

Decentering Humanity: Ethics and the Ultimate Concern

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In the famous 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*, we follow Dorothy, the Tin Man, the Cowardly Lion, and the Scarecrow into the great wizard's palace where they must confront the seemingly powerful being. Upon his assertions of his own supreme power and that they must do his will because of his power we are then confronted with the truth as Toto pulls away the curtain: There is no Wizard of Oz, only a man behind the curtain pulling levers and controlling the appearance of the ominous presence that is before them. But this twist is exactly what we all expect: Wizard or not, we are not in control but it is the powers that be that seem to exert control over us. To put forth what would have been an extremely upsetting twist The Wizard of Oz would have needed Toto to reveal that there was not even a man behind the curtain, instead there was nothing. The Wizard was simply a figurehead who only served as the embodiment of control. In a similar way, the truth of Christianity reveals the same truth: Christ on the cross is crucified and the curtain that shields us from the ultimate Truth hiding within the Holy of Holies is torn down the middle revealing the truth that humanity desires to never confront: There is nothing behind the curtain; God is a figurehead that served as the embodiment of control. Christianity

takes a more radical turn, though, as I argue that the radical truth of Christianity is this revelation and that it immediately decenters humanity, forcing us to confront the idea of meaning through ethics that we have used God to provide for.

Slavoj Žižek writes in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* that “behind the curtain of public text, there is only what we put there” (127). This is simply to say that there is what is, but beyond that we make it what we want it to be. What the figurehead of God actually does is center and elevate us to the point in which everything we do is of ultimate concern. Our underlying mentality is to always find the secret meaning that is within everything. One must go no further than conspiracy theories to see that people do not accept what is revealed to them as most obvious and instead choose to substitute their own realities, whether believable or outlandish. Religion is the invention of humanity that allows us to be “ultimately concerned” (Tillich 1). However, God is the mechanism in which we proclaim our own acts as ultimately concerning. The truly radical truth of Christianity is that it proclaims that our own acts do not actually have any repercussions beyond what happens within life itself. Christianity brings upon the death of God in order to end the total narcissism that was the act of being ultimately concerned with every single action. Christianity is “God sacrificing himself for the guilt of man” (Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* 63). However, rather than this opening up supreme nihilism, we find that it is actually a rescue from it. The decentering of humanity results in an uplifting of life itself and a possibility of redemption from misinterpretation of our situation.

Žižek reveals to us the proper nature of Christianity in his reading of the Old Testament book of Job:

Job's properly ethical dignity lies in the way he persistently rejects the notion that his suffering can have any meaning, either punishment for his past sins or the trial of his faith, against three theologians who bombard him with possible meanings... God takes his side at the end, claiming that every word Job spoke was true, while every word the three theologians spoke was false. (125)

Most importantly Žižek divorces the idea of meaning from the suffering. This once again removes the state of being ultimately concerned about our own actions. What "God" causes us to do in a confessional setting is to apply extreme narcissism to every action, but this is disavowed unless one admits to the revealed truth of Christianity. Alain Badiou notes a similar aspect when inspecting the foundation of the ethic of human rights. He writes:

We posit a general human subject, such that whatever evil befalls him is universally identifiable (even if this universality often goes by the altogether paradoxical name of 'public opinion'), such that this subject is both, on the one hand, a passive, pathetic, or reflexive subject – he who suffers – and, on the other, the active, determining subject of judgment – he who, in identifying suffering, knows that it must be stopped by all available means. (9)

The idea of a supreme God makes each of our own actions ultimately concerning. This allows humanity, as Badiou points out, to assume a dual position as both passive and active.

This passive and active state I believe is a direct result of the idea of God and brings us back to my original example of Oz. The wizard itself is not the one who possesses the power, but is instead the placeholder in which we have placed all the power we do not want to admit we possess. In the same way it is not God who possesses obscene power, but it is instead us. When we sit in passivity we use reflexivity to provide meaning to the events that occur. This is the idea behind Žižek's title, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*. He references Walter Benjamin's declaration that the illusion of history is that it is the puppet we call theology that appears to be causing history, but the real driving force is historical materialism: the dwarf pulling the strings of the puppet. It is the "key distinction between symbolic history... and its obscene Other, the unacknowledgeable... fantasmatic, secret history that actually sustains [history]" (Žižek 128). The puppet that is theology can be "seen" making its rounds and being the cause of everything. It is assigning ultimate relevance to all things and assuring that what is happening has a point that may or may not be known now, but will certainly be known later. It seems perfectly obvious as "the power of this doctrine rests, at first glance, in its self-evidence" (Badiou 9). But the truth is more cunning than the puppet. The puppet provides for history to be thoroughly self-centered, but what is revealed by Christianity, according to Žižek, is the ultimate decentering of humanity in the scope of both ourselves and history. "What is revealed in Christianity is not just the entire content, but, more specifically, that there is nothing – no secret – behind it to be revealed" (Žižek 127). Nothing is weaving the web that is everything, it simply is.

