

The Symptom of Ethics: Rethinking Ethics in the Face of the Machine

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Abstract

This essay argues that it is the machine that constitutes the symptom of ethics—“symptom” understood as that excluded “part that has no part” in the system of moral consideration. Ethics, which has been historically organized around a human or at least biological subject, needs the machine to define the proper limits of the moral community even if it simultaneously excludes such mechanisms from any serious claim on moral consideration. The argument will proceed in five steps or movements. The first part will define and characterize “the symptom” as it has been operationalized in the work of Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek. Although Žižek appropriates this term from Jacques Lacan, he develops the concept in a unique way that exceeds Lacan’s initial psychoanalytic formulations. The second and third parts will demonstrate how the machine constitutes the symptom of moral philosophy, showing how and why it comprises the always already excluded element necessary to define the proper limits of moral subjectivity. The fourth part will then consider two alternatives that promise, but ultimately fail, to accommodate this symptom. And the final section will draw out the consequences of this analysis for ethics and its excluded others.

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One of the persistent challenges of moral decision-making is determining exactly who or what deserves ethical consideration. Although initially limited to “other men,” the practice of ethics has evolved in such a way that it continually challenges its own exclusions and

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comes to encompass previously marginalized individuals and groups—foreigners, women, animals, and even the environment. Despite these progressive efforts at inclusion or what animal rights philosopher Peter Singer (1973) has called “liberation movements,” one thing remains outside the community of legitimate social subjects—the machine. Traditionally characterized as a mere instrument or “means to an end,” these technological artifacts have been and remain the excluded other. As J. Storrs Hall (2001) explains, “we have never considered ourselves to have ‘moral’ duties to our machines, or them to us” (unpaginated). And yet, despite this almost absolute categorical exclusion, ethics seems to need and to be unable to do without these mechanisms.

This essay argues that it is the machine that constitutes the symptom of ethics—“symptom” understood as that excluded “part that has no part.” Ethics, which has been historically organized around a human or at least biological subject, needs the machine to define the proper limits of the moral community even if it simultaneously excludes such mechanisms from any serious claim on ethics. Consequently, the machine in general and the automaton, or self-moving machine in particular, constitutes the other of the Other that must be excluded in order to define the legitimate boundaries of the moral community (e.g., who is and what is not considered to be a subject of rights and obligations).

The argument will proceed in several steps or movements. The first will define and characterize “the symptom” as it has been operationalized in the work of Slavoj Žižek. Although Žižek appropriates this term from Jacques Lacan, he develops the concept in a unique way that exceeds Lacan’s initial psychoanalytic formulations. The second and third parts will demonstrate how the machine constitutes the symptom of ethics, showing how and why it comprises the always already excluded element necessary to define the proper limits of moral subjectivity. The fourth part will then consider two alternatives that promise, but ultimately fail, to accommodate this symptom. And the final section will draw out the consequences of this analysis for communication ethics and the excluded other.

A Symptom of the Symptom

Slavoj Žižek has been concerned with the concept of the symptom from the very beginning. In fact, “The Symptom” comprises the subject matter of the first part of his first book published in English, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (first published in 1989, second edition issued in 2008). This text begins in a way that is rather characteristic of all Žižek’s writings—with a statement from Jacques Lacan that seems, at first, to be counterintuitive: “According to Lacan, it was none other than Karl Marx who invented the notion of symptom” (Žižek, 1989/2008, p. 3). And the two chapters that follow this statement, “How Marx Invented the Symptom” and “From Symptom to Sinthome,” are designed to explicate and develop this insight. In doing so, Žižek provides a characterization of the symptom that can itself be considered symptomatic of Western metaphysics.

The word “symptom” is typically used to indicate a mode of indication. As Todd McGowan (2014) explains for the entry “symptom” in the *Žižek Dictionary*, “the usual idea of the symptom in both psychoanalysis and traditional medicine sees it as an indication of an underlying disorder that some form of therapy (either analytic or medicinal) will attempt to cure and thereby eliminate” (p. 242). Formulated in this way, “symptom” is understood as

a sign that refers to and is the external manifestation or indication of something that is more fundamental and often hidden from direct perception. We therefore commonly distinguish the symptom from its underlying cause, and this common understanding not only adheres to the standard formula of semiotics but is informed by an original ontological decision that differentiates between mere external appearances and the more profound substance that is its ultimate cause and referent. Characterized in this fashion, the usual understanding of “symptom” can be accommodated to and explained by a metaphysical arrangement that is at least as old as Plato. According to the standard account of Platonism, or what is often called (not without controversy) “Plato’s theory of the forms,” appearances are nothing less than symptoms of more substantial transcendental ideas, and the task of thinking is to learn to penetrate or see beyond these mere external apparitions and gain access to the true form and original cause.

