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A - A = a

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In his “Instincts and their Vicissitudes”, Freud decomposes the drive into four elements. One of the elements is the object. Regarding the object of a drive, Freud points out, first of all, its variability.

The object of a drive is the thing in regard to which or through which the drive is able to achieve its aim. It is what is most variable about a drive and is not originally connected with it, but becomes assigned to it in consequence of being peculiarly fitted to make satisfaction possible.¹

Depending on how to read these words, there seems to be no proper object of a drive. And then, with regard to the object of a drive, we could say that there is a problem of being/non-being of it. In some respect, it seems to exist, and in some other, it seems not. Hong begins his *Oedipus Complex, Man's Sex, Woman's Sex* just with this problem.

While remarking on and re-interpreting Freud's discussion of the drive, Lacan pays a special attention to *the variability of its object*. Unlike *Instinkt, Trieb* does not have any (biological) purpose, so that it can obtain the same satisfaction not from a particular object but *from variable objects. Even where there is no object, it can attain the satisfaction.*²

This is the beginning of a problem. Many things begin at this point. Anyone who has read this book will find that it is also a beginning of a debate, of a critique. Hong here is aiming at the way Deleuze understands the drive. Hong's critical/theoretical main point is that the drive has something that cannot be reduced to the autoerotic organ pleasure.

Just as Lacan says “anxiety is not without object”, Hong says “drive is not without object”.³ Thus raising the issue of the variability of the object of drive. In order to look at the nature of the problem which arises here from a certain vantage point, I will quote a long phrase from Joan Copjec:

According to a long tradition that includes Freud himself, anxiety is distinguished from fear on the grounds that, unlike fear, it has no object. Anxiety is intransitive, while fear is transitive. Lacan goes against this tradition, however, to assert instead that anxiety is “not without object”. Why? What does he gain by this? The standard criterion, “with or without object”, offers a simple choice between two contradictory or mutually exclusive terms which exhaust the field of possibilities. Between the two there is a strict boundary. The choice of one or the other (object or not) decides on which side of the boundary the phenomenon is situated. Freud seems to have intuited that this boundary did not only divide fear and anxiety, but had the potential to divide the scientific and reason from the unscientific and irrational. And Freud did not want this. He never wanted his science, psychoanalysis, to be construed as a study of irrational phenomena; the workings of the psyche, no matter how troubled, did not fall outside the pale of science. . . . The sentiment of anxiety is one of hard certainty, and he felt no impulse to question it, to characterize that feeling as a delusion: that is, to dismiss this certainty as unfounded, as having no basis in reason.

Lacan’s formula, “not without object”, is fashioned out of the same concern as Freud’s. . . . [W]hen Lacan asserts that anxiety is “not without object”, he tells us, in effect, that it would be an understatement to say it has an object. For anxiety is precipitated by an encounter with an object of a level of certainty superior to that of any object of fact, to any actual object.⁴

If allowed to digress, I am tempted to say that the verb “precipitate” embedded in the last sentence is really interesting. It grasps, we might say, some kind of peculiar operation or relation. What is associated with it here is Kant. He begins his *Critique of Pure Reason* as follows:

In whatever manner and by whatever means a mode of knowledge may relate to objects, intuition is that through which it is in immediate relation to them, and at which all thought as a means is directed. But intuition takes place only insofar as the object is given to us. This again is only possible, to man at least, in so far as the mind is affected in a certain way.⁵

Though not being a reader of the history of philosophy, not being a student of philosophy, we can, only being a reader of Žižek, recognize what is at stake here - Kant excludes “intellectual intuition”. It is, according to Žižek, “an intuition that directly creates what it perceives”.⁶ In his *Tarrying with the Negative* for example, Žižek says that this intuition is a “step . . . unconditionally prohibited by Kant”.⁷ If what is at stake in the famous phrase beginning *Critique of Pure Reason* is the exclusion of intellectual intuition, what is at stake, this time, in the exclusion of that intuition? I think there are two things at stake. First, as Žižek points out, the Lacanian immortality “can emerge only within the horizon of human finitude”, just as for Kant “the finitude of the transcendental subject is not a limitation of his freedom and transcendental spontaneity, but its positive condition”.⁸ This Lacanian immortality is none other than the death drive. Secondly, the verb “affect” Kant uses

is strangely resonant with the verb “precipitate” Copjec uses. One could conceive of something like a “precipitation from an object”. This is the problem of the object of drive. The immortality and objectivity of drive, these are the two problems which I think are at the center of the exclusion of the intellectual intuition.

