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# ***Abjection Accomplished - On Jouissance as an Ontological Factor***

Dominik Finkelde SJ

Lacan's concept *jouissance* marks the both painful and joyful disturbance of a mind's libidinal equilibrium which also gives coherence to the basic structure of reality from the point of view of the individual. Because someone can live a fulfilling life and be happy at all levels of what modern society has to offer, and yet may not resist a very specific form of *jouissance* – to risk all in favor of a small and obscene deviation from the ordinary: through a WhatsApp message to a minor showing oneself half naked, through cocaine use or a photo of a preteen Thai girl which is hidden in a drawer. The life of the individual becomes condensed as symbolic in confrontation with this minor and sinful deviation from the conventional (the nude photo from Thailand, the drugs, etc.) which, paradoxically, is effective only by being potentially capable of destroying the symbolic universe of the individual. The seemingly 'slight deviation' (Epicurus) may influence as traumatic and overly intense encounter with an other the subject's ability to accept the full ontological weight of her or his world experience. Lacan's notion of *jouissance* helps us understand this kind of

transgression, which an individual mind might have to risk as a reenactment of what Lacan calls the “forced choice” of subjectivity.

## 1. Introduction

In the broad literature on Lacan the concept *jouissance* is often interpreted as an idiosyncratic form of enjoyment.<sup>1</sup> It embodies a pleasure-and-pain economy and opposes the homeostasis principle presented within the philosophy of psychoanalysis in Freud’s multiple comments on the *Lustprinzip*. In *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) Freud mentions the “self-tormenting [...] which is without doubt enjoyable”<sup>2</sup> and in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) he detects how a life-consuming enjoyment of trauma patients gives them something more in return by not letting go of “the situation of [the traumatic] accident.”<sup>3</sup> Lacan follows Freud and speaks in the course of his development of the concept specifically of surplus-enjoyment: a paradoxical pleasure that involves a certain type of suffering with violent consequences that threaten the mind and the body. *Jouissance*, he says, can be a “path towards death,”<sup>4</sup> since “without a transgression there is no access to *jouissance*.”<sup>5</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller’s often-cited essay on the “Six Paradigms of *Jouissance*” in Lacan’s oeuvre is one of the most concise elaboration’s of the concept’s development from the early seminars to the later ones, if one interprets the chronological order as presented by Miller not as one that questions the concept’s multiplicity of facets.<sup>6</sup> He shows the ways in which, at different stages of his work, Lacan links *jouissance* to his so-called “three registers”, the symbolic, the imaginary and the real, into which subjectivity is, libidinally and normatively, woven, like in a threefold cord. He so underlines that *jouissance* can be narcissistic as captured in an imaginary dyad of ego and alter ego, but it can be symbolic as well; insofar as *jouissance* emanates from demand (*Seminar V*) and it can touch upon the real as that which cannot be represented. Here the human being enjoys at the cost of his own wellbeing an experience that is beyond norms and imaginations. And this enjoyment *is* his wellbeing even if his wellbeing is exactly what is lost.<sup>7</sup> In the lecture “Psychoanalysis and Medicine” Lacan writes: “What I call *jouissance* – in the sense in which the body experiences itself – *is always in the nature of a tension*, of a forcing, of a spending, even of an exploit. Unquestionably, *jouissance* starts in the moment when pain begins to appear, and we know that it is only at this level of pain that a whole dimension of the organism, which would otherwise remain veiled, can be experienced.”<sup>8</sup>

The following paragraphs now focus especially on what Miller calls “impossible jouissance.”<sup>9</sup> The goal is not so much to repeat Miller’s insights, which have been taken up and elaborated by others, but to broaden his reading of jouissance as surplus-enjoyment and as transgression of the Law (in the name of Law) with regard to Lacan’s concept of “forced choice,” i.e. the unconscious submission that an individual has to endure in the genealogy of its ego-function. Lacan posits his theory of “forced choice” especially but not exclusively in *Seminar XI*. The purpose of this investigation is to better understand jouissance as a libidinal source that can push the human being to reset her/his conditions of life-submissions by crisscrossing the so-called symbolic order (embodied by what Lacan calls the “big Other”). As such, this article seeks to show that within Lacan’s concept of “impossible jouissance” (in his middle-period) a “jouissance of enigmatic vengeance” can also be found. Thus, it helps to interpret jouissance not exclusively as a clinical concept but also as an ontological one. And it is here, where sin becomes of importance, since within the philosophy of psychoanalysis it accounts – similar to the biblical account of the first, ‘original’ sin in the Garden of Eden (Gen. III) – for the link between lack, language, the normativity of the symbolic, and the emergence of a self. Subjectivity experiences itself not simply as being stuck time and again in relations with all kinds of objects (with their demands, their ‘appeal’, their negativity). Subjectivity can, in addition, literally transform itself into an “abject” of the world with the goal to recalibrate the world as the subject knows it from the position of its (sinful-autistic) singularity. In contrast to Kristeva’s often-cited use of the concept “abjection”, the concept’s intension as presented here does not refer to something that both “disturbs identity, system, or order,” and “does not respect borders, positions, [or] rules.”<sup>10</sup> On the contrary, here, abjection is interpreted as a form through which to realize one’s existence through touching upon what cannot be represented, i.e. the real. This acting-out property of jouissance (*passage à l’acte*) will be elucidated in the following paragraphs as enigmatic vengeance with regard to two examples (one from fiction, one from politics). It is paradoxical since the subjects in question gain surplus enjoyment through not only questioning but even potentially destroying their own conditions of symbolic life. Jouissance is therefore described as an erotic and sinful force of an individual’s psyche to question the foundations of its own reality through transforming her- or himself into an abject of the world.

