

Introduction

Today, one often mentions how the reference to psychoanalysis in cultural studies and the psychoanalytic clinic supplement each other: cultural studies lack the real of clinical experience, while the clinic lacks the broader critico-historical perspective (say, of the historic specificity of the categories of psychoanalysis, Oedipal complex, castration, or paternal authority). The answer to this should be that each of the approaches should work on its limitation from within its horizon – not by relying on the other to fill up its lack. If cultural studies cannot account for the real of the clinical experience, this signals the insufficiency of its theoretical framework itself; if the clinic cannot reflect its historical presuppositions, it is a bad clinic.

—Slavoj Žižek, “Jacques Lacan’s Four Discourses”

Who is Slavoj Žižek?

Slavoj Žižek is widely regarded as the most significant and provocative thinker of our age. As the above quotation indicates, Žižek deploys concepts from the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan in order to reactualize a dialectical method in philosophy.¹ The result is a radically new vision of

¹ Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) is the most important psychoanalytic theorist after Freud, and his ideas transformed psychoanalysis; however, his theories are notoriously difficult.

human nature and human society. In addition to Jacques Lacan, Žižek has been strongly influenced by the work of G. W. F. Hegel, F. W. J. Schelling, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Louis Althusser, and Alain Badiou. In his public lectures, Žižek has concisely introduced his own thinking as Hegelian in philosophy, Lacanian in psychology, “Christian-materialist” in religion, and communist in politics.²

But why has Slavoj Žižek become so well known in the two decades since his first publications in English? What is so captivating and so revolutionary about his fusion of philosophy and psychoanalysis? Why is Professor Žižek widely regarded as one of the most important thinkers in the world today? A preliminary answer to these questions is that he is a charismatic speaker with an extraordinary ability to engage his audience. Žižek regularly draws large crowds and packs auditoriums across whatever continent he visits, and consistently fills lecture halls beyond their normal capacity. But anyone who has also sat in his classroom will be impressed by Žižek’s ability to make difficult ideas comprehensible; he is an extremely effective *teacher*. Moreover, a look into any of his books reveals immediately that Žižek is an enormously accomplished scholar. He is the sole author of more than 20 books in English (and counting), and these innovative and theoretically substantial works have established him as one of today’s preeminent thinkers.

Žižek has written – with humor, lucidity, and extraordinary erudition – on the philosophical problem of identity, ontology, globalization, post-modernism, political philosophy, literature, film, ecology, religion, the French Revolution, Lenin, the philosophy of language, the philosophy of mind, and numerous other topics. Without question the work of Slavoj

Because Žižek’s remarks are often addressed to an audience that is already familiar with Lacanian psychoanalysis, the reader new to Lacanian theory may need to consult an introductory text as well. One of the best short introductions to Lacan is Sean Homer’s *Jacques Lacan* (London: Routledge, 2005). A more in-depth (but still non-philosophical) introduction to Lacan is *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* by Bruce Fink (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). The best essays on Lacan and philosophy are Alenka Zupancic’s *Ethics of the Real* (London: Verso, 2000), and Joan Copjec’s *Read My Desire* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994). For additional essays on Lacan and philosophy, see the website *The International Journal of Žižek Studies*, at <http://www.zizekstudies.org/>. Readers should regularly explore the wealth of resources available from the website [lacan.com](http://www.lacan.com), run in New York by Josefina Ayerza. Newcomers to Lacanian theory might want to consult Dylan Evans’ *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996).

² For an online biography of Žižek, see the faculty page of the website for the European Graduate School at <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/biography/>. Another online biography is available at <http://www.notablebiographies.com/supp/Supplement-Sp-Z/Zizek-Slavoj.html>.

Žižek will continue to inform philosophical, psychological, political, and cultural discourses well into the future. In an effort to explain the Žižek phenomenon, Ian Parker writes:

Žižek burst onto the world academic stage with commentaries and interventions in politics and psychoanalysis, with powerful examples of the way an understanding of these two domains could be dialectically intertwined and powered through a close reading of German philosophy. Žižek's academic performance has also drawn attention from a wider intellectual audience, and this has given him the opportunity to elaborate some complex conceptual machinery that can be applied to music, theology, virtual reality, and, it would seem, virtually any other cultural phenomenon. His writing appeared at an opportune moment, offering a new vocabulary for thinking through how ideology grips its subjects.³

But Ian Parker's remarks do not indicate the fundamental reasons why Žižek's work has become so prominent (and so controversial) since the publication in 1989 of *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Žižek is not only a charismatic speaker and a brilliant cultural theorist who, at an opportune moment, captivated the public with elaborate and innovative theories. Significantly, Parker (who is a practicing psychoanalyst) neglects the *philosophical* implications of Žižek's work. According to Marek Wieczorek, "The originality of Žižek's contribution to Western intellectual history lies in his extraordinary fusion of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, continental philosophy (in particular his anti-essentialist readings of Hegel), and Marxist political theory."⁴ Žižek utilizes Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts *in order to reinvent Hegelian dialectics*; he puts Lacanian theory to work in order to reactualize German Idealism for the twenty-first century.

³ Ian Parker, *Slavoj Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), pp. 2–3. Parker's interpretation of Žižek's work lapses repeatedly into circumstantial ad hominem fallacies. For example, in an attempt to formulate a critique of Žižek's politics, Parker offers a lengthy digression intended to demonstrate Žižek's alleged "over-identification" with his Slovenian origins and affiliations. In fact, Parker's entire chapter 1 is devoted to the formation, operation, and decomposition of the Yugoslav state. Parker rehearses this caricature of Žižek in his contribution to the stunningly misnamed book, *The Truth of Žižek*, edited by Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (London: Continuum, 2007). Significantly, Žižek's afterward to *The Truth of Žižek* is titled "With Defenders like These, Who Needs Attackers." This afterward is by far the most valuable contribution to the work. Žižek responds to Parker's efforts to discredit him on pages 231–2 of *The Truth of Žižek*, and succinctly refutes Parker's claims.

⁴ See Marek Wieczorek, "Introduction," in Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway* (Seattle: The Walter Chapin Simpson Center for the Humanities, University of Washington, 2000), p. viii.

This being said, it must be added that Žižek is also a psychoanalyst, and it is thus no accident that his discourse provokes what Lacanian psychoanalysts call *jouissance*. As students of the history of philosophy know, many philosophers lack a sense of humor. The prime example of this is Martin Heidegger, whose only documented joke was a jibe directed at Lacan: “Significantly, the ONLY joke – or, if not joke then, at least, moment of irony – in Heidegger occurs in his rather bad taste quip about Lacan as ‘that psychiatrist who is himself in the need of a psychiatrist’ (in a letter to Medard Boss).”⁵ Žižek is one of the few philosophers since Socrates who is able to inspire the love of learning and also to make his students and interlocutors laugh. And like Socrates Žižek continuously engages in self-critique, usually by ironically indicating the obscene underside of acceptable liberal-tolerant discourse. Žižek’s students immediately recognize when he ironically criticizes himself. If, for example, Žižek jokingly calls himself a racist, it is in the context of his criticism of those who indulge in obscene racist fantasies. But his endearing and self-deprecating sense of humor is another fundamental reason for Žižek’s success. In fact, many of his fans find his books and his lectures so enjoyable as to be almost addictive, and *enjoyment* is at the origin of the Žižek phenomenon.

“Enjoyment” is the accepted translation of the Lacanian term *jouissance*, and in his work, Žižek reveals the vital role of enjoyment in social life. But in order to understand Žižek, it is necessary to keep in mind that enjoyment is not pleasure: *jouissance* is surplus enjoyment that manifests as a strange fascination accompanied by uneasiness or discomfort (e.g., gawking at a car crash). Enjoyment is a kind of excessive stimulation, an unbearable pleasure *in* pain, an incalculable “something more” that can induce human beings to act against their own self-interest. Žižek shows that even though subjects are not usually aware of *jouissance*, all politics relies upon and manipulates an economy of enjoyment. However it is not merely Žižek’s *understanding* of enjoyment, but more importantly, his ability to *produce* enjoyment that has led to his large following. The *jouissance* engendered by his discourse is one of the primary reasons why Žižek has been the eye of a storm of cultural, political, and philosophical controversy for decades.⁶

⁵ Slavoj Žižek, “Religion between Knowledge and *Jouissance*,” available online at http://www.lacan.com/zizsmokeonthewater.html#_ftn8.

⁶ In an interview in 2007, Paul A. Taylor described how Žižek constantly questions further and revises his own thinking. Taylor points out that the uncategorizable aspect of Žižek’s writing is indicated by the geographical and disciplinary spread of his readers. But perhaps the primary feature of all his work is its ethical quality: such as his exposure of hypocrisy

Along these lines, because Žižek is a psychoanalyst, it is no coincidence that he is so successful at engendering *transference*. Although transference may manifest as hate, it more often manifests as love.⁷ And moreover – as Lacan showed – transference is primarily related to knowledge and the love of learning. Žižek’s depth of psychoanalytic insight makes him one of those rare philosophers who very effectively engender transference as the love of truth. He thrives on this transference relationship with his audience and, because of his own love of learning, he pushes himself to the limit in testing and revising his analyses, and induces his readers to actively engage in this struggle for truth. Žižek’s aim is always the further development of previous analyses.

Unfortunately, at the time of this writing, Žižek’s major work on Hegel is not yet available. This book does not pretend to be a comprehensive study; it merely provides an introductory-level focus for the approach to 24 of Žižek’s monographs.⁸ What follows is not intended as an encyclopedic synopsis of the meaning of Žižek’s work, much less as a narrative account of Žižek’s development and significance. This guide simply attempts to facilitate – for general readers – the engagement in Žižek’s philosophical struggle for the truth. The following essays simply try to let Žižek speak for himself (as much as possible) about certain fundamental problems of philosophy. Along the way, we hope to indicate why philosophy after Žižek, if it is not to regress, must build on his methodology. What follows is intended as an aid for readers who are simultaneously reading the texts that are being discussed.

and lazy thinking. Another appeal of Žižek’s theorizing is its practical usefulness; his unabashed speculative approach nevertheless uncovers the issues behind actual events better than so-called “pragmatic” works. The full interview is online at <http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/ijzs/article/viewFile/3/9>.

⁷ Žižek sometimes discusses love with reference to the song “In Praise of the Third Thing” (*Lob der dritten Sache*) from Brecht’s *Mother*: “The mother keeps (or rather, regains) her son in the very act of losing him ‘through the third thing’; they are close to each other by way of being close to the third thing (in this case, of course, their common struggle for communism).” See Slavoj Žižek, *Opera’s Second Death* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 195.

⁸ The following essays are arranged in (approximately) the order in which Žižek published the books, but have been written in such a way that they may be read *either* sequentially *or* individually (i.e. in any order). There are some minor inconsistencies, due to the fact that Žižek himself is inconsistent. For example, in some texts, he uses the term “non-all,” whereas in other texts he uses “not-All.” In the following commentary, I have tried to preserve Žižek’s variants. This explains why certain terms are capitalized or spelt differently depending on which book is under discussion. In addition, the chapter titles (except for this “Introduction” and also my “Conclusion”) correspond *exactly* to Žižek’s book titles, except for standardizing Žižek’s idiosyncratic capitalization.

What Does Žižek Mean by “Dialectic”?

In addition to the *jouissance* he provokes, and in addition to his ability to engender transference as the love of knowledge, there is another reason for Žižek’s profound impact. He is not just a theorist; he is also a theoretical activist and revolutionary. He does not simply write books and give talks: every book and every talk is an *intervention*. He intentionally provokes us, his listeners and readers, to overcome our complacency and to confront our own relation to fantasy, enjoyment, and the dialectic of desire. Žižek’s discourse engages us to the point that we actively participate as both analyst and analysand. Because of the level of engagement his thinking demands and induces, theory for Žižek is much more than what Ian Parker refers to as “conceptual machinery.” Žižek’s dialectical materialism does not merely describe the world; on the contrary, it is already changing the world. In fact, his work has already led to the reinvention of the basic theoretical coordinates of an astonishing variety of disciplines and discourses. So on the one hand, his theory involves intervention, and the inducement to the Lacanian act, which ruptures symbolic reality, and opens the possibility of new possibilities. But, on the other hand, Žižek also reveals the extent to which intervention and struggle always rely (at least implicitly) on theory.

