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Euthanasia of Freedom and Sexual *Conatus*

Keywords

sexual difference, gender, freedom, identity, Lacan, Spinoza, *conatus*, real

Abstract

One of the *tours de force* in Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire* concerns the correlation between the Lacanian formulas of sexualization and the Kantian antinomies of reason. This paper traces the modern itinerary of *freedom*, from the dynamic antinomy (male side) and Kant's free public world Scholar of the Enlightenment, through Marx's democratic State as the locus of transcendent freedom, to Copjec's sex *qua* real, i.e., as a freedom that emerges out of the signifier's own non-symbolizable effects. Accordingly, today's gender and other identitarian self-proclamations—whose "*dico, ergo sum*": "I say, therefore I am" (Jacques-Alain Miller) endeavors to subsume one's being under the signifier and, hence, eliminate the real—amount to the euthanasia of freedom. Opposing this development, this essay proposes Spinoza's substance *qua* power of self-actualization and immanent causality, as well as the singular *conatus* (striving to persevere in one's one being), as key ontological concepts required to sustain the two intertwined aspects of the real as both (an impossible) pre-symbolic cause and (an increasingly prohibited, yet inevitable) post-symbolic effect.

Evtanazija svobode in seksualni *conatus*

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Ključne besede

spolna razlika, spol, svoboda, identiteta, Lacan, Spinoza, *conatus*, realno

Povzetek

Eden od vrhuncev v knjigi Joan Copjec *Read My Desire* se nanaša na korelacijo med lacanovskimi formulami seksuacije in kantovskimi antinomijami uma. Članek sledi moderni

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poti *svobode*, od dinamične antinomije (moška stran) in Kantovega razsvetljenskega Učenjaka svobodnega javnega sveta, prek Marxove demokratične države kot kraja transcendentne svobode, do Copjecinega spola kot realnega, tj. kot svobode, ki se poraja iz nesimbolizabilnih učinkov označevalca. V skladu s tem so današnja spolna in druga identitetna samorazglasanja – katerih *dico, ergo sum*, »rečem, torej sem« (Jacques-Alain Miller), si prizadeva, da bi svojo bit podredil označevalcu in s tem odpravil realno – pomenijo evtanazijo svobode. Nasproti temu razvoju ta esej predlaga Spinozovo substanco kot moč samoudejanjenja in imanentne vzročnosti ter singularni *conatus* (prizadevanje za vztrajanje in ohranjanje v svoji lastni biti) kot ključna ontološka pojma, potrebna za vzdrževanje obeh prepletenih vidikov realnega kot (nemožnega) predsimbolnega vzroka in (vse bolj prepovedanega, a neizogibnega) postsimbolnega učinka.



Euthanasia of Freedom

A *tour de force* accomplished in Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire* concerns the correlation between the Lacanian formulas of sexualization and the Kantian antinomies of reason, with the mathematic antinomy finding itself on the female side, and the dynamic antinomy on the male side. But before we approach sexuality directly, I would like to point out another correlation within Kant's own theoretical system, specifically one between his epistemology, as presented in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787), and his political theory, as presented in his famous short article "What is Enlightenment?" ["Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?"] published in the *Berlinische Monatschrift* [*Berlin Monthly*] in December, 1784. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the dynamic antinomy (male side) postulates that as a phenomenon in time and space, everything is subject to natural determinism, but, as a thing-in-itself where the categories of time and space do not apply, everything is free.¹ Turning now to Kant's political theory in his "What is Enlightenment?" we see that this postulate of the dynamic antinomy constitutes the matrix for his conception of enlightened democracy, with civil society constituting the world of phenomena—i.e., being subject to the law—and public scholarship the realm of the thing-in-itself, that is, of freedom.

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¹ See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A 531/B 559–A 558/B 586.

In Kant's words, the "civil society" of "private citizens" functions like the world of phenomena, where you must "only obey!" the law,² while as "world citizens [. . .] in the role of a world scholar who addresses the public," you function as the thing-in-itself, being free to "argue as much as you will, and about what you will."³ The rule of law applies only within civil society or, in Copjec's words, only in "the series of phenomena (or signifiers)"—where "there is no such thing as freedom," while freedom is relegated to the sphere of public scholarship, a sphere that "serves precisely [. . .] the function of limit" by means of which "the series of phenomena [civic society] [. . .] becomes a closed set."⁴