For Žižek, however, the symptom is formulated in a way that is entirely otherwise. “Symptom” is not the sign of some hidden kernel of truth that is more substantial or profound; it is the necessarily excluded other of the system that makes the system possible in the first place. As Žižek (1989/2008) explains,

the ‘symptom’ is, strictly speaking, a particular element which subverts its own universal foundation, a species subverting its own genus . . . a point of breakdown heterogeneous to a given ideological field and at the same time necessary for that field to achieve its closure, its accomplished form. (p. 16)

For this reason, “symptom” possesses a “radical ontological status” (Žižek, 1989/2008, p. 81); it is the constitutive part of a system that is necessarily excluded from the system as such. Or as Žižek (1999) explains by way of a passage he appropriates from Jacques Rancière, it is “the part of no part” (p. 188). The symptom, therefore, comprises the constitutive exception that “threatens the functioning of the system, even though it is the necessary product of this same system” (McGowan, 2014, p. 242). It is a kind of unacknowledged (and always already unacknowledgeable) excremental reminder that is necessary for something to produce itself and function as the system that it is.

This alternative conceptualization of the symptom—a conceptualization that is simultaneously dependent on Lacan’s work and beyond the circuit of its determinations—turns out to be symptomatic of Platonism. And the fact that Žižek himself never actually acknowledges this as such is just one more symptom of the symptom. It is, in fact, only by excluding this particular concept of the symptom (the very idea of the “constitutive exception”), that Platonism can become what it is. One might recall that Socrates, as was described in Plato’s *Apology*, explains and tries to defend his own efforts as a response to the Oracle at Delphi (Plato, 1982, p. 21a). The Delphic temple, as is reported in *Protagoras* (Plato, 1977, p. 324b), famously had two laconic statements inscribed above its gate: “Know thyself” and “Nothing in Excess.” Although the latter has typically been interpreted as a call to moderation in all things, it can also be read as the trace of the symptom, inscribed at the very gateway to knowledge. In this way, the statement “Nothing in excess” may be interpreted as an exclusive operation, indicating that whatever might come to exceed the grasp of self-knowing is to remain unacknowledged, unknowable, or nothing. Consequently, every attempt to

demarcate the proper boundaries of a system and cordon off its internal workings from what it is not, always and without exception, produces an exceptional externality that it must deny—an absolutely other that is cast off, externalized, and remains nothing.

The Symptom of Ethics

If Žižek is correct, then the system of ethics must have its symptom, or better, its *sinthome*. For according to Žižek, “each subject or system has one fundamental symptom that contains the key to its structure and holds this structure together. This fundamental symptom is what Lacan calls the *sinthome*” (McGowan, 2014, pp. 242–243). And the *sinthome*—or the “constitutive exception,” if one prefers to avoid psychoanalytic “jargon”—of the system of ethics will have been the machine, and it “will have been” because the symptom arrives not from the depths of the past but from the future (but more on this later, that is, in the future.).

It was, we might say parroting Žižek, none other than René Descartes who invented the symptom of modern science. This is because Descartes, in the course of developing his particular brand of philosophical self-reflection, cordoned off the human from its others, specifically the animal and the machine. In fact, Descartes executes this exclusion by associating the animal with the machine, introducing an influential concept—the doctrine of the *bête-machine* or *animal-machine*. “Perhaps the most notorious of the dualistic thinkers,” Akira Mizuta Lippit (2000) writes,

Descartes has come to stand for the insistent segregation of the human and animal worlds in philosophy. Likening animals to automata, Descartes argues in the 1637 *Discourse on the Method* that not only ‘do the beasts have less reason than men, but they have no reason at all.’ (p. 33)

For Descartes, the human being was considered the sole creature capable of rational thought—the one entity able to say and be certain in its saying, *cogito ergo sum*. Following from this, he had concluded that other nonhuman animals not only lacked reason but were nothing less than mindless automata that, like clockwork mechanisms, simply followed pre-programmed instructions.

Conceptualized in this fashion, the animal and machine were effectively indistinguishable and ontologically the same. “If any such machine,” Descartes (1988) wrote, “had the organs and outward shape of a monkey or of some other animal that lacks reason, we should have no means of knowing that they did not possess entirely the same nature as these animals” (p. 44). Beginning with Descartes, then, the animal and machine share a common form of alterity that situates them as completely different from and distinctly other than human. [1] Despite pursuing a method of doubt that, as Jacques Derrida (2008) describes it, reaches “a level of hyperbole,” Descartes “never doubted that the animal was only a machine” (p. 75). The *bête-machine*, we can say following Žižek, is the symptom of Cartesian thought. It is the necessarily excluded other of human rationality, and it is only through this mechanism of exclusion and its exclusivity that the system of human rationality (and rationality as specifically defined by an act of self-knowing) emerges and functions.

