

What Does Intellectual Freedom Mean Today?

David Khan

For the subjectivity speaking the continual becoming of self and other within the hegemonic frame of contemporary, Western discourse, intellectual freedom today will find itself in the vanquishing and relinquishing of certain cherished myths. According to these fantasies, intellectual freedom has been conceived in terms of an antagonism between the *one* and the *other* — which is to say, in terms of the struggle for self-determination waged by the individual (defined as unique, authentic, original, self-willing) against the vanishing of the self into the collective (understood as the expression of commonality, compromise, derivation, pre-determination). Being intellectually free has tended to be construed in terms of the apotheosis or complete self-realisation of the one *in spite of or against* the others. The impossibility, for the one, of attaining the ideal state of being intellectually free exemplifies the subjective predicament. In the arena of subjectivity conceived in terms of the animus of the one against the others, finitude, lack, incapacity, destitution have been the defining characteristics of the one who would aspire to be intellectually free and, inevitably, to fail in that endeavour. In this scheme, genuine intellectual freedom is, effectively, proscribed for the “ordinary” person. Instead, one pantomimes (or, more precisely, is pantomimed by) a grotesque counterfeit freedom that *seems* socially and culturally imposed and, moreover, exceeding and eluding the rational ethos of the Kantian categorical imperative, insists with the paradoxical injunction to maximally invest in and celebrate it.¹ Even the genius — the supposed exception that proves the rule or Law by which the Other is imagined

to perform the ordinary one — is not immune to this excessive demand. Genius must pay its dues. Invariably, the intellectual freedom of the “exceptional” one carries a fearful price: isolation, insanity, persecution, pariah-hood. No wonder, then, that the idea of intellectual freedom has gathered around itself an aura of heroism — albeit, a heroism whose victories may seem pyrrhic and whose triumphs often are leavened with tragedy. In light of this state of affairs, let us propose to seek the meaning of intellectual freedom today beyond the antagonism of the one against the others. So that, even if this meaning takes the form of an ideal, imperative, or challenge that impresses with ethical necessity, it will be given neither by the one nor the others, nor by the one against the others, nor by the Other performing the one but rather by the one *and* the others, *the one with the others*.

But what does it mean, *today*, to suggest that the meaning of intellectual freedom is given by the one with the others? In the first place, we do not mean, simply, the one working constructively with the others or the others making a place for the one. On the contrary, we have in mind a conception of subjectivity that testifies to the vanishing of absolute distinctions between *the* one and *the* other, or between the *one* and the other *ones*. That is to say, we posit a subjectivity resisting the tendency of Western metaphysics to privilege the interior self-presence of the one; otherness being defined in terms of that which is exterior to and absent from the one. We propose that such a model of subjectivity gives the meaning of intellectual freedom *today* insofar as it draws on now-decades-old discursive currents that, whilst already pivotal to many of the far-reaching transformations in thinking and being we associate with the postmodern, continue to urgently insist in the present. And here, to put our cards squarely on the table, we have in mind a thinking of the one with the others responsive to Heidegger’s *destruktion* of Western metaphysics as ontotheology and his challenge to think the un-thought (indeed, *unthinkable*) ontological difference as the becoming of difference constitutive of Being and beings.² We have in mind, also, the reverberations of these Heideggerian gestures in Lacanian and Derridean thought, where the Heideggerian injunction to think the becoming of difference might be expressed, respectively, in terms of an admonition *to be in and as traversing fantasy* or *to be in and as deconstruction*.³ What is common to these different ways of thinking the one with the others is that they challenge us to understand that the “essence” of the subjectivity proper to thinking the one with the others escapes the metaphysical fixation on that which either is inside or outside the one. In the language employed by the aforementioned three thinkers, this subjectivity defines an “ek-sisting” “being-in-the-world” (Heidegger’s *Dasein*), an “intimate exteriority” or “extimacy” (the “real” dimension of Lacan’s desiring subjectivity, inculcating the

pure difference between ego and Other, conscious and unconscious, signified and signifier), or the logic of the supplement (Derrida's understanding that, in the field of subjectivity, always already, conceptions of essential interiority legislate neither entirely nor sufficiently but, on the contrary, define an original lack demanding continual supplementation by a contextual exteriority).⁴

