

Grammars of the Immanent: or, Will the Real Catholic Žižek Please Stand Up?

by

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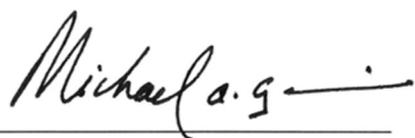
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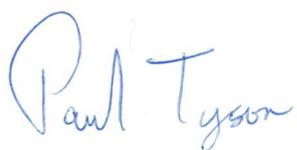
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Abstract:

The high-profile debate between John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek in *The Monstrosity of Christ* comprises an immensely important work in the contemporary intersection of Church dogmatics and ontology. This study consists of an indirect commentary on this debate, using Milbank and Žižek's dispute as a foil for mobilizing an ontology favorable to Eastern Orthodox dogmatics. The starting point here is that Orthodoxy simply bypasses Neo-Platonism as the definitive philosophical expression of its dogmatic theology, and, on this score, Žižek's powerful criticisms of theurgic Neo-Platonism can be embraced and redirected in support of an ontology of the Orthodox dogma of synergy. It will be shown that Milbank's position that there is a "Catholic Žižek" who embraces theurgy—that is, analogical, Neo-Platonist ontology—is mistaken; the dismantling of the "suspended middle" is necessary for the Žižekian and that, therefore, a Catholic version of this figure does not exist. But it will be suggested that, instead, there is a latent Orthodox Žižek whose criticism of analogical ontology can pave the way for a more profitable dialogue between Žižek and Orthodoxy. The conclusion will provide a playful reading of an Orthodox Žižek—an entirely fictional but ontologically serviceable character—who can begin new conversations between ontology and dogmatic theology. The upshot of the study is the extension of Terry Eagleton's claim that the historical materialist, but not the dialectical materialist, can legitimately venerate the Virgin Mary—to the surprising suggestion that even the dialectical materialist can justifiably venerate her, too.

Table of Contents

PRELUDE:	An Outline of Orthodox Synergy.....5	5
	<i>The Good Sommelier, I: Orthodox synergy as the immanent grammar</i>15	15
	<i>Notes</i>28	28
CHAPTER 1:	Reconstructions of Theoretical Systematics.....38	38
	<i>Never Quite Everything: Žižek and the dialectical line</i>50	50
	<i>Theurgy as Inner Feminine: Milbank and the analogical sphere</i>61	61
	<i>Notes</i>68	68
CHAPTER 2:	Critical Appraisals.....75	75
	<i>Grammars of the Immanent, I: Žižek's impoverished Symbol</i>75	75
	<i>Grammars of the Immanent, II: Milbank's divine Symbol</i>82	82
	<i>Notes</i>92	92
CHAPTER 3:	Will the Real Orthodox Žižek, Please Stand Up?.....96	96
	<i>The Good Sommelier, II, or, The Orthodox Žižek: Pregnancy as objet a?</i> 99	99
	<i>Notes</i>105	105
WORKS CITED.....		108

PRELUDE: An Outline of Orthodox Synergy

In his review of John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek’s dialogue, *The Monstrosity of Christ*,¹ John Caputo correctly notes that the debate is not between a theologian (Milbank) and an anti-theologian (Žižek) concerning the legitimacy of the Incarnational event central to orthodox Christology.² The debate rather begins from a standpoint taking seriously the claim that the God beyond the world³ becomes human, and then proceeds to ask the question “what now?” Milbank and Žižek both answer this question in formally parallel ways: an incarnational ontology is the crucible on which their theological disagreement is fought out. Caputo notices that their views, from this formally common starting point, diverge primarily on the notion of ontological reconciliation. This is the question of whether the antagonisms and oppositions, which are both relational (between things) and monadic (between a thing and itself), end up contributing to a greater ontological harmony or rather remain in an unavoidable disharmony.

The latter is Žižek’s position, which Caputo explains as the claim that “The unreconciled is real and the real is unreconciled. The only reconciliation is to reconcile ourselves to the irreconcilable, to admit that there is no reconciliation, and to come to grips with it.”⁴ Žižek’s position is one in which the ontological structure of “the world is ‘incomplete’ and indeterminate, like a Google map that is determinate only at the level of the observer, which can in turn become more or less determinate as the need arises, when we zoom in or out.”⁵ Here we are to recall the familiar “graininess” or irresolution at a given level of detail in a digital image. In such an image, say, a street view somewhere, the information provided is limited to the purposes for which the virtual presentation is available, namely for a kind of surface browsing to see how things look at the level of an ordinary pedestrian. But the limitation for Žižek is to be read ontologically—that is, as characteristic of the neighborhood itself—in that what can be seen in simply all there is to

