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The Big Other Doesn't Exist

Why did Freud supplement the Oedipal myth with the mythical narrative of the “primordial father” in Totem and Taboo (T&T)? The lesson of this second myth is the exact obverse of the Oedipus: far from having to deal with the father who, intervening as the Third, prevents direct contact with the incestuous object (thus sustaining the illusion that his annihilation would give us free access to this object), it is the killing of the father, i.e., the very realization of the Oedipal wish, which gives rise to symbolic prohibition (the dead father returns as his Name). And today's much-decried “decline of Oedipus” (of the paternal symbolic authority) is precisely the return of figures which function according to the logic of the “primordial father” from “totalitarian” political leaders to the paternal sexual harasser. But why? When the “pacifying” symbolic authority is suspended, the only way to avoid the debilitating deadlock of desire, its inherent impossibility, is to locate the cause of its inaccessibility into a despotic figure which stands for the primordial jouisseur: we cannot enjoy because HE amasses all enjoyment ...

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In the “Oedipus complex,” parricide (and incest with the mother) is the unconscious desire of all ordinary (male) subjects, since the paternal figure prevents access to the maternal object, disturbs our symbiosis with it, while Oedipus himself is the exceptional figure, the One who effectively did it. In T&T, on the contrary, parricide is not the goal of our unconscious wish, but, as Freud emphasizes again and again, a prehistoric fact which “really had to occur”, to allow the passage from animal state to Culture. In short, the traumatic event is not something we dream about, but which never really happens and thus, via its postponement, sustains the state of culture (since the consummation of the incestuous link with the mother would abolish the symbolic distance/prohibition which defines the universe of Culture); rather, the traumatic event is that which always already had to happen the moment we are within the order of Culture. If we effectively killed the father, why is the outcome not the longed-for incestuous union? In this paradox lies the central thesis of T&T: the bearer of prohibition preventing our access to the incestuous object is not the living but the DEAD father, who, after his death, returns as his Name, i.e., the embodiment of the symbolic law/prohibition. What the matrix of T&T accounts for is thus the structural necessity of the parricide: the passage from direct brutal force to the rule of symbolic authority, of the prohibitory law, is always grounded in a (disavowed) act of primordial crime. Therein resides the dialectic of “You can only prove that you love me by betraying me”: the father is elevated into the venerated symbol of Law only after his betrayal and murder. This problematic also opens up the vaguaries of ignorance not the subject's, but the big Other's: “the father is dead, although unaware of it,” i.e., he doesn't know that his loving followers have (always-already) betrayed him. On the other hand, this means that the father “really thinks that he is a father,” that his authority directly emanates from his person, not merely from the empty symbolic place that he occupies and/or fills in. What the faithful follower should conceal from the paternal figure of the leader is precisely this gap between the leader in the immediacy of his personality and the symbolic place he occupies, a gap on account of which the father qua effective person is utterly impotent and ridiculous (King Lear, confronted violently with this betrayal and the ensuing unmasking of his impotence, and deprived of his symbolic title, is reduced to an old, raging, impotent fool). The heretical legend according to which Christ himself ordered Judas to betray

him (or at least let him know his wish between the lines...) is thus well-founded: in this necessity of the Betrayal of the Great Man, which can only assure his Fame, resides the ultimate mystery of Power.

However, there is still something missing in the T&T matrix. It is not enough to have the murdered father return as the agency of symbolic prohibition: this prohibition, to be effective, must be sustained by a positive act of Will. For that reason, Freud, in his *Moses and Monotheism* (M&M), added a further, last variation to the Oedipal dispositif. Here, the two paternal figures, however, are not the same as that in T&T: the two figures are here not the presymbolic obscene/non-castrated Father-Jouissance and the (dead) father qua bearer of the symbolic authority, i.e. the Name-of-the-Father, but the old Egyptian Moses (who, dispensing with earlier polytheistic superstitions, introduces monotheism, the notion of a universe as determined and ruled by a unique rational Order) and the Semitic Moses (Jehovah [Yahve], the jealous God who displays vengeful rage when He feels betrayed by his people). M&M turns around yet again the dispositif of T&T: the father “betrayed” and killed by his followers/sons is NOT the obscene primordial Father-Jouissance, but the “rational” father embodying the symbolic authority, the figure which personifies the unified rational structure of the universe (logos). Rather than the obscene pre-symbolic father returning in the guise of his Name, of symbolic authority, we have now the symbolic authority (logos) betrayed, killed by his followers/sons, and returning in the guise of the jealous, vengeful and unforgiving superego figure of a God full of murderous rage (1). Only after this second reversal of the Oedipal matrix do we reach the well-known Pascalian distinction between the God of Philosophers (God qua the universal structure of logos, identified with rational structure of the universe) and the God of Theologists (the God of love and hatred, the inscrutable “dark God” of capricious “irrational” predestination).