The argument will be demonstrated with regard to two individuals: one taken from a work of fiction, the movie *The Thin Red Line* (1993) directed by Terrence

Malick, where a colonel finds – similar to Ernst Jünger’s essay “Copse 125 ”(1925) – an unconditional ground of existence in risking his life and the life of others in a senseless up-hill battle. The second example is taken from a political scandal from the 2010s: Anthony Weiner’s obscene enjoyment of a picture-exchange with an under-aged girl. The former politician of the Democratic Party annihilated his political career by sending explicit photos of himself half-naked to a minor. I try to rationalize with Lacan the behavior of the two individuals as paradigmatic examples that exemplify not only impossible jouissance (which Lacan sees at work also in what he calls “feminine jouissance” as acted out by Antigone and Teresa of Ávila), but also jouissance of enigmatic vengeance. The behaviors of the two personalities mentioned above exemplify ‘slight deviations’ (or unpredictable swerves) of individuals, which as traumatic and overly intense encounters of an ‘other’ within the symbolic, give the individuals the ability to accept the full ontological weight of their world experience. A structure of agency comes to light through which, in a single moment, the subject’s situation within its social framework can dramatically shift. In other words, this article shows how people may try to reenact, through an obscene painful-and-joyful transgression, their own genealogy of submission/subjugation in the process of civilization by suspending the normative and evaluative use-value of what is generally understood from Aristotle onwards as “the good life.” Sending half-nude self-portraits to a minor (Case of Weiner) or starting a military operation with excessive casualties (Captain Tall) dialectically changes the lives of the subjects in a way that mirrors Lacan’s fascination with jouissance as an ontological factor. It lays bare what subjectivity, in its core, is about: being a limit of the world. As such, jouissance does not so much express Lacan’s Hegelian conviction that “subject and object” mediate themselves through time, but that subjects must try – in order to relate to objects – to cut the very relations that tie them to others, in order to regain or rediscover their singularity of being. Situations of acting-out can exclude individuals from the social group. What has pushed them to go that far? Which forces are accountable for apparently catastrophic results? The article shows that through entering the social world (i.e., the chain of signifiers), the subject is forced to accept normative restrictions. This involves the sacrifice of its pre-symbolic enjoyment which, then, might strike back. It breaks through, as jouissance, in violent moments and seeks to establish a new order of being – one, in which both the rules and the specific jouissance of the subject get their share.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. On certainty

In the acclaimed movie *The Thin Red Line* (directed by Terrance Malick in 1998) a Colonel of the United States Army, named Gordon Tall (played by Nick Nolte), forces his unit to conquer a small hill densely covered with vegetation during the so-called “Guadalcanal Campaign” against the Empire of Japan. Against his captain’s objections that the risk of losing is too high, the Colonel breaks out angrily: “I’ve waited all my life for this! I’ve worked, I’ve slaved, I’ve eaten untold buckets of shit to get this opportunity, and I’m not passing it up now!” Soldiers, who fear for their life, try to argue the colonel out of his decision with cost-benefit calculations, but the “call” of the hill proves to be stronger. The hill, the colonel admits, is *his* hill, as if his personal life condenses into this catastrophic situation in which the hill’s capture, absurd and dangerous as it actually is from the perspective of the *Lustprinzip*, shall not be missed. Since the colonel sees the embattled hill not as a strategic point of conquest in the fight against the Japanese, but as an individual bastion of his life, his rage exemplifies Lacan’s understanding of *jouissance* as an excess that transgresses the limits of Freud’s pleasure principle.

It appears as if Tall’s life has the chance to somehow be granted consistency after a long and painful period of submission, and the colonel says so explicitly in the face of his confused captain. With a reference to a famous quote from Lacan’s *Seminar XI* one could say: The image of the hill is in the Colonel’s eye, but he himself “is in the tableau.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, for a moment, the Colonel embodies a trait that Lacan describes as paranoia, for “contrary to the normal subject for whom reality is always in the right place, [the psychotic subject] is certain of something, which is that [which] is at issue – ranging from hallucination to interpretation – regards him. Reality isn’t at issue for him, certainty is.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, for the Colonel, certainty is at stake. Suddenly, his miserable life has the chance to experience a form of absolution from another dimension of reality.

The hill literally becomes what Freud calls “das Ding” in a side-note of his “Project of a Scientific Psychology.” Lacan, as is well-known, takes up this concept in *Seminar VII* to explain the psychological source of surplus-enjoyment. He links Freud’s term even to Kant’s fascination with “the Law” that, through unaccomplishable injunctions, overburdens the subject by definition. The Thing is nothing less than the “primordial pivot around which the effects of the unconscious revolve”.<sup>14</sup> “Das Ding,” he says, “is a primordial function which is located at the level of the initial establishment of the gravitation of the unconscious *Vorstellungen*.”<sup>15</sup>

Precisely because the Thing occupies the most obscure core of the unconscious, it deserves to be identified as the most elemental motive cause of human behavior.<sup>16</sup> In the words of Jacques-Alain Miller: "What is then meant by *das Ding*, the Thing? It means that satisfaction, the truth, the drive, the *Befriedigung*, is found neither in the imaginary or the symbolic, that it is outside what is symbolized, that it is of the order of the real... everything in the two-level assembly of Lacan's great graph [of desire] is set up against real jouissance, in order to contain real jouissance."<sup>17</sup>

Here the Thing functions as a melancholy object of loss that can never be incorporated by the subject, since its loss is an a priori condition of subjectivity. Yet it must be fantasized as lost, since a subject who is not forever plagued by the experience of having been robbed of its substance would not be a subject at all. As such we are compelled to reach out for the Thing, and since we cannot attain it, limit our desire with the help of substitutions of *das Ding*: various objects of desire, called by Lacan *objets a*. "Normal jouissance" (to quote Miller 5<sup>th</sup> paradigm of jouissance) can attach itself to *objets a* but "mad" desire of jouissance cannot. It strives for more.

