

MORALISATION INTERRUPTED

On Lacan's Thesis of 'the Supreme Good as Radical Evil'¹

At least we can learn from them that absolute goodness
is hardly any less dangerous than absolute evil ...
Hannah Arendt²

The signifier [...] is what represents [...]
the subject for another signifier.
Jacques Lacan³

1. The Good in the Extreme 20th century

'Actualising the supreme good in a supreme way': Is this not an adequate title for the general socio-ethical programme of the 20th century? Were the numerous revolutions of that time not all inspired by the highest ethical values – at least by what each revolutionary programme considered as such? And once in power, were these programmes not in the possibility to remove all the obstacles barring the implementation of their social and ethical ideas? At times, however, it did not hold off the most disastrous results. The more such programmes were in the optimal condition of getting actualised, the more they were fated to turn into straight oppression and terror. The ideals of the communist project, for instance, were highly noble and social, but the regimes of that name ended up being responsible for a totalitarian violence that ruined millions of human lives. Today, in a similar way, America's intention to bring democracy all over the world rather seems to turn into the opposite. The question if the so-called 'war on terror' is itself not responsible (or at least co-responsible) for raising the quantum of terror in our global village is unfortunately all too legitimate.⁴

Though, of course, each one of these examples requires a detailed analysis, in a general perspective, one can say they all illustrate, in the domain of the political, the experience of radical finitude which is so typical for modernity and its technical condition. Modernity supposes to have limitless capability of solving all problems faced, till all at once, it is forced to face the limits of this very limitlessness. Then, in some symptomatic events, it unexpectedly faces the inherent boundaries of its technical all-powerfulness. It more precisely

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² Hannah Arendt (1981), *On Revolution*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, p. 82.

³ "Le signifiant, à l'envers du signe, n'est pas ce qui représente quelque chose pour quelqu'un, c'est ce qui représente précisément le sujet pour un autre signifiant.", in : Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire IX, L'identification, 1961-62*, lesson of December 6, 1961, unpublished.

⁴ Bob Woodward (2006), *State of Denial. Bush at War, Part III*, New York: Simon and Schuster.

faces *the limits being the very effect of its limitless omnipotence*. Able to dominate whatever met, at times, modernity's technical power realises how unable it is to dominate precisely its limitless capacity to dominate. Here, the clearest example to be put forward is the 20th century experience of the nuclear threat: as if, creating nuclear weapons, we had remained blind for their capability to destroy the entire world, including ourselves.

This kind of omnipotence's impotence which is characteristic for late modernity's technical condition can be observed in the field of the political as well. Capable of creating a totally new society, modern man forgot to notice *himself* in this very creation and ran the risk of ending up with a totalitarian political order in which none of its citizens were in the possibility of having a properly free and creative live.

And why not apply this condition of 'finite infinity' to our modern *ethical* capacities, to our moral and social intention to make this world a better place to live? We are technically able to actualise the global good, but we are capable as well of using the same ability as a weapon of terror and destruction. How often did the 20th century programs of reorganising society in a more just and ethically better world, not turn into oppression and other kinds of social disaster?

Modernity's technical, ethical and socio-political experiences force us to question the most basic suppositions underlying our relation to the world (including to ourselves). The question we face is: given the fact that we are technically able to manipulate or even create whatever we want, what, then, does it mean that we do not see we are at the same time enabling the destruction of all there is, including ourselves?

In that sense, it is far from being senseless to ask what the 'we' underlying the omnipotent self-destructive capacity exactly means? Or, to put it in a more formal way: *from which point* we, modern people, relate to reality, including ourselves? What makes this point to be the point from where we, at the same time, could make *and* destroy ourselves? In other words, what is the *subject* of that finite/infinite power of ours? What is the subject of that capacity to blindly destroy itself, i.e. the subject it is? Or, which amounts to the same thing: What is the subject/bearer of that power that meets its finitude in its very infinite?

