

PROBLENMI
INTERNATIONAL

3 / 2019



Problemi

International

2019

Problemi (Vol. LVII, Nos. 11–12/2019)
ISSN 0555–2419

Problemi International (No. 3/2019)

Edited by Simon Hajdini
Copyedited by Eric Powell

Editor-in-chief
Alenka Zupančič
alenka.zupancic@guest.arnes.si

Managing Editor
Mladen Dolar
mladendolar@yahoo.com

Editorial Board
Miran Božovič, Mladen Dolar, Simon Hajdini, Peter Klepec, Zdravko Kobe, Dragana Kršić, Gregor Moder, Tadej Troha, Alenka Zupančič, Slavoj Žižek.

International Advisory Board
Bernard Baas (Strasbourg), Alain Badiou (Paris), Rey Chow (Durham), Joan Copjec (Providence), Fredric Jameson (Durham), Catherine Malabou (Kingston, Paris), Robert Pfaller (Vienna), Eric L. Santner (Chicago), Thomas Wallgren (Helsinki).

Publisher
Društvo za teoretsko psihoanalizo / Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis
Igriška ulica 2
1000 Ljubljana
SI – Slovenia
EU
www.problemi.si

Cover Design: AOOA
Layout: Klemen Ulčakar

Printrun: 100

Printed by: Ulčakar Grafika

This publication was financially supported by Mercator.



Table of Contents

Slavoj Žižek

Varieties of the Transcendental in Western Marxism 5

Eric L. Santner

Marx and Manatheism 27

Noam Yuran

Home Economics: Why We Treat Objects Like Women. 39

Jean-Claude Milner

Reflections on the Me Too Movement and Its Philosophy. . . 65

Alenka Zupančič

Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself?! 89

Adrian Johnston

Lacan and Monotheism: Not Your Father's Atheism,
Not Your Atheism's Father 109

Robert Pfaller

The Sub-Ego: Description of An Inferior
Observing Agency 143

Zdravko Kobe

From Public Opinion to Public Knowledge:
Hegel's State as an Epistemic Institution 157

Mladen Dolar

The Endgame of Aesthetics: From Hegel to Beckett 185

Frank Vande Veire

So Fake, So Real! Josephine and the Voice of Death. 215

Alexi Kukuljevic

This Beast is Complex: Imposture and Plato's *Sophist* 249

Peter Klepec

On "the Idea" in Badiou 275

Abstracts 301

Notes on Contributors 311

Varieties of the Transcendental in Western Marxism*

Slavoj Žižek

In the last decades, the distrust of Western Marxism is growing among the few remaining radical Leftist theorists, from Perry Anderson and Wolfgang Fritz Haug to Domenico Losurdo whose main reproach is that Western Marxism lost contact with the Third World revolutionary movements. (Losurdo, who wrote a book rehabilitating Stalin, also considers Deng Xiaoping's reforms an example of authentic Marxist politics.) From the Western Marxist standpoint, it is, of course, the Third World Communist radicalism which lost contact with the authentic emancipatory content of Marxism. It is interesting to note that Western Marxism (rebaptized "Cultural Marxism") is also the target of the ongoing counterattack of the alt-right against political correctness: the alt-right interprets the rise of Western Marxism as the result of a deliberate shift in Marxist (or Communist) strategy. After Communism lost the economic battle with liberal capitalism (waiting in vain for the revolution to arrive in the developed Western world), its leaders decided to move the terrain to cultural struggles (sexuality, feminism, racism, religion, etc.), systematically undermining the cultural foundations and values of our freedoms. In recent decades, this new approach proved unexpectedly efficient: today, our societies are caught in the self-destructive circle of guilt, unable to defend

* The author acknowledges the project ("The Structure and Genealogy of Indifference," J6-8263) was financially supported by the Slovenian Research Agency.

their positive legacy. This attack from both extremes proves the continuing actuality of Western Marxism—obviously, it touches a sensitive nerve in both sides of our political spectrum. The irony is that, for those who see today’s China as the Socialist alternative to global capitalism, Western Marxism remains all too “Eurocentric,” while for the alt-right defenders of the Western Christian tradition, Western Marxism is the most dangerous weapon in the ongoing undermining of the Western tradition. So, what makes Western Marxism such a unique phenomenon? In philosophical terms, the novelty of Western Marxism resides in its rehabilitation of the transcendental dimension—perhaps the most appropriate characterization of Western Marxism would be “transcendental Marxism,” with the totality of social practice playing the role of the unsurpassable transcendental horizon of our cognition.

Western Marxism began with two seminal works, Georg Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* (Lukács 1972 [1923]) and Karl Korsch’s *Marxism and Philosophy* (Korsch 2013 [1923]). It was at its inception a Hegelian reaction to the progressive neo-Kantianism which was (more or less) the official philosophy of the reformist Second International social democracy. Neo-Kantians insisted on the gap between objective social reality and the normative realm of autonomous ethical goals which cannot be deduced from reality (they reject this option as a case of illegitimate determinism which reduces the Ought to the positive order of Being); this is why they referred to their political stance as that of “Ethical socialism.” Lukács (as well as Korsch) dismissed neo-Kantian dualism, demanding a unity of theory and practice, of the positive order of Being and ethical tasks; for Lukács, revolutionary theory is in itself a form of practice, it doesn’t just reflect reality but functions as an immanent moment of social totality. Historical materialism is not an objective theory of social life which has to be supplemented by Marxist ideology destined to mobilize masses on the basis of Marxist scientific insights: Marxist knowledge of history is in itself practical, it changes its object (the working class) into a revolutionary subject.

As such, historical materialism is not “impartial”: truth about our society is available only from an engaged “partial” position.

However, although revolutionary Marxism aims at overcoming all metaphysical dualities, its history is traversed by the gap between realism and transcendentalism: while the Soviet version of dialectical materialism proposes a new version of naïve-realist ontology (a vision of all of reality with human history as its special region, a topic of historical materialism), Western Marxism proposes the collective human praxis as the ultimate transcendental horizon of our philosophical understanding; as Lukács put it, nature itself is a social category, i.e., our notion of nature is always (over)determined by the social totality in which we dwell. Lukács is, of course, not claiming that, at the ontic level of reality, social subjectivity causally produces nature. What he claims is that, although humanity emerged out of nature’s self-development, our notion of and approach to nature is always mediated through the social totality. In the eighteenth century, nature appeared as a well-ordered, hierarchic system clearly mirroring the absolutist monarchy (such a notion of nature was deployed by Carl Linné); in the nineteenth century, nature appeared as the vast field of evolution permeated by the struggle for survival along the lines of wild market capitalism (Darwin himself took his idea of struggle for survival from Malthus); in our information era, nature appears as a vast network of information exchange and gene reproduction; and so forth. Lukács’s point would have been simply that one cannot abstract from this social mediation and approach nature as it “really is in itself,” independently of this mediation. The gap that separates the ontic view of reality from the transcendental role of social praxis is thus unbridgeable, i.e., one cannot account for the rise of social praxis in ontic terms of reality.

From this standpoint, any form of the subject-object relationship which refuses to admit the prospect of their full mediation is denounced as reified ideology: labor (in the sense of the instrumental exploitation of objective laws of nature; in labor, I use tools to manipulate natural objects to fit my purposes external

to their existence) is “reified” since it maintains towards reality the position of external manipulation and thereby treats it as the independent domain of objects; the natural sciences are also “reified” since they perceive themselves as the knowledge of reality the way it is in itself, outside its mediation through subjectivity.

The political implications of this radical Fichtian-Hegelian position of the proletariat as the subject-object of history were no less radical: until the late 1920s, Lukács considered himself the philosopher of Leninism who organized Lenin’s pragmatic revolutionary practices into the formal philosophy of the vanguard-party revolution (inclusive of advocating Red Terror); no wonder his next book after *History and Class Consciousness* was a study on Lenin. The leftist implications of Lukács’s position can be clearly discerned in his polemics against those who, after the defeat of Béla Kun’s revolutionary government in Hungary, blamed unfavorable objective circumstances. Lukács’s reply is that one cannot directly refer to objective social circumstances since such circumstances are themselves conditioned by the failure of the subjective engagement of revolutionary forces. In short, every objective state of things is already mediated by subjectivity, even if this mediation remains negative, i.e., even if it amounts to the mere lack of subjective engagement.

So, what happened in the late 1920s? Did Lukács simply surrender to the reality of Stalinism which dominated within the Communist movement? Although, from the 1930s onwards, he paid lip service to official Stalinist orthodoxy (without ever really engaging himself in Stalinist dialectical materialism—he was all too well acquainted with Hegel to do that), there is a mysterious and often overlooked intermediate stage. In 1928, after the revolutionary wave of the early 1920s subsided, Lukács published his so-called “Blum Theses” (Lukács 2014) in which he called for a strategy similar to the Popular Fronts that arose in the 1930s: the broad coalition of all democratic anti-fascist forces to combat the authoritarian trends that emerged all around Europe. The irony is that he did this too early, before the Popular Front became the

official Communist policy, so his theses were rejected and Lukács withdrew into literary theory.

At the philosophical level, Lukács's abandonment of the position advocated in *History and Class Consciousness* was also not a simple regression. The ignored obverse of his accommodation to Marxist orthodoxy (he no longer conceived the social practice of collective historical subjectivity as the ultimate horizon of thinking, instead endorsing a general ontology with humanity as its part) is the acceptance of the tragic dimension of the revolutionary subject (see Lukács 1968). Lukács refers to Marx's notion that the heroic period of the French Revolution was the necessary enthusiastic breakthrough followed by the unheroic phase of market relations: the true social function of the revolution was to establish the condition for the prosaic reign of bourgeois economy, and the true heroism resides not in blindly clinging to the early revolutionary enthusiasm but in recognizing "the rose in the cross of the present," as Hegel liked to paraphrase Luther (Hegel 1991, p. 22), i.e., in abandoning the position of the "beautiful soul" and fully accepting the present as the only possible domain of actual freedom. It is thus this "compromise" with social reality which enabled Hegel's crucial philosophical step forward, that of overcoming the proto-fascist notion of "organic" community in his *System der Sittlichkeit* manuscript and engaging in the dialectical analysis of the antagonisms of bourgeois civil society. It is obvious that Lukács's analysis is deeply allegorical: it was written a couple of months after Trotsky launched his thesis about Stalinism as the Thermidor of the October Revolution. Lukács's text has thus to be read as a reply to Trotsky: he accepts Trotsky's characterization of Stalin's regime as "Thermidorian," while giving it a positive twist; instead of bemoaning the loss of utopian energy, one should, in a heroically resigned way, accept its consequences as the only actual space of social progress. For Marx, of course, the sobering "day after" which follows the revolutionary intoxication signals the original limitation of the "bourgeois" revolutionary project, the

falsity of its promise of universal freedom: the “truth” of universal human rights is the rights of commerce and private property. If we read Lukács’s endorsement of the Stalinist Thermidor, it implies (arguably against his conscious intention) a pessimist perspective difficult to reconcile with Marxism: the proletarian revolution itself is also characterized by the gap between its illusory universal assertion of freedom and the ensuing awakening in the new relations of domination and exploitation, which means that the communist project of realizing “actual freedom” necessarily fails in its first attempt and that it can be salvaged only through its repetition. But what if, looking back at the twentieth century from our present vantage point, one should precisely maintain this pessimist turn of Lukács’s?

Lukács himself later softened this “pessimist” edge and, in his own version of the humanist Marxist revival in the 1960s, dedicated the last decade of his life to the elaboration of a new “ontology of social being” (see Lukács 1978–1980). This late ontology of Lukács’s is totally out of sync with the revival of Marxist praxis-philosophy in the 1960s: the latter remains within the transcendental space (its central notion of praxis is the unsurpassable horizon which cannot be grounded in any general ontology), while Lukács aims at deploying social ontology as a special sphere of general ontology. The central notion of his attempt is the notion of human labor as the elementary form of teleology: in human labor, nature overcomes itself, its determinism, since natural processes become moments of the process of material realization of human goals. Against Aristotelian or Hegelian idealism which subordinates the totality of nature to a spiritual telos, as a materialist Lukács sees social labor as the primary domain of teleology, a domain which remains a small part of nature and arises spontaneously out of biological processes. The supreme irony here is that, in his social ontology of labor, Lukács refers to the young Marx, to his so-called *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (first published in the early

1930s) which were the holy text of humanist Marxism. While humanist Marxists read them in a transcendental way, focusing on the notion of alienation, Lukács uses these manuscripts to justify the abandonment of the big Hegelian motif of *History and Class Consciousness*, the total mediation of subject and object in the proletariat as the subject-object of history. According to his later self-criticism, this Hegelian speculative identity of subject and object ignores the difference between objectivization (of the subject in labor) and reification (in conditions of alienation): for the young Lukács, every objectivization is reification, while he now concedes that in objectivizing its essential powers in objects which express its creativity, there is no necessary reification at work—reification occurs only when labor is exercised in social conditions of alienation. In short, for the young Lukács, labor (as the activity of realizing goals in reality by changing the shape of material objects) is as such alienated, and we overcome alienation only through the total mediation of subject and object.

Although this “ontology of social labor” cannot be reduced to a version of Stalinist dialectical materialism, it remains but one in the series of big evolutionary visions of the cosmos as the ontological hierarchy of levels (matter, plants, animal life, and human spirit as the highest level known to us), thus coming all too close to Nicolai Hartmann’s ontology (and Lukács does refer positively to Hartmann). (It is interesting to note that even Quentin Meillassoux falls into this trap and pays a fateful price for his suspension of the transcendental dimension, i.e., the price of the regression to a naïve-realist ontology of spheres or levels in the style of Hartmann: material reality, life, thought.) Such naïve realism is basically premodern, it signals a return to Renaissance thought that precedes the birth of modern science.

Other Western Marxists tried to break out of the transcendental circle without regressing to realist ontology; if we leave aside Walter Benjamin who deserves special treatment, we should mention at least Ernst Bloch who deployed a gigantic edifice of an

unfinished universe tending towards the utopian point of absolute perfection. In his masterpiece *The Principle of Hope*, he provides an encyclopedic account of mankind's and nature's orientation towards a socially and technologically improved future (see Bloch 1995). Bloch considered Marx's comments about "humanization of nature" (again, from his early *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*) of key importance: a true radical utopia should embrace the entire universe, nature included, i.e., utopias that are limited to the organization of society and ignore nature are no better than abstractions. In contrast to late Lukács, Bloch thus proposes a full future-oriented cosmology, inscribing teleology into nature itself (in contrast to our emphasis on unorientables). He thereby overcomes the transcendental circle, but the price is too high—a return to premodern utopian cosmology.

The radical counterpart to Bloch's progressive cosmology was provided by Evald Ilyenkov in his early manuscript on the "cosmology of the spirit."¹ Provocatively relying on what is for Western Marxists the ultimate *bête noire* (Friedrich Engels's manuscripts posthumously gathered in *Dialectics of Nature*, as well as the Soviet tradition of dialectical materialism), and combining these references with contemporary cosmology, Ilyenkov brings the dialectical-materialist idea of the gradual progressive development of reality from elementary forms of matter through different forms of life to (human) thought to its logical Nietzschean conclusion. If reality is (spatially and temporally) without limits, then there is overall, with regard to its totality, no progress, everything that could happen always-already happened: although full of dynamics in its parts, the universe as a Whole is a Spinozean stable substance. What this means is that, in contrast to Bloch, every development is circular, every movement upwards has to

¹ See Penzin 2018. All quotes from Ilyenkov as well as from Penzin are from this source. Ilyenkov's "Cosmology of the Spirit" was written in the early 1950s and first published in Russian in 1988 (see Ilyenkov 2017).

be accompanied by a movement downwards, every progress by a regress: movement is “a cyclical movement from the lowest forms of matter to the highest (‘the thinking brain’) *and back*, to their decomposition into the lowest forms of matter (biological, chemical, and physical)” (Penzin 2018). Ilyenkov supplements this vision of the universe by two further hypotheses. First, the movement in the cosmos is limited downwards and upwards, it takes place between the lowest level (chaotic matter) and the highest level (thought), with there being nothing imaginably higher than thought. Second, thought is not just a contingent local occurrence in the development of matter but possesses a reality and an efficiency of its own, it is a necessary part (a culmination) of the entire development of reality. And now comes Ilyenkov’s most daring cosmological speculation: “this cyclical development of the universe passes through a phase involving the complete destruction of matter—through a galaxy-scale ‘fire’.” (Ibid.) This passage through the zero-level which relaunches cosmic development does not happen by itself, it

needs a special *intervention* to rechannel the energy that was radiated during the cycle of matter’s development into a new “global fire.” The question of what (or who) sets the universe on fire is crucial. According to Ilyenkov, it is the cosmological function of thought to provide the conditions to “relaunch” the universe, which is collapsing due to thermal death. It is human intelligence which, having achieved the highest potency, has to launch the big bang. This is how thought proves *in reality* that it is a necessary attribute of matter. (Penzin 2018)

To make this key speculative moment clearer, let’s quote a passage from Ilyenkov’s own text:

In concrete terms, one can imagine it like this: At some peak point of their development, thinking beings, executing their cosmological duty and sacrificing themselves, produce a conscious cosmic

catastrophe—provoking a process, a reverse “thermal dying” of cosmic matter; that is, provoking a process leading to the rebirth of dying worlds by means of a cosmic cloud of incandescent gas and vapors. // In simple terms, thought turns out to be a necessary mediating link, thanks only to which the fiery “rejuvenation” of universal matter becomes possible; it proves to be this direct “efficient cause” that leads to the instant activation of endless reserves of interconnected motion [...]. (Ilyenkov 2017, pp. 185–86)

Now comes Ilyenkov’s craziest ethico-political speculation regarding the (not only social but) cosmological necessity and role of communism: for Ilyenkov, such a radical self-sacrifice can be performed only by a highly developed communist society:

Millions of years will pass, thousands of generations will be born and go to their graves, a genuine human system will be established on Earth, with the conditions for activity—a classless society, spiritual and material culture will abundantly blossom, with the aid of, and on the basis of, which humankind can only fulfill its great sacrificial duty before nature. // For us, for people living at the dawn of human prosperity, the struggle for this future will remain the only real form of service to the highest aims of the thinking spirit. (Ilyenkov 2017, pp. 189–90)

So the ultimate justification of communism is that, by way of bringing about a solidary society free of egotist instincts, it will have enough ethical strength to perform the highest self-sacrifice of not only humanity’s self-destruction but of the simultaneous destruction of the entire cosmos: “*if* humanity is unable to achieve communism, then collective human intelligence will not achieve its highest stage of power either, as it will be undermined by the capitalist system, which is as far as one can get from any self-sacrificial or otherwise sublime motivation.” (Penzin 2018)

Ilyenkov was well aware of the speculative nature of this cosmology (he referred to it as his “phantasmagoria” or “dream”), so no wonder that it was later interpreted in a rude historicist or

even personal way: as a cosmic extrapolation of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, or even as a foretelling of Ilyenkov's suicide in 1979. At a more immanent theoretical level, the suspicion immediately arises here that Ilyenkov's cosmology "expresses archaic, premodern contents wrapped in the language of classic philosophy, science, and dialectical materialism. The indicator of this mythic content is, especially, the theme of heroic self-sacrifice and 'global fire'" (ibid.). Along these lines, Boris Groys interprets Ilyenkov's cosmology as a return to paganism, discerning in it "a revival of the Aztec religion' of Quetzalcoatl, who 'sets himself on fire to reverse the entropic process'" (ibid.). While this is in principle true, one should not forget that once we are in modernity, i.e., after Descartes's and Kant's breakthroughs, a direct return to pagan cosmology is not possible: every such return has to be interpreted as a symptom of thought's inability to confront the radical negativity at work in the very core of modern subjectivity.² The same holds already for the first systematic deployment of the idea of total destruction in the long philosophical dissertation delivered to Juliette by Pope Pius VI, part of book 5 of de Sade's *Juliette*. As Aaron Schuster writes:

there is nothing wrong with rape, torture, murder, and so on, since these conform to the violence that is the universal law of things. To act in accordance with Nature means to actively take part in its orgy of destruction. The trouble is that man's capacity for crime is highly limited, and his atrocities, no matter how debauched, ultimately outrage nothing. This is a depressing thought for the libertine. The human being, along with all organic life and even inorganic matter, is caught in an endless cycle of death and rebirth, generation and corruption, so that "there is indeed no real death," only a permanent transformation and recycling of matter according to the immanent laws of "the three kingdoms," animal, vegetable,

² In what follows, I resume the line of thought from the last chapter of my *Disparities* (Žižek 2016).

and mineral. Destruction may accelerate this process, but it cannot stop it. The true crime would be the one that no longer operates within the three kingdoms but annihilates them altogether, that puts a stop to the eternal cycle of generation and corruption and, by doing so, returns to Nature her absolute privilege of contingent creation, of casting the dice anew. (Schuster 2016, pp. 39–40; de Sade 1968, p. 966)

What, then, at a strict theoretical level, is wrong with this dream of the “second death” as a radical pure negation which puts a stop to the life-cycle itself? In a superb display of his genius, Lacan provides a simple answer: “It is just that, being a psychoanalyst, I can see that the second death is prior to the first, and not after, as de Sade dreams it” (Lacan 2007, p. 67). (The only problematic part of this statement is the qualification “being a psychoanalyst”—a Hegelian philosopher can also see this quite clearly.) In what precise sense are we to understand this priority of the second death—the radical annihilation of the entire life-cycle of generation and corruption—over the first death which remains a moment of this cycle? Schuster points the way: “Sade believes that there exists a well-established second nature that operates according to immanent laws. Against this ontologically consistent realm he can only dream of an absolute Crime that would abolish the three kingdoms and attain the pure disorder of primary nature” (Schuster 2016, pp. 40–41). In short, what de Sade doesn’t see is that there is no big Other, no Nature as an ontologically consistent realm—nature is already in itself inconsistent, unbalanced, destabilized by antagonisms. The total negation imagined by de Sade thus doesn’t come at the end, as a threat or prospect of radical destruction, it comes at the beginning, it has always-already happened, it stands for the zero-level starting point out of which the fragile/inconsistent reality emerges. In other words, what is missing in the notion of Nature as a body regulated by fixed laws is simply the *subject itself*: in Hegelese, the Sadeian Nature remains a Substance, de Sade continues to grasp reality

only as Substance and not also as Subject, where “subject” does not stand for another ontological level different from Substance but for the immanent incompleteness-inconsistency-antagonism of Substance itself. And, insofar as the Freudian name for this radical negativity is the death drive, Schuster is right to point out how, paradoxically, what de Sade misses in his celebration of the ultimate crime of radical destruction of all life is precisely the death drive:

for all its wantonness and havoc the Sadeian will-to-extinction is premised on a fetishistic denial of the death drive. The sadist makes himself into the servant of universal extinction precisely in order to avoid the deadlock of subjectivity, the “virtual extinction” that splits the life of the subject from within. The Sadeian libertine expels this negativity outside himself in order to be able to slavishly devote himself to it; the apocalyptic vision of an absolute Crime thus functions as a screen against a more intractable internal split. What the diabolical reason of the sadist masks is the fact that the Other is barred, inconsistent, lacking, that it cannot be served, for it presents no law to obey, not even the wild law of its accelerating autodestruction. There is no nature to be followed, rivaled or outdone, and it is this void or lack, the nonexistence of the Other, that is incomparably more violent than even the most destructive fantasm of the death drive. Or, as Lacan argues, Sade is right if we just turn around his evil thought: subjectivity *is* the catastrophe it fantasizes about, the death beyond death, the “second death.” While the sadist dreams of violently forcing a cataclysm that will wipe the slate clean, what he does not want to know is that this unprecedented calamity has already taken place. Every subject is the end of the world, or rather, this impossibly explosive end that is equally a “fresh start,” the unabolishable chance of the dice throw. (Schuster 2016, pp. 41–42)

Kant had already characterized a free autonomous act as an act which cannot be accounted for in terms of natural causality, of the texture of causes and effects: a free act occurs as its own cause, it opens up a new causal chain from its zero-point. So insofar as

the “second death” is the interruption of the natural life-cycle of generation and corruption, no radical annihilation of the entire natural order is needed for this—an autonomous free act already suspends natural causality, and the subject as \S already is this cut in the natural circuit, the self-sabotage of natural goals. The mystical name for this end of the world is “night of the world,” and its philosophical name is radical negativity as the core of subjectivity. And, to quote Mallarmé, a throw of the dice will never abolish chance, i.e., the abyss of negativity remains forever the unsublatable background of subjective creativity. We may even risk here an ironic version of Gandhi’s famous motto “be yourself the change you want to see in the world”: the subject is itself the catastrophe it fears and tries to avoid.

Back to Ilyenkov. Exactly the same holds for his notion of the radical self-destruction of reality: although clearly a phantasmagoria, it shouldn’t be taken lightly, for it is a symptom of the fatal flaw of the entire project of Western Marxism. Constrained by the transcendental role of social practice as the ultimate horizon of our experience, Western Marxism cannot adequately take into account radical negativity as the crack in the Real which renders possible the rise of subjectivity; this neglected dimension, foreclosed by transcendental thought, then returns in the real as the phantasmagoria of a total world-destruction. As in the case of de Sade, Ilyenkov’s mistake resides in his very starting point: in a naïve-realist way, he presupposes reality as a Whole regulated by the necessity of progress and its reverse. Within this pre-modern space of a complete and self-regulating cosmos, radical negativity can only appear as a total self-destruction. The way out of this deadlock is to abandon the starting point and to admit that there is no reality as a self-regulated Whole, that reality is in itself cracked, incomplete, non-all, traversed by radical antagonism.

At the opposite pole from Bloch and Ilyenkov, we find Louis Althusser’s structural Marxism in which he basically applies to Marxism Claude Lévi-Strauss’s transcendentalism without the

(Kantian) subject. This list is, of course, far from complete, but one should note that, among the great Western Marxists, it was Theodor Adorno who, in his attention to the dialectics of Enlightenment, took over and explicated what we called Lukács's "pessimism": the roots of the horrors of twentieth-century history reside in the very heart of the Enlightenment project. What interests us here is that Adorno was ready to draw the philosophical consequences from this insight: with his notion of the "primacy [Vorrang] of the objective," he confronted the problem of how to break out of the transcendental approach without regressing to naïve realism. Although there is a similarity between Adorno's "primacy of the objective" and the Lacanian Real, this very similarity renders all the more palpable the gap that separates them. Adorno's basic endeavor is to reconcile the materialist "priority of the objective" with the idealist legacy of the subjective mediation of all objective reality: everything we experience as directly/immediately given is already mediated, posited through a network of differences; every theory that asserts our access to immediate reality, be it the phenomenological *Wesensschau* or the empiricist perception of elementary sensual data, is false. On the other hand, Adorno also rejects the idealist notion that all objective content is posited/produced by the subject; such a stance also fetishizes subjectivity itself into a given immediacy. This is the reason why Adorno opposes the Kantian apriori of the transcendental categories which mediate our access *to* reality (and thus constitute what we experience *as* reality): for Adorno, the Kantian transcendental apriori does not simply absolutize subjective mediation, it obliterates *its own* historical mediation. The table of Kantian transcendental categories is not a pre-historical "pure" apriori but a historically "mediated" conceptual network, i.e., a network embedded in and engendered by a determinate historical constellation. How, then, are we to think *together* the radical mediation of all objectivity and the materialist "priority of the objective"? The solution is that this "priority" is the very result of mediation

brought to its end, the kernel of resistance that we cannot experience directly, but only in the guise of the absent point of reference on account of which every mediation ultimately fails.

It is a standard argument against Adorno's "negative dialectics" to reproach it for its inherent inconsistency. Adorno's answer is quite appropriate: stated as a definitive doctrine, "negative dialectics" effectively *is*, as a result, "inconsistent"; the way to properly grasp it is to conceive of it as the description of a *process* of thought (in Lacanese, to include the position of enunciation involved in it). "Negative dialectics" designates a position which includes its own failure, i.e., which produces the truth-effect through its very failure. To put it succinctly: one tries to grasp or conceive the object of thought; one fails, misses it, and through these very failures the place of the targeted object is encircled, its contours become discernible. So, what one is tempted to do here is to introduce the Lacanian notion of the "barred" subject (§) and the object as real/impossible: the Adornian distinction between immediately accessible "positive" objectivity and the objectivity targeted in the "priority of the objective" is the very Lacanian distinction between (symbolically mediated) reality and the impossible Real. Furthermore, does the Adornian notion that the subject retains its subjectivity only insofar as it is "incompletely" subject, insofar as some kernel of objectivity resists its grasp, not point towards the subject as constitutively "barred"? This is why, when confronted with student protesters' claim that critical thought must adopt the standpoint of the oppressed, Adorno replied that negative dialectics was concerned "with the dissolution of standpoint thinking itself."³

In his critique of Hegel, Adorno surprisingly (or maybe not so surprisingly) rejoins his opponent Karl Popper, for whom, in his defense of the "open society," a straight road leads from the philosophical notion of totality to political totalitarianism.

³ Quoted from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodor_W._Adorno.

His project of negative dialectics rejects what he (mis)perceives as Hegel's positive dialectics: in Hegel, all the antagonisms that explode in a dialectical process are resolved in a final reconciliation which establishes a new positive order. Hegel doesn't see that his reconciliation is dishonest, false, an "enforced reconciliation" (*erpresste Versöhnung*—the title of Adorno's essay on Lukács) which obfuscates the antagonisms' continuous persistence in social reality. Gérard Lebrun provided a perfect reply to this critique: "what is so admirable in this portrait of the dialectician rendered dishonest by his blindness is the supposition that he could have been honest" (Lebrun 2004, p. 115). In other words, instead of rejecting the Hegelian false reconciliation, one should reject as illusory the very notion of dialectical reconciliation, i.e., one should renounce the demand for a "true" reconciliation. Hegel was fully aware that reconciliation does not alleviate real suffering and antagonisms: his formula of reconciliation from the foreword to his *Philosophy of Right* is that one should recognize "the rose in the cross of the present" (Hegel 1991, p. 22), or, to put it in Marx's terms, in reconciliation, one does not change external reality to fit some Idea; one recognizes this Idea as the inner "truth" of this miserable reality itself. The Marxist reproach that, instead of transforming reality, Hegel only proposes its new interpretation, thus in a way misses the point—it knocks on an open door, since, for Hegel, in order to pass from alienation to reconciliation, one has to change not reality but the way we perceive it and relate to it. And the critique of Hegel's system as a return to closed identity which obfuscates the persisting antagonisms also knocks on an open door: the Hegelian reconciliation is the reconciliation *with* antagonisms.

There are two ways out of the deadlock in which Adorno's "negative dialectics" ends, the Habermasian one and the Lacanian one. Habermas, who well perceived Adorno's inconsistency, his self-destructive critique of Reason which cannot account for itself, proposed as a solution the pragmatic apriori of communicative

normativity, a kind of Kantian regulative ideal presupposed in every intersubjective exchange (Habermas 1982). With Habermas, the circle of Hegelian Marxism is closed, and the Kantian gap returns with a vengeance in the guise of the gap between communicative reason and instrumental reason. We are thus safely back in transcendental waters: Habermas's discursive ethics is a transcendental apriori which cannot be accounted for in terms of its objective genesis since it is always-already presupposed by any attempt at such a genesis. Directly asked by a journalist if he believes in god or not, Habermas said that he is agnostic, which precisely means that, in a Kantian way, he considers the ultimate nature of reality inaccessible: the unsurpassable firm point for us humans is the communicational apriori.

Habermas is to be read against the background of the fact that the progress of today's sciences shatters the basic presuppositions of our everyday life-world notion of reality. The establishment basically wants to have its cake and eat it: it needs science as the foundation of economic productivity, but it simultaneously wants to keep the ethico-political foundations of society free from science. The latest ethical "crisis" apropos of biogenetics effectively created the need for what one is fully justified in calling a "state philosophy": a philosophy that would, on the one hand, condone scientific research and technical progress, and, on the other, contain its full socio-symbolic impact, i.e., prevent it from posing a threat to the existing theologico-ethical constellation. No wonder those who come closest to meeting these demands are neo-Kantians: Kant himself was focused on the problem of how, while fully taking into account Newtonian science, one can guarantee that there is a space of ethical responsibility exempted from the reach of science—as he himself put it, he limited the scope of knowledge to create the space for faith and morality. And are today's state philosophers not facing the same task? Is their effort not focused on how, through different versions of transcendental reflection, to restrict science to its preordained horizon of mean-

ing and thus to denounce as “illegitimate” its consequences for the ethico-religious sphere?

The point to notice here is how the stances towards ontology that we have dealt with here are linked to basic political positions: neo-Kantianism grounds social-democratic reformism; the early Lukács’s Hegelianism grounds his radical Leninist engagement (against the philosophical positions of Lenin himself); the ontology of dialectical materialism grounds Stalinist politics; Lukács’s late ontology of social being grounds the (utopian) hopes of a humanist reform of the really-existing socialist regimes; negative dialectics echoes political defeat, the absence of any radical emancipatory prospect in the developed Western countries. When we talk about ways to overcome the transcendental circle, we are talking (also) about basic political orientations. So, what is the solution? A return to Hegel, but to a Hegel read in a different way, not in the sense of the total subjective mediation of objectivity in the style of young Lukács.

When Hegel says that the subject should recognize itself in its Otherness, this thesis is ambiguous: it can be (and usually is) read as the total subjective appropriation of all objective content, but it can also be read as claiming that the subject should recognize itself as a moment of its Otherness, in what appears to it as alienated objectivity. But, again, does this mean that we are back at naïve objective realism where the subject is just a moment in some substantial objective order? As we have already indicated, there is a third (and properly Hegelian) way that moves beyond this alternative of Fichtianism and Spinozism: yes, the subject recognizes itself as included in its Otherness, but not in the sense of a tiny cog in (or the summit of) some substantial cosmic order. The subject recognizes its own flaw (lack, failure, limitation) as grounded in the flaw (lack, failure, limitation—or rather, imbalance) that pertains to this cosmic order itself. The fact that the subject cannot fully objectivize itself doesn’t mean that it dwells somewhere outside the objective order (of nature); it means that

this order is in itself incomplete, traversed by an impossibility. Far from signaling reconciliation with defeat, such a position opens up new prospects for radical action grounded in the redoubling of the lack.

Bibliography

- Bloch, Ernst (1995) *The Principle of Hope*, vols. 1–3, trans. Stephen Plaice, Paul Knight, and Neville Plaice (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
- de Sade, Marquis (1968) *Juliette*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Grove Press).
- Habermas, Jürgen (1982) “The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-Reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment*,” trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *New German Critique* 26: 13–30.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1991) *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, ed. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press).
- Ilyenkov, Evald (2017) “Cosmology of the Spirit,” trans. Giuliano Vivaldi, *Stasis* 5, 2: 164–90.
- Korsch, Karl (2013 [1923]) *Marxism and Philosophy*, trans. Fred Hallday (London & New York: Verso).
- Lacan, Jacques (2007) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII. The Other Side of Psychoanalysis, 1969–1970*, trans. Russell Grigg, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W. W. Norton & Company).
- Lebrun, Gérard (2004) *L’Envers de la dialectique: Hegel à la lumière de Nietzsche* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).
- Lukács, Georg (1968) “Hölderlin’s *Hyperion*,” *Goethe and His Age*, trans. Robert Anchor, 136–56 (London: Merlin Press).
- (1972 [1923]) *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
- (1978–1980) *The Ontology of Social Being*, vols. 1–3, trans. David Fernbach (London: Merlin Press).
- (2014) *Tactics and Ethics, 1919–1929*, trans. Michael McColgan (London & New York: Verso).

- Penzin, Alexei (2018) "Contingency and Necessity in Evald Ilyenkov's Communist Cosmology," *e-flux* 88; available online: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/88/174178/contingency-and-necessity-in-evald-ilyenkov-s-communist-cosmology/> (last accessed: February 19, 2019).
- Schuster, Aaron (2016) *The Trouble with Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
- Žižek, Slavoj (2016) *Disparities* (London: Bloomsbury).

Marx and Manatheism

Eric L. Santner

They were given the choice to become kings or messengers. Just like children they all chose to be messengers. For this reason, there are only messengers; they race through the world and, because there are no kings, they cry out to one another announcements that have become meaningless. They would happily put an end to their miserable life but because of their oath of office they don't dare. (Kafka 1992, pp. 235–36; my translation)

She uttered two clearly audible words, familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant. *Toyota Celica*. A long moment passed before I realized this was the name of an automobile. The truth only amazed me more. The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder. It was like the name of an ancient power in the sky, tablet-carved in cuneiform. It made me feel that something hovered. But how could this be? A simple brand name, an ordinary car. How could these near-nonsense words, murmured in a child's restless sleep, make me sense a meaning, a presence? She was only repeating some TV voice. Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida. Supranational names, computer-generated, more or less universally pronounceable. Part of every child's brain noise, the substatic regions too deep to probe. Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence. (DeLillo 1984, p. 155)

I

Among the most quoted texts in the literature of anthropology is no doubt Claude Lévi-Strauss' short *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, first published in 1950. The passages that continue to exercise an enormous force of attraction on readers are those pertaining to the notion of *mana*, a concept—or, as Lévi-Strauss calls it, a *signifier*—that itself functions as a name for just such forces of attraction in the “primitive” cultures analyzed by Mauss as well as by his uncle, Émile Durkheim. Lévi-Strauss famously argued that *mana* functions in the way his two predecessors claimed above all *in their own writings*: “So we can see that in one case, at least, the notion of *mana* does present those characteristics of a secret power, a mysterious force, which Durkheim and Mauss attributed to it: for such is the role it plays in their own system. *Mana* really is *mana* there.”¹ Lévi-Strauss' attempt to critique and, ultimately, disenchant the concept by analyzing it as a linguistic phenomenon, i.e., as the name for a structural feature of all human languages that comes to be hypostasized, treated as a substantial reality, has, it would seem, itself absorbed a remnant of the force it was meant to dissolve. The work of disenchantment can, it would seem, exercise its own considerable charms.

¹ Lévi-Strauss 1987, p. 57. The term *mana* was introduced to Europe by the missionary and ethnologist, Robert Codrington who, in one attempt at a definition writes, “The Melanesian mind is entirely possessed by the belief in a supernatural power or influence, called almost universally *mana*. This is what works to effect everything which is beyond the ordinary power of men, outside the common processes of nature; it is present in the atmosphere of life, attaches itself to persons or things, and is manifested by results which can only be ascribed to its operation” (Codrington 1891, pp. 118–19). In his *General Theory of Magic*, Mauss puts it this way: “This extraneous substance is invisible, marvelous, spiritual—in fact, it is the spirit which contains all efficacy and all life [...]. It is only supernatural ‘*in a way*,’ that is to say, that *mana* is both supernatural and natural, since it is spread throughout the tangible world where it is *both heterogeneous and ever immanent*” (Mauss 2001, p. 13). In his cultural history of the concept of the fetish, Hartmut Böhme makes the same claim with respect to Marx's use of that notion. See Böhme 2014.

Lévi-Strauss' account of the emergence and persistence of notions like *mana* is essentially an anthropogenic one, itself structured around a conceptual impasse or aporia. Becoming human, which for Lévi-Strauss means becoming a speaking being, a creature endowed with language *qua* symbolic system, implies a gap or missing link in the diachronic dimension of its occurrence, one indexed by a synchronic discordance in the communicative flow within that system. "Notions of the *mana* type," as Lévi-Strauss refers to them, are meant to master or bind that discordance and thereby facilitate further communicative intercourse and exchange. To recall Lévi-Strauss' abbreviated version of the anthropogenic story:

Whatever may have been the moment and the circumstances of its appearance in the ascent of animal life, language can only have arisen all at once. Things cannot have begun to signify gradually. In the wake of a transformation which is not a subject of study for the social sciences, but for biology and psychology, a shift occurred from a stage when nothing had meaning to another stage when everything had meaning. Actually, that apparently banal remark is important, because that radical change has no counterpart in the field of knowledge, which develops slowly and progressively. In other words, at the moment when the entire universe all at once became *significant*, it was none the better *known* for being so, even if it is true that the emergence of language must have hastened the rhythm of the development of knowledge. So there is a fundamental opposition, in the history of the human mind, between symbolism, which is characteristically discontinuous, and knowledge, characterized by continuity. (Lévi-Strauss 1987, pp. 59–60)

This opposition results in what Lévi-Strauss goes on to describe as a kind of chronic economic crisis pertaining to the supply and demand of efficacious signifiers, a crisis only apparently resolvable by way of a *deus ex machina*,

Namely, that man has from the start had at his disposition a signifier-totality which he is at a loss to know how to allocate to a signified,

given as such, but no less unknown for being given. There is always a non-equivalence or “inadequation” between the two, a non-fit and overspill which divine understanding alone can soak up; this generates a signifier-surfeit relative to the signifieds to which it can be fitted. So, in man’s efforts to understand the world, he always disposes of a surplus of signification (which he shares out among things in accordance with the laws of the symbolic thinking which it is the task of ethnologists and linguists to study). That distribution of a supplementary ration [...] is absolutely necessary to ensure that, in total, the available signifier and the mapped-out signified may remain in the relationship of complementarity which is the very condition of the exercise of symbolic thinking. (Lévi-Strauss 1987, p. 63)

As already indicated, notions like *mana* function as a kind of general equivalent for this surplus—Lévi-Strauss variously characterized it as a *floating signifier* (ibid., 63), a “symbol in its pure state” (ibid., 64), and a “zero symbolic value” (ibid.)—that serves as a relay or transfer point for its distribution and circulation. And as Lévi-Strauss further adds, notions of the *mana* type stand “surety of all art, all poetry, every mythic and aesthetic invention” (ibid., 63). So, strange as it may seem, a certain *poetic excess* would appear to be what allows social mediation to get a grip—I would say, a libidinal grip—on the imagination of embodied subjects.²

It’s worth underlining a fundamental ambiguity with respect to the notions of *surplus* and *excess*. As already noted, the

² In a recent book, Slavoj Žižek explicitly cites Lévi-Strauss’ discussion of *mana* as the background for his understanding of what he finds missing in recent discussions of Hegel (most importantly those of Robert Brandom and Robert Pippin), namely a notion of the *immediacy of mediation*. Here as elsewhere in Žižek’s work, one sees just how much the Lacanian tradition owes to Lévi-Strauss’s account of *mana*: “If the identity of a signifier is nothing but the series of its constitutive differences, then every signifying series has to be supplemented—‘sutured’—by a reflexive signifier which has no determinate meaning (signified), since it stands only for the presence of meaning as such (as opposed to its absence).” It is, as Žižek repeats an oft-used formulation, what “gives body to difference as such” (Žižek 2016, pp. 93, 95).

“signifier-surfeit” that notions like *mana* serve to bind and relay is correlated to a gap in the chain of knowledge, or perhaps better, to a knowledge that cannot be known but only, if I might put it that way, *excessively signified*. *Mana* holds the place of *something missing* in the space of reasons, the space of possible knowledge of the world. In Lévi-Strauss’ anthropogenic terms, we come into the world endowed with a distinctive sort of inadequacy, *with* something forever *withheld* from our comprehension yet insisting in our lives as a nodal point of what Raymond Williams called structures of feeling.³ To put it in somewhat paradoxical terms, we come into the world endowed with, we might even say, invested with, a *surplus scarcity* that every form of life must cope with, or better: find a way to *manage*, with special emphasis on the first four letters of the word. To bring Sigmund Freud and Lévi-Strauss together—something that, of course, Jacques Lacan claimed to have done in his account of the phallus *qua* signifier of castration—there is a “signifier-surfeit” because something has always already gone missing from the space of meaning which leaves, which *adds* to life, the remnant of a void that is in a peculiar sense “less” than the nothing of a loss or absence; the surplus of signifying stress that gets relayed by way of enigmatic signifiers “of the *mana* type” is the mode of being of an impossible knowledge of which we can only ever be *unconscious*.

II

I hope that it is clear from Lévi-Strauss’ analysis that for Mauss, Durkheim, and other researchers working in what William Mazzarella (2017) has called the “*mana* moment” of the European social sciences, *mana* functions much in the way that *value* (along

³ For a survey of the various uses of the term in Williams’ work, see Matthews 2001.

with its general equivalent, money) does for Marx in his analysis of the commodity form. One will recall that Marx characterized value as a social substance and, indeed, as an occult and spectral one, a *gespenstige Gegenständlichkeit* extracted/abstracted from the bodies of workers and transferred to objects as a surplus value in excess of any use value.⁴ Marx's *political* economic point was, of course, that in modern capitalist societies lives are governed by, subject to the demands and commands of, this marvelous surplus and its immanent drive to self-appreciation, to what might be called its "autodoxological" tendency (doxologies are, one will recall, liturgical hymns in praise of God). I introduce that notion as a placeholder for a larger argument that would link Marx's understanding of the self-valorization of Value—the true motor of capitalist economies—to Max Weber's understanding of the spirit of capitalism as emerging out of the ostensibly Protestant compulsion to work solely and unceasingly for the greater glory of God, *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*. One might indeed argue that Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism prepared the way for these later anthropological investigations of *mana*. Or rather, that the "scientific" preoccupation with *mana* (along with fetishism, totemism, etc.) is itself a displaced way of engaging with the facts of a life *ever more governed by the spectral materiality of value*.

If capitalism, as Walter Benjamin has argued in an effort to radicalize Weber's thesis, is to be grasped as a religion and indeed, one that is practiced 24/7, we should, I am suggesting, characterize it as a *manatheistic* one. As Benjamin put it, in capitalism, "there are no 'weekdays.' There is no day that is not a feast day, in the terrible sense that all its sacred pomp is unfolded before us; each day commands the utter fealty of each worshiper."⁵ Marx's labor

⁴ See Marx 2008, p. 52, and 1977, p. 128. There Fowkes translates the term as "phantom-like objectivity."

⁵ Benjamin 1996, p. 288. The fragment was translated by Rodney Livingstone.

theory of value should in its turn be grasped not primarily as a theory of work, let alone of the industrial mode of production, but rather of the processes of *mana-facturing* that not so much efficiently as *officiantly* produce the subtle matter that is, I would further argue, ultimately refined into a kind of pure state in the brand name. (This would also mean that liberal and neoliberal economic theories are best understood not as theories of efficient but rather of *officiant markets*.) Durkheim, Mauss, along with other researchers working in the “*mana* moment” were, I am arguing, already up to their ears in the stuff without ever leaving Western Europe (neither Durkheim nor Mauss did any of their own ethnographic field work).

III

Marx’s first encounter with the concept of the fetish most likely goes back to his readings in the early 1840s in the history of religion. Among the works he consulted or at least knew of second hand were those of Charles de Brosses who in 1760 introduced the concept of the fetish into European debates on the elementary forms of religious life. It is significant, I think, that the concept that would become so central to the labor theory of value began to get a grip on the European imagination at the end of the *ancien régime*, at the very moment, that is, when royal sovereignty along with the political theological doctrines and rituals that sustained it was beginning to yield to popular sovereignty—a shift that demanded new ways of establishing and sustaining social bonds. What Marx saw was that such bonds, such social relations, were coming to be determined by the relations of production of commodities, in a word, that the political theology of sovereignty was being displaced not only or even primarily by a political theory and practice of democracy but rather by the political economy of value, by the task of administering and managing a somehow

sacred, somehow spectral materiality. (Again, one should read management as *mana*-gement.) Ideology thus did not need to enter bourgeois economic relations in a secondary, super-structural way; it was always already there at its base, in the “base materiality” at issue in the *mana*-facturing process.

To repeat my claim, over the course of the nineteenth century, European theorists were extracting concepts from Europe’s various “primitive” and colonized “others” in order to grasp the transformation of social bonds brought about by historical processes of modernization. What allowed the theorists of the “*mana* moment” to recognize what the “*mana* workers”—another term I borrow from Mazzarella—were elaborating in the “primitive” cultures they were investigating was the fact that their own lives had at some level become *mana*-ical, absorbed by and busy with the everyday doxologies of value, doxologies once dedicated not only to God but also to his secular, political theological vicars on earth. As Marx argued, the political theology of sovereignty had, by the time the “*mana* moment” arrived, already become the political economy of the wealth of nations, which for that very reason meant that “wealth” was itself a misleading concept.

IV

I’d like to conclude by returning to the notion of the brand as the radical condensation of the spectral materiality at issue in the *mana*-facturing process. In her path-breaking book *No Logo*, first published in 2000, Naomi Klein presents in great and pungent detail the history of the trend in the corporate world to see the brand as the real locus of the value of the commodity (Klein 2010). In the book, she cites a number of corporate executives who proudly and, I would suggest, devoutly announce what seems to be a new *revelation of the name*, the glad tidings that the brand name functions no longer as the guarantee of the quality or reli-

ability of the product but as the site of its splendor—its glory, its *doxa*. But as we know, branding is no longer the prerogative and obligation just of corporations and, as John and Jean Comaroff (2009) have demonstrated, of nations and peoples; in the context of the reorganization of capitalism around what Gary Becker among others has theorized under the heading of *human capital*, once, that is, maximizing behavior is not restricted to market exchange but permeates all aspects of human life, every individual lives under the pressure to cultivate their own brand. We are all, at some level, interpellated as our own private *mana-facturing* enterprises; the elaboration of the spectral substance of value is now at some level performed, now *officiated* by, each member of the neoliberal polity. As the Comaroffs and others have noted, the difference between manufacturing and *mana-facturing* is largely put into practice by way of a new global articulation of commodity production. Actual, physical products are more and more manufactured “off shore” by workers hired by sub-contractors rather than directly by the parent company while the *mana-facturing* process—the production and maintenance of the brand—is performed in first-world corporate parks and offices. Some of that work is in its turn now further out-sourced to independent cognitive entrepreneur-laborers working in the “gig-economy,” itself a high-tech return to the putting-out system.

Against this background it should, perhaps, come as less of a surprise that the current president has managed to amalgamate political office, person, and brand. I am even tempted to say that Trump is not fully mistaken when he repeatedly claims that there is no real conflict of interest between his duties as president and those of running his business. He may in fact simply be naming a new mutation in modern political economy, call it *brand-name sovereignty*. What this means is that the conceptual—and lived—distinction between *homo politicus* and *homo economicus* has lost its salience. “Trump,” we might say, is the proper name, or rather, the brand name, of this zone of indistinction. Trump’s own

autodoxological drive of self-appreciation—his constant need to be praised and to praise himself in front of others, to amplify the value of his personal brand—would then no longer be a contingent quirk, the personality disorder of the present incumbent of the office of president, but rather something transpiring within the office itself, call it the rebranding of sovereignty.

✱

In “Capitalism as Religion,” Benjamin characterizes capitalism not only as a remorseless cult practiced 24/7; he also suggests that it is the first religion that *infinetizes* debt/guilt (*Schuld*) rather than offering redemption. We could perhaps say that what ultimately drives the process that Marx characterized as the self-valorization of Value is a *mana-ical enjoyment* circling around a surplus scarcity that can never be made good, a sort of repetition compulsion at the heart of every narrative that “allows” us to convert that scarcity into a payable debt—a conversion that makes *mana-theists* of us all. Against this background, a notion like sabbath rest assumes a new aspect (as does its radicalization in the notion of the messianic). I would suggest that the cessation of work at issue in what could be called our sabbatical calling, pertains not to work as such but rather to the *mana-facturing* process that keeps us *mana-ically* busy working off an impossible debt, filling in a surplus scarcity that ultimately, in one historical form or other, belongs to the human condition.

I would like to close with a short text by the author of my first epigraph, Franz Kafka. My purpose is to indicate just how difficult it is to think through, let alone practice, this “strike” on the *mana-facturing* process, to grasp what it means to become *inofficiant* in one’s use of things. In a diary entry from February 15, 1920, Kafka wrote the following:

One day, many years ago, I sat on the slope of the Laurenziberg, feeling sad. I was considering the wishes I had for my life. The most

important or the most appealing wish was to attain a view of life (and — this was inescapably bound up with it — to convince others of it in writing) in which life retained its natural full complement of rising and falling, but at the same time would be recognized no less clearly as a nothing, as a dream, as a hovering. A beautiful wish perhaps, if I had truly wished it [wenn ich ihn richtig gewünscht hätte]. Somewhat like wishing to hammer together a table with painstakingly methodical craftsmanship, and at the same time to do nothing at all, and not in such a way that people could say: “This hammering is a nothingness to him,” but rather: “This hammering is really a hammering to him yet at the same time it is also a nothingness,” whereby the hammering would have become still bolder, still more resolute, still more real, and, if you will, still more crazy [irrsinniger]. (Kafka 1994, pp. 179–80; my translation)

Bibliography

- Benjamin, Walter (1996) *Selected Writings. Volume 1: 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock, Michael Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).
- Böhme, Hartmut (2014) *Fetishism and Culture: A Different Theory of Modernity*, trans. Anna Galt (Berlin & Boston: de Gruyter).
- Codrington, Robert (1891) *The Melanesians: Studies in Their Anthropology and Folklore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Comaroff, John L. and Jean (2009) *Ethnicity, Inc.* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press).
- DeLillo, Don (1984) *White Noise* (New York: Penguin).
- Kafka, Franz (1992) *Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer und andere Schriften aus dem Nachlaß* (Frankfurt: Fischer).
- (1994) *Tagebücher: 1914–1923* (Frankfurt: Fischer).
- Klein, Naomi (2010) *No Logo* (New York: Picador).
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1987) *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, trans. Felicity Baker (London: Routledge).
- Marx, Karl (1977) *Capital, Vol. 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage).

- (2008) *Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Ökonomie. Erster Band* (Berlin: Karl Dietz Verlag).
- Matthews, Sean (2001) “Change and Theory in Raymond Williams’s Structure of Feeling,” *Pretexts: Literary and Cultural Studies* 10, 2:179–94.
- Mauss, Marcel (2001) *A General Theory of Magic*, trans. Robert Brain (London: Routledge).
- Mazzarella, William (2017) *The Mana of Mass Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press).
- Žižek, Slavoj (2016) *Disparities* (London: Bloomsbury).

Home Economics: Why We Treat Objects Like Women

Noam Yuran

1.

Let me propose the shortest definition of capitalism: an economy where “priceless” means “expensive.”

The advantages of this definition can be demonstrated by considering Michael Sandel’s misguided critique of market societies, in *What Money Can’t Buy*. Sandel focuses on the moral challenges posed by the expansion of market logic. The market economy, according to Sandel, generated unprecedented affluence and prosperity. The problem is that the sphere of market relations constantly expands, and seeps “into aspects of life traditionally governed by nonmarket norms” (Sandel 2013, p. 7). Sandel explores a wide variety of new types of goods which raise ethical questions, from selling the right to skip the security check queue at the airport to buying blood donations. Commoditizing things that should not be bought impairs their integrity and authenticity. One can buy today traditional tokens of friendship, such as a wedding toast. Different websites offer standard versions (19.95\$) or a personalized one (149\$). But one cannot really buy a friend: “the money that buys the friendship dissolves it, or turns it into something else” (ibid., p. 94). In short, in contemporary societies “almost everything can be bought and sold” (ibid., p. 5), and the moral challenge is to draw the line between legitimate commodities and things that money cannot or should not buy.

Sandel does not use the term “capitalism” and refers only to the “free-market economy.” Indeed, setting his critique against a broader historical context reveals two complementary misconceptions of capitalism. A historical characterization of capitalism as a distinct economic regime is in truth the mirror image of Sandel’s critique. First, capitalism is an economy where not everything is up for sale. Second, and accordingly, in capitalism what money can’t buy is a fundamental economic category, related not only to extreme and marginal forms of exchange, but to all types of economic conduct. A superficial gaze at the content of advertising would suggest this: all the things we buy, from chewing gums to cars, are related in advertising to what money can’t buy—happiness, sex-appeal, passions, love, adventure, power.

The unimaginable variety of commodities in capitalist economies gave rise to the idea that in capitalism everything can be bought and sold. The correct historical formulation is that in capitalism one can buy an unlimited number of things but not everything, while in pre-capitalist economies one can buy much fewer things but can exchange almost everything.

A society where everything is given to exchange is in fact closer to the anthropological concepts of primitive economy and gift economy. As Marshall Sahlins explained “what are in the received wisdom ‘non-economic’ or ‘exogenous’ conditions are in the primitive reality the very organization of economy” (Sahlins 2017, p. 168). In a primitive reality there is no “outside” to the economy because the circulation of things is entangled with social relations. Exchange also fashions social relationships: “if friends make gifts, gifts make friends” (ibid., p. 169). The exchange of things concerns more than the things exchanged. It maintains friendship, loyalty, honor—things which for us are the epitome of what money can’t buy. Exchange can involve them because from a certain perspective it is a venerable human capacity. The fact that to us these things appear as the antithesis of the world of exchange should thus be considered a fundamental fact about our *means*

of exchange. It suggests that capitalist money has fundamentally transformed the human notion of exchange. Economists refer to money as a neutral means of exchange. The truth is that, for some reason, in capitalism money is a means of the debasement of exchange. In that sense we can speak about “capitalist money,” distinctly different from pre-capitalist forms of money.

Derrida’s quibbling about the gift demonstrates how modern money debases exchange. “Mauss [...] speaks of [potlatch] blithely as ‘gifts exchanged,’” Derrida writes, “[b]ut he never asks the question as to whether gifts can remain gifts once they are exchanged” (Derrida 2017, p. 37). A true gift, to follow Derrida, should be unconditional in the sense that it demands no return. This idea, in fact, makes sense only from a capitalist perspective. If a gift is reciprocated, so our logic would lead us to believe, then what distinguishes it from ordinary, despicable, exchange? What distinguishes it from an everyday monetary purchase which is also reciprocal? What Derrida misses is that the primitive gift may be unconditional *because* it is reciprocated. The reciprocated gift is not just the object given in return, because that object is a token for reciprocity itself. It stands for what to us appears as much bigger than the mere object: loyalty, commitment, friendship, honor. Today, we usually buy gifts with money, which as a means of debasement of exchange indeed threatens their nature as intersubjective gestures (“Ask him what he wants for his birthday,” “Maybe we’ll simply give him money and he’ll decide?”). Yet this problem that haunts gift giving today can be read in the opposite way. It is one instance where money is related to what it can’t buy.¹

¹ The changed nature of exchange can be viewed from the reverse perspective. When Lévi-Strauss demonstrates that even in our own days exchange is not subsumed under utilitarian considerations, he recounts a custom in some lower-priced restaurants in the south of France, which serve a standard meal where wine is included in the price. The diners would complain loudly if they note a trifling slight in the food they had been served. When it comes to wine, their attitude is completely different: “The little bottle may contain exactly one

This brings us to the second error of Sandel. What money can't buy is not a marginal category that results from the expansion of markets. It is in truth a fundamental category of capitalist economy. It is simply the obverse of the fact that money debases exchange. Precisely because not everything can be bought and sold in capitalism, capitalist money is related to what it can't buy no less than to what it can. What money can't buy accompanies both the making and the spending of money. This category emerges in various forms in the attempts to explain the insatiable desire for riches. Weber's thesis about the origin of the capitalist spirit in the protestant ethic is a prime example (see Weber 2001). The Calvinist doctrine of predestination, which unhinged salvation from earthly human conduct, resulted, according to Weber, in an economic practice of seeking systematic profit for its own sake. We should keep in mind, though, that the exclusion of a specific monetary transaction lied at the background of this process: the selling of indulgences by the Catholic Church, which was the immediate cause of Luther's schism. A simplistic reading of Weber: when salvation can no longer be bought it motivates an unconditional striving for wealth.

It may be more indicative that even Adam Smith found it necessary to go beyond the narrow sense of economy to explain riches. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* he asks why people pursue wealth. What the rich really want, he explains, is "[t]o be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation." Smith elaborates also a mental mechanism that drives this search for recognition. It follows from the phenomenon of sympathy, our ability to imagine ourselves in place of others, which lies at the heart of Smith's moral theory.

glassful, yet the contents will be poured out, not into the owner's glass, but into his neighbor's. And his neighbor will immediately make a corresponding gesture of reciprocity" (Lévi-Strauss 1969, p. 58). The point this example actually demonstrates is that today exchange can assume its noble and primitive form when it has no economic significance.

