the natural world).

For many, it appears, assuming they find any of the above tenable, the semantic option seems the most plausible candidate for a legitimate dialetheism. A pertinent example for us here would be Kroon (2004) who asks that we

suppose that the notion of truth used in a community C is a notion with a metaphysical commitment to what one takes to be a flawed relation of language-world correspondence. In that case, it seems perfectly reasonable to express one's dissatisfaction with the notion by declaring that there is no such property as truth (as deployed in C).

Thus, the inevitability of liar-style paradoxes (or paradoxes of self-reference generally) needn't concern us particularly. He then adds that "[d]econstructionists and their ilk dispute the property of truth on just such grounds" (Kroon 2004, pp. 259-60 and p. 260n). The extent to which such a deflationary reading convinces may certainly be disputed, of course, and not without cause, but it's the ontological possibility on which I wish to focus here.

In his seminal *In Contradiction*, Priest defends "metaphysical dialetheism" (as opposed merely to "semantic dialetheism") thus:

If something is true, there must be something that makes it so. Call this the world. If some contradictions are true, then the world must be such as to make this the case. In this sense, the world is contradictory.... What it is in the world that makes it something true is another matter. It might be just

that our concepts have such and such a structure, or that our words have such and such a meaning.... This might not be the only thing, however. The contradictions of motion are due, no doubt, to our concept of motion, but there would be no contradictions unless things in the world moved. In a world where everything was frozen there would be none. Similarly, if there are laws of the form 'no person in category A is obliged to do X' and 'every person in category B must do X', whether or not there is a person who is in both category A and category B may be a quite contingent matter. (Priest, 2006, p. 299)

Now, amongst examples of such 'world' contradictions, Priest suggests the following:

I am in a room. As I walk through the door, am I in the room or out of (not in) it? To emphasize that this is not a problem of vagueness, suppose we identify my position with that of my centre of gravity, and the door with the vertical plane passing through its centre of gravity. As I leave the room there must be an instant at which the point lies on the plane. At that instant am I in or out? (Priest, 2006, pp. 160-1)

We thus appear to have a real-world, physical contradiction regarding the instant of change (and we're speaking in some cases of limits and thresholds "without breadth" [Derrida, 2009, p. 309] quite literally here, "the beginning of the inside or the beginning of the outside" [p. 312]). Regarding motion, meanwhile, he refers back to Zeno's third paradox whereby the tip of a moving arrow is at a specific point, *a*, in space at a given instant, time index 1. At this specific instant, the tip can't be in motion since this would take time. At a later instant, time index *n*, the arrow's tip is required to have arrived at point *b*; but at no *instant* between 1 and *n* has the arrow tip been in motion. Yet, manifestly, it will have been, and thus a "body cannot be localised to a point it is occupying at an instant of time, but only those points it occupies in a small neighbourhood of that time" (Priest, 2006, p. 177). (We may note in passing that this relies upon a punctual understanding of time, rather than an intervallic one, but Priest stands by this.)

Priest and the Sovereign

Returning then to Derrida, we might readily recognise a semantic dialetheism of sorts regarding the Derridean event – he does, of course, insist explicitly that “saying” the event is a (certain) impossible possibility. A formal reading, meanwhile, might look something like the following. On the one hand $(\exists x) (Px \wedge \neg Px)$ and $x \neq x$,⁸ and on the other $(Ex \wedge \neg Ex)$. We might also say – though the emphasis is subtly different – $(\exists x) (Px \wedge \neg Px) \wedge (\neg \exists x) (Px \wedge \neg Px)$.⁹ And we might further recognise the impossible possibility of certain acts of affirmation, such as the US Declaration of Independence. Not only did the US have no authority to make such a declaration until it made it, but there was no such entity as the US to make it until the moment of the act itself. An impossible act of sovereignty that nonetheless took place, and this of course not only puts us in mind of Derrida’s “force of law”,¹⁰ but also Agamben’s reading of Schmitt and the “paradox of sovereignty”. A sovereignty that legally places itself outside the law, not needing law to create law, licit and illicit, legal and illegal – “the creation and definition of the very space in which the juridico-political order can have validity” (Agamben, 1998, p. 19).

But this is where we hover between the pragmatic (taking πράγμα as “doing”, “deed”, or “occurrence”), and the ontological. In as much as events of invention, gifts, decision, hospitality, forgiveness, confession and, most pertinently here, sovereignty may be acts or instances, they are real-world states of affairs. And as above, it’s the instant of change that renders them contradictory in that at the instant of their taking place, they must be singular, unbound and unrelated if they are to be events at all. But yet, at that very same instant, their condition of possibility is that they be repeatable, relatable, iterable and divided, other than themselves. At this instant, then, which is it?

