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Are We Human? Or, Posthumanism and the Subject of Modernity

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Žižek's Inhuman Humanism: Repetition Without a Return

Although he is likely to disagree with me, I want to make (perhaps) a bold claim and argue that Žižek's antihumanist modernism, in fact, and within the context of contemporary debates over anthropocentrism and popular discourses about the Anthropocene, accomplishes a humanist gesture and helps us to rethink and revise the concept of humanism for the era of posthuman capitalism or what others now refer to as the Capitalocene.¹ The discourse on posthumanism is far from univocal and must be understood, at least, in two different modalities. It is a theory of post-HUMAN-ism, on the one hand, examining a kind of transhumanist technological augmentation to the human body, the kind of which Žižek writes about in various texts, but nowhere more focused than in his book, *Hegel in a Wired Brain*. In terms of the rise in digital automation and the prospects of a technological "singularity," tethering humans to machines as a material assemblage of technological objects of different kinds (both organic and inorganic), posthumanism strikes us as an inevitable direction for capitalism to take as part of its ceaseless logic of accumulation. In some ways, then, we can argue, as Žižek does, that to survive capitalism must become posthuman; or, as he puts it, "what we are witnessing today is nothing less than an attempt to integrate the passage to posthumanity with capitalism" (*LTBD*, 46).

But posthumanism is also, on the other hand, a theory of post-HUMANISM, in the sense of being a critical theory seeking to escape the contradictions and deficiencies of various humanist philosophies, from premodern religious and Renaissance humanisms of the early and pre-Enlightenment period, to the modern liberal secular humanisms that followed, and up to and including the various socialist, Marxist, and Stalinist humanisms of the twentieth century. Posthumanism in its various guises (such as object-oriented ontology, speculative realism, vitalist materialism, and actor-network theory) seeks to displace the role and agency of the human subject and philosophies that privilege Promethean humanist exceptionalism. For some of the posthumanists of this variety, their objective is to expand human agency onto all things through the extension of subjectivity, anthropomorphizing all that exists.² For others, the goal is to see all that exists as commonly objective: all objects of various kinds.³ In both cases, the ethic is one of building a “democracy of objects,” or a kind of “flat ontology,” that nevertheless leads into a performative contradiction that points the finger at human subjects for the ecological crises of the Anthropocene, while at the same time claiming, paradoxically, that humans are nothing special in the first place.

The anti-anthropocentrism of the posthumanists should be distinguished from antihumanisms of the 1960s (the period that saw the development of the theories of Althusser and Lacan, which have influenced Žižek’s own brand of antihumanist philosophy) by the fact that it sought to deconstruct the subject in discourse. As Lévi-Strauss argued in *The Savage Mind*, against Sartre, the goal of the human sciences is not to constitute but to dissolve human subjectivity.⁴ However, as Kate Soper notes, antihumanism remains limited to Kantian critique insofar as it takes as its object, not reality as such, but merely human representations of reality. As Foucault argues in *The Order of Things*, the object of the human sciences is “neither biology, nor economics nor even philology that comprise the human sciences, but our representations to ourselves of the activities they study.”⁵

Contemporary posthumanisms, however, seek to withdraw the human as such. For them, even the antihumanists remain caught in the Kantian, “correlationist” problematic of the distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal realms of intelligibility. As the speculative realist philosopher Quentin Meillassoux proposes, we have to assume, instead, unreason (as opposed to human reasoning and aesthetics/representation) as, itself, an ontological priority.⁶ Like other new materialist and posthumanist thinkers, Meillassoux’s postcritical philosophy strikes at the heart of modernist theory in its goal to resolve the Kantian problematic of the thing-in-itself through a return, in some ways, to precritical and premodern investments in realism. For Meillassoux, the only necessity is contingency, rendering human ethical and free agency obsolete, the kind of which that is most responsible for modernist and Enlightenment thought that takes human reasoning as a

methodological priority. For many who view as primary the conundrum of the Anthropocene, withdrawing human ethical agency can only but make sense, even if this draws them into an intractable contradiction: why even bother with polemics against anthropocentrism in the first place if there is nothing exceptional about the human subject? Who is even the target of such polemics? The irony, not to be missed, is that even the new materialist posthumanists still seem to show their belief in the agency of the Lacanian big Other confirming meaning on existence; or else, they find themselves caught in premodern, precritical mysticisms.