A close reading of Žižek’s books will reveal that his dialectical materialism offers a new approach to most of the traditional problems of philosophy. Consider the ancient controversy between nominalism and realism. *Nominalism* (derived from the Greek *onoma*, meaning “name”), is the doctrine that universal, abstract ideas, have no real existence, but are simply general names invented by humans to indicate individual entities. According to nominalism, the locus of truth and reality are these individual entities. By contrast, *realism* is the doctrine that (at least some) universal ideas transcend our identification and naming of them: these universal natures or essences (allegedly) inform all intelligible experience. Neither of these doctrines achieves the subtlety or clarity of Žižek’s ontology; but the very antagonism between them is an example of the moment of incommensurability that Žižek evokes in his investigations into what we mean when we say that something is “true.” Žižek shows how both realism and nominalism fail to recognize that what is universal is the Lacanian Real as the incommensurability or parallax gap that provokes the struggle for truth. Philosophical realism errs in conceiving the truth as some enduring content that serves as an infallible standard of correctness for all possible disclosures or human actions. Nominalism errs by reducing all

conflicts to the different particular definitions of some term. For the nominalist, there is really no conflict; the problem is simply that the two parties in the disagreement use the term (e.g., justice, freedom, etc.) in two different senses. Both realism and nominalism are wrong in presuming that we have access to some unambiguous ground or thing-in-itself (conceived either as universal ideal or as individual entities). But as we will see, Žižek points out again and again that the true universal is the Real as antagonism itself, the struggle for hegemony is itself the only sameness that permeates any possible symbolic “reality.” The price for our access to what we experience as reality is that something must remain unthought.⁹

But if any one – any whole or totality – is inherently inconsistent, then how does a name refer to the objects it denotes? Descriptivists (such as John Searle) argue that names refer to objects because of the meaning implicit to the name. According to descriptivism, a name is like a cluster of positive properties, descriptive features that comprise the meaning of the word. For example, the *intensional* meaning of the term “mouse” consists of the properties connoted by the word: being a small furry rodent, having large ears and a long thin tail, squeaking, nibbling holes in cheeses, etc. The *extensional* meaning of the word “mouse” is all of the entities in the universe denoted by this term. Intension has logical priority over extension insofar as the set of universal properties connoted by the word “mouse” determines whether or not an object belongs to the set of mice.

In contrast to this approach, antidescriptivists (such as Saul Kripke) argue that a name refers to an object because of an act of “primal baptism.” Kripke argues that a name functions as a “rigid designator” that refers to the same object in any possible worlds. Kripke’s most famous example involves the claim that “Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus.” “Hesperus” is an old name for an object that was formerly described as the evening star, and “Phosphorus” is an old name for an object that was described as the morning star. But unknown to the users of these names, both referred to the same object, the planet Venus. Therefore, the claim “Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus” must be necessarily true, because Hesperus and Phosphorus are proper names for the identical object. Each name refers to its object (and to no other object) in all possible worlds, because the object that both names designate is Venus, and Venus is self-identical: Venus is identical to Venus. Kripke argues that these names, like other names, are rigid designators.

Žižek’s account of how names refer to objects develops the philosophical implications of Lacanian theory, and departs from both descriptivism

⁹ Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 44.

and antidescriptivism.¹⁰ Because language cannot be private, meaning is always intersubjective; it exists in the symbolic order, the Lacanian big Other. But the symbolic space of language and discourse is made up of signifiers that are ambiguous: their literal meaning is “overdetermined” by metaphorical surplus meaning. This ambiguity in the field of meaning is tied down, or fixed in place through naming. Žižek argues that both descriptivists and antidescriptivists overlook the radical contingency implicit to naming.¹¹ Žižek’s account shows a sense in which, not only proper names, but every name in any common language, implies a circular, self-referential moment: “Here we encounter the dogmatic stupidity proper to a signifier as such, the stupidity which assumes the shape of a tautology: a name refers to an object *because this object is called that* – this impersonal form (‘it is called’) announces the dimension of the ‘big Other’ beyond other subjects.”¹² This tautological moment, which is a constituent of every use of names in language, is the Lacanian Master-Signifier. The Master-Signifier is an empty signifier which has no signified content, and which unifies a field of meaning precisely through this very lack or inconsistency:

each master-signifier works not because it is some pre-existing fullness that already contains all of the meanings attributed to it, but because it is empty, just that place from which to see the “equivalence” of other signifiers. It is not some original reserve that holds all of its significations in advance, but only what is retrospectively recognized as what is being referred to. Thus, to take the example of “democracy,” it is not some concept common to the liberal notion of democracy, which asserts the autonomy of the individual over the State, and the socialist notion of democracy, which can only be guaranteed by a Party representing the interests of the People. It is not a proper solution to argue either that the socialist definition travesties true democracy or that the socialist alternative is the only authentic form of democracy. Rather, the only adequate way to define “democracy” is to include all political movements and orientations that legitimate themselves by reference to “democracy” – and which are ultimately defined only by their differential relationship to “non-democracy.”¹³

¹⁰ One of the clearest and most accessible accounts of the philosophical implications of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is in chapter 3 of Slavoj Žižek’s *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), pp. 87–129.

¹¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), p. 92.

¹² Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), p. 93.

¹³ See Rex Butler, “Slavoj Žižek: What is a Master-Signifier,” online at <http://www.lacan.com/zizek-signifier.htm>. See also chapter 2 of Butler’s excellent book, *Slavoj Žižek: Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2005).

This means that “beneath” the alleged unity of the field of meaning, there is only a tautological, self-referential, *performative* gesture. In other words, it is not some pre-existing, substantial fullness of meaning to which all of the particulars refer. The Master-Signifier is an empty signifier that is – only retrospectively – seen as that to which the field of meaning refers. Every use of the term (e.g., “Democracy”) is defined through relations of difference toward others. In sum, the Master-Signifier is pure difference *misperceived* as pure identity.

The fundamental problem for antidescriptivism is to explain what makes an object identical to itself even if all of its positive properties change over time. In other words, even if antidescriptivism is correct and names function as rigid designators, how are we to conceive the “objective correlate” to the rigid designator? Žižek points out that the standard version of antidescriptivism overlooks the *retroactive* effect of naming: “That ‘surplus’ in the object which stays the same in all possible worlds is ‘something in it more than itself,’ that is to say the Lacanian *objet petit a*: we search in vain for it in positive reality because it has no positive consistency – because it is just an objectification of a void, of a discontinuity opened in reality by the emergence of the signifier.”¹⁴ This implies that antidescriptivism is misguided in its emphasis on the external causal chain that (allegedly) transmits the reference of a name to its object. Naming is radically contingent insofar as it is the act of naming itself that constitutes its own reference, in a retroactive way. There is a “necessary” (noncontingent) dimension of naming, but this necessity is only constituted *after the fact*, once we are already involved in the process of dialectical differentiation.

While reading Žižek’s books, it is important to keep in mind that he continuously refines his own earlier insights; he is perhaps his own best critic. This is an example of Žižek’s dialectical method. Methodology is the analysis of method itself, and Žižek continuously refines his own method. For example, in *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (his second book in English), he criticizes his remarkably successful previous book, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*:

The Sublime Object fails to deploy the complex interconnections within the triad Real–Imaginary–Symbolic: the entire triad is reflected within each of its three elements. [...] The Real is thus, in effect, all three dimensions at the same time: the abyssal vortex which ruins every consistent structure; the mathematized consistent structure of reality; the fragile pure appearance. And in a strictly homologous way, there are three modalities

¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), p. 95.

of the Symbolic (the real – the signifier reduced to a senseless formula; the imaginary – the Jungian “symbols”; and the symbolic – speech, meaningful language); and three modalities of the Imaginary (the real – fantasy, which is precisely an imaginary scenario occupying the place of the Real; the imaginary – image as such in its fundamental function of a decoy; and the symbolic – again, the Jungian “symbols” or New Age archetypes).¹⁵

Žižek is as ruthless a critic of himself as he is of others. But he is famous for intervening in contemporary intellectual debates and then showing precisely in what sense *both* sides are wrong: he exposes fallacies and vanities in a way that few thinkers have ever done. But Žižek is no cynic, and he supplements his devastating reductions to absurdity with startling new insights. Contemporary philosophy, psychology, cultural studies, sociology, political science, esthetics, literary theory, film theory, and theology simply cannot be evaluated without reference to the terrain-shifting innovations of Žižek’s thinking.

For example, Žižek’s dialectical materialism reveals the extent to which both post-analytic philosophy and contemporary continental philosophy are haunted by the specter of German Idealism. But in order to grasp the profundity of Žižek’s impact, it is crucial to remember that his central concern involves the reactualization of dialectical thinking. In approaching Žižek’s texts for the first time, it is important to realize that there is an insight that must be achieved regarding the dialectical aspect of Žižek’s thought. Once the dialectical insight is apprehended, afterwards everything begins to make sense, and Žižek appears in a whole new light. This insight is not a factoid or a bit of information that can simply be poured into the mind of the beginning reader like liquid from one jar to another. In order to attain this insight, the reader must *actively engage* in the struggle to understand Žižek’s texts. Žižek’s Lacanian reactualization of the German Idealist tradition – particularly Hegel – emphasizes the radical finitude of consciousness, knowledge, and, significantly, *reality itself*. But how can reality be finite or incomplete? In order to begin to understand this, we need to first consider the meaning of “dialectical” thinking.

In what follows, the reader must bear in mind that whenever Žižek discusses film, literature, or popular culture, he is not offering psychoanalytic interpretations of the books and films that he discusses. Popular culture in his books is never the whole point; the point is to introduce dialectical thinking to people who have already been

¹⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), p. xii.

indoctrinated into nondialectical so-called “thinking” (e.g., many professional philosophers in the USA, myself included). In short, Žižek discusses familiar examples from cinema and literature in order to make a dialectical point about philosophical-psychoanalytic theory. When he occasionally gets details wrong in referring to an example from a film or text, this is because *his primary aim is always the explication of a theoretical point*. As Sheila Kunkle puts it: “Žižek’s examples, if we understand them in their connection to his theory, are meant to change our orientation to the reality we think surrounds us and they open up a space for a critique of universals that emerge out of the particular cases themselves.”¹⁶

Whatever he is discussing – even if he is making a joke – Žižek’s primary aim is the development of dialectical materialist theory. Sometimes he articulates an insight for those who already grasp the basics of dialectics, as when he argues that Hegelian dialectic involves negativity, and that therefore, “synthesis” – properly understood – posits the difference as such. If the reader initially finds this confusing, but then suddenly notices that Žižek is repeating the same old joke for the umpteenth time (e.g., “Coffee or tea? Yes, please!”), the reader should not make the mistake of some hasty critics and jump to the conclusion that there is no logic or argumentation in Žižek’s texts. The point is never simply the joke: in this case, the relevant point is that the response “Yes, please!” refers to both coffee and tea without effacing *the disjunction* between them. The “yes” functions in a homologous way to Žižek’s reading of Hegelian synthesis as *not effacing, but instead preserving difference*. Along these lines, how can Žižek call himself a “Christian-materialist” when he also asserts that “Only an atheist can believe”? The answer to this apparent contradiction is easy to grasp if you just remember the coffee versus tea joke: “Christianity or dialectical materialism? Yes, please.” Is Žižek (along with other materialist theologians) audaciously trying to reinvent Christianity? Or instead, does he reveal radical-emancipatory potential in Christianity in such a way so that – retroactively – it is as if this potential was always already “there”? Once again, a provocative but accurate dialectical response to this kind of false dichotomy could be simply “Yes.” This use of a joke to undermine a dichotomy – by affirming both a conjunction and a disjunction – gives some indication of Žižek’s provocative and amusing (but ultimately rigorous) dialectical procedure.

