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Abstract

Descartes conspicuous realisation in the 17th century that reason alone could not validate itself led inexorably to the idea that God must be the form of metaphysical force that could supply the ultimate support that would allow us to know our own thoughts for certain. Similarly, Hume's extraordinary insight in the 18th century that our experiences are not intrinsically connected in terms of how we enjoy them led him to require that something natural (viz. Nature itself) must be posited to hold them together and put us back into the world of common sense.

This paper takes its departure from these self-supporting Cartesian and Humean claims and then tries to show how various other intellectual ideas and developments can be explained using a set of more general circular arguments (both virtuous and the vicious) that are framed in broadly Žizekian terms.

Key Words: Circles of Thought, Subject, Executor, Author, Origin, Support, Reason, Cause

The Shape of Thought: Subject, Executor, Author

I want to start with three categories: Subject, Executor, Author. The categories take from Žizek's little classic called "On Belief". (Žizek 2001) They may be extended as follows:

Subject/Victim/Start¹

Executor/Tool/Means²

Author/Creator/End³

As we shall see, these categories are useful because they can provide a better picture of how various systems of thought have been philosophically

constructed.⁴ But, in addition, they may enlighten us as to how various problems that arise in current culture and in contemporary politics are formed. A table may enable us to understand more of what is happening:

	Subject/Victim /Start	Executor/Tool/Means	Author/Creator/ End⁵
Cartesian Explanation	The Thinking Thing	The Method of Doubt	God/The Divine Law/Knowledge
Humean Explanation	The Non-Owned Self	Psychological Associationism	Nature/The Natural Law
Freudian Explanation	Id (Emotions and Desires)	Ego (Rational Ends)	Superego (Obscene Ethical Injunctions)
Heideggerian Explanation	Being-in-the-world/Dasein (of humans)	Anxiety	The Nothing/Death
Lacanian Explanation	The Patient [The Desiring Subject] (The Stalker)	The Therapist [Object petit a] ⁶ (The Small Lack – the minor thing/part made present to us)	The Symptom/ The Symbolic Order [The big Other] ⁷ (The Unobtainable Prey)
Žizekian Explanation	The Immanence of the Human (as supported by a fantasmic set of sub-conscious assumptions)	The Pure Instrument (Materialist Philosophy)	The Transcendent Aim (“The big Other” here is often substituted falsely by the supplement that I call “the big Audience”) ⁸

Dawkinian Explanation	The Human Being	Genes/Memes	Blind Production/The Biological Law/The Cultural Law
Fukuyamaist Explanation	Mankind	Liberal Democracy	The End of History
Butlerian Explanation	The Self	Performativity	Gender
Aristotelian Ethics	Soul/Character	The Golden Mean	Happiness
Kantian Morality	The Rational Self	Practical Reason/The Will	The Moral Law
Utilitarianism	Sentient Entities	Calculation	Well-being
Pragmatist Explanation	The Person/Situation	Whatever works	The Useful Answer
Christianity	Humanity	Christ	The Heavenly Law
Islam	The Umma	Dawa	God ⁹
Capitalism	The Individual ¹⁰	Hard Work/Bourgeois (Formal) Freedom	Money/Wealth/Progress/The Economic Law
Marxian Politics	The Common People	History/The Political Law	Communism/The Party
Liberal Politics	The Unencumbered Self	Tolerance	Cultural Community
Neo-Liberal Politics	The Self-possessed Individual	Free Markets	Wealth ¹¹
Conservative Politics	Kith and Kin	Inaction/Acceptance/Drift /Prejudice	Tradition/Law/Hierarchy
Fascist Politics	The People	The Dictator	The Total Nation

Jewish Politics (of a certain kind)	The Jewish People	Zionism	Zion ¹²
Distributive Justice	The Choosing Self	The Veil of Ignorance	Fairness
Commutative Justice	The Competitive Person	Transactional Arrangements	Property/Liberty
Representative Justice	The Voter Citizen	Democracy	Freedom
Feminist Justice	Women	Consciousness Raising	A Non- Patriarchal Kingdom of Ends
Sexual Activity	The Pleasured Being	Fantasy as Supplement ¹³	Absolute Enjoyment/The Carnal Law
Artistic Activity	The Artist	Artwork	Art ¹⁴
Aesthetic Judgement	The Beauty ¹⁵	The Minor Imperfection	Beauty ¹⁶
Legal Activity (in England)	The Lawyer	Cases and Precedents	The Law
Economic Activity	The Consumer	Rational Choice	The Free Market
Sporting Activity (e.g. football)	The Player	The Match	The Game
Design Activity	The Designer	Designing/A Design	Design

When considering this table, we can first ask a simple question: How does the Subject/Victim/Start arrive at (or access) the Author/Creator/End that will then serve to support it? The answer is through the Executor/Tool/Means.

However, what we must bear in mind in giving this simple answer is that the Author/Creator/End can act in one of two ways: either as a reason or cause for the Subject/Victim/Start. But either way, the notable thing about the last

element in our table (situated on the right) is that it acts as both support *and* end point in the scheme.

