

CRISIS & CRITIQUE

CRISIS & CRITIQUE
VOLUME 2 / ISSUE 1, 2015

Dialectical Materialism Collective

CRISIS & CRITIQUE

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SECOND ISSUE
VOLUME II / ISSUE 1, 2015

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ISSN 2311-5475

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Introduction

Agon Hamza & Frank Ruda

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Today it seems obvious, even self-evident that religion is back at the forefront of political thought. Religious commitment is not simply a peculiar side factor, an epiphenomenon of contemporary socio-political situations; rather, it seems to determine them from within. In such a (historical) situation it may not only seem plausible, but is rather imperative, to again ask the old and often raised question of how to conceive of the relation between politics and religion. Raising the question does come with at least four conceptual options: 1. It may be that religion still stands in the centre of political thought, and practice proper, and hence politics needs to be read as a continuation of religion with other means (previously, “thinkers” like Carl Schmitt defended such a position). If this were true and convincing, the concatenation between religion and politics would in one way or the other delineate a transcendental structure of political thought as such. 2. It may be that religion is the opposite of political practice, such that religious commitments and orientations hinder, block or impede politics from within, and thereby religion would be nothing but an obstacle to politics (proper) (Hegel at least in some sense was a proponent of this). From these two first options follows: 3. It may be that politics needs to embrace, include, or at least integrate, religious commitments and thought as that which either mediates between private and individual life and political collective organisation and practice or as that which is what makes the very stuff that again makes the social bond stick. Religious belief, then, would be precisely the very raw (immaterial) material which makes any social bond, any political thing into a social bond or political thing (Simon Critchley currently advocates a comparable position). Or: 4. Politics to be politics proper needs to, not only take a distance, but exorcise all religious elements from its terrain, simply to remain political and not regress to private modes of believing this or that thing. As unsatisfying these four options may be, this overly abstract schematisation clarifies one thing: raising the question of how to understand the relation between politics and religion, of politics and theology today implies to raise the question of how (collective, individual or anonymous) belief and political practices, organisation(s) are related. And, more precisely, that it is the very relation between politics and religion that needs to be put into the focus of investigation.

That this relation is an intricate one was already clear to Hegel, who claimed in an early, yet rarely read text on “love” that one needs to overcome the assumption that one can simply derive the concept of a political organisation, community, etc. from an unquestioned and

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allegedly self-evident form of religious faith. For Hegel, it were precisely some forms of religious belief that seemed internally consistent and capable to justify and ground a just and free political community, which ultimately proved highly problematic. The problematic outcomes of these belief-systems, if realised politically, not only brings out some implicit and inconsistent presuppositions they nonetheless relied upon (such that one is able to judge the position from the perspective of its outcome, of its consequences), rather it enables the insight into the true problematic assumption that is at stake here: the problem is not only that one gets from a maybe inconsistent religious belief system to an inconsistent political model, the problem is that the belief system is inconsistent and hence religious (any religion, Hegel thinks, is at least in some sense inconsistent, otherwise it would not be religion), precisely because it implies the belief that one could derive a political model from it. The inconsistency thus concerns the assumption that there is, or can be, a relation between religion and politics. It concerns the very idea that one can infer a politics from religion, and thereby presuppose some kind of stable, given relation between the two fields in question.

Hegel's short piece argues as follows: He begins with a problematisation of the relation between the political as much as religious concept of equality and argues that the assumption that there can be an objective equality of believers produces a peculiar kind of paradox. Why? Because if one starts from the idea that one deals with an equality of believers, one starts from an individual perspective, since belief cannot but be the belief of an individual. If one then seeks to generalise and apply the idea of individual belief to more than just one individual, and if one therefore seeks to draw political consequences from what is a formally religious, one assumes that all individuals that are considered to be equal share one, and essentially one only, objective predicate: namely that they belief the way they do. Yet, and this is where Hegel's criticism of this model truly hits ground, such a train of thought defines the equality of all individuals that partake in the political community by an objective trait, a property that all individuals share, namely that they all believe in the same manner. But, if what grounds equality is an objective property all equals share, this means one ultimately speaks of an (Aristotelian concept of) equality of distribution. But, and this is where things get problematic for Hegel, if one argues that belief is in fact objectively equally distributed, because it is shared by all individuals, one encounters a problem, namely a problem of measurability.

How to actually find a measure that may be able to depict if in terms of belief the others are actually equal to me or not? The only way to do this is to do precisely what one does not want to do. One seeks to relate to the others as equal and hence as individuals, precisely because one has to find a measure, one relates to them not as equals but through the mediation of this very measure (which is, and this makes sense worse, not even a measure properly speaking, as it is actually impossible to judge if someone believes in the same way, in the intensity, as I do). That is to say, one relates to them as being equal with regard to a certain possession, they posses the same amount of belief that I take myself to posses. The problem now is that this very possession (i.e. belief) is not a possession (belief is subjective and *not* objective - which is a trivial thing to state). This means that the very idea of measurability is inconsistent from the very beginning. Ultimately, this is Hegel's argument, the attempt to derive a political idea of equality from an idea of individual belief by means of objectifying it and generalizing it ends up with a result which it neither wanted nor was able to avoid: namely that one thereby has to treat all others as if they were objects, and not as individuals and hence not as equals. In the very attempt of realising equality, equality is evacuated and abolished. This is what Max Stirner will later openly embrace. Hegel's claim is that this (deriving political concepts from religious ones) leads to a strange effect, namely to an equality of objects, which ultimately only proves that there is a strange way from religion to capitalism. Hegel's critique is, thus, related to what one may call religion as capitalism (he therein more or less openly follows Martin Luther) and much later Walter Benjamin will argue, repeating and modifying some of Hegel's argument, against capitalism as religion (nowadays again taken up in a modified form by Jean-Pierre Dupuy).

To publish an issue of *Crisis and Critique* on "Politics and Theology Today" against this background means for us to emphasise the problematic, peculiar nature of the very relation between religion and politics (today). This is more than just a tautology. We rather thereby seek to emphasise that one should not all too easily accept the idea of a complicated or uncomplicated, problematic or unproblematic derivability of politics from religion or vice versa. One, thus, should not simply accept the assumption that there is a relation between politics and religion. Because one may argue with Hegel (and Benjamin) that as soon as one tries to deduce political practice, action or orientation from religious beliefs or vice versa, the danger lurking in the back is

(maybe surprisingly, maybe unsurprisingly) the danger of capitalism, capitalising the one or the other. This is why the question needs to be raised if there are other options that exceed the idea of a derivability of one of the two terms (religion or politics) from the other? Maybe one even should go as far as to start from the assumption that there is no relation between politics and religion (with the very emphasis on both the “is” and the “no”)?

Against this background it is clear that more apparent, more pressing questions emerge, too, such as: why is it that religion is returning with a vengeance? That is to say, why is religion returning in the age of the alleged destitution of its scope and validity? It seems as if in an age of ideological confusion, in which emancipatory politics has mostly disappeared from the current agenda and from the stratum of thinkability, religion gives meaning to the sufferings and plights of the poor. It seems to be giving hope to the hopeless, and orientation to those who otherwise seems to be lost in disorientation. How are we to understand this? The return of the religious calls for closer examination of what today is conceived as ‘religious fundamentalism.’ The return of religion in the form of fundamentalisms within the age of late global capitalism appears to be a necessary ingredient not only of capitalism but it fundamentalism also seems to be, within this context, the constitutive form religious life will have to turn to (at one point or another). The contradictions between politics and religion in our present situation have reached such a level that it requires a new reconfiguration of these components. This is where philosophy may prove useful. The job of the philosopher is, among other things, to draw lines of demarcations not only between different fields but also within the singular practices as well. In this sense, one should raise the question if fundamentalism is ultimately and conceptually a religious problem? An initial response may be that fundamentalism is that element which always-already sacrifices the authentic religious experience (if there is such a thing!) and thus fundamentalism is not a genuinely religious problem or phenomenon. In fact, it seems rather that fundamentalism renders visible the very lack of religious belief. If the commonsense endorses the idea that fundamentalism is essentially a religious problem, namely a matter of “too much religion”, of a too dogmatic belief-system neglecting the modern worlds as it is, philosophical questioning may bring us to see that fundamentalism rather appears at the point where authentic religious belief is lacking.

Following this, we can go on with another distinction, between

religion and theology, whose dichotomy is certainly not new, given that it can be traced back ever since the appearance of the monotheistic religions. The basic distinction between the two is that theology is the ideological mystification of religion. Religion is a doctrine that is concerned with the internal contradictions in given societies, or other forms of social organisations, questions of equality, et cetera. Authentic religion is the enterprise that always has the place for the excluded, marginalised, the poor, etc. In this sense, religion is, say in Latin America, or can be concerned with, say, pedagogical work with the peasants or with the ‘collective poor’ - a category that on a formal level, seems even broader category than what was analysed by Marx through his concept of the proletariat. Theology on the other hand is an ideological formation that brings about, or exclusively deals, with an abstract and metaphysical notion of humanity. Theology, as an ideological orientation, is concerned with formal totalities, such as ‘humanity’, ‘society,’ et cetera. In this sense, a good example of how fundamentalist movements are grounded in a theological worldview, rather than in an actual religious experience, is ISIS. True, they are anti-capitalist, but for all the wrong reasons: they are anti-modernist, identitarian, and above all, profoundly anti-Western culture, i.e. anti-culture and education, etc. These elements constitute an ideological opposition to capitalism that ultimately may be coined to be nothing but an Fascism with “Islamic” values.

The distinction between religion and theology opens up the space to rethink the consequent distinction between classes and identity, or the Left and Communism. Monotheistic religions are grounded on the universal idea of collectivity without identity (Holy Spirit, Ummah); it includes all particularities (cultural, racial, sexual, and other identities) within itself. In a similar fashion, one can argue that the difference between the Left (which, in itself includes all kinds of orientations) and Communism can be articulated as follows: when one is not a communist, emancipation does have clear borders, and those borders are always national, that is to say, identitarian borders/limits.

All this may lead one to see why the return of religion may in itself not necessarily be a bad thing. Religion devoid of its onto-theological commitments, is in fact the hard and tiring militant work for organising the poor, unemployed (today also the unemployable), and all those who are pushed aside by the relations of production. Yet here even more difficult questions, if one may say so emerge, namely: is it possible to keep militant emancipatory work without a theological worldview which

localises this work in a broader totality, “humanity”, “society”, “History”, etc? Does politics need religion today? Is religion in this sense just another name for emancipatory politics, and might embracing religion lead to a different manner of how to confront the deadlocks of thus far seen communist politics?

The thinkers gathered in the present issue of *Crisis and Critique* raise these questions in their own manner and give a variety of answers to them. Yet what they all share is that the “return of religion” is not simply a fact whose consequences should be administered by state politicians. No, to truly accept the presence of religion here and now, within the domain of politics, cannot but lead to again question their relation and all the alleged evidences (that things could not be other than this) that come with it. Questioning evidence is part of philosophical practice and, therefore, *Crisis and Critique* is proud to have assembled engaged thinkers who do not shy away from the thought that even today the relation between religion and politics is of philosophical relevance.

Agon Hamza / Frank Ruda
Prishtina / Berlin, February 2015

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Some Thoughts on the Divine Ex-sistence

Slavoj Žižek

Abstract:

This paper elaborates on the divine God through the Lacanian concept of ex-sistence. While avoiding the various possibilities of interpreting the ex-sistence of God (imaginary, symbolic...), this article will focus on the ex-sistence of God in the practice of love. We should not understand the love for God, but the love for the neighbours, as announced by Jesus Christ.

Keywords: Real, Lacan, Christianity, God, ex-sistence

At the beginning of Ridley Scott's *Prometheus*, the sequel to the *Alien* trilogy, a hovering spacecraft departs our Earth deep in prehistoric times, while a humanoid alien who remained on the Earth drinks a dark bubbling liquid and then disintegrates – when his remains cascade into a waterfall, his DNA triggers a biogenetic reaction which led to the rise of humans. The story then jumps to 2089, when archaeologists Elizabeth Shaw and Charlie Holloway discover a star map in Scotland that matches others from several unconnected ancient cultures. They interpret this as an invitation from humanity's forerunners, the "Engineers". Peter Weyland, the elderly CEO of Weyland Corporation, funds an expedition to follow the map to the distant moon LV-223, aboard the scientific vessel *Prometheus*. The ship's crew travels in stasis, while the android David monitors their voyage. Arriving in 2093, they are informed of their mission to find the Engineers. After long battles with the Engineers, the last of them forces open the lifeboat's airlock and attacks Shaw, who releases her alien offspring onto the Engineer; it thrusts a tentacle down the Engineer's throat, subduing him. Shaw recovers David's remains, and with his help, launches another Engineer spacecraft - she intends to reach the Engineers' homeworld, in an attempt to understand why they wanted to destroy humanity. In the film's last scene, Shaw (played by Noomi Rapace) desperately shouts at the homicidal alien: "I need to know why! What did we do wrong? Why do you hate us?" Is this not an exemplary case of the Lacanian "*Che vuoi?*", of the impenetrability of gods of the Real?¹

Gods of the Real

So where do we find these living gods? In the pagan Thing: God

1

Ehrenreich 2012, pp. 132-137

dies in itself in Judaism, and for itself in Christianity. The destructive aspect of the divine, the brutal explosion of rage mixed with ecstatic bliss, which marks a living god is what Lacan aims at with his statement that gods belong to the Real. An exemplary literary case of such an encounter of the divine Real is Euripides's last play *Bacchae*, which examines religious ecstasy and the resistance to it. Disguised as a young holy man, the god Bacchus arrives in Thebes from Asia, where he proclaims his godhood and preaches his orgiastic religion. Pentheus, the young Theban king, is horrified at the explosion of sacred orgies and prohibits his people to worship Bacchus; the enraged Bacchus leads Pentheus to a nearby mountain, the site of sacred orgies, where Agave, Pentheus' own mother, and the women of Thebes tear him to pieces in a Bacchic sacred destructive frenzy. The play outlines four existential positions towards the sacred orgiastic ritual. First, there is Pentheus himself, an enlightened rationalist and a sceptic in matters religious; he rejects the Bacchic sacred orgies as a mere cover for sensual indulgence and is determined to suppress them by force:

"It so happens I've been away from Thebes,
but I hear about disgusting things going on,
here in the city—women leaving home
to go to silly Bacchic rituals,
cavorting there in mountain shadows,
with dances honoring some upstart god,
this Dionysus, whoever he may be. Mixing bowls
in the middle of their meetings are filled with wine.
They creep off one by one to lonely spots
to have sex with men, claiming they're Maenads
busy worshipping. But they rank Aphrodite,
goddess of sexual desire, ahead of Bacchus."²

Then, there are the two positions of wisdom. Teiresias, a blind man of pious and reverent soul, preaches fidelity to traditions as our sacred and imperishable inheritance:

"To the gods we mortals are all ignorant.
Those old traditions from our ancestors,
the ones we've had as long as time itself,
no argument will ever overthrow,
in spite of subtleties sharp minds invent."

However, his advice is nonetheless sustained by a Marxist-

2
All *Bacchae* quotes are from <https://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/euripides/euripides.htm>.

sounding notion of religion as opium for the people: Bacchus

"brought with him liquor from the grape,
something to match the bread from Demeter.
He introduced it among mortal men.
When they can drink up what streams off the vine,
unhappy mortals are released from pain.
It grants them sleep, allows them to forget
their daily troubles. Apart from wine,
there is no cure for human hardship."

This line of thought is radicalised by Cadmus, the wise old counsellor to the king who advises caution and submission:

"You should live among us,
not outside traditions. At this point,
you're flying around — thinking, but not clearly.
For if, as you claim, this man is not a god,
why not call him one? Why not tell a lie,
a really good one?"

In short, the position of Cadmus is that of Plato in his *Republic*: ordinary people need beautiful lies, so we should pretend to believe to keep them in check. And, finally, beneath these three positions, there is the wild (feminine) mob itself: while the debate between the three is going on, we hear from time to time the passionate cries and wild ecstatic prayers of the Bacchantes who proclaim their scorn for "the wisdom of deep thinkers," and their devotion to the "customs and beliefs of the multitude." Bacchantes are anti-Platonic to the extreme: against abstract rationalism, they assert fidelity to the customs which form a particular life-world, so that, from their view, the true act of madness is to exclude madness, it is the madness of pure rationality – the true madman is Pentheus, not the orgiastic Bacchantes. Teiresias draws the same conclusion:

"You've got a quick tongue and seem intelligent,
but your words don't make any sense at all.
/.../ You unhappy man, you've no idea
just what it is you're saying. You've gone mad!
Even before now you weren't in your right mind."

In other words, the true point of "madness" is not the excess of the ecstatic Night of the World, but the madness of the passage to the Symbolic itself, of imposing a symbolic order onto the chaos of the

Real. (In his analysis of the paranoiac judge Schreber, Freud points out how the paranoiac “system” is not madness, but a desperate attempt to *escape* madness – the disintegration of the symbolic universe – through an ersatz universe of meaning.) Every system of meaning is, thus, minimally paranoiac, “mad” – recall Brecht’s slogan: “What is the robbing of a bank compared to the founding of a new bank?” Therein resides the lesson of David Lynch’s *Straight Story*: what is the ridiculously-pathetic perversity of figures like Bobby Peru in *Wild at Heart*, or Frank in *Blue Velvet*, compared to deciding to traverse the US central plane in a tractor to visit a dying relative? Measured with this act, Frank’s and Bobby’s outbreaks of rage are the impotent theatrics of old and sedate conservatives... In the same way, we should say: what is the mere madness caused by the loss of reason, like the crazy dancing of Bacchantes, compared to the madness of reason itself?

This living god continues his subterranean life and erratically returns in multiple forms that are all guises of the monstrous Thing. Let us recall J. Lee Thompson’s *The White Buffalo*, based on the novel by Richard Sale, definitely “one of the most bizarre curiosities ever released in cinemas.”³ In this strange Western variation on *Moby Dick*, Wild Bill Hickok (Charles Bronson) is an “Ahab of the West” haunted by the dreams of a giant white (albino) buffalo (also a sacred native American animal). In 1874, Hickok has just returned from play-acting on Eastern stages with Buffalo Bill; now 37, he wears blue-tinted glasses to protect his fading eyes from the “Deep Serene” – the result of a gonorrheal infection – and his various bullet wounds have brought on premature rheumatism. Among his travels, he meets Chief Crazy Horse, who is roaming the plains in an obsessive search for a giant white buffalo that killed his young daughter, and Hickok teams up with him to hunt down the beast.

Significantly, Bronson wears dark sunglasses, the codified sign of the blinded gaze and of impotence (Bronson’s impotence is clearly ascertained in the film: when he meets his old love, Poker Jenny (Kim Novak in her last role!), he is unable to fulfill her expectations and to engage in sexual intercourse with her). However, paradoxically, the same (impotence) holds even more for the White Buffalo itself, so that it would be easy to propose the elementary Freudian reading: the White Buffalo is the primordial father who is not yet dead and who, as such, blocks the hero’s sexual potency – his desperate sound is homologous

3 Jeff Bond, at <http://www.creaturefeatures.com/2010/05/the-white-buffalo/>

to that of *shofar* in Jewish religion; the scene the hero endeavors to stage is thus that of the parricide. White Buffalo, thus, stands for the dying primordial father whose blind strength is the obverse of its impotence – in a way, the beast’s impotence is the impotence of its raw strength itself. The White Buffalo is, thus, like the god encountered by Job: omnipotent, but morally insensitive and stupid.

In the course of the film, both heroes track the sacred beast to a great cave where it lives with its cows. Hickok wants the pelt as a moneymaking display item, while Crazy Horse wants it for wrapping up his dead daughter, to ease her way across the great stars. The whole movie points towards their showdown with the demon, a delirium of action and horror; this showdown is presented as a well-staged and organised climactic *scene* of the final confrontation, when, on a narrow mountain pass, the buffalo will attack the hero and he will kill him. It is crucial to bear in mind this aspect of the film: there is nothing elementary or spontaneous in the final showdown, it is presented as a carefully staged event (prior to the expected assault of the beast, Hickok and Crazy Horse carefully examine the mountain pass and arrange details here and there). What further strengthens this effect of artificiality is the mechanic nature of the beast (the film was shot before the invasion of digital creatures, and the beast’s movement are clearly those of a clumsy puppet), plus the obvious studio sets for the final confrontation (artificial snow, plastic rocks, etc.). Far from ruining the desired effect, all these features engender the somnambulistic-clumsy quality of a carefully prepared mechanic theatre scene.

Such an Event of encountering the Real Thing is brought to extreme when the Thing is no longer an inner-worldly entity but the abyss itself, the void in which inner-worldly things disappear. This abyss exerts a strange mixture of horror and attraction; it pulls us towards itself – in what direction? The famous lines of the *chorus mysticus*, which conclude *Faust* are Goethe’s “wisdom” at its worst: “Everything transient is just a simile; the deficient here really happens; the indescribable is here done; the eternal-feminine pulls us upwards.” If nothing else, this pseudo-deep bubbling gets the direction wrong: it pulls us **DOWN**, not up – down in the sense of Maelstrom from Edgar Allan Poe’s “A Descent into the Maelström” (incidentally, if there ever was a political regime where the eternal-feminine claims to draw its subjects upwards, it is today’s North Korea). Poe’s story is told by a narrator, who reports what an old Norwegian fisherman told him at the edge of a huge cliff that overlooks the stormy sea. From time to time, a furious current shapes

the smaller whirlpools of the water into a huge mile-long funnel, the “great whirlpool of the Maelström”: whenever a ship comes within a mile of the full force, it is carried to the bottom and slammed against the rocks until the Maelström ceases. Since its sublime strength seems to defy rational explanation, the narrator is drawn to more fantastic explanations that call the centre the entrance to the abyss in the middle of the Earth. Years ago, one day in July, a terrible hurricane arrives without warning and tears away the masts of the ship of the old man and his brother, who are returning home. When, after being temporarily submerged in the water, the boat recovers and floats back to the surface, the two men discover with horror that they are caught by the Maelström, and they sense their doom. When the waves subside into foam, the old man becomes calm in his despair, thinking of how magnificent it will be to die this way and awaiting his exploration of the Maelström’s depths, even if it is at the cost of his life. The man eventually opens his eyes and sees that his boat is hanging in the black walls of the Maelström, and the force of the boat’s whirling pins him to the boat. He sees a rainbow in the abyss, caused by the movement of the water, and as they slowly spiral downward, the man observes the wreckage that swirls around him and notices how small shapes and cylinders seem to descend most slowly into the abyss. He lashes himself to the water cask and cuts himself loose from the boat; his brother refuses to move from the boat and is lost. The cask sinks much slower than the boat and, by the time it sinks half of the distance between its moment of detachment from the boat and the centre of the abyss, the funnel of the Maelström has become calm. The man finds himself on the surface, where a boat picks him up; he has been saved, but, as he tells the narrator, his black hair has turned white and his face has rapidly aged.

The old man’s ability to overcome fear and reason that small cylinders provide the most of safety in the Maelström makes him similar to Auguste Dupin, Poe’s arch-model of the private detective who is a master in the art of logic and deduction: although “A Descent into the Maelström” is an adventure horror story, it can also be read as one of Poe’s mystery stories in which, at the story’s end, the detective reveals how his reasoning brought him the solution of the enigma. The old man has already resolved the enigma (a fact proven by his being still alive), and is now re-telling his thinking process to a rapt listener whose role is analogous to that of the commonsensical narrator friend of Dupin, the forerunner of Sherlock Holmes’s Watson, and Poirot’s Captain Hastings: he is honest, but lacks the spark that makes Dupin

or the old man that survived the descent into the Maelström the hero of their stories. And, effectively, the subtitle of the story should have been something like “The birth of rational thinking out of the spirit of the deadly vortex”: in the story, cold rational thinking and death drive overlap, since death drive (in its strict Freudian sense) is not the subject’s willing surrender to the abyss, his acceptance of being swallowed by the deadly vortex, but the very repetitive circulation on the edge of the abyss. In other words, the death drive is on the side of reason, not on the side of irrationality. And this brings us back to Hegel’s notion of the abyssal “Night of the World” as the very core of subjectivity: is the abyss of subjectivity not the ultimate Maelstrom? And is rational thinking not the art of circulating on the very edge of this abyss?

The Bond of the Word

So what happens when these living gods withdraw, when they no longer operate in collective libidinal economy? It was already Hegel who said that word is the murder of a thing, which means that the death of gods, far from liberating us from the symbolic link, enforces the power of the Word to the utmost – how? Let us take a perhaps surprising example, *Nightmare Alley* (William Golding, 1947), which follows the rise and fall of a con man. The first thing that strikes the eye about this outstanding *noir* is its circular narrative structure: it begins and ends at a seedy traveling carnival, with the figure of a geek. In the opening scene, Stanton Carlisle (Tyrone Power), who just joined the carnival, expresses his weird fascination at the lowest attraction there, a half-crazy geek who lives totally isolated in his cage and amuses the public by eating live chicken. He asks “How can somebody fall so low?”, but other members of the carnival reproach him for talking about a topic one should keep silent about... The figure of the geek, this “strange attractor” of the film’s universe, stands for a *homo sacer*: the living dead, alive but excluded from the community, not to be talked about. “You never give up!”, Stanton is told in the film – and, effectively, he goes to the end, fully realising his fate and, like Oedipus, becoming fully human only when he ends up as no longer human... The geek-motif underlies the entire film: the crazy laughter of the geek is regularly heard in the background at the key moments of the story.

Stanton works with “Mademoiselle Zeena” and her alcoholic husband, Pete; they were once a top-billed act, using an ingenious code to make it appear that she had extraordinary mental powers, until her

(unspecified) misdeeds drove Pete to drink and reduced them to working in a third-rate outfit. Stanton learns that many people want to buy the code from Zeena, but she won't sell; one night he accidentally gives Pete the wrong bottle of alcohol and Pete dies. Zeena is now forced to tell Stanton the code and train him to be her assistant. Stanton however, prefers the company of the younger Molly; when this is found out, they are forced into a shotgun marriage. Stanton realises this is actually a golden opportunity for him: now that he knows the code, he and his wife leave the carnival. He becomes "The Great Stanton", performing with great success in expensive nightclubs. However, he has even higher ambitions: with crooked Chicago psychologist Lilith Ritter providing him with information about her patients, Stanton passes himself off as someone who can actually communicate with the dead. First it works brilliantly, but when he tries to swindle the skeptical Ezra Grindle, it all comes crashing down. Grindle wants from Stanton a proof that he can really bring back the ghosts of the dead, so he wants to see his long-lost love. Stanton convinces Molly to participate in the trick and play the role of the deceased who appears at a distance in Grindle's park; but when Grindle is totally taken by the performance and kneels down in praying, Molly breaks down and starts to shout she cannot go on. Stanton and Molly have to leave town hurriedly; Stanton sends Molly back to the carnival world, while he gradually sinks into alcoholism. He tries to get a job at another carnival, only to suffer the ultimate degradation: the only job he can get is playing the geek... Unable to stand his life any further, he goes berserk, but fortunately, Molly happens to work in the same carnival, and she brings him back from madness to normal life. The happy ending (Stanton's miraculous redemption by Molly), was, of course, imposed by the studio; there is nonetheless an unexpected echo between these final moments of the film and the scene when Molly breaks down, unable to sustain the game of fake impersonation: it is as if, here, *the (fake) recognition succeeds* – in contrast to Grindle, Stanton is fully duped and taken by Molly's appearance.

The loop of fate which closes upon itself in the films circular structure is obvious to the point of ridicule: when, at the beginning, Stanton encounters the geek, he misses the dimension of *de te fabula narratur*, i.e., he fails to recognise in the geek his own future, what awaits him at the end of the road. The (again, ridiculously-naïve) reference to cards, which repeatedly point to catastrophic future for Stanton, plays the same role of emphasising the closed loop of fate. How does this closed loop stand with regard to the basic types of tragedy (classic,

Christian, modern, *noir*)? It fits none of them. In the classic tragedy, the doomed hero assumes the Fate that crushes him, but continues to protest against it, to curse it. In Christianity, the God of Fate is dead and the only bond remaining is that of Word; tragedy ensues when, in the absence of the God of Fate, the subject overlooks this bond of Word and wrongly thinks he can freely manipulate with words without paying the price for it. Modern tragedy is best exemplified by the feminine NO of the great literary heroines, from Princesse de Cleves, to Isabel Archer in *The Portrait Of a Lady* – a mysterious rejection of happiness at the very point when happiness is at the reach of their hand. In *film noir*, the hero is a sucker betrayed by *femme fatale*, and the tragic moment occurs at the end when, close to his death-point, fully aware of how he was the victim of brutal manipulation, the hero nonetheless has to admit that he doesn't regret any of it – if, in full awareness of his downfall, he were to be asked if he would have made the same choice, his answer would have been that he would have done it again... (And, incidentally, if *Nightmare Alley* were to be a traditional *noir*, the story would have been told in a flashback, as in Tod Browning's *Freaks*: at the beginning, we would have seen the group of visitors to the carnival observing a geek who would have remained off-screen; then, in a flashback, somebody (a guide, usually) would have told the geek's story, and, at the end, we would have returned to the carnival site and got a full view of the geek.)

In what, then, did Stanton's "sin" (guilt) consist? In playing tricks with others' beliefs, i.e., in ignoring the bond of Word in a godless world – his tragedy is, thus, closest to the Christian one. When Stanton tries to convince Molly to help him to perform his trick on Grindle, he engages in a strange debate with her: she accuses him of playing God when he cheats about his contact with the spirits of the dead; significantly, Stanton insists that he never mentions God, but just performs harmless tricks which bring satisfaction to customers - this strange respect of God who remains off limits to his manipulations is curious, but crucial. Molly, dressed up as the ghost of Grindle's dead fiancée, breaks down, she cannot go on when the customer is fully duped and falls on his knees praying - *why* couldn't she sustain it, why did she find it unbearable and blasphemous to be identified as the object of other's desire? In order to answer this question, we have to see how the bond of the Word which defines the religions of the dead god necessarily culminates in the well-known words of *Kol Nidre* sang in the evening before Yom Kippur?

"All [personal] vows we are likely to make, all [personal] oaths and pledges we are likely to take between this Yom Kippur and the next Yom Kippur, we publicly renounce. Let them all be relinquished and abandoned, null and void, neither firm nor established. Let our [personal] vows, pledges and oaths be considered neither vows nor pledges nor oaths."

For obvious reasons (to counter the charge that Jews are not to be trusted since their own sacred song enjoins them to break their vows), interpreters try to relativise this song, pointing out that it concerns only personal vows, i.e., vows one makes to oneself, not vows made to others in public space. However, such a reading obfuscates the much more radical dimension of *Kol Nidre*: the basic insight of Judeo-Christianity is that dissolving the bond of the Word is immanent to *logos*, it functions as its inner limit/excess, as the immanent negativity of the Symbolic. This is why the "pragmatic paradox" of *Kol Nidre* has to be emphasised: it makes a vow to renounce vows, i.e., the renunciation to vows has to be publicly proclaimed, performed as a symbolic act - why? Because, as Lacan put it, there is no meta-language, there is no Other of the Other. That is to say, why do we make promises? Precisely because there is always a possibility that we will break them, and a pledge, an act of obligation, can only occur against the background of this possibility. The Other (the invisible core of another subject) is by definition an abyss lurking beneath all his/her pledges: "You say this, but how do I know that you really mean it?" The paradox resides in the fact that, if we are to dwell fully within the Symbolic, this gap itself has to be reflexively inscribed into the Symbolic, and this is what happens with *Kol Nidre*.

"When the man comes around..."

How do we pass from the living gods of the Real to this dead god of the Word? The only consequent move is to make a step further from describing historical changes in how we think about god and to historicise god himself. This idea was too strong for Schelling himself who introduced it: the key shift from the *Ages of the World* to late Schelling's philosophy of mythology and revelation is that the *Ages of the World* thoroughly historicise God (the process of creation and revelation is a process into which God himself is caught, the becoming of the world is the becoming of God himself, his self-creation and self-revelation, so that the human awareness of god is the self-awareness of God himself), while the late Schelling renounces this radical historicisation

of God (in a return to traditional theology, God is not affected by the process of creation, He remains in himself what he is from all eternity, creation is a totally free and contingent divine decision/act). God as Trinity exists in eternity, as the unity of the three potencies (contraction, expansion, their reconciliation) in their atemporal/virtual state; with the process of creation which opens up temporality, the three potencies acquire autonomy and are actualised as Past, Present and Future (the dark Ground of dense matter, the light of *logos*, the reconciliation of the two in a living personality which is the Self as a point of contraction subordinated to the light of reason). The starting point, the premise, of late Schelling's philosophy of mythology and revelation remains the self-division or self-alienation of divinity:

"It is absolutely necessary for the understanding of Christianity – the *conditio sine qua non* of perceiving its true meaning – that we comprehend this cutting-off [*Abgeschnittenheit*] of the Son from the Father, this being in his own form and hence in complete freedom and independence of the Father."⁴

However, God in himself is not caught in this division – how can this be? Schelling sees creation as a process of the alienation of god from himself, which proceeds in three steps, and the separation of the Son from the Father is only the last step in this process. First, God sets free his lowest potency, the egotist principle of contraction, what in God is not God, thereby creating matter as something actually existing outside Himself. The goal of creation is for God to reveal/manifest itself in his creation; however, creation takes a wrong turn not intended by God, the created world becomes the fallen world of decay and sorrow, nature impregnated by melancholy. God's first attempt to reconcile created world and himself by way of creating Adam also fails because of Adam's fall into sin, his free choice of sin. At this moment, the higher second potency of God, the principle of love, concretises itself as the demiurge, the "lord of being." What Schelling saw clearly is that this god as demiurge of the fallen world (recall here the Gnostic notion that our material world was created by the evil demiurge) is a Janus-like two-faced god: he is simultaneously the demiurge, the lord-creator of the world, the transcendent Master elevated above the world, and a homeless god wandering anonymously exiled from eternity and

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4 Schelling p. 39

condemned to wander anonymously in his creation, like Wotan/Odin becoming Wanderer in Wagner's *Ring*. In this ultimate theological coincidence of the opposites, the Master of the world has to appear within the world in its "oppositional determination /*gegensaetzliche Bestimmung*/," as its lowest element with no proper place in it, as an anonymous homeless wanderer excluded from all social groups. (Note how, in a strictly homologous way, a will that actively wills nothing is the oppositional determination of the will which wills nothing in particular, which is a mere possibility of willing.) We thus, arrive at the first opposition in - or, rather, splitting of - the divine: the "pure" God prior to the creation of the world, the anonymous "Godhead," set against the God-demiurge, the Master of creation, who is the God outside of God, the God of the fallen world. Schelling's achievement is to show how the Christian Incarnation can be understood only against the background of this splitting.

The God-demiurge who appears in different guises in pagan religion is the "pre-existing Christ," the mythological god, the god of pagan phantasmagorias, not the actually existing god but its shadowy double, "god outside himself": "Mythology is nothing less than the hidden history of the Christ before his historical birth, the peregrinations of the God outside God."⁵ And it is crucial for Schelling that *the god who in Incarnation becomes man is not God himself or in itself, but this "God outside God," the pagan demiurge*: "Christ must possess an independent ground of divinity, an extra-divine divinity, a claim to sovereignty which he renounces. /.../ as the God outside of God, Christ has his own proper claim to being the God of the fallen world, a claim which he renounces."⁶ With the Christian Revelation, with Incarnation proper in which Christ "enters into the being of the fallen world to the point of becoming himself a fallen being,"⁷ myth becomes fact, an actually existing fully human individual, which is why, as Schelling says, pointing forward towards Kierkegaard, "Christ is not the teacher, as the saying goes, he is not the founder (of Christianity), he is the content of Christianity."⁸ In incarnation, in becoming man, god doesn't empty himself of his deity, but of the *morphe theou*, of the form of god as a

5 S.J.McGrath 2012, p. 162

6 Ibid., p. 166

7 Ibid.

8 Schelling 1856-1861, p. 35

sovereign demiurge: "he who was in the form of God willed to empty himself of this":⁹ "'God becomes man' means: the divine became man, yet not the divine /in itself/, but rather the extra-divine of the divine became man."¹⁰

We can see clearly here where Schelling deviates from Christian orthodoxy – not so much with regard to the fact that, for him, pagan religions are not simply wrong but an organic part of the divine history, a process that culminates in Incarnation proper, but in how he complicates the process of Incarnation. For Schelling, Incarnation is preceded by the self-splitting of God-in-itself (Godhead), by God's contraction in a God outside the divine, the Lord of the fallen world, so that Christ as mediator does not mediate primarily between God and creation (the fallen world), but between the pure God and the God of the fallen world, the God outside the divine. What this means is that the God who incarnates himself in Christ is not the pure Godhead but the God of the fallen world (the God-demiurge, the God outside the divine): it is *this* God who empties himself of his divinity, who renounces the "form of God," becomes purely human and then dies on the cross. In short, what dies on the cross is the God-demiurge, the God who is outside the divine, and this is why Crucifixion is simultaneously Reconciliation of the divine with itself.

This reference to Schelling allows us to complicate further this figure of Incarnation: two splittings precede Incarnation, first the self-division of God into the pure Godhead and the Lord of Creation; then the splitting of this God of the fallen world himself, the god of pagan mythology, into transcendent Demiurge and the anonymous Wanderer. The first figure of the God in its oppositional determination, God outside himself, is thus already (the standard notion of) God as the transcendent Creator and Master of the universe; the fact that this God-Demiurge again redoubles himself into himself and himself in its oppositional determination (Wanderer) signals the "abstract" character of the God-Demiurge, it signals that this God is already hampered by an imperfection. The nature of this imperfection was indicated in the most radical reading of the "Book of Job" proposed in 1930s by the Norwegian theologian Peter Wessel Zapffe, who accentuated Job's "boundless perplexity" when God himself finally appears to him: expecting a sacred

9 Schelling 1995

10 Schelling 1856-1861, p.275

and pure God whose intellect is infinitely superior to ours, Job

“finds himself confronted with a world ruler of grotesque primitiveness, a cosmic cave-dweller, a braggart and blusterer, almost agreeable in his total ignorance of spiritual culture. /.../ What is new for Job is *not* God's greatness in quantifiable terms; that he knew fully in advance /.../; what is new is the qualitative baseness.”

In other words, God – the God of the real – is like the Lady in courtly love, it is *das Ding*, a capricious cruel master who simply has no sense of universal justice. God-the-Father, thus, quite literally doesn't know what he is doing, and Christ is the one who does know it, but is reduced to an impotent compassionate observer, addressing his father with “Father, can't you see I'm burning?” – burning together with all the victims of the father's rage. Only by falling into his own creation and wandering around in it as an impassive observer can god perceive the horror of his creation and the fact that the he, the highest Law-giver, is himself the supreme Criminal. Since God-the-demiurge is not so much evil as a stupid brute lacking moral sensitivity, we should forgive him because he doesn't know what he is doing. In the standard onto-theological vision, only the demiurge elevated about particular reality sees the entire picture, while particular agents caught in struggles get only partial misleading insights; in the core of Christianity we find a different vision – the demiurge elevated above reality is a brute unaware of the horror he is creating, and only when he enters his own creation and experiences it from within, as its inhabitant, he can see the nightmare he fathered. (It is easy to discern in this vision the old literary motif of a king who occasionally dresses up as an ordinary man and mingles with the poor to get the taste of how they live and feel.)

It is here that the god of the Real returns with a vengeance in the very heart of Christianity. Postmodern philosophers from Nietzsche onwards as a rule prefer Catholicism over Protestantism: Catholicism is a culture of external playful rituals in contrast to the inner sense of guilt and the pressure of authenticity that characterize Protestantism; we are allowed to just follow the ritual and ignore the authenticity of our inner belief... However, this playfulness should not deceive us: Catholicism is resorting to such subterfuges to save the divine big Other in his goodness, while the capriciously “irrational” predestination in Protestantism confronts us with a god who is ultimately not good

and all-powerful but stained by the indelible suspicion of being stupid, arbitrary, or even outright evil. The dark implicit lesson of Protestantism is: if you want god, you have to renounce (part of the divine) goodness. One can discern the traces of this full acceptance of God's unconditional and capricious authority in the last song Johnny Cash recorded just before his death, “The Man Comes Around,” an exemplary articulation of the anxieties contained in the Southern Baptist Christianity:

“There's a man going around taking names and he decides
Who to free and who to blame every body won't be treated
Quite the same there will be a golden ladder reaching down
When the man comes around

The hairs on your arm will stand up at the terror in each
Sip and each sup will you partake of that last offered cup
Or disappear into the potter's ground
When the man comes around

Hear the trumpets hear the pipers one hundred million angels singing
Multitudes are marching to a big kettledrum
Voices calling and voices crying
Some are born and some are dying
Its alpha and omegas kingdom come
And the whirlwind is in the thorn trees
The virgins are all trimming their wicks
The whirlwind is in the thorn trees
It's hard for thee to kick against the pricks
Till Armageddon no shalom no shalom

Then the father hen will call his chicken's home
The wise man will bow down before the thorn and at his feet
They will cast the golden crowns
When the man comes around

Whoever is unjust let him be unjust still
Whoever is righteous let him be righteous still
Whoever is filthy let him be filthy still”

The song is about Armageddon, the end of days when God will

appear and perform the Last Judgment, and this event is presented as pure and arbitrary terror: God almost appears as Evil personified, as a kind of political informer, a man who “comes around” and provokes consternation by “taking names,” by deciding who is saved and who lost. If anything, Cash’s description evokes the well-known scene of people lined up for a brutal interrogation, and the informer pointing out those selected for torture: there is no mercy, no pardon of sins, no jubilation, we are all fixed in our roles, the just remain just and the filthy remain filthy. Even worse, in this divine proclamation, we are not simply judged in a just way; we are informed from outside, as if learning about an arbitrary decision, that we were righteous or sinners, that we are saved or condemned - this decision has nothing to do with our inner qualities.¹¹ And, again, this dark excess of the ruthless divine sadism – excess over the image of a severe, but nonetheless just, God – is a necessary negative, an underside, of the excess of Christian love over the Jewish Law: love which suspends the Law is necessarily accompanied by the arbitrary cruelty which also suspends the Law.

Recall the strange fact, regularly evoked by Primo Levi and other holocaust survivors, on how their intimate reaction to their survival was marked by a deep split: consciously, they were fully aware that their survival was a matter of meaningless accident, that they are not in any way guilty for it, that the only guilty perpetrators are their Nazi torturers; at the same time, they were (more than merely) haunted by the “irrational” guilt feeling, as if they survived at the expense of others who died there, and are, thus, somehow responsible for their death – as is well-known, this unbearable guilt-feeling drove many of them to suicide. This guilt-feeling displays the agency of the superego at its purest: the obscene agency which manipulates us into a spiraling movement of self-destruction. For this very reason, there is something irreducibly comical about the superego. Let us turn again to Primo Levi – this is how, in *If this is a man*, he describes the dreadful “selekcja,” the survival examination in the camp:

“The *Blockaeltester* /the elder of the hut/ has closed the connecting-door and has opened the other two which lead from the dormitory and the *Tagesraum* /daily room/ outside. Here, in front of the two doors,

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11 Incidentally, there is a traumatic occurrence in *Exodus* 4:24-26 in which precisely “the man comes around”: God himself comes to Moses’s tent in the guise of a dark stranger and attacks him (“the Lord met him, and sought to kill him”); Moses is then saved by his wife Ziporrah who appeases God by offering him the foreskin of their son.

stands the arbiter of our fate, an SSD subaltern. On his right is the *Blockaeltester*, on his left, the quartermaster of the hut. Each one of us, as he comes naked out of the *Tagesraum* into the cold October air, has to run the few steps between the two doors, give the card to the SS man and enter the dormitory door. The SS man, in the fraction of a second between two successive crossings, with a glance at one’s back and front, judges everyone’s fate, and in turn gives the card to the man on his right or his left, and this is the life or death of each of us. In three or four minutes a hut of two hundred man is ‘done’, as is the whole camp of twelve thousand men in the course of the afternoon.”¹²

Right means survival, left means gas chamber. Is there not something properly COMIC in this, the ridiculous spectacle to appear strong and healthy, to attract for a brief moment the indifferent gaze of the Nazi administrator who presides over life and death – here, comedy and horror coincide: imagine the prisoners practicing their appearance, trying to hold head high and chest forward, walking with a brisk step, pinching their lips to appear less pale, exchanging advices on how to impress the SS man; imagine how a simple momentary confusion of cards or a lack of attention of the SS man can decide my fate... do we not get here close to the arbitrary procedure of Predestination? Is the scene staged around “the man who comes around” from Cash’s song not the ultimate *selekcja* with regard to which even the Auschwitz *selekcja* is a relief? The Final Judgment is in Cash’s song not “deconstructed,” it is not transformed into an endlessly-postponed horizon, an event that is always-to-come: the Final Judgment takes place here and now, but as an obscene travesty of divine justice, an act performed by a crazy god who resembles the Nazi selector in Auschwitz.

The Deposed God

But, is this god the last word of Christianity? It is the ultimate version of the transcendent God-in-itself, and one has to go through it to reach the core of the Christian atheism. Jean-Luc Marion developed this point in detail: I only exist through being loved by the Other (God, ultimately). This, however, is not enough – God himself only exists through ex-sistence, as the effect of men’s referring to him (in the blockbuster *The Clash of Titans*, Zeus is right to complain that, if men stop praying to gods and celebrating them in their rituals, gods will

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12 Levi 1987, pp., 133-134

cease to exist). Such a properly comical notion of a God who depends on human approbation is, as one would expect it, evoked by Kierkegaard who, in his *Concept of Anxiety*, describes in a mockingly-antihegelian way how Simon Tornacensis (the 13th century scholastic theologian from Paris)

“thought that God must be obliged to him for having furnished a proof of the Trinity /.../ This story has numerous analogies, and in our time speculation has assumed such authority that it has practically tried to make God feel uncertain of himself, like a monarch who is anxiously waiting to learn whether the general assembly will make him an absolute or a limited monarch.”¹³

We should also bear in mind that we are dealing here with a properly dialectical mediation of knowing and being in which being itself hinges on (not-)knowing. As Lacan put it long ago, god doesn’t know he is dead (that’s why he lives) – in this case, existence hinges on not-knowing, while in Christianity god learns that he is dead. However, already the logical “god of philosophers” is a dead god, although in a different way, so maybe Tornacensis was wrong or at least he should be read in a more ambiguous way: if a philosopher proves the existence of god, is the god who comes to exist in this way not a dead god? So, maybe, what god really dreads is the very success of the proof of his existence, and the situation is here the same as in the well-known anecdote about the Hearst editor: God fears that the proof of his existence will fail, but he fears even more that it will *not* fail. In short, god’s impasse is that he is either alive (but as such caught in a terrifying suspension about his existence) or existing, but dead.

Kierkegaard, of course, dismisses the attempts to logically demonstrate the existence of god as absurd and pointless logical exercises (his model of such professorial blindness for the authentic religious experience was Hegel’s dialectical machinery); however, his sense of humour cannot withstand the wonderful image of a god in anxiety, dreading for his own status as if it depends on the logical exercises of a philosopher, as if the philosopher’s reasoning has consequences in the real, so that, if the proof fails, god’s existence itself is threatened. And, one can go even further in this line of Kierkegaardian reasoning: what undoubtedly attracted him to the remark of Tornacensis

13 Kierkegaard 1980, p. 151.

was the blasphemous idea of a god himself in anxiety.

The divine impasse, thus, resides in the fact that the god whose existence is proven is like a monarch whom the assembly makes an absolute one: the very form of confirming his absolute power (it depends on the whim of the assembly) undermines it. The political parallel is here crucial, since Kierkegaard himself resorts to the comparison of god and king: god exposed to the philosopher’s whimsy wit is like a king exposed to the whimsy wit of a popular assembly. But what is his point here? Is it simply that, in both cases, we should reject liberal decadence and opt for absolute monarchy? What complicates this simple and apparently obvious solution is that, for Kierkegaard, the (properly comical) point of the Incarnation is that that god-king becomes a beggar, a low ordinary human. Would it thus not be more correct to conceive Christianity as the paradox of God’s abdication – god steps down, to be replaced by the assembly of believers called the Holy Spirit?

This is why authentic religion is incompatible with direct knowledge or unconditional certainty; radical doubt is its innermost component, and the believer him/herself is again and again surprised at unexpected signs of divine presence or intervention (“miracles”). This is how one should read Kierkegaard’s point that “a miracle is only a sign that has to be interpreted and therefore /.../ a merely ambiguous indication”: already the Jansenists made the same point when they insisted that miracles are not “objective” miraculous facts which demonstrate the truth of a religion to everyone—they appear as such only to the eyes of believers; to nonbelievers, they are mere fortuitous natural coincidences. This theological legacy survives in radical emancipatory thought, from Marxism to psychoanalysis. In his (unpublished) Seminar XVIII on a “discourse which would not be that of a semblance,” Lacan provided a succinct definition of the truth of interpretation in psychoanalysis: “Interpretation is not tested by a truth that would decide by yes or no, it unleashes truth as such. It is only true inasmuch as it is truly followed.” There is nothing “theological” in this precise formulation, only the insight into the properly dialectical unity of theory and practice in (not only) psychoanalytic interpretation: the “test” of the analyst’s interpretation is in the truth effect it unleashes in the patient. This is how we should also (re)read Marx’s Thesis XI: the “test” of Marxist theory is the truth effect it unleashes in its addressee (the proletarians), in transforming them into emancipatory revolutionary subjects. The *locus communis* “You have to see it to believe it!” should always be read together with its inversion: “You have to believe [in]

it to see it!" Although one may be tempted to oppose them as the dogmatism of blind faith versus openness toward the unexpected, one should insist also on the truth of the second version: truth, as opposed to knowledge, is, like a Badiouian Event, something that only an engaged gaze, the gaze of a subject who "believes in it," can see. Think of love: in love, only the lover sees in the object of love that X which causes love, so the structure of love is the same as that of the Badiouian Event which also exists only for those who recognize themselves in it: there is no Event for a non-engaged objective observer. In his *Seminar XX: Encore*, Lacan warns against a too simplistic atheism: he says that while god doesn't exist (in the sense of an absolute Entity dwelling somewhere out there independently of us, humans), he nonetheless ex-sists. This ex-sistence, of course, can be understood in different ways, imaginary (god doesn't exist in himself, but only outside himself, as humanity's imaginary projection), symbolic (god ex-sists in human practices and rituals which refer to him, as a symbolic Cause kept alive through human activity), real – the meaning emphasized by Lacan (god is the impossible/real point purely virtual point of reference which resists symbolization, like the unbearable intensity of the *jouissance feminine*). But, we can cut short the looming debate and simply posit that God ex-sists outside himself in our practice of love - not in our love for him, but our love for our neighbors (as Christ put it to his disciples, when there is love among you, I am there). What this means is that man and god are caught in a circle: a religious man perceives god as the presupposition of his entire life, but this presupposition is posited by his serving god and has no meaning outside this relationship. This is why Kierkegaard has to insist on God's thorough "desubstantialization" – God is "beyond the order of Being," He is nothing but the mode of how we relate to him, i.e., we do not relate to him, he IS this relating:

"God himself is this: *how* one involves himself with Him. As far as physical and external objects are concerned, the object is something else than the mode: there are many modes. In respect to God, the *how* is the what. He who does not involve himself with God in the mode of absolute devotion does not become involved with God."¹⁴

The Christian passage to Holy Spirit as Love is to be taken literally: God as the divine *individual* (Christ) passes into the purely *non-substantial*

.....
14 Kierkegaard 1970, entry 1405

link between the individuals. This is why if aliens were to land on Earth, we can be certain that they would not know about Christ, Christ is exclusively a part of human history - but this is not an argument that Christ is just a human creation/projection or, even worse, that there is one divine Absolute which appears in multiple ways to different groups of people (or other rational beings). And this is also why the genuine dimension of Christian doubt does not concern the existence of God, i.e., its logic is not "I feel such a need to believe in God, but I cannot be sure that he really exists, that he is not just a chimera of my imagination" (to which a humanist atheist can easily respond: "then drop God and simply assume the ideals God stands for as your own"), which is why a Christian subject is indifferent towards the infamous proofs of God's existence. Recall Brecht's famous Herr Keuner anecdote about the existence of god:

"Someone asked Herr Keuner if there is a God. Herr Keuner said: I advise you to think about how your behavior would change with regard to the answer to this question. If it would not change, then we can drop the question. If it would change, then I can help you at least insofar as I can tell you: You already decided: You need a God."¹⁵

Brecht is right here: we are never in a position to directly choose between theism and atheism, since the choice as such is already located within the field of belief (in the sense of our practical engagement). What an authentic believer should do here is to shift the accent of Brecht's anecdote: from God to God's ex-sistence that is fully compatible with materialism. This is why doubt is immanent to an authentic religion: not abstract intellectual doubt about god's existence, but doubt about our practical engagement that makes god himself ex-sist. This doubt is brought to extreme in Christianity where (as Chesterton pointed out) not only do believers doubt God, God himself gets caught in doubt (In his "Father, why have you abandoned me?", Christ himself commits what is for a Christian the ultimate sin: he wavers in his Faith) – and Chesterton is fully aware that we are thereby approaching

"a matter more dark and awful than it is easy to discuss /.../ a matter which the greatest saints and thinkers have justly feared to

.....
15 Brecht 1995, p. 18

approach. But in that terrific tale of the Passion there is a distinct emotional suggestion that the author of all things (in some unthinkable way) went not only through agony, but through doubt.”¹⁶

What god doubts about is that the bond of human engagement that makes him ex-sist will be broken.

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16 Chesterton 1995, p.145

Confucius and Chairman Mao: Towards a Study of Religion and Chinese Marxism

Roland Boer

Abstract:

The common impression is that Mao Zedong unrelentingly dismissed Confucius as a feudal ideologue who developing a position which bolstered the ruling class. However, a careful study of Mao's texts on Confucius reveals a far more complex picture. This study provides a prolegomenon for a fuller study of "religion" and Chinese Marxism. It begins with a brief account of the negative assessments of Confucius, followed by a number of examples of a positive appreciation. In order to make sense of these two facets of Mao's engagement, I argue for a dialectical appropriation, taking my cue from Mao's own observations. This leads into a more detailed exegesis of his efforts to reread Confucius within a dialectical materialist framework, with a focus on the Doctrine of the Mean, ethics, and idealism itself. The result is nothing less than an effort to stand Confucius "on his feet."

Keywords: Mao Zedong; Confucius; dialectical materialism; Doctrine of the Mean; ethics; idealism.

So, Confucius is still useful sometimes after all. (Laughter.)¹

Chairman Mao's attitudes towards Confucius seem reasonably well-known: for Mao, he was the embodiment of out-dated feudalistic thought, the "spokesman of the decadent slave-owning aristocracy."² The contrast with today could not be sharper, when the study of Confucianism is fostered by the government – symbolised by the celebration of ten years of Confucius Institutes worldwide in 2014. Yet, the relation between Mao Zedong and Confucius is far more complex than this simplistic opposition suggests. Since this is a preliminary study and since my great love is textual work, I prefer to focus on the actual texts by Mao Zedong rather than making generalised and unfounded comparisons.

Let me be clear, my argument is neither that Mao and Confucius are diametrically opposed, nor that a deeper harmony may be found between their works. Instead, I argue that Mao Zedong continued to struggle with Confucius throughout his life. At times, he condemns

1
Mao 1957 [1992]a, pp. 358-59.

2
Editors 1974, p. 7. This quotation is drawn from one of many articles published during the "Criticize Lin, Criticize Confucius" campaign in the *Peking Review* between 1969 and 1976.

Confucius, or what the name “Confucius” stood for, and at other times he seeks to understand Confucius and his role in modern China. In order to see how this is so, I propose to follow a simple but effective argument. I begin with Mao Zedong’s negative observations on Confucius, before turning to his positive comments. I close by focusing on those that are ambivalent and indeed dialectical. If it is dialectical, it has profound implications for today. Since I cannot deal with all of his many texts on Confucius here, I focus on the most significant ones in each of the three steps of my argument.

Feudal Ideologue
“Bullshit” – so Mao describes, bluntly, the thought of Confucius.

More fully:
There is no end to learning from experience ... People make mistakes when they are young, but is it true that older people can avoid making mistakes? Confucius said everything he did conformed to objective laws when he was seventy. I just don’t believe it, that’s bullshit.³

This sums up sharply Mao’s negative assessment of Confucius. This speech was given in 1957, but we find such assessments throughout his works. Not so bluntly perhaps, but still with the point that Confucius embodies the old, feudal China. He speaks from the perspective of the old ruling class, the landlords and exploiters, all with the aim of ensuring that the ancient hierarchical system continues to function smoothly.

But was this a late development in Mao Zedong’s thought? A careful study of his writings indicates that he was already reading anti-Confucian literature in his youth, such as that by Tan Sitong, especially his sweeping and systematic attacks on the traditional Confucian customs and institutions.⁴ At about the same time, he observes, “I think that old man Confucius’ bureaucratic airs must be somewhat attenuated after all these years.”⁵ The context was of course the immense debate

3 Mao 1956 [1992]b, p. 160. The *Selected Works* choose a lighter term, “bragging” rather than “bullshit” (volume 5, p. 333). The allusion is to section 4 in “Chapter II, *Wei zheng*” (On Government, Part II) in the *Analects*, where Confucius claimed: “At fifteen, I set my mind on learning; at thirty, my principles became firm; at forty, I became free of confusion and doubt; at fifty, I knew the decree of Heaven; at sixty, my ears became obedient for the reception of truth; at seventy I followed whatever my heart desired, without transgressing what is proper.” Legge 1960, pp. 13-14.

4 Zhang 1917 [1992], pp. 138-39. Tan Sitong was a Hunanese philosopher and reformist and was perhaps the most radical of the three leading figures of the Reform Movement of 1898. He was executed by the Qing authorities. His key work is *Renxue* (The Study of Benevolence).

5 Mao 1919 [1992]e, p. 346.

over “new studies” from outside China.⁶ So strong did such a direction seem that Mao observes that any effort to stick to Confucius and resist the new learning was tantamount to making the Chang Jiang (Yangzi River) flow back in the opposite direction from the Kunlun Mountains, so that people from China could “get to Europe by just taking a boat over the Kunlun range.”⁷

In this light we may understand his early attacks on old methods of education,⁸ the fostering of new schools in Hunan, his deep criticism of old marriage customs,⁹ and even the use of Confucius to justify subservience to the Japanese occupation.¹⁰ In short, this was “The Problem of Confucius.”¹¹ He would gradually become more openly critical of Confucius, advocating alternatives to the Confucian tradition, such as Lu Xun, or the dialectical materialism of Marx, Engels and Lenin.¹² Already in 1927, he famously stated: “a revolution is not like inviting people to dinner, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so ‘benign, upright, courteous, temperate and complaisant’.”¹³ The refined and gentle qualities are precisely those that Confucius is said to have used when he sought information about the governments of countries he visited.

Perhaps the clearest statement appears some years later in the important text, “On New Democracy”:

China also has a semi-feudal culture reflecting its semi-feudal politics and economy, whose exponents include all those who advocate the worship of Confucius, the study of the Confucian canon, and the old ethical code and the old ideas in opposition to the new culture and new ideas ... This kind of reactionary culture serves the imperialists and the feudal class and must be swept away. Unless it is swept away, no new

6 Mao 1919 [1992]b, p. 371.

7 Mao 1919 [1992]c, p. 347.

8 Mao 1919 [1992]d, pp. 400-1.

9 Among others, see Mao 1919 [1992]g; 1919 [1992]f.

10 Mao 1919 [1992]i, p. 355.

11 Mao 1919 [1992]h, p. 408.

12 Mao 1937 [2004]b, p. 97; 1957 [1992]k, p. 775; 1937 [2004]a, p. 631. See also Mao 1957 [1992]g, p. 627.

13 Mao 1927 [1994], pp. 434-35.

culture of any kind can be built up. There is no construction without destruction, no flowing without damming, and no motion without rest; the two are locked in a life-and-death struggle.¹⁴

I do not wish to say more here on the negative image of Confucius in Mao Zedong's writings, since that image is reasonably well-known. But let me close this discussion with yet another sharp formulation from 1957: "Emperor Shihuang of the Qin [dynasty] came out on the short end because he only buried 460 Confucian scholars."¹⁵ The reference to the infamous *fen shu kang ru* (book burning and burying alive of scholars) under the first Chinese emperor, Shihuang (259-210 BCE), who sought to promote the Legalist school at the expense of the Confucian school.

The Good Sayings of Confucius

In the midst of the waves of negative appraisals of Confucius and the Confucian tradition, Mao also includes ample signs of appreciation. In one of his early texts, he writes:

The writings of the Confucian scholars are different from those of the men of letters. The former were translucent and pure, but the latter, unrestrained and argumentative.¹⁶

Contrary to the general impression, even in China, this positive view of Confucius is not restricted to his earlier writings. I have found that it carries through well into his late writings. Or rather, his appreciation goes through different periods, with waves of close interest, troughs of relative neglect and then a return once again. The initial wave of extensive engagement with Confucius appears in the early text, simply called "Classroom Notes" (from 1913),¹⁷ closely followed by his influential text on physical education and some of the correspondence from this time.¹⁸ Like any diligent and restive student, Mao Zedong knew Confucius's works exceedingly well. This interest and knowledge would stay with him for the rest of his life. Let me give three examples.

The first concerns Confucius's favoured disciples, Yan Hui. Mao

14 Mao 1940 [2005], p. 357; see also pp. 362-63

15 Mao 1957 [1992-e, p. 667.

16 Mao 1913 [1992], p. 33.

17 Mao 1913 [1992], pp. 13, 18, 19-20, 23, 24, 31-32, 37, 44-47, 50, 55.

18 Mao 1915 [1992]a, p. 67; 1915 [1992]c, p. 72; 1915 [1992]d, pp. 75, 79' 1915 [1992]e, p. 81' 1915 [1992]b, p. 84; 1917 [1992-a, pp. 133-34; 1920 [1992], p. 504. A number of references also appear in the commentary or marginal notes on Friedrich Poulsen (from 1917-18): Mao 1917-1918 [1992],pp. 187, 289, 292. See also Mao 1919 [1992]a, p. 335.

mentions Yan Hui a number of times, particularly with reference to the simplicity of his life: "With a single bamboo dish of rice, a single gourd dish of drink, and living in his mean narrow lane, he did not allow his joy to be affected by it."¹⁹ Or more fully:

Confucius praised Master Yan, saying that, with a single bamboo dish of rice and single gourd of drink, while others could not have endured the distress, did not allow his joy to be affected by it. Hui had the sage as his model, and a ladleful of food and a gourd dish of drink to keep him alive. Wasn't it easy for him to be not sad but happy?²⁰

I have selected this example for an obvious reason: the admonition to living simply, if not ascetically, would become a standard feature of rectification and anti-corruption campaigns. The one that comes most to mind is the warning that Mao Zedong gave to party cadres after the final success of the revolution in 1949. Here he warns the cadres not to become carried away with the exercise of power, but to remember the need for the honest and simple living that they had experienced during the long struggle beforehand.²¹

A second example of this deeper appreciation of Confucius is found in the early essay called "A Study of Physical Education." Here Mao famously outlines his daily gym routine, with some intriguing and difficult exercises that should be performed naked. "Too much clothing impedes movement," he writes. "Exercise should be savage and rude." In this condition, you may undertake exercises such as the following:

Make fists, and hold the arms straight out in front of you. Extend one leg to the side and bend the other forward. The extended leg can be moved around, while you stand on the toes of the bent leg, with the heel touching the buttocks. Left and right successively, three times.

Apart from the intriguing image of a naked Mao engaged in such vigorous and complex exercise routines, I am interested in the theoretical justification for such energetic pursuits. It comes from none other than the Confucian texts, references to which appear throughout the essay. "To know what is first and what is last will lead near to the way,"²² he quotes. And then, "I wish to be virtuous, and lo!

19 Mao 1913 [1992], p. 27. *Analects* VI and IX. Legge 1960, p. 118.

20 Mao 1913 [1992], p. 56. See also Mao 1913 [1992], pp. 16, 24, 55; 1917 [1992]a, p. 136.

21 Mao 1949 [1971].

22 Mao 1917 [1992]b, p. 115. *The Great Learning*, I. 3. Legge 1960, p. 357.

Virtue is at hand.”²³ Mao points out that this insight is even truer of physical education. It is all very well to quote choice phrases, but what of Confucius himself? Does the use of the mind mean one is deficient in physical health, and does a robust body mean one is deficient in mental capacities? Not at all, for “Confucius died at the age of seventy-two, and I have not heard that his body was not healthy.”²⁴

The third example relates to the slogans of the rectification campaigns, which often drew upon the Confucian classics. So we find from 1957: “I propose a general review be made of the work of eliminating counterrevolutionaries either this year or the next year in order to sum up the experience, promote justice, and stem evil trends.”²⁵ Here “justice” (*zhengqi*) invokes the spirit of rectitude and justice that in Confucian teaching (especially Mencius) is the fundamental spirit of heaven and earth. Or more fully:

Positive and constructive criticism will always be needed in the people’s cause. The rectification campaign of the Communist Party of China is precisely a systematic campaign of criticism and self-criticism. To encourage criticism and to dispel the worries of those who are offering criticism, the Party’s directive on the rectification campaign pointed out that we must implement resolutely the principles of “telling all that one knows; saying everything that one wishes to say; those who speak up must in no way be incriminated, those who listen [to criticism] should learn a lesson; if there are errors, corrections would be made; if not, there should be encouragement” Every member of the Communist Party should firmly commit to heart the adages of ancient China that say “Good medicine is bitter to the taste but good for curing the illness; an honest word bends the ear the wrong way but is a true guide to good behaviour.”²⁶

The most pointed appears in the text ‘On Dialectical Materialism’,

23 Mao 1917 [1992]b, p. 117. *Analects* VII, XXIX. Legge 1960, 204. For other quotations, see Mao 1917 [1992]b, pp. 113-14, 122.

24 Mao 1917 [1992]b, p. 118.

25 Mao 1957 [1992]f, p. 322. See also: “As for mistakes of other kinds, the same method can be adopted. We can issue a notice beforehand to announce that rectification will be conducted at a certain time. Then this would not be punishment without prior admonition that would be a method of small democracy.” Mao 1956 [1992]b, p. 171.

26 Mao 1957 [1992]l, p. 568. The three sayings here are: *Zhi wu bu yan*; *yan wu bu jin*, *yan zhe wu zui*, *wen zhe zhu jie* and *You guo ze gai*; *wu ze jiamian*. The first is a common saying with uncertain roots. The second and third come from “*Da xu*” (Major Preface) in the *Shi jing* (Classic of Odes) and from “*Yi*” in the *Yi jing* (Classic of Changes). The third also echoes the Confucian saying: “If there is a mistake, fear not to amend it” (*Guo ze wu dan gai*) in the chapter “*Xue er*” in the *Analects*.

where Mao writes: “‘When internal examination discovers nothing wrong, what is there to be anxious about, what is there to fear?’ This is also a correct saying of Confucius.”²⁷ The implications for today’s ‘mass line’ or anti-corruption campaign being pursued by President Xi Jinping should be obvious.

I could cite further examples of the positive assessment of Confucius, such as the need to concentrate on the true nature of things in order to accomplish goals; or the need to “ask about everything” (*Analects*, III, XV); or the need to avoid being lazy and studying hard; or the ideal of morality in which all things are nourished together without their injuring one another; or the ideal of the great peace and harmony (*taiping* and *datong*); or the need to counter-attack if needed; or the need for unity through struggle; or bringing consequences on one’s own organisation as a result of causing strife; or the need to scorn imperialism as one would scorn the term “superior man” (*da ren*); or the sacrificial connection between Socrates, Confucius and Jesus Christ; or even in his poetry.²⁸ But I have chosen these three examples – concerning simple living, the discipline of physical exercise and the need for self-criticism and rectification – since they would deepen over time and pervade later teaching and practice.

Towards a Dialectical Approach

What are we to make of this complex picture? One approach is to assume – following Mao’s own comments²⁹ – that he may have studied Confucius in his youth, but that such study was not much use. Another is to suggest that Mao was largely hostile to Confucius and that the occasional comments and references are mere window-dressing for a deeper antipathy to the purveyor of ‘feudal’ values. Neither is correct,

27 Mao 1937 [2004]a, pp. 623-24. *Analects*, XII, IV, 3. Legge 1960, 252. On a similar theme, see also: “Good medicine is bitter to the taste but beneficial for the sickness”; “Sincere advice is not pleasant to hear, but it is beneficial for one’s conduct”; “To love yet know their bad qualities, to hate and yet know their excellences.” Mao 1937 [2004]a, p. 657. See further Mao 1941 [2005]a, p. 810.

28 Respectively from Mao 1917-1918 [1992], pp. 285-86; 1930 [1995]a, p. 420; 1939 [2005]b, pp. 84, 87-88; 1913 [1992], p. 21; 1917 [1992]a, pp. 135-36; 1937 [1999], p. 615; 1939 [2005]a, p. 204; 1939 [2005]g, p. 27; 1941 [2005]b, p. 652; 1956 [1992]a, p. 60; 1956 [1992]c, p. 83. See also Mao 1956 [1992]d, p. 103; 1938 [2004], pp. 490-91.

29 “In the past, when I was a student, the conditions were not so good as those you enjoy today. First we read the works of Confucius, that is, the old stuff which goes, ‘Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application?’ Later, I went to a foreign-style school and received some bourgeois education. Although in school I did hear something about what Sun Yatsen and Marx had said, I did not learn the true doctrine of Sun Yatsenism and Marxism until after I had left school. Now you can hear about everything, except that there is a bit less about Confucius.” Mao 1939 [2005]c, p. 92. The quotation is from opening sentence of the *Analects*: Legge 1960, p. 137. See also Mao 1957 [1992]k, p. 775.

it seems to me. Instead, Mao Zedong's own texts indicate a far more complex picture. In this case, resolutely negative engagements are found side by side with sustained and even positive assessments of the legacy of Confucius.³⁰ These engagements are, however, not uniform throughout his texts. Confucius ebbs and flows throughout Mao's writings. Thus, we find an early absorption and at times criticism of Confucius in the 1910s, after which there is a break of a little over a decade with few references. However, by the end of the 1930s he returns to Confucius. Now we find many references, with some sustained pieces where he feels the need to come to terms with Confucius.³¹ This engagement would feed into his later observations on Confucius.

But I would like to close with an eye on the situation in China today regarding Confucius and Chairman Mao. In doing so, I suggest that the best way to understand Mao's complex engagement with Confucius may be understood not in terms of an unresolved contradiction, but as a dialectic. The text, "On the New Stage" (1938), makes this point very clearly:

Another of our tasks is to study our historical heritage and use the Marxist method to sum it up critically. The history of this *great* nation of ours goes back several thousand years. *It has its own laws of development*, its own *national* characteristics, and many precious treasures ... From Confucius to Sun Yatsen, we must sum it up critically, and we must constitute ourselves the heirs to this precious legacy. *Conversely, the assimilation of this legacy itself becomes a method that* aids considerably in guiding the present great movement. A Communist is a Marxist internationalist, but Marxism must take on a national form before it can be put into practice. *There is no such thing as abstract Marxism, but only concrete Marxism. What we call concrete Marxism is Marxism that has taken on a national form, that is, Marxism applied to the concrete struggle in the concrete conditions prevailing in China, and not Marxism abstractly used.* If a Chinese Communist, who is a part of the great Chinese people, bound to his people by his very flesh and blood, talks of Marxism apart from Chinese peculiarities, this Marxism is merely an empty abstraction. Consequently, *the sinification of Marxism* – that is to say, making certain that in all its manifestations it is imbued with Chinese characteristics,

30 For the more ambivalent observations on Confucius, see Mao 1917-1918 [1992], p. 202; 1930 [1995]b, pp. 363, 402, 404-5; 1935 [1999], p. 92; 1937 [1999], pp. 622-23; 1957 [1992]d, p. 303; 1957 [1992]a, pp. 358-59; 1957 [1992]b, p. 365; 1957 [1992]i, p. 733; 1957 [1992]k, p. 777.

31 Mao 1939 [2005]d, pp. 23-25; 1939 [2005]e; 1939 [2005]f.

using it according to Chinese peculiarities – becomes a problem that must be understood and solved by the whole Party without delay ... Our attitude toward ourselves should be "to learn without satiety," and toward others "to instruct without being wearied."³²

Confucius is at the beginning of this precious legacy, which makes up the specific characteristics of China. All of this must be summed up critically, weighed and assessed, in light of Marxism.

How is this to be done? Mao provides an intriguing example by means of an assessment of the political significance of some Confucian doctrines, particularly the Doctrine of the Mean, ethics and then how Confucius's idealism may be stood "on its feet." They appear in a couple of letters, one to Chen Boda and one to Zhang Wentian.³³ The focus of these letters are two articles by Chen Boda, who had joined the communists in 1927 and had become Mao's political secretary in 1937, while also working in the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee. The articles in question, "The Materialist Philosophy of Mozi" and "The Philosophical Thought of Confucius,"³⁴ indicate not only that reassessing earlier Chinese philosophers was part of the lively debates during the period of the Yan'an Soviet, but also that Mao himself was intensely interested in these discussions. Mao was one of the circle to whom Chen Boda circulated the articles for comment and suggestions, before publishing them. Given the importance of these texts, I exegete them in some detail.

In the initial letter, written directly to Chen Boda, the discussion of Confucius takes place through the medium of the Moist school of thought, founded by the lower-class artisan, Mozi (470-391 BCE).³⁵ Significantly, Mao interprets Mozi as largely in line with Confucius, an approach that had precursors in Mencius and other Confucians, but goes against Mozi's own attacks on Confucius, the subsequent antagonism between the two schools, and even the early communist

32 Mao 1938 [2004], pp. 538-39. The quotations are from the *Analects* of Confucius, VII, II. Legge 1960, p. 195. See also his comments on the need to pass down new things, such as big character posters, in the tradition, as they have done with the Confucian Classics: Mao 1957 [1992]c, p. 608; 1957 [1992]g, pp. 626-27.

33 Mao 1939 [2005]d, pp. 23-25, 1939 [2005]e.

34 The first article was published in *Jiefang* 82, 102, and 104, in 1939 and 1940. The second appeared in *Jiefang* 69, in 1939, pp. 20-24. Chen Boda also published an article on Laozi, entitled "Laozi's Philosophical Thought," which was published in *Jiefang* 63/64, in 1939.