the depicted territory. Beyond this limit of detail, the objects are undetermined and incomplete: as the observer I cannot see what the inside of the kitchen in the corner house's street-facing bay window looks like, but not because the information is there but inaccessible to me. More radically it is because, in the framework of the digital reproduction, the kitchen does not exist. Žižek's contention is that all we are left with, in the end, is this digital reproduction which is constituted by this ontological limitation or incompleteness. In terms of Žižek's Christology, this translates as the notion that "The orthodox formula 'God became man so that man can become God' is totally wrong: god became man *and that's it*, nothing more, everything already happens here..."⁶ What is revealed, for Žižek, after the Incarnation is an empty transcendent, a Void.⁷ For Žižek, God dies in the incarnational process, and leaves humanity without an ontological reconciliation by way of Resurrection. In the Google Maps register, the world disappears in its digital reproduction, leaving humanity without the real terrain which would guarantee the ontological harmony of its virtual model.

The former position, that there is a greater harmony to which this ontological limitation points, is Milbank's. But given that the limitations are, in some sense, data that need interpreting, Milbank makes use of a theoretical device which starts with the data of limitation and extrapolates from it a meta-level harmony. Caputo explains:

By invoking the analogical standpoint, we are able to see that the tempests that brew here below in time and space, the oppositions and conflicts we everywhere encounter, sometimes dialectical, sometimes not, are more deeply grounded in the ground of being.⁸

Analogy is meant to provide an ontology of reconciliation, from Milbank's point of view, in that all limitation, opposition, or antagonism, in the scriptural phraseology of Paul, ultimately "work together for the sake of the good." Milbank explains that, in analogy, what is arrived at is not contradiction but "coincidence," implying "an eschatological peace so extreme that even the

incompatible are now at one, like the lion lying down with the lamb.”⁹ Caputo’s own description goes as follows:

These conflicts send us hurtling into dialectical opposition, into war, only if we do not look up and see these opposites in their point of coincidence (Eckhart, Cusanus), in the subsistent being of God (Aquinas)—of which they are themselves finite and partial reflections, from which they themselves derive their own being, through which they are finally reconciled.¹⁰

The Google map view, for Milbank, would be characterized not by a fundamental limitation as it is with Žižek, but by an ever-greater differentiation of data at every level of resolution. Yet, as Milbank’s position goes, this final harmony would not be directly available to any observer of the digital image but, to take the example further, would be evident only to someone standing outside the map, someone in the “real world” who can guarantee that, in fact, there is a harmony of the kind which the map images.¹¹ This is the upshot of analogically “looking up” to see the unity of opposites at a point at optical infinity. The basic contention is that between Milbank and Žižek there is no disagreement at the level of the data at all: both take ontological limitation as their starting point.

It is specifically at the higher level of resolution where the ontological differences between Žižek and Milbank intersect with their theological visions. For Žižek, ontological incompleteness is the flagpole marking an empty transcendent, a Void which goes “all the way up” and which reciprocally guarantees incompleteness at all lower levels of differentiation; while for Milbank, ontological incompleteness is merely a surface illusion requiring a perspectival shift to a plenitudinous transcendent which shows that what appears as ontological partiality, limitation, antagonism, is really completable, reconcilable, harmonizable “all the way down.” Having already glanced at Žižek’s Christology from a distant vantage, Milbank’s own amounts to the notion that “The specific story of Christ is not a drama performed against the stage-backdrop of a finished ontology, nor is it decoratively redundant to ontology, nor is it the fated outcome of an ontology,

as for Hegel.”¹² Rather, Milbank argues, the “Third,” which is barred in dialectic—a Third standing in for a unity of opposites which would guarantee ontological completeness of the kind Žižek bars from the beginning—actually safeguards the notion that God can become human without thereby ceasing to be God: “Christian Trinitarian logic has a mediating structure which is *not* dialectical.”¹³ It is Žižek, by contrast, who treats the non-dialectical notions of “‘analogy,’ ‘real relation,’ ‘realism’ (regarding universals), or (after William Desmond) the ‘metaxological’”—as though, collectively, it is “merely a logical moment to be surpassed: its stasis must advance toward the dynamism of negative dialectics.”¹⁴ Milbank’s conclusion is that the incompleteness which Žižek sees as final and determinative of reality as such, an incompleteness which swallows up every attempt to reconcile contradictions at a higher level of analysis, is really only a foil for a plenitudinous “beyond.” In Paul’s words, again, this beyond is a God in whom we “live and move and have our being”—a beyond which transforms ontology into a kind of symphony, a completed choral of being. As Adrian Pabst has aptly put it, “‘Hierarchy and anagogy describe the ascending movement whose original, reverse movement is *kenosis* in the divine humanity of Jesus Christ.”¹⁵ Judged against this picture, it is Žižek who “cheats” in embracing a kenotic (self-emptying) Christology while ignoring its conceptual flip-side, that of analogy or metaxological participation.

