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Following Atheism: on a Debate in Contemporary Psychoanalytic Theory

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"Religion" is a concept of sufficient breadth that any simple embrace or rejection of what it encompasses is bound to be as much misleading as true. The following comments confirm this in following out polemics about religion within contemporary Lacanian/Freudian psychoanalysis. That is, they show the truth of the hypothesis that any effort simply to negate or, equally, to affirm the religious indicates a point where some more complex truth is being overlooked. But that doesn't mean that religion is insignificant within the Freudo-Lacanian tradition: quite the contrary, it names a foundational concern of the Lacanian analyst or theorist. What makes a discussion about religion in the academy of interest to me is the value of exposing, so as to win through to what psychoanalysis *can* teach us about it, the falsity of the *easy* addresses to religion in an analytic context.

The following comments pursue this teaching in following a 3-part agenda: I start (Section 1) from a presentation of the theological element in psychoanalysis – from, that is, an explanation of a foundational *atheism* in Freudian/Lacanian thought. After that (Section 2), I indicate how this psychoanalytic atheism naturally leads two of its important contemporary exponents (Adrian Johnston & Slavoj Žižek; a student and his teacher) to bind psychoanalysis to

contemporary polemics about religion. The fact, however, that these polemics directly oppose each other (with Johnston articulating a militant anti-religiosity and Žižek embracing an equally militant radical Christianity) will give us the clue for the final part (Section 3) of this paper. There I will propose that the atheistic *ethos* of Freud and Lacan has its value in outlining a nuanced critical theory of contemporary society, a theory that attempts to comprehend the changing historical status of religious belief.

1. Fundamental Fantasy: Unconscious Theism

Let me begin from what I take to be the hidden source of psychoanalysis' fruitfulness for Lacanian thought about religion – which is contained in Lacan's idea, as introduced beginning in about 1960, of a "fundamental fantasy." Since for Lacan this idea is a re-casting of a seminal Freudian motif, let me begin via the case that later became central in Freud's own accounts of an *Urphantasie*, namely, the case of the so-called "Wolfman." Freud wields the term *Phantasie* in various ways all of which have in common the notion of a psychically constructed and coherent scene in which the subject or (in the case of dreams) dreamer is present as an observer. (Laplanche & Pontalis 1973, 314-316) Beginning in 1915, moreover, Freud speaks of "primal fantasy" (*Urphantasie*) – using that term in relationship to a "primal scene" (most typically the scene of witnessed parental coitus) that is present to the individual even when it represents no actual experience. (See, Freud 1914/74 & 1917/74). In such a scene, Freud sees a literalization of the reference to origins, a kind of staging or representation of one's own conception. (Laplanche & Pontalis 1973 332)

So, the Freudian primal fantasy suggests a universe closed on itself – one in which the analysand watches her/himself come into being as that event happens. What is this position that includes "everything" (or, as will be seen, *almost* everything)? As Slavoj Žižek suggests, it resembles the medieval image of a completed *cosmos* represented for God.¹ Fantasy projects the real *qua* totality – what we call "reality" -- by imagining it, at least traditionally, from the position of transcendence, from a privileged subject's perspective. In order to conceive of the world as "ontologically closed" we imagine a "viewpoint" *from which* it appears as totality.²

Now, the elegant thing about the Wolfman case is that its "primal scene" also indicates, in what it *excludes* from such a picture, the necessity that an irreducibly *unconscious* element enter into the constitution of reality. The fantasy of the analysand's own presence at his conception includes consciousness *of* that presence, but only in the sense that the fantasy is *for* it: this consciousness remains necessarily also external to the scene, never a fully represented object

of its representation. On the contrary, its conscious token is only the *anxiety* accompanying the Wolfman's repeated dream of "wolves in a tree," an uncanny affect that tips us off as to the peculiar half-presence of an "objectile" self.³ The "primal fantasy" proper behind the "primal scene" is what deals with this uncanny exclusion, repressing it and thus guaranteeing that it does not disturb the "reality" produced by that original show.

