

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Eight, Number One

The Insubstantiality of Substance, Or, Why We Should Read Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature*

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A Logical Psychosis

We live in a Hegelian golden age. Even though most major philosophers in the latter half of the 20th century saw Hegel either as an antagonist or a relic, beginning in the 1980s a new wave of serious engagement with Hegel's thought began that revealed a previously unforeseen Hegel. This is a Hegel beyond the various criticisms leveled against him by earlier thinkers. This Hegelian revival reaches its climax in the thought of Slavoj Žižek and specifically with his magnum opus *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*. Like earlier defenders of Hegel, Žižek redeems concepts like absolute knowing and even Hegel's notorious insistence that "the whole is the true."¹ But the original step that Žižek takes in *Less Than Nothing* and that his other precursors do not take consists in his embrace of Hegelian ontology. He restores

Hegel's ontology to a philosophical dignity that it had utterly lost in the 200 years since its introduction. For Žižek, Hegel is not just an epistemological or political thinker but a thinker who generates compelling ontological claims, claims that have nothing to do with the standard image of Hegel who champions reason guiding the development of history. Žižek uncovers an ontological thinker who comes to his ontological claims through the exploration of the epistemological quandaries bequeathed to him by his immediate philosophical predecessors.

During the century following his death, thanks to both his followers and his enemies, Hegel's philosophy devolved into caricature. He became a panlogical whose thought traced the unfolding of reason in nature and history. According to this view, Hegel sets out to describe the structure of being itself without taking into account the epistemological barrier limiting the subject's access to this structure. It is as if Hegel is able to read the mind of God. To this day, this remains the received wisdom concerning Hegel among those yet to read any of his works. This view of Hegel finds its baldest expression in Hegel's arch-enemy Arthur Schopenhauer, who attacks "the attempt specifically introduced by the Hegelian pseudo-philosophy ... to comprehend the history of the world as a planned whole."² Though Schopenhauer offers this description as a critique, it became the standard interpretation of Hegel even among Hegelians themselves. This interpretation of Hegel views him as committing all the philosophical errors that Kant had corrected in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. After his death, Hegel became a pre-Critical philosopher, and the complete rejection of his thought became much easier.

The panlogical interpretation of Hegel takes as its point of departure Hegel's refusal of the fundamental division between thought and being. This is the division that Kant establishes in order to refute the most cherished claims of metaphysics like the proof for the existence of God or the deduction of the soul. For Kant, there is no necessary connection between our thought of God and the actual existence of God, just as there is no necessary connection between the idea of a hundred thalers and having a hundred thalers in hand.³ Nor can we establish the existence of the soul on the basis of a thinking subject. Throughout his philosophy, Hegel appears to reject this division and to justify precisely the ontological claims disallowed by Kant.

The abandonment of Kant's distinction between thought and being manifests itself in a seemingly straightforward way in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Here, Hegel claims that "everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only

as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*.”⁴ This statement provides one of the pillars of the panlogical interpretation of Hegel’s philosophy.⁵ According to this view, here Hegel is conceiving the external world, the world of independent substances, as the manifestation of the thinking subject. The subject can know the world because the world is the product of the subject’s own activity. Not only does Hegel toss aside Kant’s caution about our capacity to know, he also grants the subject an extraordinary power to create the world in its own image.

This interpretation of Hegel’s project dominates throughout the 19th and early 20th century in the works of Hegelians like Johann Karl Friedrich Rosenkranz, Thomas Hill Green, and John McTaggart, just to name a few. These followers of Hegel view him as a defender of the rationality of the world. For them, the contingencies of history and nature exist within the necessity of the subject’s self-expression and self-externalization. There is no fundamental barrier to the subject’s knowledge of the world because the subject participates in spirit’s production of the world. When the subject attempts to understand what appears external to itself, it is engaged, even if unknowingly, in an act of self-understanding.⁶

The untenable status of the panlogical Hegel doomed his thought to a marginal position within the larger philosophical universe. In order to restore Hegel’s influence, emergency surgery became necessary, and this surgery involved a radical amputation. In order to save Hegel as a viable philosopher in a universe dominated by Neo-Kantianism and positivism, 20th century followers of Hegel had to remove the ontological claims of his thought. Hegel thus underwent a dramatic transformation in the early part of the 20th century, from being a thinker announcing the structure of the universe to one confining himself to the structure of subjectivity.

