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# “Why Is There Nothing Rather Than Something?” - *Less Than Nothing's* New Metaphysics

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## 1. Introduction: Stepping Beyond Hegel

Although *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* ostensibly presents itself as a work on Hegel, a work whose culmination is the fruit of an intellectual life-time of reflection devoted to that great thinker, in many important respects it is much more. Rather than merely giving, in a typical Žižekian mode, a provocative, if heterodox account of Hegel's insurmountable relevance and influence, it also pushes key metaphysical insights of Hegelian dialectics to the point that we are forced to move beyond it. As a result, Žižek not only enters a realm that Hegel himself could never have anticipated in an unprecedented manner, but more importantly truly comes into his own by developing an utterly original variety of metaphysics.

In the following, I explore this uncharted terrain by isolating it from the manifold other theoretical subject matters comprising *Less Than Nothing*. In a first moment, I give a summary of the major concerns guiding Žižek's own Hegelian-inspired metaphysics up to this point. If the Symbolic is a self-enclosed structural system whose own inner “life” is separated from the extra-linguistic Real, how could we explain the passage from being into language? Having recourse to theoretical resources found in Kant, Žižek postulates a biological state that tears nature apart, thus opening up the space for its ideal re-articulation. But it is Hegel who fully articulates the

consequences of the insight. If we are to successfully think substance as subject by inscribing the latter into the former's ontological fold, the central role of this irreducible moment of negativity imposes upon us a vision of ultimate reality as one always already wrought by tension *all the way down*, thus proclaiming substance qua necessary self-articulating totality is an illusion.

In the second moment, I address how *Less Than Nothing* identifies previously unrecognized limitations with this Hegelian-inspired metaphysics that supplements Lacanian psychoanalysis. If substance is an illusion, what holds the physical universe together in face of its rampant negativity? Drawing upon quantum mechanics for further theoretical resources, Žižek claims that here too the more we move towards its most fundamental level, the more the latter proves to be in its depths of depths not a dense, fully subsisting reality that exists by itself by means of a self-explanatory surplus, but a series of indeterminate proto-ontological states only minimally distinguishable from the void of nothingness that serves as their contrast. Wondering how this void of nothingness could be broken so that creation itself could emerge, Žižek argues that the classical terrain of metaphysics is now for us inverted: “[f]or a true dialectician, the ultimate mystery is not 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' but 'Why is there nothing rather than something?': how is it that, the more we analyze reality, the more we find a void?” (Žižek 2012: 925)

## **2. The Obscure Grounds of the Symbolic**

As goes without saying, Žižek's theoretical starting point is Lacanian psychoanalysis, which he takes to be a revolution in thought irreversibly changing our self-understanding. What Žižek finds so ground-breaking is its explanatorily rich account of the foundations of the universe of meaning in which we live, the ways in which this universe structures our lives unconsciously, how it renders personal identity and its vicissitudes possible, and how it details the manner in which it destroys our immersion in the world understood as a purely natural entity. For Lacan, we are first and foremost *linguistic* subjects, not *biological* organisms – and he draws out all of the paradoxes of such a position, bringing it to its logical conclusion, but in such a comprehensive and systematic way that it is overflowing with theoretical and practical application.

But the project of Lacanian psychoanalysis presents us with fundamental limitations and of which Žižek is all too aware. To explicate the omnipresence of the universe of meaning in every aspect of human experience, the fact that we can never exit it, Lacan situates the three registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real in “dialectical” simultaneity, so that they all depend upon and interpenetrate one another, but with the Symbolic playing a decisive role. Lacan uses a Borromean knot to illustrate this level of mutual co-existence, as it is unclear if either can have logical priority insofar as the cutting off or isolating of one destroys the whole. The Imaginary is roughly equivalent to phenomenological experience but is also related to the *cogito* and its “narcissistic” fantasy of existential self-mastery. The Symbolic constitutes the fabric of language

and the laws of culture that transcend and are anterior to the concretely existing person. It therefore precedes the Imaginary insofar as this in a strong sense presupposes language for coherence. As a self-enclosed structural system capable of reproducing and propagating itself, the Symbolic displays an irreducible autonomy that displaces the role of nature in understanding human psychology and cultural phenomena because it is able to articulate itself in utter isolation from it: the “incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier” (Lacan 2006: 502), the solipsistic dance of language always in step with itself, means that the essential link between signifier and extra-linguistic signified has been violently ruptured. The mere chains of signifiers relating to themselves are capable of producing meaning by themselves in an ontological void. In its simplest form, the Real is that which does not fall under either the Imaginary or the Symbolic, whereby its upsurge is associated with experiences of breakdown not only of phenomenological experience, but even of language or culture itself. Although the Symbolic cannot exist without the imaginary subjects it acts through and cannot escape the Real that is a monstrous aftereffect of its self-generating system, nevertheless it remains theoretically crucial for understanding the other registers.