In the case of the rich, however, he invokes a reflexive form of sympathy, namely, the ability to imagine the imaginings of others:

The rich man glories in his riches, because he feels that they naturally draw upon him the attention of the world, and that mankind are disposed to go along with him in all those agreeable emotions with which the advantages of his situation so readily inspire him. At the thought of this, his heart seems to swell and dilate itself within him, and he is fonder of his wealth, upon this account, than for all the other advantages it procures him. The poor man, on the contrary, is ashamed of his poverty. (Smith 2016, p. 23)

In this awkwardly obscene description, Smith models all property on capital. The rich man derives a social surplus pleasure from his property by imagining the imaginings of others of it. Like Marx's concept of financial capital, this property is a "value greater than itself" (Marx 1992, p. 257). The poor man's property, on the contrary, is a value smaller than itself. What's important about this passage is that it did not appear in Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. In his economic thought, Smith laid the foundations for conceptualizing the market as reducible to egoistic individuals. In his moral theory, individuals cannot be egoistic enough. The property of the rich man keeps others both too close and too distant to himself for him to be truly egoistic. The recognition he seeks is what he can't buy: he can only imagine it. Smith touches the colloquial explanation that what the rich *really* want is honor or social status. This idea, however, diverges from the framework that he bequeathed to economic thought. It points to a benefit that wealth affords neither by use nor by exchange, but by holding on to it. Smith's invocation of imaginary social pleasures points at a possible way to distinguish capitalism from pre-capitalist economies. It is not that in capitalism the economy has become disembedded, divorced from society, as the work of Karl Polanyi has suggested. The radical proposal in Smith's argument is that in capitalism the social aspect of goods marks the growing separation of the economy

from the direct satisfactions material objects provide. This may be even more important considering that Smith's economic thought systematically disavows this possibility by focusing on "meat and potatoes."² The social aspect of economic life, as it emerges in his moral thought, is the realm of the incalculable, where things are either greater or smaller than themselves.

The evolution of capitalism in the twentieth century shows that what money can't buy is related not only to riches but is increasingly entangled with everyday consumption. Baudrillard described consumption in late capitalism with an analogy to the Melanesian cargo cult: the consumer "sets in place a whole array of sham objects, of characteristic signs of happiness, and then waits [...] for happiness to alight" (Baudrillard 2016, p. 47). Brands, the typical consumer goods today, confer on this desperate ritual a concrete economic logic, where priceless means expensive. Naomi Klein uses the term "spiritual" to describe branding: "the selling of the brand acquired an extra component that can only be described as spiritual" (Klein 2009, p. 21). This idea makes no sense if we believe that capitalism is an economy where everything is up for sale. Spiritual things, in contrast to material ones, cannot be sold and bought. But that is precisely the meaning of spirituality in branding. It refers to what the material objects we buy are not. These material things are expensive because we pay for what cannot be bought.

2.

What preceded capitalism was not primitive or gift economies but feudal economies. These were already organized around some things that money can't buy, most importantly land and

² To be more precise, Smith models the economy on bread, meat, and beer. Whenever he invokes a general example of exchange, we will meet the same triad: the baker, the brewer, and the butcher.

class status. Sumptuary laws sometimes limited consumption of various goods to specific classes, which renders feudal economies so strange to our eyes. Yet in some respect, feudal economies still exchanged more than us. They still maintained various forms of what Lévi-Strauss saw as the originary moment of exchange, namely, the exchange of wives. That is, marriage in feudal and early modern societies was conceived as an economic arrangement, in the broad sense of the term, and wives were often considered directly or indirectly the property of their husbands.

Stephanie Coontz (2006) summarizes the long process that resulted in the modern form of marriage with the subtitle *How Love Conquered Marriage*. Love emerged as the legitimate motivation for marriage during the nineteenth century. In parallel, an institutional change transformed the legal relationship between husbands and wives. The series of Married Women Property Acts from 1870s England, for example, allowed married women to be the legal owners of property. They put an end to the doctrine of coverture, which stipulated that husband and wife are a unity before the law, and could not possess individual property. As all practical decisions about the joint property of a married couple were entrusted to the husband, the doctrine of coverture was how pre-modern law expressed the age-old meaning of marriage as ownership over women.

The dual form of the transformation in marriage—on the one hand, the rise of love, and on the other hand, a change in property relations—should make the family a starting point for the study of the capitalist form of private property. Somehow in capitalism private property has to do with love. The feminist tradition has found in this articulation a ground for a critique of the discourse of romance. The modern discourse of romantic love, as Shulamith Firestone has marvelously shown, encodes the patriarchal tradition of male domination in new terms, appropriate to liberal societies (Firestone 1971, pp. 146–55). This critique, however, raises also an economic question. How should we conceptualize

private property if marriage carries, through love, a remnant of its patriarchal origin in ownership over women?

Love cannot be bought. The American ritual of the engagement ring is one clear example of the economic meaning of this cliché. The ring symbolizes love through the disavowal of buying, of a purchase of a wife. It represents a calculation that must remain implicit and uncertain (a Google search of the question “How much should I pay for an engagement ring?” brings about more than 150 million results, among the first of which is the page “How much should you REALLY spend on an engagement ring”). If we believe American movies and television shows, the ring aestheticizes price—“it’s so beautiful!” directly meaning “it’s expensive.” It aestheticizes price by disavowing it (it would be unthinkable to give the fiancé the price itself). Money in this context is very different from how economics understands it. It cannot be a vehicle of calculation because it holds a double relation to the ring: money is paid in exchange for the ring and at the same time it is symbolized by it. It is one more concrete manifestation of the meaning of “priceless” as “expensive.” Read literally, “priceless” seems to mean “non-economic”: something for which we are willing to suspend the calculating frame of mind we identify with economy. The fact that it also means “expensive,” suggests that what’s outside the economy of calculation is an economy of skewed calculation.

The engagement ring ritual represents a matrix that accompanies marriage in capitalism. To put it in blunt terms: with the rise of romantic love, marriage becomes haunted by the shadow of prostitution. When marriage is no longer conceived in terms of exchange, pragmatic considerations threaten to cross the line between marriage and prostitution. At the dawn of liberal thought, we find an emphatic warning about this danger in Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote that marrying for a support is “legal prostitution” (Wollstonecraft 1995, p. 21). Viviana Zelizer’s exploration of the entanglement of intimacy and economy provides a good

example of how this threat was reworked in the first decades of the twentieth century. Etiquette manuals from the time pondered over what types of gifts are appropriate for a young woman to receive from her fiancé during their engagement. An appropriate gift, they advised, must not possess any element of usefulness. “He may give her all the jewels he can afford,” Emily Post wrote, “he may give her a fur scarf, but not a fur coat” (Zelizer 2005, p. 111). Even a partially useful gift (a fur coat in contrast to a fur scarf) would imply that the fiancé provides for his bride’s sustenance, and thus cast her “in a category with women of another class.” We may assume that the addressees of Post’s manual were not suspected of being prostitutes or kept women. Her advice therefore shows how a sexual economy becomes embedded in economic objects: how certain goods assume obscene meanings in exchanges between men and women.

There is however a surprising aspect in this sexual economy. Young brides are pleaded to accept only gifts of pure luxury out of concern for their chastity. That is a complete reversal of the long tradition that associated luxury with promiscuity and female desire. In fact, this reversal may be the true meaning of Coontz’s idea that “love conquered marriage.” To see this, we should recall Sombart’s outrageous thesis that the origins of capitalism lie in the rise of the cult of love in the Renaissance. Erotic earthly love, according to Sombart, emerged in the Renaissance as opposed to marriage, and particularly to its institutional nature. When love itself was semi-institutionalized with the rise of a class of courtesans, this opposition acquired an economic meaning, in the practice of luxury gifts given by gentlemen to their concubines. Aristocratic and bourgeois marriages were conceived within a calculating frame of mind, aimed at increasing the economic stability of the household. The luxury gift, in comparison, expressed extra marital-love with the disruption of calculation. The fact that the meaning of luxury could have rotated from promiscuity to chastity reflects therefore a transition in the relation between love

and marriage. No longer a force opposed to marriage, love has become its official language.³ Throughout the change, it maintains its economic expression in disrupted calculation.

The history of marriage is entangled with the history of money. Coontz points out the role that money played in the emergence of the separation between the private and the public sphere with its sexual overtones. The spread in the use of money diminished the part of local barter exchange and household production in the family economy. As late as 1797 Abigail Lyman of Boston could still complain “There is no way of living in this town without cash” (Coontz 2006, p. 154). The growing dependence on money resonated in distinctions between gender roles. It distinguished between male wage labor and the work that women performed at home. It rendered the women’s work non-economic. In a broader context it was reflected in associating women with the conception of the home as a shelter from the world of work. A new conception of femininity was entailed: in place of the traditional Christian image of women as seducers, women appeared as sources of purity and tenderness. What should be added, is that this chain also traces a shift in the status of money. The purity of women represented one more way in which money became filthy. It articulated the debased nature of money in sexual terms. The sexual matrix where wives symbolized domesticity, authenticity, purity and tenderness expresses the specific immorality of capitalist money: the various ways in which money allows us to suspend our cherished self-image and act like jerks.

The abhorrence of prostitution expresses from a reverse perspective the changing moral nature of money. In broad terms, the condemnation of prostitution was detached during the progress of

³ At that historical moment, so it seems, love and marriage are ritualistically orchestrated. Before a woman would marry, and probably be sustained by her husband’s income, she should insist on useless gifts. Something of this logic still informs our gift giving today. A purely practical gift, lacking any element of superfluity, is today reserved to intimate friendships.

capitalism from the realm of sexual ethics to become a cornerstone of money ethics. It is no longer included in the same category with the traditional topics of Christian sexual ethics, such as adultery and fornication. It is abhorred specifically as an exchange of sex for money. In the seventeenth century, the discourse about prostitution still focused on sexuality. As Faramerz Dabhoiwala notes, it was occupied with the promiscuous nature of prostitutes. An extensive report on prostitution by the journalist John Dunton attempted to prove that whores “gave in to their corrupt nature” (Dabhoiwala 2013, p. 154). In the eighteenth century, money entered the discourse. Discussions started to present prostitutes as innocent victims of financial necessity. From now on, money takes part in the corruption of prostitutes, and vice versa, prostitution is the ultimate expression of money as corrupt.

Liberal societies have long left behind the nineteenth century’s superstitions about sex. Yet prostitution is still abhorred. “Whore” is still the most degrading insult directed at women. From whichever perspective we consider it, this abhorrence has to do with money no less than with sex. Progressives are appalled by the humiliation, exploitation and violence toward women in prostitution. But these also result from the ineradicable obscenity of the exchange involved in prostitution. Had the market resembled the way economics presents it, as a mechanism that allocates to every good its correct price, prostitution would have been admired rather than despised. The obscenity of prostitution is the obscenity of capitalist money. It expresses the fact that money in capitalism is involved with ethical prohibitions yet is also the means to transgress these prohibitions. That is why it is all too easy to use “prostitution” as a metaphor for almost anything we do in the context of economy. It is an odd type of metaphor, which cuts through extreme dissimilarity. An example: the need to publish in peer reviewed journals “virtually forces academics to become prostitutes: they sell themselves for money (and a good living). Unlike prostitutes who sell their bodies for money, academics

sell their soul to conform to the will of others” (yeah, right. Frey 2003, p. 206). Nothing in academic life resembles prostitution except the most general notion of “doing something for money or money equivalent.” It could become such a metaphor, because prostitution expresses something about capitalist money.

Capitalist economy is grounded on the liberal creed that a person is the owner of their own body, skills, and labor power. The idea that marriage is a consensual agreement between free individuals is another form of this creed. In a broader historical view, it would be more correct to say that in capitalism marriage was excluded from the sphere of exchange and ownership. Indeed, the rise of romantic love attests that marriage is not truly a consensual agreement between free individuals but a form of persistence of the ancient patriarchal institution of monogamy. It would be naïve to assume that the sphere of exchange itself was not affected by the exclusion of marriage from it. Economics professes this naiveté when it models its theory on meat and potatoes, as if these could have remained the same after marriage was excluded from their social circulation. The capitalist formations of love, marriage, and prostitution suggest that gender relations are not truly external to the economy. Rather, their economy is different from what economics teaches. It is an economy where money is an obscene object: related in either filthy or aestheticized forms to what it cannot buy. Its obscenity has direct economic significance. It marks moments where instead of supporting a framework of all-encompassing calculation, money upsets its possibility. This economy may not be confined to marriage, as all goods today can be somehow eroticized. In the *Arcades Project* Benjamin wrote: “Under the domination of the commodity fetish, the sex appeal of the woman is more or less tinged with the appeal of the commodity” (Benjamin 2002, p. 345). That would be read as a truly misogynistic remark, unless its underlying meaning was its opposite. It is the commodities that are feminized—as one look at advertising would confirm—thus embodying what money can’t

buy. The question is, what type of economic theory can account for money as an obscene object. What would be an economic theory that is specific to capitalism?

3.

Two eighteenth century texts that mark the birth of modern economic thought circle that question: its official beginning in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, and the obscene precursor, Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*. Both texts must be read together because they revolve around a similar idea, the notion of economy as a system where individuals' selfish acts contribute to collective welfare. Smith called this idea "the invisible hand." Mandeville called it "private vices, public benefits."

The most conspicuous difference between them is the delineation of economy, the topics they include within the scope of their studies. Smith set the tone for classical economic thought's interest in production and its social organization through the market. Mandeville's economy has more diffuse boundaries. Alongside his most remembered defense of luxury consumption and importation, we find questions which seem remote from economics, such as why virgins blush when they hear obscene words (Mandeville 1957, p. 65). But even his more standard economic claims about work, trade, and consumption are often entangled with sexual issues: love, marriage, and prostitution. He is most interested in the infiltrations between them: prostitution is necessary to "preserve the Hounor of our Wives and Daughters" (ibid., p. 96), and vice versa, virtuous women unknowingly increase the demand for prostitution (ibid., p. 95).

Reading Smith alongside Mandeville demonstrates the implications of the question whether sex and the family are included in the concept of economy. Despite the superficial similarity between them, Mandeville's inclusion of these resulted in a completely

different theory. A good entry point to explore the difference is the question of luxury. Mandeville presents luxury as suffused with vices and affects, such as envy, shame, vanity, and pride, yet argued that it is absolutely necessary for a thriving economy. The corrupt luxuries of the rich, he repeatedly writes, provide work to millions of the poor. Smith, by contrast, resents luxury. He does acknowledge that in some sense of the term all goods in European economies are luxuries. The effects of the day laborer, he writes, appear to us as extremely simple and coarse, “and yet it may be true, perhaps, that the accommodation of an European prince does not always so much exceed that of an industrious and frugal peasant, as the accommodation of the latter exceeds that of many an African king, the absolute masters of the lives and liberties of ten thousand naked savages” (Smith 2007, p. 8). We cannot see that the peasant’s humble accommodation is in fact luxury. That is exactly what draws Smith’s interest to it. It is luxury that lacks the social quality of luxury, namely, its visual conspicuousness. When it comes to explicit luxury, Smith associates it with barrenness: “Luxury, in the fair sex, while it inflames, perhaps, the passion for enjoyment, seems always to weaken, and frequently to destroy altogether, the powers of generation” (ibid., p. 52).

Two contesting views of the economy as a system quarrel around the status of luxury. Smith inaugurated the idea that a system means balance of some kind. This basic meaning of “system” precedes theorizing, as evidenced by the fact that it persisted through the comprehensive shift between classical and neoclassical economics. Mandeville developed a different idea of system: not only an imbalanced system but one that reproduces itself through its imbalance. Different choices of the substance that runs through the system are at stake in this contestation.

Smith’s system was composed of labor. His theoretical aim was to go beyond the visible aspect of the economy in exchanges of money and goods to the underlying social organization of labor. That meant that his theory, *in principle*, ignored both money and

goods. On the one hand, money expresses only the nominal price of goods. Their real price is the labor invested in their production. On the other hand, because goods stand for investments of labor, their concrete thingness is inconsequential for theory. His moralistic anxiety about luxury, therefore, reflects also a theoretical motivation. Luxury is too much of a thing to be incorporated in a thingless theory. It would force the economist to distinguish between types of things. What neoclassical economics inherited from Smith despite the theoretical revolution it launched is precisely this inherent blindness to both goods and money. Goods are now represented in theory by “utility,” the quantity of subjective satisfaction, enjoyment, or desire that a thing evokes (it doesn’t matter which subjective term we use, as long as we concede that it is only one). Basing theory on utility means that economics cannot inquire into goods. From the neoclassical perspective, the question of what is in a thing that causes us satisfaction or enjoyment is not an economic question. This enjoyment is measured by the price we are willing to pay for the thing, which means money is indeed only a measure. To go back to Smith, the economy in his view is a system because it is balanced. The prices of goods always gravitate to their real price. The prices of labor, rent and capital gravitate to their natural level in a given society. The most important form of balance is, of course, the invisible hand that guarantees that when a person worries solely for his own benefit, he unintentionally promotes the benefit of society. It is important to recall it again, because it essentially means that the economy is *not* a system, or is such only in a weak sense of the term. What it means is that individuals are not affected by their being in the economy. They go on minding their own business as if the system was not there, and the system guarantees that everybody’s efforts work for the better. It is not a system if by that we mean something that changes the units that comprise it.

At this point Mandeville clearly differs. In his work, economy is a system precisely because it puts individuals out of balance. The

stuff of economic life—goods entangled with envy, shame, pride, vanity, and lust—is for Mandeville a way of being in a market economy. Those vices and affects constitute porous individuals, for whom others are simultaneously too close and too distant, practically under their skin. For that reason, the virgins who blush at the sound of obscene words belong to his economic inquiry: they blush because they are afraid that someone will reckon that they understand them. This porousness of individuals is at the heart of Mandeville’s treatment of more standard economic topics. It sustains a system of imbalance grounded in luxury. Mandeville sketches a constantly moving social ladder where everyone strives to imitate those above them and distance themselves from those below. The poorest laborer’s wife in the parish will “half starve herself and her Husband to purchase a secondhand Gown and Petticoat.” Shopkeepers imitate merchants. The merchant’s wife, “who cannot bear the Assurance of those Mechanicks, flies for refuge to the other End of the Town.” At the court, the women of quality are aghast: “this Impudence of the City, they cry, is intolerable.” The chain goes on until “at last the Prince’s great Favourites [...] are forc’d to lay out vast Estates in pompous Equipages, magnificent Furniture, sumptuous Gardens and princely Palaces.” While style moves upwards, some money flows downwards, because the construction of those palaces “sets the Poor to Work” (Mandeville 1956, pp. 115–16).⁴ What Mandeville describes here is a system governed by inherent imbalance. Economy in his work is a system because of its imbalance.

It is not their views on human nature or society that differentiate Mandeville and Smith. The root of the difference lies in the substance they choose to describe the economy. Economy in Mandeville is a system of imbalance because it is made of money rather than labor. It is grounded on the simplest economic intuition that money spent by someone is money received by someone

⁴ That’s “trickle-down economics” without the moralistic disguise.

else. That is how luxury consumption of the rich employs the poor, and it means that labor in this theory is a secondary effect of movements of money and their parallel passions. Mandeville's thought thus provides an antithesis to the orthodox economic concept of money as neutral means. It is grounded rather on the notion that money is an obscene object. His ongoing provocation boils down to the obscenity of money. It is a "gross Error," he writes, to believe that what counts as virtue in private contexts is beneficial to the public. Consider who really contributes to it:

It is the sensual Courtier that sets no Limits to his Luxury; the Fickle Strumpet that invents new Fashions every Week; the haughty Dutchess that in Equipage, Entertainments, and all her Behaviour would imitate a Princess; the profuse Rake and lavish Heir, that scatter about their Money without Wit or Judgment, buy every thing they see, and either destroy or give it away the next Day; the Covetous and perjur'd Villain that squeez'd an immense Treasure from the Tears of Widows and Orphans, and left the Prodigals the Money to spend. (Mandeville 1956, p. 224)

This long list is not a vindication of evils as necessary for a healthy society. It is survey of the multifarious forms of the obscenity of money. The whole list is about money, as a medium that transubstantiates evils into goods. His absorption in detail reveals what Mandeville can see that Smith can't: his focus on money allows him to look into goods, to present them as effects of money movements.

Marriage in Mandeville is one of the sources of the systematically imbalanced economy:

I can make it evident, that with or without Prostitutes, nothing could make amends for the Detriment Trade would sustain, if all those of that Sex, who enjoy the happy State of Matrimony, should act and behave themselves as a sober wise Man could wish them. (Mandeville 1956, p. 161)

The economy demands that wives deviate from the official expectations of them. If they adhere to their husbands' demands for modesty and frugality, the calamity to the nation would be worse than the "death of half a million people." Obscene money articulates sexual roles and desires.

Obviously, one would hesitate to borrow from Mandeville to understand contemporary economy. But the general theoretical outline he proposed may be useful: a conception of money as obscene allows, on the one hand, to incorporate the family into the theory, and on the other, to conceive of economy as inherently imbalanced.⁵

4.

Marx's concept of surplus value is a systematic development of the disruptive power of money in capitalism. Marx follows through the classical economic idea that labor is the source of value. He accepts that, in principle, everything can be exchanged according to its value. And yet the capitalist economic system is inherently imbalanced: precisely when only equivalent values are exchanged, capital accumulates surplus value. This surplus is the difference between the value of labor power, sold as one more commodity,

⁵ Eventually, economics did turn its gaze back to the family, but it did so as the consummation of the neoclassical revolution in the approach of "economic imperialism," which asserts that economic concepts can be applied to all aspects of human behavior. The result is more vulgar than obscene: "According to the economic approach," Gary Becker writes, "a person decides to marry when the utility expected from marriage exceeds that expected from remaining single or from additional search for a more suitable mate" (Becker 1976, p. 10). The problem with this idea is not that it dismisses love. Since "utility" is an indefinitely flexible concept it can easily comprise the joy we get from being with the person we love. The bigger problem is that it ignores the difference between marriage and prostitution. This outcome was inevitable from the moment that economics established that humans are driven by a singular motive.

and the value which that labor creates. A theory grounded on the notion of balance is disrupted once family, sex, and money in their capitalist forms are incorporated into it: on the one hand, the reproduction of life (the value needed for the reproduction of the laborer and of the labor force in general), and on the other hand, the circulation of capital, which is defined as a series of exchanges beginning and ending with money.

In Marx's early writings, the concept of capital is foreshadowed in what can be called a social phenomenology of money. Regarding "the power of money" we read: "*I am ugly*, but I can buy for myself the most beautiful of women. Therefore, *I am not ugly*" (Marx 1988, p. 138). Here, money still carries human desires, which would disappear in Marx's mature concept of capital as a non-human subject. There, the only desire that the capitalist can have is to comply with capital's drive to accumulate itself. His "subjective purpose" is "the objective content of the circulation [...]—the valorization of value." The capitalist is not a person, but "capital personified and endowed with consciousness and a will." The earlier formulation may describe the capitalist had he been a human. What he shares with capital is the drive not simply for more money, but for more *than* money—the drive that in non-human capital is formulated negatively: "Use values must therefore never be treated as the immediate aim of the capitalist; nor must the profit on any single transaction" (Marx 1976, pp. 244–45). The modern corporation is the direct embodiment of non-human capital. The super-rich entrepreneurs, who are never ugly, are capital with a human face.

For an accurate economic analysis of what money can't buy we should turn, however, to the work of Thorstein Veblen. We need for that purpose to distinguish between two of his concepts that are often grouped together, namely "conspicuous leisure" and "conspicuous consumption." Both concepts refer to the display of advantage or superiority, which according to Veblen is the ulterior principle of private property in all its forms. They differ mainly

in the means of display, either through practices (conspicuous leisure) or through things (conspicuous consumption).

Conspicuous leisure characterizes mainly class societies, and it comprises the various markers of class distinctions. These markers are as a rule non-material, because their principal aim is the display of abstinence from productive work, which usually does not leave material evidence. For that purpose, they include practices which attest to past leisure. Intricate decorum, hunting and sports, acquisition of esoteric knowledge, and other habits which demand investment of non-productive efforts, provide evidence that one is free from the necessity to work for one's living. In the world of conspicuous leisure Veblen finds the best evidence for his speculation about the origin of private property in ownership over women. The lifestyle of aristocracy encodes in a refined manner this barbaric origin. Women's dress, for example, is considered elegant the more it makes work impossible for its wearer (Veblen 2007, p. 113). It manifests thus the "vicarious leisure" that a wife consumes for the reputability of the head of the household.

Conspicuous consumption is a more recent phenomenon. It is a display of a more specific type of advantage, namely wealth, and the means of this display are objects rather than practices. Objects of conspicuous consumption display their owner's wealth by making their expensiveness manifest. Writing near the end of the nineteenth century, Veblen notes that conspicuous consumption is becoming the dominant mode of display, at the expense of conspicuous leisure. There is a clear reason for this. In the urban environments of industrial societies, the addressees of display are not only one's acquaintances. Display is aimed also at strangers whose "transient good opinion" is nonetheless important for one's self-complacency. "The only practicable means of impressing one's pecuniary ability on these unsympathetic observers of one's everyday life is an unrelenting demonstration of ability to pay" (*ibid.*, pp. 60–61).

One can easily see that conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption describe two important cultural-economic personae, namely, old money and new money. The difference between them is the most precise economic definition of what money can't buy. The *nouveau riche* can acquire objects of conspicuous consumption, but they cannot imitate the practices of conspicuous leisure. That is the central theme of the cultural representations of old and new money. Something in the behavior of the parvenu will always give away their misunderstanding of the secret codes of high society. Their vulgarity, however, is not a merely cultural fact but an economic one. To follow Veblen, the demeanor of old money is inimitable because to attest to leisure it comprised of habits and skills that necessitate cultivation. A real historical process lies at the background of cultural representations of old and new money. During the rise of the bourgeoisie, imitation of the aristocracy played an active role in shaping consumption (Berg 2007). The cultural representations of old and new money—from Molière's *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* to Wharton's *House of Mirth*—point at a paradoxical driving force behind this process. Imitation of aristocracy is aimed at the inimitable. In economic terms, what such works suggest is that the *nouveau riche*'s ultimate desire is structured around what money can't buy. They want more money because they want more than money. The rise of conspicuous consumption, which parallels the rise of the bourgeoisie, might be understood as a process through which class distinctions are gradually mapped into monetary distinctions. That is a partial conclusion following from Veblen. More importantly, during the few centuries of the coexistence of conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption, bourgeoisie and aristocracy, money is constantly accompanied by more than money: vulgar new money, and aestheticized old money.

This reading of Veblen is confirmed by the emergence of substitute representatives of what money can't buy, not outside of consumption, but within it. Sometime during the twentieth

century, conspicuous leisure has all but dissolved. Some forms of leisure manifest superficial resemblance to it: luxurious vacations, yacht cruises, spas, dedication to a healthy lifestyle. These are in fact derivatives of conspicuous consumption, and thus evidence that leisure was fully absorbed into consumption. However, contemporary society has formed a distinct inheritor of the leisure class. It is marked by the cool attitude, which according to Dick Pountain and David Robins is “becoming the dominant ethic of late consumer capitalism” (Pountain and Robins 2000, p. 28). Like the culture of conspicuous leisure, the cool attitude rests on inimitability. As Pountain and Robins describe it, cool is “the art of making the difficult appear effortless” (ibid., p. 122). Moreover, like conspicuous leisure, cool maintains a secret code, distinguishing insiders from outsiders: “describing something [...] as ‘cool’ rather than ‘swell’ or ‘dandy’ makes the statement [...] that the person who utters it is Cool and not a nerd or a conformist” (ibid., pp. 30–31). Cool is judgmental and exclusive: “it can ultimately define itself only by excluding what is Uncool” (ibid., p. 24).

Because cool incorporates an element of defiance against accepted norms and tastes, it was enthusiastically embraced by late capitalist advertising and marketing. The fact that declaring something “cool” implies that other things are demoted to the status of “uncool” is most useful to a post-Fordist profit regime based on an increased rate of obsolescence and changes of fashion. In *The Conquest of Cool*, Thomas Frank (1997) goes so far as arguing that the cool attitude was fashioned by the creative revolution in advertising in the 1960s no less than by the counterculture movement. Adam Arvidsson argues that the production of cool goods is one of the central techniques of branding. Trend spotting firms employ young informers to predict the erratic movement of cool taste. Interestingly enough, they rely not on the most popular teens but on those whose social status is questioned, i.e., those “who have a motivation to constantly stay at the top of the field” (Arvidsson 2006, p. 82).

The economy of cool proves that it is indeed the inheritor of old money and conspicuous leisure in a world where they have become obsolete. It concretizes what money can't buy. Buying a cool object, we pay for what we cannot have. The fact that we buy it is precisely what makes it uncool. When conspicuous leisure was still alive, what money couldn't buy referred to the difference between things and practices. Late capitalism somehow inscribed what money can't buy into the world of commodities as things that money buys.

Cool entails a new function of private property: personal effects that insult their possessor. The lines of people camping overnight outside an Apple store, waiting for the release of a new model, are a good example of this insult. How can we understand this idiocy? Why wait a whole night if, after a couple of days, you can simply enter the store and buy the thing? In truth, they simply strive to fulfill the promise embedded in the iPhone brand to be unique individuals by owning it. The only way to really be an owner of an iPhone, even if for the shortest time span, is to wait through the night to have it before everyone else around has it. Smith suggested that the poor man's property inflicts shame on him. Today, even desirable property can do it.

Bibliography

- Arvidsson, Adam (2006) *Brands: Meaning and Value in Media Culture* (London: Routledge).
- Baudrillard, Jean (2016) *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, trans. C. T. (London: Sage).
- Becker, Gary S. (1976) *The Economic Approach to Human Behavior* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press).
- Benjamin, Walter (2002) *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap).
- Berg, Maxine (2005) *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

- Coontz, Stephanie (2006) *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (London: Penguin).
- Dabhoiwala, Faramerz (2013) *The Origins of Sex: A History of the First Sexual Revolution* (London: Penguin).
- Derrida, Jacques (2017) *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press).
- Firestone, Shulamith (1971) *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Bantam Books).
- Frank, Thomas (1998) *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press).
- Frey, Bruno S. (2003) "Publishing as Prostitution? Choosing between One's Own Ideas and Academic Success," *Public Choice* 116, 1–2:205–23.
- Klein, Naomi (2009) *No Logo: 10th Anniversary Edition* (London: Picador).
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1969) *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. James Harle Bell, John Richard von Sturmer, and Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press).
- Mandeville, Bernard (1957) *The Fable of the Bees, or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits, With a Commentary Critical, Historical and Explanatory by F. B. Kaye* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Marx, Karl (1976) *Capital, Vol. 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin).
- (1988) *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*, trans. Martin Milligan (Amherst: Prometheus Books).
- Polanyi, Karl (2001) *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press).
- Pountain, Dick, and David Robins (2000) *Cool Rules: Anatomy of an Attitude* (London: Reaktion Books).
- Sahlins, Marshall (2017) *Stone Age Economics* (London: Routledge).
- Sandel, Michael J. (2013) *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux).
- Smith, Adam (2007) *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Hampshire: Harriman House).

- (2016) *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Los Angeles: Enhanced Media Publishing).
- Sombart, Werner (1967) *Luxury and Capitalism*, trans. W. R. Dittmar (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press).
- Weber, Max (2001) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge).
- Wollstonecraft, Mary (1995) *A Vindication of the Rights of Men and A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Sylvana Tomaselli (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press).
- Zelizer, Viviana A. (2005) *The Purchase of Intimacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

Reflections on the Me Too Movement and Its Philosophy

Jean-Claude Milner

The importance of the Harvey Weinstein case far exceeds the outbreak of emotion that it provoked. In truth it concerns the general representation of sexual relations. In short, a paradigm change originated from it. The Me Too movement is both a consequence and a symptom of that change.

1) The Origin and Structure of the Me Too Movement

There have been many sexual scandals in the history of Hollywood. But they have been considered violations of a generally accepted standard of conduct. In an indirect way, they confirmed that rape was not the rule but an all too frequent exception. In the Weinstein case, on the contrary, the scandal was not that the rule had been infringed upon, but that the rule itself had been reversed. Rape was the rule, not the exception. Moreover, that situation was not considered a singularity of the film industry; it followed from the very structure of the sexual act. It revealed the true nature of what goes on between human beings whenever they engage in sexual activity: not only in Hollywood, not only in the United States, but everywhere. The “Me Too” label is in itself significant: the word *too* implies a mechanism of indefinite addition. It means that every human being may in the past have

been or may in the future become a victim of the same sexual rule that allowed Harvey Weinstein and others to act as they did.

Although the Weinstein case and the Me Too movement are of universal significance, it is not surprising that they should take place in the United States. U.S. history began with a struggle against what the European-born immigrants considered to be savagery. Nature was to be domesticated; the natives were quickly identified as savages and exterminated as such. Yet when those tasks had been accomplished, it appeared in the twentieth century that there remained one dark area where savagery still prevailed: sexual life. If U.S. society wanted to remain faithful to its founding principles, it needed to civilize that last remainder of brutal animality. Complete equality between men and women, political correctness in everyday practices, prohibition of microaggressions—such a program seemed both necessary and sufficient to reduce sexual savagery.

Western Europe was somehow slow on the uptake. For a long time, it was convinced that it had already perfected a definitive model of civilization; what had begun with Quattrocento Humanism had reached its peak at the beginning of the twentieth century. Admittedly, the two world wars destroyed most of its achievements. Yet nothing essential needed to be added to the model itself, especially in sexual matters. The task was merely to restore what had been lost. U.S. society, on the contrary, conceived of civilization as a work in progress. The European model was only a point of departure, especially in sexual matters. For that reason, sexual reformation became one of the main concerns of U.S. theoretical and practical reflection. Society thus remained faithful to the creed to which it had adhered since the beginnings of its history: savagery must be reduced not only at a collective level, but also between individuals and even in the mind of every individual. In this domain, U.S. thinkers took the lead starting in the 1960s; European culture had to follow.

Yet the Weinstein case showed also that political correctness and the banishment of microaggressions had failed. The liberal and

feminist activists had not adequately considered the continuing reality of macroaggressions. In fact, far from being a continuation of feminism, Me Too implies a harsh criticism of its main tenets and a veiled contempt for its figureheads. The Weinstein case, in particular, seemed to establish that the ideology of political correctness had been just that: an ideology, which proved radically ineffective against the reality of sexual savagery. The insistence on microaggressions had led to the neglect of macroaggressions. The question to be raised did not concern the collateral effects of sexual life or its surface structure; rather, it involved the deep structure of sexual life and the core of its structure, namely coitus. Although such discussions had already taken place in feminist literature, they had been confined to academic circles. According to Me Too, the decisive battlefield was no longer the campus; it was, rather, public opinion. The utility of clever articles and brilliant books belonged to the past. Mass media and social networks were more important. The question of coitus needed to be raised bluntly; in order to do that, uneducated lesser celebrities of the Internet were preferable to the icons of Women's Studies.

In truth, the Me Too movement seemed almost immediately to oscillate between two conceptions. At first, the center of the scandal was sexual violence *per se*. Admittedly, Harvey Weinstein had the power to promote or destroy the careers of the women whom he used, but that fact was the auxiliary condition enabling him to exert a constraint without ever fearing to be caught or denounced. It was not the defining factor. In a second period, it appeared that the central fact was, on the contrary, the way Harvey Weinstein misused the professional position he occupied; while his almost unlimited power was deemed acceptable as long as it benefited the film industry, it became shameful once it became the means to satisfy personal sexual appetites. The sexual dimension added, of course, to the gravity of the crime; but the real scandal lay in the infringement of a professional rule.

In fact, there are two faces of the movement. One could be called the sexual Me Too movement; the other could be called

the “professionalist” Me Too movement. It is the first that had an almost universal echo around the world, as well as followers in countries where the professional structures are completely different from those prevailing in the U.S. Yet the second movement seems to have gained recent prominence in the U.S., thereby forsaking the universality of its beginnings.¹

Precisely on account of its universal appeal, the sexual Me Too movement deserves a special attention. I shall focus my examination on its intellectual implications. Whatever may have happened afterwards, one novelty is undeniable: with unprecedented intensity, the movement has publicly and extensively raised the question of coitus.

2) Historical Data about the Sexual Act's Conceptions

Historically, coitus had been conceived in two different ways: either as the fusion of two bodies into one or as the use of one body by another. The main difference between the two models resides in the status of unity and duality. Fusion demands that two bodies become one, if only for an instant; use allows two bodies to remain, until the end, separate and distinct.² A common example of fusion is the incorporation of food; once digested, bread or water becomes an element in the eater's or drinker's body. Two become One. On the other hand, the user of a tool and the tool itself are equally separate at the beginning as at the end of the process. Duality is irreducible.

Plato adopted the paradigm of fusion but had to devise a stratagem to deal with it, since he was convinced that the fusion of two bodies was impossible; thus, he substituted souls for bodies.

¹ I am grateful to Prof. Daniel Heller-Roazen for having pointed out to me the importance of the “professionalist” approach.

² A more detailed study is to be found in Milner 2018.

The fusion of souls was supposed to overcome the defects of the physical act. The Latin poet and philosopher Lucretius was also convinced of the essential impossibility of sexual fusion; but as an Epicurean he rejected Plato's strategy of substitution. In the fourth book of the *De Rerum Natura*, written in the first century before the Christian era, he expounds the darkest possible doctrine of coitus. Its imaginary goal is fusion, but this goal cannot be reached; sexual partners' moans and physical efforts prove that they are lost in the pursuit of an illusion. Because the most obvious example of a successful fusion is the incorporation of food, the partners seek to bite each other's flesh or to drink each other's fluids; but they immediately grasp that such tactics never succeed. Lucretius concludes that there is no such thing as sexual pleasure; even between the most beautiful and loving bodies, coitus results in suffering and disappointment. In the fruitless quest for the impossible, it cannot avoid the constant risk of brutality, savagery even.

Lucretius's poem must have shocked its contemporary readers. That may explain why it was lost until the Renaissance. Even after the text had been rediscovered, its doctrine of coitus was not often taken into account. Kant is a major exception. Although he does not quote Lucretius's name, he adopts his views. Moreover, he renders explicit the Latin poet's underlying axiom: in 1798, Kant states openly: "carnal enjoyment is *cannibalistic* in principle (even if not always in effect)" (Kant 1996, p. 127).³

In Lucretius as in Kant, the relation is symmetrical. Each partner is as brutal and animalistic as the other. There is no difference, in this respect, between male and female. While the two approaches share this essential similarity, they differ, however,

³ The statement belongs to an appendix to the *Doctrine of Right*, Remark 3, added in 1798 to the second edition of *The Metaphysics of Morals*; the first edition had been published in 1796. It should be kept in mind that *The Metaphysics of Morals* is divided into two parts, the *Doctrine of Right* and the *Doctrine of Virtue*.

on one crucial issue. Lucretius adheres to one paradigm and one alone, namely the fusion of two bodies into one: there is no overcoming its impossibility; there is no remedy for the radical savagery and eventual dissatisfaction of coitus. Kant, on the contrary, combines the two paradigms of fusion and of use; moreover, the latter is conceived as a solution to the cannibalistic tendency of the former.

According to Kant, the male partner uses some parts of the female's body and the female partner uses some parts of the male's body (*The Doctrine of Right*, §§ 22–27; *ibid.* pp. 69–70). Although Kant does not consider homosexual relations, his analysis could easily be extended to them. Cannibalism is avoided because the user does not seek the destruction of the tool that he or she is using. There is, however, a price to pay. Each partner negates his or her own humanity. For two reasons: a) each partner treats himself or herself and the other as a mere thing; b) each partner lowers himself or herself and the other to the position of user of another human being. Each partner negates their own humanity by negating the humanity of the other.

The solution to this difficulty lies in the contractual form. Each partner gives his or her explicit consent; both give it freely and simultaneously. Each of the partners acts as a free subject at the very moment when a part of their body is put to use; each of them treats the other as a free subject at the very moment when they use the other's body. Both partners agree to be treated simultaneously and symmetrically as passive things and as free moral subjects. Provided neither of them forgets the terms of the contract, the radical savagery of coitus is successfully overcome.

Many commentators have considered these views as hopelessly obsolete or even laughable. But in present day reality, many countries have revived the Kantian approach. The only significant modification involves marriage. Kant held that free consent should be given once and for all; thus, he argued that the sole institution that materializes it adequately is monogamous marriage. Today,

marriage is deemed neither necessary nor sufficient; free consent should be given explicitly by both partners—whether married or not—before *every* single action viewed as sexual, be it coitus, a simple kiss, or even a glance. The Scandinavian countries, in particular, have much confidence in this type of social regulation. In the absence of a document signed by both parties, all types of sexual action should be considered as attempted rape.

3) Marx's Criticism of the Contractual Form in General

Such confidence in contractual form cannot be considered self-evident. Marx, for instance, raised radical objections against it. The first book of *Capital* is devoted to a close analysis of the labor contract. It endeavors to show that such a contract only appears to be symmetrical; in reality, it is based on irreducible asymmetry. The worker may seem free to sell his labor time in the same way the employer is free to hire the worker. Yet there is a difference: the worker has to sell his labor-power in order to survive, while the employer reckons only with the question of profit. Survival and profit cannot be considered symmetrical. Although Marx emphasized the specificity of the labor contract—that is, surplus value—his approach far exceeds the sphere of labor.⁴ It raises a general question: Is a contract between human beings ever symmetrical?

Curiously, Kant himself provides an example that validates Marx's doubts. After having pointed to the cannibalistic nature of sexual intercourse, he adds: "Whether something is *consumed* by mouth and teeth, or whether the woman is consumed by

⁴ I am leaving aside the details of the theory of surplus value, although I am adhering to it. The notion of surplus value belongs to the specific analysis of human labor, while my purpose here is to consider only the general notions of contract and of usage.

pregnancy and the perhaps fatal delivery resulting from it, or the man by exhaustion of his sexual capacity from the woman's frequent demands upon it, the difference is merely in the manner of enjoyment" (Kant 1996, p. 127). Obviously, both men and women are considered "equally" at risk. No one would deny the accuracy of Kant's assessment of the mortal dangers of pregnancy and childbirth. But the man's "exhaustion of his sexual capacity from the woman's frequent demands upon it" does not lay claim to such certainty. The modern reader can hardly suppress a smile; but it is interesting to note that in the nineteenth century, reactions must have been similar. For instance, when *The Metaphysics of Morals* was partially published in English under the title *The Philosophy of Law*, the translator conveniently suppressed these lines (Kant 1887, p. 239). They are not only subject to ridicule; they also reveal the impossibility of equating the dangers that women and men undergo. Exactly as with workers and employers, there is no common measure. What is at stake for women is a matter of life and death (this was especially true in 1798, but it remains true today); what is at stake for men is, at most, a matter of comfort and longevity.

Kant relied on contractual form because it enabled him to regulate the use-model. Marx criticized the contractual form, but he also analyzed the use-relation itself. His conception of use-value must be taken into account.⁵ To make use of a knife, the user must master the knife; this much holds for all types of tools. It also holds for the use of a human being's body by another human being. As long as they make use of somebody or something, users master those or that which they use. But then the relevant relation is nothing but domination. Whenever use is involved, domination is at stake. The labor contract is a case in

⁵ The essential passages are to be found in the opening chapters of *Capital*, Vol. 1. Cf. the section entitled "The Two Factors of the Commodity: Use-Value and Value" (Marx 1990, pp. 125–31).

point. It is unequal in two distinct ways: a) it is unequal because it is a contract, and all contracts are asymmetrical; b) it is also unequal because it involves use, and use always entails domination. Between a user and an inanimate tool, domination may not necessarily imply social domination of the user over the tool; it need not be expressed in terms of power. But between two human beings, domination immediately takes on a social character, opposing a socially (and sometimes physically) stronger being to a socially weaker being.

From this point of view, Kant's solution becomes irrelevant, because there is no such thing as a reciprocal domination. No one may be both strong and weak from the same point of view and at a single time. Of course, there may be successive periods where dominance changes its orientation. The former master may become the servant and the former servant may become the master; but it is impossible to conceive of a simultaneous combination of opposite roles. Analogously, an individual may dominate another in one respect, while he or she is dominated in another. But in the Kantian conception, opposite roles must be defined in exactly the same terms at the same moment. That requirement is crucial; and, according to Marx's analysis, it is impossible to fulfill.

Consequently, Kant's approach is weakened on two accounts. First, Kant's belief in the symmetrical nature of contracts is rejected as an illusion. No contract is symmetrical, because what is at stake for one party and what is at stake for the other always differ radically; but in a social context (and a contract between human beings is immediately social), difference entails inequality. In all contracts, one partner loses (or wins) more than the other. Second, the relation of use in itself implies a certain type of domination. Between two human beings, domination is the domination of the weaker by the stronger.

Of course, Marx's approach does not mention the sexual act, yet, although it was conceived as a criticism of political economy, its relevance is much wider. Many discussions of the sexual act

are in fact based on claims easily translatable into Marxian terms. The protests following the Weinstein case are a prime example. Admittedly, Marx's theory does not seem to have been a source of inspiration for the leaders of the Me Too movement, but that does not affect the logical analogy of the arguments.

4) The Weinstein Case and the Theory of Contract

One must not underestimate the situation that prevailed at the end of the twentieth century. After a long struggle, the liberal conception of society had achieved an almost complete victory. In Western societies, it was generally acknowledged that mutual consent offers the best possible basis for human relationships, not only from an ethical point of view, but also in terms of material success. The most adequate expression of mutual consent was thought to be contract, rather than law. Even among intellectuals, where the Marxian objections had been taken into account for a long time, the liberal approach began to be accepted as an undisputed point of departure. In the U.S. especially, the primacy of mutual consent seemed beyond doubt, especially in sexual matters. All types of asymmetry between stronger and weaker human beings could thus be resolved.

The Weinstein case exploded these beliefs. In the very country where mutual consent defined the ultimate rule, it appeared that its social effectiveness was next to nil where sexual relations were concerned. For these relations are *always* based on inequality. That structure is so general that mutual consent loses any significance. Admittedly, most of Weinstein's victims had not given their consent; but some of them had done so. When their testimony was challenged, they explained that their so-called acceptance followed from the risks that they ran if they refused. In more general terms, even if the weaker party gives his or her consent, that acceptance does not compensate for his or her relative weakness. In the labor

contract, the workers may seem to give their free consent; their structural weakness, however, remains the determining factor for their acceptance. The same is true of the so-called sexual contract.

It is legitimate to draw general conclusions from the Weinstein case. The sexual act constitutes the material basis of existence for all types of human societies. If it is essentially unequal, then that inequality may extend to all types of relationships in a given society. A general analysis of social inequality can then be developed; it will be analogous to Marx's analysis, except that it will find its point of departure in the sexual relation rather than the labor contract. This type of analysis did not begin with the Weinstein case. During the 1960s, it was widespread among intellectuals; but in that period Marxist theory was well known. Its approach could easily be applied to the analysis of sexual relationships. Such an approach was conceived as an extension of Marxism.

With the Weinstein case, we have the reverse: the reflection begins with sexual inequality and social analysis is no more than an extension of it. Moreover, reflection about sexual relations is not confined to intellectual circles; on the contrary, it started as a massive reaction of the so-called silent majority, which suddenly ceased to remain silent. Consequently, it would be imprudent to suppose that the analogies with Marx's doctrine were common knowledge among the followers of the Me Too movement. Even the rejection of the contractual model is not always explicit. Instead, the reference to patriarchy is deemed sufficient to characterize the type of society that allowed Weinstein and others to act as they did.

Me Too is indeed a mass phenomenon. While the creation of an academic field of Women's Studies could be considered an important victory for feminism, the consequences of the Weinstein case exceeded the limits of what could be called the intellectual *bourgeoisie*. Some icons of earlier feminism are rather severe with Me Too; the Me Too movement, for its part, is quite indifferent to their criticisms and generally does not seek justification in theoretical works by earlier feminists. But that does not mean that there

are no conceptual claims in the movement. On the contrary, even though they may not be explicit, these claims can be specified. They may be combined to form a doctrine, or rather a *philosophy*.

5) *The Philosophy of the Sexual Me Too Movement*

The most important of these claims concerns the opposition between the weak and the strong. First of all, the reason for which the contractual form is ineffective lies in the fact that there is no just contract where one party is weaker than the other. Such is the case in sexual relations. Second, weakness and strength are not descriptive qualities; they are, rather, structural. It may happen that the structurally weaker party appears, from a descriptive point of view, stronger than the structurally stronger party. That does not affect the effectiveness of the structure. Third, in sexual relations, the woman is structurally weaker than the man. It is irrelevant to check whether a particular woman is more powerful, more influential, richer or even physically stronger than the man. These are descriptive features; they are of no consequence when compared to the structural fact that woman as such is the weaker party.

This entails an overturning of the usual representations. For a long time, female weakness was thought of either in descriptive or in machist terms. The feminist program either denied this fact or sought to compensate for it by various achievements, in terms of intellectual competence, social power, professional success, and so on. Machism repeatedly derided these achievements by going back to the simplest physical level. Since the Me Too movement, the machist argument has been reversed; instead of justifying a general inferiority of women, women's structural weakness legitimates the necessity of specific women's rights. Obviously, the importance of intellectual or social achievements is maintained; but it has no bearing on the structure of coitus. Even in Western societies, where women have made decisive progress in terms of

social power, every single woman is powerless when threatened by the risk of rape. There is no need to investigate a woman's bank account or measure her physical force to prove that this risk exists. It is a question of structure; and that structure depends on the sexual relation itself, as shown in coitus. Where a specific risk exists, a specific protection is required.

Consequently, every sexual act between a man and a woman is a potential rape, regardless of whether she initially gave her consent, took the initiative, or experienced pleasure. It may even happen that a woman retrospectively feels that she has been subjected to some kind of psychological or physical violence; although she did not feel it during the act, her belated grievance is justified. Until now, a difference of kind separated legitimate coitus from rape; since the Weinstein case, according to the philosophy of Me Too, the difference is simply one of degree. The criterion resides in the woman's sensitivity, not in consent. If before, during, or after (even long after) coitus, she feels the slightest trace of violence, she has been raped. Since rape is a crime against humanity, it ought to be imprescriptible.

According to this doctrine, it is irrelevant to argue that a feeling is subjective by nature; it is irrelevant to argue that recollections may be misleading. What is relevant is that the woman, here and now, feels herself to have experienced her own weakness. That feeling is not *per se* subjective; it reflects the objective structure governing coitus. After all, many linguists hold that native speakers' intuitive feeling about their own language is the most reliable evidence about that language. Why? Because it directly reflects the objective structure of the grammar. The same is true of the woman's feelings about the coitus in which she participated.

Once again, Marx's approach presents a fruitful analogy. According to his doctrine, it may happen, in some exceptional cases, that a labor contract is equitable. This does not reduce the inequity that characterizes the capitalist relation between employer and worker. Even when a labor contract successfully passes all legal

and economic tests, its deep structure is nothing but fraud. Between an honest employer and a crook, the difference is one of degree, not kind. The employer-thief reveals the true nature of legitimate employment. Without any explicit reference to *Capital*, the Me Too philosophy thus conceives of the link of ordinary coitus to rape. The latter reveals the true nature of the former.

In the Preamble of the French *Declaration of Rights* of 1789, the crucial sentence is the following: *les hommes naissent et demeurent libres et égaux en droits*, “men are born and remain free and equal in rights.” As soon as it was published, some women objected to the exclusive character of the noun *hommes* (men). But even if the noun is understood in an inclusive way, as referring to both men and women, the *Declaration*’s founding principle cannot be sanctioned by the philosophy of Me Too. In its extreme form, that philosophy would deny that men and women are born equal in terms of strength, while also rejecting Simone de Beauvoir’s motto: “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (de Beauvoir 2010, p. 283). But in all its versions, it would certainly deny that men and women *remain* equal. That negative conclusion may seem to go back to the oldest machist stereotypes; it needs, however, to be understood in a new way: if men and women were to be treated by society as perfectly equal in *all* respects, in such an ideal world a fundamental inequality would still prevail. Its basis lies in the sexual relation and in its central materialization, namely, coitus.

Given such a structural and constant inequality, the question of rights must be considered anew. It is now impossible to be satisfied with the abstract notion of equality summarized in the statement “human beings are born equal in rights.” A new notion of rights must be defined: rights have as their essential mission to protect the weaker against the stronger. If the essence of rights is the protection of the weaker, a consequence immediately follows: only the weaker should have *real* rights. Given the thesis “Women are the structurally weaker party in the sexual relation,” the consequence entails that only women have rights in all matters that involve the sexual relation and especially coitus. In other words,

the notion of *human rights* is an illusion, since it presupposes a core of rights common to the weaker and the stronger.

That is what happens today in the judiciary domain. Whenever sexual relations are involved, there is no place for a fair trial. It is deemed improper to invoke the notion of “reasonable doubt.” In any case, no doubt should benefit a man accused of sexual abuse of any sort. In short, the gravity of the accusation should suffice to validate the accusation itself. In extreme cases, the individual identity of the culprit may not be established with certainty. Considering the nature of monarchy, Saint-Just declared during Louis XVI’s trial: “No one can reign innocently.” The philosophy of Me Too likewise implies that no male can act innocently in coitus. In other words, men have no rights in the domain of sexual relations.

There is an argument often advanced to justify the irrelevance of the classical conception of rights. For a long period of time, men benefitted from unfair advantages, especially when women accused them of misbehavior, brutalities, or rape; given such a tradition of injustice and neglect, it is a matter of simple compensation that, in some cases, the balance should be reversed. However, the philosophy of Me Too goes further than this; it holds that the only effective weapon against inequity is inequity itself, provided that it systematically reverse the former inequity’s orientation. When Harvey Weinstein’s lawyers complain about the way their client will be tried, they have a point, but they do not take into account what is at stake, namely a total change of paradigm.

6) Four Questions about the Philosophy of Me Too

The philosophy of the sexual Me Too movement deserves to be considered carefully. In other words, it deserves to be criticized. However justified the revolt at the origins of this massive protest movement, it is legitimate to question some aspects of its ideological rationalization.

The first question concerns the analysis of the sexual act. One may wonder about the material basis for the structural partition between weaker and stronger parties. The only plausible answer has to do with penetration: woman is the weaker party in coitus because her body is penetrated. In one of his last writings, “Joyce le Symptôme” (Lacan 2001),⁶ Lacan propounds a theory of the body. He singles out the relation expressed by “having a,” and he defines human being as having a body. At the same time, he rejects the relevance of the relation expressed by “being a.” From a merely linguistic point of view, it is interesting to note that the verb “to have” (like the French verb *avoir*) excludes the possibility of an identity between subject and object. Although it is transitive, “to have” cannot be used reflexively: “I have myself” seems grammatically odd as long as “to have” means “to be in possession of,” while “I own myself” has become rather frequent in psychological terminology. In French, the same is true of the impossible *je m’ai* or *il s’a*, in contrast to the unusual yet possible *je me possède*, *il se possède*. Yet in penetration, is it still true that the penetrated woman *has* her body?

Admittedly, Lacan does not mention the sexual act in “Joyce le Symptôme.” But it is legitimate to apply his model to it. A decisive step is taken by the text’s introduction of the phrase *to have a human being*. “Puisque l’homme a un corps, c’est par le corps qu’on l’a”: “Since man has a body, it is by means of the body that one has him” (ibid., p. 568).⁷ Lacan was of course perfectly aware of the difficulties that originated in the use of the noun phrase *l’homme* and of its English translation *man*. Even though his article does not directly deal with them, it makes it obvious that *homme* and *man* must be understood here in an inclusive way. An admissible

⁶ The article is based on a talk given in 1975.

⁷ The indefinite pronoun *on* derives historically from the Latin *homo*. It may only refer to human beings, without determining their quantity. Although the verb phrase’s agreement is always singular, *on* may designate either an anonymous multiplicity or an anonymous individual.

paraphrase could be: *Someone has a human being, whether male or female, by means of the body that that human being has.*

That formula summarizes the ultimate Lacanian doctrine of domination. An implicit consequence follows: the human being that someone other has does not fully have his/her body anymore. Although Lacan does not use the passive form, it is convenient to express the situation of a dominated being as follows: *The human being is had by means of the body he/she has.* The example Lacan gives is drawn from twentieth-century history; obviously, he was thinking of the concentration camps. But consider coitus: Is it absurd to hold that the penetrated woman *is had* by means of the penetration of the body she has? Is it absurd to consider that, during penetration, she does not *have* her body in the same way as before penetration? Such an approach could easily be extended to homosexual relationships, and Me Too always claimed to be concerned also with violences and abuses between sexual partners of the same gender. In short, Lacan's conception could be accepted in the philosophy of Me Too.

A subtlety, however, would have to be taken into account. Lacan does not state that a body is dominating another body; he says that a human being dominates another human being by means of the latter's body, or that a human being is dominated by another human being by means of his own body. Since Lacan refuses to consider that the human being *is* his body, the domination takes place between human beings rather than human bodies. However, the Me Too philosophy seems rather inclined to accept the equation *human being = human body*. In other words, Lacan's conception of sexual relation remains a relation between human beings (by means of the bodies they have); it is not a relation between bodies. On the contrary, Me Too's conception of coitus seems to be a relation between two material bodies, defined by their material anatomy, instead of a relation between human beings.

Coitus and penetration entail domination. Domination entails a partial or total loss on the part of the dominated woman of the

body that she had. Once again, the analysis could be modified in order to include homosexual relations. The sexual Me Too movement views the consequences of this structure as all-pervasive and affecting all sexual relations involving men, however gentle they may seem. But in that case, the philosophy of the sexual Me Too movement goes back to Freud's saying: "Anatomy is destiny" (Freud 2001 [1912], p. 189). In other words, where Women's Studies succeeded in separating gender from anatomy, Me Too returns to a particularly strong form of anatomical determinism. Once again, it breaks with earlier feminist conceptions.

Nevertheless, a second question must be raised. Is this return of anatomy necessary and sufficient to resolve the many problems that arise concerning sexual identity? Does the Me Too movement render the notion of gender completely obsolete? Since surgery (vaginoplasty or phalloplasty) is the only way to allow passive or active penetration, must it become the privileged procedure with respect to the wishes of transgender persons?

A third interrogation concerns the decision to focus on penetration and coitus. If coitus is indeed the main cause of all sexual brutalities, and the actual basis of the domination exerted by men over women, then the only way to modify the prevailing situation must concern coitus itself. But penetration seems to be indissociable from it. Does that mean that coitus should be prohibited or considered at least as an extreme sexual practice, analogous, for example, to bondage? Procreation without coitus should prevail, since the new developments of scientific research have made it possible. *In vitro* fertilization could become the preferential method to be adopted by politically minded couples. It could even be made obligatory. Moreover, it could be combined with the strict birth control that some ecologists believe to be unavoidable, if the climate change problems should be effectively addressed. Although such developments seem nowadays to belong to science fiction novels or television series, there is no principled way for the sexual Me Too movement to exclude them. Is that

really an acceptable social or political ideal for the living beings that, until now, were called human and that, in the near future, may be irreconcilably divided into two anatomically opposed subspecies, one male and one female?

It is disquieting to hear, in the accusations levelled against men taken as an homogeneous group, the echoes of analogous accusations that in the past were, and sometimes still are, levelled against other “homogeneous” groups, namely the so-called savages or the Jews or the Amerindians or the Afro-Americans or the Latinos or immigrants of all origins. Once again, we must refer to Lacan (Lacan 1995, p. 12, and 2015, p. 16).⁸ He predicted that the rise of the universal market would be followed by increasing demands for segregation. Such a demand is undeniably latent in the sexual Me Too movement. In other words, women’s material freedom is conceived as requiring an apartheid, segregating sexually mature males from the rest of the society.

The fourth interrogation concerns the notion of structural weakness. It is impossible for the sexual Me too movement to tolerate some oversimplified formulations that we find in mass media and according to which women supposedly hold a monopoly over weakness. Almost immediately the objection arises: What about the relation between children or teenagers and adults? Is it possible to state without reservations that an adult woman is structurally weaker than a male child or even a male teenager? Without taking a stand about the validity of the accusation levelled by a young comedian against the filmmaker Asia Argento, the crucial facts lie both in the question it raises and in the short time it took for it to appear. From a more general point of view, it should be acceptable, even for the leaders of the sexual Me Too movement, to grant that in sexual relations in particular and in social relations in general children or teenagers are the weakest

⁸ The statement belonged originally to a spoken intervention that took place in 1968.

party with respect to the adults, even when they are males facing a female adult. Pedophilia is not confined to the limits of the Catholic Church, nor is it exclusive to male adults.

7) *About a Defect in the Program of Me Too*

A discussion of children and teenagers immediately leads to the question of the familial environment and incest. In that domain, it should be clear that the structurally weaker party are not women *per se*.

On the contrary, by insisting on the status of adult women and on penetration, the philosophy of the sexual Me Too movement is led to forget about a massive phenomenon: the acts of violence exerted on young girls *before* penetration is supposed to have happened. The practice of female circumcision is a case in point. It is not only widespread, but spreading. In the name of multiculturalism, many Western countries refuse to take any action against this development. Although it may be argued that the custom derives from a patriarchal system of values, it is often imposed and performed on younger girls by older women—their mothers, aunts, grandmothers, etc. In such a case, the relevant feature is not the domination of men over women, but the domination of adults over children.⁹

For a long time, women have protested against the use of the noun *man* as designating humanity in general, but the same defect marks the use of the noun *woman* and of the adjective *feminine* as designating female human beings in general, without taking note of the fact that girls are submitted to specific violences.