Let us turn back to the quotation from Copjec itself. According to her, while Freud on the one hand sees that anxiety is without object, on the other hand, the notion that anxiety is not a delusion, is not without some basis. Freud is not caught here in self-contradiction. Rather, this, where we can feel some keen trembling, is the fertile soil of Freud. In this place, science is preparing for a certain leap which sharply cuts the before and the after. It will be a leap where unheard reversal and development are achieved in the basic concept of “object”. Copjec says of “an object of a level of certainty superior to that of any object of fact, to any actual object”. We should read this not only as referring to an object unknown so far, but also as implying an unknown dimension of objectivity, a new approach to object itself. And this is why we should be able to write “object *a*” simply as “object”. A new abyss of objectivity is opening up there.

In Freud’s statements of the variability of the object of drive, we find such a fertile soil. Here, in Copjec’s terms, the simple choice between two contradictory or mutually exclusive terms which exhaust the field of possibilities does not function any longer. “Unlike *Instinkt, Trieb* does not have any (biological) purpose, so that it can obtain *the same satisfaction* not from a particular object but *from variable objects. Even where there is no object, it can attain the satisfaction.*” Here we should be able to read demand of change in the concept of the object. The statement “drive is not without object” should be read together with another important statement that Hong offers - “desire is without object”. “To be precise, desire has only its cause. There is no such thing as the object of desire”.⁹ Of course, this does not mean, as Hong points out, that we cannot talk of the object of desire “in the general sense”. The statement “desire is without object” implies the difference between the way of functioning of object *a* in drive and desire. I will focus here on the object *a* as in desire. For this, we should go into the economy of desire, or into the ideological field.

If we follow Bruce Fink’s object *a*, the Lacanian object already has fifteen names. Recently, Žižek gave another name “parallax” to it, as if fifteen was not enough. But this is not all. A reader, who has read *Tarrying with the Negative* closely, will notice that Žižek equates object *a* with Kant’s transcendental object. I asked an acquaintance who had taken a doctorate in the philosophy of Kant in Germany how we could understand “transcendental object” in the first place. He answered that we could understand it in the first place as the “objectivity itself of an object”. But we can ask the same question as to the “objectivity itself of an object”. How can we understand it in the first place? We could understand it as “something that makes an object into the object”. “What is that which makes an object into the object?” is indeed an old question. Plato answered with “Idea”. Lacan would answer with “*a*”. Žižek tells us that Kant called it the “transcendental object”:

The “transcendental object” of Jewishness is precisely that elusive X which “makes a Jew into a Jew” and for which we look for in vain among his positive properties. This act of pure formal conversion, i.e., the “synthetic act” of uniting the series of positive features in the signifier “Jew” and thereby transforming them into so many manifestations of the “Jewishness” qua their hidden ground, brings about the appearance of an objectal surplus, of a mysterious X which is “in Jew more than Jew,” in other words: of the transcendental object.¹⁰

Žižek says here that what makes an object (a Jew) designated by a signifier (“Jew”) into the very object is the transcendental object (Jewishness). He says more, indeed. He equates, for example, the phrase “which makes a Jew into a Jew” with the phrase “which is in Jew more than Jew”.

In the economy of desire in the ideological form of anti-Semitism, what is it that makes a Jew into a Jew? Of course, it is useless to try to find it in his positive features. “Jews are ‘like us’; it is difficult to recognize them, to determine at the level of positive reality that surplus, that evasive feature, which differentiates them from all other people.”¹¹ How about calling what makes an object into the object the “identity element”? We know that this term is used in elementary mathematics. For example, in regard to the economy of addition, it is “0”. In the economy of multiplication, it is “1”. What is it in the economy of desire? I am tempted to say that the Lacanian answer to the question is “a”. The signifier “Jew” and the Jewishness or object *a* are something that exceed the positive object. For Lacan the signifier and object *a* exceed the positive. Generally speaking, the Anglo-Saxon tradition of the analytic philosophy has attempted to nullify, to reduce them. I am tempted to call it “the philosophical passion of empiricism”. There they find some delight. I find this delight in Berkeley as well as in Davidson. There they find the driving forces of their philosophy. believing they are supporting science. But, meanwhile, they miss the two key elements science must deal with, that is, *the name and the object as such*.