More simply, perhaps, these different ways of thinking the one with the others challenge us to understand that, always already, the other is "in" the one and the one is "in" the other; the one *is* only insofar as it is being continuously inhabited and remade by the other and, conversely, the other *is* only insofar as it is being continuously inhabited and remade by the one. Here, neither the one nor the others are "fundamental". On the contrary, priority is to be accorded to "that" which enables the process of "inhabiting" or "remaking" by virtue of which the one and the others are continually precipitated in the form of a reciprocating simultaneity — namely, a function of pure difference or differencing. Still further, we could say that the subjectivity proper to thinking the one with the others (which is to say, the subjectivity giving the meaning of intellectual freedom today) defines a reciprocating simultaneity of inside/outside, one/other, identity/difference — where, the /, virgule, or retronym underscores the nature of this subjectivity as a difference-within-unity and/or a unity-that-is-differentiated, a one that is *in itself* only insofar as it is becoming different *from itself*; in short: the continual becoming of an *identity-in-difference*.⁵ The magnitude of the challenge before us is evident in that, for the self-conscious one, full cognizance of this simultaneous reciprocity is impossible. The constitutive becoming of difference, by virtue of which the one and the others continually crystallise, precisely is where the self-conscious one isn't and where it can't be. In and of itself, the self-conscious one cannot coincide with its constitutive ground — which is to say, cannot *be at one with* what Heidegger refers to as the "event of appropriation" (*Ereignis*), Lacan the "*instance*" or "agency" of the letter, and Derrida the "arche-trace" and "*movement of différance*".⁶ Thus, the challenge posed by the subjectivity giving the meaning of intellectual freedom today is, quite literally, Sisyphean. To employ Žižekian metaphors, it is akin to being as a ray of light seeking the limit of the curvature of the space-time that is, in fact, the very "agent" of its refraction. This state of affairs engenders a "parallax view" such that, always already, objective reality bears a subjective "stain" (or self-projection) that, simultaneously, is reflecting back (or being introjected) into the subject as an aporia or lacuna exceeding the subject's grasp. As Žižek points out, this enigma corresponds to the Lacanian *objet petit a*: the unrecoverable, irresolvable, excessive, and elusive "object-cause" of desire that, in *Seminar XI*, Lacan equates with the "gaze"—an intersubjective field potential, the continuous breakdown of which precipitates

the ever-troubled subject-object dichotomy.⁷

Nevertheless, the impossibility of being in and as the subjectivity giving the meaning of intellectual freedom today does not excuse retreating into the twin nihilisms of relativism (confronting impossibility confirms subjective incapacity to speak truth) or idealism (confronting impossibility confirms subjective incapacity to know material reality – “material” tending to be conceived, metaphysically, as *substance* rather than as *difference*) insofar as these are, merely, fantasies indulged by the conscious one in the face of the “real” subjectivity that is as the continual becoming of the identity-in-difference one/other. What is crucial to bear in mind is that this subjectivity, as the thinking of the one with the others, is not and, indeed, never can be an accomplishment of either the one or the other. The gesture towards being in and as the subjectivity giving the meaning of intellectual freedom today does not require a complete abnegation of either the one or the other, nor would such an abnegation even be possible given that the one and the other are effects or precipitations of something “prior”: namely the function of pure difference or differencing by which the identity-in-difference one/other continually becomes. The critical point is that, always already, *one gestures* towards this potentially liberating mode of subjectivity only insofar as, always already, *one is as being given to make this gesture*. For the conscious one, the meaning of intellectual freedom today resides in this realisation that the one forever will be striving to coincide with its constitutive ground and that this way of being obtains because one has no choice: because *one is as forever being given to so strive*. The misrecognition underpinning the antagonism of the one against the others is to imagine that the gesture is given by the others or, indeed, the Other, as opposed to the “real” becoming of the identity-in-difference one/other: *the one with the others*.