With this in mind, here is an initial working definition of the sense in which Žižek’s thought is dialectical: there is no way to isolate “things” or

¹⁶ Cf. Sheila Kunkle, “Embracing the Paradox: Žižek’s Illogical Logic,” in *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, vol. 2, number 4 (2008), p. 4.

“facts” from our symbolic representations of things or facts. In other words, we cannot formulate any comprehensive and consistent way to separate “reality” from its symbolization. As Rex Butler puts it:

Our descriptions do not naturally and immutably refer to things, but – this is the defining feature of the symbolic order – things in retrospect begin to resemble their description. Thus, in the analysis of ideology, it is not simply a matter of seeing which account of reality best matches the “facts,” with the one that is closest being the least biased and therefore the best. As soon as the facts are determined, we have already – whether we know it or not – made our choice; we are already within one ideological system or another. The real dispute has already taken place over what is to count as the facts, which facts are relevant, and so on.¹⁷

In other words, it is not just our understanding that is dialectical; “reality” is also dialectical, and ultimately there is no unambiguous way to separate our understanding of reality from reality. As Žižek and Markus Gabriel write: “Otherwise put, the whole domain of the representation of the world (call it mind, spirit, language, consciousness, or whatever medium you prefer) needs to be understood as an event within and of the world itself. Thought is not at all opposed to being, it is rather being’s replication within itself.”¹⁸

Another way to articulate this insight into the dialectical character of reality is to say that no element or term from Lacanian theory or Hegelian theory may be defined in isolation. For example, a clearing in the forest is not simply the open ground; without the surrounding trees, this ground would just be an indistinguishable bit of land. What a clearing in the forest *is* involves both openness and enclosure. Terms only signify in relation to one another, and, moreover, *in the particular context of their use*.

Furthermore, when we isolate two meaningful approaches to the same entity or event, and there is no way to unify these two approaches into one all-encompassing perspective, we must bear in mind that each approach is inherently incomplete. And each approach must work on its own inherent limitation – from within its own universe of discourse – without relying on the other approach to complete it or fill in its lack. The reason for this is that there is no overarching and complete metalanguage, or discourse of all discourses. This “universal perspectivism”

¹⁷ Rex Butler, “Slavoj Žižek: What is a Master-Signifier,” online at <http://www.lacan.com/zizek-signifier.htm>. See also chapter 2 of Butler’s *Slavoj Žižek: Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2005).

¹⁸ See Markus Gabriel and Slavoj Žižek, *Mythology, Madness and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), p. 3.

characterizes Žižek's dialectical materialist philosophy. It implies that incompleteness and inconsistency are irreducible; in other words, the Real is immanent to any possible symbolic reality. Thus there can be no transcendent perspective of all perspectives. This is another way of saying that the universal must be articulated as a negative a priori:

The Universal is not the encompassing container of the particular content, the peaceful medium-background of the conflict of particularities; the Universal "as such" is the site of an unbearable antagonism, self-contradiction, and (the multitude of) its particular species are ultimately nothing but so many attempts to obfuscate/reconcile/master this antagonism. In other words, the Universal names the site of a Problem-Deadlock, of a burning Question, and the Particulars are the attempted but failed Answers to this Problem. Say, the concept of State names a certain problem: how to contain the class antagonism of a society? All particular forms of State are so many (failed) attempts to propose a solution for this problem.¹⁹

Because of this negativity of the universal (as a problem-deadlock, or struggle *for* universality), a dichotomy that presents us with an either/or decision ultimately proves to leave various contingent alternatives out. Žižek's works contain many examples along these lines: he investigates a dichotomous polarity between two alternatives and then shows how both sides fail to consider something, such as a presupposition they both share.

This dialectical method also informs Lacanian theory. For example, in order to come to understand a term like "the Master-Signifier," it is also necessary to think about ideology, *objet petit a*, suture, the *sinthome*, the Real as primordially repressed *jouissance* which is constituted retroactively, etc. A term signifies only in relation to other terms, and in relation to elements that are not terms (for example, a fantasy or an image). Moreover, the relations in question are often negative relations of difference. In sum, reality is dialectical in that there is no pure self-identity: no thing, event, or property simply is what it is; what a thing *is* – its very existence – involves what it is not.

Because of this negativity, opposites are never harmoniously reconciled in any higher "synthesis." Instead, *their difference is posited as such*, in the form of an inconsistent totality. Žižek clarifies this concept of dialectical materialism with a reference to the distinction between subject and object:

The ultimate *philosophical* example here is that of the subjective versus objective dimension: subjective perception-awareness-activity versus

¹⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 34–5.

objective socio-economic or physiological mechanisms. A dialectical theory intervenes with a double short circuit: objectivity relies on a subjective surplus-gesture; subjectivity relies on *objet petit a*, the paradoxical object which is the subject's counterpoint. [...] On the one hand, we should accept the lesson of Kant's transcendental idealism: out of the confused multitude of impressions, *objective* reality emerges through the intervention of the *subject's* transcendental act. [...] On the other hand, the Lacanian *objet petit a* is the exact opposite of the Master-Signifier: not the subjective supplement which sustains the objective order, but the objective supplement which sustains subjectivity in its contrast to the subjectless objective order: *objet petit a* is that "bone in the throat," that disturbing stain which forever blurs our picture of reality – it is the *object* on account of which "objective reality" is forever inaccessible to the subject.²⁰

The above quotation makes some difficult theoretical distinctions, which will be discussed in subsequent chapters. At this point, the most relevant idea is that, although "objective reality" emerges through an act of the subject, this does not imply that truth is "subjective." As Žižek puts it with reference to Badiou: "not only is Truth not 'subjective' in the sense of being subordinated to the subject's whims, but the subject himself is 'serving the Truth' which transcends him; since he is never fully adequate to the infinite order of Truth, the subject always has to operate within a finite multiple of a situation in which he discerns the signs of Truth."²¹

This dialectical problematic, which can be traced back through German Idealism to Plato's Eleatic dialogues (especially *Sophist* and *Parmenides*), implies that there is no consistent and unambiguous way to isolate reality as *given* (e.g., simply observed) from reality as *produced* (as when the very act of observing something changes it). Along these lines, the twentieth-century philosopher J. L. Austin distinguished between a "constative" utterance that *describes* the world, and a performative utterance like a promise or a vow that effectively intervenes in reality. Žižek argues that the symbolic order (the big Other, the intersubjective social network) involves a performative dimension that confers symbolic efficiency. Žižek offers an example to clarify this performative dimension: "the meeting is closed when, by means of the utterance, 'The meeting is closed,' this fact *comes to the big Other's*

²⁰ See Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), p. 239.

²¹ Slavoj Žižek, "Psychoanalysis and Post-Marxism: The Case of Alain Badiou," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 97, issue 2, Spring 1998, pp. 235–61.

knowledge.”²² In several works, Žižek describes how the distinction between the performative and the constative dimensions of meaning cannot simply be dispensed with, but neither can it be maintained in the form of an unambiguous binary opposition. Instead, the constitution of subjectivity implies a kind of conversion or direct coincidence of the opposites, since “the performative production of reality necessarily assumes the form of stating that ‘it is so.’”²³

This is an example of why there is no meaning apart from alienation in the signifier. The only way to define the identity or unity of any object (or entity, or event, or property) is to assert that the identity of the object consists in the fact that “this is the object which is always designated by the same signifier – tied to the same signifier. It is the signifier which constitutes the kernel of the object’s ‘identity.’”²⁴ This arbitrary (or contingent) alienation in the signifier informs symbolic identity and reality (any theoretical or ideological “system”). This means that necessity is constituted after the (contingent) fact: in other words, once things happen, they *retroactively* become necessary. The entire field of symbolic reality is reconfigured through encountering the Real and engaging in the Lacanian act. That is to say, through the free act, the subject reinvents a new symbolic reality, and her own identity. But at the moment this new order emerges, it is as if it always already was: in this sense, the free act of a subject restructures the past. And insofar as an act retroactively creates its own possibility, possibility does not simply “precede” actuality; on the contrary, *we have preceded it* once this actuality emerges.

Thus ultimately there can be no fixed or unchanging reality or symbolic signification. The meaning of any signifier arises in the particular context of its use, and through its relations with other terms in a dynamic and historically contingent (not deterministic) system of differences. And through the Lacanian act, a subject reinvents a new symbolic order. In sum, we can never completely and unambiguously isolate the thing from its symbolization, and yet, as Žižek emphasizes throughout his works, this radical contingency does not imply relativism. Why not? For one thing, there could not even be any equivocation without “the One” (the Master-Signifier) around which an equivocation revolves. Along the same lines, without the Lacanian *point de capiton* (“quilting point”) – which “stitches

²² Cf. Slavoj Žižek *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992, revised 2001), p. 98 in the revised edition.

²³ Slavoj Žižek *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992, revised 2001), p. 99 in the revised edition.

²⁴ Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), p. 98.

together” the signifier and the signified – there would be no reality and no identity. But it is only when the sentence is completed that the (necessary) illusion of fixed meaning arises, in a retroactive way.²⁵

These are difficult points, which we will develop more fully in what follows. For now, we should note that dialectical materialism squarely addresses the paradox of self-reference implicit to the claim that “No truth is universal.” The paradox is that “No truth is universal” is itself a *universal* claim. A similar paradox of self-reference is implicit to the familiar postmodernist assertion that “All concepts are metaphors.” Žižek reveals the limitation of this assertion: “the very reduction of a concept to a bundle of metaphors already has to rely on some implicit *philosophical* (*conceptual*) determination of the difference between concept and metaphor – that is to say, on the very opposition it tries to undermine.”²⁶

Žižek discusses the paradox of this “self-referential loop” in numerous texts. On the one hand, he emphatically asserts that subjectivity is dispersed and multiple; moreover, we can never “step onto our own shoulders” and include ourselves in the picture: in this sense, the ethico-political act is “blind.” Nonetheless, on the other hand, the unity of the subject is guaranteed in the self-referential symbolic act. The subject is the performative gesture of self-positing, of saying “I”:

This is the mystery of the subject’s “self-positing,” explored by Fichte: of course, when I say “I,” I do not create any new content, I merely designate myself, the person who is uttering the phrase. This self-designation nonetheless gives rise to, (“posits”) an X which is not the “real” flesh-and-blood person uttering it, but, precisely and merely, the pure Void of self-referential designation (the Lacanian “subject of the enunciation”): “I” am not directly my body, or even the content of my mind; “I” am, rather, that X which has all these features as its properties.²⁷

Thus “what I am” is an X, a Void of self-referential designation; this means that what makes me who I am cannot be located in my genetic formula. Nor can “what I am” be located in the way my genetic predispositions developed due to environmental influences. In fact,

²⁵ See Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 149. Evans explains that the *diachronic* dimension of the *point de capiton* is a retroactive effect of the production of meaning. The *synchronic* dimension, however, is metaphor: through metaphor the signifier “crosses the bar” into the signified.

²⁶ See Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), p. 231.

²⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), p. 245.

according to properly dialectical procedure, we cannot even speak of an *interaction* between the genes and the environment:

More precisely, even the word “interaction” is not quite adequate here, in so far as it still implies the mutual influence of two given sets of positive conditions (genes and environment), and thus does not cover the crucial feature of *self-relating*, the self-referential loop due to which, in the way I relate to my environment, I never reach the “zero-level” of being passively influenced by it, but always-already relate to myself in relating to it; that is, I always-already, with a minimum of “freedom,” determine in advance the way I will be determined by the environment, up to the most elementary level of sensible perceptions. The way I “see myself,” the imaginary and symbolic features which constitute my “self-image,” or even fundamentally, the fantasy which provides the ultimate co-ordinates of my being is neither in the genes nor imposed by the environment, but the unique way each subject *relates to him or herself*, “chooses him or herself” in relationship to his or her environs, as well as to (what he or she perceives as) his “nature.” We are thus dealing with a kind of “bootstrap” mechanism which cannot be reduced to the interaction of myself as a biological entity with my environment: a third mediating agency emerges (the subject, precisely), which has no positive substantial Being, since, in a way, its status is purely “performative.”²⁸

In sum, there can be no purely self-identical (nondialectical) mode of discourse, thought, or existence. Symbolic identity and symbolic reality – any “One” – is ruptured by the odd juxtaposition of the parallax gap. This gap (the Real) is the focus of Žižek’s dialectical materialism, whether he is talking about German Idealism, Lacanian theory, science, literature, film, religion, or politics.