Following Descartes's exclusive ontological decision, animals have not traditionally been considered a legitimate subject of moral consideration. Determined to be mere mechanisms, they were nothing more than instruments to be used more or less effectively by human beings who were typically the only subjects who mattered. When Immanuel Kant (1985), for instance, defined morality as involving the rational determination of the will, the animal, which does not by definition possess reason, is immediately and categorically excluded. [2] The practical employment of reason does not concern the animal and, when Kant does make mention of animality [*Tierheit*], he only does so in order to use it as a foil by which to define the limits of humanity proper. The same exclusions have been instituted and supported by subsequent works. According to Tom Regan, this decision also affects and is apparent in the seminal work of analytic ethics.

It was in 1903 when analytic philosophy's patron saint, George Edward Moore, published his classic, *Principia Ethica*. You can read every word in it. You can read between every line of it. Look where you will, you will not find the slightest hint of attention to 'the animal question.' Natural and nonnatural properties, yes. Definitions and analyses, yes. The open-question argument and the method of isolation, yes. But so much as a word about non-human animals? No. Serious moral philosophy, of the analytic variety, back then did not traffic with such ideas. (Regan, 1999, p. xii)

Consequently, ethics, like any closed system, must have and cannot do without its symptoms—the constitutive exception that although excluded from participation, necessarily make it what it is. This exclusivity is fundamental, structural, and systemic. It is not accidental, contingent, or prejudicial in the usual sense of those words. "When it comes to moral considerability," Thomas Birch (1993) explains, "there are, and ought to be, insiders and outsiders, citizens and non-citizens . . . 'members of the club' of *consideranda* versus the rest" (p. 315). And because this exclusivity is systemic, little or nothing changes as moral theory and practice has developed and matured over time. Even when membership in the exclusive club of moral subjects has, slowly and not without considerable resistance and struggle, been extended to previously excluded others, there have remained other, apparently more fundamental and necessary exclusions. Or to put it another way, every new seemingly progressive inclusion has been made at the expense of others, who are necessarily excluded in the process.

Take, for example, innovations in animal rights. This rather recent development in moral thinking, not only challenged the anthropocentric tradition in ethics but redefined the club of *consideranda* by taking a distinctly animo-centric approach, where the qualifying criteria for inclusion in the community of moral subjects was not determined by some list of indeterminate humanlike capabilities—consciousness, rationality, free will, and so on—but sentience and the capacity to suffer. Although Jeremy Bentham is often credited with introducing the innovation, the movement does not coalesce until the later part of the 20th century. Tom Regan (1999) identifies the crucial turning point in a single work: "In 1971, three Oxford philosophers—Roslind and Stanley Godlovitch, and John Harris—published *Animals, Men and Morals*. The volume marked the first time philosophers had collaborated to craft a book that dealt with the moral status of nonhuman animals" (p. xi).

According to Regan, this particular publication is not only credited with introducing what is now called the “animal question,” but launched an entire subdiscipline of ethics where the animal (or at least some order of animal) is considered to be a legitimate subject of moral inquiry.

What is remarkable about this development is that at a time when this other form of nonhuman otherness is increasingly recognized as a legitimate moral subject, its other, the machine, remains conspicuously absent and marginalized. Despite all the ink that has been spilled on the animal question, little or nothing has been written about the machine. One could, in fact, redeploy Regan’s critique of G. E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica* (2005) and apply it, with a high degree of accuracy, to any work purporting to address the animal question: “You can read every word in it. You can read between every line of it. Look where you will, you will not find the slightest hint of attention to ‘the machine question.’” Even though the fate of the machine, from Descartes forward, was intimately coupled with that of the animal, only one of the pair has qualified for any level of ethical consideration. [3] Technology, as Jean-François Lyotard (1993, p. 44) reminds us, is only a matter of efficiency. Technical devices do not participate in the big questions of metaphysics, aesthetics, or ethics. They are nothing more than contrivances or extensions of human agency, used more or less responsibly by human agents with the outcome affecting other human individuals. Consequently, machines like computers, robots, and other kinds of mechanisms do not, at least for the majority philosophical opinion, have an appropriate place within ethics. Although other kinds of previously excluded others have been slowly and not without struggle been granted membership in the community of moral subjects—women, people of color, some animals, and even the environment—the machine remains on the periphery. No matter how automatic, interactive, or intelligent it might appear to be, the machine remains the excluded other of the other—the constitutive exception of moral philosophy’s increasing attention to previously excluded others.