One could also say that something in Colonel Tall has failed to be expressed in the order of the signifier and that the situation of life-threatening stress he finds himself in is a way out of this impasse at whatever cost. So, while, on this account, desire operates according to Lacan's so-called "three registers" (the symbolic, the imaginary, the real) via the imaginary and the symbolic as some kind of barrier against the real, it is, by contrast, jouissance that becomes the driving force of the real against the registers of the imaginary and the symbolic. A new form of singularity finds shape. It is, as Eric Santner asserts, "a non-relational excess which is out-of-joint with respect to [...] any form of teleological absorption by a larger purpose."<sup>18</sup> Arbitrary life stages are about to fall into a totality that suddenly makes sense for Tall. All that has to be done is to put everything in jeopardy, such that everything that can be risked becomes, at the moment of a potential failure, what it may already be: actually nothing, prevented enjoyment of a badly treated soldier, who has not had a chance to get a share of "suum cuique" from the Lacanian big Other. Jouissance confronts us here within the form of the colonel's excessive desire as a traumatic element, a core of intensity, which contradicts moderation.<sup>19</sup>

Apparently one property of Lacan's concept is to underline that for us humans the world in its common sense understanding of everyday-life is *not* supposed to be experienced as coherent. If this is true, then this insight into a certain form of incoherence has the paradoxical quality of sanctioning our lives, and especially

where we find it both miserable and threatened by failure as well as suffocated by too much perfection and harmony. This may explain why Lacan interprets *jouissance* from the 1960s onwards as a form of “moral masochism” (Freud) and asserts, with regard to Kant, that “if one eliminates from morality every element of sentiments, if one removes or invalidates all guidance to be found in sentiments, then in the final analysis the de Sadeian world is conceivable – as one of the possible forms of the world governed by a radical ethics, by the Kantian ethics as elaborated in 1788.”<sup>20</sup>

Lacan’s reference to Kant’s moral law is of importance here as it actually is a law out of reach for humans, a law of anticipated inaccessibility that carries an infinite desire (especially in comparison to Aristotle’s ethics); or better, which carries an infinite and excessive demand in itself. As such, the law can be a paradoxical inspiration of restlessness, an existential electricity that serves the subject even in situations when it risks, through abjection, its own life or the well-being of a community.<sup>21</sup> *Jouissance* as both the enigma of vengeance and the act of abjection does not refer us to small pleasures or forms of excitement that are collectively celebrated, for example, on New Year’s Eve. Rather, Lacan means in his “retour à Freud” especially life-threatening forms of enjoyment – similar to Colonel Tall’s obsession – which are fundamentally based on a radical questioning of the symbolic order of which the subject is a part. (It is worth mentioning, that this kind of *jouissance* is uncovered by Lacan within Teresa of Ávila’s spiritual “mystical ejaculations [which] are neither idle chatter nor empty verbiage”.<sup>22</sup> Lacan speaks of a *jouissance* beyond the phallus<sup>23</sup> i.e. a *jouissance* which the signifier is unable to restrict and or to delimit. Because, as Lacan says, with regard to Bernini’s Teresa, “she is having *jouissance* [... but knows] nothing about it.”<sup>24</sup> As Lucie Cantin has shown, the catholic nun of the Carmelite order is intensely concerned with her honor and the importance of her words, as she was ordered by her superiors to write her experience down. But while Teresa’s autobiographic notes and her confessions obliged her to reveal everything she was limited by *jouissance* itself. “[S]he could not free her from that capture in a *jouissance* that disorganized her.”<sup>25</sup>)

### 3. Place-out-of-place

A similar example to Colonel Tall’s excessive enjoyment that carries a pleasure-in-pain economy beyond “the good life” (more on this below) can be elaborated upon through the tragi-comical fate of the American politician Anthony Weiner. The Democrat ruined his career and that of his wife, who was one of Hillary Clinton’s

closest advisors between 2015 and 2017, by repeatedly sending a photo of himself with a bath towel around his waist to a minor girl via his mobile phone. The published pictures of Weiner were amusing to a wide audience as, in one of the photos, Wiener literally grabs himself by his name (as in Wiener Würstchen). Curiously, however, it was not so much the fact of his questionable behavior but, rather, that he was caught again in a similar pose several months after the scandal calmed down (figure 1), which ended his public career.<sup>26</sup>

My admittedly speculative thesis (which asks for a maximally charitable reading) is that Weiner, as in the case of colonel Tall, *had* to act as he did against all odds of cost-benefit calculations since his world experience might have received within his mind its ontological consistency only through this form of a constitutive violation of the symbolic order and his role – touching the circles of a potential president (Hillary Clinton) – within it. The violation of the pleasure principle, which aims as a principle of suffering at a place-out-of-place, “keeps us in this world,” as Lacan says.<sup>27</sup> We live to destabilize living, since life would be unbearable without its other, life-threatening counterpart.



Figure 1: Anthony Weiner, *Selfie* (detail)

Since Lacan understands from *Seminar VII* onwards jouissance even as an ethical principle (which is not the same as being a principle within Ethics) his distance to Aristotle and the peculiar pleasure-and-desire administration within the Aristotelian understanding of “the good life” could not be more extreme. Near the beginning of Book 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle repeatedly defines the



concept of “right” desire as a necessary condition for successful practical thinking and moral excellence.<sup>28</sup> He writes: “moral virtue is a state of character concerned with choice, and choice is deliberate desire, therefore both the reasoning must be true and the desire right, if the choice is to be good, and the latter must pursue just what the former asserts.”<sup>29</sup> The enjoyment of buying a house is not supposed to carry us away beyond the limits of reasons. In this sense, right desire is restricted by practical reasoning. It needs limits to arrive at a level of true satisfaction and true enjoyment which helps the individual to flourish. Right desire, then, fits our basic enjoyments as needs that are features of the human nature. In this sense the notion of a good choice is truly objective insofar as it is grounded in facts about the world (including facts about my place in this world) and in facts about what constitutes human flourishing. When our choices conform to these facts, then our desire is right. As such, practical thought and desire are directed toward the same goal (eupraxia = acting well). Desire and intellect share the same content.

So, it is no wonder that perfect enjoyment is personified in the “unmoved mover”. One can find it as well, according to Jonathan Lear, in true contemplation.<sup>30</sup> This explains in part why Aristotle questions repeatedly the Sophists in his *Ethics* as they present themselves as the enemies of true rest promulgating a false and vain understanding of enjoyment for enjoyment’s sake through truth-relative talk. “[F]or if the nature of anything were simple, the same action would always be most pleasant to it. This is why God always enjoys a single and simple pleasure; for there is not only an activity of movement but an activity of immobility, and pleasure is found more in rest than in movement.”<sup>31</sup> The Aristotelian immobile mover embodies a particular unity of homeostatic enjoyment, being, and thinking. Aristotle distinguishes this pleasure of calmness within the balance of the good life from the understanding of the Sophists. Their philosophizing disturbs the homeostatic order of being. It does not articulate itself for the sake of truth, but produces the pleasure of speaking in favor of a normativity-free enjoyment: enjoyment for enjoyment’s sake. This is one reason why, from the 1960s onwards, Lacan compares Aristotle with the Kantian moral law, as we mentioned earlier.