⁹ These considerations about female circumcision rely heavily on a still unpublished work by Dominique Sigaud. She is presently conducting an extensive research about the girls' status in various societies. She granted me access to her documentation and to the conclusions she is drawing from them. I am very grateful to her for this invaluable information.

There is no reason for confusing a girl with an adult woman, for the risks they are exposed to are not always the same. The all too spontaneous use of the phrase “women’s rights” implies the same denial as the use of the phrase “rights of man.” I would even submit the hypothesis that, nowadays, such a denial entails graver consequences.

Admittedly, for the time being the practice of female circumcision remains a specificity of cultures the existence of which the Me Too movement does not seem to mention often, if at all. But, should this be confirmed, such a lack of attention is in itself inexcusable. If the movement and its sexual philosophy do not curb their propensity for neglecting the specific inequality between children (or teenagers) and adults, if they consider it but a subcase of the unequal relations between adults, and if, moreover, they keep forgetting about societies that exist outside the narrow circles that have adopted the liberal capitalist way of life, then disaster is unavoidable. The sexual Me Too movement will emerge as a new version of the white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant system of values. In the name of civilization, it will carry the same rejection of the so-called savages and the same horror for the physical reality of bodies that the so-called savages (in other words, men as such, but also natives, Blacks, Jews, Latinos, immigrants, etc.) are accused of rendering unbearably present.

The sexual Me Too movement entails the fearful possibility of such an evolution. All the more so since its “professionalistic” counterpart has openly chosen the path of white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant ideology. According to its views, the main aspect in the Harvey Weinstein case has to do with the fact that the sexual assaults took place within a professional framework, between a man who exerted an almost absolute power in the film industry and women who wanted to make a career in that industry. Two problems then arose: a) it is impermissible for any individual to use their professional position to satisfy their own personal fantasies (whether sexual or not); b) while there is nothing wrong with the

almost absolute power some individuals exert (provided that they remain professional), there is something fundamentally wrong with the fact that women do not hold such a position.

The sexual aspect of the abuse of professional power is no longer essential; seen from the point of view of professional ethics, the gravity of the offence would have been the same even if it had involved non-sexual idiosyncrasies such as forced binge-drinking or roulette. Sexual regulations are necessary, of course, but they function as a component of the general regulations that must be imposed on professional life and which concern the respective status of men and women. Consequently, the main goal of this specific version of the Me Too movement is twofold: on the one hand, professional life must be governed by contracts that specifically exclude any behavior, however innocuous it may seem, that a woman might experience as (either physically or morally) offensive or coercive; on the other hand, professional life must abolish any rule, however insignificant it may seem, that a woman might experience as advantageous to men.

In this conception, sexual harassment is understood in such a way that it becomes a component of a wider notion of harassment. That wider notion of harassment is indeed wide enough to include the mere physical presence of masculine bodies in a space that a woman might experience as narrow.

According to well-informed sources, the professional approach is becoming ever more widespread in contemporary U.S. society. The sexual approach of the Me Too movement, however, has not disappeared. Indeed, it still prevails outside of the U.S. It is not surprising then that the two versions of the movement should influence one another. If the “professionalist” version of Me Too comes to affect its sexual version with excessive depth, then all the limitations I pointed out will take effect. In that case, the hopes raised in the earlier days of Me Too will be crushed. Admittedly, the number of highly paid and powerful women will increase. That will ensure great changes in the composition of the

small elite that rules over the few superpowers and their satellite states. Even if that evolution benefited women of the middle and lower middle classes, its impact will be both symbolically important and materially limited. The effective situation of women around the world will not change. There is no such thing as a trickle-down in the economy; there is no such thing as a trickle-down in social matters.

Bibliography

- de Beauvoir, Simone (2010) *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Alfred A. Knopf).
- Freud, Sigmund (2001 [1912]) "On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love," trans. and ed. James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* XI:177–90 (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis).
- Kant, Immanuel (1887) *The Philosophy of Law: An Exposition of the Fundamental Principles of Jurisprudence as the Science of Right*, trans. William Hastie (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark); available online: <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/kant-the-philosophy-of-law> (last accessed: February 20, 2019).
- (1996) *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press).
- Lacan, Jacques (1995) "Proposition of 9 October 1967 on the Psychoanalyst of the School," *Analysis* 6:1–13.
- (2001), "Joyce le Symptôme," *Autres Écrits*, 565–70 (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).
- (2015) "Note sur le père," *La Cause du désir*, 2015/1 (N°89).
- Marx, Karl (1990) *Capital, Vol. 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin).
- Milner, Jean-Claude (2018) "D'une sexualité l'autre," Juan Pablo Lucchelli, Jean-Claude Milner, and Slavoj Žižek, *Sexualités en travaux*, 15–68 (Paris: Éditions Michèle).

Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself?!

Alenka Zupančič

The Neighbor Inside Me

As a result, their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to size his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. (Freud 2001, p. 111)

Freud wrote these gloomy lines in 1930, but they read as if they could have been written today. In Freud, they are part of his discussion of the Biblical commandment to “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” Together with the commandment “Love thine enemies,” which he considered to be “the same thing,” Freud found it “incomprehensible,” inhuman even. Why should we *love* our neighbor—a perfect stranger? But above all: How on earth are we to achieve this? Particularly, if we take the word “love” seriously, i.e., in the strong sense of the term.

Let us now very briefly sketch out Lacan’s very powerful intervention into this debate, providing us with important tools with which to think the problem of the neighbor, or better, the *concept* of the neighbor—the concept that aims to explain what seems an almost inevitable hostility, an aggression that springs up every time we come too close to our neighbor. “The neighbor” refers neither simply to the person next door, nor to someone “close to us,” as we say. Any sort of stranger can be our neighbor. It is well known

that Lacan linked this concept to a singular structure that he called *extimité*, “extimacy,” standing for: an excluded interiority or an included exteriority; an intimate exteriority or external/foreign intimacy, transversal to the divide between Outside and Inside; a coincidence of something most intimate, intrinsic to me, with something most external and foreign; something that belongs to me, yet at the same time strikes me as utterly foreign, disgusting even. A very good and plastic example of this structure and its effects was provided by Slavoj Žižek: say that you spit into a (clean) glass; it proves very hard to then take a sip of the saliva, to drink it. In other terms: in this passage, something that, only a moment ago has been an integral part of you, something intimately yours, proper or “clean,” is transformed into a foreign object of utmost disgust.

The structure just described lies at the very heart of the relationship between the subject and the Other (and others), which is not simply a relationship of symmetrical mirroring, but involves a much more complex dialectics: asymmetry, overlapping, and an irreducible dimension of an object. But if this structure is always there, it is not always visible. The injunction to love, or simply love as such, involves my going beyond a certain imaginary limit that separates me from, and links me to, the other as my *semblable* (to use the French term), that is, the other as my “fellow man,” who fundamentally resembles me.

In the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan comments extensively, and across different registers, on the commandment in question. He also comments on Freud’s passionate reaction to it. He attributes Freud’s aversion to his belonging to the horizon of Aristotelian ethics and conception of the Good. Freud belongs to this tradition on account of how he formulates his famous “pleasure principle,” which automatically regulates the course taken by our mental events. The pleasure principle is, of course, not about hedonism, about actively striving for pleasure, but rather about *regulating* and diminishing the tension (i.e., any kind of excess) experienced as unpleasurable.

What defines the traditional, Aristotelian morality is precisely the link between pleasure (in the above described regulative sense) and the Good. Yet, as Lacan points out, this conception comes at the price of omitting, forgetting, repressing an entire field that escapes this kind of regulation, while following its own very different logic. Freud already saw this quite clearly: the pleasure principle often fails at playing its supposedly universal role, and people are driven by things that clearly contradict it (for example, they seem compelled to repeat distinctively traumatic experiences). This led Freud to investigate what he would call the realm “beyond the pleasure principle,” linking it to a destructive “death drive” as opposed to the pleasure principle. However, such a (simple) opposition proved untenable already for Freud, and Lacan rejected it in its entirety.

It seems that we have two possibilities here: We can postulate—as Freud did at some point—the coexistence of two competing principles (“Eros” and “Thanatos,” or life and death drives) in any human being. Or, instead of saying that the pleasure principle does not exhaust the economic side of our mental life, and hence introducing yet another, second principle, we can conclude that the pleasure principle itself is far less straight, unambiguous, and unproblematic than it seems. This was basically Lacan’s move, or conclusion: the “beyond” against which the pleasure principle is supposed to protect us actually constitutes its own “impossible” excluded kernel: the whole economy of the pleasure principle is based upon an impossible, excluded Thing (*das Ding*) at its very heart. And this economy is precisely what is also at stake in the Aristotelian notion of the “golden mean,” of “moderateness,” and its link with the Good. It is in this excluded, “extimate” place of the Thing that Lacan (in *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*) situates his concept of *jouissance*, or enjoyment, as distinctive from pleasure. Enjoyment is something like a return of the “impossible Thing” in the middle of our everyday life. “Enjoyment,” too, doesn’t refer to hedonism or debauchery, but functions in Lacan as the name

for, and the concept of, the *structural effect produced by going beyond*, “*traversing*” a certain limit.

In this sense, aggression is not rooted in another, separate principle—separate from the pleasure principle—but constitutes its other side, its inherent contradiction; it is the indicator and symptom of its own limit and cost. From this perspective, the pleasure principle is not so much a primary, original principle of the functioning of our psychical apparatus, as it is already a defense formation built around a negativity, or “impossibility,” situated at its own core.

Lacan also insists on how Freud, in his reading of the commandment to “love thy neighbor,” emphasizes the term love. In the commandment in question, it is precisely love that breaks the barrier (or breaks the defense) of the pleasure principle as the fence, or wall, separating us from the beyond, which appears to us as Evil. But what is this Evil? As we have seen, Lacan calls it enjoyment, *jouissance*, as the structural effect of this very breaking of the barrier. In other words, the “pleasure principle,” and with it the traditional Aristotelian notion of the Good, indicate, even create, a certain beyond against which they protect us, keeping us on the “safe” side of it.

It is here that the question of the neighbor comes in: in the injunction to *love* your neighbor, the neighbor gives body to this beyond, thus triggering the question of Evil which sort of inevitably dwells in, or inhabits, this neighbor. But—and this is Lacan’s *coup de force*—if this is the case, then it also dwells within me. “And what is more of a neighbour to me than this heart within which is that of my *jouissance* and which I don’t dare to go near? For as soon as I go near it [...], there rises up the unfathomable aggressivity from which I flee [...].” (Lacan 1992, p. 186).

In other terms, and simply put, it is structurally, necessarily unclear whether this excluded kernel of my being is in fact mine or my neighbor’s. For it implies, by definition, the topology of “extimacy.” And this precisely is the fundamental structure and difficulty that psychoanalysis has to confront, think, and come to grips with in a better and also more efficient way than by

reinforcing, and taking shelter behind, the pleasure principle, itself constituted precisely on the repression of this dimension.

Neoliberalism and Love

Let us now jump from psychoanalysis to a very different source, namely to the way in which the commandment to love one's neighbor is commented upon in contemporary (Western) conservative politics, from moderate conservatives to the extreme right wing. The commandment at stake obviously confronts this politics with a considerable problem: on the one hand, it has to endorse it, since a crucial element of its position, its ideological legitimation and rhetoric, is the reference to Christianity as the core of "our Western identity." On the other hand, the commandment is seen as possibly ceding far too much to the neighbor as our Other, and hence as a serious threat to this same identity. This became particularly palpable and explicit with the 2015 "refugee crisis." Here's a very nice and eloquent example. When in October 2015 Tony Abbott (the prime minister of Australia at the time) delivered "The Margaret Thatcher Lecture"¹ in London, he also said the following:

Naturally, the safety and prosperity that exists almost uniquely in Western countries is an irresistible magnet. These blessings are not the accidents of history but the product of values painstakingly discerned and refined, and of practices carefully cultivated and reinforced over hundreds of years. // Implicitly or explicitly, the imperative to "love your neighbour as you love yourself" is at the heart of every Western polity. It expresses itself in laws protecting workers, in strong social security safety nets, and in the readiness to take in refugees. It's what makes us decent and humane countries as well as prosperous ones, but—right now—this wholesome

¹ The Margaret Thatcher Center organizes these lectures on an annual basis, inviting mostly "distinguished" conservative politicians.

instinct is leading much of Europe into catastrophic error [...]. // [N]o country or continent can open its borders to all comers without fundamentally weakening itself. This is the risk that the countries of Europe now run through misguided altruism. (Abbott 2015)

Before attempting to follow the meanders of this argument, it is only fair to mention that the Australian media met Tony Abbott's speech with—as one defender of Abbott put it—“a unanimous chorus of jeers and condemnation” (Myers 2015).

Christian commentators pointed out that Jesus's command to love our neighbor lies at the heart of Christian morality, and we can't simply set it aside when it happens to prove costly or inconvenient for us. Catholic priests stated that they were “absolutely astounded” and “appalled” by Abbott's remarks. On social media, the following post on Facebook allegedly summed up the general feeling: “He [that is Abbott] is SOOOOO going to hell.”

But in Christian Europe, this sentiment did not prevail, and it was particularly the self-proclaimed *Christian* politicians that had recourse to the closing of the borders, to building walls or barbed-wire fences, and to implementing a severe—why not put it like this?—“screw thy neighbor” legislation.

What exactly did Abbott preach in London? He did not reject the Christian commandment to love your neighbor, which he recognized “at the heart of every Western polity,” instead preaching a *moderate, reasonable, modest* usage of this commandment. But of course you should love your neighbor; but do so reasonably, not too much, not too many, not beyond a certain limit. We could say that Abbott preached for properly Christian ethics to cede its place to the Aristotelian ethics of proper measure. Or, to put it in a different kind of formula, he called for “love” to be substituted by “altruism,” that is, by the correct, and not “misguided” altruism. If we jump back to Freud for just a moment, we can see all this clearly.

Freud was not religious; however, he did see clearly that to love your neighbor *beyond* reciprocity, beyond the limit of convenience and of a pleasurable exchange *was the whole point* of this

commandment. And this whole point is precisely what Abbott now designates as “misguided altruism” (which, by the way, is an interesting definition of love: love is a misguided altruism, it is altruism turning askew).

Even if perhaps not visible at first sight, this move is something that rhymes profoundly with the capitalist market economy (and ideology). In the capitalist discourse, the emphasis on philanthropy and humanitarian “projects” is itself not anecdotal, but here we’re referring more specifically to the logic that governs the field of goods as commodities, and their association with the Good in the moral sense of the term.

Jeremy Bentham formulated his famous principle of utility as promoting “the greatest good for the greatest number.” This (moral) principle has often been, and continues to be, criticized as something that inevitably comes up against the demands of my egoism: psychological egoism rules out acting in such a way as to promote overall well-being when the latter is incompatible with one’s own. Lacan, on the other hand, and much more interestingly, pointed out that this objection to Bentham was misplaced and insufficient:

My egoism is quite content with a certain altruism, altruism of the kind that is situated on the level of the useful. [...] // It is a fact of experience that what I want is the good of others in the image of my own. That doesn’t cost so much. What I want is the good of others provided that it remain in the image of my own. (Lacan, 1992, p. 187)

Altruism and egoism combine without a problem, as long as we are in the realm of goods. The limit of my good is not simply the good of the other, or of others. “It is in the nature of the good to be altruistic. But that’s not the love of thy neighbor” (ibid., p. 186). So here we come back to the difference between *altruism* as fully compatible with the field of (the) good(s), and *love* as situated beyond a certain limit of the calculus of the good, pleasure, and reciprocity.

Here's Lacan's colorful explication:

As long as it's a question of the good, there's no problem; our own and our neighbor's are of the same material. Saint Martin shares his cloak, and a great deal is made of it. Yet it is after all a simple question of training; material is by its very nature made to be disposed of—it belongs to the other as much as it belongs to me. We are no doubt touching a primitive requirement in the need to be satisfied here, for the beggar is naked. But perhaps over and above that need to be clothed, he was begging for something else, namely, that Saint Martin either kill him or fuck him. In any encounter there's a big difference in meaning between the response of philanthropy and that of love. (Lacan 1992, p. 186)

“Either kill him or fuck him”—first, we should be careful not to take these examples as designating an *objective* limit with a preestablished list of things that can be shared or exchanged, on the one side, and, on the other, a list of things that cannot. For although this difference, this dividing line certainly (and structurally) always exists, in concrete historical (cultural, economic, social) circumstances things pass from one side to the other following all sorts of conditions. So when Lacan says: “Imagine that he would ask you to kill him or fuck him,” he is doing two things at the same time: 1) He chooses a striking, received example of the difference or limit between the pleasure principle and its possible “beyond,” and 2) he points out that this *limit* (whenever and wherever it happens to appear) is precisely the point where the structure of fantasy, *our* fantasy, comes into play.²

² He explicates this point in *Television*, when commenting on his prophesy of the rise of racism. When asked: “What gives you the confidence to prophesy the rise of racism? And why the devil do you have to speak of it?” he answers: “Because it doesn't strike me as funny and yet, it's true. With our jouissance going off track, only the Other is able to mark its position, but only in so far as we are separated from this Other. Whence certain fantasies—unheard of before the melting pot.” (Lacan 1990, p. 32)

For example: Although it can be factually true that Muslim culture has a different idea of manhood and womanhood than “our” Christian culture, the moment we start imagining what “these Muslim men would do to our women,” this is no longer about any factual difference; the structure of fantasy, of *our* fantasy, is already fully operative—which is to say that with these fantasies it is our own *jouissance* that we attempt to control, regulate, keep at bay.

The capitalist discourse—despite emphasizing individualism and “egoism”—does not contradict a certain kind of altruism, which Lacan also called “humaniterity” (*humanitaire*). What is a good? A good is something that can be divided, distributed, exchanged, and our society (or rather our economy) has brought this to its peak: a good is everything that subscribes, in principle, to a universal equivalent. This is the definition of the structure of (the) good(s). We are not indulging in cheap moralizing criticism of our times—this is indeed meant as a definition in the strict philosophical, logical sense of the word. It is in the nature of a good that it subscribes to a general equivalent. Otherwise, it is not a good. But love—that’s an entirely different matter. Therefore (first consequence), love is not a good. (And we can indeed see an ideological depreciation of love growing fast in our societies today.)

But let us return to Tony Abbott’s speech. We could say that he is quite right in claiming that the commandment to love your neighbor “expresses itself in laws protecting workers, in strong social security safety nets, and in the readiness to take in refugees” (Abbott 2015). What is bizarre about this claim, however, is that what Abbott describes here is usually associated with the politics of the Left, and criticized as such by the conservative Right to which he belongs.³ Moreover, the fact that the quote is from Abbott’s “Margaret Thatcher Lecture” cannot but strike us as doubly perverse.

³ The Liberal Party of Australia that Abbott had led at the time of his speech is a center-right conservative liberal party.

As a matter of fact, Margaret Thatcher turns out to be a very good lead when it comes to researching the destiny of the neighbor in conservative neoliberal politics. In the passage from the 1987 interview in which she launched the (in)famous thesis that “there is no such thing as society,” thus waging a very frontal attack on the “laws protecting workers,” and particularly on “strong social security safety nets,” the word neighbor appears twice. People, Thatcher says,

are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first. It is our duty to look after ourselves and then also to help look after our neighbour and life is a reciprocal business and people have got the entitlements too much in mind without the obligations, because there is no such thing as an entitlement unless someone has first met an obligation and it is, I think, one of the tragedies in which many of the benefits we give, which were meant to reassure people that if they were sick or ill there was a safety net and there was help [...]. That was the objective, but somehow there are some people who have been manipulating the system and so some of those help and benefits that were meant to say to people: “All right, if you cannot get a job, you shall have a basic standard of living!” but when people come and say: “But what is the point of working? I can get as much on the dole!” You say: “Look! It is not from the dole. It is your neighbour who is supplying it [...]!” (Thatcher 1987, pp. 29–30)

The neighbor first appears in a strangely shameless reversal of the biblical commandment, considering that the lines come from a devoted Christian: “It is our duty to look after ourselves and then also to help look after our neighbour” (ibid., p. 30). Furthermore, the commandment is said to be about reciprocity, exchange, commerce. The fact that this biblical commandment presents her with a serious and confusing problem was openly admitted by Thatcher on another occasion, when she stated:

I confess that I always had difficulty with interpreting the Biblical precept to love our neighbours “as ourselves” until I read some of the words of C.S. Lewis. He pointed out that we don’t exactly love *ourselves* when we fall below the standards and beliefs we have accepted. Indeed we might even hate ourselves for some unworthy deed. (Thatcher 1988, p. 2)

That is a very interesting approach to interpreting the commandment at stake. According to this interpretation, the commandment doesn’t imply that we should *always* love our neighbors, or that we should love them unconditionally. Through a rather banal psychologizing maneuver, the words “as ourselves” are used to relativize the commandment, to supply a justification for not obeying it. We don’t always love ourselves, and hence we don’t always need to love our neighbor. It’s as simple as that. And so the Thatcher-Abbott axiom is born: *Of course* we shall love our neighbor, *but...* there is a limit! Here we can fully appreciate the difference between Freud’s honesty and the manipulative opportunism of the Thatcher-Abbott position. Freud doesn’t say that the commandment at stake is basically good, but sometimes too demanding and excessive, and that in these cases we can simply ignore it. No; Freud claims that it is basically horrifying, “impossible”—and hence an important source of “civilization’s discontent.” And Lacan’s criticism of Freud in this point is also an acknowledgement of Freud’s honesty: Freud saw very well that what is at stake in *loving* your neighbor aims to surpass the neighbor as our symmetrical, resembling fellow-man, and involves our confronting precisely what strikes us as most *foreign*, heterogeneous. If anything, *this* is the radical stake involved in the “Christian legacy.” The Thatcher-Abbott position, on the other hand, is essentially opportunistic: it has no trouble subordinating the “Christian legacy,” which serves as its legitimation, to its own, very profane, everyday politico-ideological agenda.

“Neighbor” reappears at the end of the Thatcher quote, this time as the “abused” neighbor: if you are on the dole, you are

effectively stealing from your neighbor. Or, to put it the other way around: people on the dole are bad neighbors, parasitic neighbors, living at your expense. Like society, the dole, too, does not really exist: it is a term (or “ideology”) that miss-presents the actual relation between real people.

Thatcher’s attack on the welfare state was also (and perhaps primarily) an attack on something else: on love and solidarity among neighbors *as a social form*, and as based on social (symbolic) mediation. The welfare state or “institutional solidarity” is, among other things, a depersonalized love for one’s neighbor. It is a “delegated” love, comprised of many social advantages that come with this delegation. Can *love* for your neighbor be “impersonal”? At the level of society, it can only be such. But the issue is not concerned simply with the opposition, or difference, between the personal, or individual, and the social. It actually follows from Lacan’s treatment of the question of the neighbor that even at its most personal the love for your neighbor always involves a depersonalized, “inhuman” dimension, stripped of ordinary feelings. Love for your neighbor actually always involves a relation with an “inhuman partner.”

We could also put it like this: The dole is there precisely so that “*I*” (as a person) am not required to love my neighbor (the accent in this negation is on the “*I*,” and not on “love”). The dole is a delegation of this love to a social infrastructure; it is the existence of this love in the form of social infrastructure. The welfare state loves your neighbor *for* you. If, in this context, we insist on the term “love,” it is because in many respects the “welfare state” stretches beyond reciprocity; it exists as something that transcends altruism as mirroring my own good in the image of my neighbor’s good. In this sense, the dole is not so much a safety net as it is an interface. Thatcher’s “nominalist” maneuver set out to re-personalize the dole, and to re-personalize it just enough for the people to see (or “recognize”) in it a neighbor, their own neighbor, shamelessly enjoying at their expense. Let’s put a face

on the dole. What does the dole with a human face look like? Well, it looks like an Evil neighbor.

But that's only a part of the (neoliberal) story. On the one side, this is what people who have jobs, and are not on the dole or any other "social benefits," should *feel*. Here, it's all very personal. On the other side, i.e., on the side of the receivers, it's a very different story. There is no question of getting personal here; on the contrary, the purely and extremely non-personal, bureaucratic net makes sure that you don't get to talk meaningfully to any person. Ken Loaches' film *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) is a brilliant, poignant rendition of this. If you require the dole, you are confronted with impenetrable bureaucratic procedures and incomprehensible gibberish deprived of all human feeling and common sense. All of this is there so as to *prevent abuse*, of course, that is, to *protect* those who work from those who have lost it and need help. In other words, there is a safety net all right, only that now it serves to protect those who don't particularly need protection. It doesn't protect those who remain on the outside, but those who are on the inside.

This particular kind of wall that is easily penetrable, transparent, as if inexistent, and at the same time utterly impenetrable and non-transparent, is indeed one of the most salient topological figures of our times, and of the functioning of late capitalism.

Therefore, the discussion of the status of the neighbor has to also be approached from within its historical and economic context, so that the specificity of the latter is taken into account. For example: within the capitalist economy (and its form of value), proximity is not the opposite of alienation, but rather the form of its appearance. In our socio-economic order, the place of maximum proximity is not, say, the neighborhood, but the (now global) *market*: it is there that our most intimate and precious possession (our labor power as *value*, our value as embodied in the products of our labor) mingles shamelessly with other people's intimate possessions and values, is compared to them, competes

with them, gets exchanged for them. This is not an immediate bodily proximity, but rather the proximity of our value, of our surplus-value.

This is also why Lacan could predict, back in 1967: “Our future as common markets will be balanced by an increasingly hard-line extension of the process of segregation” (Lacan 1995, p. 12). That is the case because the market is the place of compulsory, structural proximity. It has often been pointed out that, while globalization is all about the mobility of capital, it is much less about mobility of the people. Yet, to be more precise, we should add that the opposition here is not simply between capital and people, but rather between people and “something in people more than people” (our “value” as labor power), with the latter being situated outside ourselves, on the side of capital, its accumulation and global circulation, and hence subjected to its radical abstraction.⁴

The growing sense among the people that they are worth nothing, or very little, is directly dependent on the capitalist ontology in which being is value. We are reduced to nothing but value. A doubtful privilege indeed, as Marx already knew very well: to be the producer of value is not a blessing, but rather a curse.

The Doubtful Privilege of Being Nothing but Value

In his recent work, David Harvey has proposed a very elaborate reading of the Marxist theory of value, that is, of Marx’s analysis

⁴ Many of today’s nationalist and identitarian movements are a response to this: they are attempts to situate our (surplus) value elsewhere—in our bodies (the basis of racism, which is not necessarily of the same kind as the past “hierarchical” racisms), in our nation or our national identity (which makes us unique). It is also this radical abstraction as the form of our value that accounts for the extreme sensitivity to the *bodies* of the Other, to other bodies, which strike us as too full of everything, too full of some menacing kind of *jouissance*.

of the form of value that characterizes capitalism, and of its implications.⁵ For Marx, value is not something that gets created in the process of exchange (hence the famous “labor theory of value”), but this does not mean that it is simply intrinsic to commodities. The value in capitalism is being constituted—Harvey claims—in an ongoing dialectic of value and anti-value or non-value. Non-value is an intrinsic moment of creation of value, but also its weak point. Whenever capital takes on a particular form (be it as a production process, as a product waiting to be sold, as a commodity circulating in the hands of a merchant capitalist, or as money waiting to be transferred or reinvested) capital is “virtually devalued.” Capital lying “at rest” in any of these states is variously termed “negated,” “fallow,” “dormant,” or “fixated.” Capital is value only when it circulates, passes from these to “active” states. In this respect, anti-value signals the potential for breakdown in the continuity of capital circulation. It prefigures how capital’s crisis-tendencies can take different forms and move around from one moment (e.g. production) to another (e.g. realization). This insight is crucial. For, as Marx has also pointed out, crises in capitalism do not necessarily spell the end of capitalism, but rather set the stage for its renewal. It is here that we observe most clearly the dialectical role of anti-value in the reproduction of capital. It has to take place in order for capital to be reborn in a modified form. But the reconstitution of capital is also insecure and has its *limits*. An accumulation of debts (claims on future value production), for example, may outrun the capacity to produce and realize values and surplus-values in the future.

In other words, anti-value (or non-value) can constitute a crisis as precisely the productive, “propelling” point of capitalism, but it is also the point where the latter is most vulnerable, prone

⁵ For a detailed reading of this see Žižek 2017, pp. 175–223. Žižek also quotes extensively from Harvey’s as of yet unpublished manuscript (“Marx and the Labor Theory of Value”), which I am also referencing here. See also Harvey 2017.

to collapse under the dead weight of anti-value. On that basis, Harvey dismisses the political relevance of the appeals to include non-productive labor as non-value (for example, unpaid domestic labor) into value-production. Granting wages for housework, if we were able to implement it, would simply reassure us that household labors can in principle be integrated into the capitalist mode of production. A similar logic is at work in the appeals to integrate the free gifts of nature into the stream of value production by some arbitrary valuation devices (e.g., those proposed by environmental economists). This “amounts to nothing more than a sophisticated green-washing and commodification of a space from which a fierce attack upon the hegemony of the capitalist mode of production and its (and our) alienated relation to nature can be mounted” (Harvey, quoted in Žižek 2017, p. 182). In an attempt at being “just” and abolishing or at least diminishing exploitation, such attempts are in fact only reinforcing the expanding and all-consuming logic of commodification.

In other words, a counter-attack on capitalism cannot result from integrating more and more things—like domestic labor—into (the capitalist form of) value, but rather from a systematic and *organized* affirmation of non-value. It can result not from exempting some things from capital-related valorization, but by questioning this form itself, and constructing an alternative form. So Harvey.

How exactly this is to be done remains a question that is far more than merely theoretical, and the answer to which does not lie somewhere outside (and prior to) concrete and often unpredictable social circumstances and events that outline its possible occurrence.

But what, by way of conclusion, I would like to do here is point out some interesting parallels between Harvey’s (Marxian) notion of anti-value and what Lacan called *jouissance*. For we could say that *jouissance* is the psychoanalytic concept of anti-value. A crucial dimension of the capitalist form of value is that

it appears as an object of utility. These are the famous closing sentences of the first section of the first chapter of *Capital*:

Nothing can be a value without being an object of utility. If the thing is useless, so is the labour contained in it; the labour does not count as labour, and therefore creates no value. (Marx 1990, p. 131)

And now let us recall Lacan's canonical definition of *jouissance* from the seminar *Encore*: "Jouissance is what serves no purpose" (Lacan 1998, p. 3).

And yet, exactly like the Marxian non- or anti-value, enjoyment can also be integrated, pulled into the economy and dialectics of valorization, which is one of the reasons for Lacan's coming up with the term "surplus *jouissance*," coined in direct reference to the Marxian notion of "surplus-value." Similarly to the way in which this happens with anti-value, *jouissance* can also be caught in the discourse as the very *source* of value. This is a historic occurrence which Lacan relates to the rise of the "capitalist discourse."

[T]he important point is that on a certain day surplus *jouissance* became calculable, could be counted, totalized. This is where what is called the accumulation of capital begins. (Lacan 2007, p. 177)

Or:

[T]he secret of the worker himself is to be reduced to being no longer anything but a value [sic!]. [...] [S]urplus *jouissance* is no longer surplus *jouissance* but is inscribed simply as a value to be inscribed in or deducted from the totality of whatever it is that is accumulating—what is accumulating from out of an essentially transformed nature. (Lacan 2007, pp. 80–81)

This very much echoes the transformation of anti-value into value, i.e. its "capitalization," in Harvey. Surplus-value is precisely a non-value that counts. When we say "non-value," this doesn't

mean that it is something intrinsically worthless, insignificant or inexistent; it means that it doesn't *count* as value, and then it starts to count. It is this permutation that generates new surplus-value. One of the main ways in which capital progresses is by incorporating more and more things ("unproductive labor") into the realm of value and its countability.

When Lacan says that we (as workers) have been reduced to nothing but value, this may sound paradoxical. Is value, and "being of value," not something good and positive? This is precisely the "obviousness" into which both Marx and Lacan sharply intervene. When our being becomes value, we are in for some nasty surprises. If we feel worthless, the answer does not lie in the attempt (and the competing) for higher valorization, but rather in getting out of the (capitalist) form of value and its own redoubled ideological valorization. But, of course, this is in no way easy, nor is it a "personal" matter. As Lacan put it when he recommended this as a possible way out: "[it] will not constitute progress, if it happens only for some" (Lacan 1990, p. 16).

What do we gain by this co-staging of *jouissance* and (anti-) value? For an orthodox Marxist, this may sound like an attempt at inscribing the Marxist historical theory into a certain eternal "psychology" of the human. That is not what we're suggesting. Two things deserve to be pointed out in this regard. Firstly, "libidinal" and social economies are far from being unrelated, and this relation works both ways: not only from the inside out (from the libidinal onto social economy), but also from the outside in: social economy determines many key parameters of our libidinal economy. Secondly, and even more importantly, psychoanalysis can help us understand a very important structural/topological feature of the (global) market, namely that the latter has become the universal point of our "extimacy." It is neither simply inside nor outside. We work, sweat and spit into its pot, and what we get in return looks sordid and impossible to swallow. Yet it is us, it is our most intimate being, our value; which makes it all the more unbearable.

And we could say that neighbors (“foreigners,” “immigrants”) appear, and are perceived today, as agents of this *extimate* point of the global market, as the “human face” of the faceless global capitalist economy.

The intensely discussed cultural differences function more and more as a handy and colorful veil that masks a much more disturbing *sameness*. A veil that makes it possible for us not to see, and to keep our distance from, something the reality of which is nevertheless closing in on us, namely that the worthless piece of shit out there is, in fact, ourselves.

Bibliography

- Abbott, Tony (2015) “Speech at the Margaret Thatcher Lecture”; available online: <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/transcript-tony-abbotts-controversial-speech-at-the-margaret-thatcher-lecture-20151028-gkkg6p.html> (last accessed: February 28, 2019).
- Freud, Sigmund (2001) “Civilization and its Discontents,” trans. and ed. James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* XXI:57–145 (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis).
- Harvey, David (2017) *Marx, Capital and the Madness of Economic Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Lacan, Jacques (1990) *Television*, trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson, ed. Joan Copjec (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company).
- (1992) *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York & London: Routledge).
- (1995) “Proposition of 9 October 1967 on the Psychoanalyst of the School,” *Analysis* 6:1–13.
- (1998) *Encore*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company).
- (2007) *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company).

- Marx, Karl (1976) *Capital, Vol. 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin).
- Myers, Benjamin (2015) "Love Your Neighbour: Why Tony Abbott Is (Partly) Right and His Critics Are (Partly) Wrong"; available online: <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/love-your-neighbour-why-tony-abbott-is-partly-right-and-his-crit/10097698> (last accessed: February 27, 2019).
- Thatcher, Margaret (1987) "Interview for *Woman's Own*"; available online: <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689> (last accessed: February 28, 2019).
- (1988) "Speech to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland"; available online: <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107246> (last accessed: February 28, 2019).
- Žižek, Slavoj (2017) *Incontinence of the Void: Economico-Philosophical Spandrels* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).

Lacan and Monotheism: Not Your Father's Atheism, Not Your Atheism's Father

Adrian Johnston

§1 Feuerbach Avant la Lettre: A Hegelian Prelude

As with so many other aspects of G. W. F. Hegel's philosophy, his stance regarding religion has remained a matter of fierce dispute for the past two centuries up through the present. Hegel has been portrayed as a Protestant theologian, an insidious atheist, and everything in between. Although Bruno Bauer's 1841 rendition of Hegel as vehemently atheistic is hyperbolic (Bauer 1999), I at least agree with the Left Hegelians that Hegelianism is, at a minimum, in tension with orthodox Protestantism specifically and theism generally.

To be more precise, I would argue that Hegel is the forefather of Ludwig Feuerbach's philosophy of religion (see Bloch 1972, pp. 65, 208–10, 268). Feuerbach's November 22, 1828 letter to Hegel indicates that the eventual author of 1841's *The Essence of Christianity* recognizes this himself (Feuerbach 1984, pp. 547–50). And, evidence suggests that Hegel left this letter unanswered out of political and professional cautiousness, due more than anything else to fears of the practical consequences of being associated with atheism (Hegel 1984, pp. 467–68). However, neither Hegel nor Feuerbach are atheists in the sense of simple dismissers of all things religious as unworthy of consideration, appropriation, or subl(im)ation.

The debates about Hegel's religiosity or lack thereof initially erupt in German-speaking intellectual circles during the 1830s and 1840s. With this original context's repressive and reactionary political atmosphere, questions about the Hegelian philosophy of religion cloak, and are motivated by, the issue of what politics follows from Hegel's thought. It is no coincidence that the distinction between Right and Left Hegelians aligns with that between those who affirm Hegel's Protestantism and irreligiosity respectively.

Relatedly, one finds in Hegel's political philosophy some of the clearest statements of his philosophy of religion. Of course, perhaps the most (in)famous instance of this Hegelian linkage between the political and the religious is the declaration from 1821's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* according to which the "state consists in the march of God in the world [es ist der Gang Gottes in der Welt, daß der Staat ist]" (Hegel 1991, p. 279; 1970, Vol. 7, p. 403). Starting with critics such as Rudolf Haym (1975), those eager to tar-and-feather the mature Berlin-era Hegel as a rationalizing apologist for the Protestant conservatism of Friedrich Wilhelm the Third's Prussia latch onto this statement, among others, as evidence for their accusations.

Yet, one can and should ask: By saying that, is Hegel divinizing the state (as many critics allege) or politicizing God? If the latter, does such politicization leave intact the religious, theological dimensions of the divine? Or, instead, does this politicization bring about a secularization and de-divinization of the very notion of God? I would suggest that the textual evidence indicates Hegel intends, so to speak, to bring Heaven down to earth in a secularizing, de-divinizing manner (see Johnston 2019).

From 1798's "The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate" through 1831's "The Relationship of Religion to the State," Hegel consistently indicates that the God of (mono)theism arises from, and is an expression of, human beings and their this-worldly communities. This proto-F Feuerbachian thesis runs like a red thread through the entire span of his intellectual itinerary. "The Spirit of Christi-

anity and Its Fate” contains a line that would fit well in the pages of Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity*—“faith in the divine grows out of the divinity of the believer’s own nature; only a modification of the Godhead can know the Godhead” (Hegel 1975, p. 266). As Feuerbach would put this, “That whose object is the highest being is itself the highest being” (Feuerbach 1966, p. 10).

Then, from the early 1800s through 1831, Hegel regularly claims that the absolute spirit of monotheism’s deity is nothing other than an idealized, picture-thinking way of forms of human “ethical life” (*Sittlichkeit*) representing themselves to themselves. In 1802’s *System of Ethical Life*, God is identified by Hegel with *Sittlichkeit* (see Hegel 1979, pp. 143–45). He here speaks of “the divinity of the people,” “the God of the people” as “an ideal way of intuiting” ethical life itself (ibid., p. 144). Approximately a year later, in the *First Philosophy of Spirit*, Hegel proposes that, “in the organization of a *people* the absolute nature of spirit comes into its rights” (ibid., p. 211). That is to say, the fullest actualization of God is not as the fiction—albeit as a real abstraction (Lacan 1986a, p. 165)—of a supernatural transcendent authority projected into an imagined supernatural Beyond. Rather, this actualization occurs as the reality of an immanent form of communal existence in the earthly *hic et nunc*. Feuerbach similarly connects politics and religion, people and God (2012a, pp. 149–51; 1966, p. 71).

Likewise, the later Hegel of the Berlin period, in resonance with a post-Hegelian refrain about Christianity being the religion of atheism, indicates that Protestantism especially is the religion of secularism. He sees the socio-political secularization of the divine as genuine progress (Hegel 1956, pp. 422–23). This same Hegel pointedly asserts that “there is nothing higher or more sacred,” religion included, than the secular state, with its “Morality and Justice” (ibid., p. 422). For him, sublated religion-as-secular-politics is more valuable and advanced than mere, unsublated religion-as-religion. All of this is affirmed even in Hegel’s contemporaneous *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*

(1985, pp. 373–74). And, just before his death, in 1831’s “The Relationship of Religion to the State,” he argues that, insofar as the essence of religion is humanity’s “*free spirit*,” religion’s maximal realization is to transubstantiate itself into the structures of the secular state (Hegel 1999, p. 226).

Admittedly, Hegel is far from a straightforward, unqualified, no-frills atheist. Yet, as the preceding shows, he is no believer in the actual doctrines of religion-*qua*-religion either. What is more, his privileging of Christianity generally and Protestantism specifically does not signal philosophical endorsement of their theological contents in their literal guises. Like Feuerbach, Christianity for Hegel is, as it were, “the one true religion” because it comes closest to admitting that anthropology is the secret behind all theology. Furthermore, Hegel’s privileging of Protestantism in particular is due to it being the religion most invested in its own secularization (something also underscored by Feuerbach).¹

Feuerbach too, despite his reputation, also is no crude atheist. His irreligiosity is not that of, for instance, eighteenth-century French materialists such as Baron d’Holbach (nor that of more recent examples of d’Holbach’s brand of atheism, such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris). To cut a long story short, Feuerbach’s atheism as secular humanism is a Hegelian *Aufhebung* of (Protestant) Christianity, not an outright negation of theism.

The closing sentence of the introduction to *The Essence of Christianity* declares, “What yesterday was still religion is no longer such to-day; and what to-day is atheism, tomorrow will be religion” (Feuerbach 1989, p. 32). A year later, in “Preliminary Theses on the Reform of Philosophy,” Feuerbach proclaims at greater length:

The Christian religion has linked the name of man with the name of God in the one name “God-man.” It has, in other words, raised the

¹ See De Kesel, 2005, p. 125; Feuerbach 1966, p. 5.

name of man to an attribute of the highest being [höchsten Wesens]. The new philosophy has, in keeping with the truth, turned this attribute into substance, the predicate into the subject. The new philosophy is *the idea realized* [die realisierte Idee]—*the truth* of Christianity. But precisely because it contains within itself the *essence* of Christianity, it abandons the *name* of Christianity. Christianity has expressed the truth only *in contradiction to the truth*. The pure and unadulterated truth without contradiction is a *new truth*—a *new, autonomous deed* of mankind. (Feuerbach 2012b, pp. 172–73; 2013)

Today's atheism is destined to become tomorrow's new religion as the "*realized* [...] *truth* of Christianity." That is to say, Christianity, as theologized anthropology, will be dialectically inverted into anthropomorphized theology, namely, the new religion of secular humanism. The old religion misattributed the virtues of natural, this-worldly humanity to a supernatural, other-worldly God. Feuerbach's "new philosophy" will be transformed into the new religion once human beings start self-consciously celebrating and venerating their virtues as their own (and not those of a superhuman deity). Feuerbach does not forecast or advocate the disappearance of the experiences of awe, reverence, wonder, and the like historically associated with religions. He sublates (*als Aufhebung*), rather than simply negates externally without remainder, Christianity (Bloch 1971, pp. 210–12).

§2 God Is Unconscious, But the Unconscious Is Not God: Lacan's Analytic Atheism

Although Jacques Lacan is not invested in making atheism into a new religion, he places his Freudian analytic atheism in a line of descent tracing back to a Feuerbachian-*avant-la-lettre* Hegel.² He is most explicit about this in *Seminar VII (The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* [1959–1960]).

² See Beirnaert, pp. 128–29; Chiesa 2015, p. 63; Causse 2018, pp. 221, 245.

This seminar contains some of Lacan's discussions of the notion of the death of God. Speaking of this, Lacan notes, "there is a certain atheistic message in Christianity itself, and I am not the first to have mentioned it. Hegel said that the destruction of the gods would be brought about [se complète la destruction des dieux] by Christianity" (Lacan 1992, p. 178; 1986b, p. 209). A couple of sessions later in the seventh seminar, Lacan equates atheism itself with Christianity's barring of the big Other, with Its/His "Law," through staging the death of God Himself on the cross (Lacan 1992, pp. 192–93). This Christianity, with its dialectics oscillating between religion/theism and irreligion/atheism (Causse 2018, pp. 201–203), is identified by Lacan here as "the first weighty historical example of the German notion of *Aufhebung* [premier exemple historique où prene son poids le terme allemand d'*Aufhebung*]" (Lacan 1992, p. 193; 1986b, p. 227).

On a prior occasion, I have dealt critically with an instance, in *Seminar IV* (*The Object Relation* [1956–1957]), where Lacan approvingly invokes the conception of the Holy Spirit (Lacan 1994, pp. 41–58; Johnston 2013a, pp. 59–77). I would observe in passing that some of Lacan's more pro-Christian moments, such as in the fourth seminar, occur when he is most proximate to Immanuel Kant's critical transcendental idealism (i.e., the Kant who "had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith" — a Kant Lacan later pointedly repudiates in, for instance, 1974's "The Triumph of Religion").³ When Lacan does not enforce a Kantian-style epistemological limit partitioning reality from the Real, he is less prone to allow for theological-type speculations about the Real-beyond-reality.

That said, Lacan's only other sustained reference to the Christian conception of the Holy Spirit, apart from the one to be found in *Seminar IV*, can be interpreted as reflective of his adhesion to the post-Hegelian atheism-in-Christianity tradition.

³ Kant 1998, Bxxx; p. 117; Lacan 2013a, pp. 80–85.

In the fifteenth seminar (*The Psychoanalytic Act* [1967–1968]), Lacan remarks, “The Holy Spirit is a notion infinitely less stupid [bête] than that of the subject supposed to know” (Lacan 1967–1968, session of February 21, 1968). *Le sujet supposé savoir* is, by Lacan’s lights, the core structural place and absolutely essential function of any and every theism.⁴ So long as one believes in some form of the subject supposed to know, one is not a true atheist. Hence, the Lacan of *Seminar XV*, in playing off *le Saint-Esprit* against this heavenly super-Subject, implies that one can (and should) have the Holy Spirit without God or His pseudo-secular surrogates. And, with the Holy Spirit as the human community left behind after the disappearance of God-the-Father and death of Christ-the-Son, Lacan’s favoring of the horizontal immanence of *le Saint-Esprit* over the vertical transcendence of any divine *sujet supposé savoir* clearly is in line with the Hegelian tradition of Christian atheism (Bloch 1971, pp. 169–70).

Moreover, the fifteenth seminar’s reference to the Holy Spirit indicates that this *Geist*, as at odds with the subject supposed to know, is anything but omniscient. In other words, the this-worldly socio-symbolic order is barred, riven by ignorance and devoid of final answers and unifying certainties. Elsewhere, Lacan attributes this lack of omniscience not only to *le Saint-Esprit*, but even to God Himself. In short, he bars God too.

On several occasions in the 1960s and 1970s, Lacan raises the question of whether God believes in God.⁵ Eventually, during the May 21, 1974 session of *Seminar XXI* (*Les non-dupes errent* [1973–1974]), Lacan finally answers this query: God does not believe in God. In this same seminar session, he immediately spells out the implications of this answer.

⁴ See Lacan 2014, p. 308; 2006a, pp. 280–81; 2001a, p. 337. See also Causse 2018, p. 45, and Johnston 2013a, pp. 22–23.

⁵ See Lacan 1965–1966 (session of May 25, 1966); 2006a, p. 177; 1971–1972 (session of January 6, 1972).

To begin with, this Lacan of the twenty-first seminar equates “God does not believe in God” with “There is something unconscious,” “*Y a d’l’inconscient*” (Lacan 1973–1974, session of May 21, 1974). How should this equation be understood? By Lacan’s lights, as seen, the essence of God resides in the structural function of *le sujet supposé savoir*. Furthermore, the kind of knowledge attributed through supposition to God (or any other transferentially invested subject supposed to know) is the reflexive, self-transparent variety of philosophical and theological traditions. From such familiar traditional perspectives, knowledge is inherently auto-reflexive and self-conscious. When one knows, one knows that one knows. Likewise, when one thinks, one thinks that one thinks. Additionally, when one believes, one believes that one believes.

On a Lacanian assessment, what is really revolutionary about Sigmund Freud’s self-styled “Copernican revolution” is his positing of the unconscious as irreflexive mentation. One is gripped by the unconscious in knowing without knowing that one knows, thinking without thinking that one thinks, and believing without believing that one believes. Lacan’s denial that God believes in God, with its associations to the irreflexivity characteristic of the Freudian unconscious, is another version of “God is unconscious,” which Lacan identifies in 1964 as the “true formula of atheism” (Lacan 1977, p. 59).

But, the unconscious definitely is not God or a substitute for Him. There is no analyst, priest, parent, etc. anywhere to be found who knowingly could provide the decisive final word about the singular, coherent unconscious truth of one’s being. Furthermore, there is no such truth to be found even within and by the subject of the unconscious itself. Admittedly, in the analytic relationship, knowledge of the unconscious resides on the side of the analysand rather than the analyst *qua* subject supposed to know (but not actually knowing, since this knowledge is a transferential supposition of the analysand to be worked

through by him/her). Yet, this does not mean that the analysand is or could ever become *le sujet supposé savoir* in relation to his/her own unconscious and its knowledge.

There are two reasons why the analysand, despite being the lone locus of knowledge of his/her unconscious, cannot be the subject supposed to know in lieu of the analyst or anyone else. First, no matter how much analysis a person undergoes, regardless of how well-analyzed someone is, he/she always still will have an unconscious. No amount of analysis ever results in a complete liquidation of the unconscious, in a becoming-fully-transparent-to-oneself. Analysts do not and cannot produce absolute self-consciousnesses, even through lengthy didactic analyses.

However, leaving things at this first reason risks leaving intact the sense that although the powers to make conscious are limited, some form of complete, self-consistent, and meaningful unconscious knowledge remains beyond these limits. Although I cannot consciously know it (even after years and years of analysis), maybe there still is a unique governing truth of my being. Perhaps my own unconscious is the subject supposed to know. Perhaps "God is unconscious" means my unconscious is God (or God-like) as the hidden omniscient and omnipotent power that makes me who I am and fatefully pulls the strings of my life history.

The preceding motivates and leads to Lacan's second reason as to why even the analysand's unconscious cannot qualify as measuring up to the role outlined by the position of *le sujet supposé savoir*. The first reason, as just explained, is that conscious efforts cannot ever make all of the unconscious known to (self-) consciousness. The second reason is, so to speak, that there is no "all" (*pas tout*) of unconscious knowledge to be known, not even in principle.

The unconscious is not its own subject supposed to know. It is not a Whole aware and in command of itself. No one is in charge of you, not even your unconscious. While the unconscious involves knowledges, it is not a synthesized and synthesizing

knower. There is no divine homunculus in heaven, on earth, or between your ears. Not only does the analyst not hold a secret set of keys to your unconscious—your unconscious has no such keys either. And, it does not even have corresponding locks to these non-existent keys, since there is no one-of-a-kind treasure chest of mysteries waiting to be unlocked. Just as God does not believe in God, so too should you not believe in your supposed (unconscious) self. There is nothing there worthy of faith or veneration.

This second reason, having to do with the not-all-ness of unconscious knowledge, is emphasized by Lacan at the same moment in *Seminar XXI* when he denies that God believes in God. After equating this denial with an affirmation of the existence of the unconscious, he proceeds to claim that, “The knowledge of the unconscious is totally the opposite of instinct,” “*Le savoir de l’inconscient est tout le contraire de l’instinct*” (Lacan 1973–1974, session of May 21, 1974). Lacan immediately clarifies that by “instinct” he intends to evoke the vision of a natural harmony (ibid.). Instinct would be, for him, knowledge in the Real as a materially innate *savoir-faire* provided by nature and guaranteeing synchronization between organism and environment. Indeed, a few months earlier during the twenty-first seminar, Lacan describes the instinctual as “a supposed natural knowledge,” “*un savoir supposé naturel*” (ibid., session of February 19, 1974).

This description of the instinctual, through its resonance with *le sujet supposé savoir*, signals that the concept of instinct brings with it an idea of a Nature-with-a-capital-N, an all-knowing and benevolent creator. This Nature as unbarred big Other obviously is a mere substitute for God, just another permutation of the subject supposed to know. It is the expression of the unprocessed theism persisting within speciously secular or atheistic naturalisms. Self-styled scientific atheists, including ones who are members of the analytic community, are non-dupes who err.

Hence, falsely naturalizing the Freudian unconscious along these lines, wrongly identifying it with (repressed) instincts (rather than drives, *Triebe*), brings about an illusory deification of it as an incarnation of a fantasized God-like Nature, *un Dieu comme ça* (a God as id). Authentic analytic atheism entails, among other things, that the unconscious itself cannot be made into another deity or divine avatar through appeals to a still-theistic version of the category of the natural. “God is unconscious” means that there is no God, no unbarred big Other, as a locus of self-transparent omniscience—not even in/as the unconscious itself imagined as a profound nature or knowledge exceeding any and all consciousness.

Likewise, if the satisfactory conclusion of an analysis involves the dissolution of transference as, for Lacan, the fall of the subject supposed to know, then the analysand comes to settle for “some unconscious” (*à la* “*Y a d’inconscient*”). He/she accepts what there is of bits and pieces of unconsciousness as revealed by and within the inconsistencies and tensions of analyzed consciousness. This acceptance of these still-valuable scraps puts an end to awaiting a final Revelation-to-end-all-revelations from The Unconscious as an expected ultimate exclamation point or punchline bringing to a neat close the labor of the analytic process. The analysand ceases anticipating such a last judgment from his/her unconscious as well as from the analyst as its presumed anointed representative. He/she somehow comes to appreciate that there is no transcendent, ineffable Other of the immanent, effable Other, no deep Truth underlying and uniting the tangled knots of unconscious truths that do surface. There is no other shoe yet to drop.

This theme of the interrelated self-opacities of both God and the unconscious arguably traces back to an earlier period of Lacan’s teaching. I am thinking particularly of a comment Lacan makes in *Seminar III (The Psychoses* [1955–1956]). He remarks there, “Our own atheism is [...] linked to this always elusive

aspect of the *I* of the other [ce côté toujours se dérochant du *je* de l'autre]" (Lacan 1993a, p. 288; 1981, p. 324). Considering this context and period of Lacan's teaching, "this always elusive aspect of the *I* of the other" should be interpreted as designating neither the Imaginary little-o-other *qua* inter-subjective alter-ego nor the Symbolic big Other *qua* trans-subjective socio-linguistic order. Instead, it designates Real Otherness, namely, the impenetrable opacity of alterity inaccessible not only to the subject relating to this Other, but also to this Other itself.⁶ The atheistic upshot of such alterity Lacan has in mind in the third seminar is the same as with his later "God does not believe in God": The Other, whether as God, parent, analyst, one's own unconscious, or whoever and whatever else, is not a subject of absolute (self-)knowledge, but is, rather, irreflexive, blind, and enigmatic to itself.

Just a few years after *Seminar III*, in the seventh seminar, "this always elusive aspect of the *I* of the other" becomes the Real Otherness of the Freudian *Nebenmensch als Ding*, neighbor as Thing, *das Ding* (see Freud 2001a, pp. 318, 331; Lacan 1992, pp. 19–84). In François Balmès's view, Lacan's Christian-atheistic God is a version of this Thing (Balmès 2007, p. 184). Balmès muses that, "One could [...] say that *das Ding* is a divine name in the times of the death of God" (*ibid.*, p. 185).

But, one has to be careful apropos Balmès's suggestion here. Linking God with the Thing risks implying that Lacan somehow or other reduces Christianity to the dark, threatening deity of the Old Testament and/or to a repressed matriarchal basis (given the equation of *das Ding* with the mother as Real Other in *Seminar VII*). So as to avoid this risk, one must appreciate that any connection between the Christian God and the

⁶ See Lacan 1993a, p. 53; 1994, pp. 168–69; 2017, pp. 472–73; 2013c, pp. 365–69; 1964–1965 (session of May 19, 1965); 2006a, pp. 224–25; 2006b, pp. 689–90. See also Johnston 2013b; 2017, pp. 164–65, 174–76.

Freudian Thing would signify again that *Dieu est inconscient*. Put differently, even the New Testament God is the name for a barred, irreflexive, and de-divinized lack. Nonetheless, this void interpellates those “left behind,” namely, persons who unite together around this absence (i.e., the Holy Spirit as a this-worldly human community).

Seemingly despite all of the preceding, Lacan (in)famously declares in “The Triumph of Religion” that, “The true religion is the Roman one [...]. There is *one* true religion and that is the Christian religion” (Lacan 2013a, p. 66). As Lorenzo Chiesa and Alberto Toscano observe, this can be taken to say that Christianity is the “least false” of all religions (Chiesa and Toscano 2007, p. 118). By way of friendly supplement, I would add to this that, insofar as Lacan explicitly situates himself in a post-Hegelian atheism-in-Christianity current, Christianity’s “truth” resides in what it self-subvertingly reveals unknowingly and inadvertently. On this reading, what makes Christianity truer than other religions is that it stands on the threshold of bringing about an immanent sublation of all religiosity/theism. As Jean-Daniel Causse correctly notes, Lacan’s identification of Christianity as “the one true religion” is not to be taken as praise of it (Causse 2018, pp. 199–201).

Indeed, *Seminar XX (Encore [1972–1973])* provides strong evidence that Lacan’s acknowledgment of Christianity’s truth is a backhanded compliment. Therein, Lacan considers this acknowledgement to be bad news for Christianity *qua* religion — “That it is the true religion [la vraie religion], as it claims [comme il prétend], is not an excessive claim [prétention], all the more so in that, when the true [le vrai] is examined closely, it’s the worst [pire] that can be said about it” (Lacan 1998, p. 107; 1975, p. 98). Later during the same seminar session (May 8, 1973), he adds, “Christians—well, it’s the same with psychoanalysts—abhor [ont horreur] what was revealed to them. And they are right” (Lacan 1998, p. 114; 1975, p. 103).

What is this abhorrent truth? What is this repulsive, scandalous “x” revealed to both Christians and psychoanalysts? I believe that a hint is to be found in Lacan’s 1963 *écrit* “Kant with Sade” when he states, “Christianity has assuredly taught men to pay little attention to God’s *jouissance*” (Lacan 2006c, p. 651). The horrifying worst that both Christianity and psychoanalysis brush up against has something to do with *jouissance*. But what, exactly, is this divine enjoyment? And, what does it have to do with the ostensible truth of Christianity as well as the radical atheism of psychoanalysis?

§3 *No Gods, No Fathers: From a Feuerbachian Freud to a Marxian Lacan*

Freud’s reflections on religion can readily be situated in the same Feuerbachian lineage within which Lacan places himself (De Kesel 2005, pp. 126–27). Simply put, just as Feuerbach reduces theology to anthropology, so too does Freud reduce the God of Judeo-Christian monotheism to the father of the Oedipus complex. Both thinkers bring Heaven down to earth by making the latter the truth of the former.

But, as Karl Marx’s fourth thesis on Feuerbach maintains, “once the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must then itself be destroyed in theory and in practice” (Marx 1998, p. 570). Although Lacan situates himself in the Christian-atheist current of a proto-Feuerbachian Hegel, Lacan’s actual position is closer to that of Marx. What holds for Marx *vis-à-vis* Feuerbach’s atheism holds for Lacan *vis-à-vis* Freud’s atheism too. To be more precise, Lacan comes to see Freud as analyzing the monotheistic God into the Oedipal father without, in turn, going through to the end with a critical analysis of the latter. Like Marx’s Feuerbach, Lacan’s Freud leaves too much to “the earthly family” he uncovers as secretly underlying “the holy family.”

Of course, the move of tethering the divinity of Judeo-Christian monotheism to the paternal figure of the Oedipal family drama is absolutely central to Freud's entire atheistic analytic assessment of religion.⁷ And Lacan, in for instance *Seminar XII*, indeed credits this Freud with further radicalizing atheism (Lacan 1964–1965, session of March 3, 1965). Interestingly, Balmès and Jacques-Alain Miller present diverging renditions of Lacan's stance with respect to this Freud. On Balmès's construal, Lacan seeks to invert Freud's analysis of God into father, instead explaining the paternal function as determined by a theological socio-symbolic constellation; God explains father, rather than *vice versa* (Balmès 1997, p. 35). By contrast, Miller's reconstruction has Lacan dissatisfied with Freud failing to dissipate fantasies about fathers after so thoroughly dissipating fantasies about gods (Miller 2004, pp. 27–28, 34–35). Evidence from the twelfth seminar and elsewhere favors Miller on this point.

In “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious” (1960), Lacan himself pointedly cautions that, “We would be mistaken if we thought that the Freudian Oedipus myth puts an end to theology” (Lacan 2006b, p. 688). If there is something religious (i.e., mythical and/or theological) about Freud's Oedipus complex (Causse 2018, pp. 240–41), then the apparent atheism of his grounding of the religious in the familial is merely apparent. But, in what way(s) is the Oedipal *à la* Freud still bound up with religiosity?