Amputating a Limb To Save the Body

In short, Hegel survived in the 20th century only in a very circumscribed form. The influence of Hegel manifested itself in the Marxism of Georg Lukács, the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, and the postcolonial theory of Frantz Fanon, but the version of Hegel present in each of these lines of thought was a Hegel focused on subjectivity and its alienation from the natural world. Hegel’s claims about substance had no place anymore, but this amputation had the effect of completely relegitimizing his philosophy. If one removed the ontological pretensions from Hegel’s philosophical body, one could not only save the patient but allow him to prosper in

unanticipated ways. He could become the ally of Heidegger and the friend of Marxism. This new version of Hegel appears in its most coherent and compelling form in the remarkable figure of Alexandre Kojève.⁷

In his lectures on Hegel during the 1930s, Kojève rescued Hegel from panlogical interpretation of his thought.⁸ Kojève centers Hegel's philosophy on its thoroughgoing commitment to the fact of human reality as the sole province of thought and as the sole source for thought. Far from being a panlogical philosopher, Hegel shows us that thought never escapes the subject itself. As he puts it, "Hegel rejects all species of 'revelation' in philosophy. Nothing can come from God: nothing can come from any extra-worldly non-temporal reality whatever. It is the temporal creative action of humanity or *History* that created the reality that Philosophy reveals."⁹ For Kojève, Hegel has value for what he says about the struggle of the human being in the history that humanity itself creates and not for what he has to say about the nature of being. As a result, Kojève dismisses the entirety of the *Philosophy of Nature* as a fantasy that anyone who takes Hegel seriously must toss aside.¹⁰ Confining Hegel to what he says about the situation of the finite and Godless subject enables Kojève to redeem Hegel as a viable thinker for the 20th century. In Kojève's interpretation, Hegel's philosophical project comes to resemble that of the early Marx or that of Heidegger in *Being and Time*.¹¹

Though Kojève's version of Hegel was not unchallenged throughout the middle of the 20th century, it did nonetheless shape the ways that thinkers both mobilized Hegel and fought against his influence. In the former case, it informed Maurice Merleau-Ponty's discussion of time in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, and in the latter, it influenced Michel Foucault's critique of dialectics in *The Order of Things*. Kojève's removal of any ontological claims from the Hegelian edifice had the effect of recreated Hegel as a force to be reckoned with in the philosophical universe. Those who simply dismissed Hegel as spouting nonsense had to stick to an image of him prevalent prior to Kojève's reinterpretation.¹² Simply put, Kojève shifted the terrain and transformed Hegel from a caricature into a philosophical titan against which subsequent philosophers had to define their thought.

Even the followers of Hegel in the later part of the 20th century who explicitly reject Kojève's influence do not depart from his de-emphasis on Hegel's ontological claims. Two of the most important thinkers who move Hegel away from Kojève's anthropological interpretation are Robert Pippin and Gillian Rose. Pippin aims at

minimizing the break between Kant and Hegel by viewing Hegel in terms of the Kantian tradition that prioritized epistemological questions. For Pippin, Hegel is an epistemologist, and that is why his philosophy retains its importance for us. He is simply pushing Kant's epistemological project further than Kant himself did, but he is in no sense departing from it. Though Kojève erred in moving Hegel in the direction of anthropology, he was not wrong to dismiss Hegel's ontology.

In fact, Pippin's justification for Hegel's continued importance depending on situating Hegel in the direct lineage of Kant and the transcendental break that brackets ontological questions in favor of epistemological ones. Hegel is not only not a pre-Critical philosopher, he is working on precisely the same philosophical question with which Kant struggles. But he goes further than Kant, according to Pippin, by rejecting any outside at all to thought. Though Pippin explicitly criticizes Kojève's interpretation of Kant in his *Hegel's Idealism*, he too removes ontology from Hegel's system and confines Hegel's contribution to a revolution within epistemology.¹³

Gillian Rose, for her part, refuses to think of Hegel as a pure epistemologist. But in her effort to grasp his importance as a political philosopher, she performs an operation similar to that of Pippin (and thus of Kojève). Rose's contribution to the understanding of Hegel should not be downplayed. The entire thrust of her thought involves redeeming the absolute as a central category in political struggle. The absolute provides us with a call for transformation and even revolution. It is a recognition of the merely formal nature of the freedom that exists within Kant's philosophy and bourgeois society. With the conceptualization of the absolute, as Rose argues in *Hegel Contra Sociology*, Hegel overcomes the split between theory and practice and thereby creates a fully politicized philosophy.

Rose aligns Hegel with radical politics while noticing how he avoids the traps that trip up his leftist inheritors like Feuerbach and Marx. Rose's Hegel is not a Hegel committed to ontology. Rose redeems Hegel as a speculative thinker and grants speculative thought a central place in her understanding of Hegel, but it is a speculation that concerns the structure of human society and not being itself. Both Pippin and Rose represent genuine breakthroughs in the consideration of Hegel's continued worth, but they nonetheless fail to recover his major philosophical breakthrough.¹⁴

The fact that the most important interpreters of Hegel in the late 20th century sustained the rejection of Hegel as an ontological thinker bespeaks the lingering shadow that the time of the panlogical interpretation cast over this period. Hegel's ontology

seemed so much a caricature that no one could hazard a reassertion of this crucial dimension of Hegel's thought. But the act of saving Hegel by amputating a limb could only go so far. Restoring his importance for contemporary thought would require once more taking up the question of his ontology.