It is, however, a conviction central to this study that Caputo is correct to think that neither position offers a fully satisfactory picture of the Incarnation. Translated into ontological terms, this is to say that neither Žižek nor Milbank offer an ontology fully capable of providing an adequate account of what the immanent must be like to be capable of receiving God Incarnate.¹⁶ The immanent, in this view, is *deifiable* in the sense that there is something about it which is capable of receiving and being transformed by God: the immanent is, to put it bluntly, “incarnatable.” This calls for the investigation of whether Milbank or Žižek have provided an account of the immanent

able to sustain dogmatic theological commitments.¹⁷ Caputo, for his part, is right to complain that Žižek is flatly mistaken in what he thinks Christ to be—this is, from the standpoint of a dogmatically responsive Christianity, painfully obvious—and moreover is right to complain that Milbank is mistaken in his insistence that “the entire world may be divided into either medieval Thomistic metaphysicians—or nihilists!”¹⁸ Both of these claims will be unpacked at length below. What is necessary at present is to back Caputo’s instinct that both Žižek and Milbank have gone astray somewhere in their attempt to craft an ontology expressive of orthodox Christianity—Žižek in his atheism and Milbank in his insistence that it is the analogy of being or bust. In a word, Caputo is correct to be skeptical of both Milbank and Žižek’s account of what the immanent is supposed to be, that both dialectic and analogy really may not be the theologically orthodox devices they claim to be. Exactly what might be is the topic of the following section.

For the moment, though, it must be underscored that Caputo’s specific ontological resolution cannot be endorsed. This consists of his claim that the debate allegedly reminds us “in case we might have forgotten, why no one trusts theology” and that this reminder prompts a negative evaluation of ontology as such: “Why not adopt the post-metaphysical idea that gives up searching for all such primordial underlying somethings or other? Why must we posit either a primordial loss or a primordial gain?”¹⁹ In Caputo’s reading, ontology really does complicate Church dogmatics in such a way that, to put it loosely, there is just no theological winning through ontology. It is, on Caputo’s reading, ontology as such which is the problem, and the way forward is to abandon it.

But Milbank and others have convincingly argued that an avoidance of ontology, such as the position offered by Caputo, is not an innocuous securing of theology from corruption. Instead, it is a theoretical edifice liable to systemic distortion corrupting societal praxis going well beyond

the merely metaphysical. Paul Tyson has explained that “Metaphysics is never simply metaphysics; metaphysics is always also politics, commerce, technology, morality, religion, art, and knowledge.”²⁰ And Milbank has made it clear, inversely, that politics, technology, morality, religion, art, or knowledge also carry in themselves a metaphysics of some sort or another. Against the backdrop of these suggestions, Milbank contends, the maneuver of leaving ontology blank is one which produces a systemic conceptual blind spot which leads to the corruption of the sociopolitical territories at large. Rightfully picking on the form of ontological avoidance anchored in Kant but found in thinkers such as Caputo, Milbank explains that Kantian metaphysics is predicated on a view of the “sublime” with respect to which “one can step up to a boundary where one ‘sees’ that phenomenal categories no longer apply, and where one grasps, with necessity, that there are things-in-themselves, even if one can give no content to them,” and at bottom amounts to an ontology “reducible to the ultimately political promotion of abstract, negative right as the foundation of human society, as opposed to any positive conception of a common ‘good’ as a collective goal.”²¹ This is a notion shared also with Milbank’s interlocutor in the *Monstrosity* debate, a connection Creston Davis, the editor of a number of Milbank-Žižek dialogues, has made in pointing out that both Milbank and Žižek aim “at nothing short of emancipating theology from the clutches of bourgeois liberalism” with its merely “formal” illusions of choice, mobility, and occupational control for the political subject.²² At the core of this insight is the notion that metaphysics, like it or not, is too deeply ingrained in praxis as such to be easily eliminated from theoretical systems, something David Bentley Hart has memorably expressed in saying that “the critique of metaphysics is often only another metaphysics.”²³ This is a notion which the present study will take as normative.

