

## Part I

# Secular Causality and Its Enjoyment

The book-keepers of compulsive actions are everywhere: they have not let Grillparzer, Lenau or Kleist escape them, and as for Goethe's sorcerer's apprentice, they only disagree as to whether it is masturbation or bed wetting that is being sublimated. If I tell them they can kiss my ass, I must have an anal predilection. . . . Appearances are against me. It would be wasted effort to try and prove that libido isn't involved—they have caught me!

—K. Kraus, "Unbefugte Psychologie"

And so they will not stop asking for the causes of causes until you take refuge in the will of God, i.e., the sanctuary of ignorance.

—Spinoza, *Ethics*

The effects are successful only in the absence of cause.

—Lacan, *The Four Fundamental  
Concepts of Psychoanalysis*

### From the First Cause to Transference

Knowledge, Aristotle argued both in *Physics* and in *Metaphysics*, is knowledge of causes, that is, understanding why something changes (or does not). Aristotelian knowledge is complete when the following four cardinal causes have been identified: (1) the material cause,

the substrate or substance of which an object is made, such as the stones that make up a house; (2) the formal cause, the shape or form of the substance, such as the specific design of the stone house; (3) the final cause, the use, purpose, or end for the sake of which something was made, such as habitation in the case of a house; and (4) the efficient cause, the primary instigator of the process of change, such as the agent who commissioned the construction of the house (see Aristotle 1970, 28–31 and 37–39; bk. II, chapters 3 and 7, 194b16–196a30 and 198a14–198b10).<sup>1</sup>

Scholasticism adopted this Aristotelian model to its own purposes, namely, to prove that the cause for the existence of all things lies in the creating will of God. God is both the first or efficient cause and the final cause, because of, and for the sake of which, all material and formal causes exist. Scholasticism did not challenge the number of causes. In his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas, one of the major revisionists of Aristotle, maintained that all physical beings are subject to four kinds of change or motion (*motus*), fashioned after the model of the Aristotelian four cardinal causes. But, going beyond Aristotle, he also argued that the process in which A moves B, B moves C, and so on, cannot go on to infinity, for such an infinity would not explain anything. There must, therefore, be a different kind of “mover,” a first mover not moved by another, and hence not a member of the chain of movers and not of the same nature as all movable, bodily things. This mover is what Christianity calls God.<sup>2</sup> This theory of God as the primal mover or first cause beyond and above all other causes was more or less the explanatory model dominating not only medieval theophilosophy but also the first attempt to secularize thought and to ground truth on human reason itself: the Cartesian *cogito*.

In 1637, René Descartes' (1596–1650) *Meditations* introduced the notorious *cogito* as the inaugural moment of the philosophical discourse of secular modernity and subjectivity. However, as is amply known, this is marked by a double logical failure. On the one hand, by deducing from the “I think” the “I am,” Descartes commits a logical leap from thought to existence. On the other, as we shall see in more detail below, Descartes fails to ground truth on human reason itself, first because he is eventually forced to invoke God as the guarantor of truth, and, second, because the necessity of God's existence is itself proven through a circular logic. Descartes' *cogito* can therefore be said to be a seminal moment (patriarchal connotations included) in the history of thought only insofar as it *demande*d that reason ground logically its own truths,

rather than accepting them as revelatory—but *not* because it did indeed ground them.

If the Cartesian *cogito* can justly be regarded as a hallmark in the history of thought it is actually because of the simultaneous critique *and* legitimization of its logical inconsistencies or circularity, offered in 1663 by Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677). It is in this sense that Spinoza, as Hegel put it, is “a direct successor to this philosopher [Descartes] . . . and one who carried on the Cartesian principle to its furthest logical consequences” (1974, 257; part III, sec. 2, chap. 1, sec. A. 2).<sup>3</sup> Spinoza revealed the leap from thought to existence in Descartes’ *cogito* by declaring that the “*I think, therefore I am*,” far from being a “syllogism,” is “a single proposition which is equivalent to this, “*I am thinking [ego sum cogitans]*” (1985, 234; *The Principles of Philosophy Demonstrated in the Geometric Manner*, part I, “Prolegomenon,” I/144). In other words, the purported syllogism is a tautology, for whether we say “I think” or “I am,” the “I” that is reconfirmed in either case is not the existential but the thinking “I,” the “I” of the “I am thinking,” and not of the “I am.” Similarly, regarding Descartes’ proof of God’s existence, Spinoza showed, in Karatani’s succinct formulation, that:

The attempt to prove the existence of God by starting from the *cogito* . . . is itself a *para doxa*—nothing more than circular reasoning. It is what Kierkegaard would call a “leap”. . . I doubt because I am imperfect and finite—which itself is the evidence (proof) that a perfect and infinite other (God) exists. (1995, 150)

Although Spinoza’s critique appears to repudiate irredeemably Descartes as a malady within an otherwise healthy body of reason, Spinoza’s own conclusion from Descartes’ ‘error’ was that the entire tradition of knowledge, with its understanding of causality, was itself debilitated. In the itinerary that separates Aristotle from Descartes, knowledge had been set up in such a way that sooner or later it had always to invoke a “first mover” whose existence cannot be derived from the logic of causality from which all other causes derive. The compulsory invocation of a “first mover” was beneficiary to theocracy, whose agenda was precisely the perpetual reconfirmation of God as the first and final cause of everything. But the secular agenda set as its cognitive task to ground truth by means of reason, whereupon the inevitability with which knowledge kept returning to God revealed a structural

flaw inherent in secular reason itself. It is not Descartes who committed a contingent, and hence avoidable error; it is secular reason that committed a structurally necessary error. Spinoza saw in Descartes not an aberration from secular reason, but its symptom—that is, the pathological moment that reveals the structure of the ‘normal’ state of things.