The crucial point is that, in contrast to the primordial father endowed by a knowledge about jouissance, this uncompromising God is that He says “No!” to jouissance as Lacan puts it, this God is possessed by a ferocious ignorance (“la féroce ignorance de Yahvé”) (2), by an attitude of “I refuse to know, I do not want to hear, anything about your dirty and secret ways of jouissance”; a God who banishes the universe of traditional sexualized wisdom, a universe with still a semblance of an ultimate harmony between the big Other (the symbolic order) and jouissance, and the notion of a macrocosm regulated by some underlying sexual tension of male and female “principles” (yin and yang, Light and Darkness, Earth and Heaven...). This God is the proto-existentialist God whose existence to apply anachronistically Sartre’s definition of man does not simply coincide with his essence (as with the Medieval God of St. Aquinas), but precedes it. Thus, He speaks in tautologies not only concerning his own quidditas (“I am what I am”), but also and above all in what concerns logos, the reasons for what He is doing, or, more precisely, for his injunctions (what He asks or prohibits us to do); His inexorable orders are ultimately grounded in “It is like this BECAUSE I SAY IT IS LIKE THIS!”. In short, this is the God of pure Will, of its capricious abyss which lies beyond any global rational order of logos, a God who does not have to account for anything he does (3)

This is the God who speaks to his followers/sons, to his “people” the intervention of voice here is crucial. As Lacan put it in his unpublished Seminar on Anxiety (from 1960-61), the voice (the actual “speech act”) brings about the passage à l’acte of the signifying network, its “symbolic efficiency.” This voice is inherently meaningless, nonsensical even, a negative gesture giving expression to God’s malicious and vengeful anger (all meaning is already there in the symbolic order which structures our universe); but it is precisely as such that it actualizes the purely structural meaning, transforming it into an experience of Sense (4). This, of course, is another way of saying that, through this uttering of the Voice which manifests his Will, God subjectivizes Himself. The old Egyptian Moses, betrayed and killed by his people, was the all-inclusive One of logos, the rational substantial structure of the universe, the “writing” accessible to those who know how to read the “great book of Nature,” not yet the all-exclusive One of subjectivity who imposes his unconditional Will on His creation.

This God of groundless Willing and ferocious “irrational” rage is the God who, by means of his Prohibition, destroys the old sexualized Wisdom, thus opening up the space for the de-sexualized, “abstract” knowledge of modern science. The paradox is that there is “objective” scientific knowledge (in the modern, post-Cartesian sense of the term) only if the universe of scientific knowledge itself is supplemented and sustained

by this excessive “irrational” figure of the prohibitive father; Descartes’ “voluntarism” (his infamous statement that 2+2 would be 5 if such were God’s Will, there are no eternal truths directly co-substantial with the Divine Nature) is the necessary obverse of modern scientific knowledge. Pre-modern Aristotelian and Medieval knowledge was not yet “objective,” rational, scientific precisely because it lacked this excessive element of God qua the subjectivity of pure “irrational” Willing: the Aristotelian God, directly equal to its own eternal rational Nature, “is” nothing but the logical Order of Things. A further paradox is that this “irrational” God, as the prohibitory paternal figure, also opens up the space for the entire development of modernity, up to the deconstructionist notion that our sexual identity is a contingent socio-symbolic formation: the moment this prohibitory figure recedes, we are back into Jungian neoobscurantist notions of masculine and feminine archetypes which thrive today. This point is crucial if we are not to misunderstand completely the gap which separates the “proper” authority of the symbolic law/prohibition from the mere “regulation by rules”: paradoxically, the domain of symbolic rules, to count as such, must be grounded in some tautological authority BEYOND RULES, which says, “It is so because said it so!”.

