

**TESTING THE COMPATIBILITY OF PSYCHOANALYSIS AND
CONTEMPORARY NEUROSCIENCE: FREUD BETWEEN SPINOZA AND
KANT**

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1. Between Spinoza and Kant: Catherine Malabou, Freud, Damasio and Žižek

What is Spinoza's insight then? That mind and body are parallel and mutually correlated processes, mimicking each other at every crossroad, as two faces of the same thing. That deep inside these parallel phenomena there is a mechanism for representing body events in the mind. That in spite of the equal footing of mind and body, as far as they are manifest to the percipient, there is an asymmetry in the mechanism underlying these phenomena. He suggested that that the body shapes the mind's contents more so than the mind shapes the body's, although mind processes are mirrored in body processes to a considerable extent. On the other hand, the ideas in the mind can double up on each other, something that bodies cannot do. If my interpretation of Spinoza's statements is even faintly correct, his insight was revolutionary for its time but it had no impact on science.¹

With these sentences Antonio Damasio—one of the leading contemporary neurologists—attempts to summarize the groundbreaking significance of the seventeenth century philosopher Baruch Spinoza for twenty-first century neuroscience. In the paragraph above Damasio focuses on Spinoza's thought about the interdependence between mind and body. Contrary to Descartes who allocated a commanding or ruling function to the

¹ Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*, (London: A Harvest Book/Harcourt Inc., 2003), p. 217.

mind—which he physiologically tried to locate in the pineal gland—Spinoza argued that mental images originate in bodily perceptions and sensation. Spinoza famously argued that the mind is the idea of the body. This implies a parallelism between mind and body. Damasio and other leading neurologists have discovered that body, brain and mind are intricately connected, that bodily emotions are the foundation of mental feelings and a sense of consciousness: 'The inescapable and remarkable fact about these three phenomenon—emotion, feeling, consciousness—is their body relatedness.'² As Damasio points out in the paragraph above, Spinoza insight into the parallelism between mind and body groundbreaking though it was 'had no impact on science'. In *Spinoza and the Specters of Modernity* I have shown that his thought has had significant—albeit marginalized—repercussions with political, historical, cultural, biological and psychoanalytical theory. Freud in particular developed his notion of 'new science' as part of Spinoza shift away from the Cartesian but also Kantian idealist notion of the mind's autonomy or full control over merely bodily or contingent external events. This Freudian shift in the understanding of the science of the mind will be discussed in the following section of this article.

Do we do justice to Freud when we characterize him as a covert Spinozist? As we shall see below he was certainly highly critical of Kant's perception of the mind's autonomy from external or pathological exposures. On the hand the identity of body, emotion, feeling, brain and mind which Spinoza as well as contemporary neuroscience maintains has troubling implications for Freudian psychoanalysis too. Slavoj Žižek—perhaps the most important contemporary Freudian/Lacanian theorist—has recently raised a red flag over what he call the reductive materialism of neurologists à la Damasio. Žižek's point of contention is a self-proclaimed progressive one: the neurologists

² Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: body, emotion and the making of consciousness*, (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 284.

abandon a Kantian position and retreat to a ‘naïve’ pre-critical perception of life. Poking fun at Damasio, Žižek articulates his ‘problem with this easy and clear solution: reading the cognitivists, one cannot help noting how their description of consciousness at the phenomenal-experiential level is very traditional and pre-Freudian.’³ Later on Žižek makes clear that he actually understands pre-Kantian by his expression ‘pre-Freudian’. Here it is important to attend to what Žižek refers to as ‘this easy and clear solution’. Without referencing her new book *The New Wounded: From Neuroscience to Brain Damage*, Žižek mentions Catherine Malabou—whose work on Hegel he keeps appraising—for having advocated a dismissal of Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalysis in favour of contemporary neuroscience:

Only with today’s brain science do we have the true revolution, namely that, for the first time, we are approaching a scientific understanding of the emergence of consciousness. Catherine Malabou draws a radical consequence from the cognitivist standpoint: the task is not to supplement the Freudian unconscious with the cerebral unconscious, but to replace the former with the latter—once we accept the cerebral unconscious, there is no longer any space for the Freudian version.⁴

As we will see, Malabou does not advocate abandoning Freudian psychoanalysis. She does, however, take issue with the Kantian residue of the mind’s autonomy within Freud’s writing and thought. It is this critique of an idealist unconscious in Freud’s conscious and outspoken attack on Kant’s notion of a mind that is in full possession of itself, which provokes Žižek’s censure of Malabou’s position. Rather than doing justice to Freud’s complex position between Spinoza and Kant, Žižek reads Freudian psychoanalysis as if it were another version of Kantian autonomy. His fondness of

³ Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, (London: Verso, 2012), p. 716.

⁴ Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, p. 715.

paradox brings Žižek to declare that radical Cartesian (Descartes's *cogito*) and Kantian (Kant's autonomy) idealism coincides with the radical materialism of Marx, Lenin and Stalin. For both pure idealists and pure materialist, there is no such thing as matter, brain, mind or selfhood. Rather than being embodied (as Spinoza and contemporary neuroscience maintains) we are disembodied, substance-less subjects: minds or organs without bodies. This insight into the non-substantial or non-corporeal foundation of human existence is what Žižek understands by 'Freudian'. It is actually not Freud but Hume and Kant as he makes clear later on: 'while Hume endeavours to demonstrate how there is no Self (when we look into ourselves, we only encounter particular ideas, impressions, etc.—no 'Self' as such), Kant claims that this void *is* the Self.'⁵ The emptiness of the empirical or embodied self serves as the foundation of Kantian autonomy. On account of the self's void, it is able to disregard empirical, embodied and contingent conditions of the merely natural (i.e. non-rational) world and legislate in an autonomous manner.