Enjoy Your Symptom

Despite its exclusion from consideration, the machine has been and remains fundamental to the system of ethics. In other words, moral theory and practice, although excluding the machine from explicit consideration needs and depends on it for its own systematicity. All too often, however, one misses this fact, because of the way we have (mis)understood and restricted the definition of the machine. Typically, the word “machine” is understood and characterized as a physical mechanism. “We have a naïve notion of a machine as a box with motors, gears, and whatnot in it” (Hall, 2001, unpaginated). It is, for example, the spring-driven mechanical clock, introduced in Europe around the middle of the 16th century, which had comprised the principal machinic prototype for much of the modern period. For Descartes, the mechanical clock, with its intricate gears, was a model of the mindless animal body, which moves itself and responds to stimulus like a well-fashioned mechanism. In Sir Isaac Newton’s *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, this image was extended to cover the entirety of physical reality, introducing a concept that has come to be called the “clockwork universe” (Newton, 1972). Even after technology had advanced well beyond the gears, springs, and levers of the clock, philosophers continued to fixate on mechanics. For Martin Heidegger (1977), for example, technology was restricted to mechanical

apparatuses: sawmills, hydroelectric power plants, high-frequency radar stations, and jet aircraft (p. 5).

This particular definition of the machine is not only restrictive but, as Hall (2001) argues, “incapable of dealing with the machines of the future” (unpaginated). According to Hall, a machine is not simply a combination of gears and motors. It is a set of rules, instructions, or messages.

The most important machine of the twentieth century wasn't a physical thing at all. It was the Turing Machine, and it was a mathematical idea. It provided the theoretical basis for computers . . . This theoretical concept of a machine as a pattern of operations which could be implemented in a number of ways is called a virtual machine. (Hall, 2001, unpaginated)

Understood in this fashion, “machine” is not merely a collection of physical springs and gears but a system of encoded instructions, an algorithm, which may be implemented and embodied in any number of ways. This general definition of the machine covers mechanical systems, like clocks that implement rules of synchronization in the form of physical space marked out on rotating gears; biological systems, like animals and plants that are composed of and operate by following instructions embedded in their genetic code; and information processing devices, like the computer, which performs different operations based on various program instructions stipulated by software. As Donna Haraway (1991) has argued, following the innovations introduced by Norbert Wiener, we are all understood and constituted as mechanisms of communication.

If the machine, according to this general definition, is a pattern of operations or a set of pre-defined instructions, then ethics has been and continues to be mechanistic. According to the English moralist Henry Sidgwick (1981), “the aim of Ethics is *to systematize* and free from error the apparent cognitions that most men have of the rightness or reasonableness of conduct” (p. 77). Western conceptions of morality customarily consist in systematic rules of behavior that can be encoded, like an algorithm, and implemented by different moral agents in a number of circumstances and situations. They are, in short, an instruction set that is designed to direct behavior and govern conduct. Take for example, the Ten Commandments, the cornerstone of Judeo-Christian ethics. These ten rules constitute something of a moral subroutine that not only prescribe correct operations for human beings but do so in a way that is abstracted from the particulars of circumstance, personality, and other empirical accidents. “Thou shall not kill” is a general prohibition against murder that applies in any number of situations where one human being confronts another. Like an algorithm, the statements contained within the Ten Commandments are general operations that can be applied to any particular set of data.

Similarly, Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy is founded on and structured by fundamental rules or what he calls, in a comparison to natural science, “practical laws.” These practical laws are “categorical imperatives.” That is, they are not merely subjective maxims that apply to a particular person's will under a specific set of circumstances. Instead, they must be universally and objectively valid for the will of every rational being in every possible circumstance.

Laws must completely determine the will as will, even before I ask whether I am capable of achieving a desired effect or what should be done to realize it. They must thus be categorical; otherwise they would not be laws, for they would lack the necessity which, in order to be practical, must be completely independent of pathological conditions, i.e., conditions only contingently related to the will. (Kant, 1985, p. 18)

For Kant, moral action is programmed by principles of pure practical reason—universal laws that are not only abstracted from every empirical condition but applicable to any and all rational agents. It may be said, therefore, that Kant, who took physics and mathematics as the model for a wholesale transformation of the procedures of philosophy, mechanized ethics in a way that was similar to Newton’s mechanization of physical science.

Finally, even the pragmatic alternative to deontological ethics, utilitarianism, operates by a kind of systemic moral computation or what Jeremy Bentham (1988) called “moral arithmetic.” The core utilitarian principle, “seek to act in such a way as to promote the greatest quantity and quality of happiness for the greatest number,” is a general formula that subsequently requires considerable processing to crunch the numbers and decide the best possible outcome. In fact, Michael Anderson, Susan Leigh Anderson, and Chris Armen (2004) have not only constructed computer-based “ethical advisors” but argue that such machines might have an advantage over a human being in following utilitarian theory, because of the sheer number of variables that usually need to be taken into account and calculated accurately (p. 2). For this reason, Joseph Nadeau (2006) has even suggested that machines might be more moral, that is, less biased and more reasonable in executing moral decision-making. In all these cases, ethics—which, according to Sidgwick (1981, p. 77), aims to systematize human cognition and conduct—conforms to the characterization of what is called “the virtual machine.” Commandments, moral imperatives, ethical principles, codes of conduct, practical laws . . . these all endeavor to provide a clear set of instructions or patterns of operation that are designed to program and direct human social behavior and interaction.

