

Ibi Rhodus Ibi Saltus! Theology, Hegel, Lacan

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Abstract: The present essay deals with Lacan and Hegel and their relation to theology, or more precisely, Christianity. It begins with discussing the notion of freedom and its meaning and implications in Aristotle, Kant. It continues with explores the consequences of the Luther event in the realm of freedom.

Keywords: Lacan, freedom, theology, Hegel, Luther

Our common notion of freedom implies a well-known ambiguity. (1) I am free when I do what I want, when I am not hindered by external obstacles. This mode of freedom is not incompatible with determinism: my acts can be totally determined by objective (neuronal, biological, social, etc.) conditions; what makes them free is that no external obstacle hinders them. (2) The next mode of freedom is freedom as self-control: I am truly free when I do not helplessly succumb to temptation (of external objects or of my inner nature) but remain able to resist it, to decide against it. Insofar as we, humans, act “freely” in the sense of just spontaneously following our natural inclinations, we are not really free but are enslaved to our animal natures. We find this same line of reasoning already in Aristotle who, referring to slavery as an example to illustrate a general ontological feature, wrote that, left to themselves, slaves are “free” in the sense that they just do what they want, while free men follow their duty—and it is this very “freedom” which makes slaves slaves:

all things are ordered together somehow, but not all alike—both fishes and fowls and plants; and the world is not such that one thing has nothing to do with another, but they are connected. For all are ordered together to one end, but it is as in a house, where the freemen are least at liberty to act at random, but all things or most things are already ordained for them, while the slaves and the animals do little for the common good, and for the most part live at random; for this is the sort of principle that constitutes the nature of each.¹

In spite of all that is deeply problematic in the quoted passage, is there not a grain of truth in it, i.e., does this characterization of slaves not provide a good determination of today’s consumerist slavery where I am allowed to act at random and “do what I want,” but remain precisely as such enslaved to the stimuli of commodities? However, the complication that arises here is: On behalf of what am I able to resist my immediate (or mediated) natural inclinations? For Kant, when my motivations are free from empirical content, I am motivated by the moral law (by the sense of duty). But can the good also be a temptation to be resisted, i.e., can the

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¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII.10, trans. W. D. Ross.

freedom of self-control also extend to my resistance to follow the inner pressure of the moral law? In other words, can there be a pure choice of evil not motivated by empirical/pathological interests? If we deny this possibility, we fall into what can be called a “moralist shortcut”: if to act freely means to follow the moral law, then “the effect of morally interpreting the positive sense of ‘free’ will be to make ‘unfree’ equivalent to immoral; if unfree is immoral, free immoral actions are not possible.”² But if we are not free in committing immoral acts, is it not that then we are also not responsible for them? Do we at least freely choose between true freedom and slavery (submission to our pathological interests)?

(3) This brings us to the third mode of freedom, that of a choice which should not be determined by any pre-existing line of causality and is therefore not reducible to any kind of objective determination. If we are able to commit such a free choice, what motivates it? Lacan’s answer is here clear: the non-pathological object-cause of desire he calls *objet a*. This object doesn’t entail any limitation of our freedom because it is nothing but the subject itself in its objectal mode, an object which does not pre-exist desire but is posited by it.

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

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² Gabriel and Rasmussen 2017, p. 24.

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

This recognition that only as one was freed from the paralyzing need to serve one’s own self, could acts of love become altruistic, was one of Luther’s most positive contributions to Christian social ethics. It enabled him to view good deeds as ends in themselves, and never as a means of salvation. . . . Luther realized that a love that sought no reward was more willing to serve the helpless, the powerless, the poor, and the oppressed, since their cause offered the least prospect of personal gain.³

