

THE PUPPET AND THE DWARF

THE PERVERSE CORE OF CHRISTIANITY



SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

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SHORT CIRCUITS

Slavoj Žižek, editor

The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity, by Slavoj Žižek

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The Perverse Core of Christianity

Slavoj Žižek

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CHAPTER 4

FROM LAW TO LOVE . . . AND BACK

The paradox of the “Higgs field” is widely discussed in contemporary particle physics. Left to their own devices in an environment to which they can pass on their energy, all physical systems will eventually assume a state of lowest energy; to put it in another way, the more mass we take from a system, the more we lower its energy level, until we reach the vacuum state at which the energy level is zero. There are, however, phenomena which compel us to posit the hypothesis that there has to be something (some substance) that we cannot take away from a given system without raising that system’s energy—this “something” is called the Higgs field: once this field appears in a vessel that has been pumped empty, and whose temperature has been lowered as much as possible, its energy will be further lowered. The “something” that thus appears is a something that contains less energy than nothing, a “something” that is characterized by an overall negative energy—in short, what we get here is the physical version of how “something appears out of nothing.”

On the philosophico-ontological level, this is what Lacan is aiming at when he emphasizes the difference between the Freudian death drive and the so-called “nirvana principle” according to which every life system tends toward the lowest level of tension, ultimately toward death: “nothingness” (the void, being deprived of all substance) and the lowest level of energy paradoxically no longer coincide, that is, it is “cheaper” (it costs the system less energy) to persist in “something” than to dwell in “nothing,” at the lowest level of tension, or in the void, the dissolution of all order. It is this distance that sustains the death drive: far from being the same as the nirvana principle (the striving toward the dissolution of all life tension, the longing for the return to original nothingness), the death drive is the tension which persists and insists beyond and against the nirvana principle. In other words, far from being opposed to the pleasure principle, the nirvana principle is its highest and most radical expression. In this precise sense, the death drive stands for its exact opposite, for the dimension of the “undead,” of a spectral life which insists beyond (biological) death. And, in psychoanalysis proper, does not this paradox of the Higgs field also embody the mystery of

symbolic castration—a deprivation, a gesture of taking away, which is in itself giving, productive, generating, opening up and sustaining the space in which something(s) can appear?

Insofar as “death” and “life” designate for Saint Paul two existential (subjective) positions, not “objective” facts, we are fully justified in raising the old Pauline question: who is really alive today?¹ What if we are “really alive” only if and when we engage ourselves with an excessive intensity which puts us beyond “mere life”? What if, when we focus on mere survival, even if it is qualified as “having a good time,” what we ultimately lose is life itself? What if the Palestinian suicide bomber on the point of blowing himself (and others) up is, in an emphatic sense, “more alive” than the American soldier engaged in a war in front of a computer screen hundreds of miles away from the enemy, or a New York yuppie jogging along the Hudson river in order to keep his body in shape? Or, in terms of the psychoanalytic clinic, what if a hysteric is truly alive in her permanent, excessive, provoking questioning of her existence, while an obsessional is the very model of choosing a “life in death”? That is to say, is not the ultimate aim of his compulsive rituals to prevent the “thing” from happening—this “thing” being the excess of life itself? Is not the catastrophe he fears the fact that, finally, *something* will really happen to him? Or, in terms of the revolutionary process, what if the difference that separates Lenin’s era from Stalinism is, again, the difference between life and death?

There is an apparently marginal feature which clearly illustrates this point: the basic attitude of a Stalinist Communist is that of following the correct Party line against “Rightist” or “Leftist” deviation—in short, to steer a safe middle course; for authentic Leninism, in clear contrast, there is ultimately only one deviation, the Centrist one—that of “playing it safe,” of opportunistically avoiding the risk of clearly and excessively “taking sides.” There was no “deeper historical necessity,” for example, in the sudden shift of Soviet policy from “War Communism” to the “New Economic Policy” in 1921—it was just a desperate strategic zigzag between the Leftist and the Rightist line, or, as Lenin himself put it in 1922, the Bolsheviks made

“all the possible mistakes.” This excessive “taking sides,” this permanent imbalance of zigzag, is ultimately (the revolutionary political) life itself—for a Leninist, the ultimate name of the counterrevolutionary Right is “Center” itself, the fear of introducing a radical imbalance into the social edifice.

It is a properly Nietzschean paradox that the greatest loser in this apparent assertion of Life against all transcendent Causes is actual life itself. What makes life “worth living” is the very *excess* of life: the awareness that there is something for which we are ready to risk our life (we may call this excess “freedom,” “honor,” “dignity,” “autonomy,” etc.). Only when we are ready to take this risk are we really alive. So when Hölderlin wrote: “To live is to defend a form,” this form is not simply a *Lebensform*, but the form of the excess-of-life, the way this excess violently inscribes itself into the life-texture. Chesterton makes this point apropos of the paradox of courage:

A soldier surrounded by enemies, if he is to cut his way out, needs to combine a strong desire for living with a strange carelessness about dying. He must not merely cling to life, for then he will be a coward, and will not escape. He must not merely wait for death, for then he will be a suicide, and will not escape. He must seek his life in a spirit of furious indifference to it; he must desire life like water and yet drink death like wine.²

The “postmetaphysical” survivalist stance of the Last Men ends up in an anemic spectacle of life dragging on as its own shadow. It is within this horizon that we should appreciate today’s growing rejection of the death penalty: what we should be able to discern is the hidden “biopolitics” which sustains this rejection. Those who assert the “sacredness of life,” defending it against the threat of transcendent powers which parasitize on it, end up in a “supervised world in which we’ll live painlessly, safely—and tediously,”³ a world in which, for the sake of its very official goal—a long, pleasurable life—all real pleasures are prohibited or strictly controlled (smoking, drugs, food. . .). Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* is the latest example of this survivalist attitude toward dying, with its “demystifying”

presentation of war as a meaningless slaughter which nothing can really justify—as such, it provides the best possible justification for Colin Powell’s “No-casualties-on-our-side” military doctrine.

On today’s market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol. . . . And the list goes on: what about virtual sex as sex without sex, the Colin Powell doctrine of warfare with no casualties (on our side, of course) as warfare without warfare, the contemporary redefinition of politics as the art of expert administration as politics without politics, up to today’s tolerant liberal multiculturalism as an experience of the Other deprived of its Otherness (the idealized Other who dances fascinating dances, and has an ecologically sound, holistic approach to reality, while features like wife-beating remain out of sight)? Virtual Reality simply generalizes this procedure of offering a product deprived of its substance: it provides reality itself deprived of its substance, of the hard resistant kernel of the Real—just as decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like real coffee without being the real coffee, Virtual Reality is experienced as reality without being so.