Yet there is an irreducible ambiguity in Lacan's definition of the Real, which serves as the starting point for Žižek's own metaphysics. The Real elicits two potentially incompatible interpretations. In its first guise, the Real is the excluded Other of the Imaginary and Symbolic, which only truly “comes to be” when the subject constitutes itself. In this sense, the Real is not merely dependent upon the symbolic matrix of language and the imaginary orbit of phenomenological experience but also only shows itself negatively through their immanent obstruction. In its second guise, we could also understand the Real as the pre-subjective life of nature from which the human infant exiles itself by becoming a linguistic subject, yet upon which the Imaginary and the Symbolic logically depend, even if they only relate to it negatively through its primordial foreclosure from phenomenological experience and language. Bruce Fink refers to this as the Real<sub>1</sub> because it is the necessary posit of the Symbolic despite the fact that it is inaccessible from within the latter, whose ciphering activity doesn't merely “reconstitute” reality by meditating it like a *camera obscura* but operates entirely by its own internal principles.<sup>i</sup> But such a free ciphering activity simultaneously creates the condition of the possibility of its own breakdown insofar as it will not always be capable of idealizing the Real in a way that enables its own autonomous, smooth functioning. These “kinks” in the Symbolic, the Real<sub>2</sub>, correspond with the Real as excluded Other: something that cannot be integrated because it presents itself as an inassimilable kernel within the self-referential matrix of the symbolic relations within which it emerged. The problem is as follows: Is the Real<sub>1</sub> a necessary, illusion of the Symbolic designed to give a fantasmatically fabricated consistency to its own universe of meaning? Or is it, more primordially, the pre-subjective, ontological basis of the Symbolic, thus showing the obscure origins of the Real<sub>2</sub> in a metaphysics?

This ambiguity arises from within Lacan's theoretical apparatus. The Symbolic exhibits what may be called a form of *ontological solipsism* insofar as it is an irreducibly self-referential matrix of

signifiers whose relation to an external, extra-ideal world has been utterly cut off. Yet to give an satisfactory explanation of our absorption in language we must not merely give an account of the omnipresence of the universe of meaning, but also describe its pre-history in being. There is after all surely something anterior to the Symbolic from which the latter arises even if this is, strictly speaking, self-contained and self-justifying. But is the Real primordially that which *precedes* and *exceeds* consciousness, or a pure lack that only presents itself through the breakdowns of the Symbolic? Falling upon various gestures in Lacan that point to an admission that there is some obscure ground of the Symbolic in that which temporally precedes it,<sup>ii</sup> but that eludes the latter insofar as the latter is for all intents and purposes a self-enclosed system, Žižek's wager is to find a manner to articulate this ground by looking into what must have happened *in the extra-linguistic world* so that language emerged as a response, since this is the great question left unanswered by Lacan and upon which his entire theoretical apparatus ultimately depends.

### 3. Lacan with Kant

For most of his philosophical career, Žižek's metaphysics has been an attempt to come to terms with the ontological standing of the Symbolic, driven by the intuition that despite this latter being self-contained and self-justifying, it cannot have simply arisen *ex nihilo*. Seeing psychoanalysis as a science of the universe of meaning as conceptually insufficient for this task, and following Lacan's suggestion that "Kant's practical philosophy [is] the starting point of the lineage culminating in Freud's invention of psychoanalysis" (Žižek 2000: 48), Žižek turns to German Idealism for aid inasmuch as he sees in it a uncanny structural parallelism to the contemporary impasse of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Explaining phenomenal reality as a free construct of an idealizing subject, Kant had already fell into the same problematic, a problematic that heralded forth a "few decades" of "breath-taking concentration of the intensity of thinking" the like of which we never saw before as philosophers sought its solution (Žižek 2012: 8). As such, Žižek could hope to here find resources for his own account of how being became the self-enclosed system of language, thereby completing Lacan's revolution by making explicit its metaphysical commitments.

Lacan's claim appears, at first, counter-intuitive. What do we see in Kant's practical philosophy except an attempt to found the ethical in the self-legislative spontaneity of reason and a listing of the a priori duties that automatically follow from its law? What is so primordial in them that could bestow upon them such a privilege for re-conceptualizing both the psychoanalytical subject? Finding numerous textual traces of the death-drive as logically prior to subjectivity, what interests Žižek in texts such as *Lectures on Pedagogy* is their insight that the passage from nature to culture depends upon an irreducible negativity inscribed within being, which suggests that what first appears as a mere parallelism between German Idealism and psychoanalysis is in fact a strict identity:

The key point is thus that the passage from "nature" to "culture" is not direct, that one

cannot account for it within a continuous evolutionary narrative: something has to intervene between the two, a kind of “vanishing mediator,” which is neither nature nor culture ... something that, although it is also no longer nature, is not yet *logos*, and has to be “repressed” by *logos*—the Freudian name for this In-between, of course, is the death drive .... a moment of human (pre)history when (what will become) man is no longer a mere animal and simultaneously not a “being of language,” bound by symbolic Law; a moment of thoroughly “perverted,” “denaturalized,” “derailed” nature which is not yet culture. (Žižek 2000: 36)