Yet the Milbank-Žižek-Caputo triad (analogy-dialectic-*différance*) does not exhaust the space in which we can seek a valid ontology responsive to the pressures put on the discipline from Church dogmatics. Greek Orthodox theologian Nikolaos Loudovikos has drilled his theological well outside of this territory while preserving the major motivational thrust validating all three positions. In agreement with Milbank and Žižek and against Caputo, Loudovikos follows Maximus the Confessor's notion that there is an "absolute ontological dependence of created entities upon the divine will" and that thus "there is an absolute ontological difference between created entities and God."²⁴ This would imply that the difference between God and creation is not a Derridean (or Caputoian) "pure" difference—the difference which leaves no material trace—but that it is a difference which is itself ontological. Žižek explains this with what he calls the untapped ontological potential for Derrida's *différance*: "in contrast to a mere difference between objects, the *pure difference is itself an object*."²⁵ Ignoring the complicated relationship this statement has with Milbank's ontological systematics, which will be the topic for later analysis, it is enough to note the specifically ontological character of the theological difference and cite this against Caputo's insistence, in Derridean fashion, that a simple bypassing of ontology produces a theological distinction between God and the world which is analogous to Derrida's brute, virtual distinction between the text and its outside.²⁶

And against Milbank, Loudovikos agrees with Caputo in that it cannot be either the analogy of being or else utter nihilism. For Loudovikos, not all autonomy of the creaturely is ontologically destructive: "the notorious 'undecidability' (of Derrida and Caputo) is not only a negation of metaphysics or revelation, but it can also be seen as an appeal to (textual) experience, and, indirectly, to theological empiricism."²⁷ This, he continues in the same place, is an autonomy which inherently comes with the risk of "[separating] us completely from God," separation which

is the inherently carried liability of being a creature. Put another way, Loudovikos' claim against Caputo mirrors one made by A. W. Moore in his assessment of Hume's metaphysics: "Hume's error, I believe, lies not in his failing to see where the limits of empiricism lie, but in his failing to see how much metaphysics lies within them."²⁸ Loudovikos' contention is that Caputo's failure is not in his judgment concerning the limitations of ontology—specifically his judgment that the analogy of being does not provide a convincing account of the Incarnation of God—but rather in his severe underestimation of just how much ontology is left after the abandonment of analogy.

The relationship of this last statement—that of the autonomy of the immanent—to Žižek's ontology is the centerpiece of the present project: how much ontology is left if the analogy of being is not a viable option? Is it really, as Milbank and his colleagues claim, that it is analogy or nihilism?²⁹ What follows culminates in a critical appraisal of both Milbank and Žižek's ontologies, an appraisal which will attempt to situate and critique the respective positions relative to what, at the very start, will be described as and taken to be the correct ontological account of the immanent from the standpoint of a proposed Christian dogmatic theology. This ontology will not so much be argued for as merely triangulated, to be used as a platform for criticizing the comparatively inferior ontological positions of both Milbank and Žižek. The position in question will be taken to be the ontology rooted in the standard Eastern Orthodox interpretation of the theological dogma of synergy, a theological category which necessitates a look at the interaction between immanent and transcendent.

Briefly, the basic contention is that both Milbank and Žižek fall short of the ontology of (capital O) Orthodox synergy in their overemphasizing what will be called "transitive" grammars,³⁰ theoretical structural accounts of ontology which "jump" the immanent/transcendent divide on terms negotiated by the immanent. What this claim amounts to is that both thinkers read

the transcendent as a “projection” of the ontological grammar particular to the immanent. To anticipate themes which will be cashed out more fully by the end of Chapter 2, Žižek, in articulating an ontology structured as self-limitation, reads the transcendent as *itself* the limitation of the immanent: the transcendent is, as Žižek puts it, the inherent failure of the immanent to transcend itself. And Milbank, in reading the Trinitarian structure into the immanent, ends up “blending” the immanent into the transcendent. More accurately, as the argument against Milbank will go, Milbank reads the Augustinian psychological “projection” of the Trinitarian interrelationship in ontological terms, and thus, inversely, reads the transcendent in terms of the “immanent” Trinity. The Orthodox synergistic reading of the immanent bypasses these concerns by rejecting the need to read ontology transitively across the immanent/transcendent barrier. In doing so, Orthodox dogmatics will be seen to be able to both dialogue with and critique Žižek in ways that Milbank cannot, chiefly centered around Žižek’s powerful arguments against the analogy of being.³¹

Chapter 1 below introduces Milbank’s and Žižek’s respective ontological programs and Chapter 2 seeks to criticize them. These appraisals have as their goal setting up an evaluation of what Milbank has called the “Catholic Žižek,” a figure whom Milbank sees as “a Žižek... who has remained with paradox [analogy], or rather moved back into paradox from dialectic... a Catholic Žižek... able fully to endorse a transcendent God, in whom creatures analogically participate.”³² What will be covered in Chapter 3 is the claim that a Catholic Žižek does not exist because Žižek’s arguments against the analogy of being block any attempt to assimilate his position into a Catholic dogmatics.³³ And what will ultimately be concluded in this chapter is an entirely playful outline of not a Catholic but an Orthodox Žižek. This discussion begins with literary critic Terry Eagleton’s claim that, since “Historical materialism is not an ontological affair,” this means that,