By grounding the socio-political edifice of the Enlightenment on the dynamic antinomy, Kant arguably secularized divinity (the thing-in-itself or freedom) in the form of the free public scholar. For, like Kant's thing-in-itself, the God of the monotheist Judeo-Christian tradition is the free cause outside time and space—the creator—causing or creating everything that exists within the determinism of time and space. However, half a century after Kant, Karl Marx revealed the religious secret of the secular democratic State of Enlightenment by showing that, rather than the public scholar, it is the State itself that occupies the place of transcendent freedom. For, like the Christian God, the State ignores all the differences of the individuals of civil society, such as "religion [. . .], private property [. . .], birth, social rank, education, occupation"⁵ and, we may add, gender, race, and all other differences that today are labeled as "identities," so that "man leads, not only in thought [. . .] but in reality, a double existence—celestial and terrestrial," as, on the one hand, an "imaginary member of an imaginary sovereignty, divested of his real, individual life, and infused with an unreal universality" projected from the State, and, on the other hand, as a "profane being" or "private individual [. . .] in civil society," where he is determined by all possible differences.⁶ For, "far from abolishing these *effective* differences, [the State] only exists as far as they are presupposed; it [. . .] manifests its universality only

² Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals and "What Is Enlightenment?"*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Liberal Arts Company, 1959), 92.

³ Kant, 87.

⁴ Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 230.

⁵ Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 33.

⁶ Marx, 34.

in opposition to these elements.”⁷ As Hegel had discerned in his analysis of “the relation of the political state to religion,” it is only by ignoring particular differences, such as those of religious “forms of authority and of faith [. . .] that the state [has placed itself] above the particular churches, [and] has attained to the universality of thought—its formal principle—and is bringing this universality into existence.”⁸ In this way, the “political state, in relation to civil society, is just as spiritual as is heaven in relation to earth.”⁹ It is this “universal” state above and beyond any religion that succeeds in becoming purely spiritual, thereby inheriting the gaze of Christian divinity for which everybody is supposed to be equal. In Marx’s words: “In fact, the perfected Christian state is not the so-called *Christian* state which acknowledges Christianity as its basis [. . .] it is, rather, the *atheistic* state, the democratic state, the state which relegates religion among the other elements of civil society.”¹⁰

In other words, Enlightenment means that freedom is possible, on the political level, only outside civil society—in the celestial or spiritual, imaginary and unreal level of the State—and epistemologically, only outside “the series of phenomena (or signifiers)”¹¹ or representation, which also means outside reason. In other words, the secular subject is condemned to a claustrophobic confinement within the law and/or representation, and freedom, then, can only emerge out of a discursive failure or, to recall Copjec’s memorable chapter title, out of the euthanasia of reason. Read against this background, her *Read My Desire* can be seen as a struggle to replace both the free public scholar or critic *and* the State with Sex: Sex as the freedom of the subject that emerges out of the signifier’s own non-symbolizable effects, that is, insofar as sex “is an effect, but not a realization of social discourses.”¹² Through Copjec’s audacity, Lacanian sexuality becomes the stronghold of the subject’s freedom.

⁷ Marx, 33.

⁸ Marx, 33; citing Georg W. F. Hegel, *Grundrisse der Philosophie des Rechtes* (Berlin: Nicolaische Buchhandlung, 1821), 346. For an English translation, see *Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1942), 173.

⁹ Marx, 34.

¹⁰ Marx, 36.

¹¹ Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 230.

¹² Copjec, 210.

The question then arises: What happens in today's era of identity's self-affirmation, in which, as Jacques-Alain Miller has pointed out, the Cartesian "*cogito, ergo sum*" has been replaced by a "*dico, ergo sum*": "I say, therefore I am"? This is a monumental shift from idealism to what I would call a constructivist ontology, insofar as the "I say, therefore I am" assumes that it suffices "to say what one is so as to be what one says."¹³ This shift is not simply one from thought (*cogito*) to saying (*dico*) or the word, a distinction that in the last analysis, after Saussure and structural linguistics, may be untenable. What is at stake in this shift is a claim to both the fullness of being and its controllability, both of which being guaranteed by a presupposed absolute coincidence between being and signifier. To spell out this point: Descartes's thought is void of the content that is supposed to constitute his being: "I think, therefore I am" but I have no idea what I am. The most positive content given in Descartes's utterance is that "I think that I doubt everything," except for the fact that I exist simply by dint of the fact that I doubt—but what am I as a doubting I? Nothing more than a "thinking thing," which, to be more precise, is a radically "doubting thing"—which is why Lacan linked the Cartesian subject to paranoia.¹⁴ Rather than accepting the Cartesian "cogito" as the means to assert "the validity of human reason," Lacan "returns to Descartes' radically skeptical assumption that all experience is an illusion, thrown up by a deceiving God," and by "substituting a deceiving ego for a deceiving God, Lacan claims that the mirror stage reveals 'the ontological structure of the human world,' in a way that 'accords with my reflections on paranoid knowledge.'"¹⁵ By contrast, the "*dico, ergo sum*" is a self-assured saying, certain of being in control of the content and form of my existence, capable of positing my being in any way I decide to posit it. As several Lacanians have pointed out, "there is no gap in this *dico*, between the thing said and the being supposed to be deduced from it, no place for the subjective division that the unconscious brings out."¹⁶

