

The Absolutes that Failed, Creativity and Human Procreation

This is a challenging book and well worth spending the time and energy required to read it. To fully grasp the arguments made here one needs at the very least to read at Kant's first critique (1998) and Hegel's first major book (2018). But it would also be helpful to see a lot of movies, especially those by Hitchcock! There is much to admire and this book will stimulate much discussion. Some of the ideas are commonplace notions expressed in somewhat veiled language, but some of the central arguments are newly formulated paradoxes that attempt to get at elusive aspects of human lived experience and the political economy of nation-states in the Late Capitalist era.

The central paradox (in common sense terms) is that it is only by striving to get what we do not necessarily hope to accomplish that we become aware of who we really are, and the true "nature" of a human being is not a static personality but a continually shifting confrontation with ontic realities and obdurate blockages, especially in creation and procreation.

Much important information is contained in this book, but at times it almost feels like a primer for obscure trivia that might emerge as questions on the tv program "Jeopardy". But for many the penetrating comments on Kant and Hegel will be worth the price of the book for anyone who is not already either a Kant scholar or a Hegel scholar. It just came out in hardcover but no doubt a paperback version will appear and that will make it even more affordable and more widely read. It is not a textbook however. It would not be useful in a lecture course although it might provoke discussion in an advanced graduate seminar. Key terms are never fully defined. It is not poetry or even verse drama, since there are too many declarative sentences to compare any of this to a work by T. S. Eliot (Žižek 2020: 419).

In "Murder in the Cathedral" Eliot argues that the highest form of "treason" is to do the right thing for the wrong reason. He was writing about the assassination of Archbishop Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral in the twelfth century (1170 CE), during the reign of Henry II. Perhaps Søren Kierkegaard was a bit wiser in his arguments with himself about marriage and being a householder versus intellectual productivity. Maybe the idea that doing the right thing for the right reason is a higher form of wisdom than doing the wrong thing for the wrong reason, or even doing the right thing for the wrong reason. The fourth possibility would be doing the wrong thing for the right reason and that often happens when one has to choose a path that is neither good nor bad but nevertheless perhaps better, like assassinating Adolph Hitler, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer was willing to be complicit with despite the Ten Commandments.

One has to either believe in *Tanakh* (which is called the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures by the goyim who are not Jews) or believe in the so-called New Testament (which Ultra-Orthodox and Orthodox Jews definitely see as apocryphal) to believe in some kind of

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YHWH/Gott/God figure in order to follow a theological argument in the way that Eliot did. (The notion of a “unified” Bible that can reconcile the Old and the New is something that Charles Sanders Peirce might deem a kind of “vague” popular belief that is not strictly logical but that helps people get through the day, more or less.)

Žižek, in his inimitable style, mixing close analytical arguments with popular culture examples, presents three Theorems, I, II, and III. He then recapitulates with a kind of overview of his central motif: negativity which is so “radical” that it cannot be “sublated”. His triad of argumentation attempts to persuade us that we can (I.) know the “fate of ontology in our era”, (II.) comprehend that it is “sexuality,” as a force of “negativity” disrupting every ontological “edifice”, that allows for our “contact with the Absolute”, and (III.) the convoluted “space” can be thought of in terms of three synecdoches: the Möbius strip, the cross-cap and the Klein bottle.

Like Durkheim’s argument about the need for prostitution to allow for bourgeois norms concerning monogamy, Žižek concludes with paradoxes: human reason requires madness as its ground; stable, committed monogamous relationships require notions of sexual passion that can also threaten the notion of bourgeois forms of romantic love between two individuals; and, the ethical aspects of “communal life” require military struggle. In other words, without madness, passion and war we cannot have liberal Enlightenment Reason, modern marriages or nation-states.

Much of the vocabulary is unnecessarily metaphorical and poetic. Part of his charm is his obfuscation of central points in numerous digressions. Sometimes the illustrations are as complex to decipher as the points they are supposed to illuminate. It all reminds me of the largest rough diamond discovered since 1905, the 1,758 carat basketball size Sowlo, discovered in April 2019 at the Karowe mine in Botswana, and recently purchased by Louis Vuitton of the LVMH corporation in Paris. Žižek’s rough diamond is not the biggest ever published. But Sewelo means “rare find” in the Setswana language and this most recent book by Žižek is indeed a rare find.

I found it at the Athenaeum book store in Amsterdam in November, 2019, when it had first come out. I was actually looking for a book by Spinoza in both 17th century and contemporary Dutch, but that book had been sold. Instead of a Dutch language version of Spinoza’s masterpiece I happened to find another deeply Metaphysical book. Žižek wants to “transpose” the “gap” between the “Absolute” and our phenomenal world. In a Kantian (or Neo-Kantian) vein, one could say he wants to focus on the distance between the phenomenal and the *Ding-an-Sich*. We can never fully know the Thing-in-itself, but we can know that we can never know.