2. A Forgotten Question

Nowadays, the question of the subject, if mentioned at all, is perceived as outdated or even senseless. This was not the case along the 20th century. Although, then, the *notion* of 'subject' was severely criticised, the *question* of the subject was on the top of the agenda, if only

because the paradigms of our relation to reality (including to ourselves) were profoundly questioned. Phenomenology, existential philosophy, anthropology, psychoanalysis, and many of the other social sciences: each of them, in their own way, tried to reconsider and to reformulate the basic assumptions of our relation to reality. And the most basic question was the one of the ‘support’, the ‘ground’ or ‘subject’ of that relation. Is there a grounding ‘*subjectum*’ to it, and what is its precise status?

It is an abysmal question, for *it questions at the same time the very condition of questioning*. Does the question of the subject proceed from a ‘point’ which is itself unquestionable? Can it suppose itself being based in an unquestionable ground, or is this question’s own subject to be put endlessly into question? In other words: is, at the end, the subject of that question more than a mere *supposition*? And what if, the subject of science and of modern consciousness in general is, in the last resort, a mere supposition as well? What if the supposed unshakable ‘ground’ of modernity’s relation to the world is indeed a mere assumption, a fiction, an imagination?

That question cannot be treated by scientific methods. Although modern science cannot but assume itself to be based in a solid point of departure, in a point of scientific ‘certainty’ (as already Descartes put it), this very point cannot be scientifically proved. Defining itself to be an ‘objective’ knowledge, it cannot make its own starting point – the point hiding its ‘subject’ – the ‘object’ of its scientific research, not to mention scientific certainty. And yet, this is nonetheless the way we commonly deal with the question of the subject nowadays. Since the last decade of the 20th century, we are driven back on science in our discussions on that issue. We again believe we can find a scientifically sustained answer to the question of the subject of science or, more generally, the subject of our consciousness.⁵

Since Descartes, the subject of modern science is the supposed ‘point’ *outside* its object. It is from that very point we organize an ‘objective’ enquiries and experiments. Yet, unlike Descartes, we no longer consider this ‘point’ to be a substantial ‘soul’. 18th century materialism taught us to give up any belief in the existence of such independent ‘cogito’ or ‘subject’. As a merely abstract point, however, it remained indispensable for modern science. Without a point ‘outside’ the object, an ‘objective’ observation – and, thus, knowledge – of this object is simply impossible. Though since La Mettrie⁶ the Cartesian dualism has been

⁵ See, among so many publications, Daniel C. Dennet (1991), *Consciousness explained*, Boston: Little, Brown.

⁶ Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1996), *Machine man and other writings*, translated by Ann Thomson, Cambridge: Cambridge university press.

declared invalid, yet the split between the ‘subject’ and the object of science remained a condition *sine qua non* for this very science.

Nonetheless, it has always been – and is still – modernity’s dream that, one day, science will succeed in doing the impossible, i.e. in having *scientific* knowledge of the very ‘outside point’ from where it operates; to have objective knowledge of the point that by definition cannot be objective at all. To explain the subject of science scientifically, i.e. to give a fully scientific explanation of the ground science rests upon and of the ‘point’ it operates from: this is what science is not able to do *precisely because of its modernity*. It is modernity’s most basic experience that our knowledge lacks such a ground. It is no longer based in being as such, in “*das Ding an sich*”, as Kant puts it. Then, we are ourselves the ‘ground’ of our knowledge, already Descartes had put forward. But not as a substantial ground but as a mere supposition, as 18th century materialism correctly had replied. And this is how things still are now: the ground upon which our relation to reality is based, the ‘point’ from where we relate to that reality – is an imaginary one, a fictitious supposition. Not only do we ignore reality’s ontological ground, we also ignore the ontological ground of the ‘point’ from where we relate to reality.

Transferred to the ethical sphere, the consequences of this modern condition come even more clearly into the light. For what to think if the ‘subject’ or ‘ground’ of moral values is merely supposed, imagined, fantasized? And when we indeed have to be *ourselves* that subject, what then if this, too, is an invention? What if our so-called ‘self’, being the subject of morality, is the result of imagination? What if both the good and the human subject of that good are mere fantasy?

