

Choose blindly: approaching death with Jacques Derrida or where Slavoj Žižek is afraid to tread.

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In order to be responsible, one must be able to respond to the needs of the other without subsuming the other under one's conception: in other words, the other must not merely become a reflection of one's self. That would be merely the construction of the other in order to react to her/ him: the result is a literal circle, a masturbatory circle, the self responding to itself.

In order for true responsibility, one must maintain the other-ness of the other whilst responding. This means that the other always remains fully other to the self: one responds to the needs of the other whilst not fully understanding what these very needs are. At the moment of response, in the terms of Werner Hamacher's elegant and deceptively simple formulation, "understanding is in want of understanding":¹ the self does not merely act towards the other, it is responding, communicating, negotiating. Responsibility is not a prescribed act – a one-way projection of the self onto the other – but a response: two-way and in full communion between the self and the other.

The problem with a responsibility that is known a priori (in the form of an ethics that is pre-determined) is that there is no consideration of the singularity of the situation. This is the problem that Jacques Lacan points out in *Kant avec Sade* – in such a case, there is no other that is responded to, as no matter what the situation is, the method

is always the same: whilst this doesn't necessarily mean that the resulting response is exactly the same, it does subsume the situation under the same conception, the same category.² In this manner, the will of the other is not taken into account; in effect the will of the other – and the other her/ him self – is effaced. A true response to the needs of the other has to take into account the unique situation that both the self and the other are in at any moment.

The Levinasian approach to ethics addresses the issue of the other, but ultimately is lacking in response as well, not in the sense of effacing the other, but ironically in its attempt to fully understand the other's needs. By claiming to privilege the 'visage of the Other' and emptying the self up to the point of becoming "hostage for the Other," what occurs is

an inverted arrogance: as if I am the centre whose existence threatens all others ... confer[ing] on [it] a central position: this very prohibition to assert [the self] makes [it] into the neutral medium, the place from which the truth about the [other] is accessible.³

² Even if one considers Kant as teleological rather than ontological – as Lyotard & Thébaud do in *Just Gaming* – it still holds that the end point becomes the lens to which one then contextualizes the entire situation. Whilst it is true that the end result is undetermined in this manner, the end is always already known: this does not allow the situation to be responded with as such.

For the more comprehensive discussion on Kant as teleological, please see Jean-Francois Lyotard & Jean-Loup Thebaud. (1985). *Just Gaming*. pp.84-93.

³ Slavoj Žižek. (2004). "Smashing the Neighbor's Face" pp.8-9 found at www.lacan.com/zizsmash.htm [additions in parenthesis are mine]. All references to Žižek in this chapter are from this source.

¹ Werner Hamacher. (1999). "Premises" in *Premises: Essays on Philosophy and Literature from Kant to Celan*. pp.1.

What happens in this situation is, the self absorbs the other under its own categories: there is a total consumption of the other. More precisely, the self simulates the other – the response is not to the other but rather to the simulacra of the other. Hence, the self is actually responding to its own projected needs – the other exists but as an imaginary other. Anytime the claim is made that the other is centered, to the extent that in Levinasian terms, “subjectivity is being hostage”⁴ – taking the place of and being a sacrifice for the other – even if the intention is to fully understand the other in order to respond to her/ his needs, what occurs is the disappearance of the other via simulation: another other is created: there is no longer an other. In order for a true response, a full understanding of the other must never be assumed, or even attempted: in this sense, the ‘visage’ of the other must always already be (at least partially) hidden.