But we deny the idea of historical materialism in our drive for power. For if we take God out of the picture we fear actually to lose

the power that is driving everything. Badiou points out that this is revealed in Psychoanalysis: "I delight in the exteriority of the other in so far as he figures as myself made visible to myself" (21). The exteriority of the other (which is only a mirror of myself) allows humanity to create themselves as the ultimate center of the universe whilst supposing that this center is actually God. The curtain, rather than separating us from the thing that is radically and wholly other, instead serves as a barrier so that we cannot encounter the Thing that is more real than we are. As Žižek points out during in his reading of the Fall of Man, "if we take these statements literally, the unavoidable conclusion is that the moment of the Fall (the forgetting of the ancient wisdom) coincides with its exact opposite – with the longed-for next step in evolution" (85). This is a reading that rather than showing humanity's bifurcation with the divine instead shows it as historical materialism's revealed logical next step. What Žižek's reading of the Fall shows us is that we separated ourselves from the divine (our idea of the center of all meaning) in order so that we could actually center ourselves. What we misinterpreted was actually whether or not this was truly a decentering. What historical materialism reveals is that it was not. What we have done by centering ourselves through the appearance of decentering is create the avenue for a subjective "objective".

As Badiou points out, "there is not, in fact, one single Subject, but as many subjects as there are truths" (28). In our decentering of ourselves in order to center ourselves we have produced a subjective "objective." This is to say that what we have constituted as objective is only objective because we, the possessors of ultimate meaning, deem it so in our now Subjective experience. We decide the meaning of things and therefore decide what an objective experience is ultimately. We do not accept our own inconsistency and therefore

create a supreme other to ultimately take in to provide ourselves with the ultimate authority. Žižek follows Badiou's thought: "Once Kant discovers the inner inconsistency of our experiential reality, he feels compelled to posit the existence of another, inaccessible, true reality of Things-in-themselves, instead of accepting this inconsistency" (70-71). We desire an absolute truth among all things to provide an ultimate meaning to all of existence. Yet, this is precisely what the truth Christianity denies.

In modern religion and belief we see that "the subject avoids its constitutive splitting by positing itself directly as the instrument of the Other's Will" (Badiou 29). However, both Badiou and Žižek reveal a deeper truth about the human situation. Badiou dismantles the idea of an absolute ethic by showing that the idea results from a false objectivity. In similar fashion Žižek shows the idea of God to be a (r)evolutionary function of humanity to assert ideals and meaning that Christianity deconstructs to reveal an utter nothing. The critique Christianity offers is one that is unique to religion. Rather than being a rendering of Tillich's state of being ultimately concerned, it actually subverts such a definition and resituates the definition as part of the problem. To clarify, if what we are ultimately concerned about is the idea of a God who pays the utmost attention to how we behave in the light of His perfect morality what becomes of ultimate concern to us is not God, but rather our own actions before God. This is represented in the Badiou quote above as our actions become of ultimate concern because we are the instrument of the Other's (God's) will.

We see this situation played out in religions that claim an "Omni-" God because the "Omni-" element of God creates an avenue to set up a universal, as I pointed out above. However, as Badiou and Žižek attempt to show, there is no universal, no ultimate

Subject, and no static ethic. Nietzsche also pointed out similar ideas long before postmodernism: "There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival 'knowing'" (On the Genealogy of Morality 85). In *On the Genealogy of Morality* Nietzsche attempts to diagnose the disease that affects humanity as morality. Morality is not something that is inherent to humanity, but is instead the result of a long history of denying our unconscious drives and declaring them also to be something "evil." Nietzsche argued "the pathos of nobility and distance, this lasting and dominant collective and basic feeling of a higher ruling nature in relation to a lower nature... *that* is the origin of the opposition 'good' and 'bad'" (11). The ruling class, the people in control, it was they who declared what was "good" or "bad," but this had *no* normative moral connotation to it, only a descriptive one. What this reveals is an understanding that the past had a different view of morality than the present, that is, no morality due to no moral system. The single individual could not commit a *good* act as he or she could only *act*.