In the essays that follow, we hope to indicate how properly dialectical procedure leads beyond itself, and culminates in the paradox involved in the encounter with the Lacanian Real. The Real is manifested as the inconsistency and incompleteness of the symbolic, but insofar as it cannot be symbolized, the Lacanian Real cannot be incorporated into reality. In this sense, the Real is “impossible.” Regarding the Real, certain ambiguities or paradoxes are ineradicable, so that sometimes all that we can do is to maintain a “parallax view,” by holding open both of the two inconsistent perspectives. This fundamental antagonism or paradox of the Real proves to be the only “sameness” that always recurs. This means

²⁸ Slavoj Žižek, “Of Cells and Selves,” in *The Žižek Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Wright and Edmund Wright (Malden, MA, and Oxford: 2009), p. 314.

that there can be no universality as an all-encompassing, perspective of all perspectives: every “opening” of signification or meaning is constituted through a covering-over. This insight will help us to understand Žižek’s arguments that rationality involves a moment of unreason, and that the symbolic Law implies presymbolic violence.

Regarding political theory, Žižek’s dialectical materialist approach facilitates a critique of capitalism that reveals the duplicity of liberal and (allegedly) tolerant multiculturalism:

Liberal attitudes towards the other are characterized both by respect for otherness, openness to it, and an obsessive fear of harassment. In short, the other is welcomed insofar as its presence is not intrusive, insofar as it is not really the other. Tolerance thus coincides with its opposite. My duty to be tolerant towards the other effectively means that I should not get too close to him or her, not intrude into his space – in short, that I should respect his intolerance towards my over-proximity. This is increasingly emerging as the central human right of advanced capitalist society: the right not to be “harassed,” that is, to be kept at a safe distance from others. The same goes for the emergent logic of humanitarian or pacifist militarism. War is acceptable insofar as it seeks to bring about peace, or democracy, or the conditions for distributing humanitarian aid. And does the same not hold even more for democracy and human rights themselves? Human rights are ok if they are “rethought” to include torture and a permanent emergency state. Democracy is ok if it is cleansed of its populist excesses and limited to those mature enough to practise it.²⁹

Žižek uses such examples of the “coincidence of opposites” to show how liberalism relies on an imaginary notion of universality as a disengaged, shared and neutral “open space” for compromise. But throughout his works, he demonstrates again and again why there can be no disengaged universality. Here is an example:

In human society, the political is the englobing structuring principle, so that every neutralization of some partial content as “non-political” is a political gesture *par excellence*. At the same time, however, a certain excess of non-political violence is the necessary supplement to power: power always has to rely on an obscene stain of violence – that is to say, political space is never “pure,” it always involves some kind of reliance on “pre-political” violence.³⁰

²⁹ Slavoj Žižek, “Against Human Rights,” in *New Left Review* 34, July–August 2005. The article is also available online at <http://libcom.org/library/against-human-rights-zizek>.

³⁰ Cf. Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), p. 234.

It is crucial to bear in mind that Žižek is primarily a philosopher, and he deploys Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts in order to re-inscribe Hegelian dialectics into contemporary political theory. Žižek elaborates Lacan's analyses of discourse and fantasy, and reformulates Lacanian theory in terms of Hegelian dialectics. The result is a sophisticated critique of postmodern culture and so-called postmodern "thought." Along these lines, he shows why one cannot reinvigorate a Marxist-style critique of political economy without first understanding Hegelian categories. In what follows, we will see how Žižek reactualizes Hegel and Marx for today, and shows how cynical postmodern subjectivity still involves what Marx described as fetishism and alienation.

Žižek analyzes capitalist society, discloses its symptoms, diagnoses its pathology, and, most importantly, reveals its repressed *truth*. In doing so, he has changed the very coordinates of intellectual life under late capitalism, and reinvigorated the philosophical transcendentalism and the ethical-political universalism of the Enlightenment. Again, Žižek does this by elaborating the philosophical implications of Jacques Lacan's linguistic reinvention of psychoanalytic theory.

Žižek's Philosophical Re-inscription of Lacanian Theory

Žižek's writing presupposes basic Lacanian concepts, and in most of his books, he assumes that the reader is already familiar with the "standard" version of Lacanian theory. For readers new to Lacan, this section introduces some basic Lacanian concepts. Žižek elaborates Lacanian psychoanalytic theory in light of the philosophy of German Idealism, particularly Hegelian dialectics, in order to forge a revolutionary new way of interpreting political life and culture. In the process, he revises both Hegel and Lacan. Because Žižek focuses especially on aspects of Lacan's *later* seminars and writings, the essays that follow this introduction will focus on the Real, the limits of symbolization, and the ethico-political implications of the feminine subject position.

Lacan's theory of "the mirror phase" shows that the ego is initially formed when the infant identifies with an external image. Significantly, the entity doing the identifying (the imagination of the infant) is not identical with the entity that is being identified with (the external and reversed image in the mirror). The ego which is formed through the process of the mirror phase is an imaginary object, a fantasy of wholeness. Even before the infant learns to speak and enters the symbolic register, it has formed a

nostalgic fantasy image of a lost oneness, a primordial interconnectedness with its mother. In the mirror phase this fantasy image of wholeness (in the form of the ego) unifies the infant's fragmentary and chaotic experiences and in this way serves as a brace or a crutch to help it gain mastery over its own body. As the child complies with the demands of its parents and is weaned and toilet trained, as it acquires language and enters the symbolic order, this phantasmatic image of unity provides an extra dimension of possibility for life. But throughout life the ego involves the identification with an external image, and because of this, the ego is an artificial, external "other." In everyday existence the ego functions as an agent of *falsification*. As a fantasy image of wholeness, the ego effaces its own otherness; the ego masks the very alienation in an image that constitutes it.

After the formation of the ego in the mirror phase, human beings are split from within by the acquisition of language; the human infant is divided or alienated from itself by its entry into the symbolic order. In a sense, the acquisition of the word is the loss of the thing. For example, any animal has biological needs, but a human infant demands food from the mother even when it is not hungry, simply as a *symbol* of her love. In such ways, the subject is irremediably divided by the acquisition of language between the imaginary register (the ego and fantasies of oneness) and the symbolic register (linguistic concepts defined by difference or otherness). Any speaking subject will always be divided into the ignorance of imaginary experience on the one hand, and, on the other, the effects of his words in the intersubjective, symbolic network. Subjectivity as such implies this discord between imaginary experience and the big Other, the symbolic register.³¹ This split is constitutive of the subject; it is a division essential to any speaking, thinking animal.

Žižek refers to the game of chess to distinguish the imaginary and the symbolic registers. The symbolic order is homologous to the rules of the game. For example, the rules of chess define the signifier "knight" in terms of the moves this figure is allowed to make, as distinguished from the other pieces.³² The imaginary dimension in this example involves the size, shape, and color of the pieces, as well as their names. Thus a variety of objects could be used to serve as a queen, as long as the object was

³¹ The Other refers both to the radical alterity of another subject (whose desire is Real for us), as well as to the intersubjective big Other that mediates relations between subjects. The mother is the child's first Other, and the castration complex arises when the child realizes her incompleteness: she lacks (and desires) the phallus. The Other is also *woman*: the feminine subject position is the Other for both males and females.

³² Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company), p. 8.

moved in accordance with the rules that define what the queen is in the reality of the game.

However, once the process of identification develops a symbolic dimension (with the movement beyond imaginary ego to symbolic subject), there is no purely “raw” sense data. As Žižek points out, we literally perceive judgments:

what we perceive as immediate reality is directly a judgement. Let’s take a standard example from a typical cognitivist book: when you enter a room and you see all chairs there are red, and then you move immediately to a second similar room, you think you see exactly the same. But it has been repeatedly demonstrated that our perception is much more fragmentary than it appears – a significant number of the chairs in the second room have different shapes, colours, etc. What is happening is that you see just a couple of fragments and then, based on your previous experience (and this all happens in the immediate moment of perception before proper conscious judgement), you make a judgement – “all the chairs must be red.” The point being that what you see is the result of your judgement – you literally see judgements. There is no zero-level sensory perception of reality which is then later coordinated into judgements. What you always already see are judgements.³³

During the process of acquiring language, the child is situated within the mother’s desire but unable to fully satisfy it; the mother’s desire extends to something that is beyond the child. The “phallus” indicates that beyond the child to which the mother’s desire is directed, and the child (boy or girl) initially tries to be the object of desire – the phallus – for the mother. Lacan’s term “symbolic castration” refers to the child’s renunciation of its attempt to be the phallus for the mother. A neurotic is a subject who has not fully accepted symbolic castration; a neurotic (male or female) still tries to be the object of desire *for the mother*. According to Žižek: “Lacan identifies hysteria with neurosis: the other main form of neurosis, obsessional neurosis, is for him a ‘dialect of hysteria.’”³⁴

Unlike the imaginary ego, the “subject” does not exist prior to the renunciation of enjoyment that is the entry into the symbolic order. Though the subject emerges through the acquisition of language, nonetheless the subject as such should be distinguished from the process of symbolic “subjectivization.” Subjectivization involves the incorporation

³³ Slavoj Žižek and Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p. 55.

³⁴ See Slavoj Žižek, “Ideology I: No Man is an Island,” note 4, available online at <http://www.lacan.com/zizwhiteriot.html>.

of the hegemonic ideology of society to such an extent that ideology becomes invisible and seems natural. The subject as such, however, is beyond ideological interpellation. Hysteria emerges when a subject questions his or her symbolic identity, and Žižek reveals the extent to which the subject is the hysteric's question: "Why am I what you say that I am?" Thus the subject as such (as feminine) involves the incompleteness ("non-all," or "not-All") of subjectivization, and of symbolic representation in general:

That is to say, what, precisely, is a "subject"? Let us imagine a proposition, a statement – how and when does this statement get "subjectivized"? – when some reflexive feature inscribes into it the subjective attitude. In this precise sense, a signifier "represents the subject for another signifier." The subject is the absent X that has to be supposed in order to account for this reflexive twist, for this distortion. [...] Hume's famous observation that, no matter how close and deep I look into myself, all I will find there are specific ideas, particular mental states, perceptions, emotions, and so on, never a "Self," misses the point: this non-accessibility to itself as an object is constitutive of being a "self."³⁵

The essence of symbolic subjectivity is desire, and desire as such is hysterical desire. The hysterical subject is the subject as the *question*. Hysterical questioning of symbolic reality opens up the void of possible Otherness that sustains desire: "this non-acceptance of the ultimate closure, this vain hope that the Other Thing is waiting for us just around the corner."³⁶

Desire manifests as the inconsistencies or gaps in the intersubjective, symbolic network. Unlike a want or a wish, desire is unconscious; it is manifested in the big Other of the symbolic order. Desire shows up as inconsistencies in speech, slips of the tongue, and bungled actions. The symbolic network is the "beyond" in which desire is disclosed; consequently, the unconscious is the discourse of the symbolic Other. Desire is constituted through fantasies about the desire of the Other, as well as fantasies of an impossible oneness. The imaginary ego and other fantasies of unity serve as a support for the consistency of experience; thus the register of the imaginary is constitutive of reality. But the imaginary register also offers a pathway to the Real, for the Real of our desire

³⁵ Slavoj Žižek, "An Answer to Two Questions," in Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009), p. 212.

³⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), pp. 29–30.

announces itself in dreams.³⁷ The subject of desire – the subject of the unconscious – is constituted in relation to signification; this means that desire is manifested as distortions within the symbolic register (e.g., slips of the tongue). The essential life substance is *jouissance*, of which the subject is usually unaware. Enjoyment is Real; it is the price we pay for being symbolic animals, or speaking beings.