Is this not the attitude of the hedonistic Last Man? Everything is permitted, you can enjoy everything, but deprived of its substance, which makes it dangerous. (This is also the Last Man’s revolution—“revolution without revolution.”) Is this not one of the two versions of Lacan’s anti-Dostoevsky motto “If God doesn’t exist, everything is prohibited”? (1) God is dead, we live in a permissive universe, you should strive for pleasure, you should avoid dangerous excesses, so everything is prohibited if it is not deprived of its substance. (2) If God is dead, the superego enjoins you to enjoy, but every determinate enjoyment is already a betrayal of the unconditional one, so it should be prohibited. The nutritive version of this is to enjoy the Thing Itself directly: why bother with coffee? Inject caffeine directly into your bloodstream! Why bother with sensual perceptions and excitation by external reality? Take drugs which directly affect your brain! And if God does exist, then everything is permitted—to those who claim to act directly on behalf of God, as the instruments of His

will; clearly, a direct link to God justifies our violation of any “merely human” constraints and considerations (as in Stalinism, where the reference to the big Other of historical Necessity justifies absolute ruthlessness).

Today’s hedonism combines pleasure with constraint: it is no longer the old notion of the right balance between pleasure and constraint, but a kind of pseudo-Hegelian immediate coincidence of opposites: action and reaction should coincide; the very thing that causes damage should already be the remedy. The ultimate example is arguably a *chocolate laxative*, available in the USA, with the paradoxical injunction: Do you have constipation? Eat more of this chocolate! (that is, of the very thing that causes constipation). Do we not find here a weird version of Wagner’s famous “Only the spear which caused the wound can heal it,” from *Parsifal*? And is not a negative proof of the hegemony of this stance the fact that genuine unconstrained consumption (in all its forms: drugs, free sex, smoking) is emerging as the main danger? The fight against such danger is one of the principal motivations of today’s biopolitics. Solutions are desperately sought that would reproduce the paradox of the chocolate laxative. The main contender is safe sex—a term which makes us appreciate the truth of the old saying “Isn’t having sex with a condom like taking a shower with your raincoat on?” The ultimate goal here would be, along the lines of decaffeinated coffee, to invent opium without opium: no wonder marijuana is so popular among liberals who want to legalize it—it already is a kind of opium without opium.

In his scathing remarks on Wagner, Nietzsche diagnosed Wagner’s decadence as consisting in a combination of asceticism and excessive morbid excitation: the excitation is false, artificial, morbid, hysterical, and the ensuing peace is also a fake, that of an almost medical tranquilization. This, for Nietzsche, was the universe of *Parsifal*, which embodied Wagner’s capitulation to the appeal of Christianity: the ultimate fake of Christianity is that it sustains its official message of inner peace and redemption by a morbid excitation, namely, a fixation on the suffering, mutilated corpse of Christ. The very term

passion here is revealing in its ambiguity: passion as suffering, passion as passion—as if the only thing that can arouse passion is the sick spectacle of passive suffering. The key question, of course, is: can Saint Paul be reduced to mixture of morbid excitation and ascetic renunciation? Is not the Pauline *agape* precisely an attempt to break out of the morbid cycle of law and sin sustaining each other?

More generally, what, exactly, is the status of the excess, the too-muchness (Eric Santner) of life with regard to itself? Is this excess generated only by the turn of life against itself, so that it actualizes itself only in the guise of the morbid undeadness of the sick passion? Or, in Lacanese: is the excess of *jouissance* over pleasure generated only through the reversal of the repression of desire into the desire for repression, of the renunciation of desire into the desire for renunciation, and so on? It is crucial to reject this version, and to assert some kind of primordial excess or too-muchness of life itself: human life never coincides with itself; to be fully alive means to be larger than life, and a morbid denial of life is not a denial of life itself, but, rather, the denial of this excess. How, then, are the two excesses related: the excess inherent to life itself, and the excess generated by the denial of life? Is it not that the excess generated by the denial of life is a kind of revenge, a return of the excess repressed by the denial of life?

A state of emergency coinciding with the normal state is the political formula of this predicament: in today's antiterrorist politics, we find the same mixture of morbid excitation and tranquilization. The official aim of Homeland Security appeals to the US population in early 2003, intended to make them ready for a terrorist attack, was to calm people down: everything is under control, just follow the rules and carry on with your life. However, the very warning that people must be ready for a large-scale attack sustained the tension: the effort to keep the situation under control asserted the prospect of a catastrophe in a negative way. The aim was to get the population used to leading their daily lives under the threat of a looming catastrophe, and thus to introduce a kind of permanent state of emergency (since, let us not forget, we were informed in the fall of 2002 that the War on Terror will go on for decades, at least for our life-

time). We should therefore interpret the different levels of the Alert Code (red, orange) as a state strategy to control the necessary level of excitation, and it is precisely through such a permanent state of emergency, in which we are interpellated to participate through our readiness, that the power asserts its hold over us.

In *The Others* (Alejandro Amenabar, 2001), Nicole Kidman, a mother who lives with her two young children in a haunted house on Jersey Island, discovers at the end that they are all ghosts: a couple of years before, she first strangled her children and then shot herself (it is the “intruders” who disturb their peace from time to time who are the real people, potential buyers interested in their house). The only interesting feature of this rather ineffective *Sixth Sense*-type final twist is the precise reason why Kidman returns as a ghost: she cannot assume her Medea-like act—in a way, continuing to live as a ghost (who doesn’t know that she is one) symbolizes her ethical compromise, her unreadiness to confront the terrible act constitutive of subjectivity. This reversal is not simply symmetrical: instead of ghosts disturbing real people, appearing to them, it is the real people who disturb the ghosts, appearing to them. Is it not like this when—to paraphrase Saint Paul—we are not alive in our “real” lives? It is not that, in such a case, the promise of real life haunts us in a ghost-like form? Today we are like the anemic Greek philosophers who read Paul’s words on the Resurrection with ironic laughter. The only Absolute acceptable within this horizon is a negative one: absolute Evil, whose paradigmatic figure today is that of the Holocaust. The evocation of the Holocaust serves as a warning of what the ultimate result of the submission of Life to some higher Goal is.

