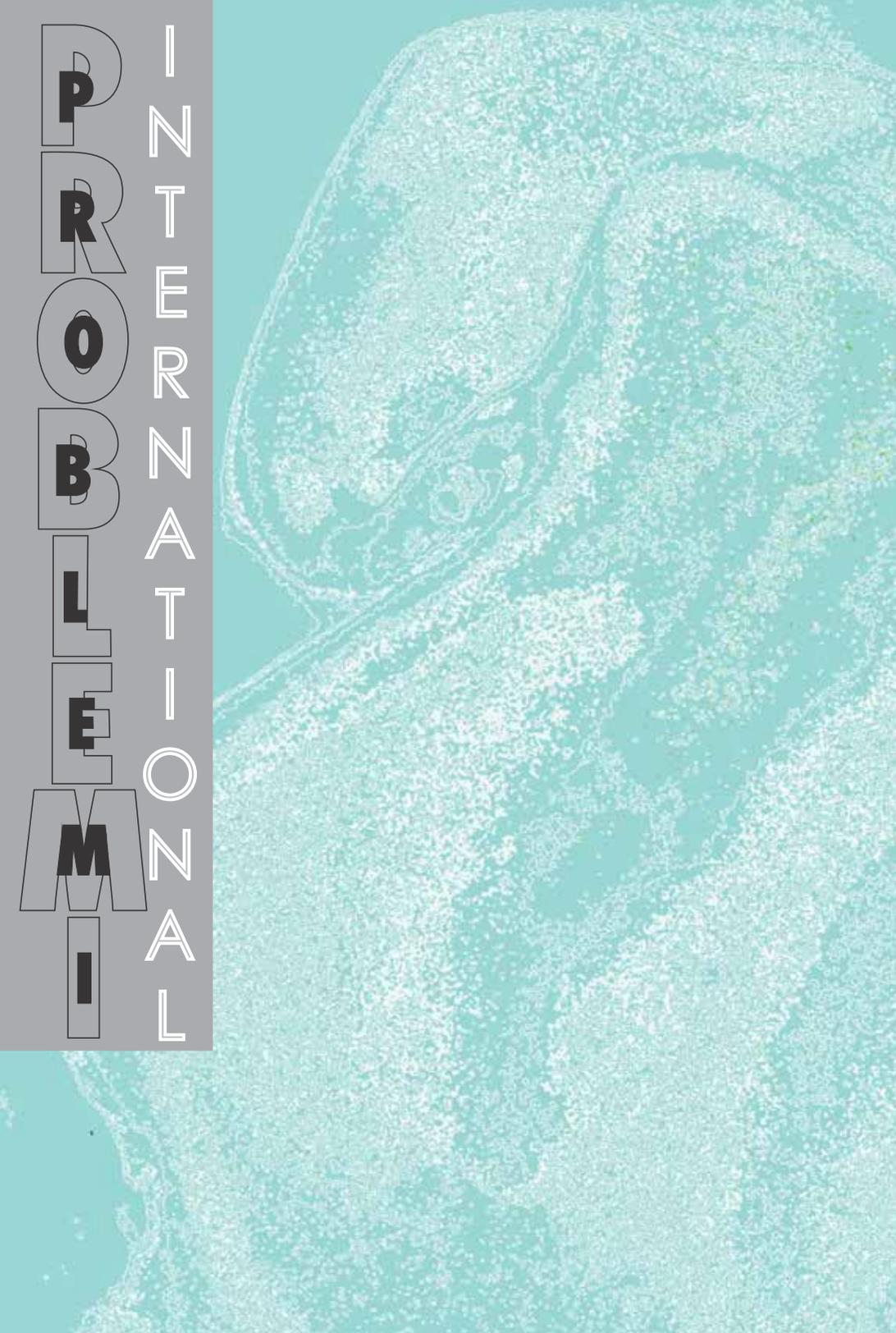


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Ibi Rhodus, Ibi Saltus!

Slavoj Žižek

Those who follow obscure spiritual-cosmological speculations have for sure heard of one of the most popular topics in this domain: when three planets (usually Earth, its moon, and the sun) find themselves along the same axis, some big cataclysmic event takes place, the whole order of the universe is momentarily thrown out of joint and has to restore its balance (as was supposed to happen in 2012). Does something like this not hold for the year 2017, which was a triple anniversary? In 2017, we celebrated not only the centenary of the October Revolution, but also the 150th anniversary of the first edition of Marx's *Capital* (1867), and the 50th anniversary of the so-called Shanghai Commune when, in the climactic moment of the Cultural Revolution, residents of Shanghai decided to follow literally Mao's call and directly took power, overthrowing the rule of the Communist Party (which is why Mao quickly decided to restore order by sending the army to squash the Commune). Do these three events not mark the three stages of the Communist movement? Marx's *Capital* outlined the theoretical foundations of the Communist revolution, the October Revolution was the first successful attempt to overthrow the bourgeois state and build a new social and economic order, while the Shanghai Commune stands for the most radical attempt to immediately realize the most daring aspect of the Communist vision, the abolishment of state power and the imposition of direct people's power organized as a network of local communes... So, what went wrong with this cycle? Perhaps, the answer is to

be sought in the fourth anniversary: 2017 was also the 500-year anniversary of 1517 when Martin Luther made public his ninety-five theses. Perhaps, it is still the reference to Protestantism which provides the coordinates for an ethics that fits the unorientable space, an ethics for a subject caught into Plato's cave.

Protestant Freedom

One of Luther's key references is the claim of Jesus that a good tree does not bring forth evil fruit (i.e., a good tree produces only good fruit), and he concluded from it that "good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works" (Luther 1915, p. 331). One should fully assume the "static," anti-performative (or anti-Pascalian) aspect of this conclusion: we do not create ourselves through the meanders of our life-practice; in our creativity we rather bring out what we already are. It's not "act as if you are good, do good works, and you will become good," it is "only if you are good can you do good works." The easy way to read this claim is to interpret it as a "necessary illusion": what I am is effectively created through my activity, there is no preexisting essence or essential identity which is expressed/actualized in my acts; however, we spontaneously (mis)perceive our acts as merely expressing/actualizing what we (already) are in ourselves. However, from a properly dialectical standpoint, it is not enough to say that preexisting self-identity is a necessary illusion; we have here a more complex mechanism of (re)creating the eternal identity itself. Let's clarify this mechanism with an example. When something crucial happens, even if it happens unexpectedly, we often get the impression that it *had* to happen, that it would violate some higher order if it were not to happen. More precisely, once it *does* happen, we see that it had to happen—but it may *not* have happened. Let's take a case of desperate love: I am deeply convinced that my love is not reciprocated, and

I silently resign myself to a gloomy future of despair; but if I all of a sudden discover that my love is reciprocated, I feel that this had to happen and I cannot even image the despair of my life without it. Or let's take a difficult and risky political decision: although we sympathize with it, we are skeptical, we don't trust the scared majority; but when, as if by a miracle, this decision *is* taken and enacted, we feel it was destined to happen. Authentic political acts take place like this: in them, (what was considered) "impossible" happens and, by way of happening, it rewrites its own past and emerges as necessary, "predestined" even. This is why there is no incompatibility between predestination and our free acts. Luther saw clearly how the (Catholic) idea that our redemption depends on our acts introduces a dimension of bargaining into ethics: good deeds are not done out of duty but in order to gain salvation. If, however, my salvation is predestined, this means that my fate is already decided and my doing good deeds does not serve anything—so if I do them, it is out of pure duty, a really altruistic act:

This recognition that only as one was freed from the paralyzing need to serve one's own self, could acts of love become altruistic, was one of Luther's most positive contributions to Christian social ethics. It enabled him to view good deeds as ends in themselves, and never as a means of salvation. [...] Luther realized that a love that sought no reward was more willing to serve the helpless, the powerless, the poor, and the oppressed, since their cause offered the least prospect of personal gain. (Kuenning 1987, pp. 306-07)

But did Luther draw all of the ethico-political consequences from this key insight? His great pupil and opponent Thomas Müntzer accused Luther of betrayal: his basic reproach to Luther's social ethics concerns the "perverse application of the proper law-Gospel distinction. Muntzer envisioned that the rightful use of the law was to bring 'destruction and sickness to the healthy,' and that of the Gospel to bring 'comfort to the troubled.' [Muntzer

1968, p. 332] He charged that Luther had turned this application on its head by defending the presumptuous and tyrannical rulers with the gracious words of the Gospel, while bringing the ‘grim sternness’ of the law to bear against the God-fearing poor and oppressed peasants. The result, according to Müntzer, was a total misuse of Scripture. “Thus the godless tyrant says to the pious, “I must torture you. Christ also suffered. Therefore you are not to resist me.” [Matthew 5] This [is] a great perversion [...] one must forgive with the Gospel and the Spirit of Christ, to the furtherance and not the hindrance of the Gospel.’ [Müntzer 1968, p. 330]” (Kuenning 1987, p. 319)

With this perversion, “the elect were no longer envisioned as directly active or forceful instruments of that retribution” (*ibid.*, p. 320) against those who violate the spirit of the Gospel. This critique of Luther is clear, but it nonetheless seems to court the danger of itself succumbing to the perverse position of perceiving oneself as the direct instrument of the big Other’s will. How to avoid this danger? Let us begin at the beginning, with the triad of Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism.

Central to the Orthodox tradition is the notion of “theosis,” of man becoming (like) god, or, to quote St. Athanasius of Alexandria: “He was incarnate that we might be made god.” What would otherwise seem absurd—that fallen, sinful man may become holy as God is holy—has been made possible through Jesus Christ, who is God incarnate. St. Maximus the Confessor wrote: “A sure warrant for looking forward with hope to deification of human nature is provided by the Incarnation of God, which makes man God to the same degree as God Himself became man [...]. Let us become the image of the one whole God, bearing nothing earthly in ourselves, so that we may consort with God and become gods, receiving from God our existence as gods.”¹

¹ Shamelessly quoted from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theosis_\(Eastern_Christian_theology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theosis_(Eastern_Christian_theology)).

This orthodox formula “God became man so that man can become God” is totally wrong: God became man AND THAT’S IT, nothing more, everything already happens here, what needs to be added is just a new perspective on this. There is no resurrection to follow, the Holy Ghost already IS resurrection. Only Protestantism enables us to think Incarnation as an event in God himself, as HIS profound transformation: He was incarnate so that HE became God, i.e., He became fully God only through His self-division into God and man. This may sound paradoxical since God is an unknown Beyond, *deus absconditus*. We thus seem to have three incompatible positions: God is an absolutely impenetrable Beyond; God is the absolute Master of our fate which is predestined by Him; God gave us freedom and thereby made us responsible for our deeds. The unique achievement of Protestantism is to bring together these three positions: everything is predestined by God, but since God is an impenetrable Beyond for me I cannot discern what my fate is, so I am left to do good deeds without any calculation and profit in view, i.e., in total freedom...

True freedom is not a freedom of choice made from a safe distance, like choosing between a strawberry cake or a chocolate cake; true freedom overlaps with necessity. One makes a truly free choice when one’s choice puts at stake one’s very existence—one does it because one simply “cannot do otherwise.” When one’s country is under a foreign occupation and one is called by a resistance leader to join the fight against the occupiers, the reason given is not “you are free to choose,” but: “Can’t you see that this is the only thing you can do if you want to retain your dignity?” This is why radical acts of freedom are possible only under the condition of predestination: in predestination, we know we are predestined, but we don’t know how we are predestined, i.e., which of our choices is predetermined, and this terrifying situation where we have to decide what to do, knowing that our decision is decided in advance, is perhaps the only case of real freedom,

of the unbearable burden of a really free choice—we know that what we will do is predestined, but we still have to take a risk and subjectively choose what is predestined.

Freedom of course disappears if we locate a human being in objective reality, as its part, as one among objects—at this level, there is simply no space for freedom. In order to locate freedom, we have to make a move from the enunciated content (what we are talking about) to our (the speaker's) position of enunciation. If a scientist demonstrates we are not free, what does this imply for the position from which he speaks (and we speak)? This reference to the subject of enunciation (foreclosed by science) is irreducible: whatever I am saying, it's me who is saying it, so apropos of every scientific reduction to objective reality (which makes me a biological machine) a question is to be raised of the horizon from which I see and say this. Is this not why psychoanalysis is exemplary of our predicament? Yes, we are decentered, caught in a foreign cobweb, overdetermined by unconscious mechanisms; yes, I am "spoken" more than speaking, the Other speaks through me, but simply assuming this fact (in the sense of rejecting any responsibility) is also false, a case of self-deception—psychoanalysis makes me even more responsible than traditional morality, it makes me responsible even for what is beyond my (conscious) control.

This solution works on one condition: the subject (believer) is absolutely constrained by the unsurpassable horizon of its subjectivity. What Protestantism prohibits is the very thought that a believer can, as it were, take a position outside/above itself and look upon itself as a small particle in the vast reality. Mao was wrong when he deployed his Olympic vision reducing human experience to a tiny unimportant detail: "The United States cannot annihilate the Chinese nation with its small stack of atom bombs. Even if the U.S. atom bombs were so powerful that, when dropped on China, they would make a hole right through the earth, or even blow it up, that would hardly mean anything to the universe as a whole, though it might be a major event

for the solar system” (Mao 1967, p. 152). There is an “inhuman madness” in this argument: is the fact that the destruction of the planet Earth “would hardly mean anything to the universe as a whole” not a rather poor solace for the extinguished humanity? The argument only works if, in a Kantian way, one presupposes a pure transcendental subject non-affected by this catastrophe—a subject which, although nonexistent in reality, *is* operative as a virtual point of reference (recall Husserl’s dark dream, from his *Cartesian Meditations*, of how the transcendental *cogito* would remain unaffected by a plague that would annihilate humanity entirely). In contrast to such a stance of cosmic indifference, we should act as if the entire universe was created as a backstage for the struggle of emancipation, in exactly the same way that, for Kant, God created the world in order to serve as the battleground for the ethical struggle of humanity—it is as if the fate of the entire universe is decided in our singular (and, from the global cosmic standpoint, marginal and insignificant) struggle.

The paradox is that, although (human) subjectivity is obviously not the origin of all reality, although it is a contingent local event in the universe, the path to universal truth does not lead through the abstraction from it in the well-known sense of “let’s try to imagine how the world is independently of us,” the approach which brings us to some “grey” objective structure—such a vision of a “subjectless” world is by definition just a negative image of subjectivity itself, its own vision of the world in its absence. (The same holds for all the attempts to picture humanity as an insignificant species on a small planet on the edge of our galaxy, i.e., to view it the same way we view a colony of ants.) Since we are subjects, constrained to the horizon of subjectivity, we should instead focus on what the fact of subjectivity implies for the universe and its structure: the event of the subject derails the balance, it throws the world out of joint, but such a derailment *is* the universal truth of the world. What this also implies is that the access to “reality in itself” does not demand from us that we

overcome our “partiality” and arrive at a neutral vision elevated above our particular struggles—we are “universal beings” only in our full partial engagements. This contrast is clearly discernible in the case of love: against the Buddhist love of All, or any other notion of the harmony with the cosmos, we should assert the radically exclusive love for the singular One, a love which throws out of joint the smooth flow of our lives.

This is also why the idea of sacrifice is foreign to Protestantism. In Catholicism, one is expected to earn salvation through earthly sacrifices, while Protestantism moves beyond this logic of exchange: there is no need for external sacrifice, a believer as empty subject (\$) IS sacrifice (of all substantial content, i.e., it emerges through what mystics and de Sade call the second death). This is what Catholicism doesn't see: one doesn't get anything in exchange for sacrifice, giving already IS getting (in sacrificing all its substantial content a believer gets itself, emerges as pure subject).

Jumping Here and Jumping There

This is also why in a consequent Protestantism there is no second coming, no final reversal—as Hegel put it, reconciliation means that one has to recognize the heart in the cross of the present, or, as he put it in a famous passage from the Preface to his *Philosophy of Right*:

This treatise, therefore, in so far as it deals with political science, shall be nothing other than an attempt to *comprehend and portray the state as an inherently rational entity*. As a philosophical composition, it must distance itself as far as possible from the obligation to construct a *state as it ought to be*; such instruction as it may contain cannot be aimed at instructing the state on how it ought to be, but rather at showing how the state, as the ethical universe, should be recognized.

Ibi Rhodus, Ibi Saltus!

Ἴδου Ῥόδου, ἴδου καὶ τὸ πῆδημα.
Hic Rhodus, hic saltus.

To comprehend *what* is the task of philosophy, for *what is* is reason. As far as the individual is concerned, each individual is in any case a *child of his time*; thus philosophy too, is *its own time comprehended in thought*. It is just as foolish to imagine that any philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as that an individual can overleap his own time or leap over Rhodes. If his theory does indeed transcend his own time, if it builds itself a world *as it ought to be*, then it certainly has an existence, but only within his opinions—a pliant medium in which the imagination can construct anything it pleases.

With little alteration, the saying just quoted would read:

Here is the rose, dance here.

What lies between reason as self-conscious spirit and reason as present actuality, what separates the former from the latter and prevents it from finding satisfaction in it, is the fetter of some abstraction or other which has not been liberated into [the form of] the concept. To recognize reason as the rose in the cross of the present and thereby to delight in the present—this rational insight is the *reconciliation* with actuality [...]. (Hegel 1991, pp. 21-22)

This “reconciliation” refers to Luther whose emblem was precisely a rose in a cross. Luther understood this in a Christian way: deliverance (rose) only occurs through Christ’s sacrifice, while Hegel conceives of it more conceptually. Luther’s emblem was the black cross in the center of a heart encircled by roses, while for Hegel Reason is apprehended as the rose in the cross of the present. However, to get properly what Hegel aims at here, one should make a step further and turn around the usual wisdom *Hic Rhodus, hic saltus* to which Hegel refers: *Ibi Rhodus, ibi saltus!* Not here, THERE is Rhodus, jump THERE! We are ready to jump here in any way, to engage ourselves, to fight, etc., on condition that we can rely on some form of big Other which

guarantees consistency of it all. Many Leftist intellectuals pursue their academic career HERE, fortified by their assurance that a true revolution is going on somewhere out THERE; religious people live (and participate) in brutal chaos HERE, fortified by their belief that there is a higher order of Justice out THERE in Heaven... And something similar goes on in sexuality—as the saying goes, *Hic Rhodus, hic saltus*, don't just boast and promise, show me here, in my bed, how good you really are in jumping on me... And the opposite also holds: we are all ready to indulge in utter skepticism, cynical distance, exploitation of others “without any illusions,” violations of all ethical constraints, extreme sexual practices, etc.—protected by the silent awareness that the big Other is ignorant about it:

[T]he subject is ready to do quite a lot, change radically, if only she can remain unchanged in the Other (in the Symbolic as the external world in which, to put it in Hegel's terms, the subject's consciousness of herself is embodied, materialized as something that still does not know itself as consciousness). In this case, the belief in the Other (in the modern form of believing that the Other does not know) is precisely what helps to maintain the same state of things, regardless of all subjective mutations and permutations. The subject's universe will really change only at the moment when she attains the knowledge that the Other knows (that it does not exist). (Zupančič 2008, p. 17)

The solution is thus not “don't jump here”—we are here, there is no other place to jump. The solution is: jump here, but in such a way that you don't rely on any figure of the big Other. This is also how we should read Hegel's formula of reconciliation: I (the subject) should achieve reconciliation by way of “recognizing myself in my Otherness” (in the alienated substance which determines me). This formula is profoundly ambiguous: it can be read in the standard subjectivist way (I should recognize this Otherness as my own product, not as something strange) or, more subtly, as a claim that I should recognize myself, the core of my

being, in this very Otherness, i.e., I should realize that the Otherness of the substantial content is constitutive of my Self: I am only insofar as I am confronted by an eluding Otherness which is decentered also with regard to itself. *Ibi Rhodus, ibi saltus* means: overcome your alienation in the Other by way of recognizing that the Other itself does not possess what you are lacking.

So, what does *Ibi Rhodus, ibi saltus* amount to in our actual ethical deadlocks? Here, negative theology enters as an obstacle to self-instrumentalization. Self-instrumentalization presupposes the big Other whose privileged interpreter and instrument is the revolutionary agent. Müntzer belongs to this line, he even grounded it; he was wrong in founding the authentic revolutionary spirit on natural law (or a theological version of it): for him, a true believer is able to decipher the Other (his command) and to realize it, to be the instrument of his realization. Luther was right here to criticize Müntzer as *der Schwärmer* who pretended to know the divine mind. Luther warns against such *Majestätsspekulation*, against trying to discern the will of god, of *deus absconditus*: one should abandon attempts to know what the Other wants from you and to assume one's position in this world, while realizing the Other as a "hole" in this position, a subtraction from it. God introduces the cut of the Absolute into the ordered Aristotelian universe (thus, of course, making the latter contingent), and the tension between the two can be resolved neither through excluding one side nor by thinking a "pactum" or a historical-dialectical relation between the two, but only by thinking one (the divine Absolute) as the subtraction, the hole in the Other. Yet, in order to uphold the theological and statist reality he affirmed, Luther could not uphold the radicalism of this solution which goes much further than Müntzer's. Although Müntzer's notion of revolutionary activity implies that our struggle for liberation is a process that takes place in God himself, his self-instrumentalization of the revolutionary agent as an agent of divine will enables him to avoid the radical openness of the struggle, the fact that the fate of God himself is decided in our revolutionary activity.

However, Luther himself later compromised this radical position, not only for pragmatic–opportunist reasons (along the lines of “I need state support to guard against counter-reformation, therefore it is not prudent to support a revolt that is bound to fail anyway”), but also on a purely theological level: as a “professor of old testament theology,” as he was characterized, he begins to practice what Lacan called “discourse of the University” and, as a “professor of old testament theology,” he retreats to the Thomist–Aristotelian safe ground. As Felix Ensslin remarked in a private communication, “he reverts back to a position which elides the ‘hole,’ the ‘subtraction’ that the Other’s desire (it’s constitutional unknowability) rips into the fabric of the ordered (causal) world.” So, we find ourselves back in a rationally ordered hierarchic universe where “everyone is called to a station and it is sin to surpass and transgress that station”; the peasant revolt is rejected because it disturbs this well-ordered universe.

Of course, Luther does not simply regress to Aquinas—he remains within the nominalist lineage and maintains the gap between *deus absconditus* and *deus revelatus* usually correlated with the difference between *potentia dei absoluta* and *potentia dei ordinata*. In the Thomist tradition, God had become rationalized to the point of nearly becoming intelligible in terms of the laws of nature, which resulted in a kind of impinging of the ordered whole on the Creator. In response to these difficulties, nominalist theologians introduced a distinction between God’s absolute power (*potentia dei absoluta*) and God’s ordained power (*potentia dei ordinata*). Being utterly transcendent and mysterious, God could do anything; however, God also entered willingly into a covenant with his people and freely binds himself to this covenant. Thus, from the point of view of God’s ordained power, he is intelligible, as is of course not the case in regard to *potentia dei absoluta*, which thereby implies the severing of the relations of the Creator with his creation.

Since *deus absconditus* is beyond our rational comprehension, the temptation is to privilege mystical experience as the

only contact with Him. In the predominant reading, the young Luther was a mystic, but then later, after dealing with the radical elements of the Reformation, he changed his position. But there is a basic continuity in his thought regarding mysticism: Luther did not rule out “high mysticism” as impossible but rather cautioned against its dangers—for him, *accessus* has priority over *raptus*, i.e., justification by faith through the incarnate and crucified Word has priority over *raptus* by the uncreated word (the latter being that which was characterized by dangerous speculations not tethered to the Word).

Although Luther employs the concept of the *potentia ordinata* of God, so characteristic for nominalistic theology, he gives it a Christological point instead of its primary epistemological meaning: the *potentia ordinata* is for him not primarily the order established by the inscrutable free God who could as well have established another order, but the order of redemption in Jesus Christ, established out of God’s mercy to provide sinful man with a refuge from danger.² But is this notion of *potentia ordinata* not all too close to the traditional notion of a transcendent God who dwells in Himself and then decides to reveal Himself to us, humans, to become God-for-us, by way of the divine Word which provides meaningful order to our existence? So, what if we risk the opposite approach and conceive *potentia absoluta* not as some transcendent and impenetrable God of Beyond but as the “irrational” miracle, a hole in reality—in short, as the incarnation/revelation itself. It is the Aristotelian God which is in-itself and for us, i.e., our representation of the In-itself, while Revelation is not logos (logos is the Aristotelian order) but the break of the Absolute into logos. When we are talking about God-in-itself, we should recall what Hegel says about our search for the meaning of Egyptian works of art (pyramids, Sphinx):

²This line of thought is paraphrased from <http://lutherantheologystudygroup.blogspot.si/2011/05/luther-and-potentia-ordinata-of-god.html>.

In deciphering such a meaning we often, to be sure, go too far today because in fact almost all the shapes present themselves directly as symbols. In the same way in which we try to explain this meaning to ourselves, it might have been clear and intelligible as a meaning to the insight of the Egyptians themselves. But the Egyptian symbols, as we saw at the very beginning, contain implicitly much, explicitly nothing. There are works undertaken with the attempt to make them clear to themselves, yet they do not get beyond the struggle after what is absolutely evident. In this sense we regard the Egyptian works of art as containing riddles, the right solution of which is in part unattained not only by us, but generally by those who posed these riddles to themselves. (Hegel 1975, p. 360)

It is in this sense that Hegel talks about “objective riddle”: a sphinx is not a riddle for our finite mind but in and for itself, “objectively,” and the same holds for *deus absconditus* whose impenetrable mystery is a mystery for God himself. Chesterton saw this clearly. In his introduction to “The Book of Job,” he praised it as “the most interesting of ancient books. We may almost say of the Book of Job that it is the most interesting of modern books” (Chesterton 2011 pp. 95-96). What accounts for its “modernity” is the way in which the Book of Job strikes a dissonant chord in the Old Testament:

Everywhere else, then, the Old Testament positively rejoices in the obliteration of man in comparison with the divine purpose. The Book of Job stands definitely alone because the Book of Job definitely asks, “But what is the purpose of God? Is it worth the sacrifice even of our miserable humanity? Of course it is easy enough to wipe out our own paltry wills for the sake of a will that is grander and kinder. But is it grander and kinder? Let God use His tools; let God break His tools. But what is He doing and what are they being broken for?” (Chesterton 2011, p. 95)

In the end, the Book of Job does not provide a satisfying answer to this riddle, “it does not end in a way that is conventionally

satisfactory. Job is not told that his misfortunes were due to his sins or a part of any plan for his improvement. [...] God comes in at the end, not to answer riddles, but to propound them” (ibid., pp. 102, 99).

And the “great surprise” is that the Book of Job

makes Job suddenly satisfied with the mere presentation of something impenetrable. Verbally speaking the enigmas of Jehovah seem darker and more desolate than the enigmas of Job; yet Job was comfortless before the speech of Jehovah and is comforted after it. He has been told nothing, but he feels the terrible and tingling atmosphere of something which is too good to be told. The refusal of God to explain His design is itself a burning hint of His design. The riddles of God are more satisfying than the solutions of man. (Chesterton 2011, p. 99)

In short, God performs here what Lacan calls a *point de capiton*: he resolves the riddle by supplanting it with an even more radical riddle, by redoubling the riddle, by transposing the riddle from Job’s mind into “the thing itself” —he himself comes to share Job’s astonishment at the chaotic madness of the created universe: “Job puts forward a note of interrogation; God answers with a note of exclamation. Instead of proving to Job that it is an explicable world, He insists that it is a much stranger world than Job ever thought it was” (ibid., p. 100). So, far from providing some kind of satisfactory account of Job’s undeserved suffering, God’s appearance at the end ultimately amounts to pure boasting, a horror-show with elements of farcical spectacle—a pure argument of authority grounded in a breathtaking display of power: “You see what I can do? Can you do this? Who are you then to complain?” So, what we get is neither the good God letting Job know that his suffering is just an ordeal destined to test his faith, nor a dark God beyond Law, the God of pure caprice, but rather a God who acts as someone caught in the moment of impotence, weakness at least, and tries to escape his predicament by empty

boasting. What we get at the end is a kind of cheap Hollywood horror-show with lots of special effects—no wonder that many commentators tend to dismiss Job’s story as a remainder of the previous pagan mythology which should have been excluded from the Bible. In his reading of “The Book of Job,” the Norwegian theologian Peter Wessel Zapffe accentuated Job’s “boundless perplexity” when God himself finally appears to him. Expecting a sacred and pure God whose intellect is infinitely superior to ours, Job

finds himself confronted with a world ruler of grotesque primitiveness, a cosmic cave-dweller, a braggart and blusterer, almost agreeable in his total ignorance of spiritual culture. [...] What is new for Job is *not* God’s greatness in quantifiable terms; that he knew fully in advance [...]; what is new is the qualitative baseness. (Zapffe 2004, p. 147)

In other words, God—the God of the Real—is like the Lady in courtly love, it is *das Ding*, a capricious cruel master who simply has no sense of universal justice. God-the-Father thus quite literally doesn’t know what he is doing, and Christ is the one who does know it, but is reduced to an impotent compassionate observer, addressing his father with “Father, can’t you see I’m burning?”—burning together with all the victims of the father’s rage. Only by falling into his own creation and wandering around in it as an impassive observer can God perceive the horror of his creation and the fact that He, the highest Law-giver, is himself the supreme Criminal (as Chesterton saw it clearly in *The Man Who Was Thursday*).

The ultimate choice is thus: is God the big Other, a guarantor of meaning (accessible to us or beyond our reach), or a crack of the Real that tears up the texture of reality? With regard to the topic of theology and revolution, this choice means: is God a transcendent point of reference that legitimizes our instrumentalization (enabling us to claim that we act on His behalf), or is he the

guarantor of ontological opening which, precisely, prevents such instrumentalization? In Badiou's terms, is the reference to God in political theology sustained by the logic of purification (a nihilist destruction of all that seems to contradict the divine message) or by the logic of separation—separation which does not mean only our separation from God on account of which God remains impenetrable to us, believers, but primarily a separation in the heart of God Himself? Incarnation is the separation of God from Himself, and for us, humans, being abandoned by God, abandoned to the abyss of our freedom, without His protective care, is when we are one with God, the God separated from Himself.

A naïve counter-question: Why do we need God at all? Why not just humans living in a contingent open world? What is missing in this picture is the minimal theological experience described by Rowan Williams, that of being out-of-place in this world. In a primitive reading of this out-of-place, we are out of place in this world, and there is another true world. In a more radical reading, we exist because God Himself is out of Himself—and it is only in Protestantism that this dimension becomes visible. The triad of Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism thus seems to correspond to the Lacanian triad of Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real: the horizon of Orthodoxy is that of the imaginary fusion between man and God; Catholicism focuses on the symbolic exchange between the two poles; Protestantism asserts the “subtracted” God of the intrusion of the Real.

Protestantism is thus totally incompatible with the New Age critique of the hubris of the so-called Cartesian subjectivity and its mechanistic dominating attitude towards nature. According to the New Age commonplace, the original sin of the modern Western civilization (or already of the Judeo-Christian tradition) is man's hubris, his arrogant assumption that he occupies the central place in the universe and/or that he is endowed with the divine right to master all other beings and exploit them for his profit. This hubris that disturbs the just balance of cosmic powers sooner or

later forces Nature to reestablish the balance: today's ecological, social, and psychic crisis is interpreted as the universe's justified answer to the man's presumption. Our only solution thus consists in the shift of the global paradigm, in adopting the new holistic attitude in which we will humbly assume our constrained place in the global Order of Being. In contrast to this commonplace, one should assert the excess of subjectivity (what Hegel called the "night of the world") as the only hope of redemption: true evil does not reside in the excess of subjectivity as such, but in its "ontologization," in its reinscription into some global cosmic framework. Already in de Sade, excessive cruelty is ontologically "covered" by the order of Nature as the "Supreme Being of Evilness"; both Nazism and Stalinism involved the reference to some global Order of Being (in the case of Stalinism, the dialectical organization of the movement of matter). True arrogance is thus the very opposite of the acceptance of the hubris of subjectivity: it resides in the false humility, i.e., it emerges when the subject pretends to speak and act on behalf of the Global Cosmic Order, posing as its humble instrument. In contrast to this, the entire Western stance was anti-global: not only does Christianity involve the reference to a higher Truth which cuts into and disturbs the old pagan order of Cosmos articulated in profound Wisdoms, even Plato's idealism itself can be qualified as the first clear elaboration of the idea that the global cosmic "Chain of Being" is not "all there is," that there is another Order (of Ideas) which suspends the validity of the Order of Being.

The feature one has to bear in mind here is the utter ambiguity of the notion of Evil: even what is commonly regarded as the ultimate Evil of our century, the cold bureaucratic mass killings in concentration camps, is split into two, Nazi holocaust and Gulag, and all attempts to decide "which is worse" necessarily involve us in morally very problematic choices (the only way out seems to be the properly dialectical paradox that the Stalinist terror was in a way "worse" — even more "irrational" and all-threatening —

precisely because it was “less Evil,” i.e. nonetheless the outcome of an authentic emancipatory liberation movement).

Perhaps the crucial ethical task today is to break the vicious cycle of these two positions, fundamentalist and liberal—and our last example already shows the way out: the true ethical universality never resides in the quasi-neutral distance that tries to do justice to all concerned factions. So, if, against fundamentalisms which ground ethical commitment in one’s particular ethnic or religious identity, excluding others, one should insist on ethical universalism, one should also unconditionally insist on how every authentic ethical position by definition paradoxically combines universalism with taking sides in the ongoing struggle. Today, more than ever, one should emphasize that a true ethical position combines the assertion of Universalism with a militant, divisive position of one engaged in a struggle: true universalists are not those who preach global tolerance of differences and all-encompassing unity, but those who engage in a passionate fight for the assertion of the Truth that engages them.

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Nuclear Deterrence and the Metaphysics of Time

Jean-Pierre Dupuy

“[T]hat [...] is how the world moves:
Not like an arrow, but a boomerang. [...]”
The end is in the beginning.”
Ralph Ellison¹

I. Metaphysics of the Prophecy of Doom

1. Bergson and the Possible

The next time an atomic bomb will be dropped over a civilian population, breaking what has been called the “nuclear taboo,” it is very likely that the event will be interpreted as the bursting forth of the possible into the realm of impossibility,² as was the case with the destruction of the Twin Towers. From now on, one heard it said, even the worst horrors have become possible. Note that if something *becomes* possible, presumably this is because

¹ Ellison 1952, p. 6. Thanks very much to Armand Braun for suggesting this quote. Armand Braun is writing a biography of French philosopher Gaston Berger (1896-1960), the inventor of the approach to the future called “prospec-tive.” One day Berger said: “From now on I’m going to devote myself fully to the study of time.” He died a few days later in an awful car accident.

² “We can’t attack [North Korea],” said Robert Kelly, a professor of dip-lomacy at Pusan University in South Korea, on August 9th 2017: “We’re talk-ing about a million people who are going to be killed. So let’s not do that.” The “can’t” obviously refers not to a physical or technological impossibility, but to a moral necessity.

it was not possible before. And yet, common sense objects, if it actually occurs, this must be because it *was* possible all along. Common sense proves here once more to be a detestable guide.

In *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1918), Henri Bergson described the sensations he felt on August 4, 1914, on learning of Germany's declaration of war on France:

Horror-struck though I was, and though I felt a war, even a victorious war, to be a catastrophe, I experienced what William James expresses, a feeling of admiration for the smoothness of the transition from the abstract to the concrete: who would have thought that so terrible an eventuality could make its entrance into reality with so little disturbance? The impression of this facility was predominant above all else. (Bergson 1935, p. 149)

Yet this disturbing familiarity stood in sharp contrast to Bergson's feelings *before* the catastrophe. The prospect of war appeared to him and his friends "as *at once probable and impossible*: a complex and contradictory idea, which lasted right down to the present day" (ibid., p. 148; my emphasis).

Some years later, Bergson managed very well to unravel this apparent contradiction in reflecting upon the nature of a work of art in an essay entitled "The Possible and the Real" (1930). "I believe in the end we shall consider it evident," Bergson wrote, "that the artist in executing his work *is creating the possible as well as the real*" (Bergson 1946, p. 109; my emphasis). Why is it, then, he asked, that one might "hesitate to say the same thing for nature? Is not the world a work of art incomparably richer than that of the greatest artist?" (Ibid.) The hesitation to extend this idea to acts of destruction is greater still. And yet who has contemplated the images of September 11 and not been filled with a feeling of exaltation and dread that resembles what one feels in the presence of the sublime, in the sense that Burke and Kant gave to this word? Of the terrorists, who could hardly have

failed to have sensations of the same kind, we may also say that they created the possible at the same time as they created the real. This was, as I say, the metaphysical view that most commentators spontaneously adopted.

In the same text, Bergson reports a delightful conversation with a journalist who had come to interview him, during the Great War, on the subject of the future of literature. “How do you conceive, for example, the great dramatic work of tomorrow?” he was asked. “But,” Bergson objected, “the work of which you speak is not yet possible.” “But it must be, since it is to take place,” retorted the other (*ibid.*, pp. 106-07). To this Bergson replied:

“No, it is not. I grant you, at most, that it *will have been possible*.” “What do you mean by that?” — “It’s quite simple. Let a man of talent or genius come forth, let him create a work: it will then be real, and by that very fact it becomes retrospectively or retroactively possible. It would not be possible, it would not have been so, if this man had not come upon the scene. That is why I tell you that it will have been possible today, but that it is not yet so.” “You’re not serious! You are surely not going to maintain that the future has an effect upon the present, that the present brings something into the past, that action works back over the course of time and imprints its mark afterwards?” — “That depends. That one can put reality into the past and thus work backwards in time is something I have never claimed. But that one can put the possible there, or rather that the possible may put itself there at any moment, is not to be doubted. As reality is created as something unforeseeable and new, its image is reflected behind it into the indefinite past; thus it finds that it has from all time been possible, but it is at this precise moment that it *begins to have been always possible*, and that is why I said that its possibility, which does not precede its reality, will have preceded it once the reality has appeared.” (Bergson 1946, p. 107; second emphasis mine)

Before 1907, the year when Picasso painted *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, that painting was not possible. More than a century

later, the fact that it has become real entails that it was indeed possible before 1907. The truth value of the proposition “The painting *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* was possible in 1900” depends on the time at which it is enunciated. Hence the recourse to a grammatical tense that is not frequently used in English—the future perfect: “it *will have been possible*.”

The explanation of our inaction in the face of many looming disasters is to be found right here: anyone who wishes *to prevent* a catastrophe must believe in its possibility *before* it occurs. The paradox is that if one succeeds in actually preventing it, its nonrealization keeps it firmly within the domain of the impossible, and efforts at prevention appear in retrospect to have been useless.³

2. Günther Anders and the Quandary of the Prophet of Doom

German philosopher Günther Anders (1902-1992) was the most profound and radical thinker to have reflected on the major catastrophes of the twentieth century. He is less well known than two of his companions who studied with him under Heidegger: Hans Jonas, who was his friend, and Hannah Arendt, of whom he was the first husband. This is probably due to his intransigence and the fragmented character of his work. Rather than weighty systematic treatises, Anders preferred shorter pieces on current issues, sometimes written in the form of a parable. More than once, he will have told in his own way the story of the flood.

Noah was tired of playing the prophet of doom and of always foretelling a catastrophe that would not occur and that no one would take seriously. One day,

he clothed himself in sackcloth and put ashes on his head. This act was only permitted to someone lamenting the loss of his dear child

³ A semi-comical illustration: the YK2 efforts at preventing a universal computer collapse at the (false) turn of the century, a collapse that didn’t take place, were deemed by many afterwards to have been a waste of resources.

or his wife. Clothed in the habit of truth, acting sorrowful, he went back to the city, intent on using to his advantage the curiosity, malignity and superstition of its people. Within a short time, he had gathered around him a small crowd, and the questions began to surface. He was asked if someone was dead and who the dead person was. Noah answered them that many were dead and, much to the amusement of those who were listening, that they themselves were dead. Asked when this catastrophe had taken place, he answered: tomorrow. Seizing this moment of attention and disarray, Noah stood up to his full height and began to speak: the day after tomorrow, the flood will be something that will have been. And when the flood will have been, *all that is will never have existed*. When the flood will have carried away all that is, all that will have been, it will be too late to remember, for there will be no one left. So there will no longer be any difference between the dead and those who weep for them. *If I have come before you, it is to reverse time*, it is to weep today for tomorrow's dead. The day after tomorrow, it will be too late. Upon this, he went back home, took his clothes off, removed the ashes covering his face, and went to his workshop. In the evening, a carpenter knocked on his door and said to him: let me help you build an ark, *so that this may become false*. Later, a roofer joined with them and said: it is raining over the mountains, let me help you, *so that this may become false*. (Anders 1972; quoted in Simonelli 2004, pp. 84-85; my emphases)

The whole quandary of the prophet of doom, as well as the ingenious way of getting out of his predicament, is inscribed in this magnificent parable. The prophet of doom is not heard because his word, even if it brings information, does not fit with the beliefs of those to whom it is addressed. It is often said that if we fail to act in the face of catastrophe it is because our knowledge is uncertain. Yet, even when we have all the clues at our disposal, we are unable to transform this information into belief.

Noah's way out is brilliant. *It consists in the staging of mourning for deaths that have not yet occurred*; in this way, says Anders, time is "reversed," since the effect (mourning) comes before the cause (the deaths). This is indeed unusual since it could

only make sense if the deaths to be mourned were inscribed in the future at a determinate date. What makes death bearable, for many of us, is precisely that we tend to liken an unknown end to an indeterminate end, and so to the absence of an end. “Whatever certainty there is in death,” 17th-century French moralist La Bruyère remarked, “is mitigated to some extent by that which is uncertain, by an indefiniteness in time that has something of the infinite about it” (Bruyère 1933, p. 398). By contrast Anders’s aim with this parable is to stress that the catastrophe is inevitable, or rather, *will have always been* inevitable once it occurs.

The prophecy of doom purports to be the antidote of Bergson’s metaphysics. Like any *pharmakon*, at the same time poison and remedy, the former retains some essential traits from the latter. In the same way that for Bergson the catastrophe is impossible before it occurs and starts having always been possible once it occurs, in the prophecy of doom the catastrophe is not necessary before it occurs and begins to have always been necessary once it occurs. In either case, it is the actualization of the event—the fact that it occurs—which retrospectively substitutes a modality for a previous one: possibility, in one case, necessity (or impossibility) in the other.

The paradox of the prophecy of doom is as follows. Making the perspective of catastrophe credible requires one to increase the ontological force of its inscription in the future. The foretold suffering and deaths will inevitably occur. But if this task is too well carried out, one will have lost sight of its purpose, which is precisely to raise people’s awareness and spur them to action so that the catastrophe *may not occur*—“let me help you build an ark, so that this may become false.”

What prevents the metaphysics inherent in Anders’s parable from boiling down to an old-fashioned classical fatalism is its future-perfect structure. Sophisticated though the latter may sound it is of common usage among us. Consider the following statement: “If Mr. Trump’s presidency ends in humiliation, future

generations may well conclude that it was bound to fail all along.”⁴ This statement is true if either Mr. Trump’s presidency doesn’t end in humiliation or it was bound to fail all along. The statement doesn’t say that Mr. Trump’s presidency is necessarily doomed; only that if it turns out to be a failure, it *will have been* destined to be such all along. Necessity here is retrospective.⁵

3. *Being a Compatibilist*

Although very suggestive, Anders’s parable remains a poetic rendering of abstract ideas, that is, an allegory. In my own work, I’ve tried to give it a formal interpretation in the framework of analytical metaphysics (and analytical theology).

My starting point has been the age-old problem of the compatibility between determinism and free will in its modern version fleshed out by such philosophers as David K. Lewis and Robert Stalnaker.⁶ Lewis calls “soft determinism” “the doctrine that sometimes one freely does what one is predetermined to do; and that in such a case one is able to act otherwise though past history and the laws of nature determine that one will not act

⁴ Yascha Mounk, “The Past Week Proves That Trump Is Destroying Our Democracy,” *The New York Times* (Aug. 1, 2017).

⁵ Another significant example is literary, drawn from Henry de Montherlant’s *La guerre civile* (1965). Montherlant imagines the following conversation between Pompey and his general Cato about Caesar. Cato: “When Caesar crossed the Rubicon, there was not a town that did not welcome him with open arms. Those who come to him increase [in number] each day. They say: ‘Resistance is futile. Caesar is inevitable.’” Pompey: “These are the words of cowards. Once someone stands in his way, Caesar will no longer be inevitable.” Cato: “But no one stands in his way.” Fate, in other words, is the sum of our individual failures to act.

⁶ See Lewis 1986, and Stalnaker 1981. As far as modalities are concerned let me recall that, given an adequate definition of a possible world, possible is that which is true in at least one possible world; necessary is that which is true in all possible worlds; impossible is that which is untrue in all possible worlds; and contingent is that which is possible without being necessary.

otherwise.” He then defines compatibilism as “the doctrine that soft determinism may be true” (Lewis 1981, p. 113).

Let us call C the state of the world at a time t_1 . We have:

A1: C was the case at t_1

Consider a subject S whose action x at $t_2 > t_1$ is determined by the laws that govern his world according to:

A2: If C was the case at t_1 , then S does x at t_2

From A1 and A2 we derive by modus ponens:

A3: S does x at t_2

Can x be a free although predetermined act? To defend soft determinism, it is always useful to start from the argument(s) put forward by those who deny it. The so-called “incompatibilist” thesis uses an operator \Box which, applied to a proposition p, asserts that p is true in all possible worlds: it is necessary. More specific to our problem, we will call \Box_t^s the operator of necessity such that:

$\Box_t^s(p)$ means: p is true and S is not free at t to perform an act such that, if he were to perform it, p would be false.

The incompatibilist argument can be written as follows:

N1: $\Box_{t_2}^s(C \text{ was the case at } t_1)$

N2: $\Box_{t_2}^s(\text{If } C \text{ was the case at } t_1, \text{ then } S \text{ does } x \text{ at } t_2)$

Thus, by modus ponens,⁷

N3: $\Box_{t_2}^s(S \text{ does } x \text{ at } t_2)$

N1 expresses the principle of the fixity of the past. N2 says that the laws that determine the subject’s actions remain the same in all possible worlds. The conclusion N3 states that S does

⁷ Whether modus ponens remains valid under the operator of necessity could be questioned.

actually do x at t_2 , but he does not act freely since it is not in his power to act otherwise.

Can this argument be refuted? Depending on the nature of the problem, there are two possibilities, neither of which has greater *a priori* legitimacy than the other.

a) We could accept N1, in which case we would have to reject N2. The past is fixed, and the subject, supposedly able to act otherwise, has the power to invalidate the fixity of the temporal chain which links C to x . The nature of this power must be made very clear. As Lewis puts it, we must distinguish between two versions:

Strong version: "I am able to break a law."

Weak version: "I am able to do something such that, if I did it, a law would be broken" (Lewis 1981, p. 113).

Obviously, there is no way that *in our world* the subject could act so that the link between C and x would be violated: this would be contrary to hypothesis A2, which indeed remains valid. The strong version is eliminated but not the weak one. To paraphrase Lewis, the way in which I was determined not to do anything other than x "was not the sort of way that counts as inability" (*ibid.*, p. 112). The power that this sort of ability represents is called "counterfactual."

b) Conversely, we could accept N2, in which case we would have to reject N1. This time the temporal chain A2 is held to be fixed (that is, true in all possible worlds). To maintain that the agent's action, x , is free although determined by the past and the laws that govern the world, we have to grant the agent a power to invalidate the past. This power obviously cannot be causal. Here too we must distinguish between:

A strong version: "I am able to change the past," which is "utterly incredible," to use Lewis's terms,

and *a weak one*: "I am able to do something such that, if I did it, the past would have been different from what it was in the actual world."

The Calvinist theologian and analytic metaphysician Alvin Plantinga, who defends the weak version, has logically dubbed this

kind of ability as counterfactual “power over the past” (Plantinga 1986, p. 243).

Although, as I said, the two ways of grounding compatibilism have an *a priori* equal legitimacy, contemporary philosophers such as David K. Lewis or Robert Stalnaker, probably because of their respective stints in the domain of rational choice theory, have focused almost exclusively on the former, which preserves the fixity of the past.⁸ I have explored thoroughly the second approach and been able to show that it formalizes elegantly the properties we have discovered as characterizing the prophecy of doom.

The first thing to be noted is that there exist situations in which the counterfactual power an agent possesses over the past causally prohibits him from acting in a certain way.⁹ Let’s consider a paradigmatic illustration which has been the object of numerous cogitations from Hobbes onward: the promise case.¹⁰ At t_1 Mary asks Peter to lend her \$1,000 and she promises to pay off her debt at $t_2 > t_1$. We are in a state of nature *à la* Hobbes: there are no state institutions, no judicial system, no rule of law. The agents are only guided by their self-interest. If the loan could take place, it would be mutually beneficial.

In the temporality that preserves the fixity of the past, it is immediate that the loan is impossible. Reasoning by backward induction we realize along with Peter that Mary at t_2 will break her promise. Peter would be a fool to lend her anything.

⁸ My master Maurice Allais, one of the founders of neoclassical economics and for a long time the only French Nobel laureate in that discipline, used to say, “When it comes to rationality, the fundamental maxim is: *only the future matters*.” Obviously, he did not mean that the past is not important. What Allais’s maxim asserted was that the past will always be what it was and, specifically, our present decision cannot change it.

⁹ This paradox is akin to the so-called “grandfather paradox” that appears to be a consequence of the assumption of time travel. If I could travel to the past and kill my grandfather “I” couldn’t be. The grandfather paradox relies unnecessarily on causal connections though, which is not the case with the implications of the counterfactual power over the past.

¹⁰ Also known in game theory as the assurance game.

In the temporality that maintains N2, that is, a necessary link between past conditions and future action, at the cost of doing away with the fixity of the past, things work very differently. Let's say Peter is an omniscient predictor capable of anticipating Mary's actions in all possible worlds. If Mary held her promise at t_2 Peter would anticipate it and the mutually beneficial loan would take place. On the other hand, if she were to renege on her promise, Peter would anticipate it as well and he wouldn't lend her the money. We see here in action the counterfactual power that Mary has on her past via her action. However, if the loan doesn't exist, Mary is not in a position to renege on her promise to pay off her debt. Hence a contradiction which is immediately solved by the conclusion that Mary won't renege on her promise if the loan takes place. The loan will indeed take place to the mutual benefit of Peter and Mary.

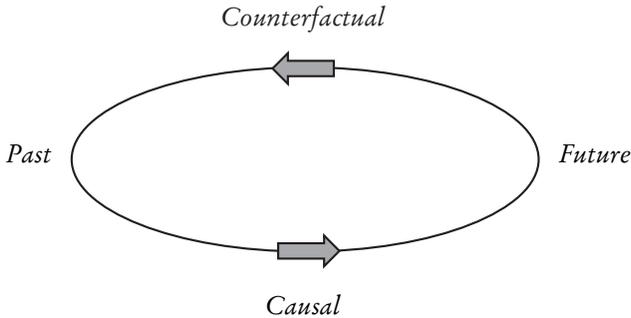
This example illustrates that in the temporality we are examining it is not true that any future goes, since "it is not the future if you stop it."¹¹ The future must be such that the past that it counterfactually determines doesn't causally prevent its occurrence. In other words, the future, far from being the outcome of the laws of nature applied to determinate initial conditions (prediction) or something that we create according to our will ("prospective"¹²), is the solution (one of the solutions) to an equation in which the unknown x —the future action—appears on both sides of the equation in the following form:

$$x = F [x],$$

¹¹ Quote from Philip K. Dick's tale, "Minority Report," a beautiful and profound illustration of some of the ideas presented here.

¹² Reference to the method known in France as prospective, and elsewhere as the "scenario method," or, more vaguely, "futurology," invented by the French philosophers Gaston Berger and Bertrand de Jouvenel at the end of the 1950s. One of its current proponents, Michel Godet, wrote: "All who claim to foretell or forecast the future are inevitably liars, for the future is not written anywhere—it is still to be built" (Godet and Roubelat 1996, p. 164).

as if it were determining itself. According to the received terminology, we will say that the future appears as the *fixed point* of a certain operator F. The latter expresses the causal consequences of a past that is itself determined counterfactually by the future x. This can be represented graphically as follows:



In this conception of time, the future is fixed, that is, necessary, since it is linked to the past by N2, a proposition that states that this link is true in all possible worlds. However, this is only true once the past is determined, which presupposes that the future itself is determined. In other terms the future is necessary — it has always been necessary — but only once it has become actualized. This is the essential trait we have learned to ascribe to the metaphysics of the prophecy of doom.

4. *On the Multiplicity of Metaphysics and the Choice of the Most Pertinent*

The indeterminacy of the past as long as action has not been performed along with the necessity of the future once action is taken serve to define a metaphysics of temporality which I have dubbed “projected time.” In what follows, in order to prepare the ground for my analysis of nuclear deterrence, I will introduce another metaphysics, which I name “occurring time,” the

one that supports all strategic reasoning, be it carried out by an economist, a game theorist, a planner, an engineer, a designer, or a military strategist. It corresponds to a very distinct conception of free will for which the agent's actions are driven by a set of beliefs and desires rather than "pushed" by a determinism. Called the "belief—desire" model, its most familiar graphic representation today is the decision tree. At every node of the tree an agent has the choice between several possible future options. When he chooses among them he holds the past as fixed, that is counterfactually independent of his choosing. Fixed past, open future: the metaphysics of occurring time is obviously in sharp contrast with that of projected time.

If metaphysics, according to the received definition, is the branch of philosophy that explores the fundamental nature of reality, the question arises: How can we account for the plurality of metaphysics?

In the 4th century BCE, a member of the Megarian School named Diodorus Kronos proposed an axiomatic, that is a set of propositions held to be self-evidently true, designed to show that the actual is the only possible and that the future is already determined.

The three axioms are:

- 1) Every true proposition about the past is necessary.
- 2) The impossible does not logically follow from the possible.
- 3) There is a possible which neither is presently true nor will be so.

Diodorus demonstrated that they are incompatible. One of them at least must go. Axiom 3 seems self-evident to most people today. However, if they hold like Diodorus that 1 and 2 too are self-evident, then they must deny 3. That is, they must hold that an event that happens neither in the present nor in the future is an impossible event.

One of the greatest French philosophers of the 20th century, Jules Vuillemin, has written a history of Western metaphysics

on the simple basis of looking at which axiom or axioms various philosophers decided to drop. This makes a fascinating story.¹³ Probably influenced by Diodorus, one of the first deniers of axiom 3 was Aristotle, as is well known because of his metaphor of the sea battle.¹⁴

The multiplicity of metaphysics finds its origin in Diodorus's theorem of incompatibility. A comparison with the history of geometry comes to mind. Once it was demonstrated fairly late in the history of mathematics that Euclid's fifth axiom, the so-called parallel axiom, couldn't be derived from the first four, it became conceivable to imagine a geometry in which this axiom wouldn't hold. The concept of a Riemannian manifold followed. And it proved extremely *useful*, as is well known, to Albert Einstein who was in the process of elaborating his theory of general relativity. French mathematician Henri Poincaré then remarked that "we choose this geometry rather than that geometry, not because it is more *true*, but because it is the more *convenient*. / To ask whether the geometry of Euclid is true [...], is [...] absurd" (Poincaré 1898, p. 42). Likewise, let's not ask whether projected time is truer than occurring time, but if it is or not more useful than the latter.