The real break, which Descartes failed to procure, came, therefore, with Spinoza’s revolutionary reconceptualization of causality, which intrepidly legitimized Descartes’ tautological or circular logic as the sole possible cognitive mode of secular thought.

Accepting the Aristotelian position that there is substance (material cause) and properties or predicates of this substance (formal cause), Spinoza argued, against Aristotle and his aftermath, that these properties are not accidental but necessary or essential properties of substance. Substance, therefore, is nothing other than its properties, or, the material and the formal causes are one and the same. For if a property of a substance were contingent, then its cause could only be the action of another substance on the first, which would have this property either as necessary or as accidental, and if the latter were the case, one would have to find a third substance having this property, and so on, until we finally find a substance in which the said property is necessary, and only then could we explain it through its necessary connection with this ultimate substance. This means that a property cannot be explained but as necessary to a substance, or, conversely, that a substance is the cause of its own properties. Hence, as far as the causality of properties (and hence knowledge) is concerned, there are not two or more substances, the one transitively effecting the other, but only one substance, which is immanent to its properties, and with which any given property has a necessary connection. Similarly, Spinoza concludes, both in *The Principles of Philosophy Demonstrated in the Geometric Manner* (1663) and in the *Ethics* (1677), to explain or know a substance is to reveal it as the cause of its properties, that is, as *causa sui* (self-caused). This, in turn, entails that there is only one substance, which is the cause of itself by dint of the mere fact that it is the substance that it is, and, further that there can be only one ultimate cause, and hence only one ultimate explanation.

The ultimate consequence of the concept of *causa sui* is that God is the created world—“Deus, seu Natura . . . una, eademque est [“God, or Nature . . . are one and the same”]”—and not some creator or first cause preceding its effect, the created world (1990, 436; 1985, 544; *Ethics*, part IV, preface). Hence, all causes, material,

formal, and final, are efficient, this being God or Nature. God or Nature is a substance that is its properties, and which exists by existing and for the sole sake of its own existence.<sup>4</sup> By thus obliterating the dualism between God and the effects of divinity—a central distinction constitutive of Judaism and Christianity alike—Spinoza safeguarded for himself the double position of both a heretic Jew and an anathema to the Christian church.

As far as knowledge is concerned, no stone could be left unturned after Spinoza's radical revision of its core concept, causality. For centuries, knowledge had been performing the same movement in which distinct causes and effects follow one another in a linear or transitive chain that is necessarily doomed to an "infinite regress" of causes, unless it invokes a "first cause" of another kind (Spinoza 1985, 321; *Principles of Philosophy Demonstrated in the Geometric Manner*, appendix, part II, chap. 3). Far from explaining anything about the world, knowledge invariably proved that something entirely different than the world (God) necessarily exists. By equating God and nature, cause and effect, Spinoza introduced the pathbreaking idea that "God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things" (Spinoza 1985, 428; *Ethics*, part I, prop. 18). This is a conclusion that means no less than that which is assumed to be the first cause is in truth an "immanent" cause, a cause that is itself the effect of its own effects and does not exist but in its own effects.

In a subversive turnaround, if God is the immanent cause of the thinking I, that is, if God *is* the thinking I, then, suddenly God *is*, just or precisely because "I think." What is more, I also am, but only insofar as I think, and, conversely, I think only insofar as I am. For, as Spinoza writes, there is a "union of Mind and Body," so that "*the object of the idea constituting the human Mind is the Body, or a certain mode of Extension which actually exists, and nothing else*" (1985, 457–58; *Ethics*, part II, prop. 13 and schol.) Although Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* derives existence from thought, at the end of the day it posits each as independent—which is why the soul can continue its immortal existence after the death of the body. By contrast, Spinoza's *ego sum cogitans* precludes the possibility of either without the other, which is why it also repudiates the immortality of the soul. The discrepancy in their conclusions is predicated on a crucial epistemological difference. The Cartesian *cogito* is possible through an invalid, presumably transitive deduction, which can pass for valid only by repressing its logical "leap." The Spinozian *cogitans*, by contrast, derives its possibility from

immanent causality, that is, from a reason that is conscious of the circularity between causes and effects.

Inversely put, Spinoza showed that, paradoxically, secular reason can extricate itself from the circular reasoning of the Cartesian type only by acknowledging its circularity—in this case, the fact that the presumed ground of its truth (God) is arbitrarily posited by itself.