Both antihumanism and posthumanism are therefore anti-anthropocentric; however, whereas antihumanism sees the subject as the product of ideology and discourse, posthumanism sees the human/nonhuman distinction as altogether harmful to nature, assigning priority to it over the human subject. As the most famous of the object-oriented ontologists, Graham Harman, puts it (quite jubilantly), finally, we are in a position to “oppose the long dictatorship of human beings in philosophy.”⁷ Žižek’s response to contemporary posthumanisms of these kinds has been twofold: it has been inspired by his Hegelian reinterpretation of dialectical materialism, but it has also, I claim, pushed him to more persuasively defend human subjectivity methodologically, as well as a universalist ethics, in a way that encourages us to repeat the kind of humanism that has its foundations in modernist conceptions of freedom, Truth, and universality. However, this repetition, to be sure, is a far cry from both bourgeois-liberal and older Marxist-humanist and existentialist defenses of human freedom and universality. Žižek’s humanism is grounded, less in the pursuit of the Absolute than in the acknowledgment that Truth remains actual only through the **failed** Absolute—that is, in the failure of its actualization, in its betrayal. And this failure of actualization of the Absolute is the place where the position of the subject is inscribed in the picture (*SFA*, 375).

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Žižek’s “humanism” goes missing in much of the discourse around his work and his ties to the Enlightenment tradition, his atheist (Hegelian) reading of Christianity, and in his ongoing questioning of modern humanisms in both their liberal and socialist varieties. Implied in this, I claim, we find the seeds for the potential to reinvent a radical, universal, and dialectical humanism appropriate for coming to grasp the contradictions of a looming posthuman capitalism in the twenty-first century. While Žižek often speaks of the inhuman core of human subjectivity, I propose instead that his own groundwork in an Enlightenment and modernist tradition, read through German Idealism and the antihumanism of Althusser and Lacan, in fact, helps us to develop what I will call a *humanism of the not-all*.

My claim, of course, appears counterintuitive since not only does Žižek consistently attack and challenge socialist humanisms (Stalinism with a “human face”), as well as liberal humanisms and postures of “human rights” (capitalism “with a human face”), but he also writes out of the Lacanian and

Althusserian antihumanist traditions. Against those who, like Althusser, claim Hegel as a humanist influence on Lukács, Lefebvre, and Sartre, for instance, in the Marxist humanism of the twentieth century, Žižek has been quick to assert that Hegel is not a humanist (*LN*, 98) and has used his Lacanian rereading of Hegel to develop an antihumanist theory of the inhuman core of human subjectivity. Nevertheless, much of his writing continues to be premised on answering the question: What is the human subject? This is a question that in some ways flies in the face of the antihumanism of Althusser and Foucault, in their own ways both declaring the end of the subject and seeing the subject as a mere by-product or epiphenomenon of ideology and discourse. But much more recently, especially in his writing about the various new materialisms and posthumanisms of the twenty-first century, Žižek encourages a rereading of Enlightenment thought and German Idealism through the lens of antihumanism, as well as through a post-Cold War communist critique of global capitalism. For him, the only way to resuscitate the Marxist goal of communism is via a turn back to Hegel. It's through his return to Hegel that I find in Žižek's writing the potential to rethink the terms of a humanist critical theory for the twenty-first century.

It is against the posthumanists, and especially with his much sharper and clearer turn toward Hegel in his books *Less Than Nothing* and *Absolute Recoil*, the reinvention of dialectical materialism beginning with *The Parallax View*, and his return to the Cartesian *cogito* in *The Ticklish Subject*, that we see not a *return* to humanism, as he often likes to claim about his writing on Lenin; rather, what we find here is a line of questioning that forces us to *repeat* core humanist thinking, not merely to answer the question: What is the *meaning* of humanity? Such a boring question is far less important than those that pertain to the survival of humanity and human ethics, in the face of looming ecological catastrophe, and the rise of digital automation, AI, or technological singularity. Here, Žižek's inhuman humanism pushes us to ask much more relevant ethical questions about our survival and how we need to think our agency in non-moralistic terms and against the kinds of moralizing we might find in other varieties of liberal consequentialist thought or in the virtue ethics of identity politics liberalism.