To see how this all works, I want to examine a rationalist and an empiricist version of the classic philosophical circle. I will first take the problem of Descartes' Cartesian circle (viz. that in knowing God we also know that he is the ontological support that will underwrite our epistemic claim to know Him) and then follow this by a discussion of the Humean circle (viz. that which involves the way that skepticism is best met by a naturalistic response). These arguments, as we shall see, gives us a more of an idea of how the relationship between Subject/Victim/Start, the Executor/Tool, and the Author/Creator/End may be operating.¹⁷

Let's first say some something about how Descartes sets things up in the *Meditations*. The classic problem of knowledge that Descartes addresses arises initially from his famous method of doubt. The central challenge is to find a way to place the individual as a thinking thing (*res cogitans*) in a position where self-certainty might follow. The issue is a genuine one, as Descartes shows, through his initial discussion of how illusion arises and puts the reliability of the senses into doubt. But he is not content to leave things there. For then his doubting becomes deeper. Here he advances the idea that dreaming might destabilise our judgements further. At this point, even the simple reasoning used in mathematics is brought into question. Then finally, of course, we have the malicious deamon (or evil genius). This last stage provides the most systematic way we have with which to question the beliefs we take for granted - at least methodologically speaking.

For Descartes, the key to resolving the problem that the method of doubt raises is to collapse the distinction between seeming and being. The argument proceeds like this. If I seem to doubt then I must also at the same time think. This is because doubting is just a form of thinking. But the thing that persuades me that the *cogito* is a well-functioning piece of philosophy is that it is a clear and distinct idea; and clear and distinct ideas are valid because they are ultimately supported by God.¹⁸ Hence the Cartesian circle.

What of Hume then? Hume has several key foci: causation, the self, induction, and the external world. With each of these Hume identifies a general problem to which he provides the same general solution. The general problem is that there we can perceive no intrinsic connection between what appear to be distinct existences. All that we experience is one thing and then another. There is as much the case with causation (with cause and effect being distinct in the way we experience them), as it is with the self (with its disparate and unconnected thoughts), induction (with enumerated instances of the same thing happening having no genuine ties), and the external world (with varying disparate perceptions unable to connect to, say, the object from which we assume they come). His scepticism, though, is then tempered by his naturalism. For, as he intimates, we cannot help but believe that these various things are connected. It is in our nature to do so. What we have, then, is, once again, a perfect (and virtuous) circle where causation, the self, induction, and the external world are philosophically supported – though this time by Nature and not God as is the case with Descartes.

What is curious is just how similar in structure the arguments from Descartes and Hume are. The only significant difference is that in Descartes God is used as a metaphysical support, whilst in Hume that support comes from Nature. But even more than this we also can see, if we glance at the table above, that numerous other philosophical positions are validated in a similar way: some problem that the Subject/Victim/Start introduces is solved via the device of the Executor/Tool/Means which allows us access to the ultimate form of metaphysical support in the form of the Author/Creator/End.¹⁹

As the overall aim in this paper is to expose the structures of belief, desire, and action that operate in various other cultural frameworks and political discourses we need now to investigate and enlarge upon our three key categories: Subject/Victim/Start; Executor/Tool/Means; Author/Creator/End.

Subject/Victim/Start

(Additional Related Concepts: Problem/Things We May Do/Presence/The Given/Accessed/The Enabled/Questioning/The Natural/The Source)²⁰

Comment. The Subject/Victim/Start position can be understood in two ways. Firstly, it can be taken as something like an individual self or person or position. Secondly, it can be taken to involve collections of selves or people or else a series of collective positions. Either way, it is the place from where we (individually or collectively) we think, feel, believe, desire, speak, and act from. It is also how subjects of experience and subjects of being (individually or collectively) produce the value that then sustains our interests in, and mood towards, the world that we confront.

Lacan's view of the partial drives (oral drives, anal drives, scopic drives, invocatory drives) of the individual person or self can help to give us an extended view of the Subject/Victim/Start with which we are concerned. We can enlarge upon what he says by noting four basic positions:

1) The Active Voice/From the Self

(to see/to hear/to taste/to touch/to smell/to balance...)

2) The Reflective Voice/To the Self

(to see oneself /to hear oneself /to taste oneself /to touch oneself /to smell oneself /to balance oneself ...)

3) The Passive Voice/From the Other

(to be seen/to be heard/to be tasted/to be touched/to be smelt/to be balanced...)

4) The Inclusive Voice/To the Self from the Other

(to make oneself seen/to make oneself heard/to make oneself tasted/to make oneself smelt/to make oneself balanced...)

In each of these four instances we can see how the cliché "be yourself" in the singular (or "be yourselves" in the collective) is/are extremely problematic.