All of this indicates why for Lacan and Žižek desire is not a function of biology, but is *decentered* insofar as it involves imaginative projection (the dimension of fantasy) and the attempt to become whatever it is that the Other desires most. This means that humans must learn to desire; desire is constituted by fantasies about the Other's desire, and fantasies of an impossible oneness. The register of the imaginary is not merely a realm of illusion, for fantasy is constitutive of the consistency of experience: "fantasy mediates between the formal symbolic structure and the positivity of the objects we encounter in reality: it provides a 'scheme' according to which certain positive objects in reality can function as objects of desire, filling in the empty places opened up by the formal symbolic structure."³⁸ In sum, it is an individual's fantasy that first teaches her how to desire. The problem is that "fantasies cannot coexist peacefully."³⁹ This is why both Lacan and Žižek insist on the need to *traverse the fantasy* and to achieve an ethics of the Real. Succinctly put, the goal is to see through the distortions and inconsistencies of our imaginary-symbolic reality and then refuse to cede or give way on the Real of our desire.

To summarize, the imaginary register involves alienation in the *image* (visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory); the symbolic register involves alienation in the *signifier* (word, symbolic practice); however, the Real – to put it simply – involves alienation as such. The Real is perhaps the most difficult of Lacanian concepts, and in what follows we will move beyond this initial, working characterization. For now it should be noted that the innermost core of "who I am" is inaccessible to me. Along the same lines, if I approach the Real too directly, both my identity and my reality disintegrate. The Real of the subject involves a radical *decentering* of the subject from itself: "I am deprived of even my most intimate 'subjective' experience, the way things 'really seem to me,' that of the fundamental fantasy which constitutes and guarantees the kernel of my being, since

³⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), p. 45.

³⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), p. 40.

³⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 168.

I can never consciously experience it and assume it.”⁴⁰ The fundamental fantasy provides the elementary coordinates of the subject’s capacity to desire, but it “has to remain repressed in order to function.”⁴¹

Žižek elaborates the philosophical implications of Lacanian theory and, in doing so, develops the theory. Regarding the Lacanian Real, Žižek argues that: “a certain fundamental ambiguity pertains to the Real in Lacan: the Real designates a substantial hard kernel that precedes and resists symbolization and, simultaneously, it designates the left-over, which is posited or ‘produced’ by symbolization itself.”⁴² Žižek often describes the Real as an “indivisible remainder” that is constituted retroactively, in and through the inconsistencies of symbolization. But, in addition, he argues that although the Real is the inherent limit of the symbolic register, it also indicates what lies “beyond” the symbolic. This implies that the Real is *not* a merely negative category. For example, desire manifests as the inconsistency of the symbolic, but the Real as drive is the “driving force” of desiring.⁴³ But if we assert that the symbolic arises from the Real, as a reaction to the Real, nonetheless we must also acknowledge that since the Real cannot be symbolized it is, in a sense, impossible: it never “exists” in symbolic reality. This impossibility of the Real – its unbearably paradoxical character – is why proximity to the Real can provoke anxiety.

By engaging with Lacanian theory in light of his reading of German Idealism (especially Hegel and Schelling), Žižek emphasizes the philosophical implications of psychoanalysis. For example, neurosis at its most elementary involves the repression of desires viewed as inappropriate by the sociosymbolic order; thus the neurotic desires that some desire remains unsatisfied.⁴⁴ The nonsymbolic life substance is *jouissance*, and this surplus enjoyment is Real. The neurotic is obsessed with the notion that *jouissance* has been stolen from her, and that some Other is illegitimately enjoying in her place. The typical neurotic strategy is to get back at least some of this “lost” enjoyment by transgressing the symbolic prohibitions that regulate desire.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), p. 121; *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), p. 171.

⁴¹ Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (New York: Norton, 2007), p. 59.

⁴² See Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 36.

⁴³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters* (London and New York: Verso, 2007), p. 97.

⁴⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), pp. 112–13.

⁴⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), p. 33.

How does Žižek offer a way out of this vicious cycle of Law and its transgression? One of the ways involves the well-known Lacanian distinction between four discourses as four forms of social linkage. In *Seminar XVII* (1969–70), Lacan distinguished between four discourses or social links: the master's, the university's, the hysteric's, and the analyst's. These four discourses are four possible symbolic configurations. The four discourses function as social links by regulating the ways that the Master-Signifier represents the subject for all other signifiers.⁴⁶ These four forms are derived through different permutations of four terms: the master (S1), knowledge (S2), the split subject (\$), and *objet petit a* (designated by the small *a*). In sum, the four discourses configure four different subjects and four kinds of social link.

Throughout his works, as we will see, Žižek articulates – in light of historical contingency – the philosophical and political implications of forms of discourse as forms of social link.⁴⁷ It is in light of (historically contingent) permutations of the four discourses that we should approach certain themes that recur in Žižek's books. For example, he argues that Lacan's "discourse of the university" refers, not just to the university as an institution, but more fundamentally, to knowledge itself. The upper level of the algorithm of university discourse is S2 in relation to *objet petit a*; this indicates knowledge in its endeavor to domesticate and integrate the (Real) excess that resists knowledge. This can help us to understand Žižek's arguments that the inherently transgressive nature of desire means that in a society where everything is permitted, enjoyment takes the form of a paradoxical hedonistic asceticism. Medical knowledge today (as S2) is not neutral; it is co-opted into the libidinal economy of capitalism; scientific knowledge about physical health is incorporated into our late capitalist economy of enjoyment. The superego injunction to enjoy is not directly knowledge; rather it functions as the Master-Signifier of knowledge. This is how university discourse today reinforces the capitalist reproduction of symbolic reality. But ironically, because narcissistic self-fulfillment must be combined with its own opposite (jogging, health food, no smoking, safe sex, etc.), access to enjoyment is as "unfree" as it ever was:

⁴⁶ Insofar as the Master-Signifier represents the subject for all other signifiers, the master's discourse is an attempt at totalization. But because the Master-Signifier is empty, it is the constitutive exception that marks the *failure* of every attempt at totalization.

⁴⁷ Žižek's most accessible treatment of Lacan's four discourses is "Four Discourses, Four Subjects," in *Cogito and the Unconscious*, ed. Slavoj Žižek, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), pp. 74–113.

Superego is thus not directly S2; it is rather the S1 of the S2 itself, the dimension of an unconditional injunction that is inherent to knowledge itself. Recall the information about health we are bombarded with all the time: “Smoking is dangerous! Too much fat may cause a heart attack! Regular exercise leads to a longer life!” etc. etc. – it is impossible not to hear beneath it the unconditional injunction “You should enjoy a long and healthy life!”... What this means is that the discourse of the University is thoroughly mystifying, concealing its true foundation, obfuscating the unfreedom on which it relies.⁴⁸

The quotation indicates how the discourse of the university (S2, knowledge) always conceals its subservience to the Master-Signifier (S1). As an illustration of this, there is nothing rational about the injunction to excessive enjoyment that permeates today’s university discourse. *Knowledge* has become one of the ways that capitalism today “interpellates” subjects as consumers, soliciting in us new and perverse, excessive desires. We are constantly offered new products to satisfy ever more excessive modes of enjoyment.

But how is symbolic desire related to *jouissance*? On the one hand, prohibitions incite the desire to transgress; but, on the other hand, prohibitions relieve capitalist subjects of the superego injunction to enjoy. Law regulates pleasures and thereby delivers us from the superego injunction to enjoy, which dominates daily life in capitalist societies. The way beyond the vicious cycle of Law and transgression involves the subject as Real: not a positive, substantial entity but rather a reflexive asymmetry in the world picture. The key insight here is that because the subject as such is split, it always *remains inherently opposed* to the process of ideological subjectivization. In other words, the Real of the subject is the empty place in the symbolic order, the split or antagonism in the midst of the intersubjective social network. By contrast, symbolic subjectivization relies on fantasy as that which covers over trauma or irreducible social antagonism. Insofar as such fantasies are a primary way that the speaking human strives to remedy its constitutive split and to regain a sense of mythic unity, social reality is first made possible by ideological fantasy. Ideology provides a fantasy construction that allows any subject to behave with some degree of consistency, as though she belongs to a society that is unified through symbolic rules (in fact, what unifies today’s societies is the transgression of symbolic rules). A fetish involves my refusal-to-know, or rather, my disavowal of something that I really know already. I know it, but because I refuse to subjectively assume

⁴⁸ Slavoj Žižek, “*Homo Sacer* as the Object of the Discourse of the University,” available online at <http://www.lacan.com/hsacer.htm>.

this knowledge, I do not yet *believe* it. But every such act of “fetishization” covers a void, such as the inability to become the phallus for the mother, or the impossibility of saying the Real. For now, it should be noted that enjoyment (*jouissance*) is Real. And because the original deadlock – of the (m)Other’s desire – is Real, the subject’s inability to discover any consistent answer to the question of desire exposes the lack in the symbolic register left by the primordially repressed Real.

Because of the irresoluble split or antagonism inherent to subjectivity, what we ordinarily consider to be reality proves ultimately to be a juxtaposition of the symbolic register (speech, sociosymbolic practices, chains of signifiers) and the imaginary register (fantasies of completeness and consistency). The Lacanian Real exceeds what can be imagined or symbolized, but it manifests as antagonism or asymmetry *within* and *between* the imaginary and symbolic registers. One of the ways that Žižek develops this point is by showing that consciousness as such is always integrally linked to an experience of incommensurability, a sense that things are “out of joint” or that something has gone wrong. This lack of fit is the Lacanian Real; the Real is an ineradicable snag or dissymmetry, an impossible limit moment that is “extimate” (inherent but inassimilable) to both the imaginary and the symbolic dimensions of subjectivity. An experience or affect – such as anxiety – may indicate the proximity of the Real, but the Real is *not* any positively existing entity, event, or property that we can simply point out or experience on an everyday basis. The Real tends to be repressed from consciousness, thus it is not simply a component part of “objective” social reality: the repressed Real does not exist, it *insists*.

It is because the repressed Real is thoroughly *immanent* to imaginary-symbolic reality that it cannot be imagined or symbolized. As Žižek puts it, the “impossible” is Real. And yet, as he emphasizes throughout his works, the impossible Real does happen, in the form of miracles like political revolution or love.⁴⁹ Whenever the impossible Real happens, it disrupts from within all signification through the symbolic and the imaginary registers:

The result of all this is that, for Lacan, the Real is not impossible in the sense that it can never happen – a traumatic kernel which forever eludes our grasp. No, the problem with the Real is that it happens and *that’s* the trauma. *The point is not that the Real is impossible but rather that the impossible is Real.* A trauma, or an act, is simply the point when the Real happens, and this is difficult to accept. Lacan is not a poet telling us how we always fail

⁴⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 84.

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the Real – it's always the opposite with the late Lacan. The point is that you *can* encounter the Real, and that is what is so difficult to accept.⁵⁰

Žižek's engagement with the Real effectively redefines the philosophical problem of knowledge. For Žižek, knowledge is not harmonious synthesis; this is one reason why he frequently refers approvingly to the radical Copenhagen formulation of quantum physics: the formulae *work*, even though there is no way we can imagine the quantum universe.

Žižek does not simply deploy Lacanian concepts; instead he develops them, especially the implications of the Lacanian Real. One of the primary ways (as already indicated), is that he shows how the entire triad of Real, imaginary, and symbolic is reflected within each of its three elements:

There are three modalities of the Real: the “real Real” (the horrifying Thing, the primordial object, from Irma's throat to the Alien); the “symbolic Real” (the real as consistency: the signifier reduced to a senseless formula, like quantum physics formulas which can no longer be translated back into – or related to – the everyday experience of our life-world); and the “imaginary Real” (the mysterious *je ne sais quoi*, the unfathomable “something” on account of which the sublime dimension shines through an ordinary object).⁵¹

The Real may be encountered as the intrusive return of some repressed trauma or antagonism. It might be even be surmised – though Žižek himself does not resort to this – that it is his emphasis on the Real that accounts for why, instead of offering considered arguments against his thinking, hasty critics sometimes resort to irrelevant criticisms of his writing style, or lapse into the straw man fallacy by simplifying Žižek's argument and then knocking over this phony dummy. In other words, if a critic hastily dismisses Žižek's thought, this unreflective dismissal may itself be the result of the anxiety produced by approaching the traumatic Real. After all, the Real is not problematic only because it is *difficult to understand* (because it resists symbolization). The Real is also problematic simply because it provokes anxiety. Neurotic symptoms are a defense against the intrusive Real, and it is easier to remain neurotically repressed than to confront Real antagonism or trauma.