As he puts in *HWB*, "One often hears that, in order to confront appropriately the threat of an ecological catastrophe, we have to renounce 'anthropocentrism' and to conceive of ourselves (humanity) as a subordinated element in the great chain of Being." He goes on, noting the posthumanist claim that we (humanity) are posing a threat to mother Earth. Yet, it is not Earth that we need to be worried about:

we are in trouble, Earth is indifferent, it has survived much worse disasters than the possible self-destruction of one of its species. What is under threat is *our* environment, *our* habitat, the only one in which we can live. From the imagined standpoint of Earth it would be much better for its

global ecosystem if we (humanity) disappeared, so what is under threat in ‘ecological crisis’ is *our* survival, the survival of our society. (HWB, 165)

Here, he points out, we find the hidden anthropocentrism of posthumanist anti-anthropocentrism. And, I would add, it’s here in his criticism of the performative contradiction of the posthumanists that we can also locate Žižek’s own repetition of the foundational (modernist) humanist gesture: of showing how it is we humans who “make history.”

By tackling the ambiguities of biogenetics and cognitive sciences, as well as the anti-anthropocentric theories and concerns of the new materialists and posthumanists amid rising uncertainties of humanity in the face of environmental and ecological catastrophe, and the rise of new digital media, automation, AI, and the forecasted technological singularity, we find in Žižek encouragement for repeating the modernist intrigue with the figure of the human and the human subject at precisely the moment when everywhere we hear about its untimely death. In large part, the repetition of the question of the human subject is forced by a demand to consider ethical questions about our political conjuncture, as in the Leninist question: What is to be done? But here it is worth noting a semantic distinction between terms like human, subject, and humanism, which tie back into some of the deficiencies with the Marxist and socialist humanisms of the twentieth century, particularly those that base themselves on the early Marx of the 1844 manuscripts.

To put it bluntly, the difficulty with a Marxist humanism that draws on some conception of “Total Man,” as Lefebvre put it,⁸ is that it assumes a completed and self-reconciled conception of humanity with itself or with its own nature—that is, it is a dream of achieving a reconciled *balance* with nature. Ironically, we find the same hope here of a balanced nature in much of the discourse on Posthumanist new materialisms and realisms, which see the birth of human subjectivity and reason as something akin to an ontological deviation from the nature of reality, as noted earlier via Meillassoux. This is similar to the rise of the “biopolitical” scientisms of the early Soviet period, in the projects of biocosmism and tech-gnosis (as Žižek calls it),⁹ from which, according to him, we see the rise of the kind of Stalinist romantic humanism that formed as a reactionary position against the failures of the Soviet new materialists.¹⁰ But it was also this turn that caused, according to Althusser, the Stalinist deviation away from the Marxist science of historical materialism, and toward the tripartite flaws of economism, historicism, and humanism.

Since the publication of *The Parallax View*, and even slightly before in his Leninist turn, and after in *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Žižek has shown that so much of the contemporary posthumanisms and new materialisms reproduce dimensions of the Soviet projects to transcend human existence. In a way, what he shows is that with the rise of Stalinist humanism, and the turns toward socialist realism, as well as traditional Russian culture, which are more or less

a response to the failures of the posthumanist Soviet projects, biocosmism, and so on, we can see an equation between humanism and forms of terror expressed by the regime of late Stalinism. Nevertheless, Žižek maintains that this guise of humanism in late Stalinism is still what exercises its inner greatness. Not necessarily in the sense espoused by Merleau-Ponty in his book, *Humanism and Terror*, which claims that the violence of the communist terror is justified by the struggle to realize the actuality of communism. For Žižek, rather, it is the guise of humanism that in fact prevented full-scale nuclear holocaust during the Cuban Missile Crisis, for instance, as in the displays of politeness that allowed the two powers to prevent outright catastrophe (*IDLC*, 214–15). This shows, in other words, that at least at the level of appearances, modernist humanism has the potential to save us from near catastrophe.