It all depends on the kind of problem we are facing. Let's note first that projected time and occurring time are two ways of skirting Diodorus's aporia. The former denies axioms 1 and 3, the latter endorses them both and therefore denies 2.¹⁵ In my work on catastrophes (see Dupuy 2002)—including a nuclear conflict—I've shown that projected time avoids many paradoxes which occurring time, i.e. strategic thinking, comes up against when it comes to conceptualizing the temporality that separates

¹³ The English version is more complete and a few errors have been corrected. See Vuillemin 1996.

¹⁴ In chapter 9 of his *De Interpretatione*: If a sea-battle will not be fought tomorrow, then it was also true yesterday that it will not be fought. But all past truths are necessary truths. Therefore, it is not possible that the battle will be fought.

¹⁵ Hence the paradoxes of backward induction. See Dupuy 2000.

us from a looming disaster the date of which is unknown. The second part of this paper will illustrate this point. Projected time defines an attitude that is neither complacency or voluntarism nor fatalism. Complacency stresses that the catastrophe although possible is not inevitable: the future is open. Fatalism makes it inevitable. By granting the agent the counterfactual power to act upon the past conditions that determine him, projected time helps him navigate between the devil of catastrophism and the deep blue sea of dumb optimism.

For reasons already mentioned, our *Zeitgeist* leans toward the latter. It is worth, then, reminding ourselves that the experience of projected time has accompanied humankind since time immemorial. It is intimately linked to the religious apprehension of the world. In all traditional societies, there are people called prophets (*nabis* in Ancient Israel) whose function is to interpret and convey the divinity's will. The prophets of the Bible, for instance, were extraordinary men, often great eccentrics and they did not go unnoticed by their neighbors. The influence their prophecies had on the world around them and on the course of events had purely human and social causes; but it was due also to the fact that those who heard them believed that the word of the prophet was the word of the Lord and that this word, which came to the prophet directly from on high, had the power to bring about the very thing that it announced. We would say today that the word of the prophet had a *performative* power: in saying things, he brought them into being. However, the prophet was well aware of this. One might be tempted to conclude that the prophet had the power to which political revolutionaries aspire: he spoke so that things might change in the direction that he wished to impress upon them. But this would be to overlook the fatalistic aspect of prophecy, which reads out the names of all those things that will come to pass, just as they are written down on the great scroll of history, immutably, ineluctably.

Revolutionary prophecy, particularly in the form it came to acquire in Marxist doctrine, has preserved the highly paradoxical

mixture of fatalism and voluntarism that characterizes biblical prophecy. German philosopher Hans Jonas said of dialectical materialism that it was “a most peculiar mixture of colossal responsibility for the future with deterministic release from responsibility” (Jonas 1985, pp. 113-14).

The metaphysics of projected time enables us to extend the notion of prophecy to our secular age and substitute for the obscure dialectic between voluntarism and fatalism a rigorous and non-paradoxical third way that is neither one nor the other. For the modern prophet, especially the prophet of doom, it is necessary to seek the fixed point of the loop between past and future, at which an expectation (on the part of the past with regard to the future) and a causal production (of the future by the past) coincide. The prophet, knowing that his public announcements are going to have a causal impact on the world, must take account of this fact if he wants the future to confirm what he foretold. The future is an x , that is, a solution to an equation which says that the reactions to the past anticipations of x causally bring about x .¹⁶

In this sense, prophets are legion in our modern democratic societies, founded on science and technology. The experience of projected time is facilitated, encouraged, organized, not to say imposed, by numerous features of our institutions. All around us, more or less authoritative voices are heard that proclaim what the more or less near future will be: the next day's traffic on the freeway, the result of the upcoming elections,¹⁷ the rates of inflation

¹⁶ Not any future goes. The prophet Jonah knew that if he prophesied the fall of Niniveh as God had asked him to do the Ninivites would repent and God would forgive them. He preferred to run away from God's gaze.

¹⁷ A poll, by making the state of public opinion known to the public, alters this very state. When a new poll is taken, some respondents, taking note of the prior results, may be inclined to prefer the winner of the earlier poll; others, as Montesquieu long ago suggested, may try to redress the balance by throwing their support behind the runner-up. It is in order to avoid such effects that polling is prohibited in some countries in the days just before an election. In a celebrated paper published in 1954, Herbert Simon, a future Nobel laureate in

and growth for the coming year, the changing levels of greenhouse gases, etc. The *futurists* and sundry other prognosticators know full well, as do we, that this future they announce to us as if it were written in the stars is a future of our own making, even if it is in reaction to these very announcements. We do not rebel in general against what could pass for a metaphysical scandal. We have, then, the experience of projected time.

II. Metaphysics of Nuclear Deterrence

1. Caveat

I am writing these lines in the winter of 2018, at a time when the prospect of a nuclear war between the US and a number of other nuclear powers is deemed by many observers stronger than it has ever been. In a lecture, former Secretary of Defense William Perry announced: “Today, the danger of some sort of a nuclear catastrophe is greater than it was during the Cold War, and most people are blissfully unaware of this danger” (Perry 2016). That was long before two heads of state whose rationality is in doubt started threatening each other with mutual annihilation. Donald Trump’s USA can indeed physically wipe the tiny North Korea off the map of the world. If it commits this abomination, even if that is in reaction to a nuclear attack launched by North Korea, it will

economics and one of the founders of artificial intelligence, showed that public opinion includes a “fixed point,” that is, an opinion that remains stable when informed of its own state. He even showed that cases exist in which there are several fixed points. If a polling organization wishes to give the impression that it is able to predict the future, without thereby affecting the actual course of events, it must compute and announce one of the fixed points so that public knowledge of the predicted state doesn’t change it. The existence of several such fixed points, if it is known, however, threatens the experiencing of projected time as the pollsters appear to manipulate public opinion by choosing one fixed point rather than another. Cf. Simon 1954.

be difficult for young Americans for generations after generations to look at themselves in a mirror. The event will remain forever an inextinguishable mark, an indelible stain. Experts have concluded that the only way to curb Kim Jong Un, now that it is clear that all other ways fail, is to contain and deter him. However, if deterring him implies threatening to annihilate his country, isn't the horror of the act transmitted to the horror of the threat?

In spite of their urgency, I won't deal with these issues here, for at least two reasons that have to do with the modesty of my goals. Firstly, I will limit my analysis of nuclear deterrence to a special case: the situation called "mutually assured destruction," known by its opportune acronym MAD. It will be clear that the confrontation between the US and North Korea doesn't fall under that category. Secondly, I won't address the ethical implications of MAD, only what can be called, oxymoronically, its rationality.

Here too, what I want to achieve is limited. The American filmmaker Errol Morris, in his movie *The Fog of War*,¹⁸ asks Robert McNamara, the former Secretary of Defense of President Kennedy, what he thinks protected humanity from extinction during the Cold War, when the United States and the Soviet Union permanently threatened each other with mutual annihilation. Deterrence? Not at all, McNamara replies: "We lucked out." Twenty-five or thirty times during this period, he notes, mankind came within an inch of apocalypse. I will show that this response is self-contradictory. All those "near-hits"¹⁹ may have been the necessary condition for nuclear deterrence (ND) to work. To the extent that ND can be at times efficient, my objective is to show that everything occurs then *as if* the protagonists had immersed themselves in the peculiar logic of projected time.

¹⁸ Errol Morris, *The Fog of War. Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* (Sony Classics, 2003).

¹⁹ The usual phrase is "near-misses." Interestingly enough, it literally says the opposite of the meaning it is supposed to convey.

Let me hasten to add that this is in no way meant to be a justification of nuclear deterrence in the MAD form. My conviction is that the latter is morally abhorrent. But there is a logic to it that can be discerned quite clearly. Above I referred to the religious mind as probably the cradle of the experience of projected time. In what follows it will appear that a number of features of MAD keep *the mark of the sacred* (see Dupuy 2014).

My strategy will be as follows. In a first phase, I will expound the broad lines of the intellectual history of ND, following Steven P. Lee's excellent book, *Morality, Prudence, and Nuclear Weapons* (Lee 1996). There is not one argument put forward by the protagonists in that discussion that has not been questioned, disputed, challenged, refuted by some, defended by others, in an unending quest for reason and justice. I won't enter into those controversies, but will be content with just reporting what the dominant arguments have been. My critical standpoint resides elsewhere and I will expound it in a second move. It consists in showing that confusions spoil the debate and they stem from the fact that a good number of arguments belong to strategic reasoning and find their place within the metaphysics of occurring time, while other arguments, in general more recent, pertain to projected time and presuppose the renunciation of strategy. Two incompatible metaphysics of time clash invisibly.²⁰

2. A Brief History of Nuclear Deterrence Theory

For more than four decades during the Cold War, the discussion of "mutually assured destruction" (MAD) assigned a major role

²⁰ To mention a similar case: in the 1970s and 1980s it was hoped by some that game theory could help give new and more solid foundations to economic theory. Efforts in that direction didn't go very far. A tentative explanation is that game theory and its key concept of Nash equilibrium are the epitome of strategic reasoning and rest on the metaphysics of occurring time, whereas the central model of economics, that is, the Walrasian general equilibrium, exhibits a fixed-point structure that links it with projected time (cf. Dupuy 2014).

to the notion of *deterrent intention*, on both the strategic and the moral level. And yet the language of intention can be shown to constitute the principal obstacle to understanding the logic of deterrence.

2.1. In June 2000, meeting with Vladimir Putin in Moscow, Bill Clinton made an amazing statement that was echoed almost seven years later by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, speaking once again to the Russians. The antiballistic shield that we are going to build in Europe, they explained in substance, is only meant to defend us against attacks from rogue states and terrorist groups. *Therefore be assured*: even if we were to take the initiative of attacking you in a first nuclear strike, you could easily get through the shield and annihilate our country, the USA.

Plainly the new world order created by the collapse of Soviet power in no way made the logic of deterrence any less insane. This logic requires that each nation exposes its own population to certain destruction by the other's reprisals. Security becomes the daughter of terror. For if either nation were to take steps to protect itself, the other might believe that its adversary considers itself to be invulnerable, and so, in order to prevent a first strike, hastens to launch this strike itself. Before being a doctrine, MAD is a situation, in which nations are at once vulnerable and invulnerable: vulnerable because they can die from attack by another nation; invulnerable because they will not die before having killed their attacker—something they will always be capable of doing, thanks to a second-strike capacity, no matter how powerful the attack that will have brought them to their knees. Clearly the confrontation between the US and North Korea doesn't meet this definition, nor would a face-off between Israel and a nuclearized Iran.

2.2. Throughout the Cold War, two *a priori* arguments were made that seemed to show that nuclear deterrence in the form of MAD could not be effective. The first argument has to do with

the noncredible character of the deterrent threat under such circumstances: if the party threatening a simultaneously lethal and suicidal response to aggression that endangers its “vital interests” is assumed to be at least minimally rational, calling its bluff—say, by means of a first strike that destroys a part of its territory—ensures that it will not carry out its threat. The very purpose of this regime, after all, is to issue a guarantee of mutual destruction in the event that either party upsets the balance of terror. What chief of state having in the aftermath of a first strike only a devastated nation to defend would run the risk, by launching a retaliatory strike out of a desire for vengeance, of putting an end to the human race while committing suicide in the process? In a world of sovereign states endowed with the minimal degree of rationality that Hobbes granted to the inhabitants of the state of nature, namely the instinct of self-preservation, the nuclear threat has no credibility whatever.²¹

The credibility question occupies the great majority of the debates about ND. Many experts conclude in particular that it is folly to make extreme threats that one is not sure one will deliver

²¹ In a private communication, David Berlinski objects to this statement. He writes, very much in tune with philosopher David Gauthier (cf. Gauthier 1990): “No one—I mean no one—doubts that a nuclear power made victim of a first strike would unhesitatingly respond with a second strike, no matter the consequences.” I know at least one exception: in his memoirs, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing confessed that as President of France he would *never ever* have pressed the nuclear button, even after a first nuclear attack, lest his country should be destroyed. The French armed forces have never forgiven Giscard for having written those lines which in effect reduce the credibility and the deterrent power of the French nuclear forces to almost zero. David Berlinski goes on to say: “If the Koreans destroyed an American city, North Korea would at once be obliterated. You do not doubt that, do you?” Yes, I do: even if a Donald Trump is at the helm, I am far from certain that the US would make good on his promise to annihilate the adverse country. I am not postulating an improbable concern for the rest of the human race, but simply the anticipation of the retrospective judgment of History. Germany has not succeeded in extirpating itself from the abyss into which it fell and may never do.

on. If your enemy calls your bluff, either you deliver and you risk what Carl von Clausewitz called the escalation to the extreme, that is mutual annihilation, or you cave in and your credibility is damaged for the future. One of the best ways to keep your credibility intact is to multiply the occasions in which you show the world that your threats are not empty words: you deliver and build a reputation of toughness.

2.3. The last remark leads to the second argument present in the literature that likewise points to the incoherence of the MAD strategic doctrine. Its premise is that, in Leon Wieseltier's words, nuclear deterrence "must be the only public arrangement that is a total failure if it is successful only 99.9 percent of the time" (quoted in Lee 1996, pp. 136-37). To be effective, ND must be absolutely effective. Not even a single failure can be allowed, since the first bomb to be dropped would already be one too many. But in that case the adversaries will never be in a position to test the other's resolve to deliver on its threats. Perfect nuclear deterrence is said to be self-defeating or "self-stultifying"²² since it undermines the very conditions that would make it efficient.

2.4. Nuclear deterrence doesn't work because the threat to retaliate is not credible. It doesn't work also because if it did, that assumption would lead to a contradiction. Those two reasons add up to the conclusion that the nuclear opponents are unable to

²² The expression was used by Gregory Kavka (Kavka 1987, p. 20) apropos of a different but kindred argument, which has for a long time been the ethical justification of the French nuclear doctrine known as deterrence "from the weak against the strong." The claim is that the deterrent intention to inflict "incommensurable" harm to the other party if it attacks you is not a genuine intention, because your true intention is to not have to carry it out. As the tortuous expression goes, we form the deterrent intention in order to make it so that the conditions that would lead to its being acted upon are not realized. Plenty are the cases in the literature where the theory of nuclear deterrence is said to be self-invalidating.

deter one another. And yet, the Cold War, also known as Nuclear Peace, seemed to demonstrate the opposite, in spite of a significant number of “near-hits.” An explanation had to be found.

Belatedly, it came to be understood that in order for deterrence to have a chance of succeeding, it was absolutely necessary to abandon the notion of deterrent *intention*. In principle, the mere *existence* of two deadly arsenals pointed at each other, without the least threat of their use being made or even implied, is enough to keep the warheads locked away in their silos. As two major philosophers put it, “The existence of a nuclear retaliatory capability suffices for deterrence, regardless of a nation’s will, intentions, or pronouncements about nuclear weapons use” (Kavka 1987, p. 48); or: “It is our military capacities that matter, not our intentions or incentives or declarations” (Lewis 1989, p. 67).

Initially due to McGeorge Bundy, this doctrine has received the name of existential deterrence. The insistence on the causal power of the mere existence of nuclear weapons is a way to downplay the importance of strategy, intentions, plans, all major constituents of military thinking. If there is no need to threaten anyone it is because the weapons themselves, due to their incommensurate power, speak for us. If rationality plays a role here it is “the kind of rationality in which the agent contemplates the abyss and simply decides never to get too close to the edge” (Lee 1996, p. 248).

3. Fate and the Tiger

How exactly does existential deterrence work? Who or what deters whom? It is significant that the explanations provided by the best theoreticians rely on a non-human actor. We will consider two of them.

Let’s start with David K. Lewis and the following quote:

You don’t tangle with tigers—it’s that simple. (Lewis 1989, p. 68; my emphasis)

The implication is that the game is no longer played between two adversaries. It takes on an altogether different form. Let's admit we are convinced that neither is in a position to deter the other in a credible way. *However, both want and need to be deterred.* The way out of this impasse is brilliant. It is a matter of creating jointly a fictitious entity that will deter both at the same time. The game is now played between one actor, humankind, whose survival is at stake, and its double, namely its own violence exteriorized in the form of a wild animal. The fictitious and fictional "tiger" we'd better not tangle with is nothing other than the violence that is in us but that we project outside of us. It is as if we were threatened *but also protected* by an exceedingly dangerous entity external to us, whose intentions toward us are not evil, but whose power of destruction is infinitely superior to all the earthquakes or tsunamis that Nature has in store for us.

According to French anthropologist René Girard,²³ the sacred stems from a similar mechanism of self-externalization of human violence. It used to be said of the atomic bomb, especially during the years of the Cold War, that it was our new sacrament. Very few among those who were given to saying this sort of thing saw it as anything more than a vague metaphor. But in fact, there is a very precise sense in which the bomb and the sacred can both be said to *contain* violence in the twofold sense of the verb "to contain": to have within and to keep in check. The sacred holds back violence through violent means, the original one being sacrifice. In the same way, throughout the Cold War it was as though the bomb had protected us from the bomb. The very existence of nuclear weapons, it would appear, had prevented a nuclear holocaust.

One must not come too near to the sacred, for fear of causing violence to be unleashed; nor should one stand too far away from it, however, for it protects us from violence. Likewise, we cannot risk coming too close to the nuclear tiger, lest it should devour us;

²³ See Girard 2005 (orig. 1972); see also Dupuy 2016.

nor can we risk standing too far away, lest we forget the danger it represents. For deterrence to work it's all about finding the right distance from the big cat.

The second quote is from Bernard Brodie:

It is a curious paradox of our time that one of the foremost factors making deterrence really work and work well is the lurking fear that in some massive confrontation crisis it may fail. Under these circumstances one does not tempt fate. (Brodie 1973, pp. 430-31; my emphasis)

Fate has replaced the tiger, but both images have in common that they place the deterrent in something other than human agency. We will return in the conclusion to a salient feature of this extraordinary quote, namely that it conjoins contingency (eventuality of failure) and necessity (fate), but we can pause at this stage and consider the following claim: the metaphysics of nuclear deterrence in its existential form is projected time. The renunciation of strategic thinking, the recourse to fate and the minimization of human agency, are all features that point in that direction.

4. Nuclear Deterrence in Projected Time

Let us admit for the sake of the discussion that the threat that underlies nuclear deterrence in its MAD form is not credible. The reasoning that supports this conclusion is strategic, and it is grounded in the metaphysics of occurring time. We reason by backward induction and we posit that if the bluff of the menacing party is called, the latter will prefer to yield rather than being annihilated. The would-be attacker won't be deterred. The question is: Doesn't projected time provide an alternative ground that would account for the efficiency of nuclear deterrence?

Given what we have learned in the first part of this paper, we can easily reach a conclusion, and it is negative. In projected time, nuclear deterrence doesn't fare better than in occurring time, but it is for entirely different reasons. The reasoning goes as follows:

1. If deterrence works the escalation to the extreme, that is, the realization of the MAD threat, doesn't take place.
2. If the escalation to the extreme doesn't take place, then it is impossible. [Negation of Diodorus's 3rd axiom.]
3. If it is impossible, then nuclear deterrence doesn't work.
4. We have shown that if nuclear deterrence works, then it doesn't work.
5. Therefore, nuclear deterrence doesn't work.

The core of this argument is of course proposition 2, which expresses the condition that in projected time the future is necessary: an event that happens neither in the present nor in the future is an impossible event.

This reasoning gives a solid foundation to the second argument put forward by the critics of MAD. The alleged "self-defeatingness of a successful deterrence" appears to be a tortuous way of expressing a straightforward *reductio ad absurdum* (propositions 4 & 5).

The detour via the metaphysics of projected time proves unsuccessful. There is a way, however, to render it successful, and it consists in taking seriously the dialectic between contingency and necessity that is suggested in Bernard Brodie's quote. Meanwhile we are going to realize that projected time is capable of solving the paradoxes of nuclear deterrence much more easily than strategic reasoning.

5. Nuclear Deterrence and the Indeterminacy of the Future

The suggestion that the manipulation of uncertainty can be a strategic tool that helps solve the credibility problem is not new. The conviction that if the agents are minimally rational they won't deliver on their threat to retaliate and launch the escalation to the extreme has led to the idea that it can be rational to pretend that one is irrational. It was first conceptualized by economist and game theorist Thomas Schelling in his landmark *The Strategy of*

Conflict (see Schelling 1960) but made famous under the moniker “Madman Theory” by Richard Nixon during the Vietnam War. The following quote is eloquent. Nixon said to his chief of staff H. R. Haldeman:

I call it the Madman Theory, Bob. I want the North Vietnamese to believe I've reached the point where I might do anything to stop the war. We'll just slip the word to them that, “for God's sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about communism. We can't restrain him when he's angry — and he has his hand on the nuclear button” and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace. (Haldeman 1978, p. 122)

The problem of course remains: What happens if the other side calls your bluff? In the current face-off between Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un, the question is, who is pretending to be mad and who is not pretending, because he really is mad?

However, in Brodie's quote, we are no longer talking strategy. The twofold reference to fate and the eventuality of failure²⁴ takes us to a completely different world. The notion that it requires an accident for fate to come to pass is as old as the oldest myths of the planet. Think of Oedipus: it was proclaimed by the Oracle that he would commit parricide and incest. What precipitated the realization of this prophecy was a random encounter with a disgruntled old man who was barring his way. The merger of fate and

²⁴ The English verb “to fail” comes from the French “*faillir*” whose initial meaning was to make a mistake, to commit an error—we would say today in the nuclear context: “*a miscalculation.*” Then “*faillir*” came to mean “almost,” in such expressions as “*J'ai failli tomber*” = “I almost fell,” that is, in the same context, *a near miss/a near hit*. Something bad happened, or came very close to happening, and this because of an error. To subsume all these meanings, I will use the word “accident” in its philosophical and etymological sense, that is, that which *occurs* without being the result of an agent's will. The natural metaphysical habitat of accident is occurring time. This paper is about what happens to it when it is relocated to projected time.

accident is a common theme of many religious traditions. Rome had a goddess who represented at the same time luck (good or bad) and fate—or, to use the language of modalities, contingency and necessity. Her name was *Fortuna*.

Once again, the metaphysics of projected time offers a framework capable of giving a precise and formalized rendering of these intuitions. The key is a concept I haven't yet introduced: the uncertainty of the future in projected time.

The uncertainty of the future in *occurring* time is approached with the usual tools. In the Madman Theory, the agent confronting some crazy behavior asks himself whether the folly is feigned, in which case the Madman will likely yield if his bluff is called, or whether he *really* is mad, in which case he may launch the escalation to mutual destruction if attacked. The agent ascribes a subjective probability epsilon, hopefully very small, to the latter possibility and the complement to 1 to the former. The way he comes to a decision is left to him—he may deem the Savage criterion of the maximization of expected utility senseless if the magnitudes are extreme: exceedingly large for the consequences, very small for epsilon, but one thing is assured: the two options make up a partition of the set of possibles, that is a *disjunction* without overlap.

In projected time, uncertainty takes on a radically different form. There are no alternative possible futures since the future is necessary. What replaces the disjunction is a *superposition* of states. Both the escalation to the extreme and its negation are part of the fixed future. It is because the former figures in the future that deterrence has a chance to work. It is because the latter figures in the future that the adversaries are not bound to destroy each other. Only the future when it comes to pass will tell.

The signature feature that distinguishes the two forms of uncertainty is the following: in occurring time, epsilon, the probability of the catastrophic scenario, can be equated to zero without that leading to a contradiction. If we continue to call epsilon the

relative weight that this scenario has in the superposition of states, then it is essential that epsilon remain strictly positive. Were it to become naught, the escalation to the extreme would become impossible, for the reasons already adduced, and deterrence would fail. Superposition of states and strict positivity of epsilon are kindred concepts.

I have arrived at the notion of superposition of states via a conceptual itinerary that owes nothing to quantum theory. However, one cannot but notice the resonances. There is probably an affinity, to say the least, between the metaphysics of projected time and some of the basic concepts of quantum theory. I cannot pursue this line of inquiry here (cf. Dupuy 2000). However, I have proposed to name the kind of uncertainty proper to projected time *indeterminacy*. That is the correct translation of the German word *Unbestimmtheit* which Heisenberg chose to name his famous relation: *Unbestimmtheitsrelation*, infelicitously translated as “principle of uncertainty.”

It’s time to conclude. The nuclear deterrent that really works has been, and still is potentially, *the indeterminacy of the future in a conception of time that makes the future necessary*. It is indeed possible to provide rational foundations to the efficiency of nuclear deterrence. And that conclusion is horrendous.²⁵

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²⁵ I share this conclusion with one of the greatest specialists of the domain, Stanford professor emeritus Barton Bernstein. Private communication, winter 2018.

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Reason Reborn: Pietistic Motifs in Kant's Moral Philosophy

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The influence of Pietism on Kant's criticism, especially on his moral philosophy, is a question of lasting discomfort.¹ All authors, biographers and commentators alike, inevitably start by mentioning the Pietistic background of Kant's upbringing, stressing how deeply he was marked by his beloved mother Anna Regina, a devout Pietist.² Similarly, it is usually remarked that in the 1730s, at the time of Kant's childhood, Königsberg was a major stronghold of Pietism; that Franz Albert Schultz, the leading figure of Königsberg Pietism, was a regular guest in the Kant household, and personally intervened in support of his education; and lastly, that Kant attended the *Collegium Fridericianum*, an educational institution that followed the same principles as the *Franckesche Anstalten* in Halle where everything was organized under the

¹ This article relies on the material published in the paper "Moralnost ponovnega rojstva," *Stati inu obstati*, Nr. 26 (2017), pp. 243–69. Kant's works (Kant 1922—) are cited according to the *Akademie-Ausgabe* (AA), save for the *Critique of Pure Reason* (*KrV*) which is cited according to the pagination of the first (A) and second (B) editions. Unless indicated otherwise, the translations are taken from the *Cambridge Edition* of Kant's works.

² It was because of the example she set that Kant always felt a deep respect for the moral attitude of the Pietists. According to Rink, Kant commented: "One may say as many bad things about Pietism as one will. Enough already. The people who took it seriously were characterized by a certain kind of dignity. They possessed the highest qualities that a human being can possess. [...] In short, even a mere observer was bound to feel respect" (Rink 1805, pp. 13–14; my translation).

sign of Pietistic thought.³ In short: because in his youth Kant was virtually immersed in a Pietistic environment, it is generally acknowledged that Pietism was bound to leave deep traces in his way of thinking, in his philosophy in general, and in the field of morality in particular.

But once an attempt is made to specify this essentially tautological conclusion, divergences arise and calls for restraint are usually voiced. If Paulsen, the author of *Kant, Philosopher of Protestantism*, concluded that Kant's "morality is nothing but the translation of this Christianity," which he had grown familiar with as a child, "from the religious language to the language of reflection" (Paulsen 1902, p. 339), Kant's more recent biographer claims, on the contrary, that it is "absurd" to talk about any positive influence of Pietism in this regard:

If Pietism had any influence on Kant at all, then it was a negative one. It may have been precisely because he was acquainted with Pietism that he came to reject almost completely any role of feeling in morality. If anything, Kant's moral and religious views betray a definite anti-Pietistic bias. (Kuehn 2001, p. 54)⁴

Two recent monographs devoted to the problem of Pietistic influence on Kant, *Kant and Pietism* (Yamashita 2000) and *Freedom Reborn* (Szyrwińska 2017), fail to bring us any closer to a definitive conclusion. The question of Kant's reception of Pietism thus "continues to be regarded as open" (Szyrwińska 2017, p. 2).

³ For a more detailed presentation of Kant's college and his schooling, see Klemme 1994. The college motto read: *Pietas fundamentum omnium virtutum*.

⁴ This assessment, too, can be supported by Kant's own words, for instance by his judgment in *The Contest of Faculties* (AA 7, p. 57): "But it was not contempt for piety that made 'Pietist' a sect name (and a certain contempt is always connected with such a name); it was rather the Pietists' fantastic and—despite all their show of humility—proud claim to be marked out as supernaturally favored children of heaven, even though their conduct, as far as we can see, is not the least better in moral terms than that of the people they call children of the world."

There are several reasons that can help to explain this situation. First, Pietism was an extremely diverse movement that established a complex network of alliances and oppositions in the German space and beyond. Any general definition of it thus soon turns out to be misleading.⁵ It is probably appropriate to describe it as a repetition of Luther's gesture within the Protestant movement, when members of the reformed Church—disappointed with ossification and hypocrisy that had spread through the new institutions—emphasized the importance of personal experience, true belief, and active manifestation of faith in everyday life. However, since Pietism emerged as a countermovement that lacked a well-defined doctrinal core, depending on circumstances it was bound to produce different, even contrary manifestations.

Indeed, it suffices to compare the Halle and the Moravian varieties of Pietism—regardless of their geographical and historical proximity—to notice the immense discrepancies both in their basic attitudes, and in the organization of everyday life. Similarly, it is common to treat the Enlightenment and Pietism as contrary intellectual movements that usually took opposing views in philosophical disputes, in particular on the issue of free will that led to the notorious controversy between Wolff and Lange.⁶ Yet, in spite of that, Wolff's and Pietists' teachings also happened to coincide on numerous points. This conciliatory tendency was especially strong in Königsberg Pietism: both Franz Albert Schultz and Martin Knutzen, Kant's professor at the Albertina, strived to produce some kind of synthesis of the two schools of thought.⁷

⁵ For a brief presentation of the main traits and leading figures of Pietism, see Schmidt 1972; Beyreuther 1978; and Lindberg 2005.

⁶ For a closer examination of the controversy, see "Libertà e fatalismo. Sulla polemica tra Joachim Lange e Christian Wolff" (Bianco 1992, pp. 31–84). The controversy was famously put to rest by the King's decree ordering Wolff, under the threat of capital punishment, to leave Prussian territories within forty-eight hours.

⁷ Wolff allegedly said: "If there is anyone at all who did understand me, then it is *Schultz* in Königsberg" (Erdmann 1876, p. 26).

For this reason, it is once again very difficult to tell what exactly should be taken as a distinctive mark of Pietism, and to what extent the presence of certain claims betrays its specific influence.

Furthermore, we have to consider the fact that Kant's philosophy, too, was neither a homogenous nor a stable formation. Of course, Kant had to go a long and uneven way in order to finally formulate his critical position, and on this journey he was bound to defend many theses that, in retrospect, sound completely un-Kantian. What is more important, however, is that this process of constant transformation continued even after the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and indeed until Kant's death. For this reason, it is hardly possible to speak of a unified doctrine in Kant, not only with regards to the proper relationship between constitutive fields of critical philosophy, but also within each of the fields themselves.

When it comes to Kant's moral philosophy, the situation is no different. It can be shown that at the time of publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781, and even for some years after that, Kant defended a highly elaborate theory of morality that derived the existence of the unconditional obligation from the necessary conditions of unity of the subject of rational action, while placing the incentive of moral action in the pursuit of happiness as a supposedly necessary demand of any rational and finite being. The radical rupture which still remains largely unexplained, in particular because its basic tenet was rather anticritical, followed around 1784, when in addition to the notion of autonomy Kant introduced also the concept of pure will, and started to treat the moral subject as a pure rational being *separated* from anything belonging to sensibility.⁸ However, the process of transformation did not stop there. While in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) Kant basically

⁸ For a closer examination of Kant's moral theory in the period of the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, including the assessment of possible reasons that brought about the rupture, see Kobe 2015.

tried to establish the possibility of a moral deed, in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1792) his exposition was focused around the problem of evil in a way that is strictly speaking unthinkable within the conceptual framework of his critical philosophy.⁹ Once again, this internal dynamism makes it hard to determine what exactly we are talking about when we speak of Kant's notion of morality. Relying on selective use of his statements, fairly diverse versions of his moral philosophy can be presented.

Finally, the question of the influence of Pietism on Kant faces a certain methodological difficulty, as it is far from clear in which area and in what way such influence should manifest itself. As long as Pietism is treated as a religious movement, the interaction seems to be categorically excluded. As a philosopher, Kant always insisted on autonomy of reason and denied that transcendence could play any founding role in matters of morality. But the influence of Pietism was not confined to the religious realm. It is well established, for instance, that by insisting on careful self-examination, and by actively inducing strong emotional states, Pietism made a lasting impact on the German vocabulary for expressing psychological phenomena. But above all, we must take into account the fact that in the Pietist environment a series of topics, and a number of habits of thought were formed that, embedded in everyday life, progressively lost their theological reference.¹⁰ This aspect is even more important in Kant's case, because, as I will claim, he displayed a similar modular style of thinking. In Kant, one can often observe how a certain complex of

⁹ A similar thesis defending a further development of Kant's moral philosophy *after* the *Groundwork* was recently proposed by Kervégan: "Everything happens so as if, from 1785 to 1793, the center of gravity of practical philosophy had *moved from the will* [volonté, i.e. Wille] *to the choice* [arbitre, i.e. Willkür]" (Kervégan 2015, p. 56).

¹⁰ This was stressed by Bianco in his path-breaking *Motivi pietistici nel pensiero dell'età di Goethe* (Bianco 1976). Part two, dedicated to Zinzendorf, regrettably was never published.

thoughts is not bound to its original content, but frees itself from its initial context and is then used and reused for other purposes. A suitable illustration is provided by paralogsms: Kant had already made use of the topic of an unavoidable error in reasoning that is discernable only from a very particular standpoint in his first published essay; in different stages of his intellectual development, he then exploited the topic for various other purposes, until finally managing to refute rational psychology by “discovering” that this was the error upon which the entire project of rational psychology had been built.

Our general thesis is that the influence of Pietism on Kant is to be traced at this modular level, and that in this respect Pietism indeed left marked traces in his moral philosophy. In order to show this, we will first indicate what, at least for our present purpose, constitutes the typical features of Pietist thought. Next, we will demonstrate the presence of Pietistic motifs both in Kant’s philosophy of religion and in his moral philosophy. Here, we won’t pretend to be drawing up an exhaustive list on the topic; however, we will try to protect ourselves against the objection of an arbitrary interpretation that takes every resemblance as sufficient proof of effective influence. Thus, we will limit ourselves only to those motifs that both display a strong resemblance to Pietism and clash with Kant’s general theory. Only after having determined that a certain complex of thoughts is somehow out of place in the Kantian system, while fitting neatly into the Pietist mental world, will I venture the assertion that it is in fact possible to speak of the influence of Pietism.

I

Pietism is a very diverse formation which is not easily reduced to a common denominator. Nevertheless, one can agree with Bruno Bianco, who (at least at the theological level) takes its “central motif” to be that of

“rebirth” (*Wiedergeburt*) of a man who, justified by faith, manifests in the fruits of his labors his participation in the divine life in accordance with the “justification” (*Rechtfertigung*). (Bianco 1976, p. 18)

The motif of rebirth, or new birth, has evolved as a radicalization of a Pauline topic that was already used by Luther in order to formulate his views on justification. With a generous degree of simplification, we can say that according to Catholic dogma man can be justified by his works. By accepting baptism, man is freed from the inherited burden of mortal sin, and can start afresh, meaning that salvation lies, at least in principle, in his hands. It turns out, of course, that the task is too demanding for this worldly creature to be able to perform it on his own. Consequently, help from above is required, especially in the form of the sacrament of forgiveness. Nevertheless, there is still some fundamental continuity between the two worlds: the greater the sum of good works over bad works, the greater the probability that the bliss of eternal life will be bestowed upon someone. As you lived in this world, one could say, so you shall live in the next.

For Luther, such a conception was unacceptable. In his view, sin is the ontological condition of man after the fall from God, so that forgiveness of sins is inevitably futile; it is as if trying to cure a person by simply erasing the visible marks of her illness. Salvation is therefore always undeserved. Indeed, the mere suggestion of bringing God's actions within the borders of our understanding is already a sign of disrespectful pretense. On the basis of such considerations, Luther restored the distinction between law and faith and, in the footsteps of Paul, affirmed that we can only be justified by faith: “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom 3:28). Works in themselves are irrelevant; their true value within the economy of salvation is determined by and grounded in their relation to faith: if performed out of faith, works are considered good regardless of their consequences; conversely, if performed without faith,

they bring no merit as regards salvation, irrespective of their humanly perceived goodness. What counts, is *sola fides*. Faith is a gift of God, however, which it is impossible to deserve. It is a proof of His presence, indeed, a miracle that occurs in us without a sufficient reason—strictly speaking without any reason—as an irruption of an entirely other order. The only thing we can do is accept this unmerited gift and remain faithful to it.¹¹

Because sin stands for the ontological condition of man, the receiving of faith entails a complete reversal of man's inner economy. In describing this event, Paul already referred to the death of the old and the resurrection of the new man (see Rom 6:5). Drawing on this metaphor, a figure of rebirth took shape in Pietism, and Spener, the informal founder of the movement, made it the central motif of the new piety. In the sermon *On the Necessity of Rebirth* he says:

If a subject-matter inherent in our Christianity is needed, it is certainly the subject-matter of rebirth, in which conversion, justification, and the beginning of our salvation coincide, and which forms the foundation of all other salvation, or the fountain from which everything good that is and that happens to us in our entire life must spring. Therefore, anyone who understands it correctly, certainly understands correctly the whole of Christianity, too. (Quoted in Jannasch & Schmidt 1965, pp. 44–45)

In Spener, rebirth was understood as a real event, accompanied by all the signs of physical birth: it “comes from above,” man “does not do anything”; the event itself is violent and laborious; in it, “something comes into being that has not existed before”; and just as once we were the children of our parents, we have now

¹¹ The gift of faith bears a strong resemblance to the logic of an event and to subsequent subjectivization, as Badiou describes it. This is no coincidence. In this regard, a clear line can be established leading from Badiou back to Heidegger, and from Heidegger further back to Luther and Saint Paul.

“become children of God.” By being born again, we have thus not only become different, but rather another person, and even though a view from the outside perceives no manifest change, “the inside, the meaning, and the attitude have been entirely transformed.” Because there is no direct correlation between the inner attitude and the outside appearance, one would expect that the mere fact of rebirth does not affect the outer configuration of works. However, it seemed natural to Spener—as to Luther before him—that the inner attitude should in a certain way also find an outward expression. Hence the idea that those reborn will confirm the fact of their salvation by constantly increasing their perfection through good deeds, that is, by living in ever greater conformity with God’s law. The good works, once the active cause of salvation, thus turn into outer manifestations of it.

For Spener, it was the structure of rebirth that was important, whereas its inner dynamics were left very much open. His pupil August Hermann Francke, however, understood rebirth as a violent physical event that took place in a precisely determined space and time. Francke prescribed a standard choreography consisting of four steps, which he presumably derived from his personal experience, which always played a significant role in Pietism (see Bianco 1976, p. 21). First, a deep personal crisis occurs, leading the sinner, usually awakened by a verse from the Bible, to realize the depth of his corruption and to fall into despair. After the *struggle of contrition* (*Bußkampf*), which varies in duration, there follows a firm *decision* or *resolve* (*Entschluß*) to leave the old life of sin behind, and to devote oneself completely to God. Only after man does everything that is in his power, the repentant sinner is penetrated by the grace of God, bringing to him a peace of mind and the unshakable certainty of God’s presence. This *eruption* or *breakthrough of grace* (*Durchbruch der Gnade*) corresponds to the moment of rebirth. In the fourth and final step, a new life follows for the reborn. The renewed life, however, does not consist in peaceful enjoyment of the certainty of salvation,

but rather forms a path of constant *self-examination* (*Selbstprüfung*), with the person continually scrutinizing her thoughts and inclinations, confirming her certainty of being in God's favor by steadily growing in moral perfection.

The fact that Francke was an exceptionally successful pedagogue, who founded numerous educational institutions, helped greatly in spreading his model of rebirth across the Prussian territories. Among many to attend an institution organized in accordance with Francke's principles was Emanuel Kant. To be sure, Kant did not retain warm memories of *Collegium Fridericianum*. It is certain, however, that he grew well acquainted with the four-stroke sequence of Francke's model, which could be summed up as follows: Humiliation—Decision—Rebirth—Moral Growth. As we shall see, this model, combined with the opposition between the inner and the outer man, which is congruent enough with Kant's duality of the intelligible and the empirical, left clear traces in his philosophy.

II

In April 1792, Kant published the essay "On the Radical Evil in Human Nature" that later became part of in his *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. In the essay, he developed his views on religion by drawing heavily upon moral considerations, so that it may well appear that, for him, religion was nothing but an extension of morality. But, as Bruch remarked, rather the opposite was the case: "it is on the basis of Christian concepts and schemes that Kant structured his fundamental moral concepts" (Bruch 1968, p. 80).

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant denied any constitutive role to the concept of good, instead preferring to build the realm of morality upon the existence of unconditional bindingness. The concept of good was declared in itself empty. In a

move that ran strictly parallel to the first Copernican Turn, Kant maintained that the good was first brought about and determined as a consequence of acting upon the moral law. Similarly, within the conceptual framework of the *Critique of Practical Reason* evil was just a failure to fulfill the requirements of reason—a failure that man as a finite rational being at any rate is unable to entirely avoid. In direct opposition to this model (but, for that matter, in accordance with the common Lutheran belief), in *Religion* Kant states that good and evil always presuppose a respective maxim that, in turn, has to be grounded in an act of freedom: “[F]reedom of the power of choice has the characteristic, entirely peculiar to it, that it cannot be determined to action through any incentive *except so far as the human being has incorporated it into his maxim*” (AA 6, pp. 23–24). In order to perform an evil deed, the human being must now, in a sense, first choose to be evil.¹²

How is such a choice possible? To answer this question, Kant first pointed out that, as a rational yet finite being, man is simultaneously subjected to two principles, namely to the principle of morality and to the principle of happiness (or of love and self-love), which inevitably raises the question of their respective hierarchy. But above all, Kant developed the concept of the primordial “intelligible deed” (AA 6, p. 31), defined as primordial in the sense of supposedly having taken place outside any temporal condition, before the beginning of time, when the subject had freely determined his intelligible character, giving priority to the one principle over the other. It would be only rational to expect that the subject preferred the principle of morality. However, because Kant thought evil was not only real but constituted the natural condition of man, he was bound to argue that in our

¹² See AA 6, p. 32: “In view of what has been said above, the statement, ‘The human being is *evil*, cannot mean anything else than that he is conscious of the moral law and yet has incorporated into his maxim the (occasional) deviation from it.’ These two references were widely exploited by Allison who, on their basis, formulated the so-called “incorporation thesis”; see Allison 1996, p. 130.

transcendental past we had, inexplicably, given preference to the principle of happiness. Kant thus developed a highly paradoxical view that in that decisive moment of choice when we truly had all the freedom, because what was at stake was the original determination of our intelligible character as such, we, as it were, blew it; and that now that we possess a clear consciousness of the moral law, and thus should be capable of doing something, we are simply powerless, because from the moral point of view every action of ours is a mere consequence of that fundamental choice.

To be sure, such a conception is rather odd for Kant and, in my view, it is very difficult, strictly speaking impossible, to integrate it into his critical system. However, I will not tarry with the question of the true source of evil here. In the end, I can simply consider it a price that Kant had to pay in order to venture into the realm of religion in the first place. It is more interesting to note that this issue by no means exhausts all of the theoretical surprises. Kant allowed for “the possibility” of amending this self-inflicted propensity to evil in our nature, for if reason demands “that we *ought* to become better human beings,” i.e. that we ought to obey the moral law, “we must also be capable of it” (AA 6, p. 45). How? This

cannot be effected through gradual *reform*, but must rather be effected through a *revolution* in the disposition of the human being (a transition to the maxim of holiness of disposition). And so a “new man” can come about only through a kind of rebirth, as it were a new creation (John, 3:5; compare with Genesis, 1:2) and a change of heart. (AA 6, p. 47)

Kant further notes:

If by single and unalterable decision [Entschließung] a human being reverses the supreme ground of his maxims by which he was an evil human being (and thereby puts on a “new man”), he is to this extent, by principle and attitude of mind, a subject receptive to the good; but he is a good human being only in incessant laboring and

becoming, i.e. he can hope—in view of the purity of the principle he has adopted as the supreme maxim of his power of choice, and in view of the stability of this principle—to find himself upon the good (though narrow) path of constant *progress* from bad to better. (AA 6, p. 48)

Here, no additional proof is needed to assert that the motif of unalterable decision followed by a gradual and steady moral growth is clearly rooted in the Pietistic model. The explicit reference to “rebirth” (*Wiedergeburt*) makes this obvious. It is significant, however, that this time the motif in question is in direct contradiction with Kant’s ontology as developed in the process of resolving the third antinomy in the first *Critique*. Because the intelligible character is by its very notion outside time, and remains the same through all of the alterations of empirical character (*KrV*, B 854/A 556), it is simply *contradictory* to claim that the intelligible character could be subject to change—just as it would be contradictory for a triangle to alter its essence and become a square. As with every thing noumenal, the intelligible character cannot but be what it is.

Be it as it may, we are bound to conclude that here Kant was obviously prepared to assume something that is not only inconsistent with his moral philosophy, but also openly contradicts his critical ontology, just so that he could include the motif of rebirth.¹³ It is hard to imagine a better confirmation of strong Pietistic influence on Kant’s thought.

The intrusion of the motif of rebirth in the *Religion* is not a fleeting occurrence. This is amply illustrated by Kant’s reasoning in *The Contest of Faculties*. Discussing the conflict between the

¹³ Bruch arrived at a similar conclusion: “The first question to raise is the possibility of conversion, a possibility that can be contested both from the moral (Does the fallen man have the power to stand up again?) and from the metaphysical point of view (Is the very structure of conversion not in contradiction with the principles of the Kantian system?)” (Bruch 1968, p. 84).

philosophical and theological faculties, Kant first asks the question, how could Christianity really become “present in the hearts of human beings” (AA 7, p. 54)? This then leads him to the question: “how is rebirth (resulting from a conversion by which one becomes an other, new man) possible” (AA 7, p. 54)? Considering the fact that people tend to conflate the “supersensible” and the “supernatural,” there are, according to Kant, but two possible solutions to the problem of “the valiant Spener”:

I maintain that [...] we can predict a priori that people [...] must inevitably divide into sects over this problem. Indeed, I maintain that this division is the only one that entitles us to speak of two different religious sects. (AA 7, p. 54)

According to one hypothesis, man is by nature corrupt and incapable of converting on his own. To this end, therefore, “a supernatural operation [...], a breaking and crushing of the heart in *repentance*, a grief [...] bordering on despair” is needed. Once the “breakthrough [*Durchbruch*]” has taken place, “the purer metal of the *reborn* gleams through the dross, which surrounds but does not contaminate it,” so that one can now conduct a life that is pleasing to God. Here, “the radical change [...] begins with a *miracle*” and ends with what would be considered natural and rational. Contrary to this, the other view maintains that the sinful man takes “the first step” towards his improvement “quite naturally, by his *reason*; for as reason holds before him, in the moral law, the mirror in which he sees his guilt, this leads him, using his moral disposition to the good, to decide [*Entschließung*] that from now on he will make the law his maxim.” If conversion is an act of reason itself, according to this hypothesis it is “the carrying out of this resolution” that constitutes “a *miracle*,” since a human being is “naturally incapable” of persevering in this resolution and to “advance constantly in goodness.” In order to achieve this, he needs “nothing less than the feeling of supernatural communion with a heavenly spirit and even continuous awareness of intercourse with it” (AA 7, p. 56).

In short, according to Kant there are only two possible trajectories of rebirth. The human being is either so utterly corrupt that she can only be born again upon the intervention of heavenly grace, although from then on she is capable of persisting in goodness on her own; or the human being can be reborn completely by herself, relying on her reason alone, but then she needs divine support in order to persevere on this path. If the first version begins with a miracle and continues as nature, the other is triggered as a natural event and ends in a miracle.

According to Kant, this difference in the conception of conversion can be derived completely “a priori,” without relying on historical considerations. Still, it may be of significance that this a priori distinction corresponds precisely to “the Spener-Francke and the Moravian-Zinzendorf difference of sects” (AA 7, p. 55), which at the time constituted the two most prominent varieties of the Pietist movement. Even if this lucky coincidence were not interpreted as evidence of Pietistic influence, it would still testify to Kant’s view of the intimate relation between the requirements of pure reason, on the one hand, and the empirical reality of Pietism, on the other. As we shall see, this intimacy extends beyond Kant’s philosophy of religion.

III

The relation of Kant’s moral philosophy to Pietism is ambiguous. Judged on its principles alone, it would be difficult to find a system that is more clearly opposed to every religious, and thus also Pietistic, ethics than Kant’s morality of pure reason. Kant initially assumed nothing but the fact of reason, and on this ground alone, without any additional considerations that would refer to human nature or traditional notions about what is considered “good” and “proper,” he tried to establish the existence of unconditional obligations that bind any finite rational being as such. The decisive operation in his derivation of morality was performed by

the concept of autonomy of reason, i.e. the thesis that reason is, in its very essence, sovereign, and that it recognizes only the laws given to it by itself. In this manner, it became impossible to derive moral rules from the notion of a perfect being, and to treat them as God's laws, as was the case with the Pietist Crusius, for example.¹⁴ In order to establish morality, no God was needed. Moreover, as Kant explained in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the idea of God could even act as an obstacle to its realization. For if something that is morally commanded happens to be performed for the wrong reasons, for instance, out of fear of punishment in the afterlife, the deed automatically turns into a manifestation of heteronomy, and loses all its moral merit.¹⁵ In this respect, Kant's moral subject is rather opposed to positive religion.

But, on the other hand, when we look at the formal features of Kant's notion of morality, we can hardly avoid the impression of a strange affinity to Pietism. True, Kant builds the edifice of morality upon the law of universal and anonymous reason. This law, however, commands with such inflexible relentlessness that to a subject it must appear as an alien and oppressive agency. It is for this reason that Schiller blames Kant for the monastic disposition of morality repressing natural human inclinations and driving all the graces out (see Schiller 1902, p. 205). In other words, and this is interesting, Schiller addresses Kant's account with the very same reproach that Kant once addressed to Francke's Pietism.

The structural affinity does not stop there, however. According to Kant, the moral value of an action is not determined by its

¹⁴ See, for instance, Crusius 1744, p. 33 (§ 26): "*The morally good* is what is in accordance with God's moral purposes [...], that is, with his laws."

¹⁵ I have to admit that this is not the only possible reading of Kant's notion of morality. However, on several occasions Kant made definitive claims that for a deed to be considered moral implies that it must be performed exclusively on moral grounds; and in the period between the publication of *Groundwork* and approximately 1790, this position was closely related to the role of moral feeling. For a more detailed presentation of the argument, see Kobe 2008, pp. 99ff.

outer appearance, for instance by the effects brought about in the phenomenal world, but rather by the subject's intention,¹⁶ and in the final analysis by the question of what figured as the determining ground of the will. If an action was performed out of the respect for the moral law, if its incentive was moral feeling, then the action was morally good, whereas otherwise it would be at best morally neutral. This requirement considerably complicates the evaluation of the moral worth of an action. Because other subjects can only see the consequences, which are irrelevant in this respect, but cannot observe the maxim, they can never really know whether the action in question was morally good. Moreover, this knowledge also remains out of reach for the subject of action, for she can never positively ascertain that no pathological inclination played a causally determining role in it. Thus, Kant developed a system of morality in which the moral worth of an action is not susceptible to empirical verification, and in which even the moral subject has no insight into her own morality.

For a system based on reason, this is definitely strange. However, once respect is replaced with faith, and morality with justification, it becomes apparent that Kant's conception of true morality almost seamlessly coincides with the problem of justification by faith characteristic of Protestants in general and of Pietists in particular.¹⁷ Just as for Pietists works do not count unless

¹⁶ Paradigmatic formulations of this point can be found in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*: "A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes, [...] but only because of its volition, that is, it is good in itself [...]. Even if, by special disfavor of fortune or by the niggardly provision of a stepmotherly nature, this will should wholly lack the capacity to carry out its purpose [...], then, like a jewel, it would still shine by itself, as something that has its full worth in itself. Usefulness or fruitlessness can neither add anything to this worth nor take anything away from it" (AA 4, p. 394).

¹⁷ Kant had already drawn an analogous connection between morality and justification in his precritical lectures on moral philosophy: "But now ethics tells us to act from a good disposition. [...] God desires, not the action, but the heart. Heart is the principium of moral disposition" (AA 27, p. 274).

they are performed in faith, so for Kant the decisive question is that of the determining ground of action; and just as for Pietists the subject can never be entirely certain of her salvation, so for Kant it is not entirely clear that in the whole history of mankind a single morally good deed was ever performed.¹⁸ Anyone who claims to be morally good, or even to have performed a single good deed, claims something that cannot be known.¹⁹ In view of such considerations it is possible to understand the position of those commentators who see in Kant's morality at least a partial translation of Protestant religiousness into the language of reflection, whereby the place of God's law is occupied by an equally inflexible and impenetrable law of pure reason.

However, as we already noted, such an agreement is by itself not yet proof, but only warrants the conclusion that both Pietism and critical philosophy draw from the same source, and that they both stress the importance of the subjective moment. There are, I propose, two specific arguments, namely the genesis of moral feeling and the postulate of the immortality of the soul, that compel us to think that Kant actually borrowed some elements of his moral philosophy from Pietistic thought. Without this assumption, it is almost impossible to explain their presence in Kant's system.

Let us begin with moral feeling. The structural place of moral feeling in Kant's system was by no means stable. Under the influence of English theory of moral sense, Kant initially treated

¹⁸ "In fact, it is absolutely impossible by means of experience to make out with complete certainty a single case in which the maxim of an action otherwise in conformity with duty rested simply on moral grounds and on the representation of one's duty" (AA 4, p. 407). And similarly: "Perhaps no one has ever performed quite unselfishly (without admixture of other incentives) the duty he cognizes and also reveres; perhaps no one will ever succeed in doing so, however hard he tries" (AA 8, pp. 284–85).

¹⁹ "I readily grant that no one can become aware with certainty of *having performed his duty* quite unselfishly" (AA 8, p. 284).

it as a faculty for perceiving good and evil. In the 1770s, when unconditional bindingness had gained a definitive foundation in reason, moral feeling acted mainly as a kind of bridge between the intelligible and the sensible, that is, its function was to provide the principles of pure reason with the means of realizing themselves in the empirical world. It became the *principium executionis* of the moral deed. Kant was well aware of the paradoxical character of this intermediate entity, which had one foot in the noumenal and the other in the phenomenal world, and contented himself with the remark that this was as it was. In *Reflection* 6860, presumably written in the second half of the 1770s, he contends:

We cannot have any concept of how a mere form of actions could have the power of an incentive. Yet this must be if morality is to obtain, and experience confirms it. (AA 19, p. 183)

In the lectures from about the same period, he similarly described the problem of the genesis of moral feeling as the “philosophers’ stone,” that is to say, as an impossible task similar to that of turning lead into gold.²⁰ Kant held on to this view in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Even in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, after already abandoning the theory of morality as one’s worthiness to be happy, Kant still claimed that “it is quite impossible to see [...] how a mere thought which itself contains nothing sensible produces a feeling of pleasure or displeasure” (AA 4, p. 460), and that it “is quite beyond the capacity of any human reason to explain *how* pure reason [...] can be of itself practical,” that is, “how the mere *principle of the universal validity* [...] can of itself furnish an incentive” (AA 4, p. 461).

²⁰ “The moral feeling is a capacity for being affected by a moral judgment. When I judge by understanding that the action is morally good, I am still very far from doing this action of which I have so judged. But if this judgement moves me to do the action, that is the moral feeling” (AA 27, p. 1428).