The self's void justifies the rule of a mind that is here even more radically than in Descartes's *cogito* completely independent of corporal or material conditions. This independence from matter establishes the mind's autonomous rule over the material or embodied world. As Žižek has put it: 'The post-Humean critical-transcendental idealists, from Kant to Hegel, do *not* return to the pre-critical, rock-like, substantial identity of the Ego—what they struggled with was precisely how to describe the Self which has no substantial identity (as was stated by Kant in his critique of Descartes's own reading of *cogito* as *res cogitans* "a thing that thinks"), but nonetheless functions as irreducible

⁵ Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, p. 720.

point of reference—here is Kant’s unsurpassable formulation in his Critique of Pure Reason: “[...] Through this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks, nothing further is represented than a transcendental subject of the thoughts=X”.⁶ According to Žižek, neuroscience returns to a pre-Freudian position, because his understanding of the pre-Freudian, is the pre-Kantian or Spinozan (critical of both Descartes’s and Kant’s autonomy of the thinking thing). Kant has emptied thought of any substance. In his critique of the material vestiges of Descartes’ *cogito* he has banished the matter implicit in the Cartesian notion ‘*res cogitans*’: ‘Kant thus prohibits the passage from ‘I think’ to ‘I am a thing that thinks’: of course there has to be some noumenal basis for (self-)consciousness, of I must be ‘something’ objectively, but the point is precisely that this dimension is forever inaccessible to the ‘I’.⁷ The inaccessibility in question here is epistemological. Kant’s epistemological critique sets the stage for his metaphysical redefinition of the body. Given that we do not know the possible meaning of our embodiment, it also could not be said with certainty that bodily contingency has any relation to a transcendent ground that would bestow on it some form of value. Our non-empirical, that is to say, rational activity operates as the true source of moral validity.

Kant’s idealism does not deny the existence of matter but maintains that matter has any right to exist except as the material base for the mind’s autonomous constructions. Precisely because the intrinsic value of matter is inaccessible the mind can rule it without restrictions. The scandal of Spinoza mind-body parallelism and that of contemporary neuroscience is that here corporeal matter is no longer inaccessible to

⁶ Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, pp. 720-21.

⁷ Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, p. 721.

mental insight but on the contrary, here the very survival of the mental depends on the corporeal materiality.

This brings us to the precarious existence of the mind, according to contemporary neuroscience. The dependency of the mind on the body has serious implications for the mental longevity, because the mind is subject to corporeal mortality. In her new book, Malabou focuses on precisely this issue. She argues that cerebral plasticity does not only denote the donation and reception but also the destruction of life. She does not dismiss Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalysis—as Žižek claims she does. She asks, however, whether Freudian thought can imagine the mortality of psychic life.

Addressing the question of whether Freud allows for the radical negativity of death as part of mental life, Malabou first points out that psychoanalysis defines mental illness not in terms of mortality but in terms of regression:

Freud thus underscores two fundamental characteristics of psychopathologies: They always entail both regression and destruction, and they only destroy that which stands in the way of regression. Destruction only bears upon the “later acquisitions and developments” that Freud compares to a garment or envelope. These superstructures are thus designed to cover over the essential—the nature that breaks through our “hard-won morality”—the nudity of the primitive psychic stratum, which becomes the aim of regression. *Destruction is merely the most effective manner of uncovering or revealing the indestructible.*⁸

The indestructible is not death but the death drive. The death drive never comes to end but turns around death returning to primitive pasts of childhood and the evolutionary beginnings of humanity before the stage of restrictive mental life, of civilization. According to Freud, the psyche operates in an autonomous manner, because it works as

an inward drive, progressing and regressing ontogenetically to the childhood of a given individual as well as polygenetically to the savage origins of mankind, to the murder of the primeval father by the brothers who envy their progenitors exclusive possession of women. Oedipus is itself a regression to this primal scene of savage patricide. Nothing seems to get lost in psychic life: over human history the same events keep returning. This is what Malabou means by Freud's indestructibility of the psychic life. This indestructibility sharply contrasts with contemporary neuroscientific findings of the mind's dependence on bodily growth and mortality. The brain of an Alzheimer patient does not regress to childhood. On the contrary rather than growing like a child, it incrementally closes down and retreats from an affective engagement with the outside world. As Malabou shows in her book, Freud vehemently denied that psychic life could shut down and cease to exist. From this perspective Freud clings to a notion of autonomy; psychic autonomy:

The psychical regime of events, for Freud, is autonomous; it does not depend on any organic causes—especially not upon any cerebral cause. This autonomy manifests itself precisely through the independence of fantasmatic work whose only creative resources come from the psyche and not the brain. Once again, the concepts of scene, fiction, and scenario are foreign to any neuronal organization that, according to Freud, does not possess an apparatus of representation.⁹

The brain, according to contemporary neuroscience, engages in work of representation. These representations are not full representations of the objects concerned. They are creations: 'But the correspondence is not point-to-point, and thus the map need not be faithful. The brain is a creative system. Rather than mirroring the environment around it,

⁸ Malabou, *The New Wounded: From Neuroscience to Brain Damage*, (New York: Fordham University, 2012), p. 59.

⁹ Malabou, *The New Wounded*, p. 98.

as an engineered information-processing device would, each brain constructs maps of that environment using its own parameters of internal design, and thus creates a world unique to the class of brains comparably designed.¹⁰ These different and divergent representations of the world constitute part of our subjectivity and create difference of perspective, different take on things. At first glance Freud, on the other hand, seems to be close to Žižek's image of him: he seems to dismiss any talk of material, embodies objects as irrelevant to the autonomy of psychic life. There is no such thing as external reality, only the hallucinations and fictions generated by the void which is psychic life: "The gap that separates the quantum level from our ordinary perceived reality is *not* a gap between ultimate hard reality and a higher-level unavoidable-but-illusory hallucination. On the contrary, it is the quantum level which is effectively 'hallucinated,' not yet ontologically fully constituted, floating and ambiguous, and it is the shift to the 'higher' level of appearance (appearing perceived reality) that makes it into a hard reality."¹¹ Our sense of 'hard reality' is itself a product of fiction whose basis is psychic life. This makes Freud appear as a Kantian who transposes Kant's notion of autonomy into the workings of the psyche. How can we then account for Freud's repeated criticism of Kant's philosophy?