This is because the following questions will arise from these four positions:

What is the Subject/Victim/Start really? How is the Subject/Victim/Start to be

enacted/performed? Why is enacting/performing the Subject/Victim/Start required of us? How is Subject/Victim/Start to be made authentic?²¹

Asking each of these questions is difficult because our attention is immediately drawn to various lacks, gaps, lacunae, and forms of emptiness that are very much part of being a Subject/Victim/Start in the first place.²² For example, I may position myself in the world as Subject/Victim/Start in an “Active Voice” so that I can be this *and* this (merger), this *or* this (refusal), *more* than this (mastery), or *less* than this (submission). And the same can happen with the positionings and repositionings of the “reflective voice”, the “passive voice” and the “inclusive voice”. This is an issue, of course, because we often appear to be caught in the middle (or, as we might say, in the circle - whether vicious or virtuous) of these numerous “voices”. And if there is no place from where we can ever begin we may then see why there is a demand for a form of metaphysical support from the outside; a form that can be partially separated from any instrument (Executor/Tool/Means) or final form (Author/Creator/End). This is why we need both the comfort and tension of a circle to protect us from the whims, contingencies, and absurdities of being abandoned somewhere in the middle of things. For as Sartre himself said: “circles, musical themes, keep their pure and rigid lines...a circle is not absurd.” (Sartre in Danto, 1975 [1991]: 14)²³ Part of coping with the Subject/Victim/Start, then, is to find the appropriate Executor/Tool/Means that will drive us towards some Author/Creator/End.

Executor/Tool/Means

(Additional Related Concepts: Instrument/Things We Must Do/Withdrawal/Apparatus/Contrivance/Resource/The Artefactual/The Transition/The Object)

Comment. The Executor/Tool/Means is important in the scheme above because it consists in a symbolic form of action (undertaken through an embodied practice) that can propel the Subject/Victim/Start towards the ideological fantasy encased in the Author/Creator/End. This can be achieved in different ways. It may be through a kind of transference of feeling towards

the Author/Creator/End which is its target.²⁴ Or it may be via the Executor/Tool/Means which is then used to sustain the Subject/Victim/Start via some all-encompassing fantasmic support that the Author/Creator/End provides.

Let's give an example. In the scheme set out, an artwork (Executor/Tool/Means) will provide the artist (Subject/Victim/Start) with the hope of (say) immediate or posthumous recognition (Author/Creator/End). And this is why (at the extreme) artists may sacrifice themselves or others (e.g. dependents) for their art. In this instance, the Author/Creator/End is both the ultimate reason for (and the fantasmic support for) the artist as Subject/Victim/Start as they continue producing art (Executor/Creator/End). Here the Executor/Tool/Means acts as redeemer especially when there is a sudden burst of creativity. For it is this that allows the artist to produce a work that (though imperfect) feels wholly resonant.

What is true of an artist as regards this imperfect resonance, holds in other contexts. For example, the person of Christ (who is perfect as God) must still be seen as imperfect *qua* man, the ideal of representative democracy must be marked by imperfections of pragmatism and compromise, and the grand perfection of the public lecture must be subject to the small moment of imperfection (e.g. a personal aside or an admission of failure) that confirms the authentic and 'real' personality that delivers it from behind the academic mask.²⁵ Thus in each of these cases (see, once again, the table above) the Author/Creator/End is kept in place precisely as an object of perfection by some minor fault, defect, or imperfection that confirm its place in that specific world of discourse.

As space is limited, I want to discuss two further examples that make the same point. I want first to look at what happens when political speakers move away from reading a speech and appear to speak their mind; and how this seeming lapse can act to authenticate the actions of the person concerned. Second, I want to examine how a genuinely spontaneous reaction can be read when a politician during a formalised political event such as an interview.

Both of these examples will give more detail to the relationship between the Executor/Tool/Means and the Author/Creator/End.

For the first example we can look at an aside of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair. (This was the Blair before the Iraq war ruined his reputation.)²⁶ It was a notable skill of Blair to appear to go “off script” during a pre-prepared speech. These were the moments where he managed to reference the ordered and pre-prepared nature of a political speech so as better to make a side comment as part of it, and, as a result, appear to be more off-the-cuff and hence more authentic. In prefacing his speech about the Good Friday Agreement in April 1998 Blair started with: “A day like today isn’t a day for sound-bites, but I feel the hand of history upon our shoulder with respect to this, I really do.” What we are supposed to find in this speech is more Tony Blair the man and not Tony Blair the Prime Minister. And this is constructed in such a way that the man is almost able to speak over the politician, whilst acknowledging that the politician is still there. It is thus that a normalised form of cynicism towards politics is (nearly) redeemed. The political ideal of a peaceful Ireland/Northern Island (construed as the Author/Creator/End) is thus closer to being enabled by a form of the Executor/Tool/Means that appears as merely a symbolic supplement to it: the little comment is one that embodies and sustains the ideal of a Prime Minister (as Subject/Victim/Start) by indicating that Tony Blair the politician is in the end, just like us, an ordinary person.

The same sort of politically redemptive event can be seen in one well-known non-scripted moment of Obama’s presidency. It involves a serious CNNBC interview in the White House. During this interview a fly starts to buzz around the room. And it is increasingly clear that it is starting to distract and bother Obama. So he takes it upon himself to swat it. But he then quickly moves to a meta level by expressing his own surprise at his prowess, saying: “That was pretty impressive, wasn’t it? I got the sucker.” Here Obama goes from being President to being an ordinary man with almost extraordinary powers – yet this is done with the sort of self-deprecating nonchalance that only a

superhero might have. Problems, this action seems to say, can, like the fly, be swatted aside.