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, this restriction suddenly falls. What used to be inconceivable turned out to be conceivable after all, for now Kant attempts not only to “show” that “pure reason of itself alone suffices to determine the will” (AA 5, p. 15), but also “to determine carefully in what way the moral law becomes the incentive” (AA 5, p. 72). The genesis of moral feeling should, Kant now claims, follow a two stage scheme, which can be described a priori. First, the moral law confronts the subject with an unconditional demand that shows no regard whatsoever for his inclinations, and thus “*infringes upon* [his] self-love” (AA 5, p. 73). In the first step, the moral law unavoidably humiliates the subject, affects his self-conceit in which he takes himself to be the center of his world: it inflicts “pain” on him. In the second step, however, this negative feeling automatically turns into a positive one, into the feeling of respect, and as such it can now serve as the incentive for performing a moral deed in the phenomenal world.

How does this conversion take place? In order to explain it, Kant resorts to an old argument that boils down to saying that, in the final analysis, it makes no difference if we raise the strength of the positive incentive for the moral action or remove the hindrances that act against it: “For, whatever diminishes the hindrances to an activity is a furthering of this activity itself” (AA 5, p. 79). Since humiliation reduces the strength of preexisting sensible inclinations, which the moral feeling must overcome in order to produce the appropriate action, it can also be taken as a strengthening of the moral feeling. To this extent, the pain of humiliation is itself equivalent to a positive feeling.

Thus far Kant. It is not difficult to see, however, that this essentially hydraulic argument is bound to fail, for it is not qualitative but *quantitative in structure*. It explains how a degree of something that already exists can rise, but it cannot explain how something not yet existing could begin existing in the first place.

In other words, if we assumed that human beings are naturally endowed with a certain inclination towards good, then we could successfully use the above mechanism to increase the strength of this already existing incentive, perhaps even up to a level where it would overcome all pathological inclinations. Yet in no way would this explain how a human being who, according to the assumption, does not yet have, and cannot have, a natural inclination towards good originally obtains something like moral feeling. However, the aim of Kant's reasoning was to demonstrate precisely that. The argument is therefore blatantly invalid.²¹

Why Kant nonetheless used the argument remains a mystery. It should be noted, however, that the entire derivation of moral feeling in its two steps displays an unusually close affinity to the Pietistic conception of rebirth, which is, as we have seen, also characterized by a sequence of initial distress, despair about oneself, which then turns into its opposite. Let us once again take a look at Kant's description of the origin of moral feeling:

Hence the moral law unavoidably humiliates every human being when he compares with it the sensible propensity of his nature. If something represented as a *determining ground of our will* humiliates us in our self-consciousness, it awakens *respect* for itself insofar as it is positive and a determining ground. Therefore the moral law is even subjectively a ground of respect. (AA 5, p. 74)

Humiliation is induced by the comparison between the sublimity of the moral law and the "sensual propensity of human nature," that is, it is induced in a situation that corresponds

²¹ It may be added that Kant must have been aware of this. For in an early attempt to introduce the concept of negative magnitudes into philosophy he listed very precise conditions of the validity of his argument; and in the case in question, these conditions were not met: "A real repugnancy only occurs where there are two things, as *positive grounds*, and where one of them cancels the consequence of the other" (AA 2, p. 175).

remarkably to the condition of a Pietist addressed by God.²² To describe this condition, Kant uses the word *Demütigung*, which is usually translated as humiliation, but which literally means “waning of courage,” “loss of self-confidence,” and thus indicates the very state of despair that characterizes the Pietist prior to being reborn. Indeed, the entire scene, both in terms of content and vocabulary, gives the impression of being taken out of some Pietistic manual. Kant notes, for instance, that practical reason “strikes down self-conceit altogether” (AA 5, p. 73), just as with regards to Pietists he speaks of “a breaking und crushing of the heart” (AA 7, p. 55). He also comments that “all claims to esteem for oneself that precede accord with the moral law are null and quite unwarranted” (AA 5, p. 73), which again is almost indistinguishable from the desolate condition of a repenting Pietist who is desperately aware of his or her powerlessness and worthlessness.²³

In Pietism, this condition of utter desolation is typically followed by a radical conversion: the despair turns into a firm

²² The analogy did not go unnoticed; see, for instance: “The Law, just like the word of God, is violent. If I may shift the focus of Kant’s imagery while still retaining its biblical color, it is as if the Law preempted a space otherwise occupied by nature alone” (di Giovanni 2005, p. 170).

²³ But perhaps there is no need to go back to Pietism, and a simple comparison with Luther will do. In his famous sermon *On the Freedom of a Christian*, Luther describes a similar situation, which is even more telling since, here, the *humiliation* is brought about by the *law* itself—the law of God, to be sure, but a law nonetheless: “Although the commandments teach things that are good, the things taught are not done as soon as they are taught, for the commandments show us what we ought to do but do not give us the power to do it. They are intended to teach man to know himself, that through them he may recognize his inability to do good and may despair of his ability. [...] Now when a man has learned through the commandments to recognize his helplessness and is distressed about how he might satisfy the law [...] then [he is] truly humbled [*gedemütigt*] and reduced to nothing in his own eyes” (Luther 1989, p. 600). It should be noted that it is often very difficult to determine the exact source of a certain motif, whether it comes from the general Lutheran tradition or specifically from the Pietistic world.

decision that hereafter one will follow the path of God. As we have seen, it was with regard to the exact course of this reversal that Kant a priori derived a distinction between the two sects, a posteriori called “Spener-Francke” and “Moravian” Pietism. In the first, the decision can only be taken through the intervention of God’s grace, while in the second, the natural power of reason should suffice:

For as reason holds before him, in the moral law, the mirror in which he sees his guilt, it leads him, using his moral disposition to the good, to decide that from now on he will make the law his maxim. (AA 7, p. 56)

What Francke attributed to the effect of God’s address to the sinner, prompting him to see all the depth of his depravity, this should be, according to Zinzendorf, produced already by the prescription of the moral law alone, which makes the subject aware of his inadequacy.²⁴ By now, it probably goes without saying that the humiliation that Kant speaks of while considering the genesis of the moral feeling refers to a situation of a virtually identical structure. The choreographies of both cases overlap to such a degree that it is difficult to tell whether the above description refers to the process whereby the necessary conditions to perform a moral action are established, or to the moment of

²⁴ Kant’s portrayal of Zinzendorf’s conception seems a bit forced, though. Zinzendorf indeed opposed Francke’s emphasis on the struggle of repentance, noting that while a child’s teething might well be plagued by pain, it would be absurd to inflict pain in order to make teeth grow: “Therefore, I consider all birth-laboring that the souls are induced to not only unnecessary to the spiritual rebirth, but also harmful” (Zinzendorf 1747, p. 68). It is also true that, according to Zinzendorf, the spiritual rebirth could have taken place already in the mother’s womb, so that in one’s physical life no additional intervention is needed. This does not mean, however, that a man could be reborn out of himself, as Kant seems to imply. For a closer assessment of Zinzendorf’s notoriously vexed theological conceptions, see Beyreuther 2000, in particular pp. 248ff.

rebirth. Therefore, it can be safely affirmed that Kant's account of the genesis of moral feeling effectively draws on the Pietistic motif of rebirth, especially since Kant's immanent derivation of the moral feeling was shown to be inconclusive.²⁵

Let us now turn to the postulate of the immortality of the soul. Kant introduces it in the dialectics of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, together with the postulates of freedom and God's existence, as an attempt to solve the antinomy arising from the fact that we are unconditionally bound to realize the highest good in the world, which however consists of two independent elements: morality and happiness. On the basis of the same idea of the highest good, we are allegedly further obliged to manifest "the complete conformity of dispositions with the moral law" which would correspond to the "holiness" of the will (AA 5, p. 122). Since for a finite rational being such holiness is not possible, while also being unconditionally commanded, Kant now argues that there can only be "an *endless progress* toward that complete conformity." And further, since this endless or infinite progress is "possible only on the presupposition of the *existence* and personality of the same rational being continuing *endlessly*," it is necessary to assume as the condition of possibility of the highest good in the world and thereby as the postulate of practical reason that the soul is immortal.

However, Kant does not seem to care all that much for immortality. It is probably more important to him that the whole

²⁵ When examining Pietism, Kant was perfectly aware of the fact that without God's intervention the conversion was possible only under the assumption that, in spite of radical evil, there still remains in us an original propensity for good: "Surely, we must presuppose in all this that there is still a germ of goodness left in us in its entire purity, a germ that cannot be extirpated or corrupted" (AA 6, p. 45). In short, speaking of certain Pietistic sects, Kant knew very well that the calling of the moral law "simply makes room" for a conversion to good, for this spirit "is already present in us by our moral predisposition" (AA 7, p. 79). This circumstance provides an additional confirmation of our reading that Kant's argument is unable to justify an original coming into existence of moral feeling.

case implies moral perfectionism, that is, the claim that for a finite rational being morality is not some state to be reached at the end of the road but consists in the practice of self-overcoming and constant improvement in goodness:

For a rational but finite being only endless progress from lower to higher stages of moral perfection is possible. (AA 5, p. 123)

Here, it is of course not difficult to notice a close structural affinity with the Pietistic motif of a gradual moral improvement which serves as an outward sign of rebirth. In the sermon *On Christian Perfection*, Francke already commented in a similar vein that no matter how far a man has come in this growth “he is never completely perfect but he can grow and increase in good works as long as he lives” (Erb 1983, p. 115). Once more, this affinity cannot prove a direct influence. It is quite possible that the problem of thinking revolution and reformation together, or the problem of how something infinite could express itself in the medium of the finite, would in any case lead to the idea of endless approaching.

What is more significant is that within the framework of transcendental idealism Kant's argument does not allow us to conclude from this that the soul is immortal, but rather leads us to affirm the *immortality of the body!* As we have seen, the conclusion of immortality is predicated upon the demand for a continuous improving, i.e., *changing* in the direction of the good. Change is only possible *in time*. In the system of transcendental idealism, however, time is itself nothing but a form of sensibility, more precisely, the form of the inner sense. It is true that Kant was rather elusive on the exact relation between the outer and the inner sense, especially as regards the question of what happens after death with the so-called separation of the soul from the body. But at least in his lectures on metaphysics, delivered only few years prior to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure*

Reason, Kant presented a sufficiently detailed theory according to which sensibility, and thereby the temporality of the inner sense, is a result of the presence of the outer sense, which in turn is a consequence of the soul being attached to the body:

But when the soul separates itself from the body, then it will not have the same sensible intuition of this world; it will not intuit the world as it appears, but rather as it is. Accordingly the separation of the soul from the body consists in the *alteration of sensible intuition into spiritual intuition; and that is the other world*. The other world is accordingly not another location, but rather only another intuition. (AA 28, pp. 297–98)

Such a conception has some interesting consequences. It implies, for instance, that the virtuous person does not go to heaven only after her death, but already *is* in heaven; she just cannot *know* it yet: “Since I still have sensible intuition in this world, *I cannot at the same time have a spiritual intuition*” (AA 28, p. 300). Be it as it may, for our present purpose it is important that according to this account of bodily death—and to our knowledge, this is the only account of it that Kant explicitly presented against the background of his transcendental idealism²⁶—at the moment of death sensible intuition of oneself turns into spiritual intuition such that in it there remains nothing phenomenal or temporal anymore. The separation of the soul from the body brings about the end of time.

But consequently, the immortality of the soul turns out to be irrelevant for the problem of infinite moral progress. Once separated from the body, the soul simply has no more room for improvement. Like all things intelligible, the soul too then simply

²⁶ There is one other occasion, in *The End of All Things* from 1794, where Kant seems to explicitly deny the idea of duration or alternation after death (see AA 8, p. 327). There is no place for moral improvement in eternity, then. Compare also Menegoni 2005, pp. 87ff.

is what it is and is where it happens to be—if it is good, it is in heaven, that is, in the spiritual community of the virtuous, and if it is evil, it is in hell. Conversely, if we were to allow for the idea of endless progress, then under given ontological assumptions, the inseparability of the soul from the body would be required for this purpose. By the force of its very structure, Kant's argument in effect leads to the immortality of the body!

And this is no coincidence, as a brief comparison with Francke serves to demonstrate. In Francke the fact of rebirth was similarly associated with endlessly approaching moral perfection. But, we may ask, if now one has become a completely other, new man, why is one not immediately good in one's deeds as well? In *On Christian Perfection* Francke comments:

If a person is justified he can be completely certain of his blessedness. Nevertheless he immediately discovers the weakness of the flesh and inherited sinful behavior. He desires in the depth of his heart nothing other than God and eternal life and he looks upon everything which is in the world as the lust of the eye, the lust of the flesh and the pride of life as dirt and harm. Nevertheless, he discovers that original sin stirs in his flesh and causes in him all kinds of doubts and evil thoughts, at times evil inclinations of the will. Likewise he discovers that because of the great and long habit of sinning he often hastens into this or that external activity with words or deeds. (Erb 1983, p. 115)

The problem is, of course, that while the soul is reborn, *the body remains unchanged*; and because it has long been leading a sinful life, sin has become its habit. The body has thus become the seat of an independent, habitual, almost mechanical sinfulness that is now in a sense detached from the spirit. As a consequence, against his or her will, so to speak, and out of mere habit, even the justified still commit evil deeds. Such transgressions “however, are not reckoned to the justified man,” provided of course that rebirth really happened and is not just a fabrication of his self-

conceit. This is attested by his life in which he, aided by Jesus Christ, “strives with all earnestness against the evil which arises in his flesh” und thus forever improves in goodness.

In introducing the postulate of the immortality of the soul, Kant relied on an argument that corresponds to the Pietistic motif of endless moral improvement. In doing so, however, he happened to overlook the fact that, according to his own ontology, as well as in line with the Pietistic conception, this argument effectively validates the persistence of the body.

IV

The massive presence of the Pietistic motif of rebirth in Kant’s philosophy of religion, and above all the markedly Pietistic manner in which Kant explained the genesis of the moral feeling and the postulate of the immortality of the soul, undoubtedly establish the influence of Pietism on his moral philosophy. True, this influence appears at first as a kind of external disturbance, working against the inner consistency of Kant’s morality. But we have to consider the fact that this is a simple consequence of our own methodological decision not to satisfy ourselves with structural resemblances, but instead search for places where Kant is inconsistent according to his own criteria, and where consequently an external cause is needed to explain the apparent deviation.

Now that we have established the presence of Pietistic influences according to these stronger requirements, we are justified to seriously entertain the possibility of Pietistic influence in some other cases where its actuality is not so obvious. On the one hand, we are referring to the motifs of the sublimity of duty, the inflexibility of the moral law, which displays a sovereign indifference to subject’s inclinations while demanding unconditional subjection; and on the other, to the fact that the true moral value of an action depends on the intention that, as it were, remains a puzzle even

to the very subject who performs it. In both cases we witness a translation of the Pietistic and broader Protestant conception of justification by faith into the field of moral agency.²⁷

If this is correct, a distinctive Pietistic influence could perhaps paradoxically be situated historically in the period that coincides with the formation of a specific Kantian morality of pure reason. We have already noted that prior to the *Groundwork* Kant defended the system of morality as worthiness to be happy. Such a conception of morality has naturally led him to moral theology, that is, to the assumption of God's existence, for, as Kant maintained (see *KrV*, B 841/A 813), without such support morality would produce no effect. Yet in spite of this theological flair, the general structure of this moral theory was very much "worldly," even common: the acting subject was virtually immersed in the empirical world, in her moral actions she relied on the necessary pursuit of happiness, and even the value of her actions was independent of a particular pure feeling. All this changes abruptly, as Kant introduces the concept of autonomy, and then the concept of pure will. As if the emphasis on the pure subject, and the subsequent deepening of the split between the intelligible and the empirical, offered a favorable ground for the use of Pietistic models of thought. In any case, Kant now drew a sharp dividing line between the inner and the outer, to the effect that, for instance, moral evaluation of an action became an entirely inner category, independent of the consequences it produced in the world.

This is how the moral theory as we know it from the *Critique of Practical Reason* emerged. But as we already noted, the development did not end there. In the later writings, and by minimizing the formal character of morality, Kant ascribed an ever greater significance to the original decision between good and evil—a decision that was difficult to think within his previous critical framework,

²⁷ It has to be added that opacity of the moral motivation is a theme that had already been broadly discussed in the English philosophy of moral sense.

but which for that reason fit neatly in the moral theory of Pietism. On this basis it seems safe to assume that after its initial intrusion the influence of Pietism on Kant's moral theory actually grew stronger.

But let us return to our basic question. As long as we search for eventual influences of Pietism and, broadly speaking, Protestantism at the level of content, for instance at the level of the role attributed to God or religion within a certain philosophical system, we are bound to conclude that, at least from the *Groundwork* on, there is virtually no such influence to be found in Kant. Even in the late *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, where such material coincidence would arguably be the most probable, Kant openly declared:

So far as morality is based on the conception of the human being as one who is free but who also, just because of that, binds himself through his reason to unconditional laws, it is in need neither of the idea of another being above him in order that he recognize his duty, nor, that he observe it, of an incentive other than the law itself. (AA 6, p. 3)

However, as our study has hopefully shown, under this general atheistic orientation there often lay buried models of thought originating in religious discourse. Furthermore, everything suggests that it was precisely the introduction of autonomy and the pure subject that made Kant more receptive to Pietistic and Protestant mental schemes.

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Laughing with Kafka *after* Promethean Shame

Jean-Michel Rabaté

We have learned that Kafka's main works deploy a fully-fledged political critique whose main weapon is derision.¹ This use of laughter to satirize totalitarian regimes has been analyzed under the name of the "political grotesque" by Joseph Vogl. Here is what Vogl writes:

From the terror of secret scenes of torture to childish officials, from the filth of the bureaucratic order to atavistic rituals of power runs a track of comedy that forever indicates the absence of reason, the element of the arbitrary in the execution of power and rule. However, the element of the grotesque does not unmask and merely denounce. Rather it refers—as Foucault once pointed out—to the inevitability, the inescapability of precisely the grotesque, ridiculous, loony, or abject sides of power. Kafka's "political grotesque" displays an unsystematic arbitrariness, which belongs to the functions of the apparatus itself. [...] Kafka's comedy turns against a diagnosis that conceives of the modernization of political power as

¹ This essay is a condensed version of the second part of *Kafka L.O.L.*, forthcoming from Quodlibet in 2018. In the first part, I address laughter in Kafka's works, showing that it takes its roots in the culture of a "comic grotesque" dominant in Expressionist German culture. Günther Anders's groundbreaking book on Kafka then highlights the political dimensions of the work while criticizing Kafka's Promethean nihilism. Anders deploys his theory of technology and the posthuman in the context of "Promethean shame" that can be traced back to Kafka via his parable on "Prometheus."

a “rationalization process.” (Vogl 2006, p. 3; quoted in Corngold and Wagner 2011, p. 117)

Such political readings are current, but there was a time when religious or humanist interpretations of Kafka dominated. The first writer who rejected this consensus was Günther Anders, one of the most astute, albeit critical, commentators on Kafka. He shares that distinction with Walter Benjamin, who happened to be his cousin. I will summarize Anders’s general view of Kafka, mostly presented in one book that is now almost impossible to find, *Kafka, Pro et Contra*, published in 1951. The agonistic title was not meant to allude to Kafka’s legalistic propensities, or to the plot of the *Trial*, but to run against the grain of glosses that, following Max Brod’s biographical memoir, insisted on the religious and allegorical dimensions of the work. Anders, who had been a student of Husserl and Heidegger and was Hannah Arendt’s first husband, was a prolific and unclassifiable writer with a passion for Kafka. Although his work is being rediscovered when he discusses technology and the “posthuman,” his groundbreaking work on Kafka has been largely ignored.

Anders’s book starts with refutations: Kafka was not a “Jewish saint” as Brod had it; he was not a mythical dreamer or a religious writer. Instead, Anders presents Kafka as a “realist” writer, in the sense that he was a “realist fable-writer” (Anders 1960, p. 9). Kafka belongs to a group that includes Bertolt Brecht, and has nothing to do with Gershom Scholem. Kafka should not be identified with specifically Jewish Talmudic traditions. Kafka is a realist because he describes a contemporary society defined by repression and alienation. The horror of a post-Holocaust world that has numbed sensibilities makes Kafka’s vision even more relevant: “We are shown without further explanation how in reality men are not rendered speechless by the unspeakable, nor horrified by what is horrifying” (ibid., p. 15). The neutral tone used by Kafka is effective because it inverts the roles: instead

of saying “men are like beasts,” Kafka shows us beasts as men. This is the mainspring of tales like “Josephine” or “A Report to an Academy,” while “Investigations of a Dog” evokes Kafka’s position as a non-believer in the Jewish community. He managed to render his plight universal because we all risk turning into pariahs one day (Anders knew something about this state, which he had experienced firsthand as a blue-collar worker in California).

Anders meditates on Kafka’s famous aphorism: “The word ‘*sein*’ means two things in German: ‘being’ and ‘belonging-to-him’” (Kafka 1991, p. 86). Existence, for Kafka, means belonging, his quandary being that he cannot belong anywhere. Even if this lack of belonging seems to indicate some freedom, for Kafka “being” will never be equated with freedom. Freedom is excluded because of the prevalence of alienation in our world (Anders 1960, p. 21). Like Marx, Kafka sees distance and alienation not between man and God but between man and man.

For Anders, Kafka’s stories are neither allegorical nor symbolic: there is no transcendent Beauty or God that could be invoked. His texts rely on the device of literalized metaphors: thus Gregor Samsa becomes a monstrous *Ungeziefer*, while in the “Penal Colony,” the condemned man learns the verdict only when the text is inscribed in his body. Kafka follows the promptings of language. When K. is shown as having to “go to school again” in the village, he lives in a schoolroom (ibid., p. 45). This embodied and material use of language causes other problems, because different metaphorical levels are superimposed without any cohesion.

If Kafka is not writing allegories, when his language resorts to abstraction it is to reflect the fact that people have been torn away from the fullness of existence (ibid., p. 47). Abstraction has a comic function, for it reduces characters to marionettes, caricatures and robots that grotesquely enact repetitive gestures, a point made clearly by Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (see Hajdini 2015). People are reduced to the barest social functions

in Kafka, whose stories detail the rituals of power while insisting on human powerlessness. Such powerlessness feeds his characters' interpretive mania (Anders 1960, p. 51). We live in a world of infinite interpretations, but it is a world that cannot be changed. Kafka's world is frozen, a static embodiment of alienation (*ibid.*, p. 55). The paralysis of time duplicates the paralysis of the will: process turns into a pure picture, which is perceptible in the syntax. One revealing trope is the image of the wound inflicted by a lasting flash of lightning; the "static flash" betrays a renunciation to agency, which explains why in Kafka's work "trauma is cherished as a cultural possession" (*ibid.*, p. 62). Kafka stands as the exact opposite of Romanticism, for he does not believe in self-expression; his style remains neutral throughout for it enacts the alienation it describes (*ibid.*, p. 66). Kafka's sentences tend to sound like official notices couched in dense administrative language as in legal notices, medical records, or political tracts (*ibid.*, p. 69).

Kafka, for Anders, is not religious: he was swayed early by Nietzsche's critique of religion. Whatever faith remains boils down to the fact that not only are we alive, but we cannot *not* be alive (Kafka 1991, p. 98). Kafka criticizes Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism by denying any validity to freedom and endorsing the values of aestheticism: "By reducing [the content of religious belief] to a purely aesthetic level, he leaves no way open for a new beginning, but succeeds, ironically enough, in bringing to its ultimate culmination the very process he was ostensibly trying to resist. He is his own enemy, the most radical of his enemies" (Anders 1960, p. 79). This inner antagonism derives from the fact that Kafka's work is founded on Nietzsche's statement that "God is dead" (*ibid.*, p. 82). If a message from the divinity had been sent, it would never reach its addressee; even if it did after an almost infinite time, the originator would be dead. Unlike Nietzsche, Kafka does not attempt to free humanity from delusions: we remain entangled in a guilt that is unsurpassable. Kafka keeps a

desire to escape from his cell, knowing that the wish is doomed. What is dangerous in this attitude is that he upholds obedience to perverse or flawed laws.

If Anders pays attention to Biblical echoes in Kafka—he mentions the Book of Job, a text Brod averred Kafka often re-read—he often downplays their impact. This is what he notes about the Book of Job: “Job finally recognizes God because God has created ‘the hippopotamus and crocodile,’ whereas he himself has created nothing; so Kafka, or at least K., recognizes that his own powerlessness deprives him of the right to question the Law” (*ibid.*, p. 89). Kafka’s religious submission leads to humiliation but he may be saved by the humorous remark that the ontological proof requires a hippopotamus and a crocodile. In fact, Anders denies any longing for salvation: “Kafka’s petrified hope of salvation has as little to do with the Jewish religion as with Socialism” (*ibid.*, p. 91). If he is right to think that Kafka abandoned Scholem’s Messianism, we may remember that only his final illness prevented him from realizing a last dream—emigration to Palestine with Dora Diamant. Anders concludes that Kafka was a “Christianizing theologian of the Jewish world” (*ibid.*, p. 92). His main aim is to bring Kafka closer to Heidegger. For Anders, both Kafka and Heidegger kill Naturalism: they get rid of the natural and the supernatural at the same time (*ibid.*, p. 92).

This leads Anders to tackle a theme he developed in the 1950s: there is no “Nature” in Kafka’s works because they criticize a mechanized civilization dominated by a capitalism appropriating and exploiting everything, creating a society in which human beings are destroyed or treated like mere cogs (*ibid.*). Commenting on two stories (“Josephine” and “The Giant Mole”) from the point of view of the clash between orthodox and assimilated Jews, Anders condenses the contradictions in Kafka’s position as a series of paradoxes. Kafka is skiing on stones just to prove that one cannot ski there or he eats from an empty plate just to show that this is impossible (*ibid.*, p. 96). The antinomies listed here

aim at making us take a critical distance from any cult of Kafka. Here are some of them:

He is a realist of the dehumanized world: but also its exalter. [...]
He wants to arrive in the world: but he reaches it by way of disaster. [...]
He discusses rights: but does not even know if he has the right to do so.
He is an atheist: but makes of atheism a theology. [...]
He is a sceptic: but one who is skeptical of his own skepticism.
(Anders 1960, p. 97)

Is Kafka really an “ineffectual conformist who sees himself with the eyes of the authority he has courted in vain” (ibid., p. 98)? If this were so, we should agree with Anders’s harsh judgment: guilty! We might add that Kafka knew in advance that he would be found guilty.

As if he regretted these barbs, Anders returned to the issue three years later in an alert essay on Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (see Anders 1965). This essay baffled most readers, with the exception of Adorno, who took from it several brilliant ideas for his own essay on *Endgame*. Anders’s thesis on *Godot* expands the argument of the Kafka book: Anders rejects allegorical and religious interpretations of Beckett’s play, seen as a negative fable because it resorts to the Aesopian device of changing men into animals; the meaninglessness of his parable shows people who have been made meaningless by society. If Beckett falls into abstraction, it is only because being “abstract” means to be cut off from a community. The tramps may be alive but they no longer live in a “world.” Unlike Don Quixote, or K. in *The Castle*, characters who still acted and hoped, Beckett’s “paralyzed clowns” have renounced action: from the start, there is “nothing to do.”

The tramps go on living because living has become pointless. They prove that by dint of waiting it is worth it to wait for something. As Heidegger would say, Didi and Gogo remain

“metaphysicians” for they still believe in a meaning to come, even though they act parts devoid of meaning. No religious faith explains *Waiting for Godot*; God’s very absence proves his “being,” which is close to the proof *ex absentia* that defines Heidegger’s position on God. God *is* only in so far as he *is not*. The two clowns, because they live outside nature, time, and history, embody a “Being without time.” They thus provide an intelligent satire of Heidegger’s philosophy, a point not lost on Adorno (see Adorno 1991).

The irruption of the second couple, Lucky and Pozzo, has the effect of an interpretation. Of course, they figure as the Hegelian couple of the master and the slave, but here if the master is happy, we have an even happier slave—Lucky merits his name: he has no volition, no freedom to worry about. What Hegel and Marx had presented as the engine of history, the mechanism of exploitation and alienation, is now projected on the stage. This is enough to reawaken a sense that history has a meaning, even when it repeats itself as farce. Didi and Gogo envy the other couple, for Pozzo and Lucky have time to share, which means that they somehow *have* time. Thus, *Waiting for Godot* is not nihilistic; what saves the play from a residual nihilism is its bantering tone and the constant clowning of the characters. Anders concludes by paying homage to clowns like Charlie Chaplin:

[T]he character who earned more gratitude in our century than any other was the pitiful figure of the early Chaplin. Farce seems to have become the last asylum for compassion, the complicity of the sad our last comfort. And although the mere tone of humanness which springs from this barren soil of meaninglessness may only be a tiny comfort; and although the voice which comforts us does not know why it is comforting and who the Godot is for whom it makes us hope—it shows that warmth means more than meaning; and that it is not the metaphysician who has the last word. (Anders 1965, p. 151)

However, Anders is reluctant to see a similar pattern emerge in Kafka's texts. One may wonder: if all the elements are in place, why not recognize features of Chaplinesque farce in Kafka as well? An answer to this question is given in the essay on Beckett:

Since the early thirties when Hegel's dialectic and Marx's theory of the class struggle began to interest the younger generation in France, the famous image of the pair "*master and servant*" from Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* so deeply engraved itself into the consciousness of those intellectuals born around 1900 that it occupies today the place which the image of *Prometheus* held in the nineteenth century: it has become the *image of man in general*. Sartre is the chief witness of this change. True, in the Orestes of his *Les Mouches* he still presented the typical Promethean figure (as had Goethe, Shelley, Byron, and Ibsen); but afterwards he replaced this figure by the Hegelian symbol. What is decisive in this new symbol is its "*pluralization*" and its inherent "*antagonism*": that "Man" is now seen as a *pair of men*; that the individual (who, as a metaphysical self-made man, had fought a Promethean struggle against the Gods) has now been replaced by *men* who fight *each other* for domination. (Anders 1965, pp. 149-50)

Beckett replaced the image of the suffering hero modeled on Prometheus, an image dominant in Kafka, with his dialectical "pseudo-couples" (a concept launched in *The Unnamable* with reference to *Mercier and Camier*). This turn to human duality opens up the stage to collective action. Beckett presupposes a more dynamic conception of politics that was missed by Kafka's staunch individualism. Despite the parallels between Kafka's and Beckett's corpuses similarly marked by alienation, abstraction, and nihilism, the Promethean element in Kafka makes him less comedic and, therefore, tragic.

This reading is predicated upon Anders's theory of Prometheus, that is, his concept of a "Promethean shame," a theory developed in essays from the 1950s. It could be called a first theory of the "posthuman." What Anders calls "Promethean shame" is

the moment when human beings realize that the machines they have made are more efficient than they are. Having created superb machines, humans are defeated by them, not in a revolt of the robots as in science fiction stories, but psychologically, because of a “shame” or an inferiority complex that humans experience when they consider the perfection and endless reproducibility of machines.

In order to understand what is at stake, we need to explore Anders’s view of Promethean affect. “On Promethean Shame” was begun in California in the forties and published in 1956 in a collection whose title can be translated as *The Obsolescence of Man*, or *The Antiquatedness of Humankind*, with the subtitle of *On the Soul During the Second Industrial Revolution*. This collection (see Anders 1956) includes the essay on *Waiting for Godot* discussed above. “On Promethean Shame,” the first essay in the collection, begins with an American anecdote. Having been a blue-collar worker in a Californian factory, Anders visited an exhibition of technology with a friend named T. who evinced a certain “shame,” the “shame” of sensing the discrepancy between human limitations and the perfect artifacts crafted by technology. Anders calls this “Promethean shame”: “*T. is ashamed about having naturally grown instead of having been made*” (Anders 2016, p. 30). Anders elaborates his version of “Promethean defiance” that he sums up as a “refusal to owe anything, including oneself, to anyone else.” Finally, the concept includes the “confusion of creator and creation” (ibid., p. 31). Conscious that these terms are hardly justified by the anecdote, Anders imagines objections that he refutes one by one before finally reaching a paradox: in our industrial societies, things are free but humans are not free (ibid., p. 38). One is tempted to ask: aren’t you exaggerating a little?

Anders is aware of the speculative nature of his claims, which is why he heaps up different arguments: we are anxious about our imperfect bodies, we hope to compensate their weakness with prostheses and by synchronizing them with machines. The

phrase “human engineering” shows that we mix up the realms of the human and the machine. We have become co-substantial with technology. Machines have become the true subjects of desire and demand (*ibid.*, p. 43). We have entered the robotic age; workers are not only cogs in the machine but dehumanized slaves. This slave-mentality generates a paradoxical “hubristic humility” in which Anders sees the traces of the last metamorphosis of the Prometheus myth (*ibid.*, p. 47). Going back to the argument elaborated in the Beckett essay, Anders concludes: “[Our contemporaries] suffer lacerations—but not because Zeus punishes their high-flying ambitions, but because they chastise themselves on account of their own ‘backwardness’ and the ‘shame of having been born’” (*ibid.*, p. 50), an expression that can be paralleled with Beckett’s echo of Schopenhauer in his essay on Proust, when he mentions the “sin of having been born.” Here is why Prometheus does not need an eagle: we all torture ourselves enough by longing for the machines we idolize, in a vain attempt to atone for our all too human sin.

We are then treated to a second autobiographical vignette. Again in California in the forties, Anders went to a hospital to visit a terminally ill coworker who ruefully wondered why humans cannot be fitted with spare parts. The worker finished with: “Isn’t this a shame?” (*Ibid.*, p. 54) This sentence appeared as a confirmation to Anders, who used it to deconstruct the humanist belief that we are unique, singular, and irreplaceable. What had been a sign of reassurance in our intrinsic value as subjects now appears as our weakness, our limitation. Human uniqueness is an obsolete vestige of humanism. Machines, on the other hand, engineer their immortality by being replaceable part by part—no human organism can be treated in this manner.

Thus, because we do not want to die, and wish to overcome our limitations as singular subjects, we find solace in the endless multiplication of images, mostly through film and television. We participate in the mass-production of endless artifacts, hoping

that this endless reproduction can offer a solution to our mortality; but immortal and infallible machines are our real masters. Here, Anders offers a third American vignette, about General MacArthur, who had won major victories in Korea. When Chinese troops rescued the North Koreans, the general wanted to use a nuclear weapon, but he was fired by President Truman. In order to justify this decision, a computer was used: it simulated the consequences of a bombing and decided against MacArthur's radical solution—the machine prevailed over the general. The human being had lost to the machine. MacArthur left the army. The story did not stop here: soon, the war hero became the president of Remington Rand, a company manufacturing office machines and the Univac computer, the first commercial computer produced in the US (ibid., p. 61). Anders reads this story as a twist in Hegel's master and slave dialectic. After the former slave (the machine) has become the new master and demoted the former master (MacArthur) to the rank of a slave, the slave has to attempt to be again the master of the master (the machine) (ibid., p. 62).

It is in this context that Anders deploys a phenomenology of shame, an affect linked with lack of agency. "Promethean shame" is not just a metaphor, for it corresponds to the pain of unfreedom, which is a normal condition given the domination of machines of all sorts: the media, film, television, and computers, all participate in a "man-made bureaucracy of machines" (ibid., p. 39). The hubristic creation culminates with artificial intelligence, a concept that beats the Tower of Babel in arrogance, a minor transgression compared with the erection of the new monster, the terrifying bureaucratic machine that decides of everything (ibid., p. 47).

What has this to do with Kafka? The mention of the Tower of Babel, a recurrent Kafkaian trope, is not made randomly. Anders knew Janouch's *Conversations* in which we overhear Kafka rail against a society in which human reproduction is mechanized. Kafka said: "If things go on as they are the world will soon be peopled by robots reproducing themselves in series" (Janouch 1971,

p. 62). Kafka loved denouncing technology: “The iron fist of technology destroys all protecting walls” (ibid., p. 71). He told Janouch that the modern world was under the domination of an enslaving capitalism, stating: “Capitalism is a system of relationships, which go from inside to out, from outside to in, from above to below, and from below to above. Everything is relative, everything is in chains. Capitalism is a condition both of the world and of the soul” (ibid., p. 152). It looks as if all the themes treated by Anders (technology as a bureaucratic machine, the shame of singular existence, the transformation of history into a frozen time, imagistic repetition as a tragicomic supersession of human finitude, the obsolescence of humanity and the disappearance of the gods) were knotted together by Kafka. What remains more speculative is the concept of a “Promethean shame,” a phrase that we need to explore.

Although shame is one of the dominant affects in Kafka’s texts, as Benjamin wrote,² from “Description of a Struggle” (see Wasihun 2015) to the stark and painful ending of *The Trial*, when K. is murdered and thinks that the shame will survive him, the link between shame and laughter is not a theme broached by Anders. “Shame” in German hesitates between the subjective sense (*Scham*) and the objective or social sense (*Schande*), both used by Anders. He could have noticed the second use by Kafka at the beginning of “Children on a Country Road.” The narrator remembers how workers would return home at night, laughing so loud that “it was a shame”: “Laborers were coming from the fields and laughed so much that it was a shame [*lachten, dass es eine Schande war*]” (Kafka 1971, p. 79, trans. modified). The mixture of grotesque, tragic, and comic elements in Kafka became less expressionistic as time passed, but remained potent until the end; this combination never rules out shame or laughter, even

² “Shame is Kafka’s strongest gesture” (Benjamin 1968, p. 129).

when the most subversive thoughts are displayed. The unstable compound is linked with issues of oral tradition and mythical history—especially in “Prometheus,” Kafka’s short tale.

Kafka told Janouch that his main theme was the struggle between the son and the father. Commenting on *The Son*, an expressionist play by Walter Hasenclever, Kafka said: “The revolt of the son against the father is one of the primeval themes in literature, and an even older problem in the world. Dramas and tragedies are written about it, yet in reality it is material for comedy” (Janouch 1971, p. 68). Kafka opposed that earnest expressionist play to John Millington Synge’s hilarious 1907 *The Playboy of the Western World*. Summing up its plot to Janouch, he felt that the Irish play provided a better model. Christy Mahon believes that he has murdered his father and gains attention from all sides for this deed, until the slightly wounded father comes back. Kafka concludes with the idea that the struggle of the young against the old is “shadow boxing” (*Scheinkampf*) (ibid., p. 69): “Age is the future of youth, which sooner or later it must reach. So why struggle? To become old sooner?” (Ibid., p. 69) The theme of time and obsolescence underpins his rewrite of *Prometheus*, the Greek archetype of heroic rebellion against a senile but still powerful Zeus. If this struggle boils down to mere “shadow boxing,” then it may become material for comedy.

Here is Kafka’s parable on Prometheus, originally without a title, translated by Edwin and Willa Muir:

There are four legends concerning Prometheus:

According to the first he was clamped to a rock in the Caucasus for betraying the secrets of the gods to men, and the gods sent eagles to feed on his liver, which was perpetually renewed.

According to the second Prometheus, goaded by the pain of the tearing beaks, pressed himself deeper and deeper into the rock until he became one with it. According to the third his treachery was forgotten in the course of thousands of years, forgotten by the gods, the eagles, forgotten by himself.

According to the fourth everyone grew weary of the meaningless affair. The gods grew weary, the eagles grew weary, the wound closed wearily. There remains the inexplicable mass of rock. The legend tried to explain the inexplicable. As it comes out of the substratum of truth it had in turn to end in the inexplicable. (Kafka 1971b, p. 432)

Max Brod changed the original order and turned the last paragraph into the first, possibly thinking that examples should lead to a general law. Kafka thought differently. Here is my more literal translation:

The legend [*die Sage*] tries to explain the inexplicable [*das Unerklärliche zu erklären*]; as it comes out of the ground of truth [*Wahrheitsgrund*], it has to return to the inexplicable in the end.

There are four legends concerning Prometheus: According to the first he was clamped to a rock in the Caucasus for betraying the secrets of the gods to men, and the gods sent eagles to feed on his liver, which was perpetually renewed.

According to the second Prometheus, goaded by the pain of the tearing beaks, pressed himself deeper and deeper into the rock until he became one with it.

According to the third his treachery was forgotten in the course of thousands of years, forgotten by the gods, the eagles, forgotten by himself.

According to the fourth everyone grew tired of the groundless affair [*wurde man des grundlos Gewordenen müde*]. The gods grew tired, the eagles grew tired, the wound closed tired [*schloß sich müde*]. There remains the inexplicable mass of rock. [*Blieb das unerklärliche Felsgebirge.*]³

Kafka planned to begin with a statement about the role of legends in general; their function is to explain natural phenomena; a spring, a tree, a river are all pretexts for Greek myths that

³ See Kafka's *Oktavheft* G, III (18 October 1917 – January 1918), MS. Kafka 25, MLR reference A (ii) XXXVII, KKA reference: KBod AIII, 7.

often entail metamorphoses, as when Niobe wept and turned into stone. The main issue is the riddle of the link between myth and nature, if we define myth as an interpretation of a mute and alien nature (Gray et al. 2005, pp. 230-31). The story of Prometheus is adduced only as an example. Its four moments sketch a process of exhaustion that takes on a hermeneutic function: after the hero has turned into stone, after all participants forget what has happened, including the hero, after all are exhausted by the exhaustion of the myth, what valid explanation can remain?

Two terms generate a theoretical clash: the verb to “explain” (*erklären*) and the concept of the “groundless” (*grundlos*), rendered as “meaningless” by the Muirs. *Erklärung* is never far from *Aufklärung*, meaning the “Enlightenment,” with its rationalist critique of myth and religion: myth would simply be a human invention making sense of time and the seasons, of the death of seeds in the winter, and so on. The concept of *Grund* evokes reason and fits Schopenhauer’s theory of the “fourfold root of the principle of sufficient reason [*Grund*].” It sends us back to Leibnitz’s principle of “sufficient reason,” a principle that entails that nothing is without a “reason” or without a “cause.” Attempting to reach a primal “cause,” the parable achieves a drastic reduction—it reduces the whole of human culture to a series of fancy tales that explain next to nothing.

Another important term is *Wahrheitsgrund*. It alludes to the principle of truth, a truth that needs a secure grounding in order to be valid; but in the end, it is only the “ground” of the rocky mountain that stands as a substratum for truth. All the rest has been invented in order to make sense of the mountain. In a gesture often performed by Heidegger, all the “ground” is transformed into an *Abgrund*, an “abyss.” The German *Grund*, derived from an archaic verb meaning “to grind,” originally referred to “coarse sand” or just “earth.” To say that something is *grundlos* (“groundless”) suggests that it provides no support. We perceive the connection between Kafka and Heidegger established by Anders.

Indeed, it was Kafka, not Heidegger, who wrote: “This feeling: ‘Here I will not anchor,’ and instantly to feel the billowing uplifting swell around one” (Kafka 1991, p. 91). Or: “What it means to grasp the good fortune that the ground on which you stand cannot be greater than what is covered by your two feet” (ibid., p. 82). Or again: “There is no having, only a being, only a state of being that craves the last breath, craves suffocation” (ibid., p. 84). Kafka wants to prevent us from believing in the possibility of grounding ourselves in the natural world. It is better to see the abyss or *Abgrund* and stick to that giddy vision: “There was one who was astonished to see how easily he moved along the road of eternity; the fact is that he was racing along it downhill” (ibid., p. 85).

If *Grund* is associated with *archē* as both a “first principle” and a “rule,” then Kafka remains an “anarchist” to the end,⁴ and he would thus agree with Heidegger when the latter rewrites his position on “ground”: “If, however, transcendence in the sense of freedom for ground is understood in the first and last instance as an abyss of ground, then the essence of what was called Dasein’s *absorption* in and by beings also thereby becomes sharper. [...] The essence of the finitude of Dasein is [...] unveiled in *transcendence as freedom from ground*” (Heidegger 1998, pp. 134-35). Kafka could not side with Schopenhauer’s aesthetic rationalism. Brod and Kafka met when Brod gave a lecture on Schopenhauer, attacking Nietzsche for having rejected his mentor. Kafka defended Nietzsche with such fervor that Brod became his friend and confidant.

In Kafka’s version of the Prometheus myth, what stands out is not a general law defining reason and interpretation but a final riddle, the stubborn presence of the mountain. If we can read

⁴ See Kafka’s conversation with Janouch about the lasting influence of anarchism on his student’s years (Janouch 1971, pp. 86-90). For links between Heidegger and anarchism, see Schürmann 1987.

the world as matter, and matter as a pure riddle, then unreason triumphs. This allogical statement underpins Kafka's debunking of myth. It also triggers an endless phenomenological reduction in an effort at getting to the root of truth. In Kafka's Prometheus tale, a first level reiterates the myth and asserts that any metamorphosis will happen as a consequence of pain. A second level outlines a psychological process, forgetting, which ends when even Prometheus forgets his dire state. A third level concludes with a general exhaustion of the mythical paradigm. There is a final liberation in this insistence on the absurdity of the world, even if this absurdity apparently still requires an explanation.

A source for Kafka's "Prometheus" was Nietzsche, who discussed Prometheus several times. A fragment from 1874 approximates Kafka's central conceit: "Prometheus and his vulture were *forgotten* when the old world of the Olympians and their power were destroyed. // Prometheus expects his redemption to come from human beings. // He did not betray his secret to Zeus, Zeus perished because of his son" (Nietzsche 1995, p. 387). For Nietzsche, obsolescence derives from a modern lack of belief in the gods. He suggests that Prometheus created not only the human race but also all the gods—he is man turning into an "overman":

Did Prometheus have to *fancy* first that he had *stolen* the light and then pay for that—before he finally discovered that he had created the light *by coveting the light* and that not only man but also the *god* was the work of his own hands and had been mere clay in his hands? All mere images of the maker—no less than the fancy, the theft, the Caucasus, the vulture, and the whole tragic *Prometheia* of all the seekers after knowledge? (Nietzsche 1974, pp. 240-41)

A seeker for knowledge, Kafka was also a seeker for autonomy; Prometheus presents a perfect model for his struggle against his Father. Kafka appears as a Prometheus who tortures himself in order to be free from the "ground" of the family, in which Zeus is played by a domineering father: "Any relationship not created

by myself, even though it may be opposed to parts of my own nature, is worthless; it hinders my movements, I hate it, or come near hating it” (Kafka 1973, p. 525). He later described this perversely comical attitude in terms of a master and slave dialectic: “The beast wrests the whip from the master and whips itself in order to become master, not knowing that this is only a fantasy produced by a new knot in the master’s whip-lash” (Kafka 1991, p. 83).

This type of self-hate is needed to achieve freedom—from what? From the “ground” of the family, the blood link and the reminders that he has been generated by his parents—a thought that is almost unbearable for Kafka:

Sometimes this bond of blood [...] is the target of my hatred; the sight of the double bed at home, the used sheets, the nightshirts carefully laid out, can exasperate me to the point of nausea, can turn me inside out; it is as if I had not been definitively born [*als wäre ich nicht endgültig geboren*], were continually born anew into the world out of the stale life in that stale room, had constantly to seek confirmation of myself there, were indissolubly joined with all that loathsomeness, in part even if not entirely, at least it still clogs my feet which want to run, they are still stuck fast in the original pulp. (Kafka 1988, p. 371)

As Kafka argues, he has some “ground” to hate his family: “*es gibt übergenug Grund zu solchem Haß*” (Kafka 1998, p. 375). There is hate because there is shame as well, the shame of not being born once and for all. This leads to the torture of having to be born (or aborted) again and again. This idea echoes with Anders’s note in “Promethean Shame” in which he praises Freud’s idea of a birth trauma:

Philosophically speaking, Sigmund Freud’s discovery of the “Trauma of Birth” cannot be rated highly enough: for what more incisive event could happen to life than being torn from the “ground”? The feelings Freud brought into view (“Oceanic Feeling;” “Death Drive”) are metaphysical in every respect, even if Freud’s language

was masked by the scientific vocabulary of his century. This is equally true of the “Trauma of Birth” with which he described the *shock of individuation*, no matter how well he disguised it. In an analogy with our question “who is ashamed?” the question to ask in relation to this trauma is the following: “*Who* is actually shocked here?” (Anders 2016, p. 93 n. 33)

However, if we can agree that the death drive means the individual’s wish to get rid of the “agony of being an individual” (ibid.), we may wonder about the link between shame, birth, and original trauma. Nevertheless, the idea that the shock of individuation is compared with “being torn from the ground” cogently corresponds to Kafka’s Prometheus parable. If Prometheus is responsible for the creation of humanity against the wishes of the higher gods like Zeus, he then relinquishes all individuality by merging with his “ground,” the rock he has been chained to.

One point has not been noticed by Anders when he quotes Freud, a point often made by Freud: laughter provides a way of overcoming shame while acknowledging shame, as in dreams of being naked in the street. Bypassing censorship, laughter reconnects us with our Unconscious and sweeps away the dams erected by social conventions. If we return to Anders’s second American vignette, we can suspect that he was rather deaf to the humorous overtones in the voice in the co-worker’s retort. When they parted, the American quipped: “Isn’t it a shame?” (ibid., p. 54), a deadpan, self-deprecating put-down, typical of working-class humor that avoids sentimentality. The dying man was man enough to make a co-worker’s joke about his alleged irreplaceability. Whatever “shame” he alluded to was not his own, as Anders rashly surmises, but the shame of the system’s inability to mass-produce human beings: his comment alludes to a world of machines reproducing each other endlessly, a theme treated in a comic mode by popular films like Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*. Chaplin’s masterpiece highlights this laughable shame, as it were.

Chaplin was appreciated by Anders, who, even if his insights announce Guy Debord's critique of a "society of the spectacle," did not know the then recently invented American "canned laughter," that "sweetening machine" that began accompanying the silliest sitcoms so as to trigger the laughter of audiences thanks to a Pavlovian reflex. Kafka, on the other hand, did not hesitate to engage with slapstick, as when he made the painter Titorelli, a key figure at the end of *The Trial*, sell K. several identical paintings that all show a banal landscape at sunset. This conception of laughter evokes Bergson. For Bergson, repetition, the essence of slapstick, generates laughter; laughter is defined by our sudden perception that what we took for a spontaneous human being can be reduced to the status of a machine. Bergson presupposes that to be human is to be mobile, spontaneous, elastic, and creative. But, if we follow Anders, what if we really wished to be machines? For Bergson, the comic pertains to a certain "mechanical inelasticity"—isn't this the pride of the machine and the shame of man?

Bergson's *Laughter*, published in 1899, the same year as Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, reiterates: "Our starting point is again: 'something mechanical encrusted [*plaque*] upon the living.' Where did the comic come from in this case? It came from the fact that the living body became rigid, like a machine. Accordingly, it seemed to us that the living body ought to be the perfection of suppleness, the ever-alert activity of a principle always at work. But this activity would really belong to the soul rather than to the body" (Bergson 1913, p. 49). Can we forget the materiality of the body when we are in a modern machinic environment?

Bergson's analysis entails this: because it is caused by the sight of a human being turning into a machine, laughter will be triggered automatically. Each time we see a man slipping on a banana peel and falling, we laugh. Laughter allies itself with its mechanical cause, the silly repetition of machines, and thus does not work by "letting the spirit shine through," for "it is really a kind of automatism that makes us laugh" (*ibid.*, p. 16). What stands out

therefore is that laughter is a machine. We now understand better how Anders's "Promethean shame" can generate a Promethean mirth. How many repetitive versions of the ancient myth will it take before we find the scene with the same old eagles tedious rather than funny? This was André Gide's question in a text that antedates Kafka's tale, his baffling *Prometheus Ill-Bound* (see Gide 2009, pp. 465-509). This prose play is a post-Nietzschean parody of the idea that we need to suffer in order to create; we "need our eagle," yes, but only until the day when we kill it, cook it and eat it...

Freud answers both Kafka's and Gide's questions. For Freud, we laugh when the Unconscious appears: "Many of my neurotic patients under psychoanalytic treatment habitually confirm it with a laugh when [the analysis] has succeeded in revealing faithfully what had been hidden and unconscious to their conscious perception; and they also laugh even if the content of what has been disclosed would certainly not justify it" (Freud 2003a, p. 174). Freud developed the idea in his essay on "The Unconscious": "In the system Pcs the *secondary process* holds sway; where a primary process is allowed to take its course in connection with elements belonging to the system Pcs, it appears 'comic' and excites laughter" (Freud 1963, p. 134). Thus the only way to avoid endless repetition would be to let the encounter with the Unconscious generate a certain birth, a birth that would be a "birth to presence," as Jean-Luc Nancy puts it (see Nancy 1993). The main issue would be to remain as a creator and as a subject in *statu nascendi*, in a perpetual state of being born.⁵

If, as Camus said, we must imagine Sisyphus happy, we should then imagine Prometheus as laughing. Prometheus is a hero because he can laugh while in pain—having been condemned for playing at being a demiurge, he rails against Zeus whose law he

⁵ I have discussed Sándor Ferenczi's theory of laughter as calling up the pleasure and displeasure of being born in Rabaté 2016.

has defied. Kafka, like Lucian, the cynical Hellenistic writer who was one model for Nietzsche in his debunking of ancient idols, felt the urge to attack the old world. Indeed, Lucian often presented himself as a Prometheus: like the hero who created new beings with clay and incurred the wrath of the gods, Lucian makes fun of the gods. In his version of the myth, Lucian insists that one of Prometheus's transgressions was to deceive Zeus about food through meat offerings: "And here comes in the apprehension of yet another Promethean analogy: have I confounded male and female, and incurred the penalty? Or no—when will resemblances end?—have I, rather, cheated my hearers by serving them up bones wrapped in fat, comic laughter in philosophic solemnity?" (Lucian 2007, p. 25)⁶

This Promethean defiance was expressed by Kafka as early as 1903: "It's this way with me: God doesn't want me to write, but I—I must. So there's an everlasting up and down; after all, God is the stronger, and there's more anguish in it than you can imagine. So many powers within me are tied to a stake, which might possibly grow into a green tree" (Kafka 1977, p. 10). Kafka's projection into a rebellious Prometheus morphed into an identification with another character unable to die: Hunter Gracchus, a figure that, according to Adorno, was Kafka's central myth. Prometheus and Gracchus are immortal because they are caught up in some mistake: a misunderstanding about Prometheus who created the human race in order to give the gods beings capable of adoring them—and this was mistaken for hubris! Gracchus missed his death as one misses a step. Moreover, both will be suffering forever. Asked whether he participates in the world of beyond, Gracchus answers the mayor of Riva, the city he has reached, that although he is "forever," he feels "lost on the stairs" to eternity,

⁶ See also "Prometheus on Causasus" (Lucian 2007, pp. 52-56), and "Prometheus-Zeus" (*ibid.*, p. 58). Nietzsche borrowed the concept of the "Overman" from Lucian's "hyperanthropos" (see Babich 2011).

adding: “The Hunter has been turned into a butterfly. Do not laugh” (Kafka 1971c, p. 228). The mayor does not laugh. Would we be tempted to laugh? Can we laugh with Prometheus in his sublime defiance of the eternal torture? If we see this as a joke, the *punctum* of the joke might be a liver that always reconstitutes itself. Bernard Stiegler wondered about the function of the liver:

It is an organic *mirror* in which divinatory hermeneutics is practiced, in which, during the sacrifice, divine messages are interpreted. [...] Organ of all *humors*, of feelings of all situations, because it is the seat of the “feeling of situation,” the liver is also, as a mirror of ceaseless mortality — which never *occurs* — of the body and the heart, the mirage of the spirit (*Gemüt*). (Stiegler 1998, p. 203)

In most legends concerning Prometheus, the hero’s regenerated liver is gnawed endlessly by an eagle; in other versions, it is a vulture, as for Nietzsche. If an eagle comes day after day to feed, it might be because the Greeks associated eagles with the heavens, the sun and lightning. Eagles would be distinguished by this feature: the ability to look straight at the sun without being dazzled — a point remembered by Freud in his 1912 Postscript to his book on Schreber (Freud 2003b, pp. 68-70).