Weiner’s lifeworld may have contracted into an experience of libidinal intensity in the moment when the mentioned photo was sent – an intensity that no longer knows any pleasure principle in its ordinary form of “right desire.” From this intensity, which is experienced with sexual relish, the individual may suspect that he/she can no longer catch up with the coming catastrophe, and yet cannot refuse the

command – to send the photo. We find here *jouissance* in its purest form: a minimal ontological inconsistency injected into a seemingly homeostatic basic structure of being by a “slight deviation” (Lat. “*clinamen*”; Lucretius and Epicurus) – triggered by pushing “send.”

But why, one might argue as a good Aristotelian and as a proponent of the good life is *jouissance* not simply an affect that is part of our psychic household, which, according to a long philosophical tradition from Plato to Kant, is attributed to the soul next to reason and emotion? Enjoyment would, in this line of argument, be a continuation of the classical triad of “*epithymetikon*” (appetite), “*thymos*” (temper), and “*logos*” (reason), which, when triggered, is nothing more than “weakness of the will” or a “syllogistic bastard” (Aristotle/Davidson).<sup>32</sup> For Lacan, though, this subjugation of *jouissance* into either appetite or temper neglects its reasonable employment: to help to settle the account of an individual’s lifeworld as forced choice by an individual’s questioning of the symbolic universe all together via a trifling deviation.

#### 4. Forced choice

Central to Lacan’s understanding of the ego’s process of socialization is the description of a sacrificial situation. In it, a pre-symbolic life-substance of enjoyment has to be given up as it paradoxically emerges with the development of the symbolic order as the ego’s other side of self-reflexivity.<sup>33</sup> The sacrificial situation is constitutive and, in the context of various social contract-theories, concerns the incorporation of the subject into the administered form of communal enjoyment and communal reasons. Donald Davidson speaks of “triangulation” to describe the change of a sentient being into a sapient one. The latter subjugates him- or herself to multiple justified true beliefs within chains of signifiers and communitarian rule-patterns.<sup>34</sup> This process of sacrifice is what Lacan calls “forced choice” (also referred to as “your money or your life!”). The subject, who is supposed to choose freely her/his community (for only a free choice is morally binding) does not exist before this choice.<sup>35</sup> It is constituted by it. The choice is paradoxical, therefore, in principle. Insofar as the single individual keeps the freedom of choice, it does so only if it has already made the right decision of subordination to the pre-existing social contract of the community. If I choose the “other” of community, I risk the freedom to lose the choice myself. “Clinically speaking, I choose psychosis” (Žižek).<sup>36</sup>

One of Lacan's sources is obviously Hegel since according to the latter, spirit incorporates sacrifice as its formal structure. Different sensations that the individual receives through sense-perception are not only perceived and experienced directly by the individual, but also conveyed as a moment of the ego-function's self-reflexivity in its co-dependence of others (*Sittlichkeit*). Sacrificed is, according to Lacan's theory of the act of choice, that which he calls with reference both to Kant as well as to Heidegger and Freud the "thing", which we already mentioned. It is the incestuous object in which an impossible enjoyment is allegedly embodied as it is fantasized. The Thing as the impossible is "that which I call the beyond-of-the signifier."<sup>37</sup> Striving for impossible enjoyment becomes our fundamental task. It leads to the fact that we all participate in *Kulturarbeit* (Freud) in its various forms as a form of compensation for the unreachable surplus-enjoyment of pleasure that, annoyingly, remains always at a radical distance and, apparently, out of reach. And it has of course to be out of reach. Only an impossible object can be the source of proof that there is more in the subject than the subject itself.

Lacan expresses this idea among others in his text on the Graph of Desire.<sup>38</sup> The so-called split subject must – in the context of the mentioned forced choice – plunge into the symbolic order of the big Other, so that, in the end, a small vegetative organism of a toddler emerges actually as, for example, Prince William Duke of Cambridge with all his insignia transmitted to him by the House of Windsor. An organism sacrifices a pre-symbolic life-substance of enjoyment to not only play a prince's role but to enjoy the symptoms of a prince *as one's own*. The American neo-pragmatist Robert Brandom describes these processes of sacrifice analogously in his theory of inferentialism. Sapient beings are trained so long as their sentient properties are subordinated to "right moves" in a game of mutual "scorekeeping" of giving and asking for reasons.<sup>39</sup> This process, though, has antinomic dimensions that were acknowledged already by Rousseau and transmitted via Kant onto Hegel as the paradox of autonomy – which is the paradox of "forced choice" seen from a different angle. They stand out when one tries to pin down the mentioned competence with a certain date, a certain age or a final exam. Kant circumvents the problem by accentuating, against Brandom, that, for example, morality cannot be learned, as it depends on a "revolution of disposition."<sup>40</sup> Morality is presented as an excess of life within nature's causes and effects. In other words: The human being always comes too late to his "correct moves" and this unsettles her/him. The threshold between the place where we are trained as moral beings and the place

where we are autonomous in our moral behavior (playing properly the game of giving and asking for reasons) is surrounded by a principle of uncertainty, which again plays into the condition of being forced to choose one's "character" (Kant), one's life, one's morality. Lacan: "Desire is a relationship of being to lack. This lack is the lack of being [...] This lack is beyond anything which can represent it."<sup>41</sup>