Put in an ethical perspective, we understand maybe better why the abysmal question of the subject nowadays has lost the popularity it had in the 20th century. In the revolutionary atmosphere of these times, the abyss of that question was still bearable, if only because it was tempered by the promising new times everyone was passionately expecting. Now, however, the time of ‘dreaming’ is over. In a way, we all have become ‘conservatives’, at least in the *formal* sense of the word. We rather behold what we have than to take the risks of radical change. Anyway, it is one of the reasons why the all too *open* question of the subject has lost its appealing effect on us. In fact, we can no longer stand this kind of unbearable openness underlying our very relation to the world as well as to ourselves – which is why science, more than ever, is asked to comfort us, and to give us a solid base. No wonder then that, in such times of science, religion has made its comeback. It fulfils a similar function as antique and medieval science did and as modern science is supposed to do according to increasing amount

of people. Better than science is able to, religion can give modern people back a stable and fixed subject. Longing for an unshakable ground underneath their feet, moderns are not abhorrent of sticking to religion.

However, this idea of a fixed, unquestioned subject is not without danger. Even in its shape of mere supposition or imagination. In order to face the problems our late modernity has to deal with, the question of the subject, whatever abysmal it may be, is as inevitable as indispensable. I will argue that it is necessary to retake once again that old, *unzeitgemäss* question of the subject, of the ‘ground’ that we suppose to rest on, and which, indeed, is nothing else than a *supposed* one, a *supposition* or *hypothesis*. The Ancient Greek word for subjectum, ‘*hypothesis*’, names in fact the very status of the modern subject: it is the fantasized, supposed, imagined point our relation to the world rests upon.

3. The Lacanian Subject

This is at least the radical conclusion Jacques Lacan draws in his conceptualisation of the human’s modern condition. Lacking any ontological ground, the human relation to reality takes its starting point from – and, in this sense, is based upon – simple supposition. And what is this supposition based upon? From a certain perspective, it is based on ‘itself’, i.e. on the human capacity to suppose, to imagine, to dream, to invent things out of nothing. It rests on what Kant called the ‘*reine Einbildungskraft*’.⁷ Or, referring to the Freudian paradigm Lacan entirely assumes: it is a matter of wishing – a wishing which *precedes* what is wished and even ‘who’ is wishing. It is an autonomous imagination or wishing which, as such, is *not* based in any self. In this, Lacan differs from Kant. For according to Lacanian theory, human wishing has to long even for a ‘self’, for a ‘ground’ to be based on. Man’s imagination has to create (i.e. to imagine) even its own ‘self’; it has to suppose itself to be the ground of his imagination and that, contrary to what is the case, therefore the human ‘self’ is *not* the product of imagination, of wish and supposition.

So, is it us who have invented us a ‘self’. Of course not. We found that ‘self’ in the others: in the ones around us with whom we identified and still identify. Consciousness or thought is primordially not an individual but a *social* affair. Thought is based in identification with others, and even there, it has still to invent (to imagine) its base, its subject. The ground –

⁷ “*Rein*”, here, means “only”, exclusive”, “autonomous”. For Kant’s critical philosophy, the imagination must never operate in a “*rein*”, autonomous way. It has to be connected to the ‘object’ perceived by the *Anschauung*. Stating that the ‘subject’ is a mere supposition, a mere product of the “*reine Einbildungskraft*”, is a provocative claim, even in relation to Kantian theory.

the bearer or subject – of my imagination or my wishing is an image, not of me but of the other. And by denying that procedure, I act as if that image is mine. That ‘acting as if’ results in the only real ‘me’ I have. So, indeed, my identity’ origin is social. For Lacan, ‘psychology’ is ‘sociology’⁸: my *psyche* – that what I think I am, my subject, the point from where I relate to reality as ‘me, as an identity – is the result of an identification with the other, with the ‘*socius*’, “*le semblable*”. Social identification with others precedes – and, in that sense, grounds – my identity.

