

Slavoj Žižek. *Sex and the Failed Absolute.* Bloomsbury 2019. 496 pp. \$29.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781350043787).

Slavoj Žižek has published a new book. Or rather, as he himself admits, he has written a new version of the same book he always writes. This book, which promises to provide the foundations for his philosophical thought, has clear academic aspirations (as opposed to his works aimed at a more general audience). The structure of this book follows the medieval scheme. It has four parts; each begins with a theorem, which is followed by a single corollary and a series of scholia. Below, I shall give an overview of the four theorems and some corollaries, leaving the scholia aside.

Theorem I sets out the basic tenets of Žižek's parallax or failed ontology. The basic idea is that the gap that, in Kant, separates the world of appearances from the thing-in-itself is inscribed in reality itself. The epistemic gap is, so to speak, ontologized. Žižek attributes this view to Hegel. More specifically, parallax ontology is Žižek's interpretation of Hegel's key insight that the substance shows itself as a subject.

In corollary 1, Žižek looks at the transition from Kant to Hegel, reflecting upon the notions of intellectual intuition and *intellectus archetypus*. It is worth focusing on Žižek's line of argument, for this section is, from a scholarly point of view, perhaps the highlight of the whole book. Žižek reflects on Kant's argument for the impossibility of intellectual intuition, that is, the impossibility of direct access to the noumenal realm. This impossibility is the *conditio sine qua non* of our being free agents. The gap between appearances and the thing-in-itself is thus constitutive of our freedom. Žižek rejects attempts made by Fichte and Schelling to close this gap, and instead moves on to Hegel. If substance is subject, the gap is still constitutive of this ontologized subject and its freedom. It is the parallax gap inscribed into the substance. This leads Hegel, in Žižek's view, to reject the notion of *intellectus archetypus*, that is, the divine understanding, which would be precisely a subject without a parallax gap.

Theorem II establishes a connection between this parallax ontology and sexuality. The connection can be sketched as follows: Lacan's formulas of sexualization can be taken as analogous to Kant's antinomies, which are, in theorem I, transposed from the epistemological into the ontological domain. These formulas characterize two principal impossibilities, masculine and feminine: in asserting the Whole, the All, one needs an exception, or one can assert the Non-all, that is, a part of the Whole without any exception. These impossibilities are experienced in the phenomenal world as the sublime, which Žižek connects to Freud's pleasure principle and death drive. This difference does not persist between two positive entities, the masculine and the feminine, but rather marks a split within a genus. The universal genus is divided into one particular subcategory (the masculine) and a remainder, the Lacanian *objet a*, which is constitutive of this split (the feminine). This Hegelian structure recurs throughout the book. The universal genus has two particular sub-genera: one proper sub-genus and a remainder that represents the division of the genus itself. The upshot of this reasoning is that there is only one gender, the masculine, and its excess, which Žižek labels as +. The feminine is thus the first transgender figure.

Theorem III restates this sexualized parallax ontology in three topological forms that he calls *unorientables*: the Möbius strip, the cross-cap and the Klein bottle. The Möbius strip represents the coincidence of a concept with its opposite. The cross-cap represents the parallax ontological space with a cut, a point of discontinuity—the *objet a*, the +. The Klein bottle represents a reflexive reversal of this cut: the inside of the cut is eventually turned into its opposite, into its outside. The inward cut is reversed through the 'snout' of the Klein bottle into the (outward perspective on the) universal

concept itself. Through this reversal we arrive at the paradoxical conclusion that each universal genus has two sub-genera: one proper sub-genus and itself.

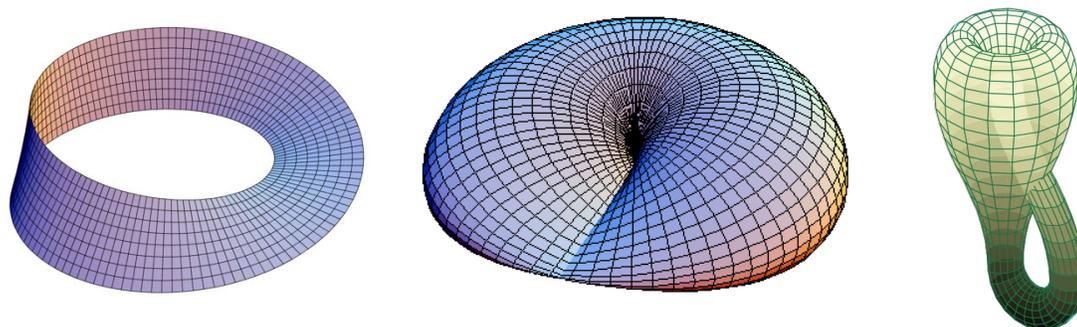


Figure 1: Möbius strip, cross-cap, Klein bottle. Source: Wikimedia Commons

These topological forms were earlier employed by Lacan (and the Möbius strip also by Hegel). My worry at this point is whether using these forms has any explanatory value. The Möbius strip is not difficult to imagine. However, the cross-cap and the Klein bottle are topologically complicated structures that most readers will never have heard of. It may well be the case that the readers learn something new about topology from their previous knowledge of parallax ontology, rather than the other way around.