⁵⁰ Slavoj Žižek and Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), pp. 69–70.

⁵¹ Slavoj Žižek, “Foreword to the Second Edition: Enjoyment within the Limits of Reason Alone,” in *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), pp. xi–xii.

Žižek's focus on the Real underlies his numerous arguments that Hegelian "Absolute Knowledge" is not harmonious synthesis, so much as the apprehension of the impossibility of any complete and consistent synthesis. Žižek, like Hegel, asks "the big metaphysical questions," even though the Real prevents us from ever definitively solving them:

For the last few decades, at least in the humanities, big ontological questions – "What is the nature of the universe?" – were considered too naive. It was meaningless to ask for objective truth. This prohibition on asking the big questions partly accounts for the explosion of popular science books. You read Stephen Hawking's books as a way to ask these fundamental, metaphysical questions. I think that era of relativism, where science was just another product of knowledge, is ending. We philosophers should join scientists asking those big metaphysical questions about quantum physics, about reality. [...] We ask the big metaphysical questions even though we cannot solve them, and as a by-product we come up with wonderful, solid knowledge.⁵²

It is Žižek's evocations of the Real that make his work so significant for contemporary philosophy. However, many established academics, particularly in the USA, do not yet recognize this philosophical significance. But anyone familiar with the history of philosophy – if they engage in serious study of Žižek's re-inscription of Hegel in light of Lacan – will recognize that Žižek effectively reinvents traditional metaphysics (theory of reality) and epistemology (theory of knowledge). Because the imaginary and the symbolic registers are bound together with the Real like the three loops of a single knot, any disclosure of "being" or existence is inherently ruptured from within. The Real is inherent to the imaginary register (fantasies of wholeness) as well as to the symbolic order (social reality). Consequently, although the Real is that which is in a sense impossible to say – it resists incorporation into shared, symbolic practices and intersubjective linguistic systems – nonetheless, what is primordially repressed from the symbolic returns in the Real of the symptom.

Žižek focuses on the Real as this fundamental limit moment. His analyses indicate how imaginary identifications and fantasies of unity prevent the confrontation with the Real that disrupts any symbolic order. The Real is not simply that which exists prior to symbolization. The Real has no substantial presence, and we can only conceive it in a limited way; it is constituted retroactively, as that which is left out of symbolic

⁵² Žižek Interview from Integral Options Cafe, online at: <http://integral-options.blogspot.com/2010/11/io9-slavoj-zizek-wake-up-and-smell.html>.

signification. And because signification involves the split or division that is constitutive of subjectivity, Žižek's dialectical materialism does not imply the "presence" of the whole signifier in the consciousness of any subject. The subject's alienation in language means that a dimension of subjectivity is externalized. One manifestation of this externalized (alienated) dimension of the subject is the pre-existing, intersubjective network, the symbolic big Other. When the child internalizes the prohibitions of the symbolic father, its superego is formed, and the public Law indicates this symbolic aspect of superego. However, the hidden side of superego is an obscene injunction to transgress the Law. On the one hand, the symbolic superego ("the Name/No! of the Father"), serves to regulate the subject's enjoyment. But on the other hand, the underside of the symbolic superego is an injunction to transgress, to engage in the unrestrained *jouissance* of the (imaginary) primal father. In numerous places throughout his works, Žižek links the superego – as the obscene injunction to enjoy – with capitalism.⁵³

The Lacanian *act* belongs to the Real; and only by means of the act do we break the grip of ideology. Insofar as it is located at the point of symbolic undecidability, the act belongs to the Real. The act identifies the Real of social antagonism in the symbolic theater of politics. The act is not a product of anyone's "will." In the act, I do that which I cannot *not* do. Moreover, the act does not propose a new Master-Signifier, because the act involves an encounter with the Real as inconsistency or sociosymbolic contradiction. The act is a mode of identification with what is excluded by the hegemonic, reigning symbolic order. Thus the act is not founded in the symbolic register, in ideology, or in any positive psychological content. Instead, an authentic act is "founded only in itself."⁵⁴ The act involves engagement with the Real; by tarrying with the negativity of the Real, the subject undergoes subjective destitution, loses his essence, and passes over into his Other. In the act we traverse the fantasy and encounter the Real. The act is excluded from the symbolic, big Other insofar as an act suspends the signifying power of words: in an act, symbolic mandates and superego imperatives no longer oblige. Žižek describes the act as "*symbolic suicide*: an act of 'losing all,' of withdrawing from symbolic reality, that enables us to begin anew from the 'zero point,'

⁵³ Žižek develops the logic of the capitalist superego (and the injunction to enjoy) at some length in chapter 3 of his *The Fragile Absolute* (London and New York: Verso, 2000).

⁵⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, revised edition (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 35.

from that point of absolute freedom called by Hegel ‘abstract negativity.’”⁵⁵
In the act we renounce all symbolic ties:

The new (the symbolic reality that emerges as the aftermath of an act) is always a “state that is essentially a by-product,” never the result of advance planning. There are numerous examples of such acts: from de Gaulle’s “No!” to Pétain and to French capitulation in 1940, Lacan’s dissolution of the *Ecole freudienne de Paris* in 1979, up to the mythical case of the act of transgression, Caesar’s crossing of the Rubicon – all of them gestures of a masculine leader. However, we shouldn’t forget that the paradigmatic case of such an act is *feminine*: Antigone’s “No!” to Creon, to state power; her act is literally suicidal, she excludes herself from the community, whereby she offers nothing new, no positive program – she just insists on her unconditional demand.⁵⁶

As this quotation indicates, the feminine subject position is only accidentally related to biological sex; in other words, a biological male can occupy the feminine subject position. But the act characterizes feminine subjectivity. The act as symbolic suicide communicates nothing and expects nothing; in the act, the (feminine) subject renounces any support in the sociosymbolic, intersubjective network of the big Other. The act is possible only against the background of the symbolic order; but in its withdrawal from symbolic reality, the act proper is not symbolic, but involves an encounter with the Real.

Against deconstructionist critics of Lacan’s alleged “logocentrism,” Žižek argues that a Lacanian approach to the symbolic register reveals communication to be constituted in and through the *failures* of communication. All communication essentially involves miscommunication and all recognition is simultaneously also misrecognition. In sum, Žižek shows that because of Lacan’s emphasis on the Real, the charge of logocentrism is simply mistaken. The Real is no foundation for any logocentric metalanguage. How could the Real be a foundation, when the Real is different for every individual? Again, the Real does not “exist”: it is not simply an entity, event, or property. This is a point that Žižek makes repeatedly: the Real is constituted retroactively, as the lack or inconsistency which disrupts our “objective” social reality. But at the moment of its emergence, it is as if the Real always already was.

⁵⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), p. 43.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

Žižek's Major Contribution (According to Žižek)

In spite of his numerous political treatises, Žižek claims in the documentary film *Žižek!* that his heart is not really in political theory, because many leftists expect answers which he cannot give (answers which no one can give).⁵⁷ In interviews he has stressed that his true focus is not ideology critique, not analyses of films, etc. Žižek has repeatedly emphasized that what really matters to him is *theory*, and then explained that by “theory” he refers primarily to the deployment of Lacanian psychoanalytic insights in order to elaborate the notion of self-relating negativity that is articulated in German Idealist philosophy. He has also described his major contribution as simply a way of taking literally Lacan’s indication that the subject of psychoanalysis is the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I exist”). Žižek develops the notion of the Cartesian subject in terms of radical doubt and the confrontation with madness, and articulates the homology between this Cartesian moment of negativity and the self-relating negativity made thematic by Kant, Schelling, Hegel, and Lacan.

By carefully considering Hegel’s actual arguments in the light of Lacanian theory, Žižek undermines the standard interpretation of Hegel’s “idealism.” Žižek shows that Hegel describes how ideals function in human activity. Ideals are cultural phenomena that develop historically; philosophers build theories, testing and refuting ideals in the struggle to attain the truth. Hegel coined the term *Zeitgeist*, “the spirit of the times,” and our postmodern *Zeitgeist* involves cynicism regarding progress. We are relativists who believe that everything about thinking is historically *contingent*, in other words, accidental and relative to its time. The problem (from Žižek’s Hegelian perspective), is that we have not thought through our own insight into historical contingency. For example, we fail to recognize that relativism too is historically contingent: it is a phase through which thinking passes now and again. Plato, Kant, and (in his own way) Hegel, were all struggling against the relativism that was fashionable in their times, and Žižek argues that it is time for all of us to thoroughly think through the problem of relativism and the historical contingency of thinking.

⁵⁷ Cf. *Žižek!* (Zeitgeist Films, 2005), directed by Astra Taylor and produced by Lawrence Konner. Some progressives fault Žižek for not providing a blueprint for a post-capitalist world. But as Marx might say, people make history *under conditions they do not choose*; therefore, it is naive to believe that anyone can provide a hard and fast plan for the future.

Significantly, Žižek's antidote to relativism is itself thoroughly *historical*. But against proponents of identity politics and multiculturalism, Žižek argues that there is a kind of universality that is negative. The universal is not an ideal as some positive content that is always implicit to any "system" of thought. On the contrary the universal is a kind of traumatic antagonism around which ever-changing, thoroughly contingent, historical constellations of thought circle and revolve. Along these lines, according to Žižek's reading of Hegel, the dialectic is a process without a subject, a process which revolves around a void or negativity. No agent (no God, humanity, or class as a collective subject) controls and directs the dialectical process. There is no need for any subjective agent to guide the dialectic, since the emergence of "system" (as inconsistent totality or non-All) is correlative to the emergence of the pure (feminine) subject as void.⁵⁸ Thus Žižek argues that Hegelian dialectic does not simply advocate "Absolute Knowledge" as a kind of rationalist "panlogicism." The notorious Hegelian Absolute Knowledge involves the recognition that any system of thought is incomplete and inherently contradictory. Systems of thought are internally inconsistent because they are constituted through the repression of some traumatic, Real antagonism (such as class struggle). Thus thinking and truth involve much more than what Richard Rorty refers to as "solidarity of belief."⁵⁹ Beneath the level of narrative, there is a dense background of proto-reality, a more elementary level that provides the proper depth of experience. For such reasons, truth is something otherwise than the narratives we tell: our narratives always leave out something crucial, and this "indivisible remainder" is where we should focus our analysis, if we are to discover how and why truth is externalized and alienated from our narratives.

Whether Hegel was always aware of it or not, dialectic exposes the constitutive *lack* inherent to the symbolic order:

for Hegel himself, his philosophical reconstruction of history in no way pretends to "cover everything," but consciously leaves blanks: the medieval time, for example, is for Hegel one big regression – no wonder that, in his lectures on the history of philosophy, he dismisses the entire medieval thought in a couple of pages, flatly denying any historical greatness to figures like Thomas Aquinas. Not even to mention the destructions of great

⁵⁸ Slavoj Žižek, in *Hegel & the Infinite: Religion, Politics, and Dialectic*, ed. Slavoj Žižek, Clayton Crockett, and Creston Davis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 231.

⁵⁹ See Richard Rorty, "Science and Solidarity," in *Rhetoric of the Human Sciences: Language and Arguments in Scholarship and Public Affairs*, ed. John S. Nelson, Allan Megill, and Donald N. McCloskey (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).

civilizations like the Mongols' wiping out so much of the Muslim world (the destruction of Baghdad, etc.) in the 13th century – there is no “meaning” in this destruction, the negativity unleashed here did not create the space for a new shape of historical life.)⁶⁰

In such ways, Žižek demonstrates that Hegel himself (even if he did not always know what he was doing) showed that the negativity of the Real makes complete and consistent synthesis impossible.