As a response to their own situation the lower class then developed a conscience; as they were unable to control their situation. They needed a *construction* to feel happy. Unlike this lower class, "the 'well-born' simply *felt* themselves to be the 'happy'" (20). There was no *meaning* behind it. However, the lower class found themselves in need of creating a purpose behind their existence. Something was needed to explain their dire situation. It was not worthwhile to admit that "there is no 'being' behind the doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is simply fabricated into the doing – the doing is everything" (25). The root of religion and God, for Nietzsche, is what he famously called "the will to power" (51). This leads me back to my idea that religion is a false decentering. To fully achieve power in the situation the lower class found themselves was

impossible. They could not simply rise up to defeat the upper class or declare them “wrong” to do such things. The brilliance of the religious decentering of humanity is that it creates a further upper class to take the same side as the lowest. To say in a different way, this religious decentering enabled the lower class to place themselves as the *actual* upper class because they created a universal ethical system that God had “given” them. This system immediately revealed that the lower class was made up of the only people who were *actually* good.

In positing the existence of the highest of the high, yet saying that this highest appeals more to the lowest culture rather than the natural assertion (of that time in history) that God would appeal to the highest culture, allows the lower class to make the movement of centering themselves by creating an ultimate being that views them as the ultimate concern. After this, the story becomes that they *deserved* to become the lowest class because they betrayed God by not obeying Him. This allows them to appear to decenter themselves and fully move God to the locus of ultimate concern. But it is a false movement, as this movement actually further *centers* humanity as the actual object of ultimate concern while disavowing this under the rouse that it is God who holds this title. According to the worldview of the confessional, orthodox Christian, originally mankind is united with God in the Garden of Eden. This leaves no need for salvation as salvation is understood as the ability to reunite with God. When the need for salvation appears God is actually the one who is decentered, but this is disavowed in order to mask what Nietzsche points out is the will to power. Instead, humanity is further centered as it understands its place in the world to be one in which it desperately needs *redemption*. Any “bad” act becomes enough of a justification for God to disown a person further by sending them to the place of

eternal separation, Hell. In this situation it is not God that is the ultimate concern; it is instead the actions of the people before God. The result of this has “simplified the psychology of every great event by reducing it to... ‘obedience *or* disobedience to God” (Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* 597). By moving God to the non-center and disavowing this, orthodoxy creates a space in which every action that happens, every thought that occurs, and every word that is uttered is truly what is of ultimate concern because humanity is the center of existence and holds ultimate importance over *everything*.

This describes the ultimate nihilism: “*nothing* is important except what *I* do *right now*.” Yet this hides behind the universal that it was able to create through the idea of God. It first posited the existence of the ultimate Subject in order to create itself as the universal subject. This is the truth behind Nietzsche’s work on religion in his *Genealogy*; “Nietzsche’s maxim forces us to consider that every non-willing (every impotence) is shaped by a will to nothingness, whose other name is: death drive” (Badiou 34). This supposed humility is purely a mask, a curtain behind which lies the utter truth of *nothing*. Not only is there nothing behind the curtain, this nothing is the desire that orthodoxy has for the world. In the same way that Judas betrays Jesus, Orthodoxy betrays the world in which it participates by ignoring the world in place of what it desires to be beyond the world. Nietzsche writes that “when one places life’s center of gravity not in life but in the ‘beyond’ — *in nothingness* — one deprives life of its center of gravity altogether” (*The Antichrist* 618). The radical truth of Christianity, however, is that it does not disavow what orthodoxy covers up. It radically confronts it, as mentioned above. So in attempting to cure the world of the idea of the underlying narcissism that is orthodoxy, what does a rethinking of Christianity have to offer?

The ironic element to this “rethinking” of Christianity is that it does not rethink the religion, but rather admits to where the logic of the Christian story leads. It asks questions that orthodoxy cannot permit, such as how God can both love us absolutely, yet judge us so harshly when the first element of love amongst humanity is its unparalleled ability to overlook faults. As Žižek writes, “love has the structure.. which suspends the ‘normal’ functioning of one’s emotional life” and that when in love “I lose my neutral capacity to reflect and judge” (112-113). It says that humanity is really decentered, just as the universe portrays. In this sense we must confront the idea of a universal ethic that we have previously understood to be created by God. An ethic is something that can be separate from God, meaning that we do not need to abandon the word. But *can* there be an ethic without a universal?