This hidden ‘visage’ of the other is not merely what Slavoj Žižek claims when he says, “the true ethical step is one beyond the face of the other, the one of suspending the hold of the face: the choice against the face, for the third.”⁵ Žižek’s claim is that in privileging the third over the ‘visage’, one is able to have an ethics that is just (in the legal sense) for then one can “abstract [the face of the Other] and refocus onto the faceless Thirds in the background.”⁶ Whilst the Žižekian gesture allows one to perform a justice (that in his conception has to be blind to specifics, as in every instance one can

always justify whatever their actions are; for instance personal short-comings such as the failing nature of man), this is an ethics which privileges the material situation (“the faceless Thirds”) whilst effacing the other completely. In the self’s act of “indifference,” what one does is indeed “suspend one’s power of imagination”⁷ with respect to the other, but what occurs instead is that this imagination is transposed to the “faceless Thirds.” In this manner, what is occurring is a simulation of the ‘faceless Thirds’ and their needs. So whilst escaping the Levinasian trap of simulating the other, the Žižekian gesture merely simulates the ‘faceless others.’ Indeed this is not

simply the Derridian-Kierkegaardian point that I always betray the Other because tout autre est un autre, because I have to make a choice to select who my neighbour is from the mass of the Thirds⁸

but rather a mere reversal of that statement – a ‘I betray the other because I refuse to select from the thirds’ or even more radically, ‘I betray both the other and all others because I am merely subsuming all of you under my conception – I have made ALL of you my absolute other(s).’⁹

The site of responsibility is indeed the third, but not as Žižek posits it, for the third exists not as an externality to the other (in the

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas. (1981). *Otherwise Than Being*. pp.127

⁵ Žižek. pp.10.

⁶ Žižek. pp.10.

⁷ Žižek. pp.11.

⁸ Žižek. pp.9.

⁹ In a conversation with Werner Hamacher, he pointed out that at no point does Levinas suggest that the ‘visage’ of the other can even be seen. In this case, one can then say that Žižek’s gesture – effacing Levinas in order to simulate a ‘Levinas’ in order to efface him yet again – is precisely a manifestation of his ethical conception.

form of the faceless others), but rather in the other her/ him self. In responding to and with the needs of the other, the self has to communicate with the other in order to uncover these needs. Communication takes place in the third itself – for true communication is not merely the exchange of information (which requires a flattening out of differences – which we see in the Žižekian gesture – in order for this exchangeability to take place), but rather is a process where the two parties connect and touch each other. Communication, as Lucretius posits, takes place in the skin (the simulacrum) between the two parties and it is in that space that the two parties negotiate.¹⁰ In this sense, there is no direct transfer of meaning but rather that meaning itself is an emergent property of the process of communication. There is no such thing as mis-communication: communication itself is an event and by definition its result cannot be pre-determined.¹¹ Responding to the other takes place in the third – between the self and the other – and it is at this site that the needs of the other potentially emerge.

There is no doubt that there is an exchange that takes place in communication – otherwise one will emerge from any process of communication completely unchanged (which is not true).

¹⁰ Lucretius. (2005). *Sensation and Sex*. pp.39-60.

¹¹ This brings all traditional models of communication into question. For instance the Shannon-Weaver model claims that mis-communication is due to interference and mis-interpretation (or 'noise' in general). However the assumption behind this claim is not only that perfect communication is possible, but more pertinently that communication is premised on information transfer, that communication is essentially an exchange. Moreover, the only manner in which the concept of 'perfect communication' can exist is if the result of communication is known a priori: by extension this means that the singularity of each act of communication is effaced.

But the exchange that takes place is not one of a direct information exchange: this would be the realm of a general exchange; an exchange of one unit of information for another. This is communication conceived as an economic exchange, where all differences have to be flattened (or abstracted from a use-value to an exchange-value) and perhaps the sense of 'meaning' that is derived from the act is then its surplus value. This fits in perfectly with the logic of capital: communication as a process that is calculable, predictable and which produces surplus value that guarantees its continual cycle. An analogy of this would be one of furniture in the modern context: each piece of furniture no longer has a meaning in itself (the last of this is perhaps 'dad's chair' which only he can sit in), except for the fact that it is part of the overall design of that particular room. In this manner, each piece is perfectly substitutable with any other piece: take any chair out and replace it with another chair – as long as it fits in with the overall design, it will work; functionality is the key here. The 'ambience' of the room is the concept that determines the individual pieces of furniture, which only have meaning insofar as being part of the network that is the room itself: each piece is individual, but not singular.¹² In a concept of communication in which there is a direct exchange of information, each word functions like a piece of furniture: nothing has meaning in itself, and there is no singularity: individual words that have meaning only as part of a network of other words, constructions, sentences, other sentences and so on. Communication itself would be subsumed under functionality (that is the purpose of communication would be pre-determined – exchange a particular piece of information). This is the only way in which one can deem that mis-communication took place: only with an aim that is set, can any failure be determined and calculated. With such a concept of communication, the importance of each person