One can see, now, why, at the level of individual libidinal economy, Lacan calls this prohibiting God the “real father” as the “agent of castration”: symbolic castration is another name for the gap between the big Other and jouissance, for the fact that the two can never be “synchronized.” One can also see in what precise sense perversion enacts the disavowal of castration: the pervert’s fundamental illusion is that he possesses a (symbolic) knowledge which enables him to regulate his access to jouissance, i.e., put in more contemporary terms, the pervert’s dream is to transform sexual activity into an instrumental, purpose-oriented activity which can be projected and executed according to a well-defined plan. So when one speaks today of the decline of paternal authority, it is THIS father, the father of the uncompromising “No!”, who seems effectively to be in retreat; in his absence, in the absence of his prohibitory “No!”, new forms of the fantasmatic harmony between the symbolic order and jouissance can thrive again. This is what the so-called New Age “holistic” attitude ultimately is about, this renewal of the harmony between Reason and Life substance (Earth or macrocosm itself as a living entity) at the expense of the prohibitory “real father” (5).

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These deadlocks indicate that today, in a sense, “the big Other no longer exists” however, in WHAT sense? The big Other is somewhat the same as God according to Lacan (God is not dead today He was dead from the very beginning, except He didn’t know it...): it never existed in the first place, i.e., the “big Other’s” inexistence is ultimately equivalent to Its being the symbolic order, the order of symbolic fictions which operate at a level different from direct material causality. (In this sense, the only subject for whom the big Other does exist is the psychotic, the one who attributes to words direct material efficiency.) In short, the “inexistence of the big Other” is strictly correlative to the notion of belief, of symbolic trust, of credence, of taking what other’s say “at their word’s value.”

What is symbolic efficiency? We all know the old, worn-out joke about a madman who thought he was a grain of corn; after being finally cured and sent home, he immediately returned to the mental institution, explaining to the doctor his panic: “On the road, I encountered a hen, and I was afraid it would eat me!” To the doctor’s surprised exclamation, “But what’s the problem now? You know you’re not a grain but a man who cannot be swallowed by a hen!”, the madman answered “Yes, I know I am no longer a grain, but does the hen know it?”... This story, nonsensical at the level of factual reality where you either are a grain or not, is fully sensible if one replaces “grain” with some feature which determines my symbolic identity. Look at what occurs in our daily dealings with the bureaucratic hierarchy? For instance, a high-level office complies with my demand and gives me a higher title; however, it takes some time for the decree to be properly executed and reach the lower-level administration which effectively takes care of the benefits from this title (higher salary, etc.). We all know the frustration caused by a lower bureaucrat who, casting a glance at the decree, indifferently retorts:

“Sorry, I have not yet been properly informed about this new measure, so I can’t help you...”. Isn’t this somewhat like telling you: “Sorry, for us you’re still a grain of corn, not yet a human being?” In short, there

is a certain mysterious moment at which a measure or a decree becomes effectively operative, registered by the “big Other” of the symbolic institution. This mysterious moment can be exemplified by a funny thing which happened during the last election campaign in Slovenia. A friend of mine was approached for help by an elderly lady from his local constituency. She was convinced that the street number of her house (not the standard 13, but 23) was bringing her bad luck the moment her house was assigned this new number due to some administrative reorganization, misfortunes had started to afflict her (burglars broke in, a storm tore through the roof, neighbors began to annoy her...). She kindly asked my friend, a local candidate there, to arrange with the municipal authorities for the number to be changed. My friend made a simple suggestion to the lady: why didn't she do it herself? Why didn't she simply repaint or replace the plate with a different number (say, 23A or 231 instead of 23)? The old lady answered: “Oh, I tried that a couple of weeks ago, I added an A to 23, but it doesn't work, the misfortunes continue you cannot cheat it, it has to be done properly, by the responsible state institution...”. The “it” which cannot be duped is, of course, the “big Other” of the symbolic institution. Symbolic efficiency is thus about this minimum of “reification”: to become operative, it is not enough for all concerned individuals to know some fact; “it,” the symbolic institution, must also know/“register” this fact. This “it,” of course, can ultimately be embodied in the gaze of the absolute “big Other,” God Himself. Do we not encounter exactly the same problem as that of unfortunate old lady with those Catholics who, in order to avoid unwanted pregnancy, have intercourse only on days with no ovulation? Whom are they cheating, as if God could not know their desire for pleasurable sex without procreation? The Church was always extremely sensitive to this gap between mere existence and its proper inscription/registration: for example, unbaptized children who died were not allowed a proper burial on holy ground, since they were not yet properly inscribed into the community of believers ...