In both the Blair and Obama cases their personalities are sustained by some form of fantasmic support. With Blair, it is about playing the ordinary man. With Obama, it is about playing the superhero. Though, as we have noticed, this is only possible because they are able to draw attention to the fact that they are not these things; that they have shortcomings or defects. And so, in their different ways, they each come to rely on a glitch-like feature which highlights an inadequacy or imperfection that, at the same time, is also such as to complete the person by acting as a spectral supplement to it.

As Žižek says, then, “Executors” are like “obscure gods”. (Žižek 2001: 138-142) And they are Gods that need constant explaining because whilst they may promise success in accessing some Author/Creator/End (e.g. God is accessed through Christ, Wealth is accessed via the free market, the “Cultural Community” is accessed via tolerance) they also draw attention to how we might fail or fall short given that what we seek is also apt to be just out of reach.²⁷

Author/Creator/End

(Additional Related Concepts: Ultimacy/Aim/Things We Mustn't Do/Absence/Uniqueness/Law/Failure/The Supernatural/Finality/Audience/Reflector/Mirror/Destiny)

Comment. Human subjects, as has been argued so far, are to be seen in captivational terms. This is the case even though we know the Subject/Victim/Start will in fact never be wholly captured by, or else subordinated to, some given Author/Creator/End or the Executor/Tool/Means that purports to secure it. That is why, whatever we do, we often come to feel that our aims (whether ideational or material) are always (somehow) “still not quite realised” or “never quite achievable”. For the Author/Creator/End is really, practically (in terms of how it is internalised in ourselves) and conceptually (in terms of how it appears as an end) connected with that which

is most pure and the perfect: it is the model that we look to and that we think and feel can most affect us. It is that which we know that must seek, idealise, and even love. But for this to be possible the Author/Creator/End must also remain unrealised and unrealisable. Nor must it ever come into full view. Indeed, the condition of its existence is that we must fall short, and be shown to do so. At the same time, though, the Author/Creator/End must also be presented to us as something that feels as though it may not do so.

In this way, then, the Author/Creator/End is an all-encompassing expression of absolute motivation and total longing; and all the more so because it appears to be a motivating force that can fail. Put more prosaically, the Author/Creator/End gets us out of bed, providing, as it does, fantasmic support in the first instance, and external-seeming energy and ultimate potentiality in the second. The Author/Creator/End is in this way always acting beyond the control of the Subject/Victim/Start. Either it is pre-supposed and inaccessible in the way that it drives personal action or else is formed as a constantly receding ideal that always appears to be just over the horizon.

What is perhaps most vital in all of this is not so much the perceived distance between the Subject/Victim/Start and The Author/Creator/End, but the nature of the relationship between the two that is being produced. For the Author/Creator/End is, curiously, the very thing that prevents the Subject/Victim/Start from being fully realisable. And in this way, the Author/Creator/End has rather monstrous qualities even whilst seeming to be either benign, or else, perhaps on occasion, a sublime and ethereal entity.

A final example will serve to illustrate the point. Let's take the dedicated capitalist – to use one of Žižek's favorite examples. The dedicated capitalist is always framed by capitalism itself, which acts as an almost ethical or religious category that produces certain abiding moods, atmospheres, and injunctions – some of which may be fatal. And given its ethical-like and quasi-religious underpinnings the dedicated capitalist, construed as Subject/Victim/Start, will actually be willing to sacrifice everything (including home, relationships, health, happiness, and so on) in order to achieve the goal of making more

money or wealth circulate and accumulate. This is because the Author/Creator/End, which is Capital itself, is unattainable in being an ever-extended state of affairs. And so, while accumulation is acting as the means (or what we are calling the “Executor/Tool/Means”) to drive the dedicated capitalist endlessly towards the abstract form of Capital, there is never the realisation that this is a monster that can never be slain or overcome.²⁸

All this explains the greatest problem for the dedicated capitalist which, of course, is that the Author/Creator/End (as Capital) is always withdrawing, and doing so at a rate, and in such a way, that it may evaporate at any minute. In the case of the ardent capitalist, then, the need for more money is really there to prove that the need for money itself will not disappear. That is why each financial transaction must further the circulation of Capital. But this also serves as a form of further proof that the vitality and importance of Capital will always present. For were money (and credit) to vanish capitalists know full well that they would lose both their fantasmic drive for life and their chosen end all in one. It is thus that we can think of the Author/Creator/End as a doubled form of support. It is something like a pure drive that is placed beyond the beliefs, desires, and actions of the Subject/Victim/Start, but it is also a rarified end that gives an ultimate direction. (This may explain why capitalists, as they age, see to build monuments to the fading vista of Capital itself in the form of bequests or legacies.)²⁹

What I have set out so far is a view of the Author/Creator/End (e.g. God, Nature, Nation, Capital, Money, Wealth, Democracy, Liberty, Equality, Gender, The Party, and so on) as the thing that holds the ideological field together though what Žižek describes as a “quilting effect”.³⁰ (Žižek 2008b: 78) This effect is important because it consolidates and purifies itself into something like a Master signifier that has its own strength and unity to act either fantasmically through us or else as a final and ever receding objective. However, at the same time, the Author/Creator/End is also something of an empty container too. Otherwise put, one way to understand the Author/Creator/End is as something that acts to fill the void at the heart of

Being. This means also seeing the Author/Creator/End as the ultimate point of reference that guarantees meaning and value.