The first serious challenge to the marginalization of Hegel's ontology in the 20th century occurs with Slavoj Žižek. While other thinkers critiqued Kojève's anthropomorphic vision of Hegel, none, prior to Žižek, had recognized that one could return unabashedly to Hegel's ontology. This return occurs throughout Žižek's thought—even as early as the *Sublime Object of Ideology* in 1989—but it comes to its ultimate fruition in *Less Than Nothing*. In the introduction to this work, Žižek offers a description of Hegel's position insofar as it differs from the other German Idealist philosophers. Specifically, he sees Hegel's philosophy as a refinement of Hölderlin's. Žižek contends, "what he adds to Hölderlin is a purely formal shift of transposing the tragic gap that separates the reflecting subject from pre-reflexive Being into this Being itself."¹⁵ With this brief statement, Žižek performs an act equaling that of Kojève and transforms the playing field for the interpretation of Hegel. All of a sudden, the notion that an epistemologically sophisticated Hegel could have nothing to say about ontology comes into question and the possibility of an ontological Hegel who doesn't fall into pre-Critical metaphysics becomes thinkable.

The Redefinition of the Subject

Žižek locates Hegel's ontology at exactly the same point as does the panlogical interpretation. He returns again and again to Hegel's statement in the preface of the *Phenomenology* that asks us to see the truth "not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*." This statement appears to ask us simply to rethink substance as the effect of the subject and thus to justify the panlogical interpretation of Hegel. According to this interpretation, we should read the term "subject" as the site for the creative unfolding of spirit and "substance" as merely the receptacle for this unfolding. But Žižek insists that we should read "subject" completely differently and thus interpret what Hegel says in a new way.

From Descartes on, the concept of the subject has two distinct and disparate meanings. On the one hand, it is the act of thinking that doubts all its representations and has certainty only about its capacity for doubt. But on the other hand, "subject" names the entity at the center of the Cartesian world that has a secure knowledge of its

clear and distinct ideas, ideas underwritten by a God who doesn't deceive. The former subject is one divided from itself and unable to know itself fully or attain self-identity. The latter is the master and possessor of the world it surveys. One of the chief reasons for the misreading of Hegel is an emphasis on this second conception of subjectivity at the expense of the first. Žižek insists that Hegel holds unfailingly to the first—to the subject as split from itself. When we examine Hegel's thought with this conception of subjectivity in mind, everything changes.

When Hegel asks us to consider substance as subject, his conception of subjectivity is not that of a subject who creates and masters all that appears external to itself. Instead, Hegel uses the term subject as a contrast with substance. Whereas substance is self-identical, subject is inherently divided against itself. Subject is self-division as opposed to substance's self-identity.¹⁶ By insisting that we view substance as subject, Hegel rejects the category of substance altogether. There is, for Hegel, no such thing as substance or self-identical being. There is no being that is entirely independent and self-sustaining, and we know this because our very act of speaking testifies to an incompleteness both in ourselves and in what we are speaking about. Hegel's ontology begins with this rejection of pure substance and affirmation of the inherent self-division of being. Where the panlogical interpretation of Hegel finds the megalomania of the subject, Žižek discovers an impoverishment of substance.

The philosophical revolution that comes from transforming the significance of "not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*" is akin to that which occurs in the key moment of Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974). Electronic surveillance expert Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) records a conversation between lovers Mark (Frederic Forrest) and Ann (Cindy Williams) in which Mark says, "He'd kill us if he got the chance." When Harry and the spectator first hear this line, the emphasis seems to be on the word "kill," which suggests that the two lovers are in danger from Ann's husband, known in the film only as the Director (Robert Duvall). Harry spends much of the film's running time convinced the Director is a potential murderer. He assumes that he was working for the Director and is thus complicit with the planned murder. After Harry clears all the static from the recording, however, the emphasis—and thus the significance—undergoes a radical shift to the word "he." This indicates that it is not Mark and Ann who are in danger but rather the Director himself. Mark is not expressing fear but rather justifying their complicity in the Director's murder by saying that he would have killed them if they hadn't killed him. When Harry Caul makes this discovery, he realizes that

he has completely misunderstood the situation and inadvertently assisted in a murder (though not in the way that he had foreseen).

The consequences are equally grave for the misreading of Hegel's statement that the panlogical interpretation produces. But Žižek functions as Harry Caul—clearing away the static so that a new reading of the statement becomes self-evident. When we understand subject as Hegel's name for self-division rather than mastery, his statement ceases to be the emblem of his philosophical arrogance and becomes his great ontological insight.

