

## No Century for Old Philosophy?

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It is a measure of the importance of a work that it upsets the chattering classes. Writing in the *New York Review of Books*, John Gray declares *Less than Nothing* to be a 'feat of intellectual overproduction' that 'amounts in the end to less than nothing' (Gray, 2012). Gray is dismissive of Žižek's attempts to elucidate the functioning of today's paraconsistent logic, but ironically in a paraconsistent way. For Gray, we should reject Žižek's work not only because it says nothing but also because of its dark tendencies towards violence and an implicit anti-Semitism (a calumny that allows Gray to recoil in liberal outrage and thereby to retreat from any substantial engagement). Thus not only is there nothing to Žižek but also we must be constantly vigilant against the threat that he poses.

Jonathan Rée takes a different tack, complaining at the lack of a 'culminating revelation' in Žižek's book (Rée, 2012). According to Rée, Žižek should stick to 'brief intellectual entertainments' and should not disappoint us with serious philosophical intent; he should delight rather than challenge. Instead of old philosophy, Žižek would do better to offer (brief) commentaries on 'poverty, inequality, war, finance, childcare, intolerance, crime, education, famine, nationalism, medicine, climate change...the production of goods...(and) the most pressing social issues of our time' (Rée, 2012). Notwithstanding the fact that Žižek has engaged (and continues to engage) with all of these issues and more, the interesting point here is what is revealed about the type of role that Žižek is expected to play. For Rée, Žižek should at least entertain and at most act as 'our' conscience. In other words, Žižek should play the role of a modern court jester. And as Žižek has pointed out, the paraconsistent function of the jester is to effectively reproduce the existing power regime through subversion – the logic of which is also embodied in the contemporary forms of (acceptable) subversion through liberal-left punditry, political satire, infotainment and so on.

Žižek's central claim is that today, more than ever, there is an urgent need to repeat Hegel; not in a straightforward sense, but in a way that develops Hegelian openings and (dialectical) principles in critical and materialist terms. Yet from the perspective of contemporary thought, this can only appear as somewhat perverse. Is not Hegel someone who, according to Deleuze, should simply be forgotten; someone whose 'view of philosophy is at best a magnificent ruin' (Rée, 2012)? How can Hegel – a philosopher who affirms repeatedly the ideas of necessity and totality – hold any relevance for our postmodern hyperchaotic world?

The contemporary world is caught in a mythological paradox. On the one hand, the dominant (Western) milieu is one that continuously recycles its themes of individual expression, free choice, infinite possibility and so on. On the other hand, this milieu is organized around a deeply fatalist core: capitalist fundamentalism. Everything can be subverted and/or overcome *except* the basic principles of capitalism. Interfering with the spontaneous movements of capital is strictly taboo and, when markets do collapse, we should rather sacrifice ourselves through austerity measures in order to appease the Gods of finance. What is manifested here is a kind of twisted Kantian logic: not only is it impossible to penetrate to the in-itself or absolute, we should not even try. We should restrict ourselves to the subjective universe and not try to disturb the transcendental structures. This is at the root of today's forms of new age spirituality. In the West this is reflected in a montage of Buddhism, Taoism and various paganistic ideas about nature, balance, harmony and so on. In China, the rapid advance of capitalist development has been accompanied by the (state-sponsored) expansion of Confucianism with its similarly pacifying refrain that we should accept our social/objective position and seek happiness and contentment within. In these ways, the future (as in new possibility) is being held hostage by a modern sense of fate.

In order to break out of the new medievalism of the modern age, Žižek argues that we need to accomplish fully the move from Kant to Hegel. If in Kant there exists an insurmountable gap *between* the subject and the substantial

(noumenal) Thing, in Hegel this gap is conceived to be *within both* subject and substance. Subject and substance achieve identity not because of any positive content but because they share an essential negativity/incompleteness (they are traversed by the same void). Against Kant, the limit of the subject does not subsist in its alienation from (inability to grasp) the fullness of substance. The point is rather that substance is already in-itself alienated. The subject is the (secondary) result of the inability of substance to constitute itself. Substance fails to be and it requires subjective distortion (subjectivation) in order to fill in the gaps/inconsistencies and thereby to establish its (historical) forms of appearance. At the same time, subjectivation (of substance) is a process that can never complete itself. There is always an excess of substance that eludes subjectivation. Insofar as it shows the limit/failure of subjectivation, this excess corresponds to the persistence of the subject as a constitutive void (the failure of subjectivation *is* the subject). It is on this basis that Hegel derives his notion of infinity. In contrast to Badiou – where ontology is conceived as the ‘science of the multiple’ (Badiou, 2005: 28) – infinity is not defined through multiplicity but rather through the (continual unrest of the) one and its void. Infinity, and all heterogeneity, derives from this essential (self-negatory) simplicity. Multiplicity is an effect of the failure of the one to constitute itself (universality similarly arises from the failure of particularity to achieve its being). It is this simplicity – an unfolding conflictuality between something and its void – that moves the world.