¹² This analysis of furniture and 'ambience' is taken from Jean Baudrillard. (2005). *The System of Objects*. pp.30-74.

is determined by her position in the network, and by extension, each person is completely and utterly replaceable, exchangeable. Each person is individual, but not singular.

A process of communication in which there is no a priori aim (and by extension result) rests on an *impossible exchange*; an exchange that occurs in spite of the fact that there is no flattening of differences. An impossible exchange is one that realizes that there can be no exchange because all logical systems rest on an exclusion, one that realizes that there is no logical system that can sustain itself within its own boundaries. As Avital Ronell eloquently states,

Gödel's theorem showed that in a logical system as abundant as arithmetic there must be at least one proposition whose truth or falsity is undecidable. No proof can possibly exist determining the truth or falsity of the undecidable statement in the language of the system within which the statement was formulated.¹³

And without the possibility of a totalizing logical system, there can never be a natural equivalence. Therefore there can never be any direct exchange except if the exchange was simulated. This brings us back to Lucretius' conception of communication: the exchange takes place in the simulacra, an exchange that is impossible but which happens non-the-less. This exchange, in the form of the act of communication, is precisely the emergent property of the process of communication: communication occurs for the sake of communication, and not some teleological goal. There is no overall 'design' or 'ambience' to govern the

¹³ Avital Ronell. (2005). *The Test Drive*. pp.57.

process of communication: an emergent property by strict definition is unknowable a priori. Hence each act of communication is unique. Since there is no overall structure under which the act of communication is subsumed, there is a potential for a unique and new response in each act of communication.¹⁴

It is this un-calculability that resides in every pure decision, where there is, as Jacques Derrida posits, "the sacrifice of economy, that without which there is no free responsibility or decision."¹⁵ It is this un-calculability that saves a decision from being a mere prelude to an act. The moment of decision is one in which there is the potential for responding to the other, where the other remains unknowable (if not totally, at least partially), and in which one responds with a degree of blindness. The blindness occurs in two realms: one with regards to the other which the self is responding to (in the sense of not subsuming the other under the self); the second to the act that is to be done in response to the other (in the sense of not knowing a priori what is to be done). It is this double blindness that allows the self to respond, in the fullest sense, to the other: not only does "every other (one) [remain] every (bit) other"¹⁶ in the acknowledgement that every decision privileges one over all the remaining others, to whom we always remain accountable towards, but also

¹⁴ There is also a chance that this does not occur – in fact, the chances of a new and unique response is probably lower than one that has already occurred: in most occasions the lack of time dictates that conventions (which are pre-determined) govern the 'emergent property' of communication such that the 'meaning' produced is not a unique one. This potential 'not to be' is part of a full potentiality, without which there would be no difference between potentiality and actuality except for difference stages in a progression. True potentiality is thus the potential 'to be' and the potential 'not to be.'

This is meditated on in detail in Giorgio Agamben. (1999). *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida. (1996). *The Gift of Death*. pp.95. All references to Derrida in this chapter are from this source.

¹⁶ Derrida. pp.82.

that the other that is privileged does not become merely an extension of the self.