Žižek's redemption of Hegel as an ontological thinker does not require a return to the naiveté that sustained the panlogical interpretation. Hegel's ontological claims are not the result of a rejection of the Kantian critique and a return to what Kant calls dogmatic metaphysics. Instead, Hegel radicalizes Kant's epistemology and through this process discovers an ontological claim inhering within it. The point is not that the constraints on our knowledge must imply constraints on being, which is what a cursory reading of Hegel's critique of Kant would suggest. This conception would entail a retreat to pre-Kantian metaphysics, in which the philosopher attains direct insight into the nature of being through reason. Instead, Hegel's claim is that the contradictions within our knowledge must be ontologically possible—there must be some disruption within the realm of being that gives rise to the disruption in language—which suggests that being itself cannot be self-identical.

The status of being as not self-identical is the basis of Hegel's ontology, but it is not a premise or a presupposition. Hegel founds his philosophy on the absence of any foundation, on the rejection of every philosophical premise or first principle. This is why he attacks Fichte's philosophy so viciously: Fichte begins with subjectivity itself as his starting point, and he offers no ground for the assumption of the subject. We cannot assume anything, not even the original act of the subject positing itself, as Fichte does. The case is altogether different with Hegel's ontology of the self-division of being.

We know that being is not self-identical because of our existence as alienated speaking beings. The speaking being's division from itself—its inability to realize its desires or achieve wholeness—must have a condition of possibility within being itself. Thus, we can work our way backward from the self-division of the subject to the self-division of being. Our ability to pose the question of our subjectivity testifies to the subject's non-coincidence with itself, and this non-coincidence appears to separate speaking beings from rocks. This leads Kojève to confine Hegel's philosophical purview

to the speaking subject and its history. But Žižek sees the error in positing this artificial limit to Hegel's reach. Even beings that cannot speak and demonstrate their self-division through speech nonetheless participate in an ontological self-division, and we know about this ontological self-division because of beings who exhibit it explicitly—that is, speaking subjects. The speaking subject retroactively reveals the contradictory nature of being. Hegel is a philosopher of language who recognizes that the nature of language reveals a fundamental truth about the nature of being.¹⁷

We Can Speak, Therefore We Aren't

Hegel discovers the self-division of being through the existence of language, which has a contradictory structure that must originate in a self-divided being. Once one begins to speak, Hegel believes, one affirms the self-division of being itself. Language functions through alienation. It alienates the signifier from the signified and the speaking subject from itself. This is clearest in Hegel's discussion of sense certainty at the beginning of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Sense certainty commences with the subject attempting to formulate its most immediate certainties from sense experience, but in order to do so, it must have recourse to language. Language doesn't simply communicate immediate certainties but distorts them into mediated and thereby universal propositions. The subject tries to articulate the immediate "here" or "now" and ends up making universal claims about what is "here" and "now," claims that don't hold just for the immediate sense experience of the subject but have a universal validity. Even when we use the simplest and most direct terms, we cannot confine our statements to the particularity of our own experience.

Hegel sees this failure as the effect of the subject's alienation in language. Language transforms what we mean to say into a truth that opposes our intended meaning. As he puts it in the *Phenomenology*, "we do not strictly say in this sense-certainty what we *mean* to say. But language, as we see, is the more truthful; in it, we ourselves directly refute what we *mean* to say, and since the universal is the true [content] of sense-certainty and language expresses this true [content] alone, it is just not possible for us ever to say, or express in words, a sensuous being that we *mean*."¹⁸ Hegel credits language with what he calls a "divine nature" for transforming whatever the subject means to say into its opposite. Though language derails the subject's efforts at articulating itself, language is "divine" because this derailment makes evident and

enables the subject to grasp its lack of self-identity, which is what others who lack this derailing cannot do. The subject's alienation in language is the site of its freedom through self-division.

Though Hegel grasps the alienating power of the signifier in this discussion and makes it central to his philosophical project, he doesn't fully elaborate it. He never takes up signification as such or proffers a theory of the signifier. As a result, the subject's alienation in language doesn't become explicit until Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics and Freud's psychoanalysis, even though it is already the guiding force throughout Hegel's philosophy.

In his *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure establishes a bar between the signifier and the signified in order to indicate the absence of any direct connection between them. The significance of the signifier doesn't derive from its signified but from the relationship between the signifier and other signifiers. As Saussure notes, "each linguistic term derives its value from its opposition to all the other terms."¹⁹ Saussure grasps that language functions through the alienation of the signifier from the signified. Signifiers interact with other signifiers and produce significance, but they don't interact with their own signifieds.²⁰ Language is not just the alienation of words from referents; it is the alienation of words from the meaning attached to them.