To recap by way of conclusion, if we read, in accordance with Derrida’s reading of Bataille, an act or instance of sovereignty as an impossible possibility, then we may be justified in referring to such an act or instance as an event (in Derrida’s sense). And since an “impossible possibility” may readily be seen to be contradictory, a dialethic reading seems convincing (assuming that it’s a true contradiction). Now, whether this be understood as semantic, formal, pragmatic or ontological, it’s my contention that Derridean events may reasonably be understood this way. In particular, however, I am endorsing a version of metaphysical dialetheism which thus recognises inconsistency as true of the world (in the sense that *reality* is inconsistent), and not simply a semantic failure to represent a wholly consistent world consistently.

To give up the idea of a decisive and founding event is anything but to ignore the event that marks and signs, in my view, what happens, precisely without any foundation or decision [...] The abyss, if there is an abyss, is that there is *more than one* ground. (Derrida, 2009, p. 333-4)

References

Agamben, G. (1998) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Heller-Roazen, D. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Badiou, A. (2009) *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event, 2*, trans. Toscano, A. London: Bloomsbury.

Bataille, G. (2014) *Inner Experience*, trans. Kendall, S. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Derrida, J. (1978) 'From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve' in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Bass, A. Abingdon: Routledge.

- (1993) *Aporias: Dying - awaiting (one another at) the "limits of truth"*, trans. Dutoit, T. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- (2007), 'A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event', trans. Walker G., in *Critical Inquiry* 33 (Winter 2007), pp. 441-61.

- (2009), *The Beast and the Sovereign Volume 1*, trans. Bennington, G. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

- (2002) 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundations of Authority"', trans. Quaintance, M. in *Acts of Religion*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Ficara, E. (2013) 'Dialectics and Dialetheism' in *History and Philosophy of Logic*, 34:1, pp. 35-52.

Grim, P. 'What is a Contradiction?' in Priest, G., Beall, J.C. & Armour-Garb, B. (eds.) *The Law of Non-Contradiction: New Philosophical Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.

49-72.

Kroon, F. (2004) 'Realism and Dialetheism' in Priest, G., Beall, J.C. & Armour-Garb, B. (eds.) *The Law of Non-Contradiction: New Philosophical Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 245-263.

Livingston, P. (2012) *The Politics of Logic: Badiou, Wittgenstein, and the Consequences of Formalism*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Priest, G. (2002) *Beyond the Limits of Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- (2006) *In Contradiction* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Purcell, L. S. (2012) 'Two Paths to Infinite Thought: Alain Badiou and Jacques Derrida on the Question of the Whole', in *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 151-176.

1 Literally, a *di-alētheia* is a double or divided truth, whilst dialetheism is its corresponding formal logic, developed by Graham Priest in particular, endorsing the view that there are true contradictions.

2 See Bataille, G. (2014) *Inner Experience*, trans. Kendall, S. Albany: State University of New York Press, p. 175.

3 See Priest, G. (2002) *Beyond the Limits of Thought*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 215.

4 Two dialethic variants - on the one hand *Logic of Paradox*, on the other *R-Mingle 3-valued Logic*.

5 Taking 'α' and 'β' as metalogical variables, and 'v' and '¬' to mean 'or' and 'not', respectively.

6 To clarify, classically the inference rules "simplification", "addition" and "disjunctive syllogism" should all be sound, therefore the below should follow:

1. Premiss: $X \wedge \neg X$ ['∧' being 'and']

2. Simplification: X

3. Simplification: $\neg X$

4. Addition: $\neg X \vee Y$

5. Disjunctive syllogism: Y

7 If 'S' is some subject and 'P' some predicate, we have e.g., 'all cats are black' etc.

8 Though $x = x$ will also be true.

9 The existential quantifier indicates "some" or "at least one" and not "there exists". P refers to a given property, and existence is denoted by the existence predicate E ; x is thus a variable standing for a given object defined as anything we can talk or think about (note that Priest advocates Meinongianism in that there can be non-existent objects). A natural-language gloss would be that we can refer to a non-identical x which both exists and doesn't (we're speaking of events, which are both constitutionally contradictory - both unique and not - and cannot have happened even when they have). This isn't necessarily to say, however, that we both can and can't refer to this non-identical x (which is to say that it both is and isn't an object), something which subtly changes the emphasis (saying the event is an impossible possibility).

10 "How to distinguish between the force of law [*loi*] of a legitimate power and the allegedly originary violence that must have established this authority and that could not itself have authorized itself by any anterior legitimacy[?]" (Derrida, 2002, p. 234).