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GOLDILOCKS AND THE THREE NEGATIONS: AN APPEAL TO A MINIMAL ETHICS FOR THE *PHIL*-ANTHROPOCENE

Abstract

I pursue a focused reading of Joanna Zylińska's *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene*, structured around following theoretical motif: mapping the pattern in Zylińska's notion of opposition or difference, marked by the logical negation. To account for this, Zylińska makes use of Karen Barad's notion of an intra-action, a device for eliminating reference to binary polarity in identifying objects. The resultant picture—let's call the negation procedure *Goldilocks*—is one where negation is “just right”: weak enough not to necessitate binary polarity between any two things but strong enough to “carve up” the world in myriad creative, intuitive, or useful ways. If negation is stronger than Goldilocks, we carve too much and erase the aboriginal embeddedness of things; and if it is weaker, then we miss important differences. I critique Goldilocks by claiming that: one, *if* there are three degrees of inferential strength to negations, *then* Goldilocks negations exhibit only the weakest of the inferential powers; and two, that there is *a priori* reason to think that denying this enriched view of negation rests on a foundational equivocation. The upshot therefore ought to be global for Zylińska's notion of ethics: we cannot begin to think through ethics without first properly thinking through negation.

Keywords: Political ontology; intra-action; negation; philosophical ethics; classical logic

Preamble

Joanna Zylińska has provided a wide-visioned critical text—straddling the border between the academic and the popular—which seeks to demonstrate

why ethical discourse, properly conceived, performs and supplants the explanatory modality formally reserved for the traditional work of ontology. The aim of the text, *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene*, is to “outline a viable position on ethics as a way of living a good life when life itself is declared to be under a unique threat” (2014, p. 11). The shift here from life as that which is lived (the subject position) to life as that which is being lost (the object position) is meant to begin a larger displacement of ontological discourses by offering a “different modulation of rationality” as a way of thinking that which is “always already embodied and immersed”—a way that is “suspicious of any current attempts to (re)turn to ontology” in all of its forms “as a predominant mode of philosophizing” (2014, p. 15). Thus it is through life as marked by the lived praxis of ethics—and if lived then in some pre-ontological sense *existing*—which is the key to replacing ontology as a mere form of thought “about” such existence (2014, p. 95). One needs to be alive first to do ontology, and so a discourse properly aimed at analyzing life as such must be more theoretically basic. Such is the claim of ethics in Zylinska’s modality: this kind of ethics formally entails that discourses proper to the qualitative and relational phenomenologies appended to sociopolitical community is self-referential and so can “territorialize” the fields of being previously taken to be the explanatory responsibility of ontology.

Zylinska’s project ultimately sutures ontology to binary modes of thinking (2014, p. 14) and seeks to offer a way out. A discourse whose analytical methods and tools go beyond the this-or-that discreteness of separate and independent objects can, under this conception, provide the exit from binary, and so ontological, modes of thinking. And if ontology was formerly the field of inquiry which among other things settled questions on identity-versus-difference, then such a way out would need to provide differentiations (fairly common sorts of divisions, between domestic cats and wild tigers, for example, or between edible and poisonous mushrooms) which replace the forms of differentiation ontological discourse would appeal to. These differentiations are not meant to be pedantic or over-exacting but, as Zylinska says, would instead deliver differences which carve the world up “*just enough*,” (2014, p. 22) but not too much. Such a goal entails a specific set of procedures associated with what can be called a “Goldilocks” view of the logical and poetic device of *negation*: neither too weak nor too strong, but “just right,” to carve up things sufficiently and suitably.