How to Survive the Robot Apocalypse

The system of ethics is both dependent upon and exclusive of the machine. It comprises that necessary part of moral thinking that morality wants no part of. And it is for this reason that it initially appears to us as a kind of external or alien threat. In fact, in the popular imagination, the machine—a generic name that is, following Derrida (2008), admittedly as problematic as the term “animal” (p. 23)—is often imagined as coming at us from another time and place. The “machinic other” is typically portrayed in the form of an invading army of robots descending on us from the outer reaches of space sometime in the not-too-distant future. This particular representation is not accidental or a mere artifact of contemporary popular culture. There is a good reason for it. As Žižek (1989/2008) explains “symptoms are meaningless traces, their meaning is not discovered, excavated from the hidden depths of the past, but constructed retroactively” from the future (p. 58). If the moral challenge of the machine is typically imagined in terms of this popular sci-fi formula, it is because it constitutes the constitutive exception of moral philosophy and can appear to us—assuming that

it does appear to us—only as a kind of external threat proceeding from the future. In this, Deleuze (1994) was undeniably correct—philosophy is a kind of science fiction (p. xx). The question then, is how do or should we respond in the face of this apparent robot invasion? There are at least two alternatives situated on opposite ends of the philosophical spectrum, neither of which is entirely adequate.

Moral Totalitarianism

One method of response, what we might call “moral totalitarianism,” is to develop a more inclusive and complete moral system that can incorporate not just the machine but any and all symptomatic others. Take, for example, Luciano Floridi’s (2013) proposal for a new moral theory he calls “Information Ethics,” abbreviated IE. According to Floridi, efforts to evolve moral consideration have been woefully inadequate insofar as each new innovation cannot, it seems, succeed without making additional exclusions. Although he does not say it in this exact way, what concerns Floridi is the symptomatic remainder of ethics. Animal rights philosophy, he points out, correctly challenged the anthropocentric tradition. But it succeeded only by further excluding other living organisms, like plants and the environment. As a result, the innovations of bioethics and environmental ethics sought to repair this exclusivity by developing a moral theory that was more inclusive of these previously excluded others. But, Floridi (2013) continues, even the innovations of

bioethics and environmental ethics fail to achieve a level of complete universality and impartiality, because they are still biased against what is inanimate, lifeless, intangible, abstract, engineered, artificial, synthetic, hybrid, or merely possible. Even land ethics is biased against technology and artefacts, for example. From their perspective, only what is intuitively alive deserves to be considered as a proper centre of moral claims, no matter how minimal, so a whole universe escapes their attention. (p. 64)

IE is designed to respond to this exclusivity by developing,

an ecological ethics that replaces biocentrism with ontocentrism. IE suggests that there is something even more elemental than life, namely being—that is, the existence and flourishing of all entities and their global environment—and something more fundamental than suffering, namely entropy, [which] here refers to any kind of destruction or corruption of informational objects, that is, any form of impoverishment of being including nothingness, to phrase it more metaphysically. (Floridi, 2008, p. 47)

Following the moral innovations of bio- and environmental ethics, Floridi advocates expanding the scope of ethics by altering its focus and lowering the threshold for inclusion, or, to use Floridi’s terminology, the “level of abstraction” (LoA). What makes someone or something a moral subject, deserving of some level of ethical consideration, is that it exists as a coherent body of information. “Unlike other non-standard ethics,” Floridi (2013) argues that,

IE is more impartial and universal—or one may say less ethically biased—because it brings to ultimate completion the process of enlarging the concept of what may count as a centre of moral claims, which now includes every instance of information, no matter whether physically implemented or not. (p. 65)

The proposal certainly sounds promising. Like previous innovations and “liberation movements” (Singer, 1973) in ethics, IE is interested in expanding membership in the moral community so as to incorporate previously excluded others and eliminate the symptom of ethics. But, unlike these previous efforts, it is arguably more inclusive, incorporating other forms of otherness, like technologies, artifacts, and machines. But IE, for all its promise to provide what one might call “a moral theory of everything,” still makes exclusive decisions. As a system of ethics it too must have and cannot proceed without its symptom. And what is excluded from this seemingly complete and all-encompassing moral theory is “nothing.” [4] As if following the two laconic imperatives inscribed above the gate at Delphi, IE’s totalizing comprehension leaves only “nothing in excess.” But this “nothing” is not no-thing; it is IE’s particular symptom. Consequently, the problem with efforts at fabricating increasing greater levels of moral inclusivity, like that proposed by IE, is that they remain symptomatic.