In one of the Marx brothers' films, Groucho Marx, when caught in a lie, answers angrily: “Whom do you believe, your eyes or my words?” This apparently absurd logic renders perfectly the functioning of the symbolic order, in which the symbolic mask-mandate matters more than the direct reality of the individual who wears this mask and/or assumes this mandate. This functioning involves the structure of fetishist disavowal: “I know very well that things are the way I see them /that this person is a corrupted weakling/, but I nonetheless treat him respectfully, since he wears the insignia of a judge, so that when he speaks, it is the Law itself which speaks through him”. So, in a way, I effectively believe his words, not my eyes, i.e., I believe in Another Space (the domain of pure symbolic authority) which matters more than the reality of its spokesmen. The cynical reduction to reality thus falls short: when a judge speaks, there is in a way more truth in his words (the words of the Institution of law) than in the direct reality of the person of judge if one limits oneself to what one sees, one simply misses the point. Lacan aims at this paradox with his “les non-dupes errent”: those who do not allow themselves to be caught in the symbolic deception/fiction, who continue to believe their eyes, are the ones who err most. A cynic who “believes only his eyes” misses the efficiency of the symbolic fiction, and how it structures our experience of reality. The same gap is at work in our most intimate relationship to our neighbors: we behave AS IF we do not know that they also smell bad, secrete excrements, etc. a minimum of idealization, of fetishizing disavowal, is the basis of our co-existence.

Today, new digitalized technologies enable perfectly faked documentary images, not to mention Virtual Reality, so that the motto “believe my words (argumentation), not the fascination of your eyes!” is more actual than ever. It is crucial to keep in sight how the logic of “Whom do you believe, your eyes or my words?” (i.e., “I know well, but nonetheless ... /I believe/”) can function in two different ways that of the symbolic fiction and that of the imaginary simulacrum. In the case of the efficient symbolic fiction of the judge wearing his insignia, “I know very well that this person is a corrupt weakling, but I nonetheless treat him as if /I believe that/ the symbolic big Other speaks through him”: I disavow what my eyes tell me and choose to believe the symbolic fiction. On the contrary, in the case of the simulacrum of virtual reality, “I know very well that what I see is an illusion generated by digital machinery, but I nonetheless accept to immerse myself in it, to behave as if I believe it.” Here, I disavow what my (symbolic) knowledge tells me and choose to believe my eyes only ...

However, the supreme example of the power of the symbolic fiction as the medium of universality is perhaps Christianity proper, i.e., the belief in Christ's Resurrection: the death of the “real” Christ is

“sublated” in the Holy Ghost, in the spiritual community of believers. This authentic kernel of Christianity, first articulated by St. Paul, is today under attack in the guise of the New Age gnostic/dualist (mis)reading, which reduces the Resurrection to the metaphor of the “inner” spiritual growth of the individual soul. What is lost is the central tenet of Christianity: the break with the Old Testament logic of Sin and Punishment, i.e. the miracle of Grace, which retroactively “undoes”, erases our past sins. The “good message” of the New Testament is that the miracle of creatio ex nihilo a New Beginning, starting a new life “from nothing” is possible. (Creatio ex nihilo, the establishment of a new symbolic fiction which erases the past one, of course is feasible only within a symbolic universe). The crucial point is that this New Beginning is possible only through Divine Grace its impetus must come from outside, and not as the result of man’s inner effort to overcome his limitations and elevate his soul above egotistic material interests. In this precise sense, the properly Christian New Beginning is absolutely incompatible with the pagan gnostic problematic of the “purification of the soul.”