Eagles were rumored to test their offspring by checking that they were able to withstand the glare of the sun. If not, the little ones were cast out of the nest. There cannot be a starker contrast than darkly pulsating viscera linked with divination and a paternal “truth” so blinding that few are capable of withstanding it. We recognize Kafka’s predicament, his being divided between a maternal side and a Father’s law that crushes him and that has to be resisted — mostly by laughing at castration threats. Here is why laughter is never far from shame — in some cases only, when it is felicitous, that is, when wit manages to “outwit” censorship, as Nancy wrote (1993, p. 221), can it flourish. An example of this pattern can be found in the story of Kafka falling in love with Julie Wohryzek. Kafka describes this moment in a letter sent to

Käthe, Julie's sister, to apologize to her family after the cancellation of their wedding:

The beginning of our acquaintance was extremely curious, and to the superstitious did not exactly augur happiness. For several days we laughed continually, whenever we met each other, at meals, while walking, while sitting opposite each other. On the whole, the laughter was not pleasant; it had no apparent reason, was painful, shameful. [*Das Lachen war ... ohne sichtbaren Grund, es war quälend, beschämend.*] (Kafka 1977, p. 215)

Kafka explains that the apparent groundlessness of their laughter made them keep a distance at first; even if they resisted having sex for the duration of their stay in the sanatorium, it would not be for long: their attraction was a “compulsion” (*Zwang*): “In the long run that would not remain the case between two people who were so fully and forcefully in harmony as we are, so that each of us is a compulsion to the other, quite independently of joy and sorrow, simply a necessity just as much as joy and sorrow” (ibid., p. 216).⁷ When Reiner Stach sums up the affair, he adds this: “There was simply no good reason for this laughter” (Stach 2013, p. 266). Why should there be any reason here, let alone a “good” one? This love was as spontaneous as it was absurd; it was a rare case of love at first laugh. *Fou rire* turned into *amour fou*, which made it irresistible. Only later, when Julie and Franz began making plans, when they had to find an apartment and deal with their families, would the sentimental laughing gas evaporate in the air. One should not be swayed by Kafka's reconstruction in a letter that foregrounds superstition and shame, astutely downplaying the magic and madness of falling in love because of a shared laughter.

⁷ Original text: “Für die Dauer konnte das allerdings nicht so bleiben zwischen zwei Menschen, die so voll und stark zusammenstimmen wie wir zwei und jeder für den andern ein Zwang ist und zwar unabhängig von Glück und Leid, einfach eine Notwendigkeit als Glück und als Leid.”

This same irrepressibly “wicked” laughter (the laughter of the reprobate, of the rebel cast in darkness by the sun god) recurs in Kafka’s letters; only when this laughter was not to be shared did he feel the need to apologize. One evening in August 1913, Kafka laughed uncontrollably as he and Brod said goodbye. He then sent a postcard to apologize, although he couldn’t explain what happened. He concludes that, were the situation to be repeated, he would again release a wicked laughter: “Which calls for another laugh, to be followed within five minutes by another such card as this. Beyond doubt wicked people exist, scintillating with wickedness” (Kafka 1977, p. 99). Part of the shine and aura of Kafka had to do with his knowledge of the dizzying human depths.

The question would be: How can one laugh in such a way that laughter sweeps away all shame, both the shame of being born and the shame of sexuality leading to reproduction, pretending that one is being born anew to the world, all the while knowing that this is a world in which one’s survival can only be a fake immortality, a state where one’s body is racked by endless pain? This was Kafka’s symptom, which triggered his melancholic and bilious laughter, a laughter issuing from the grottoes of the grotesque and, at times, reaching hysterical climaxes, which appears most when Kafka laughed at work.

In September 1911, Kafka drafted a section for the novel he was writing with Brod. In this fragment, four friends, Robert, Samuel, Max and Franz, meet regularly. Their evenings are full of gaiety: “[...] they laughed so much during these evenings that Max said on the way home that this eternal laughter is really to be regretted, because of it one forgets all the serious concerns of which everyone, after all, really had enough. [...] One should laugh in the office because there is nothing better to be accomplished there” (Kafka 1988, pp. 52-53). The temptation to lose oneself in laughter via a moment of oblivion or “self-forgetting” (*selbstvergessen*) (Kafka 1998, p. 48), is irresistible. Samuel must remove their glasses for fear they are broken for “they laughed

so self-obviously” (Kafka 1988, p. 53). This fits Freud’s thesis: the hilarity generated by a joke connects one with the drives and abolishes subjectivity for an instant. Such a glorious moment affords a sense of freedom from shame, constraints and inhibition. This freedom finds an equivalent in the inchoative character of Kafka’s work, with all the beginnings and all the textual stillbirths. Kafka did not hesitate to describe the process of writing as a birth, as he famously described “The Judgment”: “[...] the story came out of me like a real birth, covered with filth and slime, and only I have the hand that can reach to the body itself” (ibid., p. 214). When Janouch showed him the outline of his drama on a biblical theme, Kafka was skeptical. Janouch admitted that his efforts amounted to mere “scissors-and-paste-work.” Kafka could not agree more: “You are right. Only what is born lives. Everything else is vain: literature without any justification” (Janouch 1971, p. 54, trans. modified).⁸ One might say that for Kafka, in literature as in life, the only justification of existence is the birth to existence: whatever we do, we should try to remain forever *in statu nascendi*.

If this is not possible, there remains a trust in life that goes beyond any divine commandment—hence Kafka’s variation on the Abraham story, in a letter following his ironical reading of Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*:

I can imagine another Abraham [...] who would be as ready to carry out the order for the sacrifice as a waiter would be ready to carry out his orders, but who would still never manage to perform the sacrifice because he cannot get away from home, he is indispensable, the farm needs him, there is always something that must be attended to, the house is not finished. [...] It was different for these other Abrahams, who stood in the houses they were building and suddenly had to go up on Mount Moriah; it is possible that they did not even have a son, yet already had to sacrifice him. These are impossibilities, and Sarah was right to laugh. (Kafka 1961, p. 43)

⁸ The original is condensed: “*Nur das Geborene lebt. Alles andere ist eitel. Literatur ohne Existenzberechtigung*” (Janouch 1961, p. 83).

Kafka's plural retelling of the Biblical story highlights Sarah's laughter. As Many Steinkoler argues, Sarah's laughter questions a divine law that it exceeds by its feminine insistence on the question of pleasure (see Steinkoler 2016). Sarah's laughter revolves around a pleasure deemed impossible. When she laughs ("And Sarah laughed within herself, saying: After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?"⁹), she seems less surprised by a late pregnancy than by the idea that an aged husband is able to satisfy her sexually. She thus points to a male lack that rebounds from her husband to God—after such a laughter, a certain lack will be inscribed in God and in the Law. However, once her son has been born, Isaac is identified with laughter.¹⁰ After the birth of Isaac, Sarah becomes one with laughter, and this laughter is shared by all: "God has made laughter (*tsehok*) for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me." Literally: "God hath made laughter of me; every one who hears me will laugh with me."¹¹ By conflating Sarah's laughter at the birth of her son and his revulsion facing an unjust sacrifice, Kafka confirms that he is an unbound Isaac doubling as a bound but laughing Prometheus.

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⁹ *Genesis*, Sapirstein Bible.

¹⁰ *Yitzhak* is the infinitive of the Hebrew verb "to laugh," *tsehok*.

¹¹ I modify Many Steinkoler's paraphrase in Steinkoler 2016, p. 34.

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Reason Inclined: Zones of Indifference in Schiller and Kant

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The feeling of respect is considered to be one of the two key elements of Immanuel Kant's conception of the ethical act, the second being that of the moral law. For Kant, an act is considered to be autonomous, only insofar as it is delivered of any "pathological determination." In this respect, the feeling of respect as the structural companion to the ethical act permits no application to sensuous pleasure and does not concern the matter or content of our actions, but rather their very form. As Kant put it in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, respect is a moral feeling that does not arise from feelings of pleasure and displeasure, or even from indifference for that matter, but is attached to the representation of the form of the moral law. Therefore, the feeling of respect is effected through reason alone, defined as being fully independent of sensuous experience, and thus recognized as universal and necessary. However, although respect has to be understood in the same manner as the moral law itself, i.e., as an element of pure will conditioned by reason alone, one could claim that at its very core it nonetheless cannot be entirely freed from the field of sensibility. The basis for such a claim is to be found in Kant's own line of argumentation in the third chapter of his second *Critique*, titled "On the incentives of pure practical reason," where he describes the central idea underlying his practical philosophy. Kant's primary task is not to demonstrate the apriority of "the ground from which the moral law in itself supplies an incentive," but rather the

apriority of “what it effects (or to put it better, must effect) in the mind insofar as it is an incentive” (Kant 1996a, pp. 198-99). This effect of the moral law, Kant continues, can only be a negative one:

For, all inclination and every sensible impulse is based on feeling, and the negative effect on feeling (by the infringement upon the inclinations that takes place) is itself feeling. Hence we can see a priori that the moral law, as the determining ground of the will, must by thwarting all our inclinations produce a feeling that can be called pain; and here we have the first and perhaps the only case in which we can determine a priori from concepts the relation of a cognition (here the cognition of a pure practical reason) to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure. (Kant 1996a, p. 199)

Although respect is not mentioned explicitly, it nonetheless surfaces in the form of the very effect of the moral law discussed by Kant at the beginning of the same chapter. Respect emerges as an effect of the moral law’s infringement upon sensibility. In a word, respect is the result of the moral law’s suspensive invasion into the field of inclinations. By way of running counter to its opposite, thus (to adopt the very strong word that Kant deploys) “thwarting” it, the moral law inevitably produces an element that Kant calls the feeling of respect or moral feeling (*Achtung*). The most pressing question is thus the following one: Was respect, prior to the moral law acting upon the realm of inclinations, a part of this very realm? It seems that Kant does not provide us with an unequivocal answer to this question, instead adding further ambiguity to his argument by claiming that: “*So little* is respect a feeling of *pleasure*, that we give way to it only reluctantly with regard to a human being” (ibid., p. 202).¹ And precisely herein

¹ “*Die Achtung ist so wenig ein Gefühl der Lust, daß man sich ihr in Ansehung eines Menschen nur ungern überläßt*” (Kant 1882, p. 93). The fact that the feeling of respect is evoked here “*in Ansehung eines Menschen,*” i.e., “with regard to a human being,” does not weaken my point, for I only bow down in respect of

lies one of the main paradoxes of Kant's ethics: How is it possible that the formal pureness of the moral law, or the autonomy of an ethical act, is in fact accompanied, or perhaps even conditioned by this heteronomous and hence "pathological" companion? In short, how is it possible that Kant situates, in the very midst of a free and autonomous ethical subject, this inherent, yet heterogeneous element, testifying as it does to a conceptual hinging of freedom on its seemingly residual opposite?

From this narrow perspective, Kant's theory of morality in the *Critique of Practical Reason* seems to be pointing to the same paradox as the one developed by Friedrich Schiller in his theory of the beautiful. In his essay "The Danger of Aesthetic Manners," published in the eleventh issue of *Die Horen*² in 1795,

"a human being" insofar as for me he *exemplifies the factual practicability of the moral law*: "His example," writes Kant, "holds before me a law that strikes down my self-conceit when I compare it with my conduct, and I see observance of that law and hence its *practicability* proved before me in fact" (Kant 1996, p. 202).

² *Die Horen* was a German monthly literary journal published from 1795 to 1797, edited by Schiller and funded by Johann Friedrich Cotta (who was also Goethe's publisher and Heine's employer). Although Schiller formed an editorial committee consisting of well-established figures of the time, including Fichte, Goethe, Körner, W. Humboldt, and Karl Woltmann, who were initially responsible for accepting and rejecting the submitted articles, it soon became obvious that Schiller took it upon himself to be the journal's sole editor and decision-maker. But more importantly, it became clear that the initial idea, as advertised in numerous German periodicals, to "reunite under the flag of beauty and truth a world that is politically divided," was already in decline. Consequently, and already in the second half of 1795, this resulted both in a series of "outside" attacks, coming mostly from authors who could not publish their work (Friedrich Schlegel, among others), as well as from other proponents of the negative critique (especially Friedrich Nicolai), and "inside" withdrawals from the committee (Fichte left the board and condemned *Die Horen* after Schiller rejected his second contribution to the journal, titled "On Spirit and Letter in Philosophy"). Up until 1797, when the last issue appeared, Schiller published almost exclusively his own work, and at times even wrote reviews of his own essays. For a more detailed account, especially with respect to the role of women writers whom Schiller tried to engage in order to fill the empty pages of the journal, see Besserer Holmgren 2010.

Schiller considers it doubtful that morality could be based only on a feeling for the beautiful, i.e., on a feeling that has no guarantee other than taste, because morality must never have any other foundation than its own (see Schiller 1795).³ In his “The Moral Utility of Aesthetic Manners,” however, published in the same journal in 1796, he does not hesitate to attribute to taste the ability of indeed contributing to moral progress (see Schiller 1902). Without the feeling for the beautiful, Schiller affirms and henceforth strongly holds, there would be no moral progress, only morality grounded in itself. This “element of self-critique” is strikingly elegant in its simplicity: if in 1795 any recourse to feeling is to be excluded on the grounds of the self-groundedness of morality, in 1796 it is due to this same self-groundedness that morality is in danger of losing its ground. In this respect, both Kant’s feeling of respect and Schiller’s feeling for the beautiful do not merely figure as conceptual companions and guarantees of the proper ethical act, but also serve as an answer to a much bigger and arguably central ethical problem: How does one bring together reason, which demands unity, and nature, which requires individuality and plurality (Schiller)? How does one reconcile the heterogeneity of the laws of appearances, which follow the principles of understanding, and the domain of freedom (Kant)?

In spite of this similarity and close proximity, Schiller and Kant in fact offer two different answers that consequently imply two different theories of morality. Provisionally put: for Schiller, the moral act arises by virtue of taste, whereas for Kant it arises

³ Chronologically speaking, the essay appeared after Schiller gave up poetic production and followed the publications of his well-known essays on aesthetics and Kantian philosophy. By that time, it had become clear to Schiller that in order to find concrete solutions to the ethical problem he will once again have to redefine the opposition between “the necessary” and “the accidental,” which was so massively present especially in his “Kallias or Concerning Beauty: Letters to Gottfried Körner” (Schiller 2003), and later in “An die Freude,” as well as in his “Die Freundschaft.” For a detailed periodization of Schiller’s work, see Royce 1978.

by virtue of respect. Without taste, an act would simply dissolve itself into the “delightful illusion,” to deploy one of Schiller’s terms, while without respect, a moral act would merely “seem to be” a moral one, to bring forward one of Kant’s emphases. In the aesthetic world, Schiller writes, every natural being is a “free citizen and has the same rights as the most noble in the world of aesthetics,” and therefore “coercion may not take place even *for the sake of the whole*—everyone must *consent*. In this aesthetic world, which is quite different from the most perfect Platonic republic, even the gown I wear on my body demands respect for its freedom from me, much like a humble servant who demands that I never let on that he is *servicing* me” (Schiller 2003, p. 170). The thought behind this quote is significant and represents an important stepping stone in overcoming the theories of the beautiful developed by Edmund Burke, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, and Moses Mendelssohn.⁴ However, Schiller was aware that in order to be in pace with recent theoretical discoveries one has to not only expose the insufficiency of sensuous-subjective and rational-objective theories, but also shed new light on the prevailing theory of that time, the one elaborated by Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*. Like many of the then arduous thinkers of liberty and heirs of Rousseau’s thoughts on the relationship

⁴ In the “Kallias Letters,” Schiller lists four theories and essential features of the beautiful: the sensuous-subjective theory of Burke, the rational-objective theory of Baumgarten and Mendelssohn, the subjective-rational theory of Kant, to which he then adds his own, sensuous-objective theory of the beautiful: “It is worth noting that my theory is a fourth possible way of explaining the beautiful. Either one declares it subjective or objective; and either subjective sensual (like Burke among others), subjective rational (like Kant) or rational objective (like Baumgarten, Mendelssohn and the whole crowd of men who esteem perfection), or, finally, sensuous objective: a term which will mean little to you at this point, save if you compare the other three forms with each other. Each of the preceding theories reflects a part of experience and clearly contains a part of the truth, and the error seems merely to be that one has taken the true part of the theory to coincide with beauty itself” (Schiller 2003, p. 146).

between human nature and convention, Schiller, too, had to face the ongoing debates on aesthetics and those surrounding Kant's critical project, especially his third critique. But in challenging Kant, Schiller approached Kant's system all but systematically. He took the basis of Kant's systematic system, so to speak, as the very basis of his own point of departure but then in turn—as if forgetting all about this adoption—developed arguments that opposed this basis, and sometimes even his own line of argumentation. It is well said of Schiller that his strength was not so much in discussing but in creating, in the way by which he was building his system.⁵ The sentence quoted above that evokes “the gown I wear on my body” demanding “respect for its freedom from me” bears witness to this.

Schiller transfers freedom from the domain of the human being to that of nature, that is, to the domain where beauty is supposedly always already present. In addition, he transfers it to objects that are not natural givens, such as the gown. Freedom is thus seen not as something that pertains only to the subject or her actions, as was the case in Kant, but as a phenomenon already present in the natural world. Everything, including the gown that I now wear, can be seen as a feature of freedom, as participating in freedom, and in fact demanding it, as soon as one unveils the traits of beauty in the objects of the natural world. This clearly opposes Kant's view that respect “is always directed to persons,

⁵ In corroboration of this line of thought, Dieter Henrich refers to Wilhelm von Humboldt's letter of August 15, 1795, in which Humboldt reports to Schiller on how his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* were received by one of their readers: “Someone said to me, after the usual tribute of praise, that he did not understand your work and that its obscurity is of a worse sort than, for example, Kant's. For one reads Kant with great difficulty and stops doubtfully at every sentence; but, once one has struggled through, he knows distinctly what he has read. In the case of your work the reader readily accepts each individual sentence, and thinks that he has understood everything equally well; but if he asks himself afterward what he has read, he does not know how to articulate it” (quoted in Henrich 1982, p. 237).

never to things” (Kant 1996a, p. 202). And even in considering things as nonpersons—insofar as they trigger affective responses such as love, fear, and admiration—it would never have occurred to Kant to claim that a gown could be counted among them. In fact, all of Kant’s examples refer to natural objects (more precisely, to certain qualities of natural objects) in the narrow sense of the term: horses and dogs may awaken love, the sea, the volcano, and a beast of prey trigger fear, while lofty mountains and heavenly bodies may trigger admiration. These objects are nonpersons, and are hence incapable of triggering respect, but the gown is even less than that, not even a nonperson (and hence a natural object), but rather a nonobject of the natural world. Despite this, however, the difference distinguishing Kant from Schiller is perhaps smaller than it appears to be. As we have seen, respect is not directed at the person in his or her empirical and phenomenal individuality, but rather refers to a person only insofar as this person *exemplifies the factual practicability of the moral law*. In this regard, respect could in fact be seen as directed at a person as *the nonobject of the natural world*, that is, as the objectal (as opposed to objective) form of appearance of the moral law in the natural world. According to Kant, respect cannot be directed at the person insofar as she belongs to the world of natural objects; it can only be triggered by something that, observed from the point of view of the world of natural objects, is strictly speaking a nonobject. Is the person evoked by Kant the gown of the moral law?⁶

In a letter to his friend, Christian Gottfried Körner, of February 8, 1793, in which he formulates what is today most commonly recognized as a proper Schillerian ethical, as well as aesthetical, stance, Schiller sums up his thoughts in a single catchphrase: “Beauty is thus nothing less than freedom in appearance” (Schiller 2003, p. 152). Here, Schiller holds that freedom is the immediate

⁶ For Kant, to be sure, the difference ultimately amounts to two different types of causality, as presented already in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

ground of the beautiful and that beauty can be found in the free unveiling of the form: not because beauty would unveil itself in a specific way or because it is formed by the sensible perfection of the objects in nature, but because the form itself appears to the subject's imagination as being freely unveiled (cf. Henrich 1982). From the standpoint of the subject, every object in the natural world can be seen as an end in itself and thus as displaying its autonomy. If for Kant all sensuous qualities of an object that pertain to the natural world are suspended, Schiller's nature always already possesses beauty and exhibits autonomy. Along these lines, Wolfgang Iser has argued that because freedom is not seen as a privilege of the human being but is already a natural fact and an objective property of natural things, the aesthetic experience implies respect for everything that is seen as a figure of freedom. Thus, for Iser, aesthetic experience is not only a manner of approaching freedom, but also leads to a formulation of a specific kind of ethics: to an "ethics of universal freedom" and an "ethics of universal respect."⁷ For Henrich and Josiah Royce, on the other hand, the focus of Schiller's views is not so much on respect but rather on love and friendship.⁸ In a letter to Körner from December 21, 1792, Schiller expressed a desire to advance his theory of the beautiful, which he presented in Jena during the winter of 1792-1793, and invited Körner to join him in this enterprise in the form of an exchange of letters

⁷ "In this way, aesthetic experience leads to an ethics of freedom. We ought to see all things as figures of freedom and accordingly treat them with respect. Freedom is the basic character of Being. The aesthetic attitude grasps this basic character and recommends an ethics of universal respect. Here Schiller obviously transcends occidental limitations and advocates an ethical perspective that is better known in East Asia (cf. Daoism and Buddhism)" (Iser 2014).

⁸ Although the notion of respect is not to be completely neglected in Schiller, it nonetheless does not have the same prominent status as it does in Kant's ethics. Freedom in the appearances (that is one with beauty) has absolute priority over respect, for what are to be respected are freedom's demands and the desires that freedom imposes on us.

(Schiller 1849, pp. 204–06). The letters weren't published during Schiller's lifetime, but when they finally appeared we learned that in them Schiller started advocating a slightly different and far more mature position than the one from his fictional correspondence in *Philosophische Briefe*. Its aim, however, stayed almost exactly the same: to show how true morality arises only against the backdrop of the unification of reason with sensibility, of the unification of the self with the other, and how freedom reflects itself in that which is sensibly represented.

As Josiah Royce has argued with respect to the *Briefe*, Schiller understands friendship as both an “utter surrender of self” to a radical other and as an “utter abandonment of self” to the needs of nature (see Royce 1978). According to Schiller himself, the consequence of such a vision of friendship leads to the highest possible freedom and self-consciousness of the subject experiencing beauty. But if we bring this thesis to the last, instead proposing a psychoanalytical reading of the notion of the subject, according to which the subject is already radically other to herself and hence needs no externalization in (the) empirical other(ness) in order to constitute herself, one can claim that Schiller's idea of friendship essentially disavows the true nature of freedom and self-consciousness, while leading either to the idea of narcissism or of the subject's complete impenetrability to herself.⁹ The subject's utter surrender of herself to a foreign power, of which Royce is speaking—a “noble soul” at all times capable of ignoring her pathological interests—is only possible if we presuppose a universe of ideal subjects, namely a world in which morality

⁹ For Henrich, the only way to adopt Schiller's idea of externalization is to understand his notion of subject as the subject who “plays itself into the object”: “[R]eason, the heart of subjectivity, turns out to need an externalization, a passively received external counterpart, which from the point of view of Kantian dualism cannot but be described as inclination and sensibility; but this amounts to nothing less than a brute fact of attraction opaque to the self” (Henrich, 1982, p. 250).

isn't even a question. And this is precisely what Schiller does. In his attempts to establish a connection between reason that is lacking affectivity and sensibility that is lacking reflectivity, he repeatedly brings forward the notion of the Ideal: "Schiller speaks about 'Ideal' whenever he wishes to bridge the difference between emotionless reason and unreflective sensibility, between a beautiful form and sublime energy" (Henrich 1982, p. 256). Therefore, what has to be rejected in Schiller's understanding of friendship, and consequently in his theory of aesthetic morality, is the subject's submission to the (empirical) particularity of the other, the very externalization of herself, since the subject already *is* external to herself, i.e. the very form of externality to herself.

In line with this hypothesis, one also has to reject the relationship between Julius and Raphael from the *Briefe* as an image of a harmonious moral subjectivity and instead insist on the impossibility of their encounter, on a gap that is not only inherent to the subject as such but fundamentally separates him, i.e. Julius, from the numerically different other. In a word, two main characters, Julius and Raphael, can never properly meet *for Julius can never meet himself*. This puts Schiller's ideas of friendship and love in a slightly different perspective, one that comes close to that proposed by Henrich. In his essay "Beauty and Freedom," Henrich holds that since love is reason's *inclination* to unite itself with the sensible, Schiller's ethics can only lead to an "ethics of the beautiful soul."¹⁰ In contrast to Kant, for whom the capacity of

¹⁰ "Schiller understands love, quite generally, as the unification of reason with sensibility. In the case of beauty this is quite unproblematic, for freedom, a concept of reason, is meant to mirror itself in what is sensibly represented, and if in the case of the aesthetic, the act of objectification appears as an act of sensualization, then it makes good sense for Schiller to define love as the inclination of reason to unify itself with the sensible object. [...] Here Schiller ascribes an inclination to reason, applying to reason exactly the sort of psychological concept which properly belongs to sensibility according to the Kantian theory Schiller endorsed. When Schiller says that only the pure spirit can love, but also that love is an inclination, this is a blatant contradiction in a Kantian position.

reason spontaneously produces representations, while in the case of sensibility the subject is merely a passive recipient in relation to the world, Schiller was determined to adopt this Kantian view and at the same time advocate the objectification of reason. On this point, Schiller falls short, and instead of proving that what is taken to be objective is not a mere outcome of subjective fantasy, he starts introducing into his edifice first the ideal of friendship, then the ideal of love, and finally the notion of ideal taste. As quoted above, the Ideal is the notion with which Schiller tries to link together two irreconcilable domains, namely “unreflective sensibility” and “emotionless reason.” Here one cannot overlook how Schiller, when trying to synthesize reason and sensibility, thus attempting to bridge the distinction between “beautiful form and sublime energy,” actually brings forward and links *two negative terms*: reason deprived of its affective counterpart, and sensibility deprived of its capacity for reflection. In other words, Schiller attempts to join reason *without* affects with sensibility *without* reflection.

Both notions, i.e., unreflective sensibility and emotionless reason, are described in negative terms, the first with “un-”, the latter with “-less.” In one of his commentaries on Beckett’s *Unnamable*, Eric Santner has suggested that “un-” can be understood as a signifier of “falling out of sense.”¹¹ Schiller’s sensuous subject has indeed always already fallen out of sight, and out of mind, so to speak—i.e., it has fallen both out of sensibility, and out of reason, that is, out of herself. Schiller’s subject is “out of both,” in the midst of this peculiar nothingness, and detached from any

[...] // In order to understand the theoretical conditions under which Schiller’s philosophizing takes place, it is now important for us to note that in his ethics of the beautiful soul he finds himself in the same situation as when he tried to interpret the objectification of the self in beauty” (Henrich, 1982, pp. 249, 252).

¹¹ Eric L. Santner and Mladen Dolar, Seminar on “Creaturally Modernism: Freud, Kafka, Benjamin, Beckett,” Department of Germanic Studies, University of Chicago, Chicago, Autumn 2017.

possible positivity. Rather than the unity of two negatively described concepts that Schiller is looking for, the effective result of his endeavor is *a state of complete alienation*.¹² The search for this identity, if we adopt Adorno's vocabulary, takes place in a no man's land, in a zone of complete indifference between the inner and the outer. The only way to think them as a unity is effectively to think them against the backdrop of the concept of the Ideal. Consequently, this then enables us to read Schiller's theory of morality against the grain of his initial intentions as brought forward in "The Danger" and in "The Moral Utility of Aesthetic Manners." Zdravko Kobe has interestingly suggested in a private communication that Schiller's ethics implies, from the very outset, a specific kind of illusion, an illusion that is in fact imposed on us by the moral law itself. In the latter of the two aforementioned essays, Schiller has argued that by violating the moral laws we would at the same time violate the natural order of things. If the highest good demands realization of the good (as a moral end), and if its side effects include happiness (as a natural end), then acting against nature means acting against the moral end. Hence our duty as moral subjects to take care of the physical order of things, that is—to *pretend that we are moral*. What essentially insists on an illusion, while imposing on us the imperative to feign morality, is strictly speaking the law itself. In short, it is love, reason's inclination, "the law-giver" itself, that demands that we act in accordance with the illusion represented

¹² Here I am referring to one of Adorno's notes on Beckett's *Endgame* in which he employs the notion of "zone of indifference" to indicate how Beckett's pure identity becomes the identity of annihilation: "*Endgame* takes place in a zone of indifference between inner and outer, neutral between—on the one hand—the 'materials' without which subjectivity could not manifest itself or even exist, and—on the other—an animating impulse which blurs the materials, as if that impulse had breathed on the glass through which they are viewed. [...] // [P]ure identity becomes the identity of annihilation, identity of subject and object in a state of complete alienation" (Adorno 2007, pp. 127, 128).

by the Ideal of love. But my claim is not simply that Schiller's ethics amounts to a "mere illusion," but rather the following one: the Ideal (of love in the "Letters," of friendship in the *Briefe*, and of taste in "The Moral Utility of Aesthetic Manners"), by way of which Schiller tries to close the gap between unreflective sensibility and emotionless reason, is not yet the illusion itself.¹³ Instead, our suggestion would be that the Ideal represents not the illusion itself but rather the *form of an illusion* yet to be created by the subject, the form of illusion that enables the subject "to play itself into the object."¹⁴

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After this detour, let me now return to Kant, and to the problem of the feeling of respect as he conceives it in his second critique. The feeling of respect has to do, on the one hand, with one of the fundamental premises of Kantian ethics, which states that one has to insist on the radical irreducibility of the Pure to the Pathological. Kant's radical break with the traditional conception of morality can only take place against the backdrop of this irreducibility, the late conception of which was one of the main reasons why Kant didn't succeed in including moral philosophy in his system of transcendental philosophy sooner. In order to satisfy this condition, Kant had to undertake the task of subtracting from "the highest principles and their fundamental concepts" the feelings of pleasure and displeasure, which pertain

¹³ *Pace* Kant 1997, p. 229: "All ideals are fictions. We attempt, *in concreto*, to envisage a being that is congruent with the Idea. In the ideal we turn the Ideas into a model, and may go astray in clinging to an ideal, since it can often be defective."

¹⁴ "[A]n act of objectification is at work in this so-called play of the imagination. Its play is no longer the play of the subject with itself, occasioned by the intuition of an object; instead, in this act the subject plays itself entirely into the object. The intentional state of the subject is an objective one" (Henrich 1982, p. 247).

to the field of the empirical, as well as to demonstrate that it is possible to determine a priori the relation of cognition to the feelings of pleasure and displeasure. In other words, Kant had to demonstrate that the moral law as the objective determination of the will also determines the will subjectively. In addition to this—and this goes hand in hand with the previously mentioned task—we are confronted with yet another insistence, that is, with Kant's continued effort to include in his ethical edifice an element that, insofar as it represents the missing element not only of his moral philosophy but of transcendental philosophy as such, has the capacity to also determine the will subjectively.

The genesis of this notion can be traced back to Kant's early lectures and writings. Strictly speaking, it is not the genesis of the notion of respect itself that one can retrace, but rather the genesis of a feeling that is yet to become respect, while also encompassing its conceptual opposite, the entire field of inclinations. In his "Inquiry Concerning the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morals" from 1762, Kant laid great stress on the concept of obligation and its possible practical foundation. Influenced by Francis Hutcheson's moral sense theory, Kant formulated the question of whether it is the faculty of cognition or rather a feeling that decides on the principles of obligation.¹⁵ The question remained unanswered up until 1764 when Kant published his "Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime" in which he rejected the possibility of the necessity of moral obligation depending on feeling, since the former can never

¹⁵ "The ultimate fundamental concepts of obligation need first of all to be determined more reliably. And in this respect, practical philosophy is even more defective than speculative philosophy, for it has yet to be determined whether it is merely the faculty of cognition, or whether it is feeling (the first inner ground of the faculty of desire) which decides its first principles" (Kant 1992, pp. 274-75). For a more detailed view of the development of Kant's practical philosophy and other influences on Kant's early theoretical discussions of morality see Wood 1996; Gregor 1963; Schneewind 1997; Guyer 2000; and Paton 1946.

rest on an empirical foundation. At the beginning of his book, Kant insisted on the universal value of “*feeling for the beauty and dignity of human nature*,”¹⁶ but then a couple of passages further reconsidered its prospects by claiming that feelings of pleasure, i.e., feelings of the sublime and of the beautiful, cannot be regarded as being universal and thus part of the practical philosophy proper, for it is impossible to reach a common understanding on what is beautiful, since the feeling is not uniform.¹⁷ As argued by Wood and Henrich, Kant later further strengthened this position by claiming that “even if people were unanimous in their moral feelings, the necessity of moral obligation could never rest on such a merely empirical foundation” (Wood 1996, p. xv; cf. Henrich 1994, pp. 55-87).

Between 1765 and 1768, while focused solely on establishing the metaphysical foundation of his moral doctrine, and while beginning to announce his book on the metaphysics of morals, Kant took a different view of the principles of morality. In view of our initial hypothesis, this period is quite significant, because it is when Kant proclaims for the very first time that the immediacy of feeling, although still distinct from the knowledge arising from the analysis of the concepts, can lead to a specific

¹⁶ “Thus true virtue can only be grafted upon principles, and it will become the more sublime and noble the more general they are. These principles are not speculative rules, but the consciousness of a feeling that lives in every human breast and that extends much further than to the special grounds of sympathy and complaisance. I believe that I can bring all this together if I say that it is the *feeling of the beauty and the dignity of human nature*. The first is a ground of universal affection, the second of universal respect, and if this feeling had the greatest perfection in any human heart then this human being would certainly love and value even himself, but only in so far as he is one among all to whom his widespread and noble feeling extends itself. Only when one subordinates one’s own particular inclination to such an enlarged one can our kindly drives be proportionately applied and bring about the noble attitude that is the beauty of virtue” (Kant 2007, p. 31).

¹⁷ “[I]t is impossible to arrive at concordant sentiments because the feeling is not at all concordant” (ibid., p. 38).

kind of knowledge, and—more importantly—that the principles of morality can in fact be given empirical origins. During the so called “silent period,” he began announcing the publication of his book on the metaphysics of morals even more persistently. It has been noted that in the 1770s Kant systematically worked on establishing a system whose practical segment would rest on a priori principles (cf. White Beck 1960, pp. 7-9), and considered the possibility of constituting the formal principles of morality on the idea of universality. And precisely during this period Kant also started considering the possibility of connecting the metaphysical foundations of morality with the concept of the will’s freedom. Upon the publication of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, when the normative foundation for his theory of ethics was almost completely set, Kant nonetheless omitted moral theory from transcendental philosophy because he held that the concept of duty depends both on a priori principles and on empirical concepts. The question of how exactly to install morality as a cognition in transcendental philosophy was gradually resolved in the coming years, while remaining still deeply connected with the above-mentioned irreducibility, with the following questions: How can the moral law determine the will directly? How can the moral law be both a subjective and an objective determination of the will? And finally, a task that is at stake in these questions, how is freedom possible? In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, published in 1785, Kant slowly started carrying out his promise from the silent period and his first critique. The *Groundwork* thus represents Kant’s first systematic attempt to posit a pure science of ethics, *and at the same time* to introduce into his moral edifice the notion of respect (see Kant 1996b). Here, respect is considered a feeling “spontaneously produced by a concept of reason,” but it is only in the *Critique of Practical Reason* that the notion gains its full capacity to emancipate itself from its presupposed empirical origins:

What is essential in every determination of the will by the moral law is that, as free will—and so not only without the cooperation of sensible impulses but even with rejection of all of them and with infringement upon all inclinations insofar as they could be opposed to that law—it is determined solely by the law. So far, then, the effect of the moral law as incentive is only negative, and as such this incentive can be cognized a priori. For, all inclination and every sensible impulse is based on feeling, and the negative effect on feeling [...] is itself feeling. [...] // [S]ensible feeling, which underlies all our inclinations, is indeed the condition of that feeling we call respect [...]. (Kant 1996a, pp. 199, 201)

To be able to act in accordance with the categorical imperative, that is, for our acts to be considered moral and not merely legal or pathologically motivated, one has to break with the order of the pathological. To break with the realm of pathology means to break with all sensibly motivated inclinations; however, this break with the realm of feeling subsequently brings about a feeling of its own, a feeling of the break with feeling, hence a negative feeling that Kant calls pain. Here, things get complicated even further. It would seem that Kant posits not two, but three distinct orders of feeling. First, the order of the pathological, and its corresponding feelings of pleasure and displeasure, i.e., the entirety of inclinations he subsumes under the notions of “self-love” and “self-conceit,” with which the second *Critique*, for it to be a critique of pure practical reason, has to rupture (ibid., p. 199). Second, the feeling of pain, or the negative feeling, which results immediately from this rupture, i.e., a feeling considered to be the sensuous effect of the absence of sensible inclinations, or a result of the break with the order of the pathological. And third, a positive feeling derived from the negative one, from the absence or from the fundamental lack of the pathological. This latter feeling Kant calls the feeling of respect. In other words, Kant starts off by distinguishing the feeling of respect from the rest of the inclinations, but in doing so posits three sorts of feelings: positive feelings or feelings of

inclination such as love, fear etc.; the negative feeling that he calls pain; and a feeling described as a positivization of this negativity, that is, respect.

In her *Ethics of the Real*, Alenka Zupančič has argued that the feeling of respect “indicates that the law is ‘nearby’, it indicates the ‘presence’ of the moral law, the subject’s ‘close encounter’ with the moral law” (Zupančič 2000, p. 140). Respect is a minimal sign of the presence of the moral law, or of the pureness of the pure (practical reason). On the other hand, one could argue, respect can also be understood in terms of signaling the opposite, its absence: respect indicates that the lack of the pathological is “nearby,” it indicates the absence of the pathological, the subject’s close encounter with this lack. Respect is thus a minimal sign of an absence of the pathological; it is a sign of a lack, or even a signal of a lack, if we deploy Lacan’s famous definition of anxiety as “a signal of the Real” (Lacan 2014, pp. 157–69). However, if Kant more or less convincingly demonstrated the relationship between the negative feeling of pain and the positive feeling of respect, one cannot overlook the precise phrasing from the paragraph quoted above, in which Kant goes on to say that “sensible impulse is based on feeling,” which “underlies all our inclinations.” Moreover, he adds in a paragraph already quoted, that “*So little* is respect a feeling of *pleasure*, that we give way to it only reluctantly.” So again: How is it possible that Kant situates, in the very midst of a free and autonomous ethical subject “a *little* feeling of pleasure,” a pinch of sensibility? In what follows, I suggest interpreting this specific deadlock of Kantian ethics, this problem of the radical irreducibility of the realms of the pure and the pathological, against the backdrop of Lacan’s famous statement about the impossibility of the sexual relationship, whereby the impossibility will not be approached in the context of the relationship as such, but instead by way of focusing solely on the varieties of modalities proposed by Lacan (see Lacan 1999).

Lacan describes the inexistence of the sexual relationship by way of introducing three types of modalities, namely those of

necessity, contingency, and impossibility. By bringing them into a specific relation to affectivity as the structural illusion of every love relationship, he indicates the possible way of its inscription. Let me quote from the very last paragraphs of *Encore*:

“To stop not being written” is not a formulation proffered haphazardly. I associated it with contingency, whereas I delighted in [characterizing] the necessary as that which “doesn’t stop being written,” for the necessary is not the real. [...] I have also defined the sexual relationship as that which “doesn’t stop not being written.” There is an impossibility therein. It is also that nothing can speak it [...]. // I incarnated contingency in the expression “stops not being written.” For here there is nothing but encounter, the encounter in the partner of symptoms and affects [...]. Isn’t that tantamount to saying that it is owing only to the affect that results from this gap that something is encountered, which can vary infinitely as to level of knowledge, but which momentarily gives the illusion that the sexual relationship stops not being written? (Lacan 1999, pp. 144, 145)

If Kant’s central premise is that one has to insist on the radical irreducibility of the pure and the pathological, then the essential premise of psychoanalysis, or the ethics of psychoanalysis, is that one has to insist on a radical irreducibility of the Real to the Symbolic, and that the gap between the two orders has to be retained at any cost. However, the quote from Lacan implies that this is insufficient. For the Real is not merely the realm resisting symbolic cancelation, the tendency of the symbolic necessity to absorb it into its universe. The Real is not only that which “doesn’t stop not being written,” but also the realm of irreducible contingency. We encounter in the partner affects, symptoms, small signs of the subject’s banishment from its participation in the symbolic order, small fragments that resist signification, and which retain some kind of elusive and illusory meaning by way of an affect granting the precarious inscription of the nonrelation into the Symbolic order. The affect gives rise to the fundamental

illusion that that which structurally resists symbolic articulation is not only capable of being articulated, thus endowing the object-cause of desire with some flesh and blood, but also—and more importantly—that this emergence of contingency can break with the impossible and shift the negation from “it doesn’t stop *not being* written” to “it doesn’t stop *being* written,” that is from impossibility to a (however illusory) necessity.

Couldn’t one here propose an analogy in regard to Kant’s ethics? Is not Kant’s ethical constellation also subject to such an imaginary illusion? Is the feeling of respect not precisely the very affective element that joins two seemingly incompatible domains? In Lacan’s reading of the sexual relationship, the affect indicates the point of possibility of a passage from the impossible to the necessary. And isn’t this precisely the way—via the introduction of respect as the positivization of the negative feeling, the pure sensible embodiment of the negative—to break away from the pathological, and move toward the pureness of practical reason? It is important to bear in mind that when Kant speaks of the break with the pathological, the negative character of the feeling of the resulting pain is understood in a strictly logical sense: pain is logically, not morally negative; pain is nothing but a sign of a logical operation of the rupture. Here our initial question arises anew: Can one read the feeling of respect as an element of irreducible contingency? With regards to Lacan’s modalities and Kant’s insistence on the disjunction between the pathological and the pure, one could claim that what is impossible in Kant’s ethics is the very field of the pathological, which from the standpoint of the purity and apriority of the moral law precisely cannot and must not stop not being written. The feeling of respect, however, as the structural remainder of this evacuated realm of pathology is precisely an element of the pathological breaking with this logic; it is a contingent moment in which the pathological stops not being written into the moral law. In this regard, one could assert that the feeling of respect is a contingent element of Kant’s

ethics, as well as claim that the felling of respect is a structural illusion of the categorical imperative. Just as in the case of love, where we encounter in our partner affects as something that for a brief moment suspends the impossibility of the sexual relationship, so too in the case of the ethical subject the actuality of the categorical imperative finds its support in the feeling of respect as the structural illusion of the moral act. Respect for the moral law is therefore introduced so as to signal to the moral Law “its trace and its mirage-like path,” without which, that is, without the support of the feeling of respect, the Law would perhaps lose its very formalness, the empty form as its only determination.

To put it in Lacanian terms: Isn't that tantamount to saying that it is owing to the feeling of respect, as the contingent element that results from this gap, that we encounter something, which momentarily gives the illusion that the order of the pathological stops not being written? The gap between the pure and the pathological has to stay open in order for respect to be able to inscribe itself into the field of pure apriority, thus enabling the actualization of the purity of the moral law, its emergence within the world. The moral law has to dirty its hands, so to speak, with that little pinch of affectivity so as to retain both its actuality and the pureness of its determination of the will. (There is no moral law/act without respect for the moral law, and there is no need for respect, if there is no such thing as the moral law, i.e., unless one is first lead to presuppose it.) Moreover, without the moral law as an objective and subjective determinant of the will, and without respect as the structural condition or essential companion to this determination, the subject is free “only in accordance with the *letter* but not the *spirit* (the disposition)” (Kant 1996a, p. 198). Kant, however, insists on closing this gap. By situating moral feeling outside of the domain of the pathological, he in fact closes this gap once and for all, starting to assert the always already a priori nature of respect, defining it as an effect of the moral law, as something that follows or is derived immediately from it. If

earlier we interpreted the feeling of respect as a structural illusion of the moral law, as a point of suspension, we are now faced with the opposite characterization of respect, which, however, forms an impossible unity with the initial characterization. In this respect, respect is not a feeling that, in Kant's own definition, can only derive from a feeling, i.e., from the field of sensibility, but is effectively an a priori affectivity attached to the pure form of the moral law. The initial opposition between reason and sensibility thus proves to entail a more significant task of thinking reason as inclined. In short, it entails the task of conceiving the feeling of respect as both a "form of pure pathology" of reason and a "form of pathological pureness" of sensibility; it entails thinking a difference within this very zone of indifference of reason inclined.

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Inside, The Real: Moses Mendelssohn's Speculative Realism

Yuval Kremnitzer

In his influential book *After Finitude* (2008), Quentin Meillassoux argues for a new absolute, up-to-date with the 21st century—absolute contingency. There is only one thing we can know to be true completely independently of us and our modes of representing or constituting the world around us—that there is no underlying reason for being (factuality), and, therefore, nothing to guarantee any sort of necessity, except the necessity of contingency. In the jargon of Western backpackers to India, “everything is possible.” What makes Meillassoux’s book representative of a larger and rather disorienting moment in philosophy is the way he here captures an underlying desire common to many contemporaries: the desire to break out of the confinements of what he labels “correlationism”—the modern inability to think being outside its correlation with thinking, the inability, that is, to explore being as such, in and of itself, in its utter indifference to human experience:

For it could be that contemporary philosophers have lost the great outdoors, the absolute outside of pre-critical thinkers: that outside which was not relative to us, and which was given as indifferent to its own givenness to be what it is, existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or not; that outside which thought could explore with the legitimate feeling of being on foreign territory—of being entirely elsewhere. (Meillassoux 2008, p. 7)

Of course, this paradoxical desire for an experience beyond experience is nothing new in itself. It has characterized much of post-critical, that is, post-Kantian philosophy. Whatever else may be Kant's accomplishments as a philosopher, he has determined the limits of our experience, providing a powerful, at times overbearing, reality principle. It is hard to transgress the limits of Kantian experience without being labeled naïve, not yet of age, or too old and demented to realize what's what.¹ Whether or not one accepts or rejects Kant's account of the limits of human, finite experience, there has been a felt need, since Kant, to show how we might step over these boundaries, without clinging to an innocence forever lost.

With the major exception of Hegel,² rebellions against the strictures of Kantian experience have in the past usually found

¹ There is a thread connecting Walter Benjamin's earliest reflections on "experience" as a suffocating instrument of super-ego control, and his attempts to expand the Kantian concept of experience. In the early essay ("Experience") he writes: "What has this adult experienced? What does he wish to prove to us: this above all: he, too, was once young; he, too, wanted what we wanted, he, too, refused to believe his parents, but life has taught him that they were right... yes, this is their experience, this one thing, never anything different: the meaninglessness of life. Its brutality" (see Benjamin 1996, pp. 3-5). It can be shown that, for Benjamin, Kantian experience fails to distinguish itself from this common, "philistine" notion. It is a kind of universalized philistinism, a position anyone can occupy, only to see there is nothing of value to see there. As such, it cannot serve as a standard of all possible experience (see *ibid.*, pp. 100-10).

² The status of experience in Hegel's philosophy is a vexed topic, the treatment of which would far exceed the limits of this essay. For this reason, we shall restrict ourselves here to the following schematic remark. Why not include Hegel among the attempts discussed below to broaden the Kantian experience? Even though art remains for Hegel an important albeit restricted realm, already the very title of his first and best known major book, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, seems to suggest that spirit itself is an object of experience. However, the very same title lends itself to a significantly different reading, according to which spirit is not so much an object of experience, but its subject. This sets the status of experience in Hegel apart from the below-mentioned line of post-Kantian thought, for it, at a minimum, opens up the possibility not so much of a richer, fuller concept of experience, but of a different bearer of experience—the absolute.

Kant's allegiance with scientific experience too reductive, incapable of accounting for the totality of our life worlds, and have often turned to the realm of art to provide an alternative (Schelling, Heidegger). In a nutshell, Kant's notion of experience was deemed too restrictive, incapable of capturing the fullness of experience. The novelty of Meillassoux's move lies in the reversal of this stratagem; for Meillassoux, Kantian and post-Kantian experience is not scientific enough, it remains all too committed to sense and understanding, to our lived experience, and dares not the adventurous path opened up by modern science, which allows us to achieve knowledge that we no longer understand.

With his case for absolute or necessary contingency, Meillassoux strikes right at the heart of Kantian experience. For the Kantian concept of experience is premised on the impossibility for our understanding to forego the distinction between possibility and actuality. The sense that Kantian philosophy had quite literally conditioned our possible experience, imposing severe restrictions on what counts as experience, and allowing very little to transcend these restrictions, has to do with the limitation of the possible to what can be actualized by empirical experience.³ Possible experience, for Kant, has to carry within it a distinction between possibility and actuality (Goldman 2012, p. 112). Hence,

³ The ontological status of Kantian sensibility is a complex and ambivalent matter. On the one hand, Kant entirely subverts the traditional association of sensibility with passive, formless content, instead endowing sensibility with a formative power. As Simon Hajdini puts it, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* “[s]ensibility is no longer understood as a mere *a posteriori* appendage to the Understanding, but is rather conceived of as an autonomous producer of representations (of space and time) as irreducible to the categorical, i.e. intellectual, synthesis of experience. Sensibility enters the stage as a formative principle, as pure sensibility, delivered of its empirical character and of its formlessness, and thus also of its reduction to the mere receptivity of the senses” (Hajdini 2015, pp. 87-88). According to Hajdini, this conception of sensibility proved too difficult for Kant to stick to, and in the course of the *Critique*, receptivity becomes the sole irreducible characteristic of sensibility.

our discursive intellect is limited precisely to the extent that, for us, experience needs to be realized, actualized by empirical content given from without (in distinction from the hypothetical, archetypical intellect that forgoes these distinctions, but must remain an idea of reason, thinkable, even necessary as a regulative principle, but not an object of knowledge). Kantian empirically possible experience is limited to the potentially empirically given. The Kantian possible is thus possible actuality and precludes any conception of possibility that would be formally severed from empirical actuality.

At this level, the current rebellion against Kant does point in the right direction; for his notion of possibility seems clearly, in this light, not to be possible enough, so to speak, in a sense reducible to actuality. “There’s nothing you can know that can’t be known,” seems to be the message of Kantian experience, to take a theme from The Beatles.⁴ But then it is not so much, as Meillassoux argues, ancestral claims that cannot be accounted for—scientific claims about a time before human consciousness,

⁴ I thank Simon Hajdini for the following formulation of this dimension of Kantian experience: “From this point of view let us now again take a look at the structure of the Kantian analogy. If it is true that I can only gain *a priori* knowledge of the relation of a given *x* to a *y* as its effect, but not the knowledge of this *y* itself, this can also be articulated in the following way: the effect can only be a discovery, since it cannot be constructed, but *a discovery I can seek for*, a discovery I can discover (*ein Fund, den ich (auf)suchen kann*). And the reason I can seek for it is that I have the *a priori* rule of seeking for it in experience, a rule that is nothing other than the law of change, of the necessary connection of cause and effect. And because I have the rule for seeking it, what I eventually discover will always be the effect of some determinate cause and thus never a discovery of something I never sought after, or more precisely: never a find that could not be found, never a discovery that would not be consistent with the *a priori* rule for seeking it in experience. *In experience I can only discover what can be sought after*. Thus, no discovery is blind, nothing is blindly discovered, and everything is discovered in accordance with the principle of the search itself. (In experience) one cannot discover anything that would oppose the rule of the search. That is to say: in experience there are no surprises” (Hajdini 2012, unpublished manuscript).

before human life, etc. — but the very capacity of science to make truly new discoveries, discoveries that change the scope of what is possible. To know the unknown is not so much a matter of access to a time or dimension independent of our experience, but a far more radical notion of our knowledge and experience effectively changing reality as such.⁵

But such a change in the scope of the possible is hardly accountable by Meillassoux. In the first *Critique*, Kant entertains the notion of “absolute possibility,” or the possible “in every respect” (Kant 1998, p. 332). As if anticipating resistance to the strictness of his notion of possible experience, Kant explores the notion of a non-empirical conception of possibility that is utterly severed from actuality, precisely in order to distinguish the underlying criteria of the critical examination of cognition. Why not posit a different conception of experience than that of critical philosophy, one that is not limited to the formal conditions of empirical givenness and that would thus span the region of thought unlimited by any criteria of its actualization? Why not allow experience to transcend the strictures of the Kantian conditions of possibility?

Absolute possibility, unlike empirical possibility, would be essentially possible, inasmuch as the condition of its possibility would be unattainable; hence, its possibility could not be transformed by actualization. The Kantian empirically possible, by contrast, is transformed when the condition with which its concept formally agrees is empirically given, and when what was possible becomes actual. What is empirically possible is actualized when its condition is empirically given to sensibility, but absolute possibility would not be able to be so transformed; it would be possible without the chance of the condition of its possibility being overturned; it would be “possible in all respects”

⁵ See Zupančič 2017, pp. 77-83. Zupančič here develops the paradoxical notion of an independent being created as such, as independent, at the moment of its discursive creation, or scientific discovery.

without the chance of its becoming actual. Such a conception of possibility, “can in no way be of empirical use, rather it belongs solely to reason, which goes beyond all possible empirical use of the understanding” (Goldman 2012, p. 112).

The problem with absolute possibility, for Kant, is that it in principle cannot transition to actuality; in lacking conditions of possibility, it also lacks conditions for its actualization. We might choose to ignore this as a Kantian clinging to our limitation—who knows what is possible for absolute possibility? Maybe it has criteria for actualization that forego our understanding? Perhaps, but this would mean, minimally, that for us it would make no discernible difference, and is therefore of no empirical use. To paraphrase Kafka, there is infinite possibility, only not for us.⁶ In other words, absolute contingency, the assertion that, in principle everything can be different than it is, leaves us with no instrument to detect such a difference, should it occur (see Johnston 2011). We seem to be caught in a dilemma; either we accept the restriction of the realm of the possible to Kant’s transcendental conditions, or we adopt a notion of the possible that seems to intrinsically resist any detectable actualization.⁷ Either way, the sense of the possible itself seems diminished, either reduced to our empirical reality, in principle given to experience, or utterly severed from it. Possibility either hovers too close to the ground of given empirical

⁶ The best-known version of Kafka’s original line is found in Benjamin’s essay “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death.” The quote appears in the context of a conversation with Max Brod that began with “present day Europe and the decline of the human race.” In reply to Brod’s attempt to locate a dimension of hope in Kafka, Kafka is quoted as saying, “Oh, plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope—but not for us” (see Benjamin 2002, p. 798). Benjamin is quoting here from an essay written by Brod in German in 1921. A slightly altered recounting of the conversation can be found in Brod 1960, p. 75: “Plenty of hope—for God—no end of hope—only not for us.”

⁷ Agamben’s attempts at recovering a sense of the possible not reducible to its actualization, while conducted in an “archeological” fashion, tracing the problem back to Aristotle, suffer from the same problem (see Agamben 1999).

actuality, or drifts in the infinite universe of the unrealizable. Is it possible, if that word still has any meaning, to expand the Kantian limitations on possible experience from within, as it were, without losing touch with experience and without straying too far in the open sky of the absolute? Must we dismiss the desire to go beyond the strictures of Kantian experience and accept our transcendental horizon as the ultimate reality principle, or do we just need a different dream?