Part of Žižek's fear, though, about the growth of new posthumanist movements is that they potentially raise the specter of a much more brutal reactionary humanism. However, and in contrast with many of the left posthumanist movements, Žižek shows, too, that the posthuman turn also signals a change or a transformation in the capitalist mode of production. He shows that in order to save itself capitalism must become posthuman. Posthumanism, then, in its different guises, works either as an underlying defense of this new stage in capitalist production at the same time that it advocates inaction and unreason on the part of the human subjects it opposes.

Unlike Althusser, who saw in Stalin's humanism a deviation from Marxist science, Sartre was one who turned toward a humanist reading of historical materialism, precisely against the antihumanism of Stalinism; and, in fact, much of the debate that has followed in subsequent decades rests on the question of whether or not Stalinism is a humanism. The trouble with Sartre, though, as Žižek notes, and I agree, is that his humanism expresses too much of a voluntarism that dismisses the structural aspects of ideology that Althusser so significantly drew out in his theories of ideology and subjectivity. But as an entry point, then, for how I conceive Žižek's inhuman humanism, a humanism of the not-all—or, perhaps more appropriately, a repetition of the humanist gesture based on Žižek's return to the *cogito*, the dialectic, and the subject of modernity—Althusser's theory of subjectivity offers a first point for articulating Žižek's strategy for thinking the human subject and the way this is tied into his return to the Enlightenment and modernist theories of German Idealism, especially Kant and Hegel, against, for instance, the Spinoza of Althusser and the contemporary posthumanists.

The Vagaries of Choice

Perhaps the best way to see the difference between an older Marxist humanism and the kind of inhuman humanism that I am claiming here in Žižek's writing can be summed up in the difference he identifies between

Sartre and Lacan. For Sartre, according to Žižek, “the basic free act by means of which the subject ‘chooses itself,’ formulates the existential project that defines its identity, is an act of self-consciousness” (*HWB*, 93–4). Sartre’s subject of choice is one that is fully present to itself, or experienced by the subject, a point that is consistent with his well-known dismissal of the Freudian unconscious.¹¹ It is easier, in response to the centered Sartrean subject, to grasp Althusser’s point about the overlap between Marx and Freud in troubling the bourgeois subject of modernity. For Althusser, what is common in both Marx and Freud is the challenge they present to the subject of the bourgeois individual: Marx, with his conception of the class struggle, proves the masses, rather than the individual subject, are the motor of history; Freud, with the discovery of the unconscious, shows that the subject’s agency is never fully present to itself. In contrast, bourgeois and humanist ideology (and here, too, we might see what is problematic with Sartre’s existential humanism and his dismissal of the Freudian unconscious) sees the individual free and fully conscious subject as the condition of ethical and self-accountable agency. As he explains, “the ideology of man as a subject whose *unity* is ensured or crowned by consciousness is not just any fragmentary ideology; it is quite simply *the philosophical form of bourgeois ideology*”; and, in his critique of political economy, “Marx was criticizing its ‘economic’ version in rejecting any idea of ‘homo economicus’, in which man is defined as the conscious subject of his needs.”¹² For Lacan, then, in opposition to bourgeois and existentialist humanisms, “the primordial choice is unconscious since the Unconscious is not a substantial determination of the subject but the most basic level of reflexivity” (*HWB*, 94). For Sartre, the act of choice that founds subjectivity is self-conscious, whereas for Lacan it is not merely an act of the unconscious; rather, it is the primordial forced free choice that forms the unconscious in the first place, thereby creating the foundational subjectivization of the subject. We can read this difference further via Žižek’s return to Descartes and the *cogito*.