At almost the same time that Saussure discovers the alienation of the signifier from the signified, Freud theorizes the unconscious, which is the alienation of the subject from what its own desires. For Freud, the subject cannot simply state what it desires but instead reveals its desire through the failures and excesses of language. Psychoanalysis functions on the basis of this split between what the subject desires and what the subject says, and it locates the truth of the subject's unconscious desire where the subject loses track of itself in language. The psychoanalyst locates the subject's desire when the subject says what it doesn't want to say, not when the subject corrects itself by explaining what it meant to say. No amount of effort on the part of the subject can align what it desires and what it says because this gap constitutes subjectivity as such. The psychoanalyst can draw attention to the gap between what the subject says it desires and what it desires, but no one can eliminate the alienation of the subject's desire in the signifier.

Though neither acknowledges a debt to Hegel, both Saussure and Freud follow in the path that Hegel established. Their conception of language as a site of alienation for the speaking subject echoes what Hegel says in his discussion of sense certainty.

They confirm Hegel's diagnosis of language and thus unknowingly lend support after the fact to Hegel's ontological claims. If we know that language alienates the subject from itself with no possibility for overcoming this alienation, then we can also know that being must be alienated from itself. Without this alienation in being, no one would have ever been capable of speaking. Hegel's ontology begins and ends with the implications of the fact of speaking.

Speech reveals to us the limitations that govern subjectivity. The subject cannot simply say what it means or what it desires. But these limitations do not blind the subject to the nature of being or erect an intractable barrier between thought and being. Instead, they are the vehicle through which the subject can gain ontological insight. Hegel's philosophy begins with Kant's recognition of the limits on reason's capacity for making transcendent claims, but he takes a much more sanguine view of these limits. The limits of reason prove to Kant that we as finite subjects cannot discover truths about the nature of being. For Hegel, the limits of reason prove the contrary: it is because reason is limited in its power of comprehension that we can discover the self-division of being. Hegel credits Kant with uncovering the significance of the limits of reason, but Kant fails to interpret these limits correctly, which is why Hegel has to create his own philosophy and can't simply devote himself to writing a series of commentaries on the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Following Kant To the End of the Line

Kant correctly discovers a gap in our knowledge that separates the appearances that we can know from the things in themselves that we can't, though it seems as if Kant separates appearances as the realm of thought from things in themselves that exist in external reality, this is a mischaracterization of the philosophical complexity of his position. Such a reading of Kant's distinction commits one to a denigration of appearances as a pale copy of the actually existing external world. For Kant, the divide between appearances and things in themselves is a divide between two ways of knowing, one that has epistemological coherence and one that doesn't. Truth is on the side of the appearances.²¹ For Kant, this is not a divide between our knowledge and external reality but a divide within our knowledge. We can consider things as appearances or as things in themselves, and it is only when we consider them as appearances that we avoid the contradictions that befall the project of knowledge when it concerns itself with things in themselves. The domain of appearances is a limited

domain, and this enables it to remain free of the contradictions that knowledge encounters when it tries to conceive of a totality. As Kant sees it, any ontological claims depart from the limited domain of appearances and thus fall into contradiction. Kant turns philosophy away from speculation and toward epistemology, and Hegel has an ambivalent relationship to this turn.

Kant's error, for Hegel, does not lie in confining his inquiry to knowledge but in failing to see that the contradictions that our knowing encounters when it tries to consider things in themselves must have their basis in the nature of being. On the face of it, this claim seems absurd. Certainly one can conceive of failures of knowledge tell us nothing about the nature of being. In fact, most failures of knowledge fall into this category. When the child concocts an elaborate theory of the genitalia in order to explain sexual difference, this absence of knowledge informs us about the child's psyche but not about the actual status of male and female sexual organs. Anyone who tried to draw conclusions about genitalia based on children's theories would not get very far or receive a serious reception among biologists. Other failures of knowledge, like the ignorance evinced by prejudices, follow this same pattern. We can't know anything about women from listening to the views of a misogynist. But the failures that Kant explores in the *Critique of Pure Reason* are not garden-variety failures. They are the antinomies that beset reason when it attempts to think beyond the givens of experience and thus they reveal something about the object of knowledge in a way that other failures of knowledge do not.

Kant solves the antinomies of pure reason by claiming that reason contradicts itself when it tries to go too far. It is at this point that Hegel offers a corrective. If reason necessarily contradicts itself even when it is not erring logically, this indicts not just the realm of thought but also that of being. In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel makes this clear. Discussing Kant's solution to the problem of the antinomies, he writes,

It is an excessive tenderness for the world to keep contradiction away from it, to transfer it to spirit instead, to reason, to leave it there unresolved. In fact, spirit is the one which is strong enough that it can endure contradiction, but it is spirit again which knows how to resolve it. But nowhere does the so-called world ... escape contradiction; but it is not capable of enduring it and for that reason it is left to the mercy of the coming and ceasing to be."²²

The antinomies mark a point at which thought reaches outside itself and reveals a fundamental truth about the nature of being. The existence of necessary contradictions in thought, contradictions that are not simply the result of ignorance, must have their

condition of possibility in being, or else they could never arise. Being without any contradiction is unthinkable because there must be a contradiction in being for thought to emerge in the first place. Self-identical being would never open up the space in which one could think about it at all. If failure is necessary in thought, then being must be structured in a way that gives rise to failure, which is to say, it must be every bit as contradictory as thought.