¹³ Anaëlle Lebovits-Quenehen, "L'Argument d'Anaëlle Lebovits-Quenehen," 3 *Interpretations du thème de les 52es Journées de l'ECF: Je suis ce que je dis; Denis contemporaines d'inconscient*, Novembre 19–20, 2022, <https://www.causefreudienne.org/app/uploads/2023/04/J52-argument-ALQ-1.pdf>.

¹⁴ See Lacan's doctoral thesis *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

¹⁵ Kay Stockholder, "Lacan versus Freud: Subverting the Enlightenment," *American Imago* 55, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 362; citing Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 2.

¹⁶ Lebovits-Quenehen, "L'Argument."

To return to Copjec's terms, with the "*dico*," the subject is fully subsumed under the signifier, there is no room for any non-symbolizable effects, no room for a Real, and, therefore, no room for freedom. For in today's era of ontological constructivism, subjects fervently surrender the totality of their being to the signifiers of their utterances. Utterances, by the way, that are entirely monological, as the Other cannot challenge a thing. Again, in Lebovits-Quenehen's words, "This identity which he affirms" with his:

I am [. . .], and in which he recognises himself, is certainly first imposed on the subject of the *dico* himself, but he must then impose it on the Other whom he institutes as a witness to what he is. His own certainty must become that of the Other, and this to the point of dissuading this Other from questioning him: "*Insofar as I have said it, you have nothing to say.*"¹⁷

Something which understandably raises the question:

Why such an injunction to silence? Why must the declaration of identity be the last word, if not because the identity that is thereby affirmed is experienced as a wounded identity (by racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, fatphobia, etc.)? Actually, the being that emerges from the *dico* readily couples with its potential offender. This is why the *dico* aims first of all at the neutralisation of any word that could not only deny its identity, but even just question it or interpret the statements from which it proceeds. It thus takes note of the potentially striking, even hurtful effects of speech, but it extends this to any speech that would not be limited to confirming the statement from which the affirmation of identity proceeds.¹⁸

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In other words, ontological constructivism is a form of totalitarianism. If Sex, as the subject's freedom, is the surplus effect of the signifier's own euthanasia, then the shift from sex to gender difference and all the other manifestations of identity politics entails the euthanasia of freedom—even the last vestiges of freedom that the reign of reason, rationalization, discipline, and governmentality have left us with.

¹⁷ Lebovits-Quenehen.

¹⁸ Lebovits-Quenehen.

This is a directly political concern, and since, as is clear from the above, the political is always intertwined with its own ontology, tacit or not, let us examine closer the chasm separating ontological constructivism with its discourse of gender identities from the ontological position of Lacanian sexuality.

Sexual Ontology

Addressing precisely this point, Alenka Zupančič turns to Judith Butler's conception of performativity as "a process in which socio-symbolic constructions, by way of repetition and reiteration, are becoming nature," that is:

What is referred to as natural is the sedimentation of the discursive, and in this view the dialectics of nature and culture becomes the internal dialectics of culture [. . .]. Performativity is thus a kind of onto-logy of the discursive, responsible for both the *logos* and the *being* of things.¹⁹

I stress Zupančič's point that the ontology of performativity is one in which "the dialectics of nature and culture becomes the *internal dialectics of culture*," so that "the discursive [culture]" becomes "responsible for both the logos [culture] and the being [nature] of things." This is the logic of Hegelian dialectics that we very often also see in the thought of Slavoj Žižek, who argues that what appears to be a dialectics between two distinct parts (nature and culture) of equal footing turns out to be in truth the internal dialectics of only one of them (culture) so that the other (nature) is its derivative. Zupančič then proceeds to state that "to a large extent, Lacanian psychoanalysis seems compatible with this account, and it is often presented as such,"²⁰ since "[o]ne could say that for psychoanalysis, there is no being independent of language (or discourse) [. . .]. All being is symbolic; it is being in the Other."²¹ To this explanation she adds: "[T]here is only being in the symbolic—except that there is real."²² That is, the similarity between Lacanian ontology and that of performativity is only ostensible because of the real—and "it is here [in the real] that the sexuality that psychoanalysis speaks about is situated."²³ Yet, when it comes to specifying this real, Zupančič

¹⁹ Alenka Zupančič, "Sexual Difference and Ontology," *E-flux Journal* 32 (February 2012): 3.