The four sessions of *Seminar XVII* (*The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* [1969–1970]) grouped together by Miller under the fitting title “Beyond the Oedipus Complex” contain Lacan's most developed explanations of the mythical/theological residues clinging to Freud's reflections on the family. Therein, Lacan identifies the Oedipus complex as “Freud's dream” (Lacan

⁷ See Lacan 1986a, pp. 172, 174; Lacan 2013b, pp. 22–23; Askofaré 2006, p. 27.

2007, pp. 117, 137). As he notes in good analytic fashion, “Like any dream it needs to be interpreted.”⁸

Lacan similarly depicts Freud’s Oedipus as a “myth” (Lacan 1993a, pp. 214–15). During this same stretch of the seventeenth seminar, he comments, “One can bullshit [déconner] a lot over myths, because it is precisely the field of bullshitting. And bullshitting, as I have always said, is truth [la vérité]. They are identical” (Lacan 2007, p. 111; 1991, p. 127). Perhaps the fiction in Lacan’s “the truth has the structure of fiction” can be bullshit (*déconnage*) too. More precisely, and as also a “dream,” the Freudian Oedipus complex offers a manifest text (with its myths, fictions, and bullshit) that, when interpreted properly, discloses latent thoughts as this dream’s truths (Grigg 2006, p. 57). Or, in phrasing borrowed from Marx, this complex of Freud’s wraps a “rational kernel” within a “mystical shell.” For Lacan, the mystical shell of Oedipus is anything but atheistic. Yet, Oedipus’s rational kernel, which it shares with Judeo-Christian monotheism, allows for an immanent critique of both the Oedipal as per Freud and the monotheistic. There is something in both the Oedipus complex and monotheism more than these formations themselves, an extimate “x” that can explode these formations from within their own confines. But, what is this “x” according to Lacan?

At the end of the February 18, 1970 seminar session, Lacan begins answering this question. His remarks on this occasion deserve quoting at length:

[T]his recourse to the myth of Oedipus is really quite sensational. It is worth making the effort to elaborate this. And I was thinking of getting you today to appreciate what is outrageous in the fact that Freud, for example, in the last of the *New Introductory Lectures on*

⁸ Ibid., p. 137. See Grigg 2006, p. 51.

⁹ Lacan 1961–1962 (session of December 20, 1961). See also Lacan 2006a, p. 190; 2006d, p. 4; 2006e, p. 11; 2006f, p. 376; 2006g, p. 625.

Psychoanalysis, should think he had cut the question of the rejection of religion off from any acceptable horizon, should think that psychoanalysis has played a decisive role in this, and should believe that it was the end of the matter when he has told us that the support of religion is nothing other than this father whom the child has recourse to in its childhood, and who he knows is all loving [il est tout amour], that he anticipates, forestalls what may manifest itself within him as malaise. (Lacan 2007, p. 100; 1991, p. 114)

Lacan continues:

Isn't this an odd thing when one knows how things in fact are with the father's function? To be sure, this is not the only point at which Freud presents us with a paradox, namely, the idea of referring this function to some kind of *jouissance* of all the women [quelle jouissance originelle de toutes les femmes], when it is a well-known fact that a father barely suffices for one of them, and even then—he mustn't boast about it. A father has, with the master—I speak of the master as we know him, as he functions—only the most distant of relationships since, in short, at least in the society Freud was familiar with, it is he who works for everybody. He has responsibility for the “famil” [...]. Isn't that sufficiently strange to suggest to us that after all what Freud retains in fact, if not in intention, is very precisely what he designates as being the most essential in religion, namely, the idea of an all-loving father [un père tout-amour]? [...] [T]he father is love, the first thing to be loved in this world is the father. Strange vestige [survivance]. Freud believes this will make religion evaporate, whereas it is really the very substance of it that he preserves with this strangely composed myth of the father. (Lacan 2007, pp. 100–101; 1991, p. 114)

He then proceeds to reflect on the Freudian father of *Totem and Taboo* (i.e., the *Urvater* of the primal horde):

[I]t all ends with the idea of the murder, namely that the original father is the one whom the sons have killed, after which it is through the love of this dead father that a certain order unfolds. In all its

enormous contradictions, in its baroque-ness and its superfluous-ness, doesn't this seem to be nothing but a defense against these truths [vérités] that the abundance of all these myths clearly spells out, well before Freud diminishes these truths in opting for the myth of Oedipus? What is there to conceal? That, as soon as the father enters the field of the master's discourse where we are in the process of orientating ourselves, he is, from the origins, castrated. (Lacan 2007, p. 101; 1991, pp. 114–15)

In the following two sessions of *Seminar XVII* (March 11 and March 18, 1970), Lacan reiterates these points. He again stresses the fictive character of the primal father of *Totem and Taboo* ("not the slightest trace has ever been seen of the father of the human horde").¹⁰ He reemphasizes that "he who enjoys all the women is inconceivable to imagine," with fathers, as speaking beings, being symbolically castrated *qua* cut off from any presumed full, absolute *jouissance* (Lacan 2007, p. 124).

All of this calls for some careful unpacking. To begin with, Lacan appeals to certain common-sensical intuitions. For him, if one bothers even to glance for a moment at flesh-and-blood fathers, what one sees is anything but the Freudian *Urvater*: "We have seen orangutans," but not a human version of this sort of alpha male (*ibid.*, pp. 112–13). Empirical embodiments of the paternal function are miserable schmucks just like all other speaking beings, rather than ferociously potent monopolizers of a total and complete Enjoyment-with-a-capital-E. Each father barely knows what to do with one woman, let alone, like the fantasmatic primal father, all women ("a father barely suffices for one of them"). At least in recent memory, the ostensible *pater familias* is anything but an omnipotent lord—as Lacan declares already in 1938, modernity has come to be marked by the "social decline of the paternal *imago*" (2001b, pp. 60–61). If anything, the modern father is everyone else's servant, frenetically dancing attendance on family

¹⁰ Lacan 2007, p. 113. See also 1994, pp. 210–11; 2018, p. 25.

members as well as bosses, clients, etc. ("it is he who works for everybody"). In an inversion that the Hegel of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* would appreciate, the supposed paternal master is, in reality, a slave (Hegel 1977, pp. 111–19), with Lacan, as regards the master's discourse, also repeatedly referring to this same Hegel (Lacan 2007, pp. 20–22, 30, 79, 89, 170–71).

In the above-quoted material from the sessions of the seventeenth seminar assembled by Miller under the heading "Beyond the Oedipus Complex," Lacan invokes "the discourse of the master" as per his theory of the four discourses (those of master, university, hysteric, and analyst) central to *Seminar XVII*. The "master" of the master's discourse is anything but the all-powerful paternal figure of Freud's myth of the primal horde. As Lacan says in the preceding, "as soon as the father enters the field of the master's discourse [...] he is, from the origins, castrated." How so? What precisely does this mean?

The later Lacan of the early 1970s defines a "discourse" (*discours*) in his sense as a "social link" (*lien social*) between speaking beings (*parlêtres*).¹¹ That is to say, a Lacanian discourse is a specific socio-symbolic structure configuring the positions of subjects caught up in its matrices of mediation. And, the discourse of the master is the "elementary cell" of all the discourses. This is because, for Lacan, the master's discourse represents the initial, zero-level position of any and every subject as a speaking being. The other discourses (of the university, hysteric, and analyst) are subsequent permutations of this first form of socio-symbolic bond.¹² The discourse of the master is the initial result of the symbolic castration that brings the *parlêtre* as such into existence (Lacan 2007, p. 89).

¹¹ Lacan 2007, p. 152; 2018, pp. 30, 52, 62, 131–32, 160; 1998, pp. 17, 30, 54; 1973–1974 (sessions of December 11, 1973, January 15, 1974, April 9, 1974, and May 21, 1974). See Johnston 2014, p. 68.

¹² Lacan 2007, pp. 20, 69, 102–103, 148–49, 152; 2006h, p. 9; 2001c, pp. 435–36. See also Fink 1998, p. 31; Žižek 1998, p. 75; 1999, p. 28; 2004, p. 133; Johnston 2008, pp. 251–68.

Thus, when Lacan says, “as soon as the father enters the field of the master’s discourse [...] he is, from the origins, castrated,” he is saying that the paternal figure, as a speaking being subjected to language and everything bound up with it, is symbolically castrated like all subjects. He is no exception to this castration. Hence, he too has no access to any purported complete, undiluted *jouissance*, whether of “all women” or of anything else (Verhaeghe 2006, pp. 42–43, 46). Freud’s *Urvater* is pure fantasy. This absence of limitless enjoyment is what the “myth of Oedipus [...] is there to conceal.”

Apropos the fiction of the primal horde in *Totem and Taboo*, Lacan, in *Seminar XVII*, also draws attention to the murder of the primal father by the band of brothers. In Freud’s story, the *Urvater*, the enjoyer of *toutes les femmes*, ends up dead. Deploying a Lévi-Straussian structuralist approach to this story as a myth, Lacan reads the diachronic sequence in which the primal father goes from domineering *jouisseur* to vanquished corpse as indicative of a synchronic identity between unlimited enjoyment and death (Lacan 2007, p. 123). For him, the dead father signifies “the Law” bringing about desire (*désir*) through marking the prohibition/impossibility of absolute *jouissance* (Lacan 2006i, p. 464; 1990, p. 89).

As Lacan observes, “no one knows, no living being in any case, what death is [...]. [D]eath is properly speaking unknowable [inconnaissable].” (Lacan 2007, p. 123; 1991, p. 142) Therefore, *Totem and Taboo*, interpreted as a myth à la Lévi-Strauss, indicates that full *jouissance* too is “unknowable” for human beings (Verhaeghe 2006, pp. 40–41). This indeed is the conclusion Lacan reaches:

The fact that the dead father is *jouissance* presents itself to us as the sign of the impossible itself. And in this way we rediscover here the terms that are those I define as fixing the category of the real, insofar as, in what I articulate, it is radically distinguished from the symbolic and the imaginary—the real is the impossible. Not in the

name of a simple obstacle we hit our heads up against, but in the name of the logical obstacle of what, in the symbolic, declares itself to be impossible. This is where the real emerges from [C'est de là que le réel surgit]. (Lacan 2007, p. 123; 1991, p. 143)

For Lacan, the myth of the primal horde with its *Urvater* is the true version of Freud's Sophocles-inspired Oedipus complex (Lacan 2006h, pp. 68–69; Johnston 2005, pp. xix–xxiv, 283). Its core truth is that, as Lacan puts it (in the seventeenth seminar and elsewhere) in a twist on a famous line from Fyodor Dostoyevsky, “If God is dead, then nothing is permitted”¹³ (with this Lacanian line being, in part, a paraphrase of Freud's comment in *Totem and Taboo* that, “The dead father became stronger than the living one had been [...]. What had up to then been prevented by his actual existence was thenceforward prohibited by the sons themselves” [Freud 2001b, p. 143]). Specifically, the murdered *Urvater* as a dead God—for Freud, the primal father is the prototype of the divine father (ibid., pp. 147–49, 154)—signifies that no flawlessly total *jouissance* is possible and attainable.¹⁴ As Lacan states in the just-quoted passage, such enjoyment is Real *qua* impossible.

The Lacan of the seventeenth seminar contends that “the dead father” of non-existent *jouissance* (i.e., the Freudian *Urvater* as the prototype of all gods) is a mythical manifestation of an impossible Real immanent to the Symbolic (Lacan 2013c, pp. 405–406). The Real of inaccessible enjoyment “emerges” (*surgit*) out of, is secreted by, a register within which this enjoyment is nullified by signifier-inflicted castration. So long as there is symbolic castration, humanity will remain haunted by the

¹³ Lacan 2006j, pp. 106–107; 2017, p. 470; 2007, pp. 119–20; 1986a, p. 173; 2013b, p. 25; Miller 2004, p. 36; Balmès 1997, p. 94; Johnston 2005, p. 286; 2014, pp. 219–20.

¹⁴ Lacan 1992, pp. 176–77; 2006a, p. 151; Johnston 2005, pp. xxvii–xxxviii, 333–41.

fantasmatic specter of something along the lines of the primal father (whether as *Urvater*, God, the at-least-one [*au-moins-un*] of the *hommoin**sun/hommoinzin* who is magically exempt from *jouissance*-barring symbolic castration,¹⁵ etc.).

Also in the same set of sessions of *Seminar XVII*, Lacan draws attention to two oddities featuring in Freud's reductions of the God of religions to the father of both the primal horde and the Oedipus complex. What makes these two features so odd is that they fly in the face of various other aspects of the Freudian framework; they involve Freud coming into conflict with some of his own commitments. The first of these is Freud's insistence on the historical, factual reality of the tall tale of the primal horde and its killing of the *Urvater*. Lacan remarks of Freud that, "he clings strongly to what actually happened, this blessed story of the murder of the father of the horde, this Darwinian buffoonery" (Lacan 2007, p. 112), and that, "Freud holds that this was real. He clings to it. He wrote the entire *Totem and Taboo* in order to say it—it necessarily happened, and it's where everything began" (ibid., p. 113).

Indeed, Freud spends the final paragraphs of *Totem and Taboo* weighing whether or not to treat the narrative of the murder of the primal father as a "wishful *phantasy*," "*Wunschphantasie*" (Freud 2001b, pp. 159–60; 1940, p. 192). Starting with Freud's September 21, 1897, letter to Wilhelm Fliess, he maintains that repressed fantasies can be just as causally efficacious in the psyche as experienced events impressed upon the mind by "the real world" (Freud 2001c, pp. 259–60). In other words, for Freud, psychical reality can be as significant and influential as external reality.

In the concluding moments of *Totem and Taboo*, Freud revisits these considerations about fantasy (Freud 2001b, pp. 159–61). Their relevance for the question of whether the murder of the

¹⁵ Lacan 2006h, pp. 141–61; 2011, p. 46; 1971–1972 (session of June 1, 1972); 2018, pp. 34–35, 179–80; 2001d, p. 479; 1993b, p. 15.

primal father was an actual historical occurrence or a fantasmatic construction projected back into pre-history is made even more appropriate by Freud's long-standing Haeckelian tendency to draw parallels between phylogeny and ontogeny. This tendency leads Freud on a number of occasions to equate "primitives" and neurotics (Freud 2001d, p. 406; 2001e, pp. 247, 249; 2001f, pp. 262–63). Hence, if neurotics can be traumatized by repressed fantasies acting as if they were episodic memories, why not hypothesize that the same holds for the proximate descendants of the primal horde? Considering that the scene of the killing of the *Urvater* is a highly speculative anthropological hypothesis on Freud's part, why not favor viewing this scene as a causally efficacious fantasy?

But Freud abruptly brings *Totem and Taboo* to a close with an adamant insistence on the extra-psychical reality of the primal father's murder by the band of brothers. In this instance, he pointedly rejects his own habit of establishing equivalences between "primitives" and neurotics. Although the latter might be affected as much or more by thinking (as intending, fantasizing, etc.) apart from acting, "primitive men actually *did* what all the evidence shows they intended to do" (Freud 2001b, p. 161; note Freud's italicization of "*did*"). The last line of *Totem and Taboo* is a quotation from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust*: "in the beginning was the Deed," "*Im Anfang war die Tat*" (ibid., p. 161; 1940, p. 194). In a metapsychological paper dealing with phylogenetic matters not discovered until 1983, Freud reaffirms that this "triumph over the father [...] was realized" (Freud 1987, p. 20). That is to say, the deed of killing the *Urvater* really did transpire as a matter of cold, hard historical fact. Lacan thinks Freud doth protest too much here—and does so even against his own theoretical insights apropos the distinction between psychical and external realities.

As seen, in *Seminar XVII*, Lacan also underscores Freud's striking insistence that the father who lies at the basis of monotheistic religions is full of nothing but love. By Lacan's lights,

this is a “strange vestige [survivance].” More precisely, this is a *survivance* within Freud of theism. Reducing God to the paternal figure is anything but irreligious if this figure himself still is deified as “an all-loving father [un père tout-amour].” Hence, Lacan judges the Freudian mythical father as a far-from-atheistic construct. What adds to the strangeness of this vestige of religiosity in Freud is that much of the rest of what he has to say about fathers in his corpus paints a picture of them as hardly pure love. The relationship to the paternal figure of the Oedipus complex often involves aggression, envy, fear, hatred, jealousy, rivalry, and the like. Strong currents of negative affects pervade the rapport with the Oedipal father. This makes Freud’s equation of father with love in his treatments of religion all the odder.

A few years later, Lacan presses home his critique of Freud as preserving rather than destroying monotheism. In the twentieth seminar, he claims:

Freud saves the Father once again. In that respect he imitates Jesus Christ. Modestly, no doubt, since he doesn’t pull out all the stops. But he contributes thereto, playing his little part as a good Jew who was not entirely up-to-date. (Lacan 1998, pp. 108–109)

Not only does Freud prop up the father figure on the eve of “the social decline of the paternal *imago*” —in so doing, he ends up implicitly placing himself in the same position as Christ. This remains a long way from atheism indeed.

§4 Will We Ever Be Atheists? Determinate and Absolute Negations of Christianity

Freud’s myth of the *Urvater*, this exceptional *tout jouisseur*, saves fathers by occluding their unexceptional castration (Causse 2018, p. 248). As Miller, following Lacan, observes, both Christianity and Freud confront but recoil from the paternal figure’s lack of potency and his embodiment of the impossibility of (full)

jouissance (Miller 2004, p. 37). Hence, Lacanian atheism entails affirming the non-existence not only of the subject supposed to know, but also of the subject supposed to enjoy, or, to combine these two, the subject supposed to know how to enjoy (Johnston 2005, pp. 283, 337). This non-existence is the abhorrent truth at the core of both Christianity and psychoanalysis.

Again, Freud, like Feuerbach, demythologizes the holy family by grounding it in the earthly family without demythologizing the latter in turn. Like Marx *vis-à-vis* Feuerbach, Lacan *vis-à-vis* Freud takes this further step of critically analyzing the earthly family itself. Moreover, whereas Feuerbach's God is a projection of humanity's strengths and virtues, Lacanianism diagnoses this projection as defensively masking the opposite, namely, humanity's weaknesses and vices. Whether as the primal father or the divinities of monotheisms, this figure is an Other-Subject whose omniscience and omnipotence are the representative reversals, the symptomatic inversions, of human beings' ignorance and feebleness.

Additionally, as some of Slavoj Žižek's remarks indicate, Feuerbach merely transfers the status of subject supposed to know and/or enjoy from a supernatural heavenly God to a natural earthly human species (*Gattung*). For Feuerbach's not-truly-atheistic "atheism," the big Other really does exist, albeit as the praiseworthy features of this-worldly humanity's *Gattungswesen* (species-being) rather than as an otherworldly deity (Žižek 2003, p. 171; 2019). By contrast, for Lacan's genuinely consequent atheism, *le grand Autre n'existe pas*, not as God, humanity, father, or anything and anyone else.

Truth be told, *Totem and Taboo*'s myth of the primal horde is a much less atheistic scenario than that of the Christian crucifixion. In the latter, the transcendence of God-the-Father vanishes (if only apparently and momentarily), with God incarnated as Christ-the-Son losing faith and dying on the cross (Chester-ton 1995, p. 145). François Regnault, in his 1985 study *Dieu est inconscient*, emphasizes the Christian God's status as "jealous,

not-all, incarnated, etc.” (1985, p. 43). By contrast, Freud’s primal father is virtually omnipotent, all-enjoying, uninhibited, and mythically dream-like.

As G. K. Chesterton remarks, “Christianity is the only religion on earth that has felt that omnipotence made God incomplete” (Chesterton 1995, p. 145). Perhaps Ernst Bloch is justified in proposing that the immanent critique of religion via Christian atheism is more potent and effective than its external critique through plain old garden-variety atheism (Bloch 1971, p. 233). The evidence examined by me thus far seems to suggest that Lacan might agree with this fellow post-Hegelian.

Yet, I wish to close with a series of questions for the entire (post-)Hegelian atheism-in-Christianity tradition: Does a (self-)barred Christianity, as an atheistic theism, eventually make possible an atheism freed from having to continue kneeling before its religious progenitor? Can *Christian* atheism, as the atheism in Christianity, become Christian *atheism* as an atheism beyond or after Christianity? Is atheism condemned to remaining eternally, in Hegelian terms, a determinate negation of Christianity—and, hence, permanently dependent upon what it negates? Can one move from sublating religion to finally outright negating it? Is Judeo-Christian monotheism the disposable ladder of a thoroughly historical possibility condition for atheism? Or, is it an indispensable logical necessity for making possible all future atheisms?

Bibliography

- Askofaré, Sidi (2006) “De l’inconscient au sinthome: Conjectures sur les usages et le renoncement possible au Nom-du-Père,” *L’en-je lacanien* 6:23–36.
- Balmès, François (1997) *Le nom, la loi, la voix* (Ramonville Saint-Agne: Éditions Érès).
- (2007) *Dieu, le sexe et la vérité* (Ramonville Saint-Agne: Éditions Érès).

- Bauer, Bruno (1999) "The Trumpet of the Last Judgment over Hegel the Atheist and Antichrist: An Ultimatum," trans. Michael Malloy, *The Young Hegelians: An Anthology*, 177–86, ed. Lawrence S. Stepelevich (Amherst: Humanity Books).
- Beirnaert, Louis (1987) "De l'athéisme," *Aux frontières de l'acte analytique: La Bible, saint Ignace, Freud et Lacan* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).
- Bloch, Ernst (1971) *Atheism in Christianity*, trans. J. T. Swann (New York: Herder and Herder).
- Causse, Jean-Daniel (2018) *Lacan et le christianisme* (Paris: Campagne Première).
- Chesterton, G. K. (1995) *Orthodoxy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press).
- Chiesa, Lorenzo (2015) "Psychoanalysis, Religion, Love," *Crisis and Critique* 2, 1:57–71.
- Chiesa, Lorenzo, and Alberto Toscano (2007) "Agape and the Anonymous Religion of Atheism," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 12, 1:113–26.
- De Kesel, Marc (2005) "Religion as Critique, Critique as Religion: Some Reflections on the Monotheistic Weakness of Contemporary Criticism," *Umbr(a): A Journal of the Unconscious—The Dark God*, 119–37, ed. Andrew Skomra (Buffalo: Center for the Study of Psychoanalysis and Culture, State University of New York at Buffalo).
- Feuerbach, Ludwig (1966) *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Manfred H. Vogel (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company).
- (1984) "Letter to Hegel: November 22, 1828," G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel: The Letters*, 547–50, trans. Clark Butler and Christiane Seiler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).
- (1989) *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books).
- (2012a) "The Necessity of a Reform in Philosophy," *The Fiery Brook: Selected Writings*, 153–74, trans. Zawar Hanfi (London: Verso).
- (2012b) "Preliminary Theses on the Reform of Philosophy," *The Fiery Brook: Selected Writings*, 145–52, trans. Zawar Hanfi (London: Verso).
- (2013) "Vorläufige Thesen zur Reform der Philosophie," *Grundsätze der Philosophie der Zukunft und andere Schriften*, 63–79; available online: <http://www.zeno.org/Philosophie/M/Feuerbach,+Ludwig/>

- Vorläufige+Thesen+zur+Reform+der+Philosophie (last accessed: March 13, 2019).
- Fink, Bruce (1998) "The Master Signifier and the Four Discourses," *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 29–47, ed. Dany Nobus (New York: Other Press).
- Freud, Sigmund (1940) "Totem und Tabu," *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 9 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp).
- (1987) "Overview of the Transference Neuroses," *A Phylogenetic Fantasy: Overview of the Transference Neuroses*, trans. Axel Hoffer and Peter T. Hoffer, ed. Ilse Grubrich-Simitis (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).
- (2001a) "Project for a Scientific Psychology," trans. and ed. James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud [SE]* I:283–397 (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis).
- (2001b) "Totem and Taboo," trans. and ed. James Strachey, *SE* XIII:1–161 (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis).
- (2001c) "Extracts from the Fliess Papers," trans. and ed. James Strachey, *SE* I:175–280 (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis).
- (2001d) "Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis (Part III)," trans. and ed. James Strachey, *SE* XVI (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis).
- (2001e) "The 'Uncanny,'" trans. and ed. James Strachey, *SE* XVII:217–56 (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis).
- (2001f) "Preface to Reik's *Ritual: Psycho-Analytic Studies*," trans. and ed. James Strachey, *SE* XVII:257–63 (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis).
- Grigg, Russell (2006) "Beyond the Oedipus Complex," *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis: Reflections on Seminar XVII*, 50–68, ed. Justin Clemens and Russell Grigg (Durham & London: Duke University Press).
- Haym, Rudolf (1975) "Preußen und die Rechtsphilosophie (1857): Hegel und seine Zeit," *Materialien zu Hegels Rechtsphilosophie*, 365–94, ed. Manfred Riedel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp).

- Hegel, G. W. F. (1956) *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover).
- (1970) *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp).
- (1975) “The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate,” *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).
- (1977) *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- (1979) *System of Ethical Life, System of Ethical Life and First Philosophy of Spirit*, trans. H. S. Harris and T. M. Knox (Albany: State University of New York Press).
- (1984) “Hegel to Creuzer [draft]: End of May 1821,” *Hegel: The Letters*, 467–68, trans. Clark Butler and Christiane Seiler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).
- (1985) *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, Volume III: The Consummate Religion*, trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, J. M. Stewart, and H. S. Harris, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- (1991) *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, ed. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- (1999) “The Relationship of Religion to the State,” *Political Writings*, 225–33, trans. H. B. Nisbet, ed. Laurence Dickey and H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Johnston, Adrian (2005) *Time Driven: Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press).
- (2008) *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press).
- (2013a) *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism, Volume One: The Outcome of Contemporary French Philosophy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press).
- (2013b) “Jacques Lacan (1901–1981),” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; available online: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/lacan/> (last accessed: March 14, 2019).
- (2014) *Adventures in Transcendental Materialism: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).

- (2017) *Irrepressible Truth: On Lacan's "The Freudian Thing"* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).
- (2019) *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism, Volume Two: A Weak Nature Alone* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press).
- Kant, Immanuel (1998) *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Lacan, Jacques (1961–1962) *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre IX: L'identification, 1961–1962* [unpublished typescript].
- (1964–1965) *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XII: Problèmes cruciaux de la psychanalyse, ou: Les positions subjectives de l'être, 1964–1965* [unpublished typescript].
- (1965–1966) *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XIII: L'objet de la psychanalyse, 1965–1966* [unpublished typescript].
- (1967–1968) *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XV: L'acte psychanalytique, 1967–1968* [unpublished typescript].
- (1971–1972) *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XIX: Le savoir du psychanalyste, 1971–1972* [unpublished typescript].
- (1973–1974) *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XXI: Les non-dupes errent, 1973–1974* [unpublished typescript].
- (1975) *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XX: Encore, 1972–1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).
- (1977) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1964*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W. W. Norton & Company).
- (1981) *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre III: Les psychoses, 1955–1956*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).
- (1986a) "Conférence de Bruxelles sur l'éthique de la psychanalyse," *Psychoanalyse: La Revue de l'École Belge de Psychoanalyse* 4:163–87.
- (1986b) *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre VII: L'éthique de la psychanalyse, 1959–1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).
- (1990) "Introduction to the Names-of-the-Father Seminar," *Television/A Challenge to the Psychoanalytic Establishment*, trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson, ed. Joan Copjec (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company).

- (1991) *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XVII: L'envers de la psychanalyse, 1969–1970*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).
- (1992) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, trans. Dennis Porter, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W. W. Norton & Company).
- (1993a) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses, 1955–1956*, trans. Russell Grigg, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W. W. Norton & Company).
- (1993b) “Un homme et une femme,” *Bulletin de l'Association freudienne* 54:13–21.
- (1994) *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre IV: La relation d'objet, 1956–1957*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).
- (1998) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore, 1972–1973*, trans. Bruce Fink, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W. W. Norton & Company).
- (2001a) “La méprise du sujet supposé savoir,” *Autres écrits*, 329–39, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).
- (2001b) “Les complexes familiaux dans la formation de l'individu: Essai d'analyse d'une fonction en psychologie,” *Autres écrits*, 23–84, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).
- (2001c) “Radiophonie,” *Autres écrits*, 403–48, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).
- (2001d) “L'étourdit,” *Autres écrits*, 449–96, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).
- (2006a) *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XVI: D'un Autre à l'autre, 1968–1969*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).
- (2006b) “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious,” *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 671–702, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company).
- (2006c) “Kant with Sade,” *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 645–68, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company).
- (2006d) “Overture to this Collection,” *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 3–5, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company).

- (2006e) “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 6–48, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company).
- (2006f) “Psychoanalysis and Its Teaching,” *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 364–83, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company).
- (2006g) “The Youth of Gide, or the Letter and Desire,” *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 623–44, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company).
- (2006h) *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XVIII: D’un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant, 1971*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).
- (2006i) “On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis,” *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 445–88, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company).
- (2006j) “A Theoretical Introduction to the Functions of Psychoanalysis in Criminology,” *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 102–22, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company).
- (2007) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis, 1969–1970*, trans. Russell Grigg, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W. W. Norton & Company).
- (2011) *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XIX: ...ou pire, 1971–1972*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).
- (2013a) “The Triumph of Religion,” *The Triumph of Religion, preceded by Discourse to Catholics*, trans. Bruce Fink (Cambridge, UK, & Malden, MA: Polity Press).
- (2013b) “Discourse to Catholics,” *The Triumph of Religion, preceded by Discourse to Catholics*, trans. Bruce Fink (Cambridge, UK, & Malden, MA: Polity Press).
- (2013c) *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre VI: Le désir et son interprétation, 1958–1959*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions de La Martinière).
- (2014) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X: Anxiety, 1962–1963*, trans. A. R. Price, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Cambridge, UK, & Malden, MA: Polity Press).

- (2017) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book V: The Formations of the Unconscious, 1957–1958*, trans. Russell Grigg, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Cambridge, UK, & Malden, MA: Polity Press).
- (2018) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XIX: ...or worse, 1971–1972*, trans. A. R. Price, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Cambridge, UK, & Malden, MA: Polity Press).
- Marx, Karl (1998) “Theses on Feuerbach,” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (Amherst: Prometheus Books).
- Miller, Jacques-Alain (2004) “Religion, Psychoanalysis,” trans. Barbara P. Fulks, *Lacanian Ink* 23:6–38.
- Regnault, François (1985) *Dieu est inconscient: Études lacaniennes autour de saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Navarin).
- Verhaeghe, Paul (2006) “Enjoyment and Impossibility: Lacan's Revision of the Oedipus Complex,” *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis: Reflections on Seminar XVII*, 29–49, ed. Justin Clemens and Russell Grigg (Durham & London: Duke University Press).
- Žižek, Slavoj (1998) “Four Discourses, Four Subjects,” *Cogito and the Unconscious*, 74–113, ed. Slavoj Žižek (Durham & London: Duke University Press).
- (1999) “The Undergrowth of Enjoyment: How Popular Culture Can Serve as an Introduction to Lacan,” *The Žižek Reader*, 11–36, ed. Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright (Oxford: Blackwell).
- (2003) *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
- (2004) *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (London & New York: Verso).
- (2019) *Sex and the Failed Absolute* (London: Bloomsbury).

The Sub-Ego: Description of An Inferior Observing Agency¹

Robert Pfaller

01 Gods, Young and Old

In his *Praise of Folly*, Erasmus of Rotterdam has the allegorical heroine pose a typically foolish, yet also extremely clever, question: “Why is Cupid always pourtrai’d like a boy?” (Erasmus 1913, p. 28) This question as to the reason for the everlasting childishness of godly figures refers to a particular phenomenon in cultural history: cultures other than our own—yes, even the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome that we like to refer to—had young, childlike gods. As is known, ancient cultures also worshiped other deities that had but few similarities with the gods familiar to us. Theirs were extravagant, lascivious, adulterous, jealous, vain, wrathful, and even drunken gods and goddesses—thus, by and large, characters with infantile or suboptimal affect management. This was occasionally considered scandalous even by some ancient philosophers;² and it had led some nineteenth-

¹ An earlier, German version of this text appeared in my book *Erwachsensprache. Über Ihr Verschwinden aus Politik und Kultur* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer Verlag, 2017). Courtesy of the publisher.

² Xenophanes, the “monotheistic” pre-Socratic philosopher, critically remarked: “Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods everything that is a shame and reproach among men, stealing, committing adultery, and deceiving each other.” (Xenophanes of Colophon, Frgm. 11; Sextus, Adv. Math., IX, 193; see Kirk and Raven 1957, pp. 168 ff.)

century scholars to doubt whether the Greeks really had believed in their gods.³

Not all religions even have gods, as Émile Durkheim established (Durkheim 1995, pp. 27 ff). But when a religion or culture does have gods, then a certain cultural-historical regularity can be observed: The older the culture, the younger its gods. Or more precisely: The younger a culture, the more likely it is that its gods be exclusively old, wise, disembodied, nearly genderless, and, in any case, asexual.

Even in Christianity, that is, in its older version, Catholicism, the traces of ancient, infantile deities can still be recognized in chubby-cheeked little angels, while, at least in the saints, striking gender differences are manifest. In Protestantism, as the more recent version of Christianity, however, an animosity toward the image developed, most certainly first and foremost due to Protestantism's desire to purge itself of this inherited personnel stemming from classical antiquity.⁴ Following Theo Sundermeier, Jan Assmann's differentiation between "primary religions," which fear that the sacred might not be recognized and worshiped enough, and "secondary religions," which fear the opposite, that is, respecting the sacred too much (Assmann 2003, p. 11), can probably be traced back to this circumstance. For what is at issue here is not only the sacral quantity, but mainly an endeavor to ban from culture everything that is sexual and affective about the saints. In a fine observation, Sigmund Freud got to the heart of this cultural development that separates us from classical antiquity:

³ See Veyne 1988, and Engels' clever reply to this in Engels 1973, p. 14. See also Pfaller 2014, pp. 6 f.

⁴ The "genius," to whom Giorgio Agamben devoted a powerful study (Agamben 2007), is also one of these childlike gods with whom it is never very easy to get along. His keen removal from the world of art since the 1990s through diverse initiatives, such as conceptual art and documentary art, are evidence of that fanatical Protestant spirit, which, as Max Weber accurately remarked, is unaware of its religious nature (Weber 2002 [1905], p. 216).

The most striking distinction between the erotic life of antiquity and our own no doubt lies in the fact that the ancients laid the stress upon the instinct itself, whereas we emphasize its object. The ancients glorified the instinct and were prepared on its account to honour even an inferior object; while we despise the instinctual activity in itself, and find excuses for it only in the merits of the object. (Freud 2001a [1905], p. 149 n.)

02 Gods, Complementary and Aligned

If it is true that people create gods based on their own image, as Epicurus, Spinoza, and Ludwig Feuerbach claimed, then psychoanalysis should probably add a small clarification here: they create the gods based on a desired image of themselves, rather than a realistic one. People want to correspond with a certain image, and configure their gods in accordance with that. However, in doing so, the gods can assume different functions and configurations. They can take on those parts of the personality and affect features that people themselves no longer have, or refuse to accept—“Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord,” as Freud summarizes this model.⁵ Here, one can speak of “complementary deifying.” Like the State later, the gods are assigned certain monopolies on violence, games of fortune, and affects.

⁵ “A progressive renunciation of constitutional instincts, whose activation might afford the ego primary pleasure, appears to be one of the foundations of the development of human civilization. Some part of this instinctual repression is effected by its religions, in that they require the individual to sacrifice his instinctual pleasure to the Deity: ‘Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord.’ In the development of the ancient religions one seems to discern that many things which mankind had renounced as ‘iniquities’ had been surrendered to the Deity and were still permitted in his name, so that the handing over to him of bad and socially harmful instincts was the means by which man freed himself from their domination. For this reason, it is surely no accident that all the attributes of man, along with the misdeeds that follow from them, were to an unlimited amount ascribed to the ancient gods. Nor is it a contradiction of this that nevertheless man was not permitted to justify his own iniquities by appealing to divine example.” (Freud 2001b [1907], p. 127)

Subsequently, however, people seem to no longer want to allow the gods what they painstakingly deny themselves. The gods then become as wise, peaceful, good—and as old—as the people themselves aspire to be, at least potentially, or that is at least what they hope for in an agency that, so they believe, passes judgement on them. “Analogue deification” removes the complementary function of beings situated on the Olympus, or in heaven, and arranges for a strict orientation of gods and people along the same norms.

Of course, the gods conceived as complimentary, that is, the gods who had to take on all of the follies of humanity as their own,⁶ were not unproblematic companions for the inhabitants of ancient times either. Older cultures did not differ from our culture in that they considered things that appear repulsive to us as good *per se*. Instead, as Freud explained, they were aware of the ambivalent nature of the gods, while we attempt to deny or eliminate this ambivalence. The ancients, by contrast, had methods for realizing the benign aspects of this ambivalence. As Freud’s quoted remark about “glorifying the instinct” (“*Feiern des Triebes*,” literally: “celebrating the drive”) reveals, in this regard “celebrating” was the definitive cultural technique. One has to celebrate or sanctify the (disquieting) gods, as then they do not appear as something impure, but

⁶ “‘How foolish they are’ is what he thinks when the mortals misbehave, – ‘foolishness’, ‘stupidity’, a little ‘mental disturbance’, this much even the Greeks of the strongest, bravest period *allowed* themselves as a reason for much that was bad or calamitous: – foolishness, *not* sin! you understand? ... But even this mental disturbance was a problem – ‘Yes, how is this possible? Where can this have actually come from with minds like *ours*, we men of high lineage, happy, well-endowed, high-born, noble and virtuous?’ – for centuries, the noble Greek asked himself this in the face of any incomprehensible atrocity or crime with which one of his peers had sullied himself. ‘A *god* must have confused him’, he said to himself at last, shaking his head ... This solution is *typical* for the Greeks ... In this way, the gods served to justify man to a certain degree, even if he was in the wrong they served as causes of evil – they did not, at that time, take the punishment on themselves, but rather, as is *nobler*, the guilt ...” (Nietzsche 2007 [1887], p. 65)

rather—based on the dual meaning⁷ as recognized by Freud and Benveniste—as magnificent, lofty, sublime. In everyday life, traces of this cultural technique can still be observed today, albeit without explicit reference to the holy ones or gods: for example, when people gather and festively enjoy an unusually sumptuous meal (“a real pig out”), a “bad taste party,” or an otherwise “accursed”⁸ or shunned part of trivial culture (as, for instance, in the case of the methods of “camp” culture described by Susan Sontag) and thereby transform it into what for them is a sublime experience.⁹ With regard to the gods, these techniques seem to have been lost early on in our culture—a process similar to the disappearing of ambivalent pleasures in the past several decades. In this way, a great deal of what we were previously able to celebrate now appears repulsive to us; and thus, our previous gods become our demons, as Freud remarked with reference to Heinrich Heine (Freud 2001d [1919], pp. 235 ff).

03 Observation, from Above and from Below

This cultural development is of interest for psychoanalysis not only because it brings with it a changed relationship to the affects. The gods were not merely role models or afterimages of people, but also allegories for the elements of the human psyche—they symbolized the observational and judgmental agencies accommodated therein. Whether a culture is one of old or young gods, gods with or without drives, is relevant in terms of the direction from which people feel

⁷ Benveniste remarked that in almost all Indo-European languages, two notions are always to be found for these matters; for example, in English “holy” and “sacred.” Freud noted the striking ambivalence in the Polynesian notion of “taboo” that means, on the one hand, “sublime, holy,” and “filthy,” on the other. See Benveniste 2016, pp. 453 ff; Freud 2001c [1912–13], p. 18.

⁸ For the notion of the “accursed share” in culture, see Bataille 1993.

⁹ In my opinion, therein lies the precise theoretical meaning of the Freudian term “sublimation” (see Pfaller 2009).

observed and judged in their self-assessment.¹⁰ Cultures with old gods who seem superior to people with regard to all moral criteria, feel observed from above. Freud's term "super-ego" seems to correspond with this observational position that achieved dominance late in cultural history. In light of the handed down young gods, however, psychoanalysis has to draw the conclusion that yet another type of observation is possible—an observation from below. For this agency, the "sub-ego" seems an appropriate description. In contrast to Freud's concept of the "Id," which identifies no observing function for this agency, a "sub-ego" would acknowledge that also towards this side, the psyche has to cope with not only instinctual drives, but also normative demands and judgments.¹¹

One could pointedly say that in the ancient world it was not people who believed in gods, but rather the reverse, it was gods who believed in people: for the sake of the childlike ancient gods, people had to do things that they would have otherwise refused to do for themselves. For example, they felt obliged to provide entertainment for these (otherwise easily bored) beings through elaborate sporting and artistic Olympic competitions. And by celebrating and dancing, they were meant to put on a cheerful and happy face—maybe even a bit more cheerful and happy than they actually were. A similar, well-known imperative still exists today

¹⁰ On these judgment-functions and their various manifestations in cultural history, see Nietzsche's remark: "These Greeks, for most of the time, used their Gods, expressly to keep 'bad conscience' at bay so that they could carry on enjoying their freedom of soul: therefore, the opposite of the way Christendom made use of its God." (Nietzsche 2007 [1887], pp. 64–65)

¹¹ This would probably also help the term "agency" to attain its full rights. With it, Freud's "topological" differentiation would first achieve what differentiations are supposed to—namely, to distinguish things of the same nature: in this case, observing agencies. Otherwise, the psychoanalytical topology risks similar theoretical aberrations as classical political economy with its "trinity formula" of wealth ("capital—land—labor"), which Karl Marx ridiculed as making just about as much sense as the differentiation between "lawyer's fees, beetroot and music" (Marx 1991, p. 953; for a succinct commentary, see Brewer 1984, p. 181).

in the practice of politeness. Here, too, one should simulate a good mood, benevolence, and well-being, even if perhaps in reality (or what one thinks is such) one is in an entirely different mood. It is as though a naïve, virtual observing agency's belief in people's appearances should not be disappointed.

04 Insight and Hindsight

Strangely, the fact that normative, and not simply factual (i.e., instinctual), demands emanate from inferior agencies is all too easily overlooked in our culture. Yet it is legible in many forms of behavior. In the face of particular observers assessed as naïve, people refrain from enjoying some things that they would otherwise absolutely grant themselves. For example, some people do not smoke in the presence of children; not simply to avoid afflicting them with toxic substances, but also to avoid being perceived as bad role models. Others pretend to be religious, or send their children to religious schools, despite being indifferent towards religion or even rejecting it. Adult “Others,” too, can end up in this alleged observing position. The saying “What will people think?” sums up a great deal what, on the surface, can only be understood as a demand for manners located somewhere below.¹² In contrast to the more strongly internalized moral demands, nearly everything that is done so as to look good in the eyes of others—that is, all that is done for the sake of appearances, such as elegant or civilized looks, etiquette, being chic, etc.—must be described in

¹² Also belonging to this category are things that fall under sayings such as “one says,” or “one wears this nowadays,” or even “one might believe” (see the characteristic saying for the illusion of the game “*on dirait*”—“one could say”—in Mannoni 1985, p. 162). The “one” here is always of the sort that Martin Heidegger, in his notion of “*das ‘Man’*,” “the They,” situated with scorn (see Heidegger 1993, pp. 113 ff)—in relation to the I, this agency is localized as an inferior, “naïve observer” (see Pfaller 2014).

terms of demands on the part of an agency that is ignorant and only capable of perceiving formalities, yet nonetheless felt as being in control.¹³ An important difference becomes apparent here: the demands that come from above, although not always considered fulfillable (in the sense of the Kantian maxim “Ought implies can”), are nonetheless always seen as meaningful. They are, so to speak, “ego syntonic.” On the contrary, the demands from below are perceived as “ego dystonic.” They clearly boil down to what causes the behavior of splitting of the ego described by Octave Mannoni, and summarized by the saying “I know well, but all the same...” (Mannoni 1985, pp. 9 ff). While in the attempt by the ego to meet these respective demands its behavior towards the upper side can be described as one of “realizing” and “obeying,” the norm-conforming behavior towards the lower side is most certainly one of yielding and indulgent connivance. In the first case, people look up towards something and, by obeying, gain self-esteem, while in the second case they perhaps shake their head, maybe utter an affectionate chuckle, or even become fearful as they let something happen for which they have absolutely no understanding.¹⁴ That is why Freud’s comparison of the non-justifiable prohibitions of “taboo societies” to Kant’s absolute categorical imperative is misleading (see Freud 2001c [1912–13], p. 292). Kant’s imperative is a command from a human reason that makes the laws with which every reasonable being must be able to identify. The prohibitions of the taboos, on the contrary, cannot be justified and cannot be identified with because they are

¹³ See Immanuel Kant’s and Richard Sennett’s descriptions of the necessity of theatrical appearance in the public space (Kant 1974 [1798], p. 442 (§ 11); Sennett 2002 [1974], pp. 49 ff).

¹⁴ The two faces of this domain belong, as Freud remarked, to the uncanny and the comedic (see Pfaller 2008, pp. 251–72). The typical gaze of Cary Grant in comedies such as Blake Edwards’ *Operation Petticoat* (1959) describes precisely this attitude of an amazed and amused, entirely fatalistic acceptance along the lines of “I know well, but all the same...”

not issued from above, but instead come from what is basically an ego-dystonic below.

05 What We Can Laugh About Fondly

In his study on humor, Freud remarked that a humorous attitude can most definitely be adopted with regard to one's self (one could perhaps even say that this is proof of someone having a good sense of humor in the first place), and that this asset requires a relationship between two different upper-level stages of one's own psyche. As Freud explains:

[S]omeone is treating himself like a child and is at the same time playing the part of a superior adult towards that child[.] (Freud 2001e [1927], p. 164)

Through this reference to an agency that is viewed as a child, it becomes possible to recognize “the triviality of interests and sufferings which seem so great to it” and to smile at them (ibid., p. 163). Subsequently, Freud attempted to topologically define this gaze as the gaze of the super-ego looking upon the ego. After all, this surprising, affectionate attitude of the super-ego would not contradict its “origin in the paternal agency” (ibid., p. 166).

On the other hand, as Freud himself remarked, this theoretical step nonetheless appears a bit paradoxical. “In other connections we knew the super-ego as a severe master” (ibid.), Freud writes, adding that while this master is, indeed, strict, he is anything but just. The super-ego always punishes, regardless of whether one obeys it or not, and punishes us even more strictly when we obey it (see Freud 2001f [1930], p. 126). And when one experiences misfortune due to no fault of one's own, this master shows no sympathy whatsoever, instead intensifying its pressure on us. This double paradox, noted by Freud, reveals that by nature the

super-ego is a dangerous tyrant, who only in the most favorable cases can be swayed from harassing the ego with obscene double-binds. The origins of the super-ego in the parental agency is — also in Freud’s opinion — likewise no proof of its ability for affectionate leniency. On the contrary, as Freud determined: the milder the parents, the stricter the super-ego, as its role models are not the parents, but instead, their super-egos (Freud 2001g [1933], p. 67).

Beyond that, Freud remarked “that, in bringing about the humorous attitude, the super-ego is actually repudiating reality and serving an illusion” (Freud 2001e [1927], p. 166). Yet, on the other hand, Freud had just established the super-ego as representative of the reality principle (Freud 2001h [1921], p. 114). These inconsistencies can perhaps be resolved by defining, as Freud does, the humorous attitude as a gaze from above directed down below, but, unlike Freud, not conceiving it as a gaze of the super-ego onto the ego. In his topology that conceives of no other observing agencies Freud only had one candidate that could possibly fill this position of the gaze from above, namely the super-ego.

However, once we assume (instructed by the image of the childlike gods) that there are also inferior observing agencies, we can discern yet another type of the gaze from above. Accordingly, we too could gaze downward affectionately when entering into a relationship with the sub-ego. When relating to ourselves in a humorous way, we put ourselves in the position of the sub-ego; we look at ourselves the way that we otherwise tend to do with the other placeholders of this agency. And our leniency with regard to the shortcomings of this inferior being, who could also be us, would therefore rest on the fact that we have learned to also please beings whom we consider less perceptive than ourselves. What seems to agree with this hypothesis is the situation still observable today, namely that we find a more humorous, as well as a more affectionate, relationship with children in cultures that have distinctly preserved the memory of childlike gods.

December 2018

Bibliography

- Agamben, Giorgio (2007) "Genius," *Profanations*, 9–19, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books).
- Assmann, Jan (2003) *Die mosaische Unterscheidung oder der Preis des Monotheismus* (Munich: Hanser).
- Bataille, Georges (1993) *The Accursed Share, Vols. II & III: The History of Eroticism and Sovereignty*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books).
- Benveniste, Émile (2016) *Dictionary of Indo-European Concepts and Society*, trans. Elizabeth Palmer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press).
- Brewer, Anthony (1984) *A Guide to Marx's Capital* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press).
- Durkheim, Émile (1995) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karin Fields (New York: The Free Press).
- Engels, Friedrich (1973) *Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staats. Im Anschluss an Lewis H. Morgans Forschungen* (Berlin: Dietz).
- (2013) *Landmarks of Scientific Socialism: Anti-Dühring* (Miami: HardPress Publishing).
- Erasmus of Rotterdam (1913) *The Praise of Folly* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- Freud, Sigmund (2001a [1905]) "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," trans. and ed. James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud [SE]* VII:125–245 (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis).
- (2001b [1907]) "Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices," trans. and ed. James Strachey, *SE* IX:115–27 (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis).
- (2001c [1912–13]) "Totem and Taboo," trans. and ed. James Strachey, *SE* XIII:1–164 (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis).
- (2001d [1919]) "The Uncanny," trans. and ed. James Strachey, *SE* XVII:219–56 (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis).

- (2001e [1927] “On Humour,” trans. and ed. James Strachey, *SE* XXI:159–66 (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis).
- (2001f [1930] “Civilization and its Discontents,” trans. and ed. James Strachey, *SE* XXI:59–145 (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis).
- (2001g [1933] “New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis,” trans. and ed. James Strachey, *SE* XXII:3–182 (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis).
- (2001h [1921] “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego,” trans. and ed. James Strachey, *SE* XVIII:67–143 (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis).
- Heidegger, Martin (1993) *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer).
- Kant, Immanuel (1974 [1798]) *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Press).
- Kirk, Geoffrey S., and John E. Raven (1957) *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts* (London: Cambridge University Press).
- Mannoni, Octave (1985) *Clefs pour l’Imaginaire ou l’Autre Scène* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).
- (2003) “I Know well, But All the Same . . .,” trans. G. M. Goshgarian, *Perversion and the Social Relation*, 68–92, ed. Molly Anne Rothenberg, Denis Foster, and Slavoj Žižek (Durham, NC, & London: Duke University Press).
- Marx, Karl (1991) *Capital*, Vol. 3, trans. David Fernbach (Harmondsworth: Penguin).
- Nietzsche, Friedrich (2007 [1887]) *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press).
- Pfaller, Robert (2008) *Das schmutzige Heilige und die reine Vernunft. Symptome der Gegenwartskultur* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer Verlag).
- (2009) “Sublimation and ‘Schweinerei’. Theoretical Place and Cultural-critical Function of a Psychoanalytic Concept,” *JEP, European Journal of Psychoanalysis* 29:11–47.
- (2011) *Wofür es sich zu leben lohnt. Elemente materialistischer Philosophie* (Frankfurt: S. Fischer Verlag).

— (2014) *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions without Owners*, trans. Lisa Rosenblatt, with Charlotte Eckler and Camilla Nielsen (London & New York: Verso).

Sennett, Richard (2002 [1974]) *The Fall of Public Man* (London: Penguin).

Veyne, Paul (1988) *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination*, trans. Paula Wissing (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press).

Weber, Max (2002 [1905]) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (London: Penguin).

From Public Opinion to Public Knowledge: Hegel's State as an Epistemic Institution*

Zdravko Kobe

“You know that I always had a penchant for politics,” wrote Hegel in a letter in 1807. Although the confession was made at a time when he was forced to accept the job of editor of the *Bamberger Zeitung*, everything suggests it was sincere.¹ In fact, it seems that Hegel was politically engaged not only in his youth, but that even later, as he became professor in Heidelberg and then in Berlin, he kept dangerously close to radical student fraternities. Both his very first and his very last published writings—the anonymous translation of a pamphlet on the social and political conditions in the Pays de Vaud in 1798 and his lengthy essay on the English Reform Bill in 1831—were engaged interventions into the political affairs of the time. It is no coincidence that the *Philosophy of Right* stands out as the only part of Hegel's system that was intentionally given a separate presentation. It can also be claimed that the political dimension affects the very form of Hegel's thought, especially if one considers that, in Jena, Hegel

* The author acknowledges the project (“The Structure and Genealogy of Indifference,” J6-8263) was financially supported by the Slovenian Research Agency.

¹ This paper is a continuation of my engagement with Hegel's political philosophy, and draws on some topics already presented in other publications, especially Kobe 2013; 2014; 2015; and 2019. I would like to thank Luca Illetterati, Francesca Menegoni, Pierpaolo Cesaroni, and the participants of the seminar on Hegel's philosophy of absolute spirit at the University of Padova for their valuable suggestions and comments.

developed his conception of the concept under the influence of Spinoza's *political* philosophy.² Thus, the penchant in question not only connects Hegel as a historical person to the political events of his time, but also implies a structural affinity between political reality and philosophical knowledge.

This paper explores the said connection, presenting Hegel's state as an institution of knowledge, that is, as an epistemic, even philosophical organization. Throughout this study, special attention will be given to Hegel's novel conception of public opinion, and to the ways in which it can be transformed into public knowledge. At the end, I will try to formulate the problems of the modern state in Hegelian terms, as well as hint at some Hegel-inspired suggestions for their solution.

I

According to Hegel's official definition, "the state is the actuality of the ethical Idea" (§ 257), or alternatively, "the actuality of the concrete freedom" (§ 260).³ For the time being, the precise meaning of this definition may be left open. But it is immediately clear that Hegel uses the concept of the state in a flexible and expanded sense that goes well beyond the official institutions of a territorially enclosed community. If Hegel describes civil society as an "*external state*," as the "*state of necessity and of the understanding*" (§ 260), then obviously there is also an internal state, a state of freedom and of the reason; and if he speaks of "the *political* state proper" (§ 267), then there must be some dimension of the

² The thesis was convincingly established by Chierghin (see Chierghin 1977). For an additional corroboration of the thesis see also Kobe 2015.

³ In general, Hegel's works are cited here according to the reference edition *Gesammelte Werke* (Hegel 1968–), using the available English translations. For the sake of convenience, however, the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* are cited by paragraph number only (where R stands for the remark added to the paragraph).

state that extends beyond the realm of politics in the commonly understood sense of the word. To emphasize this diffusion of the state in the social tissue,⁴ Hegel uses the intentionally ambiguous expression *Verfassung*, which, similar to “constitution,” refers both to the fundamental law of the state and the actual composition of the (social) body. For that reason, Hegel was in a position to provide a trivial answer to the classical question of political philosophy, which asks who should compose the constitution for a people (see § 273). Since a given community always already has a certain social constitution, and, in this sense, it cannot be without a constitution, there is no need for devising one at all. It has only to be written down, which ultimately can be done by anyone.

What is the state in this extended sense? A promising way of approaching this question is to consider how Hegel, in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, introduced the concept of spirit. After following a series of necessarily failed attempts of the “rational self-consciousness to actualize itself,” a passage is made from the instrumental to the expressive model of actualization, that is, from activity to creativity. The subject is now supposed to make herself actual in the product, *das Werk*, created by her. At first, the new model appears quite effective. If previously the individual inevitably failed to actualize herself through her action, now, on the contrary, every attempt seems necessarily and trivially successful, since the work, whatever its nature, is in any event a manifestation of the subject. In this sense, every work is by definition “good.” For instance, if the work is mediocre, so is its author, who can no longer pretend to possess any artistic greatness. But here, too, a complication soon emerges. Once the work enters the realm of external existence, it becomes accessible to others, who give it true objectivity by way of judging it. The problem is that what the

⁴ This rootedness of the state in the actual social structures and practices is emphasized by Cesaroni, who, in this respect, deploys Hegel's expression *Verfassung im Besonderen*; see Cesaroni 2006.

others see in the work does not necessarily coincide with what I, its initial author, wanted to see in it. Moreover, their judgment is bound to differ from my own since in my interpretation I wanted to manifest *my* subjectivity, while they will want to actualize *theirs*. In this way, Hegel continues, a movement of interpretations arises that brings about a twofold consequence: on the one hand, the work becomes a *common work*, to which each subject contributes her share; on the other, it gains *independence* from any particular subject involved, thus turning into something independent.

Hegel uses various expressions to describe this new formation. He calls it a “true work,” *das wahre Werk*, as the “unity of *being and doing*, of *willing and accomplishing*” (GW 9, p. 222), thereby emphasizing that in it the subject has finally received a valid judgment regarding her subjectivity. Hegel calls it the *cause itself*, which, as a *cause*, constitutes “the permeation of actuality and individuality” (GW 9, p. 223), while, as *itself*, it stands above the mere individual’s causes “and is only a cause insofar as it is the *doing of each and all*” (GW 9, p. 227). He furthermore calls it the *universal work*, which “engenders itself through the doing of each and all as their unity and equality,” and thus also the *universal being*, even *spiritual essentiality* and *spiritual being* (GW 9, pp. 239, 239, 223, 227). Hegel then immediately proceeds to the treatment of the spirit, of course, and what was initially introduced in the context of the realization of individuality is now determined as an *ethical substance* that represents the basis for the entire further development in the *Phenomenology*. But from our point of view, it is important to note that both the cause itself and the universal being clearly suggest that, according to Hegel, we are here witnessing the emergence of the dimension of the state. *Die Sache selbst*, which is equally accessible to everyone and figures as the cause “of each and all,” is obviously — both in description and in name — an attempt to capture what in traditional political theory was called *res publica*. It is equally apparent that, here, *das allgemeine Wesen* does not stand for God, but features simply as a variant of *das gemeine Wesen* or

das Gemeinwesen, which is but another translation for *res publica* or the state. This triple conceptual connection⁵ between the true work, the ethical substance, and the state is further corroborated by the fact that, in the chapter on ethical life from the first edition of the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel does not use the term “state” at all, instead regularly deploying in its place the expression *das allgemeine Werk*, which is equated with the ethical substance: “The universal work which is the substance itself” (GW 13, p. 234).

The fact that the *Phenomenology* introduced the notion of spirit within the framework of traditional *political* theory clearly proves that Hegel’s concept of the state should be read against the background of the ethical substance. This remark is not trivial. It implies not only that in considering the state we should always bear in mind the reasons why, according to Hegel, neither abstract law nor morality are able to provide the necessary conditions for the realization of the subject’s freedom. It also suggests that in order to grasp the relationship between the state and the subject (be it individual or collective), we should rely on the model developed by Hegel with regards to the ethical substance. As we know, its fundamental armature consists of rules and institutions that happen to be effective in a certain community—those “customs and mores” that one accepts without reflection, out of habit that has become “second nature” (§ 151). Precisely because we all tend to participate in them, the “customs and mores” acquire a force of their own, hence appearing to a particular subject as something absolute, something that simply *is* “in the supreme sense of self-sufficiency” (§ 146). Confronted with this “absolute authority and power,” the subject appears completely powerless and can only accept it. However, according to Hegel, it is actually meaningless

⁵ Unfortunately, in the latest English translation of the *Phenomenology* the connection in question is blurred; the translation renders *die Sache* as the *crux of the matter* (or, alternatively, as the *fact*) and *das allgemeine Wesen* as the *universal essence*.

to speak in this context of the subject's eventual acceptance of the ethical substance, since she *always already inhabits its institutions*, and it is only on their ground and *through them that she is the subject she is*. In this sense, the subject's relation to the substance is "a relationship which is immediately even more identical than even *faith* and *trust*" (and for a Protestant, "trust" is the name for her relation to God), it is a "relationless identity" (§ 146). The substance and the subject allow for no external relation, they are the same, and the subject's acceptance of the institutions that are valid in a certain ethical community is ultimately nothing but her acceptance of herself.

Hegel's conception bears witness to the fact that a subject becomes what she is only against the backdrop of a preexisting structure. This would only be controversial if we were to suppose that the subject is her own creator. On the other hand, and contrary to first appearances, it definitely does not imply that the subject has no other choice but to fully comply with all the present norms (conformism in the ordinary sense), that she cannot act as independent and, in particular, that she cannot act against valid institutions. This is definitely possible; indeed, in Hegel's view this is precisely the way the *substance affirms itself* and proves its being alive: "Subjectivity is itself the absolute form and existent actuality of the substance" (§ 151). Customs and mores also change, as it were, and they change precisely as subjects—intentionally or unintentionally, abruptly or gradually—diverge from the accepted rules and establish new ones. It is only to the self-proclaimed guardians of tradition that such a development appears as a sign of decay of the ethical substance, whereas effectively it has to be read as proof of its vitality. Conversely, it is precisely when customs and mores are being repeated in one and the same way that we should describe them as ossified: in that case, they no longer contain any spirit or life, and they no longer form a part of the actual ethical substance, but are mere remnants of a bygone past, the value of which is now solely folkloric. In

this sense, even a rebellion against the ethical substance is a sign of its vitality, showing that the subjects consider it something worth fighting over. True death would occur only if they ceased to bother about it altogether, just as those customs and mores that no one observes anymore gradually wither away.