But did Luther draw all ethico-political consequences from this key insight? His great pupil and opponent Thomas Muntzer accused Luther of betrayal: his basic reproach to Luther’s social ethics concerns the

perverse application of the Law-gospel distinction. The rightful use of the law was to bring “destruction and sickness to the healthy,” and that of the Gospel to bring “comfort to the troubled.” Luther had turned this application on its head by defending the presumptuous and tyrannical rulers with the gracious words of the Gospel, while bringing the “grim sternness” of the law to bear against the God-fearing poor and oppressed peasants. The result was a total misuse of Scripture. “Thus the godless tyrant says to the pious, ‘I must torture you. Christ also suffered. Therefore you are not to resist me.’ [Matthew 5] This [is] a great perversion. . . . One must forgive with the Gospel and the Spirit of Christ, to the furtherance and not the hindrance of the Gospel.”⁴

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³ Kuenning 1987, pp.306-307

⁴ Ibid.

With this perversion, “the elect were no longer envisioned as directly active or forceful instruments of that retribution” against those who violate the spirit of the Gospel.

This critique of Luther is clear, but it nonetheless seems to court the danger of succumbing to the perverse position of perceiving oneself as the direct instrument of the big Other’s will. How to avoid this danger? Let us begin at the beginning, with the triad of Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism.

Central to the Orthodox tradition is the notion of “theosis,” of man becoming (like) god, or, to quote Saint Athanasius of Alexandria: “He was incarnate that we might be made god.” What would otherwise seem absurd—that fallen, sinful man may become holy as God is holy—has been made possible through Jesus Christ, who is God incarnate. St. Maximus the Confessor wrote: “A sure warrant for looking forward with hope to deification of human nature is provided by the Incarnation of God, which makes man God to the same degree as God Himself became man... Let us become the image of the one whole God, bearing nothing earthly in ourselves, so that we may consort with God and become gods, receiving from God our existence as gods.”⁵This orthodox formula “God became man so that man can become God” is totally wrong: God became man *and that’s it*, nothing more, everything already happens here, what needs to be added is just a new perspective on this. There is no resurrection to follow, the Holy Ghost already *is* resurrection. Only Protestantism enables us to think Incarnation as an event in God himself, as *his* profound transformation: He was incarnate that HE became God, i.e., He became fully God only through His self-division into God and man. This may sound paradoxical since God is an unknown Beyond, *deus absconditus*. We thus seem to have three incompatible positions: God is an absolutely impenetrable Beyond; God is the absolute Master of our fate which is predestined by Him; God gave us freedom and thereby made us responsible for our deeds. The unique achievement of Protestantism is to bring together these three positions: everything is predestined by God, but since God is an impenetrable Beyond for me I cannot discern what my fate is, so I am left to do good deeds without any calculation and profit in view, i.e., in total freedom.

True freedom is not a freedom of choice made from a safe distance, like choosing between a strawberry cake or a chocolate cake; true freedom overlaps with necessity, one makes a truly free choice when one’s choice puts at stake one’s very existence—one does it because one simply “cannot do otherwise.” When one’s country is under a foreign occupation and one is called by a resistance leader to join the fight against the occupiers, the reason given is not “you are free to choose,” but: “Can’t you see that this is the only thing you can do if you want to

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⁵ Shamelessly quoted from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theosis_\(Eastern_Christian_theology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theosis_(Eastern_Christian_theology)).

retain your dignity?” This is why radical acts of freedom are possible only under the condition of predestination: in predestination, we know we are predestined, but we don’t know how we are predestined, i.e., which of our choices is predetermined, and this terrifying situation where we have to decide what to do, knowing that our decision is decided in advance, is perhaps the only case of real freedom, of the unbearable burden of a really free choice—we know that what we will do is predestined, but we still have to take a risk and subjectively choose what is predestined.