²⁰ Zupančič, 3.

²¹ Zupančič, 8.

²² Zupančič, 8.

²³ Zupančič, 5.

is content with a rhetoric of excess with regard to the symbolic order and its differential or combinatory logic, stating, for instance:

The Real [. . .] is what irredeemably stains the symbolic, spoils its supposed purity, and accounts for the fact that the symbolic game of pure differentiability is always a game with loaded dice [. . .]. It is neither the remains of the sexual combinatory nor some aspect of sex that is entirely outside any combinatory. Rather, it is something that gets produced on top of any possible (or impossible) combinatory—it is what signifying operations produce besides what they produce (on the level of being and its regulation).²⁴

Here we hear the echo of Copjec's aforementioned phrase that the real, just like sex, “is an effect, but not a realization of social discourses.” Yet, if we want to extricate ourselves from the performative unilateral ontology that sooner or later reduces nature to culture, we must add that while the real and sex are the unrealized or unsymbolized *effect* of discourses, they are also what is *presupposed* for any discourse. The real must be conceived at once as the unrealized *effect* and as the impossible *cause* of culture, which is what leads Lacan “to define the real as the impossible,” not unlike the impossible “*objet a* cause of desire.”²⁵ If the real “acts as the out-of-jointness of the symbolic,” it is precisely because even the distinction between cause and effect is non-existent on the level of the real. Unlike the symbolic, which is constituted in terms of oppositions, such as cause and effect or presence and absence, “there is no absence in the real,” and it is only “the word [. . .] [that] creates the opposition, the contrast.”²⁶ “Externality and internality,” and any such “distinction[,] makes no sense at all at the level of the real,” for “the real is absolutely without fissure”;²⁷ in short, “the real is [. . .] undifferentiated.”²⁸ If it can be said, as many have done, that in Lacanian theory it is the symbolic that introduces a “cut in the real,”²⁹ that “the Real is a

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²⁴ Zupančič, 5.

²⁵ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 167–68.

²⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 313.

²⁷ Lacan, 97.

²⁸ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), 159.

²⁹ Evans, 159.

featureless clay from which reality is fashioned by the Symbolic” and that “it is the chaos from which the world came into being, by means of the Word,”³⁰ it is precisely because “the real is essentially that which resists symbolization.”³¹ In other words, the real *continues* to exist in spite of symbolization, before, during, and after it (i.e., eternally), as, to repeat, both the unrealized effect and the impossible cause of the symbolic. Moreover, being both the effect and the cause of the symbolic, the real is itself the cause of the symbolic, which is, in turn, the cause of the real; in short, the real is the cause of its own cause.

It was Spinoza who first introduced this causality in his monistic conception of substance, according to which all nature is God and both are One and the same substance, so that this “substance cannot be produced by anything else” and, therefore, it is “the cause of itself.”³² Being the cause of itself is what Spinoza calls immanent causality, as opposed to transitive causality, in which cause and effect are distinct, as are God and the world in any creationist conception. The creationist conception evidently operates according to the logic of phenomena in space and time or the logic of the symbolic order. By contrast, Spinoza’s conception of divinity, in which “*God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things*,”³³ means that “God or substance is the ongoing activity of self-actualization,” “the power of making itself actual,” eternally,³⁴ outside of space and time, since in order to cause its own actual existence it must have existed before it started to exist. It is this infinite power of self-actualization that is the true referent of Zupančič’s statement that “the Real [. . .] is the very [. . .] dimension that sustains the [. . .] ‘vital’ phenomena” Lacan refers to with terms such as “the libido or jouissance, [and] the drive.”³⁵ What, exactly, does Lacan mean with these terms which he equates with the real? In Lacan’s words, being or the real is what “survives any division”; it is “jouissance” or “libido, *qua* pure life instinct [. . .] immortal [. . .] or irrepressible [. . .] indestructible life [. . .] whose characteristic

³⁰ Lionel Bailly, “Real, Symbolic, Imaginary,” in *Lacan: A Beginner’s Guide* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2020), 98.

³¹ Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 92.

³² Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 412, part I, prop. 7, dem. All quotations in English refer to the Curley translation unless otherwise noted in-text.

³³ Spinoza, part I, prop. 18; emphasis in original.

³⁴ Beth Lord, *Spinoza’s Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 45, 21, 28.