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Spinoza's notion that we can somehow link up with the Absolute as that which is beyond the vicissitudes of everyday life and even politics in our comprehension of "Nature" is thus at odds with Žižek's core Metaphysical assumption that we cannot coalesce the phenomenally ontic and the transcendently ontological. For Žižek "man" is "united" with "Nature" precisely by an acceptance of the paradox that human beings cannot be entirely "natural". One does not have to accept that axiom or many others, however, in order to enjoy this uncut diamond. Nor would a fully polished version of this gem necessarily be a lot better, except perhaps for classroom use with undergraduate students, graduate students, or those not philosophically inclined already.

Like a good novel of the sort written by Tolstoy or Somerset Maugham this book is a "good read". It can also be compared to *The Signature of All Things*, a surprisingly good novel by Elizabeth Gilbert (2013) about Alfred Russell Wallace, the theory of natural selection, and related matters like the commercial production of quinine in the Indonesian archipelago. This Post-postmodernist "novel" has many plot twists and I kept being intrigued by all of the characters on the stage. Žižek has many of the characteristics of a good story teller. Many academic philosophers and social scientists have said they do not read any of Žižek's books and find them a waste of time. I can see why. He is in no way a standard academic writer. He is often slightly obscure about centrally important points, but that is actually part of the overall argument. Some things are hard to pin down completely. There are "antinomies".

Surprisingly, the antinomies in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* can be compared to the antinomies of "pure sexuation". Romantic love as a form of eros is also a form of epistemological truth and even Metaphysical Truth. There are major omissions in this book from the perspective of the social sciences. Although Žižek has profound things to say about Luther, he completely ignores Max Weber's oeuvre and the notion that the Protestant rebellion against some Roman Catholic dogmas has an "association" ("elective affinity") with the Geist of modern capitalism and the world capitalist system. It is as if Immanuel Wallerstein and other World Systems Theorists never existed.

He is keen on German-language philosophical work from Prussian and Weimar, etc., thinkers (that is often labeled "German Idealism" although much of it was composed *before* there was a *Deutschland* as a nation-state). But he does not elaborate on the Neo-Kantians or even the Neo-Hegelians very much (other than Marx and Lacan). The book looks at various ways of thinking about historical materialism and dialectical materialism. He interrogates many bits and pieces of Neo-Marxist thought. But some may have difficulty with the claim on the book jacket that this is an example of true rigor. In attempting to "re-invent" himself again, it is possible that Žižek may have gone a bit too far out in Left field to really catch all of the pop flies hit by a variety of Marxist batters. David Harvey does not

enter the stage.

There is also not much attempt made by Žižek to discuss other views of Lacan's central ideas. Felman (1987) provides a general view of aspects of Lacan's notion that we human beings chase after "the truth" but nevertheless in running after it we are always bound to miss it and to some extent lie. Yet one could read Žižek as if he is saying he (and only he) has the correct interpretations of a number of different Metaphysical, ontological, Epistemological, axiological, teleological and Methodological problems. Yet anyone who has studied history, philosophy or the socio-cultural and political-economic *Wissenschaften* knows that there is almost always room for further dialogue.

If we focus on love of the mother and jealousy of the father in young boys, then we have one little bit of the big puzzle that psychoanalysis can sometimes get at in Freudian psychoanalysis, but then we have a host of other views, including those of the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski. A thorough-going comparative symbolic anthropology and comparative historical sociology is required to even begin to solve some of the societal questions that Žižek touches on. He does indicate an awareness of Levi-Strauss' notion that one specific narrative of a "myth" is not enough and that we have to look at the subtle nuances of the variations in which the story is told to even begin to capture some of the implicit "structures" in those ideas, but he nevertheless often treats a short summary of a movie (well known or not) as a kind of empirical "proof" or "smoking gun". (The pattern is a bit like: "See: what I am saying is also depicted very well in movie Y, but not in movie X, which is flawed.")

If we go from the very, very micro (nano seconds, DNA) to the very, very macro (a Universe with billions of galaxies) then human life on planet earth is perhaps about a kind of Neo-Darwinian belief in the centrality of procreation and the survival of the species. But at the level of social life for the last 50,000 years or so there is more to sexuality and having progeny and future generations. So perhaps "creativity" should be emphasized a bit more in the foreground. Newton famously did not have any children and yet his version of physical laws was a useful way of trying to understand certain aspects of life on planet earth and the movement of physical bodies in the then known solar system.

I cannot possibly cover all of the little puzzles in this book, nor fully present much less unravel the intriguing paradoxes. It would require a book of similar length to even begin to touch on all of the ideas found in 481 pages (i.e. 458 pages of text and end notes). But let me briefly discuss two aspects of this book that made me think very carefully about some of my fundamental assumptions.