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

This solution works on one condition: the subject (believer) is absolutely constrained by the unsurpassable horizon of its subjectivity. What Protestantism prohibits is the very thought that a believer can as it were take a position outside/above itself and look upon itself as a small particle in the vast reality. Mao Ze-dong was wrong when he deploys his Olympic vision reducing human experience to a tiny unimportant detail: “The United States cannot annihilate the Chinese nation with its small stack of atom bombs. Even if the US atom bombs were so powerful that, when dropped on China, they would make a hole right through the earth, or even blow it up, that would hardly mean anything to the universe as a whole, though it might be a major event for the solar system.”⁶ There is an “inhuman madness” in this argument: Is the fact that the destruction of the planet Earth “would hardly mean anything to the universe as a whole” not a rather poor solace for the extinguished humanity? The argument only works if, in a Kantian way, one presupposes a pure transcendental subject non-affected by this catastrophe—a subject which, although non-existing in reality, *is* operative as a virtual point of reference (recall

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⁶ Mao 2007, p. 87.

Husserl's dark dream, from his *Cartesian Meditations*, of how the transcendental *cogito* would remain unaffected by a plague that would annihilate entire humanity). In contrast to such a stance of cosmic indifference, we should act as if the entire universe was created as a backstage for the struggle of emancipation, in exactly the same way that, for Kant, God created the world in order to serve as the battleground for the ethical struggle of humanity: it is as if the fate of the entire universe is decided in our singular (and, from the global cosmic standpoint, marginal and insignificant) struggle.

The paradox is that, although (human) subjectivity is obviously not the origin of all reality, although it is a contingent local event in the universe, the path to universal truth does not lead through the abstraction from it in the well-known sense of “let's try to imagine how the world is independently of us,” the approach which brings us to some “grey” objective structure—such a vision of “subjectless” world is by definition just a negative image of subjectivity itself, its own vision of the world in its absence. (The same holds for all the attempts to picture humanity as an insignificant species on a small planet on the edge of our galaxy, i.e., to view it the same way we view a colony of ants.) Since we are subjects, constrained to the horizon of subjectivity, we should instead focus on what the fact of subjectivity implies for the universe and its structure: the event of subject derails the balance, it throws the world out of joint, but such a derailment *is* the universal truth of the world. What this also implies is that the access to “reality in itself” does not demand from us that we overcome our “partiality” and arrive at a neutral vision elevated above our particular struggles—we are “universal beings” only in our full partial engagements. This contrast is clearly discernible in the case of love: against the Buddhist love of All or any other notion of the harmony with the cosmos, we should assert the radically exclusive love for the singular One, a love which throws out of joint the smooth flow of our lives.

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

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

This treatise, in so far as it contains a political science, is nothing more than an attempt to conceive of and present the state as in itself rational. As a philosophic writing, it must be on its guard against constructing a state as it *ought to be*. Philosophy cannot teach the state what it *should be*, but only how it, the ethical universe, is to be *known*.

Hic Rhodus, hic saltus.

To apprehend what *is* is the task of philosophy, because what *is* is reason. As for the individual, everyone is a son of his time; so philosophy also is its time apprehended in thoughts. It is just as foolish to fancy that any philosophy can transcend its present world, as that an individual could leap out of his time or jump over Rhodes. If a theory transgresses its time, and builds up a world as it ought to be, it has an existence merely in the unstable element of opinion, which gives room to every wandering fancy.

With little change the above saying would read:

Here is the rose, *here* dance

The barrier which stands between reason, as self-conscious Spirit, and reason as present reality, and does not permit spirit to find satisfaction in reality, is some abstraction, which is not free to be conceived. To recognize reason as the rose in the cross of the present, and to find delight in it, is a rational insight which implies reconciliation with reality.”⁷

This “reconciliation” refers to Luther whose emblem was precisely a rose in a cross. Luther understood this in a Christian way (deliverance [rose] only occurs through Christ's sacrifice), while Hegel conceives of it more conceptually: Luther's emblem was the black cross in the center of a heart encircled by roses, while for Hegel Reason is apprehended as the rose in the cross of the present. However, to get properly what Hegel aims at here, one should take a step further and turn around the usual wisdom *Hic Rhodus hic saltus* to which Hegel refers: *Ibi Rhodus ibi saltus!* Not here, *there* is Rhodus, *there* jump! We are ready to jump here in any way, to engage ourselves, to fight. . . on condition that we can rely on some form of big Other which guarantees consistency of it all. Many Leftist intellectuals pursue their academic career *here*, fortified by their assurance that a true revolution is going on somewhere out *there*; religious people live (and participate) in brutal chaos *here*, fortified by their belief that there is a higher order of Justice out *there* in Heaven. . . And something similar goes on in sexuality—as the saying goes, *hic Rhodus hic salta*, don't just boast and promise, show me here, in my bed, how good you really are in jumping on me. . . And the opposite also

