

THE LIBERAL-COMMUNITARIAN DEBATE – A LACANIAN ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT: Communitarians and liberals have long held vigorous discussions about the status of the self. The former argue that we do not actively choose our ends, but that they come to the fore through self-discovery. This implies that the self is encumbered and that the liberal self—one capable of choosing his ends—is unrealistic. In this article, we consider these two paradigms and especially Will Kymlicka's position within this debate. Kymlicka defends a liberal theory without relying on an unencumbered self, and may therefore have rescued liberalism from communitarian attacks. In the first parts of our article, we argue that Kymlicka's theory can only be sustained if it involves an unencumbered self that is prior to its ends. In order to support our argument, we introduce a distinction between the metaphysical depiction of the self as an unencumbered chooser and the psychological depiction of the self, which draws upon people's understanding of themselves as being constitutively bound to certain ends. In the second parts of our article, we invoke Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theory in order to assert that neither communitarians nor liberals are entirely able to explain what is at stake when individuals describe being bound to 'extimate ends'—ends they feel they did not choose, yet cannot relinquish. People, as we will illustrate, are free to the extent that they accept being desiring subjects oriented towards the enjoyment that comes along with *das Ding*. Although both philosophical paradigms cannot fully account for the Real 'extimate character' of the self, in the policies they respectively defend, liberalism is the one that should be preferred. After all, it seems better to live a life where one is allowed to choose what is worth doing, achieving or being, even if the choices have to be made within a certain communitarian framework which is itself unchosen. As Lacan emphasized, the subject is deeply rooted in solid Symbolic ground, however at the same time remains capable to transgress and emancipate.

KEYWORDS: Communitarianism, *das Ding*, (Un)encumbered self, desire, Extimacy, Jacques Lacan, Liberalism, Psychoanalysis, Will Kymlicka

INTRODUCTION

Like all disciplines, political philosophy is characterized by a number of long-standing and venerable discussions. The protagonists of one of these debates are

communitarians and liberals.¹ This debate deals first and foremost with the criteria that can formally be established for discussing the social order as just or unjust. As such it is a discussion about the rights of individuals in relation to rights of communities. Although the *crux* of the debate lies in the philosophical underpinnings of a just policy, both liberals and communitarians have come up with specific depictions of the self. In this article we bring these to the fore and place them under Lacanian scrutiny. This in itself is not an obvious enterprise since, as mentioned, the liberal-communitarian debate is not primarily a psychological discussion. Furthermore, it implies a combination of ‘worlds’ which rarely meet, two influential analytical political philosophies and a continental theoretical paradigm. While our main focus is the analysis of the identity theories which lie behind the liberal and communitarian theories, we also examine to a lesser extent in what way the policies to which they give rise account for Lacanian insights.

In the first section of our article—and by way of acquaintance—we read the ‘liberal-communitarian debate’ from a broad historical and societal point of view. As we will demonstrate, currently the debate can be interpreted from the perspective of dismantling neoliberal dominance. After this analysis, in the next couple of sections we delve deeper into the liberal and communitarian depictions of the self. While a variety of positions exist within the communitarian paradigm, all communitarians emphasize that individuals are constitutively bound to certain community ‘ends’—a term used here to refer to commitments and attachments such as relationships, projects, convictions, loyalties, loves, ties and aims. This means that individuals *are* these ends, which contradicts the depiction of the self by liberals as being free, unencumbered and atomist. Indeed, unlike communitarians, liberals emphasize people’s capacity to change their ends. We briefly summarize the discussion that has ensued between the two positions, with a particular focus on the stance taken by Canadian liberal philosopher Will Kymlicka. In order to defend the liberal position against communitarian contentions, Kymlicka argues that it is not necessary to rely upon the idea of an unencumbered self that is prior to its ends. However, we demonstrate why Kymlicka’s depiction of the self is not in fact able to refute the communitarian critique on liberalism. Taking the work of Simon Caney² and Andrew Cohen³ as our point of

¹ Numerous comprehensive publications have been published on this debate, see for example Daniel Bell, ‘Communitarianism’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2013 Edition). Allen Buchanan, ‘Assessing the Communitarian Critique of Liberalism,’ *Ethics* 99, pp. 852–82. Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989. Margaret Moore, ‘Liberalism, Communitarianism, and the Politics of Identity’, in Thomas Christiano and John Christman (eds.) *Contemporary Debates in Political Philosophy*, Malden, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2009, pp. 322–42.

² Simon Caney, ‘Rawls, Sandel, and the Self,’ *International Journal of Moral Social Studies* 6, 1991, 161–71.

departure, we introduce a distinction between the metaphysical self, as a choosing being, and the psychological depiction of the self, as a character. We argue that—like all voluntaristic theories—Kymlicka’s theory does in fact rely on the notion of an unencumbered self. The communitarian critique thus remains intact: liberals rely on a self that is prior to its ends. The last four sections of the article present the view that both liberal and communitarian theories are incomplete. Relying primarily on Lacan’s theory of desire, we demonstrate that liberal theory paints only half of the picture in arguing that we are free choosers—even if we are not fully unencumbered as Kymlicka asserts. Similarly, communitarians’ emphasis that we are socially attached also fails to reflect the whole truth. As we will illustrate, individuals may be attached to all kinds of ends which they did not choose and can neither explain nor relinquish. These ends do not necessarily connect an individual to a community. Such ends, termed here ‘extimate ends’, can be linked to what Lacan has called *das Ding*, the real cause of desire. These ‘extimate ends’ challenge the liberal view that no particular end should be beyond critical reflection and open to revision. The metaphysical chooser, as we will argue, is free only to the extent that it remains oriented towards *das Ding* as the impalpable and intangible source of desire. Therefore, the subject can choose its position towards the (destructive) enjoyment that goes along with *das Ding*, but, being a subject of desire, it cannot choose not to be driven by *das Ding*.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: THE LIBERAL-COMMUNITARIAN DEBATE IN A TIME OF NEOLIBERALISM

Let us first recall that most of those who were characterized as communitarians did not embrace this label, with the possible exception of the conservative sociologist, Amitai Etzioni. All those who opposed the assumptions of authors defending a form of liberalism that assumed that individuals could be understood in abstraction from society and social relations were simply lumped together and criticized for in one way or another calling for limits on negative freedom, the freedom to do what one wants, providing it does not injure bodies or property or others. Aristotle and Hegel were the main villains in this regard, although Marxism was also in the background, with their belief in the common good and positive liberty, the liberty to participate in augmenting the common good rather than the freedom to pursue one’s own interests unconstrained. While many of these thinkers have been eminent in philosophy, they were effectively defeated in practice with the global triumph of neoliberalism based on economic doctrines of Hayek, Friedman and Nozick. In defeat philosophers have

³ Andrew Jason Cohen, ‘A Defense of Strong Voluntarism’, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 35, 1998, pp. 251-65.

increasingly turned to the history of philosophy, and German philosophers have played an increasingly important role. Along with Aristotle and Hegel, the quest for autonomy by early Greek philosophers has been revived by Cornelius Castoriadis. The neo-Romanism of the Renaissance civic humanists has been revived with Quentin Skinner arguing for a third form of liberty, defined as not being enslaved, on this basis. The Hegelian tradition has been revived through the recovery of other philosophers aligned in some way with, or influenced by this tradition. The rediscovery of the arguments of Fichte, for instance, who influenced Hegel, has been associated with the revival of interest in the dialectic of recognition, and this has been further augmented by the rediscovery by Axel Honneth, Hans Joas and George Herbert Mead's philosophy in which this struggle had been made central. The British Idealists inspired by Thomas Hill Green who himself was inspired by Rousseau and Fichte as much as Hegel, have also been rediscovered, promoting a social liberalism or new liberalism that extolled positive freedom and the quest for the common good. The revival of this intellectual history has taken place while the consequences of neoliberalism have been revealing themselves, vindicating the arguments of the earlier 'communitarians'. There has been a massive concentration of wealth and power in the hands of transnational corporations; plundering of public assets; elimination of job security and the growth of managerialism; massive increases in expenditure on armaments, internal security and surveillance; the depoliticisation of the population; the transformation of universities into transnational business corporations dominated by management and business faculties; the decay of the humanities, and a failure to effectively address the growing threat of global ecological destruction. This was capped by a global financial crisis, the causes of which have not been addressed. Since political philosophy in general reflects a 'desperate struggle' to revive these older ideas to provide a real challenge to neoliberalism and its consequences, the liberal-communitarian debate as it was developed mainly in Anglophone countries in response to Rawls' political philosophy, seems somewhat antiquated. Hence both the liberal and communitarian paradigms should be evaluated in their relation towards nowadays neoliberalism dominance. Below we will see how both Kantian liberalism, communitarianism as well as recuperations of Lacan's theory can lead to detachments of neoliberalism as it is ideologically backed-up by classical liberalism.