According to Žižek, within Kant this “in-between” finds its expression in the necessity to discipline the excessive “unruliness” (*Wildheit*) of human nature, the “wild, unconstrained propensity to insist stubbornly on one's own will, cost what it may.” (Žižek 2000: 36) What is to be emphasized here is the drastic nature of this claim: if we do not tame this primordial rawness (*Rohigkeit*) that presents itself as the zero-level of human spontaneity, not only do we fail to become full-fledged, fully adjusted subjects in the socio-political field of the world, but our freedom even threatens to devour itself in its frenzy in such a way that we become *failed* subjects: we are not born as humans, but rather *become* human—or, as Kant says, “[m]an only becomes man by education” (Kant 1900: 6) which leads him to contend that “with education is involved the great secret of the perfection of human nature” (Kant 1900: 7) insofar as it is only through the principles offered by this act of disciplining our originary unruliness that a “second nature” (Kant 1900: 9) can emerge as a response to the ontological dilemma of human being, “nature ha[ving] placed no instinct in [man] for that purpose.” (Kant 1900: 13) Yet this “unruliness” cannot be equated with the brute reality of animal existence—even if it exists *within* nature, it is strictly speaking something non-natural: “with animals, their instinct renders this unnecessary.” (Kant 1900: 5; quoted in Žižek 2000: 36)

For Žižek, this extract shows how the emergence of subjectivity cannot be reduced to a mere dichotomy between nature and culture. Prior to culture's self-determining activity (if it has no basis in nature, it must have its own), there has to be some unruly excess that nature by itself is unfit to control. Because nature has not given us instincts by which our biological energies are discharged, the biologically immanent process of controlling these energies has been disrupted. As a result, something else must come on the scene to take over this process, something thus *non-natural* or *artificial*, but with a structuring force of its own. But this is precisely what the Symbolic has shown itself to be. In this regard, this unruly excess is the explanatory principle we searched for in our endeavour to come to grips with the transition between what we perceive as an otherwise brute animal reality and the autonomous system of culture. What is more, structurally speaking there is a homology between the split between nature and culture and that between noumenal and phenomenal reality insofar as the latter are in both cases the free construct of a subject. In this manner, what *prima facie* appears as a mere marginal off-hand comment in Kant's *Lectures on Pedagogy* becomes by means of a parallax shift the most decisive reflection on the nature of the transcendental or symbolic constitution of reality.

#### 4. Radicalizing Unruliness

Unruliness reveals itself to be the stepping stone from nature to a full-fledged human intersubjective existence within the universe of meaning. But for all of that there is no smooth transition from the former to the latter, there being a primordial ontological hiatus between the two irreconcilable zones. The Symbolic is radically distinct from nature since in the human organism nature has not given us instincts, which in turn frees us from their biological impulses. Yet, we do not fall into a mere dichotomy because it remains always negatively related to nature as its obscure ground. However, although Kant directly thematizes this latter in terms of cultural life, he himself fails to fully articulate it in a systematic fashion. The Symbolic has gained some ontological standing, but we still do not understand how this unruly excess came to be and what greater consequences ought to be drawn from it. Is it a contingent happening that merely befalls nature? Or does it perhaps reveal a greater self-sabotaging within its heart of hearts? In other words, what is lacking is a sufficient understanding of this ontological hiatus: if we are to truly explain the universe of meaning, we have to delve into how this split comes to be.

The early Hegel of the *Jena* period realizes that, as it stands, idealism is thus lost. We need some account of how idealization is part and parcel of the world at large. As a result, he tries to save Kant's breakthrough into phenomenal reality as a free construct of an idealizing subject by thinking substance as subject. Accordingly, his project is an attempt to *ontologize* the Kantian framework by explicating the emergence of the subject out of a ground that remains Other to it. What intrigues Žižek in the early Hegel's "night of the world" is that the latter appears to be nothing other than an elaboration of the subject's origins within an ontological disruption from nature's laws as already alluded to but not fully developed by Kant. What Žižek's Hegel adds to the Kantian notion of rational self-determination and the transcendental constitution of experience is a more sophisticated understanding of how the pandemonium of the pre-logical Real we see in "unruliness" precedes and makes possible the autonomy of the cultural life and the Symbolic:

The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity—an unending wealth of many representations, images, of which none belongs to him—or which are not present. This night, the interior of nature, that exists here—pure self—in phantasmagorical representations, is night all around it, in which here shoots a bloody head—there another white ghastly apparition, suddenly here before it, and just so disappears. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye—into a night that becomes awful. (Quoted in Žižek 2000: 29-30)

Prior to the self-legislative laws of practical reason and the synthesis of transcendental imagination constituting the unity of phenomenal reality, we must posit some kind of ontological going-haywire that represents a savage *tearing apart* of the flow of vital being ("here shoots a bloody head—there another white ghastly apparition") as that which opens up their logical possibility. If practical reason and transcendental imagination go hand in hand due to this ontological hiatus that serves as their

obscure ground, it is because both are a response to subjectivity now understood as a nature whose fold has been disrupted and thus demands re-articulation (“a night that becomes awful”):