“In theory, you could look forward to the inevitable triumph of the proletariat while spending several hours a day prostrate before a statue of the Virgin Mary.”³⁴ But, Eagleton continues, since dialectical materialism is a brand of ontology which holds that reality is “volatile, mercurial and constantly mutating, and the mind, which tends to carve up the world according to certain rather arthritic categories, finds it hard to keep abreast of this constant flux,”³⁵ it therefore cannot be compatible with the Church dogmatics central to the Catholic confession. The conclusion here, contrary to Eagleton’s claims, is that the dialectical materialist ontology is no threat to Orthodox Church dogmatics: the Orthodox Žižek can conceivably venerate the Virgin Mother along with the historical materialist. Put more precisely, should someone insist on being Žižekian, this ought not to be an impediment to such devotion.

What the Orthodox Žižek is not, to be clear, is a recommendation for how Orthodox ontology is supposed to work. The Orthodox Žižek is merely a figure which demonstrates that Orthodoxy, in its dogmatic aspect which differs from the Catholic on its rejection of the analogy of being, can dialogue more profitably with Žižek than either Milbank can, and moreover dialogue in such a way that would require comparatively minimal ontological adjustment on Žižek’s part. This project leaves it to the reader to determine whether this invitation into dialectical materialism is worth accepting, a move which this study here neither suggests nor recommends. Crucially, however, its validity does not hinge on any such acceptance.

In a word, then, the motivation for the entire project is that Žižek’s arguments against Milbank are useful to the Orthodox ontologist because Žižek critiques the analogy of being using the same theoretical toolbox as Milbank uses to defend it. In a way this assumes that they are orbiting in the same ontological constellations, despite their enormous differences, something taken up in Chapter 1 below. For now, however, the claim which will kick off this discussion is

that analogical ontology, specifically in its form as theurgic Neo-Platonism, is not the Orthodox way. Immediately below an outline of Orthodox synergy and its ontological implications will be laid out.

The Good Sommelier, I: Orthodox synergy as the immanent grammar

The purpose of this section is not to defend the Orthodox understanding of the dogma of synergy as much as to provide an outline sufficient to contrast the ontology suggested by this theological account principally—in this section—with Milbank’s theurgic Neo-Platonism. The goal is simply to show that Orthodox theology resists the analogy of being—but not analogy as such—and so produces an ontology which, though resembling theurgy-analogy-metaxology in important ways, is not a version of it.³⁶

To begin with, synergy will be loosely taken in this study as the dogma which will place the limits on what could count as a valid ontology. Also called “deification,”³⁷ synergy is a term a used in 1 Corinthians 3:9 where Paul says: “θεοῦ γάρ ἐσμεν συνεργοί, θεοῦ γεώργιον, θεοῦ οἰκοδομή ἐστε.” (“For with God we are helpmates [*synergoi*], you are God’s field, God’s building.”) A somewhat more imaginative rendition might read: “For as sourced in God we are fellow laborers, God’s tilling ground. And it is you, in turn, who are God’s handiwork.”³⁸ John Chrysostom comments on this passage, claiming that “If you are a building, you must not be split in two, since then the building will collapse.”³⁹ Here, the possibility of a building split in “two” suggests an active co-construction with God which implies two things central to the Orthodox reading of synergy. It suggests both that the relationship between creature and Creator is analogous⁴⁰ to the relationship between the architect and the architecture, and that there must be an independent integrity of the architecture vis-à-vis the architect. Of these implications, the first

is taken up here, given that the second is less a point about ontology than it is a pastoral invitation to self-correction which counsels that we must not be “split in two” in “serving two masters,” as the Scriptural phrase puts it.

And, concerning the first implication, Chrysostom’s comments chafe against the readings offered by Milbank, Desmond, and Hart,⁴¹ who variously claim that there is no independent robustness or sturdiness to creation. This claim disrupts the architectural reading given by Chrysostom that suggests that, like a building stands after its builder’s work is done, creation too stands after God’s creating is done. Hart, *pace* John Chrysostom, states that “Every finite being is groundless, without any original or ultimate essence in itself, a moment of unoccasioned fortuity, always awakening from nothing and always enfolding within itself a nocturnal interval of nothingness, an interior oblivion...”⁴² Catherine Pickstock continues this line of thought: “There is no pure finite, since at its bounding margins, it fades into the infinite” in a way which blends but does not confuse the finite with the infinite, a blending which “explode[s] and evaporate[s]” any “application of normal everyday logic...”⁴³ What this picture suggests is a view of the immanent as without substance, essence, or substantial “stuff” in itself, something Loudovikos has complained produces an ontological picture which suggests that “only one essence or substance is real; what is touched by God exists only without a real essential otherness.”⁴⁴ Judged against Chrysostom’s claims, Loudovikos’ intuition is the one that must be backed: the architectural imagery necessitates, on the Orthodox picture, a robust reading of the immanent which resists a “suspended middle” account of its essence by which created being borrows its being from God,⁴⁵ and instead holds to the notion that created being is, in an attenuated way, ontologically “on its own.”

