

Introduction to the Dossier: Samuel Weber at Eighty

James Martel and Julia Ng

Three and a half years ago, the new normal of video conferencing forced upon the world by the COVID-19 pandemic turned forth an unexpected silver lining: scholars separated by seemingly insurmountable physical distances were able to gather in celebration of Samuel Weber's 80th birthday at an online event organized by the Centre for Philosophy and Critical Thought at Goldsmiths, University of London and Northwestern University. Over the course of his long and prolific career, Weber has been a mentor and an inspiration to several generations of scholars, and it is a testament to his vast impact that those who spoke at the conference not only hail from all around the globe (*inter alia* Taipei, Berlin, London, Paris, Chicago, San Francisco, Santiago de Chile) but also work across so many different fields in the theoretical humanities and social sciences. From German, Romance Languages, East Asian studies and comparative literature to modern European and continental philosophy, from political theory and theology to psychoanalysis, from the history and philosophy of science and media studies to theories of the Global South—to name just the fields represented by the participants—, Weber's work has been a tremendous resource and fuel for thought. In this dossier, we are publishing essays deriving from that conference, which took place in December of 2020. Their authors speak to the importance of Weber's many influential publications for their respective fields as well as to one another in reflecting on his personal influences on them as thinkers and writers.

Common to each of the essays is an interrogation of the notion of "singularity." A long-standing theme of Weber's work, "singularity" is the subject of his recent book *Singularities: Politics and Poetics* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021), which gathers together his essays on various iterations of the concept from the last fifteen years alongside

new writing. Singularity was therefore selected as the topic to which the participants at the December 2020 conference were invited to respond and constellate with their own work. “Singularity,” as Weber sees it, is far more than a simple adjective describing some kind of internal unity. Instead, it functions as a form of resistance to the homogenizing tendencies found everywhere in Western thought where all things are subjected to an external measure and thereby presupposed and predetermined. *Thinking* about singularity in this way allows for a radical rupture in that homogenization in that it demands at each turn that we encounter an event or moment as if it were unprecedented, stripped of the baggage and teleology that Western thought ordinarily saddles us with. At the same time, singularity belies the interrelation of all things, an interrelation that actually makes up the stuff of reality: the thought of singularity also has a technical, even terminological quality to it that sets it at an oblique angle to that which it purportedly describes. That is, the thought of singularity exhorts us to *act* “as if” (to borrow from the Kantian lexicon) what “singularity” denotes were “singular” and to train ourselves, as it were, to unthink the ways in which we ordinarily engage with language and meaning—ways that are obscured in Kantian philosophies of the theoretical and practical. The idea of singularity, then, is a subversion of how we respond to reality as such from within the very structure of our experience of reality. It affords us, paradoxically, more engagement with materiality precisely because it takes each moment, each place, each object and each concept out of its context and treats it as if we had encountered it for the very first time.

In describing the way that identity functions in Western thought and practice, then, “singularity” is, quite paradoxically, never singular but always in relation to otherness. Following Derrida, Weber calls this the “aporetic” structure of the notion of singularity: that is, “the fact that it can only be thought conceptually, but can only be *felt and experienced* in that which resists conceptualization” (Weber viii). Weber’s work thus focuses attention on

how the concept of singularity, which has been so crucial to liberal thought in particular, betrays the autarky that liberalism desires but cannot abide. Thought in this way, a concept that resides at the heart of liberal orthodoxy becomes subversive, even radical, when it is considered in its own right. Furthermore, since every element of every category is, as itself, effectively a singularity, even as it relates to other elements both within and beyond its taxonomization, the category of singularity turns out to be astonishingly, even uncannily wide-ranging in its scope and effects. The discourses and disciplines that singularity touches—and unsettles—not only span across literature and philosophy, theology and political theory; the array of disciplines as institutionally, culturally and linguistically differentiated fields is itself the work of singularity and a terrain demarcated by an indubitably singular politics.

