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# Toward a Self-Understanding of Transformation

**Daniel Barbiero**

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Review-Essay on: *Scomposizioni. Forme dell'individuo moderno* by Remo Bodei (Torino: Einaudi, 1987) and *Geometria delle passioni. Paura, speranza, felicità: filosofia e uso politico* by Remo Bodei (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1991)

Remo Bodei's *Scomposizioni* introduces its theme with a fragment written by Hegel sometime between 1798 and 1801. The fragment begins by announcing

the ever-widening contradiction [Der immer sich vergrößernde Widerspruch] between the unknown, which humans obscurely [bewusstlos] seek, and the life that is open to and permitted them.

This statement—of what we might call Hegel's Contradiction—is dense and elliptical, but its intent seems clear. Hegel is preoccupied with the restrictions placed on our lives by the competing claims of actuality and ideality, by the divide cleaving general from particular: in short, by the limitations arising from a human existence that must be lived as a subjective striving in the midst of subject-constricting objects.

In fact it is the notion of limit that unifies the concerns of both *Scomposizioni* and Bodei's more recent *Geometria delle passioni*. For though their avenues of approach are diverse, both books are addressed to that set of problems generally subsumed under the heading of the crisis of the subject. Indeed, the crisis of the subject becomes most clearly detectable with the discovery of one or another of the factors limiting its activity, self-possession, or capacity to project itself in the world; with this understanding of limit as the center of gravity on which the intelligibility of crisis balances, Bodei takes up a multifaceted investigation that is both historical-genealogical and contemporary all at once. By no means is it the first time Bodei has used such an approach, of course: these two recent works continue along lines plotted out in such work as Bodei's study of the dissolution of the subject in the context of 19th-century French psychopathology.

*Scomposizioni* is in some respects a period study. Bodei begins with the problem of limit as stated in Hegel's fragment, and proceeds to examine the attempted solutions offered by some of Hegel's contemporaries. These solutions—which took the various forms of reconciliation, overcoming, and resignation—provide Bodei with the poetic and philosophical filters through which to consider the implications of Hegel's Contradiction.

First, though, Bodei provides an explication of the fragment that also serves as a statement of the problem to be investigated. The "ever-widening contradiction," stated as a general structure of relation, is that between the subject and the subject-limiting object. Although the object can be identified with nature, it can just as well take the form of those social figures and institutions representing unquestionable authority. In a sense, these are the purported vicars of nature, the administrators of the alleged natural order of things from which their claims of authority ultimately derive; they are lawgivers who are conceived of as simple law-upholders serving a law—nature—that already has been consecrated and put into operation. Even given a general consent to their ideological underpinnings, such laws tend to harden into rigid forms, and suffocate those who are subjected to them. Hegel's problem then, as Bodei restates it, is to found or foster an intersubjective rapport that will transcend both the externally imposed restraints of a dry legalism and the internally imposed restraints of a resigned acceptance of things as they are. Any solution to this problem would involve, as Bodei describes it, an "eticité" in which the letter of the law can be reconciled to its spirit.

Bodei detects two general lines of response to Hegel's Contradiction, as expressed by Hegel's contemporaries. The first consists of a blind urge toward the unknown, to an alternative—the details of which are unfocused or perhaps completely obscure—that will sweep away the present, intolerable situation. The second is the mirror opposite of the first: a withdrawal into the imaginative refuge of a life of interiority. Thus the contradiction imposed by sanctioned limits generates a second order contradiction of its own—a contradiction between mutually exclusive responses to the original contradiction. It is to these responses that Bodei turns next.

Bodei looks to the poets Novalis and Hölderlin for examples of the embrace of the unknown. For Novalis, the unknown was a kind of elsewhere sanctified as "das heilige Nichts," a holy Nothingness. The pursuit of such nothingness, as Bodei shows, was for Novalis an end in itself. The case of Hölderlin, in Bodei's reading, is somewhat different. Here, the unknown is to be found, and confronted without fear, in a specifically temporal, rather than spatial, projection. Deliverance from the known by the unknown will be found in a temporal transcendence toward the future, and the corresponding forgetting of the past.



Novalis and Hölderlin represent the urge toward the unknown as articulated by a segment of the educated élite. Bodei also notes the parallel, though significantly different, articulation by the non-elites of the same urge. For this latter group, limits are absolutized, and authorities accepted as part of the natural order. Yet something better—something other—is still desired, even if this desire takes the form of a passivity that would seem to have its root in resignation. In fact such passivity, as read by Bodei, seems more of a postponing than an eradication of the impulse to the as yet unknown: such is a festering rather than a withdrawal. It is for good reason that Bodei cites Tocqueville's observation that Germany at the end of the eighteenth century seemed gripped by a feeling that change was imminent, though one was uninformed by a clear idea as to the how, when, or into what.