In a first faze of his thought, Lacan defines identity as a *Gestalt*, referring to the then popular *Gestalt* psychology. In the next faze, Lacan redefines the scene in which the ‘self’ invents itself as the specific scene Freud refers to as “*die andere Schauplatz*”, the scene of the unconscious representations (*Vorstellungen*).⁹ Here again, the social field in which the libidinal being has to invent its identity (its subject), is a field of images. Yet, now, Lacan considers these images as what Freud calls ‘*Vorstellungen*’. The field of these representations forms an autonomous structure with a particular logic described in Freud’s *Traumdeutung* and (as Lacan has put it) similar to the linguistic structures described in Ferdinand de Saussure’s famous *Cours de linguistique générale*. This representational (fictional) field in which the libidinal being has to invent its identity is, more precisely, the cultural field as described by Claude Lévi-Strauss: a field organized by the materiality of the signifier – ‘*signifiants*’ – and governed by a linguistic logic.¹⁰

So, I live in and of – and *only* in and of – representations or signifiers. This is to say that *the ground of my identity – my subject – is itself not a representation or signifier*. Signifiers only *represent* it. The subject is that “which a signifier represents for another signifier”, as Lacan puts it in one of his most basic formulas.¹¹ *As such*, it has no proper existence; it exists only *through* representation, *through* the signifier, whose existence is not real but fictional.

This is crucial. The subject as such is not a signifier among signifiers, it is the insisting ‘absentee’ every signifier refers to, an ‘absentee’ who only exists through the never ending

⁸ Sociology, interpreted in the original meaning of the term: not as defining a proper object in reality, but as a specific point of view on reality. This is sociology as seen by its ‘founding fathers’, or as deployed by Georges Bataille, ex-husband of Lacan’s wife, in his famous “Collège de sociologie”. Markos Zafiroopoulos has written a remarkable book about sociology’s (specifically Durkheim’s) decisive influence on the early Lacan: *Lacan et les sciences sociales*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France (2001).

⁹ Freud, 1972; Lacan 1966: 548, 685, 689, 799.

¹⁰ Markos Zafiroopoulos (2003), *Lacan et Lévi-Strauss, ou le retour à Freud 1951-1957*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France.

¹¹ Lacan 1966: 819, 835, 840. Lacan uses this formula for the first time in his seminar on tranference: J. Lacan (1991), *Le séminaire, Livre VIII, Le transfert: 1960-1961*, texte établi par J.-A. Miller, Paris, Seuil, p. 286, 307.

game of references. The subject is the bearer of a fictional world in which, as such, it remains missing. This is the case for the human subject or, more exactly, for the subject *of* human's 'supposed' identity.

So, any identity, i.e. anything that pretends to be what it is, is not what it is; it 'is' only this pretension, thus the basic thesis of Lacanian theory. Any 'self' 'is' solely to the extent it is represented. It only exists *by means of* – *in* or *as* – this representation, i.e. *in* or *as* the signifiers that represent it, not for us or others like us, but for other signifiers. The stuff we are made of, are signifiers, but the point in which we constitute ourselves as being the bearer/subject of that stuff is a void, a kind of 'nothing' only sustained by the signifiers referring to it. This void, this 'nothing': this is 'us' in our quality of subject.

Lacan's formulation of the modern condition not only tells that we relate to things insofar as they are signifiers endlessly referring to other signifiers, but that even this signifying reality has no ground in itself, that it is itself not based in a signifier, but in what exists only by being represented by signifiers. In other words, the identity of signifiers is based in the signifier's 'unsublatable' lack.¹²

4. Good ...

And so is the good. Is the good what it is? Is it *identical* to itself? If it is, then, only in the way it *signifies* itself as such – which is solely possible by means of signifiers. In the final analysis, the good is but a signifier. No thing or act is good *in itself*. It is good only in its quality of signifier, i.e. in its quality of representing the subject to another signifier. What does this mean? And what is the position of the subject in this? What is its function?

Good is good insofar it refers to another good, insofar it is part of a signifying system of goods borrowing their quality of goodness from their mutual reflecting effect. This makes the realm of the good comparable – if not structurally similar – to that other realm of often *less moral* goods which is our modern capitalist economy. With a term borrowed from Karl Marx, one can say that the good is a fetish¹³, a commodity that takes its value no longer from what it really means in the eyes of someone. It is no longer taken for its use-value, but for its exchange-value, its reference to other fetishes, to other commodities, i.e. signifiers. We are thus dealing with an autonomous system of goods, of which the effect on us is not necessarily

¹² Here, "unsublatable" refers to the Hegelian notion of 'sublation', '*Aufhebung*'.