Classical liberalism refers to an 18th century combination of natural law philosophy and utilitarianism. Central is the protection of individual natural rights that goes hand in hand with the maximization of the individual and collective economic utility. Liberalism itself claims not to propagate specific values, except those values that give individuals the possibility to choose their goals and to shape their beliefs, hence the classical rights. The community (commonwealth) served the individual properties or, as Locke puts it, 'life, liberty and estate'. Citizens in a society are doing well, if they, as

far as possible, protect their own interests, meaning that they should arrange their affairs without state interference. The state's only interest should be the provision of unmistakable collective facilities. As modern advocates such as Popper and Berlin have warned, individualism is to be promoted since behind every community spirit a potential dictatorship is to be suspected. Both Popper and Berlin feared the metaphysical and teleological terror that would proclaim and impose the highest good upon its citizens. They understood rationality as the basis of freedom as it defined as utility maximization. According to the classical liberal paradigm, the best-ordered society would occur when citizens do not surrender to their passions, but calmly look after their own interests. This political economy as a model of rationality underpinned the idea of the good citizen as a *homo oeconomicus*. Since the pursuit of self-interest and private gain is presented as virtues, classical liberalism can be regarded as the ideological counterpart of nowadays neoliberal capitalism.

Like classical liberalism, *Kantian liberalism* has a strong individualistic basis. Kantian liberalism sees its starting point in the absolute respect for the dignity of each individual. As Kant said, one should treat others as an end and never merely as a means. In this sense Kantian liberalism differs greatly from classical liberalism. In its deontological (based on duties) ethics, it rejects the utilitarian thinking of Bentham and (the young) Mill. Hence, what is crucial is the demand for justice and this should replace the demand for utility of the individual or the commonwealth as it was expressed by classical liberalism. Based on the idea of equal respect for all people, Kantian liberalism rather than its classical counterpart, inclined to social institutions which contested inequalities. The Kantian liberalism of Rawls in fact is one great attempt to get rid of the Lockean-capitalist liberalism with its Millian-utilitarian features. As such Rawls can be considered to be the first and probably the most influential Western philosopher after World War II to have provided a serious basis for the controversial notion of justice. Rawls assumed that the principal task of a government lies in the safeguarding and the fair distribution of the liberties and economic resources individuals need to follow their freely chosen life plans. Rawls for example argued that, correctly applied to the choice of a social system, the principles of justice do not justify any form of capitalism. In this sense two economic systems that meet these principles' requirements are 'property-owning democracy' and 'liberal socialism'. Since neither can be qualified as capitalist, and both limit inequalities and broadly disseminate ownership and control of productive capital, the sources of capitalist inequalities will not exist in these societies.

Communitarianism has its roots in the classical Greek conception of the polis. Communitarians criticize (classical and Kantian) liberalism of dealing with an overly

individualistic conception of the self. Liberals have neglected that our selves tend to be defined by various communal attachments so close to us that they can only be set aside at great cost, if at all. Following Aristotle communitarians assert that political systems cannot be legitimized without reference to common goals and objectives and furthermore that one cannot understand individuals regardless of their role in the communities to which they belong (e.g. family, nation, social movement, city, neighborhood, party). As Taylor puts it: “Man is a social animal, indeed a political animal, because he is not self-sufficient alone, and in an important sense is not self-sufficient outside a polis.”⁴ Hence, individuals are not completely autonomous, but are always to some extent tied to the norms and values of the communities to which they belong. Therefore, the philosophical unity of the subject—a unity that was presupposed by liberalism on formal grounds—must be understood as a narrative unity, that is, our lives are connected to the stories, norms, values and histories of the communities to which we belong. The implication is that communitarians advocate a teleological ethics in which a shared conception of the good life is constitutive for individuals’ self-understanding. Hence, in recognizing that his roots are in the community, the communitarian subject must transfer a part of his autonomy to the community. Put differently, the subject must limit his ability to critique in favor of shared ends and community involvement. So, whereas Rawls presented his egalitarian-liberal theory of justice as universally true, communitarians in contrast argued that the standards of justice must be found in forms of life and traditions of particular societies and hence can vary from context to context. As Bell⁵ argues modern communitarians such as Galston and Etzioni blame both the left and the right—which we may respectively relate to Kantian liberalism and classical liberalism—for the current neoliberal malaise. They both have not considered well the importance of communities, moreover they have contributed to the collapse of valued forms of communal life. The political left is criticized not only for supporting welfare rights which are economically unsustainable in an era of slow growth and aging populations, but also for shifting power away from local communities and democratic institutions towards centralized bureaucratic structures which are better equipped to administer the fair and equal distribution of benefits, thus leading to a growing sense of powerlessness and alienation from the political process. Moreover, the modern welfare state with its universalizing logic of rights and formal care institutions and entitlements has also undermined family and social ties in civil society by rendering superfluous

⁴ Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Science: Philosophical Papers, Vol. ii.*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, 190.

⁵ Bell, ‘Communitarianism’.

obligations to communities, by amongst others actively discouraging private efforts to help others. Libertarian solutions favored by the political right, as it is argued, have contributed even more directly to the erosion of social responsibilities and communal life. Far from producing beneficial communal consequences, the invisible hand of unregulated free-market capitalism would have undermined the family, disrupted local communities, and even corrupted the political process.

Although *Lacan* explicitly opposed any ideological recuperation, the political strength of his ideas is unmistakable. Let us however first remind that the point of Lacan—sharply in contrast to Freud—is not so much to heal, but to abolish the impotence of the patient so that he can redeploy his existence. As we will illustrate more in detail in the second parts of this article, the psychoanalytical cure is not about the normalization of the patient, but about the rebellion against the spiritual atrophy of the patient. Lacan, as a psychiatrist, strove to free the subject from its clamped position, but this process as well has a collective and hence a political dimension. Lacanian cure, even if it is completely apolitical, provides a kind of political mold. As Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek—both modern adepts of Lacan—argue, oppression is always characterized by a tightening of the individual and collective capabilities. In their respective works, they both worked out a direct link between Lacan’s theory and a certain transgressive attitude. With Lacan they want to reopen revolutionary opportunities for a community that has sunk into blind repetition or is stuck in repression by neoliberal dictates. Or, as Žižek puts it: “It is in fact as if, since the horizon of social imagination no longer allows us to entertain the idea of an eventual demise of capitalism – since, as we might put it, everybody tacitly accepts that capitalism is here to stay (...).”⁶ Lacan indeed clearly believed in emancipation and transgression. Although the Lacanian subject is deeply rooted in solid ground—his identity is structured by language and ruled by ancient laws—at the same time he has the opportunity to free itself from that pressure and to invent something radically new.⁷ However, it is not clear whether or not Lacan would agree with the way Badiou and Žižek have recuperated his ideas. Lacan for example appeared to be highly critical of students in May 1968 who symbolically killed the father. Although Lacan defended the law as inevitable, at the same time he recognized its possible transgression. However, Lacan would have qualified the idea of a sudden revolution as it is defended by Badiou and Žižek to be nonsensical. When it comes to the possibilities of a societal

⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject. The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, London, Verso, 1999, 219.

⁷ When it comes to the aim of the cure, Lacan has stressed the traverse of the phantasm which leads to a relative liberation from the grip of a miserable Real enjoyment (see *infra*). Also identification with the symptom may be a possible destination, as some rather quirky artists have avoided a psychotic disintegration via the creation of a particular sinthome.

revolution, at its best, what happens in the therapeutic cure is to be taken as a metaphor, since, as we believe, a radical overthrow of capitalism as it is defended by both Badiou and Žižek, is not something that Lacan would evoke. Lacan has shown how bizarre and idiosyncratic desire is and can be, and if this is the case, how difficult it is to uphold the notion of the common good that all right thinking people should be concerned to foster, if the common good is understood as the condition for people to pursue their desires. However, there is no need to accept this enjoyment, and in fact Lacan, as we will discuss more in detail, did not. His psychotherapy involved convincing people that the plenitude they seek can never be realized, and that they should live in the order of the Symbolic. The whole point of Lacan is that man has to come to terms with the drive and yet the destructive force of *das Ding*. Capitalism and the neurotic way it dominates modern life illustrates the way people have not yet accepted their desire. As capitalism is able to constantly provide new objects that trigger the illusion of full enjoyment—the satisfaction of *das Ding*—it is important for people to understand that no empirical object will ever be able to provide this enjoyment and hence that, in essence, they are ‘lacks of being’ (*manque à être*). Accepting this tragic condition, could make modern people less restless, hysteric and yet more in charge of their lives. In a way it could counter the way Bauman has nicely captured the neurotic paradox of our era where capitalism has brought the worst in us: ‘Never have we been so free. Never have we felt so powerless.’⁸

SETTING THE SCENE: THE LIBERAL AND COMMUNITARIAN DEPICTIONS OF THE SELF

As modern political philosophy is struggling with the question how to detach itself from the grip of neoliberalism, the liberal-communitarian debate can be read and understood as a modulation of this attempt to dismantle the neoliberal dominance. In trying to throw off the yoke of capitalism, Lacanian ideas have been recovered by rather Marxist authors such as Badiou and Žižek. As we believe, it is not societal revolution as such, but rather the emancipation of the subject that will bring more distance to the capitalist incentives. In the rest of the article we deal with the liberal and communitarian portrayals of the self. We examine them in a critical way and place them under Lacanian scrutiny.