The affirmation of the structural affinity between the ethical substance and the state is not trivial, I've said. Conceiving the state against the background of the substance and the subject immediately implies that, in Hegel, the objective universality of the state and the subjective particularity of its citizens mutually condition one another. Hence Hegel's constant emphasis on *patriotism* (cf. § 268), understood not as a willingness to undertake extraordinary sacrifice, but as a *heroism of everyday disposition*, "tried and tested [...] in ordinary life," as a "volition that has become *habitual*" in considering the ethical substance as the basis of one's actions. It is on this account that Hegel's state is *essentially the people's state*. Its very existence permanently depends on its capacity for acquiring the support of its citizens, and it can never sustain itself by mere physical force. If we were to venture an initial definition, we could say that the state is the bond that holds people together.

II

However, the state does not dissolve totally into substance. The state is, to be more precise, the place where the universal ethical substance *becomes conscious of itself as universal*. Moreover, at least in the case of the modern state—and in Hegel's view, only the modern state actually conforms to the concept of the state—this self-conscious unity is established within the *regime of knowledge*, i.e., as a rational and thinking universal; and further, it includes the principle of subjective freedom as the principle of the modern world in general. "The state is the ethical spirit as knowing itself." (GW 26, p. 511)

The special relation between the modern state and knowledge is a result of two parallel developments. We have seen, on the one hand, that by definition the individual is embedded in the ethical substance: the subject acts “as a *particular* collaborator at the universal work” (GW 13, p. 234), while the substance provides him an objectively determined space for his self-actualization. However, even though having an existence of its own, and even though enjoying an independent authority over its members, in itself, the ethical substance is mute. As such, it cannot stop what I have called the movement of interpretations and pass *its* verdict, which means that the subject, too, cannot know her real value, and thus cannot actualize herself. For this reason, as the place of the universal, it has to acquire a *self-conscious* existence of its own. This is the state. Insofar as individuals are determined, according to Hegel, “to lead a universal life,” the state is “an absolute and unmoved end in itself” (§ 258) to them, since it constitutes the only place where they can actualize their determination. To capture this decisive moment of the self-consciousness of substance, Hegel claimed that, in the proper sense, sovereignty belongs solely to the state.

On the other hand, self-consciousness is a mode of knowledge. Knowledge can come in different modes, ranging from dark sentiment or premonition up to rational thought. In Hegel’s view, a similar progress is reflected in the historical development of the absolute spirit, which moves from art and religion to rational knowledge or science. All three domains belong to the realm of knowledge in general, and as modes of awareness of the absolute, all three can be considered religious (see GW 20, p. 542). There is a qualitative difference between them, however: in the historical progression, the artistic and religious modes of knowledge have now been superseded by scientific knowledge. Thus, if the ancient state was beautiful, and the mediaeval state was pious, the modern state is rational. To prevent a possible misunderstanding, let me add that this does not imply that the rational state is hostile to art

or religion. The rational nature of the modern state only means that, in public discourse, art and religion no longer feature as the privileged modes of formation of the political will. We may still admire the great masterpieces of past and present, but our knee does not bend before them anymore, as Hegel once remarked. In a similar vein, it now seems positively odd if the president of a modern state wants to justify a war by claiming he was inspired by God: this no longer counts as a valid mode of public justification. In paragraph 270, Hegel consequently engages in a long discussion countering the claims of any particular religion that its teachings be acknowledged by the state, or that—at least regarding the ultimate questions—the state should not teach and act against its basic religious truths. Against such pretension Hegel firmly asserted that “the state possesses *knowledge*,” that “the state, too, has its doctrine,” and finally, and most decisively, that “*science* is to be found on the side of the state, for it has the same element of form as the state” (§ 270R).⁶

In Hegel's view, then, the state, and the modern state in particular, is an institution of knowledge. It is an epistemocracy,

⁶ In his lectures, Hegel was even more explicit: “The state is precisely the one that has ‘the highest’ not only as something belonging to the instinct, but that knows it, only in that way the state is truly present” (GW 26, p. 512). “To an accomplished state essentially belongs consciousness, thinking. The state therefore knows, and knows it as something thought. Since the knowledge has its seat in the state, the science as such has its seat in the state, not in the church” (GW 26, pp. 1003–4). There has been a long and heated debate surrounding Hegel's theses on the end of art. It was far less frequently noticed that the exact same arguments led him to affirm the claim on *the end of religion*. The apparent return of religious faith does not refute this thesis, just as the persistence of various artistic practices does not invalidate Hegel's claim that art is dead. For a good overview of the question, see Moked 2004. In Moked's view, Hegel advocates “some sort of ‘neo-Protestantism’ or ‘second Reformation’, under which ethical life itself would become ‘the most genuine cult’” (Moked 2004, p. 106). This, however, is only another way of affirming the end of religion, since what is new in this neo-Protestant doctrine is precisely its complete (that is, Hegelian) rationality. For a similar emphasis, see Kervégan 2018b, pp. 368–69.

as Vieweg aptly put it.⁷ *The state thinks and knows*. In affirming this, Hegel obviously makes a metaphysical claim regarding the solidarity between knowledge and freedom. He also refers to the fact that the modern state is bound to treat individuals in a way that is universal, that is to say, according to laws that apply to all in the same way. But there is more.

The state therefore *knows* what it wills, and knows it in its *universality* as something *thought*. Consequently, it acts and functions in accordance with known ends and recognized principles, [...] and it likewise acts in determinate knowledge of existing circumstances. (§ 270)

The thesis, far from being a sign of an absurd glorification of the state, thus merely summarizes the widespread conviction of modern times that the state is obliged—in spite of its sovereignty, or rather precisely because of it—to justify its actions within the universal space of reason. “Whatever is to achieve the recognition [today] no longer achieves it by force, and only to a small extent through habit and custom, but through insight and reasons” (GW 26, p. 1464). If the state was once allowed to act arbitrarily, if it could cite the *raison d'état* to ward off any further scrutiny, the modern state is rather the *état de raison*, the state of reason, which has to determine all its measures rationally, according to prescribed procedures, and seek their approval with its citizens, in “their consciousness.”

Besides being an institution of knowledge, the modern state is marked by the principle of subjective particularity. “The right of the subject’s *particularity* to find satisfaction, or—to put it differently—the right of *subjective freedom*, is the pivotal and focal point in the difference between *antiquity* and the modern

⁷ See a succinct discussion in Vieweg 2012, particularly pp. 434ff, that pays close attention to Hegel’s conception of the state as a “constitutional, cognitive, and educational democracy.”

age" (§ 124R). In the ancient world, for instance in the Greek *polis*, Hegel often notes, the individual had no independent worth against the state. His actions were immediately regarded as actions of the universal, so in a sense he had no conscience. Only with Christianity did the awareness finally emerge that an individual is free for herself, that her consciousness constitutes the center of all her activity, and that—consequently—this particular individual is the bearer of infinite value. On account of this newly discovered right of particularity, in principle the modern subject is prepared to do something only to the extent that this action follows from her convictions, that is to say, only on condition that it makes manifest her particularity. "In the process of fulfilling his duty, the individual must somehow attain his own interest and satisfaction or settle his own account, and from his situation within the state, a right must accrue to him whereby the universal cause becomes *his own particular cause*" (§ 261R). Thereby, naturally, a new problem emerges, namely, how to think the particular and the universal together in a way that the right of the state and the right of the individual would *both be given their due*. In Hegel's view, this is not a mere coincidental complication that would put additional burden on the already overloaded state. Instead, it constitutes a conceptual accomplishment, and strength, of the modern state. If actuality is indeed another name for the unity of the particular and the universal, then the states of the ancient world were in fact *inactual* and bad states:⁸ they were *bound to perish* precisely because "there was no protesting" in them. And vice versa, "the principle of modern states has enormous strength and depth because it allows the principle of subjectivity to attain fulfillment in the *self-sufficient extreme* of personal particularity,

⁸ "The state is actual, and its actuality consists in the fact that the interest of the whole realizes itself in the particularity of the ends. Actuality is unity of universality and particularity [...]. If this unity is not present, nothing can be *actual*, even if it may be assumed to have *existence*. A bad state is one that merely exists; a sick body also exists, but it has no true reality" (GW 26, p. 1003).

while at the same time *bringing it back to substantial unity* and so preserving this unity in the principle of subjectivity itself" (§ 260). In accordance with this concept of the state, and following the widespread conviction to this effect after the triumph of the French Revolution, the state can subsist only if it allows its members a free space to indulge in their particularity.

The task is by no means easy, and in order to complete it, Hegel had to mobilize all of the conceptual resources at his disposal. Indeed, it may well be argued that Hegel developed his highly innovative conceptions of "mechanism" and "organism," as well as the concept of the "concept" itself, precisely in an attempt to solve this *political* problem of the time. On the one hand, he had to open up a special realm that would allow individuals the rare privilege of not having to bother about the universal at all, and mind exclusively their own business. This is the sphere of *civil society*, where Hegel once again uses a very traditional name to describe a radically new concept. On the other hand, he had to find a model that would articulate the universal and the particular in a positive way, and this model basically consisted in a complex system of political mediation to be considered in greater detail in the following pages.

But before I continue, I should note that the epistemic nature of the Hegelian state and the principle of subjectivity do not oppose each other, but actually represent two sides of the same coin. To see this, one has only to consider, first, that Hegel's conception of knowledge differs profoundly from the traditional one, which in Hegel goes under the name of understanding. If the latter is characterized, among others, by the fact that it maintains an external relation to its object, Hegel's concept inhabits its object from within, thus involving a *subjective* dimension. And second, it has to be considered that an individual can realize his freedom only within the space of reason, that is, within the sphere of knowledge. One can pretend to the status of the subject only if one can cite universally valid reasons presenting one's deed as an attempt to realize one's goals. Outside this framework, there is no possible subject and

no particularity to be actualized. That is to say, in order to realize her particularity, the subject has to enter the regime of knowledge. Once inside this space of universal reasons, however, the subject is relieved of the pressure to perpetually affirm his particularity, that is, to affirm it *against* the particularity of others, since here it makes no difference anymore whether a particular reason is formulated by me or you. In fact, reason makes it possible for one to become universal without therefore losing one's particularity. And since the space of reason is also the space inhabited by the state, there is again a mutual solidarity between the state and the subject.

III

The Hegelian state is sovereign. Its sovereignty is grounded in the constitution, in which the three moments—monarchic, aristocratic, and democratic—form three powers intertwined to form a single unified whole. In this atypical tripartite division of power, the legislative power stems from the people, who take part in the formation of the political will in diverse guises and on several levels: through participation of the people's representatives in legislative power; through the publicity of its operation; and, finally, through public opinion.

If we put aside the fact that, according to Hegel, the members of the universal estate—which consists of the laborers of the universal, that is, in principle, of civil servants⁹—do not enter

⁹ The universal estate is composed of those who “have the *universal interests of society* as their business” (§ 205), or, more precisely, those “who devote themselves to the *service of the government*” (§ 303). Although often identified (for example by Weber) with state bureaucracy in the traditional sense, I believe it should be understood in a much wider sense. In fact, if the universal state is defined by “receiving an indemnity from the state which calls upon its services” (§ 205), it should comprise the entire public sector, from the police to the teachers. We may notice that they do in fact share a similar *esprit de corps*, and are generally in favor of state intervention and social justice. Indeed, their mindset is bound to

legislative assembly as they are already included in executive power, and if we further put aside the strange circumstance that the members of the substantial estate—here, Hegel must have had in mind the landed nobility—directly form the upper house, then, we may conclude, the legislative power primarily belongs to those individuals active in civil society who elect their representatives to the lower house of the assembly. At first glance, and considering the restrictions mentioned above, Hegel’s conception of the people’s involvement in state politics agrees with what is now considered “democratic,” since, ultimately, they are all¹⁰ represented in the legislative assembly. The difference—an important one, of course—lies in the fact that Hegel vehemently opposed the model of representation prevalent now, which is built around the party system and general elections. Instead, he proposed a system in which the delegates would be selected in accordance with the immanent organization of the people (according to the *Verfassung im Besonderen*), who already at the level of civil society are organized into estates, corporations, and other associations and societies.

What are the reasons leading Hegel to adopt such a position? Due to technical (but not exclusively technical) constraints, a people can participate in the legislative assembly only through its deputies, who represent the interests of society within the state. For that reason, it is somewhat natural, Hegel thought, that

be different from the private sector since the inner logic of the former’s activities is directly opposed to that of the latter: while the members of the “business” estate work to satisfy their private interests, thereby happening to promote the universal, in the universal estate, “the private interest is satisfied through working for the universal” (§ 205). From this point of view, the public–private partnership is plainly a contradiction. One last comment: since the modern state is an epistemic institution in which the place of absolute spirit is occupied by science, scientists should be considered both as state officials and as the high priests of modern times. According to Hegel, to be a scientist is an inherently political function.

¹⁰ Well, not all. Hegel notes that this term is “entirely unspecific,” since “it excludes from the start at least children, women, etc.” (§ 301R) Why Hegel excludes women is a difficult question that would merit special treatment.

society selects its deputies “*as what it is*” (§ 308), as “*the whole, articulated into its particular circles*” (§ 308R), that is, according to the concrete structure of interests established in civil society. But more importantly, only in this way is it possible to guarantee the *actuality of political representation*. For if the deputies are selected through a process of general election, with abstract individuals addressing a mass of abstract individuals in order to obtain the largest number of abstract votes, then the conceptual connection between the representatives and the represented is *severed*: this atomistic and abstract view “involves separating civil and political life from each other and leaves political life hanging, so to speak, in the air” (§ 303R). In this model of representation, the legislative power loses its ground in society. It remains linked to it only by the formal and completely contingent act of elections, which can, often for no apparent reason, put in place this or that individual. In Hegel, on the contrary, society is supposed to select its representatives in a structured way, “*as what it is*.” For that reason, those representatives do not act *in its place*, they rather represent it by *being* society in miniature. “Thus, representation no longer means the *replacement* of one individual *by another*; on the contrary, the interest itself is *actually present* in its representatives” (§ 311R). In this sense, Hegel defends not the idea of representation, but the idea of *presentation* of the people in legislative power. And if, in supporting this idea, Hegel may seem to succumb to the fiction of a harmonious society, it is worth adding that, for him, civil society is a place of the divide which allows for social antagonism “*to develop to its full strength*” (§ 185R). In Hegel’s system, representing society thus also implies presenting its inner contradictions, “the differing interests of producers and consumers,” for instance, that “may come into collision with each other” (§ 236).¹¹

¹¹ “Thus,” Kervégan observed, “the Hegelian theory of the state is structured by the idea of representative mediation. Representation ensures a

Another way of involving the people in the work of legislative power is the *principle of publicity*, here understood primarily as publicity of the assembly's proceedings. As the representative of the people, the legislative assembly has the important role of translating actual social interests into the sphere of the political state. Contrary to expectations, however, this does not contribute significantly to the quality of the decision-making process: often, legislation would be better if it were left to the exclusive authority of the government. In this respect, the role of the people's assembly is "purely accessory" (§ 314). Its specific advantage is rather in acknowledging the principle of subjectivity, according to which, as we have seen, the state opens its activity to the subjects, informs them about it, and justifies its actions before them within the space of reason. "It is inherent in the principle of the more recent state that all of an individual's actions should be mediated by his will" (GW 26, p. 1025). At the same time, Hegel contends, publicity is also the most effective *means of education*, both for state officials and for the general public. To the former, it offers an appropriate platform to display their talent and requires them to be prepared for a rational discussion; even the "tiresome" obligation of the officials to defend their measures in front of deputies, who may not be willing to understand, usually proves to be beneficial, Hegel argues, since by trying to convince the representatives they ultimately convince the public, the supreme judge in political matters. But above all, the principle of publicity proves to be formative for those who are not directly involved in political decision-making by allowing them "to arrive for the first time at *true thoughts* and *insight* with

dynamic relationship between the people as a group of individuals (the *masses*), the people as a diversity of social and cultural interests (the *nation*) and the political people (the *state*)" (Kervégan 2018a, p. 249). Unfortunately, Hegel's theory of political representation remained largely unexplored, one of the rare exceptions being Edvard Kardelj's idea of the "pluralism of self-managed interests."

regards to the condition and concept of the state and its affairs, thereby *enabling them to form more rational judgments on the latter*" (§ 315). "In such a people," where this publicity exists, "there is a completely different insight and attitude towards the state than in one where the estates have no assembly or no public one" (GW 26, p. 1463). Consequently, for Hegel, publicity is primarily an important vehicle of the formative mediation of political decision-making.

And finally, the people are involved in state affairs through *public opinion*. The latter represents yet another conceptual innovation, remarkable in that Hegel treats it as an integral part of legislative power.¹² Public opinion is thus simultaneously inside and outside, it is the part of the political state that is not part of it; and—as we will see—one of the important tasks of Hegel's theory of the state is to think its paradoxical position.

The relevance of public opinion is trivially evident, all the more so for a political theory that attempts, as Hegel's does (or Spinoza's before him), to conceptualize the state against the backdrop of the actual structure of society. "Public opinion has been a major force in all ages, and this is particularly so in our own times, in which the principle of subjective freedom has this importance, this significance" (GW 26, p. 1464). As such, the institution of public opinion performs the important task of social appeasement, even of smoothing the decision-making process. "Each individual wishes to be consulted and to be given a hearing. [...] Once he has fulfilled this responsibility and had his say [...] his subjectivity is satisfied and he will put up with a great deal" (GW 26, p. 1035). But regardless of the eventual benefits of the freedom of public speech, which, anyhow, is far less risky than an imposition of public silence, the modern state is by its very nature obliged to let people express their own political views. "In public

¹² This point was justly emphasized in Tortorella 2012, one of the very few presentations of Hegel's conception of public opinion.

opinion, the way is open for everyone to express and give effect to his objective opinions on the universal" (§ 308R).

In Hegel, public opinion is therefore not merely the prevailing standpoint of the majority, obtained, for instance, by combining the private opinions of all individuals. It is understood, rather, as the *right* of each individual to publicly express her standpoint on public affairs, and thereby influence the formation of the political will. In this sense, public opinion is a *political institution*, the people's voice. However, while this is the reason why Hegel was justified in including it in the structure of legislative power, public opinion also introduces into the state a certain tension (since the people now gives away not one but *two* different voices), and a certain contradiction:

Formal subjective freedom, whereby individuals as such entertain and express their *own* judgments, opinions, and counsels on matters of universal concern, makes its collective appearance in what is known as public *opinion*. In the latter, the universal in and for itself, the *substantial* and the *true*, is linked with its opposite, with what is *distinct* in itself, as the *particular opinions* of the many. This existence is therefore a manifest self-contradiction, an *appearance* of cognition; in it, the essential is just as immediately present as the inessential. (§ 316)

To that extent, Hegel remarks, public opinion is "one of those phenomena that are the most difficult to conceive" (GW 26, p. 571). The paradox is that public opinion constitutes a mere assemblage with no inner cohesion, so the true and the infinitely wrong are directly mixed with one another. Hence the "ambivalence of public opinion," and hence also the apparent tension in Hegel's assessment that public opinion "deserves to be *respected* as well as *despised*." Hegel's definition is precise; the ambivalence is merely a consequence of the fact that public opinion is indeed a "manifest contradiction." And when Hegel remarks that it contains "the essential and the inessential," or that it constitutes "cognition as

appearance,” he is obviously referring to his *Science of Logic*. A comprehensive interpretation of public opinion in Hegel should therefore include the logical movement of essence, particularly the claim that essence and appearance (or shine) have no external relation. But since public opinion is a political phenomenon, this line of thought seems rather unpromising.¹³

For my present purpose, I will highlight the paradox of public opinion by limiting myself to two aspects. First, when attempting to determine the true nature of a subject, it is imperative to consider the subject's consciousness of herself. That does not mean that the objective aspect is not relevant—after all, for Hegel, a subject is the series of her actions; even here, however, these actions are constitutively determined by *how*, and as *what*, they are known by the subject. Without making room for the *subjective* attitude, that is, for the knowledge a subject has of herself, there can be no such thing as a subject. Now, insofar as public opinion is the people's voice, i.e., the consciousness the people have of themselves as political subjects, the same relationship applies here as well. What a people is, depends essentially on how it views itself, what position it takes in relation to the world, and what it thinks of it. This is why, trivially, a people's opinion is an essential factor of its substantive truth. Following this understanding, Hegel rejected the question of Frederick the Great as to whether it was permissible to deceive a people for their own best interests. This question—and the entire Enlightenment thinking that tried to explain religion as a complot of the priests—was simply “misplaced,” Hegel argued, as it assumed that there was something like an independent essence of a people determining its true interests, which might make it possible for deceivers to come along, secretly snatch it, and put something else in its stead. This is simply absurd. “Within the knowing of that essence in which consciousness has immediate *certainty of itself*, the notion that it

¹³ For a different approach, see Mabile 1994.

is sheer delusion is entirely out of the question” (GW 9, p. 299). Here, deception and mystification are conceptually impossible. Hegel thus answers that “it is impossible to deceive a people about its substantial basis, about the *essence* and the specific character of its spirit” (§ 317R). He adds, however, in a typically Hegelian manner, that “about the way in which this character is known to it and in which it consequently passes judgments on events, its own actions, etc.,—the people is deceived *by itself*.”

This brings me to the other aspect, according to which public opinion is precisely that—an *opinion*. Speaking about it, Hegel cannot resist the wordplay offered by the “speculative nature” of German language: opinion (*die Meinung*) is something that is primarily mine (*das Meinige*). My opinion is an immediate manifestation of my particularity. I am not obliged to provide any reasons for it, it is enough that *I* stand for it, and however extravagant and arbitrary its content may be, my self possesses the sovereign authority to accept or reject it as it pleases. The extravagance of my opinion, the fact that it differs from the opinions of others, Hegel points out, may even speak in its favor, since, in this way, my particularity expresses itself even more starkly. In addition, as the opinions of a particular subject are ultimately held together merely by her arbitrary will, they are in principle indifferent to one another. More precisely, even if singular opinions are connected by universally valid reasons, within the regime of opinion this represents a contingent circumstance, so that an opinion, even if it happens to conform to the facts, essentially remains a mere arrangement. As such, it remains forever outside the realm of universal validity, outside knowledge, and outside the true. So, while public opinion may indeed contain the substantial essence of a people, it still remains in the regime of opinion, where the essential is directly blended with the unessential, the true with the false, and, what is worse, where the true is present in such a way that even what is serious is not taken seriously.

Consequently, the decisive political task is to mediate this messy arrangement called public opinion so as to transform it into the true voice of the people. The basic formal requirement to this effect, according to Hegel, is to distance oneself: "No one can achieve anything great, unless he is able to despise public opinion, that is, as he hears it here and there" (GW 26, p. 1035). It is important to note that Hegel did not oppose public opinion as such, but only the idea that politicians should follow public opinion as it happens to manifest itself "here and there." That aside, his general idea is rather clear. Since the state is an institution of knowledge, and the state thinks and knows, the entire political constitution should be considered "a system of mediation" designed to formulate the people's voice. The laws adopted in the assembly by the representatives and enacted by the government, with the monarch at the top, therefore *are* public knowledge. The state as conceived by Hegel is nothing but a vast organism constantly producing public knowledge—knowledge that includes the endeavor to actualize itself, thereby also determining its subject.

But since the distinction between public reason and public opinion is strictly parallel to the difference between the people united within a state and this same people considered as a mere crowd of isolated individuals—and since only a radical break and no gradual transformation of opinion into knowledge seems to be possible, as has been aptly described in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*—it follows that public opinion, while it definitely may become more or less enlightened, is bound to *remain an opinion*, and hence distinct from public knowledge.

Public opinion is the inorganic way how, what a people wants and means, makes itself known. What is to be actual in a state, must work itself out in an organic way, and this is the case with the constitution. (GW 26, p. 1464)

In this respect, public opinion is "cognition as appearance" that cannot be converted into public cognition—its function is

rather to constitute a term in the complex “syllogism of power” that mediates and thereby also transforms singular elements of the state organism.¹⁴

The other mode of eventual transition from public opinion to public knowledge relates to the mediating role of a statesman or political leader. In his first published writing, Hegel already observed that sometimes “the nation can be represented in such an incomplete manner that it may be unable to get its voice heard in parliament” (GW 2, p. 470), and he expressed his fascination with Pitt, the English Prime Minister at the time, who was able to fulfill the people’s will in direct defiance of its manifestations.¹⁵ In Hegel’s view, this is the characteristic of great historic personalities, who distinguish themselves by their capacity to feel the pulse of the age, and by their efficiency to materialize what constitutes the true tendency of the time. Because these “world-historic men” often act violently and tell the people what it is that they want, Hegel was once again accused of supporting state despotism. However, while it is true that, in Hegel’s view, a people usually stands for that part of the citizenry “*which does not know what it wants*” (§ 301R), he equally affirmed that one needed “a deep insight” in order to know what one wants. Indeed, this may very well constitute the hardest task the subject is confronted with for it concerns his true identity. “The greatest that a man can achieve,” commented Hegel accordingly, “is to know what he wants” (GW 26, p. 560). In addition, the intervention of great men

¹⁴ “It is one of the most important insights of logic that a specific moment which, when it stands in opposition, has the position of an extreme, loses this quality and becomes an *organic* moment by being simultaneously a *mean*” (§ 302R). For a detailed assessment of this subject, even applied to the political, see Ross 2008.

¹⁵ For a closer exposition of Hegel’s earliest political views, see Avineri 1972, p. 7. Regarding the role of the statesman as the interpreter of public opinion: “The most difficult is to discern what a people really wants, what it believes it wants is irrelevant, only a great person surmises its true will, brings it to the consciousness” (GW 26, pp. 1465–66).

is *exceptional* in Hegel, and enters only where there is *no* effective system of mediation in place to transform public opinion into public knowledge. “The constitution is essentially the system of mediation” (§ 302A). It is only when the distance between public opinion and public knowledge has grown too wide, that is, when the state is not able to think and know any longer, that a special interpreter of the people’s will is called for.

A deep insight is needed in order to know what is truly contained in public opinion. When, for instance, there is general discontent in a people, it can be assumed that there is a need that must be taken care for; but if one asks public opinion about it, it may very well happen that exactly the opposite is suggested and proposed. Besides, no statesman, or anyone who achieves something true, may expect gratitude. But the true prevails. (GW 26, p. 572)

The political appearance of the many (now often referred to as populism), and the need for strong leaders are symptoms of the failure of public thinking.

IV

Hegel was definitely not a democrat in the contemporary meaning of the word.¹⁶ Indeed, he considered such a political system profoundly flawed as it confused the state with civil society. If we think of a system as composed of independent individuals who may freely dispose with everything that is theirs, and if we further conceive of the political community as a mere arrangement of such isolated atoms, then, Hegel argued, we destroy the

¹⁶ We should, in general, show less enthusiasm and far more restraint in using this notion. For a long time, and also in Hegel, democracy referred mainly to the “classical democracy,” which was “totalizing if not (as is often said) totalitarian,” “non-representative,” and “exclusive” (see Kervégan 2018a, p. 249).

state as a sovereign place of the universal and reduce citizens to mere private persons. This effacement of the political goes hand in hand with the privatization of the public, which in turn corresponds to the regime of opinion. These phenomena are strictly parallel and indeed share the same inner form. Just as a private person can freely use her property as she sees fit without having to give any reason for it—the proprietor has the right to *uti, frui et abuti*—so too can she freely adopt her opinions without really having to justify them in the space of reason. And to push the analogy even further, the dominations of opinion and market exchange find their completely congruent political expression in so-called free elections. This is the moment when the social bond is temporarily dissolved and the whole of society is almost physically transformed into a mere heap of isolated atoms, it is “split up into individual atomic units which are merely assembled for a moment to perform a temporary act and have no further cohesion” (§ 308).

Liberal-democratic political institutions were no doubt introduced on grounds that seem compelling at first sight. Secret balloting, for instance, was meant to protect voters from external pressure; the general addition of discrete voices was explicitly designed by Rousseau to provide for the most undistorted manifestation of the general will; the party system was proposed in order to structure the political landscape. But for various reasons, in part because of the relative insignificance of a singular vote, the final result is, Hegel notes, that “an institution of this kind achieves the opposite of its intended purpose, and the election comes under the control of a few people, of a faction, and hence of that particular and contingent interest which it was specifically designed to neutralize” (§ 311R).

This conversion was, at least in part, produced by contingent causes. It is hard to deny, however, that the developments in question followed certain tendencies that are, as Hegel demonstrated, built into the very presuppositions of modern democracy. In fact,

since in Hegel's view power can be legitimately exercised over free subjects only within the space of reason, the present demise of the state and the retreat of rational knowledge go hand in hand. Cut off from its embeddedness in reason, the state is reduced to a coordinator of interests. And if, thus, the existing state is structured according to the logic of civil society, the matrix of which is market exchange, then it is hardly surprising that politics is also organized as a business activity, in which the citizen is treated as a customer. If politicians systematically consecrate opinion, then one is hardly entitled to preach about selling votes, since opinion is by definition a matter of personal arbitrary will. In fact, there is such a structural analogy between the free market and the free world that in the political practices of today the very notion of corruption is becoming increasingly inapplicable. This should remind us of how fragile the conceptual foundations of the institutions of liberal democracy actually are. For a long time, they were widely accepted in spite of their obvious deficiencies, simply on the assumption that they still enabled the most efficient translation of social interest into the political decision-making process. Today, with the sharp legitimation crisis of democracy, they do not enjoy this privilege any longer.

Here, I cannot provide a more detailed Hegelian diagnosis of the political crisis of our times. But I can nevertheless conclude with a hint at Hegel's reaction. To put it very briefly, he would continue to keep faith in reason. True, he would have been positively astonished that philosophy—rational knowledge, basically—lost its undisputed privilege in the realm of public discourse, or that the defenders of idiosyncratic systems and religious teachings could be paid serious attention at all. For this state of affairs, he would have partially blamed the apparent deficiencies in really existing reason, and he would have been very attentive to the transformations that big data and self-executing algorithms have introduced into the very form of modern knowledge. But, in general, he would have read this as a merely temporary relapse.

Just as phrenology—in spite of all its manifest errors, which, seen from the usual standpoint, represent a huge step back—was still understood as a necessary move, and therefore yet another advance in the progress of reason, so could the present politics of knowledge be seen as nothing but a transitory setback in the otherwise steady progress of the absolute spirit. Hegel would have been certain that this situation cannot last. “For the actuality is mightier than dry understanding and therefore destroys its patchwork [Lattenwerk], since it is the concept that lives in the actuality” (GW 26, p. 1010). And against all odds, Hegel would have called for patience, patience of the concept and the perseverance of the will.

The great revolution has happened, the rest is to be left to time, God has time enough, what is to happen will happen. (GW 26, p. 765)

Bibliography

- Avineri, Schlomo (1972) *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press).
- Cesaroni, Pierpaolo (2006) *Governo e costituzione in Hegel. Le “Lezioni di filosofia del diritto”* (Milan: FrancoAngeli).
- Chiereghin, Franco (1977) “Filologia spinoziana e spinozismo nella concezione politica di Hegel a Jena,” *Verifiche* 6, 4:707–29.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friederich (1968–) *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Nordrhein-Westfälischen Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Künste (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag).
- (1971) *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).
- (1984) *The Letters*, trans. C. Butler and C. Seiler (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press).
- (1991) *Elements of Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, ed. A. W. Wood (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press).
- (1999) *Political Writings*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, ed. L. Dickey and H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press).

- (2018) *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. T. Pinkard (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press).
- Kervégan, Jean-François (2018a) *The Actual and the Rational: Hegel and Objective Spirit*, trans. Daniela Ginsburg and Martin Shuster (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press).
- (2018b) “Unsittliche Sittlichkeit?” *Philosophie der Republik*, ed. P. Stekeler-Weithofer and B. Zabel (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck).
- Kobe, Zdravko (2013) “Država in javno mnenje pri Heglu,” *Filozofski vestnik* 34, 3:35–55.
- (2014) “Drhal in proletariat: o nekem domnevno nerazrešenem problemu Heglove filozofije,” *Problemi* 52, 3–4:5–49.
- (2015) “Političnost pojma: Heglova spekulativna monarhija,” *Problemi* 53, 5–6:151–75.
- (2019) “The Interface of the Universal: On Hegel’s Concept of the Police” *Filozofija i društvo* 30, 1:101–21.
- Mabille, Bernard (1994) “Hegel et le pouvoir de l’opinion publique,” *Le pouvoir*, 188–200, ed. J.-C. Goddard and B. Mabille (Paris: Éditions Vrin).
- Moked, Oran (2004) “The Relationship between Religion and the State in Hegel’s Thought,” *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* 49:96–112.
- Ross, Nathan (2008) *On Mechanism in Hegel’s Social and Political Philosophy* (New York & London: Routledge).
- Tortorella, Sabine (2012) “L’opinione pubblica nella Filosofia del diritto di Hegel,” *Leussein* 5, 2–3:119–25.
- Vieweg, Klaus (2012) *Das Denken der Freiheit. Hegels Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink).

The Endgame of Aesthetics: From Hegel to Beckett*

Mladen Dolar

What to make of Hegel's *Aesthetics* "in these times"? The question causes some embarrassment, and the embarrassment is, I guess, structural. The name "Hegel" continues to be a battlefield (as it has been throughout the last 200 years), and the two camps at war largely see Hegel either as a metaphysical monstrosity best to be forgotten or displayed as an item in a horror show, that is, either as the scarecrow against whom we must pave new ways for a post-metaphysical thought, or else as the hero whose thought is as radical today as it was "in those times," presenting a radical edge that was not superseded but rather obfuscated by what came after, so that the new ways of thought would have to take their cue from there. There is hardly any middle ground between these two fronts, and with Hegel one is always in the line of fire. While I clearly belong to this latter camp, it nevertheless seems that there is a predicament with his *Aesthetics*, which rather tends to provide ample and easy ammunition to the former camp, i.e., that of his adversaries.

Regardless of their camp, all would agree, of course, that the *Aesthetics* presents a landmark, a monument. It is the first ambitious and systematic treatise on aesthetics as a new discipline, written three quarters of a century after its official birth, that is, after Baumgarten in 1750 singlehandedly canonized the new term and

* The author acknowledges the project ("The Structure and Genealogy of Indifference," J6-8263) was financially supported by the Slovenian Research Agency.

the new area, bringing together the hitherto dispersed reflections on beauty and art in an organized new field. Kant, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), was probably the last one who could speak of aesthetics in the traditional sense as the general theory of sensation, *Sinnlichkeit*, with the transcendental aesthetics dealing with the a priori forms of (sensuous) intuition, providing its universal rules. But already a decade later, in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant espoused the new usage and spoke of the faculty of aesthetic judgment, which deals not with the universal rule, but with its exceptions, i.e., the singular occasions that call for (non)universal judgments of taste, or the paradoxical “universality without a concept.” Hegel’s *Aesthetics* then appears as the first monumental treatment of this new discipline, encompassing all areas, as well as the historical development of art throughout millennia, in a broad and exhaustive sweep, itself situated in an even broader sweep of a philosophical system, assigning aesthetics and art a proper place, a suitable slot within the overarching systematic edifice. But once formed, this first aesthetics appears also to be the last one, for Hegel in the same breath also notoriously proclaimed its demise. Aesthetics was a very lively yet stillborn child, so that any subsequent proposal of aesthetics (and there was no lack of them) had to deal with the suspicion of its being already antiquated—none of these proposals quite followed Hegel’s views and were largely opposed to them, yet they couldn’t quite escape Hegel’s shadow, the shadow of a doubt. There is, there always has been, a malaise in aesthetics, to use Rancière’s term (2004; 2009), a discontent necessarily accompanying its very existence. Hegel managed an incredible feat: at the birth of aesthetics, he also made it obsolete, so that the lively stillborn child could subsequently only live an afterlife, without ever quite enjoying an unblemished life.

So, everybody more or less agrees that Hegel’s *Aesthetics* is a monument; but a monument to what? There are several paradoxes to be noted here. The first comprehensive and systematic philosophical treatment of art strangely coincides with the extensive discussion, or even the instauration, of the autonomy of art, the

establishment of art as a circumscribed region of human endeavor, an autonomous domain which serves no other purpose than itself. The slogan *l'art pour l'art*, “art for art’s sake,” prominent already in the 1820s, probably stems from Victor Cousin, Hegel’s early French follower (Rue Victor Cousin still runs alongside the Sorbonne), before it was vastly advertised by Théophile Gautier in the 1830s (most famously in the preface to his 1835 novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin*). Up to the Latinized version, *ars gratia artis*, which appeared in the MGM logo encircling the notorious roaring lion, with Hollywood thus extending its provenance to a fake antiquity. Thus the autonomy of art, divorcing art from the religious and ritual setting and from any social use or utility, emerged together with Hegel’s *Aesthetics* which sounded its death-knell. Once art appeared as independent and autonomous, liberated from its other usages and extraneous meanings, it was already proclaimed obsolete.

The proclamation of art for art’s sake is clearly spelled out by Hegel:

[A]rt’s vocation is to unveil [enthüllen] the *truth* in the form of sensuous artistic configuration, to set forth the reconciled opposition just mentioned [i.e. between reason and senses], and so to have its end and aim in itself, in this very setting forth and unveiling. For other ends, like instruction, purification, bettering, financial gain, struggling for fame and honor, have nothing to do with the work of art as such, and do not determine its nature. (Hegel 1973, p. 55; 1986, Vol. 13, p. 82)

This can be seen as roughly in line with Kant’s qualification of aesthetic judgments as disinterested (*Wohlgefallen ohne Interesse*), but Hegel completely divorced aesthetics from the question of the beautiful which would encompass nature and culture alike. He had no real interest in natural beauty and the charms of nature (although he paid some lip-service to the topic)—for all these, ultimately three words would suffice, *es ist so*, “so is it,” no further cause for admiration.

But after this extolling the vocation of art as the unveiling of truth by sensuous means, and nobly serving its own elevated

ends without any other concern, we may be surprised to learn the following:

For us art counts no longer as the highest mode in which truth fashions an existence for itself. [...] We may well hope that art will always rise higher and come to perfection, but the form of art has ceased to be the supreme need of the spirit. (Hegel 1973, p. 103)¹

And there is quite a bit more along these lines. Art, once established as a domain, is out-of-date; the moment when it has achieved its own freedom and auto-legislation is the moment when spirit abandoned it.

It is difficult to fully appreciate Hegel's gesture against the grain of the time and his stance against great odds. The big break presented by the French Revolution instigated a lot of high-flown speculations and declarations about the end of an epoch and a thrilling beginning of a new one, where art was called upon to fulfill a high mission, occupying the role previously reserved for religion, enhancing and complementing the new political prospects, the establishment of new forms of sociability. One can recall Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), born of a disappointment with the violent turn of the French Revolution and turning to art as the highest human endeavor, now entrusted with the education of a new humankind, which can finally arrive at itself by means of its free play. One can recall the high hopes and ambitions of Romantic poetry. And one can above all recall Hegel's own early participation in drawing up the short piece that became known as "The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism," designed together with Schelling and Hölderlin in 1796/97. Three youngsters, three roommates, three enthusiasts

¹ "However all this may be, it is certainly the case that art no longer affords that satisfaction of spiritual needs which earlier ages and nations sought in it, and found in it alone [...]. // In all these respects art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past. Thereby it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our *ideas* instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place." (Ibid., pp. 10–11)

for the Revolution, just before entering the German and European philosophical and literary stage in grand ways, wrote together this brief manifesto, this immodest proposal, which should define, among other things, precisely the nature of art at this historical juncture. Of art the fragment says the following:

Finally, the idea that unites all others, the idea of *beauty*, taking the word in a higher Platonic sense. I am now convinced that the highest act of reason is an aesthetic act since it comprises all ideas [...]. The philosopher must possess as much aesthetic power as the poet. [...] The philosophy of the spirit is an aesthetic philosophy. One cannot have spirit in anything, one cannot even reason in an inspired way about history, without aesthetic sense. [...] // In this manner poetry will gain a higher dignity, and it will again become at the end what it was at the beginning—the *teacher of the humanity* [*Lehrerin der Menschheit*]. For there is no more philosophy, no more history; poetry alone will outlive all other sciences and arts. ([Anon] 1996, p. 4; Hegel 1986, Vol. 1, p. 235)

So there we have it: art (and poetry stands for all others as the highest art, given Hölderlin's co-authorship of the "Program," and considering Hegel's later hierarchy of the arts) is the universal unifying idea, subsuming all others; and an idea can exert its power only insofar it is aesthetically embodied, and hence addressed to and available to everyone. Art stands for the universality of humanity, as opposed to the state which stands for the mechanical, the unfree. The goal would be for art to come to occupy the place previously occupied by the state (the fragment equally calls for the suppression of the state as such).² Art is itself a utopian

² "First of all the *idea* of humanity. I want to show that there is no more an idea of the *state* than there is an idea of a machine, because the state is something mechanical. Only that which is an object of freedom can be called an *idea*. We must therefore go beyond the state [über den Staat hinaus]! For every state must treat free human beings as if they were cogs in a machine [Räderwerk]; but that it should not do; therefore it should *cease* to exist [also soll er aufhören]." ([Anon] 1996, pp. 3–4; Hegel 1986, Vol. 1, pp. 234–35)

state without boundaries that can supplant the mechanical state; there is a universal citizenship only in art. It should also come to supplant both religion and philosophy, for the continuation of the fragment calls for a new “mythology of reason,” *Mythologie der Vernunft*—reason by itself is powerless unless it employs mythological, sensuous, and sensual means, hence the call for the philosopher endowed with aesthetic powers. Reason by itself is empty and mythology, divorced from reason, is blind, so one should strive for the happy unification of the two. Instead of philosopher kings, as in Plato, the poet leaders. And there is the overarching prospect of reconciliation of reason and the sensuous that only aesthetics can provide, replacing and superseding both politics and religion as now antiquated forms of spirit.

But then, a quarter of a century later, the perspective is completely overturned and directed against the massive tide of ideas promoted by ambient and rampant Romanticism: art itself, at the point that seemed to present its highpoint and historic triumph, finally on its own, is now seen as the form that spirit has already surpassed. What seemed to be the culmination of its power coincided with its demise; if not quite demise then its being relegated to a side-show, spirit having moved on—on to where? (*On?* I will come back to this word, so simple and so manifold, so treacherous in its simplicity.) Art, so lively and so vigorous until it could come on its own and finally be itself, seems to be doomed to afterlife, just like aesthetics, precisely at the moment when it could at long last for the first time fully embrace its life.

If there is a more or less general agreement that Hegel’s *Aesthetics* presents a landmark and a monument, then from there on the paths sharply diverge. Here I come back to the point that *Aesthetics*, more than Hegel’s other works (matched perhaps only by the philosophy of nature), provides ample ammunition to Hegel’s detractors. Its general narrative may indeed look like a caricature of the notorious Hegelian teleology: art is ranked the lowest of the three prominent spiritual domains, it is to be

followed and superseded by religion and finally by philosophy (and science, but science is another name for philosophy). Art stands at the lowest and initial rank in this progression because of its entanglement with the sensuous: in art the idea is manifested through sensuous means, it is *das sinnliche Scheinen der Idee*, the sensuous appearance and the sensuous shining through of the idea. It is superseded by religion which proceeds by means of representation, *Vorstellung*, and finally, by philosophy-science, which seems to have divested itself from the sensuous and the “material,” so that it is able to proceed by concepts alone, the true realm of spirit coming to its own, dealing with itself on its own grounds, liberated from alterity. It all looks like a process of a gradual massive *Aufhebung* as the process of continuing dematerialization, spiritualization, getting rid of what is alien to spirit, thus a purification of spirit, its distillation and refinement. Art is well on the way there, but not yet there, eternally not yet, however accomplished and consummate its spiritual production may be.

But while on the one hand we give this high position to art, it is on the other hand just as necessary to remember that neither in content nor in form is art the highest and absolute mode of bringing to our minds the true interests of the spirit. For precisely on account of its form, art is limited to a specific content. Only one sphere and stage of truth is capable of being represented in the element of art. [...] On the other hand, there is a deeper comprehension of truth which is no longer so akin and friendly to sense as to be capable of appropriate adoption and expression in this medium. (Hegel 1973, p. 9)

This progression, which conditions and frames the placement of aesthetics in the system, is then internally repeated within the structure of the aesthetics itself, and doubly so. First, by the all-embracing overview of its history progressing through the phases of the symbolic art, with the still abstract idea being thrust upon an external sensual material; then, of the classical art which can attain the balance of the form and the content such that “the

Idea is able to come into free and complete harmony” (ibid., p. 77); and finally, of Romantic art where “[i]nwardness celebrates its triumph over the external and manifests its victory in and on the external itself, whereby what is apparent to the senses alone sinks into worthlessness” (ibid., p. 81). “In this way romantic art is the self-transcendence of art but within its own sphere and in the form of art itself” (ibid., p. 80).

Second, the particular branches and areas of art follow the same progression, with architecture at the bottom end roughly corresponding to the symbolic art form, sculpture to the classical one and finally painting, music and poetry corresponding to the Romantic stage, with poetry as the highest stage (almost) divested of the sensual materiality.

For sound, the last external material which poetry keeps, is in poetry no longer the feeling of sonority itself, but a *sign*, by itself void of significance, a sign of the idea which has become concrete in itself. [...] Yet this sensuous element [...] is here cut free from the content of consciousness, while spirit determines this content on its own account and in itself and makes it into ideas. To express these it uses sound indeed, but only as a sign in itself without value or content. (Hegel 1973, pp. 88–89)³

Poetry may be the highest art, yet it is still not there, it is to be superseded by prose, the proper element of thought.

Yet, precisely, at this highest stage, art now transcends itself, in that it forsakes the element of a reconciled embodiment of the spirit in sensuous form and passes over from the poetry of the imagination to the prose of thought. (Hegel 1973, p. 89)

³ As Hegel himself summarizes this progression: “Consider, for example, the sensuous material. In that case architecture is the crystallization, sculpture the organic configuration, of matter in its sensuous and spatial totality; painting is the colored surface and line; while, in music, space as such passes over into the inherently filled point of time; until, finally, in poetry the external material is altogether degraded as worthless.” (Ibid., p. 89)

Thus, the whole construction of the book, the structure of the project, is based on a progression leading from the embeddedness in sensuous materiality towards the liberation in thought. Art is a liberation, yet not a liberation from the sensuous, but a process of liberation within the sensuous itself, carving the idea into the sensuous, embodying it through *das sinnliche Scheinen*. Still, the goal is to rid the idea of this otherness in order for it to reach its proper realm.

So here we have it, Hegel's notorious teleology fully spelled out, in fully fledged letters, in bold, as it were, and too large to be dismissed. Spirit is always on the move, progressing, but not yet "there"; and "there" is like a scale of this progress, so that one can measure where on this scale one finds oneself, how far from "there" or how close to it. Of course, this is a *prima facie* reading, massively imposing itself, so that one almost overlooks the opposite direction that has to be considered—the teleology running in reverse, as it were. For if spirit is always on the way "there," it is never "there," not yet—if it was to be "there" it would cease to be spirit. It can only be spirit as long as it's not on its own, as long as it grapples with its alterity, its opposite, its other, not being able to abandon its *Sichanderswerden*, its self-othering, as the apt English translation has it. So, Hegel also says the following:

In the products of art, the spirit has to do solely with its own. And even if works of art are not thought or the Concept, but a development of the Concept out of itself, a shift of the Concept from its own ground to that of sense [eine Entfremdung zum Sinnlichen hin], still the power of the thinking spirit lies in being able not only to grasp itself in its proper form as thinking, but to know itself again [wiederzuerkennen] just as much when it has surrendered [Entäußerung] its proper form to feeling and sense, to comprehend itself in its opposite [in seinem Anderen] [...]. And in this preoccupation with its opposite the thinking spirit is not false [ungetreu] to itself at all as if it were forgetting and abandoning itself thereby, nor is it so powerless as to be unable to grasp what is different from itself; on the contrary, it comprehends both itself and its opposite [sein

Gegenteil]. For the Concept is the universal which maintains itself in its particularizations [Besonderungen], overreaches itself and its opposite, and so it is also the power and activity of cancelling again the estrangement in which it gets involved. (Hegel 1973, pp. 12–13; 1986, Vol. 13, pp. 27–28)

No spirit without estrangement. No spirit without it being out of spirit. Should it simply get to its own element and be equal to itself, it would evaporate. The object of spirit is precisely its not being there yet. The “not yet” is not just the delay on the way “there,” it’s the condition of spirit having an object at all. The “not yet” is also an “always already,” the station in the reverse direction, the “backwards teleology” of the always already accomplished instead of expecting to move on to some higher stage. This is why Hegel can state that the realization of the infinite goal is getting rid of the illusion that it hasn’t been accomplished yet. The imperfect realization, measured by the scale of progression, is at the same time the accomplishment, as perfect as one can get. Or in other words, if art’s entanglement with the sensuous can be seen as its resistance to spirit in its inexorable progress, then one must see that *spirit is nothing but the resistance to spirit*.

Here I must refer to Rebecca Comay’s remarkable essay “Resistance and Repetition: Freud and Hegel” (2015) which spells out precisely this point. Let me quote just the abstract which puts it most economically:

This essay explores the vicissitudes of resistance as the central concept of both Freud and Hegel. Read through the prism of psychoanalysis, Hegel appears less as a philosopher of inexorable progress [...] than as a thinker of repetition, delay, and stuckness. It is only on this seemingly unpromising basis that the radical potential of both thinkers can be retrieved. (Comay 2015, p. 237)⁴

⁴ To take up just one quote on Hegel: “Either the work never gets started or the work gets finished all too soon. These are two sides of the same coin,

So, in this light I would like to take Hegel's *Aesthetics* not as the vintage case of the progression of spirit, with art itself and every art form placed on the scale of the "not yet," but rather in the light of stuckness of spirit, its essential tarrying with the delay, its being stuck with the object which emerges in the "not yet." Instead of the haste of spirit, constantly hurrying on, its postponement and interruption; instead of the impatience of moving on, the patience of the concept (*Geduld*).⁵ Instead of Adorno's image of the Hegelian spirit as the enormous gulping mouth where everything is consumed, devoured and digested, rather the spirit where everything is stuck in the throat.⁶ Instead of the hierarchy of progression, the reverse stuckness, the object persisting on the retroactive vector.

One can make a simple claim that the "not yet," the delay, the stuckness, the resilient lack in regard to the supposed progress, the lagging behind, the ingrained deficiency, inadequacy, the flaw—that all that is the Real of the Hegelian spirit. It is what constitutes its object. If I am to make a quick and persuasive demonstration of the object-value of the work of art, the stuckness with the art object, then I can do no better than to quote Hegel's astounding image of the artwork and its obstinate being there:

[I]t is to be asserted of art that it has to convert every shape in all points of its visible surface into an eye [zum Auge], which is the seat of the soul and brings the spirit into appearance. [...] [A]rt makes every one of its productions into a thousand-eyed Argus,

which for Hegel stake out the outer limits of German Idealism—the evil twins, roughly speaking, of Kant and Schelling: the tepid waters of endless critical reflection versus the skyrockets of rapturous revelation; the bad infinite of interminable postponement versus the 'bad finite' of instant gratification, delay versus haste." (Ibid., p. 260)

⁵ Here, I have to refer to the wonderful book on Hegel which takes this as the guideline: Lebrun 1972. I cannot imagine why it is not translated into English.

⁶ This inevitably recalls Lacan: "[...] the object that cannot be swallowed, as it were, which remains stuck in the gullet of the signifier." (Lacan 1981, p. 270)

whereby the inner soul and spirit is seen at every point. And it is not only the bodily form, the look of the eyes, the countenance and posture, but also actions and events, speech and tones of voice, and the series of their course through all conditions of appearance that art has everywhere to make into an eye, in which the free soul is revealed in its inner infinity. (Hegel 1973, pp. 153–54; 1986, Vol. 13, pp. 203–204)

There is the Greek legend of Argus, the mythical giant with a hundred eyes (not a thousand, as Hegel says), Argus Panoptes, the all-seeing Argus (a precursor of the Panopticon), whom Hera hired to watch over Io, a nymph that Zeus fell in love with and who was transformed into a white cow guarded by this super-watchman. The legend has it that Argus could sleep at all times with some of his eyes while the majority would always be open and on the watch. So Hegel proposes this very strange and troubling image: a work of art is like Argus, this giant hundred-eyed monster, everything in the work of art turns into an eye, its every element and move should be considered as an eye, a stand-in for the eye. We never simply watch an artwork, it watches us at the same time. Of course Hegel follows the traditional notion that the eyes are the seat of the soul, its revelation, the part of the body where the soul manifests itself, but pushing Hegel a bit one could make him say that what makes art special is the way that the object, i.e. the object gaze, is inscribed into the artwork. It is the kind of object which never simply exists out there, opposite to the observing subject, separate and independent—if it is an artwork worthy of its name then it has the capacity to embody the gaze, to be not just the object of the gaze, but the object into which the gaze is inscribed, a short-circuit between the subject and the object. It is not that the artwork returns the gaze in a symmetrical exchange and recognition, it is rather that it has to acquire in some form the quality of anamorphosis, the blur that regards us, its gaze entwined with our own. It is not that the spiritual gaze can recognize the gaze of the spirit inscribed in the artwork, it

is rather that the objecthood of the artwork involves a gaze that cannot be returned. What singles out art is that it is never simply an object—what we have to figure out in its enigmatic appearance is not just the way in which we are inscribed into it, but the way it embodies the gaze appearing to us as an enigma that we cannot self-reflexively grasp. To push it to the extreme: every artwork is anamorphic, art is the anamorphosis in the picture of society. In other words: Hegel's object always involves an inkling of the object *a*, it is never reducible just to an object of recognition, the standard way that the dialectics of subject-object is conceived.⁷

All this is a general caveat about the nature of Hegel's teleology, the deceptive ease with which it is usually dealt with, the way his story is commonly recounted as that of progressive liberation from the alien, the purification, the gradual spiritualization of spirit. It is told as the story of spirit lost and found again, spirit lost in its otherness but happily finding itself in the end by getting rid of its otherness—but, first, what was lost never existed in the first place, so it can never be recuperated, and second, what is found has only been produced on the way, through the loss.

One would wish that “stuckness” could redeem Hegel's *Aesthetics*, but unfortunately maybe not quite. One cannot get easily off the hook, Hegel sometimes really doesn't make it easy for his supporters and fans, and *Aesthetics* is I guess one of the major instances of this. With all the caveats, it is hard to disregard what one can call Hegel's inveterate optimism. We are well on the way, history is progressing towards increasing liberation, there is the victorious march of reason, and even if it seems that reason sometimes takes strange and even catastrophic detours, they can still be recuperated by its cunning, so that there is no turn that couldn't be retrieved and reclaimed. When it looks like we might be heading for the worst, Hegel is waiting for us with the line: “*Denn erst das*

⁷ For an extensive treatment of Hegel's use of the Argus image, cf. Comay 2014.

ganz Schlechte hat die unmittelbare Notwendigkeit an sich, sich zu verkehren" (Hegel 1986, Vol. 3, p. 257); "for only what is wholly bad is implicitly charged with the immediate necessity of changing round into its opposite" (Hegel 1977, p. 206). Even the worst, and especially the worst, possesses the immediate necessity to turn over and pave the way for the best. There is no way to halt his optimism.⁸

So, art is progressing as well by its ever more sophisticated means to shuffle off its entanglement with the sensuous and the material, and if art is at an end this is a good sign, no reason for alarm, no panic, for we have new forms of reason that have superseded it in modern society, so it's all for the best. The bottom line is always: we are heading for the best.

This is where one feels an irresistible urge to supplement Hegel with Beckett, or even to take them together as a sort of Janus figure, the inscrutable Roman double-faced deity, the god (double god?) of beginnings, gates, transitions, time, duality, doorways, passages, and the god of endings. He is always depicted with a double face, *Ianus geminus*, redoubled in itself, its own twin and double, looking at the past with one face and at the future with the other, the literal embodiment of "one split into two."

Taking the cue from Beckett's *Worstward Ho* (1983), one of his last and most extreme texts, one is tempted to retroactively put Hegel's *Aesthetics* under the label of "bestward ho," heading for the best. So what seems to be Hegel's inveterate optimism and what seems to be Beckett's inveterate pessimism (mark the "seems"), are they two entirely different entities? Or are they rather to be read as the two-headed Janus? Can there be just a minimal difference, a slight shift of perspective, a parallax view, between Hegel's best and Beckett's worst? Another, more general

⁸The moments of nostalgia are rare, thus in the *History of Philosophy*, when speaking of the Greeks, Hegel writes: "*Wenn es erlaubt wäre, eine Sehnsucht zu haben, so nach solchem Lande, solchem Zustande.*" (Hegel 1986, Vol. 18, p. 173) "If yearning were permitted, then it would be for such a land, for such a condition" (my translation).

way of putting the question would be: What happened between the inaugural moment of Hegel's *Aesthetics* (inauguration proclaiming the end of what it inaugurated) and the running out of modernism, the extreme endpoint of what announced itself (or the end of the ending that was announced) in *Aesthetics*?

I will take just Beckett's *Worstward Ho* as this ending point, the terminal stage of modernism, the maximum contrast, the extreme shriveling and withering away of art.⁹ No doubt there can be other candidates although I can't think of any quite as good. First for the title: it stems from the traditional call of boatmen on the river Thames, the river flowing from west to east, so one can either travel eastward or westward ("ho" being just an exclamation to attract attention). The call was part of folklore since the Middle Ages, so it was used a number of times, the first literary piece called *Westward Ho* was actually by John Webster (1604), in Shakespeare's time, and among several others there is a famous novel *Westward Ho!* (1855) by Charles Kingsley which Beckett knew well. (And there is a western with John Wayne called *Westward Ho* [1935].) Just a little twist is needed to turn this historic call, subsequently laden with all the prospects of finding new life which lies westward ("Go west, young man") into the new direction: "Go worst, young man!"

As historic sources go, here is another one which stems from Hegel's time and which again Beckett knew well. It comes from Lord Byron's epic poem *Lara* (1814), where we can find these lines:

Each pulse beats quicker, and all bosoms seem
To bound as doubting from too black a dream,
Such as we know is false, yet dread in sooth,
Because the worst is ever nearest truth.
(*Lara* XXVIII, Byron 1952, p. 311)

⁹ The part on Beckett couldn't be written without the intense experience of the course on "Creaturely Modernism" that I co-taught with Eric Santner in the fall of 2017 at the University of Chicago. Thinking together with Eric informs these pages.

“The worst is ever nearest truth”: the line presupposes or assumes a certain “dialectical economy.” If one descends into the deepest abyss of the worst then one can come closest to truth, and truth is something that can ultimately redeem us. There is an economy of damnation and salvation: if one heads for the worst this will necessarily turn over, there will be a redemptive (if tragic) moment of truth. And it seems that so many of Beckett’s novels and plays can be read along these lines: one starts in a desperate situation already on page one and then it only gets worse, there is a descent, but in it and through it there can be a revelation of another dimension, something that can ultimately redeem us, beyond any traditional or religiously inclined notion of redemption. Only if one is willing to go to the bottom of darkness one would find light; only the one who looks undauntedly at the worst, the most miserable and meaningless facets of human existence, would thereby be able to find a way out of it. This can be seen as being in line with a certain understanding of Hegelian dialectics, precisely with the passage I already quoted, “for only what is wholly bad [the worst] is implicitly charged with the immediate necessity of changing round into its opposite [being overturned].” (Hegel 1977, p. 206) And this seems to be in line with Beckett’s own succinct proclamation of faith, as it were, from *Mirlitonnnades* (1978): “*En face / le pire / jusqu’à ce / qu’il fasse rire.*” “Facing / the horror / returns to / laughter.” (Literally: “Face up / to the worst / until it / makes us laugh.”) The worst will yield, if not the best, then at least laughter (but is laughter redemptive? I will return to that).

