

A Love Beyond Belief: The Knight of Faith as Feminine, Revolutionary Subject

Christopher Martien Boerdam, University of Queensland,
Australia

Abstract

In the appendix of his latest book, Incontinence of the Void (2017), Žižek presents an account of how, according to his dialectical materialism, love can overcome death. This article situates Žižek's argument in the context of his ontology and his theory of the subject to explicate how Žižek arrives at this position: one that appears, on the surface, to be inconsistent with a staunch materialist and atheistic stance. Building on Žižek's references to Kierkegaard in this appendix, I will furthermore argue that the figure of the Knight of Faith from Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling can be as another instantiation of the revolutionary subject of the act. This figure can be said to participate in a type of love that overcomes death insofar as its attachment to objects of desire embodies the acephalous, undead drive that is not reducible to ontic or symbolic structures of reality.

Keywords

Philosophy; Žižek; Psychoanalysis; Critical Theory; Hegel; Kierkegaard; Love; Knight of Faith; Revolutionary Subject

Introduction

On the surface at least, psychoanalysis is underpinned by a pessimistic view regarding the possibility of human flourishing. One of the most obvious ways in which it contrasts with mainstream psychology or psychiatry is that it sees human beings – and more particularly the human mental apparatus – as fundamentally pathological. From a psychoanalytical perspective, all human animals, forever traumatized by the castrating effects of language and culture, are maladaptive. Henri Joker Bjerre and Brian Benjamin Hansen have described this perspective as ‘the common philosophical novelty of Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis’, that ‘there is no such thing as a the “normal” or “unpathological” way of living’ (Bjerre & Hansen 2015: 147). To Freud and to Lacan, the endpoint of psychoanalysis is neither a complete cure for our mental maladies, nor a transformation that renders the analysand at last ‘normal’, but rather an acceptance of a less-than-ideal situation. Lacan describes the final stages of the psychoanalytical process as a ‘traversal of the fantasy’ (Lacan 1981: 273) that involves the analysand confronting the fragile and imaginary nature of the fundamental fantasies that structure her reality. In ‘traversing the fantasy’ the analysand realizes that the analyst is not the other-who-knows, and that in fact there is no other-who-knows: no big Other, no ego, no ultimate principle that can ground her identity or her reality. In this process, the analysand experiences ‘subjective destitution’, which, as Adrian Johnston explains, is associated with:

. . . the analysand confronting the unembellished contingency and meaninglessness of the destinal truths of his/her unconscious, the brutal, idiotic facticity of the nodal points forming the “extimate” core of the analysand’s subjectivity. (Johnston 2014: 72)

In other words, the analysand experiences the loss of her identity as determined by the symbolic structures of her social world, and ideally comes to adopt a position of indifference towards the desire of the Other which up until this point determined and maintained her reality.

Referring to this ultimate end-point of Lacanian psychoanalytical practice, Žižek - in the appendix of his latest book, *Incontinence of the Void* (2017) – asks the following question: ‘Is this self-abandonment, then, the ultimate horizon of our experience? To put it in the most naïve way, can love overcome death? If yes, in what precise way, insofar as we want to remain materialists?’ (Žižek 2017: 268). In other words, is one able to accept the basic premises that underpin psychoanalysis and still believe that love is real? This question can be read in the context of the traditional division between materialism and religion. Traditionally, materialism, or scientific naturalism, is premised on a metaphysical vision of the world as comprised only of matter and the forces that interact according to a closed, complete order whose stability and persistence through time is ensured by a series universal, natural laws. This version of materialism goes hand in hand with a desacralisation of the world and a disillusionment with sublime emotions, like love, which are seen as being the surface-effects of purely mechanical processes reducible to the characteristics and features of inert matter. On one hand, psychoanalysis is firmly rooted in this tradition, starting as it does from the premise that the human being is fundamentally a cultured animal, alienated from the desires and drives of its biological nature by the demands of language and culture. Like this scientific naturalist version of materialism, psychoanalysis provides demystifying explanation of religious, romantic and artistic experiences, reducing them to expressions of unconscious forces blindly motivated by the pleasure principle. Where psychoanalysis parts ways with this scientific worldview is that it insists that immaterial phenomenon, such as the structures of language systems or subjective, traumatic experiences, can have very Real effects. What is a psychoanalytical symptom if not a bodily manifestation of a malfunction of meaning? Thus, whereas psychoanalysis firmly sides with the materialist position in opposing religious or philosophical visions of an innately rational, holistic world governed by a universal principle like ‘love’ (the sorts of discourses that have traditionally claimed: ‘love can overcome death’), it also insists on the reality of immaterial phenomena, and on the irreducibility of this phenomena to purely material causes. The main argument of Žižek’s appendix in *The Incontinence of the Void* (2017) is that a strictly atheistic and materialist ontology grounded in a Hegelio-Lacanian dialectical materialism can provide an affirmative answer to the question of whether love can overcome death. In this appendix, Žižek claims not only that love

overcomes death, but that it is the Freudian death drive that allows for the event of a genuine love in the first place.