According to communitarians such as Alasdair MacIntyre⁹, Michael Sandel¹⁰, Michael Walzer¹¹ and Charles Taylor¹², liberals have exaggerated humans’ capacity to

⁸ Bauman, quoted in Paul Verhaeghe, *What About Me?* Australia/London, Scribe Publications Pty Ltd, 2014.

⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, London, Duckworth, 1981.

¹⁰ Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1982.

distance or abstract themselves from social relationships. Liberals, they argue, not only overrate the capacity for—and value of—individual choice, but also neglect the fact that individuals' capacity for choice can only be developed and exercised within certain social and cultural contexts. According to Sandel¹³ for example, individuals are incapable of separating themselves from (some of) their ends. These ends are termed 'constitutive', in the way they define our personal identities. The implication is that the self is not prior to its ends, but rather constituted by them. As Sandel¹⁴ puts it, we simply cannot distinguish 'me' from 'my ends'. Our selves are at least partly constituted by a number of ends which are not chosen but discovered, by virtue of our being embedded in certain shared social contexts.

“(...) To say that the members of society are bound by a sense of community is not simply to say that a great many of them profess communitarian sentiments and pursue communitarian aims but rather that they conceive their identity—the subject and not just the object of their feelings and aspirations—as defined to some extent by the community of which they are part. For them, community describes not just what they have as fellow citizens but what they are, not a relationship they choose (as in voluntaristic associations) but an attachment they discover, not merely an attribute but a constituent of their identity.”¹⁵

Due to the existence of these constitutive ends, our lives run more smoothly not because we have access to the conditions necessary for selecting and revising our projects (as liberals propose), but because we have access to the conditions necessary for becoming aware of these shared constitutive ends. In other words, since these ends are constitutive of people's identities, there is no reason why a government should not attempt to strengthen its citizens' allegiance to those ends and to limit their ability to question and revise them. This is why communitarians promote a 'politics of the good'—a policy that safeguards the survival of societal groups.

In contrast with communitarians, liberals do not focus on the ties themselves but on 'autonomy'—the ability to choose and to change these ties. Liberals insist that individuals are able to detach themselves from all kinds of bindings and social practices. In other words, no particular end is set for us by society and no particular practice has authority that is beyond individual judgment, choice and potential

¹¹ Michael Walzer, 'Pluralism in Political Perspectives', in Michael Walzer, Edward Kantowicz, John Higham and Mona Harrington (eds.) *The Politics of Ethnicity*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1982, pp. 1-28.

¹² Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Science: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. ii.

¹³ Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*.

¹⁴ Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*.

¹⁵ Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, p. 150.

rejection. According to John Rawls¹⁶, individuals “do not regard themselves as inevitably bound to, or identical with, the pursuit of any particular complex of fundamental interests that they may have at any given moment.” Thus, people autonomously choose their lives’ ends within the context of their rational life plans. “The self is prior to the ends that are affirmed by it; even a dominant end must be chosen from among numerous possibilities.”¹⁷ Remarkably, in later works, Rawls partly adjusts this conception of the self and makes a concession to the communitarian viewpoint. He avoids his earlier conception of autonomy because he had begun to see it as ‘sectarian’, in the sense that it is an ideal which is “not generally, or perhaps even widely, shared in a democratic society.”¹⁸ Rawls’s new proposal does not reject the autonomy argument entirely, but restricts its scope. In particular, he continues to refer to it in political contexts while avoiding it in others. Thus, autonomy should not be interpreted as a general capability or as a general account of the relationship between the self and its ends, applicable to all areas of life. According to Rawls, the idea that individuals can form and revise their conceptions of the good should be seen as informing a strictly political conception of the individual, adopted solely for the purposes of determining public rights and responsibilities. It does not accurately reflect our deepest understanding of ourselves, since—in private—it is still possible and likely that personal identity is bound to particular ends in such a way that precludes rational revision.

It is essential to stress that citizens in their personal affairs, or in the internal life of associations to which they belong, may regard their final ends and attachments in a way very different from the way the political conception involves. Citizens may have, and normally do have at any given time, affectings, devotions, and loyalties that they believe they would not, and indeed could and should not, stand apart from and objectively evaluate from the standpoint of their purely rational good. They may regard it as simply unthinkable to view themselves apart from certain religious, philosophical and moral convictions, or from certain enduring attachments and loyalties. These convictions and attachments are part of what we may call their ‘nonpublic identity.’¹⁹

¹⁶ John Rawls, ‘Reply to Alexander and Musgrave’, *Quarterly Review of Economics*, vol. 88, 1974, p. 641.

¹⁷ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1971, p. 569.

¹⁸ John Rawls, ‘Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 14, 1985, p. 246.

¹⁹ Rawls, ‘Justice as Fairness’, p. 241.

KYMICKA'S (UN)ENCUMBERED SELF

It is apparent that Kymlicka²⁰ deeply regrets Rawls's communitarian concession. For him Rawls does not (and cannot) explain why anyone would accept the ideal of autonomy in political contexts unless they also accepted it more generally. If people are indeed constitutively tied to certain ends and if a policy recognizes this human feature, the implication is that it should also recognize illiberal ends. However, since Rawls, as a liberal, does not draw that conclusion and hence does not—cannot—legitimize illiberal acts, his 'new' viewpoint is, as Kymlicka argues, inadequate or at least of no added value to the liberal position where the human capability to change all ends is emphasized.

According to Kymlicka, the communitarian conception of the self is mistaken. In his description of the central liberal idea of the self, Kymlicka argues that:

what is central to the liberal view is not that we can perceive a self prior to its ends, but that we understand our selves to be prior to our ends, in the sense that no end or goal is exempt from possible re-examination. For re-examination to be meaningfully conducted I must be able to envisage my self encumbered with different motivations that I now have, in order that I have some reasons to choose one over another as more valuable for me. My self is, in this sense, perceived prior to its ends, i.e. I can always envisage my self without its present ends. But this doesn't require that I can ever perceive a self totally unencumbered by any ends — the process of ethical reasoning is always one of comparing one 'encumbered' potential self with another 'encumbered' potential self. There must always be some ends given with the self when we engage in such reasoning, but it doesn't follow that any particular ends must always be taken as given with the self.²¹

Thus, Kymlicka stresses that there is no need to fall back on the idea of the atomist self in order to refute communitarian critiques. Kymlicka builds on Ronald Dworkin's²² notion that no individual can question everything about himself at once, but—as Dworkin²³ makes clear—it “hardly follows that for each person there is some one connection or association so fundamental that it cannot be detached for inspection while holding others in place.” Some may think of themselves as being incapable of questioning or revising their ends, but in fact, as Kymlicka points out in reference to

²⁰ Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture*. Will Kymlicka, 'Two Models of Pluralism and Tolerance', *Analyse & Kritik*, 14, 1992, pp. 33-56. Kymlicka Will, *Multicultural Citizenship. A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995.

²¹ Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture*, p. 52-53.

²² Ronald Dworkin, 'Liberal Community', *California Law Review*, vol. 7, 1989, pp. 479-504.

²³ Dworkin, 'Liberal Community', p. 489.

Rawls²⁴, “our conceptions of the good may and often do change over time, usually slowly but sometimes rather suddenly.” Regardless of how confident we are about our ends at a particular moment, new circumstances or experiences may arise, often in unpredictable ways, which cause us to re-evaluate them. Kymlicka agrees that it may not always be easy or enjoyable to revise one’s most established ends, but it is ultimately possible—and sometimes even necessary. New experiences and circumstances may reveal that we were mistaken in our previous beliefs about the good. “No end is immune from such potential revision.”²⁵ He goes on to explain that there is no way to predict when the need for such a reconsideration will arise:

(...) a liberal society does not compel people to revise their commitments—and many people will go years without having any reason to question their basic commitments—but it does recognize that the freedom of choice is not a one-shot affair, and that earlier choices sometimes need to be revisited.²⁶

It is precisely because our judgments about the good are fallible that we have an interest, not only in pursuing our existing conceptions of the good, but also in being able to assess and potentially revise that conception. Our current ends, Kymlicka²⁷ argues, are not always worthy of our continued allegiance, and exposure to other ways of life helps us make informed judgments about what is truly valuable.

Communitarians rely on a politics of the common good in which groups can promote a shared conception of the good even if this limits individual members’ ability to revise their ends. Liberals such as Kymlicka, on the other hand, insist that individuals are able to stand back and assess their ends, moral values and traditional ways of life, and should be granted not only the legal right to do so, but also the social conditions which enhance this capacity (e.g. liberal education, freedom of conscience, association and press). This is not to say that liberals show no interest in the protection of groups or cultures. Kymlicka, in fact, is primarily known for the outline of an influential multicultural theory which draws on the idea that (societal) cultures should be protected because they are a precondition for individual autonomy.

