

THE CAUSAL CHAIN

When Slavoj Žižek talks about the extimate, and hence when we take up those topics that are primarily conditioned by the extimate (the uncanny, detached or “noncontiguous” virtuality, reversed predication, etc.), he emphasizes the fact that the “causal chain” itself has been disrupted.¹ There is a short circuit (which can also take place at the level of critical theory).² Effects become causes, as in the case of master signifiers and Deleuzian “demarks.” Partial objects would lose their enigmatic partiality were it not for this disruption of the causal chain, which surrounds them temporally and spatially with a “vortex” we label the “site of exception” (Eric Santner).³ The “intimate objective” of extimacy flips cause as well as space. Neither would Lacan’s division of speech acts into enunciation (content) and *énoncé* (act) make any sense unless this division, too, were not a disruption of the causal chain. And, when Žižek provides, as he does in multiple places, Pascal’s example of the reversed logic by which religious converts are encouraged to first kneel and pray *in order to bring about faith*, we see again how discourse, logic, space, and time are bound together in the idea of the causal chain and its revolutionary disruptions — which at the same time form the *essence* of subjective formation and development.

In other words, if the causal chain is this important, why don’t we have a clearer picture of precisely how it is broken?

What would a “picture” involve? Here I make a claim that has proved to be original if only because I cannot find any precedent, qualifying me for Žižek’s commendation as “marginal” and “disavowed by the hegemonic ideology.” This raises the question of why no one else has put it forward before now. I would like to show the disruption in a way that represents the chain and its disruption as “ongoing and potential,” an “inner quality” of the chain itself, in the sense of the metaphor “seeds of its own destruction.” The picture is really a picture, or rather a diagram. It converts Pascal’s distinction of the mechanics of praying and kneeling from the representative function of belief into two vectors held at a right angle to represent the initially independent relationship between the intended expression and the (contingent, material) means of expression.⁴

¹ Fundamentally, the extimate (*extimité*) is a case of how the exterior gets into an interior, and *vice versa*, i.e. the “intimate object.” The extimate is comprehensively introduced by Jacques-Alain Miller, “Extimacy,” in *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure, and Society*, Mark Bracher, Marshall W. Alcorn, Jr., Ronald J. Corthell, and Françoise Massardier-Kenney (New York and London: New York University Press, 1994), 74–87. See also Jacques-Alain Miller, “Extimacy,” <http://www.lacan.com/symptom/?p=36>.

² Žižek introduces the critical use of short circuits with the series of publication by the same name (MIT Press). His forward: “A short circuit occurs when there is a faulty connection in the network — faulty, of course, from the standpoint of the network’s smooth functioning. Is not the shock of short-circuiting, therefore, one of the best metaphors for a critical reading? Is not one of the most effective critical procedures to cross wires that do not usually touch: to take a major classic (text, author, notion), and read it in a short-circuiting way, through the lens of a ‘minor’ author, text, or conceptual apparatus (‘minor’ should be understood here in Deleuze’s sense: not ‘of lesser quality,’ but marginalized, disavowed by the hegemonic ideology, or dealing with a ‘lower,’ less dignified topic)?”

³ The term “site of exception” comes from Eric L. Santner’s *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 2001).

⁴ This idea of a “representative function” comes from Ernst Cassirer, who in citing three representational modalities (expressive, representational, and abstract) followed in the footsteps of Vico’s mythic, heroic, and human mentalities. The representational function constitutes the first fully independent relationship of signifiers from signifieds, evident in the thematic importance of lying, an art that distinguished Odysseus from his fellow Argives, and craft in the formation of oaths, a talent credited to Hermes. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1953). In mythic thought, the signifier was continually “contaminated” by the signified; Vico’s example would have been the thunder, which as the signifier’s material component,

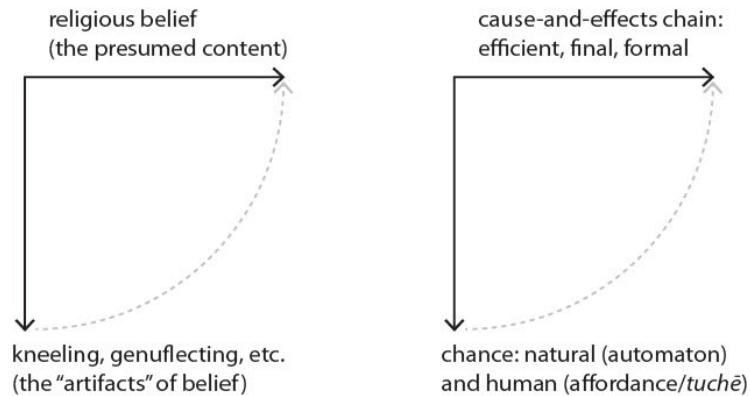


Figure 1. Pascal's advice, converted into vector form, with presumed content representing what is conventionally understood as the intended outcome of the efforts to convert new followers. The "artifact" (kneeling, etc.) "contaminates" this conventional representational content, i.e. it is an effect that works like a cause. A general model can be constructed in terms of the contamination of chance, fate, or affordance, intersecting the "chain of causes and effects" ... but this model proposes that the short circuit of the causal chain occurs "internally," because of the vector relationship between intentions and by-products/accidents.