The pre-synthetic Real, its pure, not-yet-fashioned “multitude” not yet synthesized by a minimum of transcendental imagination, is, *stricto sensu, impossible*: a level that must be retroactively presupposed, but can never actually be *encountered*. Our (Hegelian) point, however, is that this mythical/impossible starting point, the presupposition of imagination, is already the product, the result of, the imagination's disruptive activity. In short, the mythic, inaccessible zero-level of pure multitude not yet affected/fashioned by imagination is nothing but *pure imagination itself*, imagination at its most violent, as the activity of disrupting the continuity of the inertia of the pre-symbolic “natural” Real. This pre-synthetic “multitude” is what Hegel describes as the “night of the world,” as the “unruliness” of the subject's abyssal freedom which violently explodes reality into a dispersed floating of *membra disjecta*. (Žižek 2000: 33)

What the early Hegel thus outlines to is how unruliness is an ontological event. Rather than it being merely *our* non-naturalness, nature somehow forgetting to give us instincts through an accidental slip, it presents something more radical, namely, its own ghastly night into which it has fallen. At its zero-level, the subject is *nature in the mode of auto-denaturalization*. To make this more explicit, we merely have to have to formalize it into the dialectical logic of the mature Hegel already active at this stage. It is the failure of the first moment (the self-actualization of substance) that leads to/is the second (the unruliness of human nature), whose vicissitudes in turn set the stage for the third (culture and language as an autonomous logical space that attempts to suture the hole). The third moment itself is only the second insofar as it hegemonically usurps the position of the first through positing itself as such: “*this very reversal is the very definition of subject*.” ‘subject’ is the name for the principle of Selfhood which subordinates to itself the substantial Whole whose particular moment it originally was.” (Žižek 2007: 106)

In this regard, it is a mere amplification of an already existing interruption in the immanence of the first's logical field, an amplification that destroys its sway from within, but without ever leaving its fold. As such, in the dialectical movement from (i) immediacy → (ii) negation → (iii) negation of negation there is no need to posit something outside the self-movement of negativity to explain the entire logical process: “[t]here is thus no reversal of negativity into positive greatness—the only greatness is 'negativity' itself.” (Žižek 2012: 304) But if the ontological dislocation attested to by full-fledged emergence of the subject in the third is always already a part of nature as its tension as an extension of the latter, then the passage from nature to culture is a mere logical conversion—it only requires a certain gesture or incitation to be brought to the fore. Hegel's inscription of the subject into substance, and thus the Symbolic into the Real, signifies that the former is not a mere external alien force that somehow upsets the latter. Its otherness has to be *internal* to it, some kind of extimate presence upsetting it from within, which points to an emergent negativity to which it is a response. But that entails that substance cannot be a self-articulating totality of necessity, but rather must be wrought by tension, antagonism, and conflict, for otherwise the subject is metaphysically unthinkable. “Subject designates,” as Žižek puts it, “the 'imperfection' of Substance,

the inherent gap, self-deferral, distance-from-itself, which forever prevents Substance from fully realizing itself, from becoming 'fully itself.'" (Žižek 2008: 7) As a result, the idea of a unified, self-penetrating world that language somehow destroys like a parasite only comes *après-coup* as part of a fantasy that helps us protect ourselves from the horror of substance as subject.<sup>iii</sup> After all, if we are to defend that culture is self-determining and phenomenal reality a free construct we must assume it and go all the way, which leads us to a single coherent conclusion: "either subjectivity is an illusion, or reality itself (not only epistemologically) is not-All." (Žižek 2009: 168) What Hegel teaches us is that "nature is 'unnatural,' a freak show of contingent disturbances with no inner rhyme or reason" (Žižek 2012: 298) a fragile not-all. This is the conclusion we ought to draw from the ontological hiatus heralded by the Symbolic, the metaphysics that supplements psychoanalysis.

## 5. From Substance as Subject to Quantum Mechanics

What is so unique about *Less Than Nothing* is that Žižek no longer limits himself to an account of the eruptive birth of subjectivity. He has come to realize that this account has greater metaphysical consequences than he previously acknowledged, consequences that his previous Hegelian-inspired metaphysics lacks the resources to adequately treat. The Symbolic may demand that we delve into the ontology of nature it indirectly implies, a nature that shows itself to be predicated upon constitutive tension and self-sabotaging tendencies. But if substance has now been revealed to be an illusion, the structures of the world fall into the constant danger of becoming the structureless, there being no underlying metaphysical principle responsible for the order around us.