2. Freud's New Science

Indeed Freud defines his new science against Kant's modernity. Freud ironically characterizes Kant's Copernican revolution as 'old science'. What makes it old is its presumption of intra-human omniscience and omnipotence. Contra Kant, Freud argues that we are not masters in our own house. Instead our ego or our psyche is split into competing claims and commandments of which we can rarely gain control. Significantly,

¹⁰ Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*, p. 322.

¹¹ Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, pp. 726-7.

Freud undermines the Kantian notion of autonomy as mastering one's own house and world, when he locates the psychoanalytical revolution within the historical context of both Copernicus and Darwin: both have inflicted wounds on humanity's narcissism. Psychoanalysis deals a third and decisive blow to this kind of anthropomorphism:

Humanity had to endure two big wounds of its naïve self-love as inflicted by science over the ages. First when it learned that our earth is not the center of the world, but a tiny part of a much bigger and unimaginable system of the world. This wound is associated with the name of Copernicus, although Alexandrian science has pronounced something similar. The second: when biological science rendered null and void the presumed privilege of creation of man by referring to both his descent from animals and to the ineradicable nature of his animalistic constitution. This reevaluation has taken place in our time under the influence of Charles Darwin, Wallace and their predecessors [i.e. Spinoza, Herder, and Goethe], which have been met not without the fiercest resistance of their contemporaries. The third and most severe wound, however, human megalomania has to endure from psychological research, which proves to the ego¹² that it is not even master in his own house, but remains dependent on pathetic information derived from something which takes place unconsciously in the life of its soul.¹³

Here Freud clearly places his new science in a historical trajectory of maverick scientists who have radically rejected humanity's anthropomorphic conception of God.

The Copernican revolution has questioned the quasi-divine place of the earth as the center of the universe and Darwin and his predecessors Spinoza, Herder, and Goethe

¹² Translating Freud's *Ich* as "ego" can be misleading: the term *ego* seems to be related to the notion of egoism. Freud's *Ich* does not encompass such semantic associations. However, I refer to the common translation of "ego" for *Ich* in order not to confuse the reader.

¹³ 'Zwei große Kränkungen ihrer naiven Eigenliebe hat die Menschheit im Laufe der Zeiten von der Wissenschaft erdulden müssen. Die erste, als sie erfuhr, daß unsere Erde nicht der Mittelpunkt des Weltalls ist, sondern ein winziges Teilchen eines in seiner Größe kaum vorstellbaren Weltsystems. Sie knüpft sich für uns an den Namen Kopernikus, obwohl schon die alexandrinische Wissenschaft ähnliches verkündet hatte. Die zweite dann, als die biologische Forschung das angebliche Schöpfungsvorrecht des Menschen zunichte machte, ihn die Abstammung aus dem Tierreich und die Unvertilgbarkeit seiner animalischen Nature verwies. Diese Umwertung hat sich in unseren Tagen unter dem Einfluß von Ch. Darwin, Wallace und ihren Vorgängern nicht ohne das heftigste Sträuben seiner Zeitgenossen vollzogen. Die dritte und empfindlichste Kränkung aber soll die menschliche Größensucht durch die heutige psychologische Forschung erfahren, welche dem Ich nachweisen will, daß es nicht einmal Herr ist im eigenen Hause, sondern auf kärgliche Nachrichten angewiesen belibt von dem, was unbewußt in seinem Seelenleben vorgeht.' Freud, *Studienausgabe*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Mitcherlich, Angelika Richards, and James Strachey, (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1975), pp. 283-84. My trans.

have shown how humanity forms part of natural rather than exclusively spiritual history. The most severe wound to humanity's anthropomorphic concept of God and the universe is, however, inflicted by Freud's new science. Why is this so? The preceding revolutions had to do with the strictly biological (Darwin) and astrological (Copernicus) spheres, while minimally touching upon the sphere of the mind. This is why Kant is part of the Copernican revolution: with Copernicus he acknowledges the periphery of the astrological position of our habitat, the earth, but he nevertheless reclaims the autonomous mastery of humanity within its post-Copernican limits (i.e. the limits of the sublunar world).

Freud's new science is radical, because it assaults this last remaining bastion of pride: the mind. Rather than guaranteeing the proud independence of humanity from natural forces, the mind is 'not master in his own house but remains dependent on pathetic information derived from something which takes place unconsciously in the life of its soul' (see larger quote above). This indefinite 'something' (*von dem, was*) makes nonsense of any claim to an unambiguous self-knowledge. It therefore strongly undermines the Kantian position concerning transcending the empirical world, because of the autonomy of the rational mind.

According to Kant, reason shapes the material world in an a priori manner and, as a result, is capable of freedom from natural conditions.¹⁴ In Freud's *Introductory Lectures* of 1933 Kant appears as the godfather of philosophers who argues that "time and place are necessary forms of psychic activities."¹⁵ Far from being able to create stable spacial structures and temporal rhythms, the mind easily turns mindless when it removes the ego from the flow of time and also from the flow of life. This removal from time and space

¹⁴ See Mack, *German idealism and the Jew*, pp. 23-41.

¹⁵ Freud, *Studienausgabe* vol.1, p. 511.

might be substantiated by a loss of reality which characterizes various forms of psychosis.