I guess the most famous line which condenses this (dialectical?) logic is the one by Hölderlin (remember his taking part in the system fragment, together with Hegel and Schelling): “*Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst / Das Rettende auch,*” “But where danger is the saving powers grow as well,” as one English translation has it (or in a popular pointed form: “Where the danger is at the greatest, the deliverance is at the closest”). Slavoj Žižek recently labeled this stance “the Hölderlin paradigm,” the redemptive

reversal of the worst.¹⁰ Is this what both Hegel and Beckett have in mind? I think this is precisely not the way to go about it, this is rather what Beckett tried to circumvent. There is a teleology in this paradigm that Beckett ultimately never espoused (although some of his lines can be read in this way). His aim was rather to undo this very alternative, to side-step this economy of salvation, the spontaneous eschatology, the secret belief in magic by which the worst would be dialectically overturned by its own inner necessity. (Or that the worst predicament is in itself already [the beginning of] a solution.)

Are we here departing from the Hegelian dialectical model, or are we departing just from a certain (mis)understanding of Hegel's dialectics? Is the Hölderlin paradigm ultimately also the Hegel paradigm? Can they be set apart? Following this paradigm "worstward ho" would secretly communicate with "bestward ho," they would ultimately amount to running into each other and being amalgamated. Beckett's pessimism would thus figure as the reverse side of Hegel's optimism, and it would seem that the former sustains the latter in an oblique and circuitous way, after the many disasters brought by the modern age. The worst would thus ultimately be the best in a very heavy disguise. But I don't think that this is a sufficient view. Something did happen between Hegel's heading for the best and Beckett's heading for the worst, something that cannot be quite dialectically superseded, *aufgehoben*—unless we propose a very different notion of dialectics, a dialectics with a non-dialectical twist. But maybe dialectics was always that, if properly understood or properly unraveled, the Hölderlin paradigm rather presenting a misleading and too easily available clue.

¹⁰ Cf. Žižek 2014, pp. 344–49. "[T]he danger of the catastrophic loss of the essential dimension of being-human also opens up the possibility of a reversal (*Kehre*)" (ibid., p. 344). Žižek sees this paradigm at work in very different quarters, from Judeo-Christian legacy to Marxism and Heidegger.

Let me proceed by giving another quote which may well be the key to *Worstward Ho*, this time from Shakespeare. These are the lines from *King Lear* that Beckett copied in his notebook:

Edgar (*aside*): And worse I may be yet. The worst is not
So long as we can say "This is the worst." (IV, 1, 31–32)

(The context of the scene is that Gloucester has been arrested and blinded, he is wandering around blind, wanting to be led to the cliff so that he can throw himself off and die, when he stumbles upon his son Edgar, the ousted legitimate son—denounced by Edmund, the illegitimate son, the villain—whom he can't recognize. Father and son meet as outlaws.)

Is this the key to the whole? There is a mind-boggling paradox here: if one says "this is the worst" then this is not the worst by the mere act of saying it, by virtue of it being spoken out at all. (Isn't there something of the liar's paradox that appears here?) If I can say it, I already miss it, I evoke the worst but at the same time by saying it I keep it at bay, by the minimal and unbridgeable distance of enunciation to the enunciated content. Merely to say "this is the worst" is already a falsehood. Edgar's words can be taken as a comfort, a relief—where there is speech there is hope? Language is thus an obstruction on the way to the worst, on the way to nothing. There is the impossibility of reaching being, but there is also the impossibility of reaching nothing, despite all the longing for it. "Worse in vain. Never to be naught" (Beckett 1983, p. 46). Language stands in the way, the means of getting there prevent us from getting there. This goes back to Beckett's reflections from the 1930s, half a century back:

And more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it. [...] As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute. To bore one hole after another in it, until

what lurks behind it—be it something or nothing—begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today. (Letter to Axel Kaun, 1937; Beckett 1984, p.172)

Maybe the whole text is to be read as an extension, a display of this paradox. It turns *Worstward Ho* into a self-defeating project, by clinging to the protective veil.¹¹ Language is in the way, language is the veil to be torn—but the veil is what constitutes its “aesthetic” value, aesthetics is the veil, it prevents the worst (however much Beckett is trying to go for it, there is always the “unnullable least”), it also prevents the best (with Hegel deeming aesthetics to be insufficient given its sensuality, but even surpassing the limitations of aesthetics one is perhaps still stuck with its “unnullable least”).

In conclusion, let me give five points, or five perspectives, on the relation between Hegel and Beckett, on the shift that happened between the two. Moving on; gray on gray; coming too late; how to end; and the value of the aesthetic.

First; Hegel’s spirit is always on the move. Once reaching aesthetics as the realm of the absolute spirit, its first stage, the spirit already proclaimed its being surpassed and obsolete. But the absolute spirit is the last section of the *Encyclopedia*, we are almost there: to give you the sense of proportion, the section on art begins 30 pages before the end of the project which (in the Suhrkamp edition, with all the *Zusätze*) is 1300 pages long, and the section on art itself comprises five pages in all—the five pages which (in the same edition) will be blown up to more than 1500 pages of the lectures on *Aesthetics*. Arriving at any stage we have to move on. If there is one imperative of the Hegelian spirit, then it seems to be “On!” Couldn’t this be put in a strange resonance with Beckett? If with Hegel we have the urge to go on towards

¹¹ But this would then perhaps also go for “bestward ho”—should one propose “The best is not so long as we can say ‘This is the best’”?

the supposedly ever higher realms of spirit, then with Beckett we have the reduction of the thrust to go on, to progress, the reduction to the pure thrust of persistence, of perseverance, with no higher aim. Except for heading for the worst, if this can be taken as Beckett's response to the teleology of the best—but why should one head anywhere if the scale of spirit no longer holds?

Here is the beginning of *Worstward Ho*, just the first paragraph.

On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on. (Beckett 1983, p. 7)

Let me just stop at the first word, the strange word “on,” and make three comments. First, *on* is obviously Greek for “being.” Philosophy started with *on*, with Aristotle's notorious *on to on*, “being *qua* being,” up to Hegel's “being, pure being,” the notorious beginning of his *Logic*. Couldn't the beginning of *Worstward Ho* be read as Beckett's version of the beginning of Hegel's *Logic*, i.e., as the counterpart to “being, pure being”? It is reduced to just “on,” but also repeated, “say on,” reflecting or highlighting the act of saying it, the performativity of saying “on,” involving an imperative (“Be said on.”), not just of “going on,” continuation, but also the imperative of saying it.¹²

Should the Greek *on* be read as the English *on*? Is “being” inherently tied with “on”? Perhaps this contingent encounter, this pun, this minimal example of what Lacan called *lalangue*, points to something far-reaching and essential. “Being” is never just based on an assertion that “it is,” but always involves an imperative dimension. On the one hand, there is an imperative

¹² One can recall that “On. Say on.” involves an echo, a transformation of the beginning of *The Unnamable*: “I, say I. Unbelieving.” (Beckett 2009, p. 285) Looking at this minimal structure, could one propose that *The Unnamable* corresponds to Hegel's *Phenomenology* while *Worstward Ho* corresponds to his *Logic*? From the starting point with consciousness to the starting point with being?

hiding under the apparent constative, and this is what Lacan aims at when he says that being, in ontology, is always “*l’être à la botte, l’être aux ordres*,” “being at the heel, being at someone’s beck and call,” something that inscribes being into the discourse of the master.¹³ There is a command under what seems to be a mere assertion, the most universal and neutral of all, stating mere being. On the other hand, there is an imperative dimension of being that doesn’t take its support in asserting the being that is and that can be established as the most universal category, but is “something” in being that is not (yet) being, and one can show the fidelity to this dimension only by persevering, by continuing, by following the insisting “on”; something that perhaps “will have been” and that we must take on by sheer persistence; something that “is not (yet)” but pertains only to the mode of “on.” Something that is “impossible” and yet it insists (hence the famous ending of *The Unnamable*, “you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on”); something that doesn’t exist but merely insists. In the face of the master’s discourse, the insistence of the impossible.

Second. “On” is the inversion of “no,” and this was Beckett’s favorite word play “on” in the place of “no,” persistence based on negativity, through negativity, via negativity, as the shift of negativity, its reverse at the very same place. The beauty of it, if that is the right word (beauty beyond aesthetics?), is the absolute minimalism—“on” and “no” occupy the same spot, with the inversion of just two letters, a minimal anagram.

One interpretation gives a succinct comment:

¹³ “It seems that the pedicle is conserved here [in what Aristotle calls *to ti en einai*] that allows us to situate whence this discourse on being is produced—it’s quite simply being at someone’s heel, being at someone’s beck and call—what would have been if you had understood what I ordered you to do. // Every dimension of being is produced in the wake of the master’s discourse—the discourse of he who, proffering the signifier, expects therefrom one of its link effects that must not be neglected, which is related to the fact that the signifier commands. The signifier is, first and foremost, imperative.” (Lacan 1998, pp. 31–32)

The *no*, which expresses the impossibility of advancing, and the *on*, which designates the extreme urgency to move forward, are both equally constraining, imposing themselves on the subject in a univocal manner, allowing for no concession or dialectical compromise. These two antonyms offer no possibilities but compose a dilemma centred on an *impossible*. (Brown 2016, p. 200)¹⁴

Anecdotically, Beckett wrote *Worstward Ho* in English, and when pushed to translate it into French he gave up, he didn't feel capable of doing it, so the French translation was exceptionally done by someone else, Édith Fournier, and published two years after his death. There is no way to get this minimalism in any other language. So how did the French translator tackle this impossible task? "*Encore. Dire encore. Soit dit encore.*" (Beckett 1991, p. 7) Not the same at all—except that there is something gained in translation. *Encore*—sounds familiar? It strangely rejoins Lacan, *encore* to be read as an injunction. (Not to forget Lacan's own slogan "*il faut parier sur le pire*," one has to bet on the worst. But why didn't Lacan ever read or engage with Beckett?)

I can add Beckett's own reflections on negation, in conversation with Charles Juliet in 1968, without being able to comment on them properly here:

Negation is not possible. No more than affirmation. It is absurd to say that it is absurd. That is still to express a value judgment. One cannot protest, and one cannot consent. (After a long silence:) We have to stand where there is no possible pronoun, no solution, no reaction, no taking of position [...]. This is what makes the work so diabolically difficult. (Quoted in Brown 2016, p. 201)

What emerges is a being that can be neither affirmed nor denied, the "unnullable least" that creeps in and keeps persist-

¹⁴ To which one should add that dialectics is not a compromise, it is precisely this extreme tension of the two at the same time which pushes forward.

ing even if one wants to push to the end the negativity of being. Could one say there is but the minimal difference between being and non-being? One shouldn't make haste to proclaim it "beyond dialectics," it is perhaps what makes dialectics tic.¹⁵

Third. "On" is an injunction to continue, and given that "on" is the first word, we start with a continuation—in the beginning there is a continuation. If one says "on," something must have preceded, formally, so that one can then go "on," there is structurally a prolongation and an extension. It is as if we start with the second, not with the first. But what has preceded? There is no "something" that preceded "on," no something that would exist prior to "on," no first to have preceded the second: it is created, retroactively, by "on," both suppressed and brought forth by it. Maybe this constellation can be taken as exemplary: it has the structure of what Freud has called "the primary repression," *Urverdrängung*, the suppression of something that didn't exist prior to this suppression.¹⁶

Second point, second perspective: gray on gray. The best-known passage in Hegel runs:

When philosophy paints its grey in grey [Grau in Grau], then has a shape of life grown old. By philosophy's grey in grey it cannot be rejuvenated but only understood [known, *nur erkennen*]. The owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the falling of dusk. (Hegel 2008, p. 16)

It is maybe not so strange that Hegel took gray to be the proper color of philosophy, taking the cue from Goethe's *Faust*:

¹⁵ The "unnullable least" can be connected to the concept of *den* which appears in Democritus' fragment 156, the fragment that Beckett referred to as one of the keys to his entire work (Beckett 1984, p. 113). One could propose a reading of *Worstward Ho* as a prosopopoeia of *den*: "I, *den*, speak." *Den* can't speak in first person, hence all the complicated strategies of mostly subjectless sentences, and no "I".

¹⁶ I must refer to Zupančič's *What is Sex?* (2017) and her brilliant discussion of the suppression of the binary signifier.

“Grau, teurer Freund, ist alle Theorie, / Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum.” “Gray, my dear friend, is all theory, and green is the golden tree of life.” Hegel proudly took upon himself what was meant as a term of denigration of theory (can one say degray-dation?) and put it on his banner. It is stranger that Beckett took gray to be the color of his art—for art usually appeared on the side of “the green tree of life,” but not for Beckett. Beckett might well have been the only one who thought that art is even grayer than theory, and that that was a very good thing. Gray is not a color of life, it is a non-color, the discolored, dilapidated color, the indifferent mixture of all colors, the color of non-difference.¹⁷ It doesn’t even have the appeal of the absence of color, which is white, or its saturation, which is black. So gray on gray is the difference of the indifferent, of the indistinct, the minimal difference, the pure cut, the pure break. And since philosophy’s time is at dusk, i.e., at the vintage moment of grayness, the indifference between day and night, the moment of transition and transience, it is to be matched by another moment of twilight, the moment of dawn, the transition in the opposite direction, the other moment of the indistinct. So maybe gray on gray should be read in this way: the gray of dawn on the gray of dusk, the minimal difference between two transitions, the point where the gray of the evening is indiscernible from the gray of the morning; between two twilights, there is just the cut of their minimal difference.¹⁸ This is where Hegel may be seen to anticipate Beckett (as Comay pointed out); to take just one quote (from “Ping,” 1966): “Traces blurs light grey almost white on white.” (Beckett 1995, p. 193) Pale gray almost white on white: this is an even more dilapidated version of Hegel’s gray, a non-color. An anecdote tells that Beckett,

¹⁷ Here, I take my cue from Rebecca Comay’s book *Mourning Sickness* (2011) where she treats this magisterially.

¹⁸ “The doubling of gray on gray marks the almost indiscernible interval between dusk and dawn, between one twilight and another [...]. Turning evening into morning [...].” (Ibid., p. 143)

when asked about his wishes for his gravestone, allegedly said: “It can be of any color, as long as it’s gray.”

Third point: coming too late. To continue with the same quote from Hegel:

One word more about giving instruction as to what the world ought to be. Philosophy in any case always comes on the scene too late to give it. As the *thought* of the world, it appears only when actuality has completed its process of formation and attained its finished state. (Hegel 2008, p. 16)

The seemingly obvious implication is: it’s too late, always already too late, philosophy is doomed to come too late, structurally it is lagging behind. One can read this as an anticipation of Beckett, in the general stance, a very fundamental turn or figure of thought that strangely connects two completely unrelated universes: everything is already finished, it’s over, we come too late, always already too late—this is the initial situation of almost all of Beckett’s texts, this is where they begin since the very first one on: already in *Murphy* (1937), his first novel, the first sentence runs: “The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new.” (Beckett 2010, p. 3) So nothing new under the sun; from the first sentence on, we are too late, it’s already done. To turn this end into a beginning, a persistence, a loop that opens up, however totally restrained we may be by the oppressive finished reality, this may be seen as Beckett’s way to continue Hegel’s quote, as it were.

Fourth: the end. Both Hegel and Beckett are obsessed with the ending, with how to bring things to a proper end. We may always come too late, after the end, but this doesn’t mean that there has been a proper end, quite the opposite, this is where the drama starts. Another Beckett quote, epitomizing this at best: “The end is in the beginning and yet you go on” (Beckett 1986, p. 126). Hegel notoriously declared the end of history, the end of art, the end of philosophy—couldn’t this be taken precisely as the end which is at the beginning for Beckett? And then we go

on. Can the end end? Can there be an ending to the end? This is the key problem of *Endgame* (1958), the key text to consider in regard to Beckett's relation to the end, from which I can take just one point here. Freud wrote a paper called "Analysis Terminable and Interminable," and *Endgame* can be dubbed "ending terminable and interminable." Is there an end or not in the *Endgame*? The play's first line is: "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished" (Beckett 1986, p. 93). But is it? There is an essential oscillation between the two, between the ending and the neverending. A number of interpreters (e.g., McMillan and Fehsenfeld 1988; Hesla 2005; etc.)¹⁹ have opted for the ending, for the first option, and they are not wrong—the play is permeated with maximum entropy, the utter exhaustion, the key grain has been added to the heap at the very beginning. But apart from the ample references in the play to the impossibility of ending, we also have Beckett's letter that firmly indicates the second option:

[T]he impossibility logically, i.e. eristically, of the "thing" ever coming to an end. [...] In other words, the impossibility of a catastrophe. Ended at its inception, and at every subsequent instant, it continues, ergo can never end." (Quoted in Weller 2005, p. 139)

The end lies in the past, not in the future, so it cannot end—or can it? Should one decide? Can one decide? I rather like the suggestion by Shane Weller, namely to take the very impossibility of the alternative as the solution:

When it arrives the end of playing fails to arrive. This failure does not mean, however, that the end simply hasn't arrived. Rather, it means that we, as the end's witnesses, are in no position to know whether the end has arrived or not. (Weller 2005, p. 140)

The end doesn't coincide with itself, there is the minimal difference of ending and not ending—is this the only end we can

¹⁹ For all these references cf. Weller 2005.

arrive at? Isn't this a very Hegelian solution to the problem of ending? The minimal difference between the event and the non-event, the end and no end, this is what we have to engage with.

Fifth, finally: the status of the aesthetic. Let me start with a comment on Beckett's humor. Simon Critchley (1997) amply argued that this is the redemptive trait in Beckett, the acknowledgment of finitude: we are descending into the abyss, but humor is there to save us, to relieve us. Indeed, Beckett seems to be saying something like this in "Face up to the worst—until it makes us laugh." And most strikingly: "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness" (Beckett 1986, p. 101). But then, doesn't it mean that the unhappiness ensures the continuation of humor, and humor the continuation of unhappiness? So is humor redemptive? Maybe humor is the means of inflicting rather than alleviating suffering (cf. Weller 2005, p. 143). There is a trajectory "from the worst to laughter," but perhaps laughter is what makes it worse? Or can it be worse? Humor, laughter, etc. seem like a relief in Beckett's gloomy setting, but it is the relief that nails us down more. Perhaps humor doesn't avert the worst, but actually enhances it.

An analogous question can be raised about the aesthetic value, the poetic value of Beckett's texts. Can one simply treasure them for their aesthetic excellence? *Worstward Ho* is, on the face of it, incredibly economic and elegant, breathtakingly "beautiful" in the minimal means of "expression." It's a poem, with so many evocative puns, alliterations, assonances, echoes, the web of reverberations; it is the creation of a universe *ex nihilo* with the absolutely minimal, and then constantly in the same breath its decreation. In a way, it is a perfect work of art, in the sense that the unity of form and content has hardly ever been achieved to this level. All the content grows out of the minimal form of language, and there is no way to separate any content of *Worstward Ho* from the singular way it is told. Isn't this the classical ideal extolled by Hegel? But maybe this is what ultimately makes it all the more unbearable. Can one take aesthetics as a relief? Ultimately as a

consolation? Can there still be aesthetics in this? And if there is, doesn't it make it worse? Aesthetics is the real "worstward ho" pretending to be a defense against it. What would it mean to deem *Worstward Ho* beautiful for its poetic value? What standard of value of literature can one apply? Isn't the aesthetic value of it also a paramount way of evasion? Isn't it worse for being beautiful?

This is where we perhaps arrive at the endgame of aesthetics. What started in the 1820s with Hegel's *Aesthetics*, rather with the proclamation of an end of aesthetics, the outdatedness of art, has run its course in the 150 years to the extreme shriveling of aesthetic means, of art's content and form, the ending of its ending, the questioning of aesthetic means that become an obstacle. If Hegel saw the limitation of art precisely in its embeddedness in the sensuous aesthetic setting, then this very medium turns against itself through its utter reduction by the supreme mastery, a mastery undermining itself—so that the worst, the best, something or nothing, can seep through. Beckett's *Worstward Ho* can stand as its token, a most telling one.

Are we heading for the best? Are we heading for the worst? Is there but a minimal difference between the two? Where are we heading?

Bibliography

- [Anon] (1996) "The Oldest Systematic Programme of German Idealism," trans. and ed. Frederick C. Beiser, *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*, 1–5 (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press).
- Beckett, Samuel (1978) *Poèmes, suivi de mirlitonades* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit).
- (1983) *Worstward Ho* (New York: Grove Press).
- (1984) *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press).

- (1986) *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber).
- (1991) *Cap au pire*, trans. Édith Fournier (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit).
- (1995) *The Complete Short Prose, 1929–1989*, ed. Stanley E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press).
- (2009) *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press).
- (2010) *Murphy* (London: Faber and Faber).
- Brown, Llewellyn (2016) *Beckett, Lacan, and the Voice* (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag).
- Byron, George Gordon (1952) *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Comay, Rebecca (2011) *Mourning Sickness* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).
- (2014) “Defaced Statues: Idealism and Iconoclasm in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*,” *October* 149:123–42.
- (2015) “Resistance and Repetition: Freud and Hegel,” *Research in Phenomenology* 45, 2:237–66.
- Critchley, Simon (1997) *Very Little ... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy and Literature* (London: Routledge).
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1973) *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, Vol. 1*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- (1977) *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- (1986) *Theorie Werkausgabe*, 20 Vols. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp).
- (2008) *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox, ed. Stephen Houlgate (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Hesla, David H. (1971) *The Shape of Chaos: An Interpretation of the Art of Samuel Beckett* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press).
- Lacan, Jacques (1981) *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton & Company).
- (1998) *On Feminine Sexuality. The Limits of Love and Knowledge (Seminar XX, Encore)*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company).

- Lebrun, Gérard (1972) *La patience du concept* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard).
- McMillan, Dougald, and Martha Fehsenfeld (1988) *Beckett in the Theatre* (London: John Calder).
- Rancière, Jacques (2004) *Malaise dans l'esthétique* (Paris: Éditions Galilée).
- (2009) *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Cambridge, UK, & Malden, MA: Polity Press).
- Weller, Shane (2005) *A Taste for the Negative: Beckett and Nihilism* (London: Legenda).
- Zupančič, Alenka (2017) *What is Sex?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
- Žižek, Slavoj (2014) *Absolute Recoil: Towards A New Foundation Of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso).

So Fake, So Real!

Josephine and the Voice of Death

Frank Vande Veire

Impossible d'échapper à ce qui n'est rien.
Maurice Blanchot

In Kafka's story, *Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk*, the fundamental question that the narrator asks is: What does Josephine mean for the community? That is to say: What does her art give to the community that the mice cannot give to one another through personal contact? And, in addition, what does Josephine's success with the community reveal about the community of mice, given that even the biggest sceptics among them recognize her as "their" singer?

What is exceptional about Josephine is apparently not her singing itself. She cannot even sing. She only "pipes" like all mice do. What is exceptional about her is that she has the nerve to demand attention to her piping. You have to *see* her. She makes "a ceremonial performance out of doing the usual thing" (Kafka 1971, p. 388). Each time she does this, a circle of quiet, respectful listeners forms around her. Josephine decontextualizes everyday piping, so that it is heard as such: "[H]ere piping is set free from the fetters of daily life and it sets us free too for a little while" (*ibid.*, p. 397).

Another of Josephine's additions—in fact a subtraction—is that she pipes notably more quietly than the other mice. This testifies even more to her pluck: Josephine performs substandard

piping in a highly theatrical manner. But it is precisely in this way, according to the narrator, that she reveals the essence of piping. He draws a comparison with nut-cracking: the essence of nut-cracking is revealed when clumsiness or hesitation creeps in.¹ It is precisely in this way, that is, not in spite of, but *because of* the fact that she does not even reach the level of ordinary piping, that Josephine unveils its essence. But how so? Why is it that the people unite around a rather pathetic demonstration of inability?

In a passage, the narrator-mouse—expressing himself in an unusual, lyrical manner—describes how Josephine invests all her vitality and spirit into her feeble piping, as if she is on death's doorstep:

[I]t is as if she has concentrated all her strength on her song, as if from everything in her that does not directly subserve her singing all strength has been withdrawn, almost all power of life, as if she were laid bare, abandoned, committed merely to the care of good angels, as if while she is so wholly withdrawn and living only in her song a cold breath blowing upon her might kill her. (Kafka 1971, p. 390)

To claim that Josephine is doing something absurd is an understatement. On a kind of an imaginary stage, shielded from everyday life by solemn silence, Josephine expends nearly all her vital energy on piping that is weaker than the piping that costs the average mouse no effort whatsoever. But with this, as the comparison with nut-cracking suggests, she touches on the “essence” of piping that escapes the notice of the typical mouse for being done so effortlessly. Josephine indeed transcends, as the sober narrator must recognize, everyday piping. She therefore has a point when “she denies any connection between her art and ordinary piping [...]: this piping of hers is no piping” (ibid., p. 389).

¹ Just as, according to Heidegger's *Being and Time*, a “tool” only reveals its essence, namely the entire “equipmentality” of which it is a part, when it breaks down.

But how can the “essence” of piping be disclosed in a markedly toothless, usually barely audible piping? This is, of course, because all piping, regardless of how powerful and lively it might sound, has something to do with powerlessness, i.e., with an inability to pipe.

What is the nature of this inability? In Josephine’s insipid voice, the people recognize, as if in a dark mirror, the manner in which it is continuously exposed to the deadly threat of an unspecified enemy. The communality that is only really experienced when Josephine performs is therefore essentially the communality of a common exposure to death. This at least is suggested by the following sentence: “Josephine’s thin piping amidst grave decisions is almost like our people’s precarious existence amidst the tumult of a hostile world” (ibid., p. 394). Josephine flirts with death. The way in which she wantonly expends all her vital force on her singing embodies for the mouse-folk a kind of capitulation-in-advance to the always-possible death. Encouraged by Josephine’s shameless weakness, the otherwise so utilitarian-minded people become momentarily indifferent to the deadly foe. Relieved of the miserable obligation to preserve their own lives, they expose themselves to death in a childishly frivolous manner.

Therefore, the “essence” of piping relates to it not being a means of communication serving the function of self-preservation; it relates to something that resonates surreptitiously in it, namely the way in which each mouse exposes itself to death. Apparently, the mice needed Josephine’s “frail little voice” (ibid., p. 389) to be able to assume, even if unconsciously, this dimension. Through Josephine’s inaudible or barely audible voice, death confronts them not as something that must be avoided at all cost, but as their *freedom*. This freedom through death is what the mouse-folk recognize in Josephine, and it is for that reason that, unbeknownst to themselves, they recognize her.

The narrator describes how radical Josephine’s desire for recognition actually is. Indeed, Josephine demands recognition

for a piping that is manifestly weak and produces no articulable meaning. With this she expresses her exposure to death. Death condemns each of us to radical weakness and loss of meaning. Nobody knows what or how to pipe in the face of death. Everyday piping pipes, as it were, despite this powerlessness. There is something about this piping that is anxious as well as frenzied, regardless of how healthy and steadfast it may sound. Josephine “sings” this speechlessness in the face of death that pertains to all piping.

But is this opposition between Josephine’s speechlessness, on the one hand, and, on the other, the piping of her people, which bears resemblance to what Heidegger called *das Gerede* (“idle talk”), not too simple?

Lost Voice, Lost Death

Perhaps a few things can be clarified by turning to Hegel. In a fragment, the young Hegel writes something peculiar about animals: “Every animal finds a voice in its violent death, it expresses itself as sublated Self” (Hegel 1967, p. 161; quoted in Žižek 1996, p. 151, and Agamben 1991, p. 45). The cry emitted by the animal is not merely a cry of pain and horror, and thus an ultimate expression of its resistance to death. Just before dying, the animal suddenly obtains a *voice* that *assumes* death. “It expresses itself as sublated Self,” that is to say: it expresses its life as something that is over. It is not merely torn away from life, but *anticipates* itself as torn from life and, as such, looks back on its life. It is for this reason that Hegel here sees human language being born, if only to immediately disappear. For the voice of the animal is something momentary, an “immediately evaporating trace,” *unmittelbar verschwindende Andeutung* (Hegel 1967, p. 207). Moreover, the animal produces only a pure, undifferentiated sound without specific meaning. Its voice is pure sonority. In human language,

this sonority is “broken up” and differentiated by consonants. Linguistic articulation dialectically *sublates* the animal voice: it simultaneously negates and preserves it. As a speaking being, man inherits from the animal the ability to relate to life as something that is finished. But language arrives in the place of the death-cry.

With its universal concepts the speaking being withdraws from mere life. The negativity to which the animal gives voice only in the single fleeting moment just before its natural death is the rule for man as speaking being. Because of language, life is something that is remembered, and therefore also desired, from the outset. Human beings no longer need to die in order to die. The distance from life is no longer provoked by natural death itself; man assumes this distance from the outset with words, or better: words assume this distance in his stead. While the dying animal is, as it were, fully present at its death, allowing death to fully resound, man no longer has a voice for death. For man, death only lives in the labor of meaning.

The meaning of a linguistic expression is understandable only to the extent that the sonority of the “animal” voice disappears into the background. The tone is ignored in favor of the meaning. But that which is negated is preserved: the confrontation with death as something most terrifying. In his interesting comments on Hegel, Agamben draws a connection with the master/slave dialectic from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The voice must be positioned on the side of the—also disappearing—master, while the work of meaning is of course on the side of the servant. Agamben does not mention that the master does not really enter into confrontation with the terrifying aspect of death. His courage to fight was no real courage. He was actually unafraid of death because he was unaware of the absolute value of life. It was the slave who was shaken to the core in the face of death—and withdrew from it. The slave briefly experienced the absolute negation of his natural existence. But this horrible moment was fleeting and immediately reduced to an immemorial experience. The slave only

knows death in the form of labor. Labor is “sublated” negativity: through labor, negativity as but a fleeting unbearable moment of fear of death in which the slave loses all basis in reality becomes a force that *transforms* reality.

Agamben summarizes the analogy between the master/slave dialectic and Hegel’s early speculation about the origin of language as follows: “as language arrests and interrupts the pure sound of the voice, so work is desire that is curbed and preserved” (Agamben 1991, p. 47). In both cases, a radical but fleeting experience of death is the secret engine of productive labor.

“But the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it” (Hegel 1977, p. 19). Who is Hegel writing about in this iconic sentence from the Preface to his *Phenomenology of Spirit*? In all his defiance of death, the master has not really experienced death because he is not really attached to life. The servant, on the other hand, was afraid of death. Thus, *no one* has endured death as death in order to subsequently maintain itself in it. “Death,” says Lacan, “is never experienced as such, is it—it is never real. Man is only ever afraid of an imaginary fear” (Lacan 1991, p. 223). Trembling in the face of death, the servant sees itself as an imaginary figure that really dares to look death straight in the eye and subject himself to it. Withdrawing from death, his “absolute master,” the slave raises his master to the position of an absolute master. The master is death that does not kill but forces one to work. In the master, the slave recognizes and accepts the radical negativity of his own self-consciousness, the courage for a radical detachment that he himself is not capable of. From a Lacanian perspective, the master is thus an imaginary figure to the extent that the slave uses the master as an image with which he anticipates a sovereignty that he himself does not possess.

The slave works for the master, that is to say, he does not enjoy. He works so that the master would enjoy purely. With

this move, the master obtains a divine status. He enjoys so purely because he is detached, because what he consumes serves no vital need—like the gods who love the scent of the burnt offering that ascends to the sky. In that sense, the master is not a desiring subject. Enjoying purely, he is already right where he wants to be. This pleasure is just as fleeting and meaningless as the death-cry of the animal, Agamben notes (1991, p. 47). The servant is the true desiring subject. By working, he delays his pleasure.

The master and slave dialectic is a mythical story, says Lacan. Not only has a life and death struggle never really taken place, what is more, the relationship between the two protagonists never really occurs in the purely imaginary space in which Hegel describes it. The “struggle of pure prestige” (an expression that Lacan takes over from Alexandre Kojève, not Hegel himself) is a borderline case that never occurs in its purity. According to Lacan, “[f]rom the beginning, between the master and the slave, there’s a rule of the game” (Lacan 1991, p. 223; see also Lacan 2006, p. 686). Implicitly, there is always a symbolic pact, and in that sense, recognition. The fascination that the master exerts on the slave as someone who is not afraid of death is always already symbolic recognition, mediated by signifiers. For the slave, the master is never a purely sovereign figure who enjoys in his stead while he himself must work, i.e., someone whose enjoyment stands in the way of his own, and who thus alternately fills him with envy and worship. As a signifier, the “master” ensures the structural inability to fully enjoy—an impossibility that also applies to the master. The fact that Hegel sees the future as belonging to the slave must be interpreted in a Lacanian manner as saying that there had always only been slaves.

In this sense, Hegel’s speculation about the transition from the animal voice to human language must be read as a myth of origin, the chronology of which is misleading. The *Aufhebung* of the animal death-cry in the negativity of language too strongly suggests a succession. For Lacan, the voice is something immemorial

because, as concerns the human being, there is always already symbolic articulation. Man has always already lost his voice. The linguistic being imagines the voice in order to undo the lack, the loss of contact with life and death that is established by the symbolic order. Understood in this way, with the cry of the dying animal Hegel presents a creature that would fully assume its death as present in its disappearance.

The speaking being has no voice for death as its death has always already happened. It is stillborn in language. Agamben writes: “For this reason, meaningful language is truly the ‘life of the spirit’ that ‘brings on’ death and ‘is maintained’ in death” (Agamben 1991, p. 46). What is strange here is that it is not living human beings but language that bears death and is maintained in it. While the dying animal could still directly grasp its life from its—anticipated—death, in humans this capacity is bequeathed to language. Language deprives the human of the voice with which it could assume his death. It a priori distances humans from their disappearance, i.e., from the absolute point from which they could look back on their life. Formulated in a Lacanian manner: The only disappearance known to man is his or her disappearance (“fading”) in the *signifier*.

Feigned Feigning

In the struggle, Hegel’s master wants to outdo the slave—who balks, trembling in fear—by defying death. One could say: Kafka’s Josephine, at least when she sings, is pure desire, which mustn’t be confused with any need. While the mice are fully occupied with the struggle for self-preservation, Josephine exposes herself to death. However, she doesn’t expose herself to death at all. No one is less committed to the struggle against the formidable foe than this “delicate creature” (Kafka 1971, p. 390). She only *performs* a death that she, like every mouse, shies away from. She only

pipes that death, and in order to pipe that death, she must pretend that she does not have the strength to pipe—thus, she must pipe weakly. We have already seen how the narrator formulates this: “It is *as if* she has concentrated all her strength on her song, *as if* from everything in her that does not directly subserve her singing all strength has been withdrawn” (ibid., p. 390; my emphasis).

The narrator remains staid even when lyrical. It is not due to a real lack of power that Josephine, even with the greatest effort, only manages to produce a weak pipe. We may assume that Josephine is capable of making herself heard in daily life. But when she emerges as a singer, she invests all her might in a dubious *display*, a *spectacle* of speechlessness, so as to give expression to the speechlessness to which she is compelled by her exposure to death.

Between the animal voice that cries out death, and the meaningful discourse in which the negativity of death is employed in the work of meaning, we encounter something that is no longer a voice but is not yet meaning: a lack of voice that is the pure openness to a possible meaning, a speechlessness that opens up the space of language. When Josephine pipes, barely audibly, it is as if she “regresses” to this pre-human, yet no longer animal moment—it is as if she refuses to conceal the loss of voice by producing meaning. She “sings” the voice as that which she has lost in making herself understood like everyone else.

To make yourself understandable means to lose your voice. But that which is lost continues to insist. The voice becomes something ghostly for the speaker, as if it were a *Doppelgänger* that is speaking for her (Žižek 2012, p. 676). Josephine reveals this ghostliness when, with great aplomb, she presents her voice as something that irresistibly insists—outside of her, as it were—without her being able to express it. It is as if the voice were an object stuck in her throat.

Josephine wants to be seen and recognized as the person who disappears in her singing, as if her “art” would sweep her away.

It is for this reason that she cannot sing with a beautiful and full voice, for then she would actually betray the fact that she doesn't actually lose herself in her singing, i.e., that she is alive and well. One can invest much energy in a song, but one can only invest *all* of one's energy in a song that is not there.

The narrator emphasizes the theatrical aspect of Josephine's performances. There is a shift from the aural to the scopic. With great aplomb and without letting much be heard, she lets it be seen that she has a voice. She produces signifiers that everyone immediately recognizes as appropriate to a "passionate" singer, "spreading her arms wide and stretching her throat as high as it could reach," "shaken by vibrations especially below the breastbone [...], head thrown back, mouth half-open, eyes turned upwards," "she purses her lips, expels the air between her pretty front teeth" (Kafka 1971, pp. 389, 390, 396). This performance has its intended effect. It silences all the mice. Everything indicates that Josephine believes she is singing. She is blatantly narcissistic and "half dies in sheer wonderment at the sounds she herself is producing" (*ibid.*, p. 396).

The most obvious interpretation would be that Josephine, by projecting the image of herself as an ecstatic singer, raises a screen so as to divert the audience's attention from the weakness of her voice. A significant part of her sensible audience is smart enough to see through this, and the mice also joke about it among themselves. But in spite of all the skepticism and mockery, during Josephine's performances everyone behaves in a dignified and respectful manner. Everyone appears to believe in her voice. Their response seems to be a version of the formula of fetishistic disavowal, as proposed by Octave Mannoni (2003): I know very well that Josephine cannot sing, but during her performances, namely when I *see* her, together with the others, I am moved by her singing.

The question, however, is how such a disavowal is possible. How is it possible that nobody, not even those who mock her,

escape the fascination? “She gets effects which a trained singer would try in vain to achieve among us and which are only produced precisely because her means are inadequate” (Kafka 1971, p. 394). Josephine’s stereotyped gestures and facial expressions do not fascinate because they enhance her singing but because they invoke a voice that cannot be heard. In other words: the image of the ecstatic singer that Josephine displays does not fascinate *despite* the fact that there is no voice equal to her act, but precisely *because* it invokes a voice that is not there. This missing voice creates a gap in the image of the diva, it makes that image incomplete and incompletionable, and is fascinating precisely for that reason.

There is something embarrassing about the absolute seriousness with which Josephine indulges in the signifiers of a singing that is not there. The breastbone shaken by vibrations, the head thrown back, the mouth half-open, the eyes turned upwards—this seems to be a parody. All that is left of her singing is an empty posturing. The body that acts as if expending all of its strength on a song, as if just barely managing to survive the effort—“laid bare, abandoned, committed merely to the care of good angels” (ibid., p. 390)—stands there, prouder and more invulnerable than ever. Josephine’s body *simulates* the life of Hegel’s spirit that does not shy away from death but “‘brings on’ death and ‘is maintained’ in death.” It is a specter.

This is reminiscent of Bataille, for whom the sacrificial ritual as the affirmation of death is always something of a comedy by which one aims to increase one’s prestige in the face of others (Bataille 1990). Josephine’s self-sacrifice only exists as a spectacle offered to her audience. She is only capable of this sacrifice to the extent that she (dis)plays it to others, i.e., as long as she translates it into signifiers that she, moreover, borrows from these others, thus ensuring her success with them: her vibrating diaphragm, her head tilted back...

Like every mouse, Josephine is a “slave.” Death is what she fears most. However, she can only assimilate the fact that death is

more than a thing to be avoided for as long as possible by making a spectacle of it. She can therefore rightfully be suspected of expecting that her spectators believe in her show, of desiring to see them corroborate the “truthfulness,” the “authenticity” of her surrender, and thus for them to recognize her as their “master.” Only in the vision that Josephine portrays for her audience is death transformed for her from a terrifying threat into a sovereign surrender.

But does Josephine seriously believe this? Does she believe in what she imagines? The narrator outlines her desire for recognition as something very ambiguous. In any case, she is recognized to the extent that she assumes the symbolic position as “singer of the mouse-folk.” Everyone, not only her fans, treats her with every respect and tries as best as possible to respond to her whims. But this recognition does not satisfy her in the least, only increasing her dissatisfaction and the quirkiness of her demands. Josephine knows very well that those recognized by “everyone” are recognized by no one in particular. One recognizes her in order to not really have to listen to her. Any sign of recognition proves to her yet again that she is not really recognized, at least not for the right reason, not for what her art is really worth. In this sense, Josephine is truly a modern artist. She looks down on the official Josephine-cult that reduces her to a mascot, a fetish: “I am not what you think/want me to be.” She knows that she remains unacknowledged as the object of symbolic recognition; that she disappears under the signifier of that recognition. As a matter of fact, this is the essential function of the signifier. The signifier with which I am labelled by the Other teaches me to live in ignorance about who I am for the Other and what the Other desires of me (Lacan 1993, pp. 37–38). Stated in more positive terms: the signifier absolves me of forever having to guess the desire of the other. To paraphrase Lacan’s iconic “definition” of the signifier: the signifier never actually represents the recognition that the subject desires for *the subject itself* but always for *another signifier*; therefore, the signifier that would really testify to recognition is ultimately lacking.

Now, we may note that Josephine, when haughtily rejecting any form of symbolic recognition, is at risk of ending up in the imaginary, that is, in a register in which she is even more dependent on her audience. She can only look down on any sign of recognition because she imagines that there is something in her that deserves the *real* recognition of the people, i.e., that this “something” is more or less the ultimate object that the people desire. This “something” is her *voice*, the very voice that she, like all other piping mice, has lost. But is this the imaginary? The imaginary is rather at issue on the previously mentioned scopic level: Josephine’s act dazzles the eyes with its spectacle of surrender. At this level, her lack of consistency is indeed exasperating; while she openly claims that no one understands her art, she clearly relishes the cult of Josephine. Stronger still: wherever she turns up, she immediately demands all the attention.

The sceptics among the mice have every reason to dismiss the image that Josephine poses of a sovereign giving herself over to her art as vain coquetry, as an embarrassing form of narcissism. Her posing is a case of *overexposure*. Josephine turns her singing into a fetish by reducing it to pure self-presentation as a singer that lacks the essential: the song. But on the other hand, the gap between pretention and result is blatantly open. By bringing the signifiers associated with the diva into the fray in such a provocative way, while omitting the singing that these signifiers are supposed to support, Josephine betrays the void within them. She demystifies herself. Her vibrating breastbone, her head thrown back, her half-open mouth—all of this *manifestly* hangs in the air. It is a constellation of openly empty signifiers, that is, of signifiers that only serve to support a decontextualized, stripped of its meaning, and weakened version of the piping that all mice produce daily. These signifiers are offered as centered around a lack. The sovereign surrender by which Josephine wishes to distinguish herself from the “ordinary people” is not only feigned, but is also presented as feigned.

Josephine tends toward the grotesque because she explicitly turns her surrender to her singing into a pose. She is pure, self-reflective appearance. And it is precisely this reflexivity of a pose posing as a pose that enables her to radically give herself to the audience by way of her voice that remains inaudible in her highly articulate self-positing. The narrator says:

Many a time I have had the impression that our people interpret their relationship to Josephine in this way, that she [...] is entrusted to their care and they must look after her; the reason for this is not clear to anyone, only the fact seems to be established. (Kafka 1971, p. 365)

For the people, the circumstance that Josephine is entrusted to them is an inevitable fact because that which is entrusted to them in Josephine's "mere nothing in voice" (ibid., p. 394) remains obscure, namely a *lack*. If Josephine delivered a real singing performance, then she would leave herself open for judgment, assessment, and for possible rejection. But because no articulable meaning (function, usefulness, objective) can be attributed to the claim she makes on her people, the mice cannot avoid this claim, however ridiculous, ludicrous, or irritating it may seem to some of them.

With her terrifying vibrating diaphragm, her head tilted back, her eyes fixed on the heavens, Josephine clearly demonstrates her desire for recognition; she demonstrates it all too clearly, so clearly in fact that she hereby betrays that she is ultimately not seeking this type of recognition. Josephine wants to catch everyone's gaze—so that her audience would hear her lack. For something in her knows that her display is laughable, but not because of what this display is lacking, namely, her voice. Josephine may well have "much to make one laugh [...] but we do not laugh at Josephine" (ibid., pp. 391–92).

No skepticism or mockery can cope with the "nothing" of Josephine's voice. That voice is so penetrating precisely because

it is inaudible, much like someone can feel stared at so intensely because he cannot locate the gaze anywhere within his visual field.²

As a subject, Josephine is a fleeting entity that is eclipsed by the signifiers provided to her by the Other *qua* symbolic order. These signifiers help her feign that she gives herself entirely to her art. Lacan associates the French verbs *séparer* (to separate), *parer* (to fend off), and *se parer* (to show off, to adorn oneself). Josephine shows off with an image of herself. With this farce she fends off her public and also immediately separates herself from *herself* (Lacan 1998, p. 214). Isabelle Huppert once said that, at times when she gets entirely caught up in her performance, she is invisible. At the moment when she appears to give the most of herself, she is no longer there.

As a speaking being, the human finds itself in the register of appearance, feign, fiction. But the fact that the truth, as Lacan says, has the structure of a fiction (Lacan 2006, p. 684) does not mean that truth is always “only” a fiction, as vulgar Nietzscheanism would suggest. The issue is rather that you cannot escape the truth, that is, that fiction, whether you like it or not, is always a way to be open to truth.

Certainly, Josephine’s surrender is mere theatre, it is feigned. And she would be mad if she did not know that. But as an artist, she naturally assumes that there is something truthful about this theatre, and wants to read this truthfulness in the astonished eyes of her audience. By means of her audience, she believes in her masquerade. As Nietzsche says about women: they pretend to give themselves, to which one could add that, through the impression they create on men, they may even start believing in it themselves...

² Jean-Michel Vives draws this analogy that Lacan himself does not between a “blind spot” in the visual field, discussed in Lacan’s eleventh seminar, and a “deaf point” in the sonorous field. See Jean-Michel Vives, “Pulsion invocante et destins de la voix”; available online: <https://docplayer.fr/40424234-Pulsion-invocante-et-destins-de-la-voix.html> (last accessed: March 16, 2019).

But is it so simple? It seems that, for Josephine, the pose of surrender reflects itself and thereby undermines its imaginary function. She feigns that she gives herself, and she is not afraid — with her improbable shaking breastbone, her head thrown back, her mouth half-open — to *admit* that she is feigning. But perhaps she only feigns so flamboyantly so as to hide that she *truly* gives herself. Josephine does something that, according to Lacan, only people can do: they *feign feigning* (Lacan 2006, p. 683; 2014, p. 63).

Josephine can do this because she is a symbolic animal. Each signifier of which a subject avails itself never really shows it as such, but always refers it to another signifier. In this way, all speech contains an element of feigning. The subject feigns, whether it knows it or not, whether it wishes to or not. The feigning is *objective*. No subject can avoid this feigning because it has no existence outside of all the deceptive signifiers in which it hides. When she emerges as a singer, Josephine yields radically to this feigning, that is, to how she appears to her audience. This is what is so lovely about her, and this is why she is worthy of her audience's admiration: by yielding to her spectacle without any reservation or irony, she breaks through the illusion that she is hiding "behind" her spectacle. In other words: she can only commit herself so totally to her feigning because she knows that this feigning is feigned. Josephine never exposes herself more than in the spectacle in which she hides.

Josephine's show seduces her audience. She teases them; she puts them, as people say *ad nauseam* about artists, "on the wrong track." She plays a game of withdrawing and approaching. She presents herself as an enticing as well as elusive Object, in short: as a cliché of feminine mystery. In this way she keeps her audience's desire alive. But the pose with which Josephine offers herself to them as a mysterious Object is so exaggerated that it is clearly but a screen she uses so as to hide the fact that she *really* offers herself to them as a passive object, powerless, speechless, "laid bare, abandoned, committed merely to the care of good

angels.” For her, the pathetic, anything but powerless display of powerlessness, whereby she feigns that all her force is not enough to produce simple piping, is pretense, diversion—displayed, first and foremost, *for herself*—by which to effectively offer herself to her audience as a powerless object. And this object is her voice. Feigning that she only feigns exposing herself, she literally exposes herself with her voice, which is a glaring lack of voice. This “frail little voice” *embodies*—that is: provides a kind of ghostly substance to—the empty hole around which Josephine’s coquettish comedy of gestures and facial expressions turns. Identified with a voice that is buried under all the expressible and singable words, Josephine is not an object that maintains the desire of her audience but an object to be *consumed*, an object of *enjoyment*.

Each subject inscribes itself into the field of the signifiers as absent. As mentioned earlier, it enables itself to be recognized therein without being known. That is why all recognition has something false about it, something feigned. This division between recognition and knowledge is “resolved” in the fantasy. In the fantasy, I portray myself as the Other’s ideal object. Accordingly, I am not somebody because I am recognized, but I become “recognized,” or better: *enjoyed* for what I really am.

On the one hand, Josephine appreciates that she is recognized as a singer, and she knows very well the tricks by which to consolidate that recognition; however, on the other hand, she works against that recognition by piping in a barely audible manner, for she wishes to be recognized beyond any signifier that she can communicate. Thus, Josephine wants to be recognized as a *subject*, i.e., as what is lost within the fabric of signifiers. In other words: Josephine does not want to be recognized for what she says (as the subject of the statement), but as the one who is always outside itself in what is being said (the subject of enunciation). And her voice, precisely because she evokes it visually rather than audibly, embodies this “outside itself.” It is a fantasmatic object. It gives density to the empty subject of the signifier. Identified

with this voice, Josephine does not so much play with signifiers that keep the desire of the Other alive, but rather *satisfies* and thus *kills* that desire.

But in the meantime, we understand that Josephine is far from crazy. This satisfaction, which would reduce her to an object of enjoyment, is a purely unconscious-fantasmatic given that she in no way would like to see realized. Far from being a passive and speechless object, Josephine is very active and eloquent. Specifically, she knows very well how to juggle signifiers. With her arms spread wide, her neck stretched high, and her mouth half-open, she weaves as it were an “Apollonian veil” across her fantasy. She externalizes, theatricalizes this fantasy to protect herself against the frighteningly intense enjoyment that is attached to it. She feigns giving herself “totally” to her audience in order to protect herself against her actual desire of being swallowed up by that audience.

A striking, more frustrating contradiction in Josephine’s attitude should also be understood in this same sense. Although she is absolutely convinced that nobody is truly receptive to her art, “what she wants is public, unambiguous, permanent recognition of her art” (Kafka 1971, p. 399). Josephine demands that the community formally recognizes her vital contribution to it. This demand is, of course, dubious. Why must the people officially recognize an artist they don’t understand, and who even makes it a point of honor not to be understood? The explanation that in the absence of authentic receptivity to her art Josephine is simply satisfied with an official tribute, is much too obvious. Although certainly deriving narcissistic satisfaction from the institutionalized Josephine-cult, what she mainly appreciates about this cult is that the community places her at a distance, allocates her a separate scene that ensures that the excess of her surrender remains but a spectacle, safely enclosed within the social field, legal and therefore an eccentricity neutralized in advance. As long as her people harbor an impersonal respect for her, her performance will not cause any ecstatic immersion. In short: to the extent that she is

certain of being *symbolically recognized* by the Other, she is not threatened by the fantasy of being *really enjoyed* by the Other.

Ultimately, Josephine doesn't fall under the spell of her fantasy because she dares to stage it. For her, the self-objectification typical of fantasy, i.e., the reduction of oneself to an object for the satisfaction of an imaginary other, is only a game played with signifiers of the symbolic Other. Josephine does not offer herself as the ideal voice-object that must satisfy the other's desire, but rather gives to the constellation of signifiers the nature of an object by way of centering them around an absent voice. She gives the signifiers that the community has provided to her (and thereby to itself) back to the community as empty shells deprived of the alibi of their meaning. This makes her "hermetic" singing radically social: she places the responsibility for its meaning entirely in the hands of her audience.

But how is it that Josephine succeeds with such a bogus staging of her infantile fantasy? According to the narrator, for the mice Josephine's performance is an opportunity for intense togetherness, allowing the individual to "relax and stretch himself at ease in the great, warm bed of the community" (Kafka 1971, p. 396). A performance by Josephine "is not so much a performance of songs as an assembly of the people" (ibid., p. 393). It reinforces social cohesion. It is "community building." It sounds like a "message from the whole people to each individual" (ibid., p. 394). Paradoxically, this message is generated by a rather asocial individual who is somewhat condescending to the people, convinced that no one understands her message. The intelligent narrator even candidly suggests that Josephine's breathless piping increases the intensity of the togetherness to the extent that the audience pay it little or no attention. Those who would concentrate on it would have to realize that it is worthless and feel a kind of embarrassment by proxy.

How is it that the "message from the whole people to each individual," the message that best serves to merge individuals into a community, is not performed by a full, sonorous, healthy

voice? This is because Josephine insidiously betrays the secret of the community, of how individuals are *called* to communality.

Each individual is a social being; as such, it is a human being by means of an appeal issued by the community. This appeal is originally a puzzling interpellation. At a fundamental level, the individual does not know what the community desires of them. The small child is pulled into it by being bombarded with signifiers from which they can only deduce *that* something is desired of them. The question of what is desired of them is therefore the first question the child asks, and is more originary than the question “Who am I?” The fantasy is a response to this question. In it, the child imagines itself to be the answer to that question. To avert the fear that arises from the child’s ignorance of what is desired of him or her, he or she postulates him or herself as the exclusive object of that desire. The—rather masochistic—logic here is: “It doesn’t matter what the other desires as long as it desires it from me.”

In addition to the gaze, the *voice* of the other may assume a central place in the fantasy. The other’s voice convinces the subject of being the other’s privileged object. This is strange, since the voice is precisely the point in the other where its desire is most enigmatic. But it is also logical, since all the other signifiers that the other directs toward the subject refer to worldly affairs outside the child, toward which the desires of the other are also apparently directed. These signifiers produce an always unpredictable meaning that never exclusively concerns the child itself, and that is why the child binds itself to something eminently meaningless: the voice, the voice that is purely and only voice, the voice that speaks to the child without saying anything meaningful. This voice, in so far as the child hears it say that it has been chosen, is actually fantasmatic and therefore never an empirical given.

By way of fantasy, the subject protects itself not only against its ignorance concerning the desire of the other, but also against the ignorance of the other itself. Because the other can a priori

only make its desire identifiable through signifiers that refer to one another, what the other desires from the subject always remains hidden beneath what it explicitly asks. Therefore, the other's desire is a mystery for the other. When the subject believes it can discern from the voice of the other that it is itself the object of the other's desire, it thereby conceals not only its own ineluctable lack, but also that of the other.

According to Darian Leader, the small child does not just babble to itself in order to learn to speak, but rather *to fend off* all of those voices that constantly speak to it. This is a "premature incorporation" to defuse the anxiety generated by the enigmatic claim that others continually make of it. Its babbling enables the child to appropriate these coercive voices.³ To do this, it must first and foremost drown out these voices. It must become deaf to them⁴ because they too strongly arouse in him the fantasy of being the submissive object of the other. Its babbling, which may also be a soft humming, is therefore an attempt to no longer simply be the object, but also to become the subject of a voice. Is Josephine's "frail little voice" not an extension of this childish infantile babbling? And if so, in what sense?

Lacan notes that small children babble while playing their solitary games, and that they immediately cease babbling once an adult enters (Lacan 2014, pp. 273–74). Whereas children babble "to themselves," Josephine babbles for everyone, as it were. Both babble to evade interpellation by others. It is as if people first and foremost speak so as not to hear. But not hearing is impossible. Like Kant before him, Lacan notes that, in contrast to the eye, people cannot close their ears. The paradox is that those who do not wish

³ Leader 2006, pp. 8–9. Lacan says: "A voice, therefore, is not assimilated, but incorporated" (Lacan 2014, p. 277). This means that the voice remains a *Fremdkörper*, a "foreign element."

⁴ See, once more, Jean-Michel Vives, "Pulsion invocante et destins de la voix"; available online: <https://docplayer.fr/40424234-Pulsion-invocante-et-destins-de-la-voix.html> (last accessed: March 16, 2019).

to hear anything from the other only hear the other's voice. It is therefore better to listen to what the other has to say in order not to hear its voice, which is so compelling in its meaninglessness.

While the babbling child searches for the meaning of the signifying material with which it is bombarded, Josephine empties this material of its meaning. She lets it be heard as that to which she has turned a deaf ear—therefore retaining only the voice. Tired and prickly in respect to the claim that the community of mice continuously makes on her, and to the unsolicited responsibility heaped upon her, all she retains from that material is the meaningless, haunting voice that sounds inaudibly within it. She thus permits herself to reduce all signifiers to silent witnesses of the inaudible voice, buried by meaning by which the people lay claim to her.

All that Josephine's solemn piping retains of mouse-piping is the silent, originary violence of interpellation, imperative in its meaninglessness. Like Marcel Duchamp, who placed a urinal on a pedestal, thus stripping it of its function, so Josephine presents on the stage a fragment, a strange condensation of everyday piping stripped of all contextually determined content.

As the voice of the people, Josephine's voice is simultaneously weak and compelling. The people do not exist without mice that respond to its call. It remains unclear what is understood by "the people," what holds it together as a people, what "the people" means. From what the narrator tells us, we understand that the mice people have no "master signifiers" (Lacan) that would provide their piping with a semblance of a foundation, or substantial anchoring. In the absence of such a master signifier, there is only that strange, capricious, spoiled singer, piping in the name of the people. Her "message from the whole people to each individual" does not provide each individual with "the people" as something that is grounded in God, Nature, a mythical Past, a Soul of the people, or in some other pre-symbolic substance. On the contrary: Josephine gives, she reveals to each individual

its people as an irreparable lack-of-being. The bluff whereby she commands attention for her “frail little voice” is a rather grotesque parody of the way that each mouse appeals every day from out of its desire to exist.

To the extent that Josephine embodies the lack, i.e., the eternal becoming of the community, she knows nothing and in principle wants to know nothing of the meaning, the usefulness or the importance of her message, since each meaning, use or importance attached to it would cover up the meaninglessness of the voice.

According to the narrator, when Josephine’s voice is replete with “small gaieties, unaccountable and yet springing up and not to be obliterated” (Kafka 1971, p. 397) that typify the mouse-folk, it indicates *enjoyment*. This enjoyment derives from the relief of any concern for self-preservation or certainty. Still, it is too easy to say that Josephine herself enjoys. Rather, she returns to her people the signifiers—restored to their original, enjoyment-soaked mysteriousness—with which it has bombarded her since she was a child. In that respect, her art, understood as a gift to her people, seems for Josephine a strategy of ridding oneself of this interpellation.⁵

Does Josephine, as I’ve argued, place the responsibility for the interpretation of her art entirely on her audience? This is too strong a claim. It would suggest that Josephine’s singing is a question addressed to the audience for which the latter owes an answer. Anyway, the audience realizes that the recognition officially given to Josephine does not compensate for its lack of understanding. But does the audience think that it still owes her “real” understanding?

Lacan often connects the voice to Freud’s concept of a severe, accusatory superego, i.e., an authority that is not satisfied with any repayment of debt. When Josephine displays the community’s

⁵ This idea draws upon Derrida’s claim that the essence of art was never reproduction (representation), but *restitution* (see Derrida 1993).

claim on each individual in its naked meaninglessness, she seems to be a representative of this superego. But nothing could be further from the truth. Josephine relieves her audience of all responsibility because she already responds to the claim that the community makes on each individual. This response is strange. It is a doubling, a ludicrous echo of the voice that calls her from the community. Josephine is not concerned with wondering about what the community asks of everyone. Gloriously irresponsible, she lets this question resonate in the void like a question that does not know what it is asking.

Lost in her own mousey piping, Josephine's voice returns to her as a strange echo, buried under the signifiers, none of which guarantee that she speaks through them. The only guarantee that she has is fantasmatic. Josephine imagines her own voice somewhere *between* the signifiers she has lost her voice in; she imagines it where the endless sliding from one signifier to the other skips or hesitates. It is precisely in the silence within the piping that Josephine imagines the voice as that which *supports* this incomprehensible sliding.⁶

The voice as the fantasmatic object *a* is, according to Lacan, actually silent (2014, p. 276). Just as the gaze can look at me from anywhere except from someone's eyes, so I "hear" the voice issue from no mouth. In this way, a shift is always possible from the visual to the aural and *vice versa*. Just as the gaze can look at me from a rustling in the room,⁷ the voice can speak to me from the strange, mute gestures and faces of others—gestures that I have muted by cutting away the voice. Thus, the voice as an object is never a phenomenon. It is the product of a cutting away, which is an abstraction.

⁶ "It's this passage from one [signifier] to the next that constitutes the essential feature of what I call the signifying chain. // This passage, insofar as it's evanescent, is the very thing that becomes voice—[...] it's the voice that sustains this passage." (Lacan 2017, pp. 322–23)

⁷ An example that Lacan takes from Sartre: Lacan 1998, p. 84.

Essential for the fantasmatic object is that it only supports our identity insofar as it remains hidden, “silently presumed.” If it unveils itself, then it turns out to be a strange, ghostly entity that—disconnected from any individual—calls from the void. Everyday chatter drowns out the voice. Singing, by bringing words to the edge of meaninglessness, seems to reveal the voice, but it also protects it against such disclosure. Singing only evokes the voice in order to exorcise it (Dolar 1996, p. 10).⁸

If Josephine demands attention for a singing that does not sing, that does not even pipe, does she want to express the voice itself? The voice “itself”—that would be the pure emptiness of a lack, in which case Josephine would assign to the people its pure lack of ground. She would have evoked anxiety—which she does not do. Josephine *symbolizes* the lack of ground. She evokes the voice, buried under the “meaningful” faces and gestures accompanying her singing, as that from which any meaningful expression has been removed and is hovering somewhere, unspoken and unsung.

