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On a Certain Inconsistency in Lacan's Work

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This Special Contribution essay by world-renowned philosopher Slavoj Žižek reflects our commitment to broadening access to interdisciplinary philosophy and diversifying the views and approaches of philosophical research. Professor Žižek is a long-time champion of innovative and autonomous philosophical scholarship. We extend our gratitude to him for supporting this endeavor. —Kan Zhang

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As Lacanians, we should be especially attentive to shifts and inconsistencies in Lacan's own teaching. Perhaps the greatest shift occurs in the course of his seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis: there is a subtle but radical change in how he reads the motif of "Kant with Sade."[1] At the beginning, he refers to Saint Paul, to Paul's notion of a law which enables (calls for) its sinful transgression, while towards the end, law itself becomes the law of desire. To clarify this shift, let's begin with the famous passage from Paul's Romans 7:

> So, my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another,to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God. For when we were in the realm of the flesh, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code. What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting. For apart from the law, sin was dead. Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died.[2]

One of the last echoes of this stance is found in the work of Georges Bataille who for this reason remains strictly *premodern*, stuck in this dialectic of the law and its transgression, of the prohibitive law as generating the transgressive desire, which forces him to the debilitating perverse conclusion that one has

[1]See Lacan (2015).

[2]*New International Version Bible* (2011, Romans 7:4–10)

to install prohibitions in order to be able to enjoy their violation—a clearly unworkable pragmatic paradox. What Bataille is unable to perceive are simply the consequences of the Kantian philosophical revolution: the fact that *the absolute excess is that of the Law itself*—the Law intervenes in the homogeneous stability of our pleasure-oriented life as the shattering force of the absolute destabilizing heterogeneity. In Buddhism, you are taught to sacrifice desire in order to attain the inner peace of Enlightenment in which sacrifice cancels itself. For Lacan, the true sacrifice is desire itself: desire is an intrusion which throws off the rails the rhythm of our life; it compels us to forfeit everyday pleasures and comforts for discipline and hard work in the pursuit of the object of our desire, be it love, a political Cause, science... In short, Lacan's reading of Kant's ethics is not fully consistent. The basic line of Lacan's reading of Kant is adequately rendered in Russell Sbriglia's summation of Joan Copjec's elaboration of her notion of the "sartorial superego":

> Whereas utilitarianism blithely assumes that "man can be counted as zero," psychoanalysis insists that, if counted man can indeed be, he can only be counted as "minus one" (87).[3] Confident that the goal of man is the maximization of pleasure and that pleasure can therefore be used to regulate and manipulate man, utilitarianism presumes that "man is basically and infinitely manageable," that he is, in short, "fundamentally ruly" (85). The psychoanalytic objection to this supposition, Copjec clarifies, rests not on the protest that man is more than "rationalist engineers" like Bentham allow, but rather that "man is, in a manner, less" than utilitarians realize insofar as "he is radically separated from, and cannot know, what he wants" (87)—a separation and an unknowing that renders man fundamentally unruly. Hence Copjec's conclusion that "the difference between the utilitarian and the Lacanian subject is the difference between zero and minus one, between a subject who is driven to seek the maximization of his pleasure in his own greater good, and a subject for whom pleasure cannot function as an index of the good, since the latter is lost to him"—lost because the subject is ultimately "subject to a principle beyond pleasure" (87), that principle being, of course, what psychoanalysis dubs the death drive.[4]

Up to this point I cannot but fully agree: for Kant, freedom effectively is not the freedom to pursue one's pleasures without constraints, it is on the contrary "the freedom to resist the lure of the pleasure principle and to submit oneself to the law of the death drive" (96). Freedom does not reside in spontaneously following one's cravings; it is a form of *resistance* to these cravings, a form of self-control. But now we come to the problematic point: Lacan sees the limit of Kant's notion of categorical imperative in Kant's ignorance of how the distinction between the subject of the enunciated and the subject of enunciation works in the case of categorical imperative—a failure that makes it seem as though it "come[s] from nowhere," which, in turn, allows the addressee to "presume to occupy the vacant enunciative position" and "take itself as the source of the statement": "the ethical subject hears the voice of conscience as its own" (96–98). With his autonomous ethics, Kant thus "sealed up again the gap he so dramatically opened" (96): it appears that subject itself issues the moral imperative he obeys in acting ethically.

[3] Numbers in parentheses refer to pages in Copjec (1994).

[4] See Sbriglia (n.d.).

Again, in Lacanese, what Kant failed to do was to distinguish between the subject of the *enunciated* (the subject of the *statement* that Kant correctly understood the categorical imperative to be) and the subject of its *enunciation* which is decentered with regard to the moral subject—this agency that pushes the subject to act ethically is, of course, what psychoanalysis identifies as the *superego*. And here Sade enters as the "truth" of Kantian ethics: the categorical imperative is not libidinally neutral since the pain we, its subjects, experience when doing our duty brings enjoyment to the decentered superego agency. From this standpoint, we can claim that "acting ethically, paradoxically, entails not *identifying* with the moral law (as in Kant), but *dis-identifying* with it, it entails not heeding this 'impulse,' but '*recoil[ing]*' in 'moral revulsion' (88) from this 'incomprehensible part of our being' (92)."