In undermining Kant's conception of autonomy, Freud's new science refashions Spinoza's critique of both religion and philosophy as anthropomorphism. As Suzanne R. Kirschner has pointed out, Freudian psychoanalysis analyzes "the limitations of modernity's emphasis on rationality and autonomy."¹⁶ Freud's new science enmeshes cultural with natural history. According to Freud we cannot overcome nature and attain Kant and Hegel's state of freedom where natural impulses are suspended. Psychoanalysis focuses on damages caused precisely by such suspension. Rather than emphasizing a future state of reason and freedom, Freud's new science tries to persuade us to commemorate a 'savage' (i.e. pre-modern) past which, if not brought to consciousness, determines our presumably modern and civilized way of life.

3. The death drive

The focus on human savagery, on aggression, and self-destruction are certainly far removed from Spinoza's universe where suicide does not come naturally, but is instead the offspring of external societal factors. As Spinoza puts it in the third Part of the *Ethics*, 'whatever can destroy our body cannot be in it.'¹⁷ Clearly Freud is cognizant of the negativity, which Herder and Goethe have introduced into Spinoza's seemingly benign naturalistic universe. It is worthwhile adding that there already is an epistemological negativity in Spinoza, which, as analyzed by Alain Badiou, focuses on the void that separates our finite human understanding from the infinity of God or Nature.¹⁸ What

¹⁶ Kirschner, *The religious and romantic origins of psychoanalysis. Individuation and integration in post-Freudian theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 199.

¹⁷ Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 76.

¹⁸ See Badiou, *Being and Event*, pp. 112-120 and the editorial, Wakefield *The Sublime Void* (Cambridge: APJ 1.1 2011).

Hegel and Herder have introduced into Spinozist thought is a further radicalization of this void. It now turns from the merely epistemological into the ontological sphere. Spinoza, in contrast, denies that any being 'has anything in itself by which it can be destroyed, or which takes its existence away.'¹⁹

The issue of an ontological negativity has, to be sure, been reinforced by Charles Darwin's notion of natural selection, based not on the principle of merit but rather on that of arbitrariness, chance, or, in other words, tough luck. 'We behold the face of nature bright with gladness,' writes Darwin and goes on to stress nature's dark side, 'we often see superabundance of food; we do not see or we forget, that the birds which are idly singing around us mostly live on insects or seeds, and are thus constantly destroying life; or we forget how largely these songsters, or their eggs, or their nestlings, are destroyed by birds and beasts of prey; we do not always bear in mind, that, though food may be superabundant, it is not so at all seasons of each recurring year.'²⁰ In Darwin's work Spinoza's principle of self-preservation ceases to be co-operative while it is of course still entirely naturalistic: "He who believes in the struggle for existence and in the principle of natural selection, will acknowledge that every organic being is constantly endeavouring to increase in numbers; and that if any one being varies ever so little, either in habits or structure, and thus gains an advantage over some other inhabitant of the same country, it will seize on the place of that inhabitant, however different that may be from its own place.'²¹ Here the preservation of the self feeds on the weakness of others. Darwin account is Spinozist in so far as it thoroughly naturalistic. His description of nature lacks, however, any ethical component and is thus removed from Spinoza's social agenda in his *Ethics*. Freud seems to intensify this naturalistic bleakness when he discusses the death

¹⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, p. 75.

²⁰ Darwin, *On the Origin of the Species By Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, (New York: Random House, 1993), p. 89.

²¹ Darwin, *On the Origin of the Species*, p. 227.

drive: 'A strange drive,' he exclaims, 'that is bent on the destruction of its own organic home!'²² Distinguishing his approach from that of Schopenhauer, Freud argues that far from being opposed to life, the death-drive is actually the very foundation of our ability to survive. This supports Malabou thesis according to which Freud's notion of psychic life is immortal. The death drive only turns deadly if it has been cut off from an organism's erotic circulation to which it originally belongs. This reliance on the corporal organism contradicts Žižek's take on psychoanalysis in terms of Kantian radicalisation of Descartes' *cogito*. As Malabou has shown 'Freud dismisses any suggestion that an organic cause could have etiological autonomy.'²³ In this way he denies that mental illness can ever result from injury to the organ of the brain. His denial of the etiological autonomy of an organic cause does, however, not mean that Freud invalidates the significance of organic, material and embodied life and the psyche's interaction with the external world. Malabou does justice to Freud when she emphasizes he 'in no way minimizes the importance of external threats or perils.'²⁴ Oedipal fantasies and anxieties of castration refer back to substantial and embodied events such as the trauma of separation taking place at birth and the baby's dependence on parental support later on: 'Castration anxiety (the third form of separation) is itself a substitute for the fear of punishment—punishment by the mother who threatens to withdraw her love for the child (the second form of separation); and this punishment anxiety, in turn, is the expression of an even older anxiety linked to the trauma of birth (the first form of separation).'²⁵ The paradoxical position of the death-drive—confirming life while driving beyond it—results from the deeply ambiguous situation of embodied life from birth onwards.

²² "Ein sonderbarer Trieb, der sich mit der Zerstörung seines eigenen Heims befaßt!" Freud, *Studienausgabe* vol.1, p. 538. My trans.

²³ Malabou, *The New Wounded*, p. 112.

²⁴ Malabou, *The New Wounded*, p. 123.

²⁵ Malabou, *The New Wounded*, p. 125.