Under the heading of "flight," Bodei discusses the other response to Hegel's Contradiction: that of withdrawal. Bodei does this through the figures of Christ, Rousseau, and Fichte. For Bodei, the Christ that Hegel portrays in *Die Positivität der christlichen Religion* epitomizes the figure withdrawn from the world—but of very little difference is Rousseau's notion of following one's own nature through nature, in the relinquishing of will and reflection alike. If Rousseau's program entails the dispersal of human will into nature, Fichte's takes the opposite tack in calling for the absorption of nature into an infinite subject.

Yet it is Bodei's Goethe, influenced by Bruno and Spinoza, who collects and transforms the opposed impulses of blind urge and contemplative withdrawal. Goethe's vision of the coming of freedom replaces impulse and quietism with a path of evolution. For Bodei, Goethe's commitment is illustrated by his preoccupation, late in life, with the dispute between the biologists Cuvier and Saint-Hilaire. Against Cuvier's theory of the origins and extinctions of species through the agency of catastrophic upheavals, Goethe supported Saint-Hilaire's theory of an evolutionary, gradual development. Goethe, Bodei points out, was more interested in this dispute than in the ramifications of the 1830 Revolution that continued to shake France.

Bodei's engagement of Goethe—and his designation of the period under examination as Goethan age—shows Bodei's willingness to look beyond a dialectics of necessary contradiction. The title of *Scomposizioni's* concluding section, "Hegel e oltre," attests to that. Bodei's way will take us on an alternate route leading through Spinoza, and on toward a different formulation of the problem.

Already in *Scomposizioni*, Spinoza functioned as a now-explicit, now-implicit touchstone. In the *Geometria delle passioni*, his influence comes to the fore. We need only note that the title of the *Geometria* recalls the method informing Spinoza's *Ethics*, a work in which the

author analyzed and defined the ethical dimensions and interactions of the emotions and the intellect under the rigor of a systematic structure of propositions and proofs. Yet it is the emancipatory purpose of both works, I believe, that ultimately forms the basis of comparison.

The overriding purpose of Spinoza's *Ethics* consists in its attempt to provide for the liberation of the person from the bondage of passivity and ignorance combined. Bodei is about the same business, and in a similar way. The similarity lies not only in the choice of the passions as a topic of investigation, but also in the manner of formulation of the question of the passions' place in human activity. This formulation rejects at the outset the dualist view that imagines human being as rent by an antagonistic relationship between reason and the passions. Bodei characterizes such a dualist view as belonging to an outlook that has already become a part of the past, though one that is not without a certain lingering influence. Such a dualist view establishes a priority of value of reason over passion, the ideal equilibrium of which would entail the suppression of the latter by the former. Indeed this is an old story in the West, and not only in the West, if we consider such systems as Mādhyamika Buddhism, with its rigorously logical explication of desire as affliction, or classical Hinduism as expressed in the *Gita*, with its doctrine of the renunciation of all desire for the fruits of activity.

In accordance with Spinoza's perspective on the modes of human affectedness, Bodei rejects a conception of human subjectivity that represses, by not confronting, the role of the non-rational in human activity. As with *Scomposizioni*, Bodei chooses a historical epoch to illustrate his thesis. This time French Jacobinism serves as the model. Bodei shows how the drive toward a new state of affairs is pushed not simply by an urge as such (a blind impulse, say, as with Novalis and Hölderlin), but by a complex of emotion and reason: the Revolution was driven not only by the Utopian aspirations of its leaders, but by the widespread fear provoked by the violence of terror, and the increasing rationalization of techniques and ideologies. In this connection, it is interesting to recall Spinoza's assertion that hope and fear cannot be extricated from the pain that invariably accompanies them.

Although the scene has shifted from Germany to France, we can see a similarity of construction binding these two milieus. For French Jacobinism seized the frustration arising from increasingly vexed social relations and intolerably repressive limitations allegedly ordained by nature and upheld by the *ancien régime*. The Jacobins directed (and no doubt manipulated) emancipatory strivings, the exact conditions and dimensions of which were, strictly speaking, not fully clear. We can read this historical case as an example of an attempted making good of the "ever-widening contradiction:" the historical episode imprinted by the Jacobins provides an instance of the guid-



ance and articulation of the multitudes' impulse toward the surpassing of an intolerably limiting given.

And yet there is something more at work in Bodei's *Geometria*. Certainly, the question introduced in *Scomposizioni* is still in operation, at least in its broadest form: How does one achieve a reconciliation (perhaps through revolutionary transformation?) between what is given and what is desired? But in the *Geometria*, the angle of approach has changed. What is now allowed is an interpenetration of the two sides of the equation—of the subject on one side, and the subject-limiting object, or nature, on the other. Such an interpenetration, of course, transmutes the entire equation, and restructures it as something else altogether. To see how this can be, and why it should be, we must return to the end of *Scomposizioni*.