Hegel doesn't stop with uncovering contradiction in being that corresponds to contradiction in thought. Instead, he contends that the contradiction in being is even more intractable than the contradiction in thought. Most philosophers view knowledge as a movement from thought to being: thought aspires to the knowledge of being. But Hegel reverses this relationship. Thought has a higher status than being and thus can tell us about the nature of being. Though being has a chronological priority—obviously being is a necessary condition for the emergence of thought—thought has a logical priority because it has a capacity for enduring and reconciling itself with contradiction that being lacks. Being simply succumbs to contradiction without gaining any purchase on it.

Reconciliation is the great achievement of thought. Through the act of reconciliation, thought adopts a different relationship to contradiction than being does. It doesn't overcome contradiction but grasps its necessity. As Žižek puts it in *Less Than Nothing*, "what Hegel calls 'reconciliation' is, at its most basic, a reconciliation with the antagonism."²³ Even though antagonism or contradiction acts as a limit or obstacle to thought, thought nonetheless has the ability to grasp this limit as what defines it rather than as what it must surmount in order to realize itself. Spirit is, for Hegel, thought's capacity to recognize contradiction not simply as an obstacle to overcome but as its own innermost condition of possibility. Reconciliation marks a triumph through the embrace of the necessity of failure.

Understood in this way, reconciliation loses its conformist and even conservative hue. Reconciliation is not a synthesis that supersedes a negating limit but the grasp of the fecundity of that limit. Reconciling oneself to contradiction enables one to avoid establishing self-identity as one's theoretical or practical aim. This doesn't place the thinker in the position of the permanent revolutionary or the hysterical opponent of any authority. Instead, this conception of reconciliation demands that we rethink our idea of authority. Authority ceases to be self-identical structure that we can obey or fight against and becomes inherently antagonistic. For Hegel, authority is the product not only of the

ruling class but also of the efforts of those struggling against it. Once we see that this is the case, the struggle against authority must be a struggle against oneself.

Existentialism Reinvented

Reconciliation represents the point at which Hegel seems the furthest removed from existentialism. Existentialists take pains to distance themselves from any social authority that would enable them to stake out an illusory retreat from individual freedom. And yet, if we understand reconciliation as reconciliation with antagonism, it becomes Hegel's key contribution to the existentialist project because it gives the subject responsibility not just for itself but even the Other that the subject struggles against. Reconciliation provides the basis for a new form of existentialism, one made possible through Žižek's turn away from Kojève's focus on Hegel as a philosophy of subjectivity. Žižek presents Hegel as an existentialist by distancing him from the existentialist interpretation of his thought in the 20th century.

One of Kojève's great achievements in his lecture series is the association of Hegel with an existentialist turn. If we can say that existentialism begins with Søren Kierkegaard, then Kojève's association is a great philosophical irony. Kierkegaard founds existentialist thought with the critique of what he sees as Hegel's failure to account for subjectivity within the unfolding of reason in history. According to Kierkegaard, the individual subject gets lost in the objective history that Hegel establishes. The extent of Kierkegaard's misreading demonstrates the power of the panlogical interpretation of Hegel's philosophy even a short time after Hegel's death. Kojève corrects this misreading by insisting that Hegel's conception of subjectivity marks the center and lasting merit of his philosophy.

For existentialists from Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche to Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, a complete break exists between subject and substance.²⁴ Subjectivity, for existentialism, implies a loss of connection with both the natural world and the rest of the social order. The subject is necessarily an alienated and isolated subject, and the rest of being is simply self-identical. In Sartre's terms, the subject is for-itself, and the rest of being is in-itself and thus not divided. Subjectivity is fundamentally opposed to being in Sartre's philosophy and in the philosophy of other major existentialist thinkers. While the subject must struggle with the barrier that the in-itself erects to its projects, the subject remains uninvolved with the in-itself and distinct from it in structure. This is where Žižek's reading of Hegel intervenes.

