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## **Brahman and the Signifier (W)hole Being: The Subject of (Non-)Duality**

John J. Connolly, University of Pittsburgh, School of  
Medicine

The title of this essay enunciates tension between polar characterizations of the subject as (1) a fullness of being and as (2) a lack of being. The traditional Indian philosophy of Advaita Vedanta exemplifies the doctrine of non-duality and asserts the self as plenum. This ancient teaching posits that the apparent subject-object distinction predicating all experience dissolves when proper knowledge of ultimate reality is attained—that is, knowledge of the oneness of Being as the unconditioned Absolute (Brahman). Meanwhile an astonishing wealth of contemporary philosophy, particularly continental philosophy, suggests a contesting view of subject as void: Kant's noumenal self as *Ding und sich*, Heidegger's *Dasein* as *Lichtung*, Sartre's *pour-soi-en-soi*, Derrida's *différance*, Merleau-Ponty's *negintuition*, and Lacan's *divided subject* portray, each in their own way, subjectivity as a lack or hole in being. In examining this contrast, Žižek will prove to be helpful in illuminating the intricacy of both philosophical positions.

Are we plenums or are we vacuums? This modern contrast of view-points enriches an understanding of how reason breaks down when faced with what is immediate, over-proximate, and consequently, primordially inaccessible in human experience. This essay examines how a

critical analysis of a non-dual or monistic explanation of subjectivity and consciousness elucidates the abstract element implicit in perceptual-cognitive systems. The fundamental tenets of Advaita Vedanta exemplify how the linguistic signifier functions in thought's native impulse towards totality, unity, and identity. Finally, this essay demonstrates the incoherence of the notion of complete/perfect knowledge and the impossibility of ever directly experiencing whole Being or absolute oneness.

In modern Western philosophy, the 'subject of duality' is a term associated with Cartesian psycho-physical dualism, which characterizes the conscious subject as dematerialized spiritual substance that is categorically distinct from the material substance of the external physical world. This subject is characterized as empty insofar as all *materiality lies* outside it. In brief, the subject of thought is posited as an immaterial thinking substance existing beyond all sensible content. It is this categorical difference between thought (*res cogitans*) and physical objects (*res extensa*) that establishes a fundamental ontological gap.

Advaita Vedantin analysis of experience also invokes a gap of distinction between self and non-self when it negatively characterizes the subject through the employment of the Sanskrit phrase "*neti neti*"— meaning "[I am] not this, [and] not this". In other words, when a subject experiences something as Other, it at once affirms itself as *not* being that Other. This negative relation applies to objects in the widest sense of the term that includes not only the perceptual world of material objects but also to a menagerie of immaterial intentional objects such as thoughts, beliefs, ideas, moods, pains, etc. Atman's separateness from all determinate objects of experience is secured as subjectivity assumes the position of interstitial division that prevents determinate things from merging into amorphous primordial union (identity in *indifference*). This proposition further suggests that in the absence of any distinction between subject and object, all relation must collapse and blind immediacy prevail. For Lacan (1981: 218) and Žižek (2000: 374), this is the locus of *aphanisis*, the disappearing subject. Here the subject is characterized not only as disappearing behind its representative representation, as the subject of the enunciation (real subject) disappears behind the enunciated content, but also as the loss of the conscious subject itself. The point of the opposition between thinking and being is expressed when Lacan (1966) twists the Cartesian "I think therefore I am" into "I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think." The loss of consciousness is here situated at the limen of unconscious being. Advaita Vedanta, however, teaches that consciousness remains within such immediate relations. This essay reveals how Advaita Vedanta ultimately

relies on the perdurable nature of the signifier and thereby exposes its doctrine to a critical discourse regarding the legerdemain of its metaphysics.

Throughout this essay, the Advaita Vedantin name for the unconditioned Absolute, 'Brahman', is used interchangeably with the more technical term 'subject of *non*-duality'. These terms are strictly homologous in that both acknowledge the existence of a primordial ground from which both the subject of duality and the objects of plurality are subsequently figured and distinguished. The term Atman, however, has two distinct uses. For the sake of precision, this essay makes explicit the following two definitions: 'Atman-1' refers to the subject of non-duality insofar as Atman is considered in its supreme identity with Brahman, that is, as one without a second. 'Atman-2' refers to the subject of duality *only* insofar as Atman is considered in the negative terms of its ideal aloofness from, and constant witness to, the external welter of changing worldly relations. 'Atman-1' thus signifies the non-relational immediacy of identity (Atman *is* Brahman); 'Atman-2', in contrast, depends implicitly upon a posited world to which Atman negatively relates as not being it.

In modern philosophical argot, the two stipulated uses of the term Atman contrast non-intentional and intentional models of consciousness. The subject of duality posits an intentional model of consciousness insofar as it claims that all consciousness is necessarily a *consciousness-of* something. Advaita Vedanta, however, insists that all intentional consciousness (Atman-2) ultimately depends upon a more primordial non-intentional consciousness (Atman-1). Advaita Vedanta claims that Atman, considered in-itself, as one without a second (Atman *is* Brahman), does not require an object in order to be what it is, namely, conscious awareness.

According to Advaita Vedanta, I experience duality insofar as both knowledge of Otherness and ignorance of oneness prevail. From the Brahmanic perspective of absolute knowledge (*Brahmavidya*), the apparent subject of duality is not the true or ultimate subject. Advaita Vedanta proposes a way (*pramana*) of seeing through this factitious duality and into the ultimate totality (unity) of absolute reality. The proposition 'Atman *is* Brahman' asserts that somehow the intentional individual conscious subject is, in the highest reality (*ens realissimum*), the universal non-intentional subject of non-duality (Brahman). When the nature of individual consciousness is examined thoroughly, as Advaita Vedanta advises, the *true* subject of duality (Atman-1) and the subject of non-duality (Brahman) are seen to not only share consciousness

as one *essential nature*, but, more importantly, are seen to be a single subject, identical with the totality of conscious Being.