What is meant here by “negativity”? Suppose that the cognitive brain sciences could explain – in a causally determinate way – every thought and emotion. If cognitivists could account for *every* feature of conscious life by providing a consistent and comprehensive explanation in purely neurobiological-physical terms, mysteries would still remain. How is it that human beings can sometimes act against their own spontaneous inclinations? Why are we obsessed with questions about the meaning of life? Insofar as Hegelian dialectic evokes the moment of madness inherent to rationality, it implies a materialist dimension. Because of this dialectical moment of negativity or inconsistency (any One is non-identical to itself), Hegel cannot be interpreted as an “absolute idealist”:

In what, then, resides Hegel's uniqueness? Hegel's thought stands for the moment of passage between philosophy as Master's discourse, the philosophy of the One that totalizes the multiplicity, and anti-philosophy which asserts the Real that escapes the grasp of the One. On the one hand, he clearly breaks with the metaphysical logic of counting-for-One; on the other hand, he does not allow for any excess external to the field of notional representations. For Hegel, totalization-in-One always fails, the One is always-already in excess with regard to itself, it is itself the subversion of what it purports to achieve, and it is this tension internal to the One, this Two-ness which makes the One One and simultaneously dislocates it, it is this tension which is the movens of the “dialectical process.” In other words, Hegel effectively denies that there is no Real external to the network of notional representations (which is why he is regularly misread as “absolute idealist” in the sense of the self-enclosed circle of the totality of the Notion). However, the Real does not disappear here in the global self-relating play of symbolic representations; it returns with a vengeance as the immanent gap, obstacle, on account of which representations cannot ever totalize themselves, on account of which they are “non-all” (*pas tout*).⁶¹

⁶⁰ From the preface to Žižek's forthcoming book on Hegel. The preface is available online at: <http://crestondavis.wordpress.com/2010/07/06/zizeks-preface-to-our-hegel-book-with-columbia-university-press/>.

⁶¹ Ibid. If Žižek's “materialist” reading of German Idealism initially seems far-fetched, the reader should be aware that even in English language discussions the materialist

The dialectical process is always ruptured by some nonrational surd, a nonconceptual element that disrupts the complete and consistent understanding of any whole. As Žižek puts it elsewhere, Hegelian dialectic reveals the impossibility of isolating the essential, apart from the inessential:

One of the postmodern commonplaces about Hegel is the reproach of “restrained economy”: in the dialectical process, loss and negativity are contained in advance, accounted for – what gets lost is merely the inessential aspect (and the very fact that a feature has been lost counts as the ultimate proof of its inessential status), whereas one can rest assured that the essential dimension will not only survive, but even be strengthened by the ordeal of negativity. The whole (teleological) point of the process of loss and recuperation is to enable the Absolute to purify itself, to render manifest its essential dimension by getting rid of the inessential, like a snake which, from time to time, has to cast off its skin in order to rejuvenate itself. One can see, now, where this reproach, which imputes to Hegel the obsessional economy of “I can give you everything *but that*,” goes wrong and misses its target. The basic premise of Hegel is that every attempt to distinguish the Essential from the Inessential always proves itself false. Whenever I resort to a strategy of renouncing the Inessential in order to save the Essential, sooner or later (but always when it’s already too late) I’m bound to discover that I made a fatal mistake as to what is essential, and that the essential dimension has already slipped through my fingers.⁶²

Throughout his works, Žižek carefully distinguishes both Lacan’s thought and his own from postmodernism. As the following essays show, Žižek argues that postmodern (late capitalist) society involves the loss of symbolic authority. Put simply, personal freedom of choice has taken the place of symbolic order. But according to Žižek, this overemphasis on personal choice is misguided due to the reflexivity and negativity which are inherent to subjectivity. With the postmodern decline in symbolic

interpretation of F.W.J. Schelling and G.W.F. Hegel is not new. See, for example, Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism – 1781–1801* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), Gregg Horowitz, *Sustaining Loss: Art and Mournful Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), Dennis Schmidt, *On Germans and Other Greeks: Tragedy and Ethical Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), and Richard Velkley, *Being after Rousseau: Philosophy and Culture in Question* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). Though these four studies approach German Idealism from diverse orientations (Anglo-American, hermeneutic, Straussian, and Critical Theory), nonetheless, all four formulate a *materialist analysis*.

⁶² Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*, ed. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London: Verso, 2005), p. 199.

efficacy – e.g., doubt about the efficiency of the master-figure, what Eric Santner called the “crisis of investiture” – and in the absence of the prohibitions of the symbolic Father, the subject’s inherent reflexivity manifests itself in paranoia, in submission to forms of subjection, and in pathological narcissism. What is the remedy for these symptoms of postmodernism? Here Žižek asserts the necessity for the ethical or political *act*. The Lacanian act reinvents the symbolic register; therefore, through the act we can reinvent the (capitalist) conditions of possibility of postmodern society. We can overcome postmodern ideology by traversing the fantasy through the Lacanian act. Only by means of the act (e.g. a revolution) can we produce a new sociosymbolic order in which a new type of symbolic subjectivity is possible.⁶³ Žižek argues that the time of postmodern relativism and cynicism has already passed; postmodernism just doesn’t yet know that it is dead.

Žižek has written dozens of books in various languages, including Slovene, French, German, and – since 1989 – in English, but he claims in the film *Žižek!* that his four best books are *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (first published 1989), *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (first published 1993), *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (first published 1999), and *The Parallax View* (first published 2006). Since 2005, when the film *Žižek!* was completed, he has written several additional books. But for now, let us take Žižek at his word and briefly indicate the character of his major contribution through a quick look at these four “best” books.

In his first book in English, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek departed from the standard “structuralist” interpretation of Lacan that was then predominant. And significantly, he also departed from the orthodox reading of Hegel. The “sublime object of ideology” is the imaginary supplement that would (allegedly) allow complete and harmonious synthesis, or non-alienated identity. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek shows how ideology (e.g. the ideology of postmodern relativism) allows its adherents to behave as if it is possible for subjects to overcome all dissonance, trauma, or antagonism. In this book Žižek makes thematic the Kantian notion of “the sublime” in order to liken ideology to an experience of something that is absolutely vast and forceful beyond all perception and objective intelligibility. Like the Kantian sublime, ideology allows subjects to behave as though they belong to a

⁶³ See Tony Myers’ excellent book *Slavoj Žižek* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 47–8, 57–8, 104. Also see Myers’ article “Slavoj Žižek – Key Ideas,” online at <http://www.lacan.com/zizekchro1.htm>.

harmonious, unified community that transcends particular differences and social discord. Žižek does not simply define ideology as deception; rather, he shows how it serves as a fantasy construction that unifies and makes possible our everyday notion of reality. Ideological fantasy (for example, in cinema) teaches us how to desire; in fact, it *constitutes* our desire by providing its coordinates.

In *Tarrying with the Negative* (1993), Žižek argues – against deconstructionists like Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler – that Hegelian dialectic implies a fundamental moment of negativity that eludes any comprehensive, intelligible synthesis. Žižek develops his unorthodox but rigorous interpretation of Hegel in light of Lacanian theory. In the process, he shows how nationalistic identity is based on this same gap or negativity that lies beneath the illusion of consistency and harmonious synthesis. Nationalist mobilizations are based on a sublime illusion. The mythic point of origin around which nationalism revolves is actually nothing but a gap or void that is positivized through the actions of believers. Fantasy functions so as to camouflage the Real antagonism that ruptures any (allegedly) organic, social unification.

Both Lacanian analysis and philosophy involve a stepping back from relativistic orientations by exposure of the artificial, contingent character of the “Master-Signifier,” which is essential to the intersubjective symbolic system and yet indefinable within it. Again, when a term (e.g., God, democracy, human rights, nature, the people, etc.) functions as the Master-Signifier, it introduces a performative dimension that serves as a Lacanian *point de capiton* or “quilting point” to pin down chains of signifiers and thereby fix the social field of symbolic interactions. In ideology, the phallic Master-Signifier is an irreducibly external and indefinable central term that functions to pin down or fix the field of meaning. But considered in itself, this empty and inconsistent “signifier without the signified” (word without definition) implies a point of reference that is outside any possible universe of discourse. As Žižek puts it: “The phallic signifier is, so to speak, an index of its own impossibility. In its very positivity it is the signifier of ‘castration’ – that is, of its own lack.”⁶⁴

Žižek elaborates the Hegelian theme of “tarrying with the negative” (cf. section 32 of Hegel’s famous “Preface” to his *Phenomenology of Spirit*) in order to show how ruptures and paradigm shifts in theoretical systems are homologous to the analysand’s efforts to come to grips with trauma through psychoanalysis. The problem of the relationship between the social order and the individual is resolved with reference to the negative

⁶⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 157.

or materialist dimension of Hegel's philosophy: the reconciliation of the universal and the individual is not in some "higher" synthesis that mediates the thesis and the antithesis. Instead, dialectical analysis reveals that what the universal and the individual share is the very split or ontological difference that runs through both of them.⁶⁵

Subsequently, in his book *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (1999), Žižek clarifies his own understanding of personal identity – or the subject – first by defining it through contrasts with the thinking of Martin Heidegger. Next Žižek differentiates his thinking from that of several important, contemporary French political philosophers (including his friend and rival Alain Badiou). And, finally, Žižek defends Lacanian theory against criticisms from the well-known feminist deconstructionist Judith Butler. Echoing Marx, Žižek begins the introduction to the book by claiming that the specter of the Cartesian subject is haunting Western academia.

The central theme of *The Ticklish Subject* is that traditional interpretations of Descartes' *cogito* ignore the functional role of "I think therefore I exist" within the project of methodic doubt. Standard academic readings of Descartes ignore the radical implications of the effort to "start with a clean slate – to erase the entirety of reality in so far as it is *not yet* 'born out of the I' by passing through the 'night of the world.'"⁶⁶ A philosophical-psychoanalytic inquiry into madness reveals that the withdrawal into self and the passage through madness is *constitutive* of subjectivity as such.

In *The Parallax View*, Žižek investigates the "parallax gap" that separates modes of thinking between which no harmonious conceptual synthesis is possible. He articulates this parallax gap as it functions between and within philosophical, scientific, and political discourses:

First, there is the *ontological difference* itself as the ultimate parallax which conditions our very access to reality; then there is the *scientific parallax*, the irreducible gap between the phenomenal experience of reality and its scientific account/explanation, which reaches its apogee in cognitivism, with its endeavor to provide a "third-person" neuro-biological account of our "first-person" experience; last, but not least, there is the *political parallax*, the social antagonism which allows for no common ground between the conflicting agents (once upon a time, it was called "class struggle"), with its two main modes of existence on which the last two chapters of this

⁶⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 30.

⁶⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London and New York: Verso, 1999), p. 34.

book focus (the parallax gap between the public Law and its superego obscene supplement; the parallax gap between the “Bartleby” attitude of withdrawal from social engagement and collective social action).⁶⁷

The Parallax View has been called Žižek’s magnum opus, but at the time of this writing, his major work on Hegel has not yet been released. Thus it is far too early to attempt to gauge the full impact of Žižek’s ground-breaking work on the subsequent history of thought. In the preface to the revised edition of *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*, Žižek asks: “Is there then, a hope for the breakthrough of Lacanian theory in the United States?”⁶⁸ In what follows, we hope to indicate how Žižek’s dialectical materialist development of Lacanian theory embodies this hope, especially in conjunction with the ravages of late capitalism.

What is Žižek’s Primary Aim?

The Lacanian register of the Real – as the universal dimension of negativity that is constitutive of all thought and experience – is the focus of Žižek’s work. Žižek’s primary aim is to evoke this void at the heart of subjectivity. Even his books that focus on the critique of ideology and political economy cannot be adequately understood without first coming to grips with Žižek’s concept of “the parallax Real.” It is now widely known that twentieth-century mathematicians like Kurt Gödel proved that any formal system is inherently incomplete insofar as it implies at least one undecidable proposition. In short, we now have mathematical proof that we can never know that mathematics is noncontradictory. But long before this mathematical proof of incompleteness was developed, the insight behind it was evoked by dialectical philosophers (e.g., Plato, Kant, and the German Idealists). And along the same lines, Žižek too argues that any nondialectical account of truth masks irreducible paradoxes. For example, there is a self-referential absurdity implied by what he sometimes calls “postmodern relativism.” It cannot be universally true that every historical period is entirely determined by non-universal practices.