Here, Freud only hints at what Lacan and his followers have filled in with the idea of the "fundamental fantasy," namely *another* and this time necessarily unconscious formation responsible for the stable totality of reality. To suggest *that* fantasy, we might join Eric Santner and Žižek in returning to a different Freud, the speculative theorist of *Moses and Monotheism* who proposes that the myth of Moses the patriarch and, indeed, the accompanying production of a patriarchal "God-the-Father" amount to responses to a repressed *murder* of the actual (Egyptian) Moses.⁴ After all, Freud's deduced lesson from the death of the *actual* Moses, the "father," is that there *are no* external consequences, no divine retribution for murder. (Freud 1937/74, 81-85) According to this account, the fundamental fantasy – that *we* are guilty of some horrible primal crime and thus must endlessly atone for it – actually aims to defeat an unbearable anxiety, to transform it *into* guilt, the punishment exacted by the superego.

The fundamental fantasy, then, is the necessarily unconscious content of the act *by which* reality itself, with its quality of apparently seamless totality, is formed. *It* is unconscious because, by transforming subjectivity into the object of the superego, it hides the incompleteness of reality at the point of the subject. That is, guilt transforms the stain of subjectivity into a definite person wracked by guilt, and, in so doing, it hides the gap or hole in being emerging at that site of anxiety. It delivers up the consolation of a world we can inhabit, but only at the price of an endless punishment. "We" are sinners (in the Christian vision, *original* sinners, guilty of disrupting the basic fabric of Being). Effectively, reality, a complete world, is won by repressing our own uncanny presence, a presence that the fantasy converts into a definite but excluded element. In such a cosmos, we as human beings are primordially guilty of disrupting the fundamental order and therefore excluded from it. An ordered universe, essentially complete in itself, still holds "no place" for the spontaneous human will, the *subject*. The cosmos is whole: only, short of the redemption posited by orthodoxy, we cannot belong to it.

Of course, this tragic situation also brings its own consolation, in the form of the *community of sinners*, or, in Freud's terms, the form of the group of brothers who share the social tie of guilt and humiliation. That is, a stabilized reality is of-a-piece with a social bond based upon shared renunciation. We can see the other person as something other than a potential competitor or

enemy, so Freud and Lacan, to the extent that we all share in the fantasmatic casting-out of ourselves from paradise.

All that's necessary to complete the demonstration of how basic to psychoanalytic thought is Freud's atheism, is to follow the links by which psychoanalytic treatment aims to loosen the bonds of guilt holding the analysand to his or her misperception of the Real. For Lacan, analysis aims to "traverse the fantasy" potentially liberating the "patient" both from guilt and from the illusion of a transcendence producing and stabilizing reality itself. (Lacan, 1978/62, 273) No wonder, then, that for Žižek and other members of the Slovenian school of Lacanian thought, the process of an analysis aims directly at a kind of revolution, a challenging of the "good forms" of lived ontology. That, by this model, such liberation sails close to madness is, of course, neither incidental nor trivial to my modeling here, but that, too, must remain a theme for another day.

2. Johnston & Žižek: Religion and the Atheistic Imperative of Psychoanalysis

These meditations would seem to leave a clear imperative for contemporary psychoanalysis: follow out the atheistic commandment by challenging those fantasmatic structures, shared or individual, that stabilize any illusory social reality. Above all, this would imply a challenge to Freud himself who, while famously opposing the "illusion" of organized religion, famously does so in the name of an alternative "religion" of science, including the science of psychoanalysis.⁵ Exactly that challenge to Freud's positivism marks an important strain of Jacques Lacan's critique of Freud -- namely, the idea that the various scientisms and rationalisms with which Freud allied himself are not, in fact, atheistic *enough*, that they actually represent a residual, if unacknowledged "religion of science" whose carry, when coupled with the broader cultural construction it accompanies, defines our reality today.⁶

In several recent essays and books, the well-known Lacanian scholar Adrian Johnston has made the case for just this as the inescapable logic of Lacan's reception of the atheist Freud. In brief, he argues that Freud's hidden sympathies with reductive scientism lead him in his writings on religion to mistake the demands of an early modern view of nature for those of a genuine atheism. For example, in "Conflicted Matter: Jacques Lacan and the Challenge of Secularizing Materialism," Johnston interprets Lacan as arguing against the 17th and 18th-Century mechanists, early adherents of scientific reductivism.⁷ Such reductivism implicitly totalizes reality – implying the "mind of God" in which all causal chains are completed – unintentionally reinforcing the illusion of a transcendent, quasi-divine gaze, a gaze which assures us of the

continuity and self-consistency of all that is. As a result, Johnston, following Lacan, argues that the apparent materialism of self-avowed atheists like Sade, La Mettrie or Diderot (but also of more contemporary analytic philosophers of science) is simply the equivalent of, as he puts it, "a disguised body of religious belief despite itself." (Johnston 2008, 169) The vital task Johnston engages in his essay is to distinguish more rigorously these still "fideist" materialisms from the real – genuinely atheist – thing. Following Lacan's analysis of Sade in Seminar VII, (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan 1960/92), Johnston finds that Enlightenment materialists reassert "the ultimate cohesion of the material universe as a self-consistent One-All." (Johnston 2008, 169)