But sufficiently and suitably for what? Goldilocks—this will be name by which I identify this formal-material difference-making procedure of negation—would have to be weak enough not to encrust binary polarity or ontological separateness into the world¹ *but also* strong enough to differentiate, say, a growth of mold from a tasty cheese that may still be salvageable. If negation is too strong, we reintroduce the trounced binaries between things; and if it is too weak, then we lose the ability to make important and intuitive differentiations. It is Zylinska's ambition to offer a non-ontological inquiry (ethics) to deliver just this sort of perfectly balanced problematics.²

My aim in this paper is pretty simple. Right away, I want to provide a fuller approach to Zylinska's proposals for Goldilocks by offering my own views as a foil for development. It will read as a position statement. Then after I want to critique it. And what I want to say by way of critique is roughly the following. First, that negation comes in three degrees, each of which is controlled by the fullest view of logical opposition available, that of classical theory of the "square" (I will use the hexagon) of opposition. I want to hide behind ultimately *a priori* grounds to take this seriously, because it offers the most expressive diagnostic procedure in the literature for assigning degrees of inferential strength to discrete forms of opposition: by decreasing order of strength, that of contradiction, then contrariety, then subcontrariety.³ Second, I want to show that Goldilocks has the logical import of subcontrariety. And finally third, I want to show that, if Goldilocks is the only negation we have, then Goldilocks rests on a fallacious equivocation.

I'll sketch out the objection really fast—too fast, I fear, for it to be weighty enough for a discussion such as this one. But nevertheless, such a result would cast doubt on Zylinska's ability to *say why* we carve up the world adequately, why we don't eat the poisonous mushrooms or correctly identify the causes of divorces, lottery winnings, or financial meltdowns.⁴

¹ This is a metaphor. The world here is not a "whole" but is a *façon de parler* (Zylinska, 2014, p. 78f.). Zylinska also uses the notion of a "Goldilocks" protocol in (Zylinska, 2014, p. 30ff.). hilariously I didn't notice this until after I came up with this motif.

² I say "problematics" to connect Zylinska's style of discourse to that which always "starts from the middle," and is opposed to the axiomatic system of thinkers we will meet later on. For more, see (Smith, 2006).

³ Such a view can be found in (Schang, 2012, p. 167f.).

⁴ Joan Copjec's incomparable (1994, p. 62f.) shows the picture of causation I would want to stress, though not visibly here. But her intervention on thought is one I generally wish to repeat here. For a Lacanian reading of the square of opposition, on which I won't rely at all but at least squares the square with Copjec's reading, is (Schüler, 2022).

1. Preliminaries, one

I said I was going to provide a short position statement. And it is necessary given the scope of disagreement going on in this critical reading I'm offering.

In this paper I will assume that differentiations are procedures for difference-making, and negations devices for tracking difference—with the notion of opposition in general being a synonymous description of such a procedure. But Karen Barad, whom Zylinska calls on early on,⁵ will certainly not be interested in making such a claim: under a Baradean picture, negations cannot control the existence and operation of difference because difference structurally precedes negation (via “intra-actions”) and negations track discursive practices rather than steady-state objects (via “diffractions”).⁶ Like Zylinska, Barad's picture of negation is strictly pre- or perhaps meta-ontological, and specifically functions to provide diffusive mappings of regions of spacetime which do not contain specific differences independent of those embedded in discursivity or textuality (2019, p. 539, 2007, p. 132).

By contrast, where I'm coming from is from a view of negation as a difference-forming operator—in other words, that you cannot get difference without there being first some form of ur- or proto-negation—and that negations come in at least three strengths. With such a background I obviously have an ontological view of negation in mind: that oppositionality or negativity as such is part of the fabric of things, and that this carves the world in ways that are both prior and not always responsive to discursive practices.⁷

And as for the clear breakdown of communication concerning the motif central to this short study: in the end it will be the ability to account for data which is the deciding factor.

⁵ To provide “cross-pollination” of her own position and to help us “return to critical thinking, for a reparation of thought.” See (Zylinska, 2014, pp. 17 and 20).

⁶ For this, see Ch. 4 of (Barad, 2007), but also *passim*, concerning “material-discursive” practices. For a useful secondary source, see (Harris, 2021, pp. 15 and 126) for intra-action and diffraction respectively.