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7 Hegel 1942

holds: we are all ready to indulge in utter skepticism, cynical distance, exploitation of others “without any illusions,” violations of all ethical constraints, extreme sexual practices, etc.—protected by the silent awareness that the big Other is ignorant about it:

the subject is ready to do quite a lot, change radically, if only she can remain unchanged in the Other (in the symbolic as the external world in which, to put it in Hegel’s terms, the subject’s consciousness of himself is embodied, materialized as something that still does not know itself as consciousness). In this case, the belief in the Other (in the modern form of believing that the Other does not know) is precisely what helps to maintain the same state of things, regardless of all subjective mutations and permutations. The subject’s universe would really change only at the moment when she were to arrive at the knowledge that the Other knows (that it doesn’t exist).⁸

The solution is thus not “don’t jump here”—we are here, there is no other place to jump. The solution is: jump here, but in such a way that you don’t rely on any figure of the big Other.

This is also how we should read Hegel’s formula of reconciliation—I (the subject) should achieve reconciliation by way of “recognizing myself in my Otherness” (in the alienated substance which determines me). This formula is profoundly ambiguous: it can be read in the standard subjectivist way (I should recognize this Otherness as my own product, not as something strange) or, more subtly, as a claim that I should recognize myself, the core of my being, in this very Otherness, i.e., I should realize that the Otherness of the substantial content is constitutive of my Self: I am only insofar as I am confronted by an eluding Otherness which is decentered also with regard to itself. *Ibi Rhodus ibi saltus* means: overcome your alienation in the Other by way of recognizing that that Other itself does not possess what you are lacking.

So what does *Ibi Rhodus ibi saltus* amount to in our actual ethical deadlocks? Here negative theology enters—as an obstacle to self-instrumentalization. Self-instrumentalization presupposes the big Other whose privileged interpreter and instrument is the revolutionary agent. Münzer belongs to this line, he even grounded it; he was wrong in founding the authentic revolutionary spirit on natural law (or a theological version of it): for him, a true believer is able to decipher the Other (his command) and to realize it, to be the instrument of his realization. Luther was right here to criticize Münzer as *der Schwärmer* who pretended to know the divine mind. Luther warns against such *Majestätsspekulation*,

⁸ Alenka Zupančič, “Die Sexualität innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft” (manuscript).

against trying to discern the will of god, of *deus absconditus*: one should abandon attempts to know what the Other wants from you and to assume your position in this world, while realizing the Other as a “hole” in this position, a subtraction from it. God introduces the cut of the Absolute, into the ordered Aristotelian universe (thus, of course, making the latter contingent), and the tension between the two can be resolved neither through excluding one side nor by thinking a “pactum” or a historical-dialectical relation between the two but only by thinking one (the divine Absolute) as the subtraction, the hole in the Other. Yet, in order to uphold the theological and statist reality he affirmed, Luther could not uphold the radicalism of this solution which goes much further than Münzer’s. Although Münzer’s notion of revolutionary activity implies that our struggle for liberation is a process that takes place in God himself, his self-instrumentalization of the revolutionary agent as an agent of divine will enables him to avoid the radical openness of the struggle, the fact that the fate of God himself is decided in our revolutionary activity.