In other words, the world produced by that Enlightenment, with its faith in technical progress and its suspicion of superstition, is itself result of a *kind of* religion. From Johnston's perspective, psychoanalysis remains a fundamentally *anti-religious* phenomenon, indeed the positivist scientism that Freud still thought to be his ally, fails because it is still compromised by a totalized – ie., religious, ontological view. Johnston persistently calls for a more radical anti-religiosity, a revolutionary Leninist attitude, refusing compromise and moderation.⁸

One way to put this: in the famous Marxist phrase, it is *no accident* that, intending a coherent and complete "worldview," positivist scientism becomes in its content a kind of reductive equivalent of religion, itself projecting a fantasmatic totality of being. To the extent that modern science (or at least ideological projections of it) includes the possibility of a complete knowledge, a reduction of events to a closed causal account, it repeats or represents the ontological function of the fundamental fantasy. Because Johnston himself fails to do so, I haven't done justice to the *unconscious* element that underlies the projection of such a reality, but my point is simply that the very totality of a scientific ideology in fact betrays "scientific" atheism, causing it to fail the atheist test.

To take this insight a step beyond natural science, something like such coherence and totality is precisely implied in the very "world" of "worldview": to the extent that any philosophical position takes its task to be articulation of such a systematic perspective, *it* unfailingly must fall into or supplement a "religious" function. And doesn't something like this problem haunt Johnston himself? Isn't his effort to develop an anti-religious view of being in books like *Žižek's Ontology* a way of failing to escape the very trap that he so accurately sees modern scientism as falling into? (See, Johnston 2008a)

Interestingly, this very irony – that any anti-religious world-view, as such, reinstates a basic religiosity – underlies the recent theological work of Johnston's teacher (and subject of study in two books), Slavoj Žižek. As is the case with Johnston, a Freudian commitment leads Žižek to re-consider Freud's polemics about religion. In Žižek's case, though, the demands of

Freudian/Lacanian atheism lead, not to a militant polemic against the religion in science, but, rather, to a (so the author claims) subversive embrace of one specific religious tradition. Recently calling himself an "atheist Christian," Žižek has joined Thomas Altizer in connecting Christianity with a doubling or deepening of atheism, one apparently capable of withstanding reinterpretation as systematic or dogmatic belief.⁹

Indeed, for Žižek Christianity is not a worldview but rather a kind of machine for avoiding the trap of a paradoxically theistic atheism. In his account, the structure of Christian theology demands a doubling or "parallax shift" in our understanding of ourselves as excluded from the ontological totality of the world. Recall the basic economy of the fundamental fantasy: it manages to assert that the world is complete, a totality, by excluding *us* from the "all." *We ourselves* are the unruly and extraneous element in an otherwise "whole" creation, the exception that allows every created element to enjoy a pre-given place in the cosmos. (Žižek 2003, 85)

Žižek's key move is to claim that in Christianity, at its most essential, the relational negativity of the Fall (wherein the nullity of being is externalized) is doubled and thus reflected back onto being itself. The "nullity" lies in the totality of being itself rather than in us. Above all, Žižek finds this essence of Christianity in a Jesus who proves his "Father" impotent to "save him" from death when he calls out to him in despair upon the cross ("Father, why have you forsaken me?") As Žižek puts it, "Our alienation from God is at the same time the very alienation of God from himself." (Žižek 2009)

In Žižek's understanding, God can't save Jesus, because he (God) *doesn't exist*. There simply is *no force* to the universe guaranteeing that everything will "turn out" in the end. This atheism of the dying Jesus allows, as a kind of "second blow" the Fall to appear as what it "really" always was – an assertion of the essential, meaningless *non-totality* of the universe. (See, Žižek 2003, 126) Žižek's Jesus wants us to see that, precisely *because*, actually, this world is incomplete, we could only miss this by positing our "sinful" selves as exception to God's will. Jesus teaches that the very idea of a reality against which we sin is an illusion reproduced in the gesture by which we first free ourselves (as sinners) from it. In other words, the "fictionality of the Other" sustaining fantasy first appears as fantasy. For Žižek, Jesus does not come to "redeem us" from Adam's Fall but only to help us "shift our subjective position," our perspective, so that we could see "that it [redemption] is already there" in the Fall -- that there never was a "cosmos" from which we rebelled. (Žižek 2003, 86-7)