This is why Søren Kierkegaard proclaims, “the instant of decision is madness”:¹⁷ one chooses in spite of the fact that there is no rational decision to choose one course over the other(s). If one were to rely solely on logic or rationality, there will always be an aporetic situation but one has to choose in spite of this. Otherwise there is always already a situation of non-action (which is a decision in itself): this would be the decision of non-responsibility; the refusal to respond to the other and all the other others. This is the problem with Žižek’s position: by refusing to choose, he ultimately chooses a position that responds to none, that abandons all the others. However if one chooses to respond, then one must respond whilst being blind (to all other possibilities). It is this double blindness that allows for the potentiality of a response that is

an absolute responsibility [that] could not be derived from a *concept* of responsibility and therefore, in order for it to be what it must be it must remain inconceivable, indeed unthinkable: it must therefore be irresponsible in order to be absolutely responsible.¹⁸

This is why Žižek claims that the authentic moment, the real moment of decision, has to be one which is “harshness ... sustained by love,”¹⁹ which in his conception is a moment of justice that is guided by love; a blindness

¹⁷ Derrida. pp.65. which is probably a reference to Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Fragments*

¹⁸ Derrida. pp.61. *italics* from source

¹⁹ Žižek. pp.12.

in fidelity to the other. This is akin to Derrida’s claim that true responsibility is one

that doesn’t keep account or give an account, neither to man, to humans, to society, to one’s fellows, or to one’s own. Such a responsibility keeps its secret, it cannot and need not present itself It refuses to present itself before the violence that consists of asking for accounts and justifications²⁰

This is a responsibility that is blind in and to itself, in fidelity to responding to the needs of the other. Whilst responding to the needs of the other, the self and the other remain absolute singularities – this is why there is no economy of exchange that takes place. The exchange is an *impossible exchange*: it is a non-economical exchange that takes place. This is the secret of the exchange: there is nothing in the exchange except for the exchange itself. This is the secret of the gift: there is nothing in the giving but the giving itself. In a blind responsibility, one is responsible to no one except to the ability to respond: this is

the paradoxical condition of every decision: it cannot be deduced from a form of knowledge of which it would simply be the effect, conclusion or explication. It structurally breaches knowledge and is thus destined to nonmanifestation; a decision is, in the end, always secret.²¹

But in spite of this destiny, in order to respond to the other, one must respond – here of course, one can hear an echo of Samuel Beckett; that of not being able to go on, yet at the same time having to. And it is at this very point, where one has no choice but to respond, where one has to

²⁰ Derrida. pp.62.

²¹ Derrida. pp.77.

choose to respond in full awareness that one is unable to do so, where the element of blindness lies. To fully respond to the needs of the other, one must be blind to everything else, including the other: it is this that allows the other to remain fully other whilst one responds to her/ him. Hence, there is no object to responsibility; there is nothing except the ability to respond to, the possibility to respond with.

Of course once the instant of decision has occurred, there is a consequence which takes the form of the act, after-which there is an accountability to the other and to the other others as well – this is when everything is re-inscribed into an economy: one can calculate whether the response was ‘good’ or ‘bad’ and so on. However, this is an economy that is “in simulacrum, an economy that is ambiguous enough to seem to integrate noneconomy.”²² For in every true response to the other, there is the element of the unknowable – the secret – that is brought into the act itself: there is no pre-knowledge of the consequences; there is a potentiality for a previously unknown consequence. Ultimately, “the response and hence responsibility always risk what they cannot avoid appealing to in reply, namely, recompense and retribution. They risk the exchange that they might expect but are at the same time unable to count on.”²³

It is impossible to speak of a true responsibility in prescriptive terms for that would be merely another categorical imperative that attempts to subsume every situation under its logic. The double blindness that is in every decision (as opposed to mere option or alternative), in fidelity to responsibility, is not an exception or an aberrant than can be done away with –

²² Derrida. pp.109.