With Lacan, therefore, one could say that the subject will retrospectively open up the big Other (the moral Law, in Kantian terms) according to the subjectivation thesis of the Graph of Desire, as the individual itself is unconsciously posited by the big Other (the Law). After all, this means "forced choice." In doing so, self-images play a crucial role that are co-defined by the big Other and confirmed from the so-called Mirror Stage onwards. The self-image puts a primary bifurcation into the totality of the organism's libidinal energies. One result is that the unity of the Imago must, according to Lacan, always be inadequate to the abundance of desires that waggle on in our pre-symbolized bodies, which, in turn, are the recrements of our symbolic bodies. There is always a desire left over, not taken care of within the rise in the Imago. It is these desires that pop up in the lives of colonel Tall and Anthony Weiner. Lacan: "This image is the ring, the bottleneck through which the confused bundle of desire and need must pass through to be it, that is, to reach its imaginary structure."<sup>42</sup> The Imago / Gestalt stands for a standstill. This structural process of subjectivity is always a path of suffering since the psyche is, allegorically speaking, pushed through the mentioned ring in order to be recognized and symbolically equipped with a joyful investment that binds the individual to phantasies which are at the borderline of individuality and sociality. The forced choice cannot be put to rest. It lingers on in self-reflexivity causing lustful pain of the ego's self-relation with that which – coming from the unconscious – it is not. Tall and Weiner thus exemplify subjectivity's dependence on jouissance as an ontological factor with regard to "forced choice" in a way that transcends Lacan's more clinical comments on excessive desires personified in both Antigone and Teresa of Ávila.

Now, it is interesting that also Kant grounds his theory of the moral choice with the help of a purely a priori theory of a revolutionary choice of character. Before we became empirical subjects, we have – so Kant – chosen our "disposition" with regard to the moral law.<sup>43</sup> Kant speaks of an a priori choice between good and evil since this choice is, for him, a necessary condition in grounding the moral subject in a noumenal realm outside of space and time. Only this choice can guarantee that we as empirical beings within the causal structures of nature can claim responsibility for

our evil deeds. In other words, something else in us has chosen our moral disposition without an empirical proof of this primordial “forced choice.” But the Kantian choice in its noumenal dimension is always in the making.<sup>44</sup> The “forced choice” of disposition has taken place, yet at the same time it haunts us every time the moral law confronts us. As we never know what kind of disposition our noumenal self has chosen, we never know how we will choose in the present. Indeed, we are apparently predestined, but exactly *how* this Kantian predestination has turned out, for the good or for the bad, can only be realized too late. In the individual’s life this choice is, as it were, permanently in the suspension of our choosing, because “I still live” and therefore always have to face the moral law again and again. This applies not only to the moral law, but to the “forced choice” in the Lacanian sense as well. It has always taken place (in the past) and is still in the making (in the present).

Colonel Tall and Anthony Weiner grab on, speculatively thinking, to this “forced choice” in the making. “Untold buckets of shit” are supposed to be transsubstantiated into surplus enjoyment whatever the costs of life may be for colonel Tall. The goal is a transcendental fantasy: the reestablishment of Tall’s or Weiner’s sufficient reason for their surplus-enjoyment-deprived existence. The mind’s higher-order abilities may truly have “forgotten” what it had to choose in the process of entering into (and establishing) a frame of certainty, but this does not mean that unconscious parts of the psyche share the imposed process of forgetting/choosing. An anti-Platonic “anamnesis” sets in with consequences that crisscross everything that the Platonic understanding of anamnesis stands for. No clearly defined universals are found, except for forces of a nether-world within the ego and its communal dis-functioning. Those parts of the psyche that resisted forced choices can continue to inexist in the mentioned form of a lust-full pain and pleasure disturbance that is both troubling as well as electrifying for the mind. For these reasons, we can be terrified and bewildered by our dreams, but also by our actions, exemplified above by colonel Tall and Anthony Weiner. What do actions like these stand for? They may stand for an unconscious objection to the forced choice by an apparently minor deviation.

## 5. Touching the Thing

In line with the arguments presented above, I understand *jouissance* (1) in accordance with many scholars in the field of Lacanian philosophy of psychoanalysis as a painful-lust in the psyche’s libidinal economy. Especially “impossible *jouissance*” (Miller) captures a paradoxical and ultimately necessary

obscene operation of our mind to transgress certain legal and homeostatic forms of the internalized symbolic norms to which our psyche, in its self-relation, had to submit. Subsequently, however, I understand *jouissance* (2) as an enigmatic desire of vengeance that tries to re-enact the forced choice that the individual experienced through “abjection.” The mind feels not only the lustful urge to transgress normative limits, to slash out against the investiture of the self, but it wants to repeat the forced choice (through abjection), though this time from an allegedly empowered position that gives the individual a proper option – whatever it may cost for her or his life, or the life of others. Here *jouissance* can be defined as an urge to suspend the original and ultimately unconscious gesture of forced choice – of submission. It aims at resetting the individual's condition of life-submissions by resetting the big Other.

This interpretation of *jouissance* is in part indebted to Slavoj Žižek. He argues that the subject's experience of the political has to be aroused through specific relations to *jouissance*. It is via obscene enjoyment that people will get to know the deeper Truth intimated for them by their regime's master signifiers: “nation,” “God,” or “our way of life,” and so forth. Žižek argues that it is such ostensibly nonpolitical and culturally specific practices as these that irreplaceably single out any political community from its enemies.<sup>45</sup> But what Žižek says about *jouissance* as a political factor is even more valid for the subject's libidinal economy towards him- or herself in an ontological sense. Therefore, it is, as already mentioned, indeed too easy to reduce irrational patterns of behavior to emotions and affects that conquer reason and produce a syllogistic bastard.<sup>46</sup> Reason itself conquers affects in the name of the deviation for the latter's sake. If Tall's or Weiner's superego could speak in the situations mentioned above, it might say: “Disrupt for a fraction of a second everyday-life and all its normative burdens that you depend on. Now everything depends on you.” Or: “Show, what no one is allowed to see. Expose your desire in its purest form to all symbolic claims against you.” “Touch the thing. Touch what you had to sacrifice to be in this (miserable or so-called perfect) life, that is yours.”

As already mentioned, Lacan detects similar kinds of enjoyment beyond pleasure next to Teresa of Ávila also in the sublime personality of Antigone. But these examples of unrestrained enjoyment, prominently commented on by Lacan in his *Seminar VII* and subsequently by many Lacanian scholars, often compel us to overlook too quickly that *jouissance* does not have to favor sublime ideas, as Antigone does, but obscene and even horrific ones as well: the death of others or child-pornography.