With Spinoza, the distinction between truth and falsity is displaced onto the distinction between (presumably) deductive or transitive and circular or immanent modes of cognition, that is, between a thought that can sustain itself only by remaining blind to the logical leaps that it necessarily commits, and a thought that takes into account its own arbitrariness as a constitutive part of itself. Secular thought is one that accepts that “truth is the standard both of itself and of the false” (Spinoza 1985, 479; *Ethics*, part II, prop. 43, schol.).

Thus, with Spinoza, the seed is sown for a third, radically new explanatory model besides positivistic deduction and religious belief. Given that in this type of knowledge, causes do not exist but in their effects, an object (cause) does not exist but in the knowledge thereof (effect). In other words, this cognitive model acknowledges that an effect and its cause, and, hence, that it itself (cognition) and its own cognitive object, stand in a transferential relation—in the psychoanalytic sense of the word. Just as in the analytic situation, or, for that matter, any situation in which a person “speaks to another in an authentic and full manner,” there is “transference . . . something which . . . changes the nature of the two beings present,” so, too, in secular (immanent or transferential) knowledge, the nature of both knowledge and the object being known changes (Lacan 1988a, 109).

Indeed, psychoanalysis is an attempt to produce a systematic body of knowledge grounded on the Spinozian principle of immanence, rather than transitive, causality. Its central concept itself—the unconscious—is defined as a structure that, as Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar put it, “is immanent in its effects in the Spinozist sense of the term, that the *whole existence of the structure consists of its effects*, in short that the structure . . . is nothing outside its effects” (193).

#### Causes or Reasons?

Just as scientific knowledge and religious belief have been in rather unfriendly, if not inimical, terms with one another, positivist or

experimental and transference knowledge are also antagonistic. While the latter challenges scientific knowledge by arguing that there is (unacknowledged) transference also between positivistic science and the objects under its scrutiny, positivism denies the status of a science to psychoanalysis precisely because of its explicit acknowledgment of transference as its fundamental methodology.<sup>5</sup> Psychoanalysis' own pride is the very reason for its broad infamy.

Eminent among the earlier critics of psychoanalysis figures Freud's compatriot Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), who argued that epistemologically legitimate causality presupposes a "cause," something that "is found by experiment" (1979, 40).<sup>6</sup> While the validation of a "scientific cause" transcends the will or agreement of the experimenting subject, psychoanalysis offers epistemologically illegitimate "reasons," for a "reason entails as an essential part one's agreement with it" (40). Given that "the success of the analysis is supposed to be shown by the person's agreement," and that "there is nothing corresponding to this in physics," psychoanalysis, Wittgenstein concludes, is possible because of "a muddle . . . between a cause and a reason" (39). What is more, far from being restricted to psychoanalysis, this "muddle," as Jacques Bouveresse observes, "is in a way, from Wittgenstein's perspective, the philosophical confusion par excellence" (27).

Marring all philosophy, this "confusion," Wittgenstein argues further, consists in mistaking for "scientific" an "aesthetic investigation," which, unlike science, establishes an analogy between the object to be analyzed and the linguistic field (1979, 39). As an example P. M. S. Hacker mentions the fact that "we can significantly say of architectural features: 'This is rhetorical (or, bombastic).'" Such "an analogy like the linguistic one used in architecture does not generate hypotheses that can be tested in experiments, nor does it produce a theory that can be used to predict events," and neither is it "the result of new information, nor does it lead to new empirical discoveries" (Hacker 486; as cited in Bouveresse 31). And the "psychoanalytic way of finding," for example, "why a person laughs is analogous to [such] an aesthetic investigation" (Wittgenstein 1979, 39).

Nevertheless, both Hacker and Bouveresse admit that a linguistic analogy, its professed cognitive sterility notwithstanding, "yields new forms of comparison, *changing our understanding* of buildings and *affecting the way we look at things*" (Hacker 486; as cited in Bouveresse 32; emphasis mine). If this is the case, isn't then an "aesthetic investigation" a system of knowledge rather

more powerful than a positivist science, since it effects reality on the most decisive level, the level of “understanding” and of “the way we look at things”? Whether the ignition of a bomb will result in its explosion is arguably experimentally testable. But whether a person will decide to ignite the bomb—which is the nub of the matter—is not. For this decision depends precisely on “linguistic” and “aesthetic” factors. While science can merely *predict* events, it is only “linguistics” and “aesthetics” that, with the exception of certain natural events, can *cause* them to happen. If knowledge is *knowledge of the causes of change*, and insofar as the change in question involves human agency, then only a *linguistico-aesthetic investigation* is, properly speaking, *knowledge*.

Hacker’s reference to a “linguistic analogy” could not be more accurate. Knowledge of causes in the human domain operates according to the logic of linguistics. First, because, as Spinoza’s pantheism entails, the whole world, including nature, is for the human subject a linguistic field, that is, a signifying system. Second, because linguistics treats the elements of a signifying system as relating to one another differentially, that is, in the mode of immanent causality. That the human subject “is the effect of the signifier” means precisely that human—psychoanalytic, philosophical, historical, cultural, social, political, etc.—knowledge is epistemologically and methodologically linguistic (Lacan 1981, 207). By “linguistic” is here of course meant not the field canonically defined as “linguistics,” but any transferential knowledge, as defined above.