²³ Derrida. pp.96.

it is an essential part of responsibility itself. This blindness ensures that the self responds to the other, without doing away with the other-ness of the other, the *radical otherness* of the other. True responsibility is not an answer but a question: it opens up a space in which one can be responsible to the other by being a true question (for which there is no known answer, at least to the one asking the question) and “as often happens, the call of or for the question, and the request that echoes through it, takes us further than the response.”²⁴

It is this question, irresponsible to everything except responsibility itself, blind to everything – even the other – except the possibility of responding to the (unknown) other, that allows both the other and the self to preserve their singularity. In responding to each other, there is a coming together that is akin to a marriage, the precise ending of the vow being “what God has joined, man must not divide.” The joining is always already imperfect and fragile – otherwise the vow would have read ‘man cannot divide.’ This suggests that man is fully capable of dividing the union and it is this fragility that ensures that marriage is not a mere constitutive merger – the two remain fully singular and the union depends on the two recognizing its fragility and becoming one in spite of the impossibility of doing so. Hence it is only through this agreement, this contract, that the union is formed, that the union has a potentiality of occurring: in no way does the contract guarantee that the union will last, or even that the union will take place; the function of the contract is only to open up the space for the potentiality of this very union (perhaps in complete futility as it may never even occur in the first place). In the same vein, the self and the other respond to each other in spite of the potential futility of any act to change or improve the situation; the self and the other respond with each other in spite of the impossibility of doing so.

²⁴ Derrida. pp.115.

This is a responsibility in which blindness is fundamental: a responsibility that closes its eyes to everything, is irresponsible to everything, except the ability to respond. Ultimately it seems that it is this unknown, this unknowable, that Žižek fears and it is this fear, that leads him to a non-response: by refusing to pick one and accepting the consequences for doing so, he picks no one, and as a result everyone is abandoned.

But before castigating Žižek too quickly, we might want to return to Samuel Beckett and ask what it means to be unable to go on, yet having to at the same time. And more pertinently to maintain that this undecideability resides within the self – otherwise one is merely transposing all responsibility to a transcendental other, a gesture that is not very different from what we are claiming Žižek is doing. This situation of knowing something (that one has to respond to a situation), and yet not knowing what it is one has to do (there is no a priori referent to guide us) is rather similar to the dilemma faced by Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*. They are responding to a call from somewhere unknown, to wait for this particular person called “Mr Godot,” yet they know not who he is. This means that even if Godot arrived, they would never be sure whether it was actually him or not. In other words, Godot is a pure name without referent: a catachrestic metaphor that refers to nothing but the fact that it is referring. However, just because Vladimir and Estragon know not who they are waiting for does not mean that they have no responsibility: the decision to stay and wait for Godot still resides in them. In this sense, it is an active decision, an act. What remains unknown to them is both the source of the waiting – after all, they were only told to wait for him – and the object that they are waiting for. Hence all that we can say about Vladimir and Estragon is that they are waiting: we can only invoke the name of

Godot insofar as Godot is a name that names nothing except for the name itself. In other words, when they are waiting for Godot, they are attending to the possibility of waiting itself, whilst open to the potentiality of the other, all whilst not knowing who or what this other is. Vladimir and Estragon are attending to the other whilst not claiming any knowledge over the other; the other is allowed to remain fully other.

When one allows oneself to take the position – and one can only at best posit here – of responsibility as waiting, responsibility as the openness to the potentiality of responding to the other, then one opens oneself to the accusation of doing nothing. And it is this attending that is crucial in choice itself: it is only a real choice if one acknowledges that in every decision lies an absolute blindness, an unknown, and ultimately an unknowable. By attempting to locate everything in materiality, Žižek does away with this undecidable, but only by sacrificing the other.

The refusal of the unknown is also the refusal to acknowledge death. And not death as a figure, but death as the name for this very unknowable itself. Death is this unknowability that resides in every act of knowing, every attempt to know: not a death that is merely a phase of life, and end-point that is always already taken into consideration in advance, death as a negativity to life, but death as such, death that is a pure void, that can at best be constituted as a catachrestic metaphor: death as a pure name, naming nothing except for the fact that it is naming.