³⁵ Zupančič, “Sexual Difference and Ontology,” 5.

is not to exist” precisely insofar as *jouissance* or the real is a sheer potentiality, the indestructible and irrepressible power of Being to actualize itself.³⁶ And at the same time that it is this indestructible power of self-actualization, *jouissance* is—due to the “link between libido and [. . .] the death drive,”—“drive.”³⁷ And, as Lacan explicitly states, “the activity of the drive is concentrated in this *making oneself (se faire)*.”³⁸—that is, in the power of actualizing itself. The real *jouissance* or drive, at once death drive and “pure life instinct,”³⁹ is not created or produced, for it is itself the pure activity of making itself (*se faire*). In other words, *jouissance* is the cause of itself, not unlike Spinoza’s substance.

And it is this *jouissance qua* real or “indestructible life [. . . that] is precisely what is subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact that it is submitted to the cycle of sexed reproduction.”⁴⁰ For the “real is distinguished [. . .] by its separation from the field of the pleasure principle, by its desexualization, by the fact that its economy, later, admits something new, which is precisely the impossible.”⁴¹ Since it is impossible for a sexed being to be its own cause, the real, which is self-caused, presupposes desexualization, and this is why, as mentioned above, we “define the real as the impossible,” thereby acknowledging that “the opposite of the possible is certainly the real.”⁴² Miller stresses the asexual character of the real by juxtaposing any empirically possible enjoyment to the real *jouissance* which pertains to the “asexual real” and constitutes the “libido [. . .] of the real level.”⁴³ In Lacan’s words, substance or “being is the *jouissance* of the body as such, that is, as asexual [*asexué*].”⁴⁴ As Zupančič also reminds us: “nothing about (human) sexuality is natural, least of all sexual activity with the

³⁶ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 197.

³⁷ Jacques-Allain Miller, “Transference, Repetition, and the Sexual Real: Reading the Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis” and “Silet,” Lectures Given as Part of “The Lacanian Orientation” (1994–1995), unpublished. Text and notes have been edited by Anne Lysy, authorized by J. A. Miller, not reviewed by the author, 1995, 10–14.

³⁸ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 195.

³⁹ Lacan, 198.

⁴⁰ Lacan, 197–98.

⁴¹ Lacan, 167.

⁴² Lacan, 167.

⁴³ Jacques-Alain Miller, “Transference, Repetition, and the Sexual Real,” 10–14.

⁴⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972–1973*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 6.

exclusive aim of reproduction.”⁴⁵ Unlike sexual reproduction, in which the product presupposes both a cause other than itself and sexual difference, sex is the irrepressible power of Being to generate itself. Sexual reproduction takes place within duration, whereas human sexuality is metaphysical, pertaining, like Spinoza’s substance and Lacan’s *jouissance*, to the species of eternity.

These last remarks call for a further clarification. If the real is undifferentiated and, hence, asexual, then how can Lacanian theory claim, as Copjec does, that “sexual difference [. . .] is a real and not a symbolic difference,”⁴⁶ such as other differences in time and space? If the real is undifferentiated, must not the term “sexual difference” be an oxymoron? This apparent paradox is cleared away through the two orders of the real that are involved in its symbolization, a “process [that] is found in a part of Lacan’s postface to the “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’ [. . .] where Lacan introduces the cause”⁴⁷—as precisely an immanent cause—and which is theorized by Jacques-Alain Miller in his “class, *Orientalisation lacanienne*,”⁴⁸ and later recapitulated by Bruce Fink as follows:

We can think of the real as being progressively symbolized in the course of a child’s life, less and less of that “first,” “original” real (call it R_1) being left behind, though it can never all be drained away, neutralized, or killed. *There is thus always a remainder which persists alongside the symbolic.*⁴⁹

So that we can say

that the symbolic order itself gives rise to a “second-order” real [. . .]. For the symbolic order, as modeled by Lacan [. . .] produces something, in the course of its autonomous operation, that goes beyond the symbolic order itself [. . . and] this allows us to postulate two different levels of the real: (1) a real before the letter, that is, a presymbolic real, which, in the final analysis, is but our own hypothesis (R_1), and (2) a real after the letter which is characterized by impasses and

⁴⁵ Zupančič, “Sexual Difference and Ontology,” 8.

⁴⁶ Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 207.

⁴⁷ Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, 27.

⁴⁸ Fink, 182n11.