One of the obsessions of the contemporary New Age approach to Plato is to unearth beneath his public teaching at our disposal in his written dialogues his true, esoteric doctrine, Plato’s so called “secret teaching”. This “secret teaching” exemplifies case of the theoretical obscene Other which accompanies, as a kind of shadowy double, the One of pure theory. But, on a closer look, the positive content of this “secret teaching” reveals itself to be pop-wisdom commonplaces a la Joseph Campbell sold at airport bookstores: the New Age platitudes about the duality of cosmic principles, about how the One, the positive principle of Light, must be accompanied by the primordial Otherness, the mysterious dark principle of feminine matter. Therein resides the basic paradox of Plato’s mysterious “secret teaching”: the secret we are supposed to discern through the arduous work of textual archeology is none other than the most notorious New Age pop-wisdom a nice example of Lacanian topology in which the innermost kernel coincides with the radical externality. This is simply another chapter in the eternal fight waged by obscurantist Illumination against Enlightenment: insofar as Plato was the first great Enlightener, the obsession with his secret teaching bears witness to the effort to prove that Plato himself was already an obscurantist preaching a special initiatic doctrine.

The goal of recent New Age pop-gnostic endeavors to reassert a kind of Christ’s “secret teaching” beneath the official Paulinian dogma is the same: to undo, to erase, the radical novelty of the “Event-Christ,” reducing it to a continuation of the preceding gnostic lineage. Another important aspect of this gnostic (mis)reading of Christianity is the growing obsession of the popular pseudo-science with the mystery of the Christ’s alleged tomb and/or progeny from his alleged marriage with Mary Magdalene. Bestsellers like *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* or *The Tomb of God*, focusing on the region around Rennes-le-Château in the south of France, weave a large coherent narrative out of the Grail myth, Cathars, Templars, Freemasons, etc., and endeavour to supplant the diminishing power of the symbolic fiction of the Holy Ghost (the community of believers) with the bodily Real of Christ and/or his descendants. The fact that Christ left behind his body or bodily descendants undermines the Christian-Paulinian narrative of Resurrection: Christ’s body was not effectively resurrected, “the true message of Jesus was lost with the Resurrection” (6). This “true message” allegedly resides in promoting “the path of self-determination, as distinct from obedience to the written word” (7): redemption results from the soul’s inner journey, not from an act of Pardon coming from Outside. “Resurrection” is to be understood as the inner renewal/rebirth of the soul on its journey of self-purification. For the advocates of this “return of/in the real,” their discovery is the unearthing of the heretic and subversive secret long repressed by the Church as Institution; however, what if this very unearthing of the “Secret” serves the “undoing,” the riddance of the truly traumatic, subversive core of Christian teaching, the skandalon of Resurrection and retroactive pardon of sins, i.e., the unique character of the Event of Resurrection?

These vicissitudes signal that, today, “the big Other doesn’t exist” is more radical than the usual one, synonymous with symbolic order: this symbolic trust, which persists against all sceptical data, is more and more undermined. The first paradox of this retreat of the big Other is discernible in the so-called “culture of

complaint” with its underlying logic of resentment: far from cheerfully assuming the inexistence of the big Other, the subject blames the Other for its failure and/or impotence, as if the Other is guilty for the fact that it doesn’t exist, i.e. as if impotence is no excuse. The more the subject’s structure is “narcissistic,” the more he blames the big Other, and thus asserts his dependence on it. The “culture of complaint” thus calls on the big Other to intervene, and to set things straight (to recompense the damaged sexual or ethnic minority, etc., although how exactly this is to be done is a matter of different ethico-legal “committees”). The specific feature of the “culture of complaint” lies in its legalistic twist, in the endeavor to translate the complaint into the legal obligation of the Other (usually the State) to indemnify one for what? For the very unfathomable surplus-enjoyment of which I am deprived, whose lack makes me feel deprived. Thus, is not the “culture of complaint” today’s version of the hysterical impossible demand, addressed to the Other, which effectively wants to be rejected, since the subject grounds its existence in its complaint: “I am insofar as I make the Other responsible and/or guilty for my misery”? The gap here is insurmountable between this logic of complaint and the true “radical” (“revolutionary”) act which, instead of complaining to the Other and expecting it to act (i.e. displacing the need to act onto it), suspends the existing legal frame and itself accomplishes the act. What is wrong with the complaint of the truly deprived is that, instead of undermining the position of the Other, they still address It: they, translating their demand into legalistic complaint, confirm the Other in its position by their very attack.