Second, I take particular notice of Aristotle's system of causes (efficient, formal, material, final) but especially of his proximal discussion of two forms of chance: natural chance (*automaton*) and human chance (*tuchē*).⁵ The latter expands into affordance and opportunity — just as one might discover uranium accidentally while digging for gold, or have a religious conversion as the result of a touristic trip to Machu Picchu. The former divides as well: between the "anything goes" aspect of accidents in the natural world (being struck by lightning or a falling rock) and the deterministic sense of *automaton*. It would seem that the machinery of automation is the exact opposite of natural chance, but popular imagery says the opposite. When "nature does what nature does," the presumption of a system whose workings and logic are invisible to human understanding is strong. Nature is giant machine whose slow but steady progress may be tilted, slowed, or sped up but not stopped or significantly altered, an image built into both scientific and religious views of the cosmos.

Lacan's enunciation theory involves extimacy but also suggests that there is an order in the causal chain ... in effect making it not just a chain externally, such as the classic example of billiard balls, but an *internal* chain — as a "cause of cause." Add to this internal order the idea of a division between what is taken to be an intentional cause, and the psychoanalytical knowledge of intentions concealed even to the most lucid and self-reflective subject. "Desire is the desire of the Other," Lacan was famous for saying. The Other constitutes a nexus of fantasy constructions by which subjects deal with the traumatic Real. The Other is subjectivity's necessary externality; its anchor; its gravitational field. Yet,

continually overwhelmed the signifying function. Similarly, other natural substances were held to contain demons whose unpredictable behaviors/responses required ritual and magic intervention, tying these substances to the practice of divination, an elaborate reading of natural signs in which omens were "de-monstrated" into secular advice by realizing their unmediated relationships in metaphor, as in the case of the representation of the annual year by a "monster" whose head was a goat (spring), body was a lion (summer), and whose tail was a serpent (winter). The heroic universal — the representational function — established an orthogonality between thought and expression, i.e. the ability to intentionally misrepresent one's intentions, in contrast to the earlier mythic function's status as "true speech" (*vera narratio*) — incapable of dissembling.

⁵ Aristotle's theory of causality appears in his *Physics*. See <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/physics.mb.txt>, Book 2, part 3. For his discussion of *automaton* ("chance") and *tuchē*, "incidental chance" (not directly cited as *automaton* or *tuchē* in the on-line text), see parts 4 and 5.

because the Other depends on how the subject has used fantasy to construct it as well as the subject's own nature, there is no simple cause; no cause without a "shadow" that re-arranges the pages of the atlas the conscious subject would arrange for fantasy's sake.

Enunciation's primary division into content and action/performance sets up the two main levels of causality, a "phenomenal" level of how things seem to be, and are conventionally intended to be understood, and basement level indicated by the vector of the artifact (e.g. kneeling and praying, as opposed to religious belief). I avoid calling this an "unconscious" or a "virtual" level. Rather, the system as a whole is a case of the extimacy of cause. The orderly progression of the forms of cause is intrinsically self-undermined by the relation to chance, represented in the two types (natural and human) and further qualified by the divisions of chance that in some sense "re-inscribe" the logic of phenomenal cause inside the aleatory. The system's superficial order thus splits the atom of discourse into phenomenal parts and a shadow-zone of "wild particles" able to re-combine into new substances. This is the system's efficient cause — the essence of cause itself, in its dialectical complexity.⁶

This systemic efficient cause, combined with discourse theory, awards efficient cause as a type the initial position, and this primacy sets the subsequent sequence. The end of the sequence is, following the mandate of phenomenal being, formal — something perceptible: recognizable, sharable, discussable; something "out there," as well as the space and time that allow us to contextualize the perceptible and reflect on the meaning of its placement and duration.