To "follow Jesus," in Žižek's version of Christianity, mandates a movement beyond the sterile questions of belief, with their rationalist bias. The real value of Žižek's Paulinian/Hegelian theology, thus, is that it mandates the inadequacy of this very language: that is, the

point is not so much a systematic belief about the incompleteness of ontology (as Johnston takes it to be) but rather an imperative to *act* without the possibility of foundation or ground, without any possibility for a certainty about the reality *upon which* I act. (See, for example, Žižek 2003, 22 and Žižek 1999, 158). To acknowledge that there is no God is just a way of embracing the necessity that one take responsibility for one's own freedom. Building upon Kierkegaard's idea of the "leap of faith" as well as Lacan's notion of the psychoanalytic act, Žižek builds an answer to the fundamental problem of human freedom and creativity. Specifically, the 'act' evident in Christianity allows a genuinely *unanticipated* story to unfold – based upon a "faith" beyond any rational belief.

For Žižek, furthermore, this ethics of the act produces a different social bond than the community of guilt and renunciation mandated by the fundamental fantasy. Revolutionary collectivism, a social link independent of the shared guilt foundational for all traditional "community," extends the freedom of the act. (See, Žižek, 2003, 130) The collective (whether the revolutionary commune or the psychoanalytic association), is a group self-consciously -- fully knowing that it *has no place* in the cosmos, no hidden identity awaiting discovery – *producing* itself through choices it knows to be its own. What, according to Žižek, do I have in common with the others surrounding me? Only the fact that we all act together, freely shaping our own lives.¹⁰

And so, in opposition to Johnston, Žižek presents himself as not only someone who embraces at least one form of "religion," but who does so in the name of the very imperative that Freud announced in his polemics against it. The irony deepens, too, when we consider how Žižek's embrace of "atheist Christianity" explains both his criticisms of various Enlightenment-tinged or "new age" spiritual directions – Western Buddhism, Unitarianism, Reform Judaism, etc. – and when he announces his sympathy for various forms of religious fundamentalism.¹¹ That is, Žižek's numerous polemics all follow the impulse of a radical "act" or leap of faith, one unsupported by any rational belief. Those who insist upon a "reasonable" religion, a religion mediated by "progress" or worldliness, fail the basic test necessary to live up to the atheist insight.

Thus, "religion" marks a site of dispute between Johnston and Žižek, a place of uncertainty about applying the ethical force of psychoanalysis. While, of course, when it comes to that moral/political imperative, the positions of pupil and teacher remain remarkably close, they differ markedly about whether to identify religion as the problem or the solution. Still, underlying this appearance of disagreement is something else, a further underlying similarity beyond their shared Lacanian commitment: for both Johnston and Žižek, "religion" plays a similar *role* in their

theory. For *both* of them it marks the site of a significant – indeed, symptomatic – diversion, a place where subtle analysis gives way to polemic, so that significant questions are left unaddressed. In both of these thinkers, rhetorical attack recalls the move of the Wizard of Oz when, in the film of that name, his avatar demands that we "pay no attention to the man behind the curtain."

For Johnston, I've already mentioned this point of "religious" diversion, which calls our attention away from a sustained address of how the *new* religion of modern scientific reductionism displaces and *replaces* the unconscious function of the fundamental fantasy. Allowing Johnston to maintain a discourse entirely at the level of possible philosophical "positions," this turn not only evades the question of the relationship between science and the philosophy of science but also, more essentially, wins him a relatively untroubled embrace of systematicity in his work as a whole. To put this in other words, "religion" gains for Johnston the possibility of avoiding the question of the extent *his* position amounts to a "worldview" and thus has the hidden effect of reinforcing the very phenomenon against which, in its content, it struggles.