35 A complete translation of the surviving works of Mozi is now available in Johnston 2010.

tendency to champion Mozi against the Confucian tradition.³⁶ A core issue for Mao concerns the doctrine of the mean. In the first letter, to Chen Boda, he begins by citing three phrases from Mozi: “in desiring *zheng*, one weighs the benefit; in aversion to it, one weighs the loss”; “*zheng* is unshakable”; “maintaining a balance between the two without veering to one side.”³⁷ The key term is *zheng*, which may be rendered as “position,” “appropriateness,” “uprightness,” or even, in a distinctly Confucian direction, as “the Middle Way.” Significantly, Mao opts for this Confucian sense, a sense sanctioned by a long tradition that had absorbed Mozi into a Confucian framework. To make his point, he quotes four phrases from Confucius, thereby weighting his argument in favour of the latter. They all turn on the doctrine of the mean: “hold the two extremes and employ the Mean”; “choose the Mean, grasp it firmly, and do not lose it”; “stand erect in the middle and do not incline to either side”; “maintain this course to death without changing.”³⁸

Having established this closeness between Mozi and Confucius (for the sake of his argument), Mao makes his crucial point. The Mean in question is neither two positions between which one finds a balance or common ground, nor is it a substantive position with two sides. Instead, his argument is suppler. He begins by stating that a substantive disposition does have two sides, but that it will tend to veer to one side in a single process, which thereby becomes its principle meaning. This meaning is what defines the stable and core sense of the substantive. Only when one has clarified this substance disposition does it become possible to identify what veering in one or the other direction actually means: veering to the right or left is to negate the substantive, and thus another substantive would be created. One cannot avoid reading

36 Mozi’s for the early communists is that he took a stand against Confucian nostalgia and the embrace of harmony and universal love (*boai*) within the existing – and thereby hierarchical – forms of human relations. For the lower-class artisan Mozi, universal love (*jian’ai*) was non-differentiated and community oriented, against the narrow focus on family and clan. After the Warring States period, Moism suffered at the hands of imperial fostering of Confucianism, so much so that it was ignored for two millennia.

37 These are all drawn from the tenth book of Mozi’s works, chapters 40, 41, and 42. Chapters 40 and 41 are called “Canon” (*Jing*), while chapter 42 is “Commentary on the Canon” (*Jingshuo*).

38 The first couple of phrases are quoted from *Doctrine of the Mean* VI; VIII. Legge 1960, pp. 388, 389. Since Mao quotes the full texts from which these phrases are drawn in his next article, I have provided the full text below. The context for the remaining two phrases is as follows: “The superior man cultivates a friendly harmony, without being weak. How firm is he in his energy! He stands erect in the middle, without inclining to either side. How firm is he in his energy! When good principles prevail in the government of his country, he does not change from what he was in retirement. How firm is his energy! When bad principles prevail in the country, he maintains his course to death without changing. How firm is he in his energy!” *Doctrine of the Mean* X, 5. Legge 1960, p. 390.

here the political dimensions of this argument, especially in light of Mao’s observation, that this “is the explanation that should be made if the Moist school is, indeed, dialectical materialist.”³⁹ The communist movement is indeed an initial veering in one direction, away from capitalism (and thereby the Guomintang), establishing communism itself as a clear and stable substantive disposition. Within communism, turning to the right or the left is not contained within communism, but involves its negation and the establishment of a new, non-communist substantive.

In this initial engagement, Mao mentions in passing a distinction between excess [*guo*] and falling short [*buji*]. A substantive position will oppose both. In the next item – a response to Chen Boda’s article “The Philosophical Thought of Confucius” (written to Zhang Wentian) – Mao explicates in more detail what he means by these two Confucian terms. He begins by quoting in full the texts from the *Analects*, which he had quoted in part earlier:

The Master said, “There was Shun – He indeed was greatly wise! Shun loved to question others, and to study their words ... He took hold of their two extremes, determined the Mean, and employed it in his government of the people. It was by this that he was Shun!”

The Master said, “This was the manner of Hui – he made choice of the Mean, and whenever he got hold of what was good, he clasped it firmly, as if wearing it on his breast, and did not lose it.”⁴⁰

The two extremes in question may relate to philosophies, thoughts, even everyday life, but Mao is interested in the political focus of these texts. In this register, he quotes approvingly a commentary on the Doctrine of the Mean by Zhu Xi, who stresses the search for the good in light of the opposition between excess and falling short. This is the key: on the one side lies *gui* (excess), and on other *buji* (falling short). Not only should this opposition be understood in terms of the substantive disposition mentioned earlier, but also as the quality of an object in time and space. Although this quality is to be discerned from the quantities of an object or movement, the relation between quality and quantity is dialectical. One may determine the quality of certain quantities, but at the same time the quantities themselves provide an insight into quality. In this light should we understand excess and falling short:

39 Mao 1939 [2005]d, p. 25.

40 *Doctrine of the Mean* VI; VIII. Legge 1960, pp. 388, 389.

“Excess” is a “leftist” thing, and “falling short” is a “rightist” thing ... If we say that this thing is not in that state, but has entered into another state, then it has a different quality, and has become “excessive” or gone “to the left.” If we say that this thing still lingers in the same state without new development, then it is an old thing, a stagnant concept, conservative and stubborn; it is rightist and “has fallen short.”⁴¹

While Mao points out that Confucius has no such notion of the development of a position or an object, rejecting positions that had already been accepted, he also indicates his profound appreciation of the insight. Indeed, it was “a great discovery and a great achievement,” so much so that this “important field of philosophy” requires and explanation.⁴²

A couple of other themes worthy of analysis also appear in this engagement with Confucius, notably ethics and the idealism of Confucius. The discussion of these is more critical of Confucius, albeit in a way that seeks to draw insights for Marxist dialectics. On the question of ethics, the communists faced extensive deployment of Confucian traditions by the Guomindang for their own purposes. It would have been easy to consign Confucius to the reactionaries – as Mao does on other occasions – and attack the system of thought and culture as a whole. Instead, he seeks to draw the seeds of a materialist ethics from the Confucian combination of wisdom, benevolence, courage, loyalty and righteousness.

He attempts such a reworking by deploying two strategies: translation into a materialist register and a reordering of the relations between the virtues. The underlying and largely unspoken issue is class. In their initial Confucian context, these ethical precepts simply reinforce the position of the ruling class. So the challenge is to translate the Confucian virtues into ones appropriate for peasants and workers. As they stand, and as they had been used for thousands of years, the virtues read as follows: wisdom is idealist and arbitrary, benevolence is restricted to the ruling class, and courage merely entails the “courage” to oppress the poorer classes. Translated into a materialist register: wisdom is concrete, nothing less than “a theory, a thought, a plan, a program, a policy,” benevolence is the need to “love and unite with” the

41 Mao 1939 [2005]e, p. 35.

42 Mao 1939 [2005]e, p. 35.

theory and program first developed, and courage is the perseverance to overcome hardships faced in acting on the program. As with Mao's treatment of the Doctrine of the Mean, we can discern the experiences of the communist party and the peasant-worker struggle more generally, but also the glimpses of how a socialist society might work in light of these translated Confucian virtues: program, unity and perseverance become the new forms of wisdom, benevolence and courage. The second strategy involves reordering the relations between the virtues. Mao's real target here is benevolence, for it was regarded as the prime Confucian virtue. His initial move is to suggest that the three virtues are actually determined by loyalty: without loyalty wisdom is empty words, benevolence hypocritical and courage an empty shell. But we can also see how the act of translation above has made benevolence secondary. It belongs to the realm of practice, of enacting the theory and program first developed in the exercise of wisdom. He then reinforces the point by elevating yet another virtue, righteousness, over benevolence. Righteousness belongs to wisdom, to the developing of theories and programs – a point that runs counter to the Confucian assumption that benevolence is more important than righteousness. Of course, this inversion has its own dialectical feature, for elsewhere Mao will stress the crucial role of practice in developing theory.⁴³ Obviously, these different emphases should not be taken in isolation, for the theory-practice dialectic is a central feature of Marxism. Indeed, it is precisely in terms of running Confucius through the dialectic that we find the deepest engagement with Confucius.

Conclusion: Dealing with Confucian Idealism

So I come – by way of conclusion – to the final issue, namely, the idealism of Confucius. Simply put, this idealism is not to be condemned, but to be analysed for its insights, criticised for its partial nature, and recast in a dialectical materialist framework. Mao begins his argument on this matter with a quotation from the *Analects*: “If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success.”⁴⁴ For Mao, this provides only half the truth, comparable to the common Marxist point that without correct theory, one cannot have correct practice. Yet, as the Marxist tradition makes

43 Mao 1937 [1965].

44 *Analects* XIII, III, 5. Legge 1960, pp. 263-64.

clear, the theory itself arises from practice in a dialectical fashion. In this light, if Confucius had prefaced his observation on names with the sentence, “If the facts are unclear, then the name will not be correct,” then he would have developed a materialist position, with the reality of practice as the necessary other component in the theory-practice dialectic. One cannot help noticing the appreciation of Confucius in this text, so much so that certain parallels may be drawn, keeping in mind Mao’s dialectical point: “Confucius was rectifying the names of the feudal order; we are rectifying the names of the revolutionary order.” In other words, Confucius provides an intelligent idealism, one that may fruitfully become part of dialectical materialism.⁴⁵ The echoes of Marx’s famous standing of Hegel on his feet, of using dialectics itself to identify the materialism implicit in Hegel and making that the determining framework, should be obvious – albeit with one caveat: Mao’s engagement with Confucius is done “with Chinese characteristics.”

45 See also: “Without idealism, we can’t show how good materialism is. Without opposition, there will not be struggle. Only that which emerges from struggle can withstand the test. Contradictions continually occur; there must be continuous struggle, and the continuous resolution [of contradictions]; in a billion years, this will remain so. After one learns about the positive things, one must also learn about the negative things. If we talked only about materialism and didn’t say anything about idealism, if we only talked about dialectics and said nothing about metaphysics, you wouldn’t know anything from the negative side, and the things on the positive side would also not be consolidated. Therefore, not only do we have to publish a collection of Sun Yat-sen’s works, but we have to publish a collection of Chiang Kai-shek’s works as well. We’ll talk about Hegel, Kant, Confucius, Lao Zi, the two Cheng [brothers]. Zhu [Xi], Wang [Yangming]; we’ll talk about all of them.” Mao 1957 [1992]h, pp. 243-44. See also Mao 1957 [1992]j, pp. 252-56; 1957 [1992]d, p. 303.

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Psychoanalysis, Religion, Love¹

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¹ I wish to thank Luisella Brusa, Guillaume Collett, Dominiek Hoens, Mike Lewis, Paul Livingston, Marco Piasentier, Frank Ruda, and Davide Tarizzo for their feedback on an earlier version of this article.

Abstract:

Lacan's provocative claims concerning what he called 'the God hypothesis' have led some of his followers into assuming he was a believer. In this article, I am at showing how throughout his oeuvre, Lacan has persistently attempted to dispel this misunderstanding concerning the relation between psychoanalysis and religion. 'God' rather provisionally stands as a profane yet unsurpassable hypothesis about the structural oscillation of the symbolic order of language between its making One and its being not-One. It is thus precisely to the extent that religion will continue to triumph in the future that the legacy of Freud's teaching will have failed. More specifically, Lacan locates the harshest of battles between religion and psychoanalysis in the field of love. Against the redemptive value of Christian love, and its dangerous disavowal of the real, Lacan advances a psychoanalytic theory of sexuation that closely associates love as a 'desire to be One' with exorcising God. This also poses an open question about true love: can love sometimes be truthful in spite of the ultimate meaninglessness that it logically presupposes and seems to confine it to the realm of a palliative but also potentially lethal narcissistic illusion?

Keywords: Lacan, God, Christianity, other, religion

In Seminar XX (1972-1973), Lacan puts forward what he calls 'the God hypothesis', namely, 'As long as somebody will say something, the God hypothesis will persist', or also, from a slightly different perspective, 'It is impossible to say anything without immediately making Him subsist in the form of the Other'.¹ At a crucial point, he acknowledges with frustration that these statements might easily lead those who follow him into assuming he is a believer: 'Naturally, you are all going to be convinced that I believe in God!'.²

Throughout his oeuvre, Lacan has persistently attempted, with the utmost urgency, to dispel this misunderstanding concerning the relation between psychoanalysis and religion. In a few words, the necessity of the *logical* existence of the God *hypothesis* for each and every speaking animal does not inevitably entail the belief in an *ontological*

¹ Lacan 1998c, p. 45 (translation modified).

² Ibid., pp. 76-77.

divine essence; quite the contrary, it drastically puts into question this essence. On the one hand, psychoanalytical discourse must oppose with determination any precipitate materialist philosophy that feels obliged ‘to be on its guard against [...] God’, and reacts with uneasiness whenever he is mentioned.³ On the other hand, it is precisely to the extent that religion will continue to triumph in the future that the legacy of Freud’s teaching will have failed.⁴ Speaking of the Other with a capital O, putting forward the God hypothesis, that is, intentionally making *explicit* the implicit evocation of God that is already inherent to speech as such, does not in the least amount to readmitting him in disguise through the back door – by ‘laicizing’ him via a form of secularization that in the end remains religious. It rather amounts to ‘exorcising the good old God’,⁵ Lacan says, summoning him with words in order to establish *whether* he can be chased away from the body, as a body of language, of the *homo sapiens* species.

We should thus understand in this context Lacan’s repeated provocation according to which it is *theology* that, sooner or later, paves the way for a facile pseudo-atheism, where God still reigns undisturbed. For this very reason, his own redoubling of theology into a discourse on the condition of possibility of a discourse on God – ‘As long as somebody will say something, the God hypothesis will persist’ – will certainly displease theologians who aim at secularizing the divine. Lacan presents himself as an irreligious *para*-theologian who denounces, in different ways, both theologians and alleged materialists as *religious atheists*. The former have mostly spoken about God only in an attempt to make him compatible with the supposed immanent order of this world (from ancient theories of providence to recent ideas about an ‘intelligent design’). Conversely, the latter, in deciding not to speak about him – or in claiming to liquidate him axiomatically – leave unchallenged even the most blatant transcendent mirages structurally implied by his unavoidable presence in language as the semblance of a meta-language.

As Lacan spells out very clearly in ‘Le triomphe de la religion’ (1974), an interview he gave fifteen months after the conclusion of Seminar XX, which should be read alongside it, religion has primarily

3 Ibid., p. 68.

4 See Lacan 2005, p. 78.

5 Lacan 1998c, p. 68.

to do with meaning [*sens*]. Religion gives meaning to the real to be understood as a logical impasse, as ‘that which does not work’ in the symbolic.⁶ A religious man, a believer, is the one who believes, first and foremost, in the rational meaning of the world, in the world as ‘that which works’.⁷ Modern science increasingly expands the real, while at the same time trying in vain to foreclose it by feigning to totalize knowledge. Because of this, historically, religion ‘will have even more good reason to appease hearts’.⁸ In other words, in spite of appearing to be bound up with atheism, far from secularising the world, the advent of modernity will certainly entail in the future a *new* triumph of religion – this is a future which, as we all know, has become increasingly palpable over the last forty years. From this perspective, psychoanalysis is itself a historical product of science, a symptomatic discontent of scientific civilization, which has been able to circumscribe theoretically through its clinical practice the real nonsense which science fails to confront epistemologically – for instance, as it emerges in the paresthesias of the hysteric, the compulsive actions of the obsessional neurotic, and the voices of the psychotic. As long as the truth of this discovery is not closed off in a self-sufficient knowledge, as long as psychoanalysis is able to reinvent itself as a ‘knowledge of truth’ [*savoir sur la vérité*] which refuses any ‘truth of knowledge’ [*vérité sur le savoir*],⁹ it will also resist, or at least slow down, the ‘tireless’ advance of religion, whose power we should never underestimate.¹⁰

Lacan delineates here a picture that is undoubtedly pessimistic,

6 Lacan 2005, p. 76.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., p. 79.

9 Lacan 2011, p. 195. The lesson in question comes from *Le savoir du psychanalyste*, not ... *ou pire*. In 1971-1972, Lacan ran in parallel two different Seminars at distinct locations. Jacques-Alain Miller, the editor of the Seminars, has incomprehensibly included some of the lessons of *Le savoir* in ... *ou pire*, while the others have been collected in ‘Je parle aux murs’ (Paris: Seuil, 2011). The former are identifiable by the subtitle ‘talk’ [*entretien*]. I will provide the page references of these published volumes but preserve the distinction between the two Seminars in the main text by calling them, respectively, Seminar XIX and Seminar XIX B. It is also worth noting that the date of lesson XIII of ...*ou pire* reads incorrectly 10/5/1972: it should be 17/5/1972.

10 Lacan 2005, p. 79. I thus fully share Badiou’s view that ‘Freud enlisted the century in a great battle about sex, meaning, and truth, a battle that Lacan depicted as a great confrontation between religion and psychoanalysis. What is at stake in this conflict is the question of knowing whether sex has a meaning [...] or whether the subjective destiny of sexuation submits the subject to a senseless truth, the truth that, in Lacan’s words [...], there is no sexual relation’ Badiou 2007, p. 79.

yet not hopeless.¹¹ First of all, as a worst case scenario, he does not rule out the possibility that psychoanalysis could become (or has already become), against his will, a form of meaningful religion. Should this not happen, scientific civilization, here aligned with religion, will nonetheless most likely dispose of psychoanalysis very soon, repress its symptomatic value.¹² In brief, psychoanalysis will certainly never triumph. But it can survive for a long time and, we may add, venturing outside the limits imposed by Lacan's scepticism on this topic, be supplanted at some stage by another discourse – yet to be invented – that will perpetuate its truth-function, its being, as he has it, a 'flash' of the real 'between two worlds' (that is, between two phases of religion as a provider of meaning), which thus shows that 'there is no world', no universe.¹³

What interests me the most in such an assessment of our epochal predicament is that throughout his many lectures and seminar lessons on Christianity, Lacan invariably locates the harshest of battles between religion and psychoanalysis in the field of *love*. It seems that this is where Freudianism can defend itself more vigorously, and maybe counter-attack. Lacan's belligerent strategy already transpires in the 1960 'Discours aux catholiques' and continues in his later oeuvre: we must categorically not abandon, he says, the 'primacy of love' to religious dogmas since the position from which Christianity enjoins us to love our neighbour as ourselves – ultimately, in the name of the absolute love of a substantive God – is precisely 'this gaping place from which nothingness interrogates us on our sex and our *existence*', that is to say,

11 As an nineteenth century positivist, Freud is no doubt more – naively – optimistic when he claims the following: 'I must contradict you when you go on to argue that men are completely unable to do without the consolation of the religious illusion [...] That is true, certainly, of the men into whom you have instilled the sweet – or bitter-sweet – poison from childhood onwards. But what of the other men, who have been sensibly brought up? [...] They will have to admit to themselves the full extent of their helplessness and their insignificance in the machinery of the universe [...] Men cannot remain children for ever; they must in the end go out into "hostile life". We may call this "*education to reality*". Need I confess to you that the whole purpose of my book is to point out the necessity for this forward step?' This step forward can, and must be accomplished, Freud adds, because 'it is possible for scientific work to gain some knowledge about the reality of the world, by means of which we can increase our power and in accordance with which we can arrange our life [...] Science has given us evidence by its numerous and important successes that it is no illusion', Freud 2001, p. 49, p. 55.

12 'You'll see that humanity will be cured of psychoanalysis. By keeping on soaking it into meaning, into religious meaning, of course, they will manage to repress this symptom' ('Le triomphe de la religion', p. 82). To sense how this repression is still ideologically perceived as a pressing concern, one should refer to works such as *Le livre noir de la psychanalyse*. Ironically, psychoanalysis is after all being attacked for not having meaning, given its alleged theoretical blunders and clinical frauds. For a persuasive defence of psychoanalysis at this general level, see Žižek 2006, pp. 3-9.

13 Lacan 2005, p. 79, p. 87, p. 83, p. 76.

the very place of the emergence of psychoanalysis.¹⁴ If psychoanalysis intends to propose itself as an ethics of the *real*, which, since its beginnings, has in fact taken its cue from the symbolic irreducibility of questions such as 'What is sex, what is it for?' and 'How did I come into existence in this world?' (suffice it to mention as a paradigm the Little Hans case¹⁵), it will then necessarily have to tackle the use religion makes of love in *disavowing* these very questions. Unlike philosophy, which has capitulated at the exact moment when, in stopping to enquire about God, it also set aside the issue of love (for 'in philosophy, God has dominated the entire debate on love'¹⁶), psychoanalysis can still counter the triumph of religion to the extent that it manages to put forward a theory of love whereby the *semblance* of meaning is both neatly distinguished from truth as the function that signals the real *deadlock* of meaning, and thought dialectically together with it.¹⁷

As early as Seminar VII (1959-1960), Lacan disentangles the way in which the imaginary dimension underlying the command 'Love thy neighbour' disavows the real, with dangerous consequences.¹⁸ The 'altruism' of Christian religion is profoundly *narcissistic*; it ambivalently conceals a 'Love your neighbour as *yourself*', which, by definition, does not accept the other as what remains most foreign to each of us. Lacan keeps on repeating throughout his writings and seminars that the more we eroticise the image of completeness provided by the body of our fellow humans perceived as a whole form, the less we refrain from aggressively competing with them. This form, or *Gestalt*, appears to us

14 Lacan 2005, p. 12, p. 61.

15 Let us not forget that, for Freud, Hans's phobia originates from the impossibility of being provided an adequate answer to two fundamental problems: his mother's sex ('Mummy, have you got a widdler too?'), and the birth of his sister ('The arrival of his sister brought into Hans's life many new elements, which from that time on gave him no rest. [...] He was faced with the great riddle of where babies come from', Freud 2001, pp. 132-133. Tellingly, his overcoming of the phobia coincides with 'our young investigator [having] merely come somewhat early upon the discovery that all *knowledge is patchwork, and that each step forward leaves an unsolved residue behind*' (ibid, p. 100, my emphasis). It is also worth noting that Hans himself refers to his phobia as 'nonsense' (ibid., pp. 49-50). We should read this lack of meaning together with the 'Ugh!' he emits upon seeing his mother's underwear: 'When I saw the yellow drawers I said "Ugh! That makes me spit!" and threw myself down and shut my eyes and didn't look' (ibid., p. 56). In this light, it seems to me that *Little Hans* is arguably the most 'Lacanian' of Freud's founding case-histories.

16 Lacan 1998c, p. 65.

17 Alain Badiou's work, for which love is a 'truth procedure', has shown that philosophy is itself still able to accomplish such a task. Tellingly, Lacan's theory of love stands, for Badiou, from this perspective, as a 'condition for the renaissance of philosophy', Badiou 2009, p. 83.

18 Seminar VII is contemporaneous with 'Discours aux catholiques'.

as the ideal unity where we would desire to *be, replacing* the other. But it is simply that with which we can actually achieve only an alienating identification, bound to intensify the – in the end, biological – disorder of our imagination. Insofar as Christianity revolves around the precept to love our brothers as ourselves, ‘and whoever they are, may they be *like us*’ – a message of fraternity which, in Seminar XIX, Lacan will closely connect with racism – hatred thus follows the love of the neighbour ‘as its shadow’.¹⁹ Such a disquieting – and inevitable – facet of the Christian imperative was much feared by Freud: in the end, the love of the neighbour rests on a badly miscalculated endeavour to eliminate ‘my neighbour’s harmful, malignant *jouissance*’ – for instance, by giving him the other cheek when he attacks me – and, more in general, everything that seems to threaten his ideal unity but is in fact inextricable from it. This soon disastrously turns into an opposite attitude towards the other, since the same *jouissance* – the phallic *jouissance* of making One, and in particular its sadomasochism – reflexively ‘also dwells within me’.²⁰

In this light, the passionate dedication to the other of saintly figures like Angela da Foligno, ‘who *joyfully* lapped up the water in which she had just washed the feet of lepers’, and the blessed Marie Allacoque, ‘who, with no less a reward in spiritual uplift, ate the excrement of a sick man’,²¹ is ultimately supported by the implementation of a radically superegoic injunction to ‘fulfil the law’ – as St Paul has it – and to return to the alleged absolute *jouissance* of the mythical Thing – which Seminar XX significantly refers to as the *asexual* being One of God, of his essence. Such an attempted totalization of the symbolic order, which is doomed to fail, brings with it the disavowal of the real as the not-all of the symbolic, primarily in the guise of a disavowal of the real question about the sex of my neighbour: Why are there ‘men at one pole and women at the other’?²² Christian love aims at the purification of the symbolic, the complete symbolization of the real, which with the same move would however eventually achieve a real-isation of the symbolic, and therefore its disappearance, along with that of sexual difference, at what Lacan

19 Lacan 2005, p. 62.

20 To put it simply, the philanthropy of St Martin and the devastation of the crusaders are, for Lacan, governed by the same totalising logic.

21 Lacan 1992, p. 188 (my emphasis).

22 Lacan 1998c, p. 12. For psychoanalysis this question then invariably leads to *Was will das Weib?* – since the Other sex is invariably woman, for both man and woman – which Freud himself ‘expressly’ left aside, Lacan admits in Seminar XX (p. 80).

himself calls the ‘point of apocalypse’.²³

Christianity – and, in particular, the love of the Christian God as a world-order from which the order to love the neighbour is issued²⁴ – likewise disavows the real with regard to the logical impasse evidenced by any serious interrogation about existence. But throughout ‘Le triomphe de la religion’, and in various passages from Seminar XX, Lacan unexpectedly introduces the religion of Christ as ‘*la vraie religion*’.²⁵ To put it briefly, Christianity would amount to the ‘true religion’ inasmuch as, more than any other religion, it comes *near* to the materialist truth of the emergence of the signifier alongside a void (Lacan always opposes his materialist dialectic of the signifier and the void to any naïve philosophical materialism for which matter is all that exists). According to him, the religious *ex nihilo* of the *logos*, the ‘In the beginning was the Word’ that somehow borders on the psychoanalytic identification of the *logos* with the *nihil*,²⁶ should be understood as the specific feature that differentiates Christianity from the other monotheistic religions that are also creationist. For instance, to distinguish Christianity as a ‘true’ religion from Judaism, one needs to ask the following: ‘In the beginning was the Word [*parole*]. Yes, correct. But where was the Word before the beginning?’. Lacan suggests that, for Jews, the Word was *in God* before the beginning, or, ‘the Word was before the beginning’, whereas for Christians the Word is that by means of which ‘God created the world’ and cannot precede such a creation.²⁷

23 Lacan 1992, p. 207.

24 Clearly, this account is partial in that it does not take into consideration the subtleties and multifaceted value of love in Christian Trinitarian theology (e.g. with regard to the Holy Spirit, whose first gift is indeed love, although the Holy Spirit is at the same time embodied in Jesus, as ‘the Beloved Son’, at the moment of his baptism) (see Galatians 5:22-23; see also Mt 3:17; Mk 1:11; Lk 3:21-22).

25 See, for example Lacan 2005, p. 81; Lacan 1998c, p. 107.

26 This is *not* to say that Lacan believes in creationism. Language does not proceed *from* the void through the act of a transcendent will. Language is concomitant with the void, which does not precede it. “‘God has created the world from nothingness’ is the refusal of logic”, Lacan says at one point in Seminar XIX (p. 52). Yet there are passages, even in his late work, where he fails to sufficiently mark the difference between his theory of the signifier and creationism, which can give rise to dangerous misunderstandings (see for example Seminar XX, p. 41). I read these instances in the context of his polemics against the teleology of mainstream evolutionary theory – its regarding man as the ‘pinnacle of creation’, Lacan 1991b, p. 48 – but the issue remains open and should be further discussed elsewhere.

27 Lacan 2005, p. 89. This distinction is no doubt debatable. Addressing it further lies however beyond our remit here. Let us simply stress that Lacan’s point is supported by those scholars who contend that Genesis 1, and more generally the Hebrew Bible, was not initially interested in a) positing God as the creator of the world (rather than as the shaper of destiny out of a pre-existing formless matter) and b) before its encounter with Greek philosophy, conceiving creation as enacted by means of the creative Word.

Most importantly, Christianity is a 'true' religion because the birth of Christ, as God's Word or *logos* incarnated in the body of a miserable member of the *homo sapiens* species ('the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us'²⁸), *redoubles* the paradox of the incarnation of the symbolic in man, in what Lacan names 'a repugnant carnal being' who is 'ravaged by the Word'.²⁹ He can thus affirm that the statements 'in the beginning was the Word' and 'the speaking being is a sick animal' – first and foremost sexually, for language cannot represent sex, which hence remains a logical impossibility – point in the same direction.³⁰ Yet, and this is crucial, Lacan's argument clearly implies that Christian religion is the 'true' religion only inasmuch as it is *less false* than other religions. Christianity is still a *religion* and as such it disavows the real which emerges concomitantly with the signifier as its irreducible void. More precisely, Christ's coming into existence in this world, his embodying concretely God's love for man, disavows the logical impasse concerning the appearance of language in man – that is, ultimately, the question of anthropogenesis, the real question about existence. Why? Because it gives dogmatically to this truthful impasse an unprecedented *meaning*: Christ has become one of us to spread the word, the good news that the love of God may eventually save us. Therefore, it is exactly the proximity of Christianity to truth that makes it the worst enemy of psychoanalysis. If, on the one hand, Christianity as 'true' religion is the least untruthful and hence most meaningless of all religions, on the other hand, it insidiously recuperates meaning at the very level of truth as meaninglessness. In different terms, it explicitly turns the incompleteness of the symbolic into

28 Jn 1:14.

29 'Lacan 2005, p. 90.

30 Ibid., p. 93.

the definitive reason to believe in its completeness.³¹

Against this redemptive value of the Christian love of God, in Seminar XX, Lacan advances a psychoanalytic theory of sexuation that closely associates love with exorcising God, an operation I have earlier defined as 'para-theological', as lying beside theology and not simply in opposition to it (and which will ultimately pave the way for a sophisticated form of materialist agnosticism). God provisionally stands here as a profane yet unsurpassable hypothesis about the Other, namely, about the structural oscillation of the symbolic order of language between its making One and its being not-One, its producing the semblance of unity and this very production's reliance on the maintenance of a non-totality. In this non-religious framework – marked by the irreconcilability of two 'divine' faces which both immanently derive from the fact that we are speaking animals³² – love definitely sides with the semblance of unity ('a kind of mirage of the One you believe yourself to be'³³), that is, with meaning. Unlike Christianity, Lacan does not equate meaning with truth. Truth is not the eventual meaning of an apparently meaningless meaning.³⁴ Meaning is provided by the phallic logic of the signifier, which can temporarily be sutured as a whole thanks to love as a 'desire to be One'.³⁵ Truth amounts to the function that marks the real absence of the sexual relationship – i.e. the impossibility of

31 Consequently, the more Christianity highlights meaninglessness as truth, like in Protestantism, the less it accepts truth in favour of meaning. This paradox could explain Lacan's recurrent specification that Christianity as the 'true' religion is ultimately 'the Roman one' (see for example, 'Le triomphe de la religion', p. 81), where the stress on meaninglessness as truth is less evident. Yet, as is well-known, Lacan also praises Luther (Protestant meaninglessness without truth in his view?). On the one hand, the history of Christianity's relation to truth he traces in the beautiful pages he dedicates to the baroque in Seminar XX ends up with a vehement defence of the Counter-Reformation and its aesthetic 'exaltation of obscenity' as a return to the Gospels, to 'bringing back what we call the world [*monde*] to its filthy truth [*vérité d'immondice*]', Lacan 1998c, pp. 107-116. On the other hand, in Seminar VII, it is rather Luther who, in very similar terms, 'renewed the very basis of Christian teaching when he sought to express our dereliction, our fall in [this] world'; Luther's 'You are that waste matter which falls into the world from the devil's anus' is nothing less than what 'Freud came to give his approval, his official stamp, when he made that image of the world [...] return once and for all there where [it] belong[s], that is in our body', Lacan 1992, pp. 92-93.

32 See Chapter 1 of Chiesa, forthcoming

33 Lacan 1998c, p. 47.

34 See Lacan 2011, p. 186.

35 Lacan 1998c, p. 6. This late definition of love as a *desire* to be One which is also a desire to *be One* seems to contain both *agape* and *eros* (as well as *philia*). Lacan's reading of the *Symposium* in Seminar VIII, on the other hand, draws on the distinction between *agape* and *eros*. Yet, already here, he does not fail to note that these two terms are 'incredibly opposed' in Anders Nygren's seminal work on the topic, Lacan 1991a, p. 26.

enunciating this relationship as One, or to put it differently, 'the absence of any sexual meaning'³⁶ – which comes logically prior to the phallic logic of the signifier and can never be fully sublated by it.³⁷ In other words, love strives to give a meaning to the resulting *ab-sexe* – the sexual absence-abscess Lacan refers to in his 1973 article 'L'Étourdit' – and, above all, succeeds partly in this task (that is to say, to the extent that copulation as well as sexual reproduction do indeed occur in the *homo sapiens* species). And yet, invariably, 'the duet', or duo of love is 'not the sexual relationship', Lacan reminds us; rather, love precisely 'revolve[s] around the fact that there's no such thing as a sexual relationship'.³⁸

At this stage, the seminal question that, in his discussion of sexuation as well as elsewhere, Lacan surprisingly leaves in the background and that we instead need to tackle overtly is the following: does the absence of the sexual relationship allow any room for *true* love? Lacan's underestimation of the issue at stake appears to clash with his intention to develop a new irreligious discourse on love as much as with his recrimination that philosophy has done with it far too quickly. Does he think that love can sometimes, in certain circumstances, be truthful in spite of the non-absoluteness, the ultimate meaninglessness that it logically presupposes and seems to confine it to the realm of a – palliative but also potentially lethal – narcissistic illusion? Or should we take the claim according to which true 'love is impossible [since] the sexual relationship drops into the abyss of nonsense'³⁹ as his last word on the matter? If the recognition of the fact that love is never true in the sense of absolute outside of religion – 'an absolute love, that is an impossible love'⁴⁰ – were a sufficient reason for its unconditional untruthfulness, how should we then understand Lacan's speaking in the same years of 'a healthy idea of love'?⁴¹ Is the latter just a *critical* – or even sarcastic – idea aimed at unmasking love as a semblance? But in this case, does the avoidance of a systematic enquiry into what *could* make

36 See Badiou 2010, p. 111.

37 Here we are distinguishing the phallic function as truth of incompleteness from this very function's establishing itself as a signifying logic (of the semblance) of the One, although these two aspects of sexuation are co-implied.

38 Lacan 1998c, p. 57.

39 Ibid., p. 87.

40 Lacan 2005, p. 63.

41 'Je parle aux murs', p. 104.

love both true *and* compatible with the truth of incompleteness not run the risk of indirectly promoting its religious re-appropriation by a more subtle discourse on absolute meaning (for example, a psychoanalytic religion of fusional love⁴²), which is what Lacanian psychoanalysis set out to oppose in the first place?

I would argue that Lacan's theory of love remains overall unvaried throughout his oeuvre, especially with regard to what constitutes its biological basis and the main coordinates of its phenomenology. Biologically, love is the result of a 'disorder of the imagination' pertaining to the nature of the speaking animals of the *homo sapiens* species, and of the intricate dialectic of alienation and identification that both issues from such a real impasse and tries to cope with it. This very point, already present in Seminar I, is further developed through the idea of the absence of the sexual relationship and of the ensuing phallic logic of the signifier that corks it, albeit with difficulty. If Seminar XX, the work in which Lacan measures the limits of love vis-à-vis the *il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel*, still insists on the fact that humans are, as a species, fundamentally 'unhealthy', ten years earlier, Seminar XI already anticipates the positing of the absence of the sexual relationship as the point of departure of psychoanalysis by discussing how the biological function of reproduction cannot be 'represented as such' symbolically, how 'in the psyche, there is nothing by which the subject may situate himself as a male or female being' – while such a sexual localisation can only be achieved in a complex and precarious manner by means of culturally mediated 'equivalents' (i.e. the phallic function).⁴³

In parallel, Lacan continues to repeat that, in line with these biological premises, a privileged way to approach the appearance of the phenomenon of love in its conjunction with the absence of the sexual relationship is given by the transference (emerging from the concrete setting of psychoanalytic praxis, transference provides an 'experimental model' to test the structural foundations of love as applicable even to its 'natural' forms, that is, outside of psychoanalysis⁴⁴). He also insists that transference-love should be conceptualised via a return to the Freudian notions of ego, ideal ego, and ego-ideal with reference to the unfolding and resolution of the Oedipus complex. Lacan's claim,

42 See Lacan's unrelenting dismissal of Michael Balint's ideal of 'genital love' (for example in Lacan 1992, pp. 8-9, but already throughout Seminar I).

43 Lacan 1998, p. 116. Lacan 1998b, p. 204.

44 See *ibid.*, p. 125.

in Seminar I, that love may be regarded as a 'power binding subjects', a 'pact',⁴⁵ that is, an unstable symbolic balancing of the aggressivity inherent to imaginary identifications, whereby the Father as ego-ideal 'regulates'⁴⁶ the potentially catastrophic effects of the confrontation with the ideal image of the other (the ideal ego), still echoes in Seminar XI's close association of such a pacifying psychical 'deceit' [*tromperie*] with 'the point of the ego-ideal [...] from which the subject will see himself, as one says, *as seen by the other*'.⁴⁷ Although it becomes possibly harder to detect it given the increasing subtlety of Lacan's overall theory of sexualisation, the same argument also re-emerges in Seminar XIX B's suggestion that the phallic function can partly overcome the 'disappearance' [*evanouissement*] of the sexual partner precisely by promoting a fragile triangulation between the phallic universality of man and the phallic incompleteness of woman around, once again, the 'ideal point' of the Father. The latter is the 'exception' woman loves – as the 'at-least-one' [*au-moins-un*] not to be subjected to castration – and man identifies with. Using the same terminology he adopted in Seminar XI, Lacan does not fail to specify that we are dealing here with 'the only point where the duality [between the sexes] has a chance to be represented'.⁴⁸

Having said this – that is, having evidenced Lacan's Freudianism with respect to the way in which he understands the phenomenon of love in the psychoanalytic setting and beyond – it is undeniable that the Freudian *meta-psychology* derived from such an – initially clinical – phenomenology (in brief, the meta-psychology of *Eros* and *Thanatos* as the life and death instincts) becomes increasingly exposed to Lacan's attacks in later Seminars, especially beginning with the early 1970s. In open contrast to the main onto-biological argument of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Seminar XIX B thoroughly criticises the possibility of considering *Eros* as a 'sort of essence, which would tend to make One out of two'.⁴⁹ In other words, for Lacan, love as a *desire* to be one remains a structural effect of *non*-totalization, and thus does not in the

45 Lacan 1988a, pp. 110-112, p. 174.

46 Ibid., p. 141.

47 Lacan 1998b, p. 268 (my emphasis).

48 Lacan 2011, pp. 107-108. 'Chance' is not rhetorical: it signals the key role of contingency, as non-impossibility, in sexualisation.

49 Ibid., p. 107.

least – tend to – make One outside of the dimension of imaginary deceit: 'Everyone knows, of course, that two have never become one'.⁵⁰ In this context, Freud's science amounts to nothing else than a 'vulgar myth' that takes for granted a 'founding force of life, of the life instinct', which would be wholly contained by 'Eros [as] a principle of union', by 'this bizarre assimilation of Eros with what tends to coagulate'.⁵¹ In so doing, ultimately, 'Freud promotes the One', which Lacan is, on the contrary, trying to fight off.⁵²

It is precisely in opposition to the old meta-psychology of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* – as an 'exorcism' against *Eros*, Seminar XIX B specifies⁵³ – that Lacan further unravels his theory of love, which can now no longer directly be accounted for within a Freudian framework, not only biologically but also logically.⁵⁴ Freud was right in observing that the unconscious does not respect the principle of contradiction, yet, 'it is not sufficient that Freud has said that the unconscious does not know contradiction for it not to be the promised land of logic. Have we arrived in this century without knowing that logic can easily do without the principle of contradiction?'⁵⁵ Lacan's new logic of the amorous phenomenon consists first and foremost in a speculation on the *number* of love, which is neither simply the one nor the two, since love always presupposes the real 'not-two' [*pas deux*]⁵⁶ of the absence of the sexual relationship: there is one sex – the masculine – which makes One, and the Other sex – the feminine – which can never be reduced to *an*-other sex, another One. Such a logic finds its most complete elaboration

50 Lacan 1998c, p. 47.

51 Lacan 2011, p. 157, p. 126.

52 Ibid., p. 126.

53 Ibid., p. 157. We can then conclude that there is no exorcism of God without an exorcism of love, and vice versa.

54 This is not incompatible with Lacan's earlier appreciation, especially in Seminar II, of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* for the way in which it highlights repetition as a structural component of the linguistic body of the speaking animal. In the 1970s, such a Freudian element is still valid, but only if the pleasure principle, with which repetition would allegedly be in contrast, is no longer seen as a principle ('Repetition, this is where Freud discovers the beyond the pleasure principle. But of course, if there is a beyond, we should not talk about a principle. A principle where there is a beyond is no longer a principle. Let's also leave aside, with the same move, the reality principle. This needs to be revised in its entirety. There aren't two classes of speaking beings, those who govern themselves according to the pleasure and reality principles, and those who are beyond the pleasure principle') ('Je parle aux murs', p. 27).

55 Lacan 2011, p. 48.

56 See *ibid.*, p. 186.

starting from Seminar XVIII with the so-called 'formulas of sexuation', a daring attempt to dismantle Aristotle's logical modalities through an original appropriation – but also a critique – of Frege's notion of function and theory of numbers.

I believe these are the issues we need to consider initially in order to try to establish whether there is, in Lacan, a positive notion of non-narcissistic, true love.⁵⁷ If, as Seminar XX makes clear, love is phallically always a *ménage à trois* with God, and thus yet another figure of the One, can we envision a way in which the *not-two* of the absent sexual relationship does not, in love, necessarily turn into such a unitary three? How many do we have to be to be *truly* in love without God?

57 A detailed exploration of the phallic function as our species-specific logic of sexuation/subjectivation is the main topic of my forthcoming *The Not-Two: Logic and God in Lacan*.

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What's Left to Imagine: The Privation of the Absolute¹

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¹ A version of this paper was originally given at the conference: „Phantasma und Politik“ at the HAU Theatre in Berlin, 22nd to 23rd of November, 2013

Abstract:

This paper reads Hegel's famous dictum that there cannot be a proper revolution without a prior reformation by inscribing it as the limit case of what could be understood as philosophy's attempt to preserve itself by the phantasm of history. It traces philosophy's own internal rupture induced by the attempt to integrate the Judeo-Christian god into its metaphysical project. Psychoanalysis, the proper heir to the Reformation in this respect, can place the emancipatory power of philosophy, which is itself the product of this rupture, in its proper place: as the thinking of the doubling of the form of freedom not simply into its subjective content, but into the material form of the subject itself. The spiritual form does not appear in its material content in this doubling, but as a doubled, materially objective form: the form of the analytic object.

Keywords: phantasm, revolution, reformation, subject, form, *potentia dei ordinata/absoluta*, social structure of the super-ego, history, Lacan, Hegel.

1. The Phantasm of Philosophy: The Birth of the Absolute. (A short history of phantasm).

I want to start with something like a short history of the phantasm of philosophy, moving from the phantasm of unity to the phantasm of identity in difference as the course of history. The phantasm of philosophy gave birth to the Absolute. But it did so once it was forced to integrate the concept of creation, of contingency, via the tradition of monotheism. Faced with the difficulty of joining together the Judaeo-Christian god and the contingency and freedom of his act of creation on the one hand and the demands of consistency and necessity placed on it by Greek philosophy on the other, mediaeval scholastics solved the emerging conflict between knowledge and faith by introducing the Absolute. While the objects of the world were consigned to a kind of historical, i.e. contingent, necessity, they were necessary only because they had been brought about and thus constituted reality, the ordered world. The realm pertaining to what was called the *potentia dei absoluta*, the power of god considered absolutely, was something like the region of the real, or a region of necessary contingency, where infinite possibility was located as „the options initially open to god“¹ before the act of

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¹ Courtenay 1974, p. 39.

creation. Since this infinity was limited only by itself contingency and necessity were somehow coextensive in this realm of the real. From the perspective of the existing world order, however, this realm of the Absolute was initially thought of to not have any impact at all, except to unify the antagonism between god's freedom and the necessity to think of the world as indeed ordered, cognizable and reliable.² Since philosophy could not allow for an other that was both real and outside the categories of thought, this was an elegant solution. The Absolute became the container at the same time of Being and contingency, while in the world order being could be considered as that which is in fact reliable and consistent, even though it was created and thus not itself co-extensive with Being as such. So the Absolute emerged in order to save philosophy the embarrassment of thinking beyond unity or identity. Rather than realize the antagonism as such between Being and event as the split within the articulation of Being, for a long time this solution of separating the two sides for logical reasons worked. It was by inventing the Absolute, i.e. by integrating the heritage of monotheism and Greek philosophy that the phantasm as organization of unity was preserved. The condition of possibility, however, for this unity to prevail was at the same time the condition of its impossibility: the two realms which were thus divided in unity, namely the ordered existing world and the realm of the Absolute, would not actually interfere with each other, or rather the Absolute would not interfere with the ordered world, thus bringing imbalance and unreliability into reality. The options „initially open to god“ would have to remain safely in the closet of the Absolute in order for the actually chosen and realized option to not be subject to uncontrollable outbursts of contingency in its very well ordered course steering towards the *eschaton*, the repetition of the end of times in the telos of *salvific history*.

2. The Antagonism within the Phantasm of the Absolute appears

It comes as no surprise, that this phantasmatic equilibrium, organized to contain a fundamental antagonism between Being and event, was not to last. The very antagonism it thought to contain, its inherent contradictions, namely that it doubled Being into form (the Absolute) and content (the ordered world) in order to preserve its unity,

2 For the elaboration of the concept of *potentia dei absoluta* and *potentia dei ordinata* see e.g. Moonan 1994; Courtenay 1990; Courtenay 1984; Desharnais, 1966.

opened it up for various articulations beyond its phantasmatic unity. For one, it offered an explanation for miracles as still cognizable and thus not irrational phenomena: by considering them actualizations of the absolute *within* the realm of the world order. When the despot Nebuchadnezzar wants to burn the three men in the fire-oven, of course they would have to be incinerated according to the laws of the world order in both senses of the word: because they disturb the empire and because, once in the heated oven, the workings of the natural world would make sure that they burn. Since they did not burn, the intelligible explanation could be given that god out of his extraordinary (literally) benevolence chose to intervene and actualize a bit of the Absolute. Or, closer to the topic of politics: when the mendicant orders, the Franciscans and the Dominicans, were in a struggle with the ecclesiastical nomenclature, they resorted to theorizing the Absolute as a blueprint for the power of the pope to act against the laws of the church and its tradition. When Pope Martin, a pope who was supportive of their cause was on the Holy See, they ascribed to him a *potestas plenitudo* that was modelled on the *potentia dei absoluta*. This absolute power made the pope, like Ockham said of God, a „debtor to no one“³ and allowed thus the introduction of emergency measures to protect the revolutionary friars⁴. This alliance between pope and social revolution

3 A condensed formula for Ockham's doctrine, that for god it is not possible to do anything which he is not allowed to do, e.g. his affirmation of the *potentia dei absoluta*: Wilhelm von Ockham, *Commentary of the Sentences* II dist. 19 H.: „*deus autem nuli tenetur nec obligatur tanquam debitor; et ideo non potest facere quod non debet facere: nec potest non facere quod debet facere.*“ (quoted after: Ockham 1990).

4 The development of this doctrine was not, as is often thought, a nominalist question alone. The dialectic of the relationship between the pope and the mendicant apologists of his absolute power is interesting here: First, they refer to it, so it can *introduce* their gains against the traditional church hierarchy, later in order to protect these gains against further interruption. In this development Duns Scotus plays an important part, by not only taking over „the legal terminology from canon lawyers“, but also their juridical definition of both powers „in place of the normal theological definition“ [cf. Courtenay 1990, p. 101]. The decisive issue is the homogeneity of „free will“ in both men and god. Scotus goes beyond the *pactum*-theology of the nominalists that held that while god had absolute powers, he was bound by his pact of salvation with mankind. Thus *potentia absoluta* is no longer simply the space of original options open to god, but „it is the ability to act outside of an order *already established*. *Potentia absoluta* in this definition is a form of action, human and divine, that allows one to act outside and against the legal structure.“ [Ibid., p. 102.] For those who make laws – not for those subject to them – it follows that „because they make the laws, they can act in an absolute way by temporarily suspending laws or dispensing someone from the law's provisions; or sovereigns can create new laws and thus continue to act in an orderly manner, albeit according to laws that differ from previous laws.“ [Ibid.] It is interesting that it is in fact the *spirituales* faction of the Franciscans, which had originally benefited from the interpretation of the *potentia absoluta* in this manner, that began to develop the doctrine of infallibility in order to protect against further actualization of the *potestas plenitudo* against their interests. Since Pope Martin had moved in the direction of the mendicants and their vow of poverty, Olivi developed for the Franciscans that doctrine in order to thus safeguard by way of a „self-binding“ of the *plenitudo* in the world of the *potentia ordinata*. [Ibid., p. 103]

(i.e. the vow of poverty of the mendicants) was, of course, short-lived, but it serves as an illustration how the inherent contradiction within the phantasmatic unity that was originally achieved by the introduction of the Absolute was put to use. What was thus introduced was, of course, what would become the logic of the „state of exception“⁵, in Benjamin's terms „constituting power“⁶ that intervenes sovereignly in order to protect the constituted power, the idea behind this intervention still being a kind of unity or identity between both sides. As the opponents of the mendicants knew very well, this is of course never what happens. Once the power that intervenes in the situation is not one legitimated by what is possible within the constituted power, but by reference to the Absolute, the constituted power is protected only in a formal sense. If it had succeeded, the demands of the friars – the poverty of the church, the equality of all believers, etc. – could have been realized and thus the order of the world would have fundamentally changed. As it were, this did not come about: the short lived intervention succeeded momentarily only in the negation of the state of affairs, by protecting the Franciscans and the Dominicans, but did not extend itself into the negation of that negation, which would have been the slow and laborious process of realizing the demands in new social and ecclesiastical institutions, thus in fact creating a new order.

Let me sum up this short story: The Absolute was introduced in order to preserve the unity of Being, by in fact splitting Being in two: its form, which became the Absolute, and its content, the existing world order of nature and culture. The appearance of freedom within thought made this phantasm necessary, while at the same time it introduced its own beyond. The phantasm involved was the phantasm of philosophy: to thus preserve the intelligibility of the world in the face of contingency. The realm *ex nihilo* out of which this god was said to have created the world of reality, was thus deprived of its truly traumatic dimension and no longer an unthinkable abyss, but the realm of the real as the realm of the Absolute. Philosophy thus preserved its mission to think the intelligibility of the world according to its unchanging categories. However, the price to be paid for this phantasmatic solution was the introduction of a spectral ghost into the constituted world: the ghost of the Absolute itself. Every phantasm carries such a ghost within

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5 cf. Agamben 2008.

6 cf. Benjamin 2009.

itself, since that ghost is itself nothing other than the appearance of the antagonism that the phantasm is meant to contain and unite. But this spectral presence is not simply as such the negation of the phantasm, rather, as the example of Pope Martin and the Mendicants showed, it needs not only to interrupt into the existing world, but to be introduced and articulated. It introduces struggle and struggle introduces it. It needs to be realized as object-cause for a different articulation than what is possible within the existing order. It appears as the making possible of some of what is impossible.

3. “History” saves the Phantasm of Philosophy

Of course, the history of philosophy reacted to this problem, most notably with Hegel. If Kant can be thought to relegate the real in its traumatic dimension into the unthinkable itself, then Hegel wants to domesticate it as *movens* of a teleological trajectory. If the preservation of unity introduces the conditions for the destruction or negation of unity, than this negation itself has to be a feature of the unity that was meant to be preserved in the first place: the Absolute becomes the identity of identity and difference. “History” then becomes the self-movement of this real as spirit in a continuous movement through determinate moments or *Gestalten*. This introduction of the real of the Absolute into the movement of history allows to renew the phantasm of philosophy: Unity or identity is preserved by splitting the original split between Absolute and ordered again, namely by introducing the split into the Absolute itself. Matter and spirit, nature and culture, substance and subject are then names of the Absolute in its movement through the determinate content of historical moments. The intelligibility of the world is safe-guarded, because the world itself is nothing but intelligibility returning to itself. Marx and Engels only had to „put Hegel on his feet“⁷ by introducing the idea that intelligibility or spirit itself is historical, in the sense that it is produced by the moments of history and not some collection agency that introduces the results of historical movement into the register of the Absolute. The price to be paid for this renewed success of the phantasm of philosophy is, not surprisingly, the reconfiguration of the eruption of the Absolute into the ordered world as a teleological necessity, thus depriving contingency of its radical, wild dimension. Just as the Franciscans began to develop

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7 This is often quoted and rarely referenced, so for once the original German reference: Karl Marx and Engels 2009, p. 292f.

the doctrine of infallibility in order to protect the gains made by the extralegal absolute power of the pope within the ordered world, so the real Absolute of Hegel has to be integrated into the infallibility of absolute knowledge in order to protect contingency against its own traumatic insistence. There is an advance in Hegel's renewal of the phantasm, but it is not sufficient to think contingency as truly real. The advance over the scholastic solution is obvious. For the scholastics up to and including Ockham the Absolute was introduced only in order to think of it as that which is for all intents and purposes impossible within the realm of the constituted order. While it is a metaphysical realm of possibility, this possibility appears within the world of men and nature only as impossibility, for the „contingent necessity“⁸ of the course of the created world was to be safeguarded for understanding. The advance of Hegel (and Marx) was to think of the appearance of impossibility within the course of history as the appearance of „determinate negation“⁹. It thus became the object cause for transforming this impossibility into actuality, under the guidance of a logic that was the logic of history itself. The obvious problem then is, that real contingency that does not fit the form of „determinate negation“ as identified by philosophy or the party secretariat. From their perspective real contingency does not only not count, it needs to be reconfigured in order to fit the mould of that which is in the process of becoming historically actualized.

8 Before the concept of the *potentia absoluta* could be thought of as a potential interruption in relation to the processes within the world of the *potentia dei ordinata*, it had been used to introduce the following differentiation: The created world was necessary according to the *neccesitas consequentis*, the necessity related to „the consequence“ (i.e. of a previous event). In order to open up a space for a potentiality from whose standpoint this *neccesitas consequentis* could prove to be, in fact, contingent, another necessity was associated with the *potentia dei absoluta*, namely the *neccesitas consequentiae*, that is the necessity of a consequence following from its antecedent, not the necessity holding sway thanks to that original consequence. In this way, the concept of a „contingent necessity“ was introduced into scholastic thought. The world as it is, should not be looked at as eternal, like the Greek *cosmos*, but the events in it should nevertheless not be marked simply by arbitrariness, but be accountable and justified, namely within the scope of the *neccesitas consequentis*, the necessity arising from the realized will of God.

9 “The one thing needed to *achieve scientific progress* – and it is essential to make an effort at gaining this quite *simple* insight into it – is the recognition of the logical principle that negation is equally positive, or that what is self-contradictory does not resolve itself into a nullity, into abstract nothingness, but essentially only into the negation of its *particular* content; or that such a negation is not just negation, but is *the negation of the determined fact* which is resolved, and is therefore determinate negation; that in the result there is therefore contained in essence that from which the result derives – a tautology indeed, since the result would otherwise be something immediate and not a result. Because the result, the negation, is a *determinate* negation, it has a *content*.” [Hegel 2010, p. 33.] “In all this, however, care must be taken to distinguish the *first* negation, negation as negation *in general*, from the second negation, the negation of negation which is concrete, *absolute* negativity, just as the first is on the contrary only *abstract* negativity.” [Ibid., p. 89.]

Thus the phantasm of philosophy became the phantasm of the course of history instituted to contain not the „main antagonism“¹⁰ which was included as what is driving the movement of this course, but to contain the multitude of antagonisms that each locus of a more radical contingency itself *is* within the world order. This being of the multitude of contingent impossibilities from the position of the constituted world cannot be taken up within the movement of history: thus the phantasm of philosophy which had become the phantasm of the course of history has to contain these radical contingencies in dreaming or acting out phantasmatic scenes of disciplinarizing, reeducating or extinguishing them. That is it became the totalitarian phantasm.

4. The post-structuralist, post-modern and spinozist Critique of the Phantasm of the Course of History.

This diagnosis has been at the core of the last decades of left theorizing, be it the deconstruction of Derrida who safeguards radical contingency through the prevention of semantic closure; be it Toni Negri's celebration of the multitude as the concrete material realization of the immediate universality of this radical side of the Absolute as contingency; be it Simon Critchley who attempts to think these radical contingencies as anarchist interventions against but at a distance to the state, safeguarding, as it were, against the necessity of a version of infallibility; be it Ernesto Laclau and Chantall Mouffe who want to think the hegemonizing process as a precarious way of collecting these radical contingencies with a collective or rather collecting emancipatory framework; be it Deleuze and Guattari who think these radical contingencies as molecular bodies without organs against the molar organisms of the ordered world. All of them have in common that they want to save the patient who suffers from the phantasm of the ordered world from the doctor who suffers from the phantasm of overcoming the ordered world through the destructive and at the same time instituting power of negativity. If the Absolute appears originally within scholasticism as the virtual intelligible safeguard of the actual world, it then became the eruption of this virtual into the actual through negation of the ordered world: miracles and the state of exception. Now, against the totalitarian effects of the institutionalization of this eruption,

10 Famously Mao furthered Marxist dialectical thought in his „On Contradiction“ of 1937 in order to allow for a Marxist analysis of various social phenomena which were not immediately economic [cf. Mao 1967].

i.e. Marxist-Leninist revolution and its movement towards infallible Stalinism, the prospect has become to think this virtuality as positivity itself, as the transcendently empirical agent against the territorialized, disciplinarized and ordered world. It is no surprise then that in Deleuze the phantasm loses its negative connotation of delusion. Rather it is the productive form through which this positivity - one might name it the Absolute as transcendently empirical - appears in the world, freed from the totalizing phantasms of negativity, i.e. of philosophy and of the course of history itself. Similarly, and this is for example the debate between Judith Butler and some Lacanians, sexual difference no longer appears as real in the sense of negativity or privation – the real lack of a symbolic object, i.e. of the phallus, a real lack of inscription into the ordered world – but as always already mediated within the social dimension of the ordered world. Here the Absolute becomes coextensive with the ordered world itself: it is the effect of power/knowledge regimes on the distribution of what is allowed and recognized and what is non-recognizable and cannot even be mourned. And, also similarly, class-struggle is no longer the antagonism that is real and cuts through the entire social ordered world, but is dissolved into the multiple and singular struggles of identity politics and the fight for recognition or the micro-practices of resistance. Here too, the negation of particularity in the search for universality is exposed as the phantasm of the Absolute appearing as negativity. One might in a reappropriation of a slogan from Paris in 1968 say, that against this one affirms the elaboration of particularity as singularity, that is as a form in which empirically real, but socially counterfactual „phantasy“ takes over power. „Another world is possible“ then becomes the slogan that organizes the collection of these singularities under the umbrella of a regulative idea: namely the world which is - and always will continue - becoming another. The problem here is that by immediately identifying the real absolute, radical contingency, with positivity and be it subversive positivity within the ordered world, this radical contingency is always thought of as always already related and relational, as never without an object, as never being negativity as such or negativity as being. Within psychoanalysis this problem emerged in a similar way. While Melanie Klein realized that there was not only an oedipal – paternal super-ego that inscribed the subject into the ordered world, but also a more radical super-ego of hate and destruction that was prior to it, she also thought this more radical dimension as always already related, namely with the dimension of phantasm of the good and bad object to which this drive of negativity

relates. Radical contingency, the absolute as real, as the non-related agent of relation, as the impossible agency of producing possibility is not truly conceptualized here either.¹¹

5. Super-Ego and Discourse: The social organization of Phantasm

Lacan introduced his four discourses as „liens sociaux“, social links.¹² One could say, they are the structure of the ordered world, i.e. in anachronistic scholastic terms over and against the ontologically other place of the Absolute. The first of these discourses, the discourse of the master, indeed does nothing other than to repress the knowledge that the ordered world is created (by god or the labour of man).

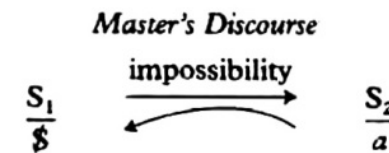


Fig. 1: Master's Discourse¹³

$S_1 \rightarrow S_2$ stands for the fact that around one or a few master-signifiers all other signifiers are ordered so as to produce the sense or the representation of this world. The signifier orders (in the double sense of this word) ones place within this world and there is nothing to be done, since this simply is a representation of being. This is, of course, the structure of repression *tout court*. The phantasm of this discourse is that there is no phantasm, since the experience of reality and the phantasm

11 "As I have mentioned, I had already recognized in Rita and Trude the internalization of an attacked and therefore frightening mother the harsh super-ego. (...) Through her analysis I learned a good deal about the specific details of such internalization and about the fantasies and impulses underlying paranoid and manic-depressive anxieties. (...) I also became more aware of the ways in which internal persecutions influence, by means of projection, the relation to external objects. The intensity of her envy and hatred unmistakably showed its derivation from the oral-sadistic relation to her mother's breast, and was interwoven with the beginnings of her Oedipus complex. Erna's case much helped to prepare the ground for a number of conclusions (...), in particular the view that the early super-ego, built up when oral-sadistic impulses and phantasies are at their height, underlies psychosis (...)." [Klein 2001, p.17].

12 Lacan 1998, p. 17.

13 Ibid., p. 16.

of this reality coincide. The surplus over this world which is thought in the doubling of the world through the *potentia dei absoluta* simply is, from this perspective, a safe-guard against the notion that things could be really different, once the thought of creation and createdness enters via the monotheistic revolution. This surplus appears, of course, also within this discourse, but it does so only as the *prestige* of the Master, that is the material embodiment of the social order it institutes, the palaces, the riches, the lands and the rights of the master. They in turn serve to hide the fact that the master himself is „castrated“, i.e. forced to articulate his orders in the domain of the ordered world, through signifiers. This repression or hiddenness is shown by the second part of the discourse below the bar.

Lacan has written that his discourses are not to be understood as historical in the sense of one giving birth to the other, instituting a teleological sequence that would place the final discourse, that of the analyst, in the position of absolute knowledge.¹⁴ This anti-Hegelian stance is necessary, of course, on two levels: on the one hand, Lacan does not want to affirm the phantasm of philosophy as the phantasm of the course of history. On the other: what absolute knowledge would the analytic discourse offer? The Absolute as knowledge depends on mediation and the analytic discourse interrupts, cuts any mediation with the impossibility of stating the „whole truth“. In the most fundamental level it stages *„Bindungslosigkeit“*, unrelatedness, not mediation. The knowledge of the unconscious, understood both as a subjective and an objective genitive, does not offer a highway to the complete representation of the situation, rather it speaks to a dynamic of presentation, of interruption, of the impossibility of saying the whole truth or the truth as something totalizing or whole. This is precisely the legitimation of the critique of the Oedipus complex by Deleuze and others. The master-discourse and its oedipal subject-machine safeguard the working of the administrated, ordered, molar world. It inscribes subjects into the workings of the pleasure-principle through the help of the reality principle. The two principles show here their complicity: The master-discourse, as the discourse of repression, organizes more or less successfully the integration of the subject into the world as it already exists. Any excess dimension of desire, jouissance itself, is relegated to the reduction through reality in order

14 Ibid.

to allow the subject to participate in the ordered world with pleasure: Pleasure, the ability to enjoy within a given identity and the social space it offers, is an index of normalization. And the agency that organizes this inscription into reality is, of course, the super-ego. This side of the super-ego is in a direct way the heir to the Thomistic principle: Serve the order, and the order will serve you.¹⁵ The condition of this possibility is, of course, castration, the acceptance of reducing one's existence to the representation within the ordered world. Yet, maybe there is something to the heroic attempt of Slavoj Žižek and the Ljubljana School to show Lacan his own disavowed Hegelian face, i.e. to read the discourses of Lacan at the same time as historically successive and dialectical. However, this is true only, if one thinks of this as a properly dialectical move: it negates Lacan, in order to articulate a negation of this negation: a psycho-analytic theory of the historical material social order itself, which in turn would think the Hegelian Absolute not as absolute mediation, but as a privation of this mediation as an inherent impossibility within mediation itself.

But let me return for a moment to Lacan's discourses: While he says that the discourses are not to be thought of as a mediated historical succession, he also says that within the change from one discourse to the other, there always is „emergence of the analytic discourse“.¹⁶

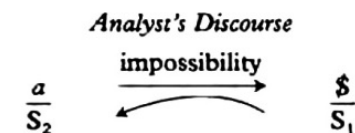


Fig. 2: Analyst's Discourse¹⁷

It has often been noted that the upper side of the Analyst's Discourse is also Lacan's algebra for the pervert. The „normal neurotic“ regains the being he has lost by the inscription into the ordered world through his relation to his phantasm: \$ <> a, which is, as we remember,

15 While not original to Thomas Aquinas, his philosophy is well summed up by the ancient adage, for centuries written on the walls of nearly every catholic institution: *„Serva ordinem et ordo servabit te.“*

16 Lacan 1998, p. 16.

17 Ibid.

the lower half of the Master-Discourse. The pervert, on the other hand, makes him or herself the object of the Other that is lacking, in order to disavow this very lack.

Here is the unity of the phantasm as such, namely to somehow organize somehow the disappearance of the lack in the Other, through denial, disavowal or foreclosure. Freud wrote that perversion is the positive to the negative of the neurotic phantasy.¹⁸ The pervert knows on the one hand, that the Other is lacking. In scholastic terms, he knows that the ordered world is created and as such is an index of lack or negativity. Thus he knows that taking over the signifiers of his interpellation and participating in the social world does not, indeed, fill this lack, as the neurotic needs to believe (whether he serves this signifier by sacrificing his own desire like the obsessive or whether he questions the desire of the Other like the hysteric). Thus the pervert offers the Other, the ordered world, not the sacrifice of his desire nor does he stage the question regarding the Other's desire, but he offers the Other his jouissance. The pervert makes himself the object for the Other's jouissance, staging the phantasmatic scenes of excess over the social order as scenes of enjoyment for the Other, the social order itself. In the scholastic language I have introduced, the pervert knows that the Absolute is not simply the outer limit of the „options initially open to god“, but his insatiable jouissance inscribed into the ordered world itself. With this we have the second side of the super-ego: if one side, the oedipal super-ego of Freud, inscribes the subject into the master-discourse, here the archaic super-ego of Melanie Klein appears as the command to enjoy and the interpellation to make oneself the object of the social order's enjoyment, not its surface institutional functioning.

The Absolute appears here as an absolute command to enjoy, here and now, to laugh at the demands of the social world, even while fulfilling them as empty gestures, devoid of the sense of reproduction in all its biological and material senses, devoid of any historical or institutional mission. The pervert laughs at the phantasm of philosophy as the phantasm of the course of history, in order to state that truth is only as excess enjoyment, as the destruction of truth. What he imagines is not the path forward but spaces and times to organize „sonderbare Veranstaltungen“¹⁹ in which he can stage the jouissance of the Other.

18 Freud 2001, p. 170f.

19 Freud 1993, p. 191.

Thus, the repression of the neurotic or the master-discourse safeguards the social order against the Absolute, by keeping it out of sight, as it were, as simply the container of ideas „that are maybe good for theory but no good for my pleasure principled practice within the reality that my obsessional sacrifice or my hysterical questioning affirms“; and the pervert realizes the Absolute as a positivity, as the excess jouissance of the Other that is the only truth there is. He safeguards the social order only as an empty shell for his „Veranstaltungen“ or simply destroys it as an act of jouissance, in the extreme burning the world down as an instrument of the hidden jouissance of the social order itself.

6. No Revolution without a Reformation

So is there no position if not outside, then at least beyond that of the phantasm? Either I uphold the phantasm that closes the antagonisms and inconsistencies in the existing ordered world or I misunderstand the positivity of my jouissance as already accomplishing an outside of the law, as its inherent place of resistance, up to and including the phantasm of self-destruction, i.e. of making myself through jouissance inoperable, useless for the master-agencies of the ordered world? One might add here, even though I left it out of consideration, the phantasm of realizing the phantasm through the act, a *passage à l'acte* à la Antigone?

One way of reading Hegel's famous dictum, that it is a false principle to think that one can have a revolution without a reformation is to read it as the affirmation of the opposite stance: the Phantasm upholding the existing order through castration or jouissance will only reemerge in different form, if the truth that splits the ordered world is not already present within it.²⁰ The most obvious reading of this dictum is of course supported by Hegel in many ways, namely that the formal introduction of freedom on the objective side of spirit – the laws governing society - has no chance of realizing itself unless it is already present on the subjective side. This is then read as a split analogous to the split of inside and outside, internal and external, mediated through the elaboration of freedom on both sides of the split. Hegel's position

20 „For it is a false principle that the fetters which bind Right and Freedom can be broken without the emancipation of conscience — that there can be a Revolution without a Reformation.” [Hegel 2001, p. 473.]

then is: The Reformation or more precisely: Luther was right, but he simply did not go far enough, he misunderstood that freedom did not only appear within or rather as the form of the subjective certainty of self-consciousness, but also as its content, the positive laws governing society. Luther thought of the content as something „given, something revealed through religion.“²¹

However, another and more radical way of understanding this would be to say that what happens in the reformation on the side of the subject is not yet an elaboration of its objective content, but simply the choice of subjectivity as such. This choice is occluded, covered up, by immediately being *related*, namely the content given through revelation in the ordered world: the word. The problem, however, would not be the obvious one that the objects of this revelation are wrong, because they are not itself the content of freedom, but that before there can be any relation, right or wrong, the subject has to choose subjectivity as unrelatedness *tout court*, as the impossibility of relation. Such a reading would be closer to some hints Lacan gives in reading Luther, namely that he thinks the fundamental *Bindungslosigkeit* of the subject, i.e. the dimension of death-drive or evil a such. For what is evil or the death-drive if not unrelatedness, *Bindungslosigkeit*?²² It is here where Lacan goes beyond Melanie Klein and her super-ego of jouissance. In this horizon what is important and leads to Hegel's dictum about the relation between revolution and reformation is the appearance of subjectivity as such, not, as Hegel himself often states, the certainty of self-consciousness as always already a testament to relation. Precisely the fact that the Reformation can misunderstand itself, because it ties itself immediately to objects given through revelation shows that this act of tying itself to these objects is not essential to subjectivity itself. What this means is that subjectivity is not identical with the subject that is produced by interpellation into the ordered world, by the master-discourse. Nor is it simply the rest which does not fit under the

21 "After a free investigation in open day, Luther had secured to mankind Spiritual Freedom and the Reconciliation [of the Objective and Subjective] in the concrete: he triumphantly established the position that man's eternal destiny [his spiritual and moral position] must be wrought out *in himself* [cannot be an *opus operatum*, a work performed *for him*]. But the *import* of that which is to take place in him — what truth is to become vital in him, was taken for granted by Luther as something already given, something revealed by religion." [Ibid., p. 461.]

22 The translators of Lacan's Seminar VII into German translate the French word *déréliction* as *Bindungslosigkeit*, which I will use in this text. [cf. Lacan 2007, p. 111; Lacan 1996, p. 115.]

signifier of this interpellation nor with the condition of possibility of reflexively subjectivizing such an interpellation. It is something more primordial, something that is in Hegelian terms substance itself as its own disturbance, prior to all articulation. For Hegel the law of nature simply *is* freedom. Freedom has a double determination: its content - „its objectivity“ - and its form, in which the subject knows itself as active, because it is the demand of freedom that the subject knows itself in this form and does what is his.²³ What this implies then, is that the appearance of the *form* of freedom which is the significant aspect of the reformation for Hegel, does not imply the ability to acquiesce into the ordered world, but rather the very impossibility to inscribe this subjectivity into the ordered world, the in- or for-itself of the content of freedom. But the doubling of freedom, its appearance as *form*, demands at the same time an articulation, activity, so that the subject of this subjectivity knows itself and does what is his. What is implied here is that the doubling happens first on the side of form itself: that subjectivity proper chooses itself as split between form and content, between freedom proper and social articulating necessity.

7. Privation of the Absolute.

Lacan famously has described the three ways in which the lack in the Other appears. Castration, Frustration and Privation.²⁴ The latter is defined as the real lack of a symbolic object. We could rewrite this here, the form of freedom, activity, lacking its form as activity related to content. Privation thus is the index of the absolute within the ordered world, neither nature nor culture ascribes immediately objects to the subject of privation. The aspect of reformation, then, without which no revolution should be engaged in, is not the quietist certainty of one's inner world, that is immediately absolute, certainty of the Absolute as immediate self-relation. The aspect of reformation is the discovery of the subject as privation of *this* absolute. The Absolute appears as privation within the ordered world, privation not of something, but of the Absolute as relatedness, as mediation itself. It is activity and movement that has not objects, subjectivity without bounds, yet tending towards a content,

23 "Freedom presents two aspects: the one concerns its substance and purport — its objectivity — the thing itself — [that which is performed as a free act]; the other relates to the Form of Freedom, involving the consciousness of his activity on the part of the individual; for Freedom demands that the individual recognize himself in such acts, that they should be veritably his, it being his interest that the result in question should be attained." [Hegel 2001, p. 467.]

24 cf. Lacan 2003.

towards an articulation, once it so chooses. One can easily see that this is the death-drive itself that exceeds the life of culture and nature, cuts through them as a ghost-like presence or as the undead substance of life itself.

We can now return to the beginning and see that the split between the Absolute and the ordered world, the phantasm of philosophy to uphold intelligibility, is a phantasm precisely because it wants to *situate* this subjectivity. We can also easily see that the phantasm of the course of history is the phantasm that wants to situate the emergence of this subjectivity within the realm of the ordered world. Neither the subject of the master-discourse, the subject of repression, which accepts and fights the interpellation into the ordered social world, nor the subject of perversion, which undermines this interpellation by staging scenes of jouissance, or realization, are identical with this subjectivity, this form of freedom as always already double.