4. Freud's Spinoza shift

The death-drive certainly forms part of the libido and as such it is life preserving. In this way, Freud speaks of 'the way in which the two drives [i.e. of life and of death] interconnect and how the death-drive is placed at the services of Eros.'²⁶ This intermingling of the constructive and destructive represents another shift within a Spinozist conception of an interconnected universe. The name Spinoza seems to be conspicuous by its absence in Freud's oeuvre: most of the time he refers to him indirectly. This absence of a direct reference to Spinoza points to the indirection or, we may say, the shift that Spinoza's thought is capable of inspiring. Freud only directly addresses his debt to Spinoza when he is asked to do so. In this way the Spinozist Dr. Lothar Bickel requested of the late Freud an acknowledgement of his intellectual reliance of Spinoza. Freud's reply is affirmative:

*I readily admit my dependence on Spinoza's doctrine. There was no reason why I should expressly mention his name, since I conceived my hypotheses from the atmosphere created by him, rather than from the study of his work. Moreover, I did not seek a philosophical legitimation.*²⁷

The term atmosphere is of course rather vague. What Freud seems to have in mind is what he has in common with Spinoza, namely, being affiliated while at the same time being disaffiliated with the contemporaneous Jewish community and with Jewish history. Both Freud and Spinoza are double outsiders: they are not part of their own community in terms of religious affiliation though they are perceived as Jews by the non-Jewish majority of their respective societies; being seen as typically Jewish they are

²⁶ "Wie sich die beiden im Lebensprozeß vermengen, wie der Todestrieb den Absichten des Eros dienstbar gemacht wird." Freud, *Studienausgabe* vol.1, p. 540. My translation.

²⁷ Quoted from Yovel, *Spinoza and other Heretics*, p. 139. This is Freud's letter to Lothar Bickel of June 28, 1931; English translation in H. Z. Winnik, "A Long-Lost and Recently Recovered Letter of Freud," *Israel Annals of Psychiatry* 13 (1975): 1-5. German original in Leo Sonntag's and Heinz Solte's *Spinoza in neuer Sicht*, (Meisenheim: Anton Hain, 1977), pp. 169-71.

automatically associated with the threatening, the savage, or, in Spinoza's case, the Satanic. This perception of their ethnicity is then reinforced through the content matter of their writing and thought, which undermines in different but nonetheless related ways the anthropomorphic conception of God or, in Freud's words, humanity's megalomania.

In his letter to Bickel Freud downplays the way in which he was an actual student of Spinoza work. As a later communication makes clear, this lack of systematic study does not mean that he was not shaped by Spinoza's thought. While declining to contribute to a volume dedicated to Spinoza's three hundredth anniversary, Freud nevertheless emphasizes his intellectual debt to the Dutch Jewish philosopher: 'Throughout my long life,' he writes, 'I [timidly] sustained an extraordinarily high respect for the person as well as for the results of the thought [*Denkleistung*] of the great philosopher Spinoza.'²⁸ Here Freud implicitly conceives of Spinoza not as single and isolated figure; rather he sees in the name Spinoza an intellectual constellation of thinkers and writers who from Lessing, Herder, and Goethe to Darwin have introduced various shifts in the way we see humanity, not as a quasi-divine representative on earth, but as deeply enfolded within the material realm of nature.

It may well be that it is due to this non-definable and super-individual influence of Spinoza's work that Freud avoids mentioning his name in his various psychoanalytical studies. Freud sometimes alludes to Spinoza by referring to Heine as his non-religious, paradoxically co-religionist (*Unglaubengenossen*).²⁹ This is precisely the term Heine employs in order describe his affinity with Spinoza. Significantly Heine focuses on

²⁸ Quoted from Yovel, *Spinoza and other Heretics*, p. 139. German original in S. Hessing (ed.), *Spinoza-Festschrift*, (Heidelberg: Karl Winter, 1932), p. 221. See also S. Hessing's "Freud's Relation with Spinoza," in Hessing's *Speculum Spinozanum 1677-1977*, (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 224-39 and J. Golomb's "Freud's Spinoza: A Reconstruction," *Israel Annals of Psychiatry* 16 (1978): 275-88.

²⁹ Freud call Heine a *Unglaubengenossen* in the *Future of an Illusion*, *Studienausgabe* Vp. 9, p. 183. And in his monograph on Jokes and their relation to the Unconscious he quote the Heine excerpt where Heine uses the term *Unglaubengenosse* as synonym for Spinoza: "'Mein Unglaubengenosse Spinoza'", sagt Heine", Freud *Studienausgabe* Vol. 4, p. 75.

Spinoza's critique of anthropomorphism in both philosophy and theology. Heine is often ingenuously right by saying something that is blatantly wrong. He does this when he claims that Spinoza never denies the existence of God but always the existence of humanity. Implicitly contradicting the seventeenth and eighteenth century charge of atheism and the twenty-first century appraisal of Spinoza as atheist, Heine writes:

Nothing but sheer unreason and malice could bestow on such a doctrine the qualification of 'atheism.' No one has ever spoken more sublimely of Deity than Spinoza. Instead of saying that he denied God, one might say that he denied man. All finite things are to him but modes of the infinite substance; all finite substances are contained in God; the human mind is but a luminous ray of infinite thought; the human body but an atom of infinite extension: God is the infinite cause of both, of mind and of body, *natura naturans*.³⁰

What Heine refers to in this important quotation is precisely the topic on which I want to focus the discussion of encounters between psychoanalysis and neuroscience: namely, the shift Spinoza introduces away from thought centering on the human to one centered upon nature. Freud reinforces this shift when he distinguishes his new science from the presumptuous claims of both religion and philosophy. By grounding the psyche in an organic natural context, Freud is not so far removed from a neuroscientific approach as Žižek in his critique of Malabou would make us believe.

5. Freud's Spinozist critique of theology and philosophy

³⁰ Heine, *Religion and Philosophy in Germany*, trans by John Snodgrass, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 72. "Nur Unverstand und Böswilligkeit konnten dieser Lehre das Beiwort 'atheistisch' beilegen. Keiner hat sich jemals erhabener über die Gottheit ausgesprochen wie Spinoza. Statt zu sagen, er leugne Gott, könnte man sagen, er leugne die Menschen. Alle endlichen Dinge sind ihm nur Modi der unendlichen Substanz. Alle endliche Dinge sind in Gott enthalten, der menschliche Geist ist nur ein Lichtstrahl des unendlichen Denkens, der menschliche Leib nur ein Atom der unendlichen Ausdehnung; Gott ist die unendliche Ursache beider, der Geister und Leiber, *natura naturans*." Heine, *Schriften über Deutschland*, ed. By Helmut Schanze, (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel, 1968), p. 95.