⁴⁹ Fink, 26–27.

impossibilities due to the relations among the elements of the symbolic order itself (R_2), that is, which is generated by the symbolic.⁵⁰

This is another way of understanding immanent causality, that is, the fact that substance or the real is both the cause and the effect of its own effects (symbolic). On the level of human sexuality, the asexual *jouissance* pertains to the “first,” “original,” presymbolic, undifferentiated real (R_1), which, to repeat, “in the final analysis, is but our own hypothesis,” as is Spinoza’s substance as the power of self-actualization (a necessary hypothesis required in order to explain the existence of being in a non-creationist way).⁵¹ Sexual difference, on the other hand, is “a real after the letter,” generated by the symbolic’s impasses and impossibilities, being “an effect, but not a realization of social discourses” or the symbolic, which is why “sexual difference cannot be deconstructed, since deconstruction is an operation that can be applied only to culture, to the signifier, and has no purchase on this other realm”⁵² of the second order real (R_2). Parenthetically, for those familiar with or more interested in Spinoza’s theoretical system, we could say that, while substance pertains to the first-order real (R_1), the second-order real (R_2) corresponds to what Spinozan scholars call “mediate infinite modes,” that is, something that “must have necessarily followed [. . .] from [. . .] some attribute [of God or substance] modified by a modification which exists necessarily and as infinite,”⁵³ such as “the face of the whole universe, which, although varying in infinite ways, yet remains always the same.”⁵⁴

It is no accident that to go beyond the unilateral ontology of performativity and to grasp the real and, with it, the psychoanalytic conception of Sex, we, like Lacan, have to turn to Spinoza’s conception of substance as the power of self-actualization and as the immanent cause of itself. As long as “Lacan invokes Hegel’s view that ‘everything which is real is rational (and *vice versa*)’,” the term “real” “disappears from Lacan’s work” and “it is not until 1953 that Lacan elevates the real to the status of a fundamental category of psychoanalytic theory.”⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Fink, 27.

⁵¹ Fink, 26–27.

⁵² Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 210.

⁵³ Spinoza, *Ethics*, part I, prop. 23.

⁵⁴ Spinoza, Letter 64, to Georg Hermann Schuller, July 29, 1675, in *Complete Works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 919.

⁵⁵ Evans, *Introductory Dictionary*, 159; citing Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 226.

By contrast, Spinoza's substance *qua* immanent cause enables us to grasp what kind of difference the human sexual difference is.

Sexual Conatus

Copjec has long cautioned us that “sexual difference [. . .] is a real and not a symbolic difference,”⁵⁶ which, in Zupančič's words, means that “sexuality doesn't amount to producing sexual difference as signifying difference. In other words, sexual difference is a different kind of difference; it doesn't follow the differential logic.”⁵⁷ Since differential differences among elements are determined through the negative relations among these elements, the non-differential difference in question must be determined not through negative relations. In juxtaposing Hegel—for whom “*omnis determinatio est negatio* [all determination is negation]”⁵⁸—and Spinoza, Pierre Macherey introduces the concept of positive determination. In Macherey's words, “to determine something negatively is to represent it abstractly according to its limits, in separating it from God that acts within it”—i.e., ignoring substance or the real as its immanent cause—“and attempting to [. . .] relate it [. . .] to that which it is not,” including to “its possible disappearance,” which is why “we present it as contingent”—unlike the real which is indestructible and eternal. By contrast, “to determine something positively [. . .] is to perceive it [. . .] according to the immanent necessity that engenders it within substance, according to the law of causality that is the same one through which substance produces itself.”⁵⁹ In this case, we “envisage it from the point of view of eternity, insofar as it is eternal, that is, insofar as it cannot be destroyed, other than by an exterior cause (*E IIP4*).”⁶⁰

Being the effect of eternal substance, the essence of every singular thing is eternal, and only its actual existence is finite and appears contingent. That is, in contrast to substance, whose essence necessarily entails its existence, singular

⁵⁶ Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 207.

⁵⁷ Zupančič, “Sexual Difference and Ontology,” 7.

⁵⁸ Pierre Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, trans. Susan M. Ruddick (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 113; citing Hegel's phrase from his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*.

⁵⁹ Macherey, 141.

⁶⁰ Macherey, 141; the parenthetical addendum is Macherey's reference to Spinoza's *Ethics*, part III, prop. 4.