Thinking Otherwise

The alternative to this moral totalitarianism proceeds and operates otherwise. And when it comes to thinking otherwise, especially as it relates to questions regarding ethics, there is perhaps no thinker better suited to the task than Emmanuel Levinas. Unlike a lot of what goes by the name of “moral philosophy,” Levinasian thought does not rely on metaphysical generalizations, abstract formulas, or simple pieties. Levinas (1969) is not only critical of the traditional tropes and traps of Western ontology but proposes an ethics of radical otherness that deliberately resists and interrupts the metaphysical gesture par excellence, that is, the reduction of difference to the same. This radically different approach to thinking difference differently is not a gimmick. It constitutes a fundamental reorientation that effectively changes the rules of the game and the standard operating presumptions.

Levinas, therefore, deliberately turns things around by reconfiguring the assumed order of precedence in situations regarding moral decision-making. For him, the ethical relationship, the moral obligation that I have to the Other, precedes and determines who or what comes, after the fact, to be considered a moral subject or “person.” [5] Ethics, therefore, is not predicated on an *a priori* determination of who or what is a legitimate moral subject. Instead, moral standing is something that is first decided on the basis of and as a product of a social encounter. According to Levinas, therefore, the Other always and already obligates me in advance of the customary decisions and debates concerning who or what is and is not considered a moral subject. This apparent inability or indecision is not necessarily a problem. In fact, it is a considerable advantage insofar as it opens ethics not only to the Other but to other forms of otherness. “If this is indeed the case,” as Matthew Calarco (2008) concludes,

that is, if it is the case that we do not know where the face begins and ends, where moral considerability begins and ends, then we are obligated to proceed from

the possibility that anything might take on a face. And we are further obligated to hold this possibility permanently open. (p. 71)

Despite the promise this innovation has for arranging an ethics that is oriented otherwise, Levinas's work is not, it seems, able to escape from the traditional anthropocentric privilege. Whatever the import of his unique contribution, Other in Levinas is still (for better or worse) unapologetically human. If, according to Levinas, previous forms of moral theorizing can be criticized for putting ontology before ethics, then Levinasian thought can be cited for its unquestioned philosophical anthropology. If Levinasian thought is to provide a way of thinking that is able to respond to and to take responsibility for these other forms of otherness, or to consider and respond to, as John Sallis (2010) describes it, "the question of another alterity" (p. 88), we will need to use and interpret Levinas's own philosophical innovations in excess of and in opposition to him. We will need, as Derrida (1978) once wrote of Georges Bataille's exceedingly careful engagement with the thought of Hegel, to follow Levinas to the end, "to the point of agreeing with him against himself" (p. 260) and of wresting his discoveries from the limited interpretations that he provided. Such efforts at "radicalizing Levinas" (Atterton & Calarco, 2010) will take up and pursue Levinas's moral innovations in excess of the rather restricted formulations that he and his advocates and critics have typically provided. "Although Levinas himself," Calarco (2008) writes,

is for the most part unabashedly and dogmatically anthropocentric, the underlying logic of his thought permits no such anthropocentrism. . . . In fact, as I shall argue, Levinas's ethical philosophy is, or at least should be, committed to a notion of universal ethical consideration, that is, an agnostic form of ethical consideration that has no a priori constraints or boundaries. (p. 55)

This radical reorientation—or other version of Levinas's ethics of otherness—obviously opens the door to what some might consider absurd possibilities:

At this point, most reasonable readers will likely see the argument I have been making as having absurd consequences. While it might not be unreasonable to consider the possibility that 'higher' animals who are 'like' us, animals who have sophisticated cognitive and emotive functions, could have a moral claim on us, are we also to believe that 'lower' animals, insects, dirt, hair, fingernails, ecosystems and so on could have a claim on us? (Calarco, 2008, p. 71)

In responding to this charge, Calarco deploys that distinctly Žižekian strategy of "fully endorsing what one is accused of" (Žižek, 2000, p. 2). "I would suggest," Calarco (2008) argues,

affirming and embracing what the critic sees as an absurdity. All attempts to shift or enlarge the scope of moral consideration are initially met with the same reactionary rejoinder of absurdity from those who uphold common sense. But any thought worthy of the name, especially any thought of ethics, takes its point of departure in setting up a critical relation to common sense and the established doxa and, as such, demands that we ponder absurd, unheard-of thoughts. (p. 72)