The Author/Creator/End is vital to social and political understanding because it highlights the consolidation of a certain sort of metaphysical failure (perhaps even glorious failure). For it is indicative of not just that which will always elude us, but also that which *must* always elude us – either personally, socially, or politically. The Author/Creator/End acts as a permanent limit and ever withdrawing point. In this way, it is like the shot of the empty road that we find in the final scene of so many American movies. We see a figure walking or driving along a road that converges perspectively. As viewers, we are positioned looking down on this tableau, slightly above the action itself, as if, in one sense, we are also looking down on ourselves. This, philosophically, is of course meant to be the positioning of hope alongside the aspiration of freedom. But it is also an image that represents the idea that we can travel forever without let or hindrance. However, we then notice that the road is also positioned for the viewer in such a way that there is no possibility that one might “err” and stray from the path chosen for us - beside the road is desert, scrub, and nothingness - we may realise that the receding horizon and the surrounding wasteland is also indicative of the idea that we can never escape nor ever arrive. The solution of this last shot, then, encompasses the ultimate problems that we face as human beings.

Conclusion

At the start of this piece we noted how, for Descartes, the initial thought datum of the cogito was validated because it was also a clear and distinct idea supported by God - God being the ultimate locus of metaphysical sustainment. We also saw how Hume sought to justify the links between the discrete seeming data of the senses by employing the compulsions of nature. For Hume, nature rather than God was the ultimate metaphysical court of appeal.

Both of these philosophies, as we noticed, were circular. And this was the kind of circularity to be found in other theories. Specifically, it was argued that virtuous circles were seen to be useful because they offered us various forms of practical and theoretical comfort. In contrast, it was maintained that vicious circles were more worrying because they can lead to certain kinds of philosophical and political imbalance that may be viewed as destructive.

If one were to think of Žižek’s philosophy as being formed into a virtuous circle it might emerge through the following schema that we noted as the start. It was this:

Subject/Victim/Start	Executor/Tool/Means	Author/Creator/End
The Immanence of the Human	The Pure Instrument (Materialist Philosophy)	The Transcendent Aim

To think of this in political terms we would need to show how an ungovernable plurality (Subject/Victim/Start) requires an interpretive field (Executor/Tool/Instrument) that will act to realise a transcendent political aim (Author/Creator/End). Of course, saying what more precisely this might consist in is problematic as Žižek has no practical political program. But perhaps we can imagine the evolution of a Žižekian political form that ends up with the idea of the State as a large-scale, but invisible, structure that provides maintenance as well as a material ground that works against the various forms of “ungovernable plurality” that stalk us with the false choices that we face under the mode of production and consumption that we call “capitalism”. The idea here, then, is roughly that because the State can take two forms that are, as it were, Heideggerian (i.e. ready-to-hand and present-to-hand) that for politics to form a virtuous circle we need to discover what we require to be present (and absent) in order for politics to function. And this means that we need to set the conditions for a functioning antagonism where healthy political passions are sustained.³¹ For if politics is really another word for conflict. Though, as paradoxical as it sounds, it must, as I have insisted, be managed.

On the vicious side, in contrast, we can see how an unholy alliance between the Subject/Victim/Start and the Author/Creator/End, when ranged against the Executor/Tool/Means, can lead to things going very badly wrong.³² We can see this, for example, in the way that various figures (from Hitler and Mussolini to Trump, Erdoğan, and Orbán) seek to fuse the superego (in the form of the hectoring male moral voice) with the id (which consists in a maelstrom of obscene drives) so as to create a political movement (and series of moments) that can act to bypass the ego (i.e. rational agency) that usually (in its benign form) takes the form of social democracy, bureaucratic liberalism, and what we might call “ethical capitalism”.³³ In this picture, any version of consensus politics, which is often thought to be instrumental to economic well-being, becomes the thin philosophical filling in the sandwich.³⁴ For in being set between two thick and tasteless wedge-like pieces of ideological bread that that compose the current currency of menace, we know that this filling will soon be squeezed to nothing – or else it will be such as to barely register. (Žizek 2008: 55) And this means that these monstrous figures can, though this metaphysical convergence, act to keep the universe of culture and politics alive by being both the cause of, and solution to, our problems. (Žizek 2008: 90)

In the end, we can ask why it is that we need a seemingly timeless and tireless Other as our Author/Creator/End in so many fields of human endeavor. And we can wonder why it often takes on such strange and magical forms. The deepest reasons we have for this adherence, of course, are hard to discern, but they may arise from the fact that this is both the most, and the least, frictional philosophy that we can imagine.³⁵ Yet, as Žizek indicates, there is still something unbearable in all of this. And our duty to face it compounds the problem. As he says: “The unbearable is not the difference. The unbearable is the fact that in a sense there is no difference.” (Žizek 2005: 2) For in the circles that we are fated to create, whether virtuous or vicious, there is always the advantage - and the disadvantage - of being offered a cause (or reason) and a solution all in one.³⁶ And this, one has to admit, is a genuine philosophical curiosity. Though oddly enough, the way that it works is best expressed in the cartoon *The Simpsons*, when its protagonist Homer

Simpson says: "Here's to alcohol: the cause of, and solution to, all of life's problems."³⁷

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¹ A collective sense of belonging for the Subject/Victim/Start can be sustained and culturally engendered in various ways, some of which are worrying. For example, EST training from the 1970s was used to smash individual confidence in order to rebuild it and thus create a more solid sense of self. Similarly, members of the Japanese Mafia will cut off part of the little finger (yubitsume) to create a stronger sense of belonging. In both these instances the mind and the body are damaged in order to provide a more robust kind of self-reforming metaphysics for the individuals concerned.