Descartes and the *cogito* are perhaps most commonly associated with the origins of modern humanism, as opposed to the Renaissance humanism, where humanity aspires to the divine. Modern humanism, in contrast, notably privileges humanity as the creator of its own material conditions. This view is due in no small part to Descartes’s rationalist methodology. Nevertheless, Žižek identifies Descartes as an antihumanist thinker and claims that “his *cogito* should be strictly distinguished from what we call ‘human personality’, all the wealth of inner life.” Against the Renaissance humanism that sought to elevate human beings above all creatures, according to Žižek, the Cartesian subject “is quite another thing: an inhuman void, an empty point of self-relating negativity” (*HWB*, 181). His point is surely provocative, but I want to argue that it makes sense in the context of reading the *cogito* according to the Lacanian logics of sexualization and their associated ethical dimensions; and, through this, we can see how Žižek’s antihumanism

of the inhuman core of human subjectivity develops a humanism of the not-all, of the feminine logic of sexuation in Lacan. It's through this logic, too, that Žižek's Hegelian dialectical materialism contrasts with the Posthumanist new materialism of twenty-first century postmodern capitalism and its contradictory anti-anthropocentrism. Rescuing the *cogito* and the subject proves pivotal in this regard.

In several places in his early writing, but most notably in *For They Know Not What They Do* and in *Tarrying with the Negative*, Žižek writes that for Lacan the Cartesian *cogito* is the subject of the unconscious, a point that is again developed in other ways in *The Ticklish Subject*. He notes that in Lacan's *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Lacan proposes dividing Descartes's *cogito ergo sum*, "I think, therefore I am," into two parts: thinking ("I think") and being ("I am"). The subject is thus forced to choose between the two. Here, Lacan claims that the subject—in the process of subjectivization—is condemned to the forced choice of thinking, thereby losing being. However, later, in *Seminar XIV*, on the logic of fantasy, Lacan reverses his earlier statement, now claiming that the subject is forced to choose being, with thought then relegated to the position of the unconscious. Here, in this sense, we see how, as noted earlier, Žižek claims that for Lacan the primordial forced choice is an act of the unconscious, since, according to him, it is a mistake to see the later formulation, in the logic of fantasy, as a correction of the earlier one. Instead, we should read the two formulas as a reflection of the antagonistic logic of the sexual difference, and as tied to the foundational forced choice that forges the subject in its relationship to its enjoyment. The masculine subject, he claims, chooses being over thought, which is relegated to the position of the unconscious; the feminine subject, then, chooses thought over being, losing the latter in the process, which is why, according to Lacan, *la femme n'existe pas*.

To understand this, we have to think of the subjectivization in terms of the binary opposition between a foundational affirmation, as well as a complementary act of negation; or, to be more precise: the foundation here is one of an initial free choice of negation that, in Lacanian terms, alienates the subject into the affirmed position of the Symbolic order, or into the community of other human subjects. In subjectivization, the choice in question (of negation and affirmation) is that of the forced choice between thought and being. Typically, the subject will choose or affirm being; but in every act of affirmation there is likewise and simultaneously an act of negation—that is, the negation of the choices not chosen, that is, thought. What Lacan calls symbolic castration is the process of being interpellated as a lacking subject. The subject lacks the choice not chosen, the "lost object" or the Lacanian object *a*. In the choice of affirming being, the subject can then externalize the cause of the negated choice onto the Other, in whose name it appears to have renounced or negated the lost choice, and in this way

becomes alienated within the Symbolic order. In so far as the lost, negated choice, *stays* lost, the subject remains capable of enjoying loss in the form of the desire that it forever pursues. What proves crucial is the fact that, by enjoying loss itself, the subject continues enjoying its own foundational forced choice, even if it experiences this enjoyment as painful since it can never recover the lost object.

The point here is that, contrary to the liberal conception of the fully self-conscious subject, the Lacanian subject is one formed by an unconscious relation to itself and to its own enjoyment. Enjoyment, not the conscious pursuit of needs, in other words, becomes the driving motivation of subjective freedom. While the subject appears to pursue its desire—the lost object of the choice not chosen—what it nevertheless repeats is the enjoyment in failing to find the lost object. In doing so, the subject repeats the enjoyment in the foundational moment of free negation, marking itself as lacking and alienated, forever incomplete. Beginning with the Lacanian subject in this sense, it would appear as though Žižek's alienated subject remains distant from the humanist subject of modernity, and even the Marxist-humanist subject seeking to disalienate. However, it's when we grasp the difference between the masculine and feminine subjects in Lacan's logics of sexuation that we start to see how Žižek's ethics of the feminine not-all helps us to revive or rethink a humanism appropriate to our era: one, that is, that sees alienation as constitutive rather than merely contingent.