Furthermore, a wide scope of phenomena the resurgent ethico/religious “fundamentalisms” which advocate a return to the Christian or Islamic patriarchal division of sexual roles; the New Age massive re-sexualization of the universe, i.e., the return to pre-modern, pagan, sexualized cosmo-ontology; the growth of “conspiracy theories” as a form of popular “cognitive mapping” seem to counter the retreat of the big Other. These phenomena cannot be simply dismissed as “regressive,” as new modes of “escape from freedom,” as unfortunate “remainders of the past” which will disappear if only we continue more resolutely on the deconstructionist path of historicisation of every fixed identity, of unmasking the contingency of every naturalized self-image. Rather, these disturbing phenomena compel us to elaborate the contours of the big Other’s retreat: The paradoxical result of this mutation in the “inexistence of the Other” (of the growing collapse of the symbolic efficiency) is precisely the re-emergence of the different facets of a big Other which exists effectively, in the Real, and not merely as symbolic fiction.

The belief in the big Other which exists in the Real is the most succinct definition of paranoia, so that, two features which characterize today’s ideological stance cynical distance and full reliance on paranoiac fantasy are strictly codependent: today’s typical subject, while displaying cynical distrust of any public ideology, indulges without restraint in paranoiac fantasies about conspiracies, threats, and excessive forms of enjoyment of the Other. Distrust of the big Other (the order of symbolic fictions), the subject’s refusal to “take it seriously,” relies on the belief that there is an “Other of the Other,” a secret, invisible, all-powerful agent who effectively “pulls the strings” behind the visible, public Power. This other, obscene, invisible power structure acts the part of the “Other of the Other” in the Lacanian sense, the part of the meta-guarantee of the consistency of the big Other (the symbolic order that regulates social life).

Here we should look for the roots of the recent impasse of narrativization, i.e., of the “end of large narratives”. In our era, when global, all-encompassing narratives (“the struggle of liberal democracy with totalitarianism”, etc.) no longer seem possible in politics and ideology as well as in literature and cinema the paranoiac narrative of a “conspiracy theory” appears the only way to arrive at a kind of global “cognitive mapping.” We see this paranoiac narrative not only in right-wing populism and fundamentalism, but also in the liberal center (the “mystery” of Kennedy’s assassination) and left-wing orientations (the American Left’s old obsession that some mysterious government agency is experimenting with nerve gases to regulate the behavior of the population). It is all too simplistic to dismiss conspiracy-narratives as the paranoiac proto-Fascist reaction of the infamous “middle classes” which feel threatened by the process of modernization: it would be much more productive to conceive “conspiracy theory” as a kind of floating signifier which could be appropriated by different political options to obtain a minimal cognitive mapping.

This, then, is one version of the big Other which persists in the wake of its alleged disappearance. Another version operates in the guise of the New Age, Jungian re-sexualization of the universe (“men are from Mars, women are from Venus”), according to which there is an underlying, deeply anchored archetypal identity which provides a safe haven in the flurry of contemporary confusion of roles and identities. From this perspective, the ultimate origin of today’s crisis is not the difficulty to overcome the tradition of fixed sexual roles, but modern man’s unbalanced emphasis on the male/rational/conscious aspect at the expense of the feminine/compassionate one. While sharing with feminism the anti-Cartesian and anti-patriarchal bias, this tendency rewrites the feminist agenda into a re-assertion of archetypal feminine roots repressed in our competitive, male, mechanistic universe. Another version of the real Other is the figure of the father as sexual harasser of his young daughters, which stands at the core of the so-called “false-memory-syndrome”: here, also, the suspended father as the agent of symbolic authority i.e., the embodiment of a symbolic fiction “returns in the real” (the controversy is caused by the contention of those advocating remembrance of childhood sexual abuses, that sexual harassment by the father is not merely fantasy or, at least, an indissoluble mixture of fact and fantasy, but a plain fact, something that in the majority of families “really happened” an obstinacy comparable to Freud’s no less obstinate insistence on the murder of the “primordial father” as a real event in humanity’s prehistory.) There is, however, yet another, much more interesting and uncanny assertion of the big Other, clearly discernible in the allegedly “liberating” notion that, today, individuals are compelled to (re)invent the rules of their co-existence without any guarantee of some meta-norm Kant’s ethical philosophy was already its exemplary case. In *Coldness and Cruelty*, Deleuze provides an unsurpassable formulation of Kant’s radically new conception of the moral Law:

... the law is no longer regarded as dependent on the Good, but on the contrary, the Good itself is made to depend on the law. This means that the law no longer has its foundation in some higher principle from which it would derive its authority, but that it is self-grounded and valid solely by virtue of its own form. [...] Kant, by establishing THE LAW as an ultimate ground or principle, added an essential dimension to modern thought: the object of the law is by definition unknowable and elusive. ... Clearly THE LAW, as defined by its pure form, without substance or object of any determination whatsoever, is such that no one knows nor can know what it is. It operates without making itself known. It defines a realm of transgression where one is already guilty, and where one oversteps the bounds without knowing what they are, as in the case of Oedipus. Even guilt and punishment do not tell us what the law is, but leave it in a state of indeterminacy equaled only by the extreme specificity of the punishment.” (8)

The Kantian Law is thus not merely an empty form applied to random empirical content in order to ascertain if this content meets the criteria of ethical adequacy. Rather, the empty form of the Law functions as the promise of an absent content (never) to come. The form is not a kind of neutral-universal mould of the plurality of different empirical contents; the autonomy of the Form rather bears witness to the uncertainty which persists with regard to the content of our acts we never know if the determinate content which accounts for the specificity of our acts is the right one, i.e., if we have effectively acted in accordance with the Law rather than being guided by some hidden pathological motifs. Kant thus announces the notion of Law which culminates in Kafka and the experience of modern political “totalitarianism”: since, in the case of the Law, its *Dass-Sein* (the fact of the Law) precedes its *Was-Sein* (what this Law is), the subject finds himself in a situation in which, although he knows there is a Law, he never knows (and a priori cannot know) what this Law is a gap forever separates the Law from its positive incarnations. The subject is thus, a priori, in his very existence, guilty: guilty without knowing what he is guilty of (and for that very reason guilty), infracting the law without knowing its exact regulations. For the first time in the history of philosophy, the assertion of the Law is unconscious: Form experienced without content is always the index of a repressed content the more intensely the subject sticks to the empty form, the more traumatic the repressed content becomes.

The gap that separates this Kantian version of the subject reinventing the rules of his ethical conduct from the postmodern Foucauldian version is easily discernible. Both assert that ethical judgments ultimately display the structure of aesthetic judgement (in which, instead of simply applying a universal rule to a particular situation, one must (re)invent the universal rule in each unique concrete situation); however, in

Foucault, this simply means that the subject is thrown into a situation in which he has to shape his ethical project with no support in any transcendent(al) Law, while for Kant, this very absence of Law in the specific sense of a determinate set of positive universal norms renders all the more sensible the unbearable pressure of the moral Law qua the pure empty injunction to do one's Duty. From the Lacanian perspective, it is here that we encounter the crucial distinction between rules to be invented and their underlying Law/Prohibition: it is only when the Law qua set of positive universal symbolic norms fails to appear, that we encounter the Law at its most radical, the Law in its aspect of the Real of an unconditional injunction. The paradox to be emphasized here resides in the precise nature of the Prohibition involved by the moral Law: at its most fundamental, this Prohibition is not the prohibition to accomplish some positive act which would violate the Law, but the self-referential prohibition to confuse the "impossible" Law with any positive symbolic prescription and/or prohibition, i.e., to claim for any positive set of norms the status of the law. Ultimately, the Prohibition means that the place of the Law itself must remain empty.

Put in classic Freudian terms: in Foucault we get a set of rules regulating the "care of the Self" in his "use of pleasures" (in short, a reasonable application of the "pleasure-principle"), while in Kant the (re)invention of rules follows an injunction which comes from the "beyond the pleasure-principle." Of course, the Foucauldian/Deleuzian answer would be that Kant is ultimately the victim of a kind of perspective illusion which leads him to (mis)perceive the radical immanence of ethical norms the fact that the subject has to invent the norms regulating his conduct autonomously, at his own expense and responsibility, with no big Other to take the blame for it as its exact opposite, as radical transcendence, presupposing the existence of an inscrutable, transcendent "big Other" who terrorizes us with its unconditional injunction, and simultaneously prohibits us access to it; we are under compulsion to do our Duty, but forever prevented from clearly knowing what this Duty is. The Freudian answer is that such a solution (the translation of the big Other's inscrutable Call of Duty into immanence) relies on the disavowal of the Unconscious: what usually passes unnoticed is that Foucault's rejection of the psychoanalytic account of sexuality also involves a thorough rejection of the Freudian Unconscious. If we read Kant in psychoanalytic terms, the gap between self-invented rules and their underlying Law is none other than the gap between (consciously-preconscious) rules we follow and the Law qua unconscious: the basic lesson of psychoanalysis is that what is unconscious is, at its most radical, not the wealth of illicit "repressed" desires but the fundamental Law itself.