Reformation and revolution are in this sense one: Reformation is the name for the fact that the agent of change has no legitimation outside of the activity of the drive itself. However, this does not mean that one realizes positively the scenes of one's jouissance, as the pervert does, nor that one questions the signifiers that orient one's drive in relation to the Other. Rather what this ultimately implies is that the subject needs to choose to enter the framework of legitimation itself and by repeating this gesture to institute the contingency of legitimation. The historical fact that the Reformation itself occluded this insight by taking its content from revelation simply clouds this insight. This is Hegel's point – in a way read against Hegel himself – about the relation between reformation and revolution. The „*Gesinnung*“²⁵ that legitimises the drive cannot be given by what it articulates, by its content, its idea. This is a misuse of the notion of *Nachträglichkeit*, après-coup. It does not simply mean that we have to see what worked, and if it works, if the signifier will have organized satisfaction – then it was true. It also means that there remains a spectral dimension of what lies unrealized, not in the sense of something yet to come nor of something that will have to be picked up and realized later. But in the sense of the dimension of subjectivity as such, of choosing freedom as form by choosing freedom as content. In a way, this notion of *Gesinnung* has to be identical with being itself, as

25 The translator of Hegel's Philosophy of History translates „*Gesinnung*“ as “Disposition”, but morality might be equally possible, if it did not conjure notions of being conscious. I leave it best untranslated. cf. Hegel 2001, p. 468.

the choice to enter the stage of appearance and to realize the concept. Just as the Absolute of the scholastic thus implicitly split being into two, so does this concept of subjectivity or *Gesinnung*. Hegel himself seems ambivalently reluctant in relation to this realization, when he later states that the effect of the Reformation was the production of a kind of atomistic individuality, that was nevertheless held together by the reciprocal trust built by the *Gesinnung* that all of life (and its labour) are “religious works”²⁶, a *Gesinnung* made possible by individuals who have certainty over their self-conscious determination. Subjectivity as being itself splits being into unrelatedness, chaos, drive *tout court* and determination, and this split has to be chosen by subjectivity itself in order to open the space to articulate itself. Obviously it can and must do so only within the ordered or the ordering of the world. The ordered world that is held together by the phantasm that governs it is met by the activity that orders only after it has chosen itself as activity and not determination. Here the absolute of mediation – the phantasm – meets its own truth, the absolute as drive. Reformation and revolution are thus in a sense not opposed, but rather and contrary to what we normally would think in the logic of social history, reformation is the truth of revolution, in the sense that only taking on, subjectivizing this fundamental subjectivity allows for the truth of revolution to develop beyond the phantasm of philosophy or the phantasm of the course of history. What is left to imagine is thus a question and an act: The question is related to identifying the dead-lock of the phantasm at work in order to identify the appearance of subjectivity that organizes this phantasm, yet is not localizable within it. And the act is to repeat the gesture of subjectivity itself. *Achtung vor dem Gesetz*, Immanuel Kant's subjective position that, as Alenka Zupan i has shown, supersedes the perverse pain that is involved in making myself the object of the law, can be rethought in this way.²⁷ Regard, *Achtung* for the law would not be

26 “Soon the whole attention of the inhabitants was given to labor, and the basis of their existence as a united body lay in the necessities that bind man to man, the desire of repose, the establishment of civil rights, security and freedom, and a community arising from the aggregation of individuals as atomic constituents; so that the state was merely something external for the protection of property. From the Protestant religion sprang the principle of the mutual confidence of individuals — trust in the honorable dispositions of other men; for in the Protestant Church the entire life — its activity generally — is the field for what it deems religious works. Among Catholics, on the contrary, the basis of such a confidence cannot exist; for in secular matters only force and voluntary subservience are the principles of action; and the forms which are called Constitutions are in this case only a resort of necessity, and are no protection against mistrust.” [cf. Hegel 2001, p. 101f.]

27 cf. Zupančič 2011.

the *Achtung* for the positive law to be articulated, i.e. simply the regard for the subjectivity that is excluded within the given world in order to then include it. Nor is it the position of making oneself the instrument of the Law. *Achtung* for the law would be the regard for the choice of subjectivity itself as the split between freedom and determination.²⁸ The political field is then described as elaborating on the one hand the antagonism that is implied in the phantasm at work, and on the other hand the necessity to realize this real, partially and painstakingly, through transferring the impossible choice of freedom into the possible world of determination. This is a process that cannot be realized without creating a new world, a different socially ordered world, because it fundamentally bars all reference to what remains the same. The difference between this position and a position of „reformism“ is clear: No matter how big the changes, reformism must accept a dimension of the Same, of determination, that underlies its activity. It presupposes a dimension of determination and thus relatedness that is always already there, be it nature, science or capitalism or all three woven into one. The non-dialectical dialectical identity of reformation and revolution on the other hand, cannot realize either side of its own condition, without addressing this dimension of choosing freedom, and to then readdress, repeat it on the level of the material, i.e. economic, cultural and social order of the world.

8. The three impossible professions

Freud has spoken of the three impossible professions: Governing, healing, i.e. analyzing, and teaching.²⁹ If we think of these three as standing in for the three elements and powers of the living state: Law, Administration, Ethics or Morality (*Gesinnung*) of which Hegel speaks in the same lecture, we receive this schema.³⁰ Administration would stand in for the regulation of the ordered world, teaching for Ethics or *Gesinnung*. This leaves psychoanalysis for the law: psychoanalysis shows us that the law is split in two, positive law and the command to enjoy. The relation between teaching and psychoanalysis, between *Gesinnung* and law offers then a different plain for action. The law of psychoanalysis is the law of desire, the unconscious, the discourse of

28 This would deserve further elaboration, of course. Please refer to Alenka Zupančič (2011) and my article “Accesses to the Real: Lacan, Monotheism, and Predestination” [Ensslin 2012].

29 cf. Freud 2005, p. 94.

30 Hegel 2001, p. 467f.

the Other, itself. If *Gesinnung* is indeed the realm of the realization of the privation of the absolute as the moment of unrelatedness to the law, as I have argued, i.e the lack of symbolic objects, of guarantees and legitimation, in order to open the dimension of choosing the very realm of guarantees and legitimation as contingent, than it is clear that *Gesinnung* is not the name of the moral convictions that make up my subjective universe of believes and even less the ideological name for what really are simply my inclinations. In fact what this implies is that there is not even a number of different *Gesinnungen*, but only one, namely the position of privation itself as the form where freedom shows itself as double. Privation means that freedom is not given, but needs to be taken. It is freedom that chooses itself in a first step as the content, namely as the form for its content. The two sides of Hegel's determination of freedom, subjective form and positive, objective content, are thus not on the same plain. For positive law to emerge as objective freedom, freedom has to choose itself first as content, i.e. as form. The task laid out by the three impossible professions is then this: Teaching needs to open up the space to subjectivize privation as the realm of the choice of relatedness as such. Contrary to what is the phantasm of pedagogy, it is not mediating anything other than the limit of mediation within itself. It needs to identify this limit as being something other than the effect of the Same, but as the form of the Absolute itself, as the Absolute as the privation of the Absolute. This then opens the space for a reorganization of the relation to the ordered world, to the law as it is thought by psychoanalysis, to the super-ego of positive law and the super-ego of jouissance. It would imply to change the way we dream, to change the unconscious, the discourse of the Other, i.e. to traverse the phantasm. Placing philosophy in traversing it's phantasm of unity, one might say that if thinking and teaching would succeed in colluding with psychoanalysis in this way, governing or administration might have no choice but to follow.

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A Prolegomena to an Emancipatory Reading of Islam

Sead Zimeri

Abstract

Despite the fact that Islam is approached from so many different angles and interpreted in ways which rarely cohere with one another, all these readings can be subsumed under two groups: ahistorical and historical approaches. The ahistorical approach generally abstracts Islam from its context, treating it as a free-floating signifier which remains the *same* in all contexts of its use. According to this approach there is only *one* Islam (which is the Islam they identify as the true Islam), and all other readings are deviations. The historical readings approach Islam as being part of the world in which it interacts where history and context play a determinant role in how Islam is understood. A proper understanding of Islam requires not only situating it in its historical context, but also understanding the forces that went into its production, and this is true of both its originating as well as interpretive contexts. According to this approach, Islam is not singular but plural; there is not one but *many* Islams. In this essay I want to problematize the historical approach by problematizing the way they understand *recontextualisation* of Islam. I argue that important as the historical reading is, to have an emancipatory reading of Islam we have to move beyond it.

Keywords: Islam, Islamic feminism, contextualisation of Islam, interpretation, Žižekian reading, emancipatory reading of Islam.

It is a truism that the Koran can be interpreted in variously different ways, but in broad outlines we can classify all interpretations of the Koran into two categories: a) ahistorical and b) historical. In the following I will explain the general modality of each of these readings, and why they cannot provide the basis for an emancipatory reading of Islam. It is suggested that a new reading of Islam is needed, a reading which is neither a synthesis of the two previously identified readings nor necessarily an overcoming of them. This new reading need not negate other readings, but simply provides an alternative to the existing interpretations and which manages to avoid the problems that the previous readings raise but are unable to solve with the methodologies that they follow. I argue that Islam needs a Žižekian type of reading which reduces a movement, or a doctrine, to a radical cut that it constitutes with what comes before it and which creates a new subjectivity that is thoroughly historical, but centred on an unhistorical eventual point. I shall make the case that there is a place

for this Žižekian reading of Islam, a reading which has the potential to dislocate Islam from the comfort zones into which it has fallen but also has the possibility of showing the inherent capacity of Islam to be a truly emancipatory movement or, at least, to provide some basis for an emancipatory direction which Muslim politics ought to take. This type of reading is necessary, I argue, because Islam today exists in a state of intellectual and political poverty. In light of the current developments of sectarianism which has spread all over the Middle East and the Muslim world, the historical and ahistorical ways of reading have so far not been able to provide a theoretical way out of the sectarian impasses. I have no doubt that the current sectarian resurgence in the Middle East has nothing to do with the way these readings present Islam, that the immediate causes are to be sought somewhere else, namely, in the two wars that were waged against two Muslim states, the collapse of the state in Iraq and Syria, the spread and dissemination of the reactionary Wahhabi ideology from Saudi Arabia, the failure of the Arab spring, all kinds of imperialistic interventions in the internal affairs of the Muslim countries – which, incidentally, shows their utter dependency on these same Western countries, and the lack of basic liberties all over the Middle East. But although the immediate causes are not to be found in the way Islam is interpreted, it is *symptomatic* that almost all expressions of contemporary Islam are antithetical to any emancipatory spirit that has characterized the Prophetic Islam. Islam is mired in sectarianism, and this sectarianism, dormant as it might have been prior to the last decades, has always been there as an undercurrent of the Islamic thought. The fact that the fight against the foreign invaders and imperialism take the form of reactionary politics to the extreme, and that Islam is constantly used to justify these forms of reactionary politics, is a cause for concern. It should be possible to have an emancipatory politics that is neither alien nor antithetical to the spirit of Islam; that Islam can develop, on the one hand, a philosophy of resistance against invaders, colonialism, and imperialism and, on the other hand, that it promotes the values of inclusiveness and liberty for all. Thus far we have only seen how resistance movements against the foreign invaders have turned oppressive and inwardly sectarian: the Hezbollah's military involvement in a war waged against the Sunni Muslims in Syria exemplifies the trend generally. These movements that seek inspiration from Islam and even speak in its name are generally reactionary movements that do not recognize the equal rights of all people who live under their control and thus prevent the development

of Islam in a direction that is, at least, conducive to the spirit of equality and liberty for all.

I

The *ahistorical* reading is one that detaches Islam from its historical context. This reading usually encompasses traditional, orthodox and canonized readings. Even when it attempts to historicize the content of the Book, like when it employs the genre of the *asbab al nuzul* (the occasions of the revelation) it does so only to reinforce an image of the Book itself as ahistorical, as standing outside history but capable of being brought down to earth from the height of the sphere of ideality. It is an image that is frozen in space and time, and then dragged into our time. When this is taken literally, it produces bizarre scenarios of fundamentalisms that seek to implement the realization of Islam of the prophet in *toto* in radically different circumstances. Since these images are usually rigid and negotiation with them is reduced to minimum, violence becomes constitutive part of its horizon. Even when violence is not used, the threat of it, structures its horizon. Insofar as we remain within this horizon, the possibility of reform or change is minimal. What is crucial here is that this hermeneutics is completely oblivious to the historicity of its model, the prophetic model. Historicity is the unthought-of and even the unthinkable dimension of this type of reading. Islam assumes the form that it took in the prophet's time; its first materialization is the only authentic (original) materialization. Muslims are obliged to follow not only the principles that are embodied in the first materialization, but the form must be, of necessity, adopted and emulated. This interpretation speaks in terms of true and false Islam, of deviation and true guidance, and in this binary pairing the first terms are always the privileged terms, the form of the salvation history. We are caught in a battle of good and evil, of those who try to live up to the prophetic Islam and those who deviate from it. Islam is on one side and the world is on the other. This does not at all mean that there is no place for the other in this grand scheme of things. There is, only that it must be coherent with the ahistorical model of the prophetic society. Reform for them has nothing to do with thinking proper, but with reconstructing the prophetic model: the best times are always behind us.

In contrast to this there is the *historical* model, which historicizes the prophetic model. This emphasizes the historical dynamism that led to the creation of the prophetic model, the socio-historical conditions

that enabled it, but also its historical limitations. It refuses to idealize and to fetishize the first model, thereby historicizing its expressions. Historicity plays a pivotal role in this methodology. Broadly, the historical model can be divided into two categories. First, there are readings that historicize the understanding of the prophetic society, revealing the purely human element to the equation. Here, however, The Book is shielded from a direct historicization of its content. Islamic feminism embodies this tendency more than any other form of progressive reading. Historicization of the content of the Book comes in through a back door, in unacknowledged interventions, through an assimilation of the content of the Book entirely into interpretation. This gives a space from which to criticize the ahistorical reading directly, but also indirectly to criticize the content of the Book. In the hands of Islamic feminism the Koran exists only in interpretation. This is not an entirely consistent position however, for should that have been the case their readings of the Koran would be an exercise in idleness. They want to maintain that their readings are, if not the true readings, at least the truer readings that are there. Islam finally found its expression, its ultimate expression, in their readings which they present as being embodiments of the intent of the Book. This raises several difficulties with regard to the voice of the Koran: what becomes of it? Does it have any voice at all, and if so, how do we recognize it? How do we know that we are in contact with that voice? Once we ask these methodological questions it becomes obvious that we have to rely on the first prophetic expression of Islam to determine whether the distinctive form that Islam took was necessary or merely a contingent expression of the prophetic movement. Islamic feminism does not have a good hermeneutics to settle these questions. Unlike the traditional, ahistorical approach which seemingly effaces its own voice entirely, the historicist methodology cannot recognize an othering voice, a dissenting voice, and a contradictory voice to its own voice. As a consequence, they have “developed interpretive techniques and complex maneuvers to try to prove that, in spite of what the text appears to mean, the Qur’an somehow coheres with our notion of gender egalitarianism. This strategy is inadequate and at times disingenuous, as it obfuscates the inclinations of the Qur’an that may be irreparably nonegalitarian from our contemporary perspective.”¹ This is problematic insofar as it commits the same mistake of which it accuses its opponents, namely,

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Hidayatullah 2014, p. 151.

of identifying its own voice with the voice of the Book. To make sense of the return to the Book they have to acknowledge not only as a matter of faith, but also methodologically the irreducible otherness of the Book, which traditional scholars always signified with “God knows best”. “God knows best” leaves the space of dissent, error, misrecognition, of minimal difference between the interpreter and the thing interpreted open; it left open the possibility of a radical restructuring of their own understanding. The gap between the Book and the interpreter could never be closed, for otherwise we would be dealing only with interpretations and would never find a way to reach the otherness of the text. In that case we are before an abyss that can never be crossed and forever losing the Book.

The other segment of the historicist reading is willing to go a step further and historicize the content of the Book itself. What is more, it proposes that the sources of the sharia are not the Koran and the Prophetic Sunnah, but its interpretations. In contrast to the timid approaches of Islamic feminism regarding the historicization of the Book, this approach is bold and courageous and also less dogmatic. They are not so much reading the book from the angle of faith as from the angle of the available historical data, but also from an examination of the way the Book has been interpreted. Arkoun² has convincingly shown in his reading of the verses of the woman’s inheritance how, through a use of a methodological tactic known as *al nasikh wa al mansukh* (the process of abrogating -suspending, qualifying, restricting- a verse by another, later verse), traditional/canonical interpretations have unabashedly subordinated the Book to their own time’s imagery. This approach affirms that there is already intervention directly within the Book and it is this intervention that the canonical interpretation tries to render invisible. Islamic hermeneutics has de facto performed a radical historicization of the Book, though it was never able to theorize it, to make it a possible in thought. The Islamic school of rational and speculative theology that flourished in Basra and Baghdad, the Mutazilites (8-10th century AD) is the only school to have broached the subject with any seriousness, but even theirs will remain limited and obliterated by the dominant forces. Historicity would be rendered impossible-to-think but also an area fraught with danger, for the Word of God was so completely subjected to the ruling methodologies that Islam

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Arkoun, 1993.

and interpretation became one and the same thing. God's voice became the voice of the ruling elites. God would become an institutionalized God, a God who had forgotten his initial mission to free the oppressed and the poor. This transformation is achieved by an astute political talent that the prophet had gained in his struggle for liberation and collective emancipation.

The necessity of recontextualizing Islam

If conservatives rely on a sacred time to interpret God's speech, they rely on a view of secular (historical) time to elevate some Qur'anic Ayat over others and also to declare the prophet's community paradigmatic. Ignoring the doctrine of the Qur'an's universalisms and transhistoricity, which they themselves profess, conservatives want instead to adhere to the contexts and "unicultural perspective" of the Prophet's community, a view that "severely limits its application and contradicts the stated universal purpose of the Book itself" (Wadud 1999, 6). Moreover, instead of conceptualizing the Qur'an's universalism in terms of its ability to be read anew by each new generation of Muslims in every historical period (recontextualized), conservatives canonize readings of it generated over a thousand years ago in the name of a sacred history and historical precedent (as represented by classical Tafsir, the Ahadith, and Ijma'). They thus end up with a historical defense of the sacred/universal even as they refuse to accept (at least, formally) a historicizing understanding of it³.

In this admirable passage Asma Barlas, the author of one of the foundational texts of Islamic feminism, has succinctly summarized the predominant methodology followed by conservatives who treat Islam as a free-floating signifier, unconstrained by history and context and, at the same time elevate into a fetish the first Muslim generation. The first generation is treated as the only normative and the only true embodiment of Islam, people with super-human qualities absolutely devoted to God and His prophet. Their understanding of Islam and the form that Islam took during the prophet's time is *the* form of Islam. This Islam is above and beyond history, affecting everything and paradoxically affected by nothing; that cultures and circumstances should accommodate themselves to this Islam. In one word, Islam

3 Barlas, 2002, p. 52.

is unchangeable.⁴ Conservatives do not acknowledge that Islam is a part of the cultures to which Muslim people belong and it cannot be separated from it except arbitrarily. It adapts itself as it makes the traditions and cultures adapt to it. It is a two way process which make Islam and cultures submerge into a unity, form a tradition, which then gives meaning to those who adhere to it. Like any other doctrine it is subordinated to, mediated by, and lives through interpretation, which is undertaken by fallible, prejudiced, culture-bound, one-sided, and imperfect human beings. It is in constant dialogue to secure and play a role with the cultures that respect its moral and legal sanctions⁵.

Despite the patent fact that Islam is in constant flux, subjected to so many contradictory definitions, conservative Muslims still view it as a monolithic, timeless and ahistorical, if not downright anti-historical.⁶ There are many reasons for this immunity to change and social adaptation, but they need not concern us here. I want, however, to problematize Barlas' critique of the traditional interpretation, which she believes has contributed not only to misinterpreting Islam but also

4 "What do you mean by saying that the laws should be subject to the needs of the time. If the laws obey the times, then who should the times obey? [...] That would imply that the laws should follow the wishes of the people. But one of the functions of the law is to control and conduct society. [...] Humanity is capable of moving forward, or veering to the right or the left or stopping and regressing. [...] *This free will means that humanity is capable of making many mistakes. [...] This is precisely why we must not be subjected to the will of the times. We must rely on absolute values. [...] We have faith in and rely absolutely on the knowledge that our series of laws and practices are eternal. [...] We regard religion as an absolute and independent of the economics and political circumstances of the time*" [Emphasis added]. Ayatollah Morteza Mottahari quoted in: Afshar, 1998, p. 104. See also: Al-Buti, 1998.

5 It gives a completely wrong impression to say that Islam should be historicized: how else can one understand Islam but as being historical. No matter how abstractly or timelessly it is thought to be, its historical character cannot be separated from it without at the same time misunderstanding the nature and the objective that it sought to achieve. Interpreters, however, must be aware that the 'text does not stand alone, it does not carry its own meaning on its shoulders, it needs to be situated in a context, it is theory laden, its interpretation is in flux, and presuppositions are here as actively at work as elsewhere in the field of understanding. Religious texts are no exception. Therefore their interpretation is subjected to expansion and contraction according to the assumptions preceding them and/or the questions enquiring them'. Soroush, 1998, p. 244/251.

6 A Moroccan writer, 'Abd al-Kabir al-'Alawi al-Madghari in his book (1999), *Al-Mar'ah bayna Ahkam al-Fiqh wa al-Da'wah ila al-Taghyir*, writes, with respect to Muslim women, the following: "We say that [the position of women in Islam is absolutely different and incomparable to any known society of the past, present, or even the future] because we absolutely believe that what Islam brought, as such, is a new recreation of a woman as a human being in a way which has no equal neither before Islam nor after its advent. This model and new creation which Islam came with, and gave meaning to woman's existence, soul and significance to her being, features to her images, and limits to her sanctity, is unique to Islam. No other civilization neither in the past nor present could have come with the like. Therefore it makes no difference whether woman had any position or not in earlier civilizations; her position in Islam is completely new... *It is an outstanding, unchangeable and perennial model which remains unaffected by people's thoughts, ideas, cultures and their visions of things*", p. 15. Emphasis added.

using the Koran itself to suppress ideals of gender equality, and, we may add, the ideals of equality in general. In her critique, traditional Islam is still being explained and interpreted in accordance with the rules of the classical/historical methodology, rules that have been devised by the scholars of the first Islamic centuries⁷. These rules are regarded sacrosanct, beyond any discussion or criticism. The scholars who devised the rules and methodologies of interpretation of Islam (*usul al fiqh*) ‘were able to replicate the Prophet’s own methodology because of their proximity in real time to him and to the first Muslim community’.⁸ Hence, Islam must be approached accordingly. Any attempt to modify or change these rules of interpretation is considered an attack on Islam and sarcastically ridiculed⁹. History and philosophy of modern hermeneutics has yet to take its place in the corpus of Islamic studies¹⁰.

However, does this critical approach not involve its own aporias and contradictions? Let’s read Barlas again. She says, “Ignoring the doctrine of the Qur’an’s universalisms and transhistoricity, which they themselves profess, conservatives want instead to adhere to the contexts and ‘unicultural perspective’ of the Prophet’s community, a view that ‘severely limits its application and contradicts the stated universal purpose of the Book itself’ (Wadud 1999, 6)”. How can this transhistoricity of the Book be translated into anything other than the model society founded by the prophet himself? Is it realistic to propose that the model society founded by the prophet is historically not paradigmatic but contingent, and that the Koran must be recontextualized in each historical period? But how? “In terms of its ability to be read anew by each new generation of Muslims in every historical period (recontextualized)” answers Barlas. But neither Barlas nor other Islamic feminists have provided a detailed hermeneutics that could make such a project of recontextualization possible. One can hardly ignore that the prophet’s society was transformed by the teachings of the Book and that it extensively relied on the Book’s instructions to regulate social interactions between people. The

7 McAuliffe, 1998.

8 Barlas, 2002, p. 51.

9 Al-Buti, 2006.

10 Al-Azm, 1997 & 1981.

Book was utilized to consolidate the new emerging frontiers of the prophetic society and the emergence of the new ethical subject in relation to the prophetic code of conduct. The new ethical subject did not simply conform to the moral and religious precepts of the Book but was created by those norms and precepts. The new ethical subject in a fundamental sense was the embodiment of the norms that were introduced by the emergence of Islam. Without this assumption Islam’s rapid success becomes mysterious. Through the Islamic practices and rituals, followers were transformed and transubstantiated into a new being. These practices have helped to create and institute the distinct ontological horizon and self-understanding of Islam which became visible for the first time in the prophet’s time. The prophet’s society under his supervision was an actualization of those principles and rules of conduct to be found on the Book. Referring back to the Koran for its recontextualization anew, in all probabilities, would produce a society similar, in moral outlook, to that founded by the prophet. The differences would be minimal and only quantitative. What route, then, should the new readings follow to make its recontextualization possible?

Moreover, speaking of recontextualization implies that the content of the Book, if any, has not been bound by the limits of historicity and its discursive production. Only its understandings, that of the prophet included, have history. On what bases does this division of historicity of the text and its interpretation depend? Presupposing that the Koran is transhistorical in its character or contains some primordial truths, can we recontextualize them by a pick and choose methodology, by giving certain verses priority over others, that is, we choose arbitrarily from the Koran what fits our situations and discard what is out of place in our contexts? Or by emptying its content to refill it with what Muslims consider appropriate to them? In this case we have the reversal case of the Koranic process of transforming society. The Koran as Islam, in transcending its immediate context out of which it emerged, posited its own context, generating it from within its theoretical vision and a set of practices, thus making possible to apply its norms. It opened a new field. It was not passively shaped by its contextual location, though it was inserted in that context and formed in response of the same, but it created the context and the field where its game was going to be played. This means that the content of the Book cannot be separated from the context it created and was a response of, because its content is the context of its application and the newly emerged religious and

ethical subject. The context, as it is, is included and signified in the content of the Book. This newly opened field is also the limit and the deterrent of the purely ideological and idiosyncratic interpretations. That is one reason why conservatives cannot be faulted without falling into their trap. One therefore must insist on the non-detachability of the content from its inclusive context for the Koran to make any sense at all. The context of the Koran and its interpellated subjects, even if they never fully coincide with the content, are a product of its “theoretical”, “ethical” and “ideological” perspectives and investments; content and context stand in an asymptotic relationship to each other.

The separation of the content from its context projects an element of extreme arbitrariness on the community created by the prophet, treating it as a pure contingency which relied on the social dynamism of its surroundings, and which can be substituted for another one in another place and at another time. In other words, there was nothing particularly normative about the first Muslim community. Is not Barlas making the Koran an absolute referent, a transhistorical universal which in order to function as such must, in a significant sense, be empty? We end up with a necessarily empty Book which is carved with a new context each time in order to be inserted into it. The new context determines the meaning of this empty universal, whereas the Koran supposedly determined its context by its religious meaning and worldview. Meaning and context is another version of the content and form dyad, they cannot be separated without both of them disintegrating or vanishing. It is obvious that the separation of the content from its context allows the interpreter to find some deeper meaning behind or beneath the literal meaning or truth. It allows her to “distinguish between the inner true meaning of the [Koran] (accessible to us today through philosophical analysis) and the mythical, imaginary, narrative mode of its presentation as conditioned by the immature state of humanity in the period when the [Koran] was written”.¹¹ This reading, as Žižek notes, misses the “level of form as such: the inner necessity of the content to assume such a form. The relationship between form and content is here dialectical in the strict Hegelian sense: the form articulates what is repressed in the content, its disavowed kernel – which is why, when we replace the religious form with the direct formulation of its “inner” content, we feel

11 Žižek, 2004, p.76. Although I quote from Žižek, Arkoun would easily lend his voice to this position. Žižek however, opposes it.

somehow cheated, deprived of the essential”.¹² While Barlas says that conservatives are led back to the historicity of the first community that they reject by a different route, she is led back to an ahistorical view of the Koran by yet another route. She knows very well about the historicity of the Koranic discourse but in her writings she acts as if the Koran has not been bounded by the historicity of its discourse. So Barlas makes it seem that, after all, conservatives got it right even if for the wrong reasons.

Islam, of course, has to be situated within its context of production just like the Muslims’ understanding and practices have to be placed in their own contexts. This, however, cannot be done at the expense of Islam’s provided context, its own ontological, ethical and hermeneutical horizon and the principles of constituting and interpellating Islamic ethical and political subjects. The landmark achievements of the prophet are readily apparent to whoever is familiar with the historical landscape of the pre-Islamic society and the formative period of Islam. Islam in a profound sense constituted an ontological, epistemological and social break with the context which gave birth to it out of its numerous internal contradictions, impasses and aporias. Islam’s break with its own environment by either reshaping the customs or breaking off completely with them cannot be seen but as an attempt to refashion human beings from within a new philosophy of life. This could be achieved, in praxis, not only by transforming the traditions but by transforming the human beings and instilling in them a new horizon from where they could rethink the old form of life, and which could not but appear as chaotic and oppressive. Because Islam is not only an abstract doctrine, it provided its followers with a general ethical guidelines, a way of life from where the doctrines and practices were seen as fully intelligible, if not the only intelligible form of life. The newly acquired “epistemological certainties” enforced by the advent of Islam and the break with its past, were not only supported by the existing contingent tribal mercantile economy and nomadic pastoralism. They, in addition, in a kind of circular determination, supported the newly emerging order. One could not exist without the other. The new game was not only contingent on the outside cultural conditions, but it conditioned the culture by providing a space for playing the game as well as some rules

12 Žižek, 2004, p. 76/7.

for how to play the game.¹³

The historicity of the Koran discourse and its interpellated subjects must not be lost when interrogating the context provided by the Koran. The Koran indeed made a break, constituted its own modernity, but even this is historical, situated in history and, as such, limited - which means that there is a need to go certain beyond its constitutive horizon. Thus the principle of the historicity when applied to the Koran means that its own worldview is bounded by the shift it constituted from the pre-Islamic period and the larger historical unfolding of history, part of which, indisputably, is the Koran.

A historical reading of the Koran must be willing to admit that the Koranic content and context is what (and how) the prophet's generation understood and applied. Islam understood historically and situated within its own context will, in all likeliness, reproduce itself along the lines of the prophet's community. The re-inscription of the Koran into another context, a context that it has not assisted in creation, will produce distorted readings and misapplications. Putting the Koran in such a context and demanding that it provide normative justifications for the believers' conduct is a function which the Koran cannot perform successfully, because it would be subordinated to a context not of its own creation. This is an Islam without its kernel, its own context, an Islam without Islam.

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13 The verses that speak about the prohibition of alcohol (*al-Khamr*) (219:2; 4:43; 5:90/1) best exemplify how the Koran created its own context even if triggered by outside stimuli. In a specific sense, the Koran was a response to its own questions and the problems it raised, to the failures to see through the consequences of its own questions. Most, if not all, of the Koran can be explained through this inner context. Thus, I think, there is little to be gained from explaining the Koran away contextually. That is, for example, the woman's inheritance is half that of man can be explained by referring to the context of the Koran's origination: she was completely deprived of inheritance and the Koran granted her the half of what the man inherits. This approach strips the Koran of any vision of its own: it followed no eventual rules, principles or guidelines of its own but simply mirrored the reality of its own context. It saw women had no right to inheritance, felt pity for them and granted them some rights. This approach does not tell us anything about the Koran's vision of femininity or masculinity, for instance. It simply assumes that it had no vision. And if one tried to clarify that vision one runs the risk of being accused of pursuing an outdated essentialist approach. However, there is nothing essentialist about it. It simply elucidates the epistemic and hermeneutic frame for a certain view. If we say that the Koran sanctions different modes of behaviour for man and woman does this mean that we are espousing false essentialism? I can hardly add my voice to this caricature of essentialism. Essentialism is a view which holds that things, persons or people are made up of unchangeable essences, a set of characteristics which remain the same in all possible worlds. Now, if I say that "women are equal to men", and you report and interpret my claim, you cannot be accused of espousing an essentialist view about my views. You can interpret them as saying that I hold the claim to be true in an essentialist manner which could be true or false depending on the view I hold or you can adopt my view as yours and defend it in essentialist terms which, again, may or may not be my view. But these are two different things which should not be confused.

That is the reason why the truth of Islam is none other than the experience of Medina, an experience that with the rapid expansion of Islam became more and more difficult to hold onto. This insufficiency explains the rise of hadith and the new schools of jurisprudence. The Koran on its own proved insufficient and unable to absorb the rapid expansion of its, by now, decontextualized doctrines. Because the individual and the community as was shaped in Medina was historical through and through, the Koran cannot be viewed but through its workings, historically, while its founding act, the revelation, must be inserted in history through connecting it with the historical reality it helped to shape. The act of revelation is, in itself, of transhistorical value, since in all its radicalness, the decision to transform a society for better can be reclaimed without directly implicating the content as inseparable, as it is, from its own context.¹⁴ The Koran is, of course, there for everybody, it is there to give hope to the unjustly treated, signifying that a change is possible, a better world can exist. But one would radically undermine the Koran's function if it understood this hope or guidance to be hidden somewhere in the Koran or in between its lines. The transhistorical truth of the Koran is the *struggle* for justice. Justice creates its own context, its own conditions of applicability but it is not determined by, even if it is a response to, the context it is trying to modify. It becomes possible only after a *decision* to alter and suspend the existing norms and the context that sustains the unjust norms, for an act, equivalent to the act of the revelation, to posit its own presuppositions, its own context. This is what the prophet did and this is what should be followed and repeated, "to regain the creative impulse"

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14 Žižek's Hegelian reading can be of help here: first we isolate Islam's key breakthrough, then we deconstruct it, analyzing its necessary inconsistency to demonstrate how it necessarily missed the key dimension of its own breakthrough, and finally, in order to do justice to it, one must move beyond it. Žižek, 2014, p. 33.

of his act but not the results of his act.¹⁵

The prophetic decision can be *repeated* to create better societies and individuals, to fight injustice, corruption, oppression, and all ills that any society at a given time and place is faced with. This is done not by another recontextualization of the Book. On the contrary, it is done by avoiding it. It is not a matter of *ijtihad*, but of *suspending* the use of the Koran as a manual in the contexts that bear no relation to it, unless of course the first materialization of Islam is considered the only authentic achievement, while others are merely derivatives of it, in which case, all later historical achievements must be redefined in terms of the model of the prophetic society - this is what fundamentalism does. The mistake that adherents of both interpretations make is that they still believe it is possible to be guided by the Koran in the modern world. Conservatives remain incapable of providing inclusive methodology that would take into account the historical distance that separates the modern Muslim from the society the prophet was struggling to create, under radically different socio-economic conditions. Their ahistoricity (the ahistorical approach) is a real problem, because it does not let the new emerge, and when it emerges it is incapable of making its own ground. The Contextualists similarly believe that the Koran offers guidance in the modern world, from which springs the idea of recontextualizing it. What both approaches have in common is the belief that the Koran

15 Žižek, 2004, p. 12. I would like to quote here a brilliant passage from this work of Žižek as it bears *direct* relevance to the issue under discussion. Žižek writes apropos of Deleuze's understanding of revolutions as they 'turn out historically and people's revolutionary becoming'. Žižek writes, "Becoming is thus strictly correlative to the concept of REPETITION: far from being opposed to the emergence of the New, the proper Deleuzian paradox is that something truly New can *only* emerge through repetition. What repetition repeats is not the way the past "effectively was" but the *virtuality* inherent to the past and betrayed by its past actualization. In this precise sense, the emergence of the New changes the past itself, that is, it retroactively changes not the actual past –we are not in science fiction- but the balance between actuality and virtuality in the past... Let us take a great philosopher like Kant. There are two modes to repeat him. Either one sticks to his letter and further elaborates or changes his system, as neo-Kantians (up to Habermas and Luc Ferry) are doing, or one tries to regain the creative impulse that Kant himself betrayed in the actualization of his system (i.e., to connect to what was already "in Kant more than Kant himself", more than his explicit system, its excessive core. There are, accordingly, two modes of betraying the past. The true betrayal is an ethico-theoretical act of the highest fidelity: one has to betray the letter of Kant to remain faithful to (and repeat) the "spirit" of his thought. It is precisely when one remains faithful to the letter of Kant that one really betrays the core of his thought, the creative impulse underlying it. One should bring this paradox to its conclusion. It is not only that one can remain faithful to an author by way of betraying him (the actual letter of his thought); at a more radical level, the inverse statement holds even more, namely, one can only truly betray an author by way of repeating him, by way of remaining faithful to the core of his thought. If one does not repeat an author (in the authentic Kierkegaardian sense of the term), but merely "criticizes" him, moves elsewhere, turns him around, and so forth, this effectively means that one unknowingly remains within his horizon, his conceptual field", p. 12/3.

can be utilized as a normative source. They both subject the Book to manipulation and intrigue, particularly when the Book espouses a radically different view.

It is possible to speculate how would the Koran have responded to our problems had it been in our situation, but the answers we will be giving are still *our* answers. One cannot, therefore, proceed to recontextualize the Koran prior to decontextualizing it from its matrices of domination, the latter being inscribed on the former. In order to recontextualize the Book one must first repress its original context in order to free the content therein. Because such a separation is *not* possible, except on the level of very general principles, without destroying its content, the recontextualization issue cannot even be raised, not if the interpreter is troubled by this delicate issue and has an understanding of its workings. In that case one retains an illusion of Islam and holds it as truth unaware that it is only an illusion. The (social, historical, cultural, linguistic) context of the Koran not only renders God's Word relevant¹⁶ but the relevance of the God's word is in the context itself. Outside that context Islam is anything but Islam, since the text can be made to speak contradictory things¹⁷ or the interpreter can project any meaning that serves some ideological interests. Islam is able to reproduce itself not despite of, but because it contains its context within the text -"enabling us to understand properly a given historical situation"¹⁸- in a manner that one cannot speak of Islam without imagining a certain, real or imaginary, context to it. The containment of the context within the text is both the condition of the possibility and impossibility of its "recontextualization". By the condition of possibility I mean that outside its context Islam does not exist, whereas by the condition of impossibility I mean that within its context Islam can hardly absorb the changes that have occurred since its inception. The Koranic context, besides anchoring and determining the meaning of God's

16 Barlas, 2002, p. 58.

17 Abu Zayd, 2000, p.141.

18 Žižek, 2004, p. 15.

Word, is the meaning of God's Word.¹⁹ On the other hand, what allows for appropriate insertion of God's Word into different contexts is the very ambiguity of the immediately relevant context. The more ambiguous the context of the revelation is, the more universal it becomes in its scope. The Koran, as Arkoun²⁰ has shown, erased the histories, the names of places and people and the individual occurrences from its verses (memory) in order to remove the historical character from its discourse through binding everything in this world to God.

I am not advocating any extreme view that filters through and passively reduces the Koran to a combination of contingent historical and social conditions “which form the framework of what is thinkable at a particular moment”²¹. We should, following Žižek, make a distinction between historicity proper and historicism. “Historicity proper involves a dialectical relationship to some unhistorical kernel that stays the same – not as an underlying Essence but as a rock that rips up every attempt to integrate it into the symbolic order”.²² Whereas “in historicism, the paradox of historicity (the thing in question *becomes* – reveals itself, proves itself to be - what it *always already was*) is somehow ‘flattened’, reduced to a linear succession of ‘epochs’”.²³ Islam is not a disembodied signifier which can move from one context to another. Wherever it goes it carries with itself its own context and wherever it settles it creates the conditions for the use of the context. The text and the context of the Koran are the two sides of the same coin. It therefore is a crude simplification to explain the text simply on

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19 To avoid any possible misunderstanding: I criticize the reduction of the Koran to its context of production not to its *produced* context. There are two contexts to emphasise: the historical context from which the Koran originated and moved away and can be analytically distanced but not historically since such a dissociation amounts to severing the connection between the Koran and the context that produced it and which the Koran made maximal use of in developing its own worldview. But the second context, the context produced by the Koran cannot be separated from the Koran and it can be reduced, analytically if not historically, to that context and vice versa.

20 Arkoun, 1996, p. 72.

21 Copjec, 2002, p.62.

22 Žižek, 1994, p. 199.

23 Žižek, 2001, p. 184. In his book, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 2007, writing against historicism Žižek states: “A particular social phenomenon can never be completely ‘contextualized’, reduced to a set of sociohistorical circumstances – such a particularization would presuppose the crudest universalism: namely, the presumption that we, its agents, can speak from a neutral-universal place of pure meta-language exempt from any specific context”, p. 214. See also Arkoun’s distinction between “radical historicity” and “positivist historicism” in: Arkoun, 2002, p. 89-96.

account of its cultural situation, important as that is for elucidating the social conditions of the working of Islam. This reductive methodology of contextualism where the context imprints itself passively onto the textual space, besides being guilty of a simple logical mistake, “the genetic fallacy” – the presumption that to determine the origin of an idea is to determine its truth or falsity - reduces the influence of the Koran on its surroundings to nothing. Islam, to borrow from Žižek once more, “‘posited its own presuppositions’, and re-inscribed its contingent/ external circumstances into an all-encompassing logic that can be generated from an elementary conceptual matrix”²⁴. In other words, the Koran created its own context, its own space with specific rules where it could play its game. It goes without saying that the Koran was, in a significant sense, part of the pre-Islamic culture. As such, it can be explained neither outside the parameters of the context of its production nor can it be reduced to it without destroying and “make -[ing] us blind to the real kernel which returns as the same through diverse historicizations/symbolizations”.²⁵

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24 Žižek, 2000, p. 225.

25 Žižek, 1994a, p. 328.

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What Christians need no longer defend: The political stakes of considering antinomianism as central to the practice and history of theology

Colby Dickinson

Abstract:

Through a brief history of antinomian thought within the modern period, and the inspection of two contemporary responses to the 'antinomian impulse', I refocus the antinomian debate as being, not necessarily a heretical endeavor, but rather a dialectic between history and memory, structure and experience. Rather than portray antinomianism as a threat to the system which needs to be removed, perhaps we can learn to perceive it as a 'weak messianic force' moving through all constituted (religious) identities, not, then, as the end of 'Christianity' as an organized religion, but its original proclamation, ever in need of greater reformation.

Keywords:

antinomianism, heresy, Michel Foucault, Martin Heidegger, Giorgio Agamben, Reinhard Hütter

Introduction

There are a number of ways in which heresy has been labeled over the years. One of the more popular versions is that of 'antinomianism,' which has reappeared throughout the centuries since the Reformation with an increased and intriguing frequency. It has crept up again and again as a major, defining political force of reform and has sparked some of the fiercest theological debates the western world has ever known. My thesis in this essay is that we often misunderstand what the 'antinomian impulse' is really about, how it actually plays an essential role in giving shape to the Christian faith. I will contend that unless we can learn to appreciate this 'antinomian impulse' for what it is—an inherent and constituent part of identity itself—we will repeatedly run the risk of de-emphasizing one of the most significant internal dynamics of a political theological discourse.

I will explore, first, an all-too-brief history of antinomian thought within the modern period, from the Reformation to the present day, in the hope that such a rereading will offer a foundation from which to view what is really at stake in the oft-recurring antinomian impulses I will later pick up and analyze. Second, I will utilize the insights of both Michel Foucault and Martin Heidegger to help us ascertain why both theology *and* philosophy are central disciplines needed to comprehend the stakes of any recurring antinomian controversy. In particular, I want to refocus the antinomian debate as being not so much a heretical endeavor, but

rather a practical exercise that takes place as a dialectic between history and memory, or structure and experience. Finally, I will point to sites within both western theology and philosophy in order to try to isolate and identify contemporary antinomian impulses within two more recent positions taken with respect to it, in their more or less ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’ guises, while trying to understand the significance of antinomianism for the practice of political theology today.

In all of this, the conclusion I am gesturing toward, though perhaps not here arriving at completely, emphasizes a new way of relating to antinomianism, and to heresy itself—a perspective willing to embrace its (doctrinally) radical ‘other’ in order to gain a better understanding of itself. What I am sketching is certainly a hermeneutical, dialectical position through and through. What I am claiming as well is that this repositioning of antinomian thought as what lies at the heart of theological history is in fact a political issue above all else, one that helps us to see why the consequences of this debate are not only heavily political, legal and ethical, but also philosophical in that they reveal latent core dynamics underneath the constitution of identity itself. It has not been a surprise to me, then, that so many philosophers have recently been attracted to the terrain of political theology, since it is precisely on these intersecting grounds that these issues have come most clearly to light. My belief is that such an inclusive position as I try to advance here will be a significant aid to theological and philosophical practice.

A brief history of modern ‘antinomian’ theologies

A curiously recurrent feature of antinomianism within the history of modern Christianity became noticeably prominent when one of Martin Luther’s fellow theologians, Johann Agricola, appeared to mistake Luther’s opposed stance to the Catholic Church’s hierarchy and rules, as well as his firm dependence upon scripture alone, to mean that all true Christians should turn away from the rule of law entirely. In this first modern ‘Antinomian controversy’—to be followed century upon century by other such controversies within the Church—Agricola and Luther went head-to-head in a series of disputations all designed to demonstrate, from Luther’s standpoint, the actual necessity of the law for social order, and its therefore immutable and inevitable presence in our world. These were points he was certainly not willing to concede,

not if his movement of reform was to have any real political force.¹ Law, it would seem, is not something entirely replaceable by grace; it is something merely *dis*-placed, subject to certain temporal qualifications, such as the political ‘office’ one must also at times fill. For Luther, there is grace for the believer, but there must also be the sword for the ‘unbelieving’ masses.

As Reinhard Hütter has recently pointed out, Luther’s response to Agricola and the other antinomians was intended to promote a genuine, Christian sense of freedom, one wherein the law and the Gospel might work together in order to defeat sin.² Since we are fallen creatures, the narrative goes, we must rely upon both the law *and* the Gospel in order to receive God’s unfolding plan of salvation for us. The law, or the ‘sword,’ in Luther’s parlance, may not be absolutely necessary for Christians, but it *is* necessary for the ‘unbelievers’ and the average Christian’s relationship to them. Christians, Luther advised, should consequently feel no qualms about being involved in the governing of the state, even if that means fulfilling the duties of the ‘hangman.’³ Though Hütter, whose analysis of Luther on this point I will address in more detail in the final section, does not note the significance of this link between the necessity for the law and the Christian’s role in society—one that is complicit at certain points with justified violent actions and exclusions—we would do well, at least, to draw attention to how the connection between Luther’s propensity to maintain order through violent means and his stress on the law is not simply a passing coincidence.

To some, Luther’s approach to the necessity of law was in fact a capitulation to his impatient desire for reform and his tendency toward the violent means needed, in his eyes, to attain it—an account altogether missing from Hütter’s more purely ‘theological’ descriptions of Luther’s notion of freedom taken up by Hütter in conjunction with natural law. The critique I am suggesting is essentially the assessment offered by the Catholic theologian Yves Congar in his survey of the true and false reforms both present within the Church, a project which finds him, for more than one reason, evaluating Erasmus more favorably than Luther. In Congar’s eyes,

.....
1 Luther 2008.
2 Hütter 2001, 142.
3 Luther 1962, 374.

What is striking about the reformers who went into schism is their radicalism. Luther himself was violent and irritable. He knew this about himself, but he thought that it was helping his mission and that without it he would not have achieved the work he had to do. That is not only because he would not have dared to do it, but because too moderate an approach, like that of Erasmus, would fail to achieve anything effective.⁴

In other words, to have any traction as politically ‘effective’, Luther’s position had to be one that worked with the law (or state, in this instance) and which could not be characterized as antinomian, even though he might have appeared to some, in his heavy critiques of Roman hierarchies, canon law and religious regulations, to be promoting such an agenda.

Despite the fact that Agricola eventually rescinded his own antinomian position, the original impetus that drove Luther to vigorously condemn the antinomian viewpoint as a misreading of Christ’s mission entirely, and which was part of his own quest to distinguish between the true and the false Church,⁵ began to accumulate a historical currency that did not fade over time, but actually became a routinely utilized concept invoked in order to vilify or slander those Christians who strayed too far from an ‘orthodox’ acceptance of some level of law as functional within *both* society and the church. There are, no doubt, reasons of contested authority behind such demonstrable tensions (Luther vs. the Catholic hierarchy of his day, as only one such example), but these tensions, we should note, are often portrayed as *theologically* secondary to the larger doctrinal claims made by both sides—a perhaps misplaced priority that I am here contesting.

What I would like to draw our attention to, at this point, is the implicit manner in which the various charges of antinomianism that spring from the Reformation’s political challenge to Catholic authority became henceforth insolubly connected to those very same political struggles that typify contesting political theologies *within* the Church. What was really being offered as a response to the challenges of the Reformation to the Catholic hierarchy, I am suggesting, was the Reformation’s own internal challenge to itself, embodied in Agricola’s challenge to Luther—a further, ongoing critique of *all* ecclesial

4 Congar 2011, 324.

5 See Edwards 1975, 156-179.

structures and authorities—the quest to locate and live out a grace apart from all law. By identifying this perpetual Reformation for what it truly is, we might begin to understand anew why antinomianism became, and still *becomes* in many ways, a type of religious, and yet also always, political movement which “had haunted the respectable magisterial Reformation from its earliest days.”⁶

Manifesting itself throughout the centuries following the Reformation in a variety of guises, from the call to perfection, to an effort to embrace an experience of Christ beyond all religious structures, for example, charges of antinomian tendencies or its explicitly embodied position were anything but few and far between. In many ways, this fundamental accusation of theological heresy often carried with it the subtle underpinnings of a genuinely antinomian sentiment—something we would do well to investigate much further than I am able to sketch here within the long history of modern theology.

As the Church historian and chronicler of Christian doctrine Jaroslav Pelikan has pointed out, even John Wesley, the eventual founder of Methodism, accused Nicolaus Zinzendorf, the once Moravian bishop, of being antinomian due to his call toward ‘perfectionism’ combined with his ecumenical zeal in advocating the love of Christ beyond any steadfast institutional affiliations—the real, structural, authoritative critique that may have won him the title of antinomian. What is revealing in Wesley’s accusation—and this is the point that Pelikan rightly draws our attention to—is that Wesley himself critiqued such ‘antinomian’ stances while maintaining a fervent tendency himself toward moral perfectionism, an embodied tension that, in reality, mirrored the Bible’s paradoxical treatment of the subject, for, as Pelikan observed, “no one born of God commits sin (1 John 3.9),” and yet there is “another law” within us “making us captive to the law of sin (Romans 7.23).”⁷

Providing us with mounting evidence that the charge of antinomianism was often a *political* charge made within the sphere of a scriptural or doctrinal point of undecidability, Wesley’s struggle to articulate the nature of sin in relation to ecclesial structures was more than paralleled by the ‘Antinomian Controversy’ of the Massachusetts Bay Colony some years earlier. Within this early American colony, the

6 MacCulloch 2009, 653.

7 Pelikan, 1989, 148. For a more detailed account of Wesley’s views on antinomian thought, see Gunter 1989.

charge of antinomianism was actually centered on specific challenges made by individuals within the settlement to a collective sense of religious authority, embodied, mainly, in certain cries for a more fluid sense of identity and less doctrinal rigidity.⁸ Colonists such as John Cotton advocated a ‘free grace theology’ that seemed to other, more conservative members, to be a deviation from the rule of the colony and an assault upon its values and governing norms. Here, the conclusions drawn by some of the ‘antinomian’ participants such as Cotton were merely that society should be more tolerant of those who diverged from normative (religious) identities, in many ways, the *real* issue that brought about the desires for and charges of antinomianism. With this general tendency of antinomian thought in mind, we witness this particular movement’s propensity toward ecumenical undertakings, such as in Rhode Island where the persecuted Anne Hutchinson—the main figure in this particular controversy besides Cotton—sought refuge under the guidance of a man who was tolerant of all religions, Roger Williams.⁹

What such cases demonstrate is that antinomianism, in large measure as perceived throughout the 17th Century, was understood as an almost entirely polemical construct, that which was synonymous with whatever “provoked fears of authority undermined.”¹⁰ Though the doctrinal issues with its ‘adherents’ were often framed as being involved with—once again as is typical within the Christian tradition—the theological (or perhaps more accurately, *theoretical*) tension between grace and works, the political implications of such tensions were where the real issues were more often to be found.

What is interesting to consider on this point, and what I am trying to center this essay on, is the manner in which antinomianism, or simply a desire to be free of certain rigid structures within Christendom, doctrine or perhaps even religion itself, in reality appears as a position determined within very specific historical and contextual political configurations that are in ever greater need of being comprehended as political challenges to rival authorities. That is, I am trying to establish antinomianism as revolutionary or reform-oriented movements arising from within a given normative framework. These are movements,

8 Breen 2001, 55.

9 See MacCulloch 2009, 722-723. For more on the context of antinomianism in the early English-American Puritan colonial scene, see also Stoeve 1978; Winship 2002; as well as, in an English context, Cooper 2001; and Huehns 1951.

10 Cooper 2001, 36.

moreover, that occur with some frequency within Christian theology, whether we label them as fundamentally antinomian impulses or not. Such a reworking of the standard theological definition of antinomianism¹¹ might enable us, therefore, to discern why the opposition to antinomianism—a movement characteristically ascribed in the Nineteenth Century, for example, to certain groups of Reformers, particularly Calvinists, who sought justification by faith alone—was itself often fervent, something even John Henry Newman admired in one’s theological position.¹²

We might pause to consider as well, and as would later become pronounced in a Danish context, the Lutheran theologian Søren Kierkegaard’s efforts to become contemporary with Christ (*contra* history, *contra* Hegel) through faith alone, which, ultimately, became an essential feature of his critique of the structures of Christendom that grounded Europe in his day. It was as if, for Kierkegaard, to mount such a large scale attack upon the seductive allegiance of Church and state, and its ‘rule’ of accepting all citizens as automatically Christian, he was required to restore Luther’s simplified vision of a faith that moved beyond certain authoritative structures of faith.¹³ As such, and though he may not have been labeled as an antinomian during his time¹⁴, his theological position, I would claim, reflected the same fundamental essence of protest as earlier antinomians—something that will occur again and again in other theologian’s efforts as we will see. Indeed, the very notion that one would be able to ‘suspend’ ethical normativity at all, as he famously claimed in his reading of Abraham’s near sacrifice of his son Isaac, calls to mind just such a possibility.¹⁵

11 From the late Nineteenth Century’s *Century Dictionary*, here quoted in the ‘Introduction by the Editor’ to Adams 1894), 12-13: the Antinomian is [...] one who maintains that Christians are freed from the moral law, as set forth in the Old Testament, by the new dispensation of grace as set forth in the gospel; an opponent of legalism in morals. Antinomianism has existed in three forms: in the early church, as a species of Gnosticism, in the doctrine that sin is an incident of the body, and that a regenerate soul cannot sin; later, in the Reformation, as a reaction against the doctrine of good works in the Roman Catholic Church, in the antagonistic doctrine that man is saved by faith alone, regardless of his obedience to or disobedience of the moral law as a rule of life; finally, as a phase of extreme Calvinism, in English Puritan theology, in the doctrine that the sins of the elect are so transferred to Christ that they become his transgressions, and cease to be the transgressions of the actual sinner.

12 Newman 1994, 26.

13 See, among other writings, Kierkegaard 1968.

14 I will, however, note here how Paul Martens has referred to Kierkegaard’s ‘Lutheran and antinomian roots,’ in Martens 2010, 94.

15 See Kierkegaard 1983.

This same impulse to suspend the mechanisms of normativity (i.e. law, structure, institution) was present, I would also argue, when the Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer sought to oppose the National Socialist movement in his Germany of the early Twentieth Century. He too strove to detach his faith in Christ from the structures of institutionalized Christianity, offering instead both a strong critique of those Christians who hope to receive grace from some form of legalistic thinking (“cheap grace”¹⁶) and his eventual hope in a “religionless” Christianity whose shape and contours he could not quite yet make out, but which he believed to be essential to the liberation of the human being from the worldly, political confines that held it.¹⁷ It is little surprise that his critique of religion was paralleled by those of both Karl Barth and Simone Weil, two thinkers whose own experiences of the early Twentieth Century in Europe were also marked by the rise of institutional authorities, both political and ecclesial, that gave them cause to rethink their relationships with religion and Church. My point here is not to suggest that these authors were all antinomian, but to stress that their theologies bore traces of this anti-structural, anti-institutional impulse that is hard to disentangle from ‘antinomian’ thought in general, whatever such a thing, in reality, actually is.¹⁸

In a sense, what these writers, among others, have been gravitating toward, I am claiming, is the original Lutheran intuition taken to its inevitable conclusion by its internal (read or *mis*-read as based in the Reformation) antinomian impulses, which were really, in many ways, the original Pauline vision of a faith in Christ that de-stabilizes but does not entirely do away with the institutionalized structures of the religious body out of which these desires spring. For Paul, of course, and we would do well to recall this here, the desire to be apart from the law was one that rendered *all* normative identities as void (e.g. Galatians 3:28), but which also allowed Paul, for one, to live within such normative cultural and religious divisions ‘as if’ they were not (1 Corinthians

16 Bonhoeffer 2003.

17 See Bonhoeffer 2010.

18 One can also perhaps see something similar in those many persons today who claim to be ‘spiritual but not religious’, and who are looking for a way to find harmony with the ‘sacred’ while breaking free of the ‘old’ trappings of what is often perceived as mere religious authority. Such formed sentiments speak immediately—that is, *without mediation*, as Luther might once have put it—to many people who are searching for an alternate way to transcend their situation, and whose hopes are captured in the title of Diana Butler Bass’ more recent, and popular book *Christianity After Religion: The End of the Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*. Bass 2012.

7:17-24). In many ways, this tension is still one that we are trying to comprehend and live out today in theological, political and philosophical terms, though we often fail to do just that; it is a project committed to the difficult, but necessary task of living “[...] a love that accomplishes what the law cannot: justice that endures for each and all.”¹⁹ This is a point to which I will return in a moment when I look at Heidegger’s reading of the foundational claims of Christianity.

What these modern and even Pauline examples suggest to us is that the same ‘antinomian’ impulse that once ignited the righteous vigor of Johann Agricola was probably something latent within Luther’s own objections to the Roman Catholic Church of his time, but which was, for Luther himself, something that necessarily needed to be tempered with structure and law in order for the Reformation to have any traction as an institutional movement in its own right. This would explain, on the one hand, why Luther had to resist such impulses, yet, on the other, why his own reforming tendencies were potentially mistaken as antinomian, why the antinomian impulse still refuses to go away and yet why it also cannot be embodied as a free-standing ecclesiastical structure. In this case, it would seem as if Hannah Arendt’s maxim that the real trick with a revolutionary movement is finding the right *institution* in which to place it could be here reread in its antinomian version: the real trick with an antinomian movement is realizing that there is no institution in which to place it, because it *already* exists *within every* institution.²⁰ If this strikes us as revealing the heart of deconstructive thought and its forever spectral messianism, I would only suggest that this is no coincidence at all, and that Derrida’s reluctance to take on any permanent label, including that of the Jew or the Christian, resides in such an understanding of the resonance between antinomian thought and deconstructivist thought.²¹

To illustrate the depths to which contemporary thought has been interwoven with antinomianism, I want to turn in the next section to the treatment of the topic in the works of both Michel Foucault and Martin Heidegger. Though my analysis will be frustratingly brief, what I hope to evidence is the resonance which both thinkers had with antinomianism, and how such a placement of their thought within the history I have

19 Jennings 2013, 214.

20 See the conclusions drawn in Arendt 1963.

21 See, among others, Jennings 2005.

already sketched above might further illuminate the contours of antinomian thinking within the West.

On Foucault, Heidegger, historicity and the potential uniqueness of Christianity

Perhaps one way to try to understand the position of those who feel inclined to defend an orthodox vision of the faith against its antinomian or nihilist threats is to reflect upon the ways in which their own efforts are more than simply mirrored by general national and military defenses of society. They, in fact, rest upon the same premises, ones that often go undisclosed as substantially the same in their foundational principles. It might prove very helpful in this respect to look to the analysis offered in Michel Foucault's 1975-1976 lectures, titled as *"Society Must Be Defended,"* for it is in these lectures on the nature of power in society that Foucault was able to isolate a number of significant principles that undergird the defense of society: authority, law, antagonism and war, among others.²² His analysis of these general, but foundational terms, all of which are similarly functional within the analysis of antinomianism in the present essay, quickly leads us to confront the major dynamics of the Reformation with an ear tuned toward how such interactions continue to shape the fields of politics, theology and philosophy today.

The doctrine of faith, as the Reformers soon discovered, and as Foucault places under evaluation in this context, was directly rooted in their relationship to the sole authority of the Bible. The principle of *sola scriptura* functioned thereby at times as much as a political ideology as it was a religious belief in revelation. As Foucault reminds us, "[...] it must not be forgotten that, at least from the second half of the Middle Ages onward, the Bible was the great form for the articulation of the religious, moral, and political protests against the power of kings and the despotism of the church [...];" as such, he continued, "The Bible was the weapon of poverty and insurrection; it was the world that made men rise up against the law and against glory, against the unjust law of kings and beautiful glory of the Church."²³ What the sole authority of the biblical text offered its believers was an apparently unmediated access to the divine that circumvented the hierarchical authority of an

22 Foucault 2003.

23 *Ibid.*, 71.

institutionalized world, politically and ecclesiastically, what has also motivated, as we have already seen, a good deal of its 'antinomian' flavor.

With the Reformation, as it were, a new way of recording history was conceived, one more capable of utilizing ambiguous historical accounts in order to provide a 'counter-history' to the more or less 'official' history as written by those in power, a counter-history that would often appear in its new spectral form as an antinomian impulse, as I have been contending throughout. Christianity, in Foucault's estimation, began to realize (*again*, hence its *re*-formation) its potential to move counter to the currents of history and to resist those worldly powers that governed historically, though it was also, at times, complicit with certain political powers in order to achieve its own global hegemony, something, I have already noted, that also pervaded Luther's own stance in relation to political force and use of the 'sword.'

Foucault, therefore, contrasts a form of history that merely sustains the rituals of sovereign power with a form of history that undoes such schemes of power within recorded history, what is for him part of the legacy of Christianity—whether actualized or not within history—and especially as it is seized upon by the Protestant Reformers. This, as I have already described, is what motivates the 'antinomian' impulse nearly entirely:

Historical discourse of the Rome type pacifies society, justifies power, and founds the order [...] that constitutes the social body. In contrast, the discourse I am telling you about, and which is deployed in the late sixteenth century, and which can be described as a biblical-style historical discourse, tears society apart and speaks of legitimate rights solely in order to declare war on laws.²⁴

What Foucault makes clear, though he does not invoke the term 'antinomianism' directly as a movement per se or by name, is the struggle ('war') *against law* that typifies political revolutionary movements, and which is inherently part of the Christian message of grace ('contra' law) even if it is latent or only spectral at times (i.e. as an antinomian *impulse* only, and hence my preference for this term). In the end, whether we call such phenomena antinomian or not, what we are assessing here is the presence of internal tensions that threaten to

24 *Ibid.*, 73.

deconstruct specific institutionalized and politicized forms which are rooted somewhere in the event of Christ and which are permanently bound up with Christianity itself.

Though I am arguing that this counter-historical impulse runs much deeper than Foucault's genealogical analysis of the Protestant Reformation, he does touch upon the core dynamic that motivates and defines the antinomian, counter-historical protest against the structures ('laws') that be. Underscoring his major thesis within this series of lectures, he affirms how "History gave us the idea that we are at war; and we wage war through history."²⁵ Antinomianism, it would seem, is simply one side of this apparently perpetual war taking place *within* history, for the representation *of* history. Since there is no 'nature, order, or peace' at the 'origins' of the historical record, there is only a mass of ambiguity that must be debated, and in, more or less, explicitly political terms.

What Foucault was pointing toward through his genealogy of a political protest against governing authority dependent upon its relationship to scripture alone, I am arguing, is what Martin Heidegger had also already been exploring many years prior to Foucault in his lectures on *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, lectures which shed much light on the project of illuminating the influence of Christian thought upon the early stages of Heidegger's work as well.²⁶ What I want to suggest—and this will help illuminate why I am turning to Heidegger—is that the counter-historical impulse found within antinomian thought is the same impulse that generated Christianity's originary impulse in relation to the Law of Judaism, and is what, in a theoretical sense, initiated a 'revolutionary' break from Judaic Law that could not yet sever itself entirely from (religious) structured forms if it was to exist as a religion in its own right throughout history.

I realize, of course, that this claim is a difficult one to prove, as the form of Christianity that has been passed down through the centuries is not a permanently antinomian one. By definition, such a thing would not even be possible to identify as a structural form. That is, purely antinomian messianic movements have a tendency to die out very quickly unless they reinscribe themselves back within an institutionalized, normative framework—the compromise that both

25 *Ibid.*, 172.

26 See, for a thorough exposition of Heidegger's early Christian influence, Kiesel 1993.

Luther and the earliest Christians, among others, had to make as well. Institutionalization (or representation itself then) is, in many ways, the zero level of hermeneutics that is necessary for religious identity to be conceived at all.²⁷

It is also a difficult claim to establish in light of Christianity's long-standing hostility toward Judaism as well as Heidegger's own anti-Semitic statements. Yet Heidegger's lectures on the uniqueness of Christianity in relation to history and historicity *are* directly relevant to the point I am trying to make, for it is in these lectures that he demonstrates how antinomianism is *not* a deviation from the Christian norm, but rather a recurring symptom of unjust representations of the Christ event within a more normative form of Christianity. What Heidegger advances in this context is an analysis of Christ's critical stance taken toward *all* those structures that characterize our world—a form of antinomianism in philosophical terms par excellence, and, consequently, well worth our attention, even if Heidegger himself was not able to digest the full consequences of this message in relation to his own views on Judaism.

Christopher Rickey has already, I believe, correctly identified this tendency in Heidegger's thought as a Lutheran-inspired antinomian impulse that lay underneath Heidegger's larger (theo)political project, and as that which motivated a good deal of 'postmodern' thought that came after it, presumably figures such as Derrida and Agamben included.²⁸ Rather than draw only a sharp critique of Heidegger's alleged antinomianism, as Rickey tends toward, I would like to draw out some of these antinomian tendencies in Heidegger's thought in order to demonstrate how this particular Christian-Lutheran strand of reasoning might actually be part of a larger hermeneutics of religious

27 The impetus for such a balanced approach, for example, can be found in the work of David Novak, who, in an article addressing the fundamental basis of antinomian thought, declared that Christians should cease labelling Jews as legalists, and Jews, for their part, should cease to call Christians antinomian. As he put it, "At the key point of human action, both of these extremes substitute man for God by replacing the divine with the human. The legalist errs by placing the kingdom of God in human hands; the antinomian errs by denying there is any kingdom at all in his or her radical individualism. The Rabbis saw antinomianism at the heart of the rejection of God's authority. The antinomian lives in an ultimately absurd universe [...]." Novak 2000, 280. His solution is to point out the manner in which both Jews and Christians adhere to the law of God, though they may differ on what exactly such an adherence in reality resembles.

28 Rickey 2002.

representation in general, though one still severely misunderstood.²⁹

For example, as Heidegger bluntly puts it within these lectures: “Christian worldview: [this is] actually a contradiction! It does not arise from a complex of a historical kind, like the Christian.”³⁰ The Christian, from this point of view, somehow eludes being a historical figure akin to all other historical figures, and this, according to Heidegger, is for a particular reason: the Christian relation to *form* itself is one that cautions the Christian to not be conformed to this world at all (e.g. Romans 12.2).³¹ History involves itself in a certain action of ‘worldization’ (*Verweltlichung*) as an attempt to secure oneself by ‘worldly’ means within this world.³² Yet, as Heidegger outlines in his lectures,

There is no security for Christian life; the constant insecurity is also characteristic for what is fundamentally significant in factual life. The uncertainty is not coincidental; rather it is necessary. This necessity is not a logical one, nor is it of natural necessity. In order to see this clearly, one must reflect on one’s own life and its enactment.³³

It is the Christian identity, then, which finds itself continuously ‘insecure’ *within* history, insecure *with* history itself. At the very moment in which Christianity declares itself to be a religion wherein the divine is particularly wedded to the historical in an essential fashion (i.e. the *Incarnation*), it simultaneously also critiques one’s relation to any historical act of ‘worldization’, and to history itself as a consequence. There is no single, monolithic *History* within the Christian narrative, or for the Christian per se—a fact that Christians, throughout the centuries, have often misunderstood in their attempts to sacralize a particular historical or social narrative. We might even suggest that

29 There is no doubt that any reading of Heidegger’s take on anything like antinomianism will have to be read alongside his anti-Semitic remarks, which, with the publication of his *Schwarzen Hefte*, will only become a more prominent issue in upcoming years. My reading of his antinomianism at present, however, is one attempting to be in line with Jacob Taubes’ reading of the difference between Judaism and Christianity that clearly resonates with certain aspects of Heidegger’s formulation of Christianity. See Taubes 2010.

30 Heidegger 2004, 87.

31 *Ibid.*, 85-86.

32 *Ibid.*, 23.

33 *Ibid.*, 73.

Heidegger himself, in his alignment with National Socialism, at some points succumbed to this temptation.³⁴

What can be sensed underlying this bold, but renewing, hypothesis on the Christian’s relation to history is the radical presence of Christ (or of God more generally), that promises to allow one to transcend history and that is the experience of God beyond all authoritative norms. This is the presence of God (*parousia*) that comports one toward God, according to Heidegger, and which causes a turning away from the worldly (or, the idolatrous), prompting one to not be concerned about the specifics of Christ’s return, but rather to be concerned with one’s awakening as a form of sobriety.³⁵ Heidegger’s rereading of the Christian’s identity is an existential redefining of the Christian in such a way that this identity can be seen to permeate any situation in which one finds oneself prior to the proclamation of the Gospels within any normative construction of identity, yet completely transformed—*continuously* transformed—from within. In this sense, and echoing Pauline thought rather heavily, nothing changes in one’s identity, though *everything*, surely, also changes radically.

What is doubly intriguing on this point are Heidegger’s suggestions made regarding Christianity’s permanent unsettling of historical identity, in that he reads such a position as one yet constitutive *of* identity as such, as foundational of such identifying structural formations. This understanding is what will allow him, within these same lectures, to conceive of the non-philosophical foundations of philosophy—the point we must return to again and again if we are really to critique the exclusively rational grounds of modern thought (what Hütter, as much as John Henry Newman, had really been trying to do, and which I am also trying to do, though in a slightly different manner).

In ways that might be said to foreshadow Deleuze and Guattari’s portrayal of the non-philosophical within the philosophical,³⁶ Heidegger suggests that “The historical is the phenomenon that for us should open up an access to the self-understanding of philosophy,” though Christianity seems to be somehow outside this particular philosophical understanding, though, also, at the same time, at its foundations, even

34 See Slavoj Žižek’s comments on Heidegger and National Socialism in Žižek 1999, 9-66.

35 *Ibid.*, 74.

36 Deleuze and Guattari 1996.

*granting it a foundation.*³⁷ It would seem, based on his conclusion to the lectures, that it is Christianity which best enables one to gain some distance from the processes of worldization—to become attuned to a radical comportment to the world that re-determines one's lived sense of temporality, but which is yet, somehow, also characteristic of a fuller experience of temporality. This is what it means, he suggests, when he states that "Christian experience lives time itself," just as the non-philosophical *lives* the philosophical as one facet of the experience of human existence, though not exclusively, as that which is solely constituent of human experience.³⁸

We arrive hence at this most curious conclusion to Heidegger's lectures, something which needs to be rethought in relation to contemporary philosophical 'returns to religion' within certain continental circles:

Real philosophy of religion arises not from preconceived concepts of philosophy and religion. Rather, the possibility of its philosophical understanding arises out of a certain religiosity—for us, the Christian religiosity. Why exactly the Christian religiosity lies in the focus of our study, that is a difficult question; it is answerable only through the solution of the problem of the historical connections. The task is to gain a real and original relationship to history, which is to be explicated from out of our own historical situation and facticity. At issue is what the sense of history can signify for us, so that the 'objectivity' of the historical 'in itself' disappears. History exists only from out of a present. Only thus can the possibility of a philosophy of religion be begun.³⁹

Or, from the perspective I have been taking in this article, why should we return to the issue of antinomianism again? My answer, pace Heidegger, is now hopefully clear: such a tension between structure and experience, as stereotypically represented by the tension between Judaism's Law and Christianity's antinomianism (its 'grace,' as it were), is what is inherent to *identity itself*—and therefore not *just* Christian or *just* Jewish identity. This lesson, which Heidegger himself, we must note, did not fully subscribe to 'all the way down' to its core, was what

37 Heidegger 2004, 24.

38 *Ibid.*, 57.

39 *Ibid.*, 89.

must be repeated as constitutive of *all* identities (religious, political or otherwise), not dismissed or critiqued out of existence altogether.

Christianity, for its part, certainly found itself asserting an identity that emphasized the antinomian impulse as it arises from out of an event that appears as an ever 'pure present', the faith that exceeds any *nomos* which exists as an already given structure. The structural forms of Christianity that arose shortly after Jesus' death certainly emphasized it, though whether or not this was Jesus' intention—as he himself seemed content to present his message fully *within* the Jewish traditions—is another question, and one very well worth pursuing.⁴⁰ Historically, however, as a phenomenon of the evolution of identity within its own right, Christianity itself, as a reform movement internal to Judaism, and so which in a sense also never ceases being a Jewish movement, seems to capture the antinomian impulse perfectly, and is, consequently, 'doomed' to repeat it over and again as essential and constitutive of its own identity.⁴¹

Perhaps a more conducive perspective for the practice of theology would be to admit the necessity for structural antinomian impulses *within* both Jewish and Christian faiths and not to shy away from their existence. Rather, we might learn to read these symptoms of structural unease as moments for the potential liberation of, and increased justice rendered toward, subjects who will always be

40 Perhaps this is why the Freudian hypothesis takes on such significance in Gershom Scholem's and Jacob Taubes' readings of it. Freud's hypothesis, for better or worse, was that Judaism did not, or could not, emphasize its own internal pluralistic elements—i.e. its alleged Egyptian origins, according to Freud, though this hypothesis should serve as only an almost metaphorical example of what was really at stake here. See Taubes 2003. See also Freud 1939. What I am suggesting here is that this ability to avow and disavow one's foundations, which Freud essentially claims, is akin to John Caputo's development of a 'religion without religion'—a privilege not accorded the more tradition-adhering sides of *any* institution or religion—perhaps provides us in some measure with a direct view of the true nature and function of antinomian thought, that which seemingly continues to motivate each 'new' burst of Christian messianic fervor, from Paul to Luther, and from Kierkegaard to Caputo (whom I will address directly in a moment).