The purpose of this article is to explicate how Žižek's dialectical materialism underpins the strange claim that love can overcome death. Part of this explication will draw on the figure of the Knight of Faith as explained in Soren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*; a reading inspired by Žižek's reference to the Kierkegaardian concept of 'Infinite Resignation' in the appendix of *Incontinence of the Void*. My argument is that the Knight of Faith can join the ranks of other revolutionary subjects in Žižek's work, such as Bartleby, who model how a subject as death drive can disrupt ideologically effected symbolic structures. My hope is that using Žižek to read Kierkegaard and using Kierkegaard to read Žižek may open up new insights regarding what amounts to a thoroughly materialist philosophy of love; one that avoids both the naïve optimism of totalising idealist obscurantism, as well as the debilitating pessimism of a reductionist mechanical materialism.¹

The Subject of Dialectical Materialism

Žižek's dialectical materialism in its most basic form is an attempt to think substance and subject. In the introduction to *The Parallax View*, Žižek contrasts dialectical materialism with historical materialism. Whereas both approaches move beyond the 'prephilosophically naïve' notion of 'thought as a passive mirroring of being' – or a simplistic split between subjective and objective that determines most metaphysical visions of the world – they move beyond this split in different ways. Whereas historical materialism overcomes this divide by conceptualising social thought as embedded in - and as a reflection of - the processes of social being, dialectical materialism accounts for how the very gap between thought and being emerges from the 'flat order of positive being':

In other words, while Lukacs et. al. endeavour to demonstrate how thought is an active-constitutive moment of social being, the fundamental categories of dialectical materialism (like the negativity of the "death drive") aim at the "practical" aspect of the very passivity of thought: how is it possible, for a living being, to break/suspend the cycle of the reproduction of life, to *install a non-act, a withdrawal into reflective distance from being, as the most radical intervention*. (Žižek 2006: 6)

To answer this question, Žižek draws on Hegelio-Lacanian conception of the subject as self-relating negativity that renders material reality as non-all, and so develops what Johnston has called the ontology of transcendental materialism (Johnston 2008). In this approach, there is nothing other than matter, but the totality of this material reality forms an incomplete set. Žižek's dialectical materialism thus rejects the claim that 'material reality is all there is', but in a way that draws on a feminine logic of Lacan's formulas of sexuation. The standard negation of 'material reality isn't all there is' posits a substance over and above that of material substance – such as the Cartesian conception of mind – whereas the feminine negation involves an assertion of a non-predicate: 'material reality is non-all' (Žižek 2012: 742). This is for Žižek the 'true formula for materialism' (Žižek & Woodward 2011: 408), one that asserts the positive existence of a negative withdrawal from being.

The resulting dialectical materialism is non-reductionist (as there is no completed or closed order of material reality that accounts for all phenomenon) and also resists idealist obscurantist or dualist approaches that attempt to posit the subject (or human nature, culture or spirit) as a sphere of substance existing above and beyond the material world. Adrian Johnston offers the following precise formulation of Žižek's metaphysics:

The Žižekian Hegel (or, alternatively, the Hegelian Žižek) promotes a non-reductive materialism in the form of a monism of the not-All One, a materialist ontology of the ground of being as a self-sundering substance fracturing itself from within so as to produce parallax splits between irreconcilable layers and tiers of existence. (Johnston 2014: 117)

To illustrate his dialectical materialism in *Less Than Nothing* (2012), Žižek contrasts this Hegelian speculative position with a Kantian transcendental condition. Whereas Kant sees reality as always constituted by the subject, and explicates 'the subjective conditions for the possibility of objective reality', he still posits a purely objective, 'in-itself' which remains beyond the boundaries of human perception and cognition. Hegel's speculative position on the other hand thinks this limited perspective of the objective as what is there – the 'in-itself' is the non-all of its appearance, and there is no beyond of this appearance other than what is put there by the subject. In this position:

. . . subjectivity is re-inscribed into reality, but not simply reduced to a part of objective reality. While the subjective constitution of reality – the split that separates the subject from the In-itself – is fully admitted, this very split is transposed back into reality as its kenotic self-emptying. (Žižek 2012: 144)

This is what Žižek has described as the ‘Hegelian shift from epistemological obstacle to positive ontological condition’ (Žižek 2012: 267). What Kant sees as a limitation of human perception, Hegel sees as a limitation of objective reality. So, Žižek asserts:

. . . there is no “objective” reality, every reality is already transcendently constituted. “Reality” is not the transcendent hard core that eludes our grasp, accessible only to us in a distorted perspectival approach; it is rather the very gap that separates different perspectival approaches. The “Real” is not the inaccessible X, it is the very cause or obstacle that distorts our view on reality, that prevents our direct access to it. The real difficulty is to think the subjective perspective as inscribed in “reality” itself. (Žižek 2012: 907)

The Real that is inaccessible in Žižek’s metaphysics is the subject as the constitutive gap that both grounds and incompletes reality – as that which must be subtracted from reality for reality to ‘be’.