The critics of psychoanalysis discern in its logic the loop of immanent causality but invariably fail to recognize that it is required for the examination of something that it itself operates according to this causality. What we actually witness in these critiques is a “muddle” between a ‘critique’ and an accurate ‘description’ of a methodology. Bouveresse’s ‘critique,’ for instance, is a perspicacious description of a fundamental insight organizing transferential methodology: “The cure for neurotic behavior is achieved by producing the conditions that make admission possible; and this allows us to identify the impossibility of that admission as having been the cause of the patient’s suffering all along” (33). Indeed this is so, for “repression [cause] and the return of the repressed [effect] are one and the same thing, the front and back of a single process,” in which the “symptom [effect] acts as a language that enables repression [cause] to be expressed” in the first place—in short, “repression . . . is structured” not like a physical but “like a linguistic phenomenon” (Lacan 1993, 60 and 62). Far



from needing to be reminded of its “circular,” immanent logic, as if it were its *faux pas* or unconscious lapsus, psychoanalysis (like properly secular philosophy and any proper analysis of the subject, culture, and society) consciously bases itself on it.

Given this linguistic structure of repression, the repressed (cause) is a signifier, which, as such, is differential, that is, “[il] ne peut être considéré comme ayant une portée univoque [it cannot be considered as having a univocal impact],” for “les éléments signifiants doivent d’abord être définis par leur articulation avec les autres éléments signifiants [signifying elements must first be defined through their articulation with the other signifying elements]”—*all* of them, including, not least, the elements signifying the return of the repressed, that is, the symptom (effect) (Lacan 1994, 289; translation mine).<sup>7</sup> A signifying element cannot be the cause of the symptom unless it becomes such in its relation or articulation with it, or, to put it more strongly, unless the symptom itself deems it to be its cause.

The arbitrariness of the admission of the cause is no different than the one involved in the possibility that a person might laugh under the same conditions that might make another person cry. This phenomenon cannot be explained without taking into account as one of the initial givens that one cause may have different effects. For *what is effected* (i.e., the person who laughs or cries) itself determines the cause (i.e., the conditions conducive to laughter or crying). Unlike transitive causality and positivism, immanent causality and transference knowledge take arbitrariness as one of their initial givens. For the arbitrary effect is *not* an accident additional to the necessity of substance, but is itself necessity. That God is the immanent cause of everything in the world means that laughter, crying, symptoms, and all occurring “modes of the divine nature have also followed from it necessarily, and not contingently. . . . For if they have not been determined by God, then . . . it is impossible, not contingent, that they should determine themselves” (Spinoza 1985, 433–34; *Ethics*, part 1, prop. 29, dem.).

There is also another “muddle” persisting in the positivist critiques of psychoanalysis, specifically, the one between the properly secular (Spinozian or pantheistic) conceptualization of nature qua culture and the Cartesian nature, which must at all costs remain separate from the soul or thought.<sup>8</sup> Such critiques are an expression of what Žižek describes as “the traditional philosophical attitude which compels us to maintain an insurmountable distance between ‘nature’ and the symbolic universe, prohibiting

any 'incestuous' contact between the two domains" (1996, 283). Strictly speaking, this "attitude" is prephilosophical, since philosophy proper begins with the Spinozian moment that takes into account its own logical leaps, or, as Hegel put it, albeit for the wrong reasons, since philosophical "thought . . . begin[s] by placing itself at the standpoint of Spinozism; to be a follower of Spinoza is the essential commencement of philosophy" (1974, 257). This is why Bouveresse is correct in identifying in Wittgenstein's critique of psychoanalysis essentially a critique of all philosophy.

Not only psychoanalysis and philosophy, but *any* field of knowledge whose object is the speaking subject is by its object determined to employ the methodology of transference knowledge and to develop an epistemology in terms of immanent causality—and it does so whether it knows it or not. One may want to call an immanent cause a "reason," if this is merely a matter of nomenclature, but if by that one means that it pertains to the realm designated by Wittgenstein's notorious finale of his *Tractatus*, then one effectively argues that one should remain silent about everything that happens in the world of speaking subjects.<sup>9</sup>

#### Science of Differential Substance

It may appear that the above conclusion assumes that nothing in the domain of the speaking subject is effected by anything other than the signifier, such as economy, or something that would be the object of physics, the positivist science par excellence according to these critics. Far from this, the underlying assumption is that the objects of these fields are at least partly also signifiers (i.e., differential), and that accordingly, if Wittgenstein's advice applies to psychoanalysis and philosophy, science should also remain silent.