Advaita Vedanta maintains that Atman-1 (non-dual consciousness-in-itself) is ontologically privileged and that intentionality, 'consciousness-of', is merely derivative. There are problems, however, in asserting that a single non-intentional consciousness serves as the unique and originary substrate for all experience. First, consciousness in-itself is better understood as a hypostatized concept that has universal application in its abstract independence in thought but has no real existence in itself independent of particular conscious acts. And second, even if one accepts the hypothetical possibility of consciousness in-itself without object, attributing actual awareness to it remains either problematic or entirely arbitrary. This essay demonstrates how pure consciousness, when taken seriously, is paradoxically unconscious and, insofar as it stands in immediate relation to itself as one without a second, it invites belief that consciousness is the supreme nidus of reality that remains the non-experienced ground of apprehension. At this level of analysis, however, the being of consciousness is not the consciousness of being; it is the consciousness of nothing, which is the nothing of consciousness, or nothing itself. This 'consciousness without Otherness' is safe from analysis; it remains beyond both experience and rational scrutiny and is arbitrarily posited as the non-experienced root of all experience.

When non-intentional consciousness (i.e., consciousness in-itself without object) is ontologically privileged, pure consciousness is posited as primordially present at the heart of every conscious act directed toward some supplemental object *of* awareness. This perspective allows Nikhilananda (1975: vol. 1, 292), in the following illustrations, to portray Brahman as the pure conscious kernel at the core of all individual experience: "[Brahman], the all-pervading and omniscient Lord, knows all collectively and understands everything individually." Furthermore (1975: vol. 2, 97), "Whenever Brahman wants to hear or see, touch or feel, He does so spontaneously, using the organs of living beings."

What is happening in these mythopoeic illustrations? In using the category of totality to form a class unity of conscious experience and then in ascribing consciousness to that unity of sameness, these illustrations commit the error of reasoning (paralogism) Kant (365) calls "the subreption of the hypostatized consciousness". In order to prevent this mistake, one must clearly see that the signified totality named in 'all conscious experience' is a conceptual unity (*ens rationis*) that exists only in thought. It is important to realize that a signified unity does not

imply any real connectedness or continuousness between aggregate instances united in the general concept. The category that groups together all conscious acts is not itself conscious. In other words, what belongs to each singly does not belong to the group as a whole. A flock of geese does not have two wings and one bill. William James (1891: vol. 1, 160) illustrates this point when he writes, "Take a sentence of a dozen words, take twelve men, and to each one word. Then stand the men in a row or jam them in a bunch, and let each think of his word as intently as he will; nowhere will there be a consciousness of the whole sentence." The general term, 'consciousness', does not name an actual cosmic individual totality (e.g., Brahman, Virat as the World Soul). This manner of (mis)understanding, according to Kant (282), is based upon a transcendental amphiboly, which confounds an object of pure understanding (signified unity) with an actual thing of appearance.

According to this criticism, Advaita Vedanta confuses the conceptual identification of the same 'thing'—by which is meant a single essential nature universally distributed and multiply counted in a plurality of entities—with a perceptual identity, which recognizes or counts a single thing as it exists through a multiplicity of circumstances. A particular gold ring has a provenance; it may be passed down from generation to generation; it is a single object counted as the same throughout changing historical circumstances. Gold, however, can establish no such provenance; it refers to a single categorical nature; its abstract singularity is distributable and counted in a plurality of perceptual objects. It is true that a gold chain and a gold necklace are made of the *same* precious metal, but only at the level of abstract quality. If by 'the same metal' we mean the same perceptible portion, concrete quantum or (unit) of gold, then these items cannot coexist. The single portion can only serially change form. In the same manner, Jack and Jill are both conscious but they are not the same conscious being. Jack's consciousness is not numerically identical with Jill's consciousness, differing only in contingent content, intentional object, or spatial circumstance. Jack and Jill, rather, share a single abstract nature insofar as they each participate in numerical identity at the abstract register of a single unifying category (viz., 'consciousness'). In his discussion of sets, Schaaf (1960: 11) writes, "The unity lies entirely in the concept and not in the things themselves." Quine (in Strawson 1963: 155) adds that the singular term purports to name one and only one object, while the general term does not purport to name at all, though it may 'be true of' each of many things.<sup>1</sup> Following Lacan, Žižek (2012: 796) characterizes this as "the mark of the unary feature *—la trait unaire—* to which an object is reduced to its symbolic registration."

Advaita Vedanta's Upanishadic illustrations often emphasize one of two possible signified unities that are the product of an abstract subject—>object schema. They claim, for instance, that perceptual objects are fungibles; contingently changing before a single unchanging witnessing consciousness. When, however, one considers, or counts, the object-world as a single indicated/signified unity, then, only *one* object categorically exists, namely the world. The principled basis for counting a worldly diversity as one signified unity is clearly stated by the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan (1997: unpaginated): "In my day we used to teach children that they must not add, for instance, microphones with dictionaries or as Lewis Carroll says, cabbages with kings. The sameness is [however] not in things but in the *mark* which makes it possible to add things with no consideration as to their differences. The mark has the effect of rubbing out the difference...." In other words, whether one speaks of a nominally conscious animalcule, the responsive tropisms of plants, or an omniscient God; or whether one speaks of a sensible instance of searing pain or an intellectual awareness of the Pythagorean theorem, the assimilative term 'consciousness' serves as a signifier that marks the site of indifference as it counts each contingent instance as the same in that they are instances of consciousness. A general concept, once abstracted from particular instances, is applied to each case viewed under the concept as if each case counted as *nothing but* an identical instance of the general concept.<sup>ii</sup>

At an abstract schematic register of signified unities (S—>O) there is only one subject (consciousness) just as there is only one object (the world). At the register of actual particulars, there are many objects as well as many conscious subjects and a multiplicity of diverse conscious acts. The doctrine of Advaita Vedanta mixes registers in the following manner: objects are perceptually counted in their fungible particularity while the categorical, signified, or schematic sense of the term 'consciousness' is mistaken for one thing that actually exists unchanged.