⁷ Here in important respects I'm not terribly far off from Joan Copjec's views, who argues that there is a primitive split—a negativity—between the actual conditions of being in its appearances and the formal conditions of the possibility of being, which never appear as such. See (1994, p. 9). Zylinska by contrast seeks to render negativity secondary to primal continuity: Goldilocks claims we can use negation as a heuristic to “make better cuts” into things which are “poetic” or *poietic*/creative (2014, pp. 87 and 105). This will involve seeing the world as a sort of contiguous plenum.

2. Preliminaries, two

One has been warned, then, of the difficulties having such a conversation as this one. But the confusion can be temporarily set aside for the moment, where we turn our attention to exactly how negation is supposed to work with Zylinska.

One of the principal operations of negation is to be able to demarcate a “this one” from a “that one.” This border-drawing procedure for Zylinska is indexed to a specific view of individuality—following Barad—whereby “Individuals do not pre-exist their interactions” (2014, p. 29). An individual is rather “an entangled and dynamically constituted node in the network of relations to whom an address is being made... and who is thus made-temporarily-singular precisely via this address” (2014, p. 74).⁸ And if individuals are necessarily co-constituted by other individuals, and those by yet others, there may be a clear implication here that what we are dealing with is a rather Deleuzian notion. This is a notion whereby there is a fundamental domain of being (a Whole) which nevertheless resists fixation and, through its irreducibly plural manifestations in time, creatively puts together novel nodes in the virtual networks which are *a posteriori* coextensive with this fundamental domain.⁹

But such a clearly ontological orientation would betray Zylinska’s resistance to this binary practice.¹⁰ For it separates the ontologist from the thing carved from nature when in reality there is no such separateness, but only the appearance of separateness occurring as a contingent feature of temporal unfolding discursively “carvable” only in creative response to observer-specific local problematics.¹¹ So far, so Deleuzian, but with the important caveat that for Zylinska “‘The world’ does not name any kind of objective external reality” (2014, p. 77). Thus, there cannot be any primordial domain of being, a thesis which Barad expands significantly: the

⁸ (Zylinska, 2014, p. 74).

⁹ For an amazingly clear take on this see (Gillespie, 2008, p. 7).

¹⁰ “My suspicion towards ontology does not mean I do not believe there are ‘things’ out there beyond the realm of the human and beyond the human conceptualization of them. However, as soon as the human takes to the human-centric practice of philosophizing, ‘things’ immediately become far less objective, realist and ‘out there’ than this human would often like, or would like others to believe” (Zylinska, 2014, p. 15).

¹¹ Note 4 in (Zylinska, 2014, p. 34) quotes (Barad, 2007, p. 134) to this effect. For the comment about observer-specific localities, I’m trying to paraphrase (Zylinska, 2014, p. 139).

foundational level of reality is instead an intra-activity between matter and void which proceeds as “a polyrhythmic structured nothingness, a dynamic play of the indeterminacy of non/being” (2019, p. 530).¹² Barad is clear that the void as such is filled with actual, causally-efficacious content, and so any appeal to a field of being would *ipso facto* be an appeal to the impossibility of providing being’s generating conditions, that is, of providing the field of being as such (2019, p. 529). Being, here, is displaced in favor of a primary “entanglement” which is beyond the being-or-nonbeing binary.

So far even Badiou, whom Zylinska critiques in Chapter 6, actually agrees with the end-point of this diagnosis. In his words, since “*there is no* universe, it belongs to the essence of the world that there are several worlds, since if there were only one it would be the universe” (Badiou, 2009, p. 102). What is principally the difference between the two views—and now we specifically come to the notion of negation—is that, for Badiou, negation is an operation which appears both within domains of appearing but also between domains of appearing and the fundamental or absolute ontological field as such.¹³ Thus Badiou is clear that the absolute field is therefore a universal class encompassing “all the sets,” that is, all things (Badiou, 2022, p. 347). But for Zylinska, there cannot be a negation of the absolute field—because as we have seen there is no such field—and so there also cannot be a true universal class membership either (2014, p. 50).