Calarco's reworking of Levinasian philosophy seems to provide for a more inclusive ethics that is able to take other forms of otherness into account. And it is, no doubt, a compelling proposal. What is interesting about his argument, however, is not the other forms of otherness that come to be incorporated through his innovative reworking of Levinas, but what gets left out in the process. For all its promise to think ethics otherwise, Calarco's radicalization of Levinas still has its symptoms. According to the letter of Calarco's text, the following entities should also be included as potentially significant: "lower' animals, insects, dirt, hair, fingernails, and ecosystems." What is obviously missing from this list is anything that is not "natural," that is, any form of artifact. Consequently, what gets left out by or excluded from Calarco's "universal consideration"—a mode of ethical concern that does not shrink from potential absurdities and the unthinkable—are tools, technologies, and machines. Although Calarco (2008) is clearly prepared, in the name of the other and other kinds of otherness, "to ponder absurd, unheard-of thoughts" (p. 72) the machine remains excluded and in excess of this effort, comprising a kind of absurdity beyond absurdity, the unthinkable of the unthought, or the other of all who are considered Other. The alterity of all kinds of other nonhuman things does, in fact, and counter to Levinas's own interpretation of things, make an ethical impact. But this does not apply, it seems, to machines, which remain, for Levinas, Calarco, and others, the excluded other of moral philosophy's own interest in otherness.

Summary and Conclusions

"Every philosophy," Silva Benso (2000) writes in a comprehensive gesture that performs precisely what it seeks to address, "is a quest for wholeness." This objective, she argues, has been typically targeted in one of two ways. "Traditional Western thought has pursued wholeness by means of reduction, integration, systematization of all its parts. Totality has replaced wholeness, and the result is totalitarianism from which what is truly other escapes, revealing the deficiencies and fallacies of the attempted system" (p. 136). This is precisely the problem with totalizing systems of moral inclusion, like Floridi's Information Ethics. For all its efforts at achieving a more inclusive form of inclusion, IE still makes a distinction between inside and outside—between who matters and what does not—even if the symptom of IE is nothing. [6]

The competing alternative to this totalitarian approach is a philosophy of difference that is oriented otherwise, like that proposed and developed by Levinas, Calarco, and others. This other approach endeavors to achieve moral completion,

by moving not from the same, but from the other, and not only the Other, but also the other of the Other, and, if that is the case, the other of the other of the Other. In this must, it must also be aware of the inescapable injustice embedded in any formulation of the other. (Benso, 2000, p. 136)

For Levinas and those others who endeavor to develop this particular brand of thinking otherwise, every other has its other such that the process of responding to previously excluded others is never fully complete. What is interesting about these two strategies is not what makes them different from one another or how they articulate approaches that

proceed from what appears to be opposite ends of the spectrum. What is interesting is what they agree on and hold in common in order to be situated as different from and in opposition to each other in the first place.

Whether taking the form of a totalizing autology or an alternative kind of heterology, both approaches “share the same claim to inclusiveness” (Benso, 2000, p. 136), and that is the problem. We therefore appear to be caught between a proverbial rock and a hard place. On the one hand, inclusion has never been inclusive enough. The machine in particular is from the very beginning situated outside ethics. It is, irrespective of the different philosophical perspectives that come to be mobilized, not a legitimate moral subject. And even when, at the apparent apex of moral inclusivity with the innovative efforts of IE, the machine can be accommodated, this inclusion cannot succeed apart from instituting additional exclusions and marginalizations. On the other hand, alternatives to this tradition have never quite been different enough. Although a concern with and for others promises to transform the status quo in ethics, “thinking otherwise” has never been entirely adequate or suitably different. Many of the so-called alternatives, those efforts that purport to be interested in and oriented otherwise, have typically excluded the machine from the space of difference, from the difference of difference, or from the otherness of the Other. Technological devices certainly have an interface, but they do not it seems, possess a face or confront the human user in a face-to-face encounter that would call for and would be called ethics.

The problem with both approaches is that they seek a utopian outcome. As Žižek (1989/2008) explains, “‘utopian’ conveys the belief in the possibility of a universality without its symptom, without the point of exception functioning as its internal negation” (p. 13). This utopianism, however, never succeeds. Each innovative effort at moral inclusion produces a remainder. Each new system of ethics cannot help but generate its symptom. Or as McGowan (2014) explains in a more politically situated context, “one cannot simply expand representation to include them because some new excluded group will always come to occupy this position” (p. 243). This is because the mechanism of exclusion is systemic and has little or nothing to do with the actual “things” that are subjected to marginalization. The exclusivity of the machine, therefore, is not simply “the last socially accepted prejudice” or what Singer (1989) calls “the last remaining form of discrimination” (p. 148), which may be identified as such only from a perspective that is already open to the possibility of some future inclusion and accommodation. It is systemic and comprises the symptom of ethics.