Žižek's restoration of Hegel as an ontological thinker is also a restoration of him as a different kind of existentialist. He is an existentialist who expands alienation of the subject to substance and thereby cuts off the remnant of faith that haunts the existentialist project. Existentialism grasps the significance of the subject's alienation and gives this alienation the central place in the existentialist project. But this project distinguishes between the alienation of the subject and the self-identity of the natural world. In other words, existentialists continue to believe in substance, even if they derive the subject of it. Existentialist thinkers don't romanticize the self-identity of the natural world, but they do contrast it with this alienation of the subject. If we insert Hegel's idea of reconciliation into this equation, then this contrast ceases to be viable. The natural world suffers from alienation even more than the subject itself because the natural world lacks the resources to reconcile itself to contradiction. Armed with Hegel's ontological claims, we should go all the way and imagine the natural world longing to speak and give voice to the antagonism that it suffers in silence.

By rethinking the status of the in-itself or the natural world as also self-divided, we avoid the trap that besets existentialism throughout its history. Existentialists constantly stumble over the question of the relationship between the subject's own project and political struggles in society. Sartre spends many pages trying to reconcile these apparently disparate efforts in *Search for a Method* and the two massive volumes of the unfinished *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.²⁵ But at no point does he successfully theorize their interaction. Sartre's failure on this question stems from existentialism's unremitting contrast between the for-itself and the in-itself or between the subject and its Other. This failure is not confined to Sartre but creeps into the thought of every existentialist philosopher.

According to Hegel, the divide between the subject and its other is not a divide between an alienation and self-identity. Instead, it is a divide between two different forms of alienation, one that can reconcile itself with its own alienation and another that has no capacity for this. As a result of this insight, Hegel deprives the existentialist philosopher of any certainty about the nature of the other. Even the existentialist idea that the natural world is absurd becomes untenable. The vision of an absurd natural world offers the existentialist a guarantee on which to base the subject's existence. Even if the natural world is absurd, it is what it is, unlike the subject which is what it is not. There is existential respite in the absurdity of being. But no such guarantee—not

even the most unappealing—is possible once we grasp that contradiction inheres in being itself.

We should read the trajectory of the interpretation of Hegel as a manifestation of the Hegelian dialectic itself. This dialectic moves not by moving closer to the truth of spirit's self-identity but by moving further away from self-identity and toward reconciliation with the unavoidability of contradiction. The initial panlogical reading of Hegel fails through omitting any necessary self-division and conceiving of spirit as the overcoming of all contradiction. Kojève corrects this omission by grasping the self-division of the subject and rejecting Hegel's ontological claims. In this vision, being escapes from the tumult of history. Žižek then adds the final turn of the screw and reveals that being is every bit as contradictory as subjectivity or that substance is itself subject. With this insight, the radicality of Hegel's philosophy becomes evident for the first time.

Hegel restores the possibility of ontology not by mindlessly adopting a pre-Critical attitude but by thinking through the implications of the Kantian critique. In doing so, he frees philosophy from its reliance on presuppositions or axioms. He believes that it is not only possible but requisite to find ontology within the epistemological deadlocks that appear to preclude its emergence. Today's golden age of Hegel is the result of other thinkers following Hegel down this path. The golden age of Hegel revolves around a philosopher who recognizes that even the natural world is at odds with itself. Hegel shows us that being itself is a mistake.

Notes

¹ The identification of the whole with the true becomes notorious with Theodor Adorno's attempt to link this statement to totalitarianism. Adorno counter Hegel by insisting on an inverse formulation of this statement: "The whole is the false." Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), 50.

² Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 2, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1966), 442. To be clear, the enmity between Schopenhauer and Hegel moved only in one direction. Hegel did not reciprocate Schopenhauer's animosity.

³ Though Hegel accepts an initial divide between thought and being, he does reject Kant's refutation of the ontological proof, despite the flaws that he detects in this proof. Hegel objects to Kant's metaphor. The difference between 100 real thalers and the idea of 100 thalers is not the same as the difference between an actually existing God and the idea of God.

⁴ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 10.

⁵ The other statement that serves as a pillar for the panlogical interpretation occurs in the preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, where Hegel says, "What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational." G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 10

⁶ This panlogical interpretation of Hegel doesn't entirely disappear in the 20th century. It remained especially powerful among Hegel's detractors, but even his champions occasionally fall victim to it. This is the case with Charles Taylor in his *Hegel*. There, Taylor offers a description of Hegel's project entirely consistent with this panlogical interpretation of the 19th century. He writes, "The general structure of the universe ... is ... determined by its being the embodiment and expression of *Geist*" (Charles Taylor, *Hegel* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975], 91). Though he writes in the aftermath of the overthrow of the panlogical interpretation, Taylor sticks to it and produces an account of Hegel's entire philosophical project from this perspective. It is a work of the 19th century written in the 20th.