This subject is Real as it is a retroactive effect of the subject’s inscription into the symbolic order:

. . . the subject “is” the void of negativity. The core of my being is not some positive feature, but merely the capacity to mediate or negate all fixed determinations; it is not what I am, but the negative way I am able to relate to what(ever) I am. (Žižek 2012: 317)

It is important to appreciate that the subject of the Real as both an excess (something that sticks out, that is out-of-joint with what-is) and a nothing (something that marks a lack or void in the symbolic dimension) is the retroactive effect of the symbolic order, or the constitutive incompleteness of this order, rather than the name for something outside of this order, or something that transcends it. In Žižek’s words:

. . . the space of subjectivity is the twisted space of representations which include their point of symptomal torsion, the point of inscription, within the

specific field of representations, of their constitutive exclusion or impossibility.
(Žižek 2014: 78)

The subject is that empty placeholder, that formal negativity, that makes it possible for an individual to acquire a substantial identity, but which also ensures that whatever substantial identity the individual possesses (male, nurse, Australian) will fall short of being the 'I' that is the subject.

To think of subjectivity as the ultimate self-withdrawal, as an irreducible in-itself, involves conceiving it as involving a Real that persists and insists for its own sake. Žižek links this self-relating core of negativity that constitutes the split subject to the Freudian term death drive, which for Žižek is another name for the inhuman excess that accompanies any 'objective' reality:

. . . the dimension that resists self-objectivization is not human self-experience but the 'inhuman' core of what German Idealism calls negativity, what Freud called death drive. . . : a gap or abyss which forever precludes the exclusively into view of humans as just another object among objects. (Žižek 2016: 27)

It is this conceptualisation of the subject that underpins Žižek's theories the 'act' of radical freedom which can disrupt the symbolic coordinates of a given social situation. In simple terms, the act could be described as an event which makes visible the subject as self-relating negativity – as that Real which in-completes the symbolic order.

Revolutionary Subject

In *Absolute Recoil*, Žižek defines the act in the following way:

This, perhaps, is the most succinct definition of what an authentic act is: in our ordinary activity, we effectively just follow the (virtual-fantasmatic) co-ordinates of our identity, while an act proper is the paradox of an actual move which (retroactively) changes the very virtual, 'transcendental' co-ordinates of its agent's being - or, in Freudian terms, which does not only change the actuality of our world, but also 'moves its underground.' (Žižek 2014: 144)

Whereas a typical *action* will involve making a choice from within a range of options presented to the subject within symbolic coordinates determined by the big Other, an

act involves refusing these options, and so making an impossible choice that reveals the impotence or non-existence of the big Other. What makes the act so terrifying is that it manifests the subject as point of negativity. To Žižek, following Lacan, subjectivization always involves a relationship to the desire of the Other of the symbolic order. Fantasy is the name for the frame of reality that constitutes a response to the mystery of the Other's desire; it provides an answer to the question: 'Che Vouï? What do you want from me?' (Žižek 2008: 9). The process of subjectivization thus always involves a fundamental misrecognition of the source of authority in the Other. This is why any process of subjectivization in a particular symbolic order carries with it the possibility for subtraction from this order. The Lacanian name for the confrontation of the subject with the lack in the Other, as has already been mentioned, is 'traversing the fantasy'. In the psychoanalytical process, the analysand addresses the analyst as a subject-supposed-to-know, and so as a figure who holds the key to dissolving the symptoms of their psychological malaise. The concluding moment of psychoanalytical treatment involves the dissolution of this relationship of transference. The analysand confronts the realisation that there is no big Other, that there is no timeless 'truth' about who she is, and that she is a mortal being for whom there is no ultimate salvation. In traversing the fantasy, the subject confronts the absence of the big Other, and so experiences a type of subjective destitution - a loss of the stable sense of self or idealistic perceptions of one's ego, provided by a belief in a stable symbolic order. Another way of putting this is to say that in traversing the fantasy the analysand comes to accept that the authority of the symbolic is, in a sense, maintained only by the subject's own positing of this authority. In Geoff Pfeifer's words: 'There is still subjection, it is simply that subjection is now recognized for what it is: as something which is internally imposed on the subject by himself' (Pfeifer 2011: 234).