What characterizes the human universe is the complication in the relationship between the living and the dead: as Freud wrote apropos of the killing of the primordial father, the murdered father returns more powerful than ever in the guise of the “virtual” symbolic authority. What is uncanny here is the gap which opens up with the reduplication of life and death in the symbolic medium, on account of the noncoincidence of the two circles: we get people who are still alive, although symbolically they are already dead, and people who

are already dead, although symbolically they are still alive. The double meaning of the term “spirit” (if we ignore the alcoholic association)—“pure” spirituality and ghosts—is thus structurally necessary: no (pure) spirit without its obscene supplement, ghosts, their spectral pseudo-materiality, the “living dead.” The category of the “undead” is crucial here: those who are not dead, although they are no longer alive, and continue to haunt us. The fundamental problem here is how to prevent the dead from returning, how to put them properly to rest.

I am tempted to construct a mock Hegelian triad here: a living organism is negated first by its death (a once-living organism dies); then, more radically, in absolute negation, by something which always-already was dead (an inanimate thing, a stone); finally, in a “negation of negation,” there emerges a mock synthesis in the guise of the apparition of the “living dead,” the undead, a spectral entity which, in its death itself, as dead, continues to live. Or, to put it in the terms of the Greimasian semiotic square: the main opposition is the one between alive and dead (as inanimate, never having been alive); this couple is then redoubled by the couple of dead (as no longer alive) and undead (as alive after death).

Perhaps we should therefore add another twist to the prohibition on killing: at its most fundamental, this prohibition concerns not the living, but the dead. “Don’t kill . . .” whom? *The dead*. You can kill the living—on condition that you bury them properly, that you perform the proper rites. These rites, of course, are fundamentally ambivalent: through them, you show your respect for the dead, and thereby prevent them from returning to haunt you. This ambivalence of the work of mourning is clearly discernible in the two opposed attitudes toward the dead: on the one hand, we should not ignore them, but mark their death properly, perform the proper rituals; on the other hand, there is something obscene, transgressive, in talking about the dead at all. We find the same ambivalence in the “speak no ill of the dead” motto: we should not judge the dead—yet is it not a fact that it is *only* the dead whom we can really adequately judge, since their life is completed?

When, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger insists that death is the only event which cannot be taken over by another subject for me—another cannot die for me, in my place—the obvious counterexample is Christ himself: did he not, in the extreme gesture of interpassivity, take over for us the ultimate passive experience of dying? Christ dies so that we are given a chance to live forever. . . . The problem here is not only that, obviously, we don't live forever (the answer to this is that it is the Holy Spirit, the community of believers, which lives forever), but the subjective status of Christ: when he was dying on the Cross, did he know about his Resurrection-to-come? If he did then it was all a game, the supreme divine comedy, since Christ knew his suffering was just a spectacle with a guaranteed good outcome—in short, Christ was faking despair in his “Father, why hast thou forsaken me?” If he didn't, then in what precise sense was Christ (also) divine? Did God the Father limit the scope of knowledge of Christ's mind to that of a common human consciousness, so that Christ actually thought he was dying abandoned by his father? Was Christ, in effect, occupying the position of the son in the wonderful joke about the rabbi who turns in despair to God, asking Him what he should do with his bad son, who has deeply disappointed him; God calmly answers: “Do the same as I did: write a new testament!”

What is crucial here is the radical ambiguity of the term “the faith of Jesus Christ,” which can be read as subjective or objective genitive: it can be either “the faith of Christ” or “the faith / of us, believers / in Christ.” Either we are redeemed because of Christ's pure faith, or we are redeemed by our faith in Christ, if and insofar as we believe in him. Perhaps there is a way to read the two meanings together: what we are called to believe in is not Christ's divinity as such but, rather, his faith, his sinless purity. What Christianity proposes is the figure of Christ as our *subject supposed to believe*: in our ordinary lives, we never truly believe, but we can at least have the consolation that there is One who truly believes (the function of what Lacan, in his seminar *Encore*, called *y'a de l'un*). The final twist here, however, is that on the Cross, Christ himself has to suspend his belief momentarily. So maybe, at a deeper level, Christ is, rather, our (believers') *subject*

supposed NOT to believe: it is not our belief we transpose onto others, but, rather, our disbelief itself. Instead of doubting, mocking, and questioning things while believing through the Other, we can also transpose onto the Other the nagging doubt, thus regaining the ability to believe. (And is there not, in exactly the same way, also the function of the subject supposed not to know? Take little children who are supposed not to know the “facts of life,” and whose blessed ignorance we, knowing adults, are supposed to protect by shielding them from brutal reality; or the wife who is supposed not to know about her husband’s secret affair, and willingly plays this role even if she really knows all about it, like the young wife in *The Age of Innocence*; or, in academia, the role we assume when we ask someone: “OK, I’ll pretend I don’t know anything about this topic—try to explain it to me from scratch!”) And, perhaps, the true communion with Christ, the true *imitatio Christi*, is to participate in Christ’s doubt and disbelief.

There are two main interpretations of how Christ’s death deals with sin: sacrificial and participatory.⁴ In the first one, we humans are guilty of sin, the consequence of which is death; however, God presented Christ, the sinless one, as a sacrifice to die in our place—through the shedding of his blood, we may be forgiven and freed from condemnation. In the second one, human beings lived “in Adam,” in the sphere of sinful humanity, under the reign of sin and death. Christ became a human being, sharing the fate of those “in Adam” to the end (dying on the Cross), but, having been sinless, faithful to God, he was raised from the dead by God to become the firstborn son of a new, redeemed humanity. In baptism, believers die with Christ—they die to their old life “in Adam,” and become new creations, freed from the power of sin.

The first approach is legalistic: there is guilt to be paid for, and, by paying our debt for us, Christ redeemed us (and, of course, thereby forever indebted us); from the participationist perspective, on the contrary, people are freed from sin not by Christ’s death as such, but by sharing in Christ’s death, by dying to sin, to the way of flesh. Adam and Christ are thus, in a way, “corporate persons” in whom people live: we either live “in Adam” (under the power of sin

and death), or we live “in Christ” (as children of God, freed from guilt and the dominion of sin). We die with Christ “in Adam” (as Adamesque creatures), and then we begin a new life “in Christ”—or, as Paul put it, “all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death”: “we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:2–4). This reading also tends to deny the direct divine nature of Christ: Christ is a man who, on account of his purity and sacrifice, after his death, “was appointed, or became, Messiah when God raised him from the dead and thus ‘adopted’ him as his son.”⁵ From this perspective, Christ’s divinity is not his “natural” property, but his symbolic mandate, the title conferred on him by God—after following in his footsteps, we all become “sons of God”: “For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26–28).