² One is tempted to describe this category as a “supporting void”. The supporting void is the thing that produces a kind of existential (rather than merely situational) anxiety that then throws things out of joint. It is apt to feel like a “creation-expansion-externalisation”. (Žižek, 2007: 24)

³ This tripartite distinction comes from Žižek. I have chosen to use it in a way that may not be to his liking though. As I have indicated, some of my own conceptual supplements have been added for the purposes of clarification. See: Žižek, S. (2001) *On Belief*, London and New York: Routledge.

⁴ My aim here is not to present an exhaustive analysis of the authors and ideas named. Instead, the goal is really to show how various philosophical views may be fitted out, without too much intellectual force and compromise, into a tripartite schema. Here I take Subject/Victim/Start and Author/Creator/End to be conceptually distinct. I also maintain that the latter

(Author/Creator/End) can provide (though the retroactive means of the Executor/Tool/Means) a form of rational, emotional, fantasmic, and theoretical support for the former (Subject/Victim/Start), whilst the former (Subject/Victim/Start) can give rise (through an interpretation gained via the Executor/Tool/Means) to our endorsing the values we think are expressed in the latter (Author/Creator/End).

⁵ The things we find in the Author/Creator/End column are often surprisingly insubstantial, indeed fragile, when subject to a philosophical challenge. To borrow an idea from Žižek, they form part of a fragile absolute that at any moment may be subject to fracture or destruction. Whether we are speaking of God, Justice, Truth, Beauty, Love, or Gender we know that what we have individuated is something that may quickly fall apart. Thus what we find when we contemplate the Author/Creator/End is a painful idea (in the form of an absence) that we may never be realised or made present. And this is one of the reasons why we need to quilt the productive concepts that fall into the Author/Creator/End category (i.e. to sure-up any evident or overt instability). For if we fail to consolidate, substantiate, and ground these ideas then life itself may crack, splinter, or be cast asunder. (This is also one of the reasons, incidentally, that we have for requiring a strong form of fantasmic support to go with them.)

⁶ This is a traumatic point, or foreign body, that cannot be incorporated into the symbolic order. This is also an object that is excessive because it (say) lacks a place in the structure of the symbolic order with which we are concerned. Christ, for example, does not fit into the world of humanity or the world of the Heavenly Law as he is both man *and* God at the same time. In this sense, one might say that he has a simultaneous function: as a man he is a surplus and as a God he is a lack. But this only serves to show how our love for him (if we have such) arises because He is both ultimately fragile and ultimately robust.

⁷ In *The Metastasis of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* Žižek says that “one should bear in mind that *object petit a* emerges to solve

deadlock of how the subject is to find support in the big Other (the symbolic order)." (Žizek 2005: 178)

⁸ In Žizek's work what I am calling "the big Audience" relates to the mass gathering of people to protest at various forms of dictatorship and injustice. An example would be the huge crowds of anti-Mubarak protestors in Tahrir square in 2011. The romanticizing of these ecstatic moments, however, will be apt to misdirect our feelings, and we may, as a result, lose much of our political energy for genuine change - or so Žizek seems to want to argue. For, as Žizek himself will always ask: What happens the day after? And he asks this here because there is always a sense that we will, if we are not careful, always quickly move back towards something settled, something that feels like normality.

Notice in this instance that Žizek often asks this question in relation to the idea that there might be a movie called "V for Vendetta, Part 2" - which would obviously be the follow-up to the original. For him, the impossibility of this sequel seems to follow from the fact that the first movie ends with an ecstatic political moment where a crowd gathers outside parliament in masks to demand change. However, one can almost imagine that a sequel would, in a more banal and comic sense, have to be called: "V for Vendetta, Part 2: The First Hundred Days". That said, in place of this rather social democratic sounding "first 100 days" the hope presumably (or so we might initially assume) is that we will realise that that Žižekian "communism" is, after all, the most authentic, genuine, and inevitable destination. (Notice here that there are some doubts about whether anything is politically inevitable. As he says: "there is no such thing as the Communist big Other, there's no historical necessity or teleology directing and guiding our actions." In Slovene: "Ni komunističnega velikega Drugega, nobene zgodovinske nujnosti ali teleologije, ki bi usmerjala in vodila naša dejanja". (Žižek 2013: unpaginated)
Source:

<https://www.webcitation.org/6FZv9WUfX?url=http://www.delo.si/zgodbe/sobotnapriloga/slavo-j-zizek-bog-daj-da-bi-ciniki-na-oblasti-res-vedeli-kaj-pocenejo.html> Accessed: 13th September 2019

⁹ One might argue that a central argument of Meillassoux's in *After Finitude* serves to show how there is a dialectical relationship between the contingent Subject (humans and the universe that they inhabit) and the necessary Author (God) that is arrived at via the Executor of an "If..." that comes to act as an ideal point in the way that God is produced. The "if..." here is, of course, the kind of unique contingency (as a great moment and event) that can turn itself into a necessity and thereby retroactively validate the contingent Subject that contemplates it.