Liberals should be concerned with the fate of cultural structures, not because they have some moral status of their own, but because it’s only through having a rich and secure cultural structure that people can become aware, in a vivid way, of the options available to them, and intelligently examine their value.²⁸

²⁴ Rawls, ‘Justice as Fairness’, p. 242.

²⁵ Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, p. 91.

²⁶ Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, p. 91-92.

²⁷ Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*.

²⁸ Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture*, p. 165.

Multicultural rights for immigrants are implemented in order to advance the integration into their 'new' societal culture. The extent to which Kymlicka's multiculturalism for immigrants—termed as polyethnic rights—aims to adjust the majority culture in order to accommodate the cultural differences of immigrants, illustrates how Kymlicka acknowledges the constitutive ties immigrants still have with aspects of their societal culture of origin.

THE METAPHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SELF

Kymlicka maintains that individuals are always capable of questioning and revising their ends. However, this does not mean that people can distance themselves from all of their ends at once—there is no need to rely on an unencumbered, atomist self—but they are potentially capable of distancing themselves from each of their ends individually. It is our view, though, that this is insufficient to settle the question of the self's status. At this point, our objection to Kymlicka's depiction of the self highlights the necessity of distinguishing two senses of personal identity. First, there is personal identity in the narrow metaphysical sense, which refers to the conditions in which a person may be said to exist over time and remain the same person. Second, there is personal identity in the psychological sense, which denotes one's character and self-understanding and refers to what one regards as essential to oneself. As Caney²⁹ points out, 'what I am' may change over time in the psychological sense even if 'what I am' in the narrow metaphysical sense does not. In line with Cohen³⁰, we could describe the 'I' in the metaphysical sense as a chooser and in the psychological sense as a character, an individual with certain constitutive ends which are perceived as unchangeable. As far as the 'I' as chooser is concerned, all constitutive ends can potentially be revised for the ends to which a person is attached are the products of choice or are at least in one way or another affirmed. If not they would have been simply expelled. This is indeed what Kymlicka suggests: no end should be treated differently, for every end can change. However, as Cohen³¹ argues, not putting all of one's ends up for revision, does not indicate metaphysical identification or equivalence with those ends. The fact that I must consider myself to have at least some ends in order to evaluate others—as Kymlicka argues—is therefore beside the point. Since all of my ends are the products of choice, the 'I' is unencumbered in the metaphysical sense; more precisely, and in contrast with Kymlicka's conception, the self as a choosing self, is unencumbered by ends. The implication is that as soon as we argue that individuals can change their ends, we are required to refer to a self that is prior to its ends. In other words,

²⁹ Caney, 'Rawls, Sandel, and the Self'.

³⁰ Cohen, 'A Defense of Strong Voluntarism'.

³¹ Cohen, 'A Defense of Strong Voluntarism'.

Kymlicka, like all voluntarists, must rely on the ‘self prior to its ends’ and is therefore not entirely able to refute the communitarian critique of the atomist liberal self.

The possible refutation that the metaphysical self always operates within a certain social context and hence should be situated within the contours provided by this context, offers no solid critique. Of course, the metaphysical chooser can only choose from the options that are being provided by his communal context or, as we think of the cosmopolitan, by the world in which he lives. As such, every metaphysical self is always incorporated in a certain spatiotemporal context. If we assert the necessity to think of an unencumbered metaphysical chooser, we obviously do not think of a self which is capable of floating above the streams of time and space. However, socialization does not imply determination. Being raised in a family of vegetarians for example does not imply that all children will become vegetarians. The idea of socialization is important for the psychological identity for it will influence—as a kind of moral background—the self as a character. However, it is and remains the metaphysical self that decides what to do with the moral message that eating meat is wrong. Will it adopt or reject the vegetarian ideas? Being raised in a ‘vegetarian family’ does not by definition preclude the child from eventually becoming a professional butcher.

EXTIMACY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

It seems to make sense that the metaphysical chooser chooses his ends in accordance with the psychological sense of self. In most cases, a person will indeed choose something because it appears more constitutive of his being—in other words, more important for his psychological identity. During our lives however we tend to feel attached to certain ‘basic ends’ which function as compass needles, orienting the many concrete choices we make. These basic ends are important for we might feel guilty or feel as if we have betrayed ourselves when not having acted in accordance with them. But why is it however that we may feel guilty if we (i.e. our metaphysical self) have not acted according to our psychological identity, for example as a man who psychologically experiences himself as being in love with a particular woman? Again, being socialized in a certain family or culture only helps to explain the social and moral context, the range of (love) objects and the way one usually expresses his love (e.g. by means of a bouquet of red roses), but it does not determine the subject as a choosing self nor as the unique psychological self he is. Therefore, the sociological approach fails. What is needed here, is a psychological explanation.

In fact, there is a broad range of psychological phenomena which refer to the experience of not having been true to oneself. In the most serious cases, a loss of integrity might even lead to psychic dissociation. This means that the ‘basic ends’ force

the metaphysical chooser to adopt them somehow. Throughout the rest of this article, we employ the term ‘extimate ends’ to refer to these ‘basic ends’. ‘Extimacy’ is a neologism coined by Lacan which refers to the notion that something can be very familiar and very strange at the same time.³² ‘Basic ends’ are extimate because they are both ‘intimate’—in that they seem to be constitutive of our psychological beings—and ‘external’, since we have not chosen them. Although we feel that these special ends are of great importance to us—they define our psychological self—we do not know why we are so deeply attached to them, we do not know what they stand for and we cannot simply ignore them since they seem to function as compass needles directing our desire.

In a way, the paradox of the extimate self resembles the paradox of the Kantian subject, whose freedom is a moral duty: “freedom and an unconditional practical law reciprocally imply each other” (Kant 1956: 29)³³. Kant’s categorical law is both ‘internal’ and ‘external’. The moral law is an impersonal command ‘coming from nowhere’ (external). Although it comes from nowhere, it is ultimately self-positing and autonomously assumed by the subject (intimate). Because the subject *can* act according to the categorical imperative, he *should* act according to it (cf. Kant’s famous dictum, ‘Du kannst, den Du sollst.’). Inasmuch as the Kantian subject is attached to a moral law, he does not do something in order to achieve something else, nor does he simply follow an order imposed by another. As Kant writes,

We cannot possibly conceive of reason as being consciously directed from outside in regard to its judgments; for in that case the subject would attribute the determination of his power of judgment, not to his reason, but to an impulsion. Reason must look upon itself as the author of its own principles independently of alien influences.³⁴

Kant thus insists on the absolute gap between acts which result from pathological sentiments (heteronomous acts) and pure forms of moral law (autonomous ethical acts). The Kantian moral is a pure form, meaning that it does not issue concrete commands but only reminds individuals of certain conditions that should be met. As such, Kant’s³⁵ categorical imperative consists of three formal formulations: (1) “act only according to that maxim [a subjective principle of one’s actions] whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law without contradiction”; (2) “act in such a way that you treat humanity whether in your own person or in the

³² Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, New York Norton, 1992 [1959-1960].

³³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Indianapolis, Bolls Merrill, 1956 [1788], p. 29.

³⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. London, Hutchinson, 1948 [1785], p. 106.

³⁵ Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*.

person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end”; and (3) “every rational being must act as if he were through his maxim always a legislative member in the universal kingdom of ends.” In a manner of speaking, people *are* the categorical imperative. If they fail to adhere to the categorical law, they are unreasonable since they are not acting in accordance with their inner moral responsibilities. When adhering to the categorical imperative, a Kantian subject is not led by any inclination. He simply has no other choice but to act according to the categorical imperative and to take full responsibility for this duty.

Likewise, when in love for example, it becomes clear what to do—in a formal way it is clear that we should show our love—but it is still unclear how we should do this in concrete terms. This opens the possibility to develop an idiosyncratic romantic and erotic culture with love letters, poems, flowers and all kinds of gestures, etc. Falling in love with a particular woman usually is not something we choose, like we choose drinking a beer or a glass of water. In fact it seems more appropriate to interpret ourselves as being ‘captured’ by the woman. As such, although we do not know why we love this and no other woman, we are convinced that she is ‘the one’ and we experience that our life suddenly has a strong axis around which our desire and its productions will rotate. It is in this specific sense that love can be experienced as having an extimate character.

Those in the grip of an ‘extimate end’ usually demonstrate a remarkably self-confident, unyielding, uncompromising and even indifferent attitude towards the utilitarian effects of their actions. They are not suffering from feelings of guilt, nor are they acting in order to gain sympathy or respect of the surrounding environment. In this sense, they are being authentic. They do the things they do because they simply feel or know that they have to. People ‘driven’ by extimate ends are characterized by a hypersensitivity to a particular end—the love object—to which they feel constitutively or categorically attached and seem to have found a way to regulate their life around their ‘object of love’ and hence to deal with their desire.