At this conceptual conjuncture, Žižek takes an additional step that leads him into a profoundly new variety of metaphysical thinking. If the subject has become synonymous with substance's constitutive site of auto-laceration, then the subject has in turn to be more fully investigated. We cannot stay at the level of substance qua nature as we typically perceive it: the physical universe that compromises cosmological, geological, and biological time is so ravaged by negativity that the subject in its various vestiges does not merely indicate the places where substance in its uneasy, trembling self-articulation *risks touching the void*, that is to say, is *in danger of no longer holding itself together*, but also the places where *the void threatens to (re-)erupt*. The dynamic processes of the world are not just dependent upon (potential) disarray, but further demonstrate that substance cannot be the last metaphysical word, since it appears on a second glance that the (weakly) structured world itself is a response to something more primordial, something that is constantly trying to show its ugly head: ultimately "there is no Substance, only the Real as the absolute gap, non-identity, and particular phenomena (modes) are Ones, so many attempts to stabilize this gap." (Žižek 2012: 377) But if there is nothing but a gap between the fragments of substance, the threat of complete collapse hangs in the air. What holds reality together since, technically speaking, *nothing* holds them together?



Risking anachronism, Žižek sees a way to reinterpret the Hegelian attempt to think substance as subject through quantum mechanics that sheds light on this problematic (Žižek 2012: 947). As quantum mechanics teaches us, any investigation into the basic material constituents of reality has a paradoxical result: “the more we analyze reality, the more we find a void.” (Žižek 2012: 925) Rather than encountering a dense field of fully constituted realities forming the ultimate building blocks of the universe, we see irreducibly indeterminate states lacking being in any traditional sense and from which “hard” reality can only emerge if there is a collapse of the wave function;<sup>iv</sup> and “normal” laws of linear temporality and causality break down as we encounter particles that retroactively “choose” their paths along virtual chains of possibilities and others that can even cheat the universe, coming in and out of existence without the latter even noticing.<sup>v</sup> But this not only drastically challenges any sharp distinction between nature and culture inasmuch as quantum reality thus uncannily behaves like the Symbolic,<sup>vi</sup> but also attests that the micro-universe of quantum particles is strangely “less” than that of the macro-universe that arises from its vicissitudes, in a way that is remarkably similar to how the Kantian subject can only construct a unified world of appearances from the inconsistent data of sensation. In an uncanny logical short circuit, it would appear that not only is there no bottom-up causality at the level of experience (transcendental constitution is more real than what Kant calls “a rhapsody of perception” [Kant 1998: A156/B195]) since it founds a coherent field of reality), but even the most fundamental level of the universe is less ontologically complete than the structured macro-level physical world that science, according to classical models, describes. Like our universe of meaning, substance is not a given, but an achievement – or rather, a work in progress: it is as if *all reality is transcendently constituted*, as if nature itself emerges out of this field of quasi-entities. But we must now explain the emergence of these ontologically incomplete realities that serve as the basis for the ordered universe. The emphasis of the key philosophical question has thus shifted from how the subject can emerge out of the Real qua substance (thought from being) to how the subject, whose meaning now undergoes a new shift to be explored more fully below, can emerge out of the Real qua void (something from nothing), for the more strictly speaking ontological question of the ontogenesis of the subject proves to be irreducibly entangled with the most fundamental of metaphysical questions.

The more we analyze reality the more we find a void because once we reach the level of quanta our conventional conceptions of the cosmos just stop working. Not only do we here recognize that “there simply *is no basic level*,” whereby “the quantum level marks the beginning of the ‘blurring’ of ‘basic’ full reality” (Žižek 2012: 726), but also that “[o]ne should thus reject the ‘positive’ ontology that presupposes some zero-level of reality where things ‘really happen’ and dismisses the higher levels as mere abbreviations, illusory self-perception, and so forth. There is no such zero-level: if we go ‘all the way down,’ we arrive at the Void.” (Žižek 2012: 730) This has a surprising consequence, one whose full metaphysical implications quantum mechanics thus summons us to accept: viz. that the closer we get to the origin of all things, the more ontologically

incomplete reality is, the less distinguishable its fundamental constituents are from the void, thus forcing us not merely to proclaim that the void is “the only ultimate reality” (Žižek 2012: 726), but more drastically still that “‘all there is’ is, precisely, not-All, a distorted fragment which is ultimately a ‘metonymy of nothing.’” (Žižek 2012: 641) In short, what we experience as hard, full reality is at its core a mere vibration of nothingness lacking any true ontological depth, since there exists a certain radical *indistinction* between being (a structured physical universe) and the void (a structureless zone with no ontological determination in any traditional sense).vii