Having said this, it must be emphasized here too that even if, in my line of argument, the “good life” serves as a contrast-foil to the work of jouissance in its all-or-nothing form, we encounter of course certain aspects of joyful rebellion against parts of the established good life all the time.<sup>47</sup> Miller’s fourth and fifth paradigms, called “Normal Jouissance” and “Discursive Jouissance,” can be mentioned here together with Slavoj Žižek’s, Mari Ruti’s, Jodi Dean’s, and my own references to enjoyment as a political factor.<sup>48</sup> “Normal Jouissance” is explained by Miller with regard to *Seminar XI* in which Lacan breaks jouissance up into various *object a(s)*. This kind of “jouissance is not reached by heroic transgression, but by the coming to mind of the drive, by the drive which makes a return trip.”<sup>49</sup> Here, Jouissance plays obviously a less destructive role. People have accepted the ready-made symbolic order received from birth and cope now, in the pursuit of touching the Thing, with jouissance, without risking all for nothing. This paper’s focus on jouissance as enigmatic vengeance (against “forced choice”) does not want to diminish these lesser forms. Its focus on jouissance of enigmatic vengeance is grounded exclusively in the aspiration to outline the concept’s hidden ontological implications in the subject-world relation as much as possible through acts of abjection.

Weiner followed, speculatively thinking, an unconscious command to be a-rational (not irrational): to risk everything for nothing. Because, as I said, he did it again (“encore”). Jouissance is included in the pleasure principle, but does not belong to this principle. It is an excess that cannot be seen as excess because its scale falls into its own form detached from the norm. And this *form out of form* is reflected upon by Kant in his moral law, since it is especially in its “holyness” (Hegel) when it is most akin to Kant’s concept of the “devilishly evil” (das teuflisch Böse).

Colonel Tall’s destiny, which bares resemblance to Ernst Jünger’s fate as described in a famous text from 1925 with the title *Copse 125. A Chronical from the Trench Warfare of 1918*<sup>50</sup>, illuminates this. For Tall, everything depends on getting his share out of untamed logics of worlds that, until now, could not guarantee him an unbiased distribution of wellbeing or a place to enjoy himself being himself. The same may be true for the fate of Anthony Weiner within the perspective presented in the paragraphs above. In sending the mentioned erotic photos, he can proof his ability to accept the full ontological weight of his symbolic world by risking his reputation, the reputation of his wife, and the reputation of a potential president of the United States by touching the “send” button. Not only for Lacan but also for Kant are humans haunted by what they are not responsible for and yet have to take

responsibility for. Lacan invokes the symbolic order to underline how the “forced choice” has turned out yesterday or will turn out tomorrow – allegedly. Jouissance is ever present here in the human libidinal economy since subjects strive for the truth of their being and seek to liberate themselves from the mentioned choice that never was a fair or truthful one, a choice that granted subjectivity its “*sum cuique*”. One could also say with another concept of Lacan that we as human beings strive for the “thing,” i.e., the entity from which we as subjects were deprived within the mentioned sacrificial structure that brings subjectivity to the fore. Jouissance strives to get a grip on the noumenal realm of this thing as that (noumenal entity), which had to be rejected for subjectivity so that objectivity could emerge. The “thing” is the phantasmagoric archetype of a lost object through which absolute enjoyment would be possible. And this is what “small deviations” (Lat. “*clinamen*”) or “trifling irritations” of the symbolic universe, mentioned above, strive for: to touch upon a spectral entity which haunts us; to lay a sufficient ground of reason (see figure 2).<sup>51</sup>

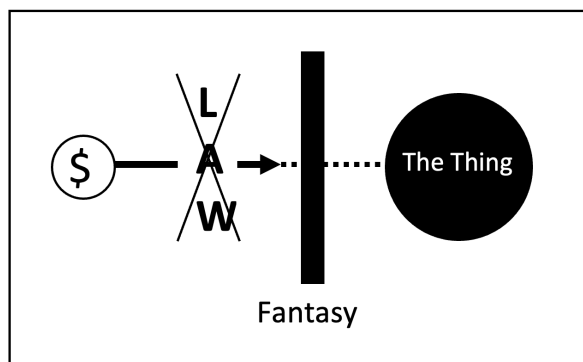


Figure 2: Split subject and the thing, by F. Depoortere.

As such, jouissance can urge someone who leads a happy family life, who has a fulfilling job, or who is on all levels of his fate apparently a happy person – to risk everything for nothing, a nothing that incorporates a particular nugget of enjoyment. In situations like these, the “*clinamen*,” i.e., the “deviation / excess,” attempts to touch upon the lost and forbidden thing from which one was separated. The goal is to give consistency to the contingent reality from a place out of place, without which even the most beautiful family-idyll can be felt as an unsupportable hell. But this subjectivity must be willing to enjoy risking everything for nothing. Jouissance, here, enjoys its own form of re-installing the symbolic. This, though, works only when the



forbidden thing is felt coming closer into the subject's range. The picture-message is sent, the command to conquer "Copse 125" is given. Abjection accomplished. The psyche may be flooded by an autonomizing elixir of life in sending the image, since now it is the individual who can subjectivize everything for nothing. Then, the outcome could still be horrible, but at least it was the result of a choice, not the collateral damage of a forced choice. In jouissance-charged actions, the psyche recovers part of the disciplinary costs passed on to him/her by the big Other. The psyche seeks to retrieve the credit imposed on itself, which is only possible if a cost-and-benefit calculation in the symbolic-libidinal household of the individual is rejected completely. In this way jouissance tries to find a space of an existential auto-creation in which everything in relation to pure nothing has to be at stake. Think again of Weiner's fate. I do not want to deny that a pathological addiction to sexual arousal may have driven the man. But I think sexuality as an affect can just be one of many variables in a complex equation that can have strong ontological components with unacknowledged desires beneath the ego's reasons. In jouissance and in the rejection of the symbolic order by an obscene and liberating gesture of excess, an unconscious act of freedom may be hidden. Incidentally, Lacan sees such an act of freedom in the work of Marquis de Sade. The latter does not want to create lust or eroticism, but, as Lacan says, "approach [the reader] to a burning center or an absolute zero. [...] Sade's work belongs to the order of what I shall call experimental literature. The work of art in this case is an experiment that through its action cuts the subject loose from his psychosocial moorings – or to be more precise, from all psychosocial appreciation of the sublimation involved."<sup>52</sup>

It does not matter if we approve of this or not. For Lacan, the ethics of psychoanalysis is not linked to "right desire" within a plurality of forms of the "good life." In jouissance we are essentially dealing with the subject as a limit to the world. The desire of jouissance is an uprising of the unconscious against the costs of submission into chains of signifiers.