41 Though, certainly in light of the present publication of Heidegger's *Schwarze Hefte* ('Black Notebooks'), much remains to be said on Heidegger's stance vis-à-vis Judaism and its apparent 'worldlessness' or 'deworlding of the world' which is bound up with his own difficult 'ontological-historical antisemitism', I am here suggesting that there is perhaps a shared tension within Heidegger's own work between both Christians and Jews with regard to their identity formation in relation to their being-in-the-world. Though Heidegger himself does not in the context of his lectures on Christianity advance a parallel between these two religions, and in fact exploits Christianity in favor of his reading of Judaism in other places, I yet believe that his work does point out the inherent structural tensions within Judaism which he himself was not able to further theorize with regard to the historical religions of Judaism and Christianity. My thesis, then, is that both Christianity and Judaism engage in a certain 'worldlessness' that must be valued as a necessary part of identity formation in general. On the anti-Semitism within the notebooks, see Gordon 2014.

‘normatively’ defined so to speak, and at times even unjustly oppressed. Accordingly, as much as this struggle is about the tensions that constitute identity—the tensions of the self permanently caught between an institutionalized structure and a private experience—it is also a struggle that contains a hope for more justice to be done to the particular individuals who continuously stand before us, asking us to recognize and even love them.⁴²

Though I have spent a good deal of space narrating a brief history of antinomian tendencies since the Reformation, I want, in what follows, to demonstrate how the specter of antinomianism—for it *is* little more than a permanent specter that haunts traditional ecclesial and theological structures and discourses—is still a major, and often undisclosed, problematic within theological and philosophical reflection and praxis.⁴³ The current situation is as if the antinomian impulse were more formalized so to speak; charges of its heresy are certainly less frequent, more vague, though the desire to present a love, an encounter, an ethics, or a person, all *beyond* the structures of the law (thus altering our coordinates of identity in general) becomes that much more forceful in a modern context. To illustrate this point, I will next move on to examine two impasses within contemporary thought that both turn, in their more ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’ versions alike, on their desires to resolve the ‘antinomian problem’.

Two contemporary responses to antinomianism

The first antinomian position in contemporary thought:
An impasse

As with both Paul and Luther, these readings of antinomianism do not carefully distinguish between religious, cultural or political antinomianism, but, rather, implicitly perceive that all of these forms go together in an undisclosed sense. This is the case, as well, and, perhaps, more directly so, with the first antinomian position in contemporary thought that I wish here to take up. It is the one we could more or less label the ‘conservative’ position, one characterized by its defensive reaction to what appears, to it, as an antinomian threat made

42 On this dialectic between structure and experience, see Malabou 2010, 81.

43 For an astute analysis of these tensions as they are played out in the field of theological discourse, see Taylor 2011.

in relation to the given normative structures of both the Christian faith and (a western, Christianized) society as a whole.

In a relatively recent article in *First Things*, R.R. Reno embodies the contours of this approach through his insistence upon the necessity, *for* the genuine expression of faith, of eradicating such antinomian flourishes that lead, not just the Church or theology, but society as a whole, down the primrose path to its moral demise. He summarizes the stakes in critical proximity to liberal Protestant trends: ‘Modern Protestantism does not have a monopoly on antinomianism. Various versions of postmodern cultural theory rest on similar assumptions and also lead to condemnations of law and endorsements of spontaneity.’⁴⁴ Indeed, even ‘spontaneity’ itself is seemingly condemned as an aberrant product of the deviation from social and religious normativity.

What I want to pay attention to here, and ultimately insofar as it supports the overall thesis of this essay, is how Reno detects this same antinomian impulse as present even within theological movements that do not recognize such a label, and as he detects them as inherently part of the dynamic that drives an ongoing Protestant Reformation of all structures. In this way, I would suggest, he is correctly attentive to the real issues underlying antinomian thought, though, perhaps, wrong in his diagnosis of the larger problematic, as we will see. Reno is, however, careful to outline exactly how such a situation arose in our western world today, as he suggests that

Luther failed to put an end to the antinomian temptation, and today it seems irresistible. Influential mid-twentieth-century theologians such as Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich translated the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone into an abstract principle that they used to critique and deconstruct all forms of religious authority.⁴⁵

His invective against Bultmann, Tillich, and even the more contemporary philosopher Gianni Vattimo (though a host of other ‘postmodern’ thinkers linger underneath his highly critical words), would seem to be centered on defending the ‘normativity’ of tradition against its disintegration at the hands of ‘postmodern’ theorists, for

44 Reno 2012, 34.

45 *Ibid.*, 34.

whom “It’s a sin to be any-kind-of-normative.”⁴⁶ It is also, presumably, his job then to uphold such normative measures—which would also include the denunciation, in the same article, of transgendered persons as ‘disordered’—all in the defense of a (structurally) genuine faith.

Rather than respond directly to Reno’s claims—something I do not feel would advance the argument very far, for, in his schema, you are either a Christian connected to the genuine faith or a postmodern, antinomian, and potential nihilist cast into the darkness of a lawless world—I want to turn to a more academic exposition of the problem from another *First Things* contributor, Reinhard Hütter, a theologian who also senses perils latent within the fragmentation of our world today.⁴⁷

For Hütter, though sharing a good deal in common on this score with Reno, the legacy of the ‘Protestant antinomian captivity’ that still drifts throughout Christianity today and which has potentially major ‘ecumenical dimensions’ for the Church, is one that needs to be disclosed for what it is and pulled up at the root.⁴⁸ In his estimation, the seduction of modernity’s embrace of the subject’s autonomy has led humanity down the path toward a particular form of ‘freedom’ that ends up more closely resembling nihilism in that it neglects the reality that “True moral autonomy consists in the free submission under and obedience to God’s moral law.”⁴⁹ Hence, the real underlying problem with Christianity today, but also with society if one frames it in such a way, is that its true antinomian flavor is one that neglects the normativity of the moral law within, and the subject suffers as a result.

Hütter’s essential claim is that humanity has sought freedom “only in a very incipient and fundamentally incomplete way,” through its restriction of natural law to reason alone, and this would serve to explain, in due measure, why his account of modernity and freedom must run through a usual list of suspects: Kant, Fichte, and Nietzsche. By framing his critique as a condemnation of such divergent viewpoints as each ‘founder’ of modernity presents us with, his analysis is, in some sense, postured in order to introduce his interpretations of Aquinas and John Paul II’s encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* as those *dei ex machina* which

46 *Ibid.*

47 See, for example, Hütter 2011, 37-41.

48 Hütter 2001, 122.

49 *Ibid.*, 130.

serve to rescue natural law as an innate moral (eternal) law.⁵⁰ As such, the law, whose “paradigmatic example” is Christ, is now capable of performing “a liminal service that protects genuine freedom from being reinterpreted as license and thus from losing the good by itself defining the good and evil and consequently losing itself.”⁵¹

Though Hütter does not take up an account of conscience as a form of natural law or even natural religious sentiment—as John Henry Newman might otherwise have put it, and thus as a natural religious element within all of humanity, whether one recognizes God in it or not—he does drive home the fundamental point of his response to antinomian initiatives within modern Protestant thought, offering his critique with a series of suggestive points addressed directly to his question of whether “genuine human freedom as constituted in Christ can be gravely endangered, deeply distorted, and ultimately destroyed by particular kinds of acts”—though he does not name these acts as such. What he does pronounce, however, is sentence upon this antinomian captivity of Protestantism via his charge that it subverts true freedom and enslaves the soul to a lawless and ignorant wandering from God:

Might it be that contemporary Protestant theology lacks the very conceptuality even to recognize this question as a challenge, since it is bereft of a theology of the law that would complement and shape the inflated and rarely reflected use of the notion of ‘freedom?’ In short, could it be that much of contemporary Protestantism is unable even to acknowledge that there is a challenge because of an antinomianism that has become so thoroughly taken for granted that any awareness—not to mention *critical* self-awareness—of the tacit antinomian commitments, deeply engrained in most of contemporary Protestantism, has been lost?⁵²

The threat of antinomianism, by this count, is really double, because not only is it all pervasive within contemporary Protestantism, but, moreover, it continues to act unimpeded and unrecognized for what it is. Hence, there is much practical deviance to be discerned

50 See also his extended discussion of Aquinas in relation to the moral law in Hütter 2012.

51 Hütter 2001, 135.

52 *Ibid.*, 137.

in the nature of the Protestant Church today behind Hütter's claim of an "antinomian fallacy of a Protestantism without the Law"—*the* fundamentally flawed notion which even Luther himself sought to overcome and which, presumably, has infiltrated every ecclesial structure at some level.

Hütter's argument is repeatedly insistent upon the fact that neither Aquinas, Luther, Melancthon nor Calvin reject the rule of natural law, and that a recovery of such an innate moral law can actually reactivate a cultural and even political landscape, one that 'political liberalism' fails to achieve through its indebtedness to certain forms of 'antinomian Protestantism'.⁵³ Yet, what Hütter's account lacks, I would argue, is its own critical self-awareness of the manner in which certain justifications of natural law are inherently and inextricably linked to forms of sovereign power. Just who determines what is and what is not 'natural?' On what grounds and through what contrasts with other 'unnatural' things? Lest we forget, it was the difficulty of determining any 'natural' theology concretely in history that once led Jürgen Moltmann to define it as "[...] in actual truth *theologia viatorum*, an anticipation of the promised future in history as a result of obedient thinking," and *not* as an originary foundational principle.⁵⁴

Moltmann's subsequent call for a form of 'permanent iconoclasm,' as a sort of ongoing Reformation within the Church in tune with his 'theology of hope', may strike many as a somewhat 'antinomian' principle in-itself.⁵⁵ What it offers us, however, is an opportunity to not get bogged down in quests for more originary 'natural' foundations that do not necessarily exist (or, at least, could never be clearly identified) in reality. Though Hütter's claims are carefully distinguished from modern forms of sovereign ('autonomous') subjectivity—something which he routinely condemns—they do at times resemble a pre-modern, almost medieval, notion of 'sovereign unification' of nature in that they assume the uncontested pre-existence of a normative, natural law. In this sense, Hütter's claims, as with Reno's, I am arguing, share in the modern quest to purify (reason or religion, it matters little which)

53 *Ibid.*, 147.

54 Moltmann 1993a, 90.

55 Moltmann 1993b, 87.

in order to attain legitimacy and political privilege.⁵⁶ This implicit embrace of a pre-modern worldview invokes my hesitation to embrace this particular response to antinomianism in contemporary thought, for it is this response which seems to lack, what I would call, a fuller political theological—or, in Hütter's formulation, critically self-aware—account of those implicit or explicit theological positions that *actually are* utilized in order to re-inscribe certain theological claims within a nexus of (sovereign) political power, ones well invested in trying to achieve political privilege through their 'naturalization' of certain privileged institutions and persons (e.g. defending heterosexual marriage, strict male/female boundaries, etc.). This position, in the end, results in a conservative 'impasse' that pits the truth of 'true freedom' versus the antinomian nihilist, and does nothing to consider the ways in which issues of justice are bound up within such tensions.

What I wish to do next in this section, therefore, is to develop an alternate account of antinomian thought that does not perceive it as an obstacle to be overcome by a more genuine theological account of freedom; that is, one that does not seek to resuscitate a pre-modern form of political power, but, rather, an account that tries to embrace 'antinomianism' as the only way to sustain truly critical thought—what will, perhaps only in appearance, be the 'liberal' alternative. Beyond this, however, what I hope to demonstrate is that even this account, one that approaches the subject from an altogether opposed angle, still at times runs the risk of missing the larger, hermeneutical framework within which antinomian thought operates, and, therefore, might also fail to overcome the same impasse that the first option encountered, though from the other side as it were. By demonstrating this second position alongside the first, however, I am ultimately aiming to try to gain access to another perspective on antinomianism altogether, one focused on the political theological elements *always already at work within* any given theological account of the law, and which are often used to justify political power and/or violent means to access (sovereign) power, though, as I hope to show, these means need not be utilized as such. In order to do this, however, I must first examine what has become, from the other 'liberal' side of things, the second antinomian position in

56 See the critique of such purification temptations in Latour 1993. One could suggest that such a quest is particularly surprising, given that the essay is dedicated to Stanley Hauerwas, an advocate of Christian pacifism, and yet seems uncritically to advocate an adherence to social norms which may be at odds with Hauerwas' position (e.g. the just war traditions put forth by each of the theologians Hütter wishes himself to champion).

contemporary thought that, I believe, does not end in an impasse, but actually opens us up to further options beyond what appears to be a nihilistic end to all law.

**The second antinomian position in contemporary thought:
Permanent reform**

The temptation within certain theological voices today—Reno and Hütter in this instance, but also many others who strive to ‘defend’ theology from both modern and postmodern claims—is to either severely critique or outright dismiss postmodern philosophical theories as hell-bent on undermining the very foundations of Christian freedom as posited in the eternal, intractable moral law within us. A typical ‘liberal’ response to such ‘conservative’ and defensive posturing might then entail a radical openness to the antinomian impulse—something akin to the notorious ‘play of differences’ that postmodern thinkers such as Jacques Derrida appeared to many to revel in.

For quite some time now, commentators on the work of the philosopher Giorgio Agamben have likewise struggled with his various attempts to ‘end’ the violence of representation and his insistence that there is a presentation beyond representation that is truly possible, if only we could learn to return ourselves properly to the ‘pure potentiality’ that resides within us.⁵⁷ His remarks in this particular vein of thought show more than a passing affinity with those reformers who would advocate an end to *all* law. His numerous comments upon the existence of the law and his desire to see the ‘transgression of the law as the only true fulfilment of the law’ have brought him into the company of other potential antinomian, messianic figures. His repeated references to Sabbatai Zevi—the once heralded potential Jewish Messiah whose transgression of the Law, and eventual conversion to Islam—and others who appear to enjoy certain antinomian impulses, does little to avert charges of antinomianism in his thought.⁵⁸

For Agamben, who has claimed to be out-deconstructing the master deconstructivist Derrida, the law exists as something to be cancelled out, or to be put to new, unintended uses that lessen its force,

57 I expand upon these themes a great deal more in Dickinson 2011.

58 On the life and antinomian tendencies of Sabbatai Zevi, see Scholem 1973. See also Taubes’ commentary on Scholem and Sabbatai Zevi in Taubes 2003.

as a child plays with an old passport.⁵⁹ Such gestures are captured, in his opinion, perfectly through the Jewish figure of the Messiah, the one person who was to undo the normative force of the law altogether.⁶⁰ Referencing the incorporation of the messianic concept within Judaism, Christianity and Shiite Islam alike, Agamben demonstrates how each of these traditions understands the Messiah as signifying

[...] the fulfillment and the complete consummation of the Law. In monotheism, messianism thus constitutes not simply one category of religious experience among others but rather the limit concept of religious experience in general, the point in which religious experience passes beyond itself and calls itself into question insofar as it is law (hence the messianic aporias concerning the Law that are expressed in both Paul’s Epistle to the Romans and the Sabbatian doctrine according to which the fulfillment of the Torah is its transgression).⁶¹

Critical questions on this point that are put to Agamben seem to circulate around the same area: is he trying to access a place *beyond* the law? Does he want anarchy to rule? How are we, practically speaking, to take him seriously in this world of contracts and property disputes, etc.? Or, in theological terms, should there be no Church anymore?⁶²

What is often mistaken by a variety of commentators upon Agamben’s work who see in his theoretical vision the dismantling of all law,⁶³ is that Agamben, despite his being fully immersed within the ‘postmodern’ milieu that should condemn him to the outer reaches of nihilistic despair, is actually searching for a way to restore a certain balance to the function of law within our world, to develop a form of ‘perfect antinomianism’ that works from within the existence of law—as, then, inherent to the existence of the law itself in order to develop a new relationship *to* law. Thanos Zartaloudis, for his part, has described this active perspective in Agamben’s work as exactly a form of antinomian thought:

59 See the conclusions reached in Agamben 1993.

60 This theme is pursued throughout Agamben 2005.

61 Agamben 1998, 56. See also, the parallel formulation in Agamben 2000, 134-135.

62 Questions such as these are pursued at length, for example, in the essays gathered in Frost 2013.

63 See, for example, the critique levied in Mills 2008.

Perfect antinomianism is a force *internal to the actuality of the law* [...] though not internal *to* the law, which inverses the latter's effectiveness; it does not preserve the law as it is nor destroy it, nor does it create a new law to replace the old law, but it instead restores law to the sphere of pure means, and renders it free to common use.⁶⁴

The incessant tension between structural forms and an experience beyond those forms—what I have elsewhere looked at in this context as a permanent tension between canonical forms and messianic forces⁶⁵—does not inevitably lead to a complete (*antinomian*) rupture with tradition, but rather develops a hermeneutics, albeit a radicalized one, in response to the tension itself. This, I suggest, is what we hear from Agamben's own lips as he contemplates the existence of the Church in 2009, something which might have appeared as a shock to those who took him as an antinomian:

By placing origin and end in contact with one another, this force endlessly fulfils and ends time. Let us call this force Law or State, dedicated as it is to economy, which is to say, dedicated as it is to the indefinite—and indeed infinite—governance of the world. As for the second force, let us call it messiah, or Church; its economy is the economy of salvation, and by this token is essentially completed. The only way that a community can form and last is if these poles are present and a dialectical tension between them prevails.⁶⁶

Rather than espouse a radicalized, 'one sided' antinomian position, he attempts here, and contrary to those many voices that have sought to present his work as yet another endless deconstructivist play in differences, to preserve the tension between a structure, or law, and its antinomian, messianic force that serves to undo it, precisely in order to maintain the (normative) identity of a community. Though many of his detractors might read his comments on antinomianism otherwise, I think it more fruitful to perceive this act of 'deconstruction' as one that, in the end, upholds our need for social structures and representations, while also finding a space for the 'pure critique' of such structures to

64 Zartaloudis 2010, 300.
65 Dickinson 2013.
66 Agamben 2012, 34-35.

be pursued, which is, as Derrida himself might have put it, the only authentic way for a genuine justice to ever prevail.⁶⁷
What we might also gain from such a reading of Agamben's work is that such a dynamic was, indeed, present in the work of Derrida, who was, perhaps, more inclined to preserve normative, canonical structures than his detractors often realized—a fundamental part of his project to remain ever open to the horizon of justice potentially always before us.⁶⁸ John Caputo, who might be taken as something of an exemplar here in refining this antinomian position—and this is what gets him in trouble with theologians such as John Milbank and presumably a good many more—follows Derrida's lead in describing what he calls a 'religion without religion', what could easily be construed as a form of contemporary antinomian thought, though which may have more going on within it in terms of identity establishment than might be noticed at first glance.⁶⁹

Caputo, maintaining Derrida's insistence that all thought seemingly boils down to the tensions between a given structure (of thought, of politics, of ethics, of religion, etc.) and its inherent desires from within to 'deconstruct' the structure (i.e. its 'autoimmunity' he would say⁷⁰), has attempted to write a theology of the event that plays precisely upon the *structural ambivalence of all identifications* in order to point the way toward a 'radical, creative, and even sacred anarchy' that promises only to both shake our identities to their core and thoroughly transform the structures that be within religion itself—though, for him, this is a task done in response to Christianity, or, more specifically, his own Catholic roots.⁷¹ It is also, however, and from the start, a political project all the way down, as he recognizes that such a reading of religious structures is bound to upset those looking to defend them.

Caputo's version of theology, likely to Hütter's chagrin, "[...] exists in fragments and asides and apostrophes within confessional

67 See, among numerous other references to justice in Derrida's later work, Derrida 1994.
68 I would point to a curious interview with Derrida that is often neglected by his critics in which he explicitly, and repeatedly, defends such normative measures as canonical representations and literary canons in general. See Derrida 1992.
69 See Caputo 1997.
70 See his numerous references to 'autoimmunity' in Derrida 2004.
71 Caputo 2013, 261.

theology,”⁷² It is not a monolithic entity and it does not, as such, need anyone to defend it. Contrary to the position of those more ‘orthodox’ theologians looking to label him as heretical, he feels, such a theology “[...] is testified to every time confessional theologians come under attack as heretics or atheists, whenever they touch a nerve in the powers that be that know their power is being put at risk.”⁷³ Fully recognizing the dilemma he is attempting to address (and in this way sounding a bit like Luther once did), Caputo is not seeking to do away with structure completely—a point well worth underscoring at the moment, for it may offer us a chance to perceive this second position as less of an impasse and more of an opportunity in the end. As he exclaims, the event of being contemporary with Christ, or God (much like Kierkegaard earlier) demands that we continuously reform the structures that be—social, political, religious, or otherwise—though we cannot do away with them altogether: “[...] the creedal structure is weakened in favor of the event while the creedal faith is not simply jettisoned, so one remains in the creedal structure, as if not.”⁷⁴ Repeating Paul’s dictum that we remain in our current social standing ‘as if’ it were not what actually defines us, Caputo is attempting, I would suggest, to illuminate antinomian thought as a *central* and *dynamic* constitutive feature within (religious) identity in general.

From Caputo’s perspective, and as a sort of answer to the apparent aporia we witnessed a moment ago in Agamben’s work, the solution to this ‘impasse’ is not to perceive deconstructionism, or postmodernism for that matter, or antinomianism—whatever these things truly are or *are not*—as a problem to be overcome, but simply as part of a larger, hermeneutical process that, in its entire scope, is seldom comprehended for what it truly is. What I am contending is that we can neither simply dismiss nor fully embrace antinomian thought. Rather, we must learn to utilize it as a symptom of structural injustices that must be listened to as prime indicators for where genuine reform is needed. Though this is a form of ‘radical hermeneutics’, it is not simply a nihilistic or absurd antinomianism: it is dialectical through and through.

72 *Ibid.*, 62.
73 *Ibid.*
74 *Ibid.*, 81.

Conclusions

In some ways, we might perceive antinomianism as the most ancient of heresies, or even blasphemies,⁷⁵ Christianity’s foundational heresy in relation to Judaism’s Law, the reformer’s heresy in protest against the Catholic Church, or as the postmodern challenge to any given normative structure. In this sense, the antinomian challenge is thoroughly political first and foremost, and should be understood as such. As Benjamin Kaplan has pointed out was the case in early modern Europe, heresy and sedition, practically-speaking, went hand-in-hand; toleration, by contrast, was an embarrassing, illegitimate position to hold.⁷⁶ Antinomianism does not diverge from this reading of heresy, but, rather, outlines itself, as read through its history, as a significant feature of it. We might thereby see antinomianism as the heresy that cannot be structurally concretized, and, as such, that which will never be wholly uprooted and removed. For many, however, antinomianism simply remains the specter in the shadows that is feared but rarely understood.

Accusations of antinomian heresy are for this reason often flung out from within such fearful and consequently distorted perspectives. Yet, what are we really to make of these heretical accusations? For, as is typically the case in history, “The spectre of heresy among the people was a disturbing symbol of the unease aroused in the privileged by those on whom their privilege rested so heavily.”⁷⁷ Heresy, as R.I. Moore has recently put it, is an ‘old weapon’ that does “not necessarily describe the beliefs of its targets more accurately.”⁷⁸ Moreover, as he makes clear, those who generally combatted heresy as the chosen social and religious war most effective for propagating the faith, often, in reality, become “[...] adept at convincing themselves and each other that resistance to their authority, and to their noble and sincerely held ideal of Christian unity under the leadership of the church universal, was the work of the devil. The measure of their achievement is that so many still believe it.”⁷⁹

The fear of rampant social and personal moral nihilism among

75 Such is where Leonard W. Levy, for example, places antinomianism in Levy 1981.
76 Kaplan 2007, 124, 143.
77 Moore 2012, 330.
78 *Ibid.*, 273.
79 *Ibid.*, 331.

the mass of individuals within western society is, in many ways, I would suggest, simply the fear of one's own internal antinomian impulses, which is really a fear of oneself, the power, anger and misguided authority that one is capable of wielding. It is also an insecurity with *not*-knowing where one narrative will cease to exist and another will take over, the crossing of boundaries where real reformation does occur, but which is 'good for the system' as well. One can never really embody an antinomian position as it has, by definition, no institutional form. Normative, institutionalized forms are yet all that we live our lives by, in the sense that they provide a shared sense of cultural intelligibility. We often fear, however, the trouble which antinomian thoughts inspire, and, consequently, have little comprehension of what such impulses might do to our reconstruction of normative measures. Within such misdirected historical quests for Christian 'unity,' and especially in light of Christian anti-Semitic positions, the politics of exclusion become manifestly more important than doctrinal divergences, as friends and enemies alike are made upon such borders.

The question to ask at this point is: to what degree does a given tradition allow itself to listen to competing histories and to discern between them as to the merit of each (by their own strengths)? Or, to what degree does a tradition seek to present itself not as an inherently plural discourse in and of itself, but as a monolithic structure undivided from within by its own internal tensions? The strength of a hermeneutical viewpoint on this score would be that it is capable of acknowledging its own fluctuations, pluralities and histories within its self-perspective. That is, the more a given canonical representation allows its own repressed elements to be heard, the more justice it does to them, thus promoting a sense of a 'happy memory.'⁸⁰ As such, this is to envision multiple *histories* within any given tradition as already engaged in a political struggle to articulate themselves, and to affirm that this is how things should be, rather than trying to achieve a singular, static representation of History. Such a schema means being attentive to the 'weak messianic forces' working within a given tradition, often *mistaken* as antinomian thoughts, but waiting to be seen at the precise moment when they are in need of being seen—therefore also as 'dangerous memories' in Johann Baptist Metz's sense of the term.⁸¹

80 On the concept of 'happy memory,' see Ricoeur 2004.

81 Metz 2007.

Maybe what we are in need of is what Shaul Magid, in the context of exploring certain strands of Jewish antinomianism—which share a certain affinity with Agamben's reading of Sabbati Zevi—refers to as a 'dialectic of heresy,' or "the very thing that enables a tradition to survive by expanding the boundaries of legitimacy in order to push the tradition towards its redemptive end."⁸² What Magid identifies, and here merely bears repeating, is a task "[...] to legitimate and even sanctify the tension of living simultaneously inside and outside the law," or that which would see antinomianism as an ally rather than an enemy in the never-ending quest for justice.⁸³

My efforts in this essay are not aimed at repeating the errors perhaps latent in Heidegger's alleged antinomianism—something no doubt bound up with his anti-Jewish positions and that might be said to have been motivated by his effacing of the Hebraic tradition altogether from his thought⁸⁴—but in returning, you might say, to Christianity *as a form of Judaism itself*, as that which arises from within its Hebraic heritage, and which, if it is to be true to itself, must in some sense return to its roots time and again. What we are trying to move toward is a theological and philosophical reading of history and the forces that work from within it to undo it, not in order to identify and defuse their apparent threat, but to see them for what they can be for us, their value and also their beauty. Rather than portray antinomianism as a threat to the system which needs to be removed, we can see it as a 'weak messianic force' moving through all constituted (religious) identities, not as the end of 'Christianity' as an organized religion, but its 'original' proclamation, ever in need of greater reformation, and, indeed, not even limited to Christianity either, though this has been my focal point in this essay. Yet we might also label this the true 'poverty' of Christian thought, its weakness that is foolishness to the strength of this world, but is, in actuality, also the strength of its 'crucified' God.

82 Magid 2003, 254.

83 *Ibid.*, 206.

84 On this, see Zarader 2006.

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Revisiting a Marxist Encounter with Spinoza: Alexandre Matheron on Militant Reason and Intellectual Love of God

Ted Stolze

Abstract:

Anglophone Marxists have scarcely engaged with the work of the French philosopher Alexandre Matheron, whose 1969 book *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* is widely regarded as a landmark of Spinoza scholarship. Yet Matheron's book is also a sustained Marxist intervention into the history of philosophy. As a result, this article addresses the theological-political value of Matheron's scholarship on Spinoza for contemporary Marxist theory and practice.

Keywords: Alexandre Matheron, Spinoza, Marxist reception of Spinoza, Theological-political implications of love

"The contemporary proletariat is Spinoza's only genuine heir."
—A.M. Deborin

In the introductory remarks to what he had intended in 1972 to be a course on "Spinoza's conception of right and politics," Louis Althusser apologized and announced that he would lecture instead on Jean-Jacques Rousseau. This was because, Althusser explained, Alexandre Matheron's book *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* [Individual and Community in Spinoza] had been recently published (in 1969), and he could hardly add anything to what Matheron had already written.¹ Yet over forty years later, Anglophone Marxists have scarcely engaged with Matheron or his major work, which is widely regarded as one of the landmarks of Spinoza scholarship.

Such neglect has doubtless largely persisted because Matheron's massive book (647 pages in French) remains to be translated into English.² Although the book continues to be duly—but selectively—referenced by Spinoza scholars, it has yet to be studied carefully and fully appreciated as a sustained Marxist intervention into the history of philosophy. To be precise, Matheron was deeply influenced by the early Marx and sought to apply Marx's concepts of alienation and ideology in order to understand Spinoza. Moreover, he reconstructed Spinoza's political thought along lines that owed much to Jean-Paul Sartre's

¹ Althusser 2012, p. 45.

² An equally massive (741 pages) collection of his articles on Spinoza and seventeenth-century philosophy has subsequently appeared. See Matheron 2011.

account of collective action in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.³ For example, he proposed an “analogy between the Sartrean problematic of the passage from series to group and the classical problematic of the passage from the state of nature to the civil state.”⁴

But for Antonio Negri, such influences were highly problematic. In *The Savage Anomaly*, his own great book on Spinoza, Negri observed that Matheron had introduced into the study of Spinoza “dialectical or paradialectical schemes, characteristics of the existentialist Marxism of the 1960s” but then complained that Matheron had substituted for Spinoza’s “constructive continuity” a “determinate dynamism fueled by a process of alienation and recomposition.”⁵ Let us take Negri’s complaint as a provocation and point of departure for engaging in a close reading of *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* and reassessing the value of Matheron’s project for contemporary Marxist theory and practice.

Matheron’s approach to the history of philosophy has not been narrowly historicist. For example, although Matheron has carefully considered the historical background to Spinoza’s philosophy, he has chiefly reconstructed the development of Spinoza’s philosophy in its own terms as a complex system of thought and has rarely quoted directly from Spinoza’s writings or situated his own interpretation in relation to other commentators.⁶ Ariel Suhamy offers a striking analogy: just as Lucretius sought to convey the essence of Epicurus’ philosophy in poetic form, so too has Matheron sought to read Spinoza so meticulously that even if the latter’s works “were to disappear from the Earth,” his argumentative reconstruction could nonetheless replace them!⁷

But what is the value for Marxists to encounter Matheron’s reconstruction of Spinoza’s philosophical system? It is not to envision

3 Sartre 2004.

4 Matheron 1988, p. 201n.385. See also Matheron 1971, p. 24-5 for a brief but intriguing application of Sartre’s concept of “fraternity-terror” in order to characterize the affective dynamics of ancient Israelite theocracy. For more on the affinities between Spinoza and Sartre, see Rizk 1996.

5 Negri 1991.

6 In these respects, Matheron has made common cause with Martial Gueroult and Gilles Deleuze, whose own important books on Spinoza appeared at nearly the same time as Matheron’s. See Suhamy 2011 and Vinciguerra 2009.

7 Suhamy 2011.

Spinoza as a kind of “precursor” to Marx but to approach Marx himself as a “successor” to problems that were already raised by Spinoza.⁸ Indeed, Pierre-François Moreau observes that Matheron has been interested less in formulating a “Marxist explanation of Spinozism” than in “posing to Spinoza the questions that Marx posed to himself,” for example, “how do individuals enter into relations among themselves—and at what cost”? This latter question, Moreau observes, demanded in the seventeenth-century that a philosopher defend a “theory of the passions.”⁹ What I would like to do in this article is to contribute to a Marxist theory of the passions by exploring the question of the transindividual pursuit of collective action—but perhaps in an unexpected way for Marxists.

I shall focus on Matheron’s warm embrace of Spinoza’s conceptions of eternity and the “Intellectual Love of God” as laid out in part 5 of the *Ethics*, that part which especially Anglophone Spinoza commentators have ignored, ridiculed, or quickly passed over in embarrassment along the way to their own reconstructions or evaluations of Spinoza’s political thought.¹⁰ For his part, Matheron has admitted that he once had a tendency to think that “Spinozist eternity prefigured the life of a militant, which seemed . . . to be the best example of the adequation of our existence to our essence.”¹¹ I share that tendency, even though obviously Spinoza himself never said anything explicitly along these lines.¹² Yet—as successors to Spinoza—Marxists today can and should consider part 5 of the *Ethics* to culminate the adventure of “militant reason”¹³ recounted in the *Ethics*: from the very constitution and composition of individuals to their being estranged from their own mental powers to understand and physical powers to act through the impact of such reactive forces as superstition and sad passions, to the countervailing influence of active affects, to the precarious enlargement of reason; from the level of duration to the

8 Matheron 2000, p. 176.

9 Matheron 2011, p. 7.

10 See Jonathan Bennett’s cavalier dismissal of what he calls Spinoza’s “unmitigated and seemingly unmotivated disaster” in his discussion of eternity (Bennett 1984, p. 357).

11 Matheron 2000, p. 175. Matheron suggests that his perspective was only a passing phase of youthful enthusiasm, whereas I take up the challenge to make good on an unfulfilled promise.

12 But, as Matheron frequently notes, “he could have.” See Vinciguerra 2009, p. 435n. 32.

13 Pautrat 2013, p. 22.

level of eternity; from individual liberation to the prospect of collective emancipation.

Part 5 of the *Ethics* consists of two main sections or argumentative “movements”: propositions 1-20 and propositions 21-40.¹⁴ The first movement concerns the attempt to discover “remedies for the affects” (*affectuum remedia*)¹⁵ and culminates (in propositions 14-20) with a discussion of “love toward God” (*amor erga Deum*). The second movement concerns the pursuit of the highest human happiness and culminates (in propositions 32-37) with an account of the “intellectual love of God” (*amor intellectualis Dei*). Spinoza’s distinction between these two kinds of love not only lies at the heart of part 5 but also serves as the highest expression of the emancipatory project detailed in the *Ethics* as a whole. However, before launching into a full investigation of the political stakes involved in this distinction, we should briefly consider the nature and dynamics of each kind of love.

This requires that we return for a moment to Spinoza’s treatment of love in part 3, in which love is defined as “joy accompanied by the idea of an external cause.”¹⁶ Here, of course, Spinoza is concerned with love for a finite object or person. Such passionate love has at least three distinctive features. First of all, it can become partially contaminated with hatred¹⁷ or even fully replaced by hatred.¹⁸ Secondly, it requires some degree of reciprocity by others;¹⁹ in fact, too little reciprocity will typically unleash the pathology of jealousy and result in loathing for

14 Moreau 1994b, p. 55. Propositions 41-42 return to what Macherey 1994, pp. 192-204 has called “an ethics of everyday life” through which, in the face of actually existing non-perfected societies, one might nonetheless strive to lead an honest and generous life and thereby help to eradicate the causes of human servitude.

15 E5p20. All references to Spinoza’s *Ethica* are based on Spinoza 1996. However, I have frequently retranslated passages from Spinoza’s Latin text, the standard edition of which may be found in Spinoza 1925. I have also adopted the following conventional abbreviations: “p” indicates a proposition, “c” indicates a corollary, “d” indicates definition, “s” indicates a scholium, and “def aff” indicates the definitions of the affects to be found at the end of part 3 (e.g., E3p59s refers to *Ethics*, part 3, proposition 59, scholium.)

16 E3p13s, def aff 6.

17 E3p17.

18 E3p38.

19 E3p33.

what was previously loved.²⁰ Finally, love for a finite object or person can be destroyed by a contrary and more powerful affect.²¹ Yet this does not mean that one’s body itself will be destroyed, for the same individual can “successively pass through several contrary passions,” and from one moment to the next “the most powerful or the most lively” passion will replace the previously dominant passion.²² In summary, we can say that the love of finite objects is “precarious”: it is both highly variable and inconstant.²³

By way of contrast, love toward God manifests the highest degree of constancy possible under duration. Feature by feature, we can distinguish between love having a finite external cause and love having an (absolutely) infinite external cause. Firstly, love toward God cannot turn into hatred, since this would require that one both know something and be passive, and thus feel not joy but “sadness accompanied by the idea of God.”²⁴ Secondly, there can be no question of reciprocity in such love, since God cannot be affected by anything human beings do.²⁵ For this reason, Spinoza argues, “neither envy nor jealousy can taint this love toward God; instead, the more human beings we imagine to be joined to God by the same bond of love, the more it is encouraged. Finally, love toward God cannot be destroyed by a contrary or more powerful affect but can only cease when the body dies. As Spinoza summarizes, “there is no affect that is directly contrary to this love and by which it can be destroyed. So we can conclude that this love is the most constant of all the affects, and insofar as it is related to the body (*quatenus ad corpus refertur*), cannot be destroyed, unless it is destroyed with the body itself.”²⁶

In the second half of part 5 Spinoza shifts direction to consider “those things which pertain to the mind’s duration without relation

20 One can see this process at work politically in Spinoza’s analysis of the multitude’s “indignation” against corrupt rulers (Matheron 2011, pp. 219-29 and Stolze 2009, pp. 151-56), the desire for private property (Matheron 2011, pp. 253-66, and the rationale for excluding servants and women from citizenship (Matheron 2011, pp. 267-304).

21 E4a1.

22 Moreau 1994b, 56.

23 Moreau 1994b, 56.

24 E5p18, c.

25 E5p17c.

26 E5p20s.

to the body (*sine relatione ad corporis*).²⁷ He sets forth and defends a conception of the intellectual love of God that goes beyond the constancy evident in love toward God. This is because, as we have just seen, love toward God still occurs on the level of duration and involves conceiving of God as the causal principle of bodily affections of images or things.²⁸ The intellectual love of God, by contrast, requires that one develop the so-called “third kind of knowledge” (*tertium cognitionis genus*) and, through a process of abstraction, focus exclusively on what constitutes the “eternal part” of love toward God.²⁹ Consequently, God is no longer conceived as the causal principle of the images of things affecting one’s body but has become the orienting principle of how one can come to know the body and mind “from the perspective of eternity” (*sub specie aeternitatis*).³⁰

Two of the three chief features of love toward God are “extended” by the intellectual love of God.³¹ As was true of love toward God, the intellectual love of God cannot be tainted or undermined by hatred. More strikingly, though, the intellectual love of God cannot even be destroyed by the death of one’s body.

Yet there is a crucial difference between these two kinds of love. Whereas love toward God is not reciprocal, the intellectual love of God is indeed reciprocal—albeit in a way unlike love for finite things. That is to say, God is capable of an intellectual love of both human beings and himself.³² As I shall argue below, it is precisely the return of such reciprocity of love—no longer at the level of duration but at the level of eternity—that allows for the possibility of collective life beyond the need for an *imperium* (Spinoza’s term for “state” or “state apparatus”).³³

Consider now a 1664 letter in which Spinoza consoled his distraught friend Pieter Balling on the recent illness and death of the

27 E5p20s.
28 See E5pp14-15.
29 See Matheron 2011, pp. 707-25.
30 E5p30.
31 Moreau 1994b, 58.
32 E5pp35-36.
33 See Moreau 1985.

latter’s young son.³⁴ Spinoza’s letter largely concerns the extent to which the imagination can in a confused way generate an omen of a future event—in this case Balling’s premonition of his child’s death. However, toward the end of the letter Spinoza also discusses the question of the extent to which one’s love for another can bind two individuals:

To take an example like yours, a father so loves his son that he and his beloved son are, as it were, one and the same. According to what I have demonstrated on another occasion, there must be in thought an idea of the son’s essence, its affections, and its consequences. Because of this, and because the father, by the union he has with his son, is part of the said son, the father’s mind must necessarily participate in the son’s ideal essence, its affections, and consequences.

Spinoza contends that, as a result of his love for his son, a father can in some sense become part of his son, as his mind comes to “participate” in the latter’s “ideal essence, its affections, and consequences.” To say the least, it is not clear what Spinoza means by such “participation” of the father’s mind in his son’s essence. Balling or any other father could hardly have what Spinoza calls knowledge of the third kind of his son’s essence. It would seem that at most one’s love for another could be based on either knowledge of the first or second kind. But neither can Spinoza mean the affective imitation associated with love he discusses in part 3 of the *Ethics*,³⁵ since affective imitation allows separation between two persons to persist. On the level of duration, the father’s mind only perceives his son through the ideas of the affections the latter has generated in his body. Spinoza possibly intends something intermediary between these two kinds of identification, which would permit an eventual transition from one to the other. This possibility cannot be ruled out, since Spinoza writes a few lines earlier in his letter that the mind “can confusedly be aware, beforehand, of something that is future.”

For Spinoza passional joys have as their “eternal condition of possibility” an “unconscious” or “barely conscious,” beatitude.³⁶

34 L17. See Matheron 1988, pp. 599-600. On Spinoza’s relationship with Balling, and on this personal tragedy (the result of an outbreak of the plague in Amsterdam during the years 1663-64), see Nadler 1999, pp. 169, 212-13.
35 See E3pp19-26.
36 Matheron 1988, p. 600.

Likewise, one's passional identification with others has as its eternal condition of possibility an implicit intellectual communion among the eternal parts of all our minds. Thus, the intellectual communion established by the third kind of knowledge only makes explicit the eternal foundation already implicit in every form of interpersonal love.³⁷ We might say that access to eternal life realizes for human beings that toward which they have never ceased to strive. Throughout passional individual and collective life (whose travails Spinoza recounts in parts 3 and 4 of the *Ethics*) human beings endeavor as much as possible to agree with other human beings, not out of mere pursuit of self-interest but in order to rejoice in others' love and thereby to love themselves better. Next, at the level of reasonable individual and collective life, human beings come to desire to communicate their knowledge with other human beings in order to share their joy in knowing. But this is still only an abstract truth. They have to grasp that this activity leads them toward an interpenetration of individual minds through the mediation of God's love. Lastly, Matheron notes,

after having moved from the level of duration to eternity itself, we assimilate ourselves to other human beings regarding what is singular in us: without ceasing to be ourselves, we coincide with them; their beatitude *is* ours. This would result in a complete transparency that, while suppressing alterity without abolishing ipseity, offers us at last, in its finished form, the glory to which we have always aspired."³⁸

On the level of duration my love toward God will indeed cease when I die and my body decomposes.³⁹ However, not even death can destroy my intellectual love of God,⁴⁰ for it belongs to the nature of my mind insofar as the latter is the eternally true idea of the singular essence of my body. For Spinoza no true idea can ever become false; its truth persists within God's eternal and infinite Intellect.

Finally, let us consider the nature of what Matheron has termed

37 In this sense, too, as Deleuze (1998, p. 30) remarks, "Book V must be conceived as coextensive with all the others; we have the impression of arriving at it, but it was there all the time, for all time."

38 Matheron 1988, p. 601.

39 E5p20s.

40 E5p37.

"collective eternal life." In a note to E5p40 Spinoza concludes his discussion of the intellectual love of God by alluding to the interpersonal relations that are now possible between a "wise person" and other human beings. He writes that

These are the things I have decided to show concerning the mind, insofar as it is considered without relation to the body's existence. From then . . . it is clear that our mind, insofar as it understands, is an eternal mode of thinking, which is determined by another eternal mode of thinking, and this again by another, and so on, to infinity; so that together, they all constitute God's eternal and infinite Intellect.⁴¹

As Matheron has argued, Spinoza makes three claims in this note.⁴² First of all, he argues that the mind, insofar as it understands, is an eternal mode of thought. This is another way of saying that to the extent that one has clear and distinct ideas, one's mind coincides with the eternal idea by which God, as manifested through the attribute of thought, conceives of the essence of one's body from the perspective of eternity.

Spinoza's second claim, however, is that this eternal mode cannot be actualized by itself. Its eternity follows from the fact that it exists simply because God exists, independent of every influence of fortune. But, as E1p21 shows, to which Spinoza refers here, the existence of this eternal mode does not derive from the absolute nature of God; otherwise, it would be infinite. If God—simply because of God's existence—forms the idea of the eternal essence of my body, it is because at the same time God forms eternal ideas of the essences of others' bodies. As a result, each finite eternal mode can exist only in relation to other finite modes.

Spinoza's third claim is that the horizontal order of causal interaction among modes is grounded in a vertical order of divine causal determination. Just as all corporeal essences are logically realizable combinations of motion and rest, so too are the ideas of these essences actually realized consequences of the eternal Idea by means of which God thinks himself.⁴³ This is why every idea can be said to incorporate

41 E5p40s.

42 Matheron 1988, pp. 609-10.

43 E3p3.

all others, since they derive from the same principle that permits them to communicate with the eternal Idea of God.

The ontological interconnection of these ideas, then, does not exclude their logical independence but, on the contrary, presupposes it. God directly conceives of every singular essence without the mediation of other singular essences. But insofar as God's knowledge of each singular essence refers to the knowledge of their common foundation—which itself refers to the knowledge of all other singular essences—God cannot conceive of a given singular essence without immediately conceiving of all other singular essences. It is because God conceives of all singular essences collectively that at the same time God conceives of the horizontal order according to which they are mutually determined to exist and operate. Thus, the eternal finite modes of the attribute of thought interpenetrate but do not become identical. They mutually imply one another through the mediation of their unique source in God, mutually condition each other through the mediation of this mutual implication, and together wind up forming a single Idea: God's eternal and infinite Intellect. However, contrary to what Spinoza's detractors often assume, this does not mean that in part 5 he is advocating a kind of mysticism.⁴⁴ At most we should say that he engages in a non-mystical use of certain mystical intellectual influences.⁴⁵

Essentially, Spinoza is arguing for an indefinite enlargement of collective beatitude or what we could call a “politics of the third kind.” A wise person is able to form a “community of minds” not only with a small number of privileged individuals but potentially with all of humanity. Indeed, such a community of all minds has always already existed *in itself*; this community-to-come only needs to be revealed to each of its members and thereby to be realized *for itself*. This requires the recomposition of finite modes and the establishment enhanced communication among individuals.⁴⁶ It is worth noting that for Spinoza a community of wise persons would not be “simpler” than societies

44 Moreau 1994a, 287-93 offers a compelling argument that for Spinoza the experience of eternity is not mystical. For a contrary assessment, see Wetlesen 1977; 1979.

45 One might identify at least three such mystical influences: (a) the Kabbalistic school of Isaac Luria, to which Spinoza's Hebrew teacher Menasseh ben Israel belonged; (b) the esoteric writings of Giordano Bruno, with which Spinoza's Latin tutor Franciscus van den Enden was probably familiar; (c) the ideas of the radical collegiant communities with whose members Spinoza associated from the time of his banishment from the Amsterdam synagogue until the end of his life.

46 On the importance of communication in Spinoza's philosophy and political thought, see Balibar 1989, esp. pp. 18-19, 41-42; 2008, pp. 113-18; and Suhamy 2010.

with *imperia* but would embody complex social-political institutions and would promote robust democratic debate.

Perhaps such a community-to-come will never be fully realized, but for the wise person it nonetheless serves as an immanent norm or what Matheron has called “a regulative Idea in the Kantian sense.”⁴⁷ To the extent that human minds know themselves to be identical to the ideas through which God conceives of their respective bodies, they can acquire at least a partial awareness of their union within the eternal and infinite Intellect. Consequently, as Matheron writes, a wise person strives as much as possible to enlighten other human beings; his or her objective is to insure that “as many minds as possible eternalize themselves as much as possible by enlightening themselves as much as possible.”⁴⁸ Just as a wise person seeks to increase indefinitely the eternal part of his or her mind, so too should he or she seek to increase indefinitely the eternal part of everyone else's mind. Of course, the success of this project requires that certain external conditions continue to be satisfied.⁴⁹ As Spinoza writes in E4p40, “things that are conducive to the common society of human beings, that is, bring it about that human beings live harmoniously, are useful; those, on the other hand, are evil that bring discord to the commonwealth.”

Consequently, a wise person would extend around himself or herself a realm of social peace and friendship, in compliance with Spinoza's recommendations at the end of part 4 concerning the free human being's temperament and way of life: avoiding unnecessary

47 Matheron 1988, p. 612n.95. Here Negri's anti-Kantian emphasis on “constitution” in Spinoza's philosophy is well taken. As Negri puts it, “The world is clay in the hands of the potter. On the metaphysical terrain of surfaces the modality is constructive. The order of the construction is within constitution. Necessity is within freedom. Politics is the fabric on which constitutive human activity principally unfolds” (Negri 1991, p. 186). Since human bodies and minds are capable of acting and perceiving the world in “a great many ways” (E2p14,d), we must avoid speculating in advance about what a given “concatenation” (E5p10) of human bodies and minds could or could not do. Indeed, it remains an ontologically—and so politically—open question whether or not such a “multitude” could construct and preserve an egalitarian community of freely associated individuals.

Although he is an unlikely bedfellow of either Spinoza or Negri, on this point Slavoj Žižek would seem to agree. Reclaiming Marx and Engels' perspective in the *German Ideology*, Žižek insists that communism is not a Kantian “regulative Idea” establishing an a priori ideal, norm, or boundary; rather, communism signifies “a movement which reacts to actual social antagonisms” and then surpasses them (Žižek 2010, p. 211).

48 Matheron 1988, p. 611.

49 For example, famine, epidemic, war, technological collapse, or ecological disaster would, to varying degrees, obstruct the realization of Spinoza's political project and place it historically off the agenda.

dangers,⁵⁰ declining others' favors,⁵¹ showing gratitude,⁵² acting honestly,⁵³ and obeying (legitimate) civil laws.⁵⁴ In sum, a wise person would strive as much as possible "to act well and rejoice."⁵⁵

Yet Spinoza does not claim that the power of militant reason to restrain and moderate the passions and convert them into active affects is unlimited. On the contrary, in his preface to part 5 he distances himself from Stoic and Cartesian exaggerated claims about the ability of the mind to "acquire an absolute command (*imperium absolutum*) over our passions" through force of will alone. At any rate, as Spinoza argues in E5p42s, a wise person is undoubtedly capable of doing more and is "much more powerful than one who is ignorant and is agitated only by lust (*qui sola libidine agitur*)."⁵⁶ Indeed, an ignorant person is "agitated in many ways by external causes, and unable ever to possess true serenity of spirit (*vera animi acquiescentia*)," whereas a wise person "insofar as [he or she] is considered as such (*quatenus ut talis consideratur*), [is] hardly troubled in spirit . . . but always possesses true serenity of spirit (*vera animi acquiescentia*)."⁵⁷ It is worth highlighting Spinoza's qualifying phrase "insofar as [he or she is] considered as such" (*quatenus ut talis consideratur*), which reminds us that no human being can attain a condition of self-mastery in accordance with which he or she could establish a personal *imperium in imperio*, and permanently restrain the power of fortune from disrupting the stability of his or her life. All human beings remain a part of nature, and to a greater or lesser extent are acted on by forces beyond their control—forces that give rise, in turn, to the fluctuation of affections and affects. Wisdom only exists as a matter of degree.

Although a wise person would experience less mental agitation and greater calm than an ignorant person, Spinoza does not envision that he or she would or could pursue a quiet retreat "far from the

50 E4p69.

51 E4p70.

52 E4P71.

53 E4P72.

54 E4P73. No doubt the legitimacy of specific civil laws has historically always been contested; but arguably there is a greater likelihood that laws fashioned by and within a well-ordered democratic republic are *more likely* to be obeyed. Oppressive regimes, by contrast, tend to generate what Spinoza calls the passion of "indignation" (on the logic of which see Matheron 2011, pp. 219-29; Stolze 2009, pp. 151-56).

55 E4P73s.

madding crowd." Serenity has nothing to do with contemplation or isolation but instead implies a continued active engagement in the passionate life of human beings.⁵⁶ Although, as Roger-Pol Droit observes, to a certain extent Spinoza revives here an ancient figure of the "sage," his perspective is solidly grounded in modernity; for he envisioned "no renunciation of the world, no separation from life, the body, or matter." On the contrary: sages would live in "the fullness of the world."⁵⁷

As a result, politics rooted in knowledge of the third kind would not be abstract and formal but would be qualitative, concrete, and concern the order of everyday existence. As a result, persons who had cultivated the affect of serenity would strive to extricate themselves from fear of failure and death and to understand that freedom is a constant struggle whose path is arduous: along the way victories are invariably mixed with defeats. A serene militant would not only persist in his or her desire for socio-political transformation over the long run but in the very midst of social upheaval would also seek to adopt, and sustain, a perspective of eternity.

However, as Matheron contends, a wise person is involved in a "much vaster meta-historical venture"⁵⁸ than even a free human being living under the external authority of an *imperium*. Beyond the various kinds and forms of *imperium*, beyond the transitional stage of an external collective life based on reason, a wise person does all that he or she can to establish an internal "communism of minds," to deepen and enrich the struggle for, and transition to, an egalitarian society of freely

56 Del Lucchese 2009, p. 164.

57 Droit 2009, pp. 120-21.

58 Matheron 1988, p. 612.

associated individuals.⁵⁹ Indeed, for Matheron Spinoza's ethical-political project has as its ultimate goal

to enable all of Humanity to exist as a totality conscious of itself, a microcosm of the infinite Understanding, in the heart of which every soul, although remaining itself, would at the same time become all the others. This is an eschatological perspective, which would be somewhat analogous to certain Kabbalists, if the final outcome were not in Spinoza pushed back to infinity: this result will never actually be attained; but at least we can always approach it. Thus we shall wind up at a partial solution to the ontological drama at the origin of the human drama: infinite Understanding, separated from itself by the necessity in which it finds itself to think the modes of Extension in their existence *hic et nunc* [here and now], will all the better overcome this separation as Humanity more and more reconciles itself with itself.⁶⁰

What is more, Matheron cites the Soviet philosopher A.M. Deborin, who insisted early in the twentieth century that a "communism of minds" implies a "communism of goods."⁶¹ Indeed, Spinoza envisioned a "complete satisfaction to our individual and interhuman conatuses: surpassing all alienations and divergences; an actualization of the I in the most complete lucidity, an actualization of the We in the most complete of communions."⁶² The result would be a "complete and definitive individual liberation in a community without restriction."⁶³ Moreover, such a community would have no need of juridical laws or

59 "Freely associated" does not mean a fleeting convergence of individual interests or affective ties but instead a nexus of non-coercive relations among maximally reasoning individuals. For Spinoza every human being is free only insofar as he or she "has the power to exist and operate in accordance with the laws of human nature (*postestam habet existendi et operandi secundum humanae naturae leges*)."⁶⁰ Moreover, to the extent that a human being "exists from the necessity of his or her own nature, so too he or she acts from the necessity of his or her own nature; that is, he or she acts absolutely freely (*libere absolute agit*)" (TP 2/7). Finally, if a multitude of human beings were indeed to exercise absolute political freedom, then each individual would no longer be subject to another's power and would be able to live "absolutely, insofar as one can live in accordance with his or her own complexion (*absolute quatenus ex suo ingenio vivere potest*)" (TP 2/9). References above to Spinoza's *Tractatus Politicus* (TP) are based on Spinoza 2000. However, I have frequently retranslated passages from Spinoza's Latin text, the standard edition of which may be found in Spinoza 2005. I have adopted the following conventional abbreviation: "TP 2/13," for example, indicates chapter two, section 13.

60 Matheron 1988, pp. 612-13.

61 Deborin 1952, pp. 115-16.

62 Matheron 1988, p. 613.

63 Matheron 1988, p. 613.

institutional constraints based on violence; the *imperium* would "wither away" after having fulfilled the conditions of its own usefulness.⁶⁴

Let us conclude this estimation of the theological-political value of Matheron's scholarship on Spinoza for contemporary Marxist theory and practice. Laurent Bove has noted that between Matheron and Spinoza "something happens."⁶⁵ Not least of what happens, we have seen, is a revitalization of the ethical-political immanent norm of a classless society, a compelling exemplar⁶⁶ of the serene militant, and a stark reminder of the rare, difficult, but excellent path ahead.⁶⁷ Perhaps more than ever, that path beckons.

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64 Compare Spinoza's similar speculation in chapter five of his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (Spinoza 2007). Joseph Almog rightly characterizes Spinoza's position that human social-political organizations arise not by accident or through contracts "against Nature" but simply as a result of "Nature taking its course" (Almog 2014, pp. 63-87). However, he wrongly describes such organizations as so many variations on the "state." For Spinoza, it is possible to envision—but admittedly difficult to realize in practice—a "non-state" (or "post-state") that would require not the return to a simpler, pre-social "state of nature" but instead arduous political struggles and the construction of a more complex—and hence more powerful (E4pp35-37; TP 2/13)—form of social-political organization.

65 Bove 2011.

66 See E4pref for Spinoza's conception of exemplars in general and human exemplars in specific.

67 As Spinoza concludes the *Ethics*, "If the way I have shown to lead to these things now seems very hard, still, it can be found. And of course, what is found so rarely must be hard. For if salvation were at hand, and could be found without great effort, how could nearly everyone neglect it? But all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare" (E5p42s).

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Political Theology and Comedy: Žižek through Rose Tinted Glasses

Marcus Pound

Abstract:

This paper defends the centrality of comedy as paradigmatic of political theology by reading the project of Slavoj Žižek through the lens of the late British philosopher Gillian Rose. I begin by exploring Rose's recovery of Hegel as means to make good on Marxist social critique with particular reference to her non-foundational or 'speculative reading' of Hegel. I then explore the degree to which her work stands in advance of Žižek's project, arguing that it is her work that makes his project possible in the first place. I turn next to the reception of Hegel and comedy, and in particular the place Rose awards comedy in Hegel's work, before exploring the central differences between Rose and Žižek's work: law verses the symbolic, and the respective shapes of their political theology. Returning to Rose's remarks on comedy *qua* law I ask in the final analysis: how should we understand the relationship between political theology and comedy? Rose I suggest offers a coherent alternative to Žižek whilst retaining nonetheless the commitment to Hegelian-Marxist social theory.

Key words: Žižek, Gillian Rose, Hegel, Comedy, Political Theology

Comedy has long served as a political virtue, not least in the form of satire. To draw upon Grigoris Sifakis, under the shield of democratic rule and freedom of speech satire is able to direct its arrow, away from private adversarial combat, and toward the public figure, a feature which deems it a democratic responsibility and public service.¹ With this in mind one might applaud the recent edited collection *Žižek's Jokes: Did you hear the one about Hegel and negation?* Yet arguably this work has stretched the patience of some critical reviewers: As Robert Eaglestone has argued (while nonetheless giving credence to Žižek's earlier work as 'full of insight and intellectual synthesis') 'the publisher's phrase is that many of the jokes are 'nicely vulgar'. In my view this means that lots of the so-called jokes are just plain racist or anti-Semitic, many are pretty sexist, and some are downright misogynistic.' Žižek is accused of 'lazy academic prose, very questionable 'jokes' and wearing a jester's hat for the intellectual bourgeoisie [which] probably isn't how the revolution will happen.'²

1 Sifakis 2006, p. 23.

2 Eaglestone 2014.

At the back of this lies the charge that philosophy is being bought into disrepute. As Todd McGowen puts it: 'a general lack of seriousness predominates across the spectrum of theorizing today.'³ However, in defence McGowen has argued: 'One dimension of Žižek's seriousness is his commitment to the joke. Žižek's focus on jokes is important not because it indicates his own pathological need to be considered funny—it might or it might not—but because it testifies to his refusal to relegate comedy to a position external to theory. He jokes seriously.'⁴ And 'Only in theoretical seriousness does the possibility exist for us to give up the quest for a truth based on knowledge and to embrace a truth of non-knowledge [non-All] that structures our being. But first we must recognize that the path to seriousness is strewn with jokes.'⁵

In what follows I wish also to defend more generally the centrality of comedy as a theo-political virtue, but doing so by reading Žižek through the lens of Gillian Rose. Rose is by no means an arbitrary choice. As I further wish to argue, her non-foundational reading of Hegel paved the way for Žižek's work⁶ and many of her criticisms of postmodernism serve in advance of Žižek's; in particular the critical relation between comedy, politics, and theology. This affords us the possibility to gain a further critical standpoint on Žižek's work within a shared framework of thought.

I begin by exploring Rose's recovery of Hegel as means to make good on Marxist social critique with particular reference to her non-foundational or 'speculative reading' of Hegel. I then explore the degree to which her work stands in advance of Žižek's project, arguing that it is her work that makes his project possible in the first place. I turn next to the reception of Hegel and comedy, and in particular the place Rose awards comedy in Hegel's work before exploring the central differences between Rose and Žižek's work: law versus the symbolic, and the respective shapes of their political theology. Returning to Rose's remarks on comedy *qua* law I ask in the final analysis: how should we understand the relationship between political theology and comedy? Rose I suggest offers a coherent alternative to Žižek whilst retaining

3 Gowan 2007, p. 58.

4 Gowan 2007, p. 66.

5 Gowan 2007, p. 66.

6 More recently, at the Conference Žižek in response to a question about the significance of Gillian Rose's thought affirmed the 'Broken Middle' as a key critical category.

nonetheless the commitment to Hegelian-Marxist social theory.

Rose and Marxism and Hegel

The reception of political theology in recent years has arguably contributed to growing scholarly consensus on the significance of Gillian Rose. One of England's foremost continental philosophers she was instrumental in the reception thereof during the eighties and nineties before she succumbed to ovarian cancer. Her early work covered Adorno, the Frankfurt School, and the legacy of Marxism; she was instrumental developing a post-foundational reading of Hegel and the development of sociological reason, and she was a powerful critic of much post-structuralism and postmodern theory. In her later work she extolled the classical virtues, inviting her readers to consider what is left for philosophy when it has discredited 'eternity, reason, truth, representation, justice, freedom, beauty and the Good.'⁷

Rose's early work took up the challenges of Theodore Adorno and the debates of the Frankfurt School during the 70s.⁸ The crux of Rose's critique of Adorno centred on the neo-Marxist legacy of 'reification' developed by Lukács which broadly speaking describes the process by which commodity exchange represents social relations of value as if they were a natural property of the commodity.⁹ According to Rose 'Reification has often been used in order to generalize the theory of value and of commodity fetishism without taking up the theory of surplus value or any theory of class formation and without developing any theory of power and the state.'¹⁰ Marx's theory of value is 'generalised as 'reification' with minimal reference to the actual productive relations between men, and without any identification of a social subject.'¹¹ In short Rose argues that in generalising Marx's theory of value to apply more broadly to culture, many of the neo-Marxists sold Marxist theory short and hence undermined the potential of critique to conceptualise social inequality.

If her early work on Adorno attempted to recover the critical potential of Marx for social theory, her subsequent work on Hegel

7 Rose 1996, p. 1.

8 For an example of the critical reception of the work see Smith 1982, pp. 463-464.

9 In particular see György Lukács's essay 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat'

10 Rose 2014, p. 36.

11 Rose 2014, p. 183.

attempted to recover the critical potential of Hegel for Marx and sociology more generally. In *Hegel Contra Sociology*, Rose argued that the historical development of social theory/sociology in all its variants, including the Marxism of the Frankfurt School, remained captive to German neo-Kantianism, manifest in the way Kantian scepticism reproduces a series of philosophical dichotomies within sociological reason: the Kantian split between subjective freedom and objective unfreedom, law and morality is repeated in the sociological split between values and validity, or meaning/value (Weber) and structure/facts (Durkheim).¹² Furthermore, as Vincent Lloyd puts it, Kant's distinction between the empirical and a set of transcendental presuppositions leaves the latter unaccountable to the former, so to take an example: 'Durkheim took 'society' to exist in the transcendental register and then applied the category of 'society' to his investigation of the empirical world without allowing the empirical world to feed back into his understanding of society.'¹³

And herein lies the overall thrust of her critical enquiry which would mark all subsequent work: according to Rose, Hegel's critique of Kant provides in advance a critique of sociological method and the means 'to link the analysis of the economy to comprehension of the conditions for revolutionary practice.'¹⁴ Where neo-Kantian sociology is epistemological in approach, Hegel provides the resources for a historical and phenomenological approach which takes into account a reason which is motile and able to reflect precisely on its own presuppositions. Hence, as with her critique of Adorno, the issue can put in terms of a sociological approach which is able to take the conditions of emerging social life contextually and aporetically.

Given the general critique being levelled at Hegel in the climate of French post-structuralism the book remains remarkable both for its embrace of Hegel, and in particular her post-foundational reading of Hege.¹⁵ As she would later put it in the introduction to *Dialectic of Nihilism*

Hegelian and Marxist dialectic does not seek to legitimise the

12 Rose 1995, pp. 1-13.

13 Lloyd 2011, p. 19.

14 Rose 1995, p. 220. For a critical appreciation of Rose's relation to Marx see Gorman 2001, pp. 25-36.

15 See for example Derrida *Glas* 1974. Galilee, 1974. Significantly the text also leaves the reader n with a quote from Hegel on comedy.

phantasy of historical completion with the imprimatur of supra-historical, absolute method, but focuses relentlessly on the historical production and reproduction of those illusionary contraries which other systems of scientific thought naturalise, absolutize, or deny.¹⁶

On Rose's reading Absolute Spirit amounts to cultural totality which includes metaphysics and religion, and rather than view Hegel as offering us history as the teleological unfolding of the Absolute, her Hegel follows the owl of Minerva, setting wing only after dusk; i.e. philosophy always arrives too late.

In *Hegel contra Sociology* this reading is underpinned by the significance she develops of Hegel's 'speculative proposition' for social theory. To read a proposition 'speculatively' means that 'the identity which is affirmed between subject and predicate is seen equally to affirm a lack of identity between subject and predicate.' In other words, in reading a given proposition one should not assume the identity of the given subject as already contained in the predicate, but rather see it as a work, something to be 'achieved'.¹⁷

For example, she claims the principle speculative relation is between religion and the state; i.e. *the* modern antinomy. Read simply, the identity of religion and state would be to imply either a theocracy, or to imply the idealist goals of religion as something to which politics should aspire to reach (e.g. social harmony). However, read speculatively the point is that the very distinction between the two speaks of the very gap within the foundation of those concepts themselves.

Hence the significance Rose attributes to rethinking Hegel's Absolute as the basis for social critique.¹⁸ To think the Absolute in this regard is to say that we need a speculative reading which traces the historical trajectories of the forms of freedom, art, and religions, from Greek ethical life to Christian morality and out of which our current cultures have emerged.

Her final paragraph in *Hegel contra Sociology* is an invitation to 'expound capitalism as a culture', i.e. to take up the Marxist critique in a way that secures it's potential for social critique in contrast to

16 Rose 1984, p. 3.

17 Rose 1995, p. 49.

18 Rose 1995, p. 208.

the neo-Marxist legacy. Indeed, she insists that ‘a presentation of the contradictory relations between Capital and culture is the only way to link the analysis of the economy to the comprehension of the conditions for revolutionary practice’.¹⁹

In what follows I want to argue that her invitation should be read as a programmatic statement of Žižek’s entire project: to revive German idealism, and Hegel’s work particular [albeit via Lacan] as a means to radicalise Marx’s critique of ideology? This takes the shape of a non-foundational and comedic reading of Hegel as the basis for political theology.

Žižek and Rose

Žižek’s non-foundational approach to Hegel is encapsulated in his earliest publications such *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) where he claims: ‘Hegelian ‘reconciliation’ is not a ‘panlogistic’ sublation of all reality in the Concept but a final consent to the fact that the Concept itself is ‘not-all’ (i.e. speculative).²⁰ Yet the instrumental role Rose played was only evident a year later in *For They Know Not What They No* when he admonished the reader to ‘grasp the fundamental paradox of the speculative identity as it was recently restated by Gillian Rose: in the dialectical judgement of identity, the mark of identity between its subject and predicate designates only and precisely the specific modality of their *lack of identity*.²¹ Žižek adopts Rose’s speculative reading of Hegel’s thesis on Substance as Subject; Substance as Subject means: ‘that non-truth, error, is inherent to Truth itself – to resume Rose’s perspicacious formula again, that Substance ‘is untrue as Subject’. This means; their very lack of identity [...] (the gap separating the Subject from Substance) is strictly correlative to the inherent non-identity, split of the Substance itself.’²² So while in distinction to Rose Žižek reads the split subject of Lacan back into Hegel, it is Rose who opens up the possibility of doing such by offering a speculative reading of Hegel in the first place. For example, one might compare the following paragraphs from Rose and Žižek respectively:

19 Rose 1995, p. 220.
20 Žižek 1989, p. 6.
21 Žižek 1991, p. 103.
22 Žižek 1991, p. 105.

the separation out of otherness as such is derived from the failure of mutual recognition on the part of two- self-consciousness who encounter each other and refuse to recognise the other as itself a self-relation: the other is never simply other, but an implicated self-relation.²³

[The] ultimate insight of Dialectics is neither the all-encompassing One which contains / mediates / sublates all differences, nor the explosion of multitudes [...] but the split of the One into Two. This split has nothing whatsoever to do with the premodern notion of [...] a Whole comprised of two opposed forces or principles [...] rather [it] designates a ‘split which cleaves the One from within, not into two parts: the ultimate split is not between two halves, but between Something and Nothing, between the One and the Void of its Place [...] -or, in other words, the opposition between the One and its Outside is reflected back into the very identity of the One.’²⁴

The similarities in their readings go some way to explain their shared antipathy to postmodern ethics: they work too often within a self/ other dichotomy without transposing the very distinction back into the subject itself [*spaltung*].

What then of Marx? As noted, Rose believed that the treatment of reification in post-Marxist thought failed to adequately account for the theory of surplus value in the theory of value and of commodity fetishism. What Lacan provides Žižek with is a means to make good on Rose’s concern. While Lacan initially claimed that Marx’s surplus value (i.e. the excess value produced by commodity exchange) finds its psychoanalytical counterpart in surplus enjoyment (i.e. *jouissance*), Žižek develops the argument: capitalism is sustained and ‘stained’ by a self-generating excess which renders the system incomplete. Only rather than mask or hide away this excess, it elevates it to the principle of social life: money begets more money. Hence the emergent social forms under capitalism can be said to arise historically at the point when surplus enjoyment/lack becomes the social principle as a whole – the superego imperative of capitalism to enjoy, mastering the drive to consume in the endless circulation of desire.²⁵ Žižek thereby shows the necessary

23 Rose 1996, p. 74.
24 Žižek 1996, p. xxvi.
25 See Calderbank 2014 who has provided a helpful summary of Žižek’s work in this regard.

supplement of psychoanalysis in the challenge to expound the link between capitalism and culture in a way which Rose was unable.

If we take then their shared consensus on the speculative relation, and their concern for a revitalised Marx we can readily appreciate their mutual distrust of the post-secular twist Derrida gave Marx. As Žižek says, 'One of the most deplorable aspects of the postmodern era and its so-called 'thought' is the return of the religious dimension in all its different guises: From Christian and other fundamentalisms, through the multitude of New Age spiritualisms, up to the emerging religious sensitivity within deconstruction itself (the so-called 'post-secular' thought).'²⁶ Žižek's contention is precisely the extent it precludes the possibility of a political act (to which I shall return).

Rose herself had invited Derrida to speak at Warwick University where he delivered 'Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International' (1993). Derrida's paper served as a prelude to his engagement with the *spectres of Marx*, a topic he had resisted approaching for some time. Yet as Rose argues, this is less a work of mourning as an '*aberration of mourning*'.²⁷ Derrida twists Marx's famous opening to *the Communist Manifesto* into a metaphor for what remains undeconstructable: the spirit of a Justice to come. At this point she takes up the concerns with Marxism that characterised her early studies of Adorno and Hegel. Derrida she argues, in spiritualising Marx disregards 'the body of Marxism...Class structure, class consciousness and class struggle, the party, the laws of capitalist accumulation, the theory of value, human practical activity. All (but justice) is vanity in Derrida's reading, 'mirror-images of the rigidities of logocentricism'.²⁸ As Rose puts it: 'Derrida has forgotten Marx's materialism and Hegel's *Logic*',²⁹ and the messianic aspect of Marxism which Derrida rescues is but 'correlate of this missing impetus.' All of this is said to stem from Derrida's '*logophobia*', 'a sub-rational pseudo-Messianism' which disqualifies both 'critical reflection and political practice. It is a counsel of hopelessness which extols Messianic hope'.³⁰

26 Žižek 2001, p. 1.

27 Rose 1996, p. 65.

28 Rose 1996, p. 66.

29 Rose 1996, p. 67.

30 Rose 1996, p. 70.

In sum, both Žižek and Rose adopt a non-foundational approach to Hegel, which is to say both adopt the speculative standpoint in such a way as to revive the basis of a Marxist critique. In particular, Žižek resists with Rose the post-secular turn in favour of a model which takes serious the notion of surplus value and class relations.

The comedy of Hegel

As Rose says: 'Marxism ignored the comedy of Hegel'.³¹ Whereas Kierkegaard employed humour in his critique of Hegel³² to short circuit any anxiety on the part of a student in the face of *the System* and its metaphysical hubris, Rose employs comedy 'to provide a route into his [Hegel's] thinking which bypasses the mines of prejudice concerning Hegel as a metaphysical thinker'.³³ In this way she aims to convince of the significance of the speculative standpoint as a means to make good on Marxist social critique. For Rose, Hegel should be read as a comic thinker. In this way Rose pits Kierkegaard against Kierkegaard in the name of Hegel, thereby highlighting the proximity of the two thinkers.

Arguably there is a historical precedence for the 'comic' reading of the *Phenomenology*. As Mark Roche has argued, the view that tragedy in Hegel is the highest of the dramatic forms is widespread, yet this is a 20th Century quirk.³⁴ Hegelian scholars in the 19th Century such as Christian Weisse, Arnold Ruge, and Karl Rosenkranz – largely forgotten now – by contrast were more likely to focus on comedy.³⁵ Moreover, comedy has the last word in Hegel's *Aesthetics*.³⁶

According to Roche, Hegel's own theory of comedy is linked to his understanding of subjectivity: 'What is comical... is the subjectivity that

31 Rose 1996, p. 64.

32 Consider for example the following extract from Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death*: 'A thinker erects a huge building, a system, a system embracing the whole of existence, world history, etc., and if his personal life is considered, to our amazement the appalling and ludicrous discovery is made that he himself does not live in this huge, domed palace, but in a shed alongside it, or in a doghouse, or at best in the janitor's quarters' (43-44).

33 Rose 1996, p. 12.

34 See Roche 1998. Indeed, the argument may be extended in part to the 21st century. David Farrell Krell for example has argued more recently – and especially in regard of Schelling and Hölderlin – that German Idealism more generally is caught within a 'double movement': the rise of tragedy in the aesthetics, and the tragic fall of the absolute, skilfully highlighting the link between the two. Krell, 2005, p. 1.