Žižek’s dialectical materialism *does* emphasize radical contingency, but in a way that is much more sophisticated than postmodernism. Žižek avoids relativism by showing the universal to be a *negative* a priori. That which always returns as the “same” in any disclosure is the Real as

⁶⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), p. 10.

⁶⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. vii.

ontological difference, the inconsistency or gap that divides any “one” from itself. Žižek shows how the distinction between the three dimensions of experience (imaginary, symbolic, and Real) facilitates a dialectical understanding of the interrelation between universal necessity and particular contingency. Žižek’s work demonstrates repeatedly and in a variety of ways how the concept of the Real as a *negative* a priori reconfigures the traditional problems of philosophy. For Žižek, universal truth is the dialectical process of becoming that is manifested as antagonism or struggle. Truth is externalized from consciousness, insofar as it is related to the encounter (or failure to encounter) the traumatic, repressed Real. In sum, necessity is constituted in a retroactive way: although truth is contingent, the illusion of fixed meaning is a *necessary* illusion.

It is in such ways that Žižek re-inscribes the German Idealist theme of self-reflexive negativity in terms of the Freudian concept of the death drive and the traversal of fantasy as an encounter with the Real. Lacan defines “drive,” not in terms of biology (as in the so-called “sex drive”), but in terms of the split subject’s relation to the demands of the parents. Along these lines, Žižek emphasizes that drive must not be conceived in terms of physiological needs or biological instincts: “the specifically human dimension” involves drive as opposed to instinct. Drive functions as a brake on instinct: “We become ‘humans’ when we get caught into a closed, self-propelling loop of repeating the same gesture and finding satisfaction in it.”⁶⁹

Žižek argues that drive as such is death drive, and links this to the moment of negativity implicit to the dialectical development of subjectivity: “the Freudian death drive has nothing whatsoever to do with the craving for self-annihilation, for the return to the inorganic absence of any life-tension.”⁷⁰ Whereas symbolic desire aims at attaining its object (and then switching to some other object that comes to signify desire), drive involves an endless circling around the *same* object: “let us imagine an individual trying to perform some simple manual task – say, grab an object which repeatedly eludes him: the moment he changes his attitude, starting to find pleasure in just repeating the failed task, squeezing the object which, again and again, eludes him, he shifts from desire to drive.”⁷¹

Understanding the Real as self-relating negativity is crucial if we are to comprehend why Žižek argues that the death drive is the pivotal concept of psychoanalytic theory of which even Sigmund Freud was not fully

⁶⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), p. 63.

⁷⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), p. 62.

⁷¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), p. 7.

aware: “crucial here is the basic and constitutive discord between drive and body: drive as eternal-‘undead’ disrupts the instinctual rhythm. For that reason, drive as such is death drive.”⁷² Unless we understand Žižek’s focus on death drive as radical negativity, we will not grasp the significance of his claims in interviews that his greatest achievement is those chapters in his works in which he develops his interpretation of Hegel.⁷³ Žižek articulates the death drive as the idea that deep within subjectivity – deeper than truth and beyond the pleasure principle – there is a self-sabotaging, non-economic, and non-evolutionary potential for the *autonomy* of the subject. This subjective autonomy is the source both of the Lacanian act as well as of radical evil. The death drive belongs to the Real of subjectivity, and as we will see, Žižek shows the Real to involve a prelinguistic “primordial repression” which entails that the Real returns in all symbolic, linguistic practices.

The Real as irreducible negativity or incommensurability is the focus of Žižek’s analyses of contemporary life and culture in all its aspects: economic, political, artistic, religious, social, sexual, and intellectual. However, unlike previous dialectical philosophers (e.g., Plato, Kant, Fichte, Schelling), Žižek delineates this negativity or “parallax gap” without ever lapsing into an imaginary sense of completeness. He shows that all wholeness is imaginary: the universe – reality itself – is incomplete. But imaginary identifications (as fantasies of wholeness or completeness) prevent confrontation with the Real as the irreducible negativity or antagonism that disrupts symbolic practices: “At the most radical level of subjectivity and experience, there is some initial moment of madness: the dimensions of *jouissance*, of negativity, of death drive and so on, but *not* the dimension of truth.”⁷⁴ Žižek shows how any symbolization depends on a more originary closing over: any symbolic reality implies primordial repression of the Real. The Real is never directly present as such, because in the encounter with the Real, both identity and reality disintegrate. Although we may approach the Real of desire in dreams, it is homologous to an insurmountable gap between two linked but irreconcilable aspects of symbolic reality. And though it is that which both informs and constitutes symbolic reality, nonetheless the Real qua Real cannot be adequately imagined or consistently symbolized.

⁷² Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), p. 31.

⁷³ For example, see Žižek’s interview with Rosanna Greenstreet, published in *The Guardian*, August 9, 2008, and available online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2008/aug/09/slavoj.zizek>.

⁷⁴ Slavoj Žižek and Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p. 64.

But insofar as it is the inconsistency (or parallax gap) inherent to any symbolic system, the Real functions as a negative kind of universality. Again, to express the paradox of the Real succinctly, the only consistency/sameness that always returns in language or reasoning is the Real, and the Real involves fundamental inconsistency/difference. This is why what is universal cannot be some all-encompassing neutral “space” or generic category that grounds each and every possible particular content. That which is universal is not a neutral medium or background to which we can appeal in order to resolve the conflicts between particularities. What is repeated as the same (as universal) in any possible symbolic reality is nothing but inconsistency, antagonism, and non-identity. This means that the universal “as such” involves the negativity of the Real. As a kind of negative a priori, the universal in this sense is never fully “present” either for perception or for thought; it is not an experience, an object, or a property of experiences or objects. How then do we discern it? It is manifested as that irreducible antagonism that the multitude of particular species attempt to occlude or domesticate or resolve. This is why the Real can be discerned only by “looking awry.”

In sum, only if we first conceive universality in terms of the Real as a negative a priori will we then grasp Žižek’s radical philosophical innovation into the nature of truth. And unless we achieve insight into the Real, we will not comprehend Žižek’s claims that we are free to overcome ideology:

My speculation here is that what Freud calls death drive – if we read it with regard to its most radical philosophical dimension – is something that has to be already operative to open up, as it were, the space for truth. Let’s take Heidegger quite literally here: truth is always a certain openness, in the sense of an opening of horizons, an opening of the world, disclosure through speech and so on. But a condition of possibility for the opening of such a space is precisely what, in psychoanalysis, we would call the primordial repression: some original withdrawal, which is again already signalled by radical negativity. And the point I would emphasize here is that, in philosophical terms, psychoanalysis is extremely ambitious. Psychoanalysis is not a simple story of basic instinctual problems; it is concerned, rather, with a formulation of what had to happen in order for the world to open itself to us as an experience of meaning.⁷⁵

The above passage gives some indication of the breadth and depth of Žižek’s dialectical materialist methodology (his analyses of method

⁷⁵ Slavoj Žižek and Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p. 64.

itself). To express his philosophical significance succinctly, Žižek's dialectical-psychoanalytic approach reveals the inadequacy of the notion of truth held by virtually all other philosophers. As we will see, Žižek's inquiries into freedom as death drive, and his analyses of the relation between this Real spontaneity and truth reveal the vacuity of the liberal-democratic notion of the universal.

Again, in liberal-democratic ideology, universality is conceived as a neutral medium for compromise, and for the expression of self-interest or group identity. Against this, Žižek argues that this sterile notion of universality serves the interests of global capitalism. But how can leftists oppose nationalism without sliding into the vacuous, liberal-democratic notion of universality as a neutral framework for compromise? Žižek answers by reviving the Hegelian notion of "concrete universality," a form of universality that is realized only through the partisan, properly *political* act of taking sides. Žižek argues that at this juncture in history, what is called for is the identification with the disenfranchised "excremental remainder" of society. The universal truth of an event or situation is *not* revealed in the big Other, the intersubjective, sociosymbolic network. On the contrary, the truth of a situation is accessible only to those who occupy the position of the abject, excluded other. Any ideology excludes and makes abject some Other, some particular group, and if this exclusion is symptomatic of a wider problem, the excluded ones experience the pathology of the entire society. This is why Žižek argues that the universal (partisan) truth of the entire social field is disclosed only through the experiences of those who are disenfranchised by the hegemonic ideology.

Žižek reveals the philosophical import of twentieth-century developments in psychoanalysis by articulating Lacanian theory in light of Hegelian dialectics. In the process Žižek illuminates the primary accomplishments (as well as the blind spots) of recent continental philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Louis Althusser, and even his friend – today's preeminent French thinker – Alain Badiou. Žižek's dialectical materialist fusion of psychoanalysis and philosophy also promises to bridge the gap between the Anglo-American (post-analytic) and continental approaches to philosophy. As indicated above, Žižek's Lacanian deployment of Hegelian categories casts new light on traditional philosophical paradoxes relating to universality and specific difference. To put the point succinctly, Žižek shows why the reference of a name to its object cannot be understood as a set of predicates or properties designated by that name. Žižek's analyses indicate that no positive ontology successfully avoids ambiguities and

implicit paradoxes of singularity and universality (see chapter 10 below). In what follows, we will see how Žižek's version of dialectical materialism casts new light on conceptual impasses relating to universality and specific difference.

For example, one of the basic problems in the theory of knowledge involves the distinction between how things seem, as opposed to how things really are. Žižek refines this question to such an extent that the original distinction becomes virtually useless. According to Žižek's dialectical materialism, there is no "how things really are." It is not just our knowledge of reality that is incomplete; reality itself is incomplete. Moreover, my existence as a subject is characterized by the difference between how things seem to me, as opposed to how things *really* seem to me. Again, Žižek's philosophical elaboration of Lacan shows why I can never access the way things really seem to me: I have no access to my most intimate subjective experience. I can never consciously experience the fundamental fantasy that forms and sustains the core of my existence:

At its most radical, the Unconscious is the inaccessible phenomenon, not the objective mechanism that regulates my phenomenal experience. So, in contrast to the commonplace that we are dealing with a subject the moment an entity displays signs of "inner life," that is, of a fantasmatic self-experience that cannot be reduced to external behavior, we should claim that what characterizes human subjectivity proper is, rather, the gap that separates the two: the fact that fantasy, at its most elementary, becomes inaccessible to the subject; it is this inaccessibility that makes the subject "empty." We thus obtain a relationship that totally subverts the standard notion of the subject who directly experiences himself, his "inner states": an "impossible" relationship between the empty, nonphenomenal subject and the phenomena that remain inaccessible to the subject.⁷⁶

Anyone who is at all familiar with some of the basic problems of philosophy should by now have some intimation that Žižek's dialectical materialism facilitates a novel approach to questions about truth, existence, identification, ethics, and justice. Žižek's Lacanian reactualization of Hegelian dialectic allows us to discern the externalized truth of contemporary intellectual life. The following essays investigate the ways that Žižek's dialectical-psychoanalytic methodology evokes not only the disavowed truth of traditional philosophy, but also the reasons for this

⁷⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 171–2.

disavowal: in particular, the hidden connections between the discourse of the university and the Real power of capital.⁷⁷

If (as Žižek claims) Heidegger is the twentieth-century philosopher that all other serious philosophers today are still obliged to confront critically, then Žižek may be the twenty-first century's definitive philosopher, insofar as his philosophy "connects us in the sense that, in a way, almost every other orientation of any serious weight defines itself through some sort of critical relation" towards Žižek's dialectical materialist ontology.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Tony Myers goes so far as to claim that "Marx's critique of capitalism is the very reason why he writes at all." See Myers' *Slavoj Žižek* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 18. Myers' book is one of the best introductory books on Žižek currently available in English. Also highly recommended is Rex Butler's *Slavoj Žižek: Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2005). Like Myers, Butler also has a good grasp of both dialectical philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis. The final chapter of Butler's book is an excellent interview with Žižek.

⁷⁸ Slavoj Žižek and Glyn Daly, *Conversations with Žižek* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p. 28.