The Katha Upanishad (Nikhilananda 1997: vol. 1, 165) states, "What is here, the same is there, and what is there, the same is here." In suggesting that the totality of Being is analogous to spatial unity, Advaita Vedanta mischaracterizes what are actually two logical unities brought about through signification ('I' and 'not-I'). Whereas *neti neti* ([I am] not this, not this...) here represents a logical exercise of this negation, *tattvamasi* ('that thou art') is an assertion of spatial unity. Many illustrations found in the Upanishads dance between logical and spatio-perceptual distinctions, which make these depictions both compelling and suspect.

The Upanishads (Nikhilananada 1979: vol. 4, 312), for example, employ a spatial simile when it claims that the apparent subject of duality exists like a river situated in union within an ocean. “These Rivers, my dear,” says the Chhandogya Upanishad, “flow—the eastern toward the east, and the western toward the west. They arise from the sea and flow into the sea. Just as these rivers, while they are in the sea, do not know: ‘I am this river’ or ‘I am that river’.” Advaita Vedanta teaches that, prior to *apparent* separation, Atman exists like a river situated in immediate local union with the ocean of Being (Atman/Brahman).

The logic of immediacy, in contradistinction to the perceptual analogy of local union, is understood temporally, that is, in terms of a relation to something always-already past—and this past was never present. The subject of duality’s relation to immediacy is like the river’s relation to the ocean in this respect: predication of originary union is a retroactive judgment—a reflective determination following the river’s factual existence. Reflection is necessary, no matter how brief or intermittent, in order to precipitate the distinction of difference and to produce a determinate act of conscious experience. Žižek (2000: 290) claims that, “consciousness is always-already self-consciousness.” The reflective act produces temporal separation between the trace of sensation and its cognitive registration. Advaita Vedanta disputes this point and maintains that, although there is no *individual* consciousness prior to reflection, consciousness nevertheless pre-exist its acts. Advaita Vedanta maintains that the separation that gives rise to individual conscious experience is unreal and never actually occurs. When one looks deeply enough, the *apparent* individual subject of duality (Atman-2) is actually the absolute subject of non-duality (Brahman). Here Advaita Vedanta shifts the illustrative focus from a spatio-perceptual depiction of local unity (like that with thou or river with ocean) to the logical unity of signification. At this point, the analogous distinction between river and ocean is considered merely superimposed upon the unique nature of water, which is universally, categorically, everywhere, always the same. The essence or univocal nature of consciousness, like that of water, is indifferent to the distinction of all individuating differences. Notice how the illustration under discussion shifts registers. The discourse begins with the local depiction of union (river within ocean) before it jumps registers and characterizes these two perceptual objects as two ideal unities of signification that find a shared union in the broader more abstract unity expressed in the consolidating term ‘water’. The original local feature that perceptually distinguished river from ocean is supplanted with a logical distinction that gets rubbed out or sublated in the higher abstract signified unity (‘water’).

Universal pure consciousness is an abstraction signifying a unity that exists only in thought. Pure consciousness in itself cannot be the essence of the separated subject because each conscious act is bound, joined in a negative relation (*netti netti*) to its intentional object. The only consciousness that is not bound in this way is the isolated abstract idea. Similarly, tangible water is always spatially determinate, limited, factually bound and circumscribed by its container, whether riverbank, ocean shore, surface of the earth, drinking glass, etc. The only water that is not spatially limited in this way is the abstract idea of water, which is never drunk, swum, or fished.

This essay argues that the conscious subject of duality is a fleeting subject that does not pre-exist the conscious act; it is constituted *ex post facto*. The subject reflectively discovers itself as always-already there. The essential point here is as important to notice, as it is obscure and difficult to grasp, viz, that a conscious act is impossible in the immediate relation. The immediacy, which comes to light in a conscious act, comes to light as lost; it only exists, *vis a tergo*, for an emergent reflecting subject. In other words, the subject 'comes to be' correlative to the disappearance of blind immediacy, which hypothetically characterizes pre-ontological non-duality. This is a peculiar disappearance because it represents the evanishment of that which is never actually present; immediacy only appears elusively in retrospect as something missed. In the words of Hegel (1989: 802), "It only comes to be through being left behind."

An important corollary of all this is that the possibility of a complete and authentic transparent self-presence is a perspective illusion. The residue of immediacy clings to reflection that cannot catch itself in the act. As soon as one catches a thought, one has already moved from that thought to another thought. In *Descartes' Conversation with Burman*, Burman (Curley 1978: 183) says, "But how can the mind be conscious, since being conscious is thinking? When you think that you are conscious you already pass to another thought, and so no longer think about what you were thinking about before; so you are not conscious that you are thinking, but that you have been thinking." Lacan (1961: 6) also cites Brentano's agreement with St. Thomas Aquinas in this matter. Lacan notes, "Being cannot be grasped as thought except in an alternating fashion. It is in a succession of alternating moments that he thinks, that his memory appropriates its thinking reality without this thinking being at any moment able to join up with itself in its own certainty." This obscure aspect of experience announces, *as it were*, an excessive proximity of the subject to itself, making the subject purblind to itself and marking the limiting threshold between unconscious being and knowing consciousness.



The impasse of immediacy is an epistemological blind spot that structurally resists illumination and produces a perspective void at the core of being. From this perspective, the evacuation of being is a function of representative thought that drives a divisive wedge between being and knowing. Because there is no conscious subject in any immediate relation, the subject must grasp itself as mediated, as other, in eccentric representation. This is why both Sartre (1978: 51, 52) and Heidegger (1962: 37) call Man “a being of distances” and describe human reality as “remote from itself.” The crucial issue here is that what lies closest to the singularity of the subject is the very thing least known. This theme is emphasized in Heidegger’s early philosophy. In *Being and Time*, he writes (37), “*Dasein* is ontically [by immediate fact] ‘closest’ to itself and ontologically [by reflective theory] farthest.” In other words, Being, which is closest to the subject, so immanent as to be it, is epistemologically farthest away. When Žižek (2012: 646) writes, “The epistemological distortion of our access to reality is the result of our inclusion in, not our distance from it”, he is clearly making the same point as Sartre and Heidegger.