Formal cause is orthogonally linked to material cause. The relationship reflects the general relationship between phenomena — what is materially present — and chance, as figure to ground. Out of all of the things that might have happened, *this something* has happened, and in this material way. Out of all the ways something has appeared, it has appeared in *this way* and not some other. We are standing over here, not over there. The particularity of experience always seems to be one occasion that has won out over other possible conditions that did not happen. In the same way, the form (Aristotle uses the example of the marble statue) engages its materials to be "what it is in particular, at this point in space and time." The two vectors that distinguish content in all its representations and the material supports of that content are thus tied securely in formal and material cause. We can represent them as the kernel of the causal chain, the central but also last in the series, an angular construct, Γ.

The connecting cause is final cause, the motive. Motive is the most obviously "psychoanalytical" cause of the four phenomenological causes. Its "basement" is filled with unacknowledged impulses, memory traces, forgotten traumas, scars, vendettas, and the like. When Lacanian psychoanalysis gets down to clinical work, it aims to excavate this basement, or rather to get the subject to "go downstairs" to piece together his/her own involvement in

⁶ It is not such a bad idea to compare efficient cause to Hegel's metaphor of the master-slave, if only to make use of the idea of Mastery as self-deconstructing, as depending on a servant to maintain it, while engaging the master with the need to imagine other masters challenging his/her mastery. In Lacan's version of the discourse of the master ($S_1/\$ \rightarrow S_2/a$), enjoyment is withheld, placed within the labor of the servant, who is "the subject supposed to know." But, know how? The servant's knowledge is a "knowing without knowing," a knowledge bound up in the materiality of the work that must be done for the master. It is the knowledge of the *bricoleur*, who must come up with a banquet for 60 or a theatrical device making angels appear with materials lying around in the cathedral basement. The servant's role as a subject whose existence is tied up with "getting things done" at the "pleasure" of a master, who is paradoxically alienated from this pleasure as a result of being alienated from the knowledge of how to make the things he/she desires, is complex and obverse at every level. Because orders flow in one direction but ricochet in unpredictable ways, the master's discourse defines just what is "efficient" about efficient cause. The efficiency is tied up with its *extimité*, its ability to both bend the truth and turn the bend into Truth.

constructing the fantasies about the Other, i.e. the real dirt of desire. "Going down the stairs" is such an obvious architectural metaphor that at this point it is necessary to mention that Gaston Bachelard's idiotic *Poetics of Space* is not entirely idiotic. It is idiotic in the literal sense, that the "idiot" is, etymologically, the "private person." The vector leading down the stairs is a private matter that has afforded the other vector its unintended participation in public affairs.

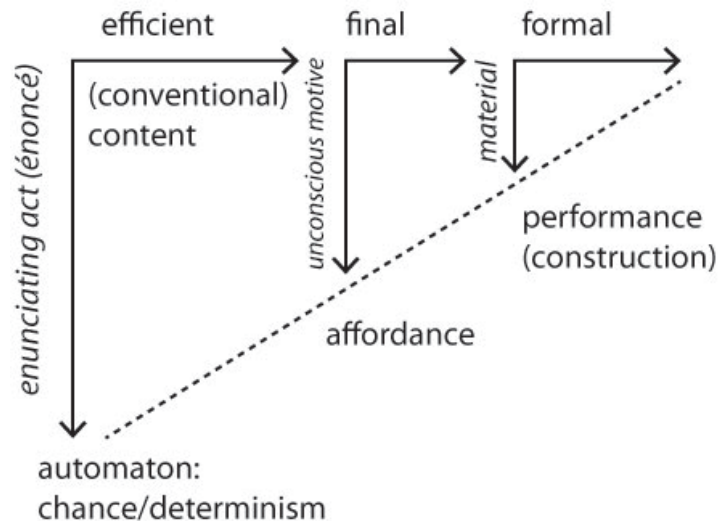


Figure 2. Efficient, final, and formal causes create conventional content at a phenomenal level (the public domain of sharable, materialized experiences). Their "artifacts," however, lead to a basement structure involving chance, affordance, and fate. With the last form of cause (formal), the material basis is configured in a performative context that combines material advantages and limitations with affordance (*bricolage*) as well as chance and a sense of inevitability.

In other words, because there is an annex to public space and time, the annex can seem to be the basis of an enigmatic finality, a fate. The tendency to see that accidental things are thus as such a way *for some reason*, even if that reason is unknowable, is isolated from actuality. By this I mean what Kant meant in his *Critique of Judgment*. Purposiveness can be detached from the chain of reasons accounting for why things are what they are. Purposiveness can be independent (Γ) from appearances; we can see things we cannot imagine to be intended: storms, wrecks, scenes of horror. We call these "sublime" because although we have disconnected them from imaginable chains linking effective cause to formal cause (or, "sense" in its two senses, both as a system for what we experience and the literal contents of what we experience), nonetheless *purpose has survived this disconnection*. It is the extimate "organ without a body," as Žižek says of partial objects, reversing Deleuze's phrase. There can be purpose where there is "no purpose," so to speak: purpose as wild, purpose as impossible, purpose as Real.