In some circumstances, extimate ends can dominate to the extent that individuals might feel compelled to pursue them even if this would mean dying or behaving in ways outside of the conventionally accepted symbolic mores. In fact, our language is littered with calibrated expressions referring to the observation that people would rather die than live without a certain aim, love, tie or conviction: “I could never give ‘x’ up”; “I cannot live without ‘x’”; “I might die if...”; “over my dead body!”; and so on. A good example here is the Greek tragedy of *Antigone*³⁶. Antigone, the daughter of King Oedipus, who has abdicated, buries her brother Polynices. However, this burial

³⁶ Sophocles, *Antigone*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

had been strictly forbidden by Creon, Antigone's uncle and the new king of Thebes, who believed that Polynices had betrayed the Gods and the kingdom. The tragedy of Antigone shows that life itself is not the highest value and that the constitutive binding to life may be subordinate to an attachment to a particular end. Various continental philosophers, such as Žižek³⁷ and Badiou³⁸, have recently restored notions such as 'courage', 'determination', 'fidelity' and 'truth' in their theories precisely in order to oppose current utilitarian conceptions which define those who risk their lives as ridiculous, stupid or dangerous. According to Žižek and Badiou, humans are not only concerned with the reproduction of life or the satisfaction of their natural inclinations, needs and pleasures: "it is difficult, properly traumatic, for a human animal to accept that his or her life is not just a stupid process of reproduction and pleasure seeking, but that it is in the service of a Truth."³⁹

Kant maintained that reason is the universal principle of humankind and that complete adherence to the moral law would therefore lead the human race to become one single ethical subject. As mentioned above, if people fail to adhere to the categorical law, they are not unreasonable in general; they are unreasonable in regard to a universal morality. However, as we will see in the next section, extimate ends are not related to the pure human faculty of reason, but rather to an idiosyncratic faculty of desire which we will call *das Ding*. Since the subject is led not by 'universal reason' but by a 'particular desire', it is impossible that humankind could become one. The inevitable consequence of acknowledging that there are individuals who are unconditionally 'driven' towards what we might call 'the good' (Kant's idea) is that we must also acknowledge the fact that there are those who are unconditionally driven towards what we might call 'the bad'. Lacan⁴⁰, for example, made a considerable effort to illustrate why Marquis De Sade, the French aristocrat and writer of some libertine sexual texts, was a Kantian. Lacan argued that De Sade was not satisfying his natural (pathological) desire for sex, power or domination, but enjoying these things in an absolute way.⁴¹ Thus, what Kant and De Sade have in common is the unconditional nature of their acts. In other words, Kant's idea of autonomy (cf. duty as a paradoxical freedom) is a precondition for understanding De Sade's excessive sexual acts. The only correct way to understand the Sadian commandment to enjoy, then, is to read it as a Kantian categorical imperative.

³⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome in the desert of the real*, London, New York, Verso, 2002.

³⁸ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, London, Continuum, 2007 [1988].

³⁹ Žižek, *Welcome in the desert*, pp. 69-70.

⁴⁰ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*.

⁴¹ Slavoj Žižek, 'Kant And Sade: The Ideal Couple', *lacanian ink*, vol. 13, 1998, pp. 12-25.

If one eliminates from morality every element of sentiment, if one removes or invalidates all guidance to be found in sentiments then in the final analysis the Sadian world is conceivable – even if it is its inversion, its caricature – as one of the possible forms of the world governed by a radical ethics, by the Kantian ethics as elaborated in 1788 [The Critique of Practical Reason].⁴²

So far we have given a rather phenomenological account of extimacy. We have given a couple of examples: love, Antigone, the ethical good in the sense of Kant, and Sadian perversion. In the rest of the article we will draw upon the Lacanian logic of desire in order to clarify the ‘human all too human’ experience of being bound to extimate ends. We will recover the metaphysical chooser and will invoke a difference between Lacan’s conception of sublimation and perversion. On the basis of this distinction, we will be able to point out some dissimilarities between our phenomenological examples.

DAS DING OR THE IDIOSYNCRATIC FACULTY OF DESIRE

In order to understand the meaning of *das Ding*, its relation to extimacy and its impact on both the liberal and communitarian theories, we must first consider a number of basic Lacanian insights and assumptions. The first of these is the notion that by entering the Symbolic dimension of language, humans become unable to attain immediate knowledge about themselves and the surrounding ‘Real’ world. A good illustration of this gap is the way in which, when an individual talks about himself, the person he is talking about is never the same as the person who is talking. The speaking subject, or ‘the subject of the enunciation’, as Lacan puts it, only exists insofar as he is represented by the signifiers being used. These signifiers refer solely to ‘the subject of the enunciated’, which never coincides with ‘the subject of the enunciation’. The ‘Real’ subject is thus never truly present, and only exists as an effect of language. Here, we note the influence of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure⁴³, who argued that meaning is produced by the relation between the signifiers and the signified and by the positions of the signifiers in relation to other signifiers. It is within this chain of signifiers that the subject can emerge: “[a] signifier is that which represents the subject for another signifier”.⁴⁴ Given that every signifier automatically invokes other signifiers, the Real subject is unconscious—caught in an endless chain of mutually referential signifiers. Humans have not only lost immediate contact with themselves, however: they have also lost their direct knowledge of the ‘Real’ world beyond

⁴² Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, p.79.

⁴³ Ferdinand De Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, London, Fontanna, 1974.

⁴⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, London, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1977b [1964], p. 157.

language. In this sense, the subject is symbolically castrated. The ‘speaking animal’ (the *parlêtre*) is structurally separated from the ‘Real world’. Because of this separation, the subject is burdened with a continuous desire to identify the ‘last words’: “thus the symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing, and this death constitutes in the subject the eternalization of his desire”.⁴⁵ If the separation were to be overcome, the subject would enter the realm of the Real and thus vanish as a Symbolic subject. In his Seminar on ethics, Lacan⁴⁶ further elaborated on this idea of a lost but attractive ‘Real Thing’ by introducing *das Ding*—a concept which he would define in later Seminars as ‘*object a*’.

While Lacan borrowed the concept of *das Ding* from *Entwurf*, an early text by Sigmund Freud⁴⁷, its background is evidently Kantian. *Das Ding*, we could argue, is Lacan’s answer to how the ‘Enlightened’ Kant⁴⁸ withdrew *das Ding an sich* from scientific knowledge (cf. “Das Ding an sich ist ein Unbekanntes”). In Lacanian theory, too, *Das Ding* refers to a radical unknowability. “Das Ding is that which I will call the outside-of-the-signified”.⁴⁹ This means that its topological place is the domain of the Real, and from this realm it operates as the ‘excessive point’ towards which desire is oriented. It is an ‘excessive point’ because individuals desire what lies beyond the pleasure and satisfaction of empirical objects, namely the Real enjoyment that accompanies *das Ding*. As mentioned above, a complete reunification of the symbolic subject and the ‘Real Thing’ is impossible while the symbolic subject remains just that, because the result of the empirical transgression would not be more pleasure but pain, and even self-destruction. Beyond a certain limit, pleasure becomes pain, and this ‘painful principle’ is what Lacan calls enjoyment. So desire is ‘driven’ by what, ultimately, can turn against the self-preservation of the desiring subject. The desire to enjoy more prompts the subject to cross a structural boundary where enjoyment becomes suffering. The more the subject enjoys, the more it fades as a Symbolic subject. Although the attainment of enjoyment is highly attractive because it could satisfy desire completely—here, Lacan notes that *das Ding* is the real cause of desire—it ultimately remains impossible for the subject: “a subject, as such, doesn’t have much to

⁴⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, London, Routledge, 1977a, p. 104.

⁴⁶ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*.

⁴⁷ Sigmund Freud, ‘Project for a Scientific Psychology’, in Marie Bonaparte, Anna Freud, Ernst Kris (eds.) *The Origins of Psychoanalysis*, New York, Basic Books, 1954 [1895], pp. 337-445.

⁴⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Buffalo, Prometheus Books, 1990 [1781].

⁴⁹ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, p. 54.

to with *jouissance*".⁵⁰ Since desire is ultimately oriented towards deadly enjoyment, in a way the Lacanian subject is what Heidegger⁵¹ might call a *Sein zum Tode*.