In his work, Žižek relates the figure of the act, the subject who has traversed the fantasy, the feminine subject as developed by Lacan in *Seminar XX: Encore*.² Lacan's mathemes of sexuation describe two ways of relating the impasses of the integration into the symbolic order, or two ways of confronting the limits of language and meaning: the masculine way and the feminine way. The masculine subject - defined by Lacan with the formulas 'There is at least one X that is not submitted to the phallic function; All X's are submitted to the phallic function' - is the subject that

enunciates from the position that assumes a legitimate foundation for its symbolic mandate: there is at least one X who is the master, who is not submitted to the phallic function, who guarantees the legitimacy of the point of enunciation. As Lacan states, 'it is through the phallic function that man as whole acquires his inscription, with the proviso that this function is limited due to the existence of a x by which the function Φx is negated' (Lacan 1975: 79). The position of enunciation of the male subject can be seen in any gesture which attempts to ground a universal or absolute by covering over the fact that this assertion of the universal is itself based on a groundless decision. For example, to believe that I am a true American or a real man, I posit an Other who can legitimise and guarantee this identity which is itself not submitted to the phallic function and so guarantees the truth of my identity.

The feminine subject on the other hand is one that enunciates from a position that assumes that there is no exception to the phallic function – that there is no Other of the other. This subject position is defined by Lacan with the formulas 'There is not one x that is not submitted to the phallic function; Not-all x is submitted to the phallic function'. A subject inscribed into the phallic function on the feminine side 'will not allow for any universality – it will be a not-whole, insofar as it has the choice of positing itself in Φx or of not being there' (Lacan 1975: 80). The female position of enunciation assumes that there is no position outside of the inconsistency of the speech and the symbolic order, but because there is no universal principle or foundation that grounds the legitimacy of the symbolic, there is no end to the series of instantiations within the symbolic. Every act of enunciation will fail to capture who I am, but there is no alternative to symbolic order that would do a better job – or, I can only 'be' in the inconsistencies involved in speech. This is why Žižek describes the feminine subject as the subject as such, because this subjective position does not assume that there is some real, substantial self beneath a social mask, or that speech and meaning is finally determined or ultimately grounded by an Other outside of the inherently inconsistent symbolic order.

The feminine figure of desubjectivized drive is the figure of a subject that desires in a way that is indifferent to the Other. This is the figure, to Žižek, that emerges after one traverses the fantasy:

What we get after “traversing the fantasy,” i.e., the pure being of drive that emerges after the subject undergoes “subjective destitution,” is not a kind of subjectless loop of the repetitive movement of drive, but, on the contrary, the subject at its purest: I am almost tempted to say, the subject “as such.” Saying “Yes!” to the drive, i.e., precisely to that which can never be subjectivized, freely assuming the inevitable, i.e., the drive’s radical closure, is the highest gesture of subjectivity. (Žižek 2017: 105)

The feminine subject that traverses the fantasy involves a shift between the castrated subject which is attached to the *objet a* of desire, to the subject identifying with the *objet a* of drive. Žižek draws a distinction between the *objet a* of desire and *objet a* of drive to articulate how the structure of desire changes to a subject who has confronted the Real of their desire, drawing again on the distinction between Kant and Hegel. Whereas the Kantian universe is the one of the inaccessible Thing-in-itself that is endlessly approached but never reached, for Hegel:

. . . the Thing-in-itself is not inaccessible, the impossible does happen here and now – not, of course, in the naïve pre-critical sense of gaining access to the transcendent order of things, but in the properly dialectical sense of shifting the perspective and conceiving the gap (that separates us from the Thing) as the Real. (Žižek 2012: 496)

This is key difference between desire and drive: whereas desire aims to obtain some missing object, spurred on by the object-cause of desire (the *objet petit a*) and a determination to complete its being, drive involves desiring the endless repetition of desire as such and an identification with the restless incompleteness of being. In Žižek’s words: ‘desire is grounded in its constitutive lack, while the drive circulates around a hole, a gap in the order of being’ (Žižek 2012: 496).

Before traversing the fantasy, the *objet a* is the support for a particular fantasy-frame: that which maintains the subject’s desire for the object is an idealization of the object supported by the Other. In the example of courtly love, for instance, the maiden for whom the knight completes his quests is both forbidden, inaccessible and idealised as a manifestation of all that is good, pure and holy. When a subject traverses the fantasy, as we have already seen, she confronts the ‘void, the gap, filled in by the fantasmatic object’ (Žižek, 2012, p. 497), or the ineradicable

dimension of the drive. The *objet a* of drive is thus an affirmation of the drive of desire as such, and so enacts or manifests loss itself. Here is how Žižek describes the distinction:

. . . in the case of the *objet a* as the object-cause of *desire*, we have an object which is originally lost, which coincides with its own loss, which emerges as lost, while, in the case of the *objet a* as the object of drive, the “object” is *directly the loss itself* – in the shift from desire to drive, we pass from the *lost object* to *loss itself as an object*. That is to say, the weird movement called “drive” is not driven by the “impossible” quest for the lost object; it is a *drive to directly enact the “loss” – the gap, cut, distance – itself*. (Žižek 2012: 498)