Attesting to the breadth of the concept of singularity and the sometimes elusive, sometimes violent productivity that it names is thus the range of disciplinary formations and domains of experience as we know them in our institutionally sanctioned, anxiety-driven desire to know in general by separating into categories. Holding the promise of radically rethinking the work of classification and categorization is, Weber proposes, the poetical and the literary. It is in thinking on poetry and literariness, broadly conceived, that the *feeling* of resistance or loss, but also of anticipation or hope, registers: it is a feeling, moreover, through which a singularity's non-identity with itself, its signification of something other than what it appears to be, and the irreducibility of this "other than" and thus of its relativity is experienced as a movement of its going beyond itself and its transformation without predestination. The operations of what Weber calls the "mono-theological identity paradigm" (Weber 6)—a form of individuation at the heart of which resides the presupposition of a divine unity that absorbs the heterogeneous and the mortal—may be dark and pervasive, but they inadvertently disclose their contradictions when pressure is applied to the joints of their

linguistic, mythic, poetic, or theatrical constructions. Thus the shock and surprise that augurs the new turn out to be tied to the possibility of repetition (Freud), the reality of the “world” qua *cogitatum* to the staging of ambiguity concerning its continuation (*Hamlet*), and meaning something once and for all to provisional construals of closure (Saussure). Attempts to grasp at what surpasses the finite and to pin down with absolute certainty reveal themselves to only be possible with an acknowledgement of the singular individual’s limitations (Hölderlin) and awkwardness (Sterne). Attending to the literary and the poetic brings the constitutive instability of meaning in any text into focus, a “structural” characteristic of signifying that is uncontainable by any such thing as an “act” of reading and calls into question all claims to self-identity and actuality. “Readers,” Weber writes, “do not merely read texts as objects; in so doing and even more in writing about them, they are ‘read’ by the texts they read” (Weber 348).

As the locus of a differential theory of signifying that discloses only ever in oblique ways a heterogeneity that can never be fully actualized or cognized in itself, singularity is both elusive and pervasive, its effects and presence in the modalities of language, thinking and politics that continue to saturate our forms of experience easy to overlook. Yet as Weber’s work shows, singularity’s refusal of attempts to “ground” it can generate wide-ranging yet interconnected insights into an unresting and polysemous dynamic that shifts how we read, think, and commune. Accordingly, we have grouped the essays in this collection under three broad and interrelated headings. The first, “Singularity’s Incriptions,” treats the ways in which singularity is revealed to us through representations of speech, reading, and writing. Here, the apparently neutral medium of communication itself becomes a subject of critique inasmuch as methods of communicating singularity necessarily and readily reveal the way they are not merely “one.” As the essays by Alfandary, Ng and Rheinberger demonstrate, this has repercussions not only for singularity as such but also for the linguistic devices that

singularity “speaks” through. The second section, “Singularity’s Philosophy,” turns to the place and role of the concept, that is, the way that singularity anchors specific movements in different regions of thought. The essays by Deuber-Mankowsky and Rosello consider how the movement of singularization operates in thinking about language as such in relation to thought and its ends (happiness, fatelessness), and in the prospects of thinking in interrelation with offering, thanking, and sacrifice from the periphery of the traditional (Global North) center of thinking and thoughtfulness. The third and final section, “Singularity’s Politics,” examines the effects of orthodox understandings of singularity as an unproblematic concept, as well as critical readings thereof, on questions of political, economic, and social life. As the essays by Hobson, Burdman, Martel and Castaño show, singularity is both abstract and concrete, general and particular and, as such, touch the most fundamental questions of politics and ethics. These questions involve the relation of the one to the other and to all, as well as power and hierarchy: the production of non-difference through classificatory means, the temptation to “ground” an ethical politics in difference as such, the inherent anarchism of the decision over life and death, and economies based on incommensurability.

Our dossier closes with a previously unpublished contribution by Weber on how singularity is thought through the notion of “transference” by Nietzsche and Freud. Drawn from materials that were originally prepared for his book *Singularity*, the essay constitutes an original interrogation of a crucial conceptual context of the book and an extrapolation from the book’s core discussions of subjectivity, relationality, sedimentation, and repetition.

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Works Cited

Weber, Samuel. *Singularity: Politics and Poetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021.