¹³ See the famous section 4 of the first chapter in *Das Kapital*: "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secrete Thereof".

morally good, as some of capitalism's vicissitudes show all too well. And so is an ethical system too: its values are not based in themselves, but in their mutual reference. And, as we will discuss further onwards, that system of ethical values can also flourish when its effect on the people is not good at all or even disastrous.

The question, then, is: does a system of goods – of fetishes, of values – rest in itself? Is it its own *subject*? Not at all. Ethics is not based in 'values', so the basic line of Lacan's moral insight sounds. Values function as signifiers, and these do not rest in themselves but are representative of something else. They represent the *subject*, and they do this not for other subjects, but for other signifiers, other values. To paraphrase Lacan's formula: an ethical value represents the subject for another ethical value. So, ethical values form a relatively autonomous system in which each of them refers to the totality of other ethical values. Yet, they do not *simply* represent one another, nor are they *based* in that mutual representation: they represent *the subject* and it is that subject which they are based in. This is to say that ethical values represent *us* and that this is the way (and the only way) in which we are involved in the good(s)¹⁴ we live by. It is *us* that are the subject of those goods.

So, does this mean that *we* decide about what is good or not? Not exactly. For, there is no 'we' independent from the good and capable of sovereignly deciding about it. The realm of the good or goods precedes us, they are that which we live in and by, which we identify with, which gives content to our life and our identity. They are, however, not to be considered as what satisfies our *needs*. The goods we live by do not fill up our lack. On the contrary, they *grant* us our lack, they affirm and consolidate it. Values are used, not to satisfy our needs, but to sustain our 'need of needs', i.e. our unsatisfiable desire. This is the core of Lacan's ethical theory.

For indeed, we *are* desire: unfulfilled and unfulfillable desire. The values ethics provides us with, the good and goods we live by, they do not satisfy our desire, they only stimulate that desire and make us *long* for satisfaction. Values and goods do not rest in themselves but in their very lack, and it is precisely there, on the locus of that lack, we locate ourselves as their subject, as their ground and 'raison d'être'.

In our quality of subject, we make the difference between the ethical value and 'itself', between the good and 'itself'. *In* that difference, we ourselves are located as desire. There, we are constituted as the bearer, the subject of those values, or, more exactly, as the subject of

¹⁴ As already mentioned, there is a formal equivalence between the ethical good and the economic goods. See Jacques Lacan (1986), *Le Séminaire, Livre VII, L'éthique de la psychanalyse 1959-1960*, texte établi par J.-A. Miller, Paris : Seuil, p. 255-256, 269 ; (1992), *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Edited by J.-A. Miller, translation by Dennis Porter, p. 215-217, 228-229.

desire supported by those values. We ‘are’ the place where those values occur, where they *take place*; and this is why they never take place in a definite and exhaustive way. Being the subject of the good, we occupy the place where that good is on the verge to get fully actualised, where it is near to become entirely real. Our function as subject, however, is to *not* let this happen. To be the subject of the good means to prevent it from getting *real*. This is the way the good is in the service of desire and this is what it means that we are the subject of the good (or, which amounts to the same thing, of the desire for the good).

5. ... and evil

And what is evil? It is the good become real. It is the accomplished fullness of a value, it is a value no longer resting in its lack. It coincides with a situation where the ethical is completely actualised, or desire *really* satisfied. Evil is a good so ‘extreme’ that it has become its own subject, i.e. that its subject is no longer a void (for it is only that void which can give us a free rein to be its bearer/subject).

How strange these definitions may sound, they are the logical consequences of Lacan’s axiom: the primacy of desire. Since we *are* desire, the satisfaction of that desire coincides with its extinction and, thus, with the extinction and death of ‘us’ who live by that desire. Life is never full life; it is basically nothing else than desire to live. So, full life or satisfied desire means death to the subject of that life and that desire. Since the good is good only in so far as it rests in its lack, and, on the very locus of that lack, represents the subject to another good, the extreme good – the good as resting finally in the completion of itself – is radical evil. It implies the death of the subject, for the subject only existed in so far as it longed for it.