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, we find a detailed explanation of how the descriptivist like John Searle tried to reduce, nullify the (master) signifier. I hope the readers will read it, for here I will deal with the object, not the signifier. Gilbert Ryle, for example, tried to reduce the object *a*.

A foreigner visiting Oxford or Cambridge for the first time is shown a number of colleges, libraries, playing fields, museums, scientific departments and administrative offices. He then asks “But where is the University? I have seen where the members of the Colleges live, where the Registrar works, where the scientists experiment and the rest. But I have not yet seen the University in which reside and work the members of your University.” It has then to be explained to him that the University is not another collateral institution, some ulterior counterpart to the colleges, laboratories and offices which he has seen. The University is just the way in which all that he already seen is organized. When they are seen and when their co-ordination is understood, the University has been seen. His mistake lay in his innocent assumption that it was correct to speak of Christ Church, the Bodleian Library, the Ashmolean Museum and the University, to speak, that is, as if “the University” stood for an extra member of the class of which these other units are members. He was mistakenly allocating the University to the same category as that to which the other institutions belong.¹²

Ryle is correct, of course, in saying that we cannot recognize the university at the level of the

individual institutions comprising the university, such as the colleges, libraries and so on. The university is not the same category as them. So he says that the foreigner made a “category-mistake”. But then, let us go into the economy of desire now, after identifying an interesting coincidence. That is to say, just as Žižek pays attention to the fact that Kripke selected as examples objects with an extreme libidinal connotation (“gold”, “unicorn”),¹³ we can pay our attention to the fact that Ryle selected as examples of the university “Oxford” and “Cambridge”. So, we should, exactly in the economy of desire, revise the foreigner’s question and return it to the guide of Oxford: “I have seen where the members of the Colleges live, where the Registrar works, where the scientists experiment and the rest. Nothing special! Is that all? Where is Oxford?”

Of course, it isn’t all. So we can say that something *remains* even after subtracting from Oxford all the positive features of Oxford. We can write “ $A - A = 0$ ” also as “ $A - A = a$ ”. If someone wants real coffee, what *more* does he want *than the coffee in coffee*? I will say he wants coffee *a* besides. Or can’t we say that he wants the Idea of coffee besides coffee? Let us return to Hong’s statement “desire is without object”. In this regard, he further says: “However, there is no reason not to use the expression ‘the object of desire’ in the general sense.” And then, what is the object of desire in the general sense? We can say that what lies in the left of the equation “ $A = A + a$ ” is the object of desire in the general sense. It is the thing that we desire. It is something that can be put in the place of object of the transitive verb “desire”. But not every object around us, not every object allowed by our language is the object of desire in the general sense. It is only when our desire occurs in an object that an object becomes the object of desire (in the general sense). And in order that our desire can occur in an object, object *a*, cause of desire, must function. This is the meaning of “ $A + a$ ”.

- 1 Sigmund Freud, "Instincts and their Vicissitudes", in *SE XIV*, p. 122.
- 2 Joon-ki Hong, *Oedipus Complex, Man's Sex, Woman's Sex*, Seoul: Ananke, 2005, p. 20.
- 3 *Ibid*, p. 27.
- 4 Joan Copjec, "May '68, The Emotional Month", in *Lacan: The Silent Partners*, ed. Slavoj Žižek, London and New York: Verso, 2006, pp. 98-99.
- 5 Immanuel Kant, *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, London: Macmillan & Co Ltd, 1963, p. 65.
- 6 Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, London and New York: Verso, 1999, p. 163.
- 7 Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1993, p. 19.
- 8 Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 163.
- 9 Joon-ki Hong, *Oedipus Complex, Man's Sex, Woman's Sex*, p. 38.
- 10 Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, pp. 151-152.
- 11 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London and New York: Verso, 1989, p. 89.
- 12 Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1949, p. 16.
- 13 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 92.