The actual existence of pure being or pure consciousness implies the collapse or disappearance (*aphanisis*) of the subject of duality into the theoretical non-dual realm of blind immediacy. The subject of duality, precipitated through specific conscious acts, is always limited, partial, and never total. The place from which the subject reflects remains a locus that is not contained in the reflection itself. Again, what eludes consciousness is its own act. Perhaps, it may be thought, if the knowing subject stood entirely within the known representation then the reflection would be complete. This coincidence is impossible, however, because a total reflection entails the complete identity of knowing and being. Knowledge, however, requires a gap—a subject—that is nothing other than the movement away from immediacy. The erroneous belief that a total reflection is possible is based upon experiences of partial reflection; it is rather like a snake that believes it can swallow its whole tail; the early assessment, “Things are going well so far,” is too optimistic. Žižek (2000: 28) writes, “There is a subject only insofar as there is some material stain/leftover that *resists* subjectivization, a surplus in which, precisely, the subject *cannot* recognize itself. In other words, the paradox of the subject is that it exists only through a ‘bone in the throat’ that forever prevents it (the subject) from achieving its full ontological identity.”

Sartre further declares how the promise of full ontological consistency appears as a perspective illusion to the fleeting subject of duality and how this illusion actually marks the

threshold of a subject's disappearance (*aphanisis*) as it approaches immediacy. He writes (1978: 297), "The very meaning of knowledge is what it is not and not what it is; for in order to know being such as it is, it would be necessary to be that being. But there is this "such as it is" [object/Otherness] only because I am not the being [object] which I know; and if I should become it, then the "such as it is" [as Otherness] would vanish and could no longer even be thought." Žižek (2000: 158) suggests, "What looks like an *epistemological limitation* of our capacity to grasp reality...is the positive *ontological condition* of reality itself. And interestingly enough, when one believes that consciousness actually exists independent of objects, intentional objects appear as obstacles, things that block the subject's access to the enlightenment of finding its "true self" and experiencing pure consciousness. The counterpart to this notion poses consciousness itself as the hindrance to experiencing oneness with the unity of nature/reality. For example, Zen Buddhism suggests the possibility of being (in) the pre-reflective moment as no-mind or no-self. Here Žižek (2006: 168) intones the hyperbole: "When we imagine the whole of reality, there is no longer any place for consciousness (and subjectivity)." In the former brand of enlightenment, an impasse is reached as the impossible nature of an objectless reality is examined. In the later case, the paradox of seeking a pre-reflective moment is itself the impasse. Both positions fail to realize that the thing portrayed as obstacle or hindrance to an ultimate realization of each respective goal, is precisely the very condition of the goals notional existence. The structure of the problem itself guarantees the unreachable goal and thereby constitutes its infinite task. Žižek (2006: 296) sees this clearly when he writes, "The true function of the explicit limitation is to sustain the illusion that, through transgressing it, we can attain the limitless."

Žižek endorses a Hegelian solution as he incorporates the structure of failure in his model of subjectivity. He writes (2012: 538), "The subject aims at representing itself, this representation fails, the subject is this failure of its own representation." Rather than asserting that some representative representation is the subject or the subject is the void left in the failed attempts of representation, the subject is portrayed as the very failure of representation itself. This subject is a self-relating negativity, a temporal flux flickering between the representation and the void of its failure. Here the infinite goal and the already accomplished coincide; the hindrance apparently blocking full realization becomes a necessary moment in its self-redeeming failure.

In summary, the intentional model of consciousness demands Otherness as a condition for the possibility of experience. It thereby precludes the possibility that a subject of non-duality (Brahman) is a knowing subject qua plenum in immediate relation to and eternally identical with itself. The assertion that the subject of non-duality (Brahman) is identical with pure consciousness appears incoherent. The existence of pure consciousness, without alloy of Otherness, is supremely difficult to fathom. As Kierkegaard (1968: 50) once quipped, "... [it is] at least as baffling as trying to depict an elf wearing a hat that makes him invisible."<sup>iii</sup> Kierkegaard's words wonderfully illustrate the nature of the issue once again resurrected when it is formulated on the basis of self-foiling propositions. For example, Derrida maintains the impossibility of being reflectively conscious of immediate perception. Dillon (1995: 109) explains, "all consciousness is consciousness of a re-presentation, and that which is re-presented can never have been present to consciousness, but presupposes repetition in its original path breaking or tracing. Every re-presentation, then, might be said to draw upon 'a kind of original past, a past which has never been present.'" Is the Advaita Vedantin proposal of pure consciousness, then, really any less intelligible than Derrida's notion of 'trace', which denies the possibility of presence? Is it any less intelligible than the nature of immediacy, which only appears as disappearance? Each proposition possesses a similar paradoxical or self-foiling quality. Kamuf (1991: xxxiv) writes, "If [Derrida's (1973: passim)] notion of trace seems difficult to grasp, it is precisely because it concerns that which disappears as soon as one tries to hold onto it." Does not Atman, as pure consciousness, elude the grasp of comprehension and intelligibility in a similar manner? Advaita Vedanta may have legitimate recourse to this rehabilitating rejoinder: the subject of non-duality can only be (mis)represented; it can never be presented in its brute immediacy. This means that any indirect or mediated experience of non-duality is, alas, not it. Since Advaita Vedanta subscribes to a non-intentional model of consciousness, it might be argued that any inability to appreciate whole being as a non-dual conscious subject is simply a prejudicial artifact of our intentional model of consciousness. In other words, perhaps the argument presented thus far does not preclude the possibility of the existence of a conscious subject of non-duality (Brahman), but rather merely suggests the impossibility of representing something that has no other. Perhaps, it may be argued, the conscious subject of non-duality remains possible, even when representing it is not.

A brief account of immediacy's relation to representation suggests how Advaita Vedanta arrives at its doctrinal conclusion and also indicates exactly where reason is led astray.