Seraphim Rose, the 20th-c Orthodox monk and theologian, explains this last point by citing what the Orthodox have largely seen as Augustine’s picture of the creature’s excessive passivity: Augustine has “falsely *absolutized* grace and can conceive of nothing that happen against the will of God...”⁴⁶ This is corrected by John Cassian, whom Rose notes as espousing the Orthodox view that, “in the Orthodox doctrine of synergy, a truer place is given to the mystery of human freedom, which can indeed choose not to accept what God has willed for it and constantly calls it to.”⁴⁷ The kind of robustness of the immanent seen in John Chrysostom’s commentary above is reiterated here: the basic idea is that the immanent is a kind of sturdy construction which continues on its own and yet is always open to being terraformed by the creature’s cooperation with God. Loudovikos has connected this explicitly to the Chalcedonian dogma which, he insists, expresses the doctrine of synergy expressed above. He outlines two features of a synergistic ontology, which mirror the two features of the Chalcedonian Creed, which M. Simonetti explains has the dyophysite (δυοφυσιτισμός—“two-natures”) formulation: “Christ, in a... single *hypostasis*, the divine and human natures coexist, entire and complete, without mixture, transformation, separation or division, so that Christ is consubstantial with the Father according to his divinity and consubstantial with us according to his humanity.”⁴⁸ These two features will be returned to later this section in the account of “co-essentiality” central to Orthodox synergy.

Loudovikos cites these Chalcedonian conditions as holding in dialogue or reciprocity both ontological poles, human and divine, distinctive to the dyophysite Christology. These have the effect of laying “the foundations and the road for the possibility and necessity for the analogical or synergistic... opening up of the natural will to the uncreated divine will, which really does provide, as of now, a foretaste of the ‘full Being.’”⁴⁹ But this “full Being” is, in Loudovikos’ terms, conditioned on a volitional response to God’s will, rather than a built-in bias of the being of created

things itself: contrary to the analogical ontologists, creaturely being's likeness to God is a voluntary acceptance rather than an automatic and unconditional reception of God. In support of this interpretation, Loudovikos cites the difference between a participation in the intellectual mode, a partaking of a partitioned sharable commonality, μέθεξις (*methexis*), and a participation in a volitional mode, a crying out for a commonality not yet had, ἀνάκρασις (*anakrasis*).⁵⁰ Μέθεξις suggests a partaking of, having a share in, a friendship; while ἀνάκρασις, rooted in the verb ἀνακρεμάννυμι, meaning a relation by which a subordinate or responsive thing is made dependent on another.⁵¹ The crucial point is in the latter: the dependence is developed after the fact, built up, so to speak, as a result of an active engagement of things with one another. And it is this robust two-way connection which confirms Chrysostom's reading of synergy.

The thrust of Milbank's opposing, fundamentally Augustinian position, is the following.⁵² Adrian Pabst most succinctly outlines the three levels of analogical relation accepted by Milbank,⁵³ which he traces to Thomas Aquinas: (1) horizontal or symmetrical analogy—being to beings, whereby individual beings share being in common; (2) vertical or asymmetrical analogy—from created being to God on which all lateral relationality depends; and (3) horizontal-vertical analogy in “the absolutely symmetric relationality between Trinitarian persons, which provides the ultimate source for the relational individuation of the whole of creation...”⁵⁴ Much more will be said on this in Chapters 1 and 2; for now the basic picture is that theurgy is the dynamic process by which the being of finite things, taken collectively or as a corporate body, is triangulated with respect to the triune God without whom there would be no being—or beings—at all. This description will be taken to be canonical theurgic Neo-Platonism on which this section is hinged.

The relationship between Christianity and theurgic Neo-Platonism, according to Milbank and Aaron Riches, is unequivocal:

The basic metaphysical convertibility [!] between Christianity and theurgic Neoplatonism lies in the way the paradox of participation entails for both a non-contrastive and non-dualist construal of the relation of divinity and even *hyle* [matter], the lowest form of creation: matter and images can therefore truly communicate the transcendent, the world is therefore truly “sacramental.”⁵⁵

It is the work of the Church Fathers, Pabst clarifies, which has “Christianized” Neo-Platonism.⁵⁶

Hart, in agreement, has gone so far to say that a rejection of the analogy of being is tantamount to a rejection of Patristics altogether. Picking on Protestant theology, he claims that “If rejection of the *analogia entis* were in some sense the very core of Protestant theology, as Barth believed, one would still be obliged to observe that it is also the invention of antichrist, and so would have to be accounted the most compelling reason for not becoming a Protestant.”⁵⁷ Should this advice be followed, it would leave us with the ironic picture that, if a rejection of theurgic Neo-Platonism is in some sense the very core of Orthodox theology, this would, by Hart’s measure, be the most compelling reason for also not becoming Orthodox.