Which of these two readings, then, is the right one? Here again we encounter the structure of the forced choice: in the abstract, of course, the participationist reading is the correct one, while the sacrificial reading “misses the point” of Christ’s gesture; the only way to the participationist reading, however, is through the sacrificial one, through its inherent overcoming. The sacrificial reading is the way Christ’s gesture appears within the very horizon that Christ wanted to leave behind, within the horizon for which we die in identifying with Christ: within the horizon of the Law (symbolic exchange, guilt and its atonement, sin and the price to be paid for it), Christ’s death cannot but appear as the ultimate assertion of the Law, as the elevation of the Law into an unconditional superego agency which burdens us, its subjects, with guilt, and with a debt we will never be able to repay. In a properly dialectical move, love and grace thus coincide with their radical opposite, with the unbearable pressure of an “irrational” Kafkaesque law. “Love” appears as the name (the mask, even) of an *Infinite Law*, of a Law which, as it were,

self-sublates itself, of a Law which no longer imposes specific, determinate, prohibitions and/or injunctions (do this, don't do that . . .), but just reverberates as an empty tautological Prohibition: don't . . . , of a Law in which everything is simultaneously prohibited and permitted (i.e. enjoined).

Take a weird but crucial feature of Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Decalogue*: the rock song performed during the credits is the only place in the entire *Decalogue* series where the Ten Commandments are mentioned—in the inverted form of injunctions to violate the Ten Commandments—"Kill, rape, steal, beat up your mother and father. . . ." This subversion of the prohibition into the obscene injunction to transgress the Law is entailed by the very formal procedure of Kieślowski's dramatization of a law: the dramatic staging automatically cancels the (purely intellectual) negation, shifting the focus on the imposing image of the act of, say, killing, irrespective of its ethical preamble (+ or –, recommended or prohibited)—like the Freudian unconscious, the dramatic staging knows of no negation. In his famous reflections on negativity and the Decalogue, Kenneth Burke reads the Ten Commandments through the opposition between the notional level and the level of imagery: "though the injunction 'Thou shalt not kill' is in essence an idea, in its role as imagery it can but strike the resonant gong: 'Kill!'"⁶ This is the Lacanian opposition between the symbolic Law and the obscene call of the superego at its purest: all the negations are powerless, and turn into mere denegations, so that what remains is the obscene intrusive reverberation of "Kill! Kill!"

This reversal of prohibitions into imperatives is a strictly tautological gesture which simply elaborates what is already contained in the prohibitions, insofar as, according to Saint Paul, the Law itself generates the desire to violate it. Along the same lines, in contrast to the Law's precise prohibitions ("You shall not kill, steal . . ."), the true superego injunction is just the truncated "You shall not!"—do what? This gap opens up the abyss of the superego: you yourself should know or guess what you should not do, so that you are put in an impossible position of always and a priori being under suspi-

cion of violating some (unknown) prohibition. More precisely, the superego splits every determinate commandment into two complementary, albeit asymmetrical, parts—"You shall not kill!," for instance, is split into the formal-indeterminate "You shall not!" and the obscene direct injunction "Kill!" The silent dialogue which sustains this operation is thus: "You shall not!" "I shall not—what? I have no idea what is being demanded of me! *Che vuoi?*" "You shall not!" "This is driving me crazy, being under pressure to do something without knowing what, feeling guilty without knowing of what, so I'll just explode, and start killing!" Thus killing is the desperate response to the impenetrable abstract superego prohibition.

In the eyes of this "crazy" Law, we are always-already guilty, without even knowing what, exactly, we are guilty of. This Law is the meta-Law, the Law of the state of emergency in which positive legal order is suspended, the "pure" Law, the form of ordering/prohibiting "as such," the enunciation of an Injunction deprived of any content. And, in effect, does not the Stalinist regime, among others, provide clear proof of how such an "irrational" unconditional Law coincides with love? In the eyes of the Stalinist Law, anyone can be proclaimed guilty at any point (accused of counterrevolutionary activity); the very denial of guilt is considered the ultimate proof of guilt, and so on—but, simultaneously, obeying a deep structural necessity, the relationship of the Stalinist subjects to their Leader is determined as that of love, of infinite love for the wise Leader.

How did Stalinism function on the level of political guidelines? On a first approach, things may seem clear: Stalinism was a strictly centralized system of command, so the top leadership issued directives which had to be obeyed all the way down. Here, however, we encounter the first enigma: "how can one obey when one has not been told clearly what to do?"⁷ In the collectivization drive of 1929–1930, for example, "no detailed instructions about how to collectivize were ever issued, and local officials who asked for such instructions were rebuked." All that was actually given was a sign, Stalin's speech to the Communist Academy in December 1929, where he demanded that the kulaks should be "liquidated as a class."

The lower-level cadres, eager to fulfill this command, anxious not to be accused of tolerance toward the class enemy and a lack of vigilance, naturally overfulfilled the order; it is only then that we get “the closest thing to an explicit public policy statement,” Stalin’s famous letter “Dizzy with success,” published in *Pravda* on March 1, 1930, which repudiates the excesses in what had been done without precise instructions by local officials.