In relation to God as the big Other Žižek sets out how we "encounter the two opposite aspects of the big Other: the big Other as the subject "supposed to know" and the Master who sees everything and secretly pulls the strings; and the big Other as the agent of pure appearance, the agent supposed *not* to know, the agent for whom appearances are maintained." (Žižek 2013: 95)

¹⁰ For Žižek, the ideology of the individual under capitalism is so dominant that the cultural sphere is often employed to reduce what really matters into something altogether more parochial and, evidently, more politically harmless. For example, social justice is reduced to personal tolerance (e.g. of other faiths, races, creeds, genders, classes, and ages of people), the economic is reduced to personal choice (for private health care plans and flexible forms of employment), and political engagement is reduced to personal responsibility (to vote in elections, to recycle the waste you produce, to make friends with your boss at work, etc.) Personal change, which is what we find in the preponderance of self-help books and courses, thus replaces political change as the ultimate social goal. This is why we are encouraged to "invest" in ourselves as if what must really matter to us, and what must be the ultimate goal in human life, is to bring about what we might call "a fully entrepreneured individual". This is not dissimilar what used to be called "the self-made man". Though in this instance one is also reminded of a certain kind of self-made woman best exemplified in the persona of Ayn Rand. (On the negative side, we should also be aware that individualism is an ideology that accepts a kind

of passive subjectivity that involves such things as whining, complaining, and constant and often insincere forms of apology.)

¹¹ Even wealth in this scheme acts as a transcendent Other. However, it is also acts as a background for the fantasmic support of the subject too.

¹² We can see how a perverted form of this construction can arise when we have Orthodox Jews as the Subject, God as the Executor, and the land of Israel as the Author. When God becomes means only (which is the central way to pervert any religion), all is lost. In this particular case, one might say that God is then the ultimate donor. (Žižek 2018: 123) He is also, in a curious way, the immovable object Grand A: an overwhelming Idea disguised as a pure and ultimate instrument.

¹³ Today this may be enhanced by technical objects of sexual enhancement (e.g. vibrators, rings, whips, erotic underwear, dolls, etc.), images (e.g. pornography on websites), books (e.g. manuals), etc.

¹⁴ 'The Origin of a Work of Art' in Heidegger, M. (1978) *Basic Writings*, London: Routledge

¹⁵ The classic female stereotype is, of course, Monroe.

¹⁶ Object petit a is really a perversion of the object that tells you what it is. Put another way, we are concerned with something absolutely contingent which signifies, and is indicative of, the fact that there is a lack in the offing. This glitch-like object is both a feature that highlights an inadequacy in the real object of interest, but, at the same time, is also such as to complete the central object of concern by acting as a spectral supplement to it. Sometimes, as Žižek often points out, we need this lack or minor imperfection to reveal and support the thing that is of real interest to us.

His own favorite example involves a comparison between the beauty of Cindy Crawford and Claudia Schiffer. The former is interesting to Žižek because she

has a very minor imperfection in the form of a beauty spot which exposes what is at stake in our judgement that she is beautiful. And this makes her more beautiful than Schiffer, who is more obviously perfect. In other words, we find that this minor imperfection is needed for the judgement of beauty to be genuinely functional for us.

In the scheme I am using, we have this:

Subject/Victim/Start	Executor/Tool/Means	Author/Creator/End
The Beauty (e.g. Cindy Crawford)	The Beauty Spot	Beauty

In this case, of course, beauty is articulated and eternalised via a contingent human instance (e.g. the beauty in the person of Crawford) which is then strangely enhanced and completed by something that acts as a wound (i.e. the beauty spot) that at the same time serves to highlight, remind, and reassure us of what real beauty is. On this account, the frame of beauty is itself then enframed by a small imperfection that is also part of its content. And it is this structure or form that our idea of beauty needs for it to be fully operational.

¹⁷ We should remember that the Cartesian circle may be considered as vicious or virtuous. But we should also recall that, either way, the solution is always already such as to underwrite the problem before we have even begun. This, of course, is the realisation that Wittgenstein came to when he described philosophy as the ladder up which we might climb, but also which we must then throw away.

¹⁸ It is notable that even the Christian God needs some form of ethical supplement. He cannot simply exist. This supplement often comes either in the positive form of love (i.e. the love for human beings in terms of the ethical effort they make to change themselves and the world in which they live) or in the negative form of grace (i.e. the grace to forgive oneself or others for their sins and for their Fall).

¹⁹ The process of constructing these arguments can be likened to what goes on when we touch up a photograph, and thereby modify and improve something we realise is imperfect. (Nozick 1974) This, as we know from photography, can be problematic because it may give us what can seem like too perfect picture.

²⁰ For the individual Subject/Victim/Start, endless progress consists in such things as self-enlightenment (e.g. Westernised forms of Buddhism), but also in a society of “permanently self-enhancing productivity” and in self-enhancing consumption (often of oneself or another). (Žizek 2001: 18)

²¹ Perhaps we ask of the subject (or of subjects) that it/they be authentic because this is something that, for example, God cannot be. God is, as it were, in a position beyond authenticity/inauthenticity.