So, even in the case of a narcissistic subject dedicated to the "care of the Self," his "use of pleasures" is sustained by the unconscious, unconditional superego-injunction to enjoy. Is not the ultimate proof of this feeling of guilt which haunts him when he fails in his pursuit of pleasures? According to sociological investigations, people find less and less attraction in sexual activity; this uncanny, growing indifference towards intense sexual pleasure contrasts starkly with the official ideology of our postmodern society as bent on instant gratification and pleasure-seeking. So, we have a subject who dedicates his life to pleasure and becomes so deeply involved in the preparatory activities (jogging, massages, tanning, applying cremes and lotions...) that the attraction of the official Goal of his efforts fades away; a brief stroll today along New York's Christopher Street or Chelsea reveals hundreds of gays putting extraordinary energy into body-building, obsessed with getting old, dedicated to pleasure, yet obviously living in permanent anxiety and under the shadow of ultimate failure... the superego has again successfully accomplished its work: the direct injunction "Enjoy!" is a much more effective way to hinder the subject's access to enjoyment than the explicit Prohibition which sustains the space for its transgression. The lesson of it is that the narcissistic "care of the Self," and not the "repressive" network of social prohibitions, is the ultimate enemy of intense sexual experiences. The utopia of a post-psychoanalytic subjectivity engaged in the pursuit of new, idiosyncratic bodily pleasures beyond sexuality has reverted into disinterested boredom; and the direct intervention of pain (sado-masochistic sexual practices) seems the only remaining path to the intense experience of pleasure.

Thus, the fact that "the big Other doesn't exist" (as the efficient symbolic fiction) has two interconnected, although opposed, consequences: on the one hand, the failure of symbolic fiction induces the subject to cling more and more to imaginary simulacra, to sensual spectacles which bombard us today from all sides; while on the other, it triggers the need for violence in the Real of the body itself (cutting and piercing the flesh, or

inserting prosthetic objects into the body).

Notes:

- (1) For a concise description of these shifts, see Michel Lapeyre, *Au-delà du complexe d'Oedipe* (Paris: Anthropos-Economica 1997).
- (2) The title of Chapter IX of Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, livre XVII: L'envers de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Editions du Seuil 1991).
- (3) In the history of philosophy, this crack in the global rational edifice of macrocosm in which the Divine Will appears was first opened up by Duns Scotus; but we owe to F.W.J. Schelling the most piercing descriptions of this horrifying abyss of Will. Schelling opposed the Will to the "principle of sufficient reason": pure Willing is always self-identical, it relies only onto its own act – "I want it because I want it!". In his descriptions of horrifying poetic beauty, Schelling emphasized how ordinary people are horrified when they encounter a person whose behaviors displays such an unconditional Will: there is something fascinating, properly hypnotic about it, one is as if bewitched by its sight... Schelling's emphasis on the abyss of pure Willing, of course, targets Hegel's alleged "panlogicism": Schelling wants to prove that the Hegelian universal logical system is in itself *stricto sensu* impotent it is a system of pure potentialities, and as such in need of the supplementary "irrational" act of pure Will in order to actualize itself.
- (4) For a more detailed account of this distinction, see Chapter 2 of Slavoj Zizek, *The Indivisible Remainder* (London: Verso 1996).
- (5) A sign of how even the Church is not resistant to this shift in the fundamental attitude are the recent grass-root pressures on the Pope to elevate Mary to the status of co-redemptrix: one expects the Pope to render the Catholic Church viable for the post-paternal third millenium by proclaiming a dogma which asserts that the only way for us, sinful mortals, to gain divine mercy, is via our plea to Mary, who serves as mediator, i.e., if we convince her, she will speak in our favor to Christ, her son.
- (6) Richard Andrews and Paul Schellenberger, *The Tomb of God* (London: Warner Books 1997), p. 433.
- (7) *Op.cit.*, p. 428.
- (8) Gilles Deleuze, *Coldness and Cruelty* (New York: Zone Books 1991), p. 82-83.