The drive thus finds satisfaction because it turns ‘failure into triumph’, because the ‘endless circulation around that object generates a satisfaction of its own’ (Žižek 2012: 498). To put it in simpler terms, if the *objet a* of desire involves some minimal, illusory idealization of the object of desire, one that relies on a big Other and so reinforces the coordinates of a subject’s fantasy, the *objet a* of drive involves an excessive ‘Yes’ to a contingent object in its brute contingency; one that – rather than relying on support of the big Other – is supported by the death drive which desires only desire. This is why Žižek can claim that the drive shows that the reading of Lacan as the philosopher of the ‘failure’ of desire is false – this reading only applies to the *objet a* of desire. With the drive, the circular movement of desire is closed – the drive is a space in which the lack coincides with the object:

. . . the concept of drive makes the alternative “either get burned by the Thing or maintain a safe distance” false: for a drive, the “Thing itself” is a circulation around the void (or, rather, hole). The drive as such is the death drive – not in the sense of longing for universal negation or the dissolution of all particularity, but, on the contrary, in the sense of the “spontaneous” life-flow of generation and corruption becoming “stuck” on some accidental particularity and circulating endlessly around it. (Žižek 2012: 499)

The drive ‘sticks’ to an object beyond and despite any symbolic or imaginary obfuscations; its insistence is an example of the Real. As Žižek states, for the drive ‘the *objet a* is not only the metonymy of lack, but a kind of transcendental stain, irreducible and irreplaceable in its very contingent singularity’ (Žižek 2012: 500).

The *objet a* of the drive causes a parallax split in the finite object of desire between its substantial properties and its divine properties, and this split is a hypostatization of the way the subject is alienated from itself in the drive. If in desire, the finite object seems to embody a sublime 'beyond' – an ineffable, unattainable quality that disappears as an insubstantial nothing if I look at the object from a different perspective or in a different way - in drive the finite object *is* the divine beyond, and so non-coincident with itself. In encountering the *objet a* of the drive, the subject relates to the hypostatization of its self-relating negativity, and so, in a sense, 'owns' the non-all void that grounds being. If in desire the finite object is never the Thing, in drive, the finite object is too much of the Thing, and involves an excess that perpetually undermines the object's identity with itself. This is Žižek's description of how this effect is manifest in the state of love:

The state of love is characterized by a permanent surprise at this coincidence – when I am in love, I look at the beloved and am again and again surprised by the shocking realization: "My God, this really is *him/her!*" In short, I am surprised by the fact that "my lover keeps reminding me of him-herself, that he/she is characterized by an extreme tension, and the repeated surprise expresses my wonder that the disparate elements nonetheless hold together. (Žižek 2017: 273)

Genuine love to Žižek is possible, and it involves an indifference towards the positive features of the loved one: 'With love, it is the same as religious belief: I do not love you because I find your positive features attractive, but, on the contrary, I find your positive features attractive because I love you and therefore observe you with a loving gaze' (Žižek 2017: 271). In other words, in saying 'Yes' to the drive, the subject is in a sense interpellated by the finite, fragile absolutes – those objects of desire - that constitute its ultimate symptom.

This is why the feminine subject as subject as 'desubjectivized being of pure drive' (Slavoj 2017: 104) has the capacity to be a 'revolutionary subject'. This subject is interpellated by the self-relating negativity of the drive, and so able to sustain a distance from the intersubjectively determined big Other. Such a figure relates to the symbolic order in an 'as if' mode³ that involves the subject acting as if the big Other exists and so following and using symbolic law, while not being bound by the law,

and so avoiding the hysterical involvement in the Other's desire. As Robert Pfeiffer states, for the subject who undergoes an act, there is still subjection, 'it is simply that subjection is now recognised for what it is: . . . as something that is internally imposed on the subject by herself' (Pfeifer 2015: 128). This feminine subject is the subject as such – as point of the Real that disrupts (as much as it grounds) any symbolic order. Such a subject resists colonization of the coordinates of social and historical situatedness, not by transcending them, but by owning the gap, the Real, that renders them radically non-all. As we will see, the shift from the hysterical subject enthralled by the *objet a* of desire to the subject as Real identifying with the *objet a* of drive provides a novel way of conceptualising the shift from the Knight of Infinite Resignation to the Knight of Faith in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*.

Knight of Infinite Resignation to Knight of Faith

Kierkegaard uses the distinction between the Knight of Infinite Resignation and the Knight of Faith to account for how it is possible for the story of Abraham and Isaac to have a happy ending. How is it possible for a father, who was accepted that his son must die, who has tied him, placed him on the altar, and held a knife to his throat, to receive his son back again as if nothing has happened? For this to occur - for Abraham to have faith and not just be a tragic hero who accepts the exigencies of an unjust God or an unjust world - he must have faith from the start that God will not demand Isaac of him: 'All along he had faith, he believed that God would not demand Isaac of him, while still he was willing to offer him if that was indeed what was demanded' (Kierkegaard 1985: 65). Kierkegaard reminds us that Abraham, if he had genuine faith in God, must have believed that God would fulfil his promise of giving Abraham descendants for generations through Isaac. That is, the very faith that made Abraham trust God enough to be willing to sacrifice his son made Abraham certain that God would be faithful in his promise of giving Abraham grandchildren through Isaac. Abraham had to be completely resigned to give up Isaac, and completely certain that Isaac would not be harmed. It is this gesture, this paradoxical psychological movement of both giving up and holding close, of completely suspending human judgement and having complete faith in God, that astounds Kierkegaard:

He believed on the strength of the absurd, for all human calculation had been suspended. That sorrow can make one demented may be granted and is hard enough; that there is a strength of will that hauls close enough to the wind to save the understanding, even if the strain turns one slightly odd, that too may be granted. I don't mean to decry that. But to be able to lose one's understanding and with it the whole of the finite world whose stockbroker it is, and the strength of the absurd get exactly the same finitude back again, that leaves me aghast. (Kierkegaard 1985: 65-66)

It is here that Kierkegaard introduces the distinction between the Knight of Infinite Resignation and the Knight of Faith. These figures are similar in that they both experience a type of subjective destitution: both are willing to sacrifice everything they are for their cause, or their loved one. Where the two are different is that the Knight of Infinite Resignation resigns himself to the impossibility of his desire, whereas the Knight of Faith believes that his desire can be satisfied, on the strength of the absurd (in other words, for reasons beyond human understanding, or beyond discursive justification).

Kierkegaard goes on to use the example of a knight falling in love with the princess to explain the distinction. The Knight of Infinite Resignation dedicates his whole being to loving the princess, and makes his love pure through an idealisation of the princess:

So the knight will remember everything; but the memory is precisely the pain, and yet in his infinite resignation he is reconciled with existence. His love for the princess would take on for him the expression of an eternal love, would acquire a religious character, be transfigured into a love for the eternal being which, although it denied fulfilment, still reconciled him once more in the eternal consciousness of his love's validity in an eternal form that no reality can take from him. (Kierkegaard 1985: 72)

In Lacanian terms, one could say the Knight of Infinite Resignation is a figure who embodies the dialectics of desire (as opposed to drive). His love of the princess involves an attachment to an *objet a* which will forever be out of reach, and which allows him to maintain a safe distance from his drive.

The Knight of Faith on the other hand is a figure that goes the step beyond Infinite Resignation:

He does exactly the same as the other knight, he infinitely renounces the claim to the love which is the content of his life; he is reconciled in pain; but then comes the marvel, he makes one more movement, more wonderful than anything else, for he says: 'I nevertheless believe that I shall get her, namely on the strength of the absurd fact that for God all things are possible.'

(Kierkegaard 1985: 75)

Whereas the Knight of Infinite Resignation gives up finitude in the infinite movement of knowing his desire can never be fulfilled, the Knight of Faith believes on the strength of the absurd that his desire will be fulfilled, and so receives finitude back. In Kierkegaard's text, the strength of the absurd relates to the all things being possible with God. In the Lacanian reading I am developing in this article, this strength of the absurd is the drive – absurd because its insistence is not reducible or explicable to symbolic or ontic coordinates of its reality. Whereas to the Knight of Infinite Resignation, the figure of the *objet a* of desire, loves the princess insofar as she represents something ineffable, sublime and unattainable, and so possesses a desire that is dependent upon the unattainability of the princess, the Knight of Faith loves the princess insofar as she *is*, and so believes that he can get her. To the Knight of Faith, the princess in all her finite existence, as impossible, absurd, contingent absolute, manifests the divine dimension. Insofar as the Knight of Faith loves the princess for love's sake, he encounters in the princess the objectal counterpart to the void of the drive.

The movement from Knight of Infinite Resignation to Knight of Faith then does involve desublimation of the figure of the princess – but it is desublimation that does not do away with a divine element. Whereas traditional materialist philosophy leads to a desublimation of the loved one that involves seeing them as 'just matter' or 'just a body', the desublimation of the princess by the Knight of Faith involves identifying the beyond as directly embodied in the princess. Another way of making the same point is to say that whereas the Knight of Infinite Resignation loves the princess because she embodies an element of a transcendent beyond that cannot be symbolized, for the Knight of Faith the princess in her finitude *is* the beyond, and she

is split by the hypostatization of the drive – because the subject can never catch up with the effects of its desire.

This is where a Žižekian dialectical materialism differs markedly from a common-sense materialism. According to common-sense materialism, any talk of love, or of a loved one being 'divine' are seen as deceptive epiphenomenon. All that exists is objective matter that interacts according to a closed set of natural laws. The key problem with this materialism, as far as Žižek is concerned, is that it cannot take the subject into account. It is a masculine discourse, which has to assert its view of reality (that there is no such thing as subject) with a subjective gesture (the act of assertion: 'I believe that there is no such thing as a subject') which is not included in its version of the world as closed system of material substance. Žižek's dialectical materialism, on the other hand, posits the subject as death drive, as self-relating negativity that marks at once an absence and an excess of any reality. To think substance as well as subject is to see reality as always already rendered incomplete or at odds with itself because of the subject. The divine according to dialectical materialism is not epiphenomenal, but a hypostatization of the drive – a positive manifestation of the negativity of the subject.