How, then, could these local cadres orient themselves? Were they totally at a loss, face to face with an unspecified general order? Not quite: the gap was ambiguously filled in by the so-called “signals,” the key element of the Stalinist semiotic space: “important policy changes were often ‘signaled’ rather than communicated in the form of a clear and detailed directive.” Such signals “indicated a shift of policy in a particular area without spelling out exactly what the new policy entailed or how it should be implemented.” They consisted of, say, an article by Stalin discussing a minor point of cultural politics, an anonymous derogatory comment in *Pravda*, a criticism of a local party functionary, the unexpected praise of a provincial worker, even an explanatory note on a historical event which had taken place hundreds of years before. The message to be deciphered from such signals was mostly quantitative; it concerned the level of pure intensities more than concrete content: “faster,” “slow down” (the pace of collectivization), and so on. These signals were of two basic types: the main type was the “hardline” signal to proceed faster, to crush the enemy more mercilessly, even if one violated the existing laws. In the big radicalization of the policy toward the Orthodox Church at the end of the 1920s, for instance, the signal enjoined the mass closings and destruction of the churches and the arrests of priests, acts which ran counter to the explicit existing laws (such instructions were issued to local party organizations, but treated as a secret not to be published). The advantage of such a *modus operandi* is obvious: since these signals were never explicitly stated, they were much easier to repudiate or reinterpret than explicit policy statements. The complementary opposite signal pointed in the direction of relaxation and tolerance, as a rule attributed to Stalin himself,

putting the blame for the “excesses” on lower-level officials who did not understand Stalin’s policy. Such a signal was also issued in an informal way—for example, Stalin personally phoned a writer (Pasternak), asking him, with feigned surprise, why he had not published a new book recently; the news circulated fast on the intelligentsia grapevine. The ambiguity was thus total: a local official, confronted by a general unspecified order, was caught in the unsolvable dilemma of how to avoid being accused of leniency, but also how to avoid being scapegoated as responsible for the “excesses.” We should not forget, however, that the deadlock of the Party leadership emitting these signals was no less debilitating: with total power in their hands, they were not even able to issue explicit orders about what was to be done.

The problem (for Giorgio Agamben, among others) is how (if at all) we are to pass from this superego hyperbole of the Law to love proper: is love just the mode of appearance of this Law, is this superego hyperbole the hidden “truth” of love, is the infinite “irrational” Law thus the hidden third term, the vanishing mediator, between Law and love, or is there love also beyond the infinite-obscene Law? The text on the back cover of the French edition of Giorgio Agamben’s *Le temps qui reste*, his reading of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans,⁸ provides such a precise résumé of the book that one can surmise that it was written by Agamben himself—it is worth quoting in full:

If it is true that every work of the past attains its complete readability only in certain moments of its own history which one should know how to grasp, this book originates in the conviction that there is a kind of secret link, which we should not miss at any price, between Paul’s letters and our epoch. From this perspective, one of the most often read and commented texts of our entire cultural tradition undoubtedly acquires a new readability which displaces and reorients the canons of its interpretation: Paul is no longer the founder of a new religion, but the most demanding representative of the Jewish messianism; no longer the inventor of universality, but the one who overcame the division of peoples with a new division and who introduced in it a remainder; no longer the proclamation of a new identity and of a new vocation, but the revoking of every identity and

of every vocation; no longer the simple critique of the Law, but its opening toward a use beyond every system of law. And, in the heart of all these motifs, there is a new experience of time which, inverting the relation between the past and the future, between memory and hope, constitutes the messianic *kairos*, not as the end of time, but as the very paradigm of the present time, of all the present times.

The first problem with this focus (not on the end of time, but) on the condensed time to arrive at the end of time is its more than obvious formalism: what Agamben describes as a messianic experience is the pure formal structure of such an experience without any specific determinations that would elaborate the claim that Benjamin “repeats” Paul: why is today’s moment a unique moment which renders Paul’s letters readable? Is it because the emerging New World (Dis)Order is parallel to the Roman Empire (the thesis of Negri and Hardt)? Furthermore, in defense of Alain Badiou (whose book on Paul⁹ is Agamben’s implicit target in the quoted passage), I am tempted to assert the fundamental equality of the statements opposed in the above résumé: what if the way to found a new religion is precisely through bringing the preceding logic (in this case, of Jewish messianism) to its end? What if the only way to invent a new universality is precisely through overcoming the old divisions with a new, more radical division which introduces an indivisible remainder into the social body? What if the proclamation of a new identity and of a new vocation can take place only if it functions as the revoking of every identity and every vocation? What if the truly radical critique of the Law equals its opening toward a use beyond every system of law? Furthermore, when Agamben introduces the triad of Whole, Part, and Remainder, is he not following the Hegelian paradox of a genus which has only one species, the other species being the genus itself? The Remainder is nothing other than the excessive element which gives body to the genus itself, the Hegelian “reflexive determination” in the guise of which the genus encounters itself within its species.

When Agamben claims that the messianic dimension is not a safe neutral universality encompassing all the species, indifferent toward

their (specific) differences, but, rather, the noncoincidence of each particular element with itself, is he not thereby reinventing the central thesis of the “logic of the signifier” according to which universality acquires actual existence in a particular element that is unable to achieve its full identity? A universality “comes to itself,” is posited “as such,” in the gap which divides a particular element not from other elements, but *from itself*. For example, in politics, as discussed by Laclau and Rancière, the properly democratic subject is the “remainder,” the element of the Whole deprived of any particular features which would give him or her a specific place within the Whole, the element whose position with regard to the Whole is that of internal exclusion. Unable to occupy its proper specific place, such a democratic subject gives body to universality as such. So when one opposes radical political universality (radical emancipatory egalitarianism) to a universality grounded in exception (for example, “universal human rights” which secretly privilege some particular groups and exclude others), the point is not simply that the latter does not cover all particulars, that there is a “rest,” a remainder, while radical universality “really includes all and everyone”; the point is, rather, that *the singular agent of radical universality is the Remainder itself*, that which has no proper place in the “official” universality grounded in exception. Radical universality “covers all its particular content” precisely insofar as it is linked through a kind of umbilical cord to the Remainder—its logic is: “it is those who are excluded, with no proper place within the global order, who directly embody true universality, who represent the Whole in contrast to all others who stand only for their particular interests.” Lacking any specific difference, such a paradoxical element stands for the absolute difference, for pure Difference as such. In this precise sense, Pauline universality is not mute universality as the empty neutral container of its particular content, but a “struggling universality,” a universality the actual existence of which is a radical division which cuts through the entire particular content.

And when Agamben cogently describes the “Kafkaesque” dimension of the Pauline distance toward the Old Testament law, when

he interprets the opposition of Law and Love as an opposition internal to the Law itself, as the opposition between a positive law with precise prescriptions and prohibitions and the Kafkaesque unconditional Law which is, as such, pure potentiality, which cannot be executed, or even translated into positive norms, but remains an abstract injunction making us all guilty precisely because we don't even know what we are guilty of,¹⁰ does he not thereby delineate the opposition between Law and its superego excess-supplement? One should effectively correlate unconditional superego guilt and the mercy of love—two figures of the excess, the excess of guilt without proportion to what I actually did, and the excess of mercy without proportion to what I deserve for my acts. In short, the superego excess is ultimately nothing but the inscription back into the domain of the Law, the reflection-into-Law, of the Love which abolishes (“sublates”) the Law. The advent of the New Pact is thus not simply a new order which leaves the old Law behind, but the Nietzschean “High Noon,” the time of the cleaving in two, of the minimal, invisible difference which separates the excess of the Law itself from the Love beyond Law.