If, as Milbank and Riches intimate above, it is the icon—the “matter and images [which] truly communicate the transcendent”—which supplies the impetus for an analogical ontology, it would be a legitimate starting point to search for traces of the analogy of being in what are perhaps *the* great Orthodox theologians of the divine images, John of Damascus and Theodore the Studite.⁵⁸ At this initial stage of the inquest, what is to be looked out for is whether these thinkers consider the likeness between creature and Creator to be in accord with *nature* (being) or in accord with *hypostasis* (person). Keeping in mind a preliminary contrast between these terms and ignoring for the moment the scope of overlap, an insight into Theodore’s thoughts might be gleaned from what follows:

... the prototype is in the image by the similarity of hypostasis...⁵⁹

... the essence of the image is not venerable.⁶⁰

Just as Christ is distinguished from the Father by His hypostasis, so He is distinguished from His image by His essence.⁶¹

The image of Christ is nothing else but Christ, except obviously for the difference of essence...⁶²

The Son is similar to the Father in all ways, as He has the same essence; therefore He has the same veneration. The image of Christ is similar to Him only in the likeness of His hypostasis; therefore it could share His veneration only in this respect.⁶³

A cursory look at the pericopes will determine that the relational likeness between an image and the prototype it depicts is not a likeness of being—in Theodore’s words, essence—but rather a likeness of the category of hypostasis, that is, person. There is, bundled here, the conviction that there is no “transitivity” between the nature of the image and the nature of God: images depict the person of God, and there is no way of getting from the immanent essence (the wood, the plaster; human tissue) to the transcendent essence. More will be said on this term in a moment; for now it is enough to notice that hypostasis is a category which is nonessential, that is, it is not directly cashed out in terms of nature or being.⁶⁴

Orthodox theologian and classicist Constantine Cavarnos has noted that the same analogical dynamic evident in Theodore is also at work in John of Damascus: “The category of relation (πρός τι) is of crucial importance in Damascene’s defense of making and venerating icons. He emphasizes the *relational nature* of icons: an icon takes the mind of the beholder *beyond* itself, *to* the holy prototype—personage or personages—it symbolizes.”⁶⁵ Once again, the goal of the analogical process in John of Damascus, as it is with Theodore, is evidently not an analogical relationality of *being* but rather an analogical relationality of *person*. Milbank and Riches are therefore correct in the bare observation that “For John matter has been transformed by the Incarnation, the descent of the divine into the lowest order of creation, in order to draw the soul of the lost human being back to God.”⁶⁶ Though the question seems to be on what grounds—taking Theodore and John as exemplars—the likeness in question is to be read as a likeness of being.⁶⁷ A short survey of relevant pericopes of John’s writing on the divine images may give an indication of what sort of likeness he, too, has in mind:

An image is a likeness depicting an archetype, but having some difference from it; the image is not like the archetype in every way.⁶⁸

For just as an icon plunged in fire does not become fire by nature, but by union and burning and participation, so what is deified does not become God by nature, but by participation.⁶⁹

Divine grace is given to material things through the name born by what is depicted.⁷⁰

For if we were to make an image of the invisible God, we would really sin; for it is impossible to depict one who is incorporeal and formless, invisible and circumscribable.⁷¹

It would be safe by way of preliminary conclusion to say that John of Damascus too emphasizes the exclusive likeness based on hypostasis or person rather than that of nature or being: the creature in its substance is, at no point, consubstantial with God. Rather, John suggests that it is the “name” of what is depicted on a thing which grants the substratum its access to God. This is particularly important for interpreting the second pericope above, where “participation” seems to be contrasted with nature: what John precisely means here must be judged relative to his dyophysite Christology, a perspective which confirms that the participation in question is not of created nature with divine nature.