¹ The characterisation of this “counterfeit freedom” as a *semblance* of social and cultural programming reflects the Lacanian/Žižekian understanding that, simply and immediately, to regard the one as dancing to the tune of the Other misrecognises the “obscene” demand of the “real” superego to “Enjoy!” In Lacanian theory, this demand is synonymous with the impossible *jouissance* theorised as constitutive of, yet also exceeding and eluding, the endlessly insisting imaginary/symbolic dialectic of desiring subjectivity – as expressed in the perpetual tension between the ideal ego (how I fantasise or prefer to see myself) and the Ego-Ideal (how I am told I should be by the big Other of

language-mediated culture and society). See, for example, Lacan SXX, 3, where it is stated: “The superego is the imperative of *jouissance* — Enjoy!” See, also, Žižek 1989, 81, where it is observed that a “commonplace of Lacanian theory” highlights the manner by which the “Kantian moral imperative conceals an obscene superego injunction: Enjoy! — the voice of the Other impelling us to follow our duty is a traumatic irruption of an appeal to impossible *jouissance*”.

² The necessity for a “destruction” of Western metaphysics is outlined in Heidegger 2010, 21-23. The challenge to think the unthought ontological difference and the characterisation of Western metaphysics as ontotheology can be found, for example, in Heidegger 1969b. Here, Heidegger remarks on the necessity to “speak the *difference* between Being and beings” in terms of a “step back... from what is unthought, from the difference as such, into what gives us thought” — namely, “the *oblivion* of the difference” (50). Still further, the “difference of Being and beings” is defined as the “differentiation” or “perdurance” of “overwhelming” and “arrival” in “*unconcealing keeping in concealment*” (65), where “overwhelming” refers to the enigmatic dimension of Being that “arrives as something of itself unconcealed only by that coming-over” into beings and “arrival” to the way beings “appear in the manner of the arrival that keeps itself concealed in unconcealedness” (64-65). Finally, Heidegger maintains that Western metaphysics is ontotheology insofar as it perpetuates (i) the “onto-logic” presumption that there is an irreducible element common to or grounding all beings and (ii) the “theo-logic” presumption that there is a “highest being” serving as absolute, transcendental origin *and* end of beings (70-71).

³ Referring to a mode of *being in and as traversing fantasy or being in and as deconstruction* carries a twofold resonance. In the first place, the subjectivity in analysis or deconstruction is in the nature of a becoming — a subjectivity that is as continually becoming different from itself. Secondly, the corollary of this endlessly becoming subjectivity is the *interminability* of analysis or deconstruction—wherein the “end” of subjective self-realization, or the determination of truth and meaning, is more in the nature of an aim or ideal than a terminus or final destination. Thus, in Lacan SVI, Seminar 21, 20 May 1959, 264, it is asserted that the “I” that must speak in the place of “unconscious desire” as “the goal, the end, the term of analysis” is “the subject of a becoming”. The characterisation of the end of analysis as traversing fantasy first appears in Lacan SXI, 273-74, where Lacan refers to it as the “beyond of analysis” that “has never been approached” or has “been approachable only at the level of the analyst” in the so-called “training analysis... a psycho-analysis that has...

specifically traversed the cycle of the analytic experience in its totality... looped this loop to its end”, where “The loop must be run through several times.” Analogously, in Derrida 1988, 4, it is suggested that

Deconstruction takes place, it is an event that does not await the deliberation, consciousness, or organization of a subject... *It deconstructs it-self. It can be deconstructed.* [Ça se déconstruit.] The “it” [ça] is not here an impersonal thing that is opposed to some egological subjectivity. *It is in deconstruction* (the Littré says, “to deconstruct it-self [se déconstruire]... to lose its construction”). And the “se” of “se déconstruire,” which is not the reflexivity of an ego or a consciousness, bears the whole enigma.