This orientation towards death is precisely why Freud could only partly agree with the Kantian implications of *das Ding an sich* in the fields of biology and neurology. It is worth recalling that Freud was a neurologist before he became a psychoanalyst. Freud agreed with the notion that modern knowledge can only encompass the phenomenological aspects of empirical nature. He thus agreed with the need to reject the old, well-established idea that all living organisms have an essence which bubbles up from within as well as with the need to replace this idea with the Enlightened notion that all creatures live and react simply because they are externally stimulated. Here, we could easily assert that the central aim of psychoanalysis is precisely to come to terms with the illusion of the human subject as self-identical. Both Freud and Lacan could be read as fierce opponents of the idea that a subject has an identity with an essence anchored in itself. Lacan's notion of the 'divided subject' and Freud's two tripartite topologies (the Conscious, Preconscious and Unconscious and the Id, Ego and Superego) are key illustrations of how they each distanced themselves from the idea of a fixed ego. Freud⁵², however, did not agree with the underlying assumption of the new biological paradigm, which stated that organisms react because they (or their sort) want to stay alive. He remained skeptical about this (Darwinian) concept because of experiences with his patients that demonstrated that death could sometimes be more attractive than life. They seemed to repeat and relive painful experiences deliberately and thus clearly did not always react in order to stay alive. Freud's alternative idea was summarized in what he called 'the death drive'—something which goes beyond the pleasure principle. Humans do not (re)act because they want to live; they (re)act because they want to experience pleasure. Freud's neurotic patients showed him that pleasure could be gained by any means, even through ends which caused pain and even death, as in the case of the anorexic who experienced pleasure while starving and who ultimately died because of that pleasure. Lacan's *das Ding* and his ideas about enjoyment capture this Freudian observation exactly in the sense that enjoyment operates entirely independently, implying that it is not necessarily oriented towards life.

Das Ding presents itself at the level of the unconscious experience as that which already makes the law (...). It is a capricious and arbitrary law, the law of the

⁵⁰ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XX: Encore*, New York, London, W.W. Norton & Company, 1998 [1975].

⁵¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, London, SCM Press, 1962 [1927].

⁵² Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1978 [1920], pp. 65-143.

oracle, the law of signs in which the subject receives no guarantee from anywhere.⁵³

Because of this sovereignty, independency and idiosyncrasy, it cannot be placed within any normative theory or conception of the good (life). As far as enjoyment is concerned, the consequences of life or death are merely epiphenomena. As people are desiring subjects directed towards *das Ding*, this does not imply that reaching *das Ding* should be univocally understood as a moral or at least personal duty. It is somewhat more complex and, as we will argue in depth, it is only through the concept of sublimation that *das Ding* actually can be connected with ethics and hence that it becomes possible to draw a distinction in the way people deal with the experience of extimacy.

EXTIMACY: A LACANIAN ANALYSIS

So, as a blind caprice, *das Ding* does not account for the so-called ‘service of the good’, be it one’s own good, the good of another person or the good of society. It is a blind force which cannot be fully controlled, neglected or explained. In fact, the many products of the Symbolic dimension (language) and the Imaginary dimension (fictions, dreams, images, fantasies) all serve to make this existential abyss bearable and to ascribe a certain (Symbolic or Imaginary) identity to the ‘black hole’ of *das Ding*. Our fantasies, for example, are constructions about the nature of the ‘lost Thing’ and about our relation to it. Inherent in these fantasies is our acceptance of the Thing’s status as lost, but we continue to believe that there is someone else—a fantasmatic other—who knows what *das Ding* is and how to access the enjoyment that accompanies it. In love, for example, it is clear how the fantasy works: the subject believes that his lover has ‘It’ and that the lover is a *conditio sine qua non* for a life worth living. The implication however is precisely that it is at the level of fantasy that we can return to the notion of agency or, in the terms of this article, the notion of a metaphysical chooser. The main task of the metaphysical chooser is to create a particular relation with *das Ding* in order not to feel guilty about not having pursued one’s desire. This however does not imply that Lacan would advise people to realize their desire right up to the level of the Real. Quite the contrary. Lacan, as we have already argued, would be highly critically for what might be called an ‘ethics of the real’. Badiou (and Žižek and Zupančič) seem to affirm this possibility—although with the proviso that there is a difference between the ‘event’ and the ‘simulacrum’.⁵⁴ However, as De Kesel argues, realizing the desire is the equivalent of promoting sadism, and therefore he appears to be more cautious.

⁵³ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, p. 73.

⁵⁴ Alain Badiou, *L'éthique : Essai Sur la Conscience du Mal*, Caen, Nous, 2003.

According to Lacan, ethics is essentially an ethics of desire, an ethics that promotes desire and, therefore, protects us against satisfaction, i.e. against the self-destructive ultimate object to which, unconsciously, it is attracted. In this sense, Lacan is more Kantian than we often admit.⁵⁵

Here it is necessary to invoke Lacan's crucial distinction between sublimation and perversion. This distinction will help to reinterpret the above-mentioned examples of love, Antigone, Kant and De Sade.

Lacan illustrates the process of sublimation on the basis of an analysis of the phenomenon of courtly love in the Middle Ages, where the idealization of the love object was central. Courtly love has formulated a kind of new 'love code' that operates beyond the existing moral codes that treated women as mere matrimonial property. Courtly love however is painful and ambivalent since the adored woman reacts in rather cold and chilly ways. As such courtly love is characterized by a strategy in order to disguise the fact that the idealized object can only be treated as being ideal because of the obstacles and the 'attitudinal distance' of the woman. The only way to 'have' the love object is indirect, meaning through a strategy of abstinence and distance. In this way the illusion is created that if only the obstacles would disappear the ultimate love object would fall within our reach and hence Real enjoyment could be obtained. Courtly love, as we might summarize it, refers to this paradox: on the one hand we acknowledge that we wish to have the most virile sex with the Lady, but on the other hand and in reality we desire a series of whimsical commandments which postpone and even prohibit the Real satisfaction of our desire. For if all obstacles would be eliminated and hence the gap between the lover and his lady is vanished, the adored object would lose its sublime status and would appear in its horrific concreteness: 'The Woman does not exit.'

As the ultimate pleasure cannot be attained in the sexual relation—there is no sexual relation, as Lacan has famously argued—sublimation can be understood as a strategy for dealing with this trauma. Love relations where one desires full reciprocity will lead to destruction. Therefore, what is required is that the other is allowed to be different so that a love relation can be built on the basis of that difference. In this way, the starting point is the lack which functions as the *condition sine qua non* for the creative work of sublimation. As Verhaeghe⁵⁶ has illustrated so brightly, as modern people seem to refuse the famous Lacanian *dictum* about the non-existence of the sexual

⁵⁵ Marc De Kesel, 'There is No Ethics of the Real. About a Common Misreading of Lacan's Seminar on The Ethics of Psychoanalysis'. Paper presented at the International Conference Rhetoric, Politics, Ethics, Ghent University, April 21-23, 2005, p. 10.

⁵⁶ Paul Verhaeghe, *Love in a Time of Loneliness - Three Essays on Drive and Desire*, New York, London, The Other Press, Rebus Press, 2000.

relation, they cannot live with the reality of flawed relations. The reason however why love relations have become so problematic in modern times, has precisely to do with the incapacity of sublimation.

For the courtly lover the woman functions as the idealized object around which the whole libidinal economy can circle. Or, as Lacan puts it, the object of love has been elevated—or sublimated—to the dignity of *das Ding*.⁵⁷ Although sublimation is related to the neurotic strategy to turn desire into an impossible desire, it nevertheless must be distinguished from it.⁵⁸ The hysteric occupies the position of *das Ding*, acting like the sublime lady who continually makes new demands on her lovers and calls for new proofs of love. However, the typical play of attraction, seduction and repulsion appears to be necessary in order for the hysteric to avoid that the truth would come to light, namely that she does not possess It (i.c. the phallus as the signifier of the lack). So, although she occupies the position of *das Ding*, she knows she is derived from the phallus that would make her The Woman. The problem however is that she sees her position of not having the phallus as an exemption and yet as a consequence of the Other who has robbed her phallus. Hence, she does not accept castration to be structural and therefore denies that being (treated as) the phallus in fact is nothing more than an effect of the sublimation of the lover. The relation of the obsessional neurotic towards *das Ding* is also different. Characteristic for the obsessional neurotic is that he accuses the Other of not being able to enjoy. Hence, he refers to a law fabricated by the Other which makes his desire to become impossible. This is different from sublimation where there is a tacit understanding between the lover and the adored lady in order to hold a distance, not because the Other would require this, but because it is a structural necessity in order not to be confronted with the horror of the Thing, and hence to realize a love relation. The *crux* of sublimation is that the lover knows that the love object does not have the phallus, but he pretends she has it, so that he can both enjoy and lament the object.

Although sublimation cannot give the subject the satisfaction of the Thing, it does not imply a regression to a neurotic pathological condition since it is conform with the polymorphous perverse drive that seeks to exceed the order of signifiers in order to reach the Thing.⁵⁹ Sublimation therefore gives the subject a certain pleasure because the desire gives no satisfaction in her purpose, reaching the extimate centre, but in the

⁵⁷ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, p. 112

⁵⁸ See Johan Schokker & Tim Schokker, *Extimiteit. Jacques Lacans Terugkeer Naar Freud*, Amsterdam, Boom, 2000.