Representation can be thought of in terms of a spatial duality between the thing and its representative representation. However, this understanding can be considered fundamentally as a metaphor for the temporality of re-presentation. The return of the presentation announces a temporal duality between a past presentation and a re-cognized re-presentation. Advaita Vedanta dogmatically abolishes all forms of duality from Atman-1 (pure consciousness). This strongly suggests that as soon as Atman/Brahman is represented, it is mis-represented; it disappears behind the delusive veil of *maya*. Atman's disappearance thus coincides with any moment that would grasp it as appearance or representation and, therefore, represents a disappearance of that which never appears except through the vanishing virtue of *neti neti*—that is, through the negative judgment that acknowledges all determinate appearance as 'not it'.<sup>iv</sup> In this way, the immediacy of pure consciousness (Atman) remains a limit to thought because any representation implies mediation and, consequently, only signifies lost immediacy and the impossibility of immediate presentation.

Immediacy is impossible to directly comprehend; only its reconstruction is understood through the mediation of reflective thought. When Heidegger (1994: 72) notes, "As soon as we inquire at all into immediate knowledge and its essence, we are already beyond immediacy," he squarely faces the futility of any attempt at grasping immediacy. Merleau-Ponty (1968: 122) also underscores this issue when he writes in his posthumous work, *The Visible and the Invisible*: "A lost immediate, arduous to restore, will, if we do restore it, bear within itself the sediment of the critical procedures through which we will have found it anew; it will therefore not be the immediate. If it is to be the immediate, if it is Being itself, this means that there is no route from us to it and that it is inaccessible by principle." Immediacy thus marks the intransigent limit to experience that both founds and confounds reason with the certain loss of that which was never possessed in experience. Immediacy is nothing but identity, numerical identity (*numerica identitas*); something that coincides with itself, whatever it is, is itself only. This notion of identity is represented in the following equation:

$$A=A$$

The tautological relation emerges as a ghostly double representing numerical identity as a unary doppelganger occupying the same place at the same time; the same place at different times; different places at different times; but never occupying different places at the same time.

Curiously enough, the manner in which tautology is represented in an identity statement,  $A=A$ , suggests that the only way to represent identity is to misrepresent A as being in two places at once. However, when the temporal aspect is noticed, in the successive left to right reading of the equation, we understand that identity is an ideal function of time that annuls time and gives rise to the eternalizing universal.

Tautology guarantees analytic certainty when knowledge of self is formulated in the identity statement: 'I am I' (or, "*Whatever* I am, I am"). Such a logical assertion, however, does no more than make 'am' an abstract equal sign stand mutely between two unknown qualities (as Kierkegaard put it). As the ultimate formal abstraction, it does not extend knowledge. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (Nikhilananda 1977: vol. 1, 312) queries, "For where there is duality, as it were, then one sees another; but when only the Self is all this, how should one see another?" An act of consciousness is the movement away from immediacy that leaves supplemental Otherness in its wake. The subject discovers Otherness through diremptive temporal difference, which supports articulate predication within the order 'S is P', and where P represents the appending other of S as a treasure trove of distinct qualities and relations. For Žižek (2012: 383), "'person' stands for the substantial wealth of a Self, while the subject is this substance centered to the singular point of negative self-relating."

The subject can neither know itself in-itself nor experience itself as absolute subject (Atman-1), because any coincidence with itself implies the disappearance of knowledge and therefore the disappearance of both self and Other. In other words, where a thing coincides with itself, there no knowledge exists.<sup>v</sup> Being A and knowing A are thus incommensurables. In the case of the represented self, the ego is posited at the site of Otherness, at an ideal distance from any immanent relation to itself. In this way, the self avoids dissolution that the union of complete self-identity implies. The finite subject, or what Advaita Vedanta calls *jiva*, escapes the erasure implied in the immediate relation that makes a unity of 'that' and 'thou'. In other words, the subject evades evanishment through a spontaneous positing of a representative-self as an ideal unity. Žezik (1997: 42) suggests, "Subject and subjectivization are to be opposed: we 'subjectivize' ourselves when we recognize ourselves in a determinate content of the Master Signifier [that is, of Otherness], in the latter's fullness, whereas the subject is the void correlative to the empty signifier." Here the subject of duality is *what it is not* and is not *what it is*.

For the sake of a simple analogy, consider what happens when white light illumines a red object. Every color in the spectrum that constitutes white light is absorbed into the object

with the exception of red, which the object characteristically reflects. In a manner of speaking, the object is in actuality every color except the one it turns away and appears to be. This object might be described as being (for us) *what it is not* and as *not* being *what it is*. The separated subject (Atman-2), in an analogous manner, drops out of the existing order in the reflective act that discovers its representative representation. The cognized empirical self represents one representative unity that functionally summates an inexhaustible array of possible knowable structures and relations, which exclude the knower itself. According to this reasoning, the otiose subject (Atman-2) remains perceiver and aloof knower of only what is other or non-self.

Advaita Vedanta follows the furthering difference of *netti netti*, which at once serves as the logical alembic that distills the conceptual purity of a conscious subject and articulates an endless proliferation of predicates and relations. The subject (Atman-2), as quasi-empirical pure consciousness, only has being as an exception that lies beyond all positive predication; indeed it is the empty place for predication. As a pure or formal locus of predication, the empty subject serves as an exception to a circulating order of positive predicates wherein it finds its contingent representation. The empty subject, qua consciousness, is the constitutive exception that totalizes the predicate object world and constitutes Being as always full. Sartre (1978: 251) writes, "But this nothingness [that is, consciousness] is *not* anything except human reality apprehending itself as excluded from being and perpetually beyond being, in commerce with nothing...human reality is that which causes *there to be* nothing outside of being." Žižek (1996: 111) suggests, "Every Whole is founded on a constitutive exception: what we can never obtain is a complete set without exception. The very gesture of completion entails an exclusion." The most important thing to notice is that this exclusion has only fleeting existence as conscious act. The 'I' only appears to possess continuous being insofar as each conscious act always establishes an excluded subject represented by an empty signifier.