We can better understand Freud's conception of his 'new science' by attending to his polemics against religion. In a highly ironic manner Freud argues that religion renders God anthropomorphic by endowing humanity with quasi-divine powers. As has been discussed above, Freud clearly characterizes his new science as an affront to Kant's conception of an autonomous mind that is capable of shaping his own world and history. Why does Freud, despite his nineteenth century background in anthropological evolutionism (i.e. Frazer and Tylor), base his conception of psychoanalysis on the non-progressivist footing of lack (or incompleteness) and the insufficiency of civilization and its morals (or on aggression and savagery as the original foundation of morals and civilization)?

To address this question it is worth drawing attention to Eric L. Santner's brilliant discussion of a sense of "too muchness" in Freud's writing and thought. The confrontation with this topic stipulated the composition of Santner's *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*. Here Santner speaks of his 'sense that Freud's mostly negative assessments of religion are in some way undermined or at least challenged by what I can't help but characterize as the 'spiritual' dimension of the new science he founded.'³¹ This 'spiritual dimension' is precisely the encounter with not only a physiological but also a psychic energy of excess (or too muchness):

Psychoanalysis differs from other approaches to human being by attending to the constitutive "too muchness" that characterizes the psyche; the human mind is, we might say, defined by the fact that it includes more reality than it can contain, is the bearer of an excess, a too much of pressure that is not merely physiological. The various ways in which this "too much," this surplus of life of the human subject seeks release or discharge in the "psychopathology of everyday life" continues to form the central focus of Freudian theory and practice. Now the very religious tradition in which Freud was raised, his protestations of lifelong secularism notwithstanding, is itself in some sense structured around an internal excess or tension—call it the tension of election—and elaborates its particular

³¹ Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 8.

form of ethical orientation to it. For Judaism (as well as for Christianity), that is, human life always includes more reality than it can contain and this “too much” bears witness to a spiritual and moral calling, a pressure toward self-transformation, toward goodness.³²

This excess is paradoxically humanity’s limitation: it is so overwhelmed by various pressures and conflicting demands that it is incapable of mastering its own house. This sense of “too muchness” splits the ego apart into at least three incompatible force fields: one is the demand to attend to the hardship imposed by external reality (what Freud calls *Lebensnot*),³³ the second are the realms of aggressive or sexual drives (the so called *id*) and the third, equally overwhelming and potentially destructive, are the valid, but sometimes non-significant, moral imperatives imposed by civilization (the superego).

In his works on religious history, Freud attempts to show how the superego or civilization itself derives from the aggression and obscenity of the drives, of the *id*. Instead of a narrative of progression here we clearly have an account of how qualitative leaps emerge only thanks to what they apparently oppose and into what they could easily regress yet again. According to Freud, civilization begins not with the promulgation of moral doctrines but with the murder of the primeval father by his sons, who are so envious of his exclusive sexual possession of women that they kill him in a fit of rage. How is murder responsible for morality? It gives rise to a sense of guilt. The excessive demand of psychic and physiological drives thus gives way to the too much of self-destructive feelings of guilt. As Santner puts it in the excerpt quoted above, it is due to this excess of guilt that we attempt to be “good.”

This sense of goodness, however, can easily turn into an anthropomorphic conception of God: through our moral consciousness we may feel identical with God. In this way religion does not bring about humility but megalomania. So Freud’s critique of

³² Ibid.

³³ Freud, *Studienausgabe* . Vol. 9, p. 186.

religion is in fact a Spinozist one that criticizes human self-aggrandizement. The specter of anthropomorphism looms large when Freud argues that religious folk are the most hubristic imaginable because they feel at one with the limitless power of God. According to Freud religious folk:

give the name of 'God' to some vague abstraction which they have created for themselves; having done so they can pose before all the world as deists, as believers in God, and they can even boast that they have recognized a higher, purer concept of God, notwithstanding that their God is now nothing more than an insubstantial shadow and no longer the mighty personality of religious doctrine. Critics persist in describing as 'deeply religious' anyone who admits to a sense of man's insignificance or impotence in the face of the universe, although what constitutes the essence of religious attitude is not this feeling but only the next step after it, the reaction to it which seeks a remedy for it. The man who goes no further, but humbly acquiesces in the small part which human beings play in the great world—such a man is, on the contrary, irreligious in the truest sense of the world.³⁴

Freud argues that it is not an awareness of humanity's insignificance but a sense of its consubstantiation with the divine that characterizes religion. He makes it clear that his way of thinking here is idiosyncratic, if not ironic. This is so because we usually define religious character in the opposite manner: not in terms of anthropomorphically occupying the place of the divine but, on the contrary, in terms of accentuating human lack in the face of God or nature. According to Freud, in contrast, this sense of lack or incompleteness shapes, not the world view of religion, but that of science.