⁵⁹ The drive is not perverse in the literal sense, but in the sense that it refers to the desire to go beyond the law of the Symbolic order—in that sense, the drive is guided by the Real Thing, which lies beyond the signifiers of the Symbolic order.

process itself—in the many artistic creations, rituals, chants, poems, rules, lyrics, etc.⁶⁰ So, sublimation does not satisfy desire as such, but it provides an image of how it could be satisfied. In fact, it is an imaginary answer to the question how the ideal can be attained, so that we can take peace in the dissatisfaction that drives us further. Sublimation prevents us to be blindly driven, as the neurotic, but remain focused on a specific object that has been elevated to the status of *das Ding*. As such this object has no intrinsic meaning—it is in fact nothing more than a signifier that pops up above the other signifiers so that it can constitute a renewed Symbolic world. Hence, it is a *creation ex nihilo* that can be enjoyed only to the extent that it remains unattainable.

Whereas in sublimation it is the object and hence never the desiring subject that occupies the place of the ultimate object of desire, in perversion this is precisely what happens since the subject, from the position of *das Ding*, dictates his law and hence addresses the violence of *das Ding* to the other. To the extent that only an object is placed beyond the boundaries of the Law, in sublimation the subject is prevented to go along with this transgression and yet can remain a subject of the Symbolic Law. Hence by elevating the object to the status of *das Ding*, the subject can find connection with the perverse character of his desire—*das Ding*—without being swept away by this transgression (see footnote 59). The pervert in contrast acknowledges *das Ding* as the ultimate object, but he denies the very impossibility of reaching it.

Did Antigone operate from the pervert position? Certainly not. From Lacan's perspective, Antigone's act is an act of sublimation. She did not jump into the Real like the pervert, but has only performed the radical nature of her own desire. By affirming her brother as the ultimate object of desire—by elevating him to the level of *das Ding*—she has simultaneously acknowledged herself as a subject of desire. As Antigone refused to refer to the Other, Creon's Law, she decided to accept and pursue the idiosyncratic enjoyment of *das Ding*. She knows that Creon is also castrated and therefore has no ultimate knowledge of *das Ding*. As a result, she is willing to listen to her extimate desire coming from *das Ding* and takes full responsibility for it. Although she does not fully understand why she is tied to her desire to bury her brother even to the price of her own dead, she recognizes *das Ding* as *her* Real cause of desire. With this kind of recognition she sealed her destiny as a woman whom Lacan refers to as being a heroine, a true subject of desire.

Is this what Lacan wants us to do? Does he want us to jump into the Real like Antigone did? As we already mentioned, authors like Žižek and Zupančič seem to affirm this, while De Kesel remains cautious. In De Kesel's opinion the famous

⁶⁰ Lacan has pointed out that the most diverse things can be considered as sublimation such as art, religion, science, ethics and even the whole Freudian psychoanalysis.

Lacanian expression of not giving way to one's desire should not be read as a moral law that enables people to test whether their actions are in line with their desire.⁶¹

As we read in Lacan's analysis of *Antigone*, this 'measureless measure' of desire does not function as an example for us to follow but as an image in which we see ourselves insofar as we escape our own grasp so as to be confronted with the desire that we 'are'.⁶²

The expression is valid solely in the specific situation of an analytic cure whose goal it is to direct the analyst's and analysand's attention to desire. This direction is necessary because in the normal order of things desire as such cannot but be repressed and ignored. The point is that when entering the cure, the analysand is still in search of that desire. Both the analyst and the analysand should discover where he 'has ceded on her desire' in order to increase the chance of coming upon the traces of his desire as such. In the cure Lacan provides for the possibility of access to the domain of enjoyment where the subject does not simply disappear as a Symbolic subject but can still more or less be present.

Lacan's 'ethics of psychoanalysis' is based on the paradoxical possibility that one can consciously confront oneself with the domain in which one usually disappears, namely, the domain of the 'thing', of *jouissance*. Only such a conscious confrontation with the unconscious lets us experience what is at the most fundamental level purely 'to be desired'.⁶³

In order to reach *das Ding*, the analysand should traverse the protection of the fantasy.

The fantasies at work in his demands must be elaborated in order to discover the true object of desire. It is here the analysand faces his fantasy as a last defence mechanism against the real, unreachable object of his desire, a defence mechanism which is at the same time desire's final support. This fantasy supports the analysand's desire, even when – for instance, in 'enjoyment' – the analysand is no longer able to be the subject of his libidinal economy and, for a moment, fades away. So, fantasy is a last 'screen' keeping the subject in touch with and at distance from its last, real truth (in Lacanese: his object *a* as real).⁶⁴

At that moment the analysand accepts that *das Ding*—as an empirical object which can be found—does not exist, yet can only be desired. This of course does not imply that the subject should only humbly accept his constitutive lack of subjectivity and thus the

⁶¹ Marc De Kesel, *Eros and Ethics. Reading Jacques Lacan's Seminar VII*, New York, Albany, SUNY Press, 2009.

⁶² Marc De Kesel, *Eros and Ethics*, p. 263.

⁶³ De Kesel, *Eros and Ethics*, p. 267.

⁶⁴ Marc De Kesel, 'There is No Ethics of the Real.', p. 14-15.

fact that there is no underlying self-identity. On the contrary, it is necessary that the subject finds a particular way to live in accordance with his desire. We can illustrate this with an example borrowed from Brousse⁶⁵, who describes a woman who wants to have a baby. This woman repeatedly finds herself in abusive relationships, and is therefore never able to fulfill her wish. During her analysis, it becomes clear that her only memory of her mother involves her saying that she was not wanted and that she intended to kill her. In subsequent relationships, the woman repeatedly assumes the role of someone who is dying, and as a vanishing woman, she is unable to maintain a relationship conducive to her desire to have a child. Now, it is not sufficient that this woman reconciles herself to her loss. In order not to abandon her desire, the woman should take a risk and initiate an act that will allow her to fulfill her desire. In this particular example, this could mean that the woman must create a different past in order to return to the present as a woman who is alive and therefore able to have a child. Here, we see the agency of the subject: the subject has to make an existential decision about the signifiers of the past. This is precisely why Lacan⁶⁶ argues that the only thing one can be guilty of is giving “ground relative to one’s desire.”

It is important for people and for the analysand in particular to be confronted with *das Ding* because people should acknowledge and come to terms with the shocking fact—which is probably the ultimate and most controversial meaning of Freudian and Lacanian theory—that our desires ultimately do not respond to the self-preservation principle but to the death principle. So *das Ding* and the deadly enjoyment it provides are aspects of the desire we encounter when we go in search of ‘ourselves’. During this search, we have the opportunity to give way to our desire or not. In this sense, we could say that the only tie which might be defined as constitutive is the connection with our desire, derived from *das Ding*. In other words, the subject *is* the desire for the Real Thing.

THE LIBERAL-COMMUNITARIAN DEBATE REVISITED

By means of Lacan’s tripartite ontology of the Symbolic (language), the Imaginary (fantasy) and the Real (*das Ding*), the subject can be defined as a multidimensional subject. While communitarians view the subject as a product of the other (people *are* their community ends), liberals stress the notion that people are agents, able to live their lives autonomously. The communitarian self is the encumbered psychological ‘I’ which feels constitutively bound to certain ends. Liberals, on the other hand, focus on

⁶⁵ Marie-Hélène Brousse, ‘The Drive (II)’, in Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, Bruce and Maire Jaanus (eds.) *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan’s Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Albany, New York, State University of New York, 1995, pp. 99-107.

⁶⁶ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, p. 319.

the metaphysical chooser. In terms of Lacanian theory, we could argue that communitarians emphasize the Symbolic dimension: the subject is encumbered by signifiers. In fact, as described above, he literally *is* an effect of language. He is unable to escape language in the same way the communitarian subject is unable to escape certain community ends. Liberals seem to emphasize the imaginary concept of a fixed ego that is capable of choosing and revising his ends freely. In its alienating capacity, the dimension of the Real functions as an important correction to both the liberal and communitarian identity concepts. As we have seen, *das Ding* is something which cannot be shared. It is an idiosyncratic element which cannot be entirely explained, adjusted or controlled by means of the Symbolic or Imaginary dimensions. It is there, and it requires the metaphysical chooser to take a position. If the metaphysical chooser chooses not to pursue his desire, relying instead on the demands and answers provided by the Other, he will lose a sense of integrity. If, however, the metaphysical chooser does not give way to his desire, he acts in full accordance with an inner categorical duty. People who pursue their desires are authentic and in this way they illustrate Nietzsche's⁶⁷ famous line "Werde der du bist" ("become what you already are") rather neatly.

Kymlicka's image of the self as both encumbered and capable of choosing from among various ends neglects the influence of *das Ding*. *Das Ding* is something extimate: it comes from nowhere but is ultimately self-positing and autonomously assumed. If we choose not to pursue it, we pay the price of 'guilt', 'self-betrayal', 'inauthenticity', 'loss of integrity', 'cognitive dissonance', and so on. If we choose to pursue it, we must be willing to pay the price of enjoyment, meaning that we risk the dead as Symbolic subject. A theory like Kymlicka's invests mostly in the top-down capability of the self as a chooser. As such, it underestimates the weight of certain ends' influence.