## 6. Non-actuality

Terrence Malick's movie-title evokes the ambivalence of a *Thin Red Line*. The latter has an outstanding property since it can be seen only when it has been violated or crossed. The line literally separates human reason from jouissance. Its relation to the Lacanian "thing" does not exist as a boundary between rationality, on the one hand, and jouissance and temper, on the other. Rather, the reference to the line's thinness

means more: namely, that we cannot make it out. It becomes visible only in looking back. Malick underlines this insight in an important scene in the last part of the movie (figure 3). We see Colonel Tall in a sitting posture of exhausted contemplation almost reminiscent of Albrecht Dürer's angel in *Melencolia I* (figure 4).



Figure 3: Film scene from *The Thin Red Line*.



Figure 4: Dürer; *Melencolia I*, Detail.

The battle has been fought successfully, although with high losses of American lives. Corpses and battle debris lie around like senseless props with an expired meaning. Did Colonel Tall really have to go that far? Of course, since the red line can, as I said, be measured only through looking back. Tall had to equip an inconsistent outside world with consistency. He had to save his life by risking (at least from his perspective) everything for nothing. A seemingly small deviation of a soldier's career became the sufficient reason to tie together subjectivity and objectivity, for a decisive moment. No one thinks after these kinds of battles of words such as "Since 5h45 a.m. we have been returning the fire" or asks who is actually responsible for the Syrian War. All the circumstances are somehow clear, now that jouissance has come to an end. Tall is sad but satisfied mentally and bodily. The battle gave his miserable life an ontological contact with reality. This may underline Lacan's insight that subjectivity must time and again make the experience of madness in order to step out of itself and into the corset of the symbolic order anew. Indeed, jouissance is the painful libidinal fuel that is requisite within the mind in order to go so far. It is the only substance that psychoanalysis claims to exist. Substances are immutable bearers of change according to the classical definition, as I

understand Lacan here. Jouissance belongs to the basic structure of reality since it remains the same basic feature in the subject-object dichotomy in all possible worlds. Hegel has given us an ingenious formulation of this power of jouissance as negativity's driving force for spirit that knows no dependency on the pleasure principle as well. In the *preface* to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he famously writes sentences that could have well been cited as a voice-over to Colonel Tall's contemplative silence. "Death, if that is what we want to call this non-actuality, is of all things the most dreadful, and to hold fast what is dead requires the greatest strength. [...] But the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather is the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. Spirit only wins its truth by finding its feet within its absolute disruption. [...] This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being."<sup>53</sup>

We should not take Hegel's understanding of spirit as an instance of divine sublimity, but rather in the sense of Lacan, as a power source of raging jouissance, which blurs the line between rationality, affect and irrationality, thus destabilizing the subject-object dichotomy ad infinitum. The colonel did not know where the red line between jouissance and reason was hiding. He discovered it as an unconscious desire looking back after trying to touch upon the Thing as the sufficient cause of reality. The colonel had to carry out his act because the symbolic order at its core carries even these insane formations at its origin. And jouissance repeatedly draws us back to this source of a forced choice, which we are called upon to re-set. The battle is an encounter with the real without the need for the colonel to know what the real is. Similarly, for a politician, a priest, or an actor, a nude photo of a minor girl or boy may be such an encounter with the real. The lustful real presence can extinguish the symbolic order with force because it is able to make the world coherent. In other words, when I am confronted with this lustful presence of utmost danger for my own symbolic role, I experience pleasure, because I can (allegedly) re-negotiate the social contract that has been done unto me.

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<sup>1</sup> Outstanding articles on the topic are: Braunstein, "Desire and Jouissance in the Teachings of Lacan"; Chiesa, "The First Gram of Jouissance"; Evans, "From Kantian Ethics to Mystical Experience"; Miller, "Paradigms of Jouissance"; van Haute, *Against Adaptation* (chapter 8).

<sup>2</sup> Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*, 251.

<sup>3</sup> Freud: "[D]reams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident." Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Lacan, *Seminar XVII*, 18.

<sup>5</sup> Lacan: "Transgression in the direction of jouissance only takes place if it is supported by the oppositional principle, by the forms of the Law" (*Seminar VII*, 177). As such Jouissance is social, as Sharpe makes clear. It "presupposes the existence ... of the 'other' [...] of a community's system and Laws, since it is what insists when a subject approaches too directly what this Law has named a prohibitively 'off limits'." Sharpe, *Slavoj Žižek*, 110.

<sup>6</sup> Miller, "Six Paradigms of Jouissance". How constructed these categories nevertheless may be is illustrated by Dany Nobus, who points out that according to him Lacan in his *Seminar XX* (Encore) alone "distinguished between at least eight different types of jouissance, without ever glossing one of

these as strictly synonymous with orgasmic satisfaction: *jouissance* of the Other, of the body, of being, feminine, perverse, phallic, sexual and surplus-*jouissance*." Dany Nobus, "The Sculptural Iconography of Feminine *Jouissance*", 30. This underlines that, in the words of Evans "the term *Jouissance* does not retain a stable meaning [...] its resonances and articulations shift dramatically over the course of Lacan's teaching." Evans, "From Kantian ethics to mystical experience", 2.