Freud's notion of science is indeed new; not least because it reverses the role traditionally attributed to religion with that of his 'new science'. Here we encounter the opposite of a triumphal narrative of progression, Freud's 'new science' focuses on our

³⁴ Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. By W D Robson-Scott, (New York: Doubleday, 1964), p. 53.

lack of self-mastery: it proves that we are not even masters of our own house. Radicalizing Spinoza's analysis of the self as being intrinsically bound up with the other, Freud denies that we are unified entities. Rather than forming a consistent whole our psyche is torn by a whirlpool of excessive demands, commands, and urges. It is due to this internal strangeness or, in other words, this experience of being overwhelmed by competing drives and desires and aspirations that it is so difficult for us to take account of what is actually happening in the external world. Psychic illness results from an overflow of internal pressures so that the ego cannot see anything in its environment but an intensification or mirror image of its mental conflicts. This is of course what Spinoza criticizes as anthropomorphic distortion of nature or God according to the life of our internal appetites or passions. This distortion is nothing else but a psychotic loss of reality where we cannot accurately assess our self as being interconnected with the world external to the self. This loss of coordination between self and other brings about destruction as self-destruction. As Malabou has pointed, psychoanalysis focuses on the point where the distinction between internal and external danger collapses; where the 'ego doubles itself, and this scission opens the psyche to the horizon of its own disappearance.'³⁵ Freud attributes equal significance to the materiality of the external world as he does to the immateriality of psychic life. The material presence of the external world is the Spinozan heritage of psychoanalysis. It is from this corporeal or material Spinoza perspective, that Freud criticizes the loft aspirations of Kantian moral philosophy.

In his *Ethics* Spinoza provides a philosophical guide for sustainable integration of the self within the world at large. According to Spinoza we achieve this coordination through the realization that we are part of what is ostensibly not us (this is the third kind of knowledge or the intellectual love God). According to Freud 'truth consists in the

³⁵ Malabou, *The New Wounded*, p. 128.

agreement with the actual external world.¹³⁶ Spinoza tackles the passions and appetites and Freud attends to the surreal reality of various drives and hyper-moral commandments in order to prepare for an accurate perception of the actual world surrounding us. Spinoza's passions and Freud's various libidinal urges and demands cause a distorted or anthropomorphic reading of nature or God. Significantly the two thinkers take these distortions seriously. They do so, because the loss of reality brought about by the passions nevertheless shapes the life of human society. According to Spinoza reason has to collaborate with the passions if it wants to change social practices. Rather than imposing a categorical framework upon the affects, Spinoza encourages us to conduct an ethical life that is not at war with the passions but makes use of their constructive rather destructive potential. In a similar vein, Freud's new science criticizes the deleterious effects of a morality that attempts to destroy the passions. This attempt at destruction is in actuality self-destructive. Both Freud and Spinoza undermine the quasi-divine status of moral commandments. Spinoza shows how our understanding of good and evil reflects our appetites and so we call that good what we desire and evil what we loathe. These categories therefore reflect our psychic and physiological state but they distort the object that they are supposed to denote.

In Spinozist fashion, Freud's 'new science' questions 'morality which God has presumably given to us.'¹³⁷ Morality as gift from God is of course an anthropomorphic construct. Significantly Freud sees anthropomorphism operative not only in religion but also in philosophy; and that nowhere more than in Kantian moral philosophy. To illustrate his discussion of an anthropomorphic deity as foundation of morality, Freud refers to Kant's famous parallelism between the mind and the starry heavens above:

³⁶ "Diese Übereinstimmung mit der realen Außenwelt heißen wir Wahrheit." Freud *Studienausgabe* Vol. 1, p. 597. My trans.

³⁷ "Die Moralität, die uns angeblich von Gott verliehen wurde." Freud *Studienausgabe* Vol. 1, p. 500. My trans.

Following the famous sentence by Kant who connects our conscience with the starry heavens, a pious person could be tempted to venerate the two as masterpieces of creation. The stars are certainly marvelous but as regards conscience, God has done an uneven and careless job [...]. We do not fail to appreciate the bit of psychological truth that is contained in the claim that conscience is of divine origin, but the sentence requires interpretation. If conscience is something “in us,” then it is, however, not so from the beginning. It is quite a counterpart to sexual life which is really there straight from the beginning of life and is not added only later.³⁸

Rather than following Kant and becoming a pious person, Freud here follows Spinoza when he uncovers the morals as appetites. By turning upside down the anthropomorphic narrative of conscience or reason as original divine endowment, Freud ironically makes the untidy sphere of sexual drives into the point of origin of all human values. The excess of sexual drives limits rather than aggrandizes humanity’s position in the universe. Instead of confirming the quasi-divine status of morality, Freud naturalizes all aspects of human society. This naturalization is so all-encompassing that it includes the realm of cultural and intellectual achievements. The work of the intellect is not the offspring of a divine gift mirroring the sublimity of the stars. Instead it emerges from the plasticity of the libido.

Freud sees in religion the main enemies of his ‘new science’, because it does not allow for such an unsavory view of humanity’s intellectual achievements. He does not take issue with art and literature, because they do not presume to be anything else but

³⁸ “In Anlehnung an einen bekannten Ausspruch Kants, der das Gewissen in uns mit dem gestirnten Himmel zusammenbringt, könnte ein Frommer wohl versucht sein, diese beiden als die Meisterstücke der Schöpfung zu verehren. Die Gestirne sind gewiß großartig, aber was das Gewissen betrifft, so hat Gott hierin ungleichmäßige und nachlässige Arbeit geleistet, denn eine große Überzahl von Menschen hat davon nur ein bescheidenes Maß oder kaum so viel, als noch der Rede wert ist, mitbekommen. Wir verkennen das Stück psychologischer Wahrheit keineswegs, das in der Behauptung, das Gewissen sei göttlicher Herkunft enthalten ist, aber der Satz bedarf einer Deutung. Wenn das Gewissen auch etwas in ‘in uns’ ist, so ist es doch von nicht von Anfang an. Es ist so recht ein Gegensatz zum Sexualleben, das wirklich von Anfang des Lebens an da ist und nicht erst spatter hinzukommt.” Freud *Studienausgabe* Vol. 1, p. 500. My translation.

illusions. Freud's 'new science' is indeed heavily indebted to works of art and literature. One could even say that he takes their purported illusion to be a true reflection of psychic reality. A striking example is of course the Oedipus complex. Freud believes in the actual truth of the Oedipus myth. The Oedipus myth articulates our unacknowledged desires. They are unacknowledged because any acknowledgment of their actuality would be an intolerable offence to humanity's quasi-divine self-image (surely as images of God we must not have any unconscious desire to be so depraved as to want to kill our father and to sleep with our mother).