Thus, to rehearse what we have analyzed once again, the implication for negation here, for Zylinska, is precisely that of the Goldilocks procedure: negations must necessarily take place as differential relations within local, observer-relevant sectors of spacetime, neither strong enough to bifurcate reality spacetime into “observer” and “observed” nor weak enough to miss crucial aspects of the lives of intra-acting agencies. Negations here, like paintings or bee pollen, are “products of human creative activity” and as

¹² Though a few pages later we have the statement that meanings are material *hauntings*, “*the ontological re-memberings, a dynamism of ontological indeterminacy of time-being in its materiality*” (Barad, 2019, p. 539). Emphasis in original. Here, though, “ontology” shifts its meaning in ways that track Zylinska’s goals in a language she is reluctant to use; they don’t plug the gap revealed in the position statement above.

¹³ In Badiou’s terms, “we only encounter classical negation”—that is, what I have called negation the domain of appearance as such—“for some particular transcendentals” (2009, p. 107). The field of being as such, for Badiou, is the bedrock of substance given with the set-theoretical absolute class *V*. See (Berankova, 2020, p. 355f.) and (Badiou, 2022), Chs. C16 and C17.

such “bring forth realities, concepts, and values” (2014, p. 105). Now what could possibly be wrong with that?

3. Critique, one

But I want to say something different, something more like negations are not (primarily) products of creative activity, but adhere to a strict and reality-embedded structuration. I like the motto found in German Idealism: “*Whatever we encounter in the world is framed by a wider context which is not itself encountered in the world*” (Gabriel and Žižek, 2009, p. 42). If creativity is a process which takes place on the plane of immanence as a “revealing” of the pre-actualized virtual, transcendental conditions of appearance—as Zylinska’s view would ultimately be expressive of—then this idealistic alternative would hold that such a system misses the context of the *observing* context which it does not encounter. I want to approach this conclusion from the specific angle by saying that Goldilocks (when applied as the exclusive form of negation) relies on an equivocation, an equivocation which has something to do with the “anthropic” context of its application.

But before this I’ll do something odd and append this idealistic view to a robust classical logical picture of the square of oppositionality¹⁴—though it is more appropriate to call the relevant model the expanded hexagon. Once I say something short about that, I’ll diagnose Goldilocks as one relation among the many in the hexagon, and then offer my principal critique: Goldilocks is too weak of a negation procedure to infer statements we have *a priori* grounds to think are true, and masks this deficiency by equivocating about first things.

Now, concerning the logical hexagon. The first thing I want to say is that my claim here is conditional: if (but not only if¹⁵) we take seriously the classical logical picture of opposition, then (but not only then) we see Goldilocks in its truer inferential power. As is well known, in classical logic oppositionality comes in three flavors tracking a hierarchy of inferential power between three forms of negation: contradictoriness, contrariness, and

¹⁴ Perhaps this is easier said than done; (Moss, 2020) thinks this picture is sutured to a non-classical (specifically paraconsistent) logic. I can’t defend my actions here, but I am interested in using this view to adjust one like (Jacquette, 2014, p. 283 Note 5).

¹⁵ Here I have in mind something like Žižek’s critique of Barad in (2012, pp. 931–43). Žižek is certainly not appending his views to classical opposition (2012, p. 1009)—as has been analyzed in part in (Dioguardi, 2022)—yet the end point is the same. I can’t get into how to “square” this here, though (Matte-Blanco, 1998, p. 49) holds the secret.

subcontrarity (Béziau, 2012, p. 7). Contradictories offer the strongest inferential powers: if one proposition is false, *a priori* you can conclude its contradictory is true and *vice versa*. Contraries offer a weaker inferential ability: for any one proposition and its contrary, all you can conclude is that *both cannot be true*, but they can both be false.¹⁶ And subcontraries offer the weakest inferential power of all: here, all you can conclude given any one proposition and its subcontrary is that under strict conditions *both can be true* but that they cannot both be false.¹⁷