Is the relationship between law (legal justice) and mercy in fact the relationship between necessity and choice (one *has* to obey the law, while mercy is, by definition, dispensed as a free and excessive act, as something that the agent of mercy is free to do or not to do—mercy under compulsion is not mercy but, at its best, a travesty of mercy)? What if, on a deeper level, the relationship is the opposite one? What if, with regard to the law, we have the freedom to choose (to obey or violate it), while mercy is obligatory, we *have* to display it—mercy is an unnecessary excess which, as such, has to occur? (And does not the law always take this freedom of ours into account, not only by punishing us for its transgression, but by providing escapes from punishment through its ambiguity and inconsistency?) Is it not a fact that showing mercy is the only way for a Master to demonstrate his suprallegal authority? If a Master were merely to guarantee the full application of the law, of legal regulations, he would be deprived of his authority, and turn into a mere figure of

knowledge, the agent of the discourse of the university.¹¹ This applies even to Stalin himself: we should never forget that, as the (now available) minutes of the meetings of the Politburo and Central Committee from the 1930s demonstrate, Stalin's direct interventions were, as a rule, those of displaying mercy. When younger CC members, eager to prove their revolutionary fervor, demanded the instant death penalty for Bukharin, Stalin always intervened and said: "Patience! His guilt is not yet proven!" or something similar. Of course this was a hypocritical attitude—Stalin was well aware that he himself generated this destructive fervor, that the younger members were eager to please him—nonetheless, this appearance of mercy is necessary.

Here, however, we confront the crucial alternative: is Pauline love the obverse of the obscene superego Law that cannot be executed and specified into particular regulations? Are we, in effect, dealing with two sides of the same coin? Agamben focuses on the *as-if-not* stance from the famous Pauline passage in which he instructs believers in the messianic time neither to escape from the world of social obligations, nor simply to accomplish a social revolution, replacing one set of social obligations with another, but to continue to participate in the world of social obligations through an attitude of suspension ("cry *as if* you are not crying, deal with money *as if* you are without it," and so on):

Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called. . . . I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away. (1 Corinthians 7:20, 7:29–31)

Agamben is right here to emphasize that this stance has nothing to do with the legitimization of the existing power relations, in the sense of "stay what you are, what you were interpellated into (a

slave, a Jew . . .), just maintain a distance toward it.” It has nothing to do with the standard version of Oriental Wisdom which imposes indifference toward worldly affairs (in the sense of the *Bhagavad-Gita*: accomplish your worldly acts as if it is not you who are doing them, as if their final result does not matter): the key difference is that, in Paul, the distance is not that of a disengaged observer aware of the nullity of worldly passions, but that of a thoroughly engaged fighter who ignores distinctions that are not relevant to the struggle. It is also to be opposed to the usual as if attitude of philosophers of fiction, from Bentham to Vaihinger: it is not that of the fetishist disavowal which pertains to the symbolic order (“although I know very well that the judge is not an honest man, I treat him, the representative of the Law, as if he were . . .”), but that of the disavowal of the symbolic realm itself: I use symbolic obligations, but I am not performatively bound by them. However, Agamben reads this suspension as a purely formal gesture of distance: “faith” has no positive content, it is nothing but this distance-toward-itself, this self-suspension, of the Law. Here Agamben refers to the Hegelian notion of “sublation [*Aufhebung*]”: Pauline love is not the cancellation or destructive negation of the Law, but its accomplishment in the sense of “sublation,” where the Law is retained through its very suspension, as a subordinate (potential) moment of a higher actual unity. Significantly, Agamben refers here also to Carl Schmitt’s notion of the “state of exception” as the negation of the rule of law which is not its destruction, but its very founding gesture—the question remains, however, if Pauline love can be reduced to this founding suspension of the Law. In short, what if Romans has to be read together with Corinthians?

What we find in Paul is a commitment, an engaged position of struggle, an uncanny “interpellation” beyond ideological interpellation, an interpellation which suspends the performative force of the “normal” ideological interpellation that compels us to accept our determinate place within the sociosymbolic edifice. Can we thus say, in reading *Paul avec Schmitt*, that love has the structure of a “state of emergency/exception” which suspends the “normal” functioning

of one's emotional life? Is love not war also in this precise sense: when I fall violently and passionately in love, my balance is disturbed, the course of my life is derailed, logos turns into pathology, I lose my neutral capacity to reflect and judge; all my (other) abilities are suspended in their autonomy, subordinated to One Goal, colored by It—indeed, love is a malady? To paraphrase Paul, when we are in love, “we buy as though we have no possessions, we deal with the world as though we have no dealings with it,” since all that ultimately matters is love itself.¹² Perhaps the gap which separates pleasure and *jouissance* is nowhere more palpable than in the situation when, after a long period of calm *complaisant* life, with its little pleasures, one all of a sudden falls passionately in love: love shatters our daily life as a heavy duty whose performance demands heavy sacrifices on the level of the “pleasure of principle”—how many things must a man renounce? “Freedom,” drinks with friends, card evenings.

It is therefore crucial to distinguish between the Jewish-Pauline “state of emergency,” the suspension of the “normal” immersion in life, and the standard Bakhtinian carnivalesque “state of exception” when everyday moral norms and hierarchies are suspended, and one is encouraged to indulge in transgressions: the two are opposed—that is to say, what the Pauline emergency suspends is not so much the explicit Law regulating our daily life, but, precisely, its obscene unwritten underside: when, in his series of *as if* prescriptions, Paul basically says: “obey the laws as if you are not obeying them,” this means precisely that we should suspend the obscene libidinal investment in the Law, the investment on account of which the Law generates/solicits its own transgression. The ultimate paradox, of course, is that this is how the Jewish law, the main target of Paul's critique, functions: it is already a law deprived of its superego supplement, not relying on any obscene support. In short: in its “normal” functioning, the Law generates as the “collateral damage” of its imposition its own transgression/excess (the vicious cycle of Law and sin described in an unsurpassable way in Corinthians), while in Judaism and Christianity, it is directly this excess itself which addresses us.