⁴ For references to the Heideggerian conception of subjectivity as “ek-sistent” “being in the world” see, for example, Heidegger 1998, 247, where “the ek-sistence of human beings” is defined as “standing in the clearing of being”, and Heidegger 2010, 129, where it is suggested that *Dasein* “is cleared in itself as being-in-the-world, not by another being, but in such a way that it *is* itself the clearing”. For a reference to the Lacanian conception of subjectivity as “intimate exteriority” or “extimacy” see, for example, Lacan SVII, 139, where these terms are used to characterise the nature of the “central place... that is the Thing” — namely, the “real” basis of subjectivity. For references to the Derridean conception of subjectivity in terms of the “logic of the supplement” see, for example, Derrida 1997, 145, and Derrida 1973, 88.

⁵ Here, we are appropriating and slightly modifying the term “identity in difference” as it is employed in Lacan SI, 243.

⁶ With regard to *Ereignis*, in Heidegger 1969a, the event of appropriation is described as “an owning in which man and Being are delivered over to each other” (36) and as “that realm, vibrating within itself, through which man and Being reach each other in their nature, achieve their active nature by losing those qualities with which metaphysics has endowed them” (37). The “agency” of the “letter” is addressed in Lacan 2006, wherein the letter is defined, somewhat obliquely, as “the essentially localized structure of the signifier” (418) (i.e., what Derrida might term a “trace structure”). A clearer sense of the letter is conveyed in Lacan SIX. Here, for example, Lacan asserts that

It is *qua* pure difference that the [linguistic] unit, in its signifying function, structures itself, constitutes itself... nothing in the function is

properly speaking thinkable, unless it starts from the following which I formulate as: the one as such is the Other. It is starting from here, from this fundamental structure of the one as difference that we can see appearing this origin from which one can see the signifier constituting itself... (Seminar 3, 29 November 1961, 27)

Lacan subsequently defines the letter as the “essence of the signifier through which it is distinguished from the sign” (Seminar 4, 6 December 1961, 32), which “in its simplest form... is... the *einzigster Zug* [single train or single trait]” or “unary trait” (ibid, 33). With regard to the arche-trace and *différance*, in Derrida 1997, there is reference to the “originary trace” as “the pure movement which produces difference”, and the assertion that “*The (pure) trace is différance*” (62), where, moreover, “Différance is... the formation of form” and “the being-imprinted of the imprint” (63) (i.e., trace and *différance* involve a simultaneous movement of inscription and effacement: the trace is that which presents as absent, appears as disappeared). On this basis, Derrida goes on to suggest that

The trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general. Which amounts to saying once again that there is no absolute origin of sense in general. The trace is the différance which opens appearance... and signification... the trace is not more ideal than real, not more intelligible than sensible, not more a transparent signification than an opaque energy and no concept of metaphysics can describe it. (65)

⁷ Žižek invokes the curved space of Einstein’s General Relativity as a metaphor for the Lacanian conception of the drive on various occasions. See, for example, Žižek 1995, 8-9, and Žižek 2006, 61. See *ibid* for an introductory definition of the ‘parallax view’ and its relationship to the Lacanian *objet petit a*. Here, Žižek defines the ‘parallax view’ in terms of the way

...subject and object are inherently “mediated,” so that an “epistemological” shift in the subject’s point of view always reflects an “ontological” shift in the object itself. Or — to put it in Lacanese — the subject’s gaze is always already inscribed into the perceived object itself, in the guise of its “blind spot,” that which is “in the object more than the object itself”, the point from which the object itself returns the gaze. (17)

As Žižek continues, the manner by which, always already, the subjectivised object is being introjected (i.e., the manner by which the gaze of the

subjectivised object returns the subject-in-the-object back into the subject) occurs 'in the guise of a stain' or 'objectivized splinter in... [the subject's] eye.' In Žižek's view, the "structure" of this "reflexive short circuit" is implicit in *objet petit a*: "the very cause of the parallax gap, that unfathomable X which forever eludes the symbolic grasp, and thus causes the multiplicity of symbolic perspectives" (17-18). With regard to the relationship Lacan establishes between *objet petit a* and the 'gaze', in Lacan SXI, one finds discussion of the "autonomy" of the "function of the stain", which is "identified with that of the gaze... in marking the pre-existence to the seen of a given-to-be-seen" and as "that which governs the gaze most secretly and that which always escapes from the grasp of that form of vision that is satisfied with itself in imagining itself as consciousness" (74). Subsequently, it is suggested that "The gaze may contain in itself the *objet a* of the Lacanian algebra where the subject falls" (76) (i.e., where the illusion of self-conscious empowerment and sufficiency evaporates in the face of the insistence of unfathomable unconscious desire) and that, in the "scopic relation" (i.e., the relation between subject and object),