Although Žižek does not necessarily provide a definitive solution to this impasse, he does indicate what would be necessary for an alternative kind of *eccentric* moral theory, called this because it would be an ethics without a clearly defined “center” as has been the case for other moral theories like anthropocentrism, animocentrism, biocentrism, and ontocentrism. Unlike Floridi, Levinas, and others, Žižek does not play the game of trying to remediate the symptom of ethics by designing systems for greater inclusivity. Instead, he proposes an *ethics of the symptom*, which would be not an (other) exclusive moral theory but a moral philosophy of the excluded. He therefore proposes a community of moral subjects consisting of nothing but a loose amalgam of excluded misfits, or what Alphonso Lingis (1994) calls “the community of those who have nothing in common.” Though this proposal can also be called “utopian,” it is a significantly different and somewhat distorted form of utopia. Žižek, as McGowan (2014) explains, does not

dismiss out of hand all utopian thinking. In fact, he constructs a utopianism based on the symptom, a utopianism in which a community forms from the exclude rather than through a universal inclusion. All those who exist outside the system as its symptoms can come together in a universal solidarity. This solidarity would not involve any sense of belonging because what the subjects have in common is only their exclusions or symptomatic status. (pp. 243–244)

What Žižek proposes, therefore, would be an eccentric community of eclectic elements that does not simply oppose one form or method of inclusivity with another, seemingly more inclusive form—the way that, for example, the ontocentrism of IE challenges the exclusions of biocentrism or Calarco’s “radicalizing Levinas” questions the exclusivity of Levinas’s philosophical anthropology. This eccentric form of moral thinking recognizes that the real challenge for ethics is not figuring out a way to include others, but to identify and confront the systemic exclusions of any and all efforts at inclusion as a significant and fundamental aspect of moral thinking itself. What we need to do in the face of the machine, therefore, is not to try to formulate more inclusive forms of moral theory that can account for and incorporate these others, but to recognize the symptom as such and allow it to question the entire history of ethics and its necessary and unavoidable exclusions. This is precisely that kind of thinking that Friedrich Nietzsche (1966) had called “the philosophy of the future,” not only because the symptom of ethics, like the machine, appears to threaten us from the future but because it points in the direction of a kind of thinking that is situated beyond (the very system of) good and evil. This means that the challenge presented to us by the machine is not just a matter of applied ethics; it invites and entrains us to rethink the entire *modus operandi* of moral philosophy all the way down. This is the task for thinking that is seen in the face or the faceplate of the machine [7].

Notes

[1] This modern innovation is also significant because it marked an important departure from medieval practices whereby animals were thought to be capable of committing crimes against human beings and put on trial for their transgressions. For more on this subject, see Beirnes (1994), Chesterman (2021), Evans (1906), and Kadri (2007).

[2] The decision to focus on *reason* as a qualifying criterion for inclusion in the community of moral subjects already hints at a potential problem and prejudicial exclusion. It is human beings—those entities who have defined themselves as *animal rationale*—who have decided that rationality (e.g., their own defining feature) is the exclusive qualifying characteristic. Human beings, therefore, grant to themselves the power and the privilege to be both the measure and measurer in matters concerning moral status. For more on this problem and its consequences, see Gunkel (2012).

[3] For a more detailed investigation of points of intersection and divergence between the “animal question” and the “machine question,” see Gellers (2021), Gunkel (2012), and Hogan (2017).

[4] One might ask (as was the case with one of the reviewers of this essay): Why is the exclusion of nothing ethically problematic? It is a very reasonable question and one that appears to exonerate IE insofar as it could be said that this moral system is so complete in its efforts at inclusivity that it excludes nothing. Although an accurate statement, this is not what is of principal importance. What is important is that IE, like all other moral philosophies, still cannot do without or escape from its symptom (e.g., the necessary and systemic exclusions that are its condition of possibility). Because IE aims to be absolutely totalizing and inclusive of all being what remains excluded can only be nothing. This “nothing,” however, is not no-thing. It is the symptom of IE. For a more complete analysis, see Gunkel (2012).

[5] This shift in focus has instituted what Coeckelbergh (2012) has called a relational turn in ethics. Other formulations of a relational approach to moral status ascription can be found in Abate (2019), Fox (1995), and Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2017).

[6] Following this, we can say that the goal of justice is not and cannot be organized around efforts to develop a more inclusive (or totalizing) ethics by eliminating (or pretending to have eliminated) all that would have been excluded. Ethics is and cannot do without its symptom. The question is not whether there is an exclusive remainder or not. Instead, what matters is how a particular formulation of ethics responds to and takes responsibility for its own necessary and unavoidable systemic exclusions. This is the task not of ethics per se but of what Derrida (1978, p. 111) called “the ethics of ethics.”

[7] My own vision of ethics following from this line of reasoning has been developed and presented in the books *The Machine Question* (Gunkel, 2012), *Robot Rights* (Gunkel, 2018), and *How to Survive a Robot Invasion* (Gunkel, 2020).

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