The idea Bodei leaves with us at the conclusion is that of the crisis of the dialectical model, with its language of subject and object, and its postulation of a necessary state of contradiction between the two terms. At least as it is expressed in the fragment, Hegel's dialectic implies an ontological alienation that arises from the limitations nature places on the human actor. This latter must be conceived in turn as a subject constituted in opposition to the nature-object. This, then, is the essence of Hegel's Contradiction: the subject is forever held in check by the object, and the particular cannot be made whole by its aggregation into a concretizing (and reciprocally concretized) totality. What is denied the subject at the level of an intersubjective, horizontal integration is likewise prevented at the level of intrasubjectivity.

Yet this insuperable alienation may be constituted as much by its manner of formulation as by the ontological relation that that formulation purports to express. And it is here that Bodei finds fault with the dialectic and its postulation of an eventual absorption of the individual into an encompassing "macro-subject." For that is the form that the reconciliation of the "ever-widening contradiction" must take. Bodei questions not only the necessarily futural, diachronic development of this macro-subjective absorption of the individual, but also its necessary lack of allowance for the synchronic integration of any individual element so absorbed. If we were to look instead to the phenomenon of the individual living synchronically, Bodei implies, we would find, instead of a unitary subject in the process of absorbing and being absorbed by the Other, an "io modulare"—a modular subject—that is dispersed into its various *Erlebnisse*, or engagements. The world-engaged subject, rather than being pulled up to a point of macro-subjective convergence, instead is separated out into its diverse modes by the centrifugal force of its engagements.

With this criticism, Bodei amplifies a point made earlier, in a paper he delivered at a 1983 symposium at New York University. The paper was entitled "Beyond Dialectical Thinking," and its point was

that the crisis in dialectical thinking corresponds to a more general crisis of subjectivity, as well as to an enduring crisis regarding the ability, and desirability, of any whole to absorb and subsume individual members. With their historical contextualizing of the crisis of subjectivity, *Scomposizioni* and *Geometria della passioni* mark an advance over this earlier paper. In the later works, the history of the individual is read through the history of individuality conceived of as problematic: looking both ways, we can see that these are two sides of the same coin, a coin that is more worn than we may care to admit.

For the crisis of the subject is contemporaneous with the discovery of the problem of limits. What is important to emphasize is not that limits must be conceived of as problematic—not necessarily in and of themselves, at any rate—but that the limiting case, by virtue of its presumably extraordinary character, must problematize the purportedly ordinary. That, I would argue, is at the root of this particular crisis of the subject.

The role of non-rational elements in the production and (especially) execution of purposive activity is just such a limiting case. We may normally conceive of purposive activity as arising from a rational consideration of alternatives (based on beliefs regarding the actor's capacities and the situation's susceptibility or resistance to modification), a judgment regarding the proper means and goals of activity, and the execution of whatever course of action has been decided upon. Undoubtedly there are many instances of goal-directed activity that conform to this model of volitional construction, and though by no means does this model exhaust all possible forms for the performance of action in the world, it does provide a straightforward model of rational activity. But the appearance can be misleading.

The difficulty arises when we look closely at the motivational state or occurrent purpose (in the sense of being accessible to the actor in a reasonably complete tokening) underlying such rational activity. Goal-directed behavior is behavior intended toward the attainment of a projected state of affairs, this much is implied in its designation as goal-directed behavior. But a goal, no matter how rationally selected and constructed, begins with something we can express (loosely) as a desire: that is, a futurally-directed receptivity to a certain outcome. Thus a volitional motivational state is an aggregate of elements of belief, judgment, articulated desires, and receptivities in varying degrees. The operative term here is "receptivity"—our accepting openness to a particular state of things that we would like to obtain. Rational goal-intending activity thus may take place for a reason, but that reason is predicated on a receptivity the origins of which are not necessarily rational.

Given this structure of goal-intending behavior, we are faced with the prospect that the force of receptivity may elude or subvert the



process of rational goal selection. We may, for example, acknowledge a certain receptivity to a particular outcome, endorse it (in other words, identify ourselves with it as being "ours"), and decide to pursue it. Yet a stronger receptivity to an entirely different outcome may prevent our execution of the action we decided in favor of. We may, in other words, choose other than what we have decided.