Alenka Zupančič has analyzed the dream element of Meillassoux's project:

[S]ince Descartes we have lost the great outside, the absolute outside, the real, and have become prisoners of our subjective or discursive cage. The only outside we are dealing with is the outside posited or constituted by ourselves or different discursive practices. And there is a growing discomfort, claustrophobia, in this imprisonment, this constant obsession with ourselves, this inability to ever get out of the external inside that we have thus constructed. There is also a political discomfort that is put into play here: that feeling of frustrating impotence, the impossibility of really changing anything, of absorbing the small and big disappointments of recent and not-so-recent history. Hence the certain additional redemptive charm of a project that promises again to break out into the great outside, to reinstate the real in its absolute dimension, and to ontologically ground the possibility of radical change. (Zupančič 2017, p. 76)

This fantasy of the great outside serves as a protective shield from its obverse anxiety, as fantasies do, saving us “from that little yet annoying bit of the outside which is at work here and now, persistently nagging, preventing any kind of discursive cage from safely closing upon itself.” (Ibid.)

Meillassoux's vision offers a way to renew the project of German idealism—to account for a post-critical absolute—but with the non-intuitive coupling of a strong commitment to scientifically informed “realism,” along with an equally strong allegiance to the fundamental experience attributed to pre-critical thinking,

and supposedly lost with Kant, and never recovered by any of his followers.

But a way forward was actually shown long ago. In order to move forward, we will now look back—to the thought of Kant’s contemporary, a figure who has come to embody, in the history of philosophy, the outdated, pre-critical, dogmatic “school” philosophy: Moses Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn’s underlying figure of thought—the frame of his fantasy—is not that of the great outdoors, but rather that of an internal exteriority, the absolute within.

Morning Hours

Mendelssohn’s *Morning Hours* (1785) is a historical object, not only because it has been thus classified, but also because it bares the marks of the historical conditions of its composition. Intended as a systematic presentation of his views on metaphysics, all in the service of proving the existence of God, it was composed in part as a response to Mendelssohn’s correspondence with Friedrich Jacobi regarding the question whether, and in what sense, Lessing was a Spinozist. As this private correspondence became public, and scandalous, it became known as the “pantheism controversy,” a public debate whose influence on the ensuing developments of German culture and philosophy is today well established (see Beiser 1987; Henrich 2008; and Franks 2005). Jacobi’s interpretation of Spinozism as the pinnacle of rational, naturalistic thought, leaving no room for the spontaneity required for a creator God and human freedom, and reducing subjectivity to a powerless witness of a mechanistically determined world, posed a challenge to the intellectual optimism of the Enlightenment, forcing a choice between rational knowledge and freedom.

In the scholarship, Mendelssohn’s role in the affair is restricted to its private aspect—the debate about Lessing (Beiser 1987).

Jacobi's dismissive attitude towards his opponent (whom he once admired) has stuck, and most interpreters have considered Mendelssohn incapable of understanding the depth of Jacobi's challenge. But it might be that Mendelssohn's very blindness to the challenge makes him of continuing relevance to philosophical concerns today. Mendelssohn's view of contingency is what made him immune to the threat of Spinozism, and also what led him to develop a notion of the absolute as that which, from within, prevents self-enclosure.

Contingencies

Jacobi is often credited with realizing, in his interpretation of Spinoza, the nihilistic consequences of the elimination of final causes from reality, rendering our universe a contingent, mechanistically determined one.

Mendelssohn saw no such threat in Spinoza. First, Mendelssohn notes, quite presciently, that Spinozism seems to lend itself just as easily to causally mechanistic accounts as it does to more vitalistic accounts,⁸ as indeed would be championed by Herder and later Schelling. More importantly, it fails to account for contingency.

Mendelssohn distinguishes between two senses of the contingent. What we call "accident," he says, aims to cancel intentional, final causes. What we call "chance" is more radical, as it aims to cancel efficient causes as well. This sense of contingency only fully emerges on the plane of history, rather than nature, and may indeed be what distinguishes the two. While we cannot

⁸ Spinozism is a "two-headed Hydra. One of these heads bears the heading: *Everything is one*; the other: *One is everything*" (Mendelssohn 2011, p. 84). That is why, Mendelssohn notes, Spinozism has been attractive to both "atheists" and "enthusiasts," or "mystics."

fully expound Mendelssohn's thinking here, it is possible to say, rather schematically, that history for him is not "outside" nature—rather, we could say it supplies the frame where the eternal and contingent (here understood as empirically contingent) aspects of reality can intersect in a significant way. An event, a real break between before and after, that introduces the "new," Mendelssohn argues elsewhere,⁹ is ontologically inseparable from its subjectivization.

While in the early stages of his discussion Mendelssohn seems to subscribe to the view that contingency is ultimately an illusion,¹⁰ arising from the limits of our finite (in Kantian terms, discursive) intellect, he breaks with this view on a decisive point. Contingency, he argues, cannot be grasped in its conceptual opposition to the necessary, for such an opposition "reifies" contingency itself, and thus makes it "pass into its opposite," to use an appropriate Hegelian anachronism, and become itself necessary:

[T]he contingent being is not on hand on account of the fact that its dependence on a necessary being makes the opposite unthinkable, for then it would, indeed, have to be necessary and immutable itself. What follows in a necessary way from a necessary truth must itself be necessary. Thus, the reason for a contingent being's existence or its dependence upon the necessary cannot be found in its property of being an object of knowledge. If this were the case, then it would not itself come to actuality merely *somewhere* and *at some time*, but instead would necessarily remain immutably the same for all time; for, as an object of knowledge, it is immutable and eternal. (Mendelssohn 2011, p. 70)

⁹ In his *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn distinguishes between eternal, contingent, and temporal truths. Interestingly, temporal truths—Mendelssohn's name for events—do not fall under either rubric, they are neither eternal nor contingent, here understood as empirical. What constitutes this domain is precisely the gap between the eternal and the empirically contingent (see Mendelssohn 1983, p. 91).

¹⁰ For a historical account of contingency, focused on it being an illusion, see Hacking 1990.

One could formulate this by saying that the contingent is necessarily contingent, as it resists the conceptual closure of the necessary. Contingency in the more radical sense, for Mendelssohn, resides in the gap between the conceptual “whatness” or essence, and “thatness” or existence—in other words, to highlight its paradoxical status: contingency resides in the gap between contingency and necessity.

We can consider this Mendelssohn’s first “speculative” move: what for Kant is characteristic of our finite, discursive mode of understanding, the gap we encounter between our concept of a thing and its empirical make up, supplied by intuition, given from “outside,” is for Mendelssohn the very definition of contingent being as such. The gap between a thing and its notion is not an epistemological limitation imposed on our understanding but the very ontological nature of anything contingent.

This notion of contingency becomes clear in Mendelssohn’s rejection of the “refined” Spinozism he attributes to Lessing. Mendelssohn’s notion of refined Spinozism is the idea that the Spinozistic ontological picture is plausible as a picture of the ideal existence in God’s mind, the world as a realm of non-actualized potentiality. “Actually existing” reality is constituted by the gap between the ideal and the real, between the conceptual space of possibility and the empirically given.

It is the gap between the ideal and the real that Mendelssohn takes to be fundamental; the world we inhabit, in its actuality, is “the best” in a very specific and somewhat paradoxical sense—in that it can be better. And it is precisely in this, in reality “falling short” of the ideal, failing to rise to its own notion, that Mendelssohn sees divine providence—God has left room for improvement, for perfection.

“Falling short” of the ideal reality that is in God means for Mendelssohn that contingent reality is under-determined, not fully actualized and articulated, as it is in God’s mind. While this gap between existence and essence is characteristic of all

contingent being, human beings for Mendelssohn in some sense are the gap, they inhabit it. Mendelssohn notes that in Hebrew, which was his first philosophical language, there is no word for contingency, and the word used to translate it carries almost the opposite meaning, that of a happy encounter, a mark of providence—an opportunity.¹¹

The Cogito's Shadow

There is one argument in *Morning Hours* for which Mendelssohn, uncharacteristically, makes a claim to originality. He constructs a proof for the existence of God based on the cogito's shadow, so to speak, on the immediately given absence of self-knowledge, or what we might call the argument from the unconscious:

I will attempt to conduct this proof in another way as well, in a way that, as far as I know, no philosopher has touched on. // In addition to the immediate feeling of my own existence [...], I also presuppose the following perception as indubitable: I am not merely what I distinctly know of myself or, what amounts to the same, there is more to my existence than I might consciously observe of myself; and even what I know of myself is in and for itself capable of far greater development, greater distinctness, and greater completeness than I am able to give it. This observation is, it seems to me, no less undeniably evident [than the consciousness of my own existence]. As a perception of the inner sense, it has its subjective certainty and since, with respect to myself, my own I is also the subject of thoughts, the predicate “immediately known” can be attributed to me as well. That I do not know everything that pertains to my existence can be no deception of the senses, no illusion. For

¹¹ Mendelssohn 2011, p. 65. Mendelssohn seems to have had in mind the Hebrew word *mizdamen*, which is a reflexive form of the root *zmn*, which means time, and carries in its semantic horizon the sense of invitation or summoning, as well as chance occurrence. It also carries the sense of the opportune.

in the first place we are not transposing something known internally onto an external object; we have no intention of connecting the make-up of one's sense with that of others, of inferring from *often* to *always*, all of which were sources of sensory illusion [...]. In fact, it would not be possible for either our body or our soul to be on hand if they were merely what we distinctly observe of them. (Mendelssohn 2011, pp. 103)

Note, first, Mendelssohn's move from less to more, from the lack in our knowledge to the assertion that there is more to know: "I am not merely what I distinctly know of myself or, what amounts to the same, there is more to my existence than I might consciously observe of myself." The gap that is characteristic of contingent beings, becomes for Mendelssohn not simply an object of experience, but the very site of experience. Therein lies the crux, easily overlooked, of Mendelssohn's argument, as well as his implicit reception of Kantian ideas. *Morning Hours*, which was composed in part as Mendelssohn's response to the pantheism controversy, was also a response to Kant's critical philosophy, as was evident to contemporaries, including Kant, but is no longer evident today. Some were willing to go further, so far as even to suggest, in clear opposition to Mendelssohn's proclaimed intentions, that *Morning Hours* had not only come to terms with the Kantian critique but, in fact, offered a decisive response to it.¹²

Indeed, Mendelssohn understands Descartes's achievement—the certainty of the "cogito"—in a way that departs from Descartes himself, and is best clarified by Kant's critique and development of this certainty as that of the transcendental "I" or

¹² As may be gathered from a letter written to Kant by Ludwig Heinrich Jakob, his disciple and admirer in Halle: "Mendelssohn deserves to have his book favorably received [...]. But right away I heard some triumphal songs [...] that celebrate a victory that Herr Mendelssohn, according to his own statements, never even had in mind. Yes, one could even make out from certain reviews that this book is thought to have dealt a serious blow to the Kantian critique" (Kant 1999, p. 246).

the unity of apperception. In recasting the “cogito” as the unity of apperception, Kant famously criticized Descartes for privileging the certainty of the “I” as content or object of a thought (cogito as my thinking of myself), and had put the focus on the formal, if implicit, self-consciousness involved in cognition regardless of its object. Since the I’s spectral presence accompanies all cognitions as a formal condition of the unity of apperception, the “I” that appears as an object of knowledge has no privileged status, and is to be known, like all other objects of experience, as receiving its material from the outside, that is, empirically. In contrast, the transcendental “I” itself, as a formal condition of experience, is not an object of experience.

Like Kant, Mendelssohn notes that the certainty of the “I” lies not in the particular act of consciousness (“I think”), but in this I’s shadowy, or implicit, underlying presence in all cognitive acts broadly construed:

The philosopher [Descartes] could have said with equal right: I hope, therefore I am; I fear, therefore I am, and so forth. Only, according to his theory, all those alterations that transpire within us possess the common characteristic that he calls “thought.” He thus included them all in the general phrase, *I think*. (Mendelssohn 2011, p. 29)

While, like Kant, Mendelssohn sees the certainty of the cogito not in its content but in its form, he simply attributes that insight to Descartes himself. It seems that for Mendelssohn, novelty in philosophy depends on treating the “old” as already addressing the challenges of the “new.” Consequently, he subtly denies the possibility of deriving existence from this certainty, just as Kant does, and instead offers a deceivably commonsensical definition of existence:

And existence? If we begin from ourselves, as we must necessarily do in all our knowledge, then *existence* is merely a common word

for *acting* and *undergoing*. We are conscious of acting or undergoing something every moment of our life and the characteristic that these two have in common we call “existence.” I have concepts and sensations, therefore I am a conceptualizing and sensing being. I act or undergo something, therefore I am actually on hand. (Mendelssohn 2011, pp. 29-30)

Note that existence belongs on neither side—neither in acting nor in undergoing, neither the active nor the passive, neither in thinking nor in substance. What is beginning to be teased out here is a paradoxical notion of existence (*Daseyn*), which is understood neither as a “whatness,” or essence, nor as a “thatness,” or pre-conceptual existence, but lies rather in their nonrelation, as the very locus of their codependence or coarticulation. It is, as Mendelssohn so disarmingly puts it, a “common word” for what, as he will proceed to argue in his original proof, is in human beings never unified. What thinking and being have in common is the gap separating them.

For Mendelssohn, as for many post-Kantian philosophers, the idea of the thing in itself, apart from our perspective, is unsustainable, and yet, he also asserts it as a real, if shadowy experience. While as a rule, in principle, there can be no meaning to a thing that does not accord with a concept, that is precisely what the fundamental experience of subjectivity attests to. It is an exception where no exceptions are permissible or thinkable:

[The] agreement between a thing and [its] concept knows no exception [...]. // My own existence is undeniable for me. It is equally impossible for me to deny the fact that inherent in my actual existence are characteristics and constitutive features that I do not consciously know and that even those of which I am conscious do not by far have in my conception the perfection that pertains to them in the thing. [...] In a word, between concept and thing, if I look merely at my knowledge of myself, the most perfect harmony is not to be found, the necessity of which we have just proven. (Mendelssohn 2011, p. 106)

It is first and foremost in our self-relation (or rather, self-non-relation)—that is, in the discrepancy we sense as a need, a demand, or an urge for realization and articulation—that we encounter the thing in itself.

*The Stammering Subject*¹³

If Descartes vacated all phenomenal contents in order to reach the purely formal but certain position of the cogito, Mendelssohn begins his own, original journey to God by taking hold of that very void. What matters for Mendelssohn in Descartes is not so much the “I think” as the hollowed out, formal “I.” The very assertion of the “I” as the site of enunciation opens a gap that all subsequent enunciations cannot quite suture. Whatever follows “I” hovers in indeterminacy. It is crucial for Mendelssohn that this lack of knowledge or indeterminacy is not merely a psychological,

¹³ Mendelssohn had in fact developed, without using the word, a concept of the unconscious. In the 1780s he was engaged in the establishment of Karl Philipp Moritz’s magazine *Know thyself, or Magazine of experiential psychology, a reader for the learned, edited with support of some friends of the truth by Karl Philipp Moritz*. An important study that Mendelssohn contributed to the magazine was occasioned by a pathological experience reported by the famous Spalding, who had been attacked by a sudden incapacity to write or speak; he felt a “tumultuous disorder” in one particular region of his mind, though his capacity for speculative thinking functioned properly as before. Whereas Spalding had tried to account for his problem in purely physiological terms, Mendelssohn offered a psychological account. In a manner that vaguely anticipates elements of Freudian thinking, Mendelssohn explained the stuttering as resulting of “unwelcome ideas” that were “strangers” in the soul. Mendelssohn’s essay here introduced, with remarkable emphasis, the concept of the “unconscious” in two senses of the term: 1) as the zero of awareness in purposive actions that, as a result of expertise, proceed almost mechanically; 2) as repressed (“dislodged”) ideas that, being as yet “unwelcome,” have been consigned to oblivion but become effective in dreams. The recalcitrant character of these ideas and the disturbing effect they have on the proper functioning of the ego, certainly call to mind key Freudian formulations (see Altmann 1973, pp. 668-71).

empirical state (susceptible to deception and the illusion of the senses), but is understood along the lines of the Kantian gap between the transcendental “I,” the condition of possibility for the unity of apperception, and the empirical, psychological “I”; it is a formal condition, a result of the gap between the “I” and subsequent predicates, and is therefore “immediately known,” as certain as the Cartesian cogito. Indeed, it is the very form of the “I,” stripped of all phenomenality and presuppositions, taken as its own content. The space of reflection is not opened up by self-transparency, but rather by the formal inaccessibility of the subject to itself. It is here, at the inaccessible heart of selfhood that Mendelssohn uncovers the meaning of the in-itself.¹⁴

While not reducible to empirical, psychological experience, it is important to Mendelssohn that this formal aspect is not a mere abstraction from experience, but rather accompanies everyday experience elusively yet palpably, just as the unity of apperception does. Mendelssohn both radicalizes and threatens Kant’s transcendental/empirical divide by, so to speak, internalizing it even further. The very gap between the “I” that thinks and is itself as an object of experience is taken as an immediate, if elusive, object of experience, a kind of background experience. It is what accompanies immediacy by always eluding it, the elusive immediacy of the immediately elusive. In other words, it is the paradoxical empirical experience of our abstract, formal, transcendental aspect, which can never become an object of empirical knowledge. What arises here is the strange materiality of the medium of experience, its density. What this dimension of experience aims at can be rendered by borrowing Walter Benjamin’s formula: it is what is experienced *in*, rather than *through* experience.¹⁵ A dimension of

¹⁴ Mendelssohn here goes a long way towards clarifying Lacan’s identification of his barred subject with the Cartesian cogito. On the Lacanian barred subject as inaccessibility “as such,” see Žižek 2016, p. 110.

¹⁵ This is the key distinction in Benjamin’s essay “On Language as Such and The Language of Man”: the distinction between what is communicated

experience which does not constitute a special empirical content, or reach outside the bounds of experience, but is rather parasitically attached to all experience, and thus exceeds the strictures of experience from within.¹⁶

Surplus Knowledge

For Mendelssohn, to know oneself as unknown is not merely to determine the limits of (self)knowledge, to declare “this is as far as one can go”; it is already to assert the reality of a privation. The knowledge that consciousness is barred is not merely a statement of limits, a recognition of the limits of human understanding, but also, at the same time, the assertion of the unknown as real, or rather, as we shall see, as something to be realized.

This is why Mendelssohn draws very different conclusions from this gap at the heart of subjectivity he discovers—with the aid of Kant—in the Cartesian subject. While Kant might be right in assigning an empirical status to the knowledge I do possess about myself, the absence of knowledge is not easily confined to the empirical. While it might make sense to subject all contents of thought to the same criteria of understanding, the non-relation at the heart of selfhood raises the issue of the ontological status of self-knowledge, and by extension, of knowledge in general. The crucial but subtle point advanced by Mendelssohn here is that the very pursuit of (self)knowledge is premised and dependent on its inaccessibility/impossibility—self-knowledge is produced in the attempt to overcome the gap constitutive of it. It is a surplus

through language and what is communicated *in* language. The former is what we use language for as a means of communication, the contents conveyed by language, whereas the latter is the spiritual essence of language (see Benjamin 1996, pp. 62-74).

¹⁶ A structure comparable to that of the Freudian drive in relation to the biological instinct.

knowledge produced by the very formal detours in the subject's effort to attain knowledge.¹⁷ The question regarding the conditions of possibility of this dimension of knowledge thus leads Mendelssohn to his "proof" of God's existence. From the inaccessibility of the self, Mendelssohn argues, "it obviously follows that an entity must be on hand which represents to itself in the most distinct, purest, and most thoroughgoing manner everything that pertains to my existence [...]. There must, therefore, be *one* thinking being, *one* intellect that thinks in the most perfect way the sum-total of all possibilities as possible and the sum-total of all actualities as actual" (Mendelssohn 2011, p. 104).

There are two dimensions to the function God fulfils in Mendelssohn's proof that need to be distinguished. First, there is God as what Lacan called "the subject supposed to know." In more philosophical terms, this is the notion of God as the site of knowledge, a necessary presupposition of the pursuit of knowledge. God is the bearer of the knowledge we lack. Why can't that site just be "objective reality," the world out there? Well, it can, of course, but it will precisely be a divinized "objective reality," a necessary presupposition one cannot effectively doubt. God here is the name of the guarantee that "the truth is out there."

Second, and this is a significant point we cannot here elaborate on sufficiently, God makes knowledge possible in the emphatic sense of the term, by guaranteeing that there is something *to* know, that is, he is responsible not for the actualization of possible knowledge but rather for its virtualization or potentiation, for maintaining that knowledge foreclosed from immediately given reality. It is only in this minimal temporal gap that a project of knowledge can set forth, relying not only on the truth being "out there" in the literal sense, but also in the figurative, on it being "out there," non-trivial, perhaps even slightly mad. For

¹⁷ On the logic of surplus enjoyment and how it relates to surplus knowledge, see Žižek 2017.

the truth to be discoverable it must also be held in suspense, not immediately given in its full scope. The truth, as Lacan put it, is half-said (Lacan 1998, p. 92).

*From Conditions of Possible Experience
to the Experience of Possibility*

Mendelssohn's conditions of possible experience thus push against the Kantian limitation of experience to the potentially empirically given, since the knowledge he is after only becomes possible by virtue of its impossibility, its structural reclusion from the empirically given. This kind of knowledge is not merely transformed from possible to actual knowledge by "filling in" with empirical material, sensibility, what was formally possible; it is actualized against the background of its formal inaccessibility, changing the conditions of possibility themselves in actualization. The transition from possibility to actuality, Kant's yardstick for a serviceable notion of the possible, is retained. But in this transition, the scope of the possible is expanded beyond the empirically given. There can be a true discovery, the creation of new knowledge, that is nonetheless not trivial, not just waiting there to be discovered. While not everything is possible, as Meillassoux would have it, one thing is, perhaps the only one that really matters: the impossible.

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Self-Evidence Derailed: Descartes's Cogito and its Anticipations

Aleš Bunta

Centuries after Descartes formulated his first principle of philosophy—*cogito, ergo sum*—the Cartesian cogito remains, for better or worse, recognized almost universally as one of the most important turning points in the history of philosophy. However, what is almost as famous as the cogito itself is the fact that strikingly similar (if not identical) arguments existed long before Descartes introduced his dictum.

Of the so-called “anticipations” of the cogito argument, the most relevant appeared in the respective works of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, the two philosopher-saints. The fact that the cogito had been anticipated by these two men whose legacies were still immensely influential during Descartes's period suffices to give rise to several significant questions: Was Descartes aware of the similarities? How could he not have been, given his formal Jesuit education at *La Flèche*? How is it that other scholars of the period, who must have been aware of these similarities, did not speak more openly against the alleged novelty of Descartes's insight? All in all, how did Descartes succeed in asserting that his first principle was new when so many must have thought that it was not?

It may come as a surprise that the first serious allegations of plagiarism surfaced as late as 1689, more than half a century after Descartes introduced his “first principle,” when Bishop Huet published his *Censura Philosophiae Cartesianae* (cf. Blanchet 1920, p. 19).

Forty-seven years earlier, Arnauld opened his notorious comment on the *Meditations* with the following remark: “The first thing that I find remarkable is that our distinguished author has laid down as the basis for his entire philosophy exactly the same principle as that laid down by St. Augustine—a man of the sharpest intellect and a remarkable thinker, not only on theological topics but also on philosophical ones” (Descartes 1985b, p. 139). It is certainly worth noting that Arnauld, who was evidently convinced that the cogito argument was not Descartes’s original invention, found a way of expressing his opinion without explicitly stating it. And yet, the hint left little room for misunderstanding.

Descartes’s short response to this comment is perplexing, to say the least: “I shall not waste time here by thanking my distinguished critic for bringing in the authority of St. Augustine to support me” (ibid., p. 154). Is this blatant cynicism? An indication that Descartes had no answer to Arnauld’s remark? Or is it possible that Descartes felt confident that the problem of the Augustinian anticipation presented no serious problem after all? And could that be the reason why he decided to respond with a mere pleasantry? And yet, the comparison Arnauld proposed in the course of his argument still appears very convincing.

Even though Aquinas’s anticipation was only a reformulation of Augustine’s cogito-like argument, the two arguments, when compared, turn out to not be the same. At a certain level, we can claim that the difference between the two anticipations is even greater, or at least clearer, than the difference between the respective anticipations and Descartes’s cogito. Thanks to Jaakko Hintikka’s famous interpretation, we now know that even though both anticipatory arguments prove or demonstrate the same thing, namely the irrefutability of one’s own existence, and that they do so in similar terms, their internal logics are in fact surprisingly diverse. While St. Augustine’s argument proceeds as a logical deduction of the irrefutability of one’s own existence, St. Thomas’s argument appears much closer to Hintikka’s own performative

account of the cogito, according to which the certainty of *sum* is not logically deduced from the fact of thinking. Rather, it emerges as a consequence of the attempt to consider one's nonexistence that instantly proves to be self-defeating, serving as an immediate manifestation of the certitude of the exactly opposite claim (Hintikka 1962, pp. 15, 16).

The obvious question is: Which of these internal logics is at work in Descartes's thought? To no great surprise, the answer is that Descartes appears to have borrowed from both argumentative principles. His reflections on the cogito from his *Replies* and *Conversation with Burman* are in fact not completely homogeneous and allow for two different lines of interpretation, each of them associable with either of the two saints. And this may well be one of the answers to the question of how Descartes managed to unintentionally defy all odds in asserting the novelty of his argument. Descartes appears to have repeatedly made use of one saint to keep him in the shadow of another saint's heavenly shine, so to speak, for whenever one tries to pin his argument to one of the two argumentative principles, a sort of remainder of the other principle appears indispensable. We nonetheless have to keep in mind that, apart from his peculiar reply to Arnauld, in his published work, at least, Descartes never so much as mentioned the problem of anticipations. The only source that we have on Descartes's own view of the issue is his private letter to the Dutch theologian Colvius, in which he claims that up until that very day, November 14, 1640, i.e., almost four years after he first introduced his first principle, he was unaware of any similarities.

Even to this day, Descartes's apparent dilemma regarding his central insight remains one of the most disputed problems within Cartesian studies. Thus, perhaps we should try to define it more precisely from this specific aspect. The reason why Hintikka can legitimately claim that the cogito argument should not be regarded as a logical inference relies heavily (although not exclusively) on the fact that on a few occasions Descartes himself appears to have

said so. In his *Replies to the Second Set of Objections*, for instance, he says the following:

When someone says, “I am thinking, therefore I am, or I exist”, he does not deduce existence from thought by means of a syllogism, but recognizes it as something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind. (Descartes 1985b, p. 100)

Harry Frankfurt fiercely contested Hintikka’s conclusion that this sentence should be regarded as Descartes’s general rejection of the inferential explanation of the cogito (Frankfurt 1999, p. 9). Instead, Frankfurt argued that the sentence merely shows that Descartes rejected the possibility of explaining cogito in terms of a simple syllogism based on the major premise “everything that thinks is or exists.” And such a rejection, according to Frankfurt, does not preclude the possibility that Descartes thought of his argument in terms of another type of logical deduction. However, even though Frankfurt was possibly right in saying so, this still does not explain what exactly Descartes had in mind in stating that the cogito *emerges as self-evident*.

The answer to this question can perhaps be found in our other philosopher-saint. While Descartes himself was usually not a keen reader of other philosophers, he did study St. Thomas Aquinas rather extensively. Aquinas was in fact very much concerned with the problem of self-evidence, and for a very specific reason. He opposed the idea that God’s existence was self-evident. Therefore, he compiled a lengthy list of arguments that supported the thesis of God’s self-evidence, which included some of the most sophisticated argumentative principles of the Middle Ages, such as the notorious ontological argument elaborated by St. Anselm. So, the arguments in favour of God’s self-evidence were themselves anything but self-evident. This “black list” also included a specific type of argument, which was, in both its structure and content, related to the earlier cogito-like argument of Augustine.

While explaining one such argument, Aquinas writes in *De Veritate* (Q10, a12, 7): “God has existence more truly than the human soul has. But the soul cannot think that it does not exist. Therefore, much less can it think that God does not exist” (Aquinas 2008, p. 66). The argument appears solid enough. However, Aquinas immediately adds the following antithesis: “For something is immediately evident in two ways: in itself and to us. That God exists, therefore, is immediately evident in itself, but not to us. Therefore, to know this it is necessary in our case to have demonstrations proceeding from effects” (ibid., p. 68).

Aquinas’s solution is brilliant: it is probably even true that God’s existence is self-evident. As a matter of fact, as he explains, one can even deduce the self-evidence of God’s existence by means of a legitimate argument. For Aquinas does not say that the argument itself was false: if our own existence is *stricto sensu* self-evident, for we cannot even think of ourselves as nonexistent, then the existence of God, which is truer than ours, must by analogy be even more self-evident than our own. However, even though God’s existence may be *considered* as veritably self-evident, it is *not self-evident to us*. The self-evidence of God, even though it cannot be truly opposed, is floating somewhere out there without reaching its proper recipient within us. The very fact that it *can* be deduced, or even merely *thought of*, probably already speaks against its presupposed ability to directly appear in our thoughts in an uninvited way.

Let us now turn to the “anticipation” itself. This appears later in *De Veritate* (Q10, a12, ad7), mostly as an additional explanation of the initial premise with which Aquinas began; its primary purpose is to specify precisely why the “human soul cannot think that it does not exist.” The anticipatory argument is, in fact, an exemplary argument meant to explain the structure of this particular self-evidence. In other words, Aquinas’s anticipation of the cogito is an argument that serves as a *demonstration* of self-evidence in general and does not focus on establishing the indubitability of

one's own existence in particular. So, in contrast to Descartes, who appears to rely on some sort of intuitive self-evidence to prove the indubitability of one's own existence, Aquinas actually feeds one's own existence to self-evidence in order to show how this *essentially invasive* mechanism really works. The argument itself runs as follows: "No one can assent to the thought that he does not exist. For in thinking something, he perceives that he exists" (ibid., p. 70). Since the attempt itself of thinking of oneself as non-existent immediately reveals itself as contradictory, this shows that any attempt at denying one's own existence serves as its immediate proof. And obviously, in contrast to the alleged self-evidence of God's existence, this argument serves as an example of *true self-evidence*. For the certainty of our existence does not really appear as the result of being *thought of* (such as a solution to a mathematical problem emerges as a result of one's thinking of this problem); it rather emerges from within our thought—in principle—regardless of what we are thinking. But it proves itself most convincingly if we try to deny it. And this uninvited *appearing* within our thought seems to represent precisely what this particular type of self-evidence is all about.

The deep connection between Hintikka's performative interpretation and Aquinas's argument becomes immediately clear. The performative argument is in fact a derivation of Aquinas's formula of self-evidence. We cannot know whether Descartes actually read this anticipatory argument in the *De Veritate*. However, it seems highly likely that Descartes must have been at least aware of some other arguments that Aquinas treated as the arguments of God's alleged self-evidence, such as the argument that Aquinas introduces right at the beginning of the second chapter of his *Summa Theologica* (Q2, a1):

Again, it is self-evident that truth exists, for even denying so would amount to admitting it. If there were no such thing as truth, it would be true that there is no truth. So, something is true and, therefore,

there is truth. But God is truth itself: "I am the way, the truth, and the life." So, it is self-evident that God exists. (Aquinas 2006, p. 21)

Even though Aquinas does not show in this argument how one's own existence can be perceived as self-evident, he nonetheless uses the same *performative structure* to make his argument: If I say that the truth does not exist, I clearly think that it is true that there is no truth, which ultimately means that by thinking that the truth does not exist, I actually directly confirm its existence *by stepping in its place myself*. It is evident that even if Descartes knew only this passage, this could still have been a major influence on how he devised his cogito argument in *Discourse on Method*.

Hintikka's performative theory, which implicitly emphasizes Descartes's relation to Aquinas, has several advantages: first, the fact is that Descartes's "original" argument in *Discourse* can be explained as a modified, "analytical" version of the performatory argument such as we observed in Aquinas. Second, Descartes himself said that the cogito is not to be perceived in terms of deducing "existence from thought by means of a syllogism." Third, in contrast to his knowledge of Augustine, which was surprisingly shallow, Descartes was well educated in Aquinas. And fourth, Descartes says that cogito must be perceived as a specific type of self-evidence, and we can now see that Aquinas not only resorts to such a structure of self-evidence, but he also relates it internally to a cogito-like argument. The fact that his own approach is diametrical, as he introduces the cogito-like argument as a demonstration of how the intrusive mechanism of self-evidence overwhelms us, and not as an argument of existence, makes the whole comparison even more compelling.

However, Hintikka's interpretation also contains at least one fundamental flaw: his performative theory of the cogito argument cannot be convincingly applied to Descartes's argumentation leading up to the point of certainty in the *Meditations*, which is Descartes's most philosophically elaborated and sophisticated

work. In my opinion, Frankfurt is right in saying that Descartes's argumentation in the *Meditations* must be perceived as a series of deductive arguments after all.

Frankfurt's argument elaborates what I will subsequently call the *argumentative substructure* of the cogito in the *Meditations*:

Instead of showing that *sum* can be deduced from a premise that is certain in its own right, Descartes in effect points out that a premise from which *sum* can be elicited is an essential and inescapable element of every context in which the need for assurance concerning *sum* arises. (Frankfurt 2008, p. 152)

However, this fundamentally correct and concise interpretation of Descartes's argumentation in the *Meditations* raises one serious difficulty. If we accept Frankfurt's interpretative thesis as the ultimate answer to Descartes's argumentation in the *Meditations*, then we must also effectively recognize *as a fact* that Descartes's treatment of the problem of the indubitability of one's own existence was no different from St. Augustine's approach to the same problem. This becomes immediately apparent once we put Augustine's various arguments together in a slightly more systematic way.

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Augustine's dictum "*Si fallor, sum*" consists of the following argument: "If I am mistaken, I am. For if one does not exist, he can by no means be mistaken. Therefore, I am, if I am mistaken" (*City of God*, XI. 26; cf. Matthews 1992, p. 29). Now, let us compare this passage from *City of God*, a passage that Augustine himself described as one of those "truths" in the face of which the "quibbles of the sceptics lose their force," to Descartes's introduction to his first principle in the *Discourse on Method*.

I noticed that while I was trying to think everything false, it was necessary that I, who was thinking this, was something. And observing

that this truth “I think, therefore I am” was so firm and sure that all the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were incapable of shaking it, I decided that I should accept it without scruple as the first principle of philosophy I was seeking. (Descartes 1985a, p. 127)

Putting these two arguments side by side and noting their common references to skepticism, it instantly becomes clear that the true difficulty we are facing is not one of finding several obvious similarities that make one wonder how Descartes could have been ignorant of Augustine's passage while writing his own. Instead, the true task is to find any essential difference between the two arguments at all, save, of course, the first impression that Descartes's passage is more elaborate. Aquinas's passage, on the other hand, is a different story. As noted above, Aquinas introduced his own version of the argument in a context that could hardly have been more diverse in all possible respects.

Similar passages are spread throughout Augustine's works. To take another example, this time from the dialogue *On Free Choice of the Will*, which is especially important because it was used by Arnauld to turn Descartes's attention to the problem of anticipations of the cogito argument. This time we are faced with a dialogue between the saint himself and Bishop Evodius.

So, to start off with what is clearest, I ask first whether you yourself exist. Are you perhaps afraid that you might be deceived in this line of questioning? Surely if you did not exist, you could not be deceived at all. (*On Free Choice of the Will* II. 3; cf. Matthews 1992, p. 11)

Evodius's reply is rather short: “Go on.”¹

The first thing one may notice (also due to Evodius's short answer), is that Augustine's arguments are in effect so simple,

¹ While quoting this passage, Arnauld was pointing to a parallel with the following sentence from *Meditations*: “But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case, I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me” (Descartes 1985b, p. 17).

and so unpretentious in their own way, that they appear to be self-evident. And this is important to observe because it shows that the entire history of the cogito argument was marked by an affinity for self-evidence.

From a slightly different angle, in Augustine's dialogue with Evodius this tendency towards self-evidence can be observed in Evodius's relative silence. What we see in this dialogue is that the subject who ultimately meets the truth remains silent throughout the argument. Quite literally, it is as if the process of his own reasoning proceeded without him. This can be said of Evodius (for it is the irrefutable truth of his own existence that is at stake). It is as if his own thinking addressed Evodius from an external position, a position represented by Augustine, who in turn asks to confirm the certainty of Evodius's existence. Evodius is clearly the key player in this game, for it is he and he alone who attains the truth of the irrefutability of his own existence. However, the entire process of thinking involved in the argument seems to serve no other purpose but to reveal itself to Evodius as something self-evident and almost redundant.

However, no matter how self-evident the result of Augustine's argument may appear to be, or how scarce the words of the subject intended to receive its meaning are, the argument that lies beneath this effect is neither simple nor does it lack strategic thinking. So, according to Augustine, why is one's own existence irrefutable? And why is this simple truth, which he himself treats as self-evident and of which he insists one only needs to be reminded, nonetheless extraordinarily important?

The argument's surface is, in fact, perfectly simple: if I presume that I exist—which is what I normally do—I cannot be making a mistake (by assuming so), for I cannot make a mistake without existing. Since my own existence is the necessary *pre-condition* of any possible mistake I can make, I can conclude that my existence itself, my assumption that I exist, cannot be counted among my mistakes. In other words, I cannot be wrong

in presuming my existence because *if I were* wrong in presuming my existence, I would not be here making presumptions of any kind whatsoever. Nor, for that matter, would I be asking any questions regarding whether they were right or wrong. Yet, I am clearly presuming something. And it is precisely this, the most superfluous of the possible pieces of evidence, that lies at the heart of any cogito argument.

Therefore, even though the skeptics may be perfectly right in saying that there is no way of telling whether our senses are not constantly deceiving us, and even though it is possible that we are thus kept in a state of constant delusion without knowing it—I can nonetheless remain reassured that I can attain truth *from within this falsehood itself* that possibly surrounds me. While I presume that I exist, I also spontaneously reflect (my own existence as) *the precondition of falsity's own appearing*. So, even if the delusion is all-encompassing, and I am consequently wrong in all that I think, I must still necessarily exist as the precondition of my own being deceived. Therefore, my spontaneous presumption that I exist cannot be wrong, regardless of the circumstances.

Not only is the argument immune to falsity, as it is anchored in that minimum of being (represented by “my” existence) that falsity itself requires to appear, but even more importantly, the *type of truth* that Augustine discovered is only unilaterally opposed to falsity. My existence, since it cannot be perceived as false, remains the opposite of falsity; however, falsity itself does not really oppose this truth (embodied by my existence), rather it serves as its ultimate proof. Any possible mistake that I make only confirms the irrefutable “truth” of my existence, it does not contradict it. Rather, *truth itself exists* as this internal contradiction of falsity, which *cannot befall my existence without contradicting even its own possibility*. Therefore, what Augustine really discovered is a specific *dimension of truth*. And it is important to stress this because he himself appears to have regarded his insight in precisely this way. This also explains why he treated the argument itself

as something almost laughable: for it is the specific nature of the truth he discovered that matters. In other words, by revealing the irrefutability of one's own existence, Augustine discovered a specific type or dimension of truth, which cannot be regarded as the pure opposite of falsity. This truth must be perceived as the internal contradiction of falsity as such, which nonetheless makes of this truth an even more effective weapon, for it ultimately turns falsity into its own affirmation.

A dialogue like the one between Evodius and Augustine represents a perfect form of expressing Augustine's insight: the Augustinian argument should fundamentally be regarded as a simple *mental experiment designed to fail*. Try to deny your own existence and you will be instantly proven wrong. And obviously, because Augustine's argument is the first historical example of an insight that is essentially embedded within what we regard today as "the subjective perspective," the repetition of such micro-experiments is also the only way to transmit the insight from one subject to the next. Even though truth itself is almost self-evident, the argument is only rendered true by means of its repetition. That is to say, by enacting the experiment's permanent failure.

Regardless of its apparent simplicity, Augustine's "*Si fallor, sum*" is in fact a formidable and complex argument which—on the basis of thinking alone—turns falsity itself into an efficient instrument of truth. More precisely, Augustine's argument can be regarded as a kind of strategic pincer movement that captures falsity from both sides: on one hand, the argument reaches beneath falsity by revealing that the presumption of one's own existence must be considered to be a reflection of falsity's own precondition, while on the other hand, this encirclement of falsity is completed by the fact that the evidence of the certainty is in fact *so shallow and superfluous that it cannot even be considered wrong*—for it is simply one's awareness that one is presuming something, regardless of whether this presumption itself is right or wrong. Ultimately, Augustine's cogito truly demonstrates the

self-evidence of which one merely needs to be reminded, but this is precisely where the argument's greatness lies.

No matter how remarkable Augustine's argument might be, what interests us here is another question: Is the argument that is developed by St. Augustine really the same argument that Descartes later introduced as his "first principle of philosophy"? Regardless of the similarities, which are clear and compelling, the two passages we just compared are in fact dissimilar in one specific way, which can make all the difference. Or at least Descartes thought so. So, let us examine the two arguments once again.

First Augustine: "If I am mistaken, I am. For if one does not exist, he can by no means be mistaken. Therefore, I am, if I am mistaken."

And then Descartes: "I noticed that while I was trying to think everything false, it was necessary that I, who was thinking this, was something."

The first tangible distinction (at the level of the passages themselves) lies in the fact that Descartes not only proves the subject's existence, but he also posits or allocates this existence exclusively within the order of thinking. In contrast to Augustine, who "only" proves existence by showing that I cannot be wrong in presuming it, Descartes attributes subject's existence to doubt (the attempt at thinking everything false) directly. "I noticed that while I was trying to think everything false, it was necessary that I, *who was thinking this, was something.*" So, in other words, Descartes not only proves this existence, but he also simultaneously begins to answer the question: "What is it that exists with such irrefutable certainty?" And his answer is: doubt.

Descartes himself was firmly convinced that this distinction resolves the entire problem of Augustine's anticipation. In *Letter to Colvius*, surprisingly enough, he instantly admits that he and Augustine rely on the same argument to prove our existence. But the real issue within his own argument, he says, is not just the mere proof of existence, but precisely demonstrating "that this I which

is thinking is an immaterial substance with no bodily elements” (AT III, p. 247; cf. Matthews 1992, pp. 12, 13). It is a well-known fact that this argument of Descartes spectacularly fails. Descartes did not consider the fact—or was even truly unaware of it—that arguably Augustine’s main philosophical goal was, no less than his own, precisely to show that body and mind were two diverse substances.² And one of the main functions of his cogito-like argument was to support this ontological view. So, Descartes’s attempt to move away from Augustine ends up stumbling into the holy man coming around the corner. However, what interests us here, at least for now, are the structures of the two arguments. And, in this sense, Descartes’s opinion remains an important guideline. For it shows that his own argument had a double, almost paradoxical purpose: He not only uses it to prove one’s own existence, but at the same time he also uses the argument to derail this existence from the order of being. He thus shows that existence only exists as thinking (and nothing else). So, how does Descartes reach this double effect at the level of the argument itself?

Even if my thinking that nothing exists were true and nothing is out there, the mere fact that this thought itself is being considered proves that the thought, contrary to other things, exists. The argument thus already indicates that the thought must be regarded as ontologically independent of the rest of the world. For the argument shows that even if nothing else exists, the thought itself *exists necessarily*. Even if it tries as hard as it can, it cannot escape the grip of existence, while the fate of the rest of the world remains obscure. Clearly, moving forward or outward in this direction leads us back to Augustine’s own dualist ontology. So, we must refocus on the argument itself, and ask ourselves precisely what this certainty hinges on. And the answer is, on thought’s own contradiction. What stands at the

² For a more elaborate study on this problem, see, for example: Matthews 1992, pp. 14-18, or Menn 1998, pp. 210-17.

centre of Descartes's cogito is precisely this consideration of pure nothing, which is instantly proven to be self-refuting *by the very fact that it is being considered*. For its immediate result is that by the effort to prove itself wrong this thought demonstrates that it necessarily exists even if nothing else does. Contrary to its own effort, it is cast out of the nothing it tries to imagine while the existence of all other things goes down the drain. Descartes pins the subject's existence precisely to this self-refuting thought and not to its subsequent reflection. Clearly, this thought to which my existence is pinned *is a mistake*. It cannot be regarded otherwise because it is proven wrong by the mere fact that it is being considered. However, it is precisely the contradiction that emerges as a *result* of the argument that serves as the point of certainty on which the whole of Descartes's argument hinges. So, ironically enough, Descartes's argument is the veritable *si fallor, sum*, for while Augustine merely anticipates the conclusion that I cannot be making a mistake when I think that I exist, Descartes actually pins this existence directly to a thought that is proven true (necessarily existent) by proving itself wrong.

However, does not Augustine say the same? He clearly says that even if everything were false, I would then exist with even greater certainty. For falsity affirms and does not contradict my existence. The arguments clearly meet in the claim: "Even so, if everything is false, I exist." Moreover, existence in both cases hinges on a mistake. But Augustine's dictum neither directly indicates that existence is inherent to thinking, nor does it show that I could exist even if nothing else existed. As a matter of fact, his strong point is precisely that my existence is *necessarily brought along* by something else existing within the order of being and this is falsity, or more precisely, *what appears false* (to me). Obviously, this does not mean that "my" existence is not absolutely certain. Augustine's certainty is still rooted within the order of being. There must be something else out there for something to appear false to me. Since my existence is the precondition of this

false appearing, this leads to the conclusion that my existence, as *the being* of falsity's *appearing*, thus reveals itself beyond falsity through the appearing of falsity itself. On the other hand, Descartes's argument in *Discourse* would almost "prefer" there to really be nothing behind the curtain of appearance. For this scene of Descartes floating in the void like a lost astronaut in space is precisely what enables him to say that only thought itself exists unquestionably.

So, it seems that we can conclude that the internal logics that drive the two arguments are in fact surprisingly diverse, and that Hintikka's general assessment that Augustine's cogito can be regarded as a logical deduction, while Descartes's argument was best perceived as a performatory argument, was correct. In fact, if only *Cogito* and *Si fallor* are put in question, such an assessment would indeed be sustainable. However, Augustine also developed several other types of cogito-like arguments that were not based on the assumption of one's existence, but upon *doubting this same assumption*.

"Who would doubt that he lives?" asks Augustine, "for even if he doubts, he lives; if he doubts, he remembers why he doubts; if he doubts, he understands that he doubts; if he doubts, he wishes to be certain; if he doubts, he thinks; if he doubts, he knows that he does not know; if he doubts, he judges he ought not to consent rashly" (*Trinity*, X.10.14; cf. Matthews 1992, p. 14). Quite a few certainties arise within Augustine's insight that are deducible from doubt directly, the first of which is precisely this implicit or negative awareness of existence harboured by doubt itself.

At this point, we must observe the main problem of Hintikka's rejection of Augustine's anticipation. On the one hand, Hintikka was arguably right in saying that Augustine's arguments can be regarded as just local applications of the general ontological principle "whatever thinks must exist," which can be traced back to Parmenides. However, this can only be ascertained regarding the mistake argument, where the point of certainty is indeed

logically deduced. And obviously, even the doubt argument *can* be perceived in this way: I cannot doubt my existence because in order to doubt I need to exist. However, Augustine's insistence on the negative awareness harbored by doubt itself, which seems to indicate that doubt itself represents a specific form of knowledge, strongly suggests another solution. Namely, that Augustine's arguments of doubt need to be perceived as performatory arguments, after all.

The situation gets even more complicated. For in the *Meditations*—and that means *after he had already been warned* of the similarities by Mersenne—Descartes approached even closer to Augustine's line of argumentation. The key to his deduction of the point of certainty is closer to Augustine's dialogue with Evodius than to his own, arguably performative, argument in the *Discourse*, at least at the level of its substructure.

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We have already said that Descartes responded to the problem of Augustine's anticipation just once, in his private letter to Colvius. However, Stephen Menn recently noted another interesting source (Menn 1998), namely one of Descartes's earliest fragments, which Baillet later published under the title "The Appendix" to *Studium Bonae Mentis*. The passage is relevant, for it can be regarded as Descartes's own miniature theory of originality.

In this fragment, Descartes attempts to answer the following (quite familiar) question: How can I say *anything at all* without merely repeating already known philosophical ideas? This partially explains why it is not so relevant that Descartes does not use the expression "originality" in the passage. Descartes tries to determine a very specific type of originality; let us name it the *intrinsic minimum of originality* (or even zero-degree originality). Let us first take an example:

The impression is that the sentence "how can I say *anything at all*, without merely repeating the already existing ideas?" might

at first seem to be another version of the question: “How can I assert *something new*?” However, for Descartes, there is an essential difference between these two questions.

The full version of Descartes’s question could be rephrased thusly: What is it that separates thinking from merely repeating the ideas of other people given that *in philosophy, thinking can only proceed by repeating* the philosophical ideas that have been previously conceived by others?

What constitutes the originality of thinking cannot be considered as *a property of any particular philosophical sentence or opinion* (for these are, in fact, in constant fluctuation). Consequently, this also means that the second sentence, “How can I assert *something new* (a new opinion)?”, cannot pass this intrinsic criterion, while there still may be some hope for the first sentence: “How can I say *anything at all*?”

As we can write no words in which there are letters other than those of the alphabet, nor complete a sentence unless it consists of the words that are in the dictionary, so neither [can we compose] a book except out of the sentences [or opinions, *sententiae*] that are found in others. But if the things I say are so coherent among themselves and so connected that they follow from each other, then it will not follow from this argument that I have borrowed my opinions from others any more than I have taken the words themselves from the dictionary. (AT X, p. 204; cf. Menn 1998, pp. 12, 13)

The passage clearly addresses the concept of originality even though the word itself is never used. Originality is addressed in its *negative form* insofar as Descartes posits a hypothesis that represents the antithesis of originality, without explicitly referring to the notion of originality. In principle, there is only one way of efficiently eradicating the possibility of originality and that is to assert that thinking as such can only consist of repeating already existing thoughts. If thinking is essentially nothing other than repeating what has already been said, then there is no such thing

as “original thought.” Descartes introduces this hypothesis by saying that a book cannot be composed in any other way “except out of the sentences (or philosophical opinions) that are found in others.” So, the first sentence of the passage is a negative hypothesis: writing a new book relies on opinions that are found in others, no less than writing a single sentence is limited by the number of words that actually exist in the dictionary, or as writing a single word is determined by the choice of letters that can be found in the alphabet. Thus, the possibility of any originality is reduced to zero.

However, another observation is equally important. The mere repetition of already existing thoughts is not only *the existential negation of originality*; it also embodies the inner *qualitative contradiction within thinking* itself. So, it is very important to note that Descartes does two things at once: he introduces the definition of the nonexistence of originality (that is to say, he determines its negative limit designated by repetition), but at the same time he introduces this definition in such a precise way that the definition implies a contradiction within the very possibility of thought.

If there is such a thing as the “auto-negation” of thinking, a “cognitive process” that reflects its own nonexistence while still belonging to the domain of thinking, then the answer is clear: such inner contradiction of thinking is represented by mere repetition of the thoughts of other people. When we merely repeat what other people have already said, we clearly do *not* think (in any qualitative sense of the word), but the process of repetition in which we thus partake is nonetheless still to be perceived as thinking. Let us put it this way: repeating is hollow thinking. It radiates nonbeing from within thinking itself. As a matter of fact, the hypothesis that thinking is simply a version of repeating seems to negate not only the possibility of (my) original thought, but also the possibility of my existence at all. For if my thinking consists entirely of repeating, then I am nothing but a copy of *something*

else repeating itself in the shape of “my” alleged thought. “I” thus still think, but my existential status is then reduced to that of a mere representation of some other thing’s *past* existence. So, I am myself quite literally nothing. *Cogito, ergo non sum*. Obviously, this is a far-fetched speculation, but let us just remember, after all, that Descartes was the philosopher renowned for questioning his own existence. Furthermore, since so many commentators report his “excessive passion for originality” (Blanchet 1920, p. 57), it is at least conceivable to imagine that, for Descartes, original thought was almost a matter of existence itself.

By treating repetition as the intrinsic negation of originality, Descartes achieved a double effect: the negation of originality incorporates the qualitative negation of thinking as such. Why is this so important? Because in doing so, Descartes exposed that there is *a certain minimum of originality that thinking must respond to in order to qualify as such*. This is the primary meaning of what I have called the minimum of originality (or zero-degree originality). The minimum of originality is therefore to be imagined as some sort of invisible threshold that thoughts must surpass to legitimize themselves as thinking. And the minimum itself is obviously defined by thought’s intrinsic capacity to exceed the level of mere repetition (of the already existing thoughts)—*at least to the extent of reaching zero-degree originality*.

So, the hidden dichotomy of the passage runs like this: on the one hand, thinking as such is defined by an intrinsic capacity to exceed the level of mere repetition; but, on the other hand, philosophy, which is allegedly the highest form of thinking, due to the necessity of repetition does not meet this minimum criterion of thinking as such. How did Descartes resolve this dichotomy? He resolved it so quickly that the dichotomy itself is not at all easily observable.

Descartes both begins and ends with the comparison to letters in the alphabet and to words in the dictionary. What Descartes first needs is namely to get rid of the *logic of origins*. For what

effectively shackles us to the past is not some sort of complete impossibility of originality, but instead the appearance that there actually may be *some original ideas*, which continue to be repeated. So, what Descartes does first with this comparison is to admit that no entirely new philosophical opinion was possible in a strong sense. Precisely because the comparison makes such a strong statement, it must convince even the most conservative observer (let us not forget that, upon writing this, Descartes had just finished his studies). However, once the comparison is accepted as the renunciation of any higher aspirations to originality, this comes with a price (for the Other), so to speak. As soon as one accepts the comparison to the letters in the alphabet and words in the dictionary, the status of the original itself is also called into question. For it is in fact no different than the status of simple words or letters.

Another way of putting this is to say that Descartes severed the relation between origin and originality, thus appropriating the past to the benefit of the present. Thought's originality has nothing to do with whether or not the particular thought had been used before. Since the number of thoughts, according to Descartes's argument, appears to be finite, we would have to conclude that all philosophical opinions have always already appeared at some previous stage. What truly legitimates thought's intrinsic minimal originality depends instead on the question of whether or not a philosophical thought can be considered as the *spontaneous result* of an author's current thinking. A thought is legitimately used "if the things I say are so coherent among themselves and so connected that they follow from each other."

On one hand, this claim exposes Descartes's view on the appropriation of other philosophers' thought: indeed, it is clear that he regarded the entire history of philosophy as a junkyard full of recyclable materials that should not go to waste. On the other hand, it is no less clear that his standards of originality were *set much higher* than our own. We can use other people's

philosophical opinions, says Descartes; however, we can only do so if we manage to mould them into an *entirely new philosophy*.

This is precisely what we need to keep in mind when reading Descartes's argument in relation to the Augustinian anticipation as he presented it in his *Letter to Colvius* approximately twenty years later:

I am obliged to you for drawing my attention to the passage of St. Augustine relevant to my [I think therefore I am]. I went today to the library of this town to read it, and I find that he does really use it to prove the certainty of our existence. He goes on to show that there is a certain likeness of the Trinity in us, in that we exist, we know that we exist, and we love the existence and the knowledge we have. I, on the other hand, use the argument to show that this I which is thinking is an immaterial substance with no bodily elements. These are two very different things. In itself it is such a simple and natural thing to infer that one exists from the fact that one is doubting that it could have occurred to any writer. But I am very glad to find myself in agreement with St. Augustine, if only to hush the little minds who tried to find fault with the principle. (AT III, p. 247; cf. Matthews 1992, pp. 12, 13)

In his letter to Descartes of July 3, 1648, Arnauld wrote the following: "I read your treatise on the separateness of mind and body with great passion. I found it clear, reasonable and superb; it does not matter that, for the sake of truth, this topic has been almost equally superbly treated by St. Augustine almost throughout his book on the Trinity, especially so in chapter 10" (AT V, p. 186). This shows that at the level of facts Descartes's argument seems to be a genuine blunder. Augustine did in fact use several cogito-like arguments in relation to his own dualist ontology. More specifically, he used these arguments to prove that the mind could attain certainty of itself regardless of the senses, showing that the body and the mind were two diverse substances. In this sense, Descartes's general argument, which emphasizes his own dualism, fails to distinguish itself from Augustine's argument.