“things do not exist necessarily,” and, therefore, “their existence and their essence are ‘determined’ in completely different manners.”⁶¹ Their existence is determined according to a negative determination, whereas their essence is determined according to a positive determination—while the two are expressions of one and the same thing. In other words, “the same things are determined from different points of view,”⁶² from that of eternity or their essence or potential, and from that of duration and the actual. “This is why the fact that singular things do not exist in eternity” on the actual level “has no effect at all on the eternity of their essence,” that is, on their positive determination.⁶³

The name Spinoza gives to the eternal essence of a thing is *conatus*—either left untranslated or translated as “striving” or “struggle”; from the verb *conor*, “to strive” or “struggle”—and Spinoza defines it as follows: “*Conatus, quo unaquaeque res in suo esse perseverare conatur, nihil est praeter ipsius rei actualem essentiam.*”⁶⁴ Samuel Shirley translates this as: “The conatus with which each thing endeavors to persist in its own being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing itself.” In another translation, by Edwin Curley, the statement reads as follows: “The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing.” In short, the essence of a thing is its *conatus*, that is, its striving to persevere in its being—not generally to persevere but to persevere *in its being*. This is a fact that Spinoza stresses several times throughout his ethics in phrases such as: “Each thing, insofar as it is in itself, strives to persevere in its being.”⁶⁵ Which is why “no thing can have in itself anything by which it can be destroyed, that is, it can annul its existence,”⁶⁶ which means that “no thing can be destroyed except by an external cause.”⁶⁷ In itself a thing cannot be destroyed—it is eternal—whereas its destruction is possible only within duration where alone causes external to itself exist and can destroy it. For only within duration can a thing be distinct from, and possibly even opposed to, an external thing through, precisely, a negative determination. The realization that “determination can be understood simultaneously in a positive

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⁶¹ Macherey, 173.

⁶² Macherey, 173.

⁶³ Macherey, 173.

⁶⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, part III, prop. 7.

⁶⁵ Spinoza, part III, prop. 6.

⁶⁶ Spinoza, part III, prop. 6, proof.

⁶⁷ Spinoza, part III, prop. 4.

and a negative sense [. . .] does away with the traditional opposition of positive and negative,”⁶⁸ since it reveals that differentiating and counting distinct things is possible only within time, in the axis symbolic-imaginary, while from the perspective of the real there is no same and other or One and Two. In Spinozan terms, only the modes—substance’s manifestations in time, where they are defined through negative determination—can they be counted, while the eternal essence of these same modes cannot. To return parenthetically to our earlier discussion, while modes exist in duration, and substance is eternal in the sense of the first-order real (R_1), the essence of a mode is eternal in the sense of the second-order real (R_2).

Translating the above back to our context means that the discourse on gender identities is concerned not with sex but with its modes, that is, precisely, the numbers of gender, its distinct and countable kinds, since it is only from within duration, within the symbolico-imaginary axis that one can distinguish, label, and count genders. This explains why Copjec argues that: “it was specifically the sex of *sexual difference* that dropped out when this term was replaced by *gender* [. . .]. For, while gender theorists continued to speak of sexual *practices*, they ceased to question what sex is.”⁶⁹ To raise the question of “what sex is” means to be concerned with sex’s ontology, its being or eternal essence, whereas describing and classifying practices of distinct gender identities is a different activity. As Mladen Dolar puts it:

[T]he sexual difference poses the problem of the two precisely because it cannot be reduced to the binary opposition or accounted for in terms of the binary numerical two. It is not a signifying difference, such that it defines the elements of structure. It is not to be described in terms of opposing features, or as a relation of given entities preexisting the difference. One could say: bodies can be counted, sexes cannot. Sex presents a limit to the count of bodies; it cuts them from inside rather than grouping them together under common headings.⁷⁰

What groups bodies together under common headings are their properties, that is, characteristics that are secondary to a given entity, which is precisely the

⁶⁸ Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, 146.

⁶⁹ Joan Copjec, “The Sexual Compact,” *Angelaki* 17, no. 2 (June 2012): 31–32.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Zupančič, “Sexual Difference and Ontology,” 8.

concern of the activity describing and classifying practices of distinct gender identities. This is an activity that is part-and-parcel of the biopolitical mechanisms that administer life by precisely naming, labeling, and classifying it, as Foucault describes them.⁷¹ This tendency is perhaps inevitable in a society such as ours that is so profoundly permeated by the reign of biopolitics, but what is truly detrimental is the further assumption that talking about the particularities of gender covers also the question of “what sex is,” its ontology. For if one accepts this assumption, then one allows “sex [to] revert [. . .] to being [. . .] a secondary characteristic that, tired of playing second fiddle, now asserted itself as impudent swagger or naughty voluntarism.”⁷²

Far from being a “secondary characteristic” or property, sex is like an attribute of the Spinozan substance. “Extension and thinking” and all the other (infinite) attributes “are not properties of a substance, but rather [. . .] different ‘ways’ that a substance can be perceived,” they are “*expressions* of the essence of substance.”⁷³ This is why, in their radical difference, they are always also the same, since they are all expressions of the same substance. As opposed to gender, sex pertains to the real where identity and otherness overlap, as does infinity (or, for that matter, any number) and the One.⁷⁴ Accordingly, what Macherey says about Spinoza’s God can be said about sex, namely, just like “God is not ‘one,’ any more than he is two, or three, or beautiful or ugly”⁷⁵—sex, too, is not ‘one’ any more than it is two, or three, and so on. To enumerate genders is to rely on “our power to imagine, which creates a fiction, not simply of two, three, or any other number of substances [or sexes] but more generally of substances [or sexes] existing in a determinate number”—which is precisely what the “*dico*” assumes.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Beyond Michel Foucault's three volumes on *The History of Sexuality*, see, for instance, his “*Society Must be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003); or *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2008).