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

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

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

Although Luther employs the concept of the *potentia ordinata* of God, so characteristic for nominalistic theology, he gives it a Christological point instead of its primary epistemological meaning: the *potentia ordinata* is for him not primarily the order established by the inscrutable free God who could as well have established another order, but the order of redemption in Jesus Christ, established out of God’s mercy to provide sinful man with a refuge from danger.⁹ But is this notion of *potentia ordinata* not all too close to the traditional notion of a transcendent God who dwells in itself and then decides to reveal Himself to us humans, to become God-for-us, by way of the divine Word which provides meaningful order to our existence? So what if we risk the opposite approach and conceive *potentia absoluta* not as some transcendent and impenetrable God of Beyond but as the “irrational” miracle, a hole in reality—in short, as the incarnation/revelation itself. It is the Aristotelian God which is in-itself and for us, i.e., our representation of the In-itself, while Revelation is not logos (logos is the Aristotelian order) but the break of the Absolute into logos. When we are talking about God-in-itself, we should recall what Hegel says about our search for the meaning of Egyptian works of art (pyramids, Sphinx):

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

⁹This line of thought is paraphrased from <http://lutherantheologystudygroup.blogspot.si/2011/05/luther-and-potentia-ordinata-of-god.html>.

of which is in part unattained not only by us, but generally by those who posed these riddles to themselves.¹⁰

It is in this sense that Hegel talks about “objective riddle”: a Sphinx is not a riddle for our finite mind but in and for itself, “objectively,” and the same holds for *deus absconditus* whose impenetrable mystery is a mystery for God himself. Chesterton saw this clearly—in his “Introduction to Book of Job,” he praised it as “the most interesting of ancient books. We may almost say of the book of Job that it is the most interesting of modern books.”¹¹ What accounts for its “modernity” is the way in which the book of Job strikes a dissonant chord in the Old Testament:

Everywhere else, then, the Old Testament positively rejoices in the obliteration of man in comparison with the divine purpose. The book of Job stands definitely alone because the book of Job definitely asks, “But what is the purpose of God? Is it worth the sacrifice even of our miserable humanity? Of course, it is easy enough to wipe out our own paltry wills for the sake of a will that is grander and kinder. But is it grander and kinder? Let God use His tools; let God break His tools. But what is He doing, and what are they being broken for?”¹²

In the end, the book of Job does not provide a satisfying answer to this riddle:

it does not end in a way that is conventionally satisfactory. Job is not told that his misfortunes were due to his sins or a part of any plan for his improvement. . . . God comes in at the end, not to answer riddles, but to propound them.¹³

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

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

¹⁰ Hegel 1991, pp.21-22.

¹¹ G. K. Chesterton, “Introduction to the Book of Job”

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

design. The riddles of God are more satisfying than the solutions of man.¹⁴

In short, God performs here what Lacan calls a *point de capiton*: he resolves the riddle by supplanting it with an even more radical riddle, by redoubling the riddle, by transposing the riddle from Job's mind into "the thing itself"—he himself comes to share Job's astonishment at the chaotic madness of the created universe: "Job puts forward a note of interrogation; God answers with a note of exclamation. Instead of proving to Job that it is an explainable world, He insists that it is a much stranger world than Job ever thought it was."¹⁵ So, far from providing some kind of satisfactory account of Job's undeserved suffering, God's appearance at the end ultimately amounts to pure boasting, a horror show with elements of farcical spectacle—a pure argument of authority grounded in a breathtaking display of power: "You see all that I can do? Can you do this? Who are you then to complain?" So what we get is neither the good God letting Job know that his suffering is just an ordeal destined to test his faith, nor a dark God beyond Law, the God of pure caprice, but rather a God who acts as someone caught in the moment of impotence, or at least weakness, and tries to escape his predicament by empty boasting. God-the-Father thus quite literally doesn't know what he is doing, and Christ is the one who does know it, but is reduced to an impotent compassionate observer, addressing his father with "Father, can't you see I'm burning?"—burning together with all the victims of the father's rage. Only by falling into his own creation and wandering around in it as an impassive observer can god perceive the horror of his creation and the fact that He, the highest Law-giver, is himself the supreme Criminal (as Chesterton saw clearly in *The Man Who Was Thursday*).