What makes the problem of the anticipations so difficult is precisely the fact that, once we reach the final destination, we lose. The only way to find distinctions at the level of the cogito itself is to stick as long as possible to the structures of the arguments themselves, while awaiting the inevitable return of the same.

However, beneath the general failure of Descartes's argument, two other significant emphases can be found. As noted above, Descartes does not really defend the novelty of his argument at the level of the argumentative substructure, for he immediately admits that Augustine used precisely the same argument "to prove the certainty of our existence." In fact, at this basic level, Descartes defends his own authorship of the cogito not by drawing a clear distinction between himself and Augustine, but rather *by the complete abolition of authorship as such* in relation to the cogito argument in general. And this obviously goes hand-in-hand with his view that the cogito is to be considered conditionally self-evident. Descartes's point is that the ideas that illustrate a certain self-evidence cannot be claimed by any single author. In this regard, it makes perfect sense to say: "In itself it is such a simple and natural thing to infer that one exists from the fact that one is doubting that it could have occurred to any writer." Descartes's argument is in complete agreement with his own general views on the problem of philosophical originality discussed above.

Therefore, at the level of argumentative substructure, there is no difference. This does not mean, however, that the Cartesian and Augustinian arguments were essentially the same. According to Descartes, the true difference between these arguments lies within the intended purpose of their use, which retroactively changes the *essence* of the argument itself. This *formal aspect* of Descartes's argument is crucial. It is not his answer to the challenge itself that is important, because his answer is ultimately misleading. What is truly important is the fact that Descartes himself clearly distinguished between two levels of the argument. There is the argumentative substructure, which he admits is shared with

the argument offered by Augustine. This nonetheless does not present a problem for Descartes because he is convinced that the argumentative substructure of the cogito relies on self-evidence and due to this feature it is therefore authorless. But apart from this argumentative substructure, there is also some sort of meta-layer of the argument that retroactively changes the quality of the initial argument. Descartes's own answer hinges entirely on this meta-level, which is where his own answer ultimately fails. However, in what follows it will become apparent that this distinction between the two levels of argumentation is in fact the key to the solution.

With regard to Descartes's demonstration of certainty in the *Meditations*, I would like to briefly propose three connected hypothetical observations:

a) At the beginning of the *Second Meditation*, Descartes actually develops *two deductions* of the cogito argument and not just one. While both of them are fundamentally Augustinian, the first argument might also be perceived as a slightly modified version of the cogito in the *Discourse*. However, Descartes's argument in the *Meditations* does allow for the point of certainty to be deduced in the same way as it is logically deduced in Augustine's "*Si fallor*." The same goes for Descartes's second cogito argument in the *Meditations*, the argument of the deceiving demon, which is based on practically the same argumentative principle as Augustine's dialogue with Evodius, at least at the level of its argumentative substructure. Taken individually, neither of the two arguments display any specifically Cartesian feature that could serve to distinguish Descartes's argument from that of St. Augustine.

b) At the same time, however, one must observe that Descartes eventually anchors the point of certainty in the second of the two deductions. His final mastery of doubt depends on some sort of *public demonstration*, which is based on the famous proof of the deceiver. This demonstration itself, however, does not really draw

its entire effect from the Augustinian ground of the argument, but rather depends on the continuity of both deductions. More precisely, it depends on the difference that emerges between the two arguments *only after* we have posited them in continuity.

c) The two arguments clearly work in support of each other. However, they work for each other by working *against* each other. According to my hypothesis, the second of the two arguments retroactively shows that the first cogito argument needs to be reconsidered as the last of the *arguments of doubt*. In other words, the first of the two cogito arguments in the *Meditations* does not resolve the problem of doubting our own existence. Rather, it can be perceived as the argument that makes it possible for such doubt *to emerge as a rationally legitimate possibility* in the first place.

Descartes proceeds in the following order. First, he presents one version of the cogito argument:

But I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. (Descartes 1985b, pp. 16, 17)

Then he continues with the second argument:

But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. (Ibid., p. 17)

The key to the whole story is probably this appearance of the deceiving demon. Does Descartes only want to say that the point of certainty that he reaches in the first argument is so solid that it cannot be shaken, not even by the omnipotent demon? Is its entire purpose purely epistemological? Or is there another, more ontological purpose behind this argument?

The first thing we must note is that the argumentative basis of the two arguments is the same. In both cases, the argument is fundamentally built upon a demonstration of the meditator's existence, demonstrating that this existence is itself a *precondition of the very attempt* at putting this existence in question. I cannot doubt my own existence, because the fact that I am doubting it proves that I exist. And even the demon cannot deceive me regarding the fact that I exist, because in order to be deceived at all I must exist as the precondition of the deception's success. This argumentative principle is obviously Augustinian.

As Miran Božovič (Božovič 1990) and Slavoj Žižek (Žižek 1998) have both shown in their respective studies, the key difference between the two arguments lies in the fact that, at the end of the second deduction, the subject's existence actually *emerges as an object*. In the first argument, the meditator simply observes that it is impossible that he has not existed while asking himself whether or not he exists. The second argument leads to a different result: the subject himself is deduced as the *objective precondition* of any act of deception. And precisely because it has been deduced as an object (of deception), the subject can be regarded as *something* that belongs to the "objective coordinate system." While in the first argument the meditator merely finds absolute *subjective* certainty in his own irrefutable existence, the second argument actually changes this subjective certainty into "something" that exists objectively (or "publicly," as Hintikka would have it). Although nothing has changed at the level of the argumentative substructure, the argument thus clearly attains a quality that is not represented in Augustine's argumentation.

At this point, I would like to briefly turn once again to the second anticipation, namely to Aquinas's formula of self-evidence: "No one can assent to the thought he does not exist. For in thinking something, he perceives that he exists."

I must admit that this formula always appealed to me more than any of the other cogito arguments. There is something

magnificent as well as horrific about a philosophical formula that changes a possible misunderstanding into the structure of its understanding. However, we must now interrogate the difference between Aquinas's formula and the Cartesian cogito. But perhaps we have posed the question in the wrong way. For once we pose this question in terms of difference, it seems we are set on the wrong track, at least if we perceive this "difference" as moving away from the formula of self-evidence. The real question is: How did Descartes *break into this formula*? Or, how did he eventually colonize the formula of self-evidence? For Descartes did break into this formula of self-evidence and in doing so he changed it into a kind of real-life philosophical experience. Perhaps all his philosophy relies on this initial act of burglary. However, in order to break into Aquinas's formula of self-evidence, Descartes had to actually *invent* doubt of one's own existence, and not to resolve it.

Doubt and rationality are prerequisites for one another in the *Meditations*. Before attaining the point of certainty, rational thinking is kept safe from delusion only in its relation to doubt. However, considered on its own, doubt is also not without a certain "delusional potential." This could easily have been one of the reasons that Descartes so famously excluded madness from the list of reasons for legitimate doubt. Doubt must be rational. As a matter of fact, every single episode of doubt in *Meditations* is rationally founded. For instance, at the same time that the meditator starts doubting even the simplest of mathematical truths, he contemplates the fact that all truth is contingent on God's will. God created those mathematical truths and God can subsequently change them. None of the episodes of doubt consists in doubting alone; each doubt must be complemented by the "positive" act of reflecting upon the reason why this particular doubt is possible. The only exception appears to be the doubt in the meditator's own existence. But is this really so?

But I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. (Descartes 1985b, pp. 16-17)

It is true that Descartes's dismissal of doubt in the meditator's existence appears prior to the introduction of the deceiver. What is it then that the hypothesis about the deceiver stands in for if not some sort of extension of this same doubt into "my own" existence that has just been raised? After all, if this were not so, why would Descartes say: "let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something." Clearly, Descartes would not need to state this if there were no remaining doubt in the meditator's existence.

The deceiver cannot shatter my existence directly. He is not a person who would appear in order to convince us of something. And even if he did appear, Descartes would be obliged to dismiss him as a false authority. What the deceiver can do is "*claim*" the *cogito argument* for himself. And he can do so with authority, for even though his own existence is rather obscure, he allegedly could be perceived as the mediator between myself and my own thoughts. "Is there not some God, or some other being by whatever name we call it, who puts these reflections into my mind?" (Ibid., p. 16) All thoughts of mine can easily be those of God or of the deceiver.

What I propose here is that *once I deduce my existence from thinking, I actually link the existence itself to the same thoughts* that the demon could possibly control. In this precise sense, the doubt of my own existence becomes possible only after the cogito itself has already been articulated. For the demon would have no means whatsoever to threaten my existence if the existence has

not already been shown to be ontologically dependent on thinking. Only once this has been proven can I start asking myself: But what if even the seemingly unshakable idea that I exist is in fact just a delusion controlled by the demon? In short, my existence can only be suspect to doubt if it is shown to be dependent on thinking. And this is what the cogito argument does. This is why the cogito must be repeated once more from another angle, which shows that even the hypothesis about the demon actually confirms the truth that I exist while thinking—instead of threatening it.

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The Absent Universal: From the Master Signifier to the Missing Signifier

Todd McGowan

Universality as Mastery

The commonsense conception of the universal associates it with the master signifier. We tend to think of universality as an overarching position that dominates all the particulars under its provenance just as the master signifier plays a determinative role for all other signifiers. The universal occupies a position of mastery relative to particulars and imposes an orientation on them. This equation of the universal with the master signifier is commonsensical because it seems utterly self-evident.

The link between the universal and the master signifier holds up under closer examination. Through recourse to the universal, we can recognize the nature of the particular's connection to other particulars. The universal assures us that particulars do not exist as isolated entities. Instead, identifying them requires taking other particulars into account. The fact that their relations to other particulars are inextricable from their own particularity becomes evident only through the appearance of the universal. A universal such as equality enables us to recognize how all particulars relate to each other. They relate as equals.

Similarly, the link between signifiers becomes evident only through the appearance of the master signifier. Without the master signifier, there are just a multitude of signifiers without any signification. This signifier offers a basis for signification. When I

define a specific signifier, I do so by using other signifiers. But the master signifier is the endpoint for this movement from signifier to signifier. It is the point at which the incessant movement from signifier to signifier stops and signification emerges.

Universals link disparate particulars together in the same way that master signifiers bind all other signifiers together and give them their signification. The universal and the master signifier both function foundationally relative to particulars and to other signifiers. We must define each signifier relative to the master signifier just as we must refer each particular to the universal in order to make sense of it. Though it is possible to imagine master signifiers that are not universals (such as “Germany” under Nazism), it appears impossible to conceive of universals that don’t operate as master signifiers.

If we examine the predominant master signifier in the contemporary capitalist universe, “freedom,” this structural overlap between the universal and the master signifier becomes clear. Freedom is the universal that underlies all particular struggles today, which testifies to its universal status. There is no struggle, no matter how particular, that does not take place under the banner of freedom. Even more than equality, it is the one universal today that has the ability to unite people together.

For instance, in 2003 the United States invades Iraq in the name of this universal—going so far as to title its invasion “Operation Iraqi Freedom”—while the same term at the same time also informs the worldwide opposition to the American war. George W. Bush could even celebrate a protest greeting him in London by identifying it with the freedom that the United States fights for. In another arena, this universal fuels both the drive for gay marriage and the conservative Christian resistance to it. Some want to be free to marry whom they want while others want to be free not to serve cakes to those they don’t want to serve because they are gay. This is not even to speak of the arena in which freedom plays the most substantive role: the capitalist economy. Proponents of

capitalism insist that it is the only system that leaves us completely free to produce and consume, while opponents see freedom in the future destruction of the capitalist system. Particular struggles going on now make reference to this universal in order to substantiate their appeal.

The contradictory nature of these examples reveals that freedom operates as a master signifier. Rather than having a clear signification like other signifiers (*birch tree*, for example, which allows us to classify birch trees as distinct from oaks), *freedom* has no signified at all. This absence of a signified enables those on opposite sides of political battles to use the same term without sensing that they are entering into enemy territory. Freedom can signify what the United States hopes to unleash in Iraq just as it can signify the fight against this offensive. I can want to marry another man in the name of freedom just as someone can refuse to bake our wedding cake while employing this same term. Its lack of any signified reveals that it is a master signifier, while its central position in contemporary political struggles testifies to its status as a universal. Freedom seems to place the complete coincidence of the universal with the master signifier beyond any dispute.

If the universal functions as a master signifier, then the danger associated with it becomes immediately apparent. As a master signifier, the universal would have an exceptional status. It would occupy a position apart from the other signifiers from which it would exercise a determinative effect on them. Particulars would lose the specificity and uniqueness of their particularity in the face of the universal's mastery. Just as the master signifier is indifferent to the singularity of any other signifier, the universal would be indifferent to every other particular. The suspicion that the universal arouses among theorists of emancipation stems directly from the belief that the universal is a master signifier. The universal suffers from guilt by association. Theorists respond accordingly.

Ernesto Laclau, for one, deals with this danger that the universal as a master signifier represents for particular identities by

highlighting the openness of the position of the master signifier, which he often calls the “empty signifier.” Laclau turns to the concept of hegemony in order to describe the process by which a particular comes to take up the position of the empty signifier and function as a universal. For Laclau, the universal is nothing but a particular that happens to temporarily occupy the structural position of universality. It is not, as a consequence, inherently universal.

Because any particular signifier can occupy the place of the master signifier and become the universal, political struggle plays the decisive role in establishing it. Through such struggle, a certain signifier comes to occupy the position of the master signifier, though its status remains contingent. At any time, another particular signifier can take its place as a result of a new political struggle. There is clearly something democratic about this conception, which makes it easy to understand the widespread appeal that it has.¹

Rather than conceiving the master signifier as an entrenched universal, one grasps its variability and fundamental openness. Radical democracy — Laclau’s name for his political project — thus entails accepting the evanescent particularity of every universal master signifier. Laclau claims, “the universal has no necessary body and no necessary content; different groups, instead, compete between themselves to temporarily give to their particularisms a function of universal representation” (Laclau 1995, p. 107). Once one adopts this position, one retains the mastery of the universal, but one exposes this mastery as mortally wounded.

The problem with Laclau’s tack is that weakening the universal is always, in the last instance, a conservative project. Even though Laclau identifies himself as a leftist theorist of emancipation, his particularization of the universal implicitly aligns him with the forces that he explicitly aims to combat. From Edmund

¹ Though Laclau has subsequently developed his conception of the shifting particularity of the master signifier, it receives its canonical articulation in the influential book that he co-wrote with Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (see Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

Burke to Arthur de Gobineau to Carl Schmitt, conservative and reactionary theorists always insist that particularity trumps universality. The entire conservative project is an encomium to particular identity. Conservative political struggle consists in protecting and developing one's particularity against all other particulars that would threaten it. For conservative and reactionary theorists, the universal is anathema because it eliminates the borders through which particular identities define themselves. As they see it, a universalist world has limits but it doesn't have borders, and borders are necessary for particular identities to sufficiently distinguish themselves. Conservatism demands clear distinctions in order to ensure the continued existence of the particular identity it aims to protect.

Though Laclau is not some type of closet conservative, his attempt to undermine universality by exposing its underlying particularity runs counter to the emancipatory political project that he attempts to advance. Laclau's solution to the problem generated by the identity of the universal and the master signifier is to accept this identity as given and subsequently denigrate the universal in order to undermine its mastery. But we might take aim at this mastery in a more fundamental way by questioning the homology itself. Though it certainly makes sense to align the universal with the master signifier, this is a case where appearances lead us completely astray.

One of the key political struggles today—perhaps the key political struggle—consists in thoroughly divorcing the universal from the master signifier. The structural homology that exists between them obscures the profound difference in the way that they function. Though we use signifiers to articulate the universal—freedom, equality, solidarity—these concepts do not emerge out of signification. We don't find them by examining the positive structures or institutions that constitute our social order. Nor do we find them by searching in different societies or in the differences between societies. Universals are not only not master

signifiers. They are not present within the field of signification at all. Universals exist on the basis of what is missing in signification. We discover the universal through what cannot be said, even as we name this absence. Every authentic universal refers to a signifying absence.

What Drops Out

The master signifier plays a structuring role in signification. We cannot do without it and remain within the signifying field. But the master signifier is not a meaningful signifier. We cannot invest our hopes in it as the site of emancipation, but neither should we fear that it will contaminate all universality. While the master signifier grounds the signifying field, it does not have any significance within that field. To imbue this signifier with significance by treating it as a universal apes the conservative error, which reveres the master signifier as the source of substantial identity. In both cases, the error lies in seeing significance in an empty structural necessity.

It is not a question of doing without the master signifier but of looking elsewhere for universality. We can find a clue for distinguishing the universal from the master signifier in Alenka Zupančič's *What is Sex?* In this work, she locates the emergence of subjectivity in a lack in signification. It is not language that constitutes the subject but instead what is missing in language. Humanity becomes distinct from its animality at the moment of the unconscious recognition of a missing signifier. As Zupančič puts it, “the human (his)story begins not with the emergence of the signifier, but with *one signifier ‘gone missing’*” (Zupančič 2017, p. 47). The missing signifier is not just absent but inscribed within the signifying field as an absence. This is why the subject has an unconscious awareness of it. Signification is never complete but always, for Zupančič, “with without-one” (ibid., p. 48). What all subjects have in common is what they don't have.

The value of Zupančič's insight lies in what it indicates for political contestation. By noting the necessity of the missing signifier for signification to be possible, Zupančič puts us on the track of how to locate universality in a way that avoids the trap of identifying it with the master signifier, which represents perhaps the key political challenge, especially today, when universality has become completely imperiled. The missing signifier, not the master signifier, marks the site of the universal. Though Zupančič herself does not make this point, her account of the missing signifier and its effects makes the location of the universal visible.

The missing signifier is unavoidable for all subjects. It forms how they relate to themselves and to the social structure. The role of the missing signifier allows us to distinguish the universal from something held in common, which is precisely the conception of the universal that always sets us on the wrong path. The universal is not what subjects have in common but what they don't have in common, the cut that blocks the social structure's completion for the subject. It is an absence that all subjects partake in. This insight cuts against the commonsense conception of universality that associates it with the master signifier.

The universal is not a master signifier. It does not dominate particulars by imposing its own regime of significance on them. Instead, the universal is located in what is lacking in the symbolic structure. We are free, equal, and in solidarity—to take the universals articulated by the French Revolution—because we are all confronted with a missing signifier. We are free, equal, and united in our unending encounter with what is not there. As a result, no one can have a privileged relationship to the universal. All subjects relate to the universal as that part of themselves that they necessarily invoke without ever mastering. This lack is not the privilege of some but the burden of all.

Because the universal is a shared lack, one cannot articulate it directly. It is not as simple as saying, for example, that all people are free or everyone is equal. This attempt to transform

the universal, which is an absence in signification, into a positivity necessarily misses it. Rather than expressing universality, one erects a master signifier that functions through exclusion. If one formulates universality in this way, one instantly produces an exception to the universality that one proclaims. In the guise of formulating a universal, one constructs an exclusive particular.

For instance, if I proclaim something like, “all men are created equal” or “race doesn’t matter,” I believe that I am expressing universal equality. But the problem with these types of expressions is that they produce universality through exclusion—which is to say, they don’t produce universality at all. In these cases, subjects recognize that they participate in the universal only insofar as they distinguish themselves from others who do not belong. When installed as a master signifier, the universal ceases to be universal. This process makes clear that the identification of the universal with the master signifier marks a profound misstep.

When Thomas Jefferson claims that “all men are created equal” in the *Declaration of Independence*, everyone knows that this universality does not apply to women or slaves. But it is important to see that this exclusion is not merely historical or contingent. Some sort of exclusion is necessary when one establishes the universal as a master signifier, even if the specific exclusion itself (women and slaves) is historically contingent. By seeing that they are not women or slaves, men of Jefferson’s epoch can see equality among themselves where there is rampant inequality. The excluded other has the effect of quilting the universal identity. It functions as what Jacques Lacan calls the *point de capiton* or quilting point for the universal master signifier.²

The quilting point tells subjects what universal equality means by providing a barrier at which it ends. When one installs the universal as a master signifier, one consequently produces a quilting point that indicates where the universality stops. Just as

² For the explanation of the *point de capiton*, see Lacan 1993.

the master signifier “German” for the Nazis needs the quilting point “Jew” in order to define what it means to be German in their world, the master signifier “equality” requires “women” or “slaves.” Germans under the Nazis know they are Germans insofar as they know they are not Jews. Men know that they are equal insofar as they know they are not women or slaves. The quilting point operates as an absolute barrier that forms identity. It is not an optional addition to the master signifier but a necessary product of its installation, which is why universality cannot be identified with the master signifier. The quilting point necessarily involves exclusion, and exclusion runs contrary to all universalizing. One cannot have universality for some and not for others while remaining within the domain of the universal. Conceiving it in this way represents a flight from the universal to the confines of particularity.

The case of “race doesn’t matter” or colorblindness seems different from Jefferson’s statement in the *Declaration* but in fact follows the same logic. When I profess my colorblind universalism, there aren’t clear exceptions as there are in the case of the *Declaration*. I may imagine that I am including everyone in my statement. But nonetheless this attempt to articulate the universal directly transforms it into a master signifier that entails a requisite exclusion.

The colorblind position privileges not having a race when it professes that race doesn’t matter. But the trick is that I know that I don’t have a race—I know that color doesn’t matter—insofar as I see those who do have a race, who have a color. In this way, the position of colorblindness enables those who adhere to it to see themselves as partaking in the privileged position of the universal that excludes racialized others. This is why those who proclaim the universal of colorblindness inevitably attack those who are clearly racialized for preaching inequality or, more commonly, for reverse racism. These racialized others who display their race (whether they like it or not) play the role of the quilting point

for the colorblind subject. The colorblind subject needs them in order to be a colorblind subject just as the Nazi needs the Jew in order to be a German.

The misreading of the universal as a master signifier creates universality through exclusion. That is to say, it eliminates universality as such and transforms it into one particularity among others. The universality of the master signifier is not universality but a case of particularity passing for universality. Equality confined to property-owning men is no longer equality. It is instead one particular group using a purportedly universal master signifier to justify its political positioning. If one wants to discover and preserve the universal, one must look for it elsewhere than in direct expressions of it. Since the universal is an absence within signification, one must look for it in what is not said.

Leaving Wittgenstein

The problem of what cannot be said is not a new problem. But thinkers tend to view what cannot be said as an obscure particular that escapes the reach of universality. It always represents the limit on universalizing. From Hume's rejection of causality and Kant's critique of the overreaches of reason to Jacques Derrida's refusal of a metalanguage and Linda Alcoff's critique of speaking for others, philosophers preoccupy themselves with what they are unable to say. They often spend time identifying the border between what can be said and what cannot be said, in order to create a philosophy that remains within the limits of the sayable.

Ludwig Wittgenstein offers a paradigmatic statement about the fundamental border of all philosophy. In the final line of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein famously announces the need for philosophy to respect the boundary of what cannot be said. He enjoins thinkers not to say what they cannot say. In a paradoxical formulation, he states, "What we cannot speak

about we must pass over in silence.”³ Of course, Wittgenstein’s statement immediately prompts the question, “If we cannot say it, why do we need to pass over it in silence?” Because this is the final proposition of Wittgenstein’s book, he doesn’t provide an answer, but rather ends in the silence that he advocates.

Much like Kant before him, Wittgenstein wants to delimit the field of knowledge (the sayable) in order to make room for what goes beyond knowledge—faith, ethics, and feelings.⁴ Wittgenstein is less clear than Kant about what he locates beyond knowledge, but he is equally emphatic about the need to respect the border between the sayable and the unsaid. Even more than Kant, he worries that trying to cross this border will not only muddy our thinking, but will also taint what can’t be said, which is a more important realm than that of what can be said. We must confine ourselves to the sayable to avoid speaking destructive nonsense.

Wittgenstein’s insistence on not trying to say the unsayable rubs Theodor Adorno the wrong way. When Adorno lays out his philosophical program near the end of his life, he envisions his project as directly opposed to that of Wittgenstein. Where Wittgenstein demands that we remain silent, Adorno wants us to endeavor to speak. For Adorno, it is our attempt and failure to say what cannot be said that accomplishes the true aim of philosophy—to reveal the nonidentical without reducing it to the identical. As he puts it, “The task of philosophy, *pace* Wittgenstein, would be to say what cannot be said” (Adorno 2003, p. 186).⁵

³ Wittgenstein 1961, p. 74. The German reads: “*Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen.*”

⁴ Kant’s claim in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that “I had to deny *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*” (Kant 1998, p. 117) could serve as a motto for Wittgenstein’s project in the *Tractatus* as well.

⁵ In the text of *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno makes the same point when he again claims that philosophy aspires “to counter Wittgenstein by uttering the unutterable” (Adorno 1973, p. 9). Wittgenstein’s logical positivist followers, like Rudolf Carnap, critique Wittgenstein from precisely the opposite direction. For them, when he says that we must silently pass over what can’t be said, he already gives too much ground to the unsayable, which has no role in philosophy at all.

Although Adorno believes that philosophy has hitherto failed at this task, he doesn't see it as an impossible one, since success ironically comes through failure. Philosophy has failed to fail at saying the unsayable, but Adorno believes that he can do so successfully, despite the apparent contradiction involved in this.

Adorno wants to say what cannot be said without reducing it to the domain of the sayable. While this appears to be an impossible problem, Adorno's solution is a formal one. By adopting the form of negative dialectics, by constantly undermining pretensions to universality while at the same time insisting on the necessity of universality, philosophy can articulate the unsaid. It occurs only through a process of unending self-critique that refuses to spare any position from its negation.

The problem with Adorno's method is that it hystericizes our relationship to the unsaid and thus to the universal. Because he sees the unsaid as the particular that resists the universal rather than the universal itself, Adorno doesn't recognize the possibility for articulating it as an absence. According to Adorno, any articulation of the missing signifier reduces it to the universality that one is attempting to avoid, which is why one must constantly unsay what one has just said in order to respect the unsaid. But when one sees the missing signifier as the signifier of the universal in its absence, this danger dissipates altogether.

One can only articulate universals as an absence. Expressions of universality are not unsayable, as Wittgenstein would have it, and they do not inevitably do violence to the absence, as Adorno would have it. Instead, they can hit the mark. They can articulate universality in the form of the missing signifier.

The example of the marriage equality movement reveals the possibility for this type of expression. Universality does not consist in the achievement of access to marriage for all. We don't achieve universality at the mythical point when all are included. The belief that this would be true universality follows from the idea that the universal is a master signifier. Universality becomes

evident rather in the claim made by proponents of marriage equality that the ban on gay marriage violates universal equality. By pointing out what is missing for the symbolic field—gay marriage—they articulate universal equality. By saying “gay marriage is marriage,” they say what is missing within the particularity of heterosexual marriage. The fact that gay marriage later becomes enshrined as law does not vitiate this articulation of universality because the achievement itself is the site of the universal.

As the fight for marriage equality shows, it is possible to say the unsayable without doing violence to it. It is possible because the unsayable is never just absent. It is always present within the signifying structure as an absence. When we express it, we express universality. The universal is the missing signifier within a particular structure—like gay marriage within the institution of marriage. Expressing it makes clear that the particular structure, despite whatever pretensions it might make to universality, is nonetheless particular. Prior to the marriage equality movement, purportedly universal marriage is simply a disguised form of particular marriage. Heterosexual marriage masquerades as universal marriage, but the marriage equality movement’s articulation of the universal gives the lie to the performance. This type of political gesture can occur only if the universal is not associated with the master signifier.

Saying What Can’t Be Said

Divorcing the universal from the master signifier does not imply that the universal must remain unarticulated or that we must pass over it in silence in order to respect its position properly. The point is rather that we access the universal through the exception that appears to be excluded from it, through the moment where the universal appears not to hold. Since what we have in common is what we don’t have, the universal can only emerge

through what is missing. The figures of the universal are not the supposedly privileged subjects in a society but those who do not belong. When subjects fail to register within the field of symbolic recognition, their absence aligns them with universality.

Those who appear as unequal and cast aside, for instance, are the figures of universal equality. The subject receiving unequal treatment from contemporary society—working for a pittance, enduring racist structures, or suffering from the threat of sexual assault—is at the moment of this exclusion and the struggle against it partaking in universal equality. Such subjects reveal that the universal becomes visible as a universal only through those who occupy the position of absence. They make evident the absence of universal equality as a presence within contemporary society, but by making evident the failure to constitute the universal, they articulate it in its true form. Because the universal is an absence rather than a master signifier, it appears where we assume it will not—in those struggling for universality rather than in those who believe they have attained it.

In the thought of theorists of political struggle, we can see this paradoxical dynamic at work. Thinkers like Frantz Fanon and Karl Marx unabashedly locate the struggles that they champion in universal terms. They articulate the universal not in the form of a master signifier but in the challenge that the colonized or the proletariat poses to the hidden particularity of European capitalist society. Through their exclusion, the colonized and the proletariat enable us to see the universal in the form of the missing signifier. Recognizing universality requires a radical shift in point of view: rather than looking at the excluded from the perspective of belonging, we must look at belonging from the perspective of the excluded.

When Frantz Fanon attacks Europe for its proclamation of universal values while perpetuating violent domination of the colonized, he gives expression to universal equality. This attack targets Europe for its reduction of universal equality to a master

signifier that entails the exclusion of colonized peoples. Fanon critiques Europe for its particularity. Fanon's aim is not to engender belonging for the colonized, to enable them to participate in European particularity, which is why he enjoins the colonized to abandon Europe. He proclaims, "Let us leave this Europe which never stops talking of man yet massacres him at every one of its street corners, at every corner of the world" (Fanon 2004, p. 235). This is not, contrary to appearances, a call for an abandonment of universality but for the rejection of European particularity and its attempt to promulgate this particularity through disguising the universal as a master signifier.

In the act of formulating this critique, Fanon indicates that the universal must be conceived differently. When Europe distorts it into the form of a master signifier, it ceases to be universal and produces exclusion—specifically, the exclusion of the colonized. All the attempts to include the colonized in this particularity disguised as universality are mere pretenses. As Fanon sees, the universal emerges not through a general statement about the indifference of race but through the recognition of the universal's absence. It is the struggle of the colonized against Europe, not the European colonial project, that embodies the universal values discovered in the Enlightenment and articulated by the French Revolution.

Fanon links universality to the struggle that testifies to its absence. One must struggle for it because it can only be present as an absence that we don't have. But the struggle does not aim at a universality to come.⁶ The struggle for universal equality is already the attainment of it, insofar as the universal cannot become

⁶ Fanon is not adopting the position of someone like François Julien, who theorizes the universal in terms of an ideal that remains ever out of reach. According to Julien, "the vocation of the universal: that of reopening a breach in all confining and satisfied totality, and reviving the aspiration towards it" (Julien 2014, p. 114). Julien theorizes the universal as a future state that recedes the closer we come to it. Fanon, in contrast, sees it as already actual in the act of struggling for it.

fully present. It exists only in the effort to realize it, not in its complete realization.⁷ To dream of a future when the universal would become fully present is to return to the illusion that we could install it as a master signifier.

Toward the beginning of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon discusses the link between the colonized recognizing their participation in the universal and their struggle against colonialism. He states, “at the very moment when they discover their humanity, they begin to sharpen their weapons to secure its victory” (Fanon 2004, p. 8). Seeing themselves as universal subjects functions as a weapon in the struggle against colonialism. Taking the side of those who don’t belong to the colonial project places one on the side of the universal, and, from the other side, recognizing the authentic universal inherently places one with the colonized in their fight.

For Fanon, the fight against colonial domination is a universal fight, a fight on behalf of universality. In contrast, colonial Europe’s expressions of universal equality betray authentic universality insofar as they constitute the colonized subject as an exception to this universality. According to Fanon, Europe tells colonized subjects that they must wait for this equality to come in the indefinite future, but this future time is infinitely receding. Europe can promise it because it will never arrive. This universality that the colonizer promises in the infinitely deferred future is universality in the form of a master signifier, which isn’t universality at all. Authentic universality resides in the struggle against this particularized universality of the master signifier.

Marx follows a vision of universality closely related to Fanon’s. When Marx identifies the proletariat as the universal

⁷ To invoke a distinction between *Realität* (reality) and *Wirklichkeit* (actuality) that Hegel makes in the *Philosophy of Right* and elsewhere, the universal’s lack of reality is its actuality. It becomes actual through its inability to realize itself.

class, this is what he's getting at. As Marx sees it, the proletariat partakes in the universal when it assumes the mantle of the leading force in the fight against class society. By struggling for its own equality, the proletariat simultaneously struggles for universal equality. In the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx makes this clear. He claims that "the emancipation of the workers contains universal human emancipation" (Marx 1964, p. 118). By demonstrating their exclusion from the regime of purported equality, the proletariat demonstrates equality's absence from the capitalist system. In this way, they highlight universal equality.

Capitalism depends on the principle of universal equal exchange. At the nub of the capitalist system, the capitalist exchanges money to the laborer for labor power. From the perspective of the system itself, this is an equal exchange. Each side gives something of value to the other side without deceiving or cheating. But what Marx shows is that this exchange occurs against a background of inequality that enables inequality to enter to stain the entire process.

The worker comes to the exchange needing to work in order to survive, whereas the capitalist arrives looking for additional accumulation of capital. As a result, the capitalist always has leverage on the worker and sets the terms of the exchange in a way that enables the extraction of not just the labor paid for, but also the surplus labor that the worker provides. This surplus labor produces the surplus value that, according to Marx, is the basis for the capitalist's profit. Although the exchange of capital for labor time is fair and equal, the capitalist always receives something additional and not paid for in the bargain. This extra is the result of the capitalist's initial advantage, which resounds throughout the structure of the capitalist system. The discrepancy excludes the worker from the system's supposed equality.

Through class struggle, the proletariat draws attention to the absence of equality within the particularity of capitalist society. This struggle reveals equality as a universal through its absence. Capitalist society proffers equality as a master signifier. It pretends

to a universality that it does not have. Marx identifies the proletariat as the universal class because universal equality actually becomes evident only when this class points out that equality is missing in capitalist society. The proletariat is the universal class insofar as its fight touches on the unsayable.

In spite of this compelling formulation, Marx's diagnosis of the universality of the proletariat requires a slight corrective. Though he comes close to Fanon in his political project, he takes a misstep that Fanon does not. Marx doesn't see that this universality cannot lie in the moment of emancipation itself. For him, emancipation would represent the point at which we finally realized universality. Emancipation is what class struggle aims at, not class struggle itself. Marx fails to recognize that universality resides in the struggle for emancipation, a struggle that cannot attain a complete realization because universality is an absence in signification.⁸ The complete realization of the universal would be akin to Baron von Munchausen lifting the chair on which he sits.

If the universal derives from what is absent and not from what is present, it becomes impossible to possess. It is in the nature of the universal as an absence that we will never fully realize it. The failure to make the universal present is not, however, an external barrier to universality. It is fundamental to universality itself. The absence of a fully realized universal is the essence of universality because it derives its status as absent within the field of signification. As a result, we access it only through articulating the struggle to realize it, not through proclamations about its reality.

If universality requires struggle, this would seem to call into question its status as universal. It is surely the case that the universal cannot include an enemy and remain universal. Even though

⁸ Fanon does not make Marx's error because he is a Hegelian thinker before he is a Marxist. Unlike Marx, Hegel does not view emancipation as arriving at a future free from contradiction but rather recognizing the necessity of contradiction, which entails recognizing universality in struggle.

universality involves struggle against an oppressive structure, this struggle does not entail an external enemy. When Fanon conceives of the colonized as champions of humanity or Marx labels the proletariat the universal class, the opposition that these figures of the universal encounter is the universal's own internal limit. The universal struggles against a limit rather than an enemy, which is why universal struggles never exclude the conversion of their opponents to the side of the universal struggle. The opponents of the universal are not enemies, but potential allies who have not yet come around. The universal struggle has no necessary opposition, though the limit it encounters—and thus the struggle itself—is necessary.

The difference between struggle on behalf of the universal and particular struggles lies in the nature of what one struggles against. Particular struggles identify an enemy that they aim to vanquish in order to advance the interest of their particular identity. This is the case, for example, with the Confederacy in the American Civil War. The Confederacy did not fight for any universality but in order to maintain the integrity of its particular identity that faced external threats. From the perspective of particular identity, the enemy is just another particular—in this case, the North.

The opponent of universal struggle is not a particular, but rather the structure that obscures universality as an absence and insists on the insignificance of what is absent. The universal struggle aims at drawing attention to the universal as a lack in signification. It consists in showing that what is absent is actual. Its opponents are those who deny the existence of the universal because they cannot recognize what is lacking.

We gravitate to the idea that the universal is a master signifier because this simplifies our dealings with it. By doing so, we can dismiss it as a synecdoche for domination or embrace it as a shorthand for marginalizing all particular struggles. But equating the universal with the master signifier represents a catastrophic betrayal of its political charge. It is only by recognizing the

universal as what signification necessarily omits that we can access this political charge. Without the universal, there is no politics. But we never have the universal, which means that politics must be nothing but the fight on its behalf.

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A Certain Logic of Professing Love

Jure Simoniti

It is a commonplace that if we weren't creatures endowed with language, we probably wouldn't be capable of love. But would it be possible to deduce the very element of language which makes us prone to loving in the first place? To answer this question, love, in our view, must no longer be regarded as existing in the usual linguistic medium of "doing things with words," but rather in the medium of doing words with things. By inverting the title of Austin's famous book, we place ourselves in an unmistakable opposition to a certain penchant of twentieth-century philosophy that conceived of language as nothing but a means of using, comprising, dominating, or endlessly mediating reality. Within the more pragmatic scope, the linguistic sign was conceived as referring to something, singling out things, specifying their kind; in the otherwise dissimilar vein of poststructuralism, deconstruction, and postmodernism, the sign still remained a contextual tool of marking out a situation. By contrast, the goal of this paper is to identify an entirely different function of language, one neglected and suppressed by the anti-idealism that permeates post-Hegelian philosophy. To be sure, the elements of language might as well have been invented so as to signal parts of reality; however, when language assumes some kind of systematic form and relative completion, it begins enticing entirely new dimensions of its deployment. We will therefore examine a certain phenomenology of language-use which is characterized by the reversal of the direction of reference. At some point, man no longer uses language in order to point to

things and states for the purpose of transferring information; rather, he seems to begin to detect and occupy the very gaps in reality in which an element of language can be declared and pronounced in its ideal purity, beyond any referential, signifying, or pragmatic end. Instead of utilizing words, man starts monumentalizing them. Love offers but one, if, due to its verbal simplicity, particularly heuristic, example of this turn in the functioning of language. In a romantic relationship, for instance, there comes a time when we cease professing love in honor of the beloved, we cease conveying our momentary inclinations, which are usually of the sexual sort, and soliciting affection in return; henceforth, in a diffuse and uneven landscape of daily life, we rather seek sparse moments and places where love itself could still be uttered, without direct reference either to the emotions of the lover, or to the qualities of the beloved. A word, instead of being a tool that refers to reality, itself becomes a referent of reality. And this process, which might be called “idealization of the linguistic sign,” achieves an adequacy that surpasses the usual mode of reference; in a way, the professing of love never misses its object. Therefore, the analyses of the instances and modalities of declaring love will represent only a small contribution to the broader research on one of the most fundamental, if strangely undervalued and ignored, features of language, namely, its necessary and irreducible idealism.

The Spontaneous Metaphysics of Words

There is something about professing love that touches upon the very core of understanding language, a fact programmatically overlooked by recent philosophy. In order to discern this point, a sweeping panorama of the development of the philosophy of language in this short period of time should be sketched out first, with the aim of defining what was successfully brought to light and what was inevitably suppressed.

The best way to approach this is to examine the anti-idealist bias of post-Hegelian thought. Nowadays, it seems self-evident to identify Western philosophy between Kant and postmodernism with anti-realism. However, Marx's critique of ideology and Nietzsche's genealogical method established a tradition of anti-idealism which might have unified the philosophy of the following hundred and fifty years even more thoroughly than its alleged lack of realism. After Hegel, the main task of philosophy seems to have been to invent procedures that would bring down ideas from the heavens of direct intuition, to bring the monologues of reason and the thoughts of God down to the Earth of mediation, labor, the market economy, power, and then, in the twentieth century, to the terrestrial spheres of communication, interpretation, and, ultimately, the normality of everyday life. Even though every one of the great thinkers of the recent century, from Heidegger and Wittgenstein to Derrida and Barthes, raised his own specific theory of language into a particular, exclusive ontology, their endeavors can be brought under the smallest common denominator, which is the suppression of the effects of idealization. And it seems that this suppression is based on one single central operation uniting such diverse systems of thought: it consists in reducing the proposition to the locus of proposition.¹ The examples are more than abundant; let us limit ourselves to a few.

It was Heidegger who disclosed the crux of the matter: "Assertion is not the primary 'locus' of truth. [...] assertion is grounded in Dasein's uncovering, or rather in its disclosedness" (Heidegger 1962, p. 269). Every articulated sentence can only be derived from a more holistic environment of everyday concerns. Similarly, in Wittgenstein, the truth value of each proposition is determined by the pragmatic point of the situation, its *Witz*. In the wake of Wittgenstein, the most influential school of analytical

¹ Here, we are following the translation of Heidegger's "*Ort des Satzes*," but Lacan's "*place d'énonciation*" must also come to mind.

language philosophy—composed of Austin, Ryle, and Strawson in Oxford—bears the title “ordinary language philosophy,” as opposed to the Viennese philosophy of ideal language. And this “ordinariness” seems merely to give a name to the general atmosphere of the century, in which language was regarded as something intrinsically quotidian, normal, average, and public, i.e., something the ideal impulses of which had to be restrained at any cost. In Lacan, to proceed with our examples, truth can only be half-said; “half-saying is the internal law of any kind of enunciation of the truth” (Lacan 2007, p. 126). Transferred to linguistics, the structure of half-saying ensures that truth never lies in a proposition alone, but always comprises its difference from the place from where it is proposed, the *place d’énonciation*. This turn was even more pronouncedly performed by Deleuze and Guattari, who stated in *A Thousand Plateaus*: “*En vérité, ce ne sont pas les énoncés qui renvoient aux propositions, mais l’inverse*” (Deleuze & Guattari 1980, p. 184).² Simultaneous with this reduction of sentences to statements, a certain descent from high to low languages takes place, so that suddenly even the analytic “ordinary language” no longer suffices, and, for Deleuze, the standards of linguistic meaning are being set by the languages of minorities, guerrillas, ghettos, as well as by gestures, exclamations, vocal tones, and local dialects. In the same spirit, Foucault claims in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*: “not only can this identity of the statement not be situated once and for all in relation to that of the sentence, but it is itself relative and oscillates according to the use that is made of the statement and the way in which it is handled” (Foucault 1989, p. 117). In short, there is no way that a sentence in its ideal, trans-contextual “truth” could ever over-

² For some mysterious reason, this very “statement” is left out of the English translation. Let us attempt a translation, deploying the opposition sentence/statement: “In truth, it is not statements which are based on sentences but vice versa.”

determine a statement in its local, historical, discursive relativity. It is the same prohibition that sets up the framework of the entire philosophy of Derrida, as for instance in this passage: “The phrase which for some has become a sort of slogan, in general so badly understood, of deconstruction (‘there is nothing outside the text’), means nothing else: there is nothing outside context” (Derrida 1988, p. 136). Every proposition is a priori contextualized, every sentence always already “grounded” in a statement, and a linguistic sign can never fully sustain its ideality by being repeated but is rather affected by each context and its network of differences, which minimally shifts the semantic substance of the sign. Finally, Barthes begins to nurture a veritable anti-sentential resentment, preferring unfinished sentences, lexical, sporadic speech, interjections, and stuttering: “There are languages of the sentence and all the other kinds. The first are marked by a constraining character, an obligatory rubric: the completion of the sentence” (Barthes 1989, p. 96).

Drawing a line at this point, an image of language painted by the twentieth century now arises before our eyes, perhaps not entirely without self-indulgence: it consists either of Heidegger’s and Wittgenstein’s practical commands and instructions ending with exclamation marks (“Hand me the hammer!”), or of Lacan’s word-plays, Derrida’s text-collages, Deleuze’s dialects in the ghettos, and Barthes’s rustle of fragmentary words. The greatest advocate of this principal and epoch-defining pluralization, disintegration, and profanation of language was undoubtedly Wittgenstein, so it is his philosophy that offers the clearest evidence and explanation of the reasons for the suppression of the effects of idealization.³ His entire mature thought is based on the assumption that the world in which we live is alright, and that there is nothing wrong

³ In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein programmatically declares: “What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (Wittgenstein 2009, § 116).

with the language we speak; difficulties only arise when we place one upon the other, assign elements of reality to the elements of language, and try to imagine rigid and sharp meanings of words. The fault of this world is not that we will never find “God,” “beauty,” “good,” or “meaning” in it; the problem is rather that the word—born out of gestures, indexes, signals, symbols, then becoming ever more abstract and general—is sought after in this world as if it was immediately incarnated and is, hence, idealized. After all, man does not suffer because his life has no meaning; he only suffers after he has begun to expect some meaning from it. The reason for the meaninglessness of life does not lie in life but in meaning. As a consequence, Wittgenstein proposes arguably the greatest anti-idealist programme in the history of thought. Henceforth, philosophy is no longer preoccupied with reality as such; its method exhausts itself in detecting instances of overvaluation and hypostasis within the spontaneous idealizations of words, and in smoothing them out into the normal functioning of ordinary language.

These illusions induced by language itself are not, of course, imposed on the world from above; they are a mere side effect of the constitutive disparity between words and reality. In oversimplified terms, for instance, there are millions and billions of cats living in this world and only one word, “cat,” to refer to all of them. And since the representational content of this concept is so general and overarching, language quickly leads us into the temptation of assuming that, next to the vast number of specimens, somewhere, even if only in our minds, there also exists the “cat-in-itself.”⁴ And Wittgenstein goes to great pains to convince us that this is not the case. If we are nevertheless determined to catch

⁴ This is why, on the very first page of *The Blue Book*, Wittgenstein states: “We are up against one of the great sources of philosophical bewilderment: a substantive makes us look for a thing that corresponds to it” (Wittgenstein 1969a, p. 1).

and seize the incarnated meaning of words—which, for that matter, the entire history of metaphysics was based on, even though it was less concerned with the “cat-in-itself” and more with the concepts of “good” and “evil,” “man” and “animal,” “freedom” and “necessity”—this only means that we illicitly extend two innocent linguistic mechanisms, abstraction and generalization, into idealization. This kind of automatic reification of the ideal is the cause of our greatest errors in reasoning, lapses in thought, everyday illusions, and existential disillusionments. It rests on the assumption that there exists a critical mass of meaning upon which the word is only subsequently bestowed, lending its name to something rounded and necessary. Yet the word never enters a consolidated, structured world, in which it can cling to an ideal, perfected object, but rather cuts into a diffuse and peripheral semantic field of blurred boundaries. As such, it simultaneously unwillingly opens the possibility of engendering new meanings and propels the process of their further shifts. For this reason, in Wittgenstein, the great Meaning of words can never be retrieved from some Platonic heavens, recollected from the intuitions of Forms in our previous lives, or at least drawn from the abstract representations in our “mental lexicon.” Instead, all we are left with is a heterogeneous, inconclusive history of its occurrences in propositions—hence, of its manifold uses:

Philosophers very often talk about investigating, analysing, the meaning of words. But let's not forget that a word hasn't got a meaning given to it, as it were, by a power independent of us, so that there could be a kind of scientific investigation into what the word really means. A word has the meaning someone has given to it. (Wittgenstein 1969a, pp. 27–28)

In all probability, Wittgenstein alludes here to the most legendary of the early philosophical methods, i.e. the Socratic maieutic, which seeks in the interlocutor precisely the “real” meaning of a word allotted to him by a “power independent of

us.” Socrates lets the other talk, he lets him make his own descriptions and specifications of “good,” “virtue,” and “justice,” and, at least in the Platonic dialogues of the middle period, he usually finds in the other the full meaning of the word, spelling out its binding determination. For Wittgenstein, such a “definitive definition” represents the paradigm of all metaphysical illusions, which must be undone with a reverse, downright anti-Socratic method: a sentence aspiring to be a definition must be dissolved into a multitude of statements, which use the word now in this way, now in that.

In brief, nothing seems to bind together the language philosophy of the twentieth century as tightly as the effort to unceasingly reduce the mere possibility of the fixation of a sentence—in its ideal, formulaic, quotational, even definitional form—to actual statements, uttered in concrete situations. Wittgenstein’s greatest merit is certainly that he underpinned and substantiated this somewhat broad-brush operation with a logical foundation: it was his idea that the source of evil lies in the word. Within the general movement of particularizing, profaning, and pathologizing language by virtue of abolishing the veridical autonomy of the sentence and reducing it to the disclosedness of the locus of proposition (Heidegger), the point of the situation (Wittgenstein), the simultaneous half-saying of the place of enunciation (Lacan), contexts (Derrida), discourses (Foucault), dialects (Deleuze), and open sentential forms (Barthes), Wittgenstein seems to have been the only one to recognize the fact that it is solely the word in its wordhood that possesses the power to elevate statements into sentences and make them into trans-contextual truths. It is the word that acts as the minimal impulse of idealization and a trigger of all metaphysical hypostases; it represents the leverage point upon which propositions decontextualize, arrogate, and become Socratic definitions, metaphysical truths, and perennial quotations—something the twentieth century in its innate pragmatism could no longer afford. And with his notorious question

of what the meaning of a word is, Wittgenstein aimed at bereaving the word of the very meaning which confers on the sentence this prohibited aura of saintliness.

It is precisely here that our intervention must set off. For in our interpretation, the declaration of love functions only if it is not a statement but a sentence, i.e., if its meaning is not derived from the situation in which it is uttered, but from resisting the mere possibility of pinning it down to this or that situation. Thus, in order to pursue another, higher, long-spurned life of truth, the ruined semantic dignity of the word must now be rehabilitated.

The Irreducibility of Idealization

Was the notion of escaping the processes of idealization not only a myth of the twentieth century? And did not the word, the most disavowed linguistic form of the era, keep re-entering through the back door as some sort of wondrous object flaring up in certain compulsions of the great philosophers, in the inevitability of their poetic and formulaic self-indulgences? Late Heidegger seems to have made a downright fetish of the word as word. In his paper “Das Wort,” an interpretation of a poem by Stefan George of the same name, his attitude is blatantly opposed to the one in *Being and Time*. Here, words are no longer mere tools of “procurring” propositions; instead, the poet’s discourse is transformed into a stage upon which the word itself is produced. The word is almost an amulet in which, as it appears, the idea and the thing overlap:

The word’s rule springs to light as that which makes the thing be a thing. The word begins to shine as the gathering which first brings what presences in its presence. (Heidegger 1971, p. 100)

Perhaps there is also some faint resemblance between Heidegger conjuring the language of poets and Lacan resorting to

mathematization. His mathemes could well be interpreted as an attempt to transcend the limitations of half-saying; with mathematical formulae, he invented a form which enunciates its truth as a whole, so to speak, and no longer needs to share its truth value with any “place of enunciation.” And, finally, does it not seem that Wittgenstein’s universe, against its very method, constantly proves itself to be incapable of suppressing idealizing impulses and at times even feasts on them?⁵ Wittgenstein himself can be caught red-handed, “relishing the limit of idealization,” so to speak, i.e., detecting and loitering at the place where the word no longer merely breeds illusions, but also acts as the momentum of its innate semantic inertia, an impetus of its own enjoyment and immortality, which cannot be simply abolished by the critical and therapeutic (in Wittgenstein’s sense) labor of philosophy.

The explicit aspiration of *The Brown Book* is certainly to educate our thinking so as to no longer venerate and fetishize words but use them as mundane agents of a multitude of heterogeneous meanings. Nonetheless, somewhere along the way Wittgenstein depicts a surprising scene in which he and his friend enjoy the beauty of flowers so much that they try to undercut the mere possibility of posing a question about their meaning:

I am impressed by the reading of a sentence, and I say the sentence has shown me something, that I have noticed something in it. This made me think of the following example: A friend and I once looked at beds of pansies. Each bed showed a different kind. We were impressed by each in turn. Speaking about them, my friend said “What a variety of colour patterns, and each says something.” [...] // If one had asked what the colour pattern of the pansy said, the right answer would have seemed to be that it said itself. Hence

⁵ Wittgenstein’s own relation to language is not without contradiction. On the one hand, he is the greatest demystifier of language in history; on the other, his private obsession was to collect newspaper clippings with jokes, puns, witticisms, and wordplays, as if he was magically drawn to those instances where language produces a surplus over its usual, everyday function.

we could have used an intransitive form of expression, say “Each of these colour patterns impresses one”. // It has sometimes been said that what music conveys to us are feelings of joyfulness, melancholy, triumph, etc., etc. and what repels us in this account is that it seems to say that music is an instrument for producing in us sequences of feelings. And from this one might gather that any other means of producing such feelings would do for us instead of music. –To such an account we are tempted to reply “Music conveys to us itself!” (Wittgenstein 1969a, p. 178)

Here, it seems that Wittgenstein is trying to warn us against a too monovalent instrumentalization of meaning; by presenting us with an instance where flowers and music “mean nothing but themselves,” he presumably teaches us to diversify as heterogeneously as possible our expectations and procedures in interpreting words. It was Wittgenstein’s pronounced endeavor to debase words into means and tools, and to derive their meaning from particular uses and effects in real life. Nevertheless, he now seems to be admiring an entity, which possesses no aim or benefit whatsoever. At the margins of a pragmatic universe, something utterly nonpragmatic arises, which overrides the basic operations of the system itself: one is unable to stop gazing, as if bewitched,⁶ at something ideal. Wittgenstein speaks of the colors of flowers and the tones of music, but we may wonder if it is not language, which awakens in us a desire to experience this useless “conveying of itself” in the first place. Would it be possible for us to recognize in flowers and music an instance of something that “says itself” if language had not previously put in our hands the matrices of idealization?

⁶ This sudden enchantment with music and flowers, and with a certain sentence as well, could be read against the titanic struggle of Wittgenstein’s philosophy to make us immune to the “witchcraft” of language. In *On Certainty*, he warns us: “The propositions which one comes back to again and again as if bewitched – these I should like to expunge from philosophical language” (Wittgenstein 1969b, § 31).

To display Wittgenstein's denied idealist talent, an even better example could be ferreted out. He himself apparently did not abstain from spelling out the possibility of making a word into an object of unexpected appeal:

Imagine it were the usual thing that the objects around us carried labels with words on them by means of which our speech referred to the objects. [...] That is to say, a label would only have a meaning to us in so far as we made a particular use of it. Now we could easily imagine ourselves to be impressed by merely seeing a label on a thing, and to forget that what makes these labels important is their use. (Wittgenstein 1969a, p. 69)

To be impressed by merely seeing a label—this might be one of the most beautiful concessions to the authentic power of the ideal in philosophy. While the operations of extending and deferring meanings by way of ever new uses of words are still in full effect, on the reverse side of these processes a certain fixation of the word in its wordhood comes about, perhaps resistant to the usual drifting of meaning. It is no longer a case of the word referring to a meaning and, due to the many situations of its use, endlessly shifting its semantic substance; it is rather the meaning which begins to dance around the word itself. And this inversion of reference contains a kernel that transcends the horizon of Wittgenstein's pragmatism; language, invented as a mere means, simultaneously becomes some sort of an end in itself.