Is full satisfaction of desire then simply not possible? Here, it is crucial to notice that it is not impossible *as such*. It is only impossible *for a subject*. This is what the Lacanian concept of enjoyment – *jouissance* – is about. *Jouissance* tells the situation in which the libidinal being enjoys its ultimate object of desire and in which, thus, his desire is entirely satisfied. This situation is possible, Lacan argues, but not without a fading of the subject. In the moment of *jouissance*, the subject cannot be present with its own experience. At that moment, his entire libidinal economy (i.e. the desire he *is*) is supported by a small set of signifiers that form the ‘phantasm’.¹⁵ The phantasm gives a last – imaginary – consistency to

¹⁵ Lacan elaborates the concept of “phantasm” in his seminar on “desire and its interpretation”. Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre VI, 1958-1959*, unpublished.

the libidinal economy when its subject fades away, as for instance is the case in the moment of *jouissance*. So, what is at stake in the concept of *jouissance* is that, in moments of full satisfaction, the subject keeps on occupying the place of the lack and keeps on affirming this lack. Only, it does so by fading away.

Is *jouissance* a good thing? Is it the good par excellence? The answer to both questions is negative. *Jouissance* is not to be considered as a signifier and, thus, not as a good. It names the *enjoyment* – the usufruct – of the ultimate object, the “object a” or “das Ding”, which is to be located *beyond* the realm of signifiers (so Lacan explains in his seminar on ethics).¹⁶ *Jouissance* is the transgressive move in which the libidinal being leaves the realm of the signifier behind. In that moment, it passes the borders limiting the realm of values and ethical norms, and loses itself – read: loses its subject – in the domain of *das Ding*. So, at the very place where Aristotelian and other traditions locate the Supreme Good, there, we must locate *jouissance*. In that perspective, enjoyment is to be considered as radical evil. For it implies the annihilation of all good(s), including even the subject of these goods.

Human ethics is orientated, not towards the Supreme Good, but towards radical evil. This is the strange conclusion Lacan, in his seminar on ethics, draws from his insight that human life is basically desire, unfulfilled desire. Ethics must provide both framework *and* freedom to desire. Therefore, it must prevent desire from getting fully satisfied, just like it must prevent ethical rules to be fully fulfilled.

Ethics is not about the attempt to fasten down human behaviour on a series of fixed values and rules that culminate in the dignity of the Supreme Good. Ethics is about desire and, thus, about us, because we ‘are’ desire or – as, more exactly, Lacan put it – because we are the subject of the desire of the Other. Since our condition has become modern, we *are* radical openness – ‘radical’ in the sense that it is no longer supported by a God who embraces and encloses that openness and gives it an ultimate protection, a divine home. Our house is the one of an open and infinite desire that has no fixed ontologically based coordinates.

However, it belongs to our modern condition as well to deny or repress the open desire we ‘are’. We can but remain blind for the lack on which our libidinal constitution is based. It is only in a fleeting moment we can face the truth telling we ‘are’ unfulfilable desire. Acknowledging this desire *as such* is inevitably at odds with the certainty of consciousness we spontaneously want. That is why, against all spontaneous inclinations, ethics must put the unconscious openness of desire in the centre of its interest. The purpose of the ethical law is

¹⁶ For the concept of ‘das Ding’, see Lacan 1986: 55-86 ; 1992: 43-70.

to give human desire a framework of limits without which it should not be able to maintain itself. The ultimate function of that framework, however, is to provide free space to desire and to make *jouissance* possible.