...the interest the subject takes in his own split is bound up with that which determines it — namely, a privileged object, which has emerged from some primal separation, from some self-mutilation induced by the very approach of the real, whose name, in our algebra, is the *objet a*.
(83)

Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*, trans Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997 (originally published as *De la Grammatologie*, Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1967). (Derrida 1997)

—. *Speech and Phenomena, And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans David B. Allison, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973 (originally published as *La Voix et le Phénomène*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1967). (Derrida 1973)

—. "Letter to a Japanese Friend", in David Wood and Robert Bernasconi (eds), *Derrida and Différance*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988 (originally written 10 July 1983), 1-5. (Derrida 1988)

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, trans Joan Stambaugh, revised and with a

Foreward by Dennis J. Schmidt, New York: State University of New York Press, 2010 (originally published as “Sein und Zeit” in *Jahrbuch für Phänomenologie und phänomenologische Forschung*, v8, 1927). (Heidegger 2010)

—. “Letter on ‘Humanism’ ” in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998 (originally written as a letter to Jean Beaufret, 1946 and originally published with “Plato’s Doctrine of Truth”, Bern: A. Francke A.G., 1947), 239-76. (Heidegger 1998)

—. “The Principle of Identity” in *Identity and Difference*, trans with Introduction by Stambaugh, New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row Publishers Inc., 1969 (originally published as *Identität und Differenz*, Pfullingen: Verlag Günther Neske, 1957), 23-41. (Heidegger 1969a)

—. “The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Western Metaphysics” in *Identity and Difference*, 42-74. (Heidegger 1969b)

Lacan, Jacques. “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud” in *Écrits, the First Complete Edition in English*, trans Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006 (originally written as “L’instance de la lettre dans l’inconscient ou la raison depuis Freud” (1957) and originally published in *Écrits*, Paris: Seuil, 1966), 412-41. (Lacan 2006)

—. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans Alan Sheridan, London and New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1981 (originally published as *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre XI. Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, Paris: Seuil, 1973). (Lacan SXI)

—. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book I. Freud’s Papers on Technique, 1953-1954*, ed. Miller, trans with notes by John Forrester, London and New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1991 (originally published as *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre I. Les écrits techniques de Freud, 1953-1954*, Paris: Seuil, 1975). (Lacan SI)

—. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX. Encore. The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973*, ed. Miller, trans with notes by Fink, New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999 (originally published as *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre XX. Encore, 1972-1973*, Paris: Seuil, 1975). (Lacan SXX)

- . *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book VII. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 1959-1960, ed. Miller, trans with notes by Dennis Porter, New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992 (originally published as *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre VII. L'éthique de la psychanalyse*, 1959-1960, Paris: Seuil, 1986). (Lacan SVII)
- . *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book VI. Desire and its Interpretation*, 1958-1959, unpublished transcript in Cormac Gallagher (trans), Jacques Lacan in Ireland, Collected Translations and Papers, <http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Book-06-Desire-and-its-interpretation.pdf>, (17.08.12). (Lacan SVI)
- . *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book IX. Identification*, 1961-1962, unpublished transcript in Gallagher (trans), Jacques Lacan in Ireland, Collected Translations and Papers, http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Seminar-IX-Amended-lby-MCL-7.NOV_.20111.pdf, (17.08.12). (Lacan SIX)
- Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London and New York: Verso, 1989. (Žižek 1989)
- . “Prolegomena to a future answer to Dr Butler”, *Agenda, Australian Contemporary Art*, i43, July 1995, 7-19. (Žižek 1995)
- . *The Parallax View*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2006. (Žižek 2006)