35 Roche 1998, p. 306.

36 Roche 2001, p. 411.

makes its own actions contradictory and so brings them to nothing.³⁷ By subjectivity is meant, the elevation of self-consciousness as opposed to objectivity (i.e. cultural norms). Hegel links comedy to the rise of subjectivity – comedy stages the battle between on the one hand moral customs and law (objective) and the subject for whom moral customs are no longer the highest. Hegel's use of comedy emphasises the role of contradiction and need for resolution. As Roche says 'In a sense comedy functions as an aesthetic analogue to Hegel's practice of immanent critique, by which the philosopher seeks to unveil self-contradictory and thus self- cancelling positions.'³⁸ Comedy is a form of 'immanent negation' ³⁹(Roche's translation) – what is negated is the false elevation of subjectivity or particularly (e.g. the man who slips on a banana skin while his thoughts are set upon the stars).⁴⁰

Roche's approach develops comedy as a category within the trajectory of Hegel's work as a whole, as if this was what Hegel *would* have said had he himself further developed the category; Roche thereby adopts a foundational approach to Hegel's work. By contrast Alenka Zupan i 's book on Hegelian comedy *The Odd One In* while underlining Hegel's discussion of comedy *qua* representation and the historical development of drama in the *Phenomenology* adopts the non-foundational reading of Hegel which is developed in tandem with Lacan. Here the approach is meta-theoretical, framed by the distinction between a Kantian or Hegelian framework, and an associated question: at what point is a joke inherently transgressive or truly transgressive? The former implies a joke which is transgressive of a situation but which nonetheless helps confers stability on that situation – for example, the libidinal joke employed to release the tension of a situation and hence maintain the situation. The latter implies a joke which is able to offer an entirely new perspective on the given situation. This argument is developed with a materialist thrust: if jokes have traditionally been on the side of materialism (and hence anti-theological), usurping the universal in favour of the particular (i.e. jokes target the false elevation of subjectivity as in the example of the man slipping on the banana skin), her point is that these jokes don't go far enough. A joke may bring

37 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, quoted in Roche 2001, p. 412.

38 Roche 2001, p. 415.

39 Roche 2001, p. 415.

40 For Kierkegaard for whom it was the false elevation of objectivity which marked comedy.

us back to earth with a thud, but it still leaves the possibilities of the heavens intact. Recalling Rose's thesis it could be said that Zupan i finds in Hegelian logic first: a critique in advance of the type of comedy which relies on a residue Kantian transcendentalism; second, a means to reinvigorate Marxist materialism with Lacanian ontology through the release their thought forms give from transcendence (what Lacan called the non-All).⁴¹

What concerns Rose is 'not what Hegel says about comedy as such, but *the movement of the Absolute as comedy*'; a meta-theoretical approach which, like Roche and Zupan i sees comedy as constitutive of the system. How so? As Rose says:

Let me shoot from the pistol: first, *spirit* in the *Phenomenology* means the *drama of misrecognition* which ensures at every stage and transition of the work – a ceaseless comedy, according to which our aims and outcomes constantly mismatch each other, and provoke yet another revised aim, action and discordant outcome." Secondly, *reason* is therefore *comic*, full of surprises, of unanticipated happenings, so that the comprehension is always provisional and preliminary.⁴²

For example, one can imagine a situation in which a chance encounter between a couple leads to a romance which ends in marriage, such that chance leads to a harmonic reconciliation – the protagonists imagine themselves as agents of action; but their subjectivity is shown to be illusory, chance is at play. The goal however reveals that only when our natural inclinations are thwarted is the true goal revealed – what Hegel called the cunning of reason.⁴³

What all this points to is the suggestion that it is not that the *Phenomenology* is not funny, merely that we need to perceive the inherent comedy when the speculative standpoint is addressed. To take an example which both Rose and Žižek consider, Hegel's chapter 'the animal spiritual conceit'.⁴⁴ As Rose points out, the very title is comic in as much the contradiction gives rise the speculative relation. The animal spiritual is premonition of the false dilemma of the modern state – rights

41 Zupančič 2008.

42 Rose 1996, p. 72.

43 See also Roche 2001, p. 415.

44 Rose 1996, p. 75

of individuals and rights of state. Where someone acts in the name of one's subjective right on the basis that it is universal, when what is really at stake is his or hers own self-interest. Comedy arises out of the contradiction, i.e. when individual rights are the means to employ a supra-individual power such that ethical substance (objective freedom) migrates to the hapless subject.⁴⁵

Law and the Symbolic

At this point one should attend to Rose and Žižek's differences. If there remains a significant difference between their approaches it can be summed up in terms of the difference between law or jurisprudence and the symbolic. Rose's interest in jurisprudence surfaces in her middling to later work, and in particular in conversation with the post-structural approaches of Derrida and Foucault, taking centre stage finally in *The Broken Middle*. Briefly put, Rose argues that jurisprudence was a central concern of the philosophical tradition from Kant onwards, yet post-structuralism abandons both reason and law in the name of the end of metaphysics, without appreciating the ways in which those self-same thought forms remains indebted to the terms of its engagement and series of conceptual antinomies. As she says in her introduction:

This essay is an attempt to retrieve and rediscover a tradition which has been tendentiously and meretriciously 'deconstructed' [...] This destruction of knowledge is justified by its perpetrators as the only way to escape the utopian projections and historicist assumptions of dialectic; 'eternal repetition of the same' is said to be a harder truth than the false and discredited promise of reconciliation. Yet neither the form of this hard truth nor the terms in which it is expressed are neutral: they are always borrowed from some historically identifiable epoch of juridical experience.⁴⁶

Another way to grasp the significance of law for Rose is in terms of the persistent line of her critical enquiry which is to develop critical theory which resists transcendental arguments regarding society in favour of a logic which can reflect on its own presuppositions. Law is the term for Rose which re-establishes the field of social critique.

45 Hoff 2014, p. 235 ff9.

46 Rose 1984, p. 1.

Rose took the rhetoric of post-structuralism to be highly critical of reason, thereby precluding the power of thought to criticise its own concepts. For example, Foucault reduces knowledge to power in such a way as to evade the claims of a rational critique. Similarly, Derrida's grammatology stages the usurpation of law and reason through the practices of writing while relegating ethics to a fetishized 'other'. And in social terms, because both Derrida and Foucault underwrite their philosophy with Nietzsche they usurp the basis of social theory in favour of the sheer arbitrary imposition of power, the consequence of which compounds the abandonment of reason in the embrace of nihilism.

Recalling her thesis in *Hegel contra Sociology*, it can be said that the postmodern inscription of power works as a Kantian transcendental, even at the point Derrida and Foucault critique Kant. For example, for all their problematizing of an *arche* or *telos*, foundational beginnings or Utopia ends, it is the middle which is evaded, the irresolvable aporia which arises between the universal and particular, politics and ethics, rhetoric and reason, at the bar of Law.

In developing her concept of law she turned to Kierkegaard and Freud amongst others to excavate what she calls the 'middle' – shorthand for the speculative standpoint. The *Broken Middle* offers a way of thinking about politics and ethics, the universal and the singular. The 'middle' is a third space, not a unitary space (e.g. the neutral space of secular liberalism) but a place of anxiety to the extent it is the sheer 'givenness' of the political and ethical situation which resists the retreat into sanctified beginnings or utopian ends. It is not a matter of employing political or ethical solutions to unify society's diremptions [divorce] such as law/ethics, the very fields arise already out of the process of diremption.⁴⁷ Her aim then is to recover anxiety within our political and ethical discourse, 're-assigning it to the middle.'⁴⁸

For the reasons above, Rose remained critical of the Lacanian symbolic.⁴⁹ Law is not '*the superior term* which supresses the local and contingent, nor is it *the symbolic* which catches every child in the closed circuit of its patriarchal embrace. The law is the falling towards or away from mutual recognition, the triune relationship, the middle formed or

47 Rose 1992, p. 286.

48 Lloyd 2007, p. 699.

49 See Rose 992, pp. 102-103.

deformed by reciprocal self-relations'.⁵⁰

Yet arguably Rose's assessment of the symbolic remains problematic, it being predicated almost entirely upon the lecture 'The Circuit' from *Seminar II* and the edited texts from *Seminar XX* translated by her sister.⁵¹ Moreover she reads the latter text on sexuality back into the earlier text from *Seminar II* – thereby presenting his work in a synchronic manner which misses the development of concepts; hence her conclusion: the symbolic is a closed patriarchal system. What about the non-All?

Nonetheless, the *Broken Middle* provides for Rose the standpoint for the critique of political theology, and serves in advance of Žižek. As noted, both Rose and Žižek share a disdain for the political theology of Derrida, albeit whilst articulating one as such. Yet in Rose's work it remains a pejorative term. 'Holy middles' are mended middles and hence aversions to the law. Taking on the theological left in the form of Marc C. Taylor's *A/Theology*, and the theological right in the form of John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* she shows how both offer a flight from the middle. In the case of Taylor's postmodern *a/theology* we are offered a philosophical approach based upon the gesture of a violent transgression in the usurpation of existing law – the death of metaphysics and the constitution of a new law. In the case of John Milbank (whose work draws heavily upon *Hegel contra Sociology* and *Dialectic of Nihilism*),⁵² the argument is forwarded that properly speaking theology is a social theory, one in which we are promised liberation from social and political dominium in some 'expectant city'.

However, as Rose puts it, between the two we are slung between 'ecstasy and eschatology, the promise of touching our own most singularity [Taylor] and the irenic holy city [Milbank], precisely without

50 Rose 1996, p. 75.

51 See Mitchell and Rose 1982.

52 In *Theology and Social Theory* (1996a) Rose was the Blackwell reader for *Theology and Social Theory*. In the book Milbank develops Rose's critique of neo-Kantian sociology and in particular its reduction of religion to the immanent plane. He adopts a genealogical method to show how the sociological, political, and economic positioning of religion is only achieved to the degree those disciplines mask their theological leanings, and that properly speaking theology is a social theory. The difference between secular and theological versions is the former's arbitrary commitment to a version of the will-to-power, as opposed to the primacy of charity.

any disturbing middle.'⁵³

It would not be difficult on this basis to fashion a Rose tinted critique of Žižek along the lines of her critique of political theology, before doing so let us rehearse Žižek's political theology.

Žižek's Political Theology

Žižek's political theology takes its orientation from Hegel's kenotic logic (God's self-emptying). 'What dies on the cross is indeed God himself; not just his 'finite container''⁵⁴ but the God of the beyond – the God of metaphysics. Thereafter 'Spirit' names the community of believers, the purely corporal body of the church; that is to say, the realization of the cross is the release it brings from transcendence, making it homologous to Hegel's 'night of the world'. Translated into the concerns of Marx, kenosis provided the basis for the political gesture, ending 'obfuscation and fetishization, and liberation into the inexplicable joy and suffering of the world.'⁵⁵

Indeed, Žižek goes as far as to suggest that theology offers the first critique of ideology in the biblical figure of Job.⁵⁶ Confronted with his suffering Job refuses the justifications offered by his theological interlocutors, they seek only to give a sense of metaphysical meaning to his suffering (e.g. you suffer in this life because...); rather, Job maintains fidelity to the very meaninglessness of suffering to the extent that even God cannot explain it. And because Žižek reads Job topologically, i.e. as the precursor to Christ,⁵⁷ he is able to further claim that Christ's cry of dereliction upon the cross is the point at which God faces up to his own powerlessness: God is an atheist.⁵⁸

So while Žižek agrees with Marx that all criticism begins with the critique of religion, he is subsequently able to claim that theology contains a subversive materialist core through its incarnational logic

53 Rose 1992, p. 285. Rose was the Blackwell reader for Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*. The Rose archives at Warwick include the letters Milbank and Rose exchanged on the subject. In particular she pushed him to clarify the nature of the subject which underpinned *Theology and Social Theory*. In response Milbank wrote 'The Sublime in Kierkegaard', Milbank 1996.

54 Žižek and Milbank 2009, p. 257.

55 O'Regan 2010, p. 283.

56 Žižek 2003, p. 124.

57 Žižek 2003, p. 122.

58 Žižek 2003, p. 14.

which releases Christianity into the world; and through which Marxism must pass to achieve revolutionary praxis.

In practical political terms this translates into what Žižek calls politics proper: ‘a politics of the *act*, i.e. an act of symbolic dereliction.’⁵⁹ This is not politics as administration, as Žižek says, ‘there is no ethical act proper without taking the risk of such a momentary ‘suspension of the big Other,’ of the socio-symbolic network that guarantees the subject’s identity’⁶⁰; i.e. a ‘self-destructive act [kenotic] could clear the terrain for a new beginning’⁶¹

However from Rose’s perspective, Žižek’s politics of transgression concerns only the foundation of law, the event as such, and therefore an evasion of law, a holy middle. Indeed, Žižek goes as far as to suggest that the heroic gesture of God’s kenotic love ultimately awaits Christianity: ‘in order to save its treasure, it has to sacrifice itself.’⁶²

We can further develop Rose’s critique by returning to her general critique of French thought: ‘the whole of recent French philosophy is melancholic’. Drawing on Freud distinction between mourning and melancholia she claims that ‘they see life as founded on absence that we’re always illegitimately trying to make present.’ In Lacan for example, Rose claims Kierkegaardian repetition becomes twisted into the search for the lost object (*objet a*) within the concatenation of language.⁶³ Likewise, Žižek’s philosophy seeks to abolish representation and complete the translation of modern metaphysics into ontology via the non-All. By contrast the work of mourning suggests that in our confrontations with violence we take up the task of justice and political action with ‘renewed and reinvigorated for participation, ready to take on the difficulties and injustices of the existing city.’⁶⁴

If Rose’s work can be considered political theology it is for three reasons: first, because she takes the speculative relation between

59 Žižek 1999, p. 246.

60 Žižek 1999, p. 263-264.

61 Žižek 2000, p. 151. Arguably the violence of his language is tempered in subsequent fashioning of ethics. Adopting the language of Bartleby the Scrivener he advocates the suspension of the big Other through a passive withdrawal from the symbolic networks, encapsulated by the line “*I prefer not to.*”

62 Žižek 2003, p. 171.

63 Rose 1992, pp. 102-104

64 Rose 1996, p. 36.

religion and the state as *the* constitutive antinomy of modernity; second, because the social import of the Hegelian Absolute implies the totality of culture and as such religion; and third because she claims the philosophical legitimacy of the universal. When later pushed on the particular question ‘*So you believe in something outside of the spatio-temporal continuum?*’ she replied, ‘Certainly, yes. But I think one has to preserve agnosticism about it. I love what Simone Weil said, that agnosticism is the most truly religious position. You must be able to say you don’t know. Agnosticism is the only true religion because to have faith is not to give up knowledge, but to know where the limit of knowledge is.’ This, I wager, is not the wishy-washy agnosticism of the undecided, but of a commitment to our ‘existing cities’ as an expression of the middle and the justice it serves through critique.

Comedy and Law

In her critique of postmodern ethics of otherness which she characterised as melancholic, Rose argued that we need to inaugurate a process of mourning, which ‘requires a relation to law that is presented by the *comedy of absolute spirit* as found in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*.’⁶⁵ What does she mean precisely? As we saw, against post-structuralism she claimed all dualistic relations to the other (e.g. an ethics posited in terms of self/Other) are ‘attempts to quieten and deny the broken [dirempted] middle, the third term which arises out of misrecognition.’⁶⁶ This ‘third term’ is law which arises out of the very misrecognition: ‘My relation to myself is mediated by what I recognise or refuse to recognise in your relation to yourself; while your self-relation depends on what you recognise of my relation to myself’⁶⁷ ‘The law, ‘in all its various historical adventures – [is] the comedy of misrecognition.’⁶⁸ And this makes the meaning of *law* inseparable from the meaning of *Bildung*, i.e. education, formation, and cultivation.

Returning then to Hegel she says ‘As a propaedeutic to politics, I offer *the comedy of absolute spirit as inaugurated* mourning: the recognition of our failures of full mutual recognition, of the law which has induced our proud and deadly dualism, of the triune law – implicit but actual –

65 Rose 1996, p. 74.

66 Rose 1996, p. 75.

67 Rose 1996, p. 75.

68 Rose 1996, p. 75.

which is always at stake.’⁶⁹

In short, and drawing upon John Baldacchino’s insights into Rose: ‘If Spirit embodies the drama of misrecognition, comedy ensures that history remains contingent, and reason full of surprises. Law looks to comedy as the becoming of possibilities that allow us to engage in life’s contingencies.’⁷⁰

Political Theology and Comedy

How then are we to understand the link between political theology and comedy? What both Žižek and Rose accomplish is a non-foundational reading of Hegel which links comedy and theology to social critique by way of the speculative standpoint. In Rose’s work the speculative standpoint is synonym for the *broken middle*; in Žižek’s work – I would wager – it can be construed in terms of the real of existence (the symbolic real): the constitutive moment of anxiety within law in a way which as yet may prove to furnish Rose’s thought. Moreover, both offer a path to revitalise social critique in a way which avoids the traps of Kant’s legacy within Marxist social thought (i.e. transcendental arguments for society); maintaining instead a commitment to a political critique of the economy. Yet both offer radical alternatives encapsulated in their respective question on God: agnosticism versus Christian atheism; law versus the symbolic. In the former comedy provokes the awareness of misrecognitions which beset our historical development, which is held yet within the tension between the universal and the singular. In the later comedy provokes a more dramatic and materialist rendering of the situation – an ontology of non-All – with the political aim of founding a new universal. Hence Žižek’s comic approach remains entirely transgressive, one which seeks a fundamental shift in the symbolic situation as such in an attempt – if not to think beyond the cultural hegemony of capitalism – to carve out the space for such a new beginning.

However, we can refract this argument through psychoanalytic terms as Natalija Bonic has done in discussion of Zupan i ’s work: the aim of psychoanalysis [and by extension politics] is not to ‘bring about a shift of perspective, in the sense of a profound transformation of how we perceive the world. It is rather part of comic practice that functions

69 Rose 1996, p. 76.

70 Baldacchino 2012, p. 190.

through endless repetition and doubling, the aim of which is to allow two mutually exclusive (and under ordinary circumstances only alternately visible) realities appear side by side, so as to reveal the gap that unites and separates them.’⁷¹ Or to put it in explicitly theological terms: what if salvation does not simply promise a form of deliverance from suffering (a cure of sorts), but by removing the limit that separates it from joy; a case of what Latin Church would call *godimento*?

For Rose this would constitute a comedy which has nothing to do with the ironic comedy of postmodernism, caught forever in its peculiar melancholy that seeks the lost object it never had in the first place. Nor is this the transgressive comedy which, with Nietzsche, heralds a new law. Rather, as she says: ‘Comedy is homeopathic: it cures folly by folly. Yet anarchy exposed and enjoyed presupposes a minimal just order [...]. Suffering can be held by laughter which is neither joyful nor bitter: the loud belly laughter, with unmoved eyes, from North Carolina; the endless sense of the mundane hilarious of one who goes to Mass every day.’⁷²

71 Bonic 2011, p. 106.

72 Rose 1995, p. 134.

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The Comedy of the Great Depression: *On Chaplin's Modern Times*

Simon Hajdini

Abstract

The research article discusses, on various levels, the relationship between Power and authority, on the one hand, and jokes, comedy and laughter, on the other. By way of analyzing the structural relation between critical comedy and (Marxist) critique of capitalism, the first section of the article draws out the difference between ideological use of laughter, relying on mechanisms of mediation and distantiation, and the use of laughter in comedy. Against this backdrop, section two of the article illustrates and further develops the initial thesis by offering an interpretation of some of the key aspects of Chaplin's *Modern Times*. The concluding section focuses on the conceptual status of the figure of the Tramp and on the paradoxical structure of Chaplin's "silent talkie."

Key Words: belief, capitalism, Chaplin, comedy, communism, ideology, Kierkegaard, Lacan, Marx, power, rest

Dry, All Too Dry for Comedy?

Kierkegaard notes at one point that Power should be seized by whoever comes up with the best joke. If for a brief moment we consider the statement independently of its specific context, we can say that it is based on a brilliant premise that Power and comedy belong together, forming a privileged couple. This idea cannot but appear totally bizarre, defying common sense and running counter to the general opinion. Any recourse to general opinion, of course, is a most delicate matter. The notion of general opinion presupposes a naïve Other of bizarre beliefs who upon a closer look turns out to be but an empty place, an apparition, a fantasy which I bring into being so as to be able to account for my "enlightened" position – a phenomenon that Robert Pfaller analyzed under the concept of "illusions without owners".¹ But this particular opinion which draws a clear line of demarcation between comedy and power, placing them in a relationship of maximum distance, is perhaps a special case; a special case of a general opinion that finds its echo in infamous names of a Bakhtin or Eco. Hence, the subject of this general opinion, or common perception, "the subject supposed to be naïve," is nevertheless not entirely nameless, but rather authorized by infamous names from the arsenal of modern theories of comedy. The exercise of Power is not considered to be a laughing matter; Power is not to

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Cf. Pfaller 2014.

be trifled with. Comedy and Power effectively form the most radical opposition. Seriousness enthrones, laughter dethrones, Power is endowed with an aura of consecration, of a codified and cultural use of the voice, while laughter appears to be chaotic and untamable. Hence, laughter places the subject at a distance to authority, laughter eludes Power's grasp, doing away with its sublime aura, undermining it, and hence presumably liberating us from the grasp of its authority.²

Kierkegaard's quip seems in line with such a conceptualization despite not being limited to a mere call to an overturning of Power, to its bare sublation, but rather positing laughter as the criterion of the constitution of a new form of Power, one that remains irreducible to the seriousness which pertains to the Law and its letter, a witty Power, a Power of wit, the wit itself in Power.³ Is the installment of wittiness a sublation of Power, its passage into another quality, leaving behind the heteronomous legalistic Universality, while opening up the space for the onset of a free and autonomous subjectivity? Or does the joke aim at the opposite meaning, so that Kierkegaard's quip should be read along the lines of Adorno, this great reader of Kierkegaard? We could claim that this seemingly crazy and bizarre criterion of Power always *is* the internal condition of its functioning, the ideological lever of its efficiency. Hence, the gist of the joke wouldn't lie in the maximum distance, but rather in a point of an impossible encounter of the two realms, an encounter of the joke as the epitome of contingency, arbitrariness and non-functionality, on the one side, and Power as the ultimate embodiment of functionality and necessity that pertain to the rule of Law, on the other. In this case, Kierkegaard's point would be the direct opposite of the one I have proposed above. Power legitimizes itself with necessity that pertains to the Law, or with eternal privileges that are rooted in transcendence; but despite all of this, Kierkegaard seems to imply, Power is just as arbitrary, occasional, haphazard and contingent as the joke itself. Once we elevate the joke into a criterion of Power, we immediately render open its decentered, heteronomous character; we render open the fact that Power is dependent on a

2 For a critique of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* see Dolar (2012 [1986], pp. 157–158) and Zupančič (2008, pp. 3–5). The most succinct and condensed critique of Bakhtin's theory of "carnival culture," of his notion of laughter which supposedly eludes Power's grasp, thus remaining a mighty weapon in the hands of the oppressed, was proposed by Todd McGowan (2014, p. 203): It was Bakhtin's bad luck that he died in 1975, missing by a hair De Palma's *Carrie* (1976). Had he seen it, he would surely be led to revoke his ideas.

3 Kierkegaard uses the German word *der Witz*, "joke." *Witz haben* means "to have Spirit": the joke, or wit, is rooted in spirit as the source of its wittiness.

moment of exteriority which is all the more fatal because this exteriority is not the exteriority of the Law, but rather the exteriority of contingency, eluding the Symbolic Law as an un-symbolizable piece of the Real. As soon as contingency is elevated into an impossible criterion of Power, it renders open the fact that the Other doesn't exist, that Power itself is impossible, hollowed out, as it were, by a lack at its very center.

However, there is an obverse side to this problem. This inexistence of the Other doesn't do away with its Real efficiency. The contingency of laughter and the distance it implies form the condition of necessity, the inner condition of Power's effective functioning. To sum up Mladen Dolar's classic point:⁴ laughter does not do away with Power, but rather functions as the lever of its efficiency, as an enclave of a supposed freedom fettering us without the tiresome and strenuous use of force. Laughter appears as liberation from Power, while effectively enabling it as its ultimate support by delivering it from the use of immediate violence or physical force. *Where physical force leaves off we find laughter* as the cipher of Power's efficiency.⁵ The supposed immediacy of Power relies on the distance and ideological mediation embodied in laughter.

I would now like to add to Kierkegaard's quip another turn of the screw and a somewhat unexpected reference. Here is its context:

"Denmark holds the balance of power in Europe. A more propitious position is inconceivable. This I know from my own experience. I once held the balance of power in a family. I could do as I wished. I never suffered, but the others always did. / O may my words penetrate your ears, you who are in high places to counsel and control, you king's men and men of the people, you wise and sensible citizens of all classes! You just watch out! Old Denmark is foundering – it is a matter of life and death; it is foundering on boredom, which is the most fatal of all. In olden days, whoever eulogized the deceased most handsomely became the king. In our age, the king ought to be the one who delivers the best witticism and the crown prince the one who provides the occasion for the best witticism."⁶

And the reference:

4 Dolar 2012 [1986], pp. 156–158.

5 I paraphrase Kierkegaard's famous dictum: "where language leaves off I find the musical" (Kierkegaard 1987, p. 69)

6 Kierkegaard 1987, p. 288.

“The bourgeoisie has played a most revolutionary role in history. / The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his ‘natural superiors,’ and has left no other bond between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous ‘cash payment.’ It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom – Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation [‘dürre Ausbeutung’, ‘dry exploitation’].”⁷

The two quotes don’t seem to have much in common, despite the fact that they first appeared in print around the same time. Kierkegaard’s book was published in 1843, and the *Communist Manifesto* appears five years later, in February 1848, in the year of the revolution. And if the *Manifesto* strives to give voice to the specter of communism, haunting the “powers of old Europe,” then Kierkegaard warns against a seemingly totally different specter, the *Gespenst* of boredom: A specter is haunting Europe – the specter of boredom.⁸ What, if anything, could link the one to the other?

Let me begin in a somewhat anecdotal manner. At a certain historical moment these two seemingly irreducible worlds actually meet and briefly touch upon each other. Kierkegaard wrote most of the manuscript of *Either/Or* during his stay in Berlin between October 1841 and March 1842. He visited Berlin on the occasion of Schelling’s lectures which were initiated by the Prussian king to combat the specter of Hegelian philosophy. The notes on the lectures Kierkegaard published as an appendix to his book on irony demonstrate that the lectures didn’t quite meet his initial expectations. Rather it was quite the opposite. In a letter to his brother, dated 27 February 1842, Kierkegaard laments over the tediousness and the overall boring nature of Schelling’s talks, “Schelling drivels on quite intolerably,” he says, comparing the lectures to “self-inflicted punishment,” and concluding with the following

.....
7 Marx & Engels 1994, p. 161.

8 “A spectre is haunting Europe — the spectre of communism. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre [...]” (Marx & Engels 1994, p. 158)

devastating remark: “I am too old to attend lectures and Schelling is too old to give them.”⁹ At the time, Schelling’s lectures were attended also by the intellectual forces of the Hegelian Left, propelled by the reactionary tendencies of the Prussian powers that be, so spectacularly embodied in the figure of the (too) old Schelling. The lectures were attended also by a youngster named Friedrich Engels, who at the time was serving as a member of the Household Artillery of the Prussian Army. In defense of the Young Hegelians, Engels wrote a brochure titled *Schelling and Revelation: Critique of the Latest Attempt of Reaction against the Free Philosophy* that appeared in 1842, that is, at the time when he began contributing to the *Rheinische Zeitung* and when he first met its editor, Karl Marx. Hence, at the very source of the two seemingly very different texts, Kierkegaard’s book and *The Communist Manifesto*, there stands the old Schelling as a metaphorical embodiment of the powers of old Europe, giving unity to three seemingly very different specters: the specters of boredom, Hegelianism, and communism.

However, apart from this, the two quotes also display a certain conceptual proximity. The *Manifesto* portrays capitalist reality in ominously boring and monotonous shades. Capitalism does away with the colorfulness and variegation of premodern social divisions, ripping apart the “idyllic relations” and drowning them “in the icy water of egotistical calculation.” The specter of communism therefore grows out of this specter of boredom that bears the name of the old Europe. However, do the boredom and balance mentioned by Kierkegaard not stand in evident opposition to the explosive revolutionary character of capitalism as described by Marx and Engels? Shouldn’t we read Kierkegaard’s warning as a comradely call to the bourgeoisie that has fallen asleep and forgot or abandoned its own revolutionary mission? Such an understanding would stem from a total misunderstanding of Kierkegaard’s concept of boredom which doesn’t stand for a state of stagnation, standstill, rest or immutability, but at once designates a revolutionary force, a force of permanent revolutionizing. A couple of pages before the cited quote we read the following: “It is very curious that boredom, which itself has such a calm and sedate nature, can have such a capacity to initiate motion.”¹⁰ There is no contradiction between the boring character of old Europe and the revolutionary role of the

.....
9 Kierkegaard 1958, p. 79.

10 Kierkegaard 1987, p. 285.

ruling class. Boredom as the constant tendency to leave the present state behind, to overthrow the existing relations, is the emblem of the new capitalist actuality whose boring atmosphere of “dry exploitation” relies on boredom as the principle of perpetual revolutionizing.

In this sense, Kierkegaard's quip should be read as a statement that traverses two regimes of Power, as an utterance that stands in-between, on the very edge that separates two different dispositifs of Power. Let us not forget, that the quip speaks of royal, that is: premodern power, that relied on relations of personal dependency and servitude and that as such was not hidden but instead operated in plain sight, characterized by massive visibility. Its legitimization, its ideological substratum, was publicly declared and transparent, as it was also the case with the plainly visible nature of exploitation (say, in form of levying tithes) and with the use of violence and physical force. Contrary to this, modern capitalist Power presupposes (at least legally) free subjects who are not subjected to personal servitude and domination; it presupposes subject at a distance to Power and its ideological mechanisms. Modern Power can go without traditional ideological curtains; it takes pride in its un-ideological character, thus replacing the immediately visible exploitation relying on “idyllic relations,” religious dogmas and political illusions with a sober gaze, with “boring” systemic domination and “dry exploitation.”

After this detour we finally arrive at our topic. What is the role of comedy in the time of the sober gaze, in the time that has done away with the sublime aura that once stuck to the figures of Power and Authority, and which perhaps formed a fruitful ground for comedic subversion? What is the function of comedy in our time, after the bourgeoisie “has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-labourers,”¹¹ when the economic calculus has undermined relations of transference? Is the reality of “dry exploitation” and of the “lean government” not dry, all too dry for comedy?

The Comedy of the Great Depression

It is only in modern capitalist societies that the ideological function of laughter truly comes to the fore in the form of a distance in relation to, or withdrawal from, immediacy. As such, it supposedly dethrones the ideological levers of Power while in fact enthroning them.

11 Marx & Engels 1994, p. 161.

And it is here that we stumble upon the key – political – problem that demands our positioning.¹² Should we conclude that comedy performs a necessary ideological function, i.e. that comedy is conservative, *lumpenproletarisch* at best, and inclined to “reactionary intrigue” (to use the terms from the *Communist Manifesto*)? Or should we introduce a further conceptual distinction, one that would snatch laughter away from ideology and return it to comedy as to its rightful owner? And is the introduction of such a distinction not the proper function of comedy taking possession of laughter by dispossessing ideology?

The most persuasive way out from this deadlock was proposed by Alenka Zupančič in the following programmatic sentence of her book on comedy:

“Comedy is and always has been a genre of non-immediacy. Not in the sense of a distance *towards* a thing or belief, but rather as an inner split of this thing or belief itself, a split which in comedy is usually embodied in an irreducible surplus.”¹³

If laughter as the locus of ideology represents the cynical distance *towards* ideology, then we have to conclude that comedy is not a simple sublation of immediacy, particularly the one pertaining to modern Power, but rather “a genre of non-immediacy,” which remains irreducible to cynical mediation. Non-immediacy is a negation of immediacy that eludes the trap of ideological mediation, the logic of mockery which is structurally blind to its own involvement in the situation from which it distances itself. Non-immediacy stands for the inner self-difference of immediacy, it stands for the “inner split,” or inner deviation, of immediacy *from itself*. As I've already indicated, this self-difference provides the key to understanding Kierkegaard's quip which is itself a comic object *as well as* a theory of the comic object in miniature. In his quip, Kierkegaard opposes the simple opposition between Power and jokes, in turn bringing to our attention the inner and heterogeneous – i.e. extimate – joke of Power itself.

Modern Times (1936), one of Chaplin's most famous films, is

12 Alenka Zupančič (2004, p. 12) was right to note that her “book [on comedy] intervenes into what I won't hesitate to call *class struggle* in contemporary philosophy/theory and in existing ideological practices.” We should universalize this point by saying that the conceptualization of the comic necessarily implies the unavoidable and radical polarization that characterizes politics proper. (The quoted passage can only be found in the Slovenian edition of Zupančič's book.)

13 Zupančič 2004, p. 17 (quoted from the Slovenian edition of the book).

precisely that: a not at all dry comedy of “wage-labourers,” of the factory and the assembly line, a comedy of the un-idyllic “cash payment,” a comedy of “the icy water of egotistical calculation,” a comedy of “Free Trade,” in which the pursuit of happiness goes hand in hand with increasing pauperization.¹⁴ *Modern Times* is the ultimate comedy of “dry exploitation,” and doubtlessly a genius of Chaplin’s stamp is needed to come up with a great comedy of the great depression. The Great Depression, which presents the film’s historical background and its narrative framework, doesn’t seem a particularly gratifying material for a comedy; the latter seems to thrive only within the confines of the aforementioned “idyllic relations” that ended with the onset of capitalism, or at least in the idyllic salons of the new ruling class. My thesis, however, is that – conceptually – capitalist domination – and not merely its cultural ideals – comes much closer to the structure of comedy than it might appear.

The film begins with a scene of a clock that marks the anonymous and systemic character of capitalist domination, whose actors or agents are only so many personifications of economic abstractions, characters who appear on the economic stage.¹⁵ Doesn’t this minimal dispositif already contain a certain comic potential? In reference to Hegel,¹⁶ Alenka Zupan i¹⁷ has argued that the comic character consists of a specific relation between Universal and Particular, between the abstract and the concrete, where – contrary to a widely spread opinion – the comic doesn’t emerge at the moment when a figure of Universality stumbles upon the Concrete which is external to it and which undermines its Universal character, but rather at the moment when the Universal as *Universal* is concretized, i.e. when the Universal proves to be marked by its own inherent Concreteness. Hence, a miser doesn’t become comical when he stumbles upon an obstacle that undermines the automatism of his or her actions; the miser is comical in this very automatism itself. Comedy renders visible the “inner split” of this automatism, its self-alienating character and self-

14 The film’s motto reads as follows: “‘Modern Times.’ A story of industry, of individual enterprise – humanity crusading in the pursuit of happiness.” Chaplin’s film differed substantially from other comedies from the times of the Great Depression, the latter portraying high society of “individual entrepreneurship,” while systematically disavowing the misery as the truth of its own “humanity.”

15 Marx 1976, pp.92, 179.

16 Hegel 1998.

17 Zupančič 2004, pp. 44-45; 2008, p. 30.

difference that functions as its privileged object. Therefore the minimal, structurally-critical point of comedy would be that there is more truth in the automatism of the Universal than in the intimate motives and idiosyncrasies of the individual, just as the truth of capitalist domination is to be sought in abstractions, like the compulsory law of competition that by way of a blind automatism forces individual capitalists into accumulation, as opposed to some individual greed and pathological lust for appropriation. Greed, the lust for appropriation, can very well be a source of laughter that results from the external difference between individual lust and abstract, systemic law of competition. But the lust for appropriation only becomes comical when it is elevated to the status of the Universal and when it is nothing but the bare embodiment of an abstraction. Just as the comic object has to be situated in the “inner split” of the Universal itself (as opposed to personal idiosyncrasies), so too the pathological character of capitalism doesn’t lie in personal perversity of individuals, but rather in the pathology of abstractions themselves. In a paraphrase of Alenka Zupan i’s point we could say that the critique of capitalism – just like critical comedy – isn’t grounded in undermining the Universal, but rather in a depiction of the Universal at work:¹⁸ the capitalist excesses are not idiosyncratic sins of individual capitalists; it is rather that *individual capitalists embody the excess of the Universal itself*.

Hence, against all odds, there exists a certain conceptual affinity between comedy and capitalism, or more precisely: between critical comedy and the (Marxist) critique of capitalism. *Modern Times* provides an excellent example of the comic object as the self-difference of “wage-labor.” I have said that the Universal doesn’t become comical by distancing itself from itself and by slipping into concreteness. It is only at the peak of its abstraction, of full coincidence with itself, that the Universal becomes truly comical and truly concrete. In other words, the Universal only becomes truly comical and truly concrete at the moment when it rids itself of its worldly umbilical cord and fully asserts itself as a pure abstraction. *The Universal becomes Concrete Universal in the excessive extreme of its own abstraction*.

A great example of this is the scene of a worker, going by the name of “Worker” (Charlie Chaplin), who is repeating over and over

18 “Comedy is not the undermining of the universal, but its (own) reversal into the concrete; it is not an objection to the universal, but the concrete labor or work of the universal itself. Or, to put it in a single slogan: *comedy is the universal at work*.” (Zupančič 2008, p. 27)

again the same gesture of tightening bolts at the assembly line. In itself, this repetitive gesture is not yet truly comical. It becomes truly comical when it liberates itself from “external concreteness” and concretizes itself internally as it were, by abandoning the reference to any utilitarian purpose. In the film this liberation of the Universal is portrayed as the substitution of the bolt for a button on the dress of a female coworker. Of course, the button requires no tightening, but as soon as we begin tightening it, the gesture of tightening is liberated from its utilitarian function, so as to pass into the domain of functionless concreteness which lies at the core of Universality. The gesture of tightening is subjectivized by deviating from its substantiality, i.e. from its functional fusion with an external object. To put it yet another way: here, the passage to comedy consists of a replacement of a thing for an object; the passage from the bolt to the button is the passage from a thing, or a *Gegenstand*, to the (comic) object which remains irreducible to the button and is nothing but an embodiment of the void that separates the function of tightening from itself. Isn’t it obvious that this scene doesn’t become comical due to the “tightening of the button,” but rather because the tightening of the button is “running on empty,” because it is devoid of any proper purpose, whereby this void (as opposed to the button that replaced the bolt) is the true comic object? However, what is at stake here is not a mere loss of function, but rather its depiction in its purest form. The tightening becomes comical (and truly concrete) at the very peak of its Universality, i.e. in its abstraction from functionality as such, as “the universal at work.”

The scene presents us with a portrayal of an ideal worker, the Idea of the Worker, which fully coincides with his wage essence. But this radical normalization, this sublation of the difference between a person and a function, coincides with the point of radical madness. And the coworkers effectively accompany the worker’s strange tightening of everything that comes into his hands with the words “He’s crazy!!!”, with three exclamation marks. Perfectly in line with Lacan’s remark about the crazy king who thinks that he is the King, the worker goes crazy when he becomes the Worker, i.e. when he directly embodies the Idea of the Worker. The words “He’s crazy!!!” should hence be interpreted as follows: “Look at him, the madman; he thinks he actually *is* a worker!!!” The comical gist of this statement and of this scene is due to the confrontation of the viewer with the craziness of zero-degree identification in a capitalist society. We have seen that capitalism “has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of

science, into its paid wage-labourers”.¹⁹ That is why it makes perfect sense to say that a physician who thinks he’s a physician, a poet who thinks he’s poet, or a philosopher who thinks he’s a philosopher, is crazy, because he doesn’t see that, in fact, he is but a wage-laborer.

However, the analyzed scene entails another turn of the screw, a radicalization of madness: not only a poet who believes himself to be a poet (when in fact he is merely a wage-laborer) is crazy; it is first and foremost the worker who believes he’s a worker that is crazy, given that he is not a worker at all, but merely the embodiment of a pure abstraction, i.e. the commodity we call labor power.²⁰

The whole succession of scenes, beginning with the first scene of the assembly line and concluding with the worker’s madness, effectively forms a complete comic sequence that has a very precise conceptual relevance. In the first scene of the sequence we see the worker who, in the company of two coworkers, is tightening bolts at the assembly line when suddenly his armpit starts itching so that he is forced to put down his work for a moment to be able to scratch himself. But the machine runs on relentlessly, the coworkers display disapproval, and Chaplin has to quickly make up for his brief deference. An agitated supervisor appears to let him know that a trespass like this could get him sacked. Chaplin tries to object, he tries to explain that he was itching, but as soon as he lifts up his hands and opens his mouth he’s trespassing again, the machine runs on and he’s once again forced to compensate for the “loss.” The situation is repeated once again, this time due to an insect of some sort, flying around Chaplin’s head and disturbing his work to such an extent that the machine has to be brought to a halt. A brief break follows. He leaves his work space and enters a toilet where he attempts to take some time off, removed from the watchful gaze of his superiors, and smoke a cigarette. But the moment he lights it and has his first puff, the director addresses him via a gigantic screen, installed to monitor the workers, and orders him to stop stalling and immediately get back to work. In the meantime, the worker who has replaced Chaplin for the time of his absence is diligently tightening bolts, but Chaplin decides to extend his break a bit and starts polishing his fingernails. The other worker is deeply dissatisfied with his behavior,

19 Marx & Engels 1994, p. 161.

20 As an aside: to get this joke of the crazy worker who believes he’s a worker one has to read *Capital*, for the *Manifesto* does not yet distinguish between labor and labor-power and hence fails to provide us with the joke’s proper “cognitive mapping.”

so Chaplin eventually gets back to work. Next, it is time for lunch. The director enters, accompanied by representatives of a company selling the “Bellows Feeding Machine.” The machine is intended to reduce the time for lunch, thus substantially increasing productivity. They try it out on Chaplin, but the machine proves inefficient, so the boss rejects the company representatives by saying: “It’s no good – it isn’t practical.” What follows is the already described scene of Chaplin’s fall into madness.

The background of this sequence consists of the Fordist organization of the labor process, the prevalence of machinery which deskills the worker by reducing his or her work to the performance of simple and monotonous operations, finally turning him of her into a mere “appendage to the machine.” Deskillng serves a very specific function of increasing productivity and the degree of exploitation of the labor power. In another text, I have already placed the process of deskilling into a relation with what Marx calls “gaps of rest.”²¹ In short: gaps of rest are intervals in the labor process that, from the point of view of production which is in the service of profit, stand for the unproductive use of labor power. From the point of view of Capital, which always strives to increase the degree of production of surplus-value, gaps of rest stand for functionless elements of a pure loss, they represent islands of enjoyment, enjoyment which (according to Lacan) is essentially useless. That is why Capital strives to close these gaps by adding them to the specter of productive use of labor power, thus turning them into elements of surplus-value.

We immediately see that the entire sequence just described rests on this specific problem of rest. The gaps of rest form its leitmotiv, giving the entire succession of the scenes a unified conceptual premise and a properly dialectical character. At different points in the sequence, gaps of rest take on different forms: first the form of an itch and a scratch, then the form of speech or voice, then of the polishing of fingernails, and finally of the insect and the cigarette. The itch, the voice, the insect and the cigarette give body to something essentially lacking any form of materiality; these objects embody gaps of rest inserting themselves into the labor process. And simultaneously with their emergence there also emerges the threat of a decrease in productivity, the threat of effectively bringing production to a standstill. As soon as this happens, the supervisor, or representative of capital, enters

21 Marx 1976, p. 460.

the stage, performing his disciplinary function, trying to close up the gap, to undo it and enable once again the smooth continuation of the production process. The cigarette scene demonstrates that the time for rest is effectively limited to what is most necessary, to the satisfaction of purely biological needs that form the limit of its admissibility and acceptability. All these scenes therefore testify to the universal tendency of Capital to close up the gaps of rest, to fill in the void, to eliminate and to take control over the useless leftover. This is best exemplified by the scene with the “Feeding Machine” which is supposed to guarantee optimum economical use of lunch time by limiting the worker to his role of a mere “appendage to the machine,” in this case the appendage to the feeding machine.²²

The comic sequence confronts us with the opposition between work, the expenditure of labor-power, and idleness, rest, the unproductive use of labor-power. The singular instances of this encounter are elements of class struggle, in which we are faced with a collision of two totally opposed interests. The itch, the voice, the insect and the cigarette are partial objects that embody the interest of the working class by undermining the laws of capitalist production. In relation to the status of the comic sequence, we cannot overlook the fact that these elements are funny, but not yet truly comical. Only the last scene of the sequence, adding an essential dialectical twist, is to be considered truly comical. If in preceding scenes we laugh at the ultimate failure of the general agenda of Capital to limitlessly exploit labor power, if we laugh at the instantaneous and short-lived victory of the Particular over the Universal which falls prey to “castration” by a tiny itch, what we effectively laugh at in the final scene of the worker’s madness is the Concrete of this Universal itself, we laugh at the Universal’s inherent itch. Put differently, at first, the relation between Capital and labor is entirely external, the Particular provokes the Universal, the Concrete opposes the Abstract, rendering open its inherent powerlessness in subjecting the worker to its functioning. The sequence, however, only becomes comical with the last scene that sublates the external split between the subject and the demand of the Other, transposing it into an

22 What compels the capitalist to eliminate the gaps of rest is the compulsory law of competition, as it is clearly stated in the advertisement for the “Bellows Feeding Machine”: “Bellows Feeding Machine, a practical device which automatically feeds your men while at work. Don’t stop for lunch. Be ahead of your competitor. The Bellows Feeding Machine will eliminate the lunch hour, increase your production and decrease your overhead. [...] Remember, if you wish to keep ahead of your competitor, you cannot afford to ignore the importance of the Bellows Feeding Machine.”

internal – and heterogeneous – split of the Other itself. Hence, the true source of comedy is not the impossibility of subjecting labor to Capital, but rather the impossibility of Capital itself that comes to the fore at the moment when the worker fully identifies with his social role and actualizes – here and now – Capital's fantasy of incessant exploitation of labor power. And (the representative of) Capital quickly establishes that this doesn't work (better put: that it works *too much*), that it is “no good,” that it is “not practical.”

Labor power is not a commodity like any other; in contrast to all other commodities it has to rest, if it is to be useful again. Capital dreams of labor power as a commodity that needs no rest, an essentially restless commodity that is incessantly up for exploitation. But as soon as this fantasy becomes reality, as soon as the worker, who has previously tried to snatch the gap of rest away from Capital, enacts its own closure, as soon as he coincides with his own wage essence and with the universe of (all other) commodities, he presents us with the madness of Capital, i.e. with its phantasmatic support as the target of comic subversion.²³

The Silent Talkie

The worker, merged with his abstract essence, embodies the immanent drive of Capital, striving after incessant appropriation of labor time. If the preceding scenes of the comic sequence have confronted us with the external negation of Universality, with moments of negativity that are embodied in partial objects, then the last scene *negates by means of affirmative repetition*, which opens up the space of comical non-immediacy as opposed to the ridiculing (ideological) mediation. The previous scenes of the sequence therefore correspond to the ideological use of laughter. The deviation from Universality, embodied in the partial objects, is precisely an enclave of false freedom which grounds us even more radically in relations of domination that it purports to subvert with its distancing mediation. The last scene abandons this false autonomy, suspending (ideological) mediation. In a gesture of immediate coincidence with the Universal (or with the role of the Worker), the Universal itself is marked with a moment of non-immediacy or with an element of its own Concreteness. Here, the

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23 The scene with the Bellows Feeding Machine is comical because the subject cannot keep up with it, just as he was unable to keep up with the assembly line. It is difficult to work as fast as the machine demands of us, but it is even more difficult to rest as fast...

relationship between the Universal, on the one hand, and the excessive enjoyment, on the other, is no longer external as in the case of the itch or the insect. Despite appearing radical, these excesses remain radically grounded within the coordinates of the Universal; their excessiveness is the result of normalization introduced by the Law. In the last scene, this duality is suspended, however this suspense that corresponds to the full identification of the worker with the Worker does not eliminate enjoyment; it merely eliminates the external difference between the spheres of Universality and enjoyment, whereby this external split between the One (Universality) and the Other (enjoyment) is transposed into the inner split of the One, i.e. into enjoyment of the Universal itself. The antinomy between the automatism of mechanical gestures that turn the worker into an embodiment of a machine and the islands of spontaneous enjoyment is sublated in the enjoyment-machine. Put in Žižek's²⁴ terms: the final dialectical passage should be read as a passage *from Nothing* (embodied in partial objects that undermine the integrity of the Universal) *to less-than-Nothing*, standing for a tiny lag or gap of Universality itself, for its inner self-difference that rests on the impossibility of (affirmative) repetition, thus marking Universality with a “minimal difference” as a sign of its inherently non-totalizable character.

Let's approach this problem from another perspective. *Modern Times* is Chaplin's last film with the figure of the Tramp which he first brought to the screen some twenty years earlier, the Tramp as a dispossessed social outcast culminating in the figure of dispossessed labor. Simultaneously, *Modern Times* is the only film in which the Tramp is not merely seen but also heard. The film uniquely situates itself in the interspace, the tiny interval, separating silent films from talkies; it is an unusual hybrid of the two, the paradoxical *silent talkie*. The Tramp, this infamous figure of the silent era, its paradigm, is like Moses who will lead Chaplin's films into the promised land of talkies, being the first to peek through the door, only to finally remain outside, confined to the threshold of the new era of sound film. It is well known that Chaplin was very much opposed to directing a sound film; not because he was clinging to the “idyllic relations,” bound to be undermined by the use of the voice, but because in the supposedly unproblematic passage from silent to sound film he detected a certain problem, best formulated by Žižek:

.....
24 Žižek 2012.

“Chaplin's well-known aversion to sound is thus not to be dismissed as a simple nostalgic commitment to a silent paradise; it reveals a far deeper than usual knowledge (or at least presentiment) of the disruptive power of the voice, of the fact that the voice functions as a foreign body, as a kind of parasite introducing a radical split: the advent of the Word throws the human animal off balance and makes of him a ridiculous, impotent figure, gesticulating and striving desperately for a lost balance.”²⁵

Modern Times stands at the very edge separating and joining these two worlds, half way out of the silent and half way into the sound universe. I claim that it is no coincidence that the lead role in this passage is entrusted to the Tramp who is perfectly cut for this passage. In what sense? According to Žižek,²⁶ the whole trick of the figure of the Tramp lies in the fact that he “accidentally occupies a place which is not his own, which is not destined for him – he is mistaken for a rich man or for a distinguished guest; on the run from his pursuers, he finds himself on a stage, all of a sudden the center of the attention of numerous gazes.” This typical dispositif of the “comedy of errors,” this discrepancy between an element and the place of its inscription, was analyzed by Alenka Zupan i in dialectical terms of the suspension of the Other and its objectal embodiment.²⁷ It is precisely this suspension of the Other, the suspension of the symbolic coordinates, guaranteeing the distribution of places pertaining to individual subjects in a given narrative, that is the minimal condition enabling the Tramp to “accidentally occupy a place which is not his own.” It is this suspension of the fixed coordinates which enables the Tramp to occupy the place that is not destined for him. In *Modern Times* he picks up a red flag which suffices to mark his place, placing him at the front of a group of protesters and catapulting him right into the role of the revolutionary leader. In its double mirroring, this example best exemplifies the aforementioned point. What is better suited to embody the temporary suspension of the Other than the revolutionary mob? And what is better suited to give body to the irreducible bearer, the surplus leftover of the

25 Žižek 2008 [1992], p. 3.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

27 “In this perspective one could also say that the comic suspense of the Other functions in such a way that the suspension of the symbolic Other coincides with the surprising appearance of a (small) other [...]” (Zupančič 2008, p. 92)

suspended Other, than a red flag, transposing the figure of the Tramp into the Leader of a revolutionary movement, marching at the head of the crowd? It is this object that lends to the mob as emblem of the suspended Other the required minimum of symbolic consistency, while at the same time bearing witness to the fact that consistency ultimately rests on contingency, on a nonsensical objectal leftover or the “inner split” of Concrete Universality.

By definition, a tramp is someone who roams around from place to place, lacking a proper place of his own, hence eternally oscillating between radical deterritorialization and failed (and thus comically successful) attempts at reterritorialization. The Tramp can occupy any place, but remains without place, and it is precisely this contingent tension between the two, between the always foreign and unsuitable places (which seem to fit him in an almost uncanny manner) and his own implacability or out-of-place-ness that is the principal source of his comedy. The Tramp has no place, but aside from his out-of-place-ness, there perhaps exists a single place that is truly his own and from which he remains absolutely inseparable: *the place of the silent film itself*. It is therefore absolutely no coincidence that *Modern Times* – which is situated in the interspace between a silent and a sound film and which for the first and last time gives voice to the Tramp – is the last film with this character. On the contrary: in this film, the Tramp is brought to the status of a concept. It is only here that he occupies the place which is truly not his own, a place which is not foreign to him simply by accident but structurally robs him of his only citizenship. The Tramp's silent place, the only place that is truly his own, hence only emerges against the background of the voice. But the voice brings this place into being only at the price of abolishing it. As long as he remained in the homeland of the silent film he could lose himself as much as he wanted and he would still remain at home. It is only when he breaks silence and begins to speak that he becomes truly homeless, radically deterritorialized by the use of the voice. And it is precisely this use of the voice, excluding him from the domain of the silent film, catapulting him into the kingdom of talkies, which in a speculative twist condemns him to silence and disappearance. It is only when he breaks silence, that he remains forever silent.

But the point is not simply that the Tramp, once he is endowed with a voice, loses his silent essence. The point is rather that it is with his use of the voice that he arrives at his full and radical realization: *only when he begins to speak do we truly hear him go silent*. His essence is actualized in

a voice without sonority which transfigures the figure of the Tramp from someone who is merely mute into the figure of the mute voice as object. And is this transubstantiation which seemingly abolishes the Tramp's essence, functioning as the lever of his disappearance, not his ultimate comedic performance, reproducing the dialectic of the comic sequence? The Tramp begins to speak, suspending the universe of the silent film, only to embody it in a mute voice as the irreducible objectal bearer of the suspended Other. The inner essence of the Tramp is not objectivized only in the externality of the film's narrative, but rather embodies the fate of the silent film as such, which henceforth persists in the kingdom of talkies as an irreducible mute voice that *Modern Times* cannot get rid of and pass on without friction into a fully realized domain of sound films.²⁸

To conclude, let me return to Kierkegaard and the problem of Power. The impossible relationship between comedy and Power is the topic of yet another one of his brilliant quips:

"In a theater, it happened that a fire started offstage. The clown came out to tell the audience. They thought it was a joke and applauded. He told them again, and they became still more hilarious. This is the way, I suppose, that the world will be destroyed – amid the universal hilarity of wits and wags who think it is all a joke."²⁹

This quip is a sort of sequel to the first, and if we examine it closely, we realize that it explicates the key premises of the former. This joke could, of course, be read in the sense of a critique of the hilarious heads buried in the sand of ideology. It could be read as a critique of the ideological function of laughter providing a false distance towards Power while freely and even more radically exposing us to its pernicious flames. The point of the joke would therefore be that a joke is never merely a joke, and that the enclave of supposed freedom

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28 For Chaplin, the problem of the sound film was not simply that it introduced the element of audibility and the voice. As a master of silent film he undoubtedly knew that the introduction of sound also transfigures the domain of muteness or silence that acquires a totally different quality. *Modern Times* as a silent talkie perhaps best exemplifies Chaplin's awareness of the delicateness of this passage by for the first time putting forward an entity that is situated at the edge between the audible and the inaudible, between the sonorous and the mute, namely precisely the entity of the (Lacanian) voice as object. That which in *Modern Times* is present only in its embryonal form, moves center stage in *The Great Dictator*, Chaplin's first complete talkie. Both films target a certain disposition of Power which in both cases seems as far removed from comedy as possible. To a large extent, *Modern Times* as the comedy of capitalism provides the key to *The Great Dictator*, this ultimate comedy of fascism. So much so that we could paraphrase Max Horkheimer's notorious dictum and conclude: "Whoever is not prepared to talk about *Modern Times* should also remain silent about *The Great Dictator*!"

29 Kierkegaard 1987, p. 30.

of cynically-enlightened subjects is paid and overpaid by their most palpable servitude. But the joke can also be read in the opposite sense that comes closer to my point and which illustrates once again the passage from laughter as the lever of ideological mediation to laughter as the lever of non-immediacy. If we begin with the first quip stating that Power should be seized by whoever comes up with the best joke, the clown from the second quip who is receiving loud ovations seems the best candidate for this impossible position. But what is most evident is that the gist of the joke lies in the fact that the clown's authoritative call doesn't work, that it miserably fails to hit the target, that the public is unable to recognize itself as its addressee, that the evacuation is a failure because all of them speak and listen past one another. In this, but also in other, regards Kierkegaard's story is very similar to the joke which is told by Mladen Dolar at the very beginning of his magisterial book on the voice.³⁰ The joke tells the story of a company of Italian soldiers called to attack by their commander. But instead of following the commander's order they remain in the trenches finally uttering the following comment: »Ah, che bella voce!«, what a beautiful voice. In both cases the call is issued in face of imminent danger, first in the middle of a menacing fire, second in the midst of a raging battle. And in both cases the call becomes literally misplaced by an applause that is at extreme odds with the initial intention of the speaker. The comic effect thus rests once again on the suspense of the Other, or the destruction of the world, as Kierkegaard would have it. We could say that the evacuation (of the public) is unsuccessful due to the (temporary) evacuation of the Other, and this evacuation of the Other as the place from which the clown's call would receive its (true) meaning once again opens up the space for the characteristic comic reconfiguration.

But yet another reading is possible. The scene with the clown could be read along the lines of the worker's fall into madness which takes place at the moment when the person totally coincides with his or her universal essence, in turn realizing this essence in the excessive extreme of its abstraction. What if the clown effectively doesn't enter the stage as a private person trying to alert the public to the threat of a menacing fire? What if he enters the stage as a clown, in his full symbolic capacity, using the menacing fire as the occasion for performing his ultimate comical act? And doesn't this act rely precisely on the split of non-immediacy, i.e. on the mechanism of a failed

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30 Dolar 2006, p. 3.

affirmative repetition? A fire breaks out offstage, so I say: “A fire broke out offstage” – and this very repetition produces an irreducible surplus as the lever of laughter which swallows the public like a withering fire - the fire as the ultimate comic relief, as the pure embodiment of the Real excess of Universality.

Hence, the clown could serve as the first model, the first experimental realization of that particular criterion of Power that Kierkegaard proposed in his quip. And the audience’s laughter can only enthrone him by bringing the world to an end, by snatching the kingdom away from the king. Power should be seized by whoever comes up with the best joke. Isn’t it evident that such a criterion excludes merit and appropriation? A joke cannot be signed, its witticism is of the character of an anonymous specter, *Gespenst*, that reaches us, hits us from the outside, from an other hand, from the hand of a non-localizable Other, so that in relation to the joke we are merely holders and carriers on which it clings like a parasite. The joke is nameless, homeless, anonymous, structurally expropriated, and as soon as we take it as the criterion of Power, the latter is radically de-substantialized and loses its right to ownership. The joke is an emblem of dispossession, at once possessing and dispossessing; it is the proletarian genre *par excellence*, the pendant to the other specter, the specter of communism, which haunts the powers of old Europe. In a mad extension, the gist of this joke is finally also the gist of the communist revolution.

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Hegelian Christology: from Kojève to Žižek

Gabriel
Tupinambà

“It is only when one no longer believes in the “absolute aspect of Christianity” - and when one doesn’t even understand that Hegel based his thought on this belief - that the scholar’s alternative of historicism/ Absolute can be born, and there also arises the anachronous image of a gifted dialectician that, however, since he was an incorrigible metaphysician, made eternity prevail over becoming”¹

§1 Hegel and the Christian Event

The practically infinite field of commentaries and interpretations of Hegel’s philosophy is a background against which the opposition between Žižek and Kojève could dissolve into a mere comparison of two different, but equally valuable, readings. However, some of the underlying similarities between the left and right-wing interpretations of his philosophy - well illustrated by the solid foundation Fukuyama found in Kojève’s Marxist reading of Hegel to support his own neo-liberal thesis - are enough to incite a certain doubt into this accumulative infinity of perspectives, which tends towards a neutralisation of the radicality of Hegel’s thought.

The objection could be raised, of course, that there is no such thing as a sole perspective on a philosopher’s thought, and that the multiplicity of possible approaches is a sign of the strength of a particular philosophy. But to this we must reply that Hegel’s thought is positioned in a rather unique place: the concepts of *totality* and *infinity* play such central roles in his system that a rigorous reading of his philosophy must account for its own place in the totality of its interpretations. Hegel himself was very clear in differentiating *bad* from *true* infinity - the infinity of an endless accumulative *series* from the infinity which, being a principle of *self-difference*, cannot be figured as *one more* nor as *the One*² - and, with this essential distinction, the philosopher himself presented the criteria through which we should measure our readings of his philosophy. To properly understand Žižek’s return to Hegel we must have the courage to measure it by such a standard.

1 Lebrun 2004, p. 239

2 Hegel 1991, p. §94-§95; 1989:§272 - See also Žižek 2008

At the beginning of *The Monstrosity of Christ*, after quoting Chesterton's *The Oracle of the Dog*, Žižek puts forth a fundamental axiom, which simultaneously addresses the above mentioned issue and supports his own reading of Hegel:

“The axiom of this essay is that there is only one philosophy which thought the implications of the four words [“He was made man”] through to the end: Hegel's idealism— which is why almost all philosophers are also no less frightened of Hegel's idealism.”³

Let us advance, then, the following presentation of this axiom: *Hegel is the only philosopher to think through the consequences of the Christian Event*. This proposition can also be developed into at least two corollaries. From the affirmation that “there is *only one* philosophy”, the Hegelian one, which developed the consequences of the Christian Event, as summarised by the four words “He was made man”, it follows that: *after Hegel the consequences of the Christian Event have been obliterated by the post-metaphysical philosophies*.

However, the fact that this axiom *can be enunciated at all* also implies that it is possible to occupy a position from which the difference between the fidelity to Hegel, and the disavowal of his philosophy, can be perceived. By relating the first statement to the place of its enunciation, we can present a second corollary: *Žižekian thinking occupies a position within contemporary philosophy, which includes the conceptual apparatus necessary to distinguish transmission from obliteration*.

These propositions clearly instruct the following passage, in which Žižek answers simultaneously to the two main threads in contemporary philosophy, the one which strives to “forget” Hegel, and the other which sets out to revise and adapt his philosophy to the contemporary demands:

“something happens in Hegel, a breakthrough into a unique

3 Žižek 2009, p.35. The stress on the uniqueness (“the only position”) of this stance in relation to Christianity can also be found in *The Puppet and the Dwarf*: “My claim here is not merely that I am a materialist through and through, and that the subversive kernel of Christianity is accessible also to a materialist approach; my thesis is much stronger: this kernel is accessible *only* to a materialist approach—and vice versa: to become a true dialectical materialist, one should go through the Christian experience” Žižek 2003, p.6

dimension of thought, which is obliterated, rendered invisible in its true dimension, by post-metaphysical thought. This obliteration leaves an empty space which has to be filled in so that the continuity of the development of philosophy can be reestablished—filled in with what? The index of this obliteration is the ridiculous image of Hegel as the absurd “Absolute Idealist” who “pretended to know everything,” to possess Absolute Knowledge, to read the mind of God, to deduce the whole of reality out of the self- movement of (his) mind—the image which is an exemplary case of what Freud called *Deck-Erinnerung* (screen-memory), a fantasy-formation intended to cover up a traumatic truth.”⁴

Similar accounts of this obliteration can be found throughout Žižek's work - already in *Hegel the Most Sublime of Hysterics* the introductory remarks begin by stating the centrality of this thesis to his philosophical project.⁵ Even so, this particular presentation of the disavowal is very pertinent to our enquiry, not only because it is the most explicit assertion by Žižek of the centrality of Hegel's Christology to the totality of his philosophical project, but also because the reference to the Freudian notion of *Deck-Erinnerung* allows us to expand our understanding of what is explicitly stated in our second corollary. Žižek's diagnosis of the Hegelian break is directly informed by the conceptual frame of psychoanalysis, which, since Freud's earliest writings, is concerned with accounting for the distinction between the empty space of trauma and the associative logic that, driven by this empty space itself, incessantly attempts to cover it up.

If we refer now to the problem we mentioned before - the issue of comparing different readings of Hegel against the background of the over-abundance of comments and interpretations - we can see how Žižek's return to Hegel is not opposed to any particular reading, but to the very field which supports these different perspectives, to their common trait. Therefore, to refer to an obliteration of Hegel's thought is ultimately to refer not to an interpretation, but to something which *was not* - or rather, that *could not* - be interpreted.

4 Žižek 2009, pp.35-36

5 Žižek 2011, p.14

However, if we accept that there is a reading of Hegel which addresses concomitantly *all* possible approaches to his thought - a position which holds on to the *impossible* as a guarantee of truth, rather than to the *possible* - then the inclusion of the impasse of interpretation into the totality of interpretations shifts the very axis of opposition, allowing us to directly address the “scarecrow image of Hegel” which serves as the negative support for the very background of most contemporary readings of his philosophy.

In its minimal form, this new opposition cutting across the field of interpretations distinguishes itself by contrasting different concepts of totality - an asymmetrical one, undoubtedly, for this so-called “democratic” totality is fundamentally a *spuriously infinite* one, always ready to accommodate a new perspective and to dissolve it into the homogenous multiplicity of the possible. The position defended by Žižek, on the other hand, unearths in Hegel the consequences of there being a *self-different* infinity, a position grounded on the affirmation that *failure* is a fundamental category of Hegel’s system.⁶ From this standpoint, one is capable of accounting for the very opposition between the notion of totality and its irreducible spectre of *totalisation*, against which post-metaphysical thought affirms the necessity of forgetting, or “deflating” Hegel’s thought.

As we shift our axis of interrogation from the multiplicity of ‘Hegels without Hegel’ - to paraphrase Žižek - to the direct confrontation with the absurd stand-in, which endows the continuity of post-Hegelian philosophy with an aura of correction and “anti-totalitarianism”, the figure of Alexandre Kojève springs forth, standing at a double intersection.

Firstly, Kojève’s reading of Hegel is a direct articulation of the ‘total’ or circular notion of totality, a solid base for the argument that Hegel would be the philosopher who claimed to ‘know [the] All’. Simultaneously, his reading is based on a radical dismissal of certain dimensions of Hegelian philosophy, especially regarding Hegel’s reading of the Christian Event, the pivotal example of Hegelian concrete universality.

6 Jarczyk 2004, p.310

The second, and superimposed, intersection has to do with the political consequences of this interpretation. Here too Kojève seems to play a double role: he was deeply concerned with bringing Hegel and Marx closer - of bringing Hegel closer to Marx, to be more precise. His reading of Hegel was incredibly influential on many of the most important left-wing French thinkers of the last fifty years,⁷ but, at the same time, Kojève’s explicitly leftist thesis found its way to the core of the neo-liberal ideology, where it seems to reside comfortably today. Fukuyama’s famous work, *The End of History and the Last Man*, might be many things, but a bad reading of Kojève is certainly not one of them.

We will now attempt to sketch some of the fundamental elements of Kojève’s interpretation of Hegel, focusing especially on the relation between the Hegelian Concept and the emptying out of the Christian ‘overtones’ of his philosophy - a movement which amounted, as we will see, to the disavowal of the dimension of what would be later known in psychoanalysis as the death drive, and which is strictly connected in Hegel’s philosophy with his account of the Christian Event. Our main interest here is to present the Kojévian figure of Absolute Knowledge which, following the Žižekian axiom previously stated, offers itself as the perfect alibi for the dismissal or revision of Hegel’s project. This investigation will also serve us as the starting point for the formal presentation of the Žižekian reading of the Absolute Knowing.

§2 An anthropology without incarnation

Kojève’s work notoriously stands out because of its two famous, and interrelated, central theses: the fundamental role played by the Hegelian dialectic of the Lord and the Bondsman in the structuring of the individual and the collectivity, and the consequence that he draws from this first thesis: that the overcoming of this dialectical opposition amounts to the coming to an end of history.

However, rather than focusing on those two points, we would like to turn our attention to what we believe to be the truly symptomatic point of his approach to Hegel - the idea that man can become Christ. This particular statement allows us to approach a nodal point in Kojève’s reading, one which forcefully binds together Hegel and the post-

7 Drury 1994; Devlin & Roger 2004; Jarczyk & Labarrière 1996

metaphysical thought through a simultaneous (imaginary) exacerbation of knowledge and deflation of the (real) Absolute.

Let us begin our presentation by considering the following paragraphs from the *Introduction to the reading of Hegel*. In the pages immediately prior to this fragment, Kojève described the historical underpinnings of the dialectical movement of Self-Consciousness - beginning with the dialectics of the Master and the Slave, through the Stoic and Skeptic societies, finally arriving at the Judeo-Christian one - let us quote this long passage in full:

“Hence Christianity is first of all a particularistic, family and slavish reaction against the pagan universalism of the Citizen-Masters. But it is more than that. It also implies the idea of a synthesis of the Particular and the Universal - that is, of Mastery and Slavery too: the idea of Individuality - I.e., of that realization of universal values and realities in and by the Particular and of that universal recognition of the value of the Particular, which alone can give Man *Befriedigung*, the supreme and definitive “satisfaction.”

In other words, Christianity finds the solution to the pagan tragedy. And that is why, since the coming of Christ, there is no longer any true tragedy - that if inevitable conflict with truly no way out.

The whole problem, now, is to realize the Christian idea of individuality. And the history of the Christian World is nothing but the history of this realization.”

Kojève continues:

“Now, according to Hegel, one can realize the Christian anthropological ideal (which he accepts in full) only by “overcoming” the Christian theology: Christian Man can really become what he would like to be only by becoming a man without God - or, if you will, a God-Man. He must realize in himself what at first he thought was realized in his God. To be really Christian, he himself must become Christ.

According to the Christian Religion, Individuality, the synthesis of the Particular and the Universal, is effected only in and by the Beyond, after man’s death.

This conception is meaningful only if Man is presupposed to be immortal. Now, according to Hegel, immortality is incompatible with the very essence of human-being and, consequently with Christian anthropology itself.

Therefore, the human ideal can be realized only if it is such that it can be realized by a mortal Man who knows he is such. In other words, the Christian synthesis must be effected not in the Beyond, after death, but on earth, during man’s life. And this means that the transcendent Universal (God), who recognizes the particular, must be replaced by a Universal that is immanent in the World. And for Hegel this immanent Universal can only be the State. What is supposed to be realized by God in the Kingdom of Heaven must be realized in and by the State, in the earthly kingdom. And that is why Hegel says that the “absolute” State that he has in mind (Napoleon’s Empire) is the realization of the Christian Kingdom of heaven.

And concludes:

The history of the Christian World, therefore, is the history of the progressive realization of that ideal State, in which Man will finally be “satisfied” by realizing himself as Individuality - a synthesis of the universal and the particular, of the Master and the Slave, of fighting and Work. But in order to radicalize this State, Man must look away from the Beyond, look toward this earth and act only with a view to this earth. In other words, he must eliminate the Christian idea of transcendence. And that is why the evolution of the christian world is dual: on one hand there is the real evolution, which prepares the social and political conditions for the coming of the “absolute” State; and on the other, an ideal evolution, which eliminates the transcendent idea, which brings Heaven back to Earth, as Hegel says.”⁸

This long, but important, fragment displays the intertwining of some of the most central aspects of Kojève’s thought. To begin with, we find here the characteristic mode of historicisation that permeates the Kojévian reading of Hegel’s figures of Self-Consciousness, giving primacy to the “concrete” elements of the examples used by Hegel over the dialectical operations at stake in such stagings. This choice is

8 Kojève, 1980, pp.66-67

most visible, and most criticised, in relation to Kojève's account of the dialectics of the Lord and the Bondsman,⁹ which, by such standards, is understood as the historical battle between Masters and Slaves, the fundamental driving force of History itself.¹⁰

From this 'historical reification' of Hegel's logic, which proposes that the only temporality at play in Hegelian philosophy is the historical one,¹¹ follows a second fundamental point -also clearly present in the above-mentioned passage - which has to do with the idea of an "overcoming", in the sense of an ascent, or a return to Man of something previously allocated in the Beyond. The passage from Christian individuality to actual freedom is signaled here as the "'overcoming' of the Christian theology" through the consolidation of Napoleon's Empire, as the passage from a transcendental to an immanent Universal, the "absolute" State. The Beyond, the last figure of mastery over the individual, would have been *potentially* overcome with the event of the French Revolution, giving rise to the end of History.¹²

The idea of an "overcoming" of the Christian Beyond, the central theme of the passage we are dealing with, is very telling of the particular intercrossing of Kojève's ontological and political projects. As we mentioned above, the emphasis given to historical time as the *sole* temporality of the Concept, together with the claim that History itself is put in motion through the struggle between the Master and the Slave, seems to directly echo the first lines of *The Communist Manifesto*, in a supposed homology between class struggle and the struggle for recognition.

But if his political aim was to bring Hegel closer to Marx, hopefully breathing into the Slave the horizon of his own liberation,¹³ Kojève was nevertheless willing to simplify the Hegelian ontology in some essential points, the most important one concerns the nature of the

9 Jarczyk & Labarrière, 1992

10 Kojève 1980, p.43

11 Ibid. p.133

12 Fukuyama would later turn this potential into the new index of social inequalities in the world. See the preface for *The End of History and the Last Man*

13 Kojève 1980, p.23

Christian Event - which clearly did not stand, according to Hegel's later writings, as an example of a Man who became "fully and perfectly self-conscious",¹⁴ as it is the case with the Kojévian figure of the Wise Man, the transparent Self-Consciousness who could appear once history would supposedly have ended.¹⁵

The individual freedom that Kojève mentions as the outcome of the descent of "Heaven back to Earth" relies on the premise that, by 'looking away' from the Beyond, the recognition which was first given only to the Master, then to the Slave, by being enslaved to God, could transparently be returned to the individual - to a man who would himself be the perfect synthesis of the Particular and the Universal: "Christian Man can really become what he would like to be only by becoming a man without God - or, if you will, a God-Man".

It is not difficult to see that, in directly opposed terms to those of Chesterton and Žižek, Kojève understands the Christian Event to represent four very different words: *Man was made God*. To "become Christ", as he says, is to achieve Man's satisfaction, to encounter oneself at the end of a process Kojève refers to as a circular knowledge,¹⁶ which is, or, at least, can be, a *total* knowledge of oneself.