That is the ultimate alternative: is the opposition between Love and Law to be reduced to its “truth,” the opposition, internal to the Law itself, between the determinate positive Law and the excessive superego injunction, the Law beyond every measure—that is to say, is the excess of Love with regard to the Law the form of appearance of a superego Law, of a Law beyond any determinate law; or is the excessive superego Law the way the dimension beyond the Law appears within the domain of the Law, so that the crucial step to be accomplished is the step (comparable to Nietzsche’s “High Noon”) from the excessive Law to Love, from the way Love appears within the domain of the Law to Love beyond the Law? Lacan himself struggled continuously with this same deeply Pauline problem: is there love beyond Law? Paradoxically (in view of the fact that the notion as unsurpassable Law is usually perceived as Jewish), in the very last page of *Four Fundamental Concepts*, he identifies this stance of love beyond Law as that of Spinoza, opposing it to the Kantian notion of moral Law as the ultimate horizon of our experience. In *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan deals extensively with the Pauline dialectic of the Law and its transgression¹³—perhaps what we should do, therefore, is read this Pauline dialectic together with its corollary, Saint Paul’s other paradigmatic passage, the one on love from 1 Corinthians 13:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast [alt. trans.: to be burned], but do not have love, I gain nothing. . . .

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. . . . For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully

known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Crucial here is the clearly paradoxical place of Love with regard to All (to the completed series of knowledge or prophecies): first, Saint Paul claims that love is here even if we possess all of knowledge—then, in the second quoted paragraph, he claims that love is here only for incomplete beings, that is, beings who possess incomplete knowledge. When I “know fully . . . as I have been fully known,” will there still be love? Although, in contrast to knowledge, “love never ends,” it is clearly only “now” (while I am still incomplete) that “faith, hope, and love abide.” The only way out of this deadlock is to read the two inconsistent claims according to Lacan’s feminine formulas of sexuation:¹⁴ even when it is “all” (complete, with no exception), the field of knowledge remains, in a way, non-all, incomplete—love is not an exception to the All of knowledge, but precisely that “nothing” which makes incomplete even the complete series/field of knowledge. In other words, the point of the claim that, even if I were to possess all knowledge, without love, I would be nothing, is not simply that with love, I am “something”—in love, I *am also* nothing, but, as it were, a Nothing humbly aware of itself, a Nothing paradoxically made rich through the very awareness of its lack.

Only a lacking, vulnerable being is capable of love: the ultimate mystery of love, therefore, is that incompleteness is, in a way, higher than completion. On the one hand, only an imperfect, lacking being loves: we love because we do *not* know all. On the other hand, even if we were to know everything, love would, inexplicably, still be higher than completed knowledge. Perhaps the true achievement of Christianity is to elevate a loving (imperfect) Being to the place of God, that is, of ultimate perfection. That is the kernel of the Christian experience. In the previous pagan attitude, imperfect earthly phenomena can serve as signs of the unattainable divine perfection. In Christianity, on the contrary, it is physical (or mental) perfection itself that is the sign of the imperfection (finitude, vulnerability, uncertainty) of you as the absolute person. Your physical beauty itself

becomes a sign of this spiritual dimension—not the sign of your “higher” spiritual perfection, but the sign of *you* as a finite, vulnerable person. Only in this way do we really break out of idolatry. For this reason, the properly Christian relationship between sex and love is not the one between body and soul, but almost the opposite: in “pure” sex, the partner is reduced to a fantasy object, that is to say, pure sex is masturbation with a real partner who functions as a prop for our indulging in fantasies, while it is only through love that we can reach the Real (of the) Other. (This also accounts for the status of the Lady in courtly love: precisely because of its endless postponing of the consummation of the sexual act, courtly love remains on the level of sexual desire, not love—the proof of this is the fact that the Lady is reduced to a pure symbolic entity, indistinguishable from all others, not touched in the Real of her singularity.)

Lacan’s extensive discussion of love in *Encore* is thus to be read in the Pauline sense, as opposed to the dialectic of the Law and its transgression: this second dialectic is clearly “masculine”/phallic, it involves the tension between the All (the universal Law) and its constitutive exception, while love is “feminine,” it involves the paradoxes of the non-All.¹⁵ Or—as Eric Santner put it in the context of Badiou’s reading of Saint Paul—

The Pauline question, in B’s reformulation, is: Is all the subject within the figure of legal subjection? There are two answers to this—Lacanian answers: 1) there is a place of exception; 2) not all of the subject is within the figure of legal subjection. The key, however, as far as I can see, is to note that there is *no direct path* from legal subjection to “not all”; “not all” only opens up through a traversal of the *fantasy* of exception, which in its turn sustains the force of the figure of legal subjection. Put differently, “not all” is what you get with the traversal of fantasy.¹⁶

The co-dependency of law and sin (its transgression) thus obeys the Lacanian “masculine” logic of exception: “sin” is the very exception that sustains the Law. This means that love is not simply beyond the Law, but articulates itself as the stance of total immersion in the Law:

“not all of the subject is within the figure of legal subjection” equals “there is nothing in the subject which escapes its legal subjection.” “Sin” is the very intimate resistant core on account of which the subject experiences its relationship to the Law as that of subjection; it is that on account of which the Law has to appear to the subject as a foreign power crushing the subject.

This, then, is how we are to grasp the idea that Christianity “accomplished/fulfilled” the Jewish Law: not by supplementing it with the dimension of love, but by fully realizing the Law itself—from this perspective, the problem with Judaism is not that it is “too legal,” but that it is not “legal” enough. A brief reference to Hegel might be of some help here: when Hegel endeavors to resolve the conflict between Law and love, he does not mobilize his standard triad (the immediacy of the love link turns into its opposite, hate and struggle, which calls for an external-alienated Law to regulate social life; finally, in an act of magical “synthesis,” Law and love are reconciled in the organic totality of social life). The problem with the law is not that it does not contain enough love, but, rather, the opposite one: there is *too much* love in it—that is to say, social life appears to me as dominated by an externally imposed Law in which I am unable to recognize myself, precisely insofar as I continue to cling to the immediacy of love that feels threatened by the rule of Law. Consequently, Law loses its “alienated” character of an external force brutally imposing itself on the subject the moment the subject renounces its attachment to the pathological *agalma* deep within itself, the notion that there is deep within it some precious treasure that can only be loved, and cannot be submitted to the rule of Law. In other words, the problem (today, even) is not how we are to supplement Law with true love (the authentic social link), but, on the contrary, how we are to accomplish the Law by getting rid of the pathological stain of love.