But if the building blocks of the world are nothing but variations upon nothingness, then why do they emerge in the first place? And what prevents the universe from imploding upon itself, leaving us with nothing but the “eternal peace” of the void? Why something rather than nothing? Žižek hints that the answer is to be found in the very tension between the void and this field of quasi-entities that, the further we push them, the more indistinguishable they appear from nothingness itself—using the Higgs field as an example. Physical systems tend towards a state of lowest energy. In another vein, if we take energy away from a system, we should eventually expect to reach a vacuum state where the total energy count would be zero. Yet certain phenomena tell us that “there has to be something (some substance) that *we cannot take away from a given system without raising that system’s energy*—this ‘something’ is called the Higgs field: once this field appears in a vessel that has been pumped empty, and whose temperature has been lowered as much as possible, its energy will be further *lowered*.” (Žižek 2003: 93) Incredibly, once a physical system’s energy has been lowered to the point where it is on the brink of zero, this “something” appears, a “something” that possesses *less energy than nothing*. Consequently, “nothingness (the void, being deprived of all substance) and the lowest level of energy paradoxically no longer coincide, that is, it is ‘cheaper’ (it costs the system less energy) to persist in ‘something’ than to dwell in ‘nothing,’ at the lowest level of tension, or in the void, the dissolution of all being.” (Žižek 2003: 93) But here we should radicalize this paradox by extending it to the ultimate metaphysical level of reality. It is not merely that we cannot bring any physical system to a zero-level of energy without the Higgs field positing itself: what the latter suggests is that *nothingness is minimally “inconsistent” with itself and that it is this very “inconsistency” that is responsible for the emergence of something out of nothing*. The rapture of void does not merely come at too high a price for us as creatures living in this world, but is, strictly speaking, impossible. Metaphysics is thus starkly remodulated:

What if we posit that “Things-in-themselves” emerge against the background of the Void of Nothingness, the way this Void is conceived in quantum physics, as not just a negative void, but the portent of all possible reality? ... For a true dialectician, the ultimate mystery is not “Why is there something rather than nothing?” but “Why is there nothing rather than something?” (Žižek 2012: 925)

## 6. Towards a Metaphysics of the Void

*Less Than Nothing's* expansive engagement with quantum mechanics not only draws out underlying ontological implications from its fundamental insights, but seeks to supply it with a wider, non-naturalistic foundation while simultaneously founding a new alternative in metaphysics. As that which controls whether forces and particles behave differently, the Higgs field has two modes: it is either “switched off” (inoperative) or “switched on” (operative). While in the first, given that the system is in a state of pure vacuum, forces and particles cannot be distinguished, in the second symmetries between particles and forces are broken so that differentiations among them can occur. However, the paradox lies precisely in the following: what is so unique about the Higgs field is that it is favorable for it to be “switched on” (operative), for if a system is in a state of pure vacuum “the Higgs field still has to spend some energy—nothing comes for free; it is not the zero-point at which the universe is just 'resting in itself' in total release—the nothing has to be sustained by an investment of energy.” (Žižek 2012: 944) Because the pure vacuum requires the expenditure of energy, in order to solve this paradox we are forced to substitute it with another by “introduc[ing] a distinction between two vacuums”:

first, there is the “false” vacuum in which the Higgs field is switched off, i.e., there is pure symmetry with no differentiated particles or forces; this vacuum is “false” because it can only be sustained by a certain amount of energy expenditure. Then, there is the “true” vacuum in which, although the Higgs field is switched on and the symmetry is broken, i.e. there is a certain differentiation of particles and forces, the amount of energy spent is zero. In other words, energetically, the Higgs field is in a state of inactivity, of absolute repose. At the beginning, there is the false vacuum; this vacuum is disturbed and the symmetry is broken because, as with every energetic system, the Higgs field tends towards the minimization of its energy expenditure. This is why “there is something and not nothing”: because, energetically, *something is cheaper than nothing*. (Žižek 2012: 944-945)

What is crucial to note with the Higgs field is that the two vacuums whose existence it posits are not by any means equal: rather than encountering a two-sided principle that brings together a delicate dance of opposites like light and day into equilibrium, we see a *constitutive imbalance*. Once we apply this principle cosmologically as a metaphysical principle, instead of having an eternal repetition of creation (breaking of the symmetries) and its destruction (return to the void), we come across a “displaced One, a One which is, as it were, retarded with regard to itself, always already 'fallen,' its symmetry always already broken.” (Žižek 2012: 949) As such, there is nothing but creation or reality because the pure vacuum wherein one would expect absolute repose is “false,” that is, impossible—*it structurally must have always already passed over into the “true” vacuum*; and although this would appear to make the “false” vacuum theoretically superfluous (it never had, or could, exist) “this tension between the two vacuums [is to] be maintained: the 'false vacuum' cannot simply be dismissed as a mere illusion, leaving only the 'true' vacuum, so that the only true peace is that of incessant activity, of balanced circular motion—the 'true' vacuum itself