In other words, perception, interpretation, memorization, etc., are processes that are highly selective and biased by *jouissance*. From all this, Lacan concludes that the agency that does the thinking, the computing and the judging is not the ego or the subject, but *jouissance*.⁶⁸

As we have seen, some individuals 'choose' to adhere to their ends even to the extent that they prefer death over life without that end. This 'choice', however, is not felt as a choice, but as an inner duty. Accepting this means that conflicts arise with Kymlicka's position, which maintains that no aims, ties, loyalties, convictions or conceptions of the good can be privileged since every end is potentially revisable. Extimate ends are identity-forming ends which should be placed beyond the field of

⁶⁷ Wilhelm Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, New York, The Modern Library, 2000 [1888].

⁶⁸ Frédéric Declercq, 'Lacan's Concept of the Real of *Jouissance*: Clinical Illustrations and Implications', *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, vol. 9 (2004), 46.

common reversibility. In response to the tragedy of Antigone, we might think that Kymlicka would probably argue that it would be possible for Antigone to follow Creon's command. She has simply chosen not to do so. However, this is the viewpoint of the external observer. From the internal perspective of Antigone this choice is simply impossible. If Antigone adheres Creon's law, she would no longer be Antigone. As Saulus became Paulus at the gates of Damascus, Antigone would have become another woman when following Creon's command. Antigone does not lack the capability to choose differently. Antigone, being portrayed by Sophocles, is not a woman who freely deliberates what she can/has to do. The tragedy is about a woman who felt that she—being the sister of Polynices—simply has no other choice than to follow her extimate desire for her brother who, as a signifier, was elevated to the status of *das Ding*.

Observing that constitutive 'extimate' ends exist is similar in some way to the communitarian idea of the 'me' which cannot be separated from certain ends. Nevertheless, the two concepts remain distinct for two reasons. *First*, the constitutive connection of the real has a disruptive character, since *das Ding* is not encumbered by a social community. An individual does not discover through life that he belongs to a certain group and that he is merely a link in the community chain. Instead, he discovers that he has a completely idiosyncratic and extimate relationship with his desire and that the Real cause of his desire does not necessarily link him to a group or culture, or even to life in general. As we have seen, *das Ding* is a caprice. It is unencumbered in its simple pursuit of enjoyment. It does not account for life or death, good or bad, happiness or sorrow. Since it can only be linked to the realm of the Symbolic as a void, it cannot be entirely explained why individuals are attached to certain ends or make certain choices. This seems to be what Alain Badiou⁶⁹ had in mind when he developed the concept of the 'event'. According to Badiou, the event, or revolution, is something external to the main knowledge of the situation in which it took place, meaning that nothing could have predicted the occurrence of the event. It is only afterwards that reasons for and half-true logical explanations of its emergence can be formulated. *Second*, while communitarians defend an ethics of the common good—Charles Taylor⁷⁰, for example, made an influential plea for a 'politics of cultural survival' in Quebec—the 'ethics of psychoanalysis' reduces ethics to a radically individual matter which cannot be interpreted by socially determined notions of 'good' or 'bad'. Communitarian ethics treats cultures as goods which should be

⁶⁹ Badiou Alain, *Being and Event*.

⁷⁰ Taylor Charles, 'The Politics of Recognition', in Gutman, Amy (ed.) *Multiculturalism and The Politics of Recognition*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 25-73.

defended, since individuals are constitutively tied to them. Psychoanalytic ethics, by contrast, treats desire and its idiosyncratic manifestation via 'extimate ends' as the pivotal issue. For Lacan, the very fact that we are willing to pay any price—perhaps even our own lives—represents the difference between what he calls 'an ordinary man' and 'a hero'. *Das Ding* itself is neither good nor bad as such. It is dysfunctional in every ethical system.

The heart of all ethics is something which is not in itself 'ethical' (nor is it 'nonethical') – that is to say, it has nothing to do with the register of ethics. This 'something' goes by several different names – although we will limit ourselves to two: for Lacan, it is 'the Real'; for Badiou, 'the event'. These terms concern something which appears only in the guise of the encounter, as something that 'happens to us', surprises us, throws us 'out of joint', because it always inscribes itself in a given continuity as a rupture, a break or an interruption.⁷¹

Having criticized the liberal and communitarian depictions of the self, how should we evaluate the different policies they both defend? We believe it is liberalism which can account the most for the existence of extimate ends. In contrast to communitarian politics of the common good, liberalism does not impose a way of living, meaning that it does not defend a paternalistic policy. Liberalism grants people the necessary freedom to live according to the own conceptions of the good. As only liberal conceptions may be pursued, its only restriction is the liberal bandwidth. Obviously there are many reasons why this demarcation can and should be installed—the liberal rule of law protects people against the negative implications of others. Lacan would not oppose the liberal rule of law since he in fact treats the many cultural laws, norms and values as objects being elevated to the status of the Thing. This means that they already function as signifiers which are associated with the lack around which the libidinal economy of the subject can circle. So, although moral rules and duties may have all sorts of neurotic effects, this is not necessarily the case because they go back to sublimations. Therefore, although it is possible to radically transgress the law and norms—something which Žižek seems to affirm since he radically rejects the capitalist system and hence strives for a transgression into the realm of the Real with uncertain and possible deadly consequences—they can also be treated as sublimations that provide a Symbolic space for the subject to protest and therefore to stay in touch with his Real desire. As should be clear by now, the point of Lacan is that people should come to terms with the extimate cause of their desire and that following this cause could lead to their dead. Following desire up to the Real is possible, but as such does not function as an ethical device. With sublimation, subjects are given an aesthetic

⁷¹ Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real. Kant and Lacan*, London, Verso, 2000, p. 235.

image that illustrates where this extreme position could lead to. Of course, dead should not always be the end point of desire. In modern times, Antigone probably could be a woman who has given up everything to make sure that ‘unreasonable laws’ are changed in the benefit of the weakest. In the courage of these people, we might find a beautiful image of what desire could lead to. Our confrontation with this image and especially the aesthetic experience, can help us to be in touch with our desire. Although it is possible, Lacan does not want us to pursue the heroic—that would lead us in the realm of the Real which lies beyond the Symbolic dimensions of the law—but the image of the hero can help us to better understand our desire as its origin lies in what usually is kept unconscious.

CONCLUSION

We started this article with an historical overview in which we illustrated how the liberal-communitarian debate can be read against the background of nowadays dominance of neoliberalism. In the rest of the article we presented an outline of the two political-philosophical positions regarding the ontological status of the self. According to communitarians, the self is constitutively bound to its ends in such a way that individuals may actually *be* these ends. On the basis of this ontology, they support the implementation of a politics of the common good. Liberals, on the other hand, argue that the self is prior to its ends and thus unencumbered. In turn, Kymlicka’s theory refutes the communitarian critique on liberalism and defends the liberal position without relying on the notion of an unencumbered self. In his view, the very fact that individuals are capable of revising all of their ends does not preclude their necessarily being bound to at least some ends. Since ends can always be revised (though not all at once), Kymlicka argues in favour of a liberal politics in which individuals are granted the rights and conditions necessary for enhancing this capability. We have argued that Kymlicka’s conception of the self is untenable, for it fails to differentiate between the self as a metaphysical, unencumbered, choosing instance and the self as psychologically characterized by certain ends. The ends to which a chooser is bound do not define the chooser as a metaphysical ‘I’ but only as a psychological ‘I’. This means that Kymlicka’s theory does require an unencumbered self, and therefore that the communitarian critique of the liberal self as being atomist cannot be refuted.

In order to further develop the status of the self, we referred to Jacques Lacan’s theory of the subject. Particular reference was made to *das Ding*, a ‘transcendent object’ which functions as the Real cause of desire, in order to explain what we term ‘extimate ends’. These ends are intimate (they define our psychological selves) but also external (since we are not aware of their meaning nor are fully capable to neglect them). The

fact that people are desiring subjects, led by *das Ding*, is something that neither communitarians nor liberals can entirely incorporate in their respective theories. Communitarians are unable to account for these extimate ends for they reduce constitutive ends to community ends, which are shared by all members of a particular community. *Das Ding*, however, is entirely idiosyncratic and does not necessarily tie an individual to a community. The extent to which laws and all kinds of cultural norms and practices can be treated as products of sublimation, implies people to remain connected to the community with its Symbolic laws. As sublimation is compatible with the polymorphous perverse drive that runs in a pulsating movement around the Thing, it invokes a subtle play of both attraction and rejection—and yet the possibility to emancipate and transgress the many laws and norms. Liberals are similarly unable to account for extimate ends because they see the subject as being capable of choosing or revising all of his ends. While Kymlicka's 'top-down theory' argues that the self masters all its ends and hence is responsible for these ends, psychoanalysis enables a 'bottom-up theory' in which the subject should be seen as a product of his Real desire, or at least as a subject who is required to take a position towards this desire. In one way or another the subject will have to come to terms with the destructive *Ding* as the origin of his desire. In other words, the metaphysical chooser is free only to the extent that he remains oriented towards the enjoyment of *das Ding*.

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