This is old stuff for psychoanalysis. In the final moments of clinical therapy, the analysand confronts the impossible-Real and his/her involvement with it at the level of fantasy formation. This, as Mladen Dolar has pointed out, provokes the subject into one final and telling defense: transference love.⁷ If the analysand, *desperate not to know what it knows*, can get the analyst to fall in love with him/her, the psyche will not be able to keep its appointment in Samarra. It will not have to "die" as a result of its own choices/finality. This last-ditch effort should be seen in its full light. As Dolar emphasizes, the theme of love is not

⁷ Mladen Dolar, "Beyond Interpellation," *Qui Parle* 6, 2 (Spring/Summer 1993): 75-96.

an accident. Love involves its own vectorial quality. Although there can be no true love that is not essential a free choice made by both partners, once love begins, there is a sense of inevitability that has drawn and continues to draw the lovers together.

In other words, the affordance of *tuchē* (the basement level of the causal chain) in combination with the chain of conventional cause-forms quickly converts the “love at first sight” moment to a series of predetermined events. If “the end” is temporalized to a moment in the future, literature tends to paint it in tragic colors, but it can just as easily be inserted at the beginning, where it acts retroactively as the fate that has brought the lovers together. Žižek’s joke about the little girl who wondered how, given that her mother was from one city, her father from another, and she was born in a third, they all managed to get together, shows that the “tree” representing the forking paths of choice made by chance can be reverse-engineered. When lovers’ eyes meet across a crowded room, to quote the cliché, a field of *tuchē* (affordances) is required for automaton-as-fate to do its stuff. This is the “always-already” aspect of the Real. Not only is purposiveness detachable, as the “wild finality” of the sublime; causality can detach itself *from itself*, leaving its place in the line of logical sequence and jumping in front, to turn its effects into causes.

The basement of the causal chain is like the situation known to bar-club owners in municipalities where licenses to serve alcoholic drinks are awarded on the basis of contiguity. One license is limited to “one premises,” but if multiple buildings are connected at the subterranean level — i.e. if their cellars are linked with passageways, tunnels, or anything humanly passable — then the coverage of the license may extend to what, above ground, appear to be separate premises. The portability of cause’s “artifact” of chance, its basement, extends causality’s legitimacy beyond the literal bounds of the progression that puts efficient cause first, final cause second, and formal-material cause third. This is the essence of the “love defense” that, as Dolar describes it, shows how psychoanalysis defines a subjectivity that is beyond the powers of ideology and ideology’s *interpellation logic*.

At this point it is possible to suggest a much larger claim about subjectivity. As far as Louis Althusser was concerned, the subject is entirely ideological. There is no remainder, no gap, no part of the subject that is not determined and structured by the ideological “moment” of interpellation, when the subject willingly but unconsciously (yes, an oxymoron) accepts the inscription of the Other at the center of his/her subjectivity. This inscription is not content. It is a void, a place-holder, a “hot-line” that the Other can use to deliver its enigmatic half-garbled messages. There is no other subject, for Althusser, in that this is the *structure of subjectivity itself*. Lacan would seem to endorse this structure, with his insistence on the significance of the mirror stage initiating the young subject into its neurotic future, where in order to belong to the networks of symbolic relations, language-sustained, he/she must accept the fact of symbolic castration — the inevitable misrecognition that results from the superior status of signifiers (the king is ruled by the crown and scepter) — or face the further disadvantages of psychosis. In neurosis, subjects “know but do not know that they know,” thanks to interpellation by the Other’s desire. They are the Hitchcockian “man who knew too much,” in that the Other appears in the form of a surplus or a lack (the negative status makes these interchangeable), the lack taking the form of a loss of something that was never possessed, the surplus being the one exception imagined to *not* be subject to the laws that bind the other subjects within a “masculine” concession, a submission to the rule of castration (-∅). The alternative is represented by James Joyce, at the stage of *Finnegans Wake*, where all signifiers are “over-determined.” Joyce is the man who knew too much — really! The surplus of a psychotic is already taken into account. It is already a part of the system that both defines and defeats the networks of symbolic relations, typically beginning with language as in Joyce’s case.