Corollary 3, in my view the most problematic part of this book, interprets quantum physics as a kind of parallax ontology (more specifically: in the form of the Klein bottle). Žižek employs the same strategy as in theorem I, where Kant's antinomies are transposed from the epistemological into the ontological domain. In quantum physics, the wave function describes epistemic probabilities of states of a quantum system. Žižek, following a recent work by Carlo Rovelli, reinterprets these probabilities as being inscribed into reality itself, that is, as ontological probabilities. Although Žižek admits, in an endnote, that Rovelli's interpretation is not universally accepted, he does not take the trouble to discuss other competing interpretations. What about, for instance, the debates surrounding Bell's inequalities and the hidden variable theory? What about Everett's many-worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics? What about contemporary debates on the foundations of quantum physics? Žižek's wording suggests that he is speaking about quantum mechanics in general without any further specification. However, his whole *cause* depends, in fact, on one marginal interpretation of quantum mechanics. How can he, then, draw far-reaching conclusions about the ultimate building blocks of reality, which are, he claims, 'less than nothing'?

In theorem IV, Žižek reinterprets Hegel's notion of 'concrete universality' such that abstractions (e.g., processes, properties) are not only features of our thinking but also persist in reality itself. The epistemic gap between empirical reality and its abstract conceptual determinations is, again, inscribed into reality. This move allows Žižek to enter into a productive discussion with recent new or speculative realist movements, especially the work of Meillassoux and Harman.

I take the main idea of the book to be a transposition of an epistemological gap into reality itself. Reality, from this perspective, contains a crack, a split which engenders a partition of the universal (genus) into a particular (sub-genus) and a remainder (*objet a*) which represents the universal genus itself. This is a well-elaborated interpretation of Hegel's system, inspired by Lacan's thought. Žižek's interpretation is unique in contemporary Hegel scholarship. He is explicitly opposed to the semantic or neo-Kantian interpretations (advanced by philosophers such as McDowell and Brandom) for the obvious reason that they are too Kantian. His interpretation is clearly metaphysical, but he is

opposed to other metaphysical interpretations (Neoplatonist, Aristotelian, Spinozist) because they take Hegel's system to be complete. Žižek's take on Hegel comes close to a recent interpretation by Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda in their book *The Dash—The Other Side of Absolute Knowing* (MIT Press, 2018). Comay and Ruda argue that the openness or incompleteness of Hegel's system is marked by the dash that Hegel uses at the end of the *Phenomenology* and at the beginning of the *Science of Logic*. In scholium 1.2, Žižek discusses this book quite approvingly (but with a critical twist (100)).

Two critical remarks: the book contains many far-fetched analogies, and like many of Žižek's works often makes vulgar, sexist and completely unfunny jokes. On several occasions, Žižek makes reference to Stalin, with regard to both his political actions and his philosophical legacy. Two examples: Žižek draws an analogy between Hegel's project of self-purging of prejudices and pre-suppositions on the one hand and Stalin's purges in the 1930s on the other (98). Further on, Žižek claims that Plato's ideal of the philosopher-king was realized only with Stalin (236). These analogies are completely out of place. Are they weird jokes or a return of Žižek's repressed admiration of Stalin?

My second problem with the book is that it is a blatant case of academic sloppiness. Many paragraphs are taken or summarized from Wikipedia, followed by endnotes like 'shamelessly summarized from the Wikipedia entry.' Citations are not consistent, often taken from Internet sources rather than critical editions. Many quotations are not properly introduced, so that the reader has to resort to the endnotes to find out who the author of the quotation actually is. Žižek or the publisher could have hired a graduate assistant to fix all these problems. My worry is that these cases of sloppiness are deliberate provocations intended as a rejection of academic rigour.

In conclusion, this book presents some good points about Hegel. However, a good deal of it comprises restatements of ideas from Žižek's previous books. Some of the topics have not appeared in Žižek's previous work, most notably the topological unorientables and several of the scholia. The book is, hence, suitable for a reader not entirely acquainted with Žižek's previous books. Other readers will not find much that is new. And Hegel scholars will probably prefer Comay and Ruda's *Dash* instead.

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