The Kojévian 'four words' can be traced back to the two theses for which he is famous: if man can become God - that is, if man can arrive at a knowledge which consistently and coherently answers the question 'Who am I?'¹⁷ without the destructive struggle with an alterity which alienates man from this knowledge - then, to put it in a Hegelian terminology, History would be understood as the process of Man alienating himself (Master) from himself (Slave), and then returning to himself (Wise Man), now in possession of a knowledge of his own position (Absolute Knowledge), constructed through the labour he endured along his alienated path. History would be the place of struggle of Masters and Slaves, and thus would come to an end once Man could

14 Ibid. p.76

15 For an expanded reading of this point, please refer to Nichols, James H. (2007), *Alexandre Kojève: Wisdom at the End of History* (20th Century Political Thinkers), (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers).

16 Kojève 1980, p.104

17 Ibid p.75

finally grasp himself as the Wise Man, the one who does not need God, for he himself has risen to a place in which such obstacles to recognition - Masters, Gods - have been lifted.

In this sense, by turning into *constituted* obstacles the otherwise *constitutive* dimension of alienation itself, Kojève's Heideggerian-Marxism could be grasped as the shift from Spirit to Man, for it brings to the historical, anthropological dimension, in a sort of strange promethean movement, an antagonism which Hegel had first placed *not only* on earth, but in the heavens as well. Instead of universalizing the restlessness which alienated the subject from himself, Kojève saw it fit to get rid of the Beyond as the place which imposed such alienation and thus to affirm its overcoming to be possible within History itself, or rather, at its end.

The consequences of this shift, we argue, is the obliteration of Hegel's essential insight into the de-centering of the subject, returning to the Cartesian-Heideggerian frame of reference, which might work with an evanescent, and punctual, subjectivity that does not coincide with the individual as such, but which does not account for the material left-over that is clearly presented as a constitutive dimension of Self-Consciousness by Hegel - not only in the last figure of the dialectics of Self-Consciousness, the Unhappy Consciousness,¹⁸ but essentially in the very form of what he called "infinite judgment".¹⁹

If Kojève's 'four words' have the paradoxical nature of simultaneously bringing Man up to God and supposedly having done with God and theism - and if, as we briefly sketched, they serve as the support for his two famous theses - then what is the conceptual support of this very particular reversal of the opening axiom of Žižek's *The Monstrosity of Christ*?

§3 The circular relation of Time and Concept

Kojève began his course of 1938-39 with two lectures on the figure of the Wise Man or Sage, and then went on to deal in more general terms with the last chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, famously titled

18 Hegel 1979, p.230 See also the chapter "Self-Consciousness is an object" in Žižek 1993

19 See Mladen Dolar's "The Phrenology of Spirit" in Copjec, Joan (1994), *Supposing the Subject*, (Verso).

Absolute Knowing [Absolute Wissen]. But Kojève, who was aware of the importance of Hegel's presentation of the relation between Concept and Time - which takes on a couple of paragraphs of the last Chapter of the *Phenomenology*, as well as some lines of the *Preface* - devoted three lectures specially to this relation. It is here that we find both the core of Kojève's interpretation of Hegel,²⁰ and the link which will allow us later on to turn the following unfounded remark into a conclusion: Kojève's reading of Hegel's Absolute Knowledge has the structure of what Lacan called *imaginary phallus*.²¹

Kojève focuses his reading of the relation between "Eternity, Time and the Concept"²² on Hegel's famous remark that "Time is the being-there of the Concept" [Die Zeit ist der Begriff selbst, der da ist].²³ Kojève praises how Hegel explicitly addressed this point, whereas most philosophers must be analysed in some depth, so one can actually unearth the relation between Concept and Time that is at play in their philosophies²⁴.

He begins his sixth lecture of that year presenting the four possible relations between Concept and Time:

- C=E (Concept is Eternity)
- C=E' (Concept is eternal - and Eternity is either outside or inside Time)
- C=T (Concept is Time)
- C=T' (Concept is temporal)

He then relates the first position to Parmenides and Spinoza, the second - which can be subdivided into two variants, the "ancient or pagan" one and the Judeo-Christian one - to Plato and Aristotle on one side, and Kant on the other. The third possibility is the Hegelian one;

20 There seems to be quite a clear correlation between Kojève's books and his main theses: *Le Concept*, *Le Temps et le Discours* expands on his reading of the relation between Concept and Time; *La Notion de l'Autorité* develops in detail his thesis on the Master and Slave Dialectics; and *Esquisse d'une Phénoménologie du Droit* presents a philosophy of right suited for the End of History.

21 Lacan 2007, p.697

22 Kojève 1980, p.100

23 Hegel 1979, p.801

24 Kojève 1980, p.131

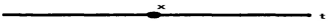
and the fourth is not a philosophical possibility, for it denies the idea of truth²⁵.

Once these four possibilities are presented, Kojève concentrates on Plato's hypothesis, using it as the basis to construct the diagram of Absolute Knowledge, given the proximity of Plato's position to the one of Christian theology.²⁶ Later on, we will return to this schema in order to compare the Kojévian Absolute Knowledge with our findings - so let us now carefully follow this construction step by step,²⁷ referring to Kojève's own description of each figure as our guideline.

He begins:

"If we symbolize temporal existence (Man in the World) by a line, we must represent the Concept by a singular point on this line: this point is essentially *other* than the other points of the line."²⁸

So, we could symbolise 'temporal existence' as a line **t** and the Concept, in this line, as a point **x**:



(FIG 1)

"Now, for Plato, the Concept is *related* to something *other* than itself (...) being eternal, the Concept must be related to *Eternity* (...) But, Plato says Eternity can only be *outside* of Time."

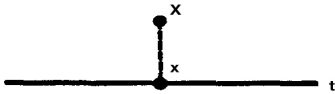
Above the point **x** we should write, outside of temporal existence **t**, the point **X**, of Eternity:

25 Ibid., p. 102

26 Ibid., p.104

27 The figures we present here are identical to the ones used by Kojève, we have only added the letters, which will later on help us to discuss them in more detail.

28 Ibid., p.104

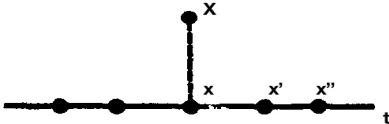


(FIG 2)

Kojève adds:

"In any case, the Concept can appear at any moment of time whatsoever. Hence the line that symbolizes existence implies *several* eternal singular points."

And now we add several other singular points (**x'**, **x''**, **x'''**...) to account for the different possible appearances (in **t**) of the Concept (**x**):



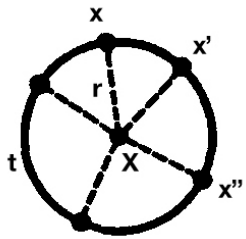
(FIG 3)

Because the relation between Eternity (**X**) and the Concept's appearances (**x**, **x'**, **x''**...) is always the same, Kojève introduces the *circular* aspect of this schema, basing himself on his reading of Plato's *Timaeus*:

"Now, by definition, *Eternity* - I.e., the entity to which the Concept is related - is always the *same*; and the *relation* of the Concept to this entity is also always the *same*. Therefore: at *every* instant of time (of the existence of Man in the World) the *same* relation to one and the *same* extra-temporal entity is possible. (...) Thus we find the schema of the metaphysics of the *Timaeus*: a circular time, the circularity of which (and the circularity of what, being temporal, is *in* time) is determined by the *relation* of what is *in* Time to what is *outside* of Time. And at the same time we find the famous "central point" that a Christian theology (I.e., in my view a variant of Platonism) must necessarily introduce into the Hegelian circle that symbolizes absolute or circular knowledge."

Two interesting aspects are implied in this step: the first is the *geometrical* understanding of the relation (r) between Eternity (X) and the appearing Concept ($x, x', x''...$), which gives rise to the circular character of the figure - for it must keep the *same* relation r for every x - and the second, the remark about the central point of the circle and its importance for the Christian theology, which strangely implies that a circle without a drawn central point *does not have that same centre*.

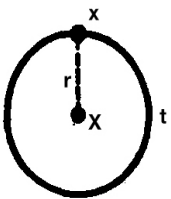
We could thus construct the figure in this way:



(FIG 4)

Now we simplify the figure:

"The Concept *can* be repeated in time. But its repetition does not change it, nor does it change its relation to Eternity; in a word, it changes nothing. Hence we can do away with all the radii of the circle, except for one"²⁹



(FIG 5)

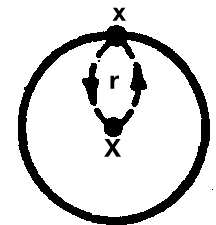
Kojève then dwells on the *double* aspect of the relation r between x

29 Ibid., p.105

and X :

"The radius symbolizes the *relation* between the eternal Concept and the Eternal or the eternal Entity. Therefore this relation too is non-temporal or eternal. Nevertheless, it is clearly a *relation* in the strict sense - I.e., a relation between two *different* things. Therefore the radius has, if you will, *extension* (in Space, since there is no Time in it.) Therefore we did well to symbolize it by a line (a dotted line, to distinguish it from the solid temporal line). However, the relation in question is undeniably *double*. Indeed, on the one hand the (eternal) Concept situated in Time - I.e., the Word - *rises* up through its *meaning* to the entity revealed by this meaning; and on the other hand, this entity *descends* through the *meaning* toward the Word, which it thus *creates* as Word out of its phonetic, sound-giving, changing reality."

Here, the importance of the classical theory of representation - that is, representation defined as the adequacy between signifier and signified, a relation commonly represented in geometric terms - to his understanding of Plato, and the Concept in general, becomes more evident. And, given that the Word rises to the Eternal entity, which then comes down to the Word, this double relation r must now be written as:



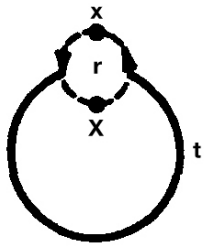
(FIG 6)

After having established the double nature of this relation r , Kojève moves on to emphasise that it is the relation itself which guarantees the *truth*, not the terms x and X , for without this double relation which binds them together, cutting across Time, there is no Concept and no Eternity:

"Generally speaking, there is a movement from the word to the thing, and a return from the thing to the word. And it is only this *double* relation that constitutes the *truth* or the revelation of reality, that is to say, the *Concept* in the proper sense. And on the other hand, this double

relation *exhausts* the truth or the Concept: the (eternal) Concept is related only to Eternity, and Eternity reveals itself exclusively through the Concept. Hence, even though they are in Time, they nonetheless have no relations with Time and the temporal. Therefore the double, or better, *circular*, relation of the (eternal) Concept and Eternity *cuts through* the temporal circle. Change as change remains inaccessible to the Concept.”³⁰

He then presents the following figure, stressing the primacy of the relation **r** over the point **x** within temporal existence **t** and the Eternal entity **X**:



(FIG 7)

Though the figure seems to displace the point **X** from its centre,³¹ this is only a graphical distortion, for Kojève bases himself on this configuration in order to stress that

“all truly coherent theism is a monotheism (...) the symbol of the theistic System is valid for every System that defines the Concept as an *eternal* entity in relation to *something other* than itself, no matter whether this other thing is Eternity in Time or outside of Time, or Time itself.”³²

So, once the construction and significance of the schema of

30 Ibid., p.107

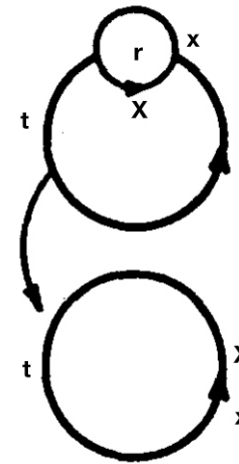
31 We constructed fig.7 according to the figure 7 that can be found on page 105 of Kojève's book. Even so, we believe that Kojève's text is not well represented by his own figure, for he seems to disregard certain conditions that were put forward before (such as the geometrical approach to *r*) and would have to be kept operational in order to maintain some rigor to the schema. As we will demonstrate later on, this inconsistency has to do both with Kojève's reading of Hegel and with the impossibility of fully formalizing Hegel's thought without the help of topology.

32 Ibid., p.121

the monotheistic System is understood, Kojève affirms once more the ‘overcoming of Christian theology’ mentioned above and claims that “Hegel does away with the small circle”³³ which, according to the relation *r*, ascended to a place outside of Time. In an inverse operation to Spinoza (who, Kojève claims, does away with the *temporal* circle), Hegel would, thus, arrive at an equally “homogeneous closed circle”:

“For we see that it is sufficient to deny that the Concept is a *relation* with *something other* than itself in order to set up the ideal of *absolute* - that is, *circular* - Knowledge.”

This amounts to the following movement:



(FIG 8)

Kojève explains that this circular schema of Absolute Knowledge, which equates Concept with Time (since, in it, **r** is nothing more than **t** itself), is the only one capable of giving “an account of History - that is, of the existence of the man whom each of us believes himself to be - that is, the *free* and *historical individual*.”³⁴ Only if the Concept is identified with Time, *historical* Time, - “the Time in which human history unfolds” - can

33 Ibid., p.121

34 Ibid., p.132

one account for the Concept as *work*,³⁵ as the work of Man, as the very existence of Man as Time.

To say, thus, that the Concept is *historical* is to supposedly give 'back' to Man a power over that which determines him. If, as Kojève claims, at the very first sentence of the introductory chapter, "Man is Self-Consciousness",³⁶ and the Concept unfolds itself solely within historical, "human" temporality, then the relation between Man and the Concept is based on a *transparency*, on the possibility of grasping the *whole* of the knowledge of oneself. To become a "God-Man", that is, an "Eternity revealed to itself", is in a certain way no longer to be in historical time (End of History) and no longer to find an obstacle to self-recognition (Mastery, the Beyond):

"It is only *finite* Being that dialectically overcomes itself. If, then the Concept is Time, that is, if conceptual understanding is *dialectical*, the existence of the Concept - and consequently of Being revealed by the Concept - is essentially *finite*. Therefore History itself must be essentially finite; collective Man (humanity) must die just as the human individual dies; universal History must have a definitive *end*.

We know that for Hegel this end of history is marked by the coming of Science in the form of a Book - that is, by the appearance of the Wise Man or of *absolute* Knowledge in the World. This absolute Knowledge is the *last* moment of Time - that is, a moment without *Future* - is no longer a temporal moment. If absolute Knowledge comes into being in Time, or better yet, as Time or History, Knowledge that has come into being is no longer temporal or historical: it is *eternal*, or, if you will, it is Eternity revealed to itself"³⁷

§4 Self-Different Negativity

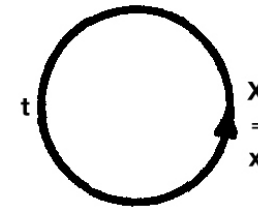
Everything hinges here on the status of one particular point in Time - its *edge* even - which we can find at the junction of *x* and *X*, the "last moment of Time". If we take another look at the Kojévian figure of

35 Ibid., p.145

36 Ibid., p.3

37 Ibid., p.148

Absolute Knowledge, there are some important elements to be noted concerning this particular point:



(FIG 9)

If $r=t$, that is, if the conceptual work amounts to a *circular* knowledge which arrives at a transparent understanding of *X*, then we must also be able to write that $x=X$ at the point where the circle *closes* - another way of stating what Kojève means by "Eternity (*X*) is revealed to itself ($=x$)". At this precise point, a certain impediment to Desire's recognition would have been lifted: from that position, a man would be "capable of answering in a *comprehensible* or satisfactory manner all questions that can be asked him concerning his acts, and capable of answering in such fashion that the *entirety* of his answers form a *coherent* discourse."³⁸ This position - as it was already made explicit by Kojève in the long quote we previously mentioned - has to do with a certain knowledge regarding Death:

"if Man is Concept and if the Concept is Time (that is, if Man is an essentially temporal being), Man is essentially mortal; and he is Concept, that is, absolute Knowledge or Wisdom incarnate, only if he knows this. Logos becomes flesh, becomes Man, only on the condition of being willing and able to die."³⁹

We would like to suggest that $x=X$ obeys the same logic of the following statement: "I am finite" or "I know (*x*) that I will die (*X*)".

Viewed under this light, the idea that Man should "become Christ" must ultimately means that Man must accept finitude, be "willing and

38 Ibid., p.75

39 Ibid., p.147

able to die”, in order to find, against the spectre of Death, the perfect return to himself, now that he knows his own horizon. By accepting that Man is not infinite - that is, that *X* is solely and fully inscribed in the historical dimension - Man’s finitude becomes *the whole of Man*. Here, we find the perfect transition point between the metaphysical tradition and the post-Hegelian, post-metaphysical currents of thought. The finite as the Absolute - the Idea of the End as the last Idea, or even as the end of the Idea - ultimately means that *to accept this figure of Absolute Knowledge is the same as to simply refuse it*, since the limits of knowledge and the knowledge of these limits directly coincide.

This, we believe, is the precise point where the core of Hegel’s philosophy finds its most radical obliteration. Kojève is one of the philosophers most responsible for bringing to the attention of 20th Century French thought the utter importance of the philosophy of Hegel as well as having being the direct influence of Lacan’s first theory of Desire. However, a possible reason as to why Kojève’s re-affirmation of Hegel also served as an alibi to dismiss him is that the Kojévian Hegel perfectly fits the role of being the last metaphysical philosopher of the Absolute and simultaneously the first philosopher of finitude - and this is precisely the function served by the Kojévian figure of Absolute Knowledge: it closes a circle with a negativity, yes, but with a *self-identical negativity*.

We should pause here for a moment to consider a particular symptom of Kojève’s reading. In his famous series of lectures, Kojève strangely *skipped*⁴⁰ the section on the dialectics of Consciousness titled “Perception: the Thing and deception” - the section in which the figure of a *negativity that coincides with itself* is proven to be equally restless and unstable any other moment in the dialectical economy, being nothing more than “the work of the empty ‘Ego’, which makes an object out of this empty self-identity of its own”⁴¹.

Similarly, nowhere in Kojève’s comments do we find a fully developed interpretation of what Hegel refers to as the moment of

40 We use the complete french edition as reference, the english one is an abridged compilation. See Kojève, Alexandre and Queneau, Raymond (1980), Introduction à la lecture de Hegel : leçons sur la Phénoménologie de l’Esprit professées de 1933 à 1939 à l’École des Hautes Études, (Gallimard).

41 Hegel 1979, p. §128 See also Hegel 1991, p. §44

Self-Consciousness in which “the enemy shows itself in its distinctive shape”⁴²: the very last figure of Unhappy Consciousness,⁴³ which attempts to reduce itself to an immediate nothingness, but cannot give away the wretchedness of its own “animal functions” - it is parasitised by its own unessential body which must serve as the support for its essential nothingness.

What these two moments have in common is that, in them, nothingness itself appears in its *constitutive impurity*. In the first case, the last moment of the dialectics of Consciousness delineates a proposition akin to “the Thing is a Veil”⁴⁴ - the supposed self-identity of the void is nothing but a product of the veil’s own inherent non-coincidence - while in the second case, it could be stated that “Nothingness is Wretchedness”⁴⁵ - there is a material obstacle that is both the product and the support of Self-Consciousness’ drive to renounce every determination in order to become itself a self-identical void. These two sentences, which have the form of what Hegel calls an infinite judgment, state that the utmost negativity is bound to a material left-over.⁴⁶ In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek remarks how easy it is to dismiss the outrageous aspect of such formulations:

“We succeed in transmitting the dimension of subjectivity *by means of the failure itself*, through the radical insufficiency, through the absolute maladjustment of the predicate in relation to the subject. This is why ‘the Spirit is a bone’ is a perfect example of what Hegel calls the ‘speculative proposition’, a proposition whose terms are incompatible,

42 Hegel 1979, p. §225

43 The abridged English version contains only a couple of references to the last figure of the dialectics of Self-Consciousness, while the complete version presents an analysis which describes it simply as “Christian” consciousness, reducing it to the same register of an anthropological example as the Stoic and Skeptical ones, without privileging its status as the *truth* of the previous moments.

44 Hegel 1979, p. §165

45 Ibid: §225: “the actual activity of consciousness becomes an activity of doing nothing, and its act of consumption becomes a feeling of its unhappiness. (...) In its animal functions, consciousness is consciousness of itself as this *actual individual*. These functions, instead of being performed without embarrassment as something which are in and for themselves null and which can acquire no importance and essentiality for spirit, are even more so now objects of serious attention. They acquire the utmost importance since it is in them that the enemy shows itself in its distinctive shape. However, since this enemy engenders itself in its very suppression, consciousness, by fixating itself on the enemy, is to an even greater degree continually dwelling on it instead of freeing itself from it.”

46 Hegel 1979, p. § 61-63

without common measure. As Hegel points out in the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, to grasp the true meaning of such a proposition we must go back and read it over again, because this true meaning arises from the very failure of the first, 'immediate' reading."⁴⁷

It is this intricate relation between the infinity of the speculative proposition - the true infinity, the infinity of *self-difference* - and the category of a failure, which extends itself even to negativity as such that is obfuscated in Kojève's interpretation. To exemplify this we could refer back to the fundamental infinite judgment that sustains the Christian Event: "God is Man". If we are to understand it in terms of the *serial infinity* of approximations and accumulations, then it does state that Man's horizon is to become the (immediate) identity of Man and God ($x=X$), a "God-Man". But considered under the light of the true, self-different infinity, "God is Man" is an assertion of God's very restlessness, his uncontrolled entanglement with his own creation. God himself has been marked by the wretched experience of self-estrangement, which defines the miserable figures of self-consciousness: "He was made Man"⁴⁸.

Hegel's famous proposition "Time is the being there of the Concept" - which so univocally supports Kojève's reading of the Hegelian edifice - also opens up to a very different approach, one that is not based on the overcoming of one term through the other, but which states their simultaneous entanglement and incommensurability. Hegel himself made it very explicit, especially in his later works, that Time itself is trapped in a dual logic of the finite and the infinite but Kojève, who did not fail to see this, referred to this duality as Hegel's "basic error".⁴⁹

§5 The Beautiful Soul and Absolute Knowledge

If we now briefly re-consider the importance given by Kojève to the dialectics of the Lord and the Bondsman, a moment which is the outcome of a fight for Life and Death between two desiring self-consciousnesses, we should be able to see that Kojève *repeats the gesture of the Slave*, for he sees in the Slave that which the Slave sees

47 Žižek 1989, p. 207

48 As we will see, we propose that, instead of $x=X$, concrete universality should be written $x\neq x$ and $X\neq X$, according a topological twist which binds them together *in their alienation*.

49 Footnote 20 in Kojève 1980, p. 133

in the Master: the possibility of pure, independent, self-coincident nothingness, one which would not be attached or parasitised by the *excessive life* which disrupts its willed freedom.

The object of desire never coincides with the promise of infinitude which shines from the Beyond - Kojève made this very clear - but this insight should be further radicalised: the Beyond also fails to coincide with itself, and is caught up in the objects which do not measure up to it. Death itself, as the ultimate name of finitude, cannot serve as Man's final horizon, for this positing implies that *it has fallen over into Life*. That is: not only is the finite different from the infinite, but this difference is so radical that the finite appears as containing that distinction itself - *being-not* the infinite - and not simply as *being* the finite. In this negative sense, something of the infinite must get stuck in the finite objects that present themselves to Man, including Man himself. This is why the total acceptance of death as the self-identical limit of our finitude ultimately consents too little to the Hegelian restlessness of the negative, which, in truth, prevents death from separating finitude and the infinite without any porosity. It is beyond the self-identity of the negative - where Žižek identifies the true outrage of the speculative - that we must come to terms with the constitutive impasse of subjectivity - perfectly formulated by Župan i in the following statement: "not only are we not infinite, we *are not even finite*".⁵⁰

This is why, ultimately, the historical reification of the figures of the Lord and the Bondsman must be strictly understood as a *fetishisation*⁵¹ of Hegel's logic. Through it, Kojève keeps alive the promise of a fully self-conscious Man, a Man in whom Desire would coincide with itself, like an Heraclitean Fire, which consumes all, but does not itself suffer the radical differentiation that it recognises in everything else:

"As long as one questions solely the fixation of determinations, we will only be moving from an ontology of the inalterable Being to an

50 Župančič, 2008, p. 53

51 In the Freudian sense of "a reminder of the triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it." - a way of simultaneously defending oneself against the universalization of a principle of non-coincidence and of electing something which we suppose to be beyond such principle. "Fetishism" (1927) in Freud (1971), Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXI (1927-1931): The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents, and Other Works [vol. 21]]. (Hogarth Press).

ontology of a devouring Becoming. Insignificant advantage. Certainly this is a way of declaring that the 'finite' is incapable of integrating in itself the Other - but one remains thinking about the finite 'thing' as a being."⁵²

In this sense, we argue that the reading in which *x* should coincide with *X* in Absolute Knowledge, as Man accepts his finitude, requires an homologous operation to the one known in psychoanalysis as *imaginary castration*: one recognises that there is an absolute lack in the Other, but this empty place is still roamed by the spectre of a complete Otherness because of the very univocity of this void.⁵³ To put it in Freudian terms: the boy has seen that his mother has no penis, but the fantasy that she *could* have one is kept alive through the very partial acceptance of its lacking - even missing, or better, *precisely* as missing, that object still serves as the background of the subject's fantasy, it is still thought as the "*it*" against which everything else is measured or valued - and self-identity remains therefore as the horizon of what can be grasped. Does Death not play a similar role in Kojève's philosophical thought? Does it not serve as the name of the subject's finitude, its irremediable lack, but an *identical* lack nonetheless? It is Death which coincides with itself in **x=X**, in what might be called the first axiom of the metaphysics of finitude.⁵⁴

Kojève's 'four words' - Man can become Christ - silently hovers on the horizon of post-metaphysical thought, for the death of Mastery, taken positively (like Kojève does) or negatively (as his critics do), cannot avoid being the hymn of Death as *the Master*. To put it in the Hegelian terms of the fight for Life and Death, the Slave's mortal encounter with Death, the Absolute Master, as it first seeks to detach itself from Life, to prove its independence, is perversely disavowed in the guise of the Wise Man's final statement, the immediate positing that "death is death". As Hegel makes very clear, the immediate positing of self-coincidence always relies on a hidden economy, which makes its

52 Lebrun 2004, p. 216

53 Lacan 1998, p. 230 See also Lacan's critique of the absolute subject in the (Kojévian) Hegel in *Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectics of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious* in Lacan, Jacques (2007), *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, (W. W. Norton & Company).

54 We use the term as it is articulated in the title "Physics of the Infinite against Metaphysics of the Finite" in Župančič, 2008

restlessness spring forth somewhere else - and the name of the figure of self-consciousness associated with this transparent self-knowledge is, in fact, the *beautiful soul*.⁵⁵

§6 Incarnation, alienation and appearance

In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel addresses the difference between the propositions "Man can become God" and "God was made Man" through a comparison between Socrates and Christ. The philosopher begins the chapter on Christianity by quoting the famous biblical passage "When the time was fulfilled, God sent his Son"⁵⁶ and emphasising the Trinitarian structure of this statement, which encapsulates the arrival of the Christian Religion:

"God is thus recognized as Spirit only when known as the Triune. This new principle is the new axis on which the World-History turns. This is wherefrom and whereto History goes. [Bis hierher und von daher geht die Geschichte] "When the Time was fulfilled, God sent his Son" is the statement of the Bible. This means nothing other than: Self-Consciousness had risen to the moments which belong to the Concept of Spirit, and to the need of seizing them in an absolute manner"⁵⁷

It is important to note that Hegel chose a very particular verb - *erfüllen* - to express the moment of Christ's coming - he paraphrases the biblical verse a couple of pages later, again referring to a *fulfilling* of Time.⁵⁸ The time of Christ does not simply 'come' as if it was a particular moment *in Time*, rather, something of Time itself is at stake in the Christian Event - something *of Time* is fulfilled.

Hegel goes on to present some essential traits that constitute the Greek, Roman and Jewish Spirits - in an abridged and slightly distinct manner from the famous chapter on religion in the *Phenomenology of*

55 Hegel, 1979, p. §668

56 Galatians 4, 4 in God (2011), ESV Study Bible, (Crossway Bibles) - Hegel translated this passage as "Als die Zeit *erfüllet* war, sandte Gott seinen Sohn" - a different translation from both 1545's *Luther Bibel* and the *Hoffnung für Alle*. See <http://www.biblegateway.com/>

57 Hegel, 1995, p. 271 We also refer the reader to the original text - the second chapter in Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (1986), *Werke in 20 Bänden und Register*, Bd.12, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, (Suhrkamp).

58 "The identity of the subject with God came into the World when the Time was fulfilled." Ibid., p.274

Spirit. After having outlined the path from the Greek law of Spirit - which could be summarised in the statement “Man, know thyself”⁵⁹ - to the wretchedness and boundless longing of the Jewish people, whose Spirit is “refined to Universality, through the reference of it to the One,” Hegel introduces the arrival of Christian Religion in the following manner:

“The infinite loss [of the Jewish Spirit] is countered only by its own Infinity, and thereby becomes infinite gain. The identity of the Subject with God came into the World *when the Time was fulfilled*: the Consciousness of this identity is the manifested God in His Truth. The content of this Truth is Spirit itself, the vital movement itself. God’s nature, being pure Spirit, is *manifested to Man in the Christian Religion*.”⁶⁰

The passage from Judaism to Christianity - encapsulated in the sentence “the infinite loss is countered only by its own Infinity, and thereby becomes infinite gain” - is explained through a reference to the narrative of Original Sin, the “eternal myth of Man”:⁶¹ in the Old Testament, it is told as the story of a Fall, an infinite *loss*, but, in Christ, it is transformed into infinite gain through the restless Infinity of its own negativity. Man does not rise up towards the Other, the inaccessible One: the negative Beyond itself, for it is *infinite*, cannot be simply self-identical, and thus manifests itself. The shift from infinite *loss* to infinite *gain* must, in this sense, be understood as the shift from a God who is a lost object to Man to a God who is himself *loss as an object*.⁶²

If at first Man fell from God, alienated in his wretched existence from the transcendental Oneness, which lay beyond his nostalgic longing, in the Christian Event *God himself falls from Heaven*. The crucial declaration of the Christian Event, which directly echoes the Chestertonian “four words”, is thus: “Christ has *appeared* [Christus ist erschienen]”.⁶³

59 Ibid., p.271

60 Ibid., p.274

61 Ibid., p.273

62 The distinction between the lost object and the loss as object is a crucial point of Lacanian theory. See Žižek 2006, pp. 63-66

63 Hegel, 1986, Bd.12:, p.393

However, Hegel is very clear in distinguishing the consequences of this Event from the idea of a direct and immediate identity of Man and God: God has not revealed himself to have been always ‘just’ Man himself, who up until then failed to grasp himself as such. On the contrary: it is the same wretchedness which alienates Man from God in the Jewish Spirit - the impossibility of reducing oneself to nothingness,⁶⁴ and thus achieve self-identity in pure Subjectivity - which is now *the very condition of Man’s reconciliation with God*:

“Man himself therefore is comprehended in the Idea of God, and this comprehension may be thus expressed – that the unity of Man with God is posited in the Christian Religion. But this unity must not be superficially conceived, as if God were only Man, and Man, without further condition, were God. Man, on the contrary, is God only in so far as he annuls the merely Natural and Limited in his Spirit and elevates himself to God. That is to say, it is obligatory on him who is a partaker of the truth, and knows that he himself is a constituent [Moment] of the Divine Idea, to give up his merely natural being: for the Natural is the Unspiritual. In this Idea of God, then, is to be found also the *Reconciliation* that heals the pain and inward suffering of man. For Suffering itself is henceforth recognized as an instrument necessary for producing the unity of man with God.”⁶⁵

Man’s alienation from himself is precisely what Man shares with God.⁶⁶ Hegel emphasises this essential point by further distinguishing Christ from the great figures of the Greek World:

“Our thoughts naturally revert to the Greek anthropomorphism, of which we affirmed that it did not go far enough. For that natural elation of soul which characterized the Greeks did not rise to the Subjective Freedom of the I itself – to the inwardness that belongs to the Christian Religion – to the recognition of Spirit as a *definite positive being*. – The appearance of the Christian God involves further its being *unique* in its kind; it can occur only once, for God is realized as Subject, and as

64 Hegel, 1995, p. 272-273 See also Hegel, 1979, p. §225

65 Hegel, 1995, p. 274-275

66 On this precise point, see Žižek’s “Il n’y a pas de rapport religieux” in Ayerza, J. (2001), Lacanian Ink 18, (The Wooster Press).

manifested Subjectivity is exclusively One Individual.”⁶⁷

In contrast to the exemplar individuals of the Greek world - as well as the Lamas and higher religious figures of the East, which are supposed to return many times throughout History - the coming of Christ is an unique Event, for “subjectivity as infinite relation to self, has its form *in itself*, and as manifested Subjectivity is exclusively One Individual”. This individuality cannot be repeated. But Hegel goes even further and claims that, though Christ was One, one misses the point of the Christian Event if he is considered to be “merely” the appearance of a *perfect* Man - the man who would be a godly or whole Man: “if Christ is only taken as an exceptionally fine individual, even as one without sin, then we are ignoring the representation of the speculative idea, its absolute truth.”⁶⁸

Christ is One, but if we are not to ignore the absolute truth of God’s manifestation, we cannot simply take him for the “impeccable” One, because “the sensuous existence in which Spirit is embodied is only a transitional phase. Christ dies; only as dead is he exalted to Heaven and sits at the right hand of God: only thus is he Spirit”. The fulfillment of Time mentioned above is, thus, properly distinguished from a ‘culmination’, it cannot be accounted for in the measurable sense of a series of qualities that, by a miracle, touched upon the Beyond. It belongs to a different register: only by counting *the One together with its own negativity* - by including Death *within* Christ - can we grasp Spirit as such:

“Christ – man as man – in whom the unity of God and man has appeared, has in his death, and his history generally, himself presented the eternal history of Spirit – a history which every man has to accomplish in himself, in order to exist as Spirit, or to become a child of God, a citizen of his kingdom”⁶⁹

Again, Hegel puts forth a very precise claim: not only is the Christian Event defined not by Christ’s ‘perfection’, but by the inclusion

67 Hegel, G W F (1995), p.275

68 Ibid. p.275-276

69 Ibid. p.277-278

of Death as part of the Event itself. Hence, one should also not strive to ‘accomplish himself’ Christ’s act - one should actually accomplish it ‘*in himself*’ [die jeder Mensch an ihm selbst zu vorbringen hat].⁷⁰ In this sense, Christ’s gift to mankind is to allow Man to name a Death which takes place *within* Life - not only a *future* Death, like the one mentioned by Kojève, which would determine the horizon of History, but a *present* one. In the words of the priest Antonio Vieira, in his famous sermon of Ash Wednesday, from 1672:

“Two things preaches the Church to all the mortals: both are great, both are sad, both are fearful, both are certain. But one is in such a way certain and evident, that it is not necessary any understanding to believe it; the other is in such a way certain and difficult, that no understanding is enough to grasp it. One is present, the other future: but the future one, the eyes can see; the present one, understanding cannot reach. What two enigmatic things are those? *Pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris*. You are dust, and into dust you shall convert. You are dust, that is the present one; Into dust you shall convert, that is the future one. The future dust, the dust we shall become, the eyes can see it: the present dust, the dust we are, neither can the eyes see it, nor can understanding grasp it.”⁷¹

Christ’s exception, thus, consists in being the One in which *one* Death was simultaneously inside and outside of Life. This is why Hegel claims that Christ’s death *is his resurrection*:

“Christ’s death assumes the character of a death that constitutes the transition to glory, but to a glorification that is only a restoration of the original glory. Death, the negative, is the mediating term through which the original majesty is posited as now achieved.”⁷²

After Christ, Death itself has been split into two - the present and the future death - and in the spiritual life of the community, founded

70 “What belongs to the element of representational thought, namely, that absolute spirit represents the nature of spirit in its existence as *an individual spirit* or, rather, as a particular spirit, is therefore shifted here into self-consciousness itself, into the knowledge that sustains itself in its *otherness*. This self-consciousness thus does not therefore actually *die* in the way that the *particular* is represented to have *actually* died; rather, its particularity dies away within its universality, which is to say, in its *knowledge*, which is the essence reconciling itself with itself.” Hegel, 1979: §785

71 Vieira, 2009, p. 260 (my translation)

72 Hegel, 2008, p. 325-326

upon this division, Christ lives on as the Holy Spirit - as a *real* presence, not a merely future presence⁷³ - which affirms Death's submission to non-coincidence:

“The followers of Christ, united in this sense and living in the spiritual life, form a *community* which is the Kingdom of God. “Where two or three are gathered together in my name,” (that is, in the determination of that which I am) - says Christ - “there am I in the midst of them”. The community is the real and present life in the Spirit of Christ”⁷⁴

The idea of a Death that is itself split into two, and therefore of a Life that “bears death calmly, and in death, sustains itself”,⁷⁵ leads us back to Galatians 4:4 - “when the Time *was fulfilled*, God sent his Son” - allowing us to grasp in this return the true dimension of the ‘fulfillment’ of Time: the founding of a new temporality which does not simply move *towards* the end, but which contains that end *within* itself, in its very constitution.⁷⁶ In minimal terms: after Christ, one is allowed *to die before one dies*.⁷⁷

Concluding the above-mentioned sermon, priest Antonio Vieira affirms the fundamental dimension of this death within life:

“Now I have finally understood that difficult advice given [to Hezekiah] by the Holy Spirit: *Ne moriaris in tempore non tuo* . Do not die in the time that does not belong to you. *Ne moriaris*. Do not die? Thus, to die is within my hand's reach: *In tempore non tuo*. In the time that does not belong to you? Thus, there is a time that is mine, and a time that is not mine. And so it is. But which time belongs to me, in which it would be good to die, and which time is not mine, in which it would be wrong for me to die? Mine is the time before death; the time after death does not belong to me. And to withhold or to wait for death, for the time after

73 Ibid., p.322

74 Hegel, 1995, p. 278

75 Hegel, 1979: §32

76 Arantes, 1981, p. 303

77 Hence Žižek's remark in “Il n'y a pas de rapport religieux” that “if one conceives of the Holy Spirit radically enough, there is simply no place in the Christian edifice for afterlife” (p.92 - in lacanian ink 18)

death, which is not mine, is ignorance, is madness, foolishness (...); but to anticipate death, and to die before life is over, in the time that belongs to me, this is the prudent, the wise and the well understood death.”⁷⁸

The Holy Spirit, thus, reminds us that man can serve himself of death - there is a death that *falls within life*. Catherine Malabou, in her seminal work *The Future of Hegel*, carefully develops how the Hegelian reading of the Incarnation is centered around the arrival of this new temporality:

“A fundamental temporality, in its very concept irreducible to no other, arrives with the Incarnation. (...) By dying, Christ reveals to the Western world a new relation between spirit and finitude, in which death is the limitation (borne), the end of a linear series of moments linked one to the other.”⁷⁹

The full weight of this passage can only be appreciated under the light of the distinction between *limit* (Granze) and *limitation* (Schranke), as it is made by Hegel in the *Science of Logic*: “In order that the limit which is in something as such should be a limitation (Schranke), something must at the same time in its own self transcend the limit. It must in its own self be related to the limit as to something which is not”.⁸⁰ That is, to have death as a *limitation* means that it must transcend its own self, it can not be understood as a separate dimension, simply ‘outside’ of Life, but one that names the limit *from within* that which it is not.

This reference to the arrival of a new temporality allows us to turn the distinction made above between Socrates and Christ into the fundamental distinction between the Greek and the Christian temporalities. Hegel's solution is to present the latter as that which reconciles the inherent duality of the first - the duality between the time of Man and the eternity of the Gods⁸¹ -, the crucial point, however, is that it overcomes this duality without having to dismiss any of the

78 Vieira, 2009, p. 273 - a very similar point is made by Brecht in his Baden Baden play on Consent. Žižek presents a brilliant reading of it at the end of *The Monstrosity of Christ* (p.299)

79 Malabou, 2004, p. 120

80 Hegel, 1989, p. 132

81 See Malabou, 2004, p. 65

two terms: the solution is *to shift the accent from the duality to the gap that separates them*⁸². As Malabou writes, “Hegel’s God (...) is situated *at the crossroads of time*”⁸³ Or, to put it in the terms used by Hegel himself, the “infinite loss” of their distinction is itself grasped as “infinite gain”: that which separates Man from Eternity is becomes that which *simultaneously constitutes both realms*: “the non-being of the finite is the being of the Absolute”.⁸⁴ We see, thus, that this conception of overcoming is radically distinct from the one implied by the Kojévian ‘Man can become God’. To paraphrase Mao Zedong’s famous retort to the Americans: the coming about of a perfect Man - the actualization of an impeccable individual who would be the culmination of the horizon set by the Greek Spirit - might even be a major event for the solar system, but it would hardly mean anything to the universe *as a whole*.

The “completion” of cyclical Time would do nothing more than to ground what was already *possible* to think - since, in a way, perfection was already *thinkable* - on actuality, but it would not change the conceptual coordinates of the world, let alone of the universe as such. The logic of Incarnation, on the other hand, the manifestation of God *as appearance* - under the Law of appearance, that is, the Law of self-difference⁸⁵ - brings about precisely such an Universal Event: through it, *negativity as such* can be grasped. Impossibility itself - the impossibility for Man *and for God*, to coincide either with each other or themselves - is born into the world as a Concept, as Holy Spirit.

This distinction, we argue, perfectly demonstrates how Hegel’s position is not simply ‘different’ from its Kojévian presentation: it encompasses the previous position and solves the *negative* inconsistency of placing finitude as a self-consistent realm by affirming the conceptual centrality of a *positive* inconsistency, a certain “logical writing of death”⁸⁶ which immerses the infinite into the finite, in a movement that disrupts both realms. This radical inconsistency, we believe, is only truly recuperated with Žižek’s Lacanian conceptual

82 On this point, see Lebrun, 2004, p. 250 and Agamben, 2005, pp. 65-68

83 See Malabou, 2004, p.130

84 Hegel, 1989, p.290

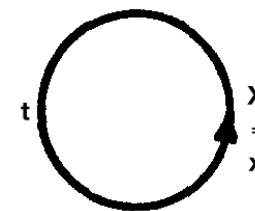
85 Hegel, 1979: §160-165 and 1989, p. 499 - 511

86 See Jarczyk, 2002

framework and is the pivot of his Christian atheism - or, to put it in Hegel’s terms, the pivot of the shift from the *historical* to the *speculative* Good Friday⁸⁷.

§ 7 The Žižekian Circle of Circles

In our presentation of the Kojévian figure of Absolute Knowledge we focused on the immediate coincidence between the Concept (**X**) and its becoming-in-Time (**x, in t**) that occurs at the point where the circle of knowledge closed on itself (**X=x**):



(FIG 9)

However, in order to properly account for Žižek’s fidelity to Hegel and for the emptying out of this scarecrow image of the “philosopher of total knowledge”, we must not only criticise the Kojévian reading, but rather attempt to develop a new figure of Absolute Knowledge, one in which the shift from the Kojévian point of immediate identity (**X=x**) - let us call it “absolute wisdom” - to the Žižekian point of the incarnation of non-coincidence (**x≠x; X≠X**) - which we will call “absolute knowing” - would allow us to demonstrate how Žižek’s reading of Hegel also encompasses the previous, Kojévian interpretation. If the Kojévian absolute wisdom supposedly takes place at the threshold of History, announcing its End, the figure of absolute knowing must be grasped as the way this End itself falls into History. It has the End of History as its *beginning*.

As we briefly mentioned in our analysis of Kojève, Hegel related the notion of a transparent self-knowledge with the figure of

87 Hegel, 1977, p. 190-191

the beautiful soul - and at the beginning of the chapter on Absolute Knowledge, he returns once more to this point:

“The unification that is still lacking is the simple unity of the concept. This concept is also already on hand in the aspect of self-consciousness, but, just as it previously come before us, it has, like all the other moments, the form of a *particular shape of consciousness*. – It is that part of the shape of self-certain spirit which stands path within its concept and which was called the *beautiful soul*. The beautiful soul is its own knowledge of itself within its pure and transparent unity – the self-consciousness which knows this pure knowledge of *pure* inwardly-turned-being as spirit – not merely the intuition of the divine but the divine’s self-intuition. – Since this concept steadfastly holds itself in opposition to its realization, it is the one-sided shape which we saw not merely disappear into thin air but also positively empty itself and move forward.”⁸⁸

Thus, the unification that is missing here, distinguishing the beautiful soul from the figure of Absolute Knowledge, is precisely the one which would *include its own blind spot* into the totality of knowledge, for “self-consciousness is the concept in its truth, that is, *in the unity with its self-emptying*”:

“It is the knowing of pure knowledge not as abstract *essence*, which is what duty is – but the knowing of this pure knowledge as an essence which is *this* knowing, *this* individual pure self-consciousness, which is therefore at the same time the genuinely true *object*, for this concept is the self existing-for-itself.”⁸⁹

We see, thus, that a ‘totality’ requires a radical a step beyond the configuration of a ‘whole’: it requires us to include ourselves in the picture as an unsurmountable hiatus which stands for the impossibility of immediately grasping our own position of enunciation. This inclusion opens up “a perspective of historical reality not as a positive order, but as a ‘non-all’, an incomplete texture which tends to its own future. It is this inclusion of the future within the present, its inscription as a

88 Ibid §795

89 Ibid §795

hiatus within the order of ‘what there is’ that makes the present into an ontologically incomplete ‘non-all’”.⁹⁰ In this sense, to quote the heading of a sub-chapter of one of Žižek’s books, we must affirm that *a totality is done with failures*.

Rather than dismissing the ‘End of History’ or resisting it, Žižek’s position is that we always speak from the end of history simply because *we are in History*. And, as we have already seen, this *abandonment* in history is what we share with God - this, in fact, is the reason why

“in history proper (...) the universal Principle is caught into the ‘infinite’ struggle with itself, i.e., the struggle is each time the struggle for the fate of the universality itself. (...) it is not that a temporal deployment merely actualizes some pre-existing atemporal conceptual structure—this atemporal conceptual structure itself is the result of contingent temporal decisions.”⁹¹.

What we encounter here, once more, is the logic that ties together truth and the real through the concrete engagement with the impossibilities of a field of knowledge. This can also be stated in the following terms: as we struggle with and for an Idea, the Idea itself struggles, with and for us.

By focusing on the importance of the emptying out of self-consciousness in the figure of absolute knowing, Žižek reminds us that Hegel’s configuration of the relation between the Concept and Time, as elaborated in the notion of concrete universality, requires of us an engagement that is postulated upon this irremovable hiatus at the core of history itself:

“not only did Hegel have no problem with taking sides (with an often very violent partiality) in the political debates of his time; his entire mode of thinking is deeply ‘polemical’, always intervening, attacking, taking sides, and, as such, as far as possible from a detached position of Wisdom which observes the ongoing struggles from a neutral distance,

90 Žižek’s “The Idea of Communism as a Concrete Universality” in Badiou, Alain and Slavoj Žižek (2011), *L’idée du communisme : Volume 2*, conférence de Berlin 2010, (Nouvelles Editions Lig-nes). p.308

91 Žižek in Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman, 2011, p. 211

aware of their nullity *sub specie aeternitatis*. For Hegel, the true ('concrete') universality is accessible only from an engaged 'partial' standpoint."⁹²

Let us now follow Žižek's formulations in *For they know not what they do* and "risk a topological specification of the Kant-Hegel relationship" focusing on the relation between finitude and totality.

Žižek begins:

"The structure of the Kantian transcendental field is that of a circle with a gap, since man as a finite being does not have access to the totality of beings"⁹³

This first figure already varies from its Kojévian version, since Kojève's account of Kant's "skepticism and criticism"⁹⁴ has marked over this gap with a dotted line, which "hypothetically"⁹⁵ closes the circle of knowledge. Kojève, as we have already seen, did not theorise how negativity as such could be part of the restless economy of determinations - in Kant's case, how finitude could be "ontologically constitutive" - choosing instead to explain Kant's transcendental constitution as an hypothetical realm, filled with abstract determinations, rather than one which constituted reality precisely in its inaccessibility.⁹⁶

Žižek's account of Kant's position should be presented as the following:⁹⁷

92 Ibid. p.214

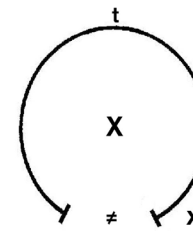
93 Žižek, 2008, p. 218

94 Kojève, 1980, p. 119

95 Ibid. p.128-129

96 Kant, 2002, p.184; See also Žižek, 2006, pp.22-23

97 Again, the figure itself is presented here as it is in the author's work, but we have added the letters (X;x;t) and operations (=;≠) to it.



(FIG 10)

In which the transcendental horizon (**X**) appears as a "missing link" that separates (≠) the noumenal from the phenomena (**x, in t**). Žižek continues:

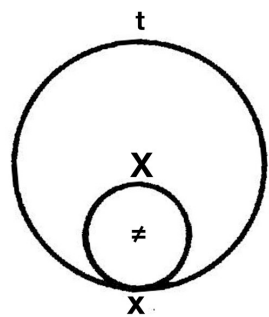
"However, contrary to common view, the passage from Kant to Hegel does *not* consist in closing the circle.

If this were the case, Hegel would simply return to pre-Kantian, pre-critical metaphysics. Hegel does indeed "close the circle", but this very closure introduces a supplementary loop transforming it into the "inner eight" of the Moebius band.

In other words, Hegel definitely *maintains* the gap around which the transcendental field is structured: the very retroactivity of the dialectical process (the "positing of presuppositions") attests to it. The point is just that he *displaces* it: the external limit preventing the closure of the circle changes into a curvature which makes the very closed circle vicious."⁹⁸

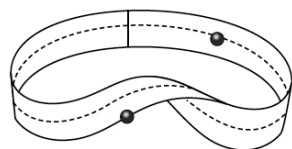
Accordingly, the philosopher presents a figure that is no longer *geometrical*, but properly *topological*, since it is no longer defined by the geometry of its centre, but by the invariance of a hole. In it, the gap (≠) that prevented the closure of the circle is displaced to the very curvature of the figure, binding its beginning and its end through the twisting of the line:

98 Žižek, 2008, pp. 218-219



(FIG 11)

In fact, the most precise definition of this figure is that it is the bi-dimensional representation of the border of a Moebius Strip:



(FIG 12)

At first, in Kojève's account of Plato's "monotheism", **X** was the "other side" of **x**, and their relation **r** cut across the circle **t**. Then, in the Kojévian absolute wisdom there was no relation **r**, but an immediate identity of **X** and **x** at the end of history. Here, in this first presentation of the Žižekian absolute knowing, we return to the platonic distinction between **X** and **x**, but with a (literal) twist: **X** and **x** do not coincide, and yet, there is no inner/outer duality in the circle. Lacan, who introduced the use of topology in the structuring of the Freudian theory of the drive, summarises this precise point very clearly in an "Escherian fable" presented in his 10th Seminar:

"the insect who moves along the surface of the Moebius strip (...) this insect can believe that at every moment, if this insect has the representation of what a surface is, there is a face, the one always on the reverse side of the one on which he is moving, that he has not explored. He can believe in this reverse side. Now as you know there is not one.

He, without knowing it, explores what is not the two faces, explores the single face that is there: and nevertheless at every instant, there is indeed a reverse."⁹⁹

Žižek's presentation of Hegel's Absolute Knowledge thus solves a representational issue we had encountered before, since it no longer requires us to account for the geometrical centre which gave rise to the duality between **X** as ineffable beyond or as immanent coincidence with its manifestation. As made clear by Lacan's explanation, in the Moebius band **X** is always the "other side" of **x**, but this non-coincidence is supported by the curvature of the strip, which, at a more fundamental level, brings **x** and **X** together.

The most important point, however, as highlighted by Zupan i , is that this figure remains strictly within the Kantian universe, because it does not do away with the hiatus of finitude in favor of a continuous circle, on the contrary, it *universalises* the missing link:

"The value of the topological model of the Möbius strip lies in the fact that the structural or constitutive missing link is precisely not something that one could see as a missing link or a lack. After all, the Möbius strip presents us with nothing more than a smooth continuity of the same surface, with no interruptions, lacks, or leaps. The leap, the paradoxical distance between its two sides, is "built into" its very structure; it is perceptible only in the fact that we *do* come to change sides, even though we never actually change them."¹⁰⁰

Furthermore, the inner eight of the Moebius strip shines a new light on Hegel's famous mention of a "circle of circles" as the proper figuration of the dialectical method, at the end of *Science of Logic*:

"By virtue of the nature of the method just indicated, the science exhibits itself as a circle returning upon itself, the end being wound back into the beginning, the simple ground, by the mediation; this circle is moreover a circle of circles, for each individual member as ensouled by the method is reflected into itself, so that in returning into the beginning

⁹⁹ Lacan, Jacques (2004), Le séminaire, livre 10 : L'angoisse, (Seuil) - class of 30/1/63

¹⁰⁰ Zupančič, 2008, p. 56

it is at the same time the beginning of a new member”¹⁰¹

However, we are still to understand how to articulate the concept of parallax within this figure of absolute knowing. In the preface for the second edition of *For they know not what they do*, written eleven years after the book, Žižek remarks that the “philosophical weakness” of his first international publications - *The Sublime Object of Ideology* especially - lies in having missed the “ridiculous inadequacy” at play in the articulation of the object *a* with the Kantian-Lacanian notion of Real qua Thing.¹⁰²

This ‘inadequacy’ - echoing Hegel’s “*Unangemessenheit*” - is the (monstrous) name of the object that is caught up in the dialectical reversal of the positing of presupposition into the presupposing of the posited: it names that of essence (**X**) which gets caught up in its material support (**x**). Moreover, marking a veritable shift of position in Žižek’s philosophical project, this inadequacy came to be the very pivot of Žižek’s concept of parallax, in which Lacan’s later elaborations on the notion of the Real are evidently at play.

Thus, though the Beyond (**X**) is no longer conceptualised as the ineffable centre of the circle of Appearances (**x**), it remains to be presented how the “missing link” which constitutes the torsion of the Mobius band relates to the indelible semblance of the beyond that remains operative in it. Even though the real is now “extimate” to the concept, we must still account for the way the Beyond itself is *split* and caught up in the restlessness of Appearance.

As we previously discussed, regarding Hegel’s logic of appearance, the negation of the Essence must be doubled, otherwise we simply return to our immediate positing in the guise of a reflection. It is not enough to grasp the Beyond separately from Illusory Being: one must include in this external positing the very split between Illusory Being and Essence, only when the very obstacle to the Absolute is

101 Hegel, 1989, p. 842 For a very compelling use of knot theory, which resonates deeply with Lacan and Žižek’s take on Hegel, as well as gives another interesting twist to the idea of a “circle of circles”, refer to Carlson, 2007

102 Žižek, 2008, pp.xii-xviii

understood as partaking in the Absolute itself¹⁰³ - that is, when the pure negativity is itself caught in a material element - do we truly grasp the determinate reflection. Accordingly, Žižek states that the Real is “simultaneously the Thing to which direct access is not possible and the obstacle which prevents this direct access”. The parallax Real can only be properly thought of if we grasp the Real qua Thing as one of its (retroactive) moments:

“the true problem is not how to reach the Real when we are confined to the interplay of the (inconsistent) multitude of appearances, but, more radically, the properly Hegelian one: *how does appearance itself emerge from the interplay of the Real?* The thesis that the Real is just the cut, the gap of inconsistency, the stellar parallax: the traps of ontological difference between the two appearances has thus to be supplemented by its opposite: appearance is the cut, the gap, between the two Reals, or, more precisely, *something that emerges in the gap* that separates the Real from itself.”¹⁰⁴

This shift from Thing to parallaxian object is precisely what we must include in the Žižekian figure of absolute knowing.

The previous figure demonstrated that Hegel remains within the Kantian horizon of finitude (**x≠X**),¹⁰⁵ for we do not have direct access to the infinite (**x=X**). What is left to be properly presented - and here Žižek’s increasing emphasis on Hegel’s account of Christianity appears as a way of articulating this second step - is how to include in the figure of absolute knowing the way something eludes both the Beyond (**X≠X**) and the Appearance (**x ≠ x**), thus tying the two together.

X ≠ X, because we have learned from the Hegelian logic of Incarnation that the external positing *is above all the positing of a split within Essence*. **x ≠ x**, because it follows from **X ≠ X** that, when we grasp Appearance, we are not simply “returning” to Being - as if without the spectre of a Beyond, grasping man as a self-transparent individual -, we are also grasping the way an inconsistency, a negativity, is inherently

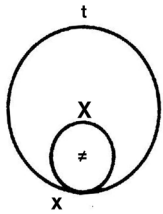
103 Hegel, 1979: §73-75

104 Žižek, 2006, pp. 106-107

105 Žižek, 2008, p. 217

bound to that being, a minimal difference through which “reality turns into its own appearance”.¹⁰⁶

Let us take up again the previous figure, elaborated by Žižek in *For they know not what they do*. There, the difference between the phenomena (**x**) and the noumena (**X**) is presented not as that of a gap opening up to another realm, but as the very “curvature” of a temporality (**t**) that is not reducible to historicism, and which maintains the noumenal always beyond our access without having to constitute it as an independent realm. passive of disclosure or dismissal:

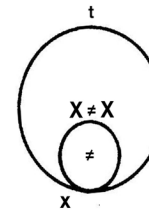


(FIG 13)

However, as we have seen, the noumena itself is caught up in the distortion that it ensues over the phenomena. So to speak, once we have completed the “walk” from one side to the other of the Moebius strip, though we do not encounter the “other side”, for it does not strictly exist, we do not simply retreat into our own “one-sidedness”: something of that other side is caught up in actuality. In this sense, not only does **x** not have access to **X**, but **X** does not coincide with itself:¹⁰⁷ it *appears* as the very negativity of phenomena - as the inconsistent quality of appearance qua appearance. So, not only **x**≠**X** but also **X**≠**X** - in which the second **X** could be for now understood as an **X** *after t*, that is, after we have faced the non-existence of the “other side”:

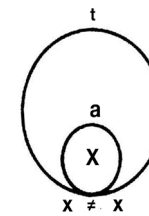
106 Žižek, 2006, p. 28

107 Žižek, 2008, p. 133



(FIG 14)

Now, the difference between Essence and itself (**X**≠**X**) - the difference between the essence of appearance and the appearance of essence - is already the new background against which we grasp the determination of appearance as such: the way Essence has spilled over into Appearance amounts to the determinate reflection not coinciding with its immediate positing (**x**≠**x**). Let us write, then, this inadequate material support of Essence's emptying out as the letter **a**. According to this, the next step of the construction of our figure would be the following:

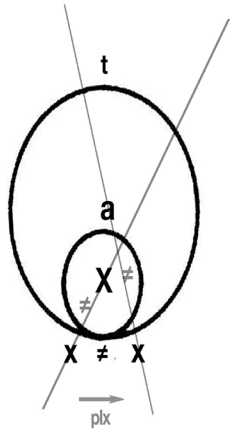


(FIG 15)

In this construction, **X**≠**X** - not being a “self-sufficient” extension into appearance, but a true inscription of Essence itself into the law of self-difference - can be split into **X**, the first external positing, grasped as such only from the standpoint of **x** as *immediately posited*, and **a**, the material left-over of the emptying out of **X**, the object which retroactively supports Essence as such.¹⁰⁸ It is with **a** as our object that we can understand what Žižek means by *parallax Real*, which is “ultimately the

108 Žižek, 2008, p. 190

very shift of perspective (**plx**) from the first standpoint (**x≠X**) to the second (**x≠a**)”:



(FIG 16)

We can now properly grasp why Žižek, following Hegel's famous remark on the quadruplicity of the method, at the end of the *Science of Logic*,¹⁰⁹ reminds us that a *dialectician should learn to count to four*.¹¹⁰

“How far must a Hegelian dialectician learn to count? Most of the interpreters of Hegel, not to mention his critics, try to convince us in unison that the right answer reads: to three (the dialectical triad, and so on) . Moreover, they vie with each other in who will call our attention more convincingly to the “fourth side”, the non-dialecticizable excess, the place of death (of the dummy - in French *le mort* - in bridge), supposedly eluding the dialectical grasp, although (or, more precisely, in so far as) it is the inherent condition of possibility of the dialectical movement: the negativity of a pure expenditure that cannot be sublated [*aufgehoben*], re-collected, in its Result.”¹¹¹

It is only by conceptualising *a* that we can understand the properly

109 Hegel, 1989, p. 836

110 And why, ultimately, “the overall structure of Logic should, rather, have been *quadruple*” Žižek 2009, p.82 See Carlson 2006.

111 Žižek 2008, p.179

retroactive dimension of presupposing the posited. It is because *a* is not a lacking object, but the lack as *object* - not death as the “outside” of life, but death as that which, within life, marks the utter universality of non-coincidence - that we can retroactively presuppose the place of an Essence which *will have been* self-identical:

“as long as contingency is reduced to the form of appearance of an underlying necessity, to an appearance through which a deeper necessity is realized we are still on the level of Substance: the substantial necessity is that which prevails. “Substance conceived as Subject”, on the contrary, is that moment when this substantial necessity reveals itself to be the retroactive effect of a contingent process. (...) The core of Hegel’s “positing the presupposition” consists precisely in this retroactive conversion of contingency into necessity, in this conferring of a form of necessity on the contingent circumstances”¹¹²

We have already mentioned the centrality of Lacan's conceptualisation of the Real as non-coincidence for Žižekian philosophy. If we indulge for a moment in a detour through the Lacanian conceptual framework, we can find a fundamental passage from *The Parallax View* in which the Hegelian logic finds direct resonance with the Lacanian one. Žižek’s precise account of the distinction between the object cause of Desire and the object of the drive in Lacan’s later thought clearly evokes the logical separation/articulation between *X* and *a* as developed in the Žižekian Absolute Knowing:

“The ultimate lesson of psychoanalysis is that human life is never “just life”: humans are not simply alive, they are possessed by the strange drive to enjoy life in excess, passionately attached to a surplus which sticks out and derails the ordinary run of things. (...) Consequently, the concept of drive makes the alternative “either burned by the Thing or maintaining a distance towards it” false: in a drive, the “thing itself” is a circulation around the Void (or, rather, hole, not void). To put it even more pointedly: the object of drive is not related to the Thing as a filler of its void: drive is literally a countermovement to desire, it does not strive toward impossible fullness and, being forced to renounce it, gets stuck onto a partial object as its remainder—drive

112 See “How necessity arises out of contingency” in Žižek, 2008, p.126

is quite literally *the very “drive” to break the All of continuity in which we are embedded*, to introduce a radical imbalance into it, and the difference between drive and desire is precisely that, in desire, this cut, this fixation on a partial object, is as it were “transcendentalized,” transposed into a stand-in for the Void of the Thing.”¹¹³

We do not intend to develop this point any further, but we believe that the Žižekian conception of a parallaxian Real, when read together with the figure of Absolute Knowing presented above, already points to the fact that we would have to effect some changes in it so that the homology between Hegel and Lacan would be truly preserved. To properly present what is at stake here - without relying so much on the *metaphorical* use of topology - we must go a step further and affirm that Absolute Knowing can only be structured as the topological object known as a *cross cap*, of which a Moebius strip is but a certain cut of the surface - it can also be defined as a “pierced cross cap”.¹¹⁴

However, the reference to the *extrinsic* dimension - that is, to the dimension in which the topological surface itself is built - which is brought into play when we refer in such a imaginary way to a hole in the centre of the Moebius band can only be rigorously accounted for if we consider the structure of the cross cap, which is itself a *Moebian space*.¹¹⁵

In his 20th Seminar, Lacan emphasised that one should not forget that the requirement of cuts and recompositions in order to create a knot out of a piece of string is not valid for any surface. Though a torus cannot itself be turned into a knot without ruptures and mendings, if we have take it to be the space in which we work, then, differently from a spherical or plane surface, one can make a knot without having to cut and recompose a line. Lacan then claims that, insofar as the toric structure allows for the creation of knots, “the torus is reason”¹¹⁶ - that is, it bears in its very constitution a certain gap which makes it possible for incommensurable figures to be formed without one having to conjure yet another spatial dimension to account for the distortions

113 Žižek 2006, pp.62-63

114 Barr 1989, p.103

115 Granon-Lafont 1999, p.76

116 Lacan 1999

and intertwinings that are proper to language as such. We believe that a further investigation of the Žižekian Absolute Knowing would have to deal with these questions of structure both in Hegel and Lacan in order to develop a reading of Lacan’s late teaching which does not require us to abandon certain insights from his most Hegelian moment - around 1970¹¹⁷.

Even so, in relation to our current comparison between Kojève and Žižek, it is enough to recognise in the above mentioned fragment on the Lacanian theory of the drives how Žižek’s account of the monstrous accomplishment of the Sublime within appearances, written in our figure as *a*, presents itself as a “drive [that] is quite literally the very ‘drive’ to break the All of continuity in which we are embedded”, a torsion which simultaneously introduces a discontinuity and prevents it from being thought as a self-identical Beyond. This fundamental split introduced at the heart of the Hegelian edifice confirms our previous claims regarding the double temporality founded by the Christian Event and further stresses that, rather than resisting it, Žižek’s return to Hegel simultaneously accounts for the Kojévian interpretation of Absolute Knowledge and renders it superfluous.

117 As we have said before, we find this thesis regarding the rupture between the mathemetic and the theory of knots most explicitly developed in Milner 1998.

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Fichte in Reverse: From Onto-theology to Materialist Ontology

Lidija Šumah

Abstract

The research article discusses the role of Fichte's concept of *Anstoss* in his early theory of self-consciousness. The term first appears in his *Science of Knowledge* and is used by Fichte to denote and explain the simultaneousness of the three elements of self-consciousness. The text demonstrates that *Anstoss* as impulse/inhibition is to be situated at the cross- or inter-section of the domains of subjectivity and objectivity, thus standing for the paradoxical "activity as object."

Keywords: activity, *Anstoss*, Fichte, Hegel, Lacan, materialism, object, *objet petit a*, self-consciousness, subject

In *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy* from 1801, Hegel distinguishes between two kinds of philosophical dogmatism – dogmatic idealism and dogmatic realism – which can be differentiated against the backdrop of the notion of disavowal (*Verleugnung*).¹

While dogmatic idealism posits subjectivity as the Real ground (*Realgrund*) of experience, dogmatic realism deduces subjectivity from the ground of objective reality to which it attributes the absolute status. Thus, dogmatic idealism is characterised by a disavowal of objectivity proper, insofar as it deduces the latter from the evidence of the subject; dogmatic realism, on the other hand, presents us with the opposite, inverted form of dogmatism, characterised by the disavowal of subjectivity as a mere a posteriori derivative of objective reality. Hence, at the very beginning of Fichte's system (and of the system of transcendental idealism as such) we are confronted with a *double disavowal*. In this sense, transcendental idealism can be conceived of as a philosophical system that strives for the abolishment of this (doubly) disavowed element of dogmatism, in turn deriving the subjective and the objective from one single principle, from their primordial transcendental co-incidence.

This is the anchoring point of Hegel's reference to Fichte as the most paradoxical critic of dogmatism, whose philosophy cannot but seem the ultimate example of the idealist dogma of absolute subjectivity, absolutely conditioning objective reality, i.e. of the dogma of a World

¹ See Hegel 1977, p. 89. Hegel uses the word *Verleugnung* only once; I translate it into English as "disavowal," thus alluding to the well-known Freudian notion.

which is but the immediate product of the Self (subjectivity).² That is why it might prove difficult to discern in Fichte's system the uprooting of philosophical notions grounded in dogmatism, or "the total eradication and complete reversal of current modes of thought,"³ as Fichte himself describes his philosophical project at the very beginning of his *First Introduction to the Science of Knowledge*. But before I proceed, let me first add a few general remarks on Fichte's science of knowledge.⁴

In his science of knowledge, Fichte presents his system in the form of principles. He accounts for his choice of method in a text from 1794, titled *Über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre* [Concerning the Concept of the *Wissenschaftslehre*], in which he defines "principle" in terms of a sentence whose certainty precedes any connection to other sentences that are derived from it, i.e. in terms of a sentence that has the character of a priori knowledge and which, due to its absolute character, is not conditioned by any connection. Differently put: any connection is but its derivative, its inferred product (just as the World is but the product of the self-positing Self). However, to this single principle that is the proper object of the science of knowledge, testifying to the primordial positedness of Subject and Object, form and content have to be subsequently ascribed, so that there can be "something about which one has knowledge, and there also must be something which one knows about this thing,"⁵ i.e. an object, as well as knowledge about this object. And this is where Hegel's discussion of Fichte's system is to be situated. When Fichte writes about the discovery of "the primordial, absolutely unconditioned first principle of all human knowledge,"⁶ when he talks about the unconditioned recognition of absolute certainty of the first sentence, adding that its content must condition its form and its form its content (self=self), the analysis of the notions of form and content (of the first principle) lead him to posit the necessity of not one but three principles: "there can be no more than one absolutely

2
Let me add an arbitrary quote from Fichte: "[Ma]n ought to be what he is simply because he is. In other words, all that a person is ought to be related to his pure I, his mere being as an I. He ought to be all that he is simply because he is an I, and what he cannot be because he is an I, he ought not to be at all." (Fichte 1993b, p. 148)

3 Fichte 1982a, p. 4.

4 For a discussion of the difficulties in translating Fichte's notion of *Wissenschaftslehre* see Breazeale 1993, p. xv.

5 Fichte 1993a, p. 109.

6 Fichte 1982b, p. 93.

unconditioned principle, one conditioned as to content, and one conditioned as to form, no other principle is possible apart from those established."⁷ Put very briefly, the first principle affirms the absolute self-positing of the Self, hence positing the Self as infinite; the second principle aims at the absolute opposing, or positing of the infinite non-Self; and the third principle displays the absolute unity of the first and the second principles, via the absolute division of the Self and non-Self, and via the division of the infinite sphere into the divisible Self and divisible non-Self under the paradigm of Self's self-identity.

The positing of one single absolute principle that would guarantee the primordial positedness of Subject and Object, and, thus, introduce into philosophy the idealist "complete reversal," proves impossible without the introduction of two additional principles. One (principle), as it were, splits into Two (additional principles). The science of knowledge hence begins with the introduction of one single fundamental principle, but as soon as it is introduced, two additional principles are posited in a paradoxical simultaneity. For Hegel, these three fundamental principles represent/stand for the three absolute acts of the Self, or for its three (inner) moments, and not so much for the primordial identity of Subject and Object that Fichte strives to conceptualise. Hegel takes recourse at this point to the conceptual distinction between the transcendental and the transcendent. The unity of Subject and Object has to be a transcendental one, because this connection presupposes the opposition of the two acts as at once preserved and sublated (*aufgehoben*), and because it is only this operation that opens the path to the simultaneity of "ideal and real synthesis." In Fichte, this synthesis is posited by the third fundamental principle that necessarily performs the function of synthetically unifying the other two; its formula is: "*In the self I oppose a divisible not-self to the divisible self.*"⁸ But for Hegel the objective Self, as it appears within this synthesis, is irreducible to the subjective Self. Here, the subjective Self is perceived as the objective Self with the supplement of the non-Self. For this logic, Hegel proposed a simple formula: subjective Self = objective Self + non-Self. For Hegel, this is not the way at all how the identity of the two elements is established, because pure consciousness Self = Self and the empirical Self = Self + non-Self remain opposed to one another. Prior to the synthesis, the

7
Ibid., pp. 109–110.

8
Ibid., p. 110.

opposed elements differ substantially from the two elements that follow from it. Prior to the synthesis, they are merely opposed to one another without any other qualification: “the one is what the other is not, and the other is what the one is not. [...] As one comes in, the other goes out.”⁹ Fichte is well aware of this problem when he says that there is an unsurpassable difference, an abyss (*Abgrund*) even, between what the Self is and that by which the Self has to be elucidated.

Fichte struggled with this problem, which is also the fundamental and initial problem of German idealism as such, throughout his life, so much so that the numerous versions of his science of knowledge could be viewed as so many attempts to come to terms with it, by developing a theory of the foundation of the phenomenon of self-consciousness. But, despite all the differing attempts to solve this problem, or at least to provide its definite formulation, he nonetheless never relinquished the basic framework of his doctrine of 1794, trying to subordinate, or bring in line the contradictory relationship between the Self and its Other with the identity of the subject, suspending the opposition of the Subjective and the Objective in a higher unity of self-consciousness. But, the main problem is the following one: How is it possible to pass from absolute subjectivity without exteriority to consciousness and self-consciousness which, by definition, presuppose something strictly external to them? How to pass from the absolute Self to objective reality as the condition of self-consciousness as consciousness of One-Self as an object of experience?

Upon the first look, it seems that Fichte fell prey to the paradoxes and sideways of transcendental philosophy, i.e. to the deadlocks ascribed to his thought by most thinkers of the 20th century. In this regard, it may come as a surprise that Dieter Henrich, one of Fichte's most succinct interpreters, in a way radically inverts this common-sensical perspective. For Henrich, the 20th century philosophical perception of German idealism was deeply marked by the Heideggerian critique of Cartesian subjectivity, and Fichte's subject was seen as its perhaps ultimate successor, i.e. the successor of a notion of subjectivity that brought about the “repression” of Being, and its reduction to the monotonous identity of objects of consciousness. But, Fichte's paradigmatic formula of “the self-positing subject” did not deprive the Self of its dispersed and heterogeneous character, but rather structurally marked its pure identity and self-evidential nature with a

9 Hegel 1977, p. 125.

dark spot of Otherness. Hence, Henrich argues, Fichte's wager and novelty is to be sought in his very interrogation and problematisation of “the reality of self-consciousness,”¹⁰ i.e. in the problematisation of the subject's involvement in the world, or his “being thrown into the world,” to use Heidegger's dictum. Fichte is not an author of the (misperceived) Cartesian tradition, the advocate of the totality of modern consciousness, but in fact its first critic. How, then do we free Fichte from this prevailing opinion? How do we preserve Fichte's subjectivity from the reproofs of identitarian reductionism and solipsism? And – last but not least – how do we protect Fichte from his own deadlocks and sideways, pointed out already by Hegel? How to defend Fichte, not from the generally unfavorable philosophical climate, but from Fichte himself?