In the case of Žižek, the "fundamentalist" polemical edge of his theology – against new age spirituality, against "progressive" or "tolerant" forms of Christianity, etc. – has a similarly diversionary effect. In rejecting the entire gamut of modern and post-modern forms of enlightened spirituality, Žižek drives contemporary theologians into a tizzy, diverting their attention from the real remaining labor demanded by his own categories – namely, the work of distinguishing *between* genuine revolution and religious fundamentalism.¹² Or, to put this in other words, Žižek tends to occlude the *difference* between "really believing" (as does the fundamentalist) and responding adequately to the atheistic demands of psychoanalysis. However, at the very least, we can say that psychoanalysis calls for something *more* than a mere leap of faith: it demands the *right* leap of faith – a distinction that, as I've argued elsewhere, indicates the extent to which Žižek cannot (and would not want to) evade the very enlightenment knowledge he seems to reject.¹³

Put otherwise, in his theological polemics, Žižek treats a *symptom* as a cause: he suggests direct *opposition* at the level of theory to cultural formations (like new-age Buddhism or "suspended" religiosity) that are themselves only the visible manifestations of fundamentally unconscious formations. In this way, paradoxically, even when he evades the lure of describing the desired "end of treatment" as a belief-system, Žižek actually falls into the same trap as Johnston, the trap of treating a psychoanalytic critical theory of contemporary society as a kind of prophylaxis against incorrect *belief*.

3. Diagnosing the Present: The Pervert's Fantasy

For all the parallels, there's an essential difference *between* Johnston and Žižek here, namely, that Žižek *knows better* than his theological polemics would indicate.¹⁴ Indeed, we might say that his work ever since *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) has circled around the increased importance today of such non-conscious elements in social formations. These are elements that Žižek identifies with fetishism and perversion – terms that, for him, name two poles of a single personality type. To this extent, Žižek already adumbrates a theory of what *replaces* the traditional fundamental fantasy when reality takes on the shape projected by modern science, the shape that Johnston leaves uninterrogated as merely "religious." Behind Žižek's loud embrace of Christianity lies a much quieter but more powerful analysis of the specific historical conditions meriting his interventions, and it is *this* analysis – emerging from an understanding of Freud and Lacan on superego and drive -- that can bear fruit in figuring out just how the basic structures of faith as well as those of *fantasy* are changing today.

Freud's discussion of the superego in *Civilization and its Discontents* contains a distinction that is critical to Žižek and to our discussion. Concerning the misery to which the superego's operation condemns progressively more "civilized" human beings, Freud makes a key observation: were the purpose or end of the superego simply the curbing of the death drive in order to socialize us, then the saint or upright moral person would be free from its grip. The truth, claims Freud, is precisely the opposite: the more "correct" a person's actions are, the more he or she is likely to be wracked by guilt, tortured by a bad conscience. Given such a result, Freud retreats from the idea that the superego can *simply* be equated with an internalized "father" or authority and posits instead that its primordial function is a re-direction of the death-drive back onto the subject, a re-channelling of aggression back onto its source. (Freud 1927/74, 125-6)

While by the end of *Civilization and its Discontents* Freud re-captures the superego within a secondary moral framework, for Lacan and Žižek, the cat is out of the bag: the operations of this "faculty" don't originally coincide with conscience – punishment for wrong-doing, etc.. The superego *can* work in that way, of course. However, it does so only insofar as inflicting guilt for moral transgression is one way of punishing, and punishment is always *excessive*-- always more than any specific disorder produced by our "bad" acts or intentions. To put it bluntly, the purpose of the superego is to visit this excess upon us. That's why, in the version of its function that I discussed under the "fundamental fantasy" we could equate its structural operation with the moral catastrophe of the "Fall" in Christian Theology – that is, with an *infinite* guilt, a guilt

against which no purely human action could be a sufficient response. The "contract" of the fantasy guarantees the perpetual punishment of humanity (even while it offers the distant promise of God's redemption) in return for a stable reality.

It is the ongoing nature of this torture, this excessiveness of its infliction rather than any particular change in human behavior, that is the superego's end. When Lacan translates this superego function as "*jouissance*" ("enjoyment") he intends precisely such excessiveness, since, as Žižek points out, the overtones of the French term (which suggests sexual orgasm, among other things!) point toward precisely what cannot be placed in any economy of pleasures and pains. (Žižek 2006c 79-80) *Jouissance* marks precisely that realm of excessive pleasure that we would choose even beyond any rational interest, what is "to die for."