Freud values art for 'not daring to make any encroachments into the realm of reality.'³⁹ As his reading of the Oedipus myth illustrates, Freud does, however, employ the self-professed illusion of art for a better understanding of psychic reality. As Beverley Clack has recently put it, "engagement with Freud's work is fruitful precisely because he takes seriously the power that phantasy has to shape one's experience of the world."⁴⁰ Freud's new science is far from being positivistic in so far as it attends to dreams and other forms of consciousness such as religious narratives or myths that are ostensibly illusory and cannot be proven in any quantitative way.

Freud's method, however, is empiricist: he observes the details of an illusory reality in a way similar to which a physicist or chemist depicts the progress of an experiment. The crucial point here is that Freud's new scientist dedicates such time and energy to the observation of false consciousness, because it forms such a substantial part of our psychic condition. In Spinozist terms false consciousness is a lamentable but necessary ingredient of humanity. Spinoza's rationalism consists in recognizing falsehood. Both Spinoza and Freud take issue with theology and philosophy, because

³⁹ "wagt sie kein Übergriffe ins Reich der Realität" Freud *Studienausgabe* Vol. 1, p. 588. My trans.

⁴⁰ Clack, "After Freud: Phantasy and Imagination in the Philosophy of Religion," *Philosophy Compass* 3 (January 2008), pp. 203-221 (p.209).

these two disciplines tend to focus on the mind's perfection while paying scant attention to the where and when it makes mistakes. Psychoanalysis, instead, focuses on the mind's blind spots. It is, however, not judgmental but treats mental failures as inevitable or, in Spinoza's terms, necessary aspects of our humanity with which we have to reckon (rather to dismiss as unworthy of scientific discussion).

Against this background it not surprising that next to the anthropomorphic conception of God as found in various religions, Freud discusses the discipline of philosophy as hostile to his 'new science'. Like religion, philosophy proclaims to be promulgating nothing less than the truth. One of its illusions, however, consists in its claim to 'proffer an unbroken and consistent world view.'⁴¹ According to Freud philosophy's methodology is even more questionable, because it 'overrates the cognitive value of our logical operation.'⁴² Philosophy shares with religion the illusion of an omniscient quasi-divine mind. Similar to the way in which Spinoza warns against electing either philosophy or theology as the key to a full understanding of biblical texts, Freud differentiates his 'new science' from the lofty sphere of the pure mind as found in a secular form in philosophy and in a spiritual shape in religion. Rather than endowing our cognitive capacities with an infallible quasi-divine power, Freud asks us to be mindful of our mind.

Freud makes the mind mindful of its origination within the dark and unsavory sphere of the drives by attending to repressed memories. He sees a resistance to this work of remembrance not so much in the relatively small world of philosophy, but in the larger ambiance of religion, in general, and Christianity, in particular. "Philosophy, however,"

⁴¹ "ein lückenloses und zusammenhängendes Weltbild liefern zu können." Freud *Studienausgabe* Vol. 1, p. 588. My trans.

⁴² "sie den den Erkenntniswert unserer logischen Operationen überschätzt" Freud *Studienausgabe* Vol. 1, p. 588. My trans.

Freud writes, “does not have an immediate influence on a large amount of people; it only catches the interest of a small number and of that small number only a tiny elite of intellectuals; and philosophy is unfathomable for everyone else.”⁴³ Religion, on the other hand shapes the life of most people. Freud takes particular aim at Christian and Jewish salvation narratives in which he sees the nucleus of endowing morality with a quasi-divine force. Those who conceive of intellect and will as pertaining to God transcribe human values and human cognition into the sphere of Divinity. This unduly aggrandizes the mind. The divinization of humanity’s intellect prevents a critical engagement with the way the mind assists rather than checks the destructive and self-destructive life of the passions. Abstractions veil what is actually occurring at the interface that connects the cerebral with the emotive. These abstractions precisely constitute the resistance to psychoanalysis. The dismissal of Freud’s new science is substantial with refusal to acknowledge humanity’s sexual constitution. This ‘resistance to sexuality’⁴⁴ results from an anthropomorphic conception of God, which, in turn, eventuates in an inability to confront the unsavory and the irrational. Freud’s psychoanalysis radicalizes Spinoza’s demand to be mindful of the mind. The resistance to such mindfulness originates in a loss of reality, where the self has assumed the omniscience and omnipotence of God.

The incompatibility of neuroscience and psychoanalysis is thus not to be found in (according to Žižek) the demoted pre-critical Spinozism of the former and the assumed Kantianism of the latter. As we have seen in this paper Freud does not perceive of the self as substance-less entity but rather he tries to evaluate when and how the subject loses a sense of her material conditions (the reality principle). The radical novelty of neuroscience consists in the potential break with assumptions of an immortal life

⁴³ “Aber die Philosophie hat keinen unmittelbaren Einfluß auf die große Menge von Menschen, sie ist das Interesse einer geringen Anzahl selbst von der Oberschicht der Intellektuellen, für alle anderen kaum faßbar.” Freud *Studienausgabe* Vol. 1, p. 588. My trans.

⁴⁴ *Psychoanalysis and Faith*, 63.

substance—be that Spinoza's *conatus* or Freud's positing of an imperishable psyche. By uncovering in the corporality of the brain material foundations of selfhood, contemporary neuroscience has also discovered the decay and mortality of the self. As Malabou has put it, '*The imperishable is death itself*.'⁴⁵ It is this prospect of the end which may well be the fourth wound inflicted on humanity's sense of pride. Neither Spinoza, nor Darwin, nor Freud was ready to face up to the trauma of irrecoverable destruction.

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⁴⁵ Malabou, *The New Wounded*, p. 118.

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