This is to say that ethics must make clear it is not able to give us what we expect from it, i.e. the satisfaction of our desire. So, for highly ethical reasons, ethics must not give us what it (necessarily) promises. If it would try to do so, if it would give us the desired satisfaction, it would certainly be unable to really do so, but it would nonetheless be able to do *as if* it does so. This ‘as if’ offers the disposition of terror and totalitarianism – also of the ethical type. An ethical authority, pretending to bring full satisfaction to us, can only oblige us to do *as if* we are in the full possession of it. And in that case, we can only do *as if* we are like this by detecting the lack of satisfaction with others – in fact by projecting our own lack onto them – accusing them for blaming the ethical standard we all are supposed to have reached.¹⁷ So, communist society pretending to have overcome all the shortcomings of the old bourgeois society ended up in a situation of paranoid social control where everyone was suspecting anyone else of being responsible for the ‘bourgeois lack’ that prevented communist society from getting actualised. Fighting the ‘enemy of the people’, they in fact transported their own lack onto these alleged enemies in order, there, to deny it– i.e. to destroy it, and – which is one of the consequences – to destroy the people who were marked by it.

The latter were forced to deny what it means to be the *subject* of communism. The place where communism ‘took place’, the locus where it touched ‘ground’, is not the one where it got actualised, but where it met its own lack, or, more precisely, where it met itself as *desire* (i.e. as *longing* for its supposed ‘self’). Here, evil was caused by denying desire or, what amounts to the same thing, by denying the true subject of desire. Pretending to be its own subject, claiming to be the answer to desire, the good turned into radical evil.

6. How to interrupt evil?

¹⁷ This ‘as if’ attitude typifies ‘perversion’, which Lacan distinguishes from the two other possible attitudes vis-à-vis of the lack constituting us as *being* desire, namely ‘neurosis’ and ‘psychosis’. ‘Neurosis’ – which names the attitude of normal people – represses the lack (*Verdrängung*) passing it constantly to other signifiers, while ‘psychosis’ rejects it (*Verwerfung*), building up an entirely imaginary world (an delusion, ‘*ein Wahn*’). In ‘perversion’, the lack is both acknowledged and denied: projecting his own lack (i.e. his finitude, pain, shortcomings, fears, et cetera) onto the other, the sadist (who is a typical example) recognises the lack constituting human desire, but at the same time denies it, doing *as if* the lack carved into the body of the other only shows absence of lack, fullness, *jouissance*. Lacan elaborates this concept of ‘perversion’ in his famous essay “Kant avec Sade” (Jacques Lacan [1966], *Écrits*, Paris: Seuil, p. 765-790).

How to avoid evil? It is not an easy question, if only because of the more basic question preceding this one: Is evil avoidable at all? Is a world conceivable without evil? Or, more precisely, is it a good thing to suppose that such world is possible? Of course, we *want* to avoid evil, we *want* a world freed from it, but since ‘evil’ is ultimately that what our wanting – our desire – is orientated towards, the question is more complex than one may think at first sight.

Let us be more precise. The fact of desire’s orientation towards evil does not mean that we really and consciously want evil to be materialised or actualised. On the *unconscious* level, we want to lose ourselves in *jouissance* which, being located beyond the good, must be characterized as evil. But the unconscious level is meant to *stay* unconscious, which implies that, on the conscious level, we suppose the satisfaction of desire to be something good. Here, we face what it really means to live at the same time on the two levels of the conscious and the unconscious. Consciously we rightly condemn evil and try to ban it out of our world. But this does not prevent us from consuming our daily portion of evil, it is true not in its *real* but in its *fictitious* state. What else do we consume on television and other mass media? The evil ethics fights against, we enjoy it time and again on the screen. And, what is more, we even do so while morally condemning it. For this is what happens while watching TV, from news-programmes to weekend movies: we perform evil in order to show, to ourselves and to others, how bad this is; but in the meanwhile we enjoy it and give way to our desire’s unconscious point of ultimate orientation. This is how ‘evil’ *jouissance* is at work in good moral consciousness. Fighting for the good(s) on the conscious level, on the unconscious one, we secretly give way to our desire’s intention to lose ourselves (i.e. our ‘subject’) in a domain that leaves all good(s) behind.