The fleeting subject of duality, as conscious act, is not a general nothingness but, rather, by the virtue of *neti neti*, is a determinate nothingness. Meleau-Ponty (53) refuses the welcoming abstraction that Advaita Vedanta finds intellectually inviting. He implicitly follows the doctrine of *neti neti* but, unlike Advaita Vedanta, he pursues it to its proper Kantian conclusion of finite transcendence when he writes, "As I have *this* before myself I am not an absolute nothing, I am a determined nothing: not this glass, nor this table, nor this room; my emptiness is not indefinite."<sup>vi</sup> The point is that each act is a fleeting determination, a passing act that only acquires ontological consistency with the supplemental fiction of a perdurable and continuous

transcendental ego, qua consciousness. When one follows Advaita Vedantin reasoning away from the concrete act and into the abstract idea, a hypostatization of a concept is enacted. For example, the Kena Upanishad (Nikhilananada (1977: vol. 1, 236) subtly hypostatizes consciousness as persistent 'knower' when it states, "The knower can know all such objects as are capable, by their very nature, of being known by him; but he can never know, in a like manner, his own self." Kant's (365) treatment of this issue only superficially agrees with the Kena. He writes, "I cannot know as an object that which I must presuppose in order to know any object." The distinction to notice here is that whereas Kant sees the fleeting subject as a logical necessity implied in each individual conscious act, Advaita Vedanta installs an ontological permanence.

The reflective act constitutes a fleeting, yet logically persistent, *locus* of predication that escapes predication. Atman-2 is considered in terms that posit a world to which Atman negatively relates as not being it. Insofar as it is negatively defined as an exception that escapes the metonymy of the object or predicate world, Atman-2 appears to hover unbound over a field of possible experience. The subject is thus an empty and meaningless suspension of being that discloses Being, not as meaningless, but as a plenitude of possible significance and intelligible reality. In this manner a subject is the site of inscription that frames the complex web of possible signification or predication. Žižek (2006: 44) underscores this view when he writes, "Man is a lack which, in order to fill itself in, recognizes itself as something." A subject is, for example, not Irish as soon as it represents itself as Irish. The negative notion of subjectivity, defined through *neti neti* ([I am] not this and not this...), is progressively purified as contingent predicates are individually and universally recognized as incidental to the logical subject. In representing (knowing) myself as 'Irish', I am Irish only insofar as I am not Irish at all. In the claim that I am Irish, I ideally consider myself as a pure subject carrying an external distinguishing mark, qua predicate—'Irish'. In other words, insofar as all terms are fungible contingent predicates symbolically circulating more or less freely, each is unnecessary and merely incidental to the pure nature of my posited ideal subjectivity. Here all predicates are contingent; because, at the level of pure subjectivity, one easily considers how state of affairs might have been otherwise. I, for instance, might have been born German, Italian, French, etc. An abstract, or intellectually purified, notion of the subject functions here as empty signifier or placeholder. Advaita Vedantin analysis thus, as in all presumption of soul, results in an empty term, a master signifier, an a priori definiendum escaping all explicit definition. This structure is

also rooted in a proposition Žižek mines from Kant's first Critique. Žižek (2006: 244) writes, "I can never know what I am in my noumenal dimension, as a "thing which thinks".<sup>vii</sup> After all, being born (or reincarnated) French does not disturb the ideal noumenal notion of my pure subjectivity any more than does being reincarnated as a grasshopper. In this way, the doctrine of reincarnation is language's subtle legerdemain that relies upon the ideal (formal) functioning of the empty master signifier. The empty signifier signifies ideal subjectivity that binds fleeting conscious acts and abstractly presents a perdurable conscious subject that appears to actually exist unchanged throughout time, an illusion, even if a very stubborn and necessary one for human reality.

The timelessness of logic is structural, and perceptual identity depends upon this structure. Identity relies upon the regulative universal constancy of the Concept through time.<sup>viii</sup> As ideal designator, the Concept is rigid, numerically identical. Lending its eternality to the schema of time, the Concept remains identically the same as it fixes the significance of experience with persistent particulars that hold together raw experience. Repetition, sameness, and identity are possible only through conceptual cognition, while perception offers only a successive flux of unrepeated impressions. The flux of sense and the formal nature of the Concept form a logical non-dialectical chiasmus between concrete empiricism and abstract formalism.

The most important feature of an abstract Concept is not that its universality may be derived from contingent particular content, but that a Concept frames a set that makes countable instances possible. In asserting that conscious acts are numerically distinct referents of a numerically identical universal concept, 'consciousness', sameness of kind and sameness of numerical identity are distinguished in one stroke. The *same* act of consciousness, qua *species* of noetic act, remains universally singular and unique, both as the *type* of act that individual minds perform and as *type* of act the same mind repeats. This is different than the numerically distinct aspect of individual operations that are in principle countable and *unrepeatable* designations of the self-identical universal. Reid (in Perry 1975: 117) writes, "The same kind or species of operation may be in different men, or in the same man at different times; but it is impossible that the same [numerically identical] individual operation should be in different men, or in the same man at different times." The subject's sense of self-identity is a signified unity derived from a species of cognitive or noetic acts, repeatable as kind (that is, as singular universal or type) but not repeatable as a numerically identical act. The signified unity



rides roughshod over individual difference and makes a class unity of instances, irrespective of degree of perfection—for instance: the rudimentary consciousness of an amoeba shares its sameness with the consciousness of an omniscient God. Žižek (2000: 370) writes, “[T]he Master-Signifier...is this kind of empty signifier which stands for the impossible fullness of meaning...” The master signifier structurally relies upon its empty universalizing function more than it relies on any particular positive content that a community might agree upon. Terms such as ‘truth’, ‘democracy’, ‘human rights’, ‘God’, ‘love’, etc., are revealed as master signifiers in that they remain mysteriously empty in their indefiniteness and yet forcefully function in ideological discourse as absolutely positively full.