<sup>7</sup> Lacan mentions the term *jouissance* for the first time in his *Seminar I* of 1953-54 (adopting an interpretation of Hegel's master-slave relation by Alexandre Kojève (Lacan, *Seminar I, Freud's Papers on Technique*, 170, 222-226.) and gives it a shift towards sexual connotations after 1956. (Francois Perrier and David Macay have proven the importance of George Bataille in the notion's expansion, though Lacan himself only mentions Bataille's name rarely. See Macey, *Lacan in Contexts*, 204-205.) Now erotic, as a potential realm of violence, becomes important. It brings *jouissance* closer to the border of death with excess as an essential and not an accidental property. Miller describes this shift as one where *jouissance* as a special form of enjoyment is no more exclusively to be found in two of Lacan's so-called "three registers" in which subjectivity is, roughly speaking, libidinally and normatively 'hung up'. Now it becomes "impossible *jouissance*" (Miller's third paradigm) with an essential reference to Lacan's third register "the real" as that which makes any symbolic and imaginary interpretation on what subjectivity is about in its core impossible. This means that especially in *Seminar VII*, *jouissance* becomes for the first time a prominent concept by "pushing", to quote Miller, "the signification to its limit" (Miller, "Six Paradigms of *Jouissance*", 6). Lacan now talks explicitly of surplus-enjoyment. He refers to Freud's "das Ding" and Kant's fascination with "the Law" that, through unfulfillable injunctions, overburdens the subject by definition. Lacan, *Seminar VII. Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 315-316. *Jouissance* stands for the eroticization and the transgression of limits. It becomes a transgressive quality, with Lacan's main concern how it overflows the mind with pleasure by overstepping existing moral and legal norms.

<sup>8</sup> Lacan, "Psychanalyse et médecine", 47 (own translation).

<sup>9</sup> Miller, "Six Paradigms of *Jouissance*", 19.

<sup>10</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> I owe these last insights to helpful comments of an anonymous reviewer.

<sup>12</sup> Lacan, *Seminar XI. Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 96 (translation changed).

<sup>13</sup> Lacan, *Seminar III. The Psychoses*, 75.

<sup>14</sup> I owe this insight to Richard Boothby (unpublished manuscript).

<sup>15</sup> Lacan, *Seminar VII, Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 62.

<sup>16</sup> The Thing stands for the eroticization and the transgression of limits. It becomes a transgressive quality, with Lacan's main concern how it overflows the mind with pleasure by overstepping existing moral and legal laws.

<sup>17</sup> Miller, "Paradigms of *Jouissance*", 7.

<sup>18</sup> Eric Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, 96.

<sup>19</sup> Das Ding names the inaccessible yet determinative engine of desire, and as such the core question constitutive of subjectivity itself. "Das Ding has to be posited as exterior, as the prehistoric Other that is impossible to forget – the Other whose primacy of position Freud affirms in the form of something *entfremdet*, something strange to me." Lacan, *Seminar VII, Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 71.

<sup>20</sup> Lacan, *Seminar VII. Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 79.

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- <sup>21</sup> See: Finkelde, "The Secret 'Code of Honor'. On Political Enjoyment and the Excrescence of Fantasy"; Finkelde, *Phantaschismus. Von der totalitären Versuchung unserer Demokratie*, Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant and Lacan*.
- <sup>22</sup> Lacan, *Seminar XX, Encore*, 76.
- <sup>23</sup> Lacan, *Seminar XX, Encore*, 77.
- <sup>24</sup> Lacan, *Seminar XX, Encore*, 76.
- <sup>25</sup> Cantin, "Femininity: From Passion to an Ethics of the Impossible", 135.
- <sup>26</sup> The photos were published, among others, in the *New York Post* on June 12, 2011.
- <sup>27</sup> Lacan, *Seminar VII. Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 185 (translation changed).
- <sup>28</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book VI, 1139a 21-31, p. 103.
- <sup>29</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book VI, 1139a 21-25, p. 103.
- <sup>30</sup> Lear, *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life*, 99.
- <sup>31</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1154b, 25-29.
- <sup>32</sup> Davidson, "Two Paradoxes of Irrationality".
- <sup>33</sup> Lacan describes the concept of forced choice in multiple ways from his "Graph of Desire", to his slogan "Your money or your life!" (Lacan, *Seminar XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 212.)
- <sup>34</sup> Davidson, "Rational Animals".
- <sup>35</sup> See on the topic the insightful comments of Slavoj Žižek in his article: "Why Is Every Act a Repetition?"
- <sup>36</sup> Žižek, "Why Is Every Act a Repetition", 75.
- <sup>37</sup> Lacan, *Seminar VII. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 54.
- <sup>38</sup> Lacan, "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious".
- <sup>39</sup> Brandom, *Articulating Reasons*, 163-165.
- <sup>40</sup> See on this topic: Finkelde, *Excessive Subjectivity. Kant, Hegel, Lacan, and the Foundations of Ethics*, 46-49.
- <sup>41</sup> Lacan, *Seminar Book II, The Ego in Freud's Theory*, 223.
- <sup>42</sup> Lacan, *Seminar I, Freud's Papers on Technique*, 176.
- <sup>43</sup> Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 72-74.
- <sup>44</sup> Finkelde, *Excessive Subjectivity. Kant, Hegel, Lacan, and the Foundations of Ethics*, 69-82.
- <sup>45</sup> Culture itself is according to Freud a pleasure-deferring and propulsion-repelling form of sublimation and, therefore, a symptom of instinctual desires that we can not see as being included in an art exhibition hall, for example, or in a physicist's cloud chamber. We take cultural forms from art to physics as examples of man-kind's creativity and ingenuity, not as collateral damage of pleasure failing and erotic exciting deferrals.
- <sup>46</sup> Davidson presents this argument in "Two Paradoxes of Irrationality".
- <sup>47</sup> An anonymous reviewer pointed out that people in the mentioned mental states of abjection do not feel free at all since the pull to act is too strong. This is where therapy can play a role. It can uncover the underlying fantasy.
- <sup>48</sup> Žižek, *Enjoyment as a Political Factor*; Ruti, *The Singularity of Being*, Dean, *Žižek and Politics*; Finkelde, "The Secret 'Code of Honour'", Finkelde, *Phantaschismus*.
- <sup>49</sup> Miller, "Six Paradigms of Jouissance", 9.



<sup>50</sup> Ernst Jünger, *Das Wäldchen 125. Eine Chronik aus den Grabenkriegen 1918*. Jünger retells the events of a ferocious battle between French and German troops for an explicitly *unimportant* piece of forest during the First World War. War needs no means and no ends. It can have its end in its own form.

<sup>51</sup> The figure is taken from the insightful article: Depoortere, "The End of God's Transcendence?"

<sup>52</sup> Lacan, *Seminar VII. Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 201.

<sup>53</sup> Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, §32, p. 19.