In other words, the superego can be taken to be excess itself; because of this, its action (rather than any result of it) can be taken to capture the gap in totality produced by the shadow of the subject knowing it. Which is just to suggest that there exists a second possible way of dealing with the anxiety of the subject's stain on being, an alternative to the path of guilt and exclusion that we found to underwrite the traditional fundamental fantasy. What if the stability of reality could be won by annexing to a "lifeless" field of representation, the immanent organic unfolding of superego activity? What if, to quote Žižek, individuals were sometimes to "push to directly enact the 'loss'—the gap, cut, distance—itsself"? (2006a 117) Such an "enactment" would promise another way to close the gap that otherwise yawns in the middle of being, would promise an alternative route to the constitution of reality.

Following Lacan in this, Žižek names such a path to the constitution of reality "perverse" or, in its transformed relationship to language, "fetishistic." Using either term (or combining both as I will do below), the point is to indicate a psychoanalytic concept far from any moralistic overtones, one "not defined by the content of what (the pervert) is doing." (Žižek 2006c 116) Rather, perversion names what *precedes* any such action, an initial sacrifice of subjectivity, a transformation of consciousness into an element capable of filling the gap produced by consciousness. As Lacan himself puts it, in perversion "the subject determines himself as an object." (Lacan 1978/62 185)

Such a determination has two immediate consequences, consequences that, between them, explain why Lacan and Žižek associate such a subjective disposition with what we usually call "perversion." On the one hand, because of its sacrifice of subjectivity, the pervert assumes a "reality" without substantial gap or lack, a field appearing to it as peculiarly "whole" and yet, also, distanced – like, in fact, the virtual reality projected by a video game. Nothing can hurt the perverse subject, who acknowledges no point of connection to or vulnerability within its world.

On the other hand, this whole, this totality appears to have a direct, superego, "will" -- to merge with which becomes the pervert's principle. For this reason the "game-playing" of the perverse subject is chillingly a-moral: he/she simply follows the superego/Other's commands, assuming these, as the imperatives of reality itself, to need no justification.

For example, in *How to Read Lacan*, Žižek proposes this amorality as explanation for a particular kind of totalitarian violence, a violence in which the subject seems to absolve himself of all responsibility. To the extent that I, as Stalinist or Nazi (Žižek mentions the Eichmann who fascinates Hannah Arendt here), take the position of "instrument of the Big Other's will," "it is not my responsibility; it is not really me who is doing it. I am merely an instrument of the higher Historical Necessity. The obscene enjoyment of this situation is generated by the fact that I conceive of myself as *exculpated for what I am doing*. I am able to inflict pain on others with the full awareness that I am not responsible for it, that I merely fulfill the Other's Will." (Žižek 2006c, 105)

In his *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1710), GWF Leibniz compares the universe to the sum of all possible pictorial perspectives on a single town. Just such an immanent or formal totalization, totalization without a point outside itself to stabilize it, increasingly defines the social construction of reality itself in the years since the 17th-Century. Above, I noted that the pervert reads the world he faces as a field of representation, complete by definition, and thus interprets "what's missing" within representation to be only "life" or "drive." This means, of course, not only that the perverse construction tends to produce the conditions of modernity, but also that modern reality reinforces the perverse/fetishistic type -- since, to the extent we are socialized through modern science, we tend to discover reality's "lack" in a drive or dynamism missing from an otherwise complete universe. One could read much of the most important post-Lacanian critical theory – the theory of Žižek, Badiou and others – as articulating the result of this modern/post-modern circle of modern science and perverse fetishism. Certainly, Žižek's own work since 1989 has been a persistent investigation of different aspects of such a knot. Whether the topic is contemporary cynicism as ideology (*The Sublime Object of Ideology*), the emergence of a "post-oedipal" subject-type (*The Ticklish Subject*) or the post-modern academy's preference for pseudo-revolution (*The Puppet and the Dwarf, Revolution at the Gates*), Žižek's consistent project is to relate such phenomena to the homogeneous representational field projected by modern science and capitalism. Thus, to give perhaps the most famous example, Žižek's critique of post-modern and post-structuralist valorizations of "social construction" notes the implicitly conservative gesture at work in such theories, a gesture that involves, precisely, immanent totalization in its suggestion of a neutral grid of perspectives or of determining

characteristics (the famous quadruple of "race, class, gender and sexual identity"). (See, Žižek 1999, 216-217)

The point here is that the ideology of scientism – what Johnston simply dismisses as a renewed "religion" – belongs inseparably with the basic possibilities of the perverse/fetishistic position. And *that* allows us to raise the question that Johnston fails to ask, namely the one about the *unconscious* structure allowing the pervert's immanent totalization of reality. If reality can only be stabilized at the price of a primally repressed fantasy, what form of fantasy characterizes perversion? In other words, we can inquire into the structure of the "contract" alternative to the traditional fundamental fantasy, the one underlying the perverse/ fetishistic formation of modern reality.