In the Lacanian logics of sexuation, the masculine position represents a universal function founded upon a particular limit (all X are submitted to the universal function F; there is at least one X that is not submitted to the universal function F). The masculine logic is, thus, limited and finite, bearing upon the logic of the phallic master-signifier. It is oriented toward the phallus as the signifier of its symbolic castration. By affirming the phallus as its limit, the masculine subject produces itself as lacking, that is, the choice of being over thought. Or, again, rather, by negating thought, the masculine subject affirms being in the form of the phallic (paternal) signifier. On the feminine side of the logics of sexuation, a particular negation implies that there is no exception, there is no limit (not all X are submitted to the function F; there is no X that is not submitted to the function F), and in this sense, the feminine subject is the one capable of *thinking* the contradiction at the heart of being, that is, the choice of thought over being. To put this difference in Hegelian terms, we could say that the masculine subject is the one of the understanding (*verstand*)—it's^{its} limit is one of mere knowledge, as in the Lacanian university discourse. The best it can do is understand what is. The feminine subject, however, is the one of thinking or reasoning (*Vernunft*); it becomes unlimited, precisely in the very form of questioning and bombarding the Other with a demand to think. The hysterical neurotic is, after all, the subject who produces for the analytical discourse the very

knowledge that becomes its basis and foundation. It's through unceasing questioning and reasoning that the subject here forces a continuous negation that is ultimately driven toward a transformative act.

If the masculine subject is, then, the subject of the All (the universality founded upon its exception), the feminine subject is the one of the not-All. But for this reason, the feminine subject of the not-All becomes the ethical subject of reasoning. In the place of the understanding subject of the *verstand*, the subject can go on enjoying the pursuit of desire; but the subject of reason, of the *Vernunft*, is the one capable of traversing the fantasy tied to being in order to think the limits of desire, thereby being interpellated according to the logic drive. The subject of the All, then, the subject of desire, remains according to Žižek the Kantian subject, limited by its inability to get beyond the antinomies of pure reason, to perceive the thing-in-itself. The subject of the not-All, however, is the one who, by grasping the contradiction at the heart of being, is *un*-limited, and can grasp the infinite in being that allows her to perform an ethical act. This subject, according to Žižek, the subject of the not-All, the subject of the drive, is Hegelian (*AR*, 372; *SFA*, 375).

Both the masculine and feminine subjects are oriented toward the phallic signifier; however, whereas the masculine subject is oriented in the mode of affirming the signifier, the feminine subject is oriented toward the negation of the signifier. As the subject of the mere understanding, the masculine subject we might say represents the subject caught in ideology—the bourgeois-liberal ideology of the fully self-conscious, self-aware subject of limited rational agency. Its limit is one of mere external reflection. As the subject of reason, however, the feminine subject is oriented toward thinking and reasoning, and is in this way positioned as ethical, where ethics is the process of taking reasoning all the way to the end, to the point of ethical action or duty; thinking to the point where it cannot but act, producing the new (concept/signifier).¹³ Put differently, in negating the phallic signifier, the feminine subject identifies, not the futility in masculine understanding, but the very self-relating contradiction of the structure of understanding itself. It therefore grasps the paradoxical freedom of the contingent but necessary foundational choice. Noting this paradox, the presupposing of the positing gives the subject the ultimate freedom to act; and, as Joan Copjec notes, for Lacan, an ethical act is feminine.¹⁴ As the reasoning subject, the feminine subject of the not-all, I claim, is the one that best suits or models what I am calling Žižek's humanism of the not-all. I claim this because the human subject of the not-all, for Lacan, as well as for Žižek's Hegel, becomes the methodological and ethical center for thinking the terms of alienation, universality, freedom, and Truth. It is this subject, the feminine subject of the not-all, that in Žižek's Lacanian-Hegelian interpretation, is the quintessential subject of modernity. Humanism of the not-all registers the foundational alienated disparity of modernity, itself.