The important thing to notice in the following scriptural examples is how ‘consciousness’, qua master signifier, remains emptied of meaning and yet formally functions at a level beyond meaningful content: Nikhilananda writes (1975: vol. 3, 74), “When—as in deep sleep or profound meditation—the Atman apparently does not see, nevertheless It is seeing, since for the Seer, who is imperishable, there is no cessation of seeing. There exists, however, no second thing besides this Seer, nothing distinct from It for It to see.” The proposition that ‘a seer’ does not require an object in order to see, represents an abstraction beyond all content and abuses the notion of ‘seeing’ by stripping away the ordinary use and significance of the term that binds a seer to an object seen. Consequently, every meaningful distinction between ‘seeing’ and ‘not-seeing’ is lost. Nikhilananda further writes (1975: vol. 3, 276), “The absence of consciousness is due to the realization of oneness. In deep sleep there is an absence of *specific* consciousness. It is not that the self in deep sleep is unconscious; for *it is consciousness itself*.” [emphasis mine] These examples show how a term, namely ‘consciousness’, is used as a pure (empty) signifier. It is pure in the sense of being purely formal. Consciousness that is not conscious of anything is merely a ghostly shell; no more than a token that operates within an ideally structured economy of symbolic order. Žižek (1997: 43) writes,

The transition from the Real to the symbolic order in which the network of signifiers is correlated to the field of meaning, can only take place by means of a paradoxical ‘pure’ signifier, a signifier without signified: in order for the field of meaning to emerge, i.e. in order for the series of signifiers to signify something (to have determinate meaning”, there must be a signifier (a ‘something’ which stands for ‘nothing’, a signifying element whose very presence stands for the absence of meaning (or rather, for absence *tout court*). This ‘nothing’ is the

Subject itself, the subject qua \$ (barred Subject), the empty set, the void which emerges as...I deprive myself of substantial content.

When a thing is stipulated as being only what it is, reason serves as a vehicle that takes the understanding for a tautological ride. The proposition that asserts the immediate identity of Atman with conscious subjectivity, strips the term 'consciousness' of its typical meaning while the token of a pure signifier (consciousness aware of nothing and belonging to nobody) formally operates in defiance of ordinary usage. This is why 'consciousness without intentional object' must be considered a formal abstraction wrought through signification. When Advaita Vedanta asserts the analytic identity of subject (Atman) with consciousness, it fixedly specifies awareness in every use of the term 'subject' and rejects the possibility that the conscious subject flickers in and out of existence correlative to instances of a logical function. In common discourse 'subject' actually plays both external (physical) and internal (mental) denotative sides of the fence. The meaning of the term 'subject' is naturally bandied back and forth like a shuttlecock between two battledores of internal and external reference. Thanks to the signifier, the empty ideal subject remains numerically singular while it is counted twice, once as physical object and once more as conscious/thinking subject. Atman, qua the one *true* conscious subject, is treated as a unit that is never counted more than once in Vedantin philosophy. An example of how the subject is only ever counted once is illustrated in a poem to Ramanatha (Shiva) written by the 10th century Indian saint, Devara Dasimayya (1973: 110). Clearly, ideality is here mistaken for an actual existent third term that singularly mediates the other two.

If they see breast and long hair coming they call it woman,  
If beard and whiskers they call it man:  
But look, the Self that hovers in between is neither man nor woman.

Universals, numbers, signifiers, all belong to Plato's eternal empyrean, existing metaphorically above and beyond the flux of the concrete sensible and the imaginable world. While eternity remains unchanging because it is not subject to temporality, what is empirically unchanging is unchanging in time, not outside time. The Concept maintains a numerical identity across time, which is not at all to say that conceptual terms have unchanging meaning. What is at stake here is not the unchanging nature of conceptual content but rather the immutable rule of construction, the essence of Concept itself, which allows contingent meaning to change beneath the mark of the signifier. The Concept, formally understood as beyond meaning, is where universality

operates, making countable instances distinctly possible. This ideal unity (unity of signification) has its notational cipher in the signifier.<sup>ix</sup>

Numerical identity is the result of the ideal functioning of the signifier, a placeholder in formal structure. This result individuates particulars as it is applied to sensible experience. For example, over a span of many decades an old ship may have had each nail and every fiber of wood replaced and yet it is counted as the same ship due to the ideal functioning of the signifier. Even when the ship of Theseus is incinerated; its ashes compressed and packed into an urn and then placed on a mantle; it intelligibly remains the same ship altered in form only. This evinces how the signifier remains independent of the thing signified. Every cell in a human body dies and is replaced every seven years and yet the body is counted as the same. “Each of us was once an embryo,” protest the pro-life/anti-embryonic stem-cell-research fanatics. And, of course, they are correct! The empirical subject, *in extremis*, may undergo all manner of protean physical alteration and may even suffer significant personality changes and disturbances in intellectual functioning, due to trauma, toxins, degeneration and disease. But the establishment of an identity throughout change, an identity in difference, does not indicate some lasting and unchanging physical or spiritual substance; it suggests rather the work of ideality through the imperishable signifier. What remains unchanged is the ideal signifier designating the subject while the signified materially changes beneath its mark. Hegel (1975: 31) writes, “‘I’ is the existence of a wholly abstract universality, ... Hence thought, viewed as a subject, is what is expressed by the word ‘I’; and ‘I’ is thinking as the subject, and since I am at the same time in all my sensations, notions, states, etc., thought is present everywhere and pervades all these determinations as [their] category.” The signifier operates beyond mere ostensive exemplification; just as ‘Red’ signifies a set of reds without being red itself; the category that groups together all conscious acts is not itself conscious; the idea of a triangle is not itself a triangle. Furthermore, any perceived or imagined instance is necessarily concrete and particular; a triangle is always either isosceles, equilateral, scalene, etc. Just as the stable idea of a triangle is merely the rule for a concrete construction and is incomplete in any particular instance, the subject is identical with its formal rule of construction and is never completed in the concrete construction itself. From this point of view, the self-relating negativity of the ideal subject refuses every contingent feature (*netti netti*) and thereby conceives (of) itself as empty frame or receptacle suitable for every manner of protean change while maintaining an aloof ideal identity.

When the unity of a logical totality (*omnitudo realitatis*) is brought about through signification, the signifier is not the thing it signifies, but is rather the thing qua object reduced to its symbolic registration. The appearance of something, similarly, is never an actual totality of the thing itself, but is, rather, a totalization in representative appearance; that is, a phenomenal or perspective representation of the thing. When these considerations converge, it is somehow true to say, for example, “I see the earth beneath my feet.” But do I really see the entire earth? Do I see its totality when I look from the porthole of a space shuttle? Signifying unities, formal unities, are independent of the reality they designate. The essential point is that there is no way of *seeing* the totality of the earth, nor a way to experience whole being (*omnitudo realitatis*), because each is an idea, a conceptual totality. But just as it is in practice only necessary to kick a small part of a football in order to kick the whole football, it is quite accurate to say “I see the earth beneath my feet” or “I stand upon the earth” or “The earth exists beneath my feet.”