Subcontrarity is, to my mind, quite clearly the negational power of Goldilocks. To see this let's take one representative case from Barad. The wave-particle duality in Quantum Field Theory fits the idea of subcontrarity to a "T." The propositions "object *o* is a wave" and "object *o* is a particle" have the following inferential properties: one, it is false that *o* is neither, and so impossible for the propositions both to be false; two, that it is false that if *o* is a wave then it is true that it is a particle—we all know this sort of thing by now; and three, crucially, that, under specific conditions, it is *true* that *o* is both a wave and a particle (Béziau, 2012, p. 6). Now Barad entirely agrees here: in Quantum Field Theory, we get "the radical undoing of the separation between being and nothingness" (2019, p. 525). That this entails "the void is not empty" (2019, p. 525) and thus that the formula "being=void" is *true*, and that it is impossible that the quantum fields are neither being nor void. But this also means that it is false that the quantum fields are either being or void. Therefore it is demonstrably the case that Barad rejects the possibility that negation names an operation stronger than subcontrarity, for if it did, it would have been evident at this most basic level.

Now I said earlier that subcontrarity is a weak form of negation; what this means specifically is that, given a proposition, *there is no way to tell what the contrary or the contradictory of the statement is*. This is in contrast to a contradictory pairing, which can recognize from any two contradictories what their contraries and subcontraries would be (under primitive

¹⁶ This is intuitionistic or paracomplete negation. Incidentally, Derrida's negation is only as strong as this: for any given proposition (such as "all hospitality is unconditional"), all we can determine is that it and its contrary ("no hospitality is unconditional") can both be false—but never that they can both be true. His language of "impossibility as a condition of possibility" is a cypher for this, in that all we can conclude about hospitality is that it is never "pure" and so co-occurs with its opposition, hostility—which is thereby also not "pure." See (Derrida, 2000, p. 15).

¹⁷ This is dialethic or paraconsistent negation. For an amazing defense, see (Priest, 2022).

containment),¹⁸ and, from contrary pairings, what their subcontraries would be. For if we know from any two propositions that they cannot be true together, we also know—also from primitive containment—the conditions under which truth-preserving consequences will be *true* together.¹⁹ But from subcontrarity, we cannot provide pathways of logical containment which tell us anything about the other forms of opposition.²⁰

And here we come to what I called my main critique, that Goldilocks, if taken to be the only cogent form of negation, rests on a vicious equivocation. Because in Barad's terms, the weakness of subcontrarity becomes visible when we remind ourselves that if it is true that the being "is" the void, and these two are sutured inseparably together, then we cannot tell under what conditions *being* and *void* as such operate. Because for Barad—and Zylinska by containment—void and being are co-conditions of the possibility of intra-activity as such, and so any attempt to cash out the conditions of one will invariably point to the *absence* of these conditions plugged up by introducing the conditions of the other.²¹ Of course it must be accepted that

¹⁸ Through the subalterns (as this containment, which does not operate as an inference) of the propositions with largest semantic scope or else the superalterns of the propositions with more restricted scope. "All objects are wave-particle dualities" is the superaltern of "Some objects are wave-particle dualities," which is the subaltern of the first. Someone holding to negation as contradictories, moreover, can recognize lower-level oppositionality insofar as with contradiction the highest degree of opposition is reached. I'm applying (Schang, 2012, p. 158) here.

¹⁹ Derrida, recalling Note 16, can say something like the following. If we know that hospitality always occurs under some "conditionalization," some impurity of the allegedly unconditional relation, then we also know that it is *possible* for hospitality to be impurified this way (the subaltern). I will take this to be obviously true. And if we know the subaltern, then we know *its* subcontrary, that there is no pure hospitality. See (Derrida, 2000, p. 4f.) and (Béziau, 2012, p. 12).