To illustrate this point, one might recall the abundance of instances where the word in being uttered provides a kind of higher-level "condensation core" of meaning. The most obvious example of how the ideal discriminants incessantly draw their boundaries across the semantic field is one of the age-old operations of philosophy (as well as, to a certain extent, everyday life), which consists in taking two words of the most similar meaning, distinguishing them, and finally placing them in diametric opposition. In German idealism, for example, reason, *Vernunft*,

differentiated itself from understanding, *Verstand*, as an absolute antipode, even though ordinary (that is, Wittgensteinian) language can hardly articulate the difference between the two. Similarly, Kant's morality could no longer rest merely upon the traditional polarity of good and evil, so each pole was invested with an additional inner distinction, opposing good to well-being, *Wohl*, and evil to ill-being, *Übel*. Moreover, we tend to imagine man as opposed to animal, although in biology there is no clear boundary, or at least no contrariety, between the two. Perhaps the most striking case of this kind of forced opposition is the vulgar antinomy between love and sex, as if the difference between the two is stark and in some way exclusive. It has become a common issue, posed for instance to celebrities in interviews, whether they prefer love or sex. Naturally, in daily existence, the question is strangely meaningless, and the Wittgensteinian mind could quickly reply: "But life never puts me in a position of choosing between the two!" Nevertheless, this minor discrepancy addresses something determinate, and as a consequence, reality itself begins to adapt to this contrived semantic choice: we are suddenly suited to making love without feeling it, or, more importantly, we may even become inclined to loving without having sex.⁷

What we are hinting at here is a peculiar evolution within language itself, an evolution that Wittgenstein underhandedly observes, but does little to untangle. Users of language seem to develop a veritable sensorium for the slightest deviations in the fabric of meaning by virtue of which they can grasp something more than just the circumstances of everyday reality. By breaking

⁷ In its most extreme form, Buñuel's film *Belle de Jour* (1967) depicts the craving of a woman, played by Catherine Deneuve, to purge her marriage of sexual desire precisely by working during the day as a prostitute, i.e., by way of entering into a number of sexual relations that by definition are deprived of love. The entire film might thus be interpreted as one giant, deferred declaration of love: she can only consolidate the love for her husband by having sex with men for whom she feels nothing.

near-synonyms in two, the one concept now designates something pertaining to the given world (“understanding,” “animal,” “sex”), while the other (“reason,” “man,” “love”) represents a downright antithetical excess, generated in the process of idealization. However, it must be stressed that the new “symmetrical opposite” emerges only by way of this operation itself. The “ideal synonym” does not come to light until having been opposed to its original “real synonym,” as it were.⁸ Reason can only define itself on the basis of its antagonism to understanding; the Kantian good can hardly be determined outside its contradistinction to well-being;⁹ man is what he makes of himself only by being juxtaposed to the animal; and love is usually characterized as something that exceeds sexual gratification, even to the point of proving itself by way of sexual abstinence. This capability of symbolically differentiating that which once was nearly indiscriminate is itself an effect of possessing words—a point which should not be taken in the trivial sense of “the limits of language mean the limits of my world,” but in a more specific way, one in which the word in its wordhood unfurls a new, irreducible dimension even with regard to language as a whole. It is the word-form which makes us susceptible to the subtle distinctions according to which *Verstand* is a fact, while *Vernunft* must be reflected upon and educated; animal is a given, whereas man must be self-made; well-being is automatic, good is imperative; sex can be wordless, love must be named. Without the matrix of idealization, provided by the word-form, we would

⁸ Since *every* word offers its body to possible idealization, the binaries listed above are not forever sentenced to assuming fixed places in the structure ideal/real. When love threatens to become a too well-adapted and comfortable form of social economy, its “empirical” twin, sex, can assume the “ideal” function of subverting the bourgeois conformism of loving marriages. When, in the nineteenth century, the concept of man became a socially reactionary symbol, Nietzsche bestowed the role of the “regulative idea” to the concept of animal, admittedly paired with the “ideal” of the *Übermensch*.

⁹ For this reason, Kant’s ethics was regularly reproached with making it impossible for us to be good except *against* our well-being.

never be able to oppose reason to understanding and become spontaneous, autonomous subjects; we could not become ethical beings except by virtue of setting the good against our well-being; and we might never contrast love with sex, thus transcending the contextual, momentary compulsions of lust.

The word-form seems to be nothing but an impulse toward transformation from a means of referring-to-something to an end of being-referred-to itself. The excitement over a “label” may not be some marginal extravagance of thought, a limiting case of (false) use, but ultimately a function around which our lives are structured. A number of examples of this fixation on the ideal can be conjured up, and one of the simplest of these “concrete idealisms” is precisely the phenomenon of love.

What makes love especially interesting in this setting is the fact that Wittgenstein spoke of it rarely and left us with only a few somewhat enigmatic allusions to it. One often comes across the claim that he addressed this subject on one occasion only, in a short note from *Philosophical Investigations*:

Does it make sense to ask “How do you know that you believe that?”—and is the answer: “I find it out by introspection”? // In some cases it will be possible to say some such thing, in most not. // It makes sense to ask, “Do I really love her, or am I only fooling myself?”, and the process of introspection is the calling up of memories, of imagined possible situations, and of the feelings that one would have if ... (Wittgenstein 2009, § 587)

In the preceding paragraphs, the verb “to love” is contrasted with a number of other verbs, such as “to believe,” “to expect,” “to hope,” on the basis of which Wittgenstein shows us that the meaning of the word does not refer to a simple feeling or a state of mind. If, for instance, we believe Goldbach’s conjecture (see Wittgenstein 2009, § 578), the “belief” does not express an inner sensation of possessing this certainty; it consists only in knowing how to use the conjecture, how to apply it, how to explain it in

a given situation. However, love behaves somewhat differently. While it is meaningless to ask ourselves whether we believe something, it apparently makes sense to pose the question of whether we love someone or not. Wittgenstein, revealingly, refuses even to describe the emotions of past love and contents himself with three dots. It almost seems as if he is secretly suggesting that, with love, something else arises, something surpassing all situations and feelings that one would have if... Perhaps, along with all kinds of mundane affections of comfort and proclivity, an additional ideal membrane is produced, one upon which we can love someone just the same, even though we might not feel it as directly in the here and now.

Other references to love, which can be tracked down in Wittgenstein's unpublished works, seem to follow along these lines. For instance, in his late *Zettel*:

Love is not a feeling. It is put to the test [*wird erprobt*], and pain is not. One does not say: "This was not true pain, otherwise it would not have ceased as quickly." (Wittgenstein 1984, §504; my translation)

If pain is a *Gefühl*, love, on the other hand, seems to pertain to a higher dimension. Pain that wears off fast is no less a pain, and we can hardly be wrong about feeling it. But from love we seem to expect more than just this situational placedness, more than just memories of some nausea and intoxication. Perhaps we expect it to make itself independent from the continuity of feelings. What, then, does this test to which love is put consist in? In the *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Wittgenstein declares:

"If it passes, then it was not true love." Why was it not in that case? [...] Love, what is important, is not a feeling, but something deeper, which merely manifests itself in the feeling. // We have the word "love" and now we give this title to the most important thing. (Wittgenstein 1980, § 115)

While Wittgenstein's seminal invention was to demonstrate that words only exist within the plurality of essentially "externalized" meanings, he obligates love to refer to something "inner," solid, and firm, a Derridean "transcendental signified" of a sort. There is a thing, and a name is bestowed upon it, fitting it like a glove. It represents the ground value around which everything else is evaluated:

Love, that is the pearl of great price that one holds to one's heart, that one would exchange for nothing, that one prizes above all else. In fact it shows—if one has it—what great value is. One learns what it means to single out a precious metal from all others. (Monk 1991, p. 505)¹⁰

These lines give the impression of abrogating everything Wittgenstein's philosophy fought for. Every painstaking thought experiment from the *Philosophical Investigations* loses its grip in the face of something as deep, unchanging, and substantial as love. Whereas all the other words, or most of them, must settle for the diffuse panoply of possible meanings, love gravitates toward a specific monolithic oneness, the precious metal that lies behind it. Similarly to Wittgenstein's conceitedly "silent" treatment of the ethical and religious dimension, love touches upon a certain tension, perhaps a contradiction, cleaving his universe asunder. It is therefore at this very spot that a fundamental inversion of his operations must be performed.

Wittgenstein's intuitions may have been right, but his solution was all too straightforward. He dissolved the meanings of words into heterogeneous multitudes of "family resemblances," but only to undergird them with instances of a metaphysical correspondence where the thing and the unspeakable word magically overlap, as is the case with "sense," "good," "God," and apparently "love."

¹⁰ These are supposed to be Wittgenstein's own words as quoted by Ray Monk in *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*.

We might agree that the word “love” follows a logic that differs from that of the majority of words in our everyday lives; a certain additional regularity in its “uses” does perhaps shine through. Nevertheless, contrary to Wittgenstein, who projected a firm and solid thing behind “love,” it might be suggested that the only “thing of oneness” to which love magically refers to can only be the word “love” itself. In other words, something is at stake with love; however, it is not some-thing but some-word.

Our claim is to grasp the gist of a certain surplus that marks the emergence of love. Of course, the meaning of the concept of love has varied throughout history: at one time, love may have been proved by locking a lady away in an ivory tower, and at another time, by excessive physical acts; some ages believed in its eternity, other in its fleetingness. What interests us here is not the history of the concept, but the specific semantic state in which the very existence of the word “love” triggers a dynamic that transposes love into a realm no longer framed by the Wittgensteinian coordinates of meaning as determined by use. As we have seen, Wittgenstein himself addressed a love-surplus, a certain distinction between the continuity and intensity of the real and the fixity and iterability of the ideal. Nowadays, this distinction is perhaps most commonly perceived in distinguishing love from mere “being-in-love,” or infatuation, as standing for some sort of additional task to overcome the state of immediate inclinations and organize a “life together” that is mostly shared by two people.¹¹ We only seem to be able to pass the test of love

¹¹ This is not to say that this kind of “ordinary” socialization of love makes up its preferred or even exclusive “meaning”; we are in no way interested in any kind of “normativity of love” and only appeal to this social model because it represents a somewhat more “usual” example of switching from the sensible to the ideal. Under specific circumstances, the utmost ideality of love, its most intangible surplus, can well manifest itself in the passionate affairs of adultery, fuelled precisely by the fact that the two lovers are not committed to sharing their everyday world.

by substituting the memory of “real” acts of (making) love for a sphere of celebrating something “ideal.” This of course means that Wittgenstein’s anti-idealist philosophy does not provide him with the right instruments for fully grasping the second, ideal aspect of love; for this reason, love seems to sneak up on him only anecdotally, unwillingly, therewith bearing witness to its own incontrovertibility. Thus, in order to substantiate the claim that love unfolds only on the reverse side of language pragmatics, at least two things must be demonstrated. First, if Wittgenstein’s institute of “use” serves to maintain meaning as an open, fuzzy set of semantic values, then love emerges only negatively and in reaction to this movement; against the incessant semantic pluralism of meaning, love is only crystallized in an instance of a certain “sameness.” And second, the only tool that enables love to surpass this dispersed horizon of manifold uses is precisely that element of language which is in itself an impulse of idealization, namely, the word—in this case “love.” In short, to get at least an inkling of the processes of language that undermine the very foundations not only of Wittgenstein’s philosophy but of the entire twentieth century philosophy of language let us outline a short phenomenology of professing love.

The Idealism of Professing Love

The fundamental move of the philosophy of language of the previous century was to feed the proposition back to the place where it was uttered. It was Wittgenstein who took it upon himself to define the crucial leverage point of this general operation; his question, what is the meaning of a word, lies at the core of reducing sentences with ideal claims to statements placed in real and particular situations. His vast and momentous unsettling of everything taken for granted about language is ultimately based on an ingenious observation that, in this world, a situation of pure

and final denomination never takes place. One can imagine no meaningful context in which someone would say “This is a table,” and thereby exhaust the meaning of the word “table.” At the very beginning of the *Philosophical Investigations*, we find a lengthy quotation from *Confessions*, in which Augustine describes having been taught to speak as a child by having had objects shown to him while their names were being pronounced; Wittgenstein calls this an “ostensive teaching of the words,” and, indirectly, giving “ostensive explanations” or “ostensive definitions.” Against this naïve notion, he consistently points out that a child never learns isolated names for ideal objects, but rather only the use of language as a practical means of getting by in the world. And since the meaning of a word has no warranted ideal content, there is no paradigmatic situation in which this meaning would be explicated once and for all. It is hence the word that, by virtue of losing its metaphysical guarantee, represents the lever through which no statement can ever gain the dignity of a sentence.

However, does it not seem that with love the very scandal occurs that, according to Wittgenstein, can never be? It happens, perhaps, that at some point, which possibly even marks the moment of transition from infatuation to love, the Augustinian situation of definite denomination is enacted. It can be argued that the only way to understand the semantics of love is to recognize in the declaration of love an instance not of a statement but of a sentence. Let us therefore sketch out a few forms and circumstances in which love is typically declared.

First, the declaration of love has a tendency of becoming abstract. In an ongoing relationship, a certain transformation of professing love can be observed, one tending toward verbal abstraction. At the time of “being in love,” we might still be prone to be exhaustive and innovative in confessing and articulating our feelings. Perhaps our vocabulary is rich and evocative in describing the characteristics of the other, such as a lock of hair falling over his forehead. We flatter the other, becoming one with him, and

the only way we know how to convince him of our innermost inclinations is by multiplying words. In most cases, of course, we make use of these lavish expressions of affection in the hope that the courtship will result in sexual intercourse. Yet, as time passes, the declarations of love undergo a process of abstraction, so that, in the end, all we are left with to say is: "I love you." The ultimate declaration of love is sparse, formal, and essentially unoriginal. And this reduction is not without purpose; it performs a very specific, indeed sorely needed function of relieving us from the compulsion of constantly having to demonstrate our devotion. At the beginning of a love affair, the signs of our fondness might still be wasteful, but soon enough there come moments when one is perhaps forced to formalize. Sometimes we feel in our hearts a burning desire for the other, to the point of craving to sleep with him tightly embraced all night. When the light goes off, however, there is always too much warmth, squeezing, and breathing between the two bodies. Nonetheless, we are seldom willing to assume responsibility for being the ones who tear ourselves from the hug and turn away. Here, a strategy to help us out of the predicament offers itself: an abstract declaration of love. If in that particular situation we say to the other "I love you," we institute a form which persists according to its own laws, thereby absolving our body from the continuous obligation of expressing love. We are finally allowed to return to our private selves and fall to sleep that is entirely our own.

Second, the declaration of love is prone to indefinite repetition. It has become a typical scene in film, or even in real life, to show a woman of a certain age confronting her husband not with the complaint "Why do you not feel for me what you have felt at the beginning?" but rather with "Why do you not tell me more often that you love me?" Her point seems clear: playing the game of love, she is not interested in realities, such as affections, but in idealities, such as recurring declarations. Love spreads out in a medium different from that of a mere exchange of emotions; it

requires something more than merely a sense of security about what the other feels for us. If one understands the functioning of love properly, one knows that the excuse of having already professed it a few years back, and now being weary of repeating the same thing over and over again, is rigorously invalid. Love inhabits a curious dimension whose reality is framed by ideal coordinates, so that one must proclaim and avow it even if one knows that the other is sure of one's love. It may well be that a declaration of love is essentially redundant. As such, it liberates us from feeling the very feeling that triggered its first articulation. Love, it seems, does not arise until the lovers find a form within which they are no longer compelled to feel it all the time. The most direct consequence of this transition to a higher level of ideality is that love stipulates a certain regularity of its communion; it demands rituals. It is a most common development of the "definite denomination of love" that it gravitates toward coded, ceremonial occasions within the organized time of our daily lives. Over the years, these testimonies of appreciation become less an expression of a momentary inspiration and more and more a symbol of a certain demure, almost liturgical uniformity. In the early phases of infatuation, the declaration of love normally still plays the role of bringing two lovers closer together; often, it is a tool of sexual seduction. Later, however, it begins to represent a kind of monument of temporary distance between the two. Instead of professing love at whatever moment of the day, we become inclined to do it only at separations and departures, i.e., before we fall asleep, at the end of phone calls, when saying farewell at airports, or even when sliding into anaesthesia, from which we may never wake up again. When mutual incompatibilities between two lovers slowly distinguish themselves, saying "I love you" even functions as an act of giving the other the right to relative autonomy. Why are we so liable to profess love precisely at the moment of bidding goodbye? Perhaps because it is a moment of allowing the other to turn away from us, go forth, forget about us, and dedicate himself

to his own concerns. And what we give to the other to take along is not a commitment that we will be thinking about him for the entire period of separation, but a mere form, which will persist even when its content is not present in our minds.

Third, the declaration of love tends to assume the form of a symmetrical inversion. Love life can only hope to endure if it manages to make the passage from the continuity of feeling love to the formalization of professing it. It is for this reason, and this reason alone, that the ultimate verification of the fundamental abstractness and repetitiveness of a declaration of love lies in its symmetrical inversion. Why does it seem that the only adequate answer to a profession of love is its mirror image, its symmetrical repetition? It is possible to think out a number of "false responses" to having had love declared. This kind of declaration should never be understood as a specification of a quality, a description of a state, a manifestation of content. We would most probably miss the point if, upon hearing "I love you," we responded with "I agree. I like myself all right," or even "What do you love most about me?" Answering in that way, we would presume that love is fed by reality, and that we ourselves embody its sufficient reason. But there is something about love which circumvents all positive reasons; no one possesses a core fathomless enough to eternally arouse feelings of infatuation in others. Likewise, there would be something wrong in asking back "How come? Have you not been ill-disposed just minutes ago?" Or even: "What is with you all of a sudden? Are you of such feeble spirit that you cannot manage to love yourself?" By replying in that vein, we would falsely surmise that a declaration of love is an expression and innervation of a certain tension in the other, whose intensity he should vouch for. But the games of love are sober and stringent, and if we want to play them, two self-indulgences must first be sacrificed: that we are worthy of love, and that the infatuation of the other is infinite. Thus, by and by, the only thing we are left with in responding to "I love you," is another "I love you," while

the qualities of the beloved and the inner disposition of the lover are allowed to recede into the background.¹²

In brief, we seem to have sketched out the vague contours of a new logical space that unfolds along with love's aim to be professed; the typical biography of love exhibits a propensity to formalized, ritualized, and symmetrically inverse expressions. Emotions can go one way or the other, and no one can control their rising and falling; yet along with these oscillations there persists, in all its immunity, a warranty of a declaration of love that is drawn toward achieving a certain verbal uniformity. Passions decline, sexual prowess wanes, or, even more commonly, an eroticism proliferates that has nothing to do with love any more. However, all these feelings accompanying each declaration do not put the concept of "love" to different uses that would perpetually shift its meaning, but instead display a certain situational impotence to touch the semantics of love. The great test of love does not inquire whether one's emotions are as profound as to ensure continuity, but whether one is able to temporarily set them aside and let the loving be done by words alone. When all is said and done, is not love merely a commitment that, no matter the deviations of sentiments, one will still be able to give the name "love" to something he is sharing with the other? As paradoxical as it may sound, the declaration of love in its most ideal limit might read: "I will continue to declare love to you even when I am not able to feel it anymore."¹³ It is no great secret that

¹² Truffaut's *L'histoire d'Adèle H.* (1975), arguably *the* film on unrequited love, shows a woman, played by Isabelle Adjani, precisely in the state where in response to her endless, impetuous professions of love the beloved man infinitely withholds any acknowledgment or reply. In this intersubjective vacuum, all she can fall back on is the inner intensity of her own feelings, the constancy of which is impossible to maintain. Thus, even though her passion is exuberant and excessive to the point of insanity, at a certain occasion she sends to her lover a note saying: "At this moment, I do not love you."

¹³ Love does not necessarily possess a sensorium for the vacillations in the emotional states of those in love, which is why amorous entanglements are often described with a paradox: "Until it ends, every love is eternal."

in the course of a love relation we come to a point when we still “love” someone without feeling it in the gut. But what is this “love” a name for if we cannot conjure back its original excitement? The only way to resolve this paradox is to transfer love from the realm of real foundations to the realm of ideal products, from sensations to the act of bestowing a name.

What therefore strikes the eye is the stark opposition of this emergent space to the elementary principles of Wittgenstein’s theory and, indirectly, to the principles of a large part of twentieth-century philosophy of language. Let us reduce the innovation and impetus of Wittgenstein’s “revolution” to three conditions. First, the aberrations of a particular language use a priori override the semantics of conventional formulae; the latter receive their meaning and determinacy by way of the former, and not vice versa. From this it follows that, second, there always must be a context, a *Witz*, for a proposition to be understood at all; to put it in simplified terms, someone must have a pronounced need for a hammer for the assertion “Hand me the hammer!” to be articulated in the first place. And third, it also follows that there must be an “objective” sufficient reason which “grounds” and “centers” a situation; there must be a slab lying around somewhere, if the imperative “Bring me a slab!” is to make sense at all. In love, however, things appear to be altogether different. Perhaps the coordinates of its logical space could even be defined by the exact inversion of the three Wittgensteinian parameters. First, the conventional abstraction seems to overdetermine the heterogeneous particularity of language use. Second, it is the very function of the ceremonial repetition to invalidate the contingencies of being placed within a situation. And third, the mirror image or symmetrical inversion only serves to bracket the validity of sufficient reasons. As we will see, these inversions have consequences for the function of the love-professing subject, for the function of the object of the declaration of love, and for the place where the two intersect, i.e., the situation in which love is ultimately professed. First, a certain hollowing out of the

subject, his “locus of proposition,” takes place; we do not have to mean it in order for the declaration of love to succeed. Second, a certain lack of the object comes to light; we do not have to refer to anything real, i.e., point to a positive quality of the beloved, in order for love to be declared. Third, a complex situation of professing unfolds, which keeps any possible situation at bay; through repetition, love somehow tends toward only being declared within the blind spots of space and the loopholes of time.

It is here, in this specific spacio-temporality of professing love, that the difference between Wittgenstein’s and our own theory of the meaning of a word becomes most clearly visible. Wittgenstein is a sworn philosopher of everyday life, of a *Lebensform*; every word must stand the test of its most concrete application in a situation, that is, of its use. We, on the other hand, brought to light a certain type of proposition that tends to be asserted within the very slipstream of time when everyday life weakens its pragmatic control over determining meaning; our emphasis was on the declarations proclaimed at partings, celebrations, birthdays, and anniversaries. Against the philosophy of the workday, we have opposed the philosophy of the holiday, as it were. And within these exempt moments, language ceases to be a mere tool of transferring information and becomes itself an object of a specific enjoyment. With time, we no longer profess love in order to let the other know that we love him—for he may as well know that already. We only declare it for the sake of declaring; and what we thereby point at is merely the pointing itself. The success of a declaration of love thus gradually becomes less dependent on what it expresses, and more dependent on the satisfaction brought about by its articulation. Contrary to twentieth century pluralist pragmatism, in love the usage of words, whose purpose is to cause certain praxes, is replaced by the act of professing, which must be maintained in its very quality of being professed.

In other words, the key to professing love lies precisely in no longer being exposed to the fluctuations of momentary moods

and the inclinations of the “place of enunciation”; it lies in persisting in the background of a love relationship as an instance of the sameness of a sentence, which no particular, situational enunciation can underpin or overwrite. Just as with Wittgenstein’s flowers and music, love conveys nothing but itself, so it does not point to something that can be grabbed and used; instead, it, so to speak, strives to carve a statement in the marble of the air. To put it another way, when a lover professes his love for us, we should never take him at his word; rather, we should take his word for it. We best not grub for what lies behind but allow the declaration itself to resonate in the dignity of a sentence.

How could this new logical space of professing love be bindingly defined in terms of the philosophy of language? The issue can be solved in one move. Love accustoms us to cultivate a technique of professing it, which is clearly opposed to the tendency of reducing propositions to their locus. In Wittgenstein, a sentence can only be “understood” if it is transformed into a statement; the meaning of a sentence depends on what someone meant by uttering it. Accordingly, every time Wittgenstein is faced with a “sentence,” i.e., a statement which sounds too abstract and construed, he asks whether there can be a meaningful context in which stating it can have any sense at all. Is it possible, for instance, to imagine a particular scene where it could be conceivable what someone meant by saying “this is pain”? Inversely, while ordering coffee can only be meaningful in a café and not, for instance, in a shoe shop, the mechanics of love places its articulation in a more complex situation. In our view, the only way to decipher the context of professing love is to establish that it is a pseudo-Augustinian antisituation. This means that the real object of love is not the thing to which the word refers, but rather the word which is being proclaimed. In love, the fact that the word is pronounced overdetermines any possible meaning this word might evoke or signify.

Of course, if the focal point around which love revolves is its own “professedness,” then love loses its substantial status of

a simple and immediate state of mind. Why is it that two lovers so often draw forth the question: “Have you already said ‘I love you’ to each other?” An overhasty answer would imply that love is not something that is simply there, waiting to be declared only subsequently; what is there are merely impulses, leanings, and desires, which only become love once they are designated as such. Love is not something to be named; it is something that emerges by being named. But there is more to it than this almost trivial logic. The more essential point is that with love a certain fundamental function of language seems to reverse its trajectory. The real concern with love is not whether the lovers have substantiated enough emotion in their hearts to eventually confess to it; rather, the issue is whether, within the continuum of emotive situations, they have managed to hollow out the antisituation, where love itself could be uttered. The gist of saying “I love you” for the first time might not consist in increasing the intensity of feeling it to the point of making it burst out in a declaration, but in achieving the first distance to the inner tension of feelings, i.e., in finally reaching the state in which one no longer clings to words in order to grasp some part of reality, but rather lets reality recede and make room for the emergence of the profession itself. This is why we usually declare love for the first time only once we become aware of the fact that the beloved is no longer constantly on our minds, that he does not occupy the entire space of our thoughts any more. It seems that in order to love one must first be able to occasionally forget the beloved for a while. While the situations of daily reality force us to utter replies, exclamations, imperatives, descriptions, and narratives, the artistry of loving commonly consists in knowing how to suppress its imminent declaration and to postpone it until the non-place within time and space is sought out and unfolded. And it is in this very skill that a certain fundamental change of object manifests itself. While the body and soul of the beloved may be the primary object of love, its ultimate object rather hinges on the acts of its own professing—on uttering the word itself.

We have come upon the most crucial point, and this inversion in the use of language, this change of the original function of words, deserves some elucidation. In love, we no longer use words to refer to things; we reduce things to mere occasions, by aid of which we can finally refer to “love.” Perhaps it is possible to demonstrate how the very evolution of a typical “biography of love” is nothing but one colossal expression of this reversal of the direction of reference, where “love” forfeits its initial referential function of pinning down a situation, instead itself becoming a referent to which a certain generalized and totalized reality claims to have a permanent recourse. In the early phases of a love affair, the word “love” might still serve as the usual “differential designator.” We “love” this and that about the beloved: his feet, his voice, his modesty, etc.; it is arguably more a case of “liking” than “loving.” The word still plays its customary role of distinguishing and specifying reality. By means of it, we pinpoint what we like in order to discriminate it from other things (“I love you more than anything else!”), thereby elevating the beloved into a distinctive object of love. In this early phase, it is not uncommon to suffer from a (however sweet) compulsion to like “every single thing” about the beloved; love makes us proverbially blind, incapable of recognizing the disadvantages of the other. At some point, however, this hard labor of constant differentiations of qualities that we like against the negative ones that we merely gloss over wears itself out. The positive reasons of love tend to run out. And now, against the overbearing hegemony of everyday life with its fluctuations of likes and dislikes, the usual amorous digging up of trenches against the outside world can be absolved by the abstract declaration of love. Hence, the lover declares: “I love you.” The beloved might at first even reply: “Oh? Is it my full hair? Or my slender body?” But the lover insists: “No, you don’t understand. It is *you* that I love.” Behind the multitude of positive qualities with which “I” once fell in love, the instance of “you” crystalizes. But since “I” only posited “you” in order to put an end to the constant playing of the

likes against the dislikes, this “you” that I love is precisely *not* the profound essence behind the lovable appearances, as Wittgenstein might have thought, but rather a blank space that will finally enable “love” to free itself from having to pinpoint this or that on the object of love, discriminate it from the rest of the world, and overlook its possible detriments. With “you” that I love, I do not begin to love “every single thing” about you. On the contrary, a most stringent and definite structural turn is performed here. By having love declared, I have instituted a logical space of a certain totality, in which love ceases to serve as a differentiating factor of reality, and instead becomes an ideal guardian of the fundamental indiscrimination of the entire space shared by me and you. Under the banner of love a specific “everything” now unfolds, while the “you” of the declaration only stands for the logical mark of its universalization. In other words, what love usually strives for is to establish a new universe of “everything,” in which every single like and every single dislike can start referring to the same ideal framework. Does not love also consist in setting up a space of freedom where one is even allowed some quirks that the partner does not care for? For only now, within the realm of ideal concessions, can love life finally let in all the vestiges of imperfection which once had to be overlooked. Henceforth, I might begin to admit to myself (or even to you) that I dislike your hands or the way you eat. But even if I bump into you in the bathroom in the morning, I might recognize in your bland appearance a token of love; and it is not because I distinctly like faces without make-up, but because, by showing me your unflattering side, you testify to partaking in the very “everything” that love has inaugurated. In a nutshell, love is not about distinguishing and identifying its ground in reality, its ultimate reason, its mystical x; it is about instituting an indiscriminate field of reality where suddenly everything, even drawbacks, can avail itself of an essentially declared ideality. This, precisely, is the reversal of reference. And perhaps the only tool qualified to accomplish this turn is that element of language

which provides the genuine “impulse of idealization,” namely, the word. The word alone in its predisposition to being elevated into a monument of pronunciation is capable of breaking out of the horizon of referential correspondence to a real object, without, in its newly objectless state, withdrawing into the ivory tower of idealism; instead, the word becomes the very force that carries out the process of normalization and neutralization of reality.

Many examples from the daily phenomenology of love validate this point. That the word “love” in the phrase “I love you” is ultimately not a “designator” or an “identifier,” but itself a referent, comes best to light in the fact that it begins to represent some sort of “background support point” that one can fall back on at any time. Instead of using it to express what we like as opposed to what we dislike, we soon start using it as some sort of “ideal umbrella” under which the entire reality of a love relationship with all its deviations must be put up with. It seems to function as a constant possibility of recourse when life exhibits its less lovable aspects. One often hears a film character utter the phrase “yes, you made a mistake, but I still love you,” thereby implying that there exists an inconsumable amount of love that the particular aberrations are incapable of affecting directly. Or when someone is faced with the other leaving him, he sometimes appeals to this preestablished whole by saying “but don’t we love each other?”, as if, even though helpless against the overwhelming evidence of particularities, the totality is still somewhat hesitant to bid goodbye. Similarly, by the very fact of having love declared, we are likely to forfeit the right to use it as a tool for discriminately manipulating the beloved, say, in the manner of: “If you do that, I will continue to love you, and if you don’t, I will stop.” For “love” has already lost the power of differentiating and instead assumed the role of the guardian of totality that must be presupposed in order to subsequently release the space of possible negotiations of what we want or do not want from the other; henceforth we can surely bargain and make deals, but without appealing to love.

It is under these terms that we can now venture an (almost grammatical) analysis of the declaration of love. Semantically speaking, the final remit of the delicate technique of professing love seems to be to enact the “situation of definite denomination” in which the word in its wordhood becomes the true referent of the sentence. How, then, can this apotheosis of the word within a sentence be reconstructed? We can start by pointing out that the “you” in “I love you” plays the role of an antireferent, a void which rearranges the entire field of assignations. It stands for the lack of positive reasons of love and the subsequent indiscrimination of love’s reality, which manifests itself mostly in the normalization of everyday life. And this emptiness at the heart of “you” now shifts the motive for uttering the declaration “I love you” from the object to the verb itself. To repeat, love is not there to point to you; you are there to point to love. This is why a certain change of emphasis in pronouncing the words in the sentence “I love you” can sometimes be observed. In the fresh stages of love, one might still say “I love you,” as if to reassure oneself of whom one loves, or to signal to the other that everyone else is excluded. But then the usual articulation gravitates toward accentuation: “I *love* you.” For “you” are now already certain, and there is no third around to be loved. However, by stressing the word “love,” I demonstrate that I have swallowed my pride and converted the blissful diffusion of emotions into an event of having this sole word finally verbalized. After all, this is also what the beloved commonly wants to hear: not that he is the deep reason of love, but that I have managed to bring the very word to the surface. He does not want to be loved rather than others and their real qualities but towards love and its ideal warranty. Here, one could even take up the old Spinozist logic of having to love the other back on account of not having given any cause to receive his love in the first place, and transfer this logic from the level of affects to the level of words. When “you” realize that you are not the true object of the declaration of love, but a mere placeholder of

the resonance of the verb “to love,” it is a matter of taste that you undo the illusion that the declaration was actually aimed at you. By replying: “I love you,” you concur that you know that it is in fact not you but love that is being sanctified. In other words, the function of the symmetrical repetition of the profession of love is to invalidate the remaining traces of the objectal reference of the first declaration. In Spinoza, we return the affect; here, we only corroborate the fact that it has only been about words all along. Thus, in hollowing out by way of symmetrical inversion both the subject and the object, me and you do nothing else but monumentalize the word “love.” It is in this sense, and in this sense alone, that a declaration of love is only adequately “understood” if it is not interpreted as a statement, but rather as a full-blown sentence. For it is no longer a case of a statement conveying our feelings, pointing to objects, and placing us in situations, but a case of a sentence being conceived as a stage for the verbalization of a single word.¹⁴

To return to our Augustinian theme, the coordinates of professing love that we have outlined, i.e., abstraction, conventionality, inverse symmetry, and ritualism, seem to enact in a straight form, albeit on a new, higher level, the scene of pointing and giving a name, a scene prohibited in the universe of linguistic pragmatism. Wittgenstein’s critique of Augustine rests on unmasking the naivety of enacting “pure, noncontextual situations,” as if a child can be taught to speak in a vacuum of bare words and ideal objects.

¹⁴ From this, a certain preliminary and still very formal philosophical definition of “word” could be derived: the word is the ideal impulse upon which every contextual statement always possesses a minimal, irreducible surplus of a sentence. Not only can a sentence never be uttered outside this or that situation, thus becoming a statement, but it is also not possible to utter a statement without simultaneously instituting a transcontextual sentence—something the twentieth century was so unwilling to take account of. Even Derrida’s quotations are only there to incite new contexts, which serve to displace once more the original meaning of words.

Wittgenstein insisted that we only learn language inasmuch as we need it, and not superfluously. We never simply learn words; we only learn them insofar as they are comprised in sentences, that is, in statements which effectuate this or that. However, by saying “I love you,” we seem to enact the very thing of pragmatic impossibility: a superfluous pronunciation of a word. The profession of love therefore amounts to the pseudo-Augustinian declaration “this is love” that isn’t trying to move something in the world but is rather only making the word itself be heard.

To be sure, we first had to earn this unique, redundant, and excessive opening of the Augustinian logical space of mere words being called out. The “return to Augustine” must thus be properly understood; it is, as it were, a return executed “under Wittgenstein’s conditions.”¹⁵ Our Augustinianism consists in the fact that professing love can only be grasped if its reason is no longer conceived to be real, but essentially ideal. Nevertheless, there are three crucial differences that must be pointed out. First, Augustine could still rely on the warranted ideality of meaning; between the table pointed at and the word “table” exclaimed, the entire meaning was explicated. Second, the Augustinian situation presupposed the full presence of the referent; his parents indicated

¹⁵ Again, by replacing the pre-Wittgensteinian *idealism of meanings* with post-Wittgensteinian *idealism of words*, we tried to follow Wittgenstein’s steps so as to surpass them. It was he who, against Augustine, taught us to never—except, ironically, when it comes to love itself!—reach *behind* words; it suffices to know how to *act upon* them. When hearing the other cry “I am in pain!,” we do not need to *relieve* this pain; if we take him to the doctor, we understand everything there is to understand about this proposition. We have to realize the point of the situation, and that is all. Consequently, Wittgenstein’s word has no backside, only a multitude of front sides; instead of one meaning, it has many uses. However, it was our intention to discern another, inverse even, phenomenology of “using” language. In contrast to everyday speech acts, a profession of love functions as a test of whether one can resist the temptation to pin it down to the context of its declaration. Perhaps the ultimate question posed to us by the test of love is: *Are you capable of hearing a statement and understanding it as a sentence?*

the visible objects of this world, such as a table, a chair, a spoon, or a fork. And, third, the learning process was irreversible and cumulative. Augustine memorized words in order to know them once and for all; and after having learned them, he never had to ask for them again. We, on the other hand, have taken Wittgenstein's lessons seriously. There is no love behind the word "love" in the same way as there was the Augustinian fullness of the table behind the word "table." However, this "lack of the definitive object" engenders its own, entirely trans-Wittgensteinian logic. One must say "I love you" precisely when and because there is no love lying around. And since love is built upon this original groundlessness, it is in need of a new ontological justification. There is no palpable thing at the end of the pointing finger, so the situation of the pointing must, in return, be reenacted indefinitely. Because love is in the process of losing its original object, it can only substitute this lack by repeating its declarations. Or, expressed from the opposite side, the only possible object of the contextually immune recurring sentence is the ideal impulse of the word. This is why the value of Wittgenstein's turn is in no way diminished, and his critique of Augustine is still valid; in order to recap the Augustinian "scene of definite denomination," we had to leap over from the realm of real objects to the realm of ideal ones. And here we arrive at the decisive difference between Augustine's learning of words and our professing of them. While in Augustine the ideal element, which, after all, represents the sufficient reason for learning words, was the great Meaning, i.e., the platonic Form authorized and justified by God, our ideal foundation, the trigger of the processual, self-referential ritual of professing love, is not the metaphysical content of love, but the great Word itself. To put it in simplified terms, Augustine's parents uttered single, decontextualized words so that he could learn what they meant; our lovers, on the contrary, must already know what the word "love" means and suppress the endless deviations of its meaning, so that they could pronounce it in its noncontextual,

ideal purity. The word is the only object of the “real” world whose repetitive quality produces enough “ideality” to be able to instigate its own drives; it is only within the ideal sameness of the word that the sole motive for pronouncing it lies. The magical object, around which the entire obsession with love revolves, is thus the nonmetaphysical guarantee that, in this godless universe of shifting meanings, wavering subjects, and unworthy objects, the only constant that the recurring sentence can name over and over again is the sameness of the word.

Towards a New Definition of Word

Simultaneously with the profanation of language, the twentieth century also raised language into “a limit of my world,” “a text with no outside,” a prison with no escape, a horizon that cannot be trespassed. However, in our view, the question posing itself is not only how to recognize the outside world through the lattices of language, but also, inversely, how to catch sight of the pure ideality of the word through the unordered continuum of the world, which indiscriminately blends things, events, movements, relations, gestures, signals, and finally statements.

Against the semantic pluralism of the twentieth century, we have pointed out a different, recursive life of language, where the meaning achieves a certain fixation and discrimination in the moment when its referent becomes the word itself. The word “love,” for instance, is a most ordinary tool for expressing our inclination toward an object; however, in its very inert wordhood it can provoke an idealist turn, so that the object of love becomes a mere occasion, at which we begin to refer to the word “love” itself. To Wittgenstein’s question, what is the meaning of a word, we might thus reply that it is a hill with two slopes: on the one side, there is the multitude of its ordinary uses, while on the other, this very increase in the possibilities of use as a means

to mean something provokes the word to become an ever more exclusive motive of its own pronunciation. It is thus a case of a means becoming an end, and an instance of ordinariness inducing idealization. Seen from this angle, the word as word appears within language as some kind of a foreign body, a negative boundary, which ultimately undermines the power of everyday life to endlessly redefine its meanings. Perhaps the following definition could be written down: the word is a form whose every use opens a logical space in which the word itself can seize and occupy one of the meanings.

Since there is a word only for every ninth thing, as Ivan Cankar famously said, perhaps the tenth thing will someday descend to Earth; and this thing will be precisely the word in its being uttered. What is more, Cankar's lamentation of there not being any words for the most painful things might be a mere consequence of the fact that the moment the word becomes "its own thing" it begins to harbor illusions that it is a name for something fuller, deeper, and unspeakable—the illusions Wittgenstein could never resist. But the only depth of this world is the surface of the word. It is for this reason that we must not remain silent, as Wittgenstein commanded, but must continue to utter certain words, because it is the only way to disenchant their meanings.

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Twice Two: Hegel's Comic Redoubling of Being and Nothing

Rachel Aumiller

Marx somewhere remarks that history repeats itself: first as tragedy, then as farce. But what he failed to mention—what Hegel already knew—was that the historical doubling of tragedy and farce repeats itself: first as tragedy, then as farce.

In the opening act of the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Karl Marx stages tragedy and farce as a historical duo, farce tripping directly into tragedy's historical footprint (Marx 1960, p. 115). Marx states that although Hegel recognized that history repeats itself, he failed to see this historical doubling through the structures of tragedy and farce. Although Marx claims to make this addition to Hegel, we also might hear a bit of irony in his famous catchphrase, which is followed by an analysis dripping with sarcasm, one-liners, and paradox. "First as tragedy, then as farce" has the ring of Abbott and Costello's "Who's on first? *Who's* on first!" (Yarbrough et al. 1945) In the events of 1848, the Young Hegelians learned firsthand that what announces itself as comic revolution is often exposed as farce: tragedy wearing a comic mask. On a formal level, "first as tragedy, then as farce" appears on the historical stage as an odd couple like Abbott and Costello or Laurel and Hardy: a pair of opposites, one of which is always at the heels of the other. On the level of content, "first as tragedy, then as farce" is not the odd couple but identical twins, a mirroring of the same: *Who's* on first? *Who's* on first! Prior to the failures of 1848, the Young Hegelians anticipated that a revolution would erupt in the form of a comedy, demolishing

the tragic structures of their own historical stage. Marx was the first to introduce the concept in his 1842 essay on Prussian censorship (Marx 1956). In his first Young Hegelian “coming out” piece, Marx argues that the attitude of Prussian seriousness, which reinforces the status quo, must be countered with the humorous spirit of critique, which laughs in the face of that which was once revered. His older comrades eagerly responded with their own visions of comic revolution.¹ Arnold Ruge, the most nuanced reader of Hegel amongst the group (once having been imprisoned for his controversial Hegelianism, allegedly served his five-year sentence happily reading Hegel and Greek poetry), was quick to identify the theme of comedy as a Hegelian concept. Ruge’s contribution challenged Marx’s initial oppositional framing of dogmatic seriousness and critical laughter. We cannot laugh down the object of critique from a critical distance. Comedy, as simply opposed to tragedy, reveals itself to be a farce: a formal break that preserves the content of that which comes before it. Historical comedy can only erupt when tragedy, grasping itself by its own contradiction, can no longer take itself seriously.²

Not only did Hegel himself already frame historical repetition as a theatrical production, but he took Marx’s formulation of the historical double (tragedy and farce) one step further, multiplying “first as tragedy, then as farce” times two: first as tragedy, then as farce, now once more *only this time comically*. We see (2 x 2) in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel 1970) in Hegel’s analysis of “Art-Religion” and “Revealed Religion.” Greek tragedy and comedy are repeated in the divine drama of Christianity: first, in the tragedy of the incarnation in which contradiction is attributed to one tragic hero, then in the comedy of the crucifixion in which

¹ See, for example, Stirner 1983, pp. 327-53, and Ruge 1983, pp. 211-36.

² Ruge thus does not identify religion as the object of laughter/critique but rather as potential site for tragic contradiction—the corrupt relationship between Church and State—to grasp the absurdity of its own farcical nature and erupt in a subversive comedy (Ruge 1983, pp. 229-236).

the very same contradiction is revealed as belonging to all.³ In Marx's second formulation of critique and comedy, which he again positions against Hegel, he claims that the ancient gods had to die twice: once tragically and then once again comically.⁴ But in Hegel's own analysis, the double death of the ancient gods had to occur twice more so that God the Absolute could grasp his own tragic contradiction and erupt in comedy.⁵ What is played out on the dramatic stages of art and religion enacts an ontological drama in the opening of Hegel's *Science of Logic*. (2 x 2) also occurs as the redoubling of the original comic duo: Being and Nothing (Hegel 1986a, p. 82). As Hegel frames it, Being and Nothing are already from the beginning redoubled: "Being, pure Being...Nothing, pure Nothingness."⁶ This passage, as I will explore, holds itself open allowing the ontological double to be redoubled in several ways.

Sigmund Freud identifies the figure of the double as producing an uncanny effect. As he argues, *das Unheimliche* traditionally describes an encounter with something quite strange, some form of sinister opposition that threatens to snuff out one's existence (Freud 1999). But the chill that runs over my skin at the uncanny encounter is not due to the strangeness of this other but instead comes from a repressed familiarity. My opposite turns out to be my mirror image, although I may not recognize myself in its reflection. Freud positions the double not as between tragedy and comedy, but as between comedy and horror. (Marx's philosophy of the historical double of tragedy and farce similarly slips into horror with revolutions fought by ghosts and zombies.) Freud puzzles over the double, recognizing that although in one context the double chills

³ For another account of Hegel's analysis of the life and death of Christ as the double of Ancient theater, see Hegel 1986b.

⁴ On the double death of the gods, see Marx 1956, p. 382.

⁵ For a similar reading of Hegel's staging of Christ as an elevation of Greek comedy, see Zupančič 2008, pp. 44-60.

⁶ In this context, I made the decision to capitalize Being and Nothing to treat them like stage characters, comparing them to comic duos known by their proper names, Laurel and Hardy.

us, in another context the double strikes us as funny. He concludes that the experience of standing face-to-face with our own double creeps us out, because we cannot recognize that this other is a repetition of something that has already occurred or something that is already present within myself or someone who is no different than myself.⁷ But when the double is reproduced (in art for example), we are able to recognize something about the double that was formerly too close for comfort. The “ghastly multiplication” (ibid., p. 252) of the double allows for a certain recognition to come to the surface. What was once uncanny produces a burst of laughter.

Following Freud’s analysis of the fragile line between the uncanny double and its comic redoubling, I identify the doubling of the double found in critical moments of Hegelian dialectic as producing a kind of comic effect. It almost goes without saying that two provides greater pleasure than one, the loneliest number. Many also find two to be preferable to three, the tired trope of dialectic as a teleological waltz. Two seems to offer lightness, relieving one from her loneliness and lacking the complications of a third who comes in between. And yet, we learn through Marx and Freud that the double (even the double of tragedy and farce) borders on something closer to horror than comedy. In the following, I would like to explore why four is funnier than two in my staging of dialectic as the doubling of the double or, to borrow a movie title from Laurel and Hardy, “Twice Two” (Roach et al. 1933a). I will begin by exploring the formulations of the double in the form of a pair of opposites and in the form of a pair of twins. The literary tropes of the double as the odd couple, on one side, and the twins, on the other, appear to serve very different narrative functions, which incite different kinds of affective responses from the audience. However, the form of the opposed double sometimes conceals the realization that the empty or fragmented content of the first is only reduplicated in the second. The “straight man” of

⁷ On the comic effect and the double see Freud 1999, pp. 236, 245, and 252.

the odd couple cannot see himself in his counterpart “the comic.” The redoubling of the double, however, forces not only the audience, but the original double on stage to confront what was already present, but unrealized, from the beginning. To illustrate this redoubling of the double within the opening of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, I consider two short films by Laurel and Hardy in which the comic duo redoubles itself. The formula (2 x 2) produces a comic excess through the dialectical redoubling of there uncanny double.

Double It

Chewing Gum and The Mirror Phase—Autoeroticism Times Two

A dramatic duo comes in two varieties: in the form of twins—two of the same—and in the form of the odd couple—a pair of opposites who are two in one. In both cases, the second figure of the set of two seems to relieve the first from her tragic nature. The spirit of gravity—represented by the first of the pair—appears to be elevated by the spirit of frivolity—introduced by the second. However, although two (at first) may seem to be more fun than just one, two can also be slightly creepy. We experience this feeling while in the presence of obsessive lovers who threaten to annihilate each other in their passion. And yet although two may have the tendency to lose their initial appeal, twice two produces a hilarious effect.

Let’s consider the old Doublemint gum commercials with the unforgettable imperative: “Double your pleasure! Double your fun!” The first commercial for Doublemint chewing gum aired in 1959. A woman sits in front of her vanity intently gazing into her reflection as she combs her hair. She stands and turns away from her vanity. Her reflection follows her! To her delight her reflection is revealed to belong to another figure with her exact appearance and form. Wrigley’s Doublemint gum twins are born in this moment when the lonely girl finds a perfect companion in her reflection that comes to life. The moment when one is revealed as two appears to be delightful. One will never be alone again now that she is two. When the 1980s rolled around, Wrigley decided that the twins

weren't really all that fun anymore. The fantasy of the twins at first had sex appeal, but at the end of the day there was something unsettling about the ultimately autoerotic nature of the girl who had only her reflection for companionship. Rather than imagining oneself erotically positioned between the two playful sisters, the viewer instead sees herself in the girl blowing bubbles alone in front of the mirror. Although one is revealed to be two, two are also still one. The original incompleteness of the one was merely doubled in two, although this repeated inadequacy was masked by the appearance of completeness offered by the missing half.



*Fig. 1 and Fig. 2*⁸

⁸ Joan and Jayne Knoerzer in Wrigley's Doublemint Gum (1959) commercial. All rights reserved. Courtesy of Mars, Inc.

Just as minty-fresh was losing its flavor, Wrigley found its marketing solution within the tagline of its own slogan: “Come on and double it!” In the early commercials, silhouettes of two identical men appear in the background or foreground in the position that the audience occupies. The new campaign brought the boys to the same playing field as the girls, making all four figures objects of pleasure. The girls were redoubled in their male counterparts, finding lovers at last in the redoubling of the first autoerotic double. In doubling the twins, the original one’s loneliness or fragmented nature is not overcome. But the audience can take pleasure in the absurdity of what was initially pitiful if not creepy: the girl’s mistaken sense of completeness found in her reflection. In shifting her object of desire from her own reflection to one found in the world, the first girl seems to overcome her isolation. And yet it seems all too obvious that the twin girls fall immediately in love with the twin boys simply because they see themselves in their male doubles. The same may be said of the boys’ attraction to the girls.

We might consider the development of the Doublemint girl who discovers a perfectly symmetrical companion in her reflection through what Jacques Lacan identifies as “The Mirror Stage.”⁹ Lacan defines the mirror phase as an early pre-linguistic stage in which the infant gains a sense of “self” through its identification with its reflection. Prior to recognizing itself in the mirror, the infant could only observe itself through fragmented moving parts of its body (its hands or its toes). When the infant shifts from a fragmented body-image to an image of itself as a totality, it gains a permanent sense of self. This sense of self, however, is rooted in this “double” that is inverted and distorted in size. As the infant matures, it shifts from the spectral ego based in the mirror-image to a social ego based in its dialectical grasp of itself through the other. These two phases of the ego—in which we grasp our

⁹ For one formulation of the mirror phase see Lacan 2007.

self through the mirror-image and in which we grasp ourselves through the other in the world—may appear to be opposed. Yet, Lacan claims that the individual will continue to relate to herself and her environment imperfectly throughout her life, since there will always be a certain disjunction between her physical reality and the inverted double through which she grasps both herself and the world.

In the case of the Doublemint girl, the discovery of her double initially offers her a sense of completeness, but her security quickly gives way to a sense of uneasiness. To overcome this uneasiness, she seeks security not in her mirror image but in a form quite different from her own. And so the twin girls are partnered with the twin boys. The disjunction between the two sisters, whose relationship ultimately leaves something to be desired, is also the disjunction between the first girl and herself. We might speculate that the uncanny nature of the second girl lies in the fact that she is not perfectly identical; her actions are inverted. The uncanny nature would thus lie in this slight difference, this sense of something being slightly off. But we may also speculate that the uncanny nature of the second does not lie in difference but sameness, as the first twin recognizes a disjunction in herself that is not filled but only magnified by the presence of her twin.

Wrigley's campaign found success in the familiar comic trope of the double-double, a trope that Shakespeare employed frequently in his comedies. The two sets of twins in *The Comedy of Errors*, for example, allow for "double the pleasure" by doubling the trouble with more possibilities for confusion, misidentifications, inversions, and the old "switch-a-roo" (Shakespeare 1988). But why does the first double become funnier in its redoubling? What does the doubling of the double do to the first double? My suggestion is that the dialectical process of doubling the double reveals something that was already true about the relationship of the first duo. Something or, more precisely, *nothing* new emerges in the relationship between the split in the first double and the

doubling of the split itself in the second double. The addition of the boys of course does not fill the gap between one and two (which is to say, between one and one) but rather represents a shift from the first girl's imperfect relationship with herself to her imperfect relationship to the world. In a sense, nothing changes in the doubling of the double. But in another sense, the first undergoes transformation. In the redoubling, the first one is able to recognize the disjunction in herself as something she cannot overcome. Instead, in grasping the disjunction outside of herself as something that exists between the two brothers, she has the opportunity to recognize the disjunction as constitutive of her subjectivity. The uncanny thus may be experienced in a moment of comic relief.

*Two Peas in a Pot*¹⁰

*The Tragedy of One—One becomes Two—Twins vs. the Odd Couple—
The Game of “Not”*

One is the subject of tragedy. As Antonin Artaud argues in *Theater and its Double*, the content of tragedy is that which is absolutely singular, that which cannot be repeated or represented by another (Artaud 1994). Hegel also defines tragedy by oneness, but for him the oneness of tragedy is the joke of comedy: comedy is the process of exposing the oneness of tragedy as farce. The tragic figure sees herself from the start as an absolute singularity. Her conviction to her ethical ideals pits her against the world. She is tragic, however, not because she must die at the hands of the world

¹⁰ This heading comes from a famous Stan Laurel malapropism in *Sons of the Desert* (Roach et al. 1933b). Stan is searching for the expression “two peas on a pod” to describe himself and Ollie, but accidentally stumbles upon the charming malapropism “two peas in a pot.” Stan’s malapropisms always seem to hit the nail on the head. The suggestion here is that two who are too close for comfort are likely to get each other in deeper trouble, like two peas in a boiling pot of water.

that refuses to see the rightness of her conviction. Her tragedy is instead in her one-sidedness: her inability to see that the ethical action that is demanded by her deeply personal conviction is also an impersonal product of the system that she believes she opposes. On the other side of the tragic hero is the one who protects the unity of the whole and demands the challenger's death. This one opposed to the first one fails to see that the transgression of the outsider is also demanded by the ethical system he protects. What appears to be the loneliest number is a logical absurdity, because there are always two tragic heroes who mirror each other even in (especially in) their opposition. Tragedy can only see itself from the eyes of the hero on one of the sides of its conflict. It tries to maintain the absurdity of its ultimate Oneness by killing the one who is identified as introducing conflict. The conflict however does not belong to the outsider—who is not an outsider at all—but belongs instead to the stage itself. Tragedy cannot see that the crack that divides one and one is that which constitutes the stage. Tragic blindness is blindness to the perspective of the blind spot itself: the nonperspective of the crack.¹¹

The tragic perspective does not see that the figure of the double is always already lurking within one. Farce, to use Marx's terms, presents itself as comic relief but is as blind as tragedy to the crack within one. It sees tragedy as the loneliest one and attempts to relieve tragic alienation by providing one with a companion. And so, one becomes two either through a sister who is the same (as in the Doublemint gum commercial) or through a companion who is her missing half, her opposite who is not opposed but who makes her whole (girl meets boy). As we see in Aristophanes's myth of the circle people from Plato's *Symposium*, two of the same as well as two opposites hopelessly struggle to overcome their incompleteness by attempting to mend the crack between them

¹¹ Hegel on the two tragic sides that mirror each other: Hegel 1970, pp. 539-40.