Josephine pipes from out of a type of gap she has created within the common piping; she pipes from out of the point in that piping to which she has turned a deaf ear because she was too exposed to it, unarmed against it, with no answer. She pipes from within the people itself as someone who gets lost in their piping and therefore can in no way guarantee its meaning. She pipes as somebody that is nobody. When she opens her mouth half-way, when she purses her lips, throws her head back, without thereby generating but ordinary piping, she openly conceals the nothing from within which the people pipe to her.⁹

It is no wonder that the sober narrator’s astonishment regarding the fact that there is a place in the mouse community for

⁸ According to Jean-Michel Vives, if Lacan calls painting a “*dompte-regard*” (Lacan 1998, pp. 105, 109, 111), singing is a “*dompte-voix*.”

⁹ The voice “resonates in a void that is the void of the Other as such, properly speaking *ex-nihilo*” (Lacan 2014, p. 275).

something like Josephine is colored by the presumption of her uselessness. Like everyone who is called by their people, Josephine is indeed the one who is unable to translate this call into a clearly defined task or function; in a kind of helpless dismay, the philosophical astonishment at which is perhaps a kind of mitigating concealment, she pauses before the enigma of being interpellated by the other. In this sense, she belongs to those that Nietzsche addresses as the “superfluous,” *Überschüssigen* (1988, pp. 664–65).

“Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk.” As “superfluous,” as an eccentric exception, atypical for the people and, moreover, a transitory phenomenon, Josephine *is* the mouse-folk. She embodies the enigmatic, groundless and enjoyment-soaked message from the whole people to each individual. Nothing makes the mice cling together as a people like Josephine’s “fragile little voice,” which enables them to hear that there is no pre-given ground or reason to sticking together. It is apparently the strange privilege of art to give a positive and gentle form to the groundlessness of our togetherness. This is the luxury of its irresponsibility. But particularly essential is the paradoxical need for such a luxury. Art is evidently necessary because the lack of ground cannot be assumed as such, or better: the negativity of this lack, and the corresponding enjoyment, can apparently only be assimilated if they are *embodied*, i.e., if they adopt the positivity of, for instance, a singing body. This lack, conceptualized by Lacan as the “lack in the Other,” can only appear as a fascinating *Fremdkörper*, fundamentally unintegratable into the daily discourse in which everyone is supposed to guarantee the meaning of what is said, and may therefore be held responsible for it. Therefore, the popular utopia of the fusion between art and life is false. There is such a thing as art because there is something to life that remains forever intolerable, irreconcilable with life as it is “normally” lived.

Death Given Away

What is ultimately the relationship between Josephine and death? Hegel very speculatively employs the fatally injured animal as a *missing link* between purely biological and linguistic life. In its death cry, the animal, unmediated by language, finds a voice for its own disappearance. Man has lost this voice because language has cut him off from the living body with which he could express his death. In this sense, as Blanchot never tired of saying, language always turns death into something that has always already happened; and therefore it is impossible to die. Hence the recourse to fantasy: in fantasy, the subject still coincides with a voice that testifies to its death, thus enabling the subject to survive it.

In Lacan we read:

The first object he [the subject] proposes for this parental desire whose object is unknown is his own loss—*Can he lose me?* The phantasy of one's death, of one's disappearance, is the first object that the subject has to bring into play in this dialectic [...]. (Lacan 1998, p. 214)

Intimidated by the desire whose object is unknown to it, the subject offers itself as object. But since no specific attribute of the subject guarantees for the satisfaction of the Other, the only “object” that can do this is an object that transcends every attribute: the radical negation of all of the attributes of the subject, its disappearance. In a Hegelian “struggle for pure prestige,” the subject challenges the other with his disappearance, imagining that the other will experience this as an insurmountable lack. The subject thus not only presents to the other its disappearance; it also puts itself in the place of the other, from where it contemplates itself in its disappearance. It indeed sees itself as “the life that brings on death and is maintained in death.” The Hegelian subject that overcomes the absolute negativity of death by facing up to it is thus the subject of the unconscious fantasy.

In connection with the subject who offers its own disappearance as an object, Lacan uses, but does not further explain, the example of mental anorexia. Josephine seems to be an example of mental *aphasia*, although it is not real, certainly not that real that she could not perform it on the stage in front of an audience. Contrary to this, in his or her delusion of independence the anorexic has no audience. He or she does not know that by trying to realize a condition of total purity and intactness through starvation he or she challenges the Other with his or her virtual disappearance. An anorexic's relationship with the audience is unconscious, speechless. If they would make a spectacle of their hunger, they would end up in the paradox of Kafka's hunger artist (see "A Hunger Artist" in Kafka 1971). In order to invalidate all suspicion of deceit, the hunger artist absolutely wishes for his audience to believe that he really is starving. And he does this also because he really has an aversion to food. If his audience came to know this, it would realize that his starving has no artistic value.

The hunger artist *feigns feigning*. He presents his starvation as an art in order to hide from his audience the fact that his pain is real, as it is only pleasure. It seems that Josephine also feigned feigning. She too eloquently acts as if she is speechless, thereby hiding (first and foremost from *herself*) the fact that she is really speechless. However, in contrast to the hunger artist, who entrenches himself in an illusion of authenticity, Josephine is fully committed to her feigning. This commitment implies a moment of *disinterestedness*: Josephine can only immerse herself so intensively in her show because she is indifferent to the question of the extent to which she is really present in it—while for the hunger artist, of course, this is the essential question. Josephine only *unconsciously* believes that her speechlessness is real: she only believes it at the level of fantasy.

Josephine is in the throes of her fantasy in so far as she is convinced that her people are deaf to her singing and that she therefore sings for a mysterious Other that is actually receptive to it. This Other *believes* in her; it believes that she is only feigning

her speechlessness because she, in a hidden layer of her being, really is speechless—as speechless as the animal that, overwhelmed by death, has a voice only once. The hesitation in her voice expresses in the ear of this fantasized Other her speechless dismay toward death. But such a fantasy now seals precisely the loss, the expropriation of her voice: Josephine’s voice now only sounds through the ear of an imaginary other.

On the imaginary level, Josephine is certainly vain, and she tells her people something like: “Your much too practical pipe-speak leaves me with no voice for my speechlessness in the face of death, and so I pipe speechlessly to someone other than you.” On the symbolic level she says: “Only by piping in our pipe-speak am I, together with you, speechless, and my entire show is a demonstration of this.”

Josephine’s fragile little voice therefore sounds particularly impure. She “makes a ceremonial performance out of performing the usual thing” (Kafka 1971, p. 388). We know that this “usual thing” is a decontextualized and weak version of the busy piping by which the mice avoid death and in which they get lost. While the mice are usually immersed in the meaning of what they pipe, in Josephine they hear the forlornness of their piping. This forlornness is indeed the secret of their curious cheerfulness, of the fundamental lack of seriousness with which they transcend their utilitarianism.

The Other that would hear Josephine’s lost voice, the Other in which she would “maintain” her death, is a mirage, and so her voice is irretrievably lost, an unlocalizable drifting voice that belongs to and is intended for no one. In other words, it is only designated for the people that are deaf to it. But like the child who turns a deaf ear to the interpellation of others in order to “incorporate” it, the deafness of the people is a form of receptiveness. This occurs precisely when the mice no longer even try to garnish something from her voice, but “are quite withdrawn into themselves” and dream away, while “into these dreams Josephine’s piping drops note by note” (ibid., p. 396). It is precisely when Josephine is *barely there for them anymore*, that her voice interpellates them from a

source that is everywhere and nowhere, like a “message from the whole people to each individual.” Only then does Josephine’s voice visit them in and through her absence. In this way, Josephine has relinquished her voice, and her death along with it.

Because of this gap between the mice’s rather poor experience of Josephine’s performances and the uncanny effect that her voice has on them; because the mice do not understand how Josephine’s voice touches them, they may suspect that they are witnessing a communication that transcends them. In that sense they are fascinated by Josephine because they believe that she first and foremost addresses a superior, unknown Other, much like the priest who, turning away from the believers, addresses incomprehensible prayers to God. The modest narrator seems to believe in this ideal listener by going along with Josephine’s conviction that nobody can assess the value of her singing, thereby suggesting that there must be someone that recognizes its value.

For the mice, such a faceless Someone would serve as a kind of minimal religious compensation for their lack, namely for their lack of genuine receptivity to the enigmatic claim that Josephine makes on them in the name of the community. Because they only hear Josephine’s voice without knowing it, because in this way their receptiveness to her voice is conditioned by a primary *un*receptiveness, they imagine an Other that would be perfectly receptive to Josephine’s voice.

But all in all, there is little to suggest that the mouse-folk are religious. Ultimately, the mysterious Other for whom Josephine goes to such great lengths can only be the people themselves. The narrator suggests this when melancholically musing about the time when Josephine will no longer be there:

[H]ow can our gatherings take place in utter silence? Still, were they not silent even when Josephine was present? Was her actual piping notably louder and more alive than the memory of it will be? Was it even in her lifetime more than a simple memory? Was it not rather because Josephine’s singing was already past losing

in this way that our people in their wisdom prized it so highly?
(Kafka 1971, p. 403)

Josephine's piping is so weak that it anticipates the silence that will prevail once she is no longer there, as if she wants it to be heard that her voice is already *sublated* (negated and preserved) in what her people gather from it. Thus, she pipes her voice as if the future in which she and that voice will be no more has already arrived, as if her death will therefore make no difference. She pipes her voice as it will be remembered, that is to say *forgotten*, by an Other that is radically unknown to her and to itself: her people. Josephine is the disposable, actually already disposed of bearer of a piping that is already there only for the people. That is why the mice value her singing so highly: it is a pure gift to her people. This gift is a *restitution* of something she never possessed. Namely, she gives to her people the gift of a voice for the death that she never had because it was always already lost in the ordinary piping of the people. Something in her may then fantasize that someone somewhere eternalizes her voice; but her whispering pipe is a type of condensation of the way the people, for whom each death is a vague reminder already before it even occurred, cheerfully pipe all death away in desperation.

As we know from Hegel and Heidegger, the ability to anticipate one's own death/absence is what is human about mankind. There is, however, something futile about such anticipation, but also something uncannily *frivolous*: in advance, I have placed my death in the hands of others. My death is no point from which I appear as true and indispensable. It is never mine, but that of the erratic, superficial, *cheerful* others who I myself am, of the others for whom there is no remembrance without forgetting. With her arms spread wide, her neck stretched to the extreme, her eyes turned upwards, her lips pursed, Josephine has already given herself entirely to those others, and thus to oblivion, "committed merely to the care of good angels."

Bibliography

- Agamben, Giorgio (1991) *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen E. Pinkus with Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
- Bataille, Georges (1990) "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice," trans. Jonathan Strauss, *Yale French Studies* 78:9–28.
- Derrida, Jacques (1993) *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press).
- Dolar, Mladen (1996) "The Object Voice," *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, 7–31, ed. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (Durham & London: Duke University Press).
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1967) *Jenaer Realphilosophie. Vorlesungsmanuskripte zur Philosophie der Natur und des Geistes von 1805–1806* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner).
- (1977) *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Kafka, Franz (1971) *The Complete Stories* (New York: Schocken Books).
- Lacan, Jacques (1991) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953–1954*, trans. John Forrester, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W. W. Norton & Company).
- (1993) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses, 1955–1956*, trans. Russell Grigg, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W. W. Norton & Company).
- (1998) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1964*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W. W. Norton & Company).
- (2006) "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious," *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 671–702, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company).
- (2014) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X: Anxiety, 1962–1963*, trans. A. R. Price, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Cambridge, UK & Malden, MA: Polity Press).

- (2017) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book V: Formations of the Unconscious, 1957–1958*, trans. Russell Grigg, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Cambridge, UK & Malden, MA: Polity Press).
- Leader, Darian (2006) “La voix en tant qu’objet psychanalytique,” *Savoirs et clinique* 7:151–61.
- Mannoni, Octave (2003) “I Know Well, but All the Same...,” trans. G. M. Goshgarian, *Perversion and the Social Relation*, 68–92, ed. Molly Anne Rothenberg, Denis Foster, and Slavoj Žižek (Durham & London: Duke University Press).
- Nietzsche, Friedrich (1988) *Kritische Studienausgabe, Band 9: Nachgelassene Fragmente, 1880–1882*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin & New York: de Gruyter).
- Žižek Slavoj (1996) *The Indivisible Remainder* (London & New York: Verso).
- (2012) *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London & New York: Verso).

This Beast is Complex: Imposture and Plato's *Sophist*

Alexi Kukuljevic

Like one beginning to rouse himself from a dose of chloroform treacherously given, he half divines, too, that he, the philosopher, had unwittingly been betrayed into being an unphilosophical dupe. To what vicissitudes of light and shade is man subject! (Melville 1971, p. 112)

There are posers and there are imposters. The imposter is more insidious, more dangerous, than what we colloquially term a poser. Whereas the poser apes the manner, style, or presence of something, he nonetheless desires to be the thing that he can only appear to be. The poser's lack of *technē* ("know-how," "skill," "art") makes his identification and expulsion integral to the technician's on-going refinement and purification of their knowledge, of their craft. Although the poser's pose is merely an appearance, his confusion of the thing itself with the signs of its presence makes him vulnerable. The poser's vulnerability lies in his desire to be *something*. Far from a threat, the poser's identity constantly attests to its deficiency, the inconsistency of its presence, which exposes a lack that serves to reinforce the possessor of knowledge, who is, in turn, tasked with either emendating or castigating the poser's pose, sifting the difference between pose and posture. The radicality of imposture, on the contrary, concerns the danger of one who knows that she does not desire what the other has or possesses, does not desire the

other's knowledge. Far more pernicious, the imposter cannot be corrected, since her truth lies in upsetting the measure by which one determines the difference between the correct and false. Her truth is otherwise than correct. If the *poseur* is one who desires to belong, the imposter belongs without belonging, an outsider inside. The imposter, to borrow Heidegger's apt formula for the sophist, is "the walking incarnation of μή ὄν [*mē on*: non-being]" (Heidegger 1997, p. 279).

*

Plato's *Sophist* is perhaps the first treatise on imposture, the sophist the paradigmatic figure of the imposter. The sophist cannot simply be reduced to the dialectic between pose and posture, which is nevertheless how Plato often seeks to position him. The sophist's ridiculous character (*katagélastos*), according to Plato, consists not merely in the fact that he presumes to know what he in fact does not, but that he poses as an educator who sells what he does not *in truth* possess. As Socrates puts it in the *Protagoras*, "the sophist is a kind of merchant [*emporos*] or huckster [*kapēlos*] of wares by which the soul is fed" who peddles "knowledge to whomever desires it" and who praises "everything they sell" regardless of whether it is "good or bad for the soul" (Plato 1977, 313c–e; quoted in Hénaff 2010, p. 41). The "money-making kind [*khre̐matistikòn génos*]" seems to be his most salient feature. As a "merchant of knowledge," to cite Marcel Hénaff, if the sophist sells something which he in fact knows little about, if he does not truly possess "knowledge of wise things [*sophōn epistēmōna*]," if he does not know what virtue (*aretē*) is, then his claim to educate the human being (*paidein anthrōpous*) in such matters is fraudulent: "if there is a payment but no transmission of *aretē*, then the Sophist really is a faker and an illusionist, or even worse, a cheat" (Hénaff 2010, p. 40). The claim is not simply that the sophist does not know that he does not know (in contradistinction to Socrates's knowledge of his own ignorance) but that he *knowingly* deceives.

The sophist may not know what he nonetheless claims to teach, but he may in fact know that he does not know, making him Socrates's villainous double. "And so is a wolf like a dog—the wildest lie the tamest" (Plato 1996, 231a).

Sophistry would then not be the activity of a "mindless soul," a form of "mental derangement [*paraphrosynē*]" due to ignorance (ibid., 228d). It would be a "sickness of soul" closer to "villainy [*ponēria*]." Sophistical practice would then imply a certain knowledge of deceit, of trickery (*apatē*). And its practice would entail a knowledge of falsity (*pseudos*). Sophistry would be the inheritor of *mētis*, a form of cunning intelligence.¹ Sophists would be teachers of this dark art. They would be experts precisely in the art of corrupting the soul of those they taught, youth and elderly alike. If such is the case, the sophist is not one who falls prey to contradiction, who gets "tripped up in thought" by having an "opinion that one know something while not really knowing it" (ibid., 229c), but one who apprehends and mobilizes it albeit for nefarious purposes, for making the weaker argument triumph over the stronger, for callous cash payment.² The sophist argues fallaciously, which is not only to say that he says something false, but that he does so in order to deceive.³ If such is the case, then the sophist's pose becomes imposture.

A fraud, a sham, *ein Hochstapler*, or what Herman Melville terms a "confidence-man": an imposter is not merely one who

¹ Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant position the sophist as a kind of meeting point between "traditional *mētis*" and "the new intelligence of the philosophers" (Detienne and Vernant 1978, p. 4).

² Commenting on this character of sophistry, Marcel Detienne notes, "This is a level of thought that comprehends contradiction, even though the principle of contradiction was not actually formulated until Aristotle produced his theory of contradiction and drew the logical conclusions from it." (Detienne 1999, p. 203, n. 63)

³ "But starting with Plato and then with Aristotle, sophistical thought would be devoted to sophistry, in the sense of fallacious reasoning, in other words, reasoning that is not only false but also intentionally deceptive." (Casin 2014, p. 1007)

appears to be something one is not (a poser), but one who appears not to be something without the other's deceit. Deceit is the sophist's *ousia*, "beinghood." Yet, this requires trust: the kind of trust that Odysseus capitalizes on when he tells Polyphemos, the Cyclops, that his name is *Outis*, "no-one";⁴ and the kind of trust guaranteed by *Zeus xénios*, i.e., Zeus, the patron god of strangers.⁵ The confidence-man is defined not by the "con," which names the dupe, i.e., the one conned, but by the act by which the con's *confidence* is traded upon. And even a man-eater has his vulnerabilities. Polyphemos trusts in the name, in the fact that the name names something, and it is this very fact that Odysseus turns to his advantage. The imposter's imposture trades upon the pose of the poser, capitalizing on the latter's desire to be (something), not in order to expose the difference between the appearance and what the appearance is an appearance of, but in order to capitalize on that lack of being.⁶ Otherwise than being, not a one, the sophist is what the Stranger from Elea, in Plato's *Sophist*, terms an imitator, a *mimētēs*, which Jakob Klein for instance, on at least one occasion, translates as imposter (Klein 1977, p. 30).

⁴ Odysseus's cunning consists in playing on the *logos* as *légein tí*, so that when Polyphemos is asked, "Is someone [mē tis] killing you by ruse or by force," he responds, "My friends, no one is killing me [Outis me kteinei]." As Pietro Pucci points out, the passage plays on two forms in which the negative is formed in Greek: *ou* or *ouk*, a factual negation, and *mē*, a prohibitive or subjective negation. Thus, he suggests that *mētis* is a compound of *mē* (negative particle) and *tis*, "someone," which makes Odysseus's "finest plan" a dramatization of *mētis*, that is, "cunning," "intelligence." See Box 1 under the entry "Mētis" in Cassin 2014, p. 658.

⁵ It is thus of central importance that the Socratic figure of the dialogue—a dialogue concerned above all with matters of language and naming, and their referents—remains nameless, a *xénos*, "Stranger," that counts on our trust as to his identity. "*Xenos* means both guest and host, that is, any of two parties bound by ties of hospitality" (see "Glossary" in Plato 1996, p. 86).

⁶ On this score, the comparison between Melville's *The Confidence-Man* and Plato's *Sophist* seems particularly apt, since the former's novel takes particular aim at the "liberal's" desire to appear good, to appear human, more than be good or human.

The word “imposture,” which names the manner, way, or mode of the imposter, derives from the Latin, *imponere*: *im* (“into,” “in,” “on,” “upon”) and *ponere* (“to put” or “to place”). Imposture is “in the place of” and thus is related to position, positing, and imposition. The imposter posits or positions him or herself in the place of the other and the other is thereby placed in the position of his or her absence. The imposter singularly attests to the paradoxical existence of non-being. If we are to attribute being to the sophist, which we do by the force of the *logos*, when saying that he exists, that he *is* of such and such a character, then we risk attributing being to non-being. We threaten being’s *proprietary* relation to itself. The existence of the sophist, of imposture, imposes on the philosopher, on the student of Parmenides, and on thought as such, an inconsistent logic—what Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe calls a “law of impropriety”⁷—in which being would appear to exclude itself from being.⁸ It would not belong to itself, attributable to that which it is not. The imposter is both a permanent threat to the *logos*’s inscription in and of being, a threat to the meaning of being, imperiling the assumption that when we speak we are indeed saying something (*légein ti*). As the Eleatic Stranger says, “Whenever there is speech, it’s necessary that it be speech about something [*légein ti*], and impossible for it not to be about anything” (Plato 1996, 262e). This threat becomes the eminent occasion for philosophizing, summoning it to think

⁷ In “Diderot: Paradox and Mimesis,” Lacoue-Labarthe writes: “only the ‘man without qualities,’ the being without properties or specificity, the subject-less subject (absent from himself, distracted from himself, deprived of self) is able to present or produce in general. Plato, in his way, knew this very well: the mimeticians are the worst possible breed because they are no one, pure mask or pure hypocrisy, and as such unassignable, unidentifiable, impossible to place in a determined class or to fix in a function that would be proper to them and would find its place in a just distribution of tasks” (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, p. 259).

⁸ See for example formulations such as “then it turns out that Being lacks itself” and “so, according to this account, Being, since it is deprived of itself, will be not-being [*ouk òn*]” (Plato 1996, 245c).

what sense the imposter's non-sensical apparition might have. As Heidegger notes, the Stranger's determination of the *logos* as "speech about something" "sustains the whole discussion," and, yet, "[a]s long as we actually adhere to this structure, we cannot touch the sophist with any argument, and indeed not only because no arguments can be proffered against him but because it is not even possible to begin to speak about him" (Heidegger 1997, p. 293). To begin to speak of him entails that one either says too little, which is to say, nothing at all, or too much, in the effort to track and pin down the proliferation of identities that the hunt itself seems to engender. This makes the sophist a "wondrous object" (Plato 1996, 225e), a truly complex beast.

It is the multiple guises of the "many-headed sophist" (*ibid.*, 240c), the many masks of the imitator, the imposter's lack of a stable identity, that makes this figure so slippery, so difficult to hunt down and so resistant to conceptual determination.⁹ The sophist confronts philosophical thought with an unbounded multiplicity. The very being of the sophist appears to be not one but many. However, the peculiar fact that this manifold bears the name of single expertise, sophistry, signals this being's unsoundness, his villainy: "villainy is sedition and sickness of soul" (*ibid.*, 228b).

⁹ The dialogue is staged as a game between the hunter and the hunted, between a master at evasion (debate) and a master at identification (method of division). The sophist is conceived as a "beast" that disguises its identity, evading capture, through the multiplication of his identity. The Stranger's attempt to pin the sophist down (to adopt his own wrestling metaphor) through the method of division yields a creature with "many-heads." He appears as "a paid hunter of the young and the rich," a "trader" and a "peddler" of "soul-related learnables," a "self-seller of learnables," an expert in polemical argument, and even "a soul-related cleanser of opinions that impede learning" (*ibid.*, 231d–e). Commenting on Theaetetus's exasperation, his being at an impasse, at the sophist appearing to be "so many things," the Stranger states: "Your being at an impasse is likely enough. But then we must consider that he too is by now totally at an impasse about how he'll continue to slip through our account. For the wrestler's proverb is right: 'Not easy to escape all the holds'" (*ibid.*, 231c).

Although the sophist “appears to be a knower of many things,” he “is called by the name of one expertise” (ibid., 232a). Does language here conceal the nature of the sophist or betray its truth? In either case, the sophist is deemed “something unsound” because the very mode of his being betrays his inscription in language. The sophist is uncontained, unmeasured by the name (*ònoma*).

The imposter is an *archē*-villain within the Platonic universe, because imposture is the most sophisticated form of sedition, which the Eleatic Stranger, in the dialogue, defines as “the differing of what is by nature akin, arising from some sort of dissolution” (ibid., 228a). The sophist is essentially divisive, embodying an ugliness of soul, since he incarnates “that everywhere ill-formed kind, ‘lack of measure [amétrios]’” (ibid.). Ill-formed (*duseidēs*), his soul is a grotesque mixture of unnatural, incompatible types, a turbulent motion without end to direct his course or measure to harmonize his being: “opinions with desires, and spiritedness with pleasures, and reason with pains, and all such things with one another” (ibid., 228b). The sophist’s unseemly appearance throws into question the *logos*’s capacity to determine what it in fact names. If *légein* is *légein tì*, then the sophist despite his locquacity seems to be a “mute obstacle” to speech: not something, but not nothing; something that is not one, which is to say, not a one, and is thus uncountable. Or, at a minimum, a thing that throws off the count. Escaping from the *logos* by means of the *logos*, the sophist embodies the form of that which is ill-formed by pitting the *logos* against itself through debate (*antilégein*). “For it’s apparent to me,” states the Stranger, “that one thing reveals him [menuein] most of all” (ibid., 232b). The sophist is *antilogikos*. And this is Plato’s point of departure: if the sophist’s multiplicity is uncountable, how can sophistry be a *technē*? How can it be an art, a skill, a practice? If the sophist does indeed teach something, as they indeed claim and for which they are paid, then sophistry can be learned, and if it is learnable, a *mathēma*, it must be *accountable*. Plato thus approaches sophistry as *sophistikē* (the art of

sophistication: a *technē* of professing wisdom or appearing to be wise). One thus has to come to know what art it is that the sophist practices. By determining this “object,” fish-like in its slipperiness, it can be pinned down, hooked and thereby dragged up from below, from the depth, by the mouth: the instrument of speech.

What is the art that the sophist practices, the expertise that he deploys and teaches for a price? It is *antilégein*, “debate.” It is the art of embracing the “seam” of language (*lógos*), the very difference between *légein* and *légein tí*.¹⁰ It is the sophist’s character of *antilogikos*, of working in, but against language, that philosophy will seize upon, acting as a purgative that seeks to mend, to reform, to set straight his motley character, to educate the educator by gathering into one his dispersed manifold. This is a tricky business precisely because the Stranger characterizes the sophist’s art of refutation in terms that seem to efface the difference between the sophistic and Socratic *elenchus*, presenting him as one who cleanses rather than corrupts. Like the philosopher, the Stranger suggests, the sophist exposes the contradictions in speech:

They question someone on those topics about which he thinks he’s saying something when in fact he’s saying nothing. Then, inasmuch as the people they question wander in their opinions, they easily inspect them; and bringing those opinions together in the same place through discussion, they put them alongside each other and, by putting them together in this way, display the opinions as contradicting themselves about the same things with respect to the same points in the same ways. (Plato 1996, 230b)

¹⁰ “Well then, he’s got a very marked seam. For one of them is naïve, because he thinks he knows the things that he opines. But the figure of the other—because of his mucking about among arguments—contains much suspicion and fear that he’s ignorant of those things about which he’s presented himself to others in the figure of a knower” (ibid., 268a).

In order to guard against this “similarity,” the Stranger proposes to think the knowledge that such a power to dispute “about all things” implies. If Socratic wisdom is on the side of irony, the *sophistēs*, the professor of wisdom, is on the side of the joke (*paidiàn*), the laughable (*gélastos*) and the ridiculous or the absurd (*katagélastos*). “Don’t we have to regard it as a joke [*paidiàn*],” the Stranger asks Theaetetus, “when someone says that he knows everything and would teach it to another for a little money and in a little time?” (Ibid., 234a) The statement itself is a fine example of irony, since if the sophists truly knew everything then they would indeed be utter fools to sell it so cheap. Such irony recalls the rhetorician Isocrates’s claim for who the sophists, however, were less fools than hypocrites who render themselves “ridiculous” since “they distrust those from whom they are to get this small profit—those to whom they intend to impart their sense of justice—and they deposit the fees from their students with men whom they have never taught” (Isocrates 2000, pp. 4–5; quoted in Hénaff 2010, p. 37). If the sophist is not a fool, then the emphasis shifts from the truly ridiculous claim to “know all things” to the sophist’s self-presentation, his ability to *play* at being wise. The Greek word *paidiàn*, translated by Brann, et al. as “joke,” could also be translated as “game,” and moreover as a “children’s game [...], an activity lacking accountability” (Hénaff 2010, p. 48). Even if the sophist knows that he is not wise, he acts as if he is. It is a form of “make-believe.”

It is the sophist’s character as a *mimētēs* that is thus at issue. The character of the *mimētēs* is to pretend to know what he does not, because he has knowledge of pretension. He knows how to seem wise without being wise. The imitator is an “enchanter [*goēta*],” a joker, a jester, a juggler (*goēs*), who bids “farewell to the truth” in an effort to produce a semblance. Like a magician, the sophist makes something appear more, even though it is less, true. He is thus a “wonder-worker [*thaumatopoiōn*]” (Plato 1996, 235b). Preferring to juggle words for the effects they produce

rather than pin them down, the sophist does not take the *logos* in earnest (*spoudē*). “He only handles words,” in the words of Hénaff, “as a mere game (*padein*), without caring about truth, which is to say about being, the weight of which is borne by words” (Hénaff 2010, p. 49).

The knowledge that the sophist has is not knowledge of truth but *doxistikē*, “opinion producing knowledge” (Plato 1996, 233c). The sophist excels in producing opinions about all things and these “enchant” only to the extent that they seem to be. The sophist is a *mimētēs*, according to the Stranger, because he is an “enchanter [goēta],” but he enchants because he is “an imitator of the things that *are*” (ibid., 235a). The art of *antilégein* is not only an art of “separating” opinions, of “refutation,” the Stanger claims; it is an art similar to an art that knows how “to make and do [poieîn kai drân] all things” (ibid., 233d). Such an art is likewise conceived as a joke: “do you know a more artful or delightful form of joke [ēidos è tò paidiās] than the imitative one [mimētikón]?” (Ibid., 234b) The imitator is thus conceived as one who “plays jokes [paidiās metekhóntōn]” (ibid., 235a).

Plato’s interest in the imitator returns the question of *mimēsis* to its roots in mime (*mîmos*). In the *Memorabilia*, Xenophon already extends the following set of terms—*mîmos* (“mime” as both genre and actor), *mimeisthai* (“to mimic”), *mimēma* (product of the action of mimicking), and *mimētēs* (the one who mimics)—to the activities of painting and sculpting. He thus applies a notion which initially refers primarily to mime, but also dance and music, “activities aimed at expressing an inner reality,”¹¹ at what Jean-Pierre Vernant terms the “presentification” of the

¹¹ I am here citing Jacqueline Lichtenstein’s and Elisabeth Decultot’s entry on “Mimesis” in Cassin 2014, p. 659.

invisible,¹² to designate the rendering of an external reality. Yet, as Vernant stresses, Xenophon's treatment of *mimeisthai* does not pose the problem of *mimēsis* as a problem of the resemblance between a model (*paradigma*) and image (*eidōlon*). Rather, it involves a triadic structure. Painting and sculpture are like the mime's practice insofar as they perform or testify to a presence (that which is mimicked) addressed to a spectator called upon to verify this presence. In this structure, the spectator is privileged and *mimeisthai* is conceived as "a performance, a demonstration" rather than a representation.

Plato widens the sense of the term *mimeisthai* to involve "all figurative or representational activities," but he also restricts the sense of *mimeisthai*, according to Vernant, to the dyad of imitation and the imitated, the copy and the model, foregrounding the problem of their relation and thus crucially of their difference. From the triadic to the dyadic, a shift in "accent" occurs. Vernant writes,

By privileging the relationship of mimic-spectator, the vocabulary of *mimeisthai*, as used in the fifth century, operates between two poles. In the first place, there is deception: in the mimic—and through him—the spectator perceives not the person in question as he really is, but the one the mimic is trying to copy. A second factor is identification: *mimēsis* implies that, by adopting the other's ways, the simulator becomes just like the one he is intending to mimic. In Plato, except where *mimeisthai* is used in an ordinary sense,

¹² Vernant writes, "At the pivotal point of the fifth and fourth centuries, the theory of *mimēsis*, sketched out by Xenophon, and elaborated in a fully systematic way by Plato, marks the moment when in Greek culture the turn is completed that leads from the 'presentification,' the making present, of the invisible to the imitation of appearance. It is at this time that the category of figural representation emerges in its specific features and, at the same time, becomes attached to *mimēsis*—the great human fact of imitation, which gives it a solid foundation." (Vernant 1991, p. 152) This has the effect of separating the problem of the image from the religious, since it attaches it to the question of "art," in the sense of *technē*.

the accent, on the contrary, is emphatically put on the relationship between the image and the thing of which it is the image, on the relationship of resemblance that joins and yet distinguishes the two. This explicit formulation of the bond of “semblance” that every kind of imitation must activate brings to the fore the problem of the copy and the model and what they are, as much in themselves as in relation to one another. The question then overtly posed is that of the nature of “resembling,” of the essence of “semblance.” (Vernant 1991, p. 166)

In the *Sophist*, Plato effectively moves between these two determinations of *mimēsis*. The imitator is precisely a figure who occupies the space between the dyadic and triadic structure. The sophist introduces into his discourse a relation, which positions the thing in itself (being) in relation to its difference from itself, to the way that it seems, approaching what is said in terms of its effect upon a subject which is absent. His discourse addresses itself to an absent third whose absence it presents: an addressee that I have referred to elsewhere as the “absentee subject” (see Kukuljevic 2017).

Antilégein engages in the art of making (*poiesis*) a spoken image of something which is absent. An image (*eidōlon*) is twofold; it is a likeness (*eikōn*) or an apparition (*phántasma*). To make an image is to make something that is “not”: not the thing that appears or seems to be but its likeness or its apparition. The “not” is thus not itself univocal, but divided depending on its place: whether it relates to a presence that is absent (as in the case of a likeness) or whether it absents a presence, assuming the absent place of the thing itself (an apparition). The image is thus a form of non-being, which would make the image-making art (*mimetikē*) a kind of knowledge of non-being. Whereas likenesses derive their being from the beings they are like, apparitions are truly problematic, since they force the speaker to attribute being not only to a likeness but that which lacks being, that which is not a likeness. It is a compound negativity. The sophist’s *anti-légein* is a *poiesis*, since

it makes something that is not, an *eídōlon*. If speaking is a matter of making images in words, it is crucially important to know if one makes a likeness or an apparition. If the latter, then one makes “something” that runs counter to the *logos* as *légein tí* (speech about something), for one can only speak about an apparition in term of what it lacks; it is not like but dislike. *Antilégein* produces *phántasma* by positioning something in the place of its absence.

To think the sophist, the *mimētēs*, the imposter, is to think the place of what he makes: the place of absence (non-being). As the practitioner of the apparition-making art, the imposter does not make a likeness, but an image that internalizes a relation to an absence and presents that absence as present. “What do we call,” the Stranger asks, “that which appears to be like the beautiful only because it is seen from an un-beautiful point of view, but which, if someone were empowered to see things that large adequately, wouldn’t even seem to be like what it claims to be like? Since it appears but is not like, shouldn’t we call it an apparition (*phántasma*)?” (Plato 1996, 236b) The apparition is not an image that presents something it is not, invoking an absent presence, which it is like; rather the apparition is not like the thing it presents, since it is made to appear in the very place of its absence. And the Stranger says precisely: it is not-beautiful, because it is positioned in relation to the ugly, an “un-beautiful point of view.” It is out of place. The apparition is not-beautiful because it presents its displacement of place.

The imposter would thus be one who makes of himself an apparition: “when the very maker of the apparition furnishes himself as the instrument [...], when someone uses his own body to make it appear to resemble your figure, or to make his voice like your voice—this part of the apparition making art [*phantastikḗs*] has especially been called, I suppose, ‘imitating’ [*mímēsis*]” (ibid., 267a). The imposter makes the place of the other appear. And he does so by making his own presence absent. Imposture would be a certain knowledge of the void of place, knowing that who one

is is not “one,” not something, but the absent place of the other. The imposter could know that she is, but not who or what she is: inhabiting the difference between her absent place and the form that occupies it. The imposter must know not-being by grasping the place of her absence.

The claim to know nothing (*mēden*), and worse, to be a know-nothing, sounds utterly ridiculous. Yet, the sophist is not an idiot even if he plays dumb at times. The Stranger establishes something shared between the sophist and the philosopher—even if it entails parricide—through their mutual opposition to idiocy. In the “battle between the Gods and the Giants” concerning the beinghood (*ousia*) of beings, both philosopher and sophist oppose those who “maintain strenuously that that alone *is* which allows for some touching and embracing. For they mark off being and body as the same” (ibid., 246a–b). For those “who drag everything by force into the body” it is not only hard, but perhaps impossible for them to give anything other than an inarticulate account. They consign speech (*logos*) to utter noise, lacking all sophistication. If the idiot speaks at all he grunts, reducing speech to the sheer index of a proper name. The idiot is utterly and truly ridiculous, as the Stranger puts it, since he lays claim to a discourse that either immediately subverts itself, or, if forced despite himself to give an account, reduces it to the most trite of platitudes, to that “feast for youths and for oldsters late in learning,” which the Stranger mocks, that insists that “man is man” and that the “good is good” (ibid., 251c). The idiot would have to speak without forging relationships between things, but this amounts to the denial of the *logos*: “Since they’re powerless to keep these out of and not to bring them into their speeches, they don’t need others to refute them. But, as the saying goes, they have their enemy and future opponent right at home, and as they make their way, they always carry around something uttering

speech from deep inside, like that absurd ventriloquist Euricles" (ibid., 252c). "Struck with wonder" due to their "poverty of good sense," they marvel at the complete vapidness of tautology without being aware that, through this insistence, they destine the *logos* to ruination by destroying signification and the very possibility of relation. So, if these "terrible [deinoûs] men" (ibid., 246b) are forced to speak, to reason, and not just point and grab, they will have to admit that "what has the power to become present to or absent from something certainly *is* something" (ibid., 247a). They will have to admit that being is not simply presence but absence and what they call beinghood is in fact "some sort of swept-along becoming [genesis]" (ibid., 246c).

The sophist is not an idiot, but a joker, making use of the *logos*, not simply to deny it, but to make something of nothing. If the imitator makes of oneself an apparition, to speak of the being of an apparition is to speak of the truly false. The problem is how to make such a claim—a claim that says that "falsehoods genuinely *are*"—without being "hemmed in by contradiction" (ibid., 236e–237a). By bringing everything to "not" the sophist thereby makes the very pretension to knowledge laughable if one does not "dare to pronounce Utter-non-being [tò mēdamōs òn]." To speak of an impostor, one has to speak of a being that is in no way someone as the adverb *mēdamōs* subtly suggests (*mēdé*: "not" + *amōs*: "someone"). Capable of debating all things, this "wondrous sophistic power" (ibid., 233a), the Stranger suggests, is a "deception-inducing" art (ibid., 240d), engendering false opinions, that make the sophist appear wise and knowledgeable. This expertise does not operate by means of subverting the *logos* (like idiocy) but by making its character and characters slip. The sophist plays with sense and thus imperils education (*paideía*) by making of it a joke (*paidía*). The Greek word for "joke," *paidía*, derives from *pais*, which refers to a child or a slave, and is one signifier away from *paideía*, which is the Greek word for education. Conceived in contrast to *spoudē*, "seriousness" or "earnestness,"

the sophist is a joker, a figure who relates to knowledge as child's play. By playing with this slippage in the Greek between joke and education, *paidía* and *paideía*, Plato shows that philosophy too is not without a sense of humor. The dialogue as a whole is an effort to take seriously the sophist's play in which he unanchors, unmoors, the letter that allows education to slip from health to sickness, from integrity to corruption. The sophist can appear to know everything because he knows nothing, and it is this fundamental inversion that makes the sophist a jester, a comedian, a figure of *paidía*.

The difference between the imposter and the philosopher will thus hinge upon a single letter, a shift in stress, that separates *paidía* and *paideía*. The philosopher will have to anchor this difference, the slippage of the letter, differentiating one enslaved to nonsense and the idle production of opinion from one committed to the joke's earnestness (*spoudē*). Philosophy must educate the jester by thinking the joke. Rather than playing with language for laughs, Plato undertakes to think its condition in *antilegein* by neutralizing its contagious effects. Philosophy must take seriously the task of knowing nothing and thereby sever the bond forged by Democritus between thought and laughter: "Democritus was nicknamed Wisdom and Laughter, because he laughed at the empty aspirations of mankind" (Taylor 1999, p. 59). The *logos* is no laughing matter, and the effort to maintain its gravitas will require nothing less than parricide, the most serious of acts. Yet the overthrow of Parmenides, like the Olympian insurrection, will be for the sake of the institution of a law that saves Father Parmenides, and thus philosophy, from himself. Parmenides's prohibition itself, instituting a separation between being and non-being, becomes a refuge for sophistry. The sophist goes "so far as to deny utterly that the false in any way is: 'For let no one either think or speak Non-being, since in no way at all does Non-being partake of beinghood'" (Plato 1996, 260d). If the assertion of non-being appears at first to be ridiculous, since it subverts the

logos, it is Parmenides's hypothesis, if followed to the letter, that truly subverts the *logos* since it renders the sameness of thinking and being untenable. For the hypothesis that "the one alone is" (ibid., 244b) can easily be countered by appealing to the *logos* of its enunciation. If "one alone is," then why are there two names for some one thing: the "one" and "being"? This is not only a problem of there being many names for some one thing; but it seems to cut to the root of the *logos* as such. If *legein* is *legein tí*, the *logos* itself introduces a division into being that splits it between being as such and the name. The name designates something other than itself. If one avoids this cut by positing the identity of the name and the thing which is named, then one either asserts that the name names nothing, or conversely that the name is only the name of a name (ibid., 240a). In either case, thought becomes imbued with the idiocy of tautology. To preserve being's relation to truth, it becomes necessary to "force" the "way to the conclusion that Non-being in some respect *is* and that Being in turn *is not* in some way" (ibid., 241d). If one does not take on the "paternal argument," "hardly anyone will be able to avoid being ridiculous [katagēlastos]" as they stumble into contradiction (ibid., 241e).

To take nothing seriously is to put into question the relation between being and the one. And the Stranger suggests that "Parmenides and everybody else" have been altogether too casual when "they rushed into a judgement about marking off the 'how many' and the 'what sort' of beings" (ibid., 242c). The path is "danger-ridden" precisely because the philosopher must trade places with the sophist, which is to say, speak like a sophist and dare to utter Non-being. The philosopher must suppose that "Non-being *is*" (ibid., 237a) and risk stumbling into the trap of an irreparable contradiction. The ambition of Plato's *Sophist* is to take the laughable seriously, risking appearing "mad [manikos]" (ibid., 242a) and altogether "discordant," but this risk is necessary in order to shift the terrain of the *logos* from that of the joke to irony. "If, then, not as a point of contention or a joke

but in earnest, one of Parmenides' listeners had to think it out and to answer the question, 'Where must this name Non-being be applied?', how do we think he would use the name—for what purpose and for what sort of thing? And how would he show this to the one who inquired?' (ibid., 237b–c). The aim is to kill or neutralize sophistry's irresponsible child's play with philosophical earnestness. Yet, this neutralization requires confrontation with non-being.

If to speak truly is to say something and not nothing, then language is always language about something that *is*: *légein* is *légein tí*. Non-being is thus not *a* being. One cannot say that non-being is indeed something. The Stranger focuses on the notion of "some [tí]." The Stranger claims that there is a necessity that binds the relation implied by "some" to being "some *one*" (ibid., 237d). Non-being is not a being in the sense of being either one or many. As soon as one speaks of "some," this itself implies a relation to beings: "to use it alone, naked and isolated, as it were, from all the beings—that's impossible" (ibid.). "Thus," Heidegger writes, "every τὶ [tí] co-signifies a ἓν [hén], i.e., in the broadest sense, a number" (Heidegger 1997, p. 290). This is the necessity of all counting and accounting. One counts some-thing, which is to say, some-one. "For you will say that singular 'some' is in fact a sign of one, dual 'some' of two, and plural 'some' of many [...]. And so it's utterly necessary, it seems, that he who says 'not some' [mè tò] is saying no-thing at all [mēdèn]" (Plato 1996, 237d–e). One says "nothing" precisely because one says something about nothing and thus "counts" the uncountable by treating it either as a plurality (non-beings) or as a unity (non-being). It is thus structurally impossible, given that *légein* is *légein tí*, "to utter or speak or think Non-being all by itself [tò mè òn autò kath' hautó]—that it is unthinkable [adianōtón] and unspeakable ['unsayable': *árrhēton*, and 'voiceless': *áphthenkton*] and irrational [álogon]" (ibid., 238c). Nothing or non-being *all by itself* is utterly paradoxical and perplexing, since it cannot be

refuted. To utter it assigns to it a status that it cannot have and thereby puts the "refuter" him or herself into "perplexity," for it forces the one who relates to it to say or think the opposite (*en-antía*) (ibid., 238d). To address it at all, even through the form of negation, assigns to it a unity, "the form of a one" betraying the fact that it is neither one nor many. One cannot speak correctly about it, since the "very act of accosting" it addresses "it in the form of a one" (ibid., 239a).

In order to speak of non-being Plato has to suspend the *légein té*, marking the space between saying and saying something, the very gap mobilized by sophistry. He has to distrust the *logos*'s compelling force. He does this by suspending the "one," establishing a relation between that which cannot be counted *and* the act of taking account of that which cannot be counted. There is some "nothing" that *is*, but cannot be counted: namely the unlimited (*ápeiron*). Non-being takes the "unlimited in multitude" into the account. But by being taken into account, it makes the one who speaks speak ridiculously: one has to say and think something genuinely strange, claiming the "non" as not not-being. "Non" belongs to being through being *other* to being. Thus, we encounter the famous thesis of the dialogue: "Whenever we say Non-being, as it seems, we don't say something contrary to Being but only other" (ibid., 257b). Non-being does not signify the opposite of being (nothingness), but only its other (ibid., 258b).

The sophist has been hooked with the very instrument by which it enters into debate (*antilégein*). He has been hooked like a fish, from below and by the mouth. As a form of *antilégein*, sophistry has the capacity, the power (*dynaméis*), to relate everything that is said to nothing. But philosophy must separate the nothing from itself, non-being from not-being, and thus determine the sense in which non-being can be said to be. The sophistical play between "non" and "not" can be brought to halt.

There is no "nothing" that is not "some," but the "some" that nothing is, is not "one."



If non-being can only be addressed as “not a one,” as “unlimited in multitude,” in order to not err in the attribution of being to what is not, then the truly parricidal consequence of the dialogue must be drawn: being itself is not one. “Do you not see then that we have disobeyed Parmenides far beyond his prohibition?” (Ibid., 258c) Being can only be determined as *one* if it is non-identical with itself, withdrawn from accountability. Being can be held to account only if there is something that is not countable, namely non-being. Or conversely, for being *to be* one, for the one to be determinate of the beinghood of being, being has to be affected by itself. Yet, by entering into relation to itself it becomes not “a” one, but many. It enters into community with others. To deny this relation is to deny speech and thus deprive thought of its voice.¹³ “To detach each from all is the final and utter eclipse of all speech. For Speech has arisen for us through the interweaving of the forms” (ibid., 259e). To speak of the beinghood (*ousia*) of being requires that we think the weave of its determination. Something can only be said to be if it communes (*proskoinōnōin*) with beinghood (ibid., 252a). But then being is non-identical with that with which it mixes, namely itself. Being has to be thought from the outset as riven: in relation and apart, as mixture and non-mixture, as included and as excluded. Without this minimal distinction, without being’s separation from itself, determination as such (of being or, for that matter, anything else) would not be possible.

Being differs from itself through a form that allows a being to be delimited, marked off as separated from all the beings it is not.

¹³ The Stranger argues that speech (*logos*) requires the “blending” of nouns and verbs and it is this “interweaving” that makes possible *légein* as *légein tí* (ibid., 262a–e). Remarkably, he claims that thinking and speech are the same, differentiating them by means of an inner and outer voice. Thought is “the soul’s inner conversation with itself, when it arises without voice” (ibid., 263e).

There is a “form [eidos] of Non-being” (ibid., 258d) which is the Other (*tháteron*). The form of the Other is what allows one being to differ from another; it separates being from non-being. Being is other to the others, and in this way it is not. Being establishes its difference from beings through the Other. However, the Other is defined as what is “always in relation to an other” (ibid., 255c). It is this definition that necessitates that Being and the Other are “entirely different” (ibid., 255d). There cannot be an other that is, so to speak, absolutely Other: an Other that is not in relation to *an* other. If the absolutely other existed, there would be no way of differentiating Being and the Other: “if the Other partook of both the forms you granted, as does Being, there would sometimes also be an other among the others that is unrelated to any other. And yet it has now inescapably fallen out for us that whatever is other is what it is necessarily through an other” (ibid., 255d). The form of the Other is thus paradoxical, even if the Stranger does not state this as such, since it would be a form that is without limit, unbounded, *ápeiron*. It is perhaps what one could call the pure unformed. The Stranger says, “Then regarding each of the forms, Being is many, while Non-being is unlimited in multitude [*ápeiron dè plêthei tò mē ón*]” (ibid., 256e). Being is other to the others, and therefore “many,” by virtue of the form of the Other, since it mixes with everything that is, but in being other to the many (others), the others are not and are thus unlimited in multitude. The form of the Other is *ápeiron* (an unlimited multitude). “Then we must also say that Being itself is other than the others [...]. And also that however many the others are, in relation to so many, Being is *not*. For insofar as it is not those others, it is itself one; and again it is *not* in relation to those others, which are unlimited in number” (ibid., 257a). The nature of the Other is thus to not be a one (to be unlimited, unaccountable). In separating Being from the Other, being is always “a” being, that is, countable as one (even if many). Being makes the Other thinkable as non-being (the other of being), repeating the separating of Being and Other through an

infinite procedure of counting. Since there is not an Other to the other, its nature is “all chopped up” (ibid., 257c). The Other is as “distributed” through the unlimited multitude of what is not. It is the very relationality of things (ibid., 258e).

In order to contain the wild appearance of the sophist, the Stranger introduces the form of the unlimited. The form of the formless is thus pitted against formlessness of form. And it is perhaps this very difference that Theaetetus and the Stranger discover in their pursuit of this illusive figure, the sophist, who always seems to be out of place, unable to be pinned down, disguised. The dialogue itself confirms above all that “the man is wondrous in his very being and utterly difficult to keep in our sights, since even now he’s fled, in very good and clever fashion, down into a form that offers no passage for our tracking” (ibid., 236d). As they pursue the tortuous path of this protean figure, they cannot help but stepping into a trap intended, rather, for their prey. At the end of the dialogue, they encounter the enigma of their own philosophical image, distorted, disfigured, caricatured, in the face of the sophist. In looking for the sophist they find instead the philosopher, but it is a philosopher no longer in control of the *logos*, no longer in control of its own image. They encounter, in short, a philosophical impersonation.

Is the Stranger’s impersonation of Socrates sophisticated or philosophical? Is this Stranger to be distrusted? The dialogue ends as a kind of warning to know *who* it is with whom one speaks, since not even philosophy can be fully insulated from treachery and betrayal. Philosophy requires a minimum of trust. If unanchored from being, discourse or speech (the *logos*) becomes a treacherous medium—and all the more so if mobilized with nefarious intentions. The philosopher should admire the act of treachery, study its workings, but remember to hate a traitor. And it is not accidental that the sophist does not appear as a subject (an

interlocutor) who speaks, but only as an object of discourse.¹⁴ As an object, the sophist can be depicted archetypically as the figure who overturns the authority of the *logos*, unbinding it from its capacity to signify, to designate, to represent. An impersonator is not a viable interlocutor, since he undoes the legitimacy of the *logos* by not recognizing that the I of the speaker (the self) is committed by speech to abide by the law that necessitates consistency in one's speech. If one does not know with whom one is speaking, then the I of the other cannot be relied upon to recognize the truth or falsity of what one says. The speaker who speaks is thus not responsible for their speech and cannot be held to account. As such, the authority of the *logos* that depends upon the mutual recognition that signification cannot intend its opposite—this minimal criterion of consistent, rational, discourse—is challenged by a figure who does not accept *the principle of identity*.

This is the insidious and subversive nature of sophistry: its power to make that which is the same other. And we should perhaps not be surprised that in the end we encounter this being, whose very being consists in being Other—the sophist—in its Other—the philosopher. Is this the final irony or the beginning of a ludicrous joke? It is doubtless a token of Plato's deep respect for this enemy of truth. Lacking an identity, the sophist can only be glimpsed in the distortions it induces in its other, just as the figure who claims to lack knowledge can only be exhibited through exposing the falsity of the opinions of those who claim to know. Philosophy cannot speak to, but only *about* sophistry; one has to recast sophistry in the image of philosophy in order to force its submission to a rule of discourse that it does not recognize. And even this is tricky, as the inversion of the sophist and the philosopher portends. Even as an object it threatens to subvert the philosophical subject. "You see, then, how true it is to say that this beast is complex" (ibid., 226a).

¹⁴ Jean-Claude Milner emphasizes this precise point (2012, pp. 114–15).

Bibliography

- Cassin, Barbara (2014) (ed.) *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, trans. Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
- Detienne, Marcel (1999) *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books).
- Detienne, Marcel, and Jean-Pierre Vernant (1978) *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press).
- Heidegger, Martin (1997) *Plato's Sophist*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press).
- Hénaff, Marcel (2010) *The Price of Truth: Gift, Money, and Philosophy*, trans. Jean-Louis Morhange with Anne-Marie Feenberg-Dibon (Stanford: Stanford University Press).
- Isocrates (2000) "Against the Sophists," *Isocrates I*, trans. David C. Mirhady and Yun Lee Too (Austin: University of Texas Press).
- Klein, Jacob (1977) *Plato's Trilogy: Theaetetus, the Sophist, and the Statesman* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press).
- Kukuljevic, Alexi (2017) *Liquidation World: On the Art of Living Absently* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press).
- Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe (1989) *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, ed. Christopher Fynsk (Stanford: Stanford University Press).
- Melville, Herman (1971) *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, ed. Hershel Parker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company).
- Milner, Jean-Claude (2012) "The Point of the Signifier," *Concept and Form, Volume One: Key Texts from the Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, 107–18, ed. Peter Hallward and Knox Peden (London: Verso).
- Plato (1977) *Ion, Hippias Minor, Laches, Protagoras*, trans. R. E. Allen (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).
- (1996) *Sophist or The Professor of Wisdom*, trans. Eva Brann, Peter Kalkavage, and Eric Salem (Newburyport, MA: Focus Philosophical Library).
- Taylor, C. C. W. (1999) *The Atomists, Leucippus and Democritus: Fragments; a Text and Translation with Commentary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press).

Vernant, Jean-Pierre (1991) "From the 'Presentification' of the Invisible to the Imitation of Appearance," *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays*, 151–63, ed. Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

On “the Idea” in Badiou*

Peter Klepec

Despite Badiou’s constant reference to “the Idea,” there seems to be no systematic presentation of “the Idea” in his opus, which is quite surprising for one of the most systematic philosophers. What *is* the Idea for Badiou? What does he *refer to* when he talks about the Idea? What does the Idea *stand for* in his system; what *is it the name of*? Departing from Badiou, of course, what I want to do is simply summarize his views, while being fully aware that Badiou himself (perhaps) would not subscribe to my account as presented here. Let me start with Badiou’s recapitulation of the “state of the art” from nearly a decade ago:

The theme of the Idea appears gradually in my work. It was no doubt already present in the late ‘80s from the moment when, in *Manifesto for Philosophy*, I designated my undertaking as a “Platonism of the multiple,” which would require a renewed investigation into the nature of the Idea. In *Logics of Worlds*, this investigation was expressed as an imperative: “true life” was conceived of as life lived in accordance with the Idea, as opposed to the maxim of contemporary democratic materialism, which commands us to live without any Idea. I examined the logic of the Idea in greater detail in *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, in which the notion of ideation, and thus of the operative, or working, value of the Idea is introduced. This was backed up by a multifaceted commitment to something like a renaissance of the use of Plato. (Badiou 2010a, pp. 229–30, n. 1)

* The author acknowledges the financial support from the Slovenian Research Agency (research core funding No. P6-0014).

This passage contains many themes to which I will return later on. It is obvious from it—firstly—that Badiou himself is quite serious about the Idea. Though Badiou is notorious for his self-declared Platonism and communism, all the talk about the Idea is not intended merely to complete his image and is not a provocation for its own sake. It has its role in Badiou’s philosophical project—the laicization and secularization of infinity—while securing new grounds for a renaissance of philosophy, as well as for the withering away of the State and the radical transformation of society in the direction of Communism.

Here, the Idea is charged with some important tasks. It is an operator that directs and orients us in these disoriented¹ times, without being (completely) synonymous with Kant’s regulative Idea: “For almost thirty years, the present, our historical present, has been a disoriented time: a time that does not offer its youth, especially the youth of the popular classes, any principle to orient their existence. The continuation of globalized capitalism provides no sense at all of collective and individual existence” (Badiou 2016, p. 1).² The Idea addresses two interrelated questions. In theoretical terms, it addresses the question of *thinking*: “What is thinking in our times?” is a key question for Badiou (see Badiou 2011, p.

¹ It is no coincidence that one of Badiou’s seminars (taught in Paris from 1983 to 2016) has “orientation” in its title. Furthermore, the seminars held in the last fifteen years, at least, are somehow “internally oriented”: one passes from an analysis of the images of our present times to the question of how to orient ourselves in them via Plato and the question of how to change the world. All this culminates in the question of how this change in the form of “immanent truths” can be thought and enacted: *Images du temps présent* (2001–2004); *S’orienter dans la pensée, s’orienter dans l’existence* (2004–2007); *Pour aujourd’hui: Platon!* (2007–2010); *Que signifie “changer le monde”?* (2010–2012); *L’immanence des vérités* (2013–2017).

² It is worth noting that on the “philosophical front” the main “enemy” remains the same: while in *Manifesto for Philosophy* the “enemy” was called “poetic disorientation” (Badiou 1999, pp. 73–74), today, in *Immanence of Truths*, it is called “finitude.”

38); in practical terms, it tackles the question of *acting*: in order to act politically, one has to have an Idea, but lacking it, the popular masses’ confusion is inescapable. Or, better put, without the Idea, the popular masses’ disorientation is impossible to avoid or escape (see Badiou 2010a, p. 258). Precisely on account of such a stance, Badiou has been accused of many things,³ while remaining firm on this point: we need the Idea, “a compass” (Badiou 2017a, p. 85), whose tasks are the following: to orient ourselves in the present; to orient the life of an individual in accordance with the True; to view the situation one is in as one entailing a choice; to become a subject who “makes a pure choice, a choice without concept, a choice between two indiscernible terms” (Bartlett et al. 2015, p. 219). The choice Badiou talks about is not to be understood in the sense of the “free choice” of the dominant ideology, but rather as The Choice that, precisely, stands against it: by way of making the choice, an individual becomes a subject; subjectivity results from the encounter with and a fidelity to an event. Here, we get a glimpse into the inner tension and the crucial point of Badiou’s system at which the Idea, at least in my view, is situated. Accused by his critics of overemphasizing the emergence of an event (or “miracle”⁴) which might or might not emerge at all, in recent years Badiou has increasingly emphasized that “truths are eternal.” It seems, however, that “truths” are still deployed conditionally here (the infamous *sinon* in the phrase “except that there are truths”), while “the Idea” is deployed unconditionally and invariantly; it somehow has to be here as a kind of didactic means. Didactics, “as we know, is the crux of Plato’s first dialogues, and subsequently

³ For instance: “Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to accuse him of anthropocentrism, since he does not privilege human existence so much as a capacity for thinking which he only sees exemplified by the human animal. The problem lies in Badiou’s ‘noocentrism’ rather than in any alleged anthropocentrism.” (Brassier 2007, p. 114) For an ingenious defense of “idealism without idealism” see Ruda 2015.

⁴ See Bensaid 2004, pp. 94–105.

of the whole of non-critical philosophy. Starting from any situation whatever, one indicates, under the progressively clear name of Idea, that there is indeed something other than bodies and languages” (Badiou 2010b, p. 140). In this context, the Idea is a lighthouse, a light,⁵ similar to Plato’s sun, the light “making the invisible visible,” which would be consistent with Badiou’s claim that another name for the Idea is purity: “*pure* is an invariant, *purity* is an invariant, because it is ultimately the name of the Idea” (Badiou 2010c, p. 140).