⁷² Copjec, “Sexual Compact,” 31–32.

⁷³ Lord, *Spinoza’s Ethics*, 21.

⁷⁴ Of course, this also means that from the perspective of R_1 , to say that “no thing can be destroyed except by an external cause” (Spinoza, *Ethics*, part III, prop. 4) is no different than saying that anything is destroyed by an internal cause, since on this register the distinction internal-external does not exist. Nevertheless, on the register of modes and time, “no thing can be destroyed except by an external cause.”

⁷⁵ Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, 104.

⁷⁶ Macherey, 104.

We could say about both Spinoza's attributes and sex that they are identical in their radical otherness, that is, "even if they are in reality distinct" or, rather, "exactly because they are in reality distinct, [they] are not like beings that could be enumerated, even in a perspective tending toward the infinite, because this would act to reduce their distinction to a modal distinction, that is, in a certain way, to think about the infinite from a finite point of view."⁷⁷ Any number, including infinity, is already a concession to the imaginary. Paraphrasing Macherey, to say there is a single or two, three, or how many sexes is to speak from the imagination that can only consider the absolute—the real—negatively, and, therefore, just like "Spinoza was no more profoundly a monist than a dualist, or whatever other number one wanted to assign this fiction,"⁷⁸ sex is no more One or Two or whatever other number one may want to assign the fiction of gender.

Ultimately, what eludes the logic of gender identity is something that generally eludes the logic of both the symbolic and the imaginary, namely, singularity—something which is to be distinguished from countable individuals or particulars. Speaking of the essence of a thing, Spinoza states: "That which is common to all things [. . .] and which is equally in the part and in the whole constitutes the essence of no singular thing."⁷⁹ The essence of each and every thing is singular and cannot be shared. Moreover, as we have seen, the essence of a thing is its *conatus*, that is, its power [*potentia*] to persevere in its own being, which, furthermore, when it comes to the human thing, is also its desire: "[d]esire is the very essence of man," "*Cupiditas est ipsa hominis essential*."⁸⁰ For psychoanalysis, the rule of singularity applies equally to sex and desire. Following Cesare Casarino's suggestion regarding *conatus* in general—"to each its own *conatus*"⁸¹—we can say, regarding specifically human *conatus*: *to each its own desire, to each its own sex*.

Last but not least, since on the level of the real there are no oppositions such as external and internal, and since the essence of a thing is its *conatus* or struggle

⁷⁷ Macherey, 103.

⁷⁸ Macherey, 104.

⁷⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, part II, prop. 37.

⁸⁰ Spinoza, part III, prop. 56, proof.

⁸¹ Cesare Casarino, "Grammars of *Conatus*: Or, On the Primacy of Resistance in Spinoza, Foucault and Deleuze," in *Spinoza's Authority, Volume 1: Resistance and Power in Ethics*, ed. A. Kiarina Kordela and Dimitris Vardoulakis (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 63.

to persevere in *its own being*, this *struggle* cannot be against something external to itself—as in the popular fantasy of a conflict between “men coming from Mars” and “women from Venus.” This is a struggle within its own being, an *internal struggle*. And since “no thing can be destroyed except by an external cause,” this internal *conatus* is not about survival even on the modal level within time. The *conatus* is an internal struggle for persevering in one’s being which is at the same time constitutive of one’s being. In Zupančič’s relevant remark, sex is antagonism

in the same way that for Marx “class antagonism” is not simply conflict between different classes, but the very principle of the constitution of the class society, antagonism as such never simply exists between conflicting parties; it is the very structuring principle of this conflict, and of the elements involved in it.⁸²

Sexual *conatus* is constitutive of one’s being; it is the struggle to persevere *in my own singular being*, as opposed to any mold into which the symbolic order with its identities, including my own “*dico*,” may attempt to contain me. Sexual *conatus* is the struggle for this freedom.

Data availability statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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⁸² Zupančič, “Sexual Difference and Ontology,” 5.

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