²² For some other interesting insights and sundry themes see Danto, A. (1975) [1991] (2nd. Ed) *Sartre*, London: Fontana

²³ A rather local and barely disguised form of this can be found in such things as the “born again” Christian, the miraculous political conversion, or the person who seems to start their personality from the scratch with the help of psychiatry or self-help books. In these instances, it is as if we wish to be included in some kind of circle of perfection. Žižek, himself, also draws our attention to a kind of circular existence in an obscene form, namely in the context of cartoons where no matter what kind of devastating harm occurs to a character (e.g. in a case where the individual is blown to pieces) it can be still be subject to reassembly so that it can then start acting again. All of this can be viewed as a kind of strange metaphysical re-entry into the circle of life.

²⁴ There is often a supplement that helps to sustain (or undermine) the status of the Author/Creator/End. The “quirk” is an example of such a supplement. This is because a quirk in a person can be endearing or charming, in which case it tends towards virtuous; or else grating and annoying, in which case it

tends towards the vicious. A quirk is curious as it is not the sort of thing that one may notice at first. Indeed, it is often something to which one's attention may suddenly be drawn - impersonators are very good at doing this. Learning to like a quirk can, strangely enough, take some time. The physical and verbal quirks of Žižek himself are a little like this. Disliking a quirk, however, can often be instant.

²⁵ A similar moment may occur in comedy where the comedian makes a spontaneous reaction to a heckle (that may or may not have already been prepared). Here the interruption is precisely the imperfection in the smooth running of the show that serves to confirm the talent of the performer.

²⁶ At this point in the argument I am really giving my own variations on an example of Žižek's. His aim is to show that jokes about such things as racist stereotypes, at least if handled properly, can produce a form of obscene contact with the Other that may then establish genuine proximity and connection. These are the tiny humorous exchanges that act as forms of displacement that can reveal how the mask of power is being worn. To give one example, the difficulty for Žižek in terms of the way that political correctness often operates is that it removes the notion of responsibility for others through a kind of false empathy – say, for the culture that one has encountered through them. This may be expressed in an over-emphasis on a love for of food or clothing from another society. One might think of this in some ways as a kind of intellectualised form of cultural appropriation.

²⁷ The “Executor” is also concerned in some sense with “withdrawal”. Take the therapist. The therapist withdraws from the patient by becoming a meta-system. And so the patient is forced to cope with this distance via transference, which acts to draw the therapist closer, at least emotionally speaking. The therapist thus becomes needed but somehow obscene because what they withdraw from most is the judgement that the patient thinks that they need. And this is why the patient continues throughout the therapeutic process to try to make them into a judging, perhaps parental,

figure. This process, in the end, may help the patient cope with their life. It may also help them to cope with both being judged - whether by oneself or others - but also (and this may be harder) with being unjudged.

²⁸ For more on this see the basic plot 'Overcoming the Monster' in the book *The Seven Basic Plots* by Christopher Brooker.

²⁹ This fury might be linked to the realisation that no matter how much money you have immortality will always elude you. Life is not for sale. Though, as indicated, this fury may be displaced or ameliorated by a kind of cathartic giving which, in America, means creating a foundation to one's memory.

³⁰ I take this quilting to be such that it can hold together various diverse metaphysical, epistemic, conceptual, semantic, logical, political, social, cultural, legal, and ethical features. One can understand how this same point can be personalised by thinking of how we imagine the "one" person we are meant to spend our life with as a transcendent aim that quilts together a kind of singularity in terms of a series of desirable personal attributes.

³¹ Žizek often mentions how at one time it was just assumed that rape and torture were impermissible. These things used to form part of a vital background to our discussions precisely because they were not discussed. Anyone attempting to do so would immediately be seen as an idiot. It is indicative of the corruption of our times that these subjects are now discussed.

³² We can also think of how Subject and Author are compacted in the medical condition called Munchausen's by proxy. Here the person who is the cause of the illness is also (miraculously) the heroic savior from it.

³³ The terrorist group ISIS has evolved the most extreme form of this conjunction.

³⁴ The danger of these views lies in the fact that politics is viewed as a tool to provide for economic prosperity only.

³⁵ There is a general academic tendency, particularly in the sciences, to want to replace the “Why?” of reasons with the “Why?” of causes. It is part of the job of philosophy to restore the space of reasons.

³⁶ As Žižek says: “the Cause is simultaneously the retroactive product of its own effects.” (Žižek 2005: 31) My more general point is also that the Author/Creator/End persists, in some sense, in the sub-conscious of the Subject/Victim/Start.

³⁷ A more Žizekian ending might be this: ““Here's to capitalism: the cause of, and solution to, all of life's problems.” In fact, Žizek himself is actually rather close to this ending in another context when he says: “Is not the solution to the problem of God that he is, in a sense, both part of the world and its cause?” (Žižek 2005: 154) He also gives the example of how George Soros is both the cause of and solution to capitalism in the sense that he is someone who is willing to accept the downside of capital speculation because this allows him to make donations to good causes.