²⁰ The reason for this is tough to work out, but is outlined in (Béziau, 2012, p. 12). Here, the superaltern relation in the paraconsistent logical link certainly contains the subaltern, but since we only affirm the subaltern we can neither provide the primitive consequence connective to get us the superaltern transformation itself nor kick off the chain of inferences needed to link this opposition to one or more others, since for this we would need to supply its superaltern first. In the terms I've used in the Notes up to now, we can say that "It is not necessarily the case that *p*," where *p* is "Object *o* is a wave-particle duality" does *not* entail that "Object *o* is not a wave-particle duality." This I also take to be obviously true.

²¹ This logical circle (albeit not vicious) is pointed out about Deleuze in (Gillespie, 2008, p. 20); the only difference here is that Barad's circle is considerably smaller. I have in mind the succinct passage: "particles do not take their place in the void; rather, they are constitutively inseparable from it" (2019, p. 530).

if Barad's picture is true, then the primal identity of being and void would somehow be prior to our attempting to capture them in transcendental formulae.²² But it would remain the case that this is an *a priori* difficult to believe hypothesis. For it would entail that we could not discover what the contradictory or contrary conditions of being are—and yet surely we have some idea why there aren't flying pigs (the contradictory of “some pigs fly”) or how some voids can truly be empty (the contraries being “all voids are empty” and “no voids are empty”).

In short, Barad here is equivocating on the diacritical shift between the void as the nothing as such (the contradictory of being²³) to the void as nothing in particular²⁴ (the *contrary* of being).²⁵ So if we were to eliminate this equivocation, under such a view “being is the void”—Barad's subcontrary solution to the diacritical impasse²⁶—could also mean that being is not “a” being, a statement not only compatible with a host of other ontologies but also binary at its most basic level.

And so Goldilocks, if it is appended to a picture where the *only* inferential capability of negation is that of subcontrarity, is an *a priori* unbelievable position which rests on a clear equivocation. Zylinska has shown equally clearly that her system is sutured to Barad's—and so of Zylinska too we can only conclude the same.

²² For Badiou, too, being is the “name” of the void, but this takes place only because for him, being as such is a merely formal condition irrelevant to the actual conditions of existing things; in short, this means that for Badiou there are no actual conditions of being—objects are merely assumed. See Part 1, Ch. 4 of (2006), and also (Gillespie, 2008, p. 11). For a critique of Badiou consistent with my position statement above, see (Gabriel, 2015, p. 117ff.).

²³ This point is brilliantly made in (Correia, 2012, p. 43f.). “All things have being” and “some things do not have being” are the relevant contradictories.

²⁴ Since “mere lack or absence matters” (Barad, 2019, p. 529).

²⁵ “All things have being” and “No things have being” are the relevant contraries. The inspiration for this point is in (Burgis, 2022, p. 175).

²⁶ The calculus would look this this: in the contradictory statement, looking back to Note 23, “some things do not have being” would be placed into subcontrary relation with “some things have being,” which is itself a statement made by applying primitive containment (subalternity) to the original contradictory “All things have being.” Thus we derive Barad's paraconsistent formulation, that (some) being is (some) void—but for Barad, notably, the intra-activity between the two guarantees that neither appears as ‘total’ or ‘all,’ but only in their aboriginal entanglement, and in this way mimics the maximal domain of universal quantification, only this time appended to the subcontrary oppositional formula. Clearly this is simply how the square or hexagon would provide this formula.

Conclusions

What would this mean for Zylinska's ethical project? A "minimal injunction for our ethics" she says, would be "to recognize that life itself is a system constituted by a dynamic movement of forces, that time itself is movement, that we are just wayfarers in the world, and that microbes were there before us" (2014, p. 45). It ought to be clear by now that there is an equivocation lurking here too, also in the form of a diacritical shift. This is the shift from the notion that we are *nothing* at all without the rest of the cosmos in whose environment we are enfolded (a reasonable statement), to the problematic notion that we are *not things* at all given embeddedness. And that is why I choose to say that what we need is an ontology for the *phil*-anthropocene: to show that we will have to settle for at least some forms of fundamental binary separation. And I take it that this is a very good thing for us humans.

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