As is known, quantum physics does not have much to do with positivism, exhibiting, as Slavoj Žižek argues, even "parallels [with] . . . Lacanian psychoanalysis" (1996, 282). This is due to the "homologies between the quantum universe and the symbolic order," that is, the order of the signifier, given the "purely 'differential' definition of the particle, which directly recalls the classic Saussurean definition of the signifier (a particle is nothing but the bundle of its interactions with other particles)" (282–83). In the fields of both particles and signifiers, as Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) himself would put it, "there are only differences *without positive terms*," with "both the signified and the signifier," or particles and waves, being "purely differential," for "in any semio-

logical system," just as in any system of particles, "whatever distinguishes one sign [or particle] from the others constitutes it" (Saussure, 120–21).<sup>10</sup>

Because the field of particles is a kind of a "semiological system," in quantum physics, unlike in mechanics, as Werner Karl Heisenberg (1901–1976) has argued, there are only programs, no exact predictions (see Heisenberg 1957 and 1963). Quantum indeterminacy refers to what Žižek wittingly calls an "ontological 'cheating,'" insofar as it describes the phenomenon in which "an electron can create," *ex nihilo*, as it were, "a proton and thereby violate the principle of constant energy," under the precondition that "it reabsorbs it quickly enough" so that its "environs" do not have the time to "'take[] note' of the discrepancy" (1996, 279). As John Gribbon puts it in his popular *In Search of Schrodinger's Cat*, this extra energy can be there "before realizing its mistake," but upon "acknowledging its own unreality," it "turn[s] around to go back from where it came," that is, in Žižek's paraphrase, "into the abyss of Nothingness" (Žižek 1996, 279; Gribbon, 201). The said indeterminacy is real only when both conditions are fulfilled: (1) that the "environs," the "modality and direction of our search participate in the creation of the object for which we are searching"—the point that Žižek stresses; and (2) that, insofar as "events . . . go on 'in the twinkling of uncertainty while the universe 'isn't looking,'" it remains indeterminate *whether or not* the electron will create a proton while we are 'not looking' (280–81). For, otherwise, we would speak of exact prediction, since we would know that whenever we are 'not looking' this is what the electron invariably does.

The same is true of the example from the field of the signifier with which Žižek compares the above example of quantum indeterminacy. It is one of Žižek's favorite jokes, the one

about the conscript who tries to evade military service by pretending to be mad: he compulsively checks all the pieces of paper he can lay his hands on, constantly repeating: "That is not it!" The psychiatrist, finally convinced of his insanity, gives him a written warrant releasing him from military service; the conscript casts a look at it and says cheerfully: "That *is* it!" (1996, 281)

"What we have here," Žižek comments, "is a paradigmatic case of the symbolic process which creates its cause, the object that sets

it in motion" (281). In truth, however, far from being "a paradigmatic case" of the performative function of language, through which the latter "creates its cause, the object" that motivates it (the warrant releasing the conscript), this joke, alas, describes a highly exceptional or aberrant case, which is why it can function as a joke in the first place. Its humor derives from precisely its total elimination of the signifier's indeterminacy. In actual life, most objects (not the least release warrants), as many conscripts who have attempted to evade military service by pretending to be mad know very well, are not produced with such unexpectedly unmediated determinism. If we are taken by surprise and laugh it is because the joke treats the relation between signifier and object not with the uncertainty marking real life but with the same confidence with which behaviorism shackles together stimulus and response.

As late as 1945, Bertrand Russell was arguing that Spinoza's metaphysics is "incompatible with modern logic and the scientific method," for "the concept of substance, upon which Spinoza relies, is one which neither science nor philosophy can nowadays accept" (560; as cited in Woods, chap. 5). Such a statement is possible only from a perspective that restricts scientificity within the confines of mechanistic physics and generally empiricism. The truth, however, about both science and Spinoza is rather the opposite. As Alan Woods aptly puts it, "by not restricting himself to the narrow confines of empirical philosophy," Spinoza "was able to transcend the limits of the mechanistic science of the day" (chap. 5).<sup>11</sup> By defining substance as the cause of itself, and by equating substance with God and nature, Spinoza effectively argues that the subject is the cause of itself. This conception of causality has been transcending "the limits of . . . mechanistic science" since the seventeenth century.

The claim of self-causation may at first sight appear to contradict the obvious and undeniable observation that there is a rich variety of external factors effecting the subject. But, just as in quantum physics the existence of a particle presupposes that it 'knows' whether another slit is aware of it, in human life, too, the existence of an external factor presupposes that it 'knows' whether the subject itself is aware of it. To say that the subject is the cause of itself amounts to the assertion that *everything* can be the cause of the subject, under the precondition that the subject 'agrees' that this is its cause. As the increasing proliferation of causes amply testifies, it takes a gaze that sees something as a cause for a cause to exist. There was a time when not even history, society, and

culture were considered to be the causes of the subject—let alone those more recent and still embryonic finds, such as the discourses on sexuality, insanity, race, or biopolitics. *Self-causation is not the opposite of historical determinism but its proper understanding.*

Similarly, self-causation could not lie any farther from either the relativism of 'everything goes' or the idealism of the 'free subject,' assumed to be capable of becoming whatever it wills. As in the quantum universe, in Spinoza's nature qua signifier there is only one substance: a *differential substance*. Subject or object A is one mode in which the differential substance manifests itself *while and because* this same substance manifests itself in all other actual (i.e., also potential) modes (all other subjects or objects) under whose gaze A perceives itself as being seen. To speak of differential substance effectively means to speak of value, rather than a fixed matter that is defined by inherent characteristics such as its mass and quality.<sup>12</sup> And values, whether semantic (signifier) or economic (capital), do not obey the laws of transitive causality, for, as Karl Marx (1818–1883) put it:

[Value] differentiates itself as original value from itself as surplus-value, just as God the Father differentiates himself from himself as God the Son, although both are of the same age and form, in fact one single person; for only by the surplus-value of £10 does the £100 originally advanced become capital, and as soon as this has happened, as soon as the son has been created, and, through the son, the father, their difference vanishes again, and both become one, £110. (1990, 256)

In the realm of value, "causation," as Geoff Waite remarks, "is not . . . a *temporal* relation but rather a *logical* one," in which all "terms" are "*reciprocal*" and "*simultaneous*," and which therefore, is the kingdom of immanent causality and its laws (25). Or, as Kenneth Burke puts it:

Though there is a sense in which a Father precedes a Son, there is also a sense in which the two states are "simultaneous"—for parents can be parents only insofar as they have offspring, and in this sense the offspring "makes" the parent. That is, logically, father and Son are *reciprocal* terms, each of which implies the other. (32)

To put it on the plane of history, the two centuries that separate Spinoza from Marx do not make the former's work the cause of the latter's. Nor is Lacan's work their and Freud's (1856–1939) effect or the cause of the work of those thinkers enumerated in chronological detail in an earlier endnote here. For far from constituting a series of causes and effects, the one diachronically causing the other, all these figures derive their possibility equally from the emergence of value, the differential substance of secular, capitalist modernity. It is this that for the first time in history renders the existence of transferential systems of knowledge possible, just as it renders possible their critique.

The intrinsic characteristic of differential substance is the one identified by Saussure as marking value. In his words, "[A]ll values are apparently governed by the same paradoxical principle." They "are always composed: (1) of a *dissimilar* thing [signified, the concept of an object to which it points as its referent] that can be *exchanged* for the thing of which the value is to be determined"—just as the value of a dollar is composed of itself, a thing that is dissimilar to the amount of gasoline (use-value) for which it can be exchanged and whose value is to be determined through the dollar. And "(2)," they are composed "of *similar* things [the value of other signs] that can be *compared* with the thing of which the value is to be determined"—just as are quarters, dimes, pennies, other amounts of dollars, and all other currencies (exchange-values) with which the one dollar can be compared (Saussure, 115; see Marx 1990, 125–63). In other words, differential substance is something that in itself cannot be positively given to experience but rather manifests itself empirically as two different things: on the one hand, as exchange-value or signifier, and, on the other, as specific commodities, the "object[s] of utility" ("use-value") or objects, as the referents of the signified (Marx 1990, 152). Capital and objects of utility, and signs with their referential objects are the two modes of the empirical manifestation of differential substance on the economic and semantic levels, respectively.

The homology between economic and semantic value as two of the domains of differential substance precludes the classical Marxist assumption that the "base" (economy) determines the "superstructure" (sign, hence, culture), as well as its idealist bourgeois inverse. Both are directly caused or determined to exist in this way by the differential substance whose modes they are. And insofar as substance (God) is the immanent cause of its effects, it itself is the effect of its own modes.

Two important, perhaps counterintuitive conclusions follow here. First, the above argument does not entail an ontologization of capitalism. Capital is *not* substance; *nor* is the secular sign substance. Unlike capital and sign which are empirically given, substance is a differential nonentity, something whose ontological status is negative. It is this differential that determines capital and sign to exist as they do, but it is simultaneously capital and sign that determine their own cause (differential substance) to determine them in this way. The empirical effects its own transcendental preconditions, just as the inverse is true. Immanent causality *de-ontologizes ontology*, insofar as the latter is no longer an immutable entity but a historical effect, albeit not realized within historical reality. With immanent causality, Being in itself, the universal beyond historical relativism, is real, but, as Joan Copjec puts it in the context of Lacan, "the real displaces transcendence," insofar as it is itself the unrealized effect of the historical (2002, 5).<sup>13</sup> Like theocratic feudalism, with its "ternary" sign (Word) and fixed, nondifferential substance, capitalism too, with its "binary" sign and differential substance, is yet another historical episode.

The important thing that the present ontology allows us to understand, however, is that capitalism is *not an autonomous*, purely economic phenomenon that could dissipate while the structures of the sign and of the cause of both sign and capital (differential substance) remain intact. That the virtual is actual means that reality could change only under one of the following two conditions. Either differential substance can manifest empirically in economic and semantic exchange in further modes beyond those so far known as capitalism and secular sign, or differential substance should be replaced by another substance of radically other attributes, which would manifest in other modes, for the modes could be other than what they are only if the substance that determines them were other than what it is.

Second, as a consequence, and since knowledge is knowledge of causes, neither capital nor the sign can be known if examined in isolation, as separate fields, since they are both caused by one and the same substance. The analysis of capitalist economy, therefore, must be included among the sciences whose object is a mode of the differential substance, such as the analysis of all fields that involve the examination of language.<sup>14</sup> For otherwise knowledge ignores a whole array of effects of the cause it examines, as well as a whole array of causes that effect this cause.