When Dolar suggests that “love is the answer,” one must ask “what was the question?” If there is a remainder, something else besides the interpellation of the ideological subject — i.e. to the *structure* by which the choices of neurosis and psychosis are laid out as the *forced choices* for subjectivity — how is this remainder not just a last-ditch effort to avoid facing the truth. How is love *per se* involved with revising the model of interpellation, replete with its obscurities, extimacies, and hidden passageways?

Love throws the causal chain and its double layered structure into crisis, but it also confirms it as the means by which “love” has been made the inevitable end of subjectivity by the clever ploy of making it an outlaw.⁸ The causal chain is made by three “rings” — efficiency, finality, and materialized form — but the link between any two of these is, like the Borromeo knot Lacan used to characterize the unity of the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real, reliant on the existence of a *third*. If this is put in terms of “the rival,” the case of René Girard is brought into discourse theory. This is the view that human culture in its entirety is grounded in the idea of singularity and challenges to singularity, which at the level of drama is the theme of the hero and his/her rival. In other words, singularity (identity, authenticity) is always *shadowed*, and in this shadow we see the historical-cultural operations of the uncanny: detached virtuality, fantasy formation, the unsettling of domesticity (the implicit fraying of the networks of symbolic relations).



Figure 3. The wild man, demon of the field of affordance represented by the Medieval forest, embodied knowledge and therefore had to be tricked or tortured to reveal his secrets.

Where Vico emphasized the importance to human origins not just of burial but “love and marriage,” Lacan seems to add that “you can’t have one without the Other,” as the maudlin lyrics of the song, “Love and Marriage,” idiotically anticipate, without being aware of

⁸ This is the ploy well known to dramatists and writers familiar with the romantic device by which the future lover is introduced negatively, i.e. as the “bad boy” (or girl) who is at first hated or refused. Whether this negative beginning is reversed through a discovery of the “true circumstances” or a “heroic accomplishment” (saving the family or a beloved pet), cause is assigned to what Freud would have linked to the *einzigster Zug* — a unary trait that, by virtue of its singularity, constitutes a means of authenticating and legitimizing the love choice. He/she is “the one,” says the lover who knows just how this number is involved in the selection process. “One and only” are tied with a Borromeo knot, where each ring-pair of is bound to the other by means of a *third* — a rival — to prove the point that no two things (or persons) can occupy the same place at the same time. The point is that, “if this be love,” then so the subject and subjectivity in general must follow the same rule. The circumstantial-empirical choice of lover by the subject involves the same double claim. The unary trait is ultimately a phenomenal requirement of the “one,” but without the rival (the shadow zone of causality, whereby time and space can “recirculate” both positionally and logically — hence, the uncanny role of “detached causality”) this one cannot exist.

the death connection.⁹ The Other is in fact buried: buried, in ideology, within subjectivity, inscribed at its heart, an enigmatic permanent void from which, nonetheless, a voice can be heard to deliver its half-message (*le voix acousmatique*); and buried, in the system of three rings, three causes, and three whatevers — *liberté, égalité, fraternité* — as a basement of connected corridors, linking the past with the future, constructing a “future anteriority” by the time of which a past will conjoin with a present as an “always-already.”

The place of the third is a place of exile, a forest in which there is a “wild man” who embodies — who takes on, *incorporates* — truth whose exact nature is revealed by the fact that Medieval belief held that the wild man’s knowledge had to be extracted through *stealth* or *torture*.¹⁰ This is the third that shows how the causal chain sets up its force field by relying on resonance — in particular, the “resonance of chance” that is the tricky twin of “stochastic resonance” of neural network theory. Thus, the “premises” (homes) above ground are legitimized (licensed) to “serve” based on the uncanny (*unheimlich*) and undomesticatable passageways that, thanks to the metrics of detached virtuality and other techniques of spatial-temporal outlaw-ism, provide a dark passage.

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⁹ The Vichian idea of linking marriage and burial amounts to a double endorsement of the theme of *katabasis*, as the status of the bride as “already-always dead” indicates. Every bride is in a sense a “bride the underworld” — an idea that survives intact in such myths as Orpheus, “Cupid and Psyche,” *Alcestis*, and the more modern *Nozze de Figaro*, where the Count relives Admetus’s most embarrassing humiliation in *Alcestis*. Thus, civilization is always “shaking off the dirt of the grave,” cleaning off the shit so to speak, in order to found the “clean re-start” of family genealogy.

¹⁰ For a comprehensive view of wild man lore, consult Richard Bernheimer, *Wild Men In The Middle Ages; A Study In Art, Sentiment, And Demonology* (New York: Octagon Books, 1970).