In this respect, let us recall Marx's famous letter to Feuerbach, in which Marx attacks Schelling's theosophy, reaching out to Feuerbach for help in this endeavor, calling him “Schelling in reverse.”¹¹ Along the same lines, the present article tries to bring to the fore another Fichte, a “Fichte in reverse.” However, it attempts do so not by way of abandoning Fichte's philosophical project, but rather by way of rendering visible the obverse side of Fichte's thought itself. Can Fichte's controversial three steps be read “in reverse”? In what follows, I will try to demonstrate that a paradoxical object, which Fichte calls *Anstoss*, provides a possible way out of the muddle-headedness of Fichte's explication of the “reality of self-consciousness.” But, before I proceed with the analysis of this problematic notion (whereby its problematic nature might provide the key to the problematic of Fichte's self-consciousness), let me first examine the problem of the two periods in the development of the theory of self-consciousness, as proposed by Dieter Henrich.¹²

The first period, concluding with Kant, is characterised by the so-called “reflexive theory of self-consciousness.” For Henrich, Fichte was the first philosopher to radically challenge this theory, hence becoming the originator of the second epoch. But, Fichte's risky gesture, which earned him this privileged position of the founding father of the new

10 Henrich 1982, p. 71.

11 “To the French romantics and mystics he replies: ‘I is the union of philosophy and theology’, to French materialists: ‘I is the union of flesh and idea’, to the French sceptics: ‘I is the destroyer of dogmatism’, in a word, ‘I’. [...] You would therefore be doing a great service to our enterprise, but even more to truth, if you were to contribute a characterization of Schelling to the very first issue. You are just the man for this because you are *Schelling in reverse*.” (Marx [1843])

12 See Henrich 1982, pp. 60-82.

theory of self-consciousness, was not some radical act which would imply an exhaustive “positive” programme: Fichte’s significance lies not in the answer he provided but rather in the problem he detected and incessantly followed throughout the various articulations of his philosophical project. We could claim that “Fichte” is not so much a name of a Break, but rather a name of a Gap, or a fissure, that he didn’t fill in with a positive programme, rather leaving it open in its problematic persistency. (Thus, one could claim that Fichte is not a significant philosopher due to the problem he solved, but due to the fact that he never ceased solving it.) The reflexive theory begins with the thinking subject that forms the foundation of consciousness, and hence also the foundation of any possible knowledge of an object. But as such, it presupposes something that demands a preceding explication: if the Self reaches self-consciousness by way of taking itself as an object, i.e. by reflecting itself, then a preceding Self has to be presupposed, a Self that precedes all possible knowledge and self-consciousness, i.e. all reflexivity. The Self is, thus, simultaneously the act of positing and the (produced) result of this act, at once reflecting and reflected.

One can discern this problem in Fichte’s first principle: the act by which the Self posits itself is simultaneously a part of what is posited by this act itself. Consequently, the question remains how the Self can be a positing instance, when in fact it comes into being only through the act of positing, i.e. as its effect. This circular structure lies at the core of Fichte’s problem: How to think the act of self-positing of the Self in such a way that it would remain irreducible to that which is posited by it? Differently put: Is it possible to think the act of self-positing as distinct from the posited Self?¹³ Henrich proposes two possible exits from this deadlock of reflection: we either renounce the quest for the foundation of self-consciousness, or we locate this foundation in the exteriority of the Self, thus relinquishing the essential character of self-consciousness. The first solution would lead us to affirm the deadlock of reflexive theory, whereas the second would obviously lead to dogmatic realism, for the Self, which is grounded in exteriority, loses the nature of a foundation.

The problem of the first period in the theory of self-consciousness, hence, concerned the paradox of reflection that is at once the cause and

13 “In this regard, his [i.e. Fichte’s] first theory entails a certain ambiguity which is often emphasized: it suggests that the Self posits itself, while at the same time maintaining that the Self precedes all knowledge and all self-consciousness.” (*Ibid.*, pp. 72–73)

the product, or effect of self-consciousness. So, how is it possible to think this “double character” of self-consciousness? Fichte begins by positing the Self as an “absolute activity,” which is nothing but a pure affirmation of an unlimited, un-determined, un-differentiated Self that is not yet an object of consciousness, since it precedes all objectivity. The absolute Self is a bare, un-reflected form devoid of any determinate content. Hence, the absolute Self is not yet its own object, but rather a pure act of positing without an object. It is infinite precisely because it is not its own object. Objectivity (of the Self) implies (its) determinedness, (its) limitation; the object as *Gegenstand* is always opposed to the Self as a non-Self, i.e. as Self’s limit. Hence, the first principle aims at the purely abstract, unconditional self-consciousness that abstracts from all empiricity. How, then, do we conceive of the passage from absolute activity to the realm of experience, i.e. from an *absolute* to an *objective* activity? How does the non-differentiated Self reach reflection, how does it “objectify” itself, thus constituting self-consciousness as the condition of all possible knowledge? In Henrich’s terms: How do we infer from the first principle the reality of self-consciousness, how to we derive the latter from the foundation of absolute subjectivity? One has to proceed from the following point of departure, proposed by Breazeale and Žižek:

“Fichte was the first philosopher to focus on the uncanny contingency at the very heart of subjectivity: the Fichtean subject is not the overblown Ego=Ego as the absolute Origin of all reality, but a finite subject thrown, caught, in a contingent social situation forever eluding mastery.”¹⁴

At this point (the concept of) *Anstoss* enters Fichte’s theoretical edifice to explain the aforementioned passage from absolute to objective activity, i.e. from the platform of experience to experience proper. A quote from Fichte:

“The objective element [the Not-I] that is to be excluded [from the I] has no need at all to be present; all that is needed, if I may so put it, is the presence of an *Anstoss* for the I. That is to say, the subjective element must, for some reason that simply lies outside of the activity of the I, be unable to extend any further. Such an impossibility of

14 Žižek 2012, p. 115. See also Breazeale 1995, pp. 87–114.

further extension would then constitute the indicated mere interplay or meshing; such an *Anstoss* would not limit the I as active, but would give it the task of limiting itself. All limitation, however occurs through opposition, and thus simply in order to be able to satisfy this task, the I would have to oppose something objective to the subjective element that is to be limited and would then have to unite both synthetically, in the manner just indicated. And thus the entire representation could be derived in this way. . . . What [this explanation] assumes is not a not-I that is present outside of the I, and not even a determination that is present within the I, but rather the mere task, on the part of the I itself, of undertaking a determination within itself – that is, the *mere determinability* of the I.”¹⁵

In the first approach, *Anstoss* is understood as external impulse or impetus. The absolute and limitless Self requires something other than itself to be limited by it and to reflect itself; so as to be able to reflect itself in its interiority, the Self requires an instance of exteriority. Since it is situated beyond all objectivity, absolute activity precedes the opposition between the Inner and the Outer. *Anstoss* is an external impulse; an impulse of the non-Self, differentiating the pure Self by way of intervening in its non-differentiated realm, thus constituting the Self as limited and finite. Here, we encounter the first paradox of Fichte’s notion of *Anstoss*: through this exterior impetus the Self becomes an object, hence acquiring a consciousness and a minimum of knowledge of itself; however, this impetus nonetheless cannot be simply exterior to the Self, since it precedes any opposition between the Inner and the Outer, between interiority and exteriority. It seems that this first attempt at a conceptualisation of *Anstoss* once again leads to the deadlocks of reflexive theory: here, *Anstoss* is understood in terms of an exterior impetus that intervenes into the in-finite realm of the self-positing absolute Self, thus introducing the opposition between the Self and the non-Self, or between the Inner and the Outer. However, Fichte has to prove that this limitation of the (absolute) Self is nothing but an act of the Self, he has to demonstrate that the limitation is but a self-limitation, which also means that the *exterior* impulse of the determination of the Self is nothing but an *interior* act of self-determination.

In *The Foundations of the Entire Science of Knowledge*, Fichte thus asserts that an exterior impulse is only possible with the subject’s *Zutun*,

15 Quoted in Breazeale 2013, p. 162.

i.e. on the condition of subject’s “participation.” Thus, without this activity, without the absolute act of self-positing, there is no *Anstoss*; its intervention reflects “the outwards striving activity” [hinaus strebende Tätigkeit], directing it back onto itself. Furthermore, the *Anstoss* – being conditioned by Self’s activity – is nevertheless *durch das setzende Ich nicht gesetzte Anstoss*, i.e. an impetus which is not posited by the positing Self.¹⁶ In short, there is no *Anstoss* without the activity of the Self; there is no self-determination of the Self without *Anstoss*; there is no objectivity without the self-determination of the Self.¹⁷

activity --- Anstoss --- (self-)determination --- objectivity

With such a characterisation, Fichte effectively situates *Anstoss* at the very cross-section of subjectivity and objectivity, in the field of interference of pure activity and materiality. Therefore, one could argue that *Anstoss*, being both exterior and interior – an impetus that is both exterior to subjectivity and nothing but the act of a self-positing subjectivity –, is effectively a paradoxical *activity as object* (or object-activity).

Activity itself, which is infinite and unlimited, since it has no exteriority that would limit it, receives an impetus, *Anstoss*, that reflects activity onto itself, driving it back into itself, *nach innen getrieben*. But this interiority, this *Innen*, is effectively the first interiority that emerges with the external impulse. We are thus faced with an interiority that precedes interiority, as well as with an exteriority that precedes exteriority; and in their collision reflection is produced. Fichte proposes the following image of absolute activity:

A --- B --- C --- D --- etc.

“A” stands for the absolute act of the self-positing of the Self as the absolute, un-limited, infinite Self, encompassing All, i.e. the Totality, which however is not yet a limited Totality (and hence not yet Total at all), but rather a Totality in its un-differentiated One-ness which is at the

16 Fichte 1971, p. 212.

17 “The *Anstoss* (which is not posited by the positing I) occurs to the I insofar as it is active, and is thus an *Anstoss* only insofar as the I is active. Its possibility is conditioned by the activity of the I: no activity of the I, no *Anstoss*. And *vice versa*: the I’s activity of determining itself would, in turn, be conditioned by the *Anstoss*: no *Anstoss*, no self-determination. Moreover, no self-determination, nothing objective, etc.” (Quoted in Breazeale 1995, p. 92)

same time Nothing since it has no part and is not limited by anything. This implies that it lacks any possible representation: *for itself*, this Self is Nothing; it contains no difference between the Positing and the Posited, between the subject and its predicate, between the Self and its counterpart. Let us now suppose that in “B” an impetus occurs, i.e. that the Totality of the absolute Self is affected by an *Anstoss*, the cause of which doesn’t lie in the Self, but rather in something external to it, in the non-Self, that reflects the direction of activity that leads from A to C back from C to A, thus forming a finite limited Totality of the Self. However, Fichte argues, the Self cannot be effected, it cannot undergo any effect (*Einwirkung*), without a retroactive moment; the reason for this is that it always already presupposes the movement of absolute activity. Therefore, *Anstoss* functions in reverse, retroactively, and it is this retroactive functioning that establishes the objectivity of the Self, as well as the Self in its absolute positedness. Pure activity is *an activity without an object* that perpetually returns back to itself in circular movement. *Anstoss*, thus, entails a double temporal vector which generates the movement, passing from A to C *as well as* from C to A. This “double course of the Self” is *mit sich selbst streitende Richtung der Tätigkeit des Ich*, an activity of the Self which is at cross purpose with itself: on the one side we are presented with the Self as pure spontaneity, and on the other side we are presented with the Self as *leidend*, suffering (affected), passive, empirical, finite. The result is a passivity that is only through an activity, and an activity which only comes into being as mediated by passive suffering. The Self as pure intelligence thus depends on the non-Self as its exterior impulse which – first – drives it to reflection and – second – provides an obstacle to its infinitive striving. *Anstoss* is thus posited as an impulse, impetus, as well as an obstacle that deals a blow to the endless spreading of the absolute Self.¹⁸ In the next step, Fichte tries to abolish this initial relationship that subordinates the Self to an exterior, contingent impulse:

“Since they [sc. the Self and the non-Self] are not the same, the question always remains which follows which and to which we must ascribe the cause of the equation [Gleichung].”¹⁹

18 See also Žižek 2012, p. 115.

19 Fichte 1971, p. 260.

Here is the answer: everything has to be determined within the Self, the Self should be independent. By reintegrating the exterior impulse into the structure of the absolute Self, *Anstoss* is no longer an external *cause* of reflection, but becomes an *effect* of the Self on the Self; here, Fichte once again asserts the double nature of the impulse that testifies to a specific causality, which however has to be understood as an effect, consequence, or derivative of Self itself. With this move, Fichte puts in question the very nature of *Anstoss* as a cause of reflection.²⁰ Hence, Self and non-Self stand in a relation of a tension, they are at odds with one another (*Widerstreit*), and this “dispute” between them cannot be sublated by way of inferring the non-Self from the Self, because in this case the non-Self would not be a non-Self at all but merely one of the moments of the Self, i.e. Self itself. But at the same time, one cannot simply affirm the pure exteriority of the impulse of the non-Self as constitutive of the Self, for in this way one loses the Self itself. The non-Self has to become the object of the Self; we have to demonstrate the existence of a causal relation between the Self and the conditioned object. Fichte accomplishes this move by introducing the aforementioned distinction between two types of activity: one that is absolute and hence without an object, and the other that is objective, and hence is characterised by being oriented towards an object. The second is possible only against the backdrop of the first, hence enabling Fichte to demonstrate the indirect link between the absolute activity of the Self and “its” object. There is no object without activity that opposes it; there is no object without the objective activity, and there is no objective activity without absolute activity.

To Fichte, *Anstoss* seemed a plausible and promising solution to the deadlock of self-consciousness, but subsequently turned out to be an insolvable problem, repeating the deadlock of reflexive theory. *Anstoss* is conceived as something *fremdartiges*, alien (to the Self), and as a bearer of a specific inequality that impedes the Self’s striving for self-identity, i.e. for immediate identity with itself. Both poles are “at odds [im Streit] with Self’s striving for immediate identity.”²¹ Here, we encounter the second of the two principle moments of *Anstoss*, namely *Anstoss* as an obstacle to the direct self-identity of the Self. *Anstoss* is the condition of subject’s self-identity, enabling the consciousness of the Self by way

20 “The expressions: to posit the non-Self, and: to limit the Self, are completely univocal [...]” (*Ibid.*, p. 252)

21 *Ibid.*, p. 265.

of establishing the difference between the Self and the non-Self; but at the same time, *Anstoss* as *Hemmung*, as inhibition, necessarily remains un-reflected, resisting being incorporated into the Self, thus inhibiting its activity. Hence, *Anstoss* as impulse/inhibition is precisely the ultimate difference, the *Abgrund*, abyss of self-consciousness that Fichte spoke about.

From this perspective, Fichte's initial principle ("The Self posits itself") becomes very problematic. Fichte presents a series of oppositions (infinite-finite, absolute-objective, unconditional-conditional), traversed by an un-sublatable contradiction. However: Is the impulse/inhibition not precisely some sort of junction of irreducible elements, a paradoxical *infinite objectivity* or *activity as object*? As I've already shown, *Anstoss* is not simply an exterior impulse, but a piece of the absolute, i.e. infinite and indeterminate activity, emerging as a singular finite object that limits the Self by introducing the alien realm of the non-Self, or the realm of objectivity. *Anstoss* is a finite impulse, and only as such can it limit the Self in its absoluteness (that which has no limit cannot be the limit of anything else). But on the other hand, *Anstoss* is also a barer of a specific infinity; it is both an infinite "organ without a body" which is not a mere part of something else and, thus, is not limited by any "corporeal" exteriority, *and* finite in its function of the limit of the Self. It seems that the only possible way out of this circle of endless mutual implications is to affirm the paradoxical notion of *activity as object* (which, of course, is not identical with objective activity and) which pertains to the Self (as an activity) and is at the same time radically alien to it (as an object). Recall in this respect Hegel's reading of Fichte, i.e. his distinction between the subjective and the objective Self: the subjective Self of self-consciousness equals the objective Self plus the non-Self, i.e. it equals the Totality plus its part. But this part, or activity as object (a), should be conceived of as being inherent to the Totality of Self (I = I), while at the same time remaining radically heterogeneous in relation to it:

$$(I=I) = (I=I) + a$$

We can further illustrate this last point by recourse to Fichte's reformulation of the first principle: "The Self posits itself as Self-positing [Sich-selbst-Setzen]." Henrich is right to emphasise that by positing itself the Self also posits the notion of itself, since without this

re-doubling it would have had no knowledge of itself.²² Hence, the act of self-positing results in the emergence of the object-Self, as well as in the notion of the Self, which correspond to this object, whereby the act of positing necessarily precedes both of these results.

The formula Self=Self thus involves two splits: the first split is the split between the Self as absolute activity, on the one hand, and the objective Self, on the other; the second split concerns the re-doubled result of activity (object-Self, the notion of the Self). Hence, the objective Self is both an empirical objectivity *and* the notion without which this objectivity of the Self would necessarily remain un-thought; it would simply dissolve in an un-reflected, notionless intuition beyond any possible knowledge. Fichte's reformulation of the first principle of science of knowledge has to be interpreted as follows: the Self as absolute activity can only posit itself by positing the concept of itself, however this "signifying positing" is only possible as mediated by a non-reflected object that stands at the cross-section of the object-Self and its concept while remaining irreducible to them. The Self as other, i.e. as opposed to itself, is the totality of thing (*Gegenstand*) and concept, traversed by a paradoxical object (*Objekt*).

Fichte's problem with the notion of *Anstoss* can also be formulated in temporal terms: *Anstoss* at once precedes the determination of the Self and functions as the effect of its self-determination that emerges in the cross-section of the posited Self. One way out of this deadlock is to interpret *Anstoss* as a structural function that "always already" occupies its space in the interference of Self and other. This would imply a double causality, so that the Self, on the one hand, and *Anstoss*, on the other, would display two different modes of causal relation. *Anstoss* is irreducible to the causality of the Self; rather it is characterised by Deleuzian quasi-causality: hence, *Anstoss* is not the (exterior) cause of self-consciousness, but rather a paradoxical quasi-cause that can only be apprehended retroactively, i.e. from the point of view of self-consciousness. As such, it presupposes absolute activity that defends the Self from its determination. Fichtean subjectivity is to be found neither on the side of absolute, un-limited activity of the Self, nor on the side of the objective activity of the finite subject: the transcendental subject is neither the Absolute nor an empirical subject; the problem with the latter is that they exclude the uncanniness of the subject, embodied in the concept of *Anstoss* as the *Abgrund* of self-

22 Henrich 1982, p. 66.

consciousness. Fichte's subject emerges in relation to this un-reflected object that the Self can never fully appropriate and which persists as its inherent split.

In his text, Henrich proposes three formulations of Fichte's theory of self-consciousness. The first two formulations are explications of the "theory of positing" that replaced the "reflexive theory" without relinquishing the moment of reflection and, hence, without radically breaking with the classical theory of self-consciousness. And if reflexive theory interpreted this moment in terms of a succession, the theory of positing interprets this reflexive moment in terms of a simultaneity of Self and self-consciousness. To quote Henrich: "where the self is, there is always self-awareness."²³ The third formulation introduces into the science of knowledge the metaphor of the eye. Self-consciousness is now interpreted as an activity into which an eye has been installed, to paraphrase Fichte's formula. Fichte wrote numerous versions of the science of knowledge.²⁴ The science of knowledge is a metonymical project, and what slides through it is precisely the object that Fichte tries to grasp with the notion *Anstoss*, with the metaphor of the eye, with the notion of God, etc. But the metaphor of the eye is not a simple explication of the notion of *Anstoss*; Fichte used it to give a better account of the three principles and to address the problem of the simultaneity of the three moments of self-consciousness. The first, absolute, un-conditioned principle only posits the Self and nothing more; it merely affirms its (un-conditioned, *unbedingt*) existence, not unlike Spinoza's substance. The second and the third principles are conditioned (are affections of the substance, so to speak): the second principle, concerning empirical consciousness, is conditioned in relation to its content (insofar as what is given is not given *by* the Self while nonetheless being given *through* it), while the third one, concerning the non-Self, is conditioned in relation to its form (insofar as the form is dependent on the Self). Differently put: the first principle is unconditioned, the second principle is unconditioned in relation to its form, and the third principle is unconditioned in relation to its content. However, the unconditioned (*unbedingt*) character of the first principle aims at something different from the unconditioned character of the second and third principles. The difference between

23 Henrich 2003, p. 244.

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 206–207, footnote 3.

the first principle and the remaining two corresponds to two different meanings of the term *unbedingt* that should be understood either in an *absolute* or in a *relative* sense. In the first principle, *unbedingt* should be translated as "un-conditional," hence aiming at the Self which has no opposite, while in the second and the third principle one should understand it in the sense of "un-conditioned," i.e. in opposition to what is conditioned, *bedingt*. To put it yet another way: there "exists" an un-conditional moment of the un-conditioned character of the Self in relation to its form and the conditioned character of the Self in relation to its content; and there "exists" an un-conditional moment of the un-conditioned character of non-Self in relation to its content and the conditioned character of non-Self in relation to its form. And *Anstoss*, this intermediary *activity as object*, is nothing but the split of the un-conditional and (un-)conditioned; it is the activity (of the absolutely un-conditional) as object: *Anstoss* as an element of the non-Self within the Self, as the un-conditional of the (un-)conditioned enables us to think the simultaneity of the finite and the infinite. If from here we take a look at Fichte's metaphor of the eye, we notice that it follows the same logic: the activity (of the eye) is dependent on a third element, acting as an impulse that sets it in motion. This element structurally corresponds to the function of *Anstoss* and Fichte calls it "the gaze." But, the gaze is not simply an "inner light of activity," as Henrich suggests: with such an assumption one loses the crucial distinction between the gaze and the eye of activity – the eye of activity emerges in the gaze as a paradoxical object, as the objectal un-conditional moment of the opposition of the (un-)conditioned. The object-gaze is extimate, to use Lacan's formulation, it is excluded into interiority and it represents that particular structural moment that affects both the interior and the exterior of the Self, but only as a moment of their (non)coincidence, as a dark spot of the eye of activity which corresponds to Fichte's early conceptualization of *Anstoss*, the impulse/inhibition that persists as the blind spot of Fichte's project.

Much has been written on Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, mostly by Fichte himself. Against the backdrop of Hegel's critique we denoted Fichte's project as a project of a double disavowal. To this double disavowal we can now add a third one, namely, the disavowal that somehow pertains to the history of philosophy and is inherent to the philosophical thinking as such as the conceptual thinking of the impossible. But, the task of philosophy is not to grasp a certain notion or a problem that is to be solved; its task is to conceptually grasp the

impossible of conceptual thinking itself. That is why Deleuze rightly defined philosophy as an invention or creation of concepts, insofar as the latter are discovered at the points of impossibility of conceptual thinking as such. In this regard, Daniel Breazeale and Slavoj Žižek, each in their own way, undertook the first radical theoretical step towards conceptually thinking the impossible in Fichte. They both fully grasped what Fichte detected but wasn't able to articulate properly, namely the uncanny core of subjectivity. By addressing and analysing the shift in Fichte's doctrine from the Jena period to the Berlin period, Žižek's analysis is in line with the proposed reading of the science of knowledge as a metonymical project. In Fichte's later writings the ground, Žižek argues in *Less Than Nothing*, is no longer "identified with the I qua absolute I but with something absolute prior to and originally independent of the I,"²⁵ namely *Seyn* and/or *Gott*. In later Fichte, God thus becomes another name for this paradoxical object, sliding through the metonymical chain of the doctrine of science.

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The Problem of Evil and the Problem of Legitimacy: On the Roots and Future of Political Theology

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Abstract:

This essay traces the roots of the problem of political theology to the Hebrew prophetic tradition's attempts to reconcile the political experience of the Jewish people with their special relationship to a just and powerful God—in other words, their attempt to answer the problem of evil. It gives an account of the origins of this tradition as well as the apocalyptic thought that grew out of it, ultimately giving rise to Christianity. It then turns to contemporary debates in political theology, arguing that they are often blind to this history due to the influence of Carl Schmitt. Drawing on Jacob Taubes, it shows that Schmitt himself is best understood as a representative of the post-Constantinian political theological paradigm that viewed the earthly ruler as heading off apocalypse. With the broader prophetic-apocalyptic perspective in mind, it turns to the modern world and asks if there is a secular answer to the problem of evil. It argues that modern paradigms of government and economics stand in basic continuity with the prophetic-apocalyptic tradition, with the major difference being that human freedom has replaced God as the principle of legitimacy. Observing that those modern paradigms now seem to be exhausted, it calls for a renewal of critical and creative theological thought to develop new, more livable paradigms for the contemporary world.

Keywords: political theology, apocalyptic, Hebrew Bible, Schmitt, Taubes, Agamben

I.

The modern discipline of political theology starts from the homology between God and the earthly ruler, but the historical experience that stands at the root of the political theology of the West starts from their radical disjuncture. I am speaking here of the historical experience of the Jewish prophets and intellectuals who attempted to make sense of their special relationship to God in the light of almost inconceivable setbacks and catastrophes: the apostasy of the majority of their fellow Israelites from the divine covenant, the destruction of their kingdom and way of life, and their exile in a foreign land.

These Hebrew thinkers could have been forgiven for turning their backs on their defeated God and bowing down in worship to the foreign gods who had so thoroughly proven their superior power. Instead, they responded to incalculable loss with a bold theological risk. In the face of

their God’s apparent defeat, they doubled down and claimed that their local God was actually the God of all the earth. Far from being defeated by the pagan empires, the God of Israel had orchestrated their rise—and eventual fall.

The basis for this outlandish claim goes back to the Torah, particularly the Book of Deuteronomy. This book consists primarily of a long speech put into the mouth of Moses, in which he recounts the history of Israel’s relationship to God and reiterates the divine commandments on the eve of Israel’s entry into the promised land. The story is one of human ingratitude in the face of divine grace and favor: even after God showed his mighty power by liberating the Israelite slaves from their oppression in Egypt, the people rebelled against his rule, to the point where God condemned the Israelites to wander in the desert for forty years so that the rebellious generation could be superseded by their children. The terms of the covenant are clear: “See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today; and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn from the way that I am commanding you today, to follow other gods that you have not known” (Deuteronomy 11:26-28).¹

For the intellectuals who collected and consolidated Israelite history and legend, Deuteronomy provided a convenient framework for understanding the political vicissitudes their country had experienced throughout its tumultuous history. Though the term is somewhat anachronistic, the Deuteronomistic paradigm provided them with something like an answer to what we would now call the “problem of evil”—that is to say, the problem of how to reconcile faith in a powerful and beneficent God with the experience of evil and suffering. Their solution preserved faith in God by claiming that the apparent evils they suffered were not truly evils, but were instead well-deserved punishments aimed at putting the people back on track.

This theological paradigm figured God as law-giver and law-enforcer. Yet instead of legitimating an easy parallel between God and the earthly ruler, this theocratic paradigm rendered every earthly king a potential rival to God’s reign. The Book of Deuteronomy itself envisions the possibility of a just king who serves as something like a faithful functionary for the divine ruler, submitting fully to the divine law:

When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy

1 All biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests. It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes, neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel. (17:18-20)

By contrast, the remainder of the Deuteronomistic history (the segment of the Hebrew Bible made up of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings) is significantly less optimistic about the prospects for an Israelite king. In the famous passage where the Israelites demand that the prophet Samuel appoint a king, Samuel predicts that the king will oppress the people:

These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day. (1 Samuel 8:11-18)

For his part, God makes the rivalry explicit when he claims that “they have rejected me from being king over them” (8:7). Subsequently, in the view of the Deuteronomistic historian, the fate of Israel hangs on whether the king is a divine functionary within God’s rule or a rival to the theocratic ideal.

Earthly rulers thus become a site of intense theological reflection, a trend that is only intensified when successive waves of imperial conquest in the ancient Near East lead to the final defeat of the Israelite kingdoms and the transfer of their intellectual elites to the imperial center. The Hebrew prophets responded to this development with an extension of the Deuteronomistic scheme: they claimed that the pagan kings were actually a tool that God was using to punish and purify the remnant of Israel. When their usefulness to God ran out, however,

they would be punished for their own injustice and wickedness. The prophet Jeremiah's account is exemplary here:

Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: Because you have not obeyed my words, I am going to send for all the tribes of the north, says the Lord, even for King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, *my servant*, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these nations around; I will utterly destroy them, and make them an object of horror and of hissing, and an everlasting disgrace. And I will banish from them the sound of mirth and the sound of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones and the light of the lamp. This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, says the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste. I will bring upon that land all the words that I have uttered against it, everything written in this book, which Jeremiah prophesied against all the nations. For many nations and great kings shall make slaves of them also; and I will repay them according to their deeds and the work of their hands. (Jeremiah 25:8-14; emphasis added)

The ambivalence between ruler-as-functionary and ruler-as-rival reappears in an intensified form, insofar as this passage figures Nebuchadrezzar as both “my servant” and as an enemy to be defeated by God. By contrast, other rulers are depicted as more or less entirely positive, most notably Cyrus of Persia, who financed the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem as part of an imperial policy of encouraging local religions to keep the peace. Thus the prophet Isaiah can call Cyrus God's “anointed... whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes” (45:1)—a divine role Cyrus can fulfill even though the Word of the Lord, addressing Cyrus, can say, “you do not know me” (45:4).

Within this political-theological scheme, the Jews are encouraged to suspend judgment of the pagan rulers under whom they must live. God will judge in his own due time, and until then, the duty of the Jewish community is to be as faithful as possible to the law and to contribute positively to the surrounding community:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your

daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jeremiah 29:4-7)

Over the centuries that followed, this prophetic paradigm provided the basic model for the Jewish community's relationship with earthly powers. From this perspective, the model Jew is a figure like Joseph or Daniel, who rises to a high government position and yet maintains his Jewish identity, leading the earthly ruler to give glory to the God of Israel.

At times, however, historical conditions became so extreme that this careful balance could no longer be maintained. One such period was the brief but tumultuous reign of the mad king Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century BCE (recounted most vividly in the apocryphal book of 2 Maccabees, widely available in standard translations). The ruler of one of the Hellenistic empires that resulted from Alexander's conquest, Antiochus attempted to impose Hellenistic culture and religion on the Jews, defiling their temple and forcing faithful Jews—under threat of torture and death—to violate the Torah by eating pork. Within both the Deuteronomistic and prophetic paradigms, this turn of events was incomprehensible: they were brutally persecuted, tortured, and even killed precisely *for* being faithful to God's law. Hence the king is no longer God's unwitting servant, but his conscious and willful enemy. Yet though it stretches the Deuteronomistic-prophetic paradigm nearly to the breaking point, this newly emerging apocalyptic paradigm does not depart from it entirely. Even the king conceived as demonic plays a necessary role in God's plan, as he serves as God's final enemy, whose defeat ushers in the messianic age.

The radical evil of the earthly ruler in the apocalyptic scheme thus paradoxically leads to a more elevated cosmological status. If he is to be a rival to God, he must operate not only on the earthly political plane, but on the spiritual plane as well. Hence the rich imagery of apocalyptic literature, which produces a kind of spiritual overlay for geopolitics—above all in Daniel, whose apocalyptic later chapters narrate the history of world empires up to the time of Antiochus (the “little horn” of the vision). Here we are as far as possible from Schmitt's homology between the divine and earthly ruler. The most relevant theological homology from the perspective of apocalyptic thought is, rather, that between the earthly ruler and God's demonic enemy.

From this perspective, we can see that it is not accidental that

the leaders of the Maccabean revolt against Antiochus belonged precisely to the priestly class rather than to the remnants of the ruling dynasty. Within the apocalyptic worldview, at least at this stage of its development, the prospect of a “good king” is no more acceptable than the rule of a “good emperor” on the model of Cyrus. A return to the theocratic ideal is the only legitimate option once the earthly ruler becomes God’s cosmic rival.

This is the context within which we must understand the New Testament’s calls for the coming of the “Kingdom of God” or “Kingdom of Heaven”—as well as its straightforward portrayal of Satan as the ruler of this world. This latter point is clear above all in the temptation of Christ, where Satan’s offer of worldly power makes no sense unless he really has worldly power to give. More dramatically, the author of Revelation associates contemporary Roman rulers with demonic forces and appears to anticipate a direct take-over by Satan in the near future. And throughout the Pauline epistles, there are references to expelling someone out of the community to make their way through the world as “handing that person over to Satan.” For the New Testament authors and the early Christian writers known as the Church Fathers, Christ did not come to suffer the punishment due for our individual sins, but to set us free from the demonic powers that rule this world.

What enabled the Hebrew prophets to make their bold, counterintuitive gesture? Why double down on their apparently defeated God instead of setting him aside? It is likely impossible to know for sure, but we can trace elements in the Hebrew theological tradition that made their daring gambit plausible. First, the God of the Hebrew Bible is not only a god of power, but a God of law—and justice. Second, already in the Torah God cannot be limited to a merely local relationship to the Israelites, because he is portrayed as using the Israelites themselves to carry out his judgment against the injustice of the land of Canaan. Nor indeed can he be limited by any created image:

Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sounds of the words but saw no form; there was only a voice.... Since you saw no form when the Lord spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely, so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves, in the form of any figure—the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the sea. (Deuteronomy 4:12, 15-18)

Hence the prophets can envision God’s demand for justice as transcending even the written Torah itself, as when Jeremiah declares that God will make a “new covenant” that will transcend the old insofar as “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts” (31:33).

This God of justice stands in stark contrast to the Greek and Roman mythological tradition, where the gods are often forces of chaos and destruction. Though the Greco-Roman gods have some inchoate relationship with certain unwritten laws surrounding hospitality and burial rites, it is difficult to come away from a reading of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, for instance, with a view that the gods are systematically committed to law and justice in general. It is this moral and political difference—and not, as an anachronistic liberalism would have it, simple intolerance—that underwrites the prophetic critique of pagan idolatry. A false idol is a god who is hungry for glory and power, while the God of Israel can say, “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6). Indeed, this conviction that the gods of the other nations were power-mad tyrants provided a crucial background to the apocalyptic diagnosis that the world is ruled by demonic forces opposed to divine justice.

II.

Students of contemporary debates in political theology could be forgiven for being unfamiliar with much of this history. This context is completely absent from Badiou, Agamben, and Žižek’s studies of the Pauline epistles, for instance. As a result, even though Badiou claims to have utterly no interest in the traditional reception of Paul’s thought, he winds up reproducing many of its most toxic elements—most notably its strident anti-Judaism. Žižek offers a more pro-Jewish reading, claiming that Paul offers to Gentiles the same “unplugged” stance toward the law enjoyed by Jews, but his reading is ahistorical and anachronistic, drawing on Eric Santner’s work on the psychodynamics of Judaism and projecting that theory onto the very different situation of the first century.² For his part, despite the fact that his scholarly work on Walter Benjamin has given him a deep knowledge of Judaism, Agamben makes very limited reference to the Hebrew Bible or Jewish tradition, preferring to concentrate on Paul’s influence on the Western tradition.

Within the emerging mini-canon of contemporary philosophical engagements with Paul, only Jacob Taubes’s *Political Theology of Paul*

2 I discuss Badiou and Žižek’s readings of Paul at greater length in Kotsko 2008.

fully situates the Apostle in the context of Jewish political theology, and thus only Taubes is able to present Paul's intervention not as merely analogous to politics (as in Badiou), but as directly and irreducibly political: "the Epistle to the Romans is a political theology, a *political* declaration of war on the Caesar." More than that, Paul and his contemporaries are struggling against the dominant political theology of their age: "Christian literature is a literature of protest against the flourishing cult of the emperor."³

The same broad historical perspective, first developed in his path-breaking study *Occidental Eschatology*, allows him to contextualize Carl Schmitt within the tradition of apocalyptic thought.⁴ Putting it in slightly different terms than Taubes does, we can view Schmitt's political theology as a recent outgrowth of a profound reversal that took place within Christian political theology after Constantine. Within the apocalyptic framework, these political developments were tantamount to the devil converting to Christianity.

Once the earthly ruler was no longer God's cosmic rival but his faithful servant, Christianity was able to step back from its apocalyptic outlook and embrace the relative stability of something like the Jewish prophetic model. Yet a total reversion to the prophetic model was impossible within the terms of Christianity insofar as Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection had already begun the apocalyptic sequence. In conceptualizing this strange new development, Christian theologians drew on an enigmatic passage from the (likely spurious) Pauline epistle of 2 Thessalonians:

Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day [of Judgment] will not come unless the rebellion comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one destined for destruction. He opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, declaring himself to be God. Do you not remember that I told you these things when I was still with you? And you know what is now restraining [*katechon*] him, so that he may be revealed when his time comes. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, but only until the one who now restrains [*katech n*] it is removed. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy with the breath of his mouth, annihilating him by the manifestation of his

3 Taubes 2004, pg. 16.

4 See Taubes 2103 and the appendices to Taubes 2004.

coming. (2:3-8)

It is impossible to reconstruct with confidence what the author of the passage originally meant by the *katech n* or *katechon* (the personal and impersonal grammatical forms, respectively), but post-Constantinian interpreters seized on the ambiguous term to designate the Christian ruler's role in staving off the advent of the Antichrist—and hence delaying the apocalypse.

Schmitt himself emphasizes the importance of this concept in *Nomos of the Earth* when describing the European political theology of the medieval period:

This Christian empire was not eternal. It always had its own end and that of the present eon in view. Nevertheless, it was capable of being a historical power. The decisive historical concept of this continuity was that of the restrainer: *katechon*. 'Empire' in this sense meant the historical power to restrain the appearance of the Antichrist and the end of the present eon; it was a power that withholds (*qui tenet*), as the Apostle Paul said in his Second Letter to the Thessalonians.... The empire of the Christian Middle Ages lasted only as long as the idea of the *katechon* was alive.⁵

Indeed, he explicitly cites the concept as a way of overcoming what in his view was a historical deadlock introduced by Christianity's apocalyptic orientation: "I do not believe that any historical concept other than *katechon* would have been possible for the original Christian faith. The belief that a restrainer holds back the end of the world provides the only bridge between the notion of an eschatological paralysis of all human events and a tremendous historical monolith like that of the Christian empire...."⁶ It is on the basis of the *katechon* that Taubes will later describe where his thought deviates from Schmitt's, despite their shared apocalyptic outlook:

Schmitt had one interest: that the Party, that chaos did not win out, that the state stood firm. At whatever cost.... That is what he later called the *katechon*: the restrainer who holds back the chaos bubbling up from the depths. That is not the way I think about the world, that is not my experience. I can see myself as an apocalyptic: it can all go to hell. I have no spiritual investment in the world as it is. But I understand that another does invest in this world and sees the apocalypse, in whatever

5 Schmitt 2013, pp. 59-60.

6 Schmitt 2013, pg. 60.

shape or form, as the adversary and does everything to subjugate and suppress it, because, from there, forces may be released that we are incapable of mastering.⁷

From this perspective, we can see that the decisive question in political theology is not sovereignty, but apocalyptic. Schmitt's focus on sovereignty, which has been so deeply shaped the contemporary field of political theology, actually presupposes a prior answer to the more fundamental question of apocalyptic. And apocalyptic is a *political* theological question because it grows out of a long history of theological developments that closely tied the theological problem of evil to the political problem of the ultimate legitimacy of the earthly rulers. Within the Christian framework, the choice is between the apocalyptic paradigm, in which the earthly rulers are God's illegitimate rivals, or the katechontic paradigm, in which the earthly rulers are God's legitimate, if provisional, servants. Yet since the katechontic paradigm can never fully dispense with the apocalyptic framework if it is to remain Christian, it is constantly threatened with apocalyptic dissolution—a prospect that was welcomed by the avowedly apocalyptic early Christian movement, but that gradually came to be viewed as a terrifying eventuality to be staved off at all costs.

The Schmittian framing of the discipline of political theology thus limits it to a very narrow—and deeply reactionary—corner of the intellectual options that developed in the Jewish and later Christian traditions. It influences political theologians to read early Christian sources anachronistically, through a post-Constantinian katechontic lens that obscures their more radical apocalyptic stance. And it encourages them to ignore contemporary theological movements that renew the apocalyptic protest against the illegitimacy of the earthly powers: Latin American liberation theology, radical black theology of North America, postcolonial theology, feminist theology, queer theology—movements that, despite the clichés about the supposedly intrinsic narrowness of “identitarian” intellectual approaches, are in a rich and continual dialogue with each other and with more traditional theologians as well. The Schmittian enclosure dooms us—we mostly white, mostly male political theologians—to continually replicate the intellectual construct of “The Christian West,” with all its deadlocks and blinders.

7 Taubes 2013, pg. 54.

III.

At the dawn of modernity, this katechontic vision of Christianity began to lose its hold, as the Christian God seemed to be less the guarantor of justice than a force of chaos akin to his pagan predecessors. While there were radical apocalyptic protests, by and large the secular state emerged as the only force that could subdue the violence of religious conflict. Even at this historical moment, the memory of the deep association between the earthly powers and the demonic still exerts its influence, as Hobbes could figure the state as the Leviathan, a mythical creature that readers of the Book of Job had traditionally associated with the devil.

This basic continuity is a clue that we are dealing here with a mutation in political theology rather than a radically new beginning. Just as in the more explicitly theological schemes, the ruler is not self-legitimizing, but needs some outside principle of legitimation. In the Hobbesian paradigm, free human consent replaces the divine decree—and like the divine decree, this human consent is irrevocable, so that anything the ruler does, whether good or evil, is legitimated by the choice to submit to his rule. And in keeping with the katechontic scheme, anything he does is preferable to the apocalyptic scenario of the war of all against all that his rule staves off.

In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Agamben has shown that the theology of divine providence stands at the genealogical root of modern concepts of economy—the invisible hand is a secularization of the hand of God. Here again, the principle of legitimation changes from God's will to human free will, as expressed through market mechanisms that aggregate and balance individual choices into a single outcome. And again, even apparently evil results are legitimate and necessary insofar as they reflect the outcome of human freedom.

Agamben begins *The Kingdom and the Glory* with the declaration that there are “two paradigms”—the political theological and the theological economic. He leaves unspecified exactly when and where these paradigms hold and how we should view the relationship between them. From the perspective of the present investigation, I would suggest that we view them as distinctively modern paradigms, which are both legitimated by reference to human freedom and which normally coexist. Under “normal” conditions of liberal democracy, they achieve some form of harmony that allows them to mutually legitimate each other—the state, founded in popular sovereignty, is the custodian of the economy, founded in freely chosen contracts, and the economy founds the

strength of the state.

Like the God of the prophetic paradigm, the legitimating principle of human freedom expresses itself only indirectly, and sometimes in apparently counterintuitive ways. The connection with the prophetic paradigm goes deeper, however, insofar as the modern subject is always “in exile.” In theoretical discourses, our entry into the spheres of the state and market is often figured as requiring us to leave some logically prior, more “natural” state, and our submission to the laws of state and market is presented as a necessary evil given the impossibility of fully actualizing human freedom in the world. We alienate our political power by electing representatives and alienate our productive power through the regime of wage labor. In short, we are never fully “at home” in the institutions of the state or in the marketplace—and as Agamben points out, the fact that the modern secular paradigm cuts off all hope of eschatological fulfillment renders our condition always potentially hellish.⁸

The modern prophetic paradigm of liberal democracy attempts to hold the two powers of state and economy in balance. Under extreme conditions, however, apocalyptic protests emerge that not only shatter the balance, but attempt to eliminate one power entirely.

Fascism asserts popular sovereignty and seeks to permanently overcome the imbalances introduced by the free play of the economy. This leads to a fixation on “foreign” elements within the body politic, which are symbolically associated with the negative effects of the economy, as in the Nazi campaign against the Jews or contemporary movements opposed to immigrants or Muslims in Western countries. Such movements are often deeply legalistic, desperate to find legal legitimation for their violations of the law. It is distressing to realize that arguably everything the Nazis did in Germany was formally legal. More recently, the Bush administration aggressively deployed “legal tools” to legitimate its extra-legal actions in the War on Terror.

By contrast, Communism attempts to destroy the state, conceived as an illegitimate tool of class domination, and aggressively develops the “material conditions for full communism,” in the hopes of ushering in a new economic order of unprecedented abundance and freedom, unmarked by the contradictions and injustices of capitalism. Communist regimes often flaunt their defiance of conventional political legitimacy, for instance by stealing elections seemingly on principle,

⁸ Agamben 2011, pg. 164.

even when they would win easily. This principled illegitimacy still holds in contemporary China, where the Communist Party is not a legally registered organization and where conventional state institutions “exist” in some sense but are basically ignored.

If these paradigms have any descriptive power, then they vindicate many elements in Agamben’s contemporary attempt to expand the political theological enterprise—for instance, his “two paradigms” in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, his insistence in *Homo Sacer* and elsewhere that liberal democracy and totalitarianism participate in the same deep structure. Yet they also show the limitations of his project, cut off as it is from the deeper political theological roots of the Jewish prophetic and apocalyptic traditions. Once his insights are reconsidered in light of those more foundational paradigms, things fall into place much more elegantly.

IV.

The question that remains now is whether we are at the threshold of a new political theological configuration. At the very least, it seems indisputable that we are at least living through the exhaustion of the modern secular model legitimated by human freedom. Does anyone seriously believe that liberal democratic institutions provide a workable forum for free and equal citizens to collaboratively develop solutions to serious problems? And in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008, can anyone with any intellectual integrity trust that the economy is a reliable tool for increasing human welfare and expressing human freedom? In theory, there are many plausible plans for using state power to reform the economy and return us to the more promising trajectory experienced in most Western countries in the early postwar era. Yet there is apparently no appetite to attempt such measures in any major developed nation, where political elites are essentially all devoted to the neoliberal project of aggressively deploying state power to exacerbate all the most destructive aspects of capitalism.

In short, the modern answer to the problem of evil has failed. Popular sovereignty and economic freedom are no longer sufficient to the task of legitimating our world order and explaining away its apparent evils as part of a broader good. Indeed, in contemporary discourse, the function of these principles is limited almost exclusively to blaming the everyday citizen for the evils in the world. Why do they keep electing these fools? Why don’t they turn up and vote sufficiently often or with sufficient enthusiasm? Why don’t they choose environmentally

sustainable consumer goods, or healthier food? Why don't they develop the job skills necessary to boost employment and global competitiveness?

These types of complaints should not be surprising, given the role of free will in the Christian theological tradition. We are accustomed to viewing free will as the epitome of human dignity, but for mainstream theologians, its primary purpose was to absolve God of responsibility for the existence of evil, off-loading it instead onto his creatures. Free will is first of all a mechanism for producing blameworthiness—free choice is a trap.

But what would it mean to think beyond the horizon of human freedom? Is it possible to find another principle of legitimacy to make our lives livable without forcing us to deny our experience of evil? Or is our only option an absolute apocalyptic refusal to grant any legitimacy to this world? Taubes teaches us that this latter option historically develops into something like Gnosticism—and here we might think of certain Western Marxists or even the later Schmitt, who persist in the work of uncompromising criticism with no genuine reference to the eschatological hopes that founded their discourse—and ends in total nihilism.⁹

If theology has any future, its task must be to grapple with these questions. This will require us to rethink the nature of theology as an intellectual enterprise, setting aside clichés about “belief in God” or the necessity of faithfulness to some presently existing “religious” community. Instead, we should view theology more broadly as a discourse on “ultimate concerns,” on what is most meaningful and meaning-making, and what is more, as a critical and historically-invested discourse on ultimate concerns. This will allow us to recognize modern political theory and economics as a theology of human freedom. There is much critical work to be done in this vein, and Goodchild's *Theology of Money* might serve as one productive model.

Yet more urgent is the constructive task of theology, which at its most powerful actually *creates* new and promising visions of what our ultimate concern could be, of what our life together might mean—or, perhaps better, of what meaning we might collectively give to our lives. To have any purchase, these new meanings cannot be completely disconnected from what came before them, nor can their ultimate effects be predicted and accounted for. Like the Hebrew prophets, we

9 See, for example, Taubes 2010, pg. 73.

must take the creative risk or renewing and transforming our tradition against almost impossible odds.

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Mysticism as Political Action

Catherine Tomas

Abstract

Here I argue that far from being a corrupted resource, the texts of certain female mystics from the Catholic tradition can be read as powerful liberating texts. If we read the writings and actions of some certain mystics through the lens of Hannah Arendt's concept of *Action*, certain forms of mysticism become political action itself. Here I trace the development of the concept of *Praxis* from its Aristotelian origins and show how Arendt's reconception offers a valuable way of understanding the actions taken by mystics such as Teresa of Avila and Hildegard von Bingen. By using this conception of action and applying it to these historical texts, I hope to open up a new and fruitful way of reading the writings and actions (and writings as actions) of female mystics who have suffered from being appropriated by institutions with conservative, oppressive ideologies.

Keywords: Political Action; Arendt; Praxis; Poesis; Mysticism; Teresa of Avila; Hildegard von Bingen;

It is not surprising that mysticism has been neglected as an intellectual resource for contemporary political action. One could convincingly argue that this is because the role of the mystic is directly related to the role of the Church. In the modern world, perhaps even in this "post-secular" world¹, the role of The Church as an intellectual or philosophical interlocutor, and perhaps specifically the Roman Catholic Church, has been dismissed as insignificant for those serious scholars of culture and philosophy. Mysticism, it may be argued, belongs to a deeply outdated and even backward world view. Mysticism is linked to an ideology that those interested in rigorous intellectual pursuits should not even deign to engage with. Mysticism is for 'religious people' for the peasants; the uneducated; the illiterate. Those who need a transcendent being to offer hope and purpose. How could a tradition so foundational to one of the most oppressive structures of power, offer hope of release from that same structure?

Mysticism is indeed for the peasants, for the uneducated; the illiterate and those who need a transcendent being. And what the texts

¹ If such a thing even exists.

of certain female mystics offer us is not a model of the ideal femininity², or the ideal way in which to submit ourselves before authority³ but the opposite. If we read the writings and actions of mystics through the lens of Hannah Arendt's concept of *Action*, certain forms of mysticism become political action itself. And this is my intention with this paper.

I define political action as any action designed to challenge the power of hegemonic structures of political, religious, or cultural institutions. And I follow Hannah Arendt in defining action as an activity which discloses the agency and character of the individual who acts. In this way, a particular type of mystic emerges from the abundance of mystics within the Catholic tradition each clamoring for attention.

There are certain mystics whose mysticism is explicitly and unequivocally, politically active. I will be arguing here that their mysticism, in fact, is political action. A certain type of mystic whose character and agency is revealed through their taking action, can and does challenge oppression and hegemonic power⁴. I call this *The Liberating Mystic*. *The Liberating Mystic* offers a model of political action which empowers those most oppressed by hegemonic power structures (such as, but not limited to) The Roman Catholic Church.

I will focus on Arendt's conception of *Action*. I shall use italics to distinguish this concept from other agential concepts. I will show how the actions of a specific collection of mystics fulfill Arendt's conception. It is in *Action*, as conceived by Arendt, that we can see the liberative potential in mystical texts – because it is in these texts that we see described the actions taken by the mystics, and in some cases, it is the writing of the texts themselves which constitute *Action*. These texts are liberative because they describe a form of action which is itself liberative and because they are the product of a process – namely, writing – which is itself liberative.

After briefly outlining Arendt's notion of *Action*, I will trace the historical distinction between passive and active mysticism, and show

2 Teresa of Avila, Terese of Liseux and Catherine of Sienna are all heralded as role models for women within Catholicism

3 As Catherine of Sienna's texts have been used by some Catholic conservative writers.

4 Although often, these are not always found together.

how a certain type of mystic performs Arendtian *Action*. Unlike the historical distinction between passive and active mysticism, Arendtian active mysticism does not concern the manner in which communication or dialogue with the divine is achieved, rather it is concerned with what happens after this; with what the mystic does with this dialogue, how they act. This form of Arendtian active mysticism has real liberative potential. This Arendtian action is liberative because it is a species of a more general notion of liberative action, *and* because mystical actions are often uniquely liberative in their nature. Mysticism is characterized by its existence outside of established rules of engagement with the divine such as those set up by organized religions.

The Vita Activa

Arendt defines the *Vita Activa* – literally Active Life - as divided into three 'fundamental human activities: labor, work, and action'⁵(Arendt 1958: 7). Arendt's *Labour* may be easily understood as those biological processes of the human body that maintain and allow physical life⁶; 'the human condition of labor is life itself' (Arendt 1958: 7). *Work* are those activities which are 'unnatural' to human existence but which provide the artificial world of things⁷; 'The human condition of work is worldliness' (Arendt 1958: 7). *Action*, according to Arendt is the 'only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter [as both labor and work do], corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not man live on the earth and inhabit the world.'(Arendt 1958: 7). An example of *Action* would be talking to one another; engaging in conversation.

Arendt's Action

Action, therefore, is the human activity that is fundamentally connected to our being with others, and the constitution of the self in relation to others. Arendt's conception of *Action* is based upon a re-

5 The English translation uses American spelling, and so when quoting directly American spelling is used.

6 The boundary between *labour* and *work* are in some instances difficult to distinguish – it is not clear, for example, whether hunter-gathering would fall under labour or work for Arendt – perhaps one could argue more easily that eating itself was a form of Labour. Would hunting and eating an animal be Labour, whereas dining in a three Michelin starred restaurant be Work? Is the distinction between Labour and Work the point of necessity? So it is necessary to eat, but anything beyond satisfying that basic primal drive becomes work. Arendt is not clear.

7 Heidegger's famous hammer would be a product of *work* as would any human-made item.

conception of the ancient idea of *praxis*, and specifically the distinction between *praxis* (action) and *poesis* (fabrication).

Historically, and by this I mean before Arendt developed a new conception of the concept, the idea of *praxis* was broader, and encompassed a knowledge of what to do in a certain situation. *Praxis* was also to do with practice in general and not only social activity or activity between human beings. Arendt shifted the meaning of *praxis* when she explicitly separated it out from *poesis*. When we encounter this distinction in Aristotle, *poesis* is explained as knowledge of how to make an artefact; make something in the world. This form of action Arendt separates out from *praxis* and calls *Work*, leaving *praxis* – practical knowledge – to be reconceived as *Action*. The important move she makes is to make this *Action* political and not ethical in the loose sense that Aristotle was concerned with.⁸

The distinction between *poesis* and *praxis* is important to Arendt because she wants to focus our attention on *praxis*. She refines the notion of *praxis* to argue that it should be understood to be made up of two elements: plurality and natality. It is this construction of *praxis* that lends Arendtian *Action* its decidedly political character, and moves it beyond simply a loosely ethical conception as in the Aristotelian form.

Plurality is the idea that all action is taken in relationships with and to others, and natality is the idea that within each action lies the potential for freedom and change, to act in a completely new way. Arendt links both of these notions to the phenomena of speech and language⁹. Without speech we would find it very difficult to coordinate our actions with those of others. Without speech, the plurality of action – one of the central elements of action for Arendt – would not be

8 See Aristotle, W. D. Ross, and Lesley Brown, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). I am indebted to Constantine Sandis for helping me work through these distinctions with regard to Arendt, as well as Ansuman Biswas and Luke Brunning, conversations with whom helped clarify the distinction between *poesis* & *praxis* (if one can or ought to be made).

9 Aristotle divided *praxis* into two forms also, but, these are different to Arendt's. For Aristotle, *praxis* was either (εὐπραξία), "good *praxis*" or dyspraxia (δυσπραξία) "bad *praxis*, misfortune". Ibid. at VI, 5, 1140b7.

possible¹⁰. Speech is also the way in which an individual discloses their action; action without speech may well be meaningless. It is through speech that we ascertain the meaning of an individual's actions.

Plurality

Action, for Arendt, is something ontological. In other words, it is through action that Being itself is enacted, and revealed. This is because *Action* (as opposed to work or labour) is only something that we can do in relation to, and because of, others. For Arendt, Being is fundamentally a Being-with, or Miteinander¹¹ 'Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live' (Arendt 1958: 8). Within action, then, plurality means that we have the ability to distinguish ourselves from others through our action at the same time as realising that it is only through engagement with others, that we 'are'.

According to Arendt, it is in the third fundamental human activity, *Action* (distinct from work and labour) that Being itself is revealed or created. One cannot 'be' other than in relation to others. Humans enact their otherness or distinction from each other, by taking *Action*, and for Arendt, it is through speech that human distinctiveness (which all living things possess) is transformed into otherness (which only humans possess).

For Arendt, 'human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings.' (Arendt 1958: 176) and this because it is only in plurality – in the fact that we are all only ever human beings – that our uniqueness can be expressed. 'Human plurality,' Arendt writes, is 'the basic condition of both action and speech' (Arendt 1958: 175). By this, she means that within speech and action lies plurality, or, speech and action (and speech as a form of action) have at their core, plurality.

10 It may seem therefore, that one cannot 'Act' on ones own – and to some extent this is correct. One may be able to take *Action* alone, but it can only be *Action* in the Arendtian sense, if it is with an awareness of plurality (and therefore others). In which case completely isolated *Action* is not *Action* and is instead simply an act.

11 Although first discussed by Martin Heidegger in Martin Heidegger, *Sein Und Zeit* (Halle a. d. S: M. Niemeyer, 1927) xi, 438 p. Simone de Beauvoir writes extensively (and more helpfully) on *Mitsein* in Simone De Beauvoir et al., *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage, 2011) xxv, 822 p.

Natality

The other essential element of action is natality. Natality denotes the idea that within every action, there is the potential for a radically new beginning:

‘the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting.’ (Arendt 1958: 9)

In this way, natality is the absolute freedom to always start again, to initiate a totally new way of being.

It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings ... The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world (Arendt 1958: 177-8)

Political revolution is *Action* writ large for Arendt: ‘revolutions are the only political events which confront us directly and inevitably with the problem of beginning,¹²’ (Arendt 1963: 21). In revolutions, people understand and clearly see the power of action and its ability to define and give identity to, human Being. They also confront us with a direct engagement with radical freedom: with revolutions, one is made aware of all possibilities, including those previously hidden by oppression:

It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings and in all origins. [...] The fact that man is capable of action means that the

12 By the ‘problem of beginnings’, Arendt means that often without revolutions – the prime example of *Action* for Arendt – it is often impossible to know how to initiate a new way of being. The problem of beginning is in knowing how to find oneself at ‘the beginning’. For Arendt, *Action* is the solution to this problem. When we take *Action*, we are confronted with the ability to start something new, but this ability is like looking into abyss. This problem of beginnings is that of being confronted with the “abyss of nothingness that opens up before any deed that cannot be accounted for by a reliable chain of cause and effect and is inexplicable in Aristotelian categories of potentiality and actuality.” Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York ; London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) at 208.

unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world. (Arendt 1958: 177-8)

Action, Revolution, and the Mystic

Hannah Arendt’s conception of *Action* is perhaps one of the most important and influential concepts for political philosophers, particularly those working to effect liberation from political oppression. Arendt’s category of *Action* is important because it offers a conception of political action that places political action at the heart of Being itself. Those who engage with Arendt’s work are left with a responsibility to effect political change, as well as the conceptual tools to do so. The responsibility exists because within every action is the potential to make something completely and totally new. Following Arendt, to act is to engage with the potential for change; to act in any way is to make a choice; with the power to effect change comes the responsibility to either effect change or support the status quo.

Moreover, this change and action are directly related to community – one cannot take action without it being intrinsically linked to other people because within *Action* is always plurality. Arendt is keen to ‘combat the reductionist character of the teleological model of action’ – the understanding that action is always towards a certain end – by ‘exposing the nihilistic consequences of denying meaning or value to the realm of action and appearances’ (Villa 1992: 276). *Action*, for Arendt, is valuable in and of itself.

‘Action, in so far as it engages in founding and preserving political bodies, creates the condition for remembrance, that is, for history.’ (Arendt 1958: 9) *Action* is so important because it has at its core, a potential (natality) to create something totally other to that which has come before. History is important for Arendt because it how we remember that which came before. When we take *Action*, we are changing the way in which we understand and remember that which came before – we are changing history.

It is through taking *Action* that radical political and ontological change occurs. Taking *Action* might be seen to be good in and of itself since it manifests an interdependent plurality of people, but it is

additionally good in then enabling via this same plurality, further change that helps the community. When this action is intentionally engaging with plurality and natality, change can occur.

I want to put this conception of action to work in applying it to the texts and actions of specific mystics to show how the work of certain mystics can count, fruitfully, as a form of Arendtian *Action*.

Re-reading Mystical Texts as Arendtian Action

Arendt’s concept of *Action* offers a way of understanding the lives and actions of mystics that reclaims their liberating potential. We can find evidence within the texts of mystics, of action that contains both plurality and natality, but more than this, we can find in these texts previously used to support the status quo, actions that challenged and changed it.

Much historical and even contemporary scholarship on female mystics, perhaps specifically Christian female mystics, focuses on mystical texts as resources that support an oppressive form of femininity and/or Christian life. Instead of liberative texts, these writings are used to suppress true political action, to suppress change and challenge, and to maintain oppression. Female mystics have their stories sanitized, re-written, heavily edited and re-packaged by members of religious organisations who go on to use these re-packed texts and hagiographed autobiographies as examples of ideal Christian femininity. Often these texts emphasize passivity, submission, and only emphasise a certain lack of particular form of action.

It is this emphasis on speech and action and speech as action that makes Arendt’s concept of *Action* so helpful in understanding and reading the work of female mystics. Here I use Arendt to argue against a passive form of contemplative mysticism, which has traditionally (and in some places, still) been presented as the more preferable, noble and ‘authentic’ form of mysticism. But I want to suggest first that this way of reading and the encouragement of this way of reading mystical texts is itself a political action – one aimed at maintaining the oppressive status quo. Second, I suggest that those historical mystics – at least those I will engage with here – were fundamentally engaged in Arendtian action.

As Arendt writes,

A life without speech and without action, on the other hand—and this is the only way of life that in earnest has renounced all appearance and all vanity in the biblical sense of the word—is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men. (Arendt 1958: 176)

There is no meaningful life without speech and action, supporting my claim that only a form of mysticism that is active and political can be meaningful. The role of plurality in action for Arendt ‘makes possible the peculiar freedom of political action.’ This freedom is ‘the very opposite of ‘inner freedom’, the inward space into which men escape from external coercion and *feel free*.’ (Arendt in Villa 1992: 277)

‘Inner freedom’ here is that which has been sold by The Church to the oppressed as a substitute for real freedom: a safe substitute that maintains the *inaction* of those disenfranchised by the political status quo. Much like certain forms of oppressive conservative Christianity encourage a focus on getting to heaven over achieving basic standards of living conditions, this way of reading the texts of mystics encourages inaction, it encourages ‘inner freedom’ as a substitute for real freedom.¹³

Mystics who take Action

Scholars of mysticism have distinguished between ‘active’ and ‘contemplative’ mysticism. Various mystical texts make this distinction, and scholars of mysticism have maintained this binary classification since the study of mysticism developed as an academic discipline. In his survey of mysticism, F.C. Happold points out the various stages of mystical union that Richard of Victor, one of the most important twelfth century mystics¹⁴, describes.

In the first degree, God enters into the soul and she turns inwards into herself. In the second she ascends above herself and is lifted up to God. In the third the soul, lifted up to God, passes over altogether into Him. In the fourth the soul goes forth on God’s behalf and descends

13 Challenging such pernicious theologies was an aim of many liberation theologies, and much of my wider work locates itself within this tradition.

14 Richard of Saint Victor is considered to be the first person to attempt to create a systematic theology of mysticism. Previous to his work, mystical experience was not understood as being related to scripture or any theology.

below herself.(Richard of Saint Victor in Egan 1991: 193)

Happold makes the point that Richard's fourth degree on mystical union can be read as a call to action. When the soul 'descends below herself', Happold claims, Richard is talking about returning to engage with the everyday world. For Happold, this movement indicates a distinct type of mysticism: 'To the mysticism of understanding and knowledge and of union and love I would add the mysticism of action.'(Happold 1963: 101-2) It is here we see for the first time, the distinction between the 'mysticism of action' coined by Happold, and 'active mysticism'. I wish to add a further specification: that what we find in the texts of certain mystics is neither 'mysticism of action' nor 'active mysticism' but is Arendtian action.

Happold elaborates:

The true mystic is not like a cat basking in the sun, but like a mountaineer. At the end of his quest he finds not the enervating isle of the Lotus Eaters, but the sharp, pure air of the Mount of Transfiguration. The greatest contemplatives, transfigured on this holy mountain, have felt themselves called upon to 'descend below themselves', to take on the humility of Christ, who 'took upon Him the form of a servant', and, coming down to the plain, to become centers of creative energy and power in the world.(Happold 1963: 101)

Although Happold is not the only (or indeed first) scholar of mysticism to mark out different types of mysticism, he is the first to mark out a mysticism of action as a distinct form of mysticism. The most interesting and important distinction between forms of mysticism has been between 'active' and 'passive'. But this distinction is not the same distinction he makes, and the one I want to develop here, using Arendt.

This division between active and passive has been related to contemplation, a key element of mysticism, and what has been called mystical experience. Much discussion of mysticism has focused on contemplation as either the method of communication with the divine, or the medium through which the divine could communicate with the individual. This distinction- between the mystic who actively attempts to cultivate a spiritual environment suitable to communicate with God, and the mystic who is spontaneously gifted with communication from God

in contemplation, has traditionally been the foundation of the distinction between active and passive mysticism. But it is not my intention to focus on this how certain mystics receive their communication. The active and passive mysticism I discuss is concerned with what the individual mystics do *after* the dialogue or communication with the divine has been experienced or received.

'Modern writers on mystical theology commonly distinguish two kinds of contemplation, the one acquired, active, ordinary; the other infused, passive, extraordinary.' (Butler: 216). The difference between the active and passive in this distinction is the way or manner in which the mystical experience was reached. When 'active', the mystic attempts through conscious and intentional prayer, to reach union with God. The 'passive' mysticism in this model is one given or bestowed upon the mystic by God. In this way, 'active' mysticism is like Underhill's practical mysticism; something that one does (mystical practice) in order to achieve a mystical union. In Happold's model, he calls this mysticism of action 'The lesser mystic way'. He claims that 'the word 'lesser' implies no value-judgement' (Happold 1963: 102) but this does not seem correct, or indeed, true. Even his use of Richard of Saint Victor demonstrates a belief that to take action in the world requires a stepping down; the mystic deigns to return to the world and busy herself with human matters.

I am suggesting something totally other to this: that mystical *Action* or mysticism as *Action* can come about after the event of dialogue with the divine. Arendtian Active mysticism or a mysticism of *Action* – because either fit my conception - is a form of political action that is informed by and inspired directly by an experience of dialogue (or union if understood as such) with the divine. Arendtian Active mysticism does not concern how one receives the divine dialogue, it is concerned with what one does with this information conveyed in the dialogue, in the world.

There are two moves here; the first is from passive mysticism to active mysticism in the ordinary way that Happold understands it. The second is to say that there is another, different form of action which is concerned with what the mystic *does* after they have their experience of union with the divine. This is where Arendt's model of *Action* is helpful. It is not enough to simply argue that active mysticism is about taking some

form of action towards union or dialogue with God. Active mysticism, I argue, needs to imply an active, intentional act that moves beyond an isolated contemplative union or communion with the divine. For this reason, Arendt's conception of *Action* with its integral understanding of natality and plurality, is essential to any attempt to argue for this.

Arendtian Active mysticism, then, is political *Action* taken intentionally to disrupt the status quo, *Action* that contains within it the potential of absolute freedom (natality). It also has at its core not only an understanding of the mystic's being-in-the-world as related to beings in the world, (plurality), but an understanding of the action itself being something that *defines* this plural nature of the mystic's Being.

In other words, the Arendtian active mystic is one who engages in active mysticism. Active mysticism is constituted by activity that is directly informed by dialogue with the divine, as well as having impact that defines the Being of the mystic as always ever a being amongst beings. Additionally, this *Action* taken as a result of dialogue with the divine, holds within it the seed of change that is political.

Active mysticism then, is something radically other than a form of mysticism that is set up as other to quiet contemplation, and rather, falls nicely into the fourth degree of union with God that Richard Saint Victor describes in his Texts. It is 'In the fourth the soul goes forth on God's behalf and descends below herself.'(Egan 1991) This descending below herself is to return to the world of beings, to actively and practically engage in the world. This must be a specific form of active engagement with others.

Active Mysticism in the Texts

Now that I have clarified what I mean by active mysticism, I want to examine mystical texts to show how their actions conform tightly to this model of active mysticism. We will see in these texts how the activities of the mystics fit Arendt's conception of action – in particular how they demonstrate both plurality and natality. I intend to reclaim the texts of female mystics as offering examples of the struggle towards the liberation from oppression and this is one way in which this can be done. We may not be able to have a liberated Teresa, but we can have a liberating Teresa.

Hildegard of Bingen

Perhaps the best example of Arendt's *Action* in the testimonies of mystics comes from Hildegard of Bingen. Hildegard was constantly getting into trouble with those in authority, and her letters are entertaining and engaging as a consequence. What we see in the testimony of Hildegard is evidence of her taking action due to the instruction she believes she received from the divine, and getting rebuked because of this. But her action is *Action* because in it we see the Arendtian characteristics of plurality and natality.

Perhaps the best example of Hildegard's *Action* comes in the form of Letter 23 to the prelates at Mainz. As abbess of Mount St Rupert, she had been ordered to disinter the body of a man previously buried in the sacred ground of the monastery. She refuses after claiming to have been told by God that to do so would be wrong:

By a vision which was implanted in my soul by God the Great Artisan before I was born, I have been compelled to write these things because of the interdict¹⁵ by which our superiors have bound us, on account of a certain dead man buried at our monastery, a man buried without any objection, with his own priest officiating. Yet only a few days after his burial, these men ordered us to remove him from the cemetery. Seized by no small terror, as a result, I looked as usual to the True Light, and, with wakeful eyes, I saw in my spirit that if this man were disinterred in accordance with their commands, a terrible and lamentable danger would come upon us like a dark cloud before a threatening thunderstorm.

Therefore, we have not presumed to remove the body of the deceased inasmuch as he had confessed his sins, had received extreme unction and communion, and had been buried without objection. Furthermore, we have not yielded to those who advised or even commanded this course of action.(Hildegard et al. 1998: 76)

Here we can see how Hildegard takes action based directly on her dialogue with the divine. She writes how it was only after asking the True

.....
15 An interdict is an ecclesiastical censure that prevents certain individuals or groups from partaking in certain, specified rites of the church. In this case, Hildegard was prevented from singing the offices and from celebrating Mass.

Light ‘with wakeful eyes’ that she decided not to obey the command of those with authority over her. She is careful to point out that it was when she was awake, alert and actively looking to see the outcome if she were to disinter the man; this was no dream-like vague sense, it is real, solid, and clear.

Moreover, this non-action (refusing to do something) is actually significantly more of an *Action* than if she had simply acquiesced to their demands. Hildegard is fully aware of the repercussions of her actions; she had already been threatened with having her right to sing and even the right to partake in celebrating Mass. Indeed so clear is she in her refusal and knowing full well what her punishment would be, she tells the prelates to whom she writes not only that she did indeed disobey their orders, but that she has already ‘ceased from singing the divine praises and from participation in Mass’ ‘in accordance with their injunction’. The tone of her letter is defiant and lacks genuine respect. She is almost challenging the prelates to defy her as she has them. I have already ceased from singing, she seems to be saying, ‘in accordance with your injunction’ as if this was indeed in accordance with their wishes. The fact of course was that the withdrawal of the right to music was not something Hildegard was offered in exchange for disobeying their order: it was a threat. A threat, by taking up herself without their order, she seems to be proving is no threat at all. Far from being an attempt to ‘not be totally disobedient’ her ceasing to sing and celebrate Mass is instead a challenge of the authority of the prelates of Mainz. You can take away my music if you want, she says, but I answer to a much higher authority than you.

She even explicitly says this:

As a result my sisters and I have been greatly distressed and saddened. Weighed down by this burden, therefore, I heard these words in a vision: It is improper for you to obey human words ordering you to abandon the sacraments of the Garment of the Word of God, ‘Who, born virginally of the Virgin Mary, is your salvation. Still, it is incumbent upon you to seek permission to participate in the sacraments from those prelates who laid the obligation of obedience upon you.’ (Hildegard et al. 1998: 77)

The result of this letter and her disobedience was serious.

Hildegard was threatened with excommunication and actually punished with a lesser injunction which involved serious restrictions on her ability to engage with her community. Her *Action*, she knew, would impact her sense of self as part of a community and the community itself. It was fully *Action* in that it was an act that directly confronted not only the plurality inherent in the issue she was refusing to part take in (the exhumation of a member of the wider community), but also the plurality of her position as a member of her own religious community. Hildegard’s *Action* has natality at its core also: her refusal to engage with the prelates in the way that was expected of her marked a totally revolutionary way of acting. Hildegard was confronted by the ‘abyss of nothingness that opens up before any deed’ (Arendt 1978: 208).

Although we do not have the entirety of all correspondences regarding this situation remaining, there are letters between the prelates and Hildegard as well as from Hildegard to the archbishop himself that add more detail to this story. A nobleman was interred in the consecrated ground of Hildegard’s monastery and this caused great controversy as at one time in his life he had himself been excommunicated (Hildegard et al. 1998: 79-80).

Although Hildegard was informed and had first-hand eyewitness evidence that the excommunication had been lifted, this made no difference. Apparently, there were political reasons for the prelates in at Mainz to insist on his exhumation. Suspicion surrounds the motivation for their actions because of the swiftness with which they acted as well as their timing, waiting until the Archbishop (a friend and supporter of Hildegard) was out of the country to enforce their interdict. ‘In any case, Hildegard was obdurate, refusing to give up the body’ (Hildegard et al. 1998: 80). It was this act, and the apparent miracle surrounding it, that contributed to her canonization as the reports for her protocol claim ‘that she made the sign of the cross over the grave with her *baculus*, causing the tomb to vanish without a trace’ (Hildegard et al. 1998: 80).

Hildegard writes to the Archbishop of Mainz, begging for his intercession and help. She is explicit in appealing to the Archbishop’s belief in her as someone with a privileged communication with God and encourages him to take her side by aligning herself with the will of God. ‘We are confident that the fire of Love, which is God, will so inspire you that your paternal piety will deign to hear the cry of lament, which, in our

tribulation, we raise to you.’(Letter 24, Hildegard et al. 1998: 80-81) She tells the Archbishop what has occurred, from her perspective:

When our superiors at Mainz ordered us to cast him out of our cemetery or else refrain from singing the divine offices,¹⁶ I looked, as usual, to the True Light, through which God instructed me that I was never to accede to this: one whom He had received from the bosom of the Church into the glory of salvation was by no means to be disinterred. (Letter 24, Hildegard et al. 1998: 81)

Hildegard makes it very clear that she is not acting according to her own will but because she has no choice, she is being commanded by an authority greater than any other. ‘I would have humbly obeyed them, and would have willingly yielded up that dead man, excommunicated or not, to anyone whom they had sent in your name to enforce the inviolable law of the Church – if my fear of almighty God had not stood in my way’ (Letter 24, Hildegard et al. 1998: 81).