Secular Ontology: Differential (Non-)Substance  
and the End of (Anti-)Platonism

This is the moment to spell out the difference between, on the one hand, both Spinoza's and Marx's monism and, on the other, what both "Neo-Spinozists" and their critics mis-conceive as monism. As we shall presently see, Spinozian and Marxian monism constitutes a radical break with all Platonic thought (whether straightforward or its anti-Platonic reaction), whereas "Neo-Spinozism" (including its critique), not unlike bourgeois idealism, continues to be a rendition of Platonism, or, what amounts to the same, a form of anti-Platonism. The latter point becomes clear through Badiou's assessment of Deleuze's work as Platonic/anti-Platonic, that is, as an overturning of Plato that nevertheless sustains the Platonist premises.<sup>15</sup>

Let us begin with a thesis that could be unanimously agreed upon by all four, Plato, Deleuze, Badiou, and the author of the present work, even if not necessarily as meaning the same thing for all four: there is "one Being and only for all forms and all times," or, as in the more aptly modified translation cited in Badiou's book on Deleuze: there is "one Being and only one for all forms and all times" (Deleuze 1990, 180; Badiou 2000, 119). In what can this eternal univocity of Being consist, when, as the present work maintains, Being is a substance that is both transcendent and the effect of historical reality? In that it is precisely *that which each historical state produces as its own transcendent surplus*. Everything else of Being is multiple. This is the thesis of the present work on Being, but not one shared by the other thinkers in question.

According to this thesis, the surplus of theocratic feudalism was Being that was God, insofar as everything that existed was His manifestation, or, in the Platonic idiom, His simulacrum. In secular capitalist modernity, Being, as follows from Spinoza's immanent causality, is the first cause, insofar as it is lacking.<sup>16</sup> Or, what amounts to the same, Being, as follows from Marx's analysis of capital, is surplus, insofar as it is not given to experience. The surplus in question is conceived as surplus-value in economy, and, as surplus-enjoyment on the level of the signifier and the subject. Neither is empirically manifest as such. Surplus-enjoyment is the first cause, which is nothing other than the gaze, "not as such but in so far as it is lacking," and it is always lacking since "the gaze I encounter . . . is not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other" (Lacan 1981, 103 and 84).<sup>17</sup> Similarly, surplus-value is also not given to experience, insofar as, in Marx's words:



Certainly M [money] becomes  $M + \Delta M$ , £100 becomes £110. But, considered qualitatively, £100 is the same as £110, namely money . . . the value of the £110 has the same need for valorization [*Verwertung*] as the value of £100, for they are both limited expressions of exchange-value. . . . At the end of the process, we do not receive on the one hand the original £100, and on the other the surplus-value of £10. What emerges is rather a value of £110, which is in exactly the same form, appropriate for commencing the valorization process, as the original £100. At the end of the movement, money emerges once again as its starting point. (1990, 252–53)

In the realm of experience, we cannot ever have a surplus-value in our hand; what we hold is exchange-value. Surplus-value is a concept, an idea with no empirical referent, which we infer from the purely quantitative difference between the originally advanced and the resulting amounts of exchange-value. Nevertheless, it is the cause both of capital and of all things. For, on the one hand, surplus-value is the cause of “the transformation of money into capital,” and, on the other, although “the circulation of money as capital is an end in itself,” nevertheless “capital cannot . . . arise from circulation, and it is equally impossible to arise apart from circulation,” so, “it must have its origin both in circulation and not in circulation,” in the realms of both capital and of non-capital, that is, use-value or objects of utility, material things (Marx 1990, 245, 253, and 268). Conversely, therefore, if there were no exchange between exchange-values and things, there would be no surplus-value either. Hence, the latter is both the cause and the effect of everything that exists—which is why beyond being a concept, it is also the *one* substance.

In truth, only surplus-value is differential substance in the proper sense of the word, that is, a purely differential (non-)substance, a form rather than a substance in the traditional sense of the word, which applies even to exchange-value, insofar as it is always embodied in some form of material currency. For in any system of value, or, as Saussure put it, “in any semiological system, whatever distinguishes one sign from the others constitutes it. Difference makes . . . value . . . *language is a form not a substance*,” in which “there are only differences *without positive terms*” (120–22). This is the accurate definition of value as a purely differential relation, which is never given to experience as such. For

empirically, we can only deal with either exchange-value or words, both of which have material existence as coins, paper money, letters, sound, etc. Strictly speaking, they are differential substance, whereas *Being is a differential (non-)substance*. Therein lies the difference between modes and attributes.

According to the Spinozian-Marxian-Lacanian line of thought, Being in itself is transcendent to all that is given to experience, both exchange-value or signs and use-value or things, while it is their cause and (unrealized) effect. The attributes of (non-)substance determine the modes of substance to be as they are, just as they are determined by the modes to determine them in this way, since the modes presuppose them. Surplus or Being is the immanent cause of all that exists.