remains forever a traumatic disturbance.” (Žižek 2012: 949-950) But why? - *for the precise reason that without this primordial antagonism we could not explain the minimal distinction between the void and its vibrations, between the nothing and the ontologically incomplete realities barely distinguishable from it—in short, how the symmetries between particles and forces could have been broken in the first place.* Were we only to have the “true” vacuum, then finitude, materiality, and ultimately experience would be a mere illusion, for there would be no difference between the symmetry of the void and its disturbance, leaving nothing but a nirvana-like principle of nothingness to which all things are reducible. But once we witness the irreducibility of the antagonism within the void itself between its two modes, reality becomes less a seeming that we have to break through than a self-standing field inasmuch as it is forever distinct from the “false” vacuum, being a metaphysically traumatic perturbation of the latter. Even if nothing and the metonymy of nothing is all there is, this presupposes that the latter does not logically collapse into the former although the exact boundary between them is blurred. Hence, the reason Žižek can say that if “[t]he answer to 'Why is there Something rather than Nothing?' is thus that there *is* only Nothing, and all processes take place 'from Nothing through Nothing to Nothing,'" then “this nothing is not the Oriental or mystical Void of peace, but the nothingness of a pure gap (antagonism, tension, 'contradiction'), the pure form of dislocation ontologically preceding any dislocated content” (Žižek 2012: 38), thus radically changing our very notion of nothingness itself.

The Higgs field thus not only offers us an interesting naturalistic explanation of the world when used in cosmology, but more strongly requires a new variety of metaphysics. Fleshing out its broad consequences, Žižek is not only able to offer a new account of the emergence of something out of nothing, but can also drastically modify his understanding of the subject. For him, the primordial fact from which metaphysics must begin is the fact that nothingness *is*. Drawing upon insights gained by contemporary science, however, he says that in order to explain the mere existence of things, we must posit that nothingness necessarily fails “to be,” for any attempt to have a purely vacuous void paradoxically costs more energy than things existing against the background of this void. Here we encounter “the primacy of the inner split” (Žižek 2012: 386) through which irresolvable conflict is located at the origin of all things: the absolute is nothing but this fragile de-substantialized process that “arises” out of the self-splitting of a positively charged void. There is no primordial fullness, no positive hard reality that self-unfolds according to a creative principle of actualization; there is nothing but a pure ontological dislocation of which we can only say *eppur si muove* (“and yet it moves”). But insofar as this gap cannot be mediated, it presents itself as “the non-dialectical ground of negativity,” so that “[t]he old metaphysical problem of how to name the nameless abyss pops up here in the context of how to name the primordial gap: contradiction, antagonism, symbolic castration, parallax, diffraction, complementarity, up to difference.” (Žižek 2012: 950) But the name that is perhaps best suited to this is *the subject*. First, this would inscribe this metaphysics of the void into the legacy of the Hegelian attempt to think substance as subject, while bringing us simultaneously beyond it and into a new sphere, a new

materialism of the void. If Hegel has taught us the obscure ground of the Symbolic is actually identical with being's own division to itself, quantum mechanics calls us to go further and proclaim that in the subject we encounter the same structure as the split responsible for all things:

This, perhaps, is how one can imagine the zero-level of creation: a red diving line cuts through the thick darkness of the void, and on this line, a fuzzy something appears, the object-cause of desire—perhaps, for some, a woman's naked body (as on the cover of this book). Does this image not supply the minimal coordinates of the subject-object axis, the truly primordial axis of evil: the red line which cuts through the darkness is the subject, and the body its object? (Žižek 2012: 60)

Žižek's paradoxical conclusion is that if the subject is “the primordial Big Bang” (Žižek 2000: 31), it cannot merely be that of the universe of meaning, *but must also be that of all that there is*. Both exhibit the same catastrophic cutting. The great lesson to be drawn from *Less Than Nothing* is therefore that “[w]hat, ultimately, 'there is' is only the absolute Difference, the self-repelling Gap” (Žižek 2012: 378): although substance qua nature proves itself to be not-all (traces of which we see in German Idealist accounts of negativity and most radically in contemporary science), so that we must posit the logical precedence of the void according to which the former is always already contrasted and thus impossibilized, nevertheless just like substance qua nature this originary void in itself also proves to be split—a split that is not merely a mere catastrophic cut, but a rupturing antagonism imbued with an “energetic” or “energizing” force, a force that is somehow less than nothing. This has two drastic consequences. First, the complex order of the cosmos may at some point in time be reduced to unimaginable chaos (being nothing but a heterogeneous play of powers, there is no underlying necessity that prevents it) but never to a nirvana-like nothingness, for before the moment at which an absolute zero would be reached the void would, as it were, break its own symmetry in advance and prevent its own repose because the turmoil of existence costs the universe less energy than the pure virtuality of the void. Second, if thinking substance as subject reveals more than nature itself is anything but a powerful, creative source inasmuch as the subject becomes synonymous with an inborn negativity that impossibilizes its attempt at a self-articulating totality from the outset. It further demonstrates that it is not the human subject that is the ultimate ontological catastrophe, but *reality as such*:

There is nothing, basically. I mean it quite literally. But then how do things emerge? Here I feel a kind of spontaneous affinity with quantum physics, where, you know, the idea there is that [the] universe is a void, but a kind of a positively charged void—and then particular things appear when the balance of the void is disturbed. And I like this idea spontaneously very much, that the fact that it's not just nothing—things are out there—it means that something went terribly wrong, that what we call creation is a kind of a cosmic imbalance, cosmic catastrophe, that things exist by mistake. (Taylor 2007)