Interestingly, Žižek several times references what he calls "the ultimate perverse fantasy," which he also, in an essay on the Wachowski's brother's first *Matrix* film, names "the very fundamental fantasy that sustains our being today" – that is, a kind of perfect reverse-side of the *conscious* fantasy of the pervert of merging into the dynamic power of super-ego *jouissance*. (Žižek 2006b, 313) If the *reality* of our world is, like that of *The Matrix*, a kind of representational system (in this case, projected by a network of computers), and if our "dream," given such a situation is to latch on to the hidden mastery of this world in the fashion of "the One" foretold in the film and embodied by *The Matrix's* protagonist, Neo, then the unconscious element of this contract is revealed in *The Matrix's* underlying conceit: beneath the appearance of everyday life is the world of the computers who, for their own enjoyment, maintain persons as batteries immersed in amniotic fluid. Having accepted the challenge to "go down the rabbit hole" and face what lies beneath the virtual projection he has always lived, Neo awakens to find himself cradled in a "field" of such adult embryos tended by monstrous, insect-like machines.

And, while of course the idea of a "real reality" underlying our own is ideological nonsense, it is this image, that, so Žižek, lets us glimpse the *other side* of the perverse formation, the fantasmatic price we constantly pay for a "society of enjoyment." Today we are (perhaps) less tortured by moral guilt than previous generations have been, but in conscience's stead we bear a kind of standing horror, an unaddressable fear that our "merging" with the Other is only a cover for our consumption by it. We bear a fundamental fantasy in which, "we are ultimately instruments of the Other's *jouissance*, sucked out of our life-substance like batteries." (Žižek 2002, 15)

From the perverse standpoint, the price for a stable reality is not so much moral exclusion as it is a kind of lurking horror, a monstrous, paranoid sense of threat. We are sure that things are about to fall apart, or, more precisely, things will no doubt go against us in some

unpredictable and coordinated way. And we, facing this threat, are already exhausted, depleted, without reserves: that's the sense with which the pervert constantly lives. This inner, fatalistic certainty, this "sublime" sense of pending doom, is just the sign that our reality rests upon another pact, another fantasm than the moralistic one constructing traditional symbolic reality.

Armed with this account of the perverse fundamental fantasy, we at last can leave behind the arid territory of "religion" and address the question of psychoanalytic atheism at the level it demands – a level *heterogeneous* to all pro- or anti-religious polemic. We can see that the important issue here is how to challenge the fixity of reality in a way that doesn't simply reproduce it in its perverse form. How to negotiate the Scylla of transcendence and the Charybdis of immanent totality? That's ultimately the challenge Freudian/Lacanian thought leaves for us. In a passage from *The Parallax View* in which he equates the pervert's embrace of superego excess with Lacanian "demand," Žižek puts this as follows:

. . . What one needs is *a demand no longer addressed to the Other*. Both desire and demand rely on the Other – either a full (omnipotent) Other of demand or a "castrated" Other of the Law; the task, therefore, is fully to assume the *non-existence* of the Other – even and also of the *dead* Other. (Žižek 2006b, 296)

While Žižek himself has oscillated between *different* ways of theorizing such a demand no longer addressed to the Other, to reality itself in its wholeness, his work is consistent in its support of such a project.¹⁵ It is this imperative, and not the diversionary religious "culture-wars" waged by either Johnston or Žižek himself that, so I would assert, marks the legitimate challenge set by today's psychoanalysis.

¹"What psychoanalysis calls 'fantasy' is the endeavor to close this gap by (mis)perceiving the pre-ontological Real as simply another, 'more fundamental', level of reality -- fantasy projects on to the pre-ontological Real the form of constituted reality (as in the Christian notion of another, suprasensible reality)." (Žižek 1999, 57)