In this ontology, *both exchange-value or signs and use-value or things are simulacra* of the transcendent differential (non-)substance. *Being is neither things or beings nor words or ideas, while both equivocally attest to the historically univocal power of Being*, for they are the two empirical modes through which Being, *as the historical effect of secular capitalist modernity*, points to itself. *This Being, in turn, attests to the transhistorical univocity of Being, as the transcendence effected by the very historical experience it causes.*

This having been said, in his defense of Platonism against Deleuze's professed anti-Platonism, Badiou writes something that, like Deleuze's afore-cited passage on Being, initially may appear to be at least partly akin to the present ontological thesis:

Certainly, it is true that sense [in Plato] is distributed according to the One and that beings are of the order of the simulacra. . . . But it in no way follows from this, as Deleuze assumes is the case with Plato, that the simulacra or beings are necessarily depreciated or considered as non-beings. On the contrary, it is necessary to affirm the rights of simulacra as *so many equivocal cases of univocity* that joyously attest to the univocal power of Being. (2000, 26)

I have no problem concurring with Badiou on this point and granting that the "hierarchy" that "Deleuze suspects Plato of" is not necessarily there, even if Badiou seems to contradict himself when he writes in the same paragraph:

One does far more justice to the real One by thinking the egalitarian coexistence of simulacra in a positive way than by opposing simulacra to the real that they lack, in the way Plato opposes the sensible and the intelligible. (2000, 27)

In any case, and without making clear whether the following passage applies to Plato or Deleuze or both, Badiou goes on to state something that again appears to be in partial agreement with the ontology presented here:

For, in fact, this real [One] lies nowhere else than *in that which founds the nature of the simulacrum as simulacrum*: the purely formal or modal character of the difference that constitutes it, from the viewpoint of the univocal real of Being that supports this difference within itself and distributes to it a single sense. (2000, 27)

I can more easily see Deleuze rather than Plato in this statement, but, in the last analysis, it turns out that, as far as Badiou is concerned, it does not matter whether these are paraphrases of Plato's or Deleuze's ontology, for:

Even in supposing that the glorification of simulacra as a positive dimension of the univocity of Being constitutes an overturning of Platonism, the fact remains that, in the same way as for Plato . . . Deleuze's approach has to confront the thorny question of the names of Being. What, indeed, could be the appropriate name for that which is univocal? Is the nomination of the univocal itself univocal? (2000, 27).

Having turned to this question, Badiou comes to the conclusion that "a single name is never sufficient" to name the univocity of being; instead, "two are required." For "Being needs to be said in a single sense both from the viewpoint of the unity of its power and from the viewpoint of the multiplicity of the divergent simulacra that this power actualizes in itself." Whether otherwise Platonist or anti-Platonist, Deleuze remains within the Platonic tradition precisely because this "problem is constant from Plato . . . to Heidegger" and, beyond, to Badiou's own return to Plato (27).

But, prior to addressing the question Badiou invites us to, let us pause to examine the opposition between the “univocity” or “unity” of Being and the “multiplicity of the divergent simulacra.” That Being in itself is a differential (non-)substance means that it involves both univocity—insofar as it is *one* function or relation: difference—and multiplicity—insofar as difference is a relation between at least *two* elements. The Spinozian–Marxian pantheism, that is, the subjection of the world to the signifier and economic value, indicates that in secular capitalist modernity, as Lacan put it, “the One is based only on (*tenir de*) the essence of the signifier” (1998, 5). As far as the historically specific Being of secular capitalism is concerned, its univocity emerges as an effect of the univocity of the signifier or exchange-value, the realm of metaphor or circulation, where one can give “one object for another,” since all objects are there qualitatively the same: values (Lacan 1981, 103). In other words, the univocity of secular Being is introduced through the imaginary. Its multiplicity, on the other hand, emerges from the necessity of something that is not exchange-value, namely, objects of utility, required for the accrual of surplus-value. Unlike in Plato, neither the univocity nor the multiplicity is Being or its power. These are the two modes in which the attributes of the differential surplus manifest themselves empirically. Being in itself is a differential (non-)substance, which is to say undifferentiated univocity and multiplicity. Univocity and multiplicity as distinct categories emerge only on the empirical level.

Turning now to Badiou’s question, the differential character of Being entails that its nomination requires three names. Secular Being needs to be said in a single sense (1) from the viewpoint of what appears to be true or real: beings and objects of utility, or the multiplicity of Being; (2) from the viewpoint of what appears to be false or imaginary: the sign or exchange-value, that is, the unity of Being; and (3) from the viewpoint of Being’s own power, transcendence or differential (non-)substance itself, which alone is really true and real.<sup>18</sup>

If there is, therefore, a tradition that is neither Platonist nor anti-Platonist, this is the one that runs from Spinoza, through Marx, to Lacan. This line of ontology, even as it responds to the same question that has puzzled philosophy since Plato, does not simply overturn the Platonic hierarchy but collapses it as obsolete, since it reveals that the registers on which Being needs to be named are the following: (1) *being as the imaginary univocity of abstract thought, that is, as simulacrum (exchange-value or signifier)*; (2) *beings as the multiplicity of being (use-value or physical beings)*; and (3) *the*