For this reason, Žižek's dialectical materialism can be said to have much in common with religion, insofar as one defines the basic insight of religious discourse as that things are not how they ought to be, as Žižek points out in the closing page of *Incontenance of the Void*:

At its most radical, religion is thus not the opium of the people . . . but an awareness of the incongruity and/or inconsistency of existing positive reality, the incongruity which we have pursued throughout this book whose basic premise is that the order of being is haunted by – and originating from – its own impossibility. This ontological paradox throws a new light on the problem of deontology, of how to derive an Ought from Is: some kind of deontological tension is always-already at work at the level of being itself, making it incomplete/antagonistic – the order of being is always haunted by its own impossibility, it is never what it "ought to be." (Žižek 2017: 286)

By including subject in its account of substance, dialectical materialism completely subverts the assumptions that underpin any project of scientific reductionism.

According to such accounts, the ultimate explanation of everything will rest upon some account of material processes that does not include the subject. According to the dialectical materialist, any explanation rests finally on the positing of the subject as the repetitive, acephalous insistence of the death drive. Divine manifestations of the drive are Real in dialectical materialism, so long as this is conceived as a transcendent dimension brought about by the immanent incompleteness of reality, rather than a transcendent Beyond of a supernatural, alternative reality breaking into reality from another dimension.

This is how Žižek can ultimately claim that love can overcome death. Love overcomes death not because there is some world beyond this one, but because, when the nature of love is truly appreciated, we cannot even catch up or live up to the value of the finite loved one of this world. In the space of a genuine love of the drive, any question of the ultimate value of a loved one cannot be enunciated. This is because any call for justification, any questioning of the ultimate worth of a loved one, relies on the positing of some big Other who will be able to give an account of whether or not this love is 'real'. When the subject identifies with the drive, it is the existence of this Other that is suspended. It just does not make sense to ask the question 'Is this love real?' because there is no longer anyone or anything to whom to address this question. Love overcomes death not because it somehow participates in an immaterial dimension that transcends our world, but because it is a positive manifestation of the void of the drive that possesses an undead persistence that is indifferent to the conditions or restrictions of this world.

The figure of the drive, of the subject who, in saying 'Yes' to the drive, becomes its object, and so who is 'interpellated beyond interpellation'⁴ by the drive, is, I argue, captured in the figure of the Knight of Faith in *Fear and Trembling*. This reading involves an important proviso. Obviously, a Žižekian Knight of Faith does not act for the sake of God as big Other. The 'other' for the Žižekian Knight of Faith, if we can say there is an other, is the drive itself, for which the subject becomes the object. For the atheistic Knight of Faith, her attachment to finite objects in the world is immortal, infinite and resists and refuses any calling to account. She has given up everything (any stability or guarantees of the big Other) to accept everything back (finite attachments) on the strength of the absurd (the drive). Here is Kierkegaard's description of the Knight of Faith:

The acquaintance is struck, I am introduced. The moment I first set eyes on him I thrust him away, jump back, clasp my hands together and say aloud: 'Good God! Is this the person, is it really him? He looks just like a tax-gatherer.' Yet it is indeed him. . . . This man takes pleasure, takes part, in everything, and whenever one catches him occupied with something his engagement has the persistence of the worldly person whose soul is wrapped up in such things In the afternoon he takes a walk in the woods. He delights in everything he sees, in the thronging humanity, the new omnibuses, the Sound - to run across him on Strandveien you would think he was a shopkeeper having his fling, such is his way of taking pleasure Towards evening he goes home, his step tireless as a postman's. On the way it occurs to him that his wife will surely have some special little warm dish for his return, for example roast head of lamb with vegetables. If he were to meet a kindred spirit, he could continue as far as Osterport so as to converse with him about this dish with a passion befitting a restaurateur. As it happens he hasn't a penny and yet he firmly believes his wife has that delicacy waiting for him If his wife doesn't have the dish, curiously enough he is exactly the same. . . . Carefree as a devil-may-care good-for-nothing, he hasn't a worry in the world, and yet he purchases every moment that he lives, 'redeeming the seasonable time' at the dearest price; not in the least thing does he do except on the strength of the absurd. . . . He drains in infinite resignation the deep sorrow of existence, he knows the bliss of infinity, he has felt the pain of renouncing everything, whatever is most precious in the world, and yet to him finitude tastes just as good as to one who has never known anything higher, for his remaining in the finite bore no trace of a stunted, anxious training, and still he has this sense of being secure to take pleasure in it, as though it were the most certain thing of all. . . . He resigned everything infinitely, and then took everything back on the strength of the absurd. (Kierkegaard 1985: 68-69)

I would argue that here we have something like a portrait of a subject who says 'yes' to the infinite, undead repetition of the drive. If the comparison is convincing (and it must be admitted the parallel is not exact) we have moved a little way to justifying why a subject who 'embodies negativity' as such is not necessarily a figure of nihilistic destruction. Rather, the negative gesture of the act, or subjective destitution,

of traversing the fantasy, opens up a space for an interpellation beyond interpellation in which the subject can enter an as-if mode in relation to the big Other. In this mode he or she will still relate to the big Other, but will maintain a minimal distance from her symbolic identity. Such a subject, pulled into the commitment to the finite, no longer operating within a framework of justification and accountability of the big Other, participates in the immortal, undead life of the drive – it becomes a symptom of being's failure to be consistent with itself.