⁷ Another version of the amputated Hegel appears in Allen Wood's *Hegel's Ethical Thought*. Wood aims at establishing Hegel as an unparalleled ethical and political thinker, but in order to do so, he believes that he must cut away completely "his system of speculative logic" and preserve only "his reflections on the social and spiritual predicament of modern Western European culture" (Allen W. Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990], 5). Though Wood never mentions Kojève in his book, he nonetheless follows Kojève's lead in limiting Hegel's importance to the human realm.

⁸ Raymond Queneau edited and published Kojève's lecture series in 1947, and an English translation followed decades later. But this translation makes significant cuts to Queneau's edition, with the result that the philosophical originality of Kojève's position is largely lost. He

appears as someone who reduces all of Hegel's philosophy to the dialectic of the master and the slave.

⁹ Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, ed. Raymond Queneau (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), 331.

¹⁰ Kojève blames Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature* on the influence of Schelling. He notes, "the real (metaphysical) and phenomenal Dialectic of Nature exists only in the (Schellingian) imagination of Hegel" (Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture*, 490).

¹¹ The theorist who most fully realizes Kojève's project of uniting Hegel with Heidegger and Marx is Walter Davis. Davis makes a compelling case that these projects (along with Freud's) share a common aim—the freedom of the subject—and an acknowledgment of the trauma that this aim entails. See Walter A. Davis, *Inwardness and Existence* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

¹² This is clearly the case with famous anti-Hegelian Bertrand Russell. In his *History of Western Philosophy*, Russell simply reiterates the panlogical interpretation of Hegel and acts as if nothing had changed in the 20th century. He claims, "Hegel believed in a mystical entity called 'Spirit,' which causes human history to develop according to the stages of the dialectic as set forth in Hegel's *Logic*. Why Spirit has to go through these stages is not clear. One is tempted to suppose that Spirit is trying to understand Hegel, and at each stage rashly objectifies what it has been reading" (Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945], 784). To be fair, when Russell wrote this attack on Hegel, Kojève's lectures had not yet been published in French, let alone in English translation. But throughout the rest of Russell's life, he showed no sign of acknowledging the error underlying his complete dismissal of Hegel.

¹³ The Pittsburgh School of Hegelians (specifically Robert Brandom and John McDowell) takes Pippin's position even further and limit Hegel's reach to an analysis of the necessary constraints of language. In their vision, he becomes a slightly more speculative version of Frege.

¹⁴ For the revolutionary interpretations of Pippin and Rose, see Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1981).

¹⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2012), 15.

¹⁶ The self-identity of substance is what leads Spinoza to insist that there can only be one substance and that God is this substance. Hegel's claim that substance is subject represents what he sees as the only possible way of avoiding Spinozism. The moment that one grants the existence of substance that isn't already subject itself, one implicitly declares one's allegiance to Spinoza.

¹⁷ If we glance at Robert Brandom's interpretation of Hegel, we can see how one might confine Hegel's philosophy to a meditation on the nature of language that has no ontological implications at all. According to Brandom, "Hegel's distinctively *linguistic* version of the social recognitive model of normativity opens up a powerful and original notion of positive *expressive* freedom and normative selfhood, as the product of the rationality-instituting capacity to constrain oneself by specifically *discursive* norms." Robert B. Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 77.

¹⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 60.

¹⁹ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), 88.

²⁰ Though Jacques Lacan takes the alienation of the signifier from signified from Saussure, he emends it in two significant ways. First, he places the signifier on top of the bar, indicating the dominance of the signifier over the signified. Second, he notes the existence of signifiers that reach across the bar and impact the signified. He calls these signifiers quilting points, and they have the effect of stopping the sliding of the signifier in relation to the signified.

²¹ In his commentary on the first *Critique*, Graham Bird points out that Kant wants to privilege appearances rather than malign them. He notes, 175—“for Kant the world of appearances is not a second-best substitute for ‘real’ knowledge but an *expression* of the real world of possible experience and science” (Graham Bird, *The Revolutionary Kant: A Commentary on the “Critique of Pure Reason”* [Chicago: Open Court, 2006], 175). To read Kant any other way is to equate him with George Berkeley, an equation that Kant specifically rejects in the “Refutation of Idealism” that he adds to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

²² G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 201.

²³ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 951.

²⁴ Though only Sartre claims the moniker “existentialist” among these four thinkers, the others share with him a conception of subjectivity as fundamentally alienated and contrast this alienation with the self-identity of being. What unites existentialist thinkers—whether they adopt this name or not—is the insistence on this contrast, which forces the subject to rely on itself for whatever significance its existence will have.

²⁵ Sartre continually balks at Marxism’s tendency to submerge the individual in the collective world struggle. For instance, he notes in *Search for a Method*, “What contemporary Marxists have forgotten is that man, alienated, mystified, reified, etc., still remains a man. When Marx speaks of reification, he does not mean to show that we are transformed into things but that we are men condemned to live humanly the condition of material things.” Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Vintage, 1968), 104.