We should be very precise here: the death of Christ is not the death of the transcendent real God and its sublation into a symbolic God, a God who exists only as a virtual/symbolic entity kept "alive" through the practice of believers – such a "sublation" already happens in Judaism, and in Christianity, something much more weird happens: God has to die the second time. What dies in the cross is not the real God but the big Other, the ideal/virtual entity, or, as Lacan would have put it, as the symbolic big Other. This is why God has first to be re-personalized in reincarnation, not as the majestic absolute Being but as its opposite, the miserable-comic figure of Christ, in his appearance an ordinary human like others. (In short, Christ is like the Monarch in Hegel's philosophy of right: an ordinary human who, in the very arbitrariness of his presence, provides the "quilting point" for the State as the ideal-spiritual order

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14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

of society and thus makes the State an actual entity – if the Monarch is deposed, the State disintegrates.) King The function of Christ is, in Lacanese, to fill in the gap in the big Other, to provide *le peu de reel* that sustains the symbolic/virtual order, so when Christ dies, the symbolic big Other also collapses. This is why the Holy Spirit is not a new figure of the virtual big Other but the spirit of a community (of believers) which accepts the non-existence of the big Other.

The ultimate choice is thus: Is God the big Other, a guarantor of meaning (accessible to us or beyond our reach), or a crack of the Real that tears up the texture of reality? With regard to the topic of theology and revolution, this choice means: Is god a transcendent point of reference that legitimizes our instrumentalization (enabling us to claim that we act on His behalf), or is he the guarantor of ontological opening which, precisely, prevents such instrumentalization? In Badiou's terms, is the reference to God in political theology sustained by the logic of purification (a nihilist destruction of all that seems to contradict the divine message) or by the logic of separation—separation which means not only our separation from God on account of which God remains impenetrable to us believers, but primarily a separation in the heart of God Himself? Incarnation is the separation of God from Himself, and for us humans, being abandoned by God, abandoned to the abyss of our freedom, without His protective care, is when we are one with God, the god separated from itself.

In a joke about Auschwitz that circulates among Jews, a group of them who were burned in the camp sit at a bench in paradise and talk about their suffering, making fun of it. One of them say: "David, you remember how you slipped on the way to the gas chamber and died before even gas engulfed you?", etc. Strolling around in Paradise, God himself comes by, listens to them and complains that he doesn't get the joke; one of the Jews steps towards Him, puts a hand on his shoulder and comforts him: "Don't be sad. You were not there, so of course you cannot get the joke!"¹⁶ The beauty of this reply resides in the way it refers to the well-known statement that God died in Auschwitz, that there was no God there: "no God in Auschwitz" does not imply that God cannot understand the horror of what went on there (God can do that easily, it's his job to do it) but that He cannot understand the humour generated by the experience of Auschwitz. What god doesn't (and cannot) get is the obscene sovereignty of the human spirit which reacts with laughter to the very space where he (god) is absent.

Perhaps, however, Christianity provides a specific solution here – the only consistent Christian answer to the eternal critical question: was god there in Auschwitz? How could He allow such immense suffering? Why didn't He intervene and prevent it? The answer is neither that we

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16 I owe this joke to Udi Aloni, of course.

should learn to withdraw from our terrestrial vicissitudes and identify with the blessed peace of God who dwells above our misfortunes, from where we become aware of the ultimate nullity of our human concerns (the standard pagan answer), nor that God knows what he is doing and will somehow repay us for our suffering, kneel its wounds and punish the guilty (the standard teleological answer). The answer is found, for example, in the final scene of *Shooting Dogs*, a film about the Rwanda genocide, in which the group of Tutsi refugees in a Christian school know that they will be shortly slaughtered by a Hutu mob; a young British teacher in the school breaks down into despair and asks his fatherly figure, the elder priest (played by John Hurt), where is Christ now to prevent the slaughter; the elder priest answer is: Christ is now present here more than ever, he is suffering here with us...