The Disparity of Alienated Being

For Žižek, one of the primary differences between premodern and modern ontology lies in the way that the latter, in its scientific bent, turns away from subjective enchantments toward the raw, meaningless, and cold “objective reality.” Sexual difference is seen as a mere historicist, subjective humanizing of the real reality. For modern transcendental philosophy, as he puts it, “sexual difference is deontologized, reduced to the ontic sphere of the human race.” Ontologizing sexual difference, one runs the risk of being accused of illegitimate anthropomorphism, “of projecting onto the universe what is merely an empirical (biological and psychic) feature of human beings” (*LN*, 739). However, for Lacan, it’s not that sexuality remains merely an ontic dimension of human reality; rather, sexuality registers an ontological cleavage already present in reality, itself; and this, Žižek notes, is a cleavage already acknowledged in modern philosophy by German Idealism, from Kant to Hegel.

As Copjec has shown, the Lacanian logics of sexuation express, similarly, the logics of the Kantian antinomies of pure reason, with the masculine logic falling on the side of the dynamic antinomies, and the feminine logic falling on the side of the mathematical antinomies.¹⁵ Žižek explains that the antinomies are “indications of the inability of finite reason to grasp the noumenal reality: the moment we apply our categories to what can never become an object of our experience, we become caught up in insoluble contradictions” (*LN*, 740): for instance, the question of whether the universe has a beginning or an ending in time and space, or if it is in fact infinite and expansive. For Kant, the resolution of such a problem is to produce the distinction between phenomena of human experience, and noumena, or things-in-themselves, which can never truly be objects of human knowledge and understanding. To put it bluntly, for Kant, we can know only our knowledge of things, but we cannot know things-in-themselves. Human knowledge, for Kant, remains limited in this sense, and it is not too hard to see here how Kant represents the masculine subject of mere understanding (*verstand*) par excellence. The Hegelian subject, however, of the determinate reflection, and of the infinite judgment, is the one capable of grasping, through reasoning, an intractable contradiction at the heart of being. This is where, for me, a humanist premise returns in our grasping of reasoning and ethics; but humanism here operates somewhat closely to the Kantian idea of the heuristic concept. We begin with the modern humanist subject of limited agency only to arrive at the not-All, alienated, inhuman core of the subject: from positing the presuppositions (in Kant) to presupposing the positing (in Hegel). This alienated humanity is what Žižek calls the disparity.

Disparity refers to the way that Žižek redefines the being of being-human as alienated, or as incomplete. The failure to be what one is, he writes, is constitutive of being-human (*D*, 28). This is a failure that triggers human

creativity and reasoning. Or, as he puts it elsewhere, deficiency is a core feature of being human (*HWB*, 183). In this sense, there can be no in-humanism without the betrayal of humanism—that is, without the prior positing of the humanist subject so that through the processes of reasoning, the inhuman subject becomes capable of presupposing the positing of its foundational humanist gesture. It's only from the perspective of our inhumanity that the universality of humanism is even comprehensible. Or, yet another way to make this point is the claim that the subject is, precisely, the failure of its own actualization (*LN*, 750). Therefore, there is no inhuman subject without humanism; or, in other words, the ethical subject only emerges through the (creative) failure of the humanist subject to realize itself. Its universality is perceived only in its betrayal, and this betrayal, I claim, is the humanist subject.