This suggests that we cannot define death, that at best we might begin to approach it but that it will always already slip away from us. It is not as if we cannot know death because it is beyond us – in fact it is part of us, a part of us that is always already (n)either within us (n)or without us. In this sense we are always stricken with death, but a death from within that remains unknowable to us, one that we can at best

glimpse as a metaphor, as a narrative, as fiction.

It is with this in mind that we approach Marguerite Duras' beautiful tale *The Malady of Death*. Perhaps in this non-direct way, we might begin to catch a glimpse of the unknowability that haunts the self, that is always already of the self, that doesn't allow the self to totalize. One must never forget that we can only see ghosts when are not looking for them to begin with.

In *The Malady of Death*, there is a conversation between a 'you' and a 'her': at first glance, it would seem that it is between a man and a woman in a room by the sea. Occasionally an 'I' – perhaps a narrator; perhaps the 'he' – interjects: it is never possible to distinguish between the two; one can never be certain whether the 'I' is a character or a narrator. It is this impossibility of distinguishing, of separating the 'he' and the 'I' within the text that bring the 'she' into question: this opens the question of referentiality: if one is never able to discern who is uttering the utterances, the poles of elocutioner and referent – the binary of subject and object – are imploded. At the end, all you can say about the status of referentiality in the text, to borrow a phrase from the very first time the 'I' appears, is "I don't know" (3); not just an 'I don't know' in terms of a lack of knowledge, but more precisely an 'I don't know who the I that is uttering this statement is in the first place'. An echo of this is found later in the line "you think you know you know not what ..." (40): the first register it opens is 'whether one can know they don't know something'; another potentially more interesting register is, 'if one only "thinks" one knows one does not know, then whether something is known or not known is now unclear'. In either instance, the difference between knowing and not knowing is blurred; they are no longer antonyms but rather parts of each other: in other words, 'every time something is known,

there is always already something unknown within it'. The unknowability is not only in the content – the object to which the utterance refers to – but more radically in the relationality of the subject to itself: each time one utters "I don't know," (s)he is attempting to name herself as well, to utter her-self into being.

The only difference that is posited between the 'I', 'you', and 'her' is found in the line "your difference, your death." (32) In this sense, what is unknowable – the difference between the utterers – what can only at best be posited – is death itself. This is why the tale is named *The Malady of Death*: death is always within one (one is a carrier of death from the very beginning) and always also from without (death ultimately claims you). But it is not as if one ever knows how death affects one: "one knows without knowing how" (19) and more than that, "whoever has it doesn't know he's a carrier, of death. And also because he's like to die without any life to die to, and without even knowing that's what he's doing." (19)

It is this gap in knowing – the gap that allows one to reach out and touch the other, yet at the same time never allows the relationality between the self and the other to be known except perhaps in the moment of the relation itself – that prevents a totalitarian theory from coming into being, that prevents the effacement of either the other, or even the self. This unknowability, this death, both allows communication with the other, but also ensures that communication is impossible at the same time: in this sense, the exchange is always already a *symbolic exchange* – one where there is no equalization, flattening out of differences, abstraction, but only reversibility, play – or even better still, an *impossible exchange*, an exchange between *irreducible differences*. How two singularities affect each other can never be calculated, predictable, nor known in advance: all we can posit is that they do: and each exchange happens only in the moment of exchange.

Not only does the irreducibility of their difference prevent either the self or the other from subsuming the other, it also allows both singularities to be as such: otherwise by consuming the other completely, both consume themselves, into meaninglessness, into nothingness.

Hence ultimately it is this step into non-materiality, into the unknown, the imaginative, fictional gesture, that allows both the self and the other to retain their singularities. Only by allowing death to be as such, can one perhaps retain the possibility of communication, touch, and relationality. Ironically, only by awaiting death – oblivion – can one have the possibility of living.

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