Not only the Idea, but Badiou’s personal philosophical style as such is devoted to clarity and distinctiveness, inspired by the Cartesian project. What is instantaneously clear and evident to anyone who has ever listened to one of Badiou’s talks, seminars, interviews, or debates, to anyone who has ever read his texts, is that his *style of presentation* is always committed to clarity and being as understandable as possible. His writing style and procedure are reminiscent of Beckett’s effort to write as simply and minimally as possible by cutting out all redundant, superfluous elements. One can even say that Badiou’s “philosophical writing—regardless of its effects of style or literary qualities—is always *didactic* writing: its rationale consists in conveying the Idea and, consequently, in convincing and changing intellectual subjectivities” (Burchill 2013, p. vii). In this context (of light, clarity, guiding principles), it is clear that Badiou is committed to the Enlightenment—perhaps even more than he is willing to admit. It is nonetheless no coincidence that—I will save the analysis of further implications of this for some other occasion—Badiou recently tackled the question of orientation in Descartes (*morale provisoire*) and in Kant (“What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?”).

⁵ See, for instance, the following passages: “For me, an event is something that *brings to light* a possibility that was invisible or even unthinkable” (Badiou 2013a, p. 9); “This means that—as in the Platonic myth, but in reverse—to paint an animal on the wall of a cave is to flee the cave so as to *ascend towards the light of the Idea*” (Badiou 2010b, p. 19; my emphasis).

The first task of the Idea is therefore to present a choice (“to live with/without the Idea”) and an orientation. For Badiou, this orientation is not something neutral. Even common sense somehow associates “the idea” with Plato and a political cause. This is indeed the case for Badiou, for whom the Idea evokes and struggles for the legacy of Plato’s philosophy, while—within the field of praxis—evoking the struggle for the cause of radical politics, the politics of equality, or, simply, for communism. While I will omit here the problematics of the *communist* Idea⁶ and of *communism*, it is nonetheless clear that today the mere mentioning, let alone fidelity to (the Idea of) communism, causes troubles. And while Badiou does not miss an opportunity to declare himself a Platonist, he also admits: “‘Platonism’ is intended as a provocation or a banner by which to proclaim the closure of the Romantic gesture.”⁷

Having a banner and being provocative (as the Idea is) is essential for at least two main reasons. For Badiou, *polemos*, polemics, and controversy constitute a vital, if not the most important, part of any thought or practice. He himself has been a militant and activist his whole life. His influences range from Sartre and Mao to Althusser (who defines philosophy as “class struggle in theory”) and Kant (Badiou frequently refers to Kant’s definition of metaphysics/philosophy, from the Preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, as a “battlefield”). In short, philosophy is never “just a theory.” But first and foremost—and this is the second reason—today philosophy is neither dead nor over. “The Idea” and the name of Plato are upheld here not only to fight the topics of Romanticism, i.e. finitude and death, but also because, for Badiou, Plato is *the* philosopher, if there ever

⁶ It is interesting to note in passing that the predicate “communist” is used by Badiou as an almost exclusive predicate of the term “Idea.” There are only rare exceptions, such as the “Christian Idea” (see Badiou 2016a, p. 7).

⁷ Badiou 2017b, p. 100. See also Badiou 2004, p. 27.

was one. Plato was the first to set up philosophy in relation to its four conditions,⁸ and he marks a turning point in the history of thought. Badiou is not blind to Plato's mistakes and errors, and can sometimes be quite harsh on him⁹; however, for Badiou, "Plato's problem—which is still ours—is how our experience of a particular world (that which we are given to know, the 'knowable') can open up access to eternal, universal, and, in this sense, transmundane truths" (Badiou 2011, p. 106). That is the main reason why Badiou not only devoted many years of his seminar to Plato, but also no less than six years of his life to the "(re)translation" of Plato's *Republic* (Badiou 2012a; 2013b). Or, as Badiou put it in 2015: "I've always desired to affirm a Plato who would be our contemporary" (Badiou and Kakogianni 2015, p. 11). And in this context, leaving all other interesting subtleties aside, it is not unimportant that in his first *Manifesto for Philosophy* from 1989 Badiou declared his project as one of a "Platonism of the multiple," while in the *Second Manifesto for Philosophy* from 2009 he changed this formulation to a "Communism of the Idea" (Badiou 2011, p. 125). So, the Idea is not something marginal, but one of the pivots of Badiou's system; he even goes as far as to describe his *Second Manifesto* as devoted to the "return of the affirmative power of the Idea" and as structured around the question: "What is an Idea?" (Ibid., pp. 5, 6)¹⁰

Yet, *what is* an Idea? Is it the perfect model, the arch-design, the ideal that must be pursued, for instance by love, poetry, or theater? Is the Idea their essence; is Badiou an essentialist? Absolutely not, for he never talks about the Idea of love, poetry, or

⁸ "The fact is that today—and on this point things haven't budged since Plato—we only know four types of truths" (Badiou 2010b, p. 71).

⁹ See, for instance, Badiou 2016b; 1989–1990; 2007–2010; 2004, pp. 49–58. On Badiou and Plato see Bartlett 2011; Klepec 2017.

¹⁰ In a sense, perhaps all of Badiou's work, starting with his *Concept of the Model*, could be understood as a variation on the theme of the following question: "What is a Form/Idea?" (see Badiou 2007a, p. 102)

theater, but rather about their relation to the Idea. In this context, recall that Badiou never speaks about “true ideas” or “the Idea of Truth,” but rather about “the Idea of the True.” In other words, the Idea is not some Ideal one would try to realize, copy, or get as near as possible to; it is not some perfect paradigm regulating our actions, acts, or deeds. Moreover, and unlike in “vulgar Platonism,” for Badiou an Idea is never an “idea of something”: “I am a sophisticated Platonist, not a vulgar one. I do not uphold that truths pre-exist in a separate ‘intelligible place’ before becoming mundane and that they are born simply by descending from the heavens above” (Badiou 2011, p. 26). What holds for truths, also holds for ideas, but one has to be mindful of Badiou’s terminology, for he does not speak about “ideas” but about “the Idea.” Is there only one idea? Is, then, the Idea “the One”? Rather, it alerts the reader/listener to the fact that, here, we are *not dealing with the usual understanding of what an idea is*.

For Badiou, the Idea is not a representation, an image or a notion, but something actively taking place in the form of a fiction: “the Idea exposes a truth in a fictional structure” (Badiou 2010a, p. 239). Contrary to the philosophical category of Truth, which is a sort of seizing (“pincers”), the Idea is more like a framing. It is therefore neither the essence nor the truth in the usual sense, but rather a “schema,” a “frame,” something that resembles Lacan’s *matheme*. What kind of schema or frame is it? I will disregard a possible parallel between Badiou and Kant concerning “schematism,” a parallel that—via the well-known discussion between Heidegger and Cassirer apropos of Kant (and via the parallels between Heidegger and Badiou)—would lead us to psychoanalysis and to Lacan’s conception of fantasy or phantasm.¹¹ What is clear, though, is that for Badiou the Idea is always already here for everybody, and that truths (and Ideas, one might add) are

¹¹ As regards this particular point, the parallel between Kant and Lacan has already been proposed by Bernard Baas and Slavoj Žižek.

created in one world, but are valid in all possible worlds. This fictional structure is simultaneously eternal and contemporary. For Badiou, to be a contemporary means “to partake of the trans-temporal, or really, trans-mundane, and not to be finally subject to time but to inscribe eternity in one’s own time/world under the general name of Idea. Philosophy, for Badiou, is contemporary to the material and materialist conditions that in their own time produce the new discourses of time, and also to the Idea itself as the composition of this contemporaneity” (Bartlett et al. 2015, p. 10). Accordingly, the time of the Idea is a paradoxical time; it is the time of the future anterior, or the future perfect, the time of a “will have been,” torn between “always-already” and “not yet”: “The idea [of an education by truths] is always yet to come. At the same time, it is always already *there*” (Bartlett 2011, p. 231). A *decision* is taken that “there is an Idea”: “The philosophical act always takes the form of a decision, a separation, a clear distinction” (Badiou 2012b, p. 12).

But this decision in at least one firm and absolute point also presents a point (of view) *from, and in relation to, which everything else is defined or thought*. *Mathematics*, for instance, “has always been the place-holder of the Idea as Idea, the Idea as Idea to which Lacan gave the name of *matheme*” (Badiou 2017b, p. 207). *Love*, which (contrary to sexuality) exists only in the element of the Idea, as “the power of the Two” carves “out an existence, a body, a banal individuality, directly on the sky of Ideas” (Badiou 2010b, p. 32). *Cinema* is an “art of the trace of the Idea,” *theatre* “the site of the Idea’s living appearance,” *dance*, as a metaphor for thought, is “the representation of that which the body is capable of without reference to the Idea” (Badiou 2015a, pp. 59, 63, 62). *Opera* “is the connection between the infinite and purity as an index of the Idea” (Badiou 2010c, p. 142). *Poetry* “is situated at a twofold distance from the Idea,” but it also “subordinates sensible desire to the aleatory advent of the Idea. The poem is a *duty* of thought” (Badiou 2005, pp. 17, 20). *The soldier* has no

proper name and is but “a conscious part of a great discipline, under the power of the Idea” (Badiou 2012b, p. 47), etc. Many authors dear to Badiou, such as Plato, Beckett, and Mallarmé, are presented in relation to the Idea. For Plato “the experience of love is an impulse towards something that he calls the Idea” (Badiou 2012c, p. 16). Questions proper to Beckett’s work can be summarized as a “functional reduction oriented towards the essence or the Idea” (Badiou 2003, p. 4). The supreme operation of Mallarméan poetics “is this operation that yields the Idea, and Mallarmé was perfectly aware of it” by putting “the poem in the Idea’s service” (Badiou 2017b, pp. 58, 60, 61).

Note that Badiou is speaking strictly about “the Idea” and not “an idea.” This was not always the case, and one can even speak about a certain tendency in his opus of pointing out three features of the idea. First, the tendency to gradually abolish the indefinite article in favour of the definite article (from *an* idea, we eventually shift to *the* idea); second, there is a shift from ideas taken and spoken about in plural to idea in the singular, i.e., to the idea as one; and finally, there is a change in writing from “idea” to its capitalization (“the Idea”). When Badiou talks about the Idea, in the vast majority of cases, at least nowadays, the word is capitalized and used with a definite article, and in the singular. There are some exceptions, of course, which—at least in part—are definitively due to accidental reasons (one such prominent recent example is found in *In Praise of Theatre* that speaks strictly of “the idea” instead of “the Idea”).¹² But in other rare cases, when Badiou talks about ideas in the plural the emphasis is the same as in his later use of “the Idea.”¹³ This is most clearly visible in his early work from 1976 *De l’idéologie* (written together with François

¹² For instance: “the theatre, when it takes place, is a representation of the idea” (see Badiou 2015a, p. 56; 2013c, p. 63).

¹³ See, for instance, the idea that theater spreads ideas and works with “theater-ideas” in Badiou 2015a, and 2005, p. 72 ff.

Balmès) where Badiou talks about “communist ideas,” “ideas of the masses,” and “just ideas” (*idées justes*).¹⁴ But these uses are all related to the questions: of orientation and that of providing direction; of universality; of something that does not “vary” or “change” (Badiou speaks of “communist invariants,” whereby in late Badiou invariant¹⁵ is eternity);¹⁶ of force and action; of scission and regeneration (something similar to “resurrection” from the *Logics of Worlds*).

“The Idea,” therefore, is not just “one single idea” or some general idea; it is not this or that idea, let alone *just any idea*; and last but not least, it is not *an idea*, but *the Idea*.¹⁷ How are we to think that? Two associations arise here: one is Spinoza, with his “*habemus enim ideam vera*” (“for we have a true idea”) from §33 of his *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*; and the other is Godard’s statement frequently mentioned by Badiou: “*Ce n’est pas une image juste, c’est juste une image*,” i.e., “This is not a just image, this is just an image.” It seems that what matters for Badiou is first and foremost that “the Idea” is not *just an idea* in Godard’s sense of an image being “just an image,” but rather one without which we are lost: “to put it in one word: we need courage to have an idea. One big idea” (Badiou 2018a, p. 56). The latter can be written as Idea in the sense of a worldview, an ideology,

¹⁴ See Badiou 2012d, pp. 152, 159, 167, 172.

¹⁵ But neither early nor late Badiou conflates invariant and program: “the invariant of the Idea is the measure of the action”; however, “the Idea is not the program for the action.” (Badiou 2017c, p. 12).

¹⁶ The role of “communist invariants” in early Badiou was highlighted by Hallward (2003, pp. 30, 36), Balibar (2004, p. 37), Toscano (2004, p. 140), and Feltham (2008, 35 ff), however, it was Bruno Bosteels who insisted most on this point, perhaps to back up his argument as to the continuity of the “early” and the “late” Badiou (see Bosteels 2011, p. 277 ff). The parallel between the works *Of Ideology* and *Logics of Worlds* concerning the logic of “communist invariants” and the Idea is proposed in Bartlett et al. 2015, p. 207.

¹⁷ There are exceptions, of course; see, for instance, Badiou 2014, § LXXII, p. 105: *une Idée*.

or—if you wish—a fundamental fantasy. There are ideas, indeed, but only one of them is “the Idea” (which Badiou himself takes part in). That clarifies Badiou’s claim—in the controversy with Jean-Claude Milner—that idea/Idea is “unfortunately nothing in itself positive,” for “there are criminal ideas,” such as Nazism (Badiou and Milner 2014, p. 25), and there are reactive ideas. Furthermore, there is some cruelty linked with ideas/Ideas: “the only veritable cruelty is that of the Idea” (2007b, p. 117). There is also something violent and cruel in the act of thinking as such: “Thought is unpalatable precisely because it breaks the individual apart” (Jones 2018, p. 183). In this context, Badiou likes to quote Deleuze: “Thought is primarily trespass and violence, the enemy, and nothing presupposes philosophy: everything begins with misosophy. Do not count upon thought to ensure the relative necessity of what it thinks. Rather, count upon the contingency of an encounter with that which forces thought to raise up and educate the absolute necessity of an act of thought or a passion to think” (Deleuze 2001, p. 139). But while, on the one hand, Badiou points out the moment of encounter—“the word ‘encounter’ is essential” (Badiou 2015b, p. 38; see also pp. 36–40)—or affirms, in his parlance, that “there are truths,” he conceives of “the Idea” as a connector, an operator, an orientation towards “truths.” Or, as one might put it following Spinoza: “one has to have (a true) Idea.”

The very expression “to have a true idea,” or “the Idea of the True” (or, simply: “the Idea”), implies several things. First, it means that if there is no event, if there are no truths, then there is no Idea. Here is Badiou’s recent explanation:

I name “Idea” that which, regarding a given question, proposes the perspective of a new possibility. The Idea, in politics, is not directly political praxis nor is it a program; it is not something that is going to be achieved by concrete means. It is rather the possibility in the name of which you act, you transform and you have a program.

It is, then, fairly close to “principle” — “act in the name of principles” — but it is more precise. The Idea is really the conviction that a possibility, other than what there is, can come about. The “event,” in the sense we’ve stated this to involve the creation of a possibility, can very well be said to create an Idea. An Idea is associated with an event because the event is the creation of a possibility and the Idea is the general name of this new possibility. (Badiou 2013a, p. 14)

In other words, “regarding a given question,” the Idea “proposes the perspective of a new possibility”; it somehow connects us to truth. “To have one true idea” means that one is a subject of an event, and therefore a subject of truth: “This ‘entry into truth’ is what the Idea brings about” (Badiou 2011, p. 108). So, strictly speaking “we have one true idea” (Spinoza) only conditionally.

Here we should emphasize two things. First, “to have an idea” does not mean that we somehow consciously manipulate it, or possess it as “individuals.” It is rather the other way around: we are “subject to truths/the Idea” (one of the meanings of the French word *sujet* is also “being subject(ed) to,” being obedient, subordinate, governed), or as Badiou himself put it: to live is “to live under the authority of an Idea” (Badiou 2016c, p. 74). As Kierkegaard ingeniously put it: “I belong to the idea. When it beckons me, I follow. When it summons me, then I wait day and night. No one calls to dinner, no one waits supper on me. When the idea calls, I leave everything, or more correctly, I have nothing to leave. I disappoint no one, distress no one, by being true to it” (Kierkegaard 2009, p. 75). And second, “the Idea” in Badiou is the name of many things at once: first, it pinpoints the moment of fidelity and subordination; second, it stresses the moment of “the true”; third, “the Idea” then is always “the Idea of the True”; fourth, as such, it is the present orientation-point; fifth, it is a point of view; sixth, it is something that can be transmitted; seventh, it is something one can partake in.

“The Idea” is a kind of trinity, a knot of various triplets. For instance, “the Idea” is a triplet of a decision, a principle, and a

hypothesis:¹⁸ it is a *hypothesis* that has to be proven and in which one believes in advance;¹⁹ therefore, a *decision* has already been taken to rely on the hypothesis as a *principle*. “The Idea” can be presented in terms of another triplet, this time inspired by Lacan: “the Idea” is simultaneously a pivot, a knot, and a matheme (see Badiou 1991). It is a *knot* that binds together many different registers (Badiou himself speaks of “the Idea” in terms of Lacan’s three registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real²⁰); it is a *matheme* due to its transmissibility — “the idea of universal transmissibility is called by Lacan matheme, matheme is addressing all” (Badiou 2015b, p. 25); “the Idea” is a *pivot* because it plays a central role in Badiou. It is not irrelevant here that the same word (pivot) was used by Lacan to describe the importance of transference, which is “the pivot on which all of psychoanalytic treatment rests” (Lacan 1998, p. 132). One might say that for Badiou “the Idea” is the pivot from which everything is seen, thought, and *done*, since for Badiou thought itself is not the final goal: “what matters to me: the Idea and its development [devenir] in reality” (Badiou and Gauchet 2016, p. 55). What matters for Badiou is the deployment of “the Idea,” i.e., what might become of it. In this sense, as a *hypothesis*, a supposition of a certain knowledge, “the Idea” is also a precondition for producing *new knowledge*; as such, it always takes a form, but its task is also “to propose new form” (Badiou 2017d, p. 55). Hence, it is nothing but “a general scheme of thought that can give rise to concrete experiences and

¹⁸ I have borrowed this triplet, and the basic arguments for it, from Oliver Feltham’s argument in favor of Badiou’s proposition “mathematics is ontology,” deployed in the “Translator’s Preface” to Badiou’s *Being and Event* (see Feltham 2005, p. xxii).

¹⁹ The dimension of belief is an integral part of every Idea: “Traditional society is completely different, because it imposes a belief, and therefore an Idea.” (Badiou 2017a, p. 85)

²⁰ For a detailed development of this point, see Badiou 2010a, p. 238.

can thus be gradually embodied and verified”²¹; it is therefore a *decision* and a belief that cannot be rationally grounded²²; and yet, it is also a guiding and orienting *principle*. “The Idea” is nothing but a *matheme* that can be transferred and transmitted to others, and that operates in other worlds: it is, therefore, a *knot* of all of its features and registers; it is *eternal*, *universal*, and *transmundane*; finally, as such, it is the *pivot*.

However, “the Idea” differs from the notion of Idea in both Plato and in (vulgar) Platonism. If the former posits the Idea of the Good, or “the Idea of the Supreme Good,” Badiou parts ways with Plato, or at least with a certain dominant understanding of Plato. The Idea is not something general; it is not the Truth, but something local, singular, concrete. But first and foremost, “the True” is not the same as “the Good,” or “the Idea of the (Supreme) Good.” This means that Badiou distances himself from Plato on this point; this is evident from Badiou’s *Plato’s Republic*. His (re)interpretation of Plato focuses on three main points: 1) There is no division in Plato between the sensible and the intelligible; this world is all that we have—Plato’s thought is not dualistic at all. 2) The Greek term *ousia*, for which a proper translation is yet to be found, is not some kind of essence, entity, or substance, nor should it be translated as such, but “what of being exposes itself to thought” (“*ce qui de l’être s’expose à la pensée*”) as Badiou put

²¹ “I give the word ‘hypothesis’ a technical meaning, similar to the one it has in epistemology. A hypothesis, in this instance, isn’t a more or less fanciful assumption of the mind, a more or less credible invention of the imagination. No, I mean ‘hypothesis’ in the experimental sense, as a general scheme of thought that can give rise to concrete experiences and can thus be gradually embodied and verified. This meaning is closely akin to another part of my culture, my militant commitment. The communist hypothesis thus refers to the possibility and testing out of a scheme provided by the Idea—‘the communist Idea’.” (Badiou and Gauchet 2016, pp. 49–50)

²² One important reference I cannot go into here is Pascal, and the moment of the Pascalian wager in Badiou: “Ultimately life is the wager.” (Badiou 2010b, p. 509)

in his seminar of 19 May 2010. 3) “The Idea of (the Supreme) Good” is not to be understood in some moral or theological sense, but strictly in the sense of a principle, or an orientation towards *ousia*. At best, it provides a guarantee that we have “true ideas” and therefore “the Idea of the True.” These three points are scattered throughout many of Badiou’s seminars on Plato, but most clearly presented in his seminar of 14 April 2010. In Badiou’s published works, they are most clearly and concisely expressed in the following passage:

This sense of the word “Idea” instantiates my own interpretation of the Platonic idea, and particularly the “idea of the Good” [...]. By replacing the word “Good”—used by too many moralizing theologies from the early Neoplatonists on—with that of “True” we [...] can open up access to eternal, universal and, in this sense, transmundane truths. For this to come about, according to Plato, this experience must be set out “in truth,” with this immanence being understood in the strict sense that only inasmuch as it is set out *in* the element of truth can a particular object of the world of our experience be said to be known, not only in its particularity, but in its very being. That this object of the world is then grasped in its being, he adds, is because there is situated “in” truth that share of the object which only is in so far as it is exposed to thought. We are, as a result, at the point where the being of the object is indiscernible from what, of this being, is thinkable. This point of indiscernibility between the particularity of the object and the universality of the thought of the object is exactly what Plato names the Idea. Finally, as for the Idea itself, given that it only exists in its power to bring forth the object “in truth” and, hence, to uphold that there is something universal, it is not itself presentable because it *is* the presentation-to-the-true. In a word: there is no Idea of the Idea. This absence, moreover, can be named “Truth”. Exposing the thing in truth, the Idea is true and is, therefore, always the idea of the True, but the True is not an idea. // The configuration I’m proposing, by way of philosophy’s salvation, is basically a materialist transposition of this Platonic vision—unless, that is, Plato himself were already a materialist and to have created a *materialism of the Idea*. (Badiou 2011, pp. 105–107)

But if “the Idea” does not exist as a separate entity, how does it “exist”? It exists in a rather paradoxical manner, which can be rendered by Beckett’s words from *First Love* (1945): “But I have always spoken, no doubt always shall, of things that never existed, or that existed if you insist, no doubt always will, but not with the existence I ascribe to them” (quoted in Badiou 2017b, p. 257).

So, finally, *what* do we “have” when we “have the Idea”? Strictly speaking, nothing, since the Idea is a *localization of the void*; as Badiou points out:

Philosophy and psychoanalysis can be compossible, since the double paradoxical condition of mathematics and love *cross over at the point where the void is localized* in the disjunction of an un-known truth and a knowledge of that truth. This point, I maintain, is that of the Idea. Psychoanalysis and philosophy both ultimately demand that we adhere to Spinoza’s unfounded and un-foundable maxim: “*Habemus enim ideam veram*”, we in effect have, but as an effect of nothing, as *localization of the void*, a true idea. One, at least. (Badiou 2017b, p. 208)

As a localization²³ of the void, the Idea is a site of thought, an operator, a universal prescription for thought or for action directing them toward the “inexistent”; but the Idea is not the void itself, but that which localizes it. In a way, it is torn between nothing and everything: “[w]ell, in the thinkable, everything is Idea,” since “the Idea is the occurrence in beings of the thinkable” (Badiou 2002, pp. 90, 36). In other words: “The Idea is not specific to the time of the situated production of truths (lower case), nor is it a substance, fullness, purity, or perfection from which all else issues or to which all is subordinated; it is that which is thinkable as the

²³ Here, Badiou simultaneously both commends and criticizes Plato: Plato recognized that thought need not be only negative but could also be affirmative, which for him was secured by the Idea as construction of “a place of the Idea”; however, “his weakness is his incapability to bring to the end the localization of the Idea.” (Badiou 2017e, p. 31)

thought of each process of innovation and invention, of event and consequence, in whatever field of thought it takes place—political, artistic, scientific or amorous” (Bartlett et al. 2015, p. 31). In this context, the Idea is the name for “the immanence of truths,” as something that is never easy, spontaneous, or automatic, something rare, violent, and hard, but yet blissful and joyful: every real happiness is fidelity, and only marching under the imperative of the Idea, or the true idea, destines us for happiness.²⁴ And from this perspective, the Idea is yet another kind of a triplet: it is an excess; it is a gap or a rupture;²⁵ and it is an operator of mediation, or formalization. The Idea, first, is the name for “what exceeds our possibilities”: “In any period of time, in any sequence of history, it is important that we maintain a relationship with what exceeds our possibilities—with what, as an idea, exists beyond the natural needs of the human animal” (Badiou 2012b, p. 41). To put it differently: “If we agree to call ‘Idea’ that which both manifests itself in the world—what sets forth the being-there of a body—and is an exception to its transcendental logic, we will say, in line with Platonism, that to experience in the present the eternity that authorizes the creation of this present is to experience an Idea. We must therefore accept that for the materialist dialectic, ‘to live’ and ‘to live for an Idea’ are one and the same thing” (Badiou 2010b, p. 510). An Idea, therefore, has not only a dividing but also a unifying power: “Only an Idea divides, owing to its unifying power” (Badiou and Milner 2014, p. 155). This affirmative and unifying power of an Idea is implied by the sheer variety of signifiers by means of which Badiou—especially in *Logics of Worlds*, the *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, and in the *Communist Hypothesis*—tries

²⁴ See, in this context, Badiou 2015b, pp. 57–85, and 2016c, pp. 84–105. Also see the mention of “beatitude in the Spinozist sense” in Badiou 2008, p. 144.

²⁵ The moment of the rupture, cut, and interruption has always been crucial for Badiou; happiness, for instance, is defined as the “affirmative experience of an interruption of finitude.” (Badiou 2015b, p. 10) On rupture and Idea, see Badiou and Kakogianni 2015, p. 17.

to specify its function. In these works “the Idea” is qualified as: the “subjective operation,” “operator,” “operator of incorporation,” “mediation,” “operative mediation,” “integration,” “subjectivation of an interplay,” “what organizes subjectivation,” and as “abstract totalization.” Let me quote just two among the many illustrative passages: “The Idea is an operative mediation between the real and the symbolic, and always presents the individual with something that is located between the event and the fact” (Badiou 2010a, p. 246). But “the Idea” is not just a mediator or operator, it is also a kind of fundamental frame or base: “I name ‘Idea’ that upon which an individual’s representation of the world, including her- or himself, is based once s/he is bound to the faithful subject type through incorporation within the process of a truth. The Idea is that which makes the life of an individual, a human animal, orient itself according to the True. Or, put another way: the Idea is the mediation between the individual and the Subject of a truth—with ‘Subject’ here designating that which orientates a post-evental body in the world” (Badiou 2011, p. 105). The Idea, then, is a *mediation* between an individual and a subject, between body and truth, between the Symbolic and the Real. What does “the Idea” mediate? Does the process of mediation ever stop? Does it represent a reconciliation between two poles, or is there, rather, an irresolvable inner tension, a gap, that cannot be annihilated and abolished? Badiou writes:

We can call “idea” that which is at once immanent and transcendent. The idea presents itself as more powerful than ourselves and constitutes the measure of that which humanity is capable of: in this sense, it is transcendent; but it exists only precisely when it is represented and activated or incarnated in a body: in this sense, it is also immanent. As long as it isn’t immanent, it’s phantasmic. An idea is an orientation in existence which provides the measure of a power, all the while needing to be incarnated. The theatre, when it takes place, is a representation of the idea: we see bodies and people who speak and we see them struggle with the question of their

origin and what they are capable of. What the theatre shows is the tension between the transcendence and the immanence of the idea. (Badiou 2015a, pp. 56–57)

The task of concretely specifying all of this is left to *The Immanence of Truths* as a whole. I cannot go into it more specifically here; however, I would like to outline the importance of “the Idea” for Badiou’s project, which was constantly criticized for its supposed “dualism.” Jean-Toussaint Desanti presented an interesting overview of Badiou’s philosophy in which, *inter alia*, he claimed (following Parmenides’ reply that whoever does philosophy is two-headed): “The *dikrania* (two-headedness) proper to mortals must be fully assumed. The task of thought consists in connecting the two heads, which in the present instance means connecting two kinds of discursiveness” (Desanti 2004, p. 63). It seems that, in Badiou, there is always a rupture, a split—from the two processes in his *Theory of the Subject*, through the duo of event and situation in *Being and Event*, to the logics of the Two in love. However, this split is insurmountable only insofar as one stays at the level of “finitude,” while for Badiou we are well capable of being in touch with the Absolute. And it is precisely here that “the Idea” performs its role: “The philosopher is a worker in another sense: detecting, presenting and associating the truths of his or her time, reviving those that have been forgotten and denouncing inert opinion, s/he is the welder of separate worlds” (Badiou 2011, p. 25). “The Idea” is the name of the praxis that produces the new, and serves as a “mediating instance between the act of thought and the act of being” (Badiou 2004, p. 167). All of this implies that “the Idea” is not just any “Idea,” and that it is always “part of” and “in the service of” emancipatory project(s): “At the end of the day, every emancipatory politics presupposes an unconditioned prescription” (Badiou 2017b, p. 152).

However, here we have arrived at the most difficult and yet the most crucial problem, namely that of participation, appearing

in various disguises as participation in emancipatory politics, participation “in the True,” participation in “in the Idea.” At this crucial point, Badiou at once follows and deviates from Plato. However, in order to illustrate what is at stake in the question of participation, I would propose another path, and claim that Badiou somehow has to answer this question by way of rethinking the concept of “repetition.” Why is the concept of repetition so crucial (not only for Badiou, but for philosophy as such)? Because it is connected to the notion of the Absolute, as well as to the crucial concept of dialectics, namely that of *Aufhebung*.²⁶ The German term is notoriously difficult to translate into any language if one wishes to preserve its main meanings: to negate, to cancel, to leave, to pass behind, but simultaneously also to preserve and to lift up (English translations of *aufheben* range from “to abolish,” or “to suspend,” to “to sublate”). For Hegel, that which is *aufgehoben* is at the same time preserved; it has lost “something” (its immediacy), but it is not annihilated altogether. In my view, this problem is recapitulated in Badiou’s problematic of the “participation in the Idea,” as well as in the topic of “repetition.”

Badiou as “the philosopher of the new” has always been reluctant to use the term “repetition,” which for him is something oppressive and conservative. Instead, he has preferred other expressions, such as—in response to Žižek’s critique—“resurrection” (in *Logics of Worlds*), or subsequently “rebirth”: “the rebirth of History must also be a rebirth of the Idea” (Badiou 2012e, p. 6). Upon a closer look, we discover many other variants of this *re-* in Badiou’s opus: from the problem of the (re)commencement (of materialist dialectics) in his first philosophical text, via the effort

²⁶ See the first lecture of Badiou’s seminar *Immanence of Truths* (14 November, 2012), and Louise Burchill’s ingenious comments on the English translation of Hegel’s term *Aufhebung* in the “Translator’s Preface” to Badiou 2011, pp. viii–xxxiv (esp. x–xxiii).

to (re)do *The Communist Manifesto*, to the subsequent resurrection, (re)activation, (re)orientation, and (re)incorporation. *Re-, re-, re-!* What repeats itself here? In my view, we can discern no less than seven conceptions²⁷ of repetition in Badiou’s opus (the number itself is irrelevant). The first conception can be discerned, at a general level, in the relationship between philosophy and its conditions, between Truth and truths, while the second conceives of repetition as oppressive and relates it to the State and to Capital. The third and fourth conceptions result from Badiou’s 1985 claim that “we have to redo the *Manifesto* (of Marx and Engels).” The third conception compares our contemporary capitalism with the capitalism of the 1840s, while the fourth is contained in the very logic and the titles of his two *Manifestos for Philosophy* and the three volumes of *Being and Event*. The fifth conception is present in the *Theory of the Subject*. The sixth is a “creative repetition” of the philosophical gesture,²⁸ whereas the seventh presents Badiou’s fully developed mature conception of repetition, which is consistent with his conception of “the Idea.”

In the lecture “What repeats itself?” from his seminar *Immanence of Truths*,²⁹ as well as in the fourth chapter of *Immanence of Truths* (Badiou 2018b, pp. 135–50), Badiou splits repetition into two, i.e., into creative repetition and circular repetition. The main idea here is that circular repetition is the one that Sartre talked about—repetition that is supported in reality by the mechanism of the circulation of capital—whereas creative repetition has a

²⁷ I developed this claim in the paper “Badiou on Repetition” which I presented at the conference organized by the Hegelian society *Aufhebung* and titled “REPETITION/S: Performance and Philosophy” (Ljubljana, 22 September, 2016). The paper was developed further and published in Slovene: Klepec 2016.

²⁸ In one of his recent texts, Badiou fully recognized the fact that—to some extent—philosophy is always the same thing, always a repetition of the same act (see Badiou 2012b, pp. 1–40).

²⁹ Badiou 2014–2015 (session from 2 February, 2015). For a video clip of the lecture, see: <https://vimeo.com/119121890>.

different (eventual) temporality: it breaks out of the circle and identity; it repeats itself in the direction of the true. This comprises the necessity to begin again, to recommence, to “*re-entreprendre*,” to declare and to say again, “*re-dire*.” Here, what we have to repeat, to redo, is the Absolute. Creative repetition makes the Absolute occur, arise, appear; to create something means to say (again) that the Absolute is possible. This means to take part, to participate in “the Absolute” via “the Idea.” Note that in French the verb “*partager*” means to divide and to share, to have the same sentiments/affects as others. To take part and to partake in “the Idea,” then, is something repetitive and something that can be transmitted. Creative repetition is at the same time the creation of something new *and* declaring that the Absolute is here: “*le redire, le refaire, le refaçonner, le recréer*,” says Badiou in his Seminar and in his book (Badiou 2018b, p. 149). And that, finally, is what “the Idea” is the name of: the (re)creation/(re)doing/(re)working of the Absolute.

Bibliography

- Badiou, Alain (1989–1990) “La République de Platon” (unpublished seminar); available online: <http://www.entretiens.asso.fr/Badiou/89-90.htm> (last accessed: February 22, 2019).
- (1991) “Lacan et Platon: le mathème est-il une idée?” *Lacan avec les philosophes*, 133–54 (Paris: Albin Michel).
- (1999) *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Norman Madarasz (Albany, NY: SUNY Press).
- (2002) *Briefings on Existence: A Short Treatise on Transitory Ontology*, trans. Norman Madarasz (Albany, NY: SUNY Press).
- (2003) *On Beckett*, trans. Nina Power and Alberto Toscano (Manchester, UK: Clinamen Press).
- (2004) *Theoretical Writings*, trans. and ed. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano (London & New York: Continuum).

- (2005) *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press).
- (2007a) "The Concept of a Model Forty Years Later: An Interview with Alain Badiou," *The Concept of a Model: An Introduction to the Materialist Epistemology of Mathematics*, trans. and ed. Zachary Luke Frazer and Tzuchien Tho (Melbourne: re.press).
- (2007b) *Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge, UK & Malden, MA: Polity Press).
- (2007–2010) "Pour aujourd'hui: Platon!" (unpublished seminar); available online: <http://www.entretiens.asso.fr/Badiou/seminaire.htm> (last accessed: February 22, 2019).
- (2008) *Number and Numbers*, trans. Robin Mackay (Cambridge, UK & Malden, MA: Polity Press).
- (2010a) *The Communist Hypothesis*, trans. David Macey and Steve Corcoran (London & New York: Verso 2010).
- (2010b) *Logics of Worlds. Being and Event II*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London & New York: Continuum).
- (2010c) *Five Lessons on Wagner*, trans. Susan Spitzer (London & New York: Verso).
- (2011) *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Louise Burchill (Cambridge, UK & Malden, MA: Polity Press).
- (2012a) *La République de Platon* (Paris: Fayard).
- (2012b) *Philosophy for Militants*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London & New York: Verso).
- (2012c) *In Praise of Love*, trans. Peter Bush (London: The New Press).
- (2012d) *Les années rouges* (Paris: Les prairies ordinaires).
- (2012e) *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London & New York: Verso).
- (2013a) (with Fabien Tarby) *Philosophy and the Event*, trans. Louise Burchill (Cambridge, UK & Malden, MA: Polity Press).
- (2013b) *Plato's Republic. A Dialogue in Sixteen Chapters, with a Prologue and an Epilogue*, trans. Suzan Spitzer (Cambridge, UK & Malden, MA: Polity Press).
- (2013c) *Éloge du théâtre* (Paris: Flammarion).

- (2014) *Rhapsodie pour le théâtre* (Paris: PUF).
- (2014–2015) “L’immanence des vérités (3)” (unpublished seminar); available online: <http://www.entretemps.asso.fr/Badiou/14-15.htm> (last accessed: February 26, 2019).
- (2015a) *In Praise of Theatre*, trans. Andrew Bielski (Cambridge, UK & Malden, MA: Polity Press).
- (2015b) *Métaphysique du bonheur réel* (Paris: PUF).
- (2016a) “General Introduction to the Seoul Conference,” *The Idea of Communism. Vol. 3. The Seoul Conference*, ed. Alex Taek-Gwang Lee and Slavoj Žižek (London & New York: Verso).
- (2016b) *L’Un. Descartes, Platon, Kant, 1983–1984* (Paris: Fayard).
- (2016c) (with Gilles Haéri) *In Praise of Mathematics*, trans. Susan Spitzer (Cambridge, UK & Malden, MA: Polity Press).
- (2017a) *The True Life*, trans. Susan Spitzer (Cambridge, UK & Malden, MA: Polity Press).
- (2017b) *Conditions*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London & New York: Bloomsbury).
- (2017c) *Que signifie “changer le monde”? 2010–2012* (Paris: Fayard).
- (2017d) “Entretien avec Giovanni Minozzi,” Alain Badiou, *De l’idéologie à l’idée. Sous la direction de Giovanni Minozzi* (Paris: Éditions Mimésis Visage).
- (2017e) *Que signifie “changer le monde”? Le Séminaire 2010–2012* (Paris: Fayard).
- (2018a) *On a raison de se révolter* (Paris: Fayard).
- (2018b) *Immanence des vérités: L’Être et l’événement 3* (Paris: Fayard).
- Badiou, Alain, and Jean-Claude Milner (2014) *Controversies: Politics and Philosophy in Our Time*, trans. Susan Spitzer (Cambridge, UK & Malden, MA: Polity Press).
- Badiou Alain, and Marcel Gauchet (2016) *What Is To Be Done? A Dialogue on Communism, Capitalism, and the Future of Democracy*, trans. Susan Spitzer (Cambridge, UK & Malden, MA: Polity Press).
- Badiou, Alain, and Maria Kakogianni (2015) *Entretien platonicien* (Paris: Lignes).
- Balibar, Etienne (2004) “The History of Truth: Alain Badiou in French Philosophy,” *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, 21–38, ed. Peter Hallward (London & New York: Continuum).

- Bartlett, A. J. (2011) *Badiou and Plato. An Education by Truths* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).
- Bartlett, A. J., Clemens, Justin, and Jon Roffe (2015) *Lacan Deleuze Badiou* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).
- Bensaïd, Daniel (2004) “Alain Badiou and the Miracle of the Event,” *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, 94–105, ed. Peter Hallward (London & New York: Continuum).
- Bosteels, Bruno (2011) *Badiou and Politics* (Durham, NC & London: Duke University Press).
- Brassier, Ray (2007) *Nihil Unbound. Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke, UK & New York: Palgrave Macmillan).
- Burchill, Louise (2013) “Translator’s Introduction,” Alain Badiou with Fabien Tarby, *Philosophy and the Event* (Cambridge, UK & Malden, MA: Polity Press).
- Deleuze, Gilles (2001) *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London & New York: Continuum).
- Desanti, Jean-Toussaint (2004) “Some Remarks on the Intrinsic Ontology of Alain Badiou,” *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, 59–66, ed. Peter Hallward (London & New York: Continuum).
- Feltham, Oliver (2005) “Translator’s Preface,” Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London & New York: Continuum).
- (2008) *Alain Badiou: Live Theory* (London & New York: Continuum).
- Hallward, Peter (2003) *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis, MN & London: University of Minnesota Press).
- Jones, Campbell (2018) “Where Thought Is Not,” *Badiou and his Interlocutors*, 177–91, ed. A. J. Bartlett and Justin Clemens (London & New York: Bloomsbury).
- Kierkegaard, Søren (2009) *Repetition and Philosophical Crumbs*, trans. M. G. Piety (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Klepec, Peter (2016) “Badiou in ponavljanje,” *Problemi* 54, 9–10:175–214.
- (2017) “Badioujev Platon,” *Problemi* 55, 5–6:145–83.
- Lacan, Jacques (1998) *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (London & New York: W. W. Norton & Company).

- Ruda, Frank (2015) *For Badiou. Idealism without Idealism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press).
- Toscano, Alberto (2004) "Communism as Separation," *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, 138–49, ed. Peter Hallward (London & New York: Continuum).

Abstracts

Varieties of the Transcendental in Western Marxism

Slavoj Žižek

Contrary to today's few remaining radical Leftist theorists, whose main premise is that the Western Marxism has lost contact with the Third World revolutionary movements, this article argues that it is in fact the Third World Communist radicalism which has lost contact with authentic emancipatory content of Marxism. The main novelty of Western Marxism, the article further argues, resides in its rehabilitation of the transcendental dimension. If at its inception, Western Marxism was a Hegelian reaction to the progressive neo-Kantianism which was (more or less) the official philosophy of the reformist Second International social democracy, neo-Kantians insisted on the gap between objective social reality and the normative realm of autonomous ethical goals which cannot be deduced from reality (they reject this option as a case of illegitimate determinism which reduces the Ought to the positive order of Being); which is why they referred to their political stance as that of "Ethical socialism." However, although revolutionary Marxism aims at overcoming all metaphysical dualities, its history is traversed by the gap between realism and transcendentalism: while the Soviet version of dialectical materialism proposes a new version of naïve-realist ontology (a vision of all of reality with human history as its special region, a topic of historical materialism), Western Marxism proposes collective human praxis as the ultimate transcendental horizon of our philosophical understanding.

Key words: cosmology, Marxism, materialism, ontology,
the transcendental

Marx and Manatheism

Eric L. Santner

In this essay, I argue that Claude Lévi-Strauss' critical engagement with the concept of *mana* in the writings of Marcel Mauss and Émile Durkheim offers a new perspective on the nature of work in capitalist societies. Supplementing Marx's notion of the fetishism of the commodity, I argue that the so-called labor theory of value comes down to the claim that what is really at stake in the manufacture of commodities is *mana-facture*, the production of a spectral substance that "enchants" the social relations of secular modernity. I follow Lévi-Strauss in reading *mana* as an enigmatic signifier that holds the place of a void of knowledge that can never be made whole but only elaborated by historically specific modes of "mana-ical" enjoyment.

Key words: branding, fetishism, Lévi-Strauss, mana, Marx, political economy, political theology, value

Home Economics: Why We Treat Objects Like Women

Noam Yuran

Anyone but avowed economists would suspect that money today is an obscene object. The question is what economic theory would look like had it acknowledged this. This article traces the obscenity of money to the sexual economy of capitalism as it surfaces in the contexts of marriage, prostitution, and love. With the progress of capitalism, marriage was separated from the social production, circulation, and exchange of goods and money. Obviously, this separation could not have taken place without affecting the nature of goods, money, and exchange. It tied the workings of goods and money to what money can't buy. Capitalist money is obscene because it is related to what it can't buy. Rather than a universal equalizer, obscene money upsets equivalence and generates excesses. It fosters an alternative view of the capitalist market as a system of inherent imbalance.

Key words: Adam Smith, capitalism, love, luxury, Mandeville, marriage, Marx, money, prostitution, sexual economy, Veblen

Reflections on the Me Too Movement and Its Philosophy *Jean-Claude Milner*

The Me Too movement initiated a radical paradigm change in the representation of sexual relations. One of the main conceptions of coitus goes back to Kant; it relies on the contractual form and mutual consent. The philosophy of the Me Too movement rejects this approach in a way that shares a striking analogy with Marx's criticism of the labor contract. Both doctrines claim that so-called contracts are in fact based on an inequality between a weaker and a stronger party. Women, according to Me Too, are systematically wronged, because they structurally belong to the weaker side, just as workers do according to Marx. Yet, civil rights are often referred to contractual forms in Western societies; consequently, their validity must be questioned whenever sexual relations of any kind are involved. Such a philosophy cannot be considered as self-evident. Moreover, its relevance for non-Western societies is debatable.

Key words: coitus, contract, inequality, Kant, Lacan, Marx, structural weakness, women

Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself?! *Alenka Zupančič*

Reference to Christianity, and to the Christian tradition, is one of the key ingredients of the expanding right-wing identity politics in Europe (and more broadly, in the West), including its more or less explicit nationalism and racism. The commandment to love your neighbor as yourself obviously presents this politics with a problem by seemingly undermining "our" identity. This necessitates a severe (re)interpretation of its meaning. This article looks into some examples of this interpretational work, and how it affects the figure of the neighbor. At the same time, it interrogates the reasons why Freud has situated this commandment at the very core of what he called "discontent" in our "civilization" (*das Unbehagen in der Kultur*). What is this aggressiveness that tends to emerge together with, and is inseparable from, the figure of the neighbor? To answer this

question, this article takes recourse to (Lacanian) psychoanalysis, not so as to steer away from the political dimension of the question, but rather to help us work our way back to it.

Key words: anti-value, capitalism, Good, love, Marx, neighbor, value

Lacan and Monotheism: Not Your Father's Atheism, Not Your Atheism's Father

Adrian Johnston

In terms of the critique of religion, a striking parallel exists between the Feuerbach-Marx and Freud-Lacan relationships. The fourth of Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach" faults Feuerbach's gesture of reducing "the holy family" of theology to "the earthly family" of anthropology for not carrying out the additional labor of critiquing the latter in turn. Likewise, Lacan, in his later reassessments of Freud's Oedipus complex and myth of the primal horde, takes Freud to task for failing to be thoroughly atheistic in leaving the figure of the earthly father, to which he reduces the heavenly father, deified (as all-loving, all-powerful, etc.). By Lacan's lights, such Freudian texts as *Totem and Taboo* protect the very essence of Judeo-Christian monotheism by preserving a vision of paternity central to such theism—and this despite Freud's vehement atheism. Furthermore, Lacan explicitly situates himself in the same post-Hegelian atheism-in-Christianity lineage to which Feuerbach, Marx, Chesterton, Bloch, and Žižek also belong. Lacan's critical reflections on religion generally, and Christianity especially seek to radicalize this atheism. Through examining these facets of Lacan, I conclude by raising questions for the Hegel-inspired tradition concerning me here, particularly: Can an atheism *in* Christianity ever become an atheism *after* and *beyond* Christianity? Can the determinate negation of an immanent critique of religion eventually morph into an absolute negation no longer dependent on and beholden to what it negates?

Key words: atheism, Christianity, Feuerbach, Freud, Hegel, Lacan, Marx, religion

The Sub-Ego: Description of An Inferior Observing Agency

Robert Pfaller

The children Gods of older religions (like Eros in ancient Greek mythology) deserve some attention from psychoanalytic theory: Do they not show us that older cultures felt observed—and obliged—by something which they situated (morally and intellectually) well below their ego? Following this idea, one should regard the lower agency in Freud's topography of the psychic apparatus not as an "Id" from which "drives" stem, but rather as a "sub-ego" that issues somehow silly, but still obligatory duties. Ambivalent matters and practices, such as drinking alcohol, love, sex, carnival, sports, art, etc., were ambivalent also for the ancient Greeks; yet by regarding them as duties imposed from "below," they were able to give them a sublime quality by celebrating them, with celebration providing the required obligatory, collective, and social character to these matters. We moderns, on the contrary, feeling observed only from above, cannot see in those "folies" anything but appalling outbursts of individual, anti-social drives that have to be tamed. Therefore, the other who indulges in a certain pleasure is today in most cases perceived as a "thief of enjoyment," i.e., a kind of anti-social, uncastrated "primordial father." Yet perceiving the enjoying other as somebody following a duty from below would allow us to experience the other as castrated, and his pleasures as something that can be shared in solidarity.

Key words: drives as duties, infantile Gods, observation from below, sub-ego, sublimation

From Public Opinion to Public Knowledge: Hegel's State as an Epistemic Institution

Zdravko Kobe

In this paper, I attempt to explore the connection between the political and the logical in Hegel's philosophy, presenting his conception of the state as an institution of knowledge, that is to say, as an epistemic, even

philosophical organization. Throughout my exploration, special attention is given to Hegel's novel theory of public opinion and the ways in which it can be transformed into public knowledge. I conclude with an attempt to formulate some problems of the modern state in Hegelian terms, as well as proposing some Hegel-inspired suggestions for their solution.

Key words: ethical substance, politics of knowledge, political representation, public opinion, public reason, state

The Endgame of Aesthetics: From Hegel to Beckett

Mladen Dolar

This paper first treats the problematic and paradoxical status of Hegel's *Aesthetics*. The major paradox is that it coincides with the advent of the autonomy of art (*l'art pour l'art*) while at the same time proclaiming the "end of art," art having become obsolete as a stage that the progress of spirit has already left behind once it reached its full autonomy. The question is posed about the problematic framework of the Hegelian progression of spirit and its teleology which seemingly testifies to Hegel's inveterate optimism—"we are constantly progressing towards the best." As opposed to this, the second part of the paper scrutinizes one of Beckett's last texts, *Worstward Ho* (1983), which seems to be the furthest removed from Hegel's optimism. The paper proposes five perspectives from which to consider the relationship of Hegel and Beckett and the shift that happened in the century and a half between the two: the question of progression ("On"); gray on gray; coming too late; the problem of how to conceive the end (Beckett's *Endgame*); and the problem of assessing aesthetic value. The paper tries to measure the distance between Hegel's "Bestward Ho" and Beckett's "Worstward Ho," taking them as a Janus figure of a parallaxic shift.

Key words: aesthetics, Beckett, end of art, Hegel, negation, progression, spirit, teleology, *Worstward Ho*

So Fake, So Real! Josephine and the Voice of Death

Frank Vande Veire

Kafka's story *Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk* is about a singer who feigns investing all her power into a singing that is barely audible. Producing only the empty signifiers of a singing performance, she gives the spectacle of a voice that is lacking. This lacking voice expresses her speechlessness to which death compels her. That is why the community of mice, including the ones who are mocking her, are fascinated by her. In Josephine's "frail little voice" they recognize their own speechlessness in the face of an indeterminate enemy which stands for death, and in that secret silence that is never openly admitted they more than ever form a community. Never is Josephine more "authentic" in her "being towards death" than when feigning to lose herself in a song wherein she presents her voice as a hidden object.

Key words: Agamben, art, death, dialectic, Hegel, Kafka, Lacan, voice, object *a*

This Beast is Complex: Imposture in Plato's *Sophist*

Alexi Kukuljevic

In this paper, I argue that the figure of the sophist should be thought as an impostor. Drawing a conceptual distinction between posing or being a poser and imposture, I develop an interpretation of the figure of the sophist as a form of philosophical impersonation that seeks through its use of speech to incarnate non-being. I thus read Plato's dialogue *Sophist* as an effort to determine and frame a "subject" defined by its present absence. This is what the Eleatic Stranger, in the dialogue, calls an imitator. The sophistical subject who makes of himself an "apparition" takes refuge through an art of sophistication: a kind of practical know-how that works with non-being. By putting non-being into practice, sophistry makes use of language's capacity to slip from the hold of signification. The sophist is not a figure who does not know what he does not know. Like the philosopher, rather, he knows that he does not know, but unlike him, he is actively dishonest about what it is that he knows. This makes

him philosophically villainous, trading like Melville's Confidence-Man on the trust implicit in speech (*logos*). The effort of Plato's dialogue is to pin down speech's capacity to slip from determination—a slippage that turns the aims of education into something ridiculous, a joke. The sophist causes *paideía* (education) to slip into *paidía* (joking around). Plato's dialogue takes this joke, this play (*paidía*) seriously, in earnest (*spoudē*), by thinking the absent place that such slippage implies, pinning absence to the form of otherness. The difference between sophistry and philosophy thus hinges on the capacity to draw a distinction between a form of non-being that is and a form of non-being that is not: a difference that is perilous like every encounter with one's double.

Key words: absence, being, confidence-man, difference, dishonesty, Heidegger's Sophist, imitation, impersonation, imposture, logos, mimesis, non-being, nothing, Other, performance, Plato, posing, presence, Sophist, sophistry, speech, subjectivity, trust

On “the Idea” in Badiou

Peter Klepec

This text presents an overview of the topic of “the Idea” in Alain Badiou's opus. It attempts to account for its prominent place, as well as to determine the exact role it plays in Badiou's philosophy. Written almost exclusively as “the Idea,” the concept stands for several tasks. It is simultaneously “a compass” that orients us in these disoriented times, and a banner of Platonism that evokes, provokes, and fights for the legacies of Plato and Communism. As a name for thinking and acting, “the Idea” is an operator and a mediator that somehow connects two poles of every truth-process: contemporaneity and eternity, finitude and infinitude, etc. The text proposes to think the concept through various triplets that specify its role: hypothesis, principle, decision; matheme, knot, pivot; eternity, universality, transmundanity; excess, gap, operator or mediator, etc. Finally, it addresses the question as to why we participate in “the Idea”? The text claims that the answer lies in Badiou's (up until very recently missing) theory of repetition: while himself reluctant

to use the term “repetition,” or even opposed to it, instead preferring other concepts such as “resurrection,” “rebirth,” “redoing,” etc., Badiou has, however, in the course of time spontaneously produced no less than seven different conceptions of repetition, of which the latest, “creative” as opposed to “circular” repetition, presents a way of simultaneously producing the new and to repeat, re-declare, and re-touch the Absolute.

Key words: Badiou, idea, operator, participation, Plato, triplet

Notes on Contributors

Mladen Dolar is a Professor and Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. His principal areas of research are psychoanalysis, modern French philosophy, German idealism, and art theory. He has lectured extensively at universities in the United States and across Europe. He is the author of over one hundred papers in scholarly journals and collective volumes. In addition to his ten books published in Slovenian, his books include, most notably, *A Voice and Nothing More* (MIT Press 2006, translated into five languages) and, with Slavoj Žižek, *Opera's Second Death* (Routledge 2001, also translated into several languages).

Adrian Johnston is Chair of and Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque and a faculty member at the Emory Psychoanalytic Institute in Atlanta. His most recent books are *Irrepressible Truth: On Lacan's "The Freudian Thing"* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) and *A New German Idealism: Hegel, Žižek, and Dialectical Materialism* (Columbia University Press, 2018). Moreover, *Prolegomena to Any Future Materialism, Volume Two: A Weak Nature Alone* will be published by Northwestern University Press in September 2019. With Todd McGowan and Slavoj Žižek, he is a co-editor of the book series *Diaeresis* at Northwestern University Press.

Peter Klepec is a Research Adviser in the Institute of Philosophy of the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, and an Associate Professor at the Postgraduate school ZRC-SAZU. His main areas of research are contemporary French philosophy, German idealism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, and critique of ideology.

Zdravko Kobe teaches Classical German Philosophy at the University of Ljubljana. He has published four books on Kant's theoretical and practical philosophy and numerous articles, especially on Kant, Hegel, and contemporary philosophy. He is the Slovenian translator of classical philosophical texts such as Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and Hegel's *Science of Logic*.

Alexi Kukuljevic is University Assistant in the Art Theory department at The University of Applied Arts in Vienna. He is the author of *Liquidation World: On the Art of Living Absently* (MIT Press, 2017). He is currently working on a book entitled *Like Hell It Is* addressing the vertiginous intersection between comedy and horror.

Jean-Claude Milner was born in Paris in 1941. His academic specialty is linguistics. His interests include Lacanian theory, political philosophy, and literary criticism. He was the president of the Collège international de philosophie from 1997 to 2000 and a professor of linguistics in Paris until 2001. His latest book, a conversation with Philippe Petit, is *Considérations sur l'Europe* (Éditions du Cerf, 2016).

Robert Pfaller is Professor of Philosophy and Cultural Theory at the University of Art and Industrial Design in Linz, Austria, the founding member of the Viennese psychoanalytic research group “stuzzicadenti,” the 2015 recipient of the “Best Book Award” by the American Board and Academy of Psychoanalysis (ABAPsa) for *The Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions without Owners* (Verso, 2014), and the 2007 “The Missing Link” award by the Psychoanalytisches Seminar Zürich (PSZ). His latest books include *Erwachsenensprache: Über ihr Verschwinden aus Politik und Kultur* (Fischer, 2017), *Interpassivity: The Aesthetics of Delegated Enjoyment* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), and *Wofür es sich zu leben lohnt: Elemente materialistischer Philosophie* (Fischer, 2011).

Eric L. Santner is the Philip and Ida Romberg Distinguished Service Professor in Modern Germanic Studies at the University of Chicago. He works at the intersection of literature, philosophy, psychoanalysis, political theory, and religious thought. His books include: *Friedrich Hölderlin: Narrative Vigilance and the Poetic Imagination* (Rutgers UP, 1986); *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (Cornell UP, 1990); *My Own Private Germany: Daniel Paul Schreber's Secret History of Modernity* (Princeton UP, 1996); *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (The University of Chicago Press, 2001); *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (The University of Chicago Press, 2006); *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (with Slavoj Žižek and Kenneth Reinhard; The University of Chicago Press, 2005); *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (The University of Chicago Press, 2011). He edited the German Library Series volume of works by Friedrich Hölderlin and co-edited, with

Moishe Postone, *Catastrophe and Meaning: The Holocaust and the Twentieth Century* (The University of Chicago Press, 2003). His work has been translated into German, Spanish, French, Korean, Hebrew, Polish, Italian, Portuguese, and Slovenian. He delivered the Tanner Lectures in Human Values at UC Berkeley in the spring of 2014; they appeared in 2015 with Oxford University Press under the title, *The Weight of All Flesh: On the Subject-Matter of Political Economy*. A new book, *Sovereignty, Inc.: Three Inquiries in Politics and Enjoyment*, co-authored with Aaron Schuster and William Mazzarella, will appear in fall 2019.

Frank Vande Veire is a Belgian philosopher. He writes on philosophy, art, and literature. He wrote a prizewinning collection of critical essays on art, a survey of the history of the philosophy of art, a study on enjoyment in contemporary culture, a study on Žižek and Kant, and the “pornographic” novel *Blossoming Agatha*. He teaches at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent, Belgium.

Noam Yuran is a Senior Lecturer in the Graduate Program for Science, Technology and Society at the Bar-Ilan University, Israel. He is the author of *What Money Wants: An Economy of Desire* (Stanford University Press, 2014).

Alenka Zupančič is a Slovene philosopher and social theorist. She is a Research Advisor in the Institute of Philosophy of the Research Center of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, and a visiting professor at the European Graduate School (Saas-Fee, Switzerland). Notable for her work at the intersection of philosophy and psychoanalysis, she is the author of numerous articles and books, including *What Is Sex?* (MIT Press, 2017); *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (MIT Press, 2008); *Why Psychoanalysis: Three Interventions* (NSU Press, 2008); *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche’s Philosophy of the Two* (MIT Press, 2003) and *Ethics of the Real: Kant and Lacan* (Verso, 2000).

Slavoj Žižek is a Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, the International Director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities at the University of London, and a professor of philosophy and psychoanalysis at the European Graduate School (Saas-Fee, Switzerland). His latest books include *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (Verso, 2012), *Absolute Recoil: Towards A New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (Verso, 2014), and *Like a Thief in Broad Daylight: Power in the Era of Post-Humanity* (Allen Lane, 2018).

Tadej Golob
writer
Leninov park, 2018

She put on shorts and a shirt that was too big and almost resembled a student, and not even a student about to graduate. She held a Mercator's bag ...

Bus station Mercator
Ljubljana

WE HAVE BEEN ENTERING YOUR LIVES FOR OVER SEVENTY YEARS.

Dan D
PLAC under former hipermarket
Mercator, Novo mesto

INTO YOUR BOOKS, BUS STOPS, MUSIC, SQUARES, AND STREETS.



**WE DO GOOD.
FOR OVER 70 YEARS.**



Mercator, d. d., Dunajska 107, 1000 Ljubljana