Totality is a useful fiction; a heuristic cognitive schema that summates sensation into particular units of thought (unary features) and, thereby, constitutes the quantized (signifier-ized) effectiveness of thought, judgment, and perception.<sup>x</sup> We experience the distinct Otherness of our world through concepts that re-cognize and order perception and judgment into structured understanding and knowledge. Both the actual fleeting subject of duality and the factitious pure conscious subject of non-duality are figured through the same signifying function that structures symbolic order, conditions reflection, and constitutes, coordinates, and regulates every aspect of experience including the subject’s unity and consistency. Consciousness, as well as whole Being, becomes a totality in conceptual thought only, produced through spontaneous reflective acts that temporalize the alienating tension between the flux of concrete sensibility and the fixed atemporal ideality of formal concepts. In the absence of this duality there is no conscious subject. The fleeting subject of duality is on the side of flux and is only fixed by the ideality of signs.

## Conclusion

The collapse of the subject of duality into immediate relation spells the demise of the subject of non-duality. The later possibility only appears within a token reflexive economy of the signifying system of symbolic order. In other words, duality is actually the very condition for non-duality’s

elusive horizontal possibility. A coordinate structure is essential in order that a subject may situate acts of constituting reflection. Although experience is constituted through a chiasm of *formal* abstraction and *concrete* sensibility, it is a mistake to consider that their *logical* independence announces a *real* independence. The existence of a perdurable subject of non-duality is a perspective illusion of the fleeting subject of duality. Pure consciousness is the invention of the separated subject that eccentrically identifies itself as the site of inscription that supports the metonymic passing of determinate experience and where its identity is structurally deferred and incomplete in any particular instance of representative representation.

There is no real hole in Being, nor is there whole Being without exception. The breach between being and knowing necessarily denies all claims of perfect/complete knowledge and exposes the fantasmatic nature that the possible closing of this breach incites (*unio mystica*). The subject is not a persistent hole in Being but an exceptional act that constitutes totality, a conceptual wholeness of Being, as well as a unified empirical self.

## <sup>i</sup>Notes

<sup>i</sup> After quoting Quine, Strawson (1963: 238) later writes, “The subject-expression introducing a particular, carries a presupposition of definite empirical fact; the predicate-expression, introducing a universal, does not.”

<sup>ii</sup> This is the level at which Kant believes the Leibnizian theory of the identity of indiscernibles actually operates. While Lacan (1962: unpaginated), in his seminar on identification, refers to this simply as “the repetition of the apparently identical.” Kant (289) writes, “The principle of the identity of indiscernibles is really based on the presupposition, that if a certain distinction is not to be found in the concept of a thing in general, it is also not to be found in the things themselves, and consequently that all things which are not distinguishable from one another in their concepts (in quality or quantity) are completely identical (*numero eadem*). Because in the mere concept of a thing in general we abstract from the many necessary conditions of its intuition, the conditions from which we have abstracted are, with strange presumption, treated as not being there at all, and nothing is allowed to the thing beyond what is contained in its concept.”

<sup>iii</sup> Since the issue here implies the taking away of an object that consciousness appears to require, it may be more apt to rephrase Kierkegaard and say, “...as baffling as trying to depict an elf *not* wearing the hat that makes him *visible*.”

<sup>iv</sup> The Judeo-Christian tradition similarly characterizes Yahweh as One who brooks no graven images representing Him. Kamuf (1991: xxiii) writes, “God’s jealousy moves to subtract His name and face from the substitutions of metaphor, but in forbidding substitution, it commands that there must be (only) substitution.”

<sup>v</sup> This is also the locus of the Freudian ethic: *Wo es war soll Ich werden*, “Where Id was, there, Ego must come to be” or “Where It was, there I must come to be.” The unconscious may be characterized, as the repository of what one does not know what one is. In other words, the divided subject of psychoanalysis is predicated on the unconscious site where one is something one knows not; or where one unconsciously knows what one does not know consciously (cf. Lacan (1977: 128-9)).

<sup>vi</sup> Sartre (1978: 786) similarly writes, “The For-itself [consciousness] is not nothingness in general but a particular privation; it constitutes itself as the privation of *this being*”

<sup>vii</sup> Žižek (2006: 23) presents a crucial caveat related to understanding Kant’s noumenal subject: “Kant’s own formulations are misleading here, since he often identifies the transcendental subject within the

noumenal I whose phenomenal appearance is the empirical “person”, thus drawing back from his radical insight how the transcendental subject is a pure formal-structural function beyond the opposition of noumenal and phenomenal.”

<sup>viii</sup> ‘Concept’, with a capital ‘c’, is used here to accent the logical functioning of the universal concept beyond meaning. Lower case ‘c’ in ‘concept’ refers to the meaningful aspect, the content of the concept. When these functions overlap, an intelligible reading can be gleaned under both aspects.

<sup>ix</sup> In medieval Europe, Abailard (1929: vol. 1, 237) noticed this when he wrote, “We understand nothing other than that those individuals are men, and in this they do not differ in the least, in this, I say, that they are men, *although we appeal to no essence.*” Pierce (1991: 122) also voiced agreement in the twentieth century when he wrote, “It can by no means be admitted that the two real men have really anything in common, for to say that they are both men is only to say that the one mental term or thought-sign [signifier] ‘man’ stands indifferently for either of the sensible objects caused by the two external realities.”

<sup>x</sup> Sartre writes (1978: 251), “[The] fact of revealing being as a totality does not touch being any more than the fact of counting two cups on the table touches the existence or nature of either of them.” Also (262): “My negative upsurge into being is parceled out into independent negations which have no connection other than that they are negations which I have to be; that is, they derive their inner unity from me and not from being.”

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