(Symp. 189c-193e). The twin, as I have already claimed, has the appearance of providing great fun for the loneliest one. The twin enters the private world of the one and shares the one's personal convictions and senses of pleasure that appear to be only one's own. There are many comedies that revolve around the playfulness of twins. However, although twins have been taken up as the subject of comedy, they are also the subject of horror: we think immediately of the twin sisters who haunt the halls of Overlook Hotel. In movies, such as *The Parent Trap* (1961), one finds great pleasure in the discovery of a lost other who is as familiar as her self. But this same plot also produces a chilling effect when one discovers the other who is no different from one's self. The horror of *The Shining* (Kubrick et al. 1980) does not lie in Jack's encounter with ghosts from the past, but rather in his encounter with himself as his own split identity comes to the surface.

The comic-horror of the figure of the double is illustrated nicely by the film *Single White Female* (Schroeder et al. 1992). The story opens with Allie Jones who kicks her fiancé out of their apartment after she discovers he has cheated on her with his ex-wife. Allie's appearance of fierce individuality, represented by her distinctive spunky red haircut, sets her up as the tragic hero. She maintains her independence although she is alone in the Big City, surrounded by predatory older male figures. Allie posts an ad for a roommate and finds relief from her isolation in Hedy Carson. When Hedy moves in the girls quickly become as close as sisters (Hedy mentions that her own twin died at birth). The girls complement each other in their differences. Each becomes the other's missing half. Sisterly giggles are exchanged as they fix their broken plumbing, raise a puppy, and swap clothing. There is, at first, an air of lightness when one becomes two and two are fused into one. However, the problem with the one-two-one formula is that in the process of joining two, one side tends to absorb the other into itself. The sister eats her twin. The tone of the film changes when the girls go to a salon to get their hair

cut. As Allie admires herself in the mirror she catches a glimpse of Hedy descending the staircase of the salon, sporting Allie's signature red bob haircut.



*Fig. 3*¹²

¹² *Single White Female* © 1992 Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy of Columbia Pictures.

The scene is a dark double of the Doublemint gum commercial, in which the reflection comes to life. The lightness of sister play descends into horror as Hedy quickly takes over Allie's identity and eventually attempts to snuff out her existence altogether. We learn that Hedy in fact killed her real twin and now seeks redemption by repeating the murder. Allie begins to experience her relationship with Hedy as uncanny not simply because Hedy is revealed to be something other than what she initially seemed (not a shy, sweet girl, but a serial killer). Allie experiences the relationship as uncanny, because this other takes the form of something that is all too familiar, a figure who becomes indistinguishable from Allie herself. It becomes clear to both girls that there is not room for two. Despite the appearance of fusion, there is still the first or the original who is threatened to be displaced by the secondary copy. But which one is which? In the final scene, Hedy and Allie fight to the death. Which one is original and which one is copy is of no matter. The victor emerges when one side of the double is destroyed.¹³

The trope of the odd couple produces a different dramatic tone than the trope of the twins. As we have seen, two of the same can be funny or horrifying depending on how the two-fused-in-one are staged. However, there is something inescapably comic about the difference between two opposites fused into one, as proven by great double acts such as George Burns and Gracie Allen. Even when the odd couple plays the role of the villain,

¹³ This fight to the death illustrates what makes dialectical repetition distinct from postmodern repetition. In postmodern repetition, there is no longer any claim to originality. Dialectical repetition is characterized by a tension produced between two, each of which seem to have equal claim to the position of the first. And yet, it is impossible to decide which side is referent and which side is signifier. In my view, the repetition of the first double in the second double (the movement from 2 to 4) does not overcome this tension, but rather allows for a new affective response to the tension between two. The fight to the death of one of the two sides also does not overcome the tension, since in the greatest irony one is shown to be already two.

the comic chemistry of the duo shines through. The first figure of the odd couple, as in the case of the first of the twins, fits the mold of the tragic hero. The first is typically narrow-minded and stubborn, hotheaded and quick to anger. He shakes his fist at the world which he must conquer with his small-minded plans lest the world destroy him. He is blinded by his one-sidedness. Unto himself this frustrated isolated figure is not very funny at all, but instead rather pathetic. And yet, when the spirit of gravity is paired with its opposite—the spirit of frivolity—the tragic nature of the first seems to be defused. Figure one represents order, necessity, fate, and essence: both what is and what ought to be. Figure two, in contrast, represents play, possibility, contingency, and accident: both what may be and what is not. One is absolute and one is not. At each step the second figure trips up the fatalism of the first. At each turn the seriousness and severity of the first is mocked by the silliness of the second. The tragedy of the first is constantly overturned by his comic double who is the immediate repetition of his every movement. Like the broom-faced sweeper dog from *Alice in Wonderland* (Walt Disney Productions et al. 1951), the comic double immediately sweeps away the tracks of tragedy.

But is the tragic nature of the first one really overcome by the comic cleanup man? Hegel saw Greek comedy on the ancient stage not as comic relief from tragedy but as a mirror of the tragic stage. As he puts it, the reconciliation on the comic stage of Greek history is superficial or partial freedom (Hegel 1970, pp. 541-45). On the ancient tragic stage, the grave hero steps before the chorus to defend the absolute rightness of her actions. She soberly utters, “It is. It must be. It cannot be undone.” The tragic hero solemnly sacrifices herself in the name of her gods, which she represents. On the comic stage, we drag the gods out onto the stage and make them represent themselves. We laugh as they are tortured and mocked and cry: “The gods are dead! All that was no longer is. It is not.” The double in the form of the odd couple

represents these two stages on one stage. The tragic utterance “It is.” is immediately met with the comic proclamation “It is not!”

We children of the 1990s played an incredibly obnoxious game in which we would interrupt someone’s speech yelling “NOT!”¹⁴ In fact, it was much more than a game. It was both our ethical duty and sick compulsion to scream “NOT” in someone’s face the moment they opened their mouth. The comic double operates on this game of “NOT!” One says, “It is.” Two responds, “Not.” “It is.” — “Not.”

(It is | Not) | (It is | Not)
(Being | Nothing) | (Being | Nothing)

The immediate movement from the tragic one to the comic double reflects the first movement of Hegel’s *Science of Logic*. Following Hegel, we begin with what would appear to be the most fundamental category of thought: pure Being without further determination. We begin with Being but the moment we try to point to Being—to determine what it is that Being might be—we arrive at its negative double, Nothing. This is so since the content of pure Being—indeterminate immediacy—cannot be distinguished from the emptiness of pure nothingness. A radical change appears in the immediate movement from Being to Nothing—from the spirit of gravity to the spirit of frivolity—from “It is” to “It is not”—from tragic seriousness to comic laughter. However, insofar as these two stages appear as simply opposed (even as they appear on the same stage) the relationship between one and (not) one fails to show us anything new. The radical change in appearance is a mere repetition of the empty contents of the pure forms. Insofar as the two appear to be simply opposed,

¹⁴ The game of “Not!” became popular in North America through the Saturday Night Live sketch “Wayne’s World,” later produce as a movie in 1992. That same year, The American Dialect Society selected “Not!” as the word of the year.

we miss the biggest joke of philosophy: according to logic itself, Being and Nothing cannot be the same, and yet we cannot logically distinguish one from the other.

One can understand this crisis as belonging to the logician who cannot distinguish the pure form of Being from the pure form of Nothing. But one can also imagine this identity crisis as belonging from the beginning to Being itself. From this perspective, the *Logic* begins with a depiction of “the mirror phase” of Being’s development. In other words, “the beginning” is in Being’s repeated failed attempt to grasp its own identity as something that is whole and complete. Being tries to grasp itself both in its mirror image and in the image of its negative counterpart. In one reading of this passage, Being appears in the form of the odd couple: Being and Nothing. Hegel redoubles the odd couple when he replays the movement from Being to Nothing backwards, this time starting from Becoming and moving from Nothing (or non-Being) to Being (Hegel 1986a, p. 84). It is as if Being passes by a mirror and is chilled by its missing reflection. Nothing likewise attempts to reflect on itself as pure nothingness and is startled by the image of its uncanny double, Being. Thus, Being and Nothing try again to grasp themselves, but this time as an ontological compound of Being and Nothing. And yet even as a compound, Being and Nothing can only grasp themselves imperfectly through a reflection that is inverted. In this way, I read Being and Nothing as the odd couple that is redoubled and inverted in Nothing and Being.

The originary redoubling of the odd couple may also be read as the redoubling of twins. As Mladen Dolar points out in his provocative reading of *The Science of Logic*, titled “Being and MacGuffin,” “Being, pure Being” is already split by a comma and repeated:

One could say: in the beginning there is *being* posited twice, or in the beginning there is a gap in *being*, a gap between the first and second *being*, splitting the *being* from itself, by the sheer cunning-

ness of its grammatical structure. [...] The minimal rhetorical device is precisely repetition, introducing redundancy, the surplus of rhetoric over “information.” Saying something twice is redundant, it doesn’t bring new information [...]. But the rhetorical at this point has immediate ontological value, it is the rhetoric of being itself, which makes that being insist before ever properly “existing,” it insists as a repetition and a cut. The minimal, for being pure, is a redoubled minimal. (Dolar 2017, pp. 92-93)

Being is already from the beginning its own double, even “before” Being loses itself in the image of its negative double. As I see it, this splice and repetition within pure Being allows Being to fold onto itself in an originary, although imperfect, self-relation. Being tries to reflect upon itself but can only grasp itself by the disjunction between itself and its double.¹⁵ The first set of ontological twins is mirrored in the second set of twins: “Nothing, pure Nothingness.” Nothing appears as a radical negation of Being, but it is instead nothing more and nothing less than the repeated content of Being. The content of pure Being from this perspective is not nothing in the form of emptiness, but rather negativity in the form of the comma, the splice, the disjunction, or the split.

(Being | Nothing) | (Nothing | Being)
(Being | Being) | (Nothing | Nothing)

In my interpretation, this originary crack or stutter in pure Being is heightened when repeated in pure Nothing. In fact, the only content of pure Being and pure Nothing is the stutter itself. The disturbance that causes Being to interrupt and repeat itself is echoed in Nothing. The comma represents a stirring in Being that is mirrored in the stirring in Nothing: a negative glitch within indeterminate negativity. The difference between one and one in

¹⁵ A comic double of Aristotle’s absolute as thought thinking itself (see *Met.* 12.1072b.20). Here thought attempts to think itself but its mind goes blank.

the case of the twins (Being and Being or Nothing and Nothing) and one and one in the odd couple (Being and Nothing or Nothing and Being) is only formal. In both cases, the redoubling of the double magnifies an active negativity—a repeated stutter or glitch—in the stillness of pure emptiness. The second ontological double magnifies something—or rather nothing—that was there from the beginning. In the beginning was the stutter. In the beginning was the glitch.¹⁶

Nothing Changes

The Doubling of the Comic Double—The Crack in the Crack

Comedy teaches us how to count to four: One—Charlie Chaplin, Two—Abbott and Costello, Three—The Three Stooges, Four—The Marx Brothers.¹⁷ But the comic dialectician begins with the double to count to four.¹⁸ To illustrate this dialectical doubling of the double through comedy, I conclude by turning to the classic comic duo, Laurel and Hardy. Oliver Hardy was a large 280-pound man who wore a bowler hat and suit that were slightly too small, while Stan Laurel was a slim man who wore a bowler hat and suit that were slightly too large. Ollie played the role of the serious man who was easily frustrated. He saw himself as the more intelligent of the two, although he constantly led the two into pitfalls. Stan, Hardy's easygoing sidekick, played the role of

¹⁶ A sort of origin story that constantly interrupts itself and restarts: it is a beginning that cannot quite be expressed in a full sentence (Gen. 1:3), but also requires more than a single word, since the word is already repeated (John 1:1); it is at the same time less than a single word since it is no more than the gap between the repetition.

¹⁷ Thanks to Aaron Schuster for counting to four with me through classic comic cinema.

¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek also recognizes the quadruplicity in the *Logic* but offers a different suggestion of how a dialectician may count to four with Hegel (see Žižek 1991).

the simpleton. As Nabokov describes him, “[Stan was] wonderfully inept, yet so very kind” (Appel 1971, p. 213). While Ollie easily loses his temper, Stan easily bursts into tears. And yet Stan, who appears so fragile and naïve always seems to come out on top without even trying. His mere presence causes Ollie—the spirit of gravity—to self-sabotage. In every episode, Ollie, thinking he knows best, forcefully pushes Stan out of the way and takes the lead. Ollie of course walks directly into disaster, while Stan remains unscathed.

The chemistry between Laurel and Hardy reflects the dynamics between the spirit of gravity and the spirit of frivolity. However, there are two Laurel and Hardy shorts that intensify the formula of the odd couple times two. Through an early experiment with overlaying film, the two play themselves and their doubles. *First as tragedy, then as farce* is fully played out as *first as tragedy, then as farce: redoubled*. In the 1933 short, “Twice Two,” Laurel and Hardy marry each other’s sisters, also played by the duo, in a double wedding. In the opening scene, the men call their wives from work. The usual slapstick that takes place between Laurel and Hardy is mirrored in the antics between their female counterparts who are at home preparing an anniversary dinner. Hardy is squirted in the face with black ink while the female Hardy gets a cake in the face. Initially the dynamic between Laurel and Hardy is only paralleled by the dynamic between the sisters. But the dynamic is complicated when all four sit down to the table together. Laurel sits across from the female version of himself (an exact replica in drag) and next to the female version of Hardy (his opposite in drag). Hardy likewise sits across from his female twin and next to his female opposite. The anniversary dinner begins with two sets of twins sitting at the table, each twin looking into his or her near reflection. But over the course of the dinner, four different combinations of the odd couple emerge: Laurel and Hardy, the female Laurel and female Hardy, Laurel and female Hardy, and Hardy and female Laurel. The traditional dynamic

between Laurel and Hardy operates on a movement that oscillates to and fro from one to two to two to one, like an endless game of *fort-da* between Being and Nothing, a game in which nothing changes. The dinner table, which stages the double-double, also features a ping-ponging of bickering and slapstick between one and one's opposite. The exchange is always between some version of Laurel and Hardy, but never the exact same combination of Laurel and Hardy. Even when nothing changes, the movement from one back to the other is not exactly the same. As Dolar puts it, "One cannot step into the same being twice" (Dolar 2017, 92).



Fig. 4¹⁹

The 1930 short "Brats" is a rare instance in which Laurel and Hardy carry out the entire plot without the aid of any other actors.

¹⁹ *Twice Two* (1933). James Parrott. MGM. Pictured: Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy (Image Credit: Snap).

And yet double is not alone on stage. Laurel and Hardy redouble themselves, this time playing both the roles of Stan Sr. and Ollie Sr. and the roles of their sons Stan Jr. and Ollie Jr. (Roach et al. 1930). While their wives are out hunting ducks, the men are given the womanly task of watching the children. The scene opens with a game of checkers. Ollie is determined to win although Stan has already captured a large stack of Ollie's red checker pieces. Like a game of "NOT" in which children negate each other's words almost before they leave the other's mouth, Stan jumps to make a move the moment Ollie's hand hovers over a checker piece. When Stan is distracted, Ollie quickly makes his play. Stan immediately captures two more pieces. *It is. It is Not. It is Not.* After pausing to look sternly into the camera, Ollie begrudgingly advances one of his pieces. *It is.* The spirit of gravity plays the spirit of frivolity at a game of checkers. This scene has a dark double in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (Bergman et al. 1957) in which Antonius faces Death in a game of chess. But Stan and Ollie do not play chess but rather a round of children's checkers, which Ollie nevertheless treats very seriously. The game of checkers is redoubled in the children games in which the boys too go back and forth. In a game of building blocks, the boys take turns placing one block upon the other. The boys gain speed until Stan Jr.'s block lands on Ollie Jr.'s finger, resulting in a violent crash of the block tower (the crash is of course the *telos* of a game of building blocks). The formula seen in checkers and building blocks is repeated twice more: the boys take turns grasping the long neck of a glass vase placing one hand over the other's hand. This game predictably ends with the crashed vase. Finally, a game of tag is proposed, otherwise known as "It," which ends before it can begin. For a game of "You're it." immediately becomes a war of "Not it!" "Not it!"

Between one and two there is a change in form but not in content, since *It* and *Not* are initially indistinguishable, but create what would appear to be a changeless movement to and fro. In the mirroring of this movement in the second double there is

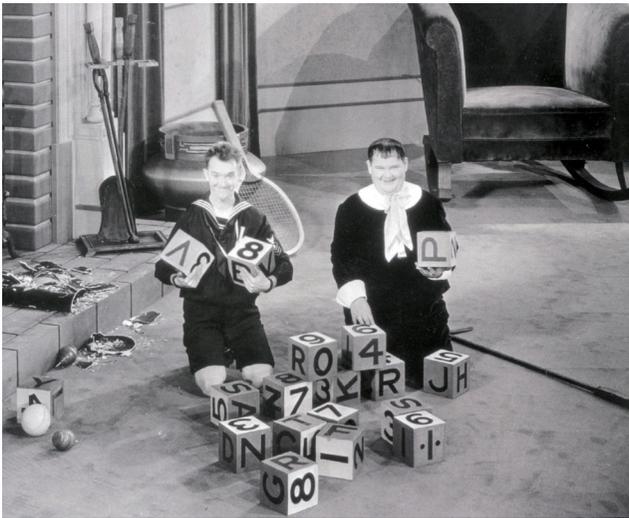


Fig. 5 and Fig. 6²⁰

²⁰ Fig. 5. Image title: Jan. 1, 1930 - Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy on set of the film *Brats* (1930) (Image Credit: © Glasshouse/Entertainment Pictures). Credit line: Entertainment Pictures / Alamy Stock Photo.

Fig. 6. Image title: *Brats* (1930). Hal Roach film with Stan Laurel (left) and Oliver Hardy. Credit line: Pictorial Press Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo.

no formal change between one and two (the original Stan and Ollie) and one and two (the mechanical reproduction of the first in Stan Jr. and Ollie Jr.). What changes in the repetition between the first double and its exact duplication that produces a comic effect? My answer is nothing. Nothing changes in the dialectical redoubling of the comic double. *Nothing changes* in three ways:

1) Nothing changes. In the movement from the first double to the second double there can be a change in form without a change in content (Being, Being → Nothing, Nothing). Between Being and Nothing there is no change in content. There is also no change in content in the alternative formulation (Being, Nothing → Nothing, Being). Both the dialectical redoubling of the twins with the negative companions and the redoubling of the odd couple fail to bring about new content.

2) Nothing changes. This is to say, nothing itself undergoes transformation. When the first duo is duplicated or mirrored in the second duo, the split (Hegel's comma) between the first duo is itself repeated in the second split between the second duo. Negativity at first appears to be represented by the second figure who defuses the severity of the first one. However, when the double is repeated, negativity reveals itself to be between the first two. This becomes clear when the splice is repeated in the second two. What appears to be between two is already true of one.

3) Nothing changes. This is to say, the negativity that binds and separates Being and Nothing (and Being and Being) is the agent of change. The comma sets everything in motion. Nothing itself, represented by the comma, is in the position of the subject who in counting (to three) forgets to count herself (to be more exact, forgets to count herself as nothing).

The oscillation between Stan Jr. and Ollie Jr. highlights what should already be obvious in the relationship between Laurel and Hardy: the second does not make the first whole nor does the second overcome the first as the work of the negative, which only takes off in the redoubling. Instead, the two opposites are

somehow always already wrapped up in the other, because both are constituted by the crack that binds and separates them. There is no Laurel without Hardy, nor Hardy without Laurel. The tension between the two sustains both sides. It is precisely because each is bound to his distinct role that the severity and seriousness of the one has already crossed over into the lightness of the other. In turn, the frivolity of the second has already been sucked into the gravity of the first in the exact place where the second finds his lightness. What may be already obvious to us must become obvious to the double itself. As Stan says in one of his famous nonsensical proverbs, “You can lead a horse to water, but a pencil must be lead.” Ollie—the spirit of gravity—must get hit on the head with a block by the second set of doubles to realize Stan’s second accidental insight when he confuses himself and Ollie with their mini-mes. Stan scolds the boys, “If *you* don’t quiet down, we’ll have to send *us* to bed.” To which Ollie replies, “Not *we!* *Them!*” But Stan’s misspoken words are always closer to the truth.

Between the double and the redouble *nothing* changes, and for this very reason both the tension and the possibility of a comic eruption is heightened twice-two. The repetition of the deficiency in the first results in an excess. Comedy is not in the second repetition but in the crack that makes Being and Nothing a game of “It” (“Not It!”). The comedy of spirit emerges when nothing itself changes, when the crack is split open by yet another crack in the doubling of the double: the transformation of negativity itself.

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“Freudful Mistakes”: On Forgetting and On Forgetting Psychoanalysis

Benjamin Noys

Forget Psychoanalysis!

If you forget psychoanalysis then “You never made a more freudful mistake, excuse yourself!” (Joyce 1992, p. 411) To forget psychoanalysis is, I will argue, amongst other things, to forget that language matters. Psychoanalysis, the “talking cure” (Freud and Breuer 1974, p. 83), a phrase coined by Anna O. in English, begins with a recognition of the power of language in relation to matter. Language, such as the signifier “arm” in the case of Anna O., determines the symptom, the paralysis of matter (Adams 1986). These are “magic words” (Abraham and Torok 1986), which echo in the body and in matter. Language matters not only because language determines the unconscious symptom, but also because language engages with matter and because language itself is strangely material. We should not forget that. Today, however, we are called to abandon the “prison-house of language” for the “great outdoors” (Meillassoux 2008, p. 7)—to escape the limits of human subjectivity and its “correlation” with reality, a correlation often achieved through language, for the materiality that lies beyond. In the ironic suggestion by the writer Iain Sinclair, considering his own constant writing on “territories,” “terrain does not require the neurosis of language” (2016, p. 38).¹ The various

¹ On neurosis as the “mediation” of language, the psyche and the material, see Noys 2017 and 2018.

speculative and new materialisms proclaim unironically, in different forms, that language does not matter or, more tentatively, that language matters less than matter. We are called to forget that language matters. What, though, if we try to remember language matters? What happens if we return to the matter of language through forgetting? These are the stakes of my intervention.

Of course, James Joyce, who coined the phrase “freudful mistake” in *Finnegans Wake*, wanted nothing more than to forget psychoanalysis. Joyce was angered by C. G. Jung’s essay on *Ulysses*, hostile about Jung’s treatment of his daughter Lucia, and generally dismissive of the “new Viennese school” as inferior to the insights of Thomas Aquinas (Joyce 1994, p. 264). In *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce writes of the “grisly old Sykos who have done our unsmiling bit on ’alices, when they were yung and easily freudened in the penumbra of the procuring room” (Joyce 1992, p. 115). The psychos, Freud and Jung, do grisly work on young girls in their consulting rooms, pimping them out to their “unsmiling” theories. Of course, however, Lacan wrote that Joyce “is the simplest consequence of a refusal—such a mental refusal!—of a psycho-analysis, which, as a result, his work illustrates” (Lacan 1977, p. ix). The revenge of psychoanalysis upon Joyce is that while Joyce may be the one who most forgot, or tried to forget, psychoanalysis, his work is, for Lacan, the greatest illustration of psychoanalysis as an encounter with language and with jouissance (Lacan 2016). After all, both Joyce and Freud knew something of enjoyment, of jouissance, as their names testify (Lacan 2016, p. 146). They also both knew something about language.

Joyce, we might say, forgets psychoanalysis to remember the matter of language, which is writing. According to Derrida, what Joyce finds in writing is an

endeavour [that] would try to make the structural unity of all empirical culture appear in the generalised equivocation of a writing that, no longer translating one language into another on the basis

of their common cores of sense, circulates through all languages at once, accumulates their energies, actualises their most secret consonances, discloses their furthestmost common horizons, cultivates their associative syntheses instead of avoiding them, and rediscovers the poetic value of passivity. (Derrida 1989, p. 102)

Joyce’s passivity before language tries to make language appear as such, but also, as Lacan suggested, makes language appear as *lalangue*, the intersection of *jouissance* and language (Lacan 2016, p. 146). Jacques-Alain Miller notes that “there is a *jouissance*, which drives directly from the relation to language” (Miller 2005, p. 12), which Joyce achieves. Joyce’s writing is a writing that while trying to forget psychoanalysis illustrates the saturation of language by *jouissance*, the moment of the “lettering” and “littering” of language (Joyce 1992, p. 93; Lacan 2016, p. 145). Language appears in and through equivocation and homophony (Milner 2017). The “freudful mistake” is the “frightful mistake” (through English as *lalangue*) and a “joyful mistake” (through German as *lalangue*). The frightful mistake is to forget the “freudful mistake” and so to forget the joyful mistake, to forget that language matters. This is why the path back to psychoanalysis and language lies in the Freudian slip, as the moment that allows us to register that language matters in its frightful and joyful aspects.

The Primal Scene of Forgetting

Freud is driving in the company of a stranger from Ragusa in Dalmatia to a place in Herzegovina: “I asked my companion whether he had ever been to Orvieto and looked at the famous frescoes painted there, painted by . . .” (Freud 1975, p. 39). An ellipsis appears, the three dots (. . .) that indicate an omission or falling short. In this case, the omission of the name of the painter, a moment of forgetting, a falling short at the moment of expression.

This elliptical moment might well be understood as the rhetorical figure of “aposiopesis,” the indication of a “falling silent.” As a rhetorical figure, this usually indicates being overcome by passion, being speechless with rage or feeling. In fact, we could say, Freud’s analysis will supply that missing passion to what seems a trivial act of forgetting.

Freud has forgotten the name of a painter, Signorelli, who painted the frescoes the “Four Last Things” in Orvieto Cathedral. It is an apocalyptic moment. Freud, however, remembers two other names of painters—*Botticelli* and *Boltraffio* (ibid., p. 38). Freud seeks explanation in the previous topic of conversation, which concerned the (supposed) custom of “Turks” living in *Bosnia* and *Herzegovina* to confide in doctors and resign themselves to their fate when fatally ill. They address the doctor as “*Herr* [Sir]” (ibid., p. 39). A second, repressed thought of Freud’s is the emphasis these “Turks” place on sexual enjoyment as the highest value of life—so much so that death is preferable to that loss. Here we can see in the figure of these “Turks” fantasies of racialized enjoyment and the speculation on a subject who possesses “full” enjoyment and, in this case, who will sacrifice their life for the sake of that enjoyment (Žižek 1990). In particular, this is the continuation of the fantasy of the “Orient” that projects on to the Other as site of enjoyment (Grosrichard 1998). Freud was also concerned with the news that reached him at *Trafoi* of a patient’s suicide due to an incurable sexual disorder (Freud 1975, p. 40). Forgetting was not random, but motivated, and motivated by the desire to repress thoughts of “death and sexuality” (ibid., p. 40).

This act of repression is evident in the process by which Signorelli is forgotten. The name is split in two, in which the first part, “Signor,” which recalls “Herr” and so death and sexuality, is displaced into *Herzegovina* and *Bosnia* (ibid., p. 41). The second part, “elli” is then the root for the movement from *Bosnia* into “Botticelli,” while “Boltraffio” absorbs “Trafoi” and the “Bo.”

The result is a rebus, a picture puzzle,² and this is the chance for one of Freud’s famous diagrams,³ which traces the splitting of the signifier into component “letters,” little bits of nonsense, that are treated homophonically to generate new signifiers (*ibid.*, p. 41). This moment of forgetting is the eruption of *lalangue* into language, in which the failure of repression reveals not only the instance of Freud’s forgetting and repression, but also the “primal repression” which denies the entry of the “psychical (ideational) representative” of the drive into consciousness and language (Freud 1984a, p. 147). It is the absence, the “hole” made in language (Lacan 2016, p. 21), which reveals the insistence of the drive as what matters. The drive is that uncanny concept “lying on the frontier between the mental and the physical” (Freud 1977, p. 83; Dolar 2017). In this moment matter, in the form of the insistence of the drive, of the bodily circuit (Lacan 1977, p. 178), penetrates language, to cross Freud’s diagram of forgetting with Lacan’s diagram of the circuit of the drive (*ibid.*).

Already, this remembering of forgetting in psychoanalysis I am undertaking is taking place under the tutelage of Lacan, who has done most to remind psychoanalysis, which can also forget, that language matters. In fact, Lacan draws inspiration from Freud’s account of forgetting as a revelation that the unconscious operates through language, through the signifier, and also by “effacement” (*ibid.*, p. 27). It is this operation through language that means that Freud’s notion of the unconscious is, according to Lacan, not the Romantic unconscious of “the divinities of the night” (*ibid.*, p. 24).⁴ The unconscious is not the site of “primordial will” but of the “play of the signifier” (*ibid.*). This is not a happy play, because in the phenomena of the unconscious there

² Freud famously describes the dream as a “rebus” (Freud 1976, p. 382).

³ On Freud’s diagrams, see Gamwell and Solms 2006.

⁴ It is for this reason that the prophets of the vitalist Romantic unconscious constantly reject the “mechanical” (we would say logical) unconscious of Freud, from Jung to Ludwig Klages (Lebovic 2013, p. 53; Noys 2015, p. 172).

is always an *impediment* (ibid., p. 25). “In a spoken or written sentence something stumbles” (ibid.). In this moment, we see “absence emerge” and “silence emerge as silence” (ibid., p. 26). For Lacan, the incident of the forgetting of Signorelli is one that demonstrates this mode of effacement, of silence emerging and of the censorship by which the unconscious emerges:

The term *Signor, Herr*, passes underneath—the absolute master, I once said, which is in fact death, has disappeared there. Furthermore, do we not see, behind this, the emergence of that which forced Freud to find in the myths of the death of the father the regulation of his desire? After all, it is to be found in Nietzsche, who declares, in his own myth, that God is dead. And it is perhaps against the background of the same reasons. For the myth of the *God is dead*—which, personally, I feel much less sure about, as a myth of course, than most contemporary intellectuals, which is in no sense a declaration of theism, nor of faith in the resurrection—perhaps this myth is simply a shelter against the threat of castration. // If you know how to read them, you will see this threat in the apocalyptic frescoes of Orvieto cathedral. (Lacan 1977, p. 27; see also Lacan 2002, p. 316)

A certain defence emerges even in Freud, about the “absolute master” death, about the myths of the dead father, which like Nietzsche’s death of God, is, Lacan suggests, a shelter against the threat of castration. In this way, we can suggest, Freud is also at risk of forgetting the relation to language as the relation to castration. Even more radically, as Miller suggests, castration, or the fantasies around it, might conceal “the true traumatic kernel [...] the relation to language” (Miller 2005, p. 15).

The risk of making the trauma the trauma of the relation to language is that the relation of language to the drive might be occluded. What we can take from Lacan is the rewriting of forgetting, of the lapsus, of the “freudful mistake” towards the “frightful mistake” and the “joyful mistake”—towards the “original fault” (Lacan 2016, p. 5). For Lacan, writing in *Seminar XXIII*:

The fault expresses the life of language, life being utterly different for language from what is simply called *life*. What signifies *death* for the somatic support has just as much place as *life* in the drives that fall within the remit of what I’ve just called *vie de langage*. (Lacan 2016, p. 128)

The life of language is something that coincides with death, or coincides with the uncanny correspondence between the life drive and the death drive. This is what is forgotten in the forgetting of psychoanalysis, of forgetting, and of language—the “life of language” in which the drive intersects with and infuses language.

Two Ways of Forgetting Psychoanalysis

What does it mean to forget this moment of forgetting? What if we were to forget the drive, to forget psychoanalysis? This often takes the form of an imperative “forget about it”; an active desire to forget the psychoanalytic interpretation of forgetting. Forgetting remains, but without the causal form psychoanalysis inscribes, without “death and sexuality,” without the drive. This is the moment of resistance to psychoanalysis, which, as Jacques Derrida proposes, can take a double form: the usual sense resistance *to* psychoanalysis, as an opposition to psychoanalysis, and the second sense of a resistance *of* psychoanalysis, an internal resistance in which psychoanalysis confronts its own limit (Derrida 1998, pp. vii-viii). I want to take two examples that instantiate these forms of resistance and forgetting. The first is that of Sebastiano Timpanaro’s *The Freudian Slip* (1974), which targets Freudian slips and this instance of Freud’s forgetting. Timpanaro rejects psychoanalysis as an unnecessary imposition of the unconscious onto language by suggesting that language itself can account for this forgetting and any “freudful mistakes.” If this is resistance *to* psychoanalysis, Catherine Malabou’s *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage* (2007) is an example of the resistance

of psychoanalysis, in which psychoanalysis is pushed towards its internal limit. Malabou argues that not only can psychoanalysis not account for the traumatic results of brain injury or illness, but also that these forms of damage pose a problem to the psychoanalytic search for meaning in relation to trauma.

Sebastiano Timpanaro is an almost classical instance of the resistance to psychoanalysis. In *The Freudian Slip*, as his friend Perry Anderson summarizes:

Timpanaro showed how often errors of memory or slips of the tongue that Freud had attributed to repressed sexual materials were to be explained more persuasively by a standard set of deviations from the lexical norm, “corruptions” of which philologists had developed their own fine-grained classification. (Anderson 2001)

It is the materiality of language, rather than any force of “death and sexuality,” which is to account for “freudful mistakes.” Even more classically, Timpanaro’s objections to psychoanalysis are also rooted in a personal animus due to its failure to cure him of his neurotic symptoms—the intense anxiety caused by public speaking and agoraphobia (*ibid.*). What is noteworthy, although at the risk of “wild psychoanalysis,” is that these symptoms are symptoms of speaking and of appearing in public. They are symptoms that language matters in the relation of desire to expression.

In Timpanaro’s account of Freud’s forgetting of Signorelli and its replacement by Botticelli, the explanation is that it is merely “a confusion between words of an equal number of syllables which are also connected by a marked phonic similarity, or even better, by assonance or rhyme” (Timpanaro 1976, p. 64). The explanation of the more unlikely substitution of Boltraffio is, according to Timpanaro, a misguided act of correction (*ibid.*, p. 71). As Freud is now thinking of Botticelli, the path of correction lies along Renaissance artists beginning with “Bo-”. For Timpanaro, language matters but in the very matter of its blind

materiality, in the very literal substance of its own operations that create errors for its users.⁵

This scepticism towards psychoanalysis also extends to what Timpanaro understands of Lacan's emphasis on the "primacy" of the signifier (*ibid.*, p. 222). While Timpanaro concedes, in a postscript, this is "not without interest" (*ibid.*), in a footnote in the body of the text he is much more typically condemnatory:

I must confess that I am incurably committed to the view that in Lacan's writing charlatanry and exhibitionism largely prevail over any ideas that are of a comprehensible, even if debatable, nature: behind the smoke-screen, it seems to me, there is nothing of substance. (Timpanaro 1976, p. 58 n. 5)

The unkind Freudian or Lacanian critic might note the excess of this denunciation, including the accusation of "exhibitionism," in relation to Timpanaro's own phobias, but what is also interesting is the suggestion of a lack of "substance." We might read this in terms of the replacement of the materialism of language with a materialism of the signifier. Again, the resistance to psychoanalysis turns on materiality — on the rejection of psychic reality, let alone the Lacanian Real. Catherine Malabou has suggested the necessity of taking neuroscience seriously as a thinking of the capacities of the brain. Using her concept of plasticity, also a term in neuroscience, Malabou argues that the brain offers capacities for change that are not simply consonant with neoliberal capitalist flexibility (Malabou 2008, pp. 78–82). Also, as plasticity can refer to traumatic damage (as in plastic explosives), Malabou argues the brain can undergo far more radical traumas than are usually considered in psychoanalysis. In line with Spinoza's famous remark about the

⁵ There is some strange similarity between this contention and the late work of Paul de Man, who argues that it is "the prosaic materiality of the letter" which disrupts ideology and aesthetics (de Man 1996, p. 90).

body, “they do not know what a body can do” (Spinoza 1976, p. 72), we can say, “they do not know what a brain can do.”

Malabou’s analysis in *The New Wounded* makes a transition, as her subtitle has it, “from neurosis to brain damage.” Malabou argues that psychoanalysis relies on a sexual aetiology of neurosis that correlates an external traumatic event with an inner sexual conflict (Malabou 2012, p. 2). This involves Freud distinguishing violent events that affect the brain, such as lesions or brain damage, from the field of psychic life. What psychoanalysis cannot think, according to Malabou, is “the wound without hermeneutic future” (ibid., p. 8), a charge she also repeats to Lacan and Žižek (Malabou 2015). Contrary to the image of a subject already subject to sexual trauma, Malabou posits the “new wounded” as forms of subjectivity in which trauma intrudes from outside, is senseless, and rearranges the coordinates of personality.⁶ In this way, she eliminates the psychoanalytic account of forgetting, which depends on sexual meaning and the drive, from consideration in psychic life. While we might recognize the truth of this claim, but see it as restricted to these severe forms of brain damage, Malabou argues

I thus authorize myself also to extend the category of “new wounded” to cover every patient in a *state of shock* who, without having suffered brain lesions, has seen his or her neuronal organization and psychic equilibrium permanently changed by trauma. (Malabou 2012, p. 10; italics in original)

While traversing psychoanalysis to the limit of the hermeneutic, both in Freud and Lacan, Malabou ends up restricting psychoanalysis to a very limited field as the “new wounded” expands as a category to become the signature disorder of the present moment.

⁶ Malabou appears to be drawing upon Derrida’s argument that psychoanalysis cannot deal with “radical destruction” that goes beyond a logic of repression and retention (Derrida 1998, p. 44).

To repeat Derrida terms, Malabou's resistance of psychoanalysis comes to coincide with Timpanaro's resistance to psychoanalysis. Malabou's argument is for a materiality of the brain that also constitutes an affective plasticity and so replaces language (and the problem of forgetting) as the key to our "psychic" life. What I want to note is a strange symmetry here. On the one hand, for Timpanaro, language matters *more* as the matter of language. Forgetting (and slips) are merely the stuff of language, merely errors resulting from the form of language. Also, interestingly, Timpanaro also hopes for a neurophysiological explanation that will transcend the claims to science made by Freudian psychoanalysis (Timpanaro 1976, p. 95). On the other hand, for Malabou, language matters *less* to get at the matter of the brain. Forgetting is a matter of the worst, of radical trauma from the outside that is not amenable to language and meaning. In both cases, materiality is posed against the matter of language, if we take that matter, as I have suggested, to be this strange signifying absence. Language is "filled in," or completed, by a materiality that absorbs this absence.

Remember Psychoanalysis!

I am suggesting that Timpanaro and Malabou represent two ways to forget psychoanalysis and so to forget language matters by forgetting the strange immaterial materiality of language. To complete this suggestion, I want to conclude by turning to Freud's late essay on "Negation" (1925). Lacan remarks on this text that

It is not one of those two dimensional texts, which are infinitely flat, as mathematicians say, which have only a fiduciary value in a constituted discourse, but rather a text which carries speech insofar as speech constitutes a new emergence of truth. (Lacan 2002, p. 318)

This essay is well-known for its opening concerning the moment of resistance. Freud recounts how patients present material in the mode of a negation: “You ask who this person in the dream can be. It’s *not* my mother.” The psychoanalyst’s rejoinder is “So it *is* his mother” (Freud 1984b, p. 437; italics in original).⁷ Timpanaro singles out this moment as the sign of a Freudian refusal to consider counterexamples: “the patient is always, or nearly always, wrong when he makes a denial, because every negation on his part is in reality a manifestation of resistance and thus an involuntary confession” (Timpanaro 1976, p. 56). In this way, according to Timpanaro, while Freud recognizes a psychological mechanism he generalizes it to such an extent that there is no space for denial and refutation within psychoanalysis.⁸

This initial point in Freud’s paper opens out onto a discussion of negation that has a wider “metapsychological” significance as a mechanism of defence crucial to the ego (Lacan 2002, p. 311). Because what is negated appears, negation is a lifting of repression if not an acceptance of what has been repressed. Lacan notes, through negation “doubtless the ego makes a great many things known to us” (Lacan 1988, p. 59). In the experience of negation, the affective and the intellectual are separated, but, we would add, the material and the linguistic are intertwined. This is evident in the fact that the act of negation is an intellectual function linked to the “primitive” function of the oral drive. The intellectual judgement of negation corresponds to the judgement of whether I would like to eat this or whether I would like to spit it out (Freud 1984b, p. 439). The act of negation is the act of spitting something out, but in that act what is negated appears, it has a presence in the mouth, on the tongue, before being negated, before becoming nothing. If, in forgetting, something is present in the mode of

⁷ On the “logic” of this negation of the mother, see Zupančič 2012.

⁸ Freud would later dispute this claim to infallibility in his “Constructions in Analysis” (1937).

absence, we can "taste" the absent word on the tip of our tongue, in negation something absent is made present to be ejected from the mouth—to be spat out. This can obviously include words, as we can spit those out too.

This intellectual function is also a matter of the drives. Judging refers not only to oral desire, but also, in the polarity of judgement, to the drive: "Affirmation—as a substitute for uniting—belongs to Eros; negation—the successor to expulsion—belongs to the instinct of destruction" (ibid., p. 441). Negation is rooted in these drives, but is also a moment of "freedom," through the creation of a "symbol of negation" (ibid.). Certainly, as we have seen with Lacan's emphasis on the "life of language," the mythological opposition of Eros and Thanatos can be collapsed in the thinking of the drive as both binding and unbinding (Laplanche 1976). This is a point reiterated by Žižek, for whom the "death drive" is the inconsistent repetition that haunts and inhabits the libido (Žižek 2010, p. 305). The act of negation is the revelation of that repetition, but also a revelation that bears on the materiality of language as the moment in which language concedes the intrusion of the drive.

Language emerges as the moment of negation that, as Paolo Virno insists in a different manner, disrupts agreement and consonance for the possibility of destruction and even evil (Virno 2008). It also, I am suggesting, marks the moment of negativity as a "materiality" that comes to be in the moment of ejection. Language matters in this strange space of "materialization" and dematerialization of "something" and "nothing." Forgetting points us towards this strange presence of absence, which is denied in those materialisms that try to close the mouth to language. They negate language, which is to say they make it present but only to say "No, language doesn't matter." Negation points to this persistence of language in the moment of denial. It indicates the way in which resistance and denial of language and of psychoanalysis carries the trace of that denial, of that liminal space in

which “language matters.” As we live in the time of materialisms of many types (although few that are historical or dialectical), we live in the time in which language does not matter. Language has to disappear, to be forgotten, to be spat out. In the face of the circulating abstractions that make up our world, the appeal to materialism is to something that denies these abstractions. Yet, the forgetting and denial “that language matters” leaves us only with a pseudo-concrete and with little sense of what matters. The matter of abstraction is rendered absent by the abstraction of matter.

Therefore, the Freudian and Lacanian account might seem relentlessly focused on the human subject. This, for the new materialisms, is the original fault or sin that forgets the nonhuman. Jane Bennett argues that:

To attempt, as I do, to present human and nonhuman actants on a less vertical plane than is common is to bracket the question of the human and to elide the rich and diverse literature on subjectivity and its genesis, its condition of possibility, and its boundaries. (Bennett 2010, p. ix)

Access to “vital matter” is bought at what Bennett regards as the necessary cost of the elision of psychoanalysis. Instead, my suggestion is that the only access to matter is through this experience of subjectivity and at the boundary in which “matter” is not stable between the “inside” and “outside” of the subject. This experience is signalled by forgetting and negation in the mode in which language fails or in which language succeeds in rendering matter as something “outside.” The “great outdoors” is as much a “great indoors,” or the mediation or “metabolic interaction” (Marx 1990, p. 290), which forms the experience of matter.

William Burroughs once remarked, the “word may once have been a healthy neural cell. It is now a parasitic organism that invades and damages the central nervous system” (Burroughs 1999, p. 208). The conception of language as a virus, as an alien parasite or intrusion, speaks to the way in which language matters. On

the one hand, as we have seen, language is a virus to be expelled to get to what matters—the materiality of language or the materiality of the brain (or a whole number of other materialities of the “great outdoors”). On the other hand, language is a virus that matters and that remains in the mouth. We forget language, only to remember that language matters, only to really remember this strange “mattering” of language: “It’s on the tip of my tongue.” “Just spit it out!” In this moment of the mouthfeel of language something matters. The desire to be free of the “virus” of language and to access matter or the nonhuman directly is a fantasy conditioned by the experience of the drive and of language. In the process of forgetting psychoanalysis, this mediation is forgotten or elided to ensure a process in which nothing gets stuck in the mouth or throat.⁹ Psychoanalysis, on the contrary, finds matter in that “nothing” stuck in the mouth, in the matter of language that engages with this “nothing” in the redoubled negation. If psychoanalysis matters today, and nothing could be less certain, it is due to this “nothing” that matters.

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⁹ “Matter” here recalls the “dream of Irma’s injection,” in which Freud dreams that he finds in Irma’s mouth “a big white patch” and “extensive whitish grey scabs upon some remarkable curly structures which were evidently modelled on the turbinal bones of the nose” (Freud 1976, p. 182).

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Abstracts

Ibi Rhodus, Ibi Saltus!

Slavoj Žižek

The article discusses Marx's *Capital*, the October Revolution, and the Shanghai Commune as the marks of the three stages of the Communist movement. Marx's *Capital* outlined the theoretical foundations of the Communist revolution, the October Revolution was the first successful attempt to overthrow the bourgeois state and build a new social and economic order, while the Shanghai Commune stands for the most radical attempt to immediately realize the most daring aspect of the Communist vision, the abolishment of state power and the imposition of direct people's power organized as a network of local communes. The author then proposes the fourth stage, the 500-year anniversary of 1517 when Martin Luther made public his ninety-five theses, and claims that it is the reference to Protestantism which provides the coordinates for an ethics that fits the unorientable space, an ethics for today's subject caught into Plato's cave.

Key words: ethics, freedom, Marx, Protestantism, revolution

Nuclear Deterrence and the Metaphysics of Time

Jean-Pierre Dupuy

Is nuclear deterrence rational? The only rationality those who ask this question have in mind is the one familiar to economists, game theorists, planners and decision makers of all stripes. It is unable to provide foundations for the standard theory of nuclear deterrence. I show that another doctrine, called "existential deterrence," can be grounded in a

very different metaphysics of time. It belongs to a philosophical tradition that includes names like Henri Bergson, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and others. Its major categories have nothing to do with rational choice or cost-benefit analysis. They include notions such as fate and accident, and imply the absolute renunciation of strategic thinking. In this metaphysics, being guided by reason is no guarantee of goodness either. In its light, nuclear deterrence appears to be grounded in reasons, but is nonetheless abominable.

Key words: nuclear deterrence, mutually assured destruction, madman theory, rationality, metaphysics, time

Reason Reborn: Pietistic Motifs in Kant's Moral Philosophy

Zdravko Kobe

The article tries to trace the presence of Pietistic motifs in Kant's moral philosophy, whereby the core matrix of Pietism is found in the motif of rebirth as presented in Francke's sequence of Humiliation—Resolution—Conversion—Moral Perfecting. It is strongly suggested, first, that the conversion towards the good in Kant's philosophy of religion was developed under the direct influence of the theme of rebirth, as it is structurally identical to the latter and at once incompatible with Kant's critical ontology. The same applies to the genesis of the moral feeling and the postulate of the immortality of the soul, which lack proper justification in Kant's moral philosophy, yet correspond neatly to Pietistic habits of thought. In conclusion it is argued that Kant's conception of the moral act, performed out of respect for the moral law, can be read as a secularized extension of the *sola fide* doctrine.

Key words: August Hermann Francke, Immanuel Kant, Nikolaus Ludvig von Zinzendorf, intelligible character, justification, morality, moral feeling, Pietism, rebirth

Laughing with Kafka *after* Promethean Shame *Jean-Michel Rabaté*

The political function of laughter in Kafka's works deriving from the "comic grotesque" prevalent in Expressionist German culture can find a new focus thanks to Günther Anders's groundbreaking insights. Anders highlights the political and atheistic dimension of the work while criticizing Kafka's Promethean nihilism, before developing a theory of technology and the "posthuman" condensed by "Promethean shame." Promethean shame can be construed as leading back to a Promethean laughter to be deduced from readings of Kafka's parables. Kafka's laughter will thus be shown *in statu nascendi*.

Key words: Franz Kafka, Günther Anders, Prometheus, laughter, the grotesque, comic theology, shame, technology

Reason Inclined: Zones of Indifference in Schiller and Kant *Lidija Šumah*

The feeling of respect is considered to be one of the two key elements of Kant's concept of the ethical act, the second being the moral law. For Kant, an act is considered to be in accordance with the categorical imperative, and thus autonomous, only insofar as it is delivered of any "pathological determination." In this respect, the feeling of respect as the structural companion of the ethical act permits for no application to sensible pleasure and does not concern the matter or content of our actions, but rather their very form. However, although the feeling of respect is understood in the same manner as the moral law, i.e., as an element of pure will conditioned by reason alone, at its very core the notion of the feeling of respect is nonetheless not entirely free of the field of sensuality. And precisely herein resides one of the main paradoxes of Kant's ethics: How is it possible that the formal pureness of the moral law, or the autonomy of an ethical act, is in fact accompanied,

or perhaps even conditioned, by this heteronomous and hence “pathological” companion? In short, how is it possible that Kant situates, in the very midst of a free and autonomous ethical subject, this inherent, yet heterogeneous element, testifying as it is to a conceptual hinging of freedom on its seemingly residual opposite?

Key words: affectivity, beauty, ethics, indifference, Kant, Lacan, illusion, respect, Schiller

Inside, The Real: Moses Mendelssohn’s Speculative Realism *Ywval Kremnitzer*

Part of the appeal of Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude* is the prospect opened up by it to go beyond the limitations of the Kantian experience. The recent “speculative turn” in philosophy can be distinguished from previous historical attempts to overcome the strictures of Kantian experience by its allegiance with modern science’s claim to knowledge, in particular its independence from the realm of sense and understanding (its mathematizability). It is science, not poetry, that is capable of delivering a truly “alien” knowledge. The project of absolutizing contingency strikes at the heart of what makes Kant’s notion of experience such an overbearing “reality principle,” namely, the very restricting sense given by it to the notion of “possibility.” And yet, Kant, as if preemptively, had made a strong argument for this restriction, and its superiority over a non-restricted, or absolute notion of the possible: it offers a yardstick to distinguish between the possible and the actual, the yardstick of actualization in empirical experience. We seem to be forced to choose between a notion of possibility that is all too close to our experience (reducible to empirical actuality), or one that is utterly divorced from it. In the essay, I argue that it was Moses Mendelssohn, known in the history of philosophy as the last “pre-critical” philosopher, that cleared the path to avoid such a choice, by developing a notion of possibility that exceeds the Kantian restrictions from “within,” retaining the yardstick

of actualization while allowing for the scope of possibility to achieve its independence from empirical actuality.

Key words: Kant, Lacan, Meillassoux, Mendelssohn, potential, speculative realism, subjectivity

Self-evidence Derailed: Descartes's Cogito and its Anticipations

Aleš Bunta

The article is a comparative study of Descartes's cogito and its anticipations in St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. Even though the Cartesian cogito is generally perceived as one of the most important turning points in philosophy, arguments that strongly resemble the cogito appear already in Augustine and later, in a modified version, in Aquinas. Therefore, the articulation of the true novelty of Descartes's insight seems to depend on finding an essential difference that distinguishes his own argumentative principle. However, this task is by no means simple. Not only did Descartes's own attempt at distinguishing his argument from Augustine's clamorously fail; also probably the best known explanation of the difference between Augustine's argument and Descartes's cogito, the famous Hintikka's performative theory, comprises a serious difficulty. The fact is that even though Hintikka's explanation arguably resolves the problem of Augustine's anticipation, it is itself probably more convincingly connected to Aquinas's anticipation than to Descartes's own arguments. The article also includes an analysis of one of Descartes's earliest fragments, which can be regarded as Descartes's own miniature theory on originality. The analysis of this passage sheds new light on Descartes's own partial refusal of the Augustinian anticipation.

Key words: anticipations, cogito, Descartes, originality, self-evidence

The Absent Universal: From the Master Signifier To the Missing Signifier

Todd McGowan

The association of the universal with the master signifier seems commonsensical. It is also responsible for the suspicion that greets reference to universality, which comes to seem like an act of violence. This essay contends that the universal is actually not the master signifier at all but rather what is missing in the signifying field. It is thus a call for an unabashed embrace of universality in political contestation.

Key words: identity, master signifier, particular, quilting point, universal

A Certain Logic of Professing Love

Jure Simoniti

The paper exploits love and its professing as a pretext to demonstrate a very particular phenomenology of language use, in which *the direction of reference reverses*. In love, arguably, we no longer use words in order to refer to things, but exploit the object of love as a mere occasion, at which we begin to refer to the word “love” itself. With the intention to outline the new logical space established by professing love, the paper defines the declarations of love to be abstract, conventional, mirror-symmetrical, and finally ritually and ceremonially repeated, thus defying the pragmatic constraints of ordinary language. As such, the technique of professing love is placed in opposition to the tenor of twentieth-century philosophy of language, most notably Wittgenstein’s, which a priori reduced enunciation to the place of enunciation and curtailed sentences into mere statements uttered in this or that situation. Inversely, love is shown to transform the *word as word* into the object of its own specific reference and reverence, thereby reversing the Wittgensteinian operation and elevating the statement back into a full-blown, trans-contextual, ideally motivated sentence.

Key words: idealism, love, sentence, Wittgenstein, word

Twice Two: Hegel's Comic Redoubling of Being and Nothing

Rachel Aumiller

Comedy teaches us how to count to four: One—Charlie Chaplin, Two—Abbott and Costello, Three—The Three Stooges, Four—The Marx Brothers. But the comic dialectician begins with the double to count to four through the formula 2×2 . My paper treats Being and Nothing of Hegel's *Science of Logic* as the original dramatic duo. I explore the comic effect that results in the immediate redoubling of the uncanny double of Being and Nothing. I enact this first movement in *Logic* through the figures of Laurel and Hardy in two shorts in which the comic duo play themselves and their double.

Key words: Being, Nothing, the double, the mirror phase, the uncanny, comedy, repetition, Hegel, Freud, Lacan

“Freudful Mistakes”: On Forgetting and On Forgetting Psychoanalysis

Benjamin Noys

Today we are called to forget psychoanalysis in order to escape the confines of the subject and language and so to embrace the “great outdoors” of materiality. In the face of this call to forget psychoanalysis and to forget that language matters, I return to psychoanalysis and language through Freud's account of forgetting proper names. What Freud reveals in the moment of forgetting is the insistence of the drive as that which occurs in the absence of language and in the “material” of the body. In Lacan's formulation, this is the eruption of *lalangue*, the eruption of a “language” that intersects with the drive. This is forgotten in the turn to materiality, which turns away from language and the drive. Sebastiano Timpanaro reduces the Freudian lapsus to the mere material play of language itself, while Catherine Malabou moves to a neurophysiological plasticity that resists inscription in meaning. The symmetry of

these gestures lies in a common materialism that erases the relation to language. To complete the return to language and matter I conclude by reexamining Freud's discussion of negation. In negation, the saying of "not," we find a cancelling of language that reveals the insistence of the drive and the material in language.

Key words: forgetting, language, materialism, matter, psychoanalysis

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