But there is another god who was alive in Auschwitz – the pre-symbolic brutal god of the Real, god of the sacred terror. Today's rising fundamentalism compels us to turn around Lacan's that god always was dead, he just didn't know it (or, more precisely, we (believers who kept him alive with our prayers) didn't know it. Today it is that god is alive again (in his most terrifying real, in fundamentalism), but we don't know it - and don't want to know it. Habermas was one of the atheist philosophers who sensed this already two decades ago.

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

Protestantism is thus totally incompatible with the New Age critique of the hubris of the so-called Cartesian subjectivity and its mechanistic dominating attitude towards nature. According to the New Age commonplace, the original sin of modern Western civilization (or already of the Judeo-Christian tradition) is man's hubris, his arrogant assumption that he occupies the central place in the universe and/or that he is endowed with the divine right to master all other beings and exploit them for his profit. This hubris that disturbs the just balance of cosmic powers sooner or later forces Nature to reestablish the balance: today's ecological, social and psychic crisis is interpreted as the universe's justified answer to man's presumption. Our only solution thus consists in

the shift of the global paradigm, in adopting the new holistic attitude in which we will humbly assume our constrained place in the global Order of Being. . . In contrast to this commonplace, one should assert the excess of subjectivity (what Hegel called the “night of the world”) as the only hope of redemption: true evil does not reside in the excess of subjectivity as such, but in its “ontologization,” in its re-inscription into some global cosmic framework. Already in Sade, excessive cruelty is ontologically “covered” by the order of Nature as the “Supreme Being of Evilness”; both Nazism and Stalinism involved the reference to some global Order of Being (in the case of Stalinism, the dialectical organization of the movement of matter).¹⁷ True arrogance is thus the very opposite of the acceptance of the hubris of subjectivity: it resides in false humility, i.e., it emerges when the subject pretends to speak and act on behalf of the Global Cosmic Order, posing as its humble instrument. In contrast to this, the entire Western stance was anti-global: not only does Christianity involve the reference to a higher Truth which cuts into and disturbs the old pagan order of Cosmos articulated in profound Wisdoms, even Plato's Idealism itself can be qualified as the first clear elaboration of the idea that the global cosmic “Chain of Being” is not “all there is,” that there is another Order (of Ideas) which holds in abeyance the validity of the Order of Being.

The feature one has to bear in mind here is the utter ambiguity of the notion of evil: even what is commonly regarded as the ultimate evil of our century, the cold, bureaucratic mass killings in concentration camps, is split into two, Nazi Holocaust and Gulag, and all attempts to decide “which is worse” necessarily involve us in morally very problematic choices (the only way out seems to be the properly dialectical paradox that the Stalinist terror was in a way “worse”—even more “irrational” and all-threatening—precisely because it was “less evil,” i.e., nonetheless the outcome of an authentic emancipatory liberation movement).

Perhaps the crucial ethical task today is to break the vicious cycle of these two positions, fundamentalist and liberal—and our last example already shows the way out: the true ethical universality never resides in the quasi-neutral distance that tries to do justice to all concerned factions. So if, against fundamentalisms which ground ethical commitment in one's particular ethnic or religious identity, excluding others, one should insist on ethical universalism, one should also unconditionally insist on how every authentic ethical position by

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¹⁷There is, of course, a difference in the basic functioning of the two universes. A small marker of this difference is the attitude towards anti-Semitism: Hitler just rounded up and killed as many Jews as possible, while Stalin, when he prepared the deportation of the Jews to a designated area in Siberia, was careful to make it appear that he was merely acquiescing to the request of the Jews themselves. According to some sources, the secret police planning the deportation compelled the big representatives of Jewish culture (in sciences, arts...) in the USSR to sign a petition demanding the Soviet state to allocate them a territory in Siberia...

definition paradoxically combines universalism with taking sides in the ongoing struggle. Today, more than ever, one should emphasize that a true ethical position combines the assertion of universalism with a militant, divisive position of one engaged in a struggle: true universalists are not those who preach global tolerance of differences and all-encompassing unity, but those who engage in a passionate fight for the assertion of the Truth that engages them.

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