However, the actual "incomprehensible part of our being" is not superego but *desire itself*, which is constitutively decentered with regard to subject, desire which makes subject barred, a void. And, as it was formulated with brilliant simplicity by Lacan, the reason Sade was not able to think the barred subject resides in his misconception of the difference between the two deaths, the biological death of the common mortal body and the death of the other "undead" body: it is clear that what Sade aims at in his notion of a radical Crime is the murder of this second body. Sade deploys this distinction in the long philosophical dissertation delivered to Juliette by Pope Pius VI in the book 5 of *Juliette*:

> There is nothing wrong with rape, torture, murder, and so on, since these conform to the violence that is the way of the universe. To act in accordance with nature means to actively take part in its orgy of destruction. The trouble is that man's capacity for crime is highly limited, and his atrocities no matter how debauched ultimately outrage nothing. This is a depressing thought for the libertine. The human being, along with all organic life and even inorganic matter, is caught in an endless cycle of death and rebirth, generation and corruption, so that "there is indeed no real death," only a permanent transformation and recycling of matter according to the immanent laws of "the three kingdoms," animal, vegetable, and mineral. Destruction may accelerate this process, but it cannot stop it. The true crime would be the one that no longer operates within the three kingdoms but annihilates them altogether, that puts a stop to the eternal cycle of generation and corruption and by doing so returns to Nature her absolute privilege of contingent creation, of casting the dice anew.

What, then, at a strict theoretical level, is wrong with this dream of the "second death" as a radical pure negation which puts a stop to the life-cycle itself? In a superb display of his genius, Lacan (2006) provides a simple answer: "It is just that, being a psychoanalyst, I can see that the second death is prior to the first, and not after, as de Sade dreams it" (p. 667). (The only problematic part of this statement is the qualification "being a psychoanalyst"—a Hegelian philosopher can also see this quite clearly.) In what precise sense are we to understand this priority of the second death—the radical annihilation of the entire life-cycle of generation and corruption—over the first death which remains a moment of this cycle? Aaron Schuster points the way:

> Sade believes that there exists a well-established second nature that operates according to immanent laws. Against this ontologically consistent realm he can only dream of an absolute

Crime that would abolish the three kingdoms and attain the pure disorder of primary nature.[5]

In short, what Sade doesn't see is that there is no big Other, no Nature as an ontologically consistent realm—nature is already in itself inconsistent, unbalanced, destabilized by antagonisms. The total negation imagined by Sade thus doesn't come at the end, as a threat or prospect of radical destruction; it comes at the beginning, it always-already happened, it stands for the zero-level starting point out of which the fragile/inconsistent reality emerges. In other words, what is missing in the notion of Nature as a body regulated by fixed laws is simply *subject itself*: in Hegelese, the Sadean Nature remains a Substance, Sade continues to grasp reality only as Substance and not also as Subject, where "subject" does not stand for another ontological level different from Substance but for the immanent incompleteness-inconsistency-antagonism of Substance itself. And, insofar as the Freudian name for this radical negativity is death drive, Schuster is right to point out how, paradoxically, what Sade misses in his celebration of the ultimate Crime of radical destruction of all life is precisely the death drive.

This brings us back to Kant, to Kant's preeminence over Sade: Kant characterized free autonomous act as an act which cannot be accounted for in the terms of natural causality, of the texture of causes and effects: a free act occurs as its own cause, it opens up a new causal chain from its zero-point. So insofar as "second death" is the interruption of the natural life-cycle of generation and corruption, no radical annihilation of the entire natural order is needed for this—an autonomous free act already suspends natural causality, and subject as already is this cut in the natural circuit, the self-sabotage of natural goals. The mystical name for this end of the world is "night of the world," and the philosophical name, radical negativity as the core of subjectivity. And, to quote Mallarmé, a throw of the dice will never abolish the hazard, i.e., the abyss of negativity remains forever the unsublatable background of subjective creativity. We may even risk here an ironic version of Gandhi's famous motto "be yourself the change you want to see in the world": the subject is itself the catastrophe it fears and tries to avoid. And is the lesson of Hegel's analysis of the French revolutionary terror not exactly the same (which is why the parallel between Sade's absolute crime and revolutionary terror is well grounded)? Individuals threatened by the Terror have to grasp that this external threat of annihilation is nothing but the externalized/fetishized image of the radical negativity of self-consciousness—once they grasp this, they pass from revolutionary Terror to the inner force of the moral Law.

So I think Lacan ultimately doesn't claim that the Kantian categorical imperative is sustained by a Sadean superego injunction to enjoy: what happens in an authentic ethical act is another dis-identification, a dis-identification between the moral law and the superego. If my desire is sustained by a superego imperative (as is the case in every form of transgressive desire, a desire that thrives on violating what the law prohibits), then this desire is by definition compromised—in acting in this way, I betray my desire.

And to dispel the impression that we are dealing here with distinctions of no practical or political interest, think about Ukraine today, in 2024. The country is confronting a forced choice: life or freedom? However, this choice has an additional twist: both choices imply death. If, in the present situation, you choose life (surrender), you choose death (disappearance as a nation, as Russia repeatedly made it clear). If you choose freedom (i.e., continued armed resistance, but with the prospect of less Western support),

[5] Schuster (2016). From this point, all unattributed quotations refer to the pages of this work.

you choose (for many Ukrainians and their habitat) actual death and destruction. In Lacanian terms, the difference is none other than the one between the two deaths: symbolic death (loss of symbolic identity) and actual biological death. Perhaps, this is the best definition of our global predicament today.

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