² In a passage from *The Fragile Absolute*, Žižek articulates this point in relationship to sexual fantasy: "one should not" Žižek writes, "confound this 'primordially repressed' myth ('fundamental fantasy') with the multitude of inconsistent daydreams that always accompany our symbolic commitments, allowing us to endure them." In order to make this distinction, he then elaborates on two predominant forms of (heterosexual) fantasy today -- Peter Hoeg's idea, from *The Woman and the Ape*, "of a woman who wants a strong animal partner, a potent 'beast', not a hysterical impotent weakling" and the notion of the "cybernetic" lover from male fantasy, the "perfectly programmed 'doll' who fulfils all his wishes, not a living being." The point of this excursion into gendered sexual fantasy is that, in this context, the level of the *fundamental fantasy* could be metaphorized through "the unbearable ideal couple of a male ape copulating with a female cyborg, the fantasmatic support of the 'normal couple of man and woman copulating.'" That is, the fundamental fantasy is the fantasy of an Other in both senses of the genitive: it is the fantasmatic projection of an Other whose perspective includes all possible perspectives (in this case, the female and the male of the couple). On the other hand, reality is conceived (by us) as the Other's viewpoint or fantasy. Žižek 2000, 65-6.

³Freud traces to this affect a series of repressed representations of the subject -- first, the opening and closing of the window separating the dreamer from the tree; then the desire for copulation with the father and the mother (ie., to return to her womb) and finally, in as the membrane or "caul" with which he was apparently born. See, Freud 1917/1974.

⁴See, Santner 2000 and Žižek 2003, 128-9.

⁵The *locus classicus* for such an argument is *The Future of an Illusion*, where he explicitly identifies the alternative "religion" of psychoanalysis. (See, Freud 1927/74, 46-49)

⁶ Perhaps the most famous site for Lacan's challenge to Freud regarding religion is his 1974, "The Triumph of Religion," printed in Lacan 2005/1974.

⁷See the excellent historical account of various Enlightenment "materialisms" in "Conflicted Matter." (Johnston 2008, 169-174)

⁸That, for Johnston this comes out to an embrace of the most radical possibilities of science itself, that it leads to a radically materialist philosophy of science, one that takes the Enlightenment beyond itself, is important but need not detain us here. For more, see *Žižek's Ontology*. (Johnston 2008a)

⁹Žižek uses the phrase in a joint appearance with Thomas Altizer at the 2009 annual meeting of the *American Academy of Religion* in Montreal. See, Žižek 2009.

¹⁰ "Holy Spirit" designates a new collective held together not by a Master-Signifier, but by fidelity to a Cause, by the effort to draw a new line of separation that runs "beyond Good and Evil," that is to say, that runs across and suspends the distinctions of the existing social body. The key dimension of Paul's gesture is thus his break with any form of communitarianism: his universe is no longer that of the multitude of groups that want to "find their voice," and assert their particular identity but that of a fighting collective grounded in the reference to an unconditional universalism." (Žižek 2003, 130)

¹¹For an example of this sympathy with fundamentalism see the introduction to *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (Žižek 2003) or the discussion in *The Parallax View* (Žižek 2006b, 283-284).

¹²In the final chapter of *How to Read Lacan*, Žižek calls attention to this task, noting the essential overlap between today's liberal cynics and their fundamentalist opponents: "Both liberal-sceptical cynics and fundamentalists share a basic underlying feature: the loss of the ability to believe, in the proper sense of that term. What is unthinkable for them is the groundless decision that installs all authentic beliefs, a decision that cannot be based on a chain of reasonings, on positive knowledge." (Žižek 2006c 117)

¹³See my article, "Polemical Ambivalence: Modernity and Utopia in Žižek's *The Puppet and the Dwarf*." (2007).

¹⁴It is vital to see this "knowing better" as precisely the form that Žižek himself takes to be endemic to the fetishistic/perverse construction of reality ("I know very well that. . . but, nevertheless, . . .") In other words, it is vital to see Žižek's error here as a kind of perversity rather than simply a traditional "unconscious" structure.

¹⁵One such inconsistency concerns the "master signifier," a signifier that, within the structure of the traditional fantasy, locates the presence of the Other for the subject. Žižek vacillates about whether the revolutionary simply *replaces the master signifier* (See Žižek 2006b 307-8), or whether, alternatively, as Žižek proposes in "Objet a in Social Links" (Žižek 2006a) the key is to disrupt the very function of such a signifier. Of perhaps even more concern is Žižek's failure to establish a consistent way of speaking of the fundamental fantasy itself. At times, he seems to indicate that a perverse social link is "post-fantasmatic", while at other times (see the text I quoted from Žižek's essay on *The Matrix*) he suggests the existence of a "perverse fantasy." I discuss this latter impasse at more length in my book, *Žižek and Heidegger: the Question Concerning Techno-Capitalism* (Brockleman 2008 60-65).

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