On the creation of an ethic, Badiou writes “whatever convokes someone to the composition of a subject is something extra, something that happens in situations as something that they and the usual way behaving in them cannot account for” (41). So for Badiou, *something* sets up the need for a new way of behaving; a new ethic, if you will. It is the something *extra* that he wants to hinge his idea upon. We see something similar in Žižek:

What makes life ‘worth living’ is the very *excess* of life: the awareness that there is something for which we are ready to risk our life (we may call this excess ‘freedom,’ ‘honor,’ ‘dignity,’ ‘autonomy,’ etc.). Only when we are ready to take this risk are we really alive. So when Hölderlin wrote: “to live is to defend a form,” this form is not simply a *Lebensform*, but the form of the excess-of-life, the way the excess violently inscribes itself into the life-texture. (95)

Žižek calls Badiou's "extra" the "excess" of life. It is the excess of life that provides an avenue for what both call a truth. This truth is not objective, as it would be coming from God, but is instead a purely subjective *event*. This event is the excess or extra of life because it contains humanity, but offers something in which we can participate in while still remaining individuals. The need for the creation of a new ethic is simultaneous with the happening of an event, as "the event was excluded by all the regular laws of the situation" this "compels the subject to *invent* a new way of being and acting in the situation" (Badiou 41-42).

According to Badiou, "It is clear that under the effect of a loving encounter, if I want to be *really* faithful to it, I must completely rework my ordinary way of 'living' my situation" (42). An event requires a response. It was something encountered that was unexpected, but now changes everything, including how one must act post-event. Badiou's language connotes, ironically from the staunch atheist, religious semantics. His idea of an event leads to one in which one *binds* his or her self to being faithful to the change that has occurred in his or her life. This brings to mind the original meaning of religion: to bind. The response Badiou has to an event that is required to develop a new ethic can be understood as a religious response. It is something that forever changes the person who experiences it, causing him or her to "rework [his or her] ordinary way of living" (42). So it can be understood that even in a situation of denying the idea of an ultimate God that asserts what is actually truth, we see that religion still holds a place. Even in holding the philosophical notion that there is no ultimate objective truth, only perspectives of individual truths, religion is not something that is dismissed. It is rather something that potentially moves to the forefront, but is understood in a new way. Just as the irony of

rethinking Christianity required that we approach Christianity by taking it for what its story says, so we approach a rethinking of religion by taking the term for what it truly means.

John Caputo calls religion “the vocabulary of excess we have come up with in the face of carnal, mortal, and bodily life” (Caputo 256). In his book, *The Insistence of God*, Caputo wants to argue for a new understanding of religion and God. God, rather than some hyper-being, becomes the name that houses an event: “God is a name for the event, but the very idea of an event prevents us from saying the event *is* God” (10). The event is the encounter with the excess of life; the thing that makes it worth living. It is this very excess that would be negated by a literal heaven and hell. Says Caputo, “literalized, heaven and hell ruin everything” (241). Life must be more than a worrisome escapade in which we must be so paranoid that every single one of our actions matter that we find a way for each one of them to be the most ultimately concerning thing in the universe. As Caputo continues, “life is demeaned the moment it is made a means, the subject matter of a covenant or contract” (242). Yet we have psychologically demeaned ourselves while denying our own ability. It is as Nietzsche wrote, “with the fear of man we have also forfeited the love of him, the reverence toward him, the hope for him, indeed the will to him. The sight of man now makes us tired – what is nihilism today if it is not *that?*... We are tired of *man*...” (*On the Genealogy of Morality* 24).

Religion now opens itself back up in light of the event. Instead of being understood as the thing that most separates humanity from itself, it can instead be understood as the thing that allows humanity to bind itself *to itself*. The event of accepting the real revelation of Christianity allows us to reassess our situation. As the original idea of religious ascetism allowed a person to affirm “*his* existence and

only his existence," the religion that is post-event cannot allow such narcissism and nihilism (Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* 75). For it was never a "me-and-only-me" existence. Humanity is a single thing made of multiples. Religion now instead produces a situation in which the response that is required is the creation of a new ethic that is dynamic as it moves from perspective to perspective, forcing man and woman to see humanity as it is, and forcing both to constantly be working to create a new ordinary; only to be changed again by the next event as he or she is "punctured, by this truth that 'passes' through that *known* multiple that he is" (Badiou 46).

Moreover, humanity now must begin to look beyond itself if we desire a future. Though through our order-desiring eyes we can see only wonderful order to the world,

The total character of the world... is in all eternity chaos—in the sense not of lack of necessity but of a lack of order, arrangement, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever other names there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphisms... it is neither perfect nor beautiful, nor noble, nor does it wish to become any of these things. (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 168)

What I most hope to point out is that because our view of the world is constructed it can be deconstructed and constructed again into something different. Even something as seemingly sturdy as the word "truth" must at some point be examined to see what we have put there in relation to what is actually there. Humanity has now reached the point where we must recognize our differences not to alienate, but to instead coexist. It is no longer viable to treat the people who are "other" to us as the thing that prevents from attaining our Lacanian *objet petit a*. Instead of declaring that there is

most definitely a certain way of truth, we must now examine the perspectives and perhaps agree on a “best” direction, rather than an “only” direction.

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