Paul’s negative appreciation of law is clear and unambiguous: “For no human being will be justified in his sight by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20). “The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the

law” (1 Corinthians 15:56), and, consequently, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law” (Galatians 3:13). So when Paul says that “the letter kills, but the spirit gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:6), this letter is precisely the letter of the Law. The strongest proponents of this radical opposition between the law and the divine love moving him to grace are Lutheran theologians like Bultmann, for whom

[t]he way of works of the Law and the way of grace and faith are mutually exclusive opposites. . . . Man’s effort to achieve his salvation by keeping the Law only leads him into sin, *indeed this effort itself in the end is already sin*. . . . The Law brings to light that man is sinful, whether it be that his sinful desire leads him to transgression of the Law or that that desire disguises itself in zeal for keeping the Law.¹⁷

How are we to understand this? Why, then, did God proclaim Law in the first place? According to the standard reading of Paul, God gave Law to men in order to make them conscious of their sin, even to make them sin all the more, and thus make them aware of their need for the salvation that can occur only through divine grace—however, does this reading not involve a strange, perverse notion of God? As we have already seen, the only way to avoid such a perverse reading is to insist on the absolute *identity* of the two gestures: God does not first push us into Sin in order to create the need for Salvation, and then offer Himself as the Redeemer from the trouble into which He got us in the first place; it is not that the Fall is followed by Redemption: the Fall is *identical* to Redemption, it is “in itself” already Redemption. That is to say: what is “redemption”? The explosion of freedom, the breaking out of the natural enchainment—and this, *precisely, is what happens in the Fall*. We should bear in mind here the central tension of the Christian notion of the Fall: the Fall (“regression” to the natural state, enslavement to passions) is *stricto sensu* identical with the dimension from which we fall, that is, it is the very movement of the Fall that creates, opens up, what is lost in it.

We should be very precise here about the Christian “unplugging” from the domain of social mores, from the social substance of our being: the reference to the Jewish Law is crucial here—why? As Eric

Santner has pointed out, it is already the Jewish Law that relies on a gesture of “unplugging”: by means of reference to the Law, Jews in diaspora maintain a distance toward the society in which they live. In short, the Jewish Law is not a social law like others: while other (pagan) laws regulate social exchange, the Jewish Law introduces a different dimension, that of divine justice which is radically heterogeneous with regard to the social law.¹⁸ (Furthermore, this justice is different from the pagan notion of justice as reestablished balance, as the inexorable process of Fate that reestablishes the balance disturbed by human hubris: Jewish justice is the very opposite of the victorious reassertion of the right/might of the Whole over its parts—it is the vision of the final state in which all the wrongs done to individuals will be undone.) When Jews “unplug,” and maintain a distance toward the society in which they live, they do not do it for the sake of their own different substantial identity—in a way, anti-Semitism is right here: the Jews are, in effect, “rootless,” their Law is “abstract,” it “extrapolates” them from the social Substance.

And there we have the radical gap that separates the Christian suspension of the Law, the passage from Law to love, from the pagan suspension of the social law: the highest (or, rather, deepest) point of every pagan Wisdom is, of course, also a radical “unplugging” (either the carnivalesque orgy, or direct immersion in the abyss of the primordial Void, in which all articulated differences are suspended); what is suspended here, however, is the “pagan” immanent law of the social, not the Jewish Law that already unplugs us from the social. When Christian mystics get too close to the pagan mystical experience, they bypass the Jewish experience of the Law—no wonder they often become ferocious anti-Semites. Christian anti-Semitism is, in effect, a clear sign of the Christian position’s regression into paganism: it gets rid of the “rootless,” universalist stance of Christianity proper by transposing it onto the Jewish Other; consequently, when Christianity loses the mediation of the Jewish Law, it loses the specific Christian dimension of Love itself, reducing Love to the pagan “cosmic feeling” of oneness with the universe. It is only reference to the Jewish Law that sustains the specific Christian notion of

Love that needs a distance, that thrives on differences, that has nothing to do with any kind of erasure of borders and immersion in Oneness. (And within the Jewish experience, love remains on this pagan level—that is to say, the Jewish experience is a unique combination of the new Law with pagan love, which accounts for its inner tension.)

The trap to be avoided here is the opposition of the “external” social law (legal regulations, “mere legality”) and the higher “internal” moral law, where the external social law may strike us as contingent and irrational, while the internal law is fully assumed as “our own”: we should radically abandon the notion that external social institutions betray the authentic inner experience of the true Transcendence of Otherness (in the guise, for example, of the opposition between the authentic “inner” experience of the divine and its “external” reification into a religious institution in which the religious experience proper degenerates into an ideology legitimizing power relations). If there is a lesson to be learned from Kafka, it is that, in the opposition between internal and external, the divine dimension is on the side of the external. What can be more “divine” than the traumatic encounter with the bureaucracy at its craziest—when, say, a bureaucrat tells us that, legally, we don’t exist? It is in such encounters that we catch a glimpse of another order beyond mere earthly everyday reality. There is no experience of the divine without such a suspension of the Ethical. And far from being simply external, this very externality (to sense, to symbolic integration) holds us from within: Kafka’s topic is precisely the obscene *jouissance* through which bureaucracy addresses the subject on the level of the disavowed innermost (“ex-timate,” as Lacan would have put it) real kernel of his being.

As such, bureaucratic knowledge is the very opposite of scientific knowledge concerned with positive facts: its pervasiveness gives birth to a certain gap best exemplified by the French “certificat d’existence,” or by strange stories, reported from time to time, of how (usually in Italy) some unfortunate individual, asking a certain favor from a state apparatus, is informed that, according to the register, he

is officially dead or nonexistent, and that, in order to be able to make claims, he must first produce official documents that prove his existence—do we not find here the bureaucratic version of “in-between the two deaths”? When bureaucratic knowledge thus brings home the absurd discord between the Symbolic and the Real, it opens us up to the experience of an order that is radically heterogeneous to commonsense positive reality. Kafka was well aware of the deep link between bureaucracy and the divine: it is as if, in his work, Hegel’s thesis on the State as the earthly existence of God is “bugged” in the Deleuzian sense of the term, given a properly obscene twist.