Hildegard puts the Archbishop of Mainz in a position that makes it almost impossible for him to not lift the punishment placed on her as if he believes her to be in contact and dialogue with the divine then he cannot insist that she disobey His (Christ’s) orders. Hildegard refers to a letter written by the Archbishop, and delivered to her by the prelates, ‘forbidding us, once again, to celebrate those offices’. Hildegard is insistent that ‘having confidence in your paternal piety, I am assured that you never would have sent the letter if you had known the truth of the matter.’.(Letter 24, Hildegard et al. 1998: 81)

Teresa of Avila

Another example of a mystic taking Arendtian *Action* can be found in the writings of Teresa of Avila. One of the most important actions that Teresa took over the course of her life; one that she is most famous for and that brought her the most trouble and work, was of establishing a monastery of discalced Carmelites. After a collection of visions of Christ, as well as events that she describes as torments from the devil, she woke one day with an overwhelming desire to please God. By this time she had been living in a Carmelite monastery in Avila for over twenty five years. She liked it there, as she describes herself ‘I was very

16 This is in fact not accurate- they did not offer her a choice, it was a threat.

happy in the house where I was. The place was very pleasing to me, and so was my cell, which suited me excellently; and this held me back’ (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 237).

Teresa had no need or desire to leave. The monastery in Avila was comfortable, a large house well patronized by wealthy guests, where the nuns wanted for nothing. It is important to note that despite the hagiographical redescrptions of Teresa’s story- redescrptions that emphasize how she was deeply dissatisfied with the culture and nature of the culture in the monastery- it being too lax and not holy enough, for example – her own writings prove the opposite. She was happy, content, very pleased with how comfortable and pleasant life was there. It was because of the desire placed within in, as she describes it, by God, and only because of this desire placed in her by God, that she decided to pursue setting up here own monastery. As far as Teresa was concerned, the instruction from the divine was clear:

One day, after Communion, the Lord earnestly commanded me to pursue this aim with all my strength. He made me great promises; that the fail to be established, the great service would be done Him there, that is name should be St Joseph’s; that he would watch over us at one of its doors and Our Lady at the other; that Christ would be with us; that the convent would be a star, and that it would shed the most brilliant light. (237Teresa and Cohen 1987)

This action was not welcomed by everyone, not least of all by Teresa herself. But the real challenge she faced after her own unwillingness to leave the comfort of Avila, was from the Roman Curia. According to Teresa, Christ himself foresaw the troubles she would encounter and right from the beginning, instructed her accordingly. ‘He told me to convey His orders to my confessor, with the request that he should not oppose them or in any way hinder my carrying them out’ (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 237).

Despite having the support of her spiritual advisor, as well as another nun she describes as her ‘companion’, the idea was rejected and ridiculed by those in ecclesiastical authority. ‘Hardly had this news of this begun to spread around the place than there fell upon us a persecution so severe that it would not be possible to describe it in a few words. They talked, they laughed at us, and they declared that the idea

was absurd' (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 238).¹⁷

Teresa's *Action*, like Hildegard's, was taken with a full awareness of the community she was a part of, and that her action would effect. Despite there being 'hardly anyone among the prayerful, or indeed in the whole place, who was not against us, and did not consider our project absolutely absurd', she persisted only because of her dialogues with God. 'The Lord showed me no other way' (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 239).

Teresa could not tell them of her principle reason to set up the convent because she had by this time already made herself unpopular within the convent because of her visions and locutions. Teresa had been accused of receiving visions from the devil himself and not from God and the visions and locutions she experienced on a regular basis were gossiped about viciously. Teresa's visions and the type of people that they attracted – namely holy men - had already placed her in a difficult social setting. She was already on the fringe of convent social life due to the visions and ecstasies that she suffered (or enjoyed). Throughout the *Life* she writes about how she wishes more than anything that her spiritual advisors and confessors would be more discreet. She knows that talk of her divine dialogues was rife throughout the convent, and that many of the nuns resented her, thinking her of attempting to gain attention for herself through these supposed ecstasies. The plan to start her own convent encouraged this bad feeling, and the only truth she could offer as some sort of explanation, she was unable to supply, because it would only feed into their existing prejudice.

Action is not always popular. In fact very often *Action* is deeply unpopular. The very nature of Arendtian *Action* – that it has at its heart plurality and natality – means that more often than not it is disruptive and not 'populist'. The point of *Action* is not that it is an act conceded my most to be correct, rather, it is an act or collection of acts that has at its foundation an awareness of the interconnectedness of beings, and the potential for change. When Teresa is harassed for eighteen years by the divine, and finally submits to His demands,¹⁸ a tipping point is reached.

17 I will return to this series of events, and the response Teresa receives from the authorities, in the next and final chapters as it is a good example of what I term abjection.

18 For Teresa, although not for all female mystics, the divine was male.

Her submission and consequential *Action* is a form of revolution.

Vassula Ryden

The final example of a mystic taking action based upon communication with the divine, is of Vassula Ryden. Ryden is most famous for taking a very particular position regarding ecumenism. Ryden understands that God wishes all of the Churches to be united, and claims that this wish was conveyed to her on multiple occasions, directly. She continues to engage with the Roman Curia for this reason, despite their continued attempts to ignore and silence her.

From the very beginning of her communication with God, Ryden was told that one of the main reasons for the communication was to encourage or help bring about, 'Church Unity'. She was encouraged by Christ, who she understands to be communicating with her, to give speeches, talks, and publish the communications he gives to her all on this topic. If there were one single issue that the writings and actions of Ryden focus on, it is Church Unity.

Under the title *True Life in God*, Ryden publishes her communications in physical form as books, as well as well as online, and her website is of the same name. The nature of Ryden's online presence and instant dissemination of her messages through the Internet and her website has meant that a large online forum and community has developed around True Life in God. She talks about TLIG as if it is a movement, and not only a religious or spiritual movement, but specifically a movement for Church Unity. 'True Life in God is a call to Unity – all in TLIG have the responsibility to circulate widely the TLIG book "Unity, Virtue of Love".'(Ryden)

There is little doubt that one of the reasons the Roman Curia, with whom Vassula Ryden has had much involvement and engagement - have historically anxious about her work is because of this, and remain so today. Not only does TLIG represent a new religious movement of sorts, it is a new religious movement that has at its core, a fundamentally un-doctrinal idea.

Like other mystics, it is possible to identify a collection of actions that confirm to my model of Arendtian 'active mysticism' and that can be considered demonstrations of a mysticism of *Action*. Here I will focus on

the *Action* Ryden continues to take in promoting Church Unity. This is because it is this action which has been the most controversial and has resulted in her being abjected.¹⁹

One of the most important speeches cited by Ryden herself as well as members of TLIG, was delivered on May 25th 2007, in Turkey. It is considered important for a collection of reasons; first, it had a large audience of over 500 people, second, in this audience were a Cardinal, two Archbishops, nine Bishops as well as a collection of lay people. Ryden's website claims that this audience was made up of people from 'eighteen Christian denominations and of other faiths' and that 'the speech received a standing ovation from all present for two minutes.' (Ryden)

The two most important elements of the speech are her claim that the responsibility for:

The Church is one and has always been one, but the people of the Church are those that with their quarrels, prejudices, their pride and mainly their lack of love for one another managed to divide themselves, and we all know it!

And second, that Christ himself was 'offended' (Ryden) by the continued quarrels, prejudices, and pride of those 'people of the Church.' By 'people of the Church', Ryden is referring to the leaders of the respective denominations who reject unity. The most important and powerful of these are the Roman Curia of the Holy Roman Catholic Church and the leaders of the Eastern Orthodox Church. It is unknown if either of these Churches had representatives present, although this is the implication of the text on Ryden's website. By making such strong claims Ryden took some risks; she was already unpopular with both sides of the largest division, and her words in this speech do not show restraint.

She quotes one of the messages from Christ as saying:

My Kingdom on earth is My Church and the Eucharist is the Life

19 I use abjection here as a development of the Kristevan term as found in Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs De L'horreur : Essai Sur L'abjection* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1980) 247 p.

of My Church, this Church I Myself have given you. I had left you with one Church but hardly had I left, just barely had I turned back to go to the Father, than you reduced My House to a desolation! You leveled it to the ground! And My flock is straying left and right. For how long am I to drink the Cup of your division? Cup of affliction and devastation!(Ryden)

She continues, this time in her own words:

There are two choices here. The first choice belongs to God and comes from God and that is: to live in love, peace, humility, reconciliation and unity. The second choice belongs to Satan and comes from him and that is: hatred, war, pride, lack of forgiveness, ego and division. It's not so difficult to choose.

There is more than a passing resemblance between this speech and the letters of Hildegard of Bingen to the prelates at Mainz. Indeed, when we look at Ryden's other texts, particularly her letters to and from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, we see a striking similarity in tone and content. One of the other most important resources we have in examining the relationship between the communication Ryden claims to have with the divine and her actions, are these letters. In them members of the CDF engage in a dialogue with Ryden in an attempt to 'discern the spirit'. It is in these correspondences that we find evidence of Ryden's actions being motivated by her communications, as well as seeing how her *Action* – in this case the speeches and writings she publishes on Church Unity – confirm to the model of an Arendtian mysticism of action.

In her speech given on the 25th of May, and published widely online and in hard copy, she claims that regarding Church Unity:

There are two choices here. The first choice belongs to God and comes from God and that is: to live in love, peace, humility, reconciliation and unity. The second choice belongs to Satan and comes from him and that is: hatred, war, pride, lack of forgiveness, ego and division. It's not so difficult to choose. (Ryden)

This is a brave act, and one directly motivated by her communication from God. Later, in a letter to the CDF in response to their questioning of her motivation, she writes:

I do not believe I would have ever had the courage or the zeal to face the Orthodoxy to bring them to understand the reconciliation our Lord desires from them if I had not experienced our Lord's presence, neither would I have endured the oppositions, the criticisms and the persecutions being done on me by them. In the very beginning of God's intervention I was totally confused and feared I was being deluded; this uncertainty was truly the biggest cross, since I never heard in my life before that God can indeed express Himself to people in our own times and had no one to ask about it. Because of this, I tried to fight it away, but the experience would not leave and later on, slowly, with time, I became reassured and confident that all of this was only God's work, because I started to see God's hand in it. This is why I stopped fearing to face opposition and criticism and have total confidence in our Lord, knowing that where I lack He will always fill, in spite of my insufficiency, and His works will end up always glorious. Approaching the Orthodox priests, monks and bishops to acknowledge the Pope and to reconcile with sincerity with the Roman Church is not an easy task as our Lord says in one of the messages; it is like trying to swim in the opposite direction of a strong current, but after having seen how our Lord suffers in our division I could not refuse our Lord's request when asked to carry this cross; therefore, I have accepted this mission, yet not without having gone through (and still going through) many fires. You have asked: "Why do you take up this mission?" My answer is, because I was called by God, I believed and I answered Him; therefore, I want to do God's will. One of Christ's first words were: "Which house is more important, your house or My House?" I answered, "Your House, Lord." He said: "Revive My House, embellish My House and unite it." (Ryden 2002)

Here Ryden demonstrates how her actions can be considered a form of Arendtian *Action*; her action demonstrates both plurality and natality. There are few actions more explicitly concerned with plurality than promoting and fighting for the unity of the Church. Unity of the Church indicates a fundamental understanding that one is only ever a being amongst others – Vassula's concern with unity is due to the understanding that the Church as she understands it can only grow and develop together – as a being amongst beings. Finally, the brave (or naïve and/or simplistic) call for complete unity demonstrates her belief in the true potential for radical shift to occur, through *Action*. Her public

condemnation of Church leaders for their 'pride' and 'stubbornness' as a reason for the failure of Church Unity so far, may well be dismissed as foolish by those more aware of the complex nature of ecumenism, but it remains the case that it also demonstrates her understanding that radical shift and change can occur as a result of her action.

The Liberating Mystic

All of the mystics examined here demonstrate a profound ability to take *Action* as defined by Arendt's model. They all take *Action* that contains within it plurality and natality. All of the mystics engaged with here share a specific quality; that of being acutely aware of their locatedness within a nexus of others and of having the potential to radically change the political and / or social situation for both themselves and others. Instead of dismissing these texts of female mystics as corrupted by misreadings, mistranslations and appropriation by oppressive institutions, I argue that their reading through the lens of Arendtian *Action* can offer inspiration for political change today, as well as a richer and more accurate understanding of the nature of these texts and their authors.

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Spirit and Utopia: (German) Idealism as Political Theology

Kirill Chepurin

In these philosophers [i.e. Kant, Fichte, and Schelling], revolution was lodged and expressed as if in the very form of their thought.

Hegel¹

Abstract

Can we understand (German) idealism as emancipatory today, after the new realist critique? In this paper, I argue that we can do so by identifying a *political theology of revolution and utopia* at the theoretical heart of German Idealism. First, idealism implies a certain revolutionary event at its foundation. Kant's Copernicanism is ingrained, methodologically and ontologically, into the idealist system itself. Secondly, this revolutionary origin remains a "non-place" for the idealist system, which thereby receives a utopian character. I define the utopian as the ideal gap, produced by and from within the real, between the non-place of the real as origin and its reduplication as the non-place of knowledge's closure, as well as the impulse, inherent in idealism, to attempt to close that gap and fully replace the old with the new. Based on this definition, I outline how the utopian functions in Kant, Fichte and Hegel. Furthermore, I suggest that idealism may be seen as a political-theological offshoot of realism, via the objective creation of a revolutionary condition. The origin of the ideal remains in the real, maintaining the utopian gap and the essentially critical character of idealism, both at the level of theory and as social critique.

Keywords: Kant, Fichte, Hegel, idealism, revolution, utopia

The goal of this paper is to revisit the political-theological concept of *utopia* as applicable to German Idealism today, after the new realist critique – "utopia" not merely as an "idealistic" political vision, but as a revolutionary condition inscribed within (German) idealist thought. I will attempt to identify the locus of the utopian at the level of the German Idealist *theory*, thereby providing a theoretical foundation for understanding German Idealism as a form of utopian and revolutionary thought – a thought *of* utopia and revolution. Ernst Bloch placed his concept of utopia in the Hegelian-Marxist tradition; Louis Marin found a "utopic" principle of the "neutral" in Kant; Daniel Whistler

¹ Hegel 1970, 20, p. 313.

importantly sees it inherent in Schelling's concept of abstraction.² For my consideration of the utopian, I will turn to what I see as a common problem in Kant, Fichte and Hegel – the problem of the origin (or production) of idealist thought as such. I also hope that this analysis might prove useful for understanding what “idealism” is or how it is produced, and why it is what it is – namely, I suggest, a utopian critique.

The goal of this paper is, in other words, to look, not for ways *out* of idealism, but for a new way *in*. I see the concept of utopia as precisely such an alternative point of entry. Since Quentin Meillassoux has taken the Kantian-Hegelian “correlationism” to be the paradigmatic case of anti-realism,³ I will follow his lead and, while not denying Meillassoux's indictment of correlationism or the related charges that some important Schellingian scholars make, attempt to identify the revolutionary and the utopian as two commitments and structural similarities, *beyond* correlationism, that German Idealism may entail. Along the way, I will suggest that idealism may be seen, onto- and anthropologically, as an anti-realist offshoot of realism *from within* realism, the creation of a revolutionary condition (a division between the old and the new) and a utopian impulse (towards a full transformation of the old) through which idealism itself receives a utopian character. It is thus precisely the “anti-” in German Idealism's “anti-realism” that will interest me here – and so I will turn to consider Kant together with the two, so to speak, most idealist of German Idealist philosophers, Fichte and Hegel. The essence of this “anti-” can, I will argue, be encapsulated in three terms: revolution, retrospectivity, and utopia.

1.

Since the entire German Idealism may be said to be engaged in the task of revisiting Kant, we would do well to begin by doing the same. As is well known, Kant's critical or transcendental idealism begins with a self-proclaimed revolutionary gesture known as the “Copernican turn,” involving a delineation of what we can and cannot know, and therefore a division between two perspectives, of knowledge and of the unknowable. As soon as a rational being begins to cognize the world, it is not the

2 Bloch 1986; Marin 1984; Whistler 2015. I am thankful to Daniel Whistler for pointing me to Marin's work.

3 Meillassoux 2008.

world as it may exist independently of us, or “an sich,”⁴ but the world as it appears to us that our mind explores, using the mind's own a priori categories to give it a rational form. No knowledge of the world that would forego the categories inherent in our mind and know the world as it is “an sich” is possible. Such is Kant's “correlationism,” as dubbed by Meillassoux. There has, of course, been a multitude of different readings of what exactly Kant means by the *Ding an sich*, but what matters here is the very existence of a certain world, point of view, set of inner qualities, or generally something which remains “outside” idealist knowledge and to which we have no cognitive access. The important point here is not that, if we were to know the in-itself, we would gain some new or “real” (kind of) knowledge – but the opposite: namely, that our (kind of) knowledge is itself something *new* compared to whatever or however things may be “in themselves” or independently of us. It is the *Ding an sich* as the ground of knowledge – the “unknown ground of phenomena” (A380),⁵ or the “true correlate of sensibility” (A30/B45) that is “unconditioned” (B xx) by sensibility – that I will call “the real” in Kant. The terms “ground” and “correlate of sensibility” point to Kant's (in)famous claim, debated among Kantian scholars, that our sensibility is directly affected by the thing in itself – a position he explicitly and firmly defended against Beck's and Fichte's criticism.⁶ Interesting in this regard is also Kant's talk of the transcendental object, the “inscrutable” ground of receptivity corresponding to the thing in itself, as the “basis of appearances” (A613/B641) that serves as a kind of indeterminate original guarantee of their unity (“the unity of the thought of a manifold in general,” A247/B304, or “the unity of the manifold in sensible intuition” as the “correlate of the unity of apperception”, A250). The transcendental object is essentially all that remains of the real strictly *within* idealism – an indeterminate ghost of the real, a haunting as well as a promise (of

4 Kant himself does believe such a reality exists, since the “conclusion that there can be appearance without anything that appears” sounds “absurd” to him (B xxvi). We will see, however, that the exact nature of this reality does not matter for identifying the “utopian” structure of idealism.

5 From here onwards, “A” and “B” reference the two editions of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, as is customary in Kant scholarship. “AA” references the *Akademie-Ausgabe* (Kant 1900ff.).

6 See e.g. Westphal 2004; Addison 2013.

reality).⁷ No less controversially, for Kant, the thing in itself *causally* brings about idealist knowledge, via a “causality that is not appearance, even though its effect is encountered in appearance” (B567). Both “ground” and “cause” suggest that, aside from being something new compared to the real, the ideal is a certain transformation of, and coming from within, the latter. As soon as we have begun to cognize them, things change (for us); the transformation produces newness, but this newness originates as an affect of the real.

Of course, Kant’s idealism cannot claim knowledge of how exactly the grounding or the causality function or originate; neither, shall we see, can Fichte’s or Hegel’s idealism, despite doing away with the thing in itself *sensu stricto*. This fact – that there is no satisfactory idealist answer to the question of origin as origin, or that such an answer can only be retrospective (so that, according to Kant, we can and must think, but not “really” know this origin) – belongs to the essence of Kantian idealism as a doctrine of the new. Kant’s hypothesis of a causality between the noumena and the phenomena is controversial because it transphenomenally applies a concept within critical idealism to something that precedes and grounds it while not being a part of what we can legitimately know. It is, in other words, a retrospective hypothesis, in which idealist thought must think the old (the real) using the conceptual apparatus belonging to the new (the ideal). Considered in this way, Kant’s hypothesis serves a vital function within idealism as an example of the approximatory character of our knowledge (which strives to know the thing in itself but cannot do so – the noumenon as *Grenzbegriff*, “limit-concept”⁸) and the closest we can come to appropriating the revolution of human knowledge (as the foundational event for idealist thought) to our ways of thinking.

As such, the thing in itself (and thus Kantian idealism) goes “beyond” correlationism in two directions at once. Namely, the real as the “limit-concept” works both ways: limiting our sensibility as the origin of idealist knowledge, it also limits how far this knowledge can go and

7 Cf. Grier 2004, p. 84, after referencing Kant on the manifold being “given prior to the synthesis of the understanding and independently of it” (B145-146): “At A110 Kant claims that this relation to an object is the necessary unity of consciousness and the synthesis of the manifold. The transcendental object, then, serves to account for the ability of thought ... to refer to something given to it from elsewhere (i.e., from “outside” thought). Indeed, in this very general and abstract sense, it may be viewed as the referent of such thought. In this way, the concept of the transcendental object acts to “confer upon all our empirical concepts in general relation to an object, that is, objective reality” (A 109-110).”

8 See e.g. A289/B345, or B307 on it as a “negative conception.”

where the mind has to stop in its progress. In a sort of reduplication, the unknown that affects our sensibility – the real as origin – re-appears as the unattainable closure of knowledge, creating a fundamental gap that “leaves open a space which we can fill neither through possible experience nor through pure understanding” (A289/B345). From the standpoint of idealist knowledge, the real is a “non-place”: we can retrospectively point to it (as a gap), we can think it as empty, but we cannot incorporate it fully into the newness that has broken away from it. Kant himself speaks of the noumenon as “empty for us,” so that “we” (i.e. we as embodying the ideal) “are unable to comprehend how such noumena can be possible” (A255). We can thus approximate the limit, but never reach it or close the gap.

It is this ideal *gap*, produced by and from within the real, between the non-place of the real as origin and its re-duplication as the non-place of knowledge’s closure, as well as the *impulse*, inherent in idealism, to attempt to close that gap and fully re-place the old with the new, that I would like to call *utopian*. Thus understood, the utopian has newness, or the revolutionary break of the ideal, as its objective condition. This is also a different way of looking at Jacobi’s critique of Kant’s transcendental idealism in *David Hume on Faith, or Idealism and Realism*, where Jacobi says of the thing in itself that we cannot enter Kantian idealism without it, and cannot remain within it if we accept it (“*ohne jene Voraussetzung in das System nicht hineinkommen, and mit jener Voraussetzung darinnen nicht bleiben konnte*”⁹).

Jacobi’s criticism perceptively identifies the core problematic at the heart of idealism; if we separate it from the specific textual problems with Kant’s concept of the thing in itself, we may regard as something *constitutive* of idealism. Namely, already in Kant and already in its underlying *theoretical* foundation, idealism defines itself through a dissatisfaction with the *status quo* of the real, seeing itself not as continuous but as proceeding from a radical break with the real in a utopian impulse pointing towards the second non-place, that of the system’s closure, also inconceivable if we want to “remain within the system.” To be sure, there are many “conservative” moments to be found in Kant’s further theoretical and practical elaboration of idealism (although one might argue those are inevitably needed to escape the permanent revolution and to structure the new), but this theoretical foundation remains and even becomes morally and politically radicalized

9 Jacobi 2004, p. 109.

in Kant's conception of "revolution" and "new man" in his *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. In the next sections of this paper, we will see the utopian re-appear in different variations, but always inextricable from the figure of the origin (of idealist thought).

2.

(Kantian) idealism is thus revolutionary. Politically, the real is the *status quo* against which the ideal revolts. Moreover, this revolution has its objective "cause" or "ground" in the real; we may say it is the real that revolts *against itself*, producing a standpoint of newness that can only retrospectively point to the old, but leaves the real as *such* behind. The Copernican revolution is not only methodological, and not only a revolution in thought, but may be regarded as producing a revolutionary division between the old and the new within itself – at the very foundation of idealist epistemology, ontology, and even anthropology (with the human being as the primary case of the rational being to which the knowledge of the phenomenal world corresponds). I call this division "revolutionary" not only because of Kant's use of the term in the *Religionsschrift*, or because it sharply distinguishes the new from the old, but also because it is radical, discarding its origin (which *remains*) just as it proceeds from and transforms it, looking at the world from the standpoint of the new as the "end in itself." Newness in thought turns out to be a thought *of* newness. The real as "ground" or "cause" indicates that we must think this revolution as at once immanent (if considered immanently or prospectively from the standpoint of the real) and transcendent (if considered retrospectively from the standpoint of the ideal).

Unsurprisingly, we find the same retrospective indication of a revolutionary origin, and a similar utopian gap, in Kant's philosophy of history. Here, Kant starts from the new – the birth of knowledge, freedom, and morality – as a *fact*, as if man produced it "completely from within himself" (as if "der Mensch alles, was über die mechanische Anordnung seines tierischen Daseins geht, gänzlich aus sich selbst herausbringe"¹⁰). This is why the "beginning" of history can only be "presumable" or "conjectural" for Kant ("mutmaßlicher Anfang"). Objectively, it is as if humankind were propelled – in a sort of "thrust,"¹¹

10 AA 8:19.

11 AA 8:114.

"drive"¹² or "release"¹³ – to break from nature and the animal condition by some sort of external force or stimulus; this external ground, however, is, again, the real (or "nature"). On the one hand, "if one is not to be overenthusiastic in one's speculations, then one must begin with that which cannot be derived by human reason from preceding causes of nature: the existence of a human being"; on the other, "*nature* has made this beginning."¹⁴ Of course, just like with the thing in itself, we cannot from the idealist standpoint know how exactly the beginning of history happens. *For* idealism, the origin of history is essentially a self-positing, an I = I.¹⁵ Kant is driven to retrospectively postulate a divide between the old and the new, such as in his remark, in the *Conjectural Beginning of Human History*, that our "ground" is divided into two predispositions, the animal and the moral ("daß die Natur in uns zwei Anlagen zu zwei verschiedenen Zwecken, nämlich der Menschheit als Tiergattung und eben derselben als sittlicher Gattung gegründet habe"¹⁶). There is a division here, and the real cause of this division is "grounded" in and by nature.

This division manifests itself also, theologically, in Kant's interpretation of the Genesis and the Fall, as well as in the framework underlying his *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht* (except this time reduplicated or inverted towards the future). "Everything begins with evil," says Kant.¹⁷ The evil and the Fall are interpreted as the beginning of knowledge. The common criticism that Kant does not make evil intelligible to us, may also be seen as inherent in the revolutionary standpoint to which Kant adheres. In the *Conjectural Beginning*, Kant himself speaks of that division as "a gap" that idealist thought cannot "endeavor to fill"¹⁸ – a phrase that echoes the "open space" that "cannot be filled" from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, referenced earlier – as well as emphasizes the revolutionary character of reason by pointing out, here as well as elsewhere in Kant's practical philosophy,

12 AA 8:115.

13 AA 8:114.

14 AA 8:109-10.

15 Cf. Philonenko 1986, p. 152ff.

16 AA 8:117.

17 AA 15/2:615; cf. AA 8:115.

18 AA 8:110.

that reason is free to act “contrary to” natural urges. Further, again, Kant can only hypothesize about nature in his philosophy of history by proceeding from the standpoint of idealist theory and from how “we” can think nature from where we are now.

This sort of anti-naturalism is not to be understood literally, but as part of the same distinction between the standpoint of the old or the “an sich,” and the standpoint of the new or the ideal. From within idealist thought, the ideal can only be cognized as if it were a product of a revolutionary creation from nothing, even as we retrospectively *think* (but not know) its objective origin in the real. Kant’s disagreement with Herder also has its origin here. Herder, with his insistence on the cognizable real ground not just of the human body, but reason, *Humanität*, and freedom as well,¹⁹ is from idealism’s point of view a “dogmatist,” as Kant calls him,²⁰ adhering to the kind of natural status quo from which idealism revolted. Idealism, by contrast, is revolutionary, not cumulative. Kant criticizes Herder for making the principle of thought into an “effect” of “invisible nature”; however, idealism itself has its “ground” and “cause” in the real – it is just that it is a retrospective critique of the real and a utopian attempt at its full and radical transformation, not its endorsement *as such*. It is in this “as such” that the root of the disagreement between Kant and Herder lies.

In his theoretical philosophy, Kant identifies the real with the domain of things as they are by themselves; in his philosophy of history, with nature – but not nature as we cognize it. At the point of the origin, there is yet no “we”; “we” can only point to that origin by looking back at it. Only by virtue of our morality, says Kant, i.e. at the culmination of the ideal and looking back at the origin, can we (retrospectively) consider ourselves to be the end goal of nature.²¹

This move will be repeated in Fichte and Hegel, because for idealism, the origin is interesting not as origin, but only as a transformation of that origin as enacted by (idealist) thought. From the standpoint of the ideal, the origin is, literally, *nothing*. Herder indicts

19 “...von der Nahrung und Fortpflanzung der Gewächse stieg der Trieb zum Kunstwerk der Insekten, zur Haus- und Muttersorge der Vögel und Landtiere, endlich gar zu Menschen-ähnlichen Gedanken und zu eignen selbst erworbenen Fertigkeiten; bis sich zuletzt alles in der *Vernunftfähigkeit, Freiheit und Humanität* des Menschen vereinet” (Herder 1989, p. 166).

20 AA 8:54.

21 AA 8:114.

Kant’s “Beleidigung der Natur-Majestät,”²² but he misses the point, which is revolutionary. Idealism “deprecates” the natural *because* it sees it as part of, and complicit with, the old *status quo* of the real. We will see this in Hegel, too, who disregards nature as origin while praising nature as “idealized” by *Geist*. This is not a contradiction, but a consequence of the transformative character of the ideal. *If* idealism were to envisage nature as such on the side of the new and as part of the revolution, the attitude could be different. Is that perhaps what happens in Schelling?

The political aspect of Kant’s utopian idealism, manifest in the progress of human history as an “infinite process of gradual approximation” towards a “perpetual peace,”²³ becomes political-theological in the *Religionsschrift*. Here, the utopian re-appears, along with the themes of evil or the uncognizable “innateness” of the beginning, as the impulse towards a full reformation of the human being and community, and as the gap between infinite approximation and “revolution” in the creation of the “new man.” Far from being purely moral or theological, the utopian here is fundamentally political, insofar as Kant speaks of a “revolution in our mode of thought” that “will not be brought about solely through the striving of one individual person ... but requires rather a union of such persons into a whole toward that end.”²⁴ Here, idealist thought of newness becomes explicitly a political theology of revolution. In Kant’s articulation of “revolution,” an important reversal takes place, inherent in the utopian, a transposal of the original revolution into the *future*. From the standpoint of the real, as we suggested, the ideal (i.e., for Kant, human thought, morality, and politics) is something new. However, from the standpoint of the ideal (i.e. from within the unfolding of the new), it is the closure of the original gap – the attainment of perfect knowledge and morality – which appears as the future “revolution.” There can be no “conservative” return to the origin from within idealism, and the original non-place’s transposition into the future makes the real function not as the old, but a new reality

22 Herder 1989, p. 335.

23 AA 8:386.

24 AA 6: 97-8. Space does not permit me to go into detail about the *Religionsschrift* here, but see e.g. Wood 1999, p. 314.

(of perfection or absoluteness).²⁵ The old is thus reduplicated as the *new* new; the full transformation desired by the ideal in a sense returns to the real (retrospectivity) in an attempt to incorporate the remainder and join idealism back with realism. This makes idealism itself utopian.

3.

The thing in itself in the narrow sense does, of course, go away in Fichte, but not the specific non-place that it occupied. The utopian in the sense outlined above, as the ideal gap between the old and the new real, remains. Fichte “never tired of insisting that ... the underlying ‘spirit’ of the Critical philosophy and the *Wissenschaftslehre* were one and the same”;²⁶ as a result, the problem of the origin of idealism as such is constitutive for the *Grundlage des gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (1794/95), too. Despite popular opinion, the science of knowing does not involve only and merely a pure self-positing of the I, or what Jacobi called a “speculative egoism.”²⁷ Rather, Fichte takes up (and transforms) precisely the term “Ding an sich” when discussing the uncognizable origin of idealism and its connection to the real, which *remains* a “something” *at the limit* of the system.

“Das Ding an sich ist etwas für das Ich, und folglich *im* Ich, das doch *nicht im Ich* seyn soll: also etwas widersprechendes, das aber dennoch als Gegenstand einer nothwendigen Idee allem unseren Philosophiren zum Grunde gelegt werden muss, und von jeher, nur ohne dass man sich desselben und des in ihm liegenden Widerspruchs deutlich bewusst war, allem Philosophiren, und allen Handlungen des endlichen Geistes zu Grunde gelegen hat. Auf dieses Verhältniss des Dinges an sich zum Ich gründet sich der ganze Mechanismus des menschlichen und aller endlichen Geister.”²⁸

“The thing-in-itself is something for the self, and consequently in the self, though it ought *not* to be *in the self*: it is thus a contradiction, though as the object of a necessary idea it must be set at the foundation

25 In this point, this paper’s ‘theoretical’ definition of the utopian is in agreement with Bloch’s principle of hope, and his famous statement that “*the true genesis is not at the beginning, but at the end*, and it will only start to come about when society and existence become radical, i.e. take themselves by their own roots” (Bloch 1986, pp. 1375-6). Bloch takes these “roots” to be the non-alienated human; here, I take the origin to mean the utopian non-place conditioned by a revolution of the real.

26 Breazeale 2000, p. 172.

27 Jacobi 2004, p. 112. Cf. Arndt and Jaeschke 2012, p. 72.

28 Fichte 1965, p. 413.

of all our philosophizing, and has always lain at the root of all philosophy and all acts of the finite mind, save only that no one has been clearly aware of it, or of the contradiction contained therein. This relation of the thing-in-itself to the self forms the basis for the entire mechanism of the human and all other finite minds.”²⁹

Essentially, Fichte thereby identifies the foundation of the relationship between the real and the ideal in idealism. What he calls the contradictory approximates what I call the utopian (at least as origin), and what he calls the thing in itself is the formal point of entry into “the non-subjective origin of the existence of appearances.”³⁰ It is “formal” insofar as it can point to the fact of the origin in the real, but not to the “how,” since the “how” is unknowable by the ideal. Not only is the “Non-I” posited by the I, but also the other way around – the I gets the *first* “Anstoß,” impetus or impulse, from the Non-I, resulting in a “Wechsel” between the Non-I and the I that constitutes the “ultimate ground,” uncognizable from within the *Wissenschaftslehre*, so that “the ultimate ground of all consciousness is an interaction of the I with itself via a Non-I considered in its various aspects” (“der letzte Grund alles Bewußtseyns ist eine Wechselwirkung des Ich mit sich selbst vermitteltst eines von verschiedenen Seiten zu betrachtenden Nicht-Ich”³¹). The real *remains* “in the I” as something that “ought *not* to be in the I,” something belonging to the old and not to the new, thereby making it the goal of the ideal to fully this remainder of the real. We see here the same utopian impulse we saw in Kant, driving the idealist knowledge forward towards something that defines its limit. Fichte himself acknowledges this kind of constitutive ambivalence of his (and all true, non-“dogmatic”) idealism by calling it a “Real-Idealismus” or “Ideal-Realismus.”³² The first impulse thus again comes *from within* the non-place of the real, defining idealism as a utopian repulsion, via the *Anstoß*, of the ideal against and by the real. As a result, contra Jacobi, even the “most decisive idealism” (“kräftigster Idealismus”) does not need to endorse “speculative egoism” (“spekulativer Egoismus”),³³ as that would deprive it of the utopian character that drives it towards the new.

29 Fichte 1982, p. 249.

30 Kuhne 2007, p. 164.

31 Fichte 1965, p. 413.

32 Fichte 1965, p. 412.

33 Jacobi 2004, p. 112.

In a historical as well as an explicitly political-theological context, the utopian impulse re-appears in Fichte's *Die Grundzüge des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters*, where the division between the old and the new takes the form of the unknowable beginning of history. In Lecture IX, Fichte speaks of a "normal people" at the origin of history, contrasting it with "historical" peoples, so that the beginning of history proper consists for Fichte in a diasporic dispersal of the "normal people" and its *mélange* with the "barbarians" that surround it – a *mélange* which gives birth to history: "The Normal People must therefore, by some occurrence or other, have been driven away from their habitations ... and must have been dispersed over the seats of Barbarism. Now for the first time could the process of the free development of the Human Race begin; and with it, History, the record of the Unexpected and the New, which accompanies such a process. ...now, for the first time, could History, properly so called, have a beginning."³⁴

History thus, as the ideal "record of the new," has in Fichte the same kind of revolutionary beginning it had in Kant – and just as the "Ding an sich" in the *Wissenschaftslehre*, the non-place of "normalcy" remains in the intermixture of the diasporic *mélange* as something that does not properly belong but remains there, a productivity driving spirit towards the utopian closure of knowledge and history. The political aspect of this closure is envisaged by Fichte as an expressly utopian future – the final "age" or "epoch" of humankind – in which "true science" and "true religion" are fully realized and actual. In a familiar move, the old real re-surfaces as the new: the break with the "normalcy" of the origin as the *normative* newness at history's end. Importantly, nature returns here, too, as part of the "true religion" and therefore as belonging to the new; this new nature is, of course, not merely a return of the old – it has rather been transformed and "developed," so that "what is the Law of Nature to other" is to the true religion "the development of the seemingly dead carrier of the original life" ("die Entwicklung des als ertötet erscheinenden Trägers des ersten Lebens"),³⁵ i.e. a transformative return of the origin. The point of the utopian is, further, not whether or not such a future is possible in the form that Fichte gives it, but that the present, as the actuality of the utopian gap, is the constant generation "of the unexpected and the new" precisely thanks to its (ever actual)

34 Fichte 1848, p. 138.

35 Fichte 1848, p. 248 (translation altered).

revolutionary condition. It is the incessant *practice* of newness that finds it culmination in Fichte's political-theological vision of a future society.

Fichte's characteristic of the ideal as the production "of the unexpected and the new," as well as his rethinking of the "Ding an sich," point also to another aspect of idealism's theory of knowledge that goes beyond correlationism. Meillassoux is correct to point out that idealism "supplants the *adequation* between the representations ... and the thing itself as the veritable criterion of objectivity";³⁶ both Kant and Fichte show, moreover, that it is the real that provides the impulse for not conforming to the in-itself. Newness must go *against* the way things are, arriving at a correlationism only because, for the German idealists, we are the agent and "effect" of this transformation (as "caused" or "grounded" in the real). That is also why, as Meillassoux critically points out, for Kant scientific truth belongs to "a scientific community."³⁷ The original condition or, in Fichte's terms, the "ultimate ground" of idealism is thus not correlationism, but the fact of the revolutionary production of newness from within the in-itself. In place of the merely adequate, idealism puts the utopian.

4.³⁸

Hegel characterizes spirit, *inter alia*, as an activity of "ideality," *Idealität*, or "idealization", *Idealisierung*.³⁹ In Hegel, we find the actual beginning of *Geist*, or the ideal, as the new contrasted with the old, right at the start of his *Philosophy of Spirit*, in what he calls the "anthropology" – his doctrine of "the soul," encompassing sensation, individuality, and the unconscious. Anthropologically, the definition of spirit as idealization is, according to Hegel, one of the most significant,⁴⁰ so that the entire logic of the anthropology, from the "natural soul" to the "actual soul" and the transition to consciousness, turns out to be a logic of the ideal. As a logical-philosophical systematization of the realm of the pre-conscious, Hegel's anthropology may be regarded as taking up the challenge of

36 Meillassoux 2008, pp. 4-5.

37 Meillassoux 2008, pp. 15.

38 This section recapitulates some of the arguments found in a more fleshed-out form in Chepurin 2015, where I argue for the importance of Hegel's anthropology to his *Naturphilosophie*.

39 See e.g. §381Z. or Hegel 1994, p. 30. References to Hegel's *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* are given via references to the relevant paragraph, with an additon of "A." for an *Anmerkung* or "Z." for a *Zusatz* where required.

40 §403A.

illuminating precisely the *Wechselwirkung* between the real and the ideal, the mind and the Non-I, of which Fichte spoke.⁴¹ However, as the very term “idealization” implies, this *Wechselwirkung* is in Hegel decidedly one-sided – it’s all about spirit and how it transforms itself and nature, and not about nature as such, this “as such” remaining, again, beyond the confines of the system proper.

Just like in Kant and Fichte, the figure of the origin appears at the beginning of the Hegelian *Geist* via a revolutionary condition. The anthropology follows the development of the individual human soul right from its birth. This birth is defined by Hegel as an “absolute negativity”⁴² and a “*saltus*”⁴³ – an emergence that takes place *within* nature but immediately goes *beyond* it, a leap from *Natur* to *Geist*, to the “immediate spirit”⁴⁴ that “must be grasped as spirit” and not as nature.⁴⁵ Spirit, says Hegel in his lectures on the philosophy of history, can only begin “from spirit.”⁴⁶ We see here the idealist move, in which, right from its moment of birth and even while still apparently “captivated”⁴⁷ by nature, spirit is already defined by its opposition to the latter. What Hegel calls the “natural soul” deals precisely with this non-real “captivity,” the remainder of “natural influences and changes” in the soul that do not properly belong to it, just as it was with the Non-I’s remainder that we saw in Fichte. As the first form of the ideal, the “natural soul” has already left the nature as such “behind”; its origin in the real now “lies behind” it, says Hegel.⁴⁸ To further emphasize the ideal as the new compared to the real, Hegel describes the event of the soul’s birth as a “play of the absolute spirit with itself,” in which the absolute directly “posits” the individual soul⁴⁹ in a sort of *creatio ex nihilo* (as seen from within the system).

41 Cf. Greene 1972 on Hegel’s anthropology as an anti-Cartesian exploration of the realm of the pre-conscious from within (Kantian) idealism.

42 §§381-382.

43 Hegel 1994, p. 52.

44 §387; Hegel 1994, p. 31.

45 Hegel 1994, p. 11. Cf. Hegel 1994, pp. 3, 20, 30.

46 Cited in Stederoth 2001, p. 106.

47 §387Z.; cf. §385Z.

48 §§391, 391Z.

49 Hegel 1994, p. 31.

What follows after that in the anthropology – and what defines its logic and structure – is an examination of how and where the soul proceeds in the wake of its “absolute” break from nature. Characteristically, the ideal immediately starts to *transform* the world that surrounds it, disregarding its independence as something irrelevant (which is manifest for Hegel even in such basic interaction of the soul with the world as the first cry of the human child or the way the child denies the “an sich” of the external world by breaking its toys and generally anything it comes across⁵⁰). Hegel’s theory of this transformation constitutes his account of sensation, *Empfindung*, understood by him not as receptivity, but as a *structured transformation* of both the soul *and* the world that surrounds it. In §401, Hegel defines it as a cycle of *Verleiblichung* and *Erinnerung*. On the one hand, the soul can reach out to and “idealize” a particular “immediate” (i.e. given or natural) sensation, “make it internal” (“innerlich gemacht”⁵¹), place it inside itself (*Erinnerung*) as another building block of its inner world.⁵² On the other, the soul can reach inside its *Fürsichsein* for a particular feeling – a memory of or a reaction to a sensation⁵³ – that it then enacts externally (*Verleiblichung*). “Pure corporeality is not sensation; it must *erinnern* itself, and vice versa, the purely inner must *verleiblichen* itself.”⁵⁴ That which comes from within the soul, claims Hegel, must be *verleiblicht* in order for the soul to “discover” it (“in order to be sensed, this content must be *verleiblicht*”⁵⁵) – it must become part of the surrounding world, influencing and transforming it.

In *Verleiblichung* and *Erinnerung*, says Hegel, the “natural” is “idealized” towards the “posited totality of its [i.e. the soul’s] *particular* world”⁵⁶ that includes its “inner” as well as, crucially, its “outer” world. This is why Hegel defines the soul’s activity of “idealization” not only

50 See e.g. Hegel 1994, p. 53.

51 §401.

52 Hegel plays here on the German word *Erinnerung* (usually translated as “recollection”), breaking it down into *Er-innerung*, “internalization.” In this *Er-innerung*, the particular sensation in question is negated so that, according to the way Hegel wants us to understand negation in the note to §403, it is “virtually preserved *even if* it does not exist” (emphasis mine).

53 Hegel 1994, p. 84.

54 Hegel 1994, p. 86. Cf. Hegel 1994, p. 131.

55 Hegel 1994, p. 84.

56 §403A.

as knowledge, but also as “appropriation” or “assimilation” of the world to spirit (“Idealisierung oder *Assimilation*”⁵⁷). This is not merely a “metaphorical” assimilation; it is, on the contrary, the soul’s body and its material power that allows it to appropriate and transform its surroundings. The soul defines its “individuality” by the “totality,” *Totalität*, of the things it touches or digests, the things it “fills” itself with (*Erfüllung* made actual, “posited” as a process of “subjectivity”⁵⁸). The soul does not simply consume what is given; it is always in the process of the “positing of nature as its [i.e. *Geist*’s] own world,” as Hegel characterizes it in §384.

The *Wechselwirkung* of sensation therefore does not leave nature “as it is.” What *Geist* starts to cognize as the “external world” at the end of the anthropology and the transition to the phenomenology, is not nature as origin, but as already “assimilated” by spirit. This is further confirmed by Hegel’s pointing out, in his lectures, that the condition for the philosophy of nature is for spirit to approach nature “geistig liebend,”⁵⁹ i.e., “in a spiritually loving way” or “with spiritual love.” Philosophical knowledge of nature proceeds from within the ideal, not nature “as such,” and is therefore retrospective. If we turn again to Hegel’s philosophy of subjective spirit in the *Philosophie des Geistes*, we will see that knowledge of the external world originates for him in the phenomenology, which follows the anthropology. Hence, by the time spirit can *think* nature, this nature is already transformed. Prior to the transition from the anthropology to the phenomenology, no philosophical knowledge of nature is possible. Like all idealist philosophy, philosophy of nature is for Hegel retrospective – it retrospectively traces how nature leads up to spirit from the standpoint of spirit itself. After suggesting that any true philosophy of nature must approach nature “geistig liebend,” Hegel remarks that “the highest foundation of such a study of nature lies *within* the human.”⁶⁰ Even if we assume that nature can be idealized fully, this idealization will fail to be simply identical with nature-as-origin, because any such identity must necessarily first go through us as the ideal.

57 §381Z.; emphasis mine.

58 §403.

59 Hegel 2007, p. 3.

60 Hegel 2002, p. 6.

5.

Hegel thus, too, is not concerned with knowledge of the origin as it is. Philosophy, and therefore knowledge, of the real must necessarily go through the ideal, thereby becoming retrospective, so that the system in a sense unfolds from spirit back to nature. The *Philosophy of Nature*’s place within the *Encyclopedia* is a sign of this idealist retrospectivity, and not of a continuous evolutionary progression from *Natur* to *Geist* – hence also its ambivalence as both a *critique* of nature and a demonstration of how it may “point to”⁶¹ spirit (from within spirit). Spirit marks the “utopic stage” (Louis Marin) between the non-place of the real, from which the ideal revolts in a “play of the absolute spirit with itself” (the “saltus” which is the birth of a human soul), and this play’s re-duplication as the absolute spirit “proper” at the system’s closure. In this play, the absolute is defined as being something new – a new beginning – compared to the real. Hegel aims to break with the thing in itself completely, even more so than Fichte, and he does so *within* the system, but precisely because idealism is utopian as predicated on a revolutionary condition, it needs the origin as something that remains.

The political theology of revolution and utopia inscribed in Hegel’s philosophy of spirit also entails the political in the classical sense – in the sense of the community. In the anthropology, every birth of a human soul is a “*saltus*.” Thus, every such birth is a revolution, and since, anthropologically, *Geist* “has its actual truth only as *singularity* (*Einzelheit*)”⁶² and the soul is the first form of *Geist*, spirit as such has its first actual existence precisely as an anthropological multiplicity of embodied individualities, all born from within the real in a constant re-enactment of the revolutionary *saltus*. (At the same time, every new birth is a new break with the real, therefore requiring the real, so that the non-place is re-enacted, too.) The utopian impulse becomes thereby not only the general progress of idealist knowledge and history – it becomes ontoanthropologically embodied as *Geist*, with every individual in the community as an actor on this utopian stage. In Hegel’s anthropology, “we” are the absolute and “we” are the utopian. Every single event of revolution is incomplete, and the utopian is that which bridges the event and its full enactment; consequently, utopia may serve as another name for *Geist*. This may be called the ontological “practice” of the utopian (or

61 See e.g. §381Z.

62 §391.

the absolute), which follows from its “theory.”

If we take the anthropological origin seriously – and throughout the anthropology, Hegel seems confident that his theory of the individual is supposed to flow naturally into his theory of *Gemeinwesen*, grounding the latter – then we will have to accept that, in Hegel, the seemingly stable community and social institutions rest on a volatile, revolutionary anthropological foundation. Here, however, is where the mature Hegel’s “conservatism” comes into play. If Fichte is happy with history being the production of “the unexpected and the new,” and with philosophically imagining completely new forms of science, life, and society as the closure of the utopian gap, Hegel is not. The utopian structure of idealist theory remains, but its temporality is altered: in contrast to Fichte and Kant, for Hegel the future is already here in a fundamentally actual sense – in the anthropological sense of being re-embodied in every new *saltus*, together forming a cohering, progressive ethical whole that he calls “das Werk der Welt.”⁶³ Hegel does not need to think the “new man,” as Kant does, because for him every soul *is* the “new man.” As a result, Hegel’s social theory, and his concept of *Sittlichkeit*, are a re-configuration and a re-affirmation of forms of life that are already there.

The revolutionary is the multitudal, but Hegel only needs this multitude as a *sittliche* whole, perhaps because he is wary of its revolutionary potential. In the *Philosophy of Spirit*, he endorses the spirit of newness because he requires the productivity granted by the utopian impulse, only to then attempt to reign it in because only in this way, as put under control, that he sees it being *productive* instead of *destructive*. The destructive aspect of this revolution is sharply criticized by Hegel in the anthropology – for instance, in his analysis of “youth” and “adolescence” as something which the “mature man” must grow out of.⁶⁴ The adolescent embodies in Hegel the revolutionary taken to the extreme: not content with opposing itself to the natural *status quo*, the adolescent by extension opposes himself to the *status quo of society* (“goes against the world”). The adolescent is the point at which the ideal becomes too “idealistic,” and as such it is, of course, derided by Hegel. Further, the same destructivity re-appears in the anthropology in the guise of madness, the third and most dangerous type of which, “frenzy” or “mania” (*Wahnsinn*), bears an uncanny structural similarity

63 Hegel 1994, p. 55; §391Z.
64 Hegel 1994, p. 55; §396Z.

to adolescence: just like the adolescent, the madman is driven to enact his abstract anti-social idea by means of destroying the social.⁶⁵ Hegel prefers to normalize or exclude the anti-social, and that is why he is so keen to downplay the individual’s contribution to the “Werk der Welt,” insisting on the latter’s predominantly “objective” character (“the self-executing work of the world”⁶⁶) as a sort of invisible hand for which only the sum total of the anthropological vectors matters.

Aside from the notions of “maturity” and the “healthy” (non-mad) soul, this conservative aspect of Hegel’s idealism takes the anthropological form of “habit,” *Gewohnheit*, which is a social and, so to speak, a “counter-revolutionary” form. It is the task of habit to make sure idealization functions properly and the individual does not stray too far from the norm. Every activity of *Geist* rests for Hegel on what he calls the “mechanism” of habit,⁶⁷ and every individual is thus formed by both self-discipline and that enacted by others (the family, society, etc.). Habit in Hegel controls the activity and the content of the soul alike, encompassing, further, “all kinds and stages of the activity of spirit.”⁶⁸ Since every individuality is founded on a revolutionary nothing (non-place), it has no stable foundation within the system and must thus be shaped, through individuation and habit, in such a way as to direct it towards the above-mentioned “Werk der Welt” as its *own* “subjective” goal. This contact with nothing resurfaces in the anthropology in the notion of *Geist*’s “solitude,”⁶⁹ and its important social dimension also comes to the fore in Hegel’s concept of “conscience” (*Gewissen*), described in the *Philosophy of Right* as one’s “deepest internal solitude vis-à-vis oneself,” in which everything “disappears.”⁷⁰

Despite these (very preliminary) misgivings about the fate of the anthropological revolution in Hegel’s concept of the social, it needs to be emphasized that *Geist* remains for him indispensably utopian. It is, furthermore, *because* of (and against) this utopian and revolutionary dimension that Hegel feels the need to introduce the counter-

65 §408Z.
66 Hegel 1994, p. 55.
67 §410A.
68 §410Z.
69 See e.g. §392Z., §394Z.
70 Hegel 1970, 7, p. 253.

revolutionary dimension of the individual and the social. Still, some of today's more radical readings of Hegel's political thought⁷¹ show that at some points Hegel's politics can, at least partially, be subverted from within. In other words, the revolutionary foundation defines the beginning and progression of the *Philosophy of Spirit*, as well as re-appears at crucial moments, even if sometimes only as a concern. It is perhaps starting from this fact, taken together with Hegel's anthropological analysis, that his political philosophy may be further subverted or radicalized.

In German Idealism, the utopian connects the end and the beginning – both the end of the old (the real) with the beginning of the new (the ideal), and the beginning of the new with the fully enacted newness (the new real as the non-place of the ideal's closure). As a result, what idealism generates in its revolution, is not knowledge of the old as such, but of newness inherent in or proceeding from the old (the thing in itself, the natural as such, or the real). It explores the old not to know it as such, but to fully transform it. The utopian is, for reason, a non-place – but it is also the whole history of reason. All teleology of history and spirit in Kant, Fichte or Hegel leads up to the standpoint of the present or the future because it is the point it proceeds from, and not as a depotentiation, but on the contrary, a further idealist potentiation. The origin of the ideal, however, *remains* in the real, which maintains the utopian gap (in order for the ideal itself not to become the “dogmatic” *status quo*) and thus the essentially critical (anti-dogmatic) character of the ideal, both at the level of theory and as possible social critique. Idealism creates a locus or stage for a critique,⁷² which lies between the real and the revolution as fully actualized. The utopian as the *real condition* guarantees that this condition remains relevant at all time, as long as we remain within this ideal gap, so that the utopian work of spirit is not yet done. The point of this political theology in German Idealism is by itself not correlationist; rather, while the ideal does take for Kant, Fichte, and Hegel the historical form of human thought and progress, its definition consists in transforming the old from the standpoint of the new as a result of a revolt of the real *against itself*, as an affect or effect of the real.

71 Such as e.g. the works of Slavoj Žižek or Frank Ruda.

72 In this, the concept of the utopian presented in this paper comes close to Louis Marin's analysis of the “utopic stage” in Thomas More's *Utopia*, although I do not share Marin's claim that the utopian is not itself the object of a critique (“is itself not criticized,” Marin 1984, p. 196). Making the utopian immune to critique seems to preclude any re-production, or return, of the revolutionary origin. Marin's claim may be conditioned by the fact that he gets to *define* utopia as already a “totality” (ibid., p. 195).

Perhaps this is also the point where Schelling's thought of nature is crucially aligned with the German Idealist project. To return to Jacobi's criticism, idealism cannot be a *full* correlationism without becoming solipsism. In order not to become solipsism, it must be a utopian offshoot of realism, which means that idealism *must* be revolutionary in order to be viable. Idealism works in the implicit assumption that there is something within the real that can objectively lead to a revolutionary impetus, that the real cannot exist without revolutionizing itself. Understood in this manner as a political-theological theory, idealism does not make the real secondary – it makes it primary, but in a different, radical way.

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Romanticism, Marxism and Religion in the “Principle of Hope” of Ernst Bloch

Michael Löwy

Translated by: Rodrigo Gonsalves

The **Principle of Hope** from Ernst Bloch is undoubtedly one of the major works of emancipatory thought in the twentieth century. Monumental (more than 1600 pages), it occupied the author for a large part of his life. Written during his exile in United States, from 1938 to 1947, it would be reviewed for the first time in 1953 and a second in 1959. Following his condemnation as “revisionist” by authorities of the German Democratic Republic, the author eventually left East Germany in 1961.

Nobody had ever written a book like this, stirring in the same breath the visionary pre-Socratic and Hegelian alchemy, the new Hoffmann, the serpentine heresy and messianism of Shabbataï Tsevi, Schelling’s philosophy of art, Marxist materialism, Mozart’s operas and the utopias of Fourier. Open a page at random: it is about the man of Renaissance, the concept of (material) substance in Parecelse and Jakob Böhme, of the **Holy Family** in Marx, of the doctrine of knowledge in Giordano Bruno and the book on the **Reform of Knowledge** of Spinoza. The erudition of Bloch is so encyclopedic that very few readers are capable of judging the entirety of each theme developed in the three volumes of the book. His style is often hermetic but with a powerful, suggestive quality: the reader must learn how to filter the lighting jewels and the precious stones planted by the poetic and esoteric feather of the philosopher.

Unlike so many other thinkers of his generation – starting with his friend György Lukacs – Bloch remained faithful to the intuitions of his youth and never denied the revolutionary romanticism of his early writings. In this way, **The Principle of Hope** frequently references **The Spirit of Utopia**, his first book published in 1918, including many themes that recur in the 50s – especially the idea of utopia as anticipatory conscience, as a figure of “pre-appearance”.

The fundamental challenge of Ernest Bloch is the following: will philosophy be the conscience of tomorrow, the bias of the future, the knowledge of hope, or will it not have any knowledge at all? In his eyes, the utopian will guides the libertarian movements of the history of mankind: “Christians know it in their own way, sometimes with a slumbering conscience, sometimes with a very awake interest: isn’t that bequeathed from the passages in the Bible related to exodus and messianism?”.

The philosophy of hope from Bloch is primarily an ontology of the **not-yet-being** in its various manifestations: the not-yet-conscience of the human being, the not-yet-becoming of history, the not-yet-

manifested of the world. For him, the world has its full disposition to something, a tendency towards something, **latency** to something, and that something to which the world strives is the culmination of the utopian intention: a world free of unworthy suffering, anxiety, alienation. In his research on anticipatory functions of human spirit, the dream occupies an important place, from its most quotidian form – the waking dream – towards a “dreaming forward” inspired by the images-of-wish.

The central paradox of the **Principle of Hope** is that this powerful text, fully facing the horizon of the **future**, the **Novum**, the Not-yet-being, says almost nothing about the future itself. It practically never tries to imagine, predict or prefigure the next moment of human society except in terms of the classical Marxist perspective, of a classless society without oppression. In fact, apart from the most theoretical chapters, the book is a fascinating journey through the **past**, consisting of the images of desire and the landscapes of hope scattered in medical, architectural, technical, philosophical, religious, geographical, and artistic utopias.

In this very particular form of the typically romantic dialectic between past and future, the challenge is to **discover the future aspirations of the past** – in the form of unfulfilled promise: “The barriers erected between the future and the past collapse by themselves, the future is not now visible in the past, while the past avenged and collected as a heritage of the publicized past and the minnow becomes visible in the future”. It is not to sink into a dream or a melancholic **contemplation** of the past, but to make the past into a living source for revolutionary **action**, for a **praxis** oriented towards the achievement of utopia.

The necessary complement of anticipatory thinking is the critical view back **towards this world**: the vigorous indictment of the industrial/capitalist civilization and its harm is a major theme. Bloch pilloried the “pure infamy” and “ruthless ignominy” of what he calls “the current world of business” – a world “generally placed under the sign of the swindle”, in which “the thirst for gain chokes any other human impulse”. It also attacks the cold and functional modern cities that are no longer homes – **Heimat**, one of the key-terms of the book – but “machines for living” reducing human beings “into the state of standardized termites”. Denying organic forms, refusing the Gothic heritage of the three of life, modern constructions resemble the crystal of death represented by the Egyptian pyramids. In a last analysis, “the functional architecture reflects and even doubles the glacial nature of the world of automation,

its people divided by the work of its abstract art”.

Bloch’s critique of modern technology is primarily motivated by the romantic exigency of a more harmonious relationship with nature. The bourgeois technique does not maintain with nature a relationship other than the hostile relationship of the market: it “is installed in nature like an army occupying an enemy country”. As the thinkers of the Frankfurt School, the author considers “the capitalist concept of technique as a whole” reflects “a wish of domination, a master and slave relationship” with nature”. This is not to deny the technique as such but to oppose the existing one in modern societies to the utopian one of “technical alliance, a technical publicized with the coproduction of the nature”, a technique “understood as deliverance and publication of the slumbering creation buried in the lap of nature” – a formula borrowed (as often with Bloch, without reference source) from Walter Benjamin.

This sensitivity, which could be called “pre-ecological”, is directly inspired by the romantic philosophy of nature, a **qualitative** conception of natural world. According to Bloch, it is with the rise of capitalism, exchange value and mercantile calculation that we assist the “forgetfulness of the organic” and the “loss of sense of qualitative” in nature. Goethe, Schelling, Franz von Baader, Joseph Molitor and Hegel are some of the representatives of the return to qualitative, which developed as a reaction against this omission. Habermas was not wrong to call Ernst Bloch the “Marxist Schelling” insofar as he attempts to articulate, in a unique combination of romantic philosophy of nature and historical materialism.

Bloch also shares with Schelling a philosophical interest in religion – even if he is radically opposed to conservative ideas of the romantic German thinker. Of all the forms of anticipatory consciousness, religion occupies a privileged place because it constitutes for its author the utopia par excellence, the utopia of perfection, the totality of hope. It is nevertheless clear that the religion which Bloch subscribes to – to use one of his favorite paradoxes – is an atheistic religion. It is a kingdom of God without God, which reverses the Lord of the World settled in his heavenly throne and replaces it with a “mystical democracy”: “Atheism is such little enemy of religious utopia, that has same presupposition: **atheism without messianism has no place**”.

However, Bloch tends to distinguish, in a sufficient trench, his religious atheism from any vulgar materialism, “bad disenchantment” conveyed by the flatter version of the Enlightenment – that he calls

Aufklärlicht, distinct from the **Aufklärung** – and by the bourgeoisie doctrines of secularism. It does not oppose the banalities of free thought, but attempts to save it by transporting to immanence the contents of desire of religion, treasures which include under the most diverse forms **the idea of communism**: from the primitive communism of the Bible (remembering nomadic communities) to the monastic communism of Joachim de Flore and the chiliastic communism of millenarian heresies (albigensian, hussites, taborites, anabaptists). To demonstrate the presence of this tradition in modern socialism, Bloch concludes maliciously in his chapter on Joachim de Flore with a little known quote by the young Friedrich Engels: “The self-consciousness of humanity is the new Holy Grail where people come together around with joy... this is our task: to become knights of the Grail, gird the sword for him and risk our lives joyfully in the last holy war to be followed by the millennial Kingdom of freedom”.

This is a major reference for Bloch’s Marxism as well as part of his **heritage** from utopian traditions from the past, not only social utopias from Thomas More up to Fourier and William Morris, but of all the waking dreams and wish-images of the history of humankind – including those in the Bible and the history of Christianity. Bloch’s opponent is “the old enemy” of humanity, the millenary selfishness that, “as the capitalism has conquered more than ever before”, transforms all things and all human beings into commodities.

The Marxism that brings about the new is the **docta spes** (hope learned), the science of reality, the active knowledge directed towards the horizon of the future. Unlike abstract utopias of the past – which were content to oppose their wish-image to the existing world – Marxism starts from the trends and objective possibilities present in the reality itself: thanks to this real mediation, it allows the advent of the **concrete utopia**.

Brackets: despite his admiration at the time (before 1956) to the Soviet Union, Bloch did not confuse “really existing socialism” with the concrete utopia - it remained in his eyes unfinished, a wish-image that has not yet been accomplished. His philosophical system was entirely based on the category of Non-yet-being, and not on the rational legitimization of any “actually existing” State.

To define Marxism as utopia does not mean, for Bloch, to deny its scientific character: it cannot play its revolutionary role without an inseparable unity of sobriety and imagination, reason and hope, the rigor of the detective and the enthusiasm of the dreamer. According to

an expression that has become famous, the cold and warm current of Marxism must merge - both are indispensable even if there is a clear hierarchy between them: the cold current exists **for the warm current**, in the service of it, just as Marxism needs scientific analysis to get rid of abstraction and make concrete utopia.

The “warm current” of Marxism inspired what Bloch calls his “militant optimism”, that is to say, its active hope in the **Novum**, in the fulfillment of utopia. However, it differs very explicitly between the militant hope and “flat automatic optimistic faith in progress”. Considering that this dangerously false optimism tends to become a new opium of the people, he even thinks that a “pinch of pessimism would be better than this blind and flat faith in progress. For pessimism concern of realism is less easy to be surprised and disoriented by setbacks and catastrophes”. He therefore insists on the “non guaranteed character” of utopian hope.

Reinterpreting a famous formula of Marx – “We still live in the prehistory of humanity” – Bloch concludes the book by stating his conviction that “the genesis is not at the beginning but at the end”. The last word, significantly, is **Heimat**, the native home.

Theodor Adorno, one of the most pessimistic thinkers of the century, argues that the author of the **Principle of Hope** is one of the few rare philosophers of our time that never gave up the thought of a world without domination of hierarchy.

The Pedagogical Detour

Louis Althusser, *Initiation à la Philosophie pour les Non-Philosophes*, Paris: PUF 2014.

Reviewed by Jason Read

The name Louis Althusser is often taken to be synonymous with the academization of Marxism, shifting its focus from the factory to the classroom. This characterization overlooks two crucial things. First, and most generally, no matter how one conceives the history of (Western) Marxist thought in the twentieth century, tracing a lineage from Marx, Lenin, Mao, and Gramsci to Althusser, or crafts a lineage that passes from Lukács to Horkheimer and Adorno, it is hard to avoid a trajectory that begins with militants and ends with professors. Even Italy, long considered the holdout for a more engaged and political Marxism eventually ends in the classroom even if the professors continued their extracurricular activities. Which is to say both that the history of the academicization of Marxism exceeds the space of this review, and that it extends beyond Althusser. Althusser may be guilty of a philosophical reading of *Capital*, but he cannot be seen as single-handedly responsible for the academic nature of Marxist

thought. Moreover, and this is the second point, is that despite his reputation of producing a highly theoretical Marxist, Althusser spent much of the seventies teaching, lecturing, and writing books that were intended for non-philosophers. These activities ranged from a course for scientists to the idea of writing manuals introducing Marxist concepts to activists and workers. Even Althusser's most famous or infamous text, the essay on "Ideological State Apparatuses," which is often considered to be the exemplary text in a turn away from history and politics towards theory and academia, is itself part of a larger text titled *Sur la Reproduction*, aimed less at students of theory than with those actively involved with the class struggle.

The posthumous publication of *Initiation à la philosophie pour les non-philosophes* makes it possible to not only to expand the picture of Althusser's writing that exceeded the discipline of philosophy, but to see the way in which the experience of teaching outside ultimately redefined Althusser's conception and practice of philosophy. That Althusser offered courses and lectures meant to introduce non-philosophers to philosophy necessarily comes into contradiction with his own attempt to develop Marxist thought as a

new practice of philosophy. In these lectures Althusser sets himself a double task, to introduce non-philosophers to philosophy while simultaneously redefining and contesting the dominant image of philosophy. Althusser's attempt to define philosophy necessarily passes through a series of detours (It is for this reason that this text, like *Sur la Reproduction* was not published during Althusser's lifetime, left to the gnawing of its own internal contradictions and tensions). In order to define philosophy in a materialist, or Marxist way, it is necessary to situate its place in the superstructure, which in turn requires a definition of society, labor, ideology, and so on. Far from being a simple watering down of philosophy, philosophy for non-philosophers, or rather a non-philosophical account of philosophy for philosophers, defining philosophy for non-philosophers has the added difficulty of presenting a non-philosophical account of philosophy. Althusser draws the two tasks together, presenting philosophy to non-philosophers while examining from its outside. Philosophy is turned inside out, explained to philosophers based on its own internal limits.

In the *Initiation* these two projects coincide with Althusser's adoption of Gramsci's famous

dictum that "everyone is a philosopher." As with Gramsci this universal definition splits into two. Althusser posits two different types of philosophy. The first inherits its questions if not its answers from religion. The religious questions are the questions of the origin and end of the world. It is not just the religious questions that philosophy initially inherits, but its attitude as well. The dominant attitude of such religious philosophy is one of resignation, resignation to the world as it is. In this text it is resignation, and not the reproduction of the relations of production, that ties together idealism and ideology. The resignation of the world as it is slides from an acceptance of Gods infinite wisdom to the acceptance that "the poor will always be among us." The acceptance of the world as created leads to an unthinking acceptance of the social order. In contrast to this Althusser argues there is a second tendency in philosophy. As Althusser, "This philosophy is in principle no longer religious, no longer passive, and no longer resigned. On the contrary it is a philosophy of work, of struggle, an active philosophy...that affirms the primacy of theory over practice" (84). If the philosophy of resignation connected idealism and ideology, then the philosophy

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of practice connects together materialism and revolution.

The dualism that Althusser posits between resignation and practice could thus be situated along the history of the demarcations that Althusser draws between different philosophies from the early distinction between philosophy and the scientific theory of theoretical practice, and the final division between idealism of necessity and the aleatory materialism of the encounter. It can be seen how it participates in elements of both. However, no sooner is this division posited by Althusser than it is interrupted by a "grand detour." If the first aspect, the line of demarcation, corresponds to Althusser's attempt to both define philosophy and make it understandable, then the second, the detour, corresponds to his attempt to problematize the very practice of philosophy, questioning its fundamental presuppositions. In order to answer this question a detour is necessary, a detour not into a definition of philosophy, but also philosophy's relationship with its outside, with non-philosophy. Here once again there is a particular structural similarity with *Sur la reproduction*, which also proceeds by a massive detour into the very nature of society, which in turn entails an examination of the

mode of production, reproduction, and so on. To situate philosophy in the superstructure is to first theorize the superstructure.

In the *Initiation* this detour concerns not the outside of philosophy, society, but its internal condition, abstraction. Philosophy exists because there are abstractions. As much as Althusser espouses a philosophy of practice, a philosophy grounded on transformation, this philosophy is not identical with the everyday common sense, or what Althusser would call "spontaneous philosophy of practice, which claims that everything is concrete. Althusser cites Spinoza and Hegel to argue that the operative distinction is not between the abstract and concrete, but between different ways of conceiving abstractions. Materialist philosophy recognizes the abstract as always already there. Althusser's argument owes much to Hegel, to the opening passages on sense certainty in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. As in those passages Hegel asserted the primacy of the abstraction of language, the "this" over every attempt to simply posit the empirical existence of this tree. Althusser extends, and in some sense, materializes Hegel's argument, arguing not just for the primacy of language over any enunciation, but the primacy

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of law over social relations, and the primacy of the relations of production over every productive act. As Althusser writes, ...the social appropriation of the concrete passes by the relation of abstract relations. There are therefore two concretes: the concrete that is not socially appropriated, which at the limit is nothing, and the concrete not just socially appropriated by mankind, but produced as concrete by this appropriation. That is to say: without language and without right, without the relations of production and ideological relations, nothing in the world is concrete to man. Without it I can neither name, nor produce, nor signify my intentions (120).

The primacy of abstraction becomes a materialist thesis when it is expanded from language, from the primacy of the word and the concept over experience, to encompass the abstractions that shape social existence. Language is not the only abstraction or even the determining abstraction, all of our actions and thoughts have abstractions as their precondition. Or rather, materialism and idealism are differentiated in terms of how they posit abstraction: the first takes abstraction as a fact, the primacy of the relations of production, of social relations over any experience, while the latter

posits the abstractions of the idea as determining. Materialism is not just the assertion of the brute facticity of material existence, the fact that history requires living men and thus the production of food, but is the assertion of the primacy of the relations of production as abstractions over the other abstractions, of the social over linguistic abstractions.

Althusser's detour thus intersects with another path in the history of Marxist thought, one with a different starting point and a different destination. I am referring to Alfred Sohn-Rethel's *Intellectual and Manual Labor*, and its attempt to develop the concept of "real abstraction" of an abstraction that is lived rather than thought. To borrow a phrase from Marx, it is not just that life determines consciousness in terms of the former's irreducible concreteness and particularity, but that that life is experience first and foremost through its constitutive abstractions. Althusser and Sohn-Rethel differ in terms of how they conceptualize these "real abstractions." For Sohn-Rethel real abstraction is grounded in the forms of capitalist existence, specifically the commodity form and abstract labor. These abstractions posit a form of equivalence that structures experience, even as thought focuses on the specifics

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of use value and concrete labor. As Sohn-Rethel argues thought and experience go their separate ways, thought is focused on particularity while practice, labor and exchange, engages with the abstract equivalence. In contrast to this, Althusser turns not to the commodity form, as the basis of production, but the primacy of the relations of production over the forces of production. The former stresses abstraction as equivalence, while the later stresses abstraction as relation.

While Althusser's detour on abstraction raises interesting points of connection and comparison with other texts, and traditions—connections that ultimately bear on the different invocations of abstraction in Marx's thought from exchange value to relations of production, it is equally revealing for what it reveals about Althusser's thought particularly during the period of the seventies, a period situated between the defining works of structural causality and the conjuncture from the sixties, and the aleatory materialism of the eighties. As I have noted above, there is a particular formal similarity between this text, and *Sur la Reproduction*, both of which are not only pedagogical in their orientation but structured by detours. The detours that define these texts could be considered

simply residues of their pedagogical nature. The detours could just be the digressions where the teacher recognizes the necessity of defining terms and clarifying perspectives. Any systematic knowledge is always going to be difficult to present without entering into a series of presuppositions for each term. This can be seen in Marxist thought in which the concepts of ideology, relations of production, mode of production, and capitalism necessitate and imply each other. Any attempt to define one passes through the others. However, it is also possible to understand this detour, or displacement, as something of a kind of dialectic at work in Althusser's thought. What is first presented as a division between two different conceptions of philosophy is transformed in terms of their relation to a third term, to a third question, that of abstraction. Abstraction both unifies the two conceptions, it is abstraction that makes even materialist philosophy a philosophy, differentiating it from the everyday assertion on the concrete nature of things, but it also abstraction that differentiates the two very different perspectives on philosophy. Materialism asserts a very different primacy of abstraction, not the primacy of language or the concept but the primacy of the abstractions that

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define the relations of production. The detour does not so much present a synthesis, bringing the two into one, as it displaces and extends their very antithesis. The detour is both the mark of the transformation of philosophy, it is through the detour that philosophy encounters its outside, and it is the necessary encounter with contingency. Thus, it is possible to argue that between the Althusser of the conjuncture, and its corollary of structural causality, and the Althusser of the encounter, there is the Althusser of the detour, of the necessary displacement of philosophy onto its non-philosophical conditions.

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