In Kant the idea that we are limited/historical actors, cut off from the absolute, allows him to maintain the view that there is an Other world of authentic (positive) substance. This creates the sense of a mystical space that is today occupied by such ‘absolutes’ as market forces, global realities, business confidence, the need for enterprise and so on. Here capitalism effectively operates with its own (faux) Kantian-style ethos: we should make all kinds of subjective adjustments, participate in continuous ‘changemaking’, while accepting that there is a pre-given index of measurement that shapes our fate. In Hegel, by contrast, there is no space for any mystical functioning. Substance itself is also incomplete (and incompletable) and can only appear in relation to

(incompletable) subjectivity. Consequently there is no Other (as such) and there are no alibis: we produce our own shadows up to and including the indices of measurement we chose to live by. By showing that the absolute is inconsistency itself – the impossible (self-negatory) configurations of substance and subject – Hegel confronts us with a far more radical, and horrifying, dimension of freedom: the freedom to choose fate itself.

Throughout *Less Than Nothing* the Hegelian absolute of substance=subject is iterated and developed across a range of contexts. Žižek argues that ultimately the problem that we are faced is not epistemological but ontological in character. Inconsistency is not something that can be eventually overcome by increasing knowledge or by more and better science (*à la* Meillassoux and speculative realism). Inconsistency functions rather as a constitutive ontological crack that runs throughout the very structure of all (versions of) reality. In Hegelian terms, the more epistemological clarity we achieve the more we approach the absolute *qua* distortion. The question is not the one posed by William James – ‘why is there something rather than nothing?’ – but the opposite: ‘why is there nothing rather than something?’ (Žižek, 2012: 925). It is this (ontological) question that is taking on an increasing relevance for contemporary science: the more the structure of reality is being penetrated, the more that science is confirming a fundamental void; a void that shows that the ‘building blocks’ of reality are nothing but distortion. And here it should be stressed that the void is not known to itself (there is no possibility of being ‘at one’ with the void); it is not a passive place then it is then disrupted. The void is rather disruption itself, irreducibly split between its ‘true’ and ‘false’ forms; a place of pure movement of becoming and un-becoming, the very currency of alienated-ness. Indeed it makes more sense to speak of void-ness rather than ‘the void’.

It is against this background that Žižek finds a particular resonance with the ancient Greek notion of *den* (as developed by Democritus). *Den* is the sublime unrest of void-ness and ‘functions’ at a level below the quantifiable (as a less-than-nothing); or, more precisely, it functions as a pure surplus of the quantifiable (the unquantifiable condition of possibility for the emergence of the

quantifiable) as both less than nothing and more than something. *Den* is the paradoxical 'stuff' out of which both nothing and something are made and, at the same time, it is that which prevents nothing and something from fully constituting/stabilizing themselves. Everything is derived from, and carries within it, the impossible surplus dimension (or echo) of *den*. In Hegelian terms, *den* provides a name for pure unrest, non-coincidence and intrinsic difference. In Lacanian terms, *den* correlates to the radical Real. One of the ways of characterizing Žižek's masterwork might be to say that it represents a systematic attempt to both de-fatalize fate and to revitalize this sense of *den*.

The papers that are collected here represent a broad range of engagement with the thematic content of *Less Than Nothing*. The intention has not been simply exegetical (or adversarial), but rather one of attempting to continue the conversation with Žižek's re-working of Hegelian (and Lacanian) insights and openings with a view to developing further lines of inquiry. My paper focuses on Žižek's response to questions of science and knowledge in respect of the recent interventions by speculative realists such as Meillassoux. Joseph Carew takes us into Žižek's metaphysics of the void and draws out the consequences of the metaphysical cataclysm that lies at the heart of all being. Todd McGowan explores Žižek's arguments in the context of a close reading of Hegel wherein he gives central emphasis to (constitutive) alienation. Rex Butler elaborates on the materialism of the discursive form of *Less Than Nothing* and the way in which Žižek continuously refines examples in order to reaffirm the play of drive and inconsistency around the (dialectical) expressions of 'nothing'. Daniel Tutt analyzes the characteristic uses of Oedipal logics in both Žižek and Badiou and how these underpin their distinctive approaches to questions of subjectivity and emancipatory politics.

Slavoj Žižek completes the cycle with a reaffirmation of the importance of making the philosophical move from Kant to Hegel. Rather than maintain a Kantian sense of a gap between form and content, we should assume fully the Hegelian insight that this gap is reflected back into content itself; content is incomplete, always-already not-all. Thus what appears as the failings of culture

(the symbolic form) applies equally to (the content of) nature. As Hegel points out, nature can never reach the fullness of the notion and is at every level dogged by defective and inconsistent manifestations of itself. In contrast to Lacan – who sometimes maintained a tendential distinction between culture and nature – Hegel affirms a basic inhesion of the Real across both culture and nature. At every turn, *Less Than Nothing* develops and improvises upon this radical interiorization of the Real and perhaps, in this sense, it marks both an end and a beginning to philosophical thought.

### Bibliography

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