That such apparently paradoxical activity not only occurs, but occurs frequently, should be puzzling to a classical rationalist position. Such a position, we may assume, is based on a conception of a transcendental subject as a unifier, and ultimate rationalizer, of occurrent desires and behaviors. The upsurge and execution of unauthorized receptivities naturally would pose a threat to the coherence of behavior that reasonably could be expected of a transcendental subjectivity. This is not to say that the existence of such apparently defiant receptivities have been ignored in past accounts of rational action: we need only look to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* for a discussion of *akrasia*, or action supposed to exhibit a weakness of will, or incontinence, in the akratic actor.

But it would be wrong to think that between the judgment (or decision) and the actual situated choice that will execute and thereby realize that judgment, the passions can intervene and overthrow reason's carefully crafted plan with an irrational impulse. This may happen in some cases, but the structural truth of the matter is more complicated. In fact it is against such a dualistic scheme that opposes the rational to the irrational that Bodei, following Spinoza's example, constructed his *Geometria* in the first place. The "passions" (and even this is too broad a term, as it can encompass such disparate phenomena as impulses, appetites, modes of being affected, and the instantiations of certain dispositions toward being affected) are not alien, intervening (or supervening) forces, but constituent elements in the domain of activity.

The passions, in the guise of the force behind various receptivities, play an integral role in our grasp of the holism of mind and body. Nor is this role an obstructing one, as it might appear to a rationalist position built on the fear of affective force. Bodei is right, in the *Geometria*, to conceive of human being as structured by a cognitive-affective holism. The body is not simply inhabited by an alienated and controlling mechanism that Ryle scoffingly called "the ghost in the machine," but is existed as a concrete presence interpreted in meaning states and concrete modes of affectedness. This is to say that the body's states of movement and equilibrium are interpretable not only through tokened content states, but also through its concrete, contentless states of affectedness. It is presumably with the sense of this meaning in mind—if the anachronism of terminology can be forgiven—that Spinoza, in his *Ethics*, claims that the body in its extension is



the object of the mind not necessarily insofar as the body is intended, but as far as its movements are an interpreted presence. In Spinoza's terms, the mind grasps the body through ideas of the body's modifications. Yet even when such interpretation is intentional—that is to say, tokened in directed content states comprised of semantic entities of whatever sort—it appears against a background of affectedness. Our bodily modifications and behaviors are meaningful as felt as well as known: we cannot escape a situatedness that involves our acting on, and being acted on by, objects that provoke our desires and revulsions.

In short, our status as beings constituted by a cognitive-affective holism provides for the *de facto* horizontal integration of our different modes. Such horizontal integration, which is evidenced in the performance of skilled activity occurring under the description of a cognitive-affective self-presence, is the other, functional, side of Bodei's "io modulare." Drawing approvingly from Schutz, Bodei suggests that the different modes of the modular subject arise within and are meaningful in terms of the diverse "mondi vitali" that comprise the aggregate life world of everyday and specialized endeavors, or practical fields. The unity of any such mode of the "io modulare"—which latter self-evidently must be understood in terms of modes of behavior, and ultimately as a series of instantiations of particular dispositions to act, given relevant competences and belief states—would derive from the practical field in which activity arises or is necessitated.

In fact such modularity of the agent not only allows, but requires the horizontal integration of each of the agent's various modes. The prerequisite of competence is learning, which entails the interpretation of self and surroundings in order best to adapt the former to the latter. Even the successful activation of competences and skills, no matter how unconsciously done, or unthought (at least to the extent that no tokened intentional state is occurrent at the time of activity), entails a self-presencing of affectedness interpretable in the appropriate capacity, in order that the actor can gauge the performance.

(A corresponding vertical integration, through which all modes of behavior are aggregated into a transcendental sense of self, is not assumed by horizontal integration. In order for such vertical integration to be constituted, persistent patterns of behavior must be postulated out of the raw observed data of motivational states and activities that are accessible to the actor by way of the descriptive contents or concrete modes of affectedness in force at the time of activity. Vertical integration, in other words, would consist in an after the act aggregation of the constituent modes of the modular subject. But by no means is this meant to imply that the subject's different modes by definition are mutually sealed off.)

It is with the recognition of a horizontal integration of reason and passion, of cognition and affectedness, that we return to the projection

of a "comprensione trasformatrice" that Bodei offered in his contribution to *Crisi della ragione*. For if there is to be an unfolding auto-comprehension, the unfolding of which would transform the process of unfolding by virtue of a broadening of that which is to be comprehended—it seems to me that it must take the form of an articulation of the horizons (or limits, if you prefer) within which a subject's modes of behavior are instantiated. It is in this respect that Bodei's turn to Spinoza is illuminating. For it was Spinoza who claimed that emancipation would follow if an adequate understanding of bodily modifications could be had; what is this recommendation if not a prolegomenon to a hermeneutics of activity in the world?

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