However, if what we call creation, the primordial Big Bang of the physical universe, is some kind of cosmic mishap, then this mishap must in some sense have been unavoidable. The ontological

catastrophe that is creation *is a necessity* because nothingness itself fails “to be” nothingness and through its failure never ceases to create “something.” The world does not find its origin in a willed creation, an impersonal emanation from a sphere of consummate being overflowing in itself, or the uncontainable productivity of substance qua nature—no, the world comes to be in a primordial metaphysical cataclysm that *is always already occurring*, it being impossible to pinpoint a logical moment within which nothingness could have succeeded at “being” itself. Yet the split that is the subject in both its modes should not be considered a loss, but rather *a liberation*. Ontological catastrophe is paradoxically “*a deprivation, a gesture of taking away which is in itself a giving*, productive, generative, opening up and sustaining the space in which something(s) can appear” (Žižek 2003: 93) even if these something(s) only exist because ontological catastrophe is uncannily less than nothing. That reality is just a metonymy of nothing is not something we should lament: it is still distinguishable from that void of pure virtuality in which reality as we know it would be impossible.

## **7. Conclusion: The Gap as the Ultimate Word**

*Less Than Nothing* adds a new chapter to Žižek's metaphysics. In its first version, it asked what was the ontological standing of the Symbolic. This forced it to include that substance could not be a self-articulating totality, but must be inflicted with a thoroughgoing negativity, a negativity that is greater than any fixed order. As such, the immanent causality of nature is seen to be predicated upon its potential internal breakdown as that which is logically primary. In its new version, this investigation acquires a new depth. If we are to understand how the not-all of substance could sustain itself in its own precarious being and, more fundamentally, how it could have emerged in the first place, we must drastically modify our understanding of the subject as the constitutive dysfunctioning of substance into that of split in the void itself between two vacuums. We have thus come full circle: an ontological account of the emergence of the subject (the arising of language out of being) has morphed into a discussion concerning the ultimate metaphysical structure of the world (the upsurge of “something[s]” out of nothing), because the two questions are seen to be intimately linked, the former automatically leading to the latter. And falling upon this intuition, Žižek asks what if the same structure is at play at both levels, so that the answer to the latter will prove to be similar to that of the former, namely, that the movement from the Real of void to creation is not as initially problematic as it may appear because the Real of void shows itself to be always already tainted by the Real of a self-repelling gap just as substance was always already subject. The negative connotations associated with the language of catastrophe is in this sense completely justified, for creation does not present itself as intrinsically beautiful, creative or purposeful, but rather as a monstrous series of ontological abortions and terrors devoid of sense, even if this series is from time to time capable of miracles, namely, that of phenomenal reality itself out of the meaninglessness of the Real of the void.<sup>viii</sup> Rather than the world being given to us by the self-

overflowing exuberance of the Good, the immanent productivity of substance, or the personal hand of God, it moves from nothing through nothing to nothing due to the internal split of a positively charged nothingness, which thus denies all positivity to that which it sets in motion. But this signifies that “[p]erhaps this gap separating the two vacuums is then the ultimate word (or one of them, at least) that we can pronounce on the universe: a kind of primordial ontological dislocation or *différance* on account of which, no matter how peaceful things may appear *sub specie aeternitatis*, the universe is out of joint and *eppur si muove*.” (Žižek 2012: 377) In this regard, we can begin to catch sight of what Žižek means when he asserts that we now have to enact a radical reversal of metaphysics. Instead of being concerned with the study of being qua being (the level of the ordered, perceived universe) we ought to investigate nothing qua nothing (the self-repelling gap of the void from which “something(s),” which as ontologically incomplete entities are mere metonymies of nothing, emerge as themselves less than the nothing of virtual potentiality).

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- i For a discussion of this distinction between the Real<sub>1</sub> and the Real<sub>2</sub>, see Fink 1995: 24ff.
  - ii In the late seminars of the 1970s, Lacan comes to realize that he needs to redefine not only human nature but nature itself if he is to explain the ontogenesis of subjectivity, without which psychoanalysis would lack any account of the foundation of its own subject matter. However, he only gives puzzling remarks such as nature is a rottenness from which nature bubbles forth, which seems to imply a radicalization of the organic disorder he placed at the centre of the mirror stage earlier in his career and consequently also that of death drive. For a succinct account, see Johnston 200: 272ff.
  - iii For a discussion of a whole substance, see Žižek 2007: 220 and 223.
  - iv For a discussion of the relation of “dense” reality to the collapse of the wave function, see Žižek 2012: 724.
  - v For a discussion of how quantum particles relate outside the coordinates of how ordered universe, see Žižek 2012: 918–19 and Žižek 2007: 220ff.
  - vi For a discussion of the similarities between quantum reality and language, see Žižek 2012: 920ff.
  - vii For a discussion of the indistinction between being and the void, see Žižek 2012: 60.
  - viii Žižek explicitly refers to the emerge of the Symbolic from the Real as a miracle in Žižek and Daly 2004 : 59