Žižek, therefore, accomplishes a rethinking of humanism on the grounds of alienation and negativity as opposed to a humanist Marxist conception of unalienated or disalienated species being, fully reconciled toward itself; and, it is via his psychoanalytic reading of Hegel and German Idealism that we find the distinction between the latter, which sees alienation as contingent, and a view of alienation as constitutive, both of subjectivity as well as of reality itself. For Žižek, the development of human sexuality, which as we saw earlier bears upon a fundamental antagonism with regards to the foundational moment of subjectivization, is in fact not a product of the humanization of nature. Quite the opposite. Sexuality, according to Žižek, is the product of our subjectivization of an incompleteness within ontological reality. Human sexuality is the very way in which we come to grasp the very incompleteness at the heart of reality. Or, as Žižek explains, “‘sexuality’ is the way the ontological deadlock, the incompleteness of reality in itself, is inscribed into subjectivity. It is not a subjective distortion of objective reality, but a subjective distortion which is directly identical with the non-All, the inconsistency, out-of-jointness, of reality itself. This is why sexuality is, at its most radical, not human, but the point of inhumanity, the ‘operator of the inhuman’” (*LN*, 745). Nevertheless, the humanism of human sexuality is still, as it reflects an ontological deadlock, the royal road toward subjectivizing the overlapping not-All of substance and subject.

Put differently, if reality is ontologically complete, that leaves human subjects impotent, having no true ability to impact upon the Real. But we are told we have produced an Anthropocene in which too much of the world has been impacted, changed, and transformed, by the human footprint. If, however, we acknowledge the incompleteness of ontological reality, we may grasp the human subject as the very place of this ontological gap in the parallax of reality. This positions (alienated) human subjects as ethical agents, with the ability to either destroy or take care of the world. It is our ontological incompleteness, as well as the ontological incompleteness of reality, that gives us the sense in which human ethical action is made

capable of materially transforming the world, for better or worse. And it is the modernist universalist ethic that drives us forward, in contrast with the postmodernist anti-universalist ethic, that sees only the end of history and dystopia as the folding back in on the present, the perpetual present, that cautions us to only “stay with the trouble,” as Donna Haraway puts it. Against such a Posthumanist perspective that sees the human subject as the culprit of planetary demise, we see how Žižek’s humanism of the not-all, his inhuman humanism, provides the model for seeing through toward the salvation of humanity, as the reaching of its own Notion of the modernist project of universal emancipation.

Here, I am not proposing to add meaning or meaningfulness to being-human; rather, we are called to grapple with the fact of a human subject that always sticks out and, in the face of this and other impulses tied to enjoyment, to ask how we might act according to the ethics of the modernist emancipatory project. This doesn’t mean that the subject of modernity has passed its time. Rather, we see that the humanist subject of modernity set in motion a process that still troubles us for thinking the dimensions of Truth, reasoning, universality, and freedom. And this is still a project to which Žižek remains devoted. This idea, of a human subject of the not-all, capable of making reality just as much as it makes us, is not only an arm in the dialectics of nature, but it is also a project with a view to which humanist modernism continues to set its sights. The point is not, as Habermas put it, that modernity is an incomplete project. Rather, it’s that incompleteness, as grasped by the humanist subject of modernity, is the Truth of every identity.

Notes

- 1 See, for instance, Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (New York: Verso, 2016); and, Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2016).
- 2 For instance, see Steven Shaviro, “Consequences of Pansychism,” in *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 19–44. Shaviro also elaborates on his pansychism in his book on Whitehead, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
- 3 Levi Bryant, for instance, argues that all things are machinic objects of different kinds in *Onto-Cartography: An Ontology of Machines and Media* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2014). Bryant’s object-oriented ontology draws similarly from the object-oriented philosophy of Graham Harman who, likewise, also argues that all things are objects of various kinds. See *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (New York: Pelican, 2018).

- 4 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 247.
- 5 Cited in Kate Soper, *Humanism and Anti-Humanism* (La Salle: Open Court Press, 1986), 97.
- 6 Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2008), 53.
- 7 Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), 2.
- 8 Henri Lefebvre, *Dialectical Materialism*, trans. John Sturrock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
- 9 See also, Boris Groys (ed.), *Russian Cosmism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).
- 10 On this point, see Žižek, “Sexuality in the Posthuman Age,” *Stasis* 4, no. 1 (2016): 54–69.
- 11 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984), 728–9.
- 12 Louis Althusser, “Marx and Freud,” in *Writings on Psychoanalysis: Freud and Lacan*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 114–15.
- 13 On this point, see Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 139–55.
- 14 Joan Copjec, *Imagine There’s No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 7.
- 15 Copjec, “Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason,” in *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