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One enlightening discussion is the notion that Kant's antinomies and Lacan's antinomies overlap. Whether or not Lacan's explanation makes it clear that in essence Kant was dealing with "sexuation", it is nevertheless provocative to think through the question. The second stimulating analysis, however, grabbed me even more. That is the comments on Luther and Christian theology. I found myself trying to explain the Roman Catholic dogmatic notion of "predestination" and Jean Calvin's emphasis on the individual human being and "double predestination" to a group of male friends. They were not interested and it is highly likely they would not even consider picking up this book if it were available to them for free. (It will soon be in many libraries.) But Corollary 4 of Theorem IV blew me away.

It is I am sure coincidence and not Jungian synchronicity but 1517, 1857, 1917 and 1957 (Shanghai Commune) are all important dates and they are all interlinked. The Protestant Reformation sparked a break up of the Medieval Roman Catholic order in Western Europe and that then had an important impact on the quest to form a unified nation-state called Deutschland in the nineteenth century. If there had been a unified empire of all German-speaking people rather than a split between Deutschland and the Austro-Hungarian Empire then many things would have turned out differently, including a series of wars that eventually culminated in the long wars of 1914-1918 and 1932-1945. The Emperor Napoleon's military leadership laid the groundwork for the events that inspired Hegel in 1807 to publish a very veiled revolutionary tract and that led to Lenin being allowed to return to the Finland Station. No one could have predicted that dialectic in 1517 when Luther made his 95 theses public.

Žižek immediately links Aristotle and Luther to today's "consumer slavery" (without mentioning Weber's oeuvre). True freedom (as opposed to nominal political freedom) and true slavery (as opposed to what we normally think of as slavery) may not be as straightforward as we usually assume. The master-slave dynamic is complex, as Hegel points out eloquently. It may be an illusion to think that God has chosen the elect and that those who are not among the elect cannot do anything about that, but it can be psychologically reassuring to the rich capitalist merchant in Amsterdam who owns stock in the first limited liability company in the world, the *Vereenigde Oost-Indië Compagnie* (VOC) and becomes so wealthy he can have a very big and wide house built on the *Heerengracht*. His good fortune is God's will.

Human beings did not always sense a logical inconsistency between double predestination and free will because if an action succeeds (e.g. if the town of Leiden holds out against the enemy siege), then it seems as if that was predestined to happen. (It is partially a matter of type I and type II errors in our thinking; if we lose, we assume it was bad luck, but if we win, we assume we deserved it.) Free choice, Žižek (2020: 392) points out, is not a matter of

choosing between strawberry cake or chocolate cake, but choosing to put all one's chips on the table, to put "at stake one's very existence". There is no free choice in a death camp or maximum security prison other than the choice to die or to make the most of each day and still remain as honorable as is humanly possible. But in most of life's circumstances (at least in societies where the average poor person can still obtain running water and sufficient food) there is some degree of freedom, however slight. (Solzhenitsyn wrote eloquently about that in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.)

The biggest hole in this important book is lack of discussion of Charles Sanders Peirce's Pragmaticism and triadic epistemology. If Peirce's semiotic of Interpretant (i.e. Interpretive Networks) and Representant (i.e. Operationalized Representations) had been included, some of the less clear aspects of this rough diamond could have come to light. The Interpretant is never a solitary interpreter, but sometimes one feels that Žižek treats himself as the lone wolf who knows exactly how to travel the obscure trails and beat the pack. His use of "sign systems" is never quite clear since we do not know what his real intellectual allegiances come down to other than his somewhat idiosyncratic interpretations of Hegel and his allegiance to everything that Lacan wrote (or said).

I like this book, but precisely since I enjoy reading and even re-reading certain paragraphs. I sometimes wish I was reading Terry Pinkard's biography of Hegel again (see Hegel 2018 for references), or Shoshana Felman's (1987) take on Lacan again instead. I hope that Žižek will continue to go into the topics raised so well in this book and start to educate himself in the social sciences, especially the comparative historical sociology and political economy of Max Weber. His language skills will allow him to read Weber's original German exposition of ideas and Weber's letters in the MWGA volumes. The *Gesamtausgabe* is a valuable resource that Žižek has not tapped but that will deepen and broaden his intellectual quest. I myself have been struggling to work my way through the German edition and compare it to the English translation that has been in wide use since 1968. I look forward to reading more of Žižek's stimulating work in the future and hope that this book will not only be widely read but also critiqued by scholars with far more knowledge of all the subjects that are touched on than any one person can muster. The Interpretive Network of Kant scholars will certainly want to comment on the way in which Žižek links Lacan to Kant and, perhaps, dialogue between psychoanalysts and Kant scholars will produce further refinement of the ideas concerning the noumenal and the phenomenal. Ditto for work on Hegel and for analysis of the impact of the Protestant Reformation.

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