Reading the Knight of Faith as a revolutionary subject lends further weight to the arguments made by Geoff Pfieler and Fabio Vighi that the gesture of subtraction that accompanies the Lacanian act need not be read as purely destructive. As the example of the Knight of Faith makes clear, the traversal of the fantasy that results in the subject's confrontation with the truth that there is no big Other, and the accompanying experience of subjective destitution, need not entail a nihilistic despair. Pfieler, drawing on the figure of Bartleby, points out that negativity of Bartleby's refusal:

. . . is also *at the same moment* the creation of a new possibility and is in this way, simultaneously positive in its negation. Thus, it is not really a suicidal act at all, it is a recognition of the power that comes with the rejection of the perceived externality (and completeness) of the order in which the subject finds herself. (Pfieler 2011: 229)

Vighi makes the similar point, arguing that the traversal of the fantasy must be regarded as 'synchronous with, or immediately conducive to, the construction of a new fantasy space.' For the revolutionary act to be successful, 'we must not only dispel the fantasy that makes us what we are, but also reconfigure it radically' (Vighi 2010: 163). The Knight of Faith provides us with an image of what this radically reconstituted fantasy space may look like. Unlike the horrifying, self-destructive or tragic figures of the act that litter Žižek's work, from Antigone to Keyser Soze, the Knight of Faith is a figure which exhibits the positive potential of the drive; it provides us with a different vision of what subjective destitution could entail.

Conclusion

Reading the Knight of Faith as a Žižekian revolutionary subject reinforces the central thrust of the appendix to *Incontinence of the Void*: that the ultimate level of reality is

not the dead, mechanical interactions of material matter, but the undead out-of-jointness of the subject as death drive. This incompleteness means being is always, to use Žižek's words, 'by its own impossibility. . . never what it "ought to be" (Žižek 2017: 286). Dialectical materialism asserts, in other words, not only that genuine love is real, but that it is Real – a love that is a manifestation of the non-all nature of the world, and of the subject that positively manifests this gap in being. Kierkegaard's description of the Knight of Faith paints a picture as to what this love in the 'as if' mode may look like: it is an attachment made on the strength of the absurd, indifferent to symbolic strictures or to calls of justification, or to the desire of the Other. Such a love, as hypostatization of the drive, manifests the repetitive, acephalous insistence that, by becoming fixated on a small piece or pieces of the finite world, finds itself perpetually surprised by the existence of what it loves, serenely other-worldly in the restlessness of its desire. Such a love avoids sublimation as idealization, which always involves the intersubjective desire of the other, as it is attached to objects in their brute contingency. Such a love exists beyond question. This reading of the Knight of Faith as a Žižekian subject who has traversed the fantasy shows that Žižek's radically revolutionary subject, even as she comes to embody the radical self-relating negativity of substance's inconsistency with itself, is not a subject that is indifferent to finitude. Rather, this subject can be attached to the finite world in a way that is beyond the economy of exchange or justification as determined by the symbolic – a love beyond belief, accountability or reason; a love that manifests, even celebrates, being's incapacity to complete itself.

Notes

¹ I have borrowed the terms for this distinction from Žižek – see the introduction to *The Parallax View* (2006: 4) in which he claims that today's sciences philosophically oscillate between these two poles.

² See Chapter 3 of *Incontinence of the Void* (2017) in which Žižek relates Lacan's four discourses to Lacan's theory of sexualisation. Žižek relates the Master and University discourses to the masculine position, and the Hysteric and Analyst discourses to the feminine. As Žižek states, his reading of the feminine narrative as involving the move from the hysterical questioning of the desire of the Other to the analyst position of identifying with the drive shows how the Lacanian theorisation of the subject does allow for a space beyond identification through the Other. This space beyond the Other involves the subject saying "Yes!" to the drive (105).

³ This phrase is used by Žižek in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2003: 113) to describe how Pauline love interpellates individuals in a way that involves the suspension of the 'obscene unwritten underside' of the law, but not its explicit prescriptions. The subject obeys the law as if they were not obeying them, or, on the surface, they do what the law states, but with a serene indifference – in a way that suspends the subject's reliance of the desire or approval of the other.

⁴ I have borrowed this term also from *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (2003: 112).

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