Is this kind of evil avoidable? Is human culture conceivable without dealing with evil in an imagined, fictional way? I don’t think so. Since time immemorial, human beings have imagined evil things and have enjoyed those images including the evil they show. All ancient legends, epics, tragedies, even comedies seem to confirm this. So, is then this kind of evil innocent and harmless? Should we, then, not worry about it? Certainly we should. For if we do not bother about it, we cynically collaborate with it and stimulate the evil of ‘moralizing ethics’, i.e. the ethics of the ‘beautiful soul’, as Hegel puts it in his critique on Kantian morality.¹⁸ In such a moral mind, the focus on evil is not so much meant to fight it, but to promote the own moral ‘soul’ as being itself free from evil or other ethical incorrectness. Its

¹⁸ For this Hegelian concept see, among other passages, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, VI, C, c. (G.W.F. Hegel [1988], *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, p. 433, 439-440).

constant obsession for evil is but a veil for a narcissistic preoccupation in its own 'soul'. This is why such moral consciousness does not realise that, in fact, it *sustains* the evil in the outside world. Instead of fighting evil, it makes use of it in order to persuade the own soul that all evil is with others. This kind of moral consciousness does not realize that it basically transfers its own evil onto others.

This is the dominant immorality of current moralizing ethics, as perfectly sustained by contemporary visual culture. How comfortable it is to transfer our own evil fascination for evil to others locked up behind a television-screen. Dumping our own evil in that little box, we can pretend to be ourselves untouched by any evil at all. In this perspective, television and mass media in general are the way par excellence to install all over the planet the moralizing ideology of the 'beautiful soul'. It is time we realize that precisely this world wide practiced moralizing ethics is at least co-responsible for the evil in the world that it pretends to fight against.

Can we avoid this? Can we avoid the evil of moralizingly misusing human evil? The problem is that, if we pretend we can, we almost inevitably fall into the trap of moralizing ethics, since we, then, suppose the world conceivable without any evil. In this case, we presume that our desire to get rid of all evil can fully be satisfied. And, as has become clear now, this is the trickiest way to deny what ethics is about: desire, unfulfillable desire. In the name of desire, in the name of desire's orientation towards *jouissance*, we always will have to deal with evil. At least as something we deal with in our imagination, evil is unavoidable.

But all this is not to say we should not *interrupt* the evil of the moralizing misuse of human evil. Not able to definitely clear up that evil (since it is involved in the human condition defined as desire), we can – and must – *disrupt* it and at least temper its pernicious effects. We must do so for the sake of ethics. It is the aim of ethics to stop the miscognition of human's basic reality, i.e. his desire. The aim of ethics is not to give us the good we expect from it (it is exactly this, which it cannot give us), but to sustain our desire and to make *jouissance* possible. It is crucial to realise that desire's miscognition cannot be stopped once and for all. This miscognition belongs to desire's very condition. For no man can consciously stand the void he – i.e. his desire – is based on. That is why we cannot but repress and deny what we, on the most basic level, are: desire. However, since this denial can be ethics' own evil, we must have an eye for it, detect it and interrupt it.

Here, we face the core of non-moralizing ethics. Its main target is to interrupt again and again the never absent, spontaneous miscognition of human desire. That is why ethics, first of all, has to be critical about itself, about its hidden inclination to deny its very *raison*

d'être, i.e. human desire. Ethics' shape is that of a law, i.e. of a set of commandments limiting desire and prohibiting *jouissance*. But the subject of that law is not to be located in the good it contains or in the values it supports, but in the point where all good and all values lack. This is to say that the ethical law rests in its lack; that its subject is to be located in that very void. This is the precise place the human subject occupies, as subject of the law in the double sense or the word: in the sense that he is subjected to the law and passively thrown under it, *and*, at the same time, as active subject/bearer of the law, as the one who gives ground and *raison d'être* to that law. Within the gap between both, between the passively subjected one and the active subject, there, desire moves to and fro. This gap makes the law a support of desire; and it is the same gap which makes man both the law's and desire's subject. Or, which amount to the same thing: in the distance or difference between the law and the law 'itself', there, the law found its ground, a ground coinciding with both its own lack and the lack we '*are*' in our quality of libidinal being.

The evil that threatens ethics from within is to miscognize its lack as being its very base, its subject. This is the evil at work within contemporary moralizing ethics as well as in the great ethical and social ideologies of the former and current century. Without retaking the question of the subject, we will never be able to interrupt that evil. And for the sake of ethics, we have to interrupt the evil, which is inherent to ethics very condition.