The preliminary evidence available from John’s writings on Christology in *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*⁷² confirms John’s nearness to Theodore. Setting up his Christological account, John notices that *energy* words are used to name God, that is, that God is identified not on the basis of essence but on the basis of actions and modes.⁷³ John emphasizes that energy words—θείοω (*theioō*), to burn, smoke, or purify through fumigation; αἶθω (*aithō*), to kindle, incandesce, burn, blaze; θεάομαι (*theaomai*), to look or gaze on, to behold, to view as spectator⁷⁴—may point toward the essence of God, but do not determine that essence: “we still do not grasp the essence itself, but only things relating to it.”⁷⁵ The difference between the Orthodox reading of synergy here and what the Orthodox see as Augustine’s excesses is not a dispute about apophatic naming: it is safe to say unequivocally that both Eastern and Western traditions are uncompromisingly apophatic. The point rather is to read John’s comments on the names of God

though his Christology, which is staunchly Chalcedonian, following the essence/energies distinction given above. John says that “if Christ had one compound nature after the union... then He is neither consubstantial with His Father, who has a simple nature, nor with His Mother, because she was not composed of divinity and humanity.”⁷⁶ This is to say, as John does a little later, that what is “one” in Christ is not his nature but his person, that is, his person in two natures.⁷⁷ The energy words used to identify God’s nature, based as they are on “the efficacious and substantial motion of the nature”⁷⁸ must be seen in relation to Christ’s singular person: “If the operation [energy] of the Lord Christ is one, then it would be either created or uncreated; for just as there is no intermediate nature between the created and the uncreated, neither is there any such operation.”⁷⁹ John goes on to say in the same place, that a single operation or energy cannot originate in a dual nature, such as Christ’s, because “no being acting according to nature can do things which are contrary.”⁸⁰ The energy names for God must then be responsive to the dual operations of Christ’s two natures, since, crucially, Christ’s two natures produce two wills: if we should speak of “one compound will in Christ, then we are making Him distinct from the Father in will, because the will of the Father is not compound.”⁸¹

The attenuated conclusion to be drawn from these passages in confirmation of the Orthodox reading of synergy is that it will always be more obvious, more apparent, more immediate, than any reading of John’s theology, *pace* Milbank and Riches, as one espousing the analogy of being, as though he is a “Christianized” theurgic Neo-Platonist. This account implies that Christ’s human nature operates in unity with his divine nature, since the human nature is always already borrowed from the divine. Though the “suspended middle” ontology, that of the analogy of being, does not predicate on creatures a dual nature, as creature and as God, the account nevertheless suggests, in conflict with the dyophysite Christology, that all there continues to be in the creature is what there

first has been in God.⁸² This notion problematically reads Christ's human nature as *itself* divine.⁸³ Chapter 2 will deal with Milbank's account, and his objections to this alleged conflict, in more detail. For the moment, it is sufficient to explain how Theodore and John's ontologies are *not* to be read, and that is as Christos Yannaras reads them, that "Beings do not contain Being. Being is not their very self, the structured coherence of their properties. Beings *witness to Being* when they rise up in the space of personal relation. They refer to being as the content of the person."⁸⁴ The issue here, as Oleg Davydov has pointed out, is that "it is possible to criticize Yannaras himself for an incorrect notion of the relationship between Creator and creations and the essentialization of personalist equivocity."⁸⁵ The issue is precisely that Yannaras *ontologizes* the personal relation, in so doing implies just the sort of composite operation John of Damascus seeks to resist.

Pabst pushes this rebuttal further: following the personalistic viewpoint, of which Yannaras is a proponent, it is wrong to claim "that the unity of God's substance or being is somehow grounded in the freedom of the three divine persons... Rather, God reveals himself as both substance and relation..."⁸⁶ Vindicating Pabst's objection, yet without confirming the analogy of being, Loudovikos says that it is not enough to say, with the aforementioned personalists, that person is the "what" of nature, its being; rather what is appropriate is to say that person is the "how" of nature, the means by which nature exceeds itself.⁸⁷ Loudovikos' aim with this formulation is to establish the notion of *consubstantiality* within the Orthodox synergistic picture, a notion meaning that there is "no ontological 'priority' of person, just as there is no ontological priority of essence—none precedes the other...The monarchy of the Father is the total surrender of His Essence to each of the other two Persons, at the begetting and the procession..."⁸⁸ Taken in Chalcedonian terms, that "beings are infinite dialogues" with God, that the Orthodox picture is one of "ontology-in-synergy... [whereby the] whole of creation is in a process of becoming, not

as regards to essences, which remain the same, but as regards their tropoi/modes of existence, which alter in accordance with the dialogue between God and Man.”⁸⁹ The architectural dynamic given by John Chrysostom we started with is meant to be expressed, in Loudovikos’ eyes, in his adjustment of Yannaras’ personalist ontology.

Though, from the Orthodox standpoint, correctly critical of the analogy of being, it seems as though Loudovikos’ notion of consubstantiality is an overreaching of the “co-essentiality” formula suggested by John of Damascus and Theodore the Studite above, namely the hypostatic union of two natures codified in the Chalcedonian formula. At a coarse-grained analysis, Loudovikos suggests, along with Milbank, that human (i.e., creaturely) being can itself be consubstantial with God; the dispute between Loudovikos and Milbank is then cashed out in terms of *when* this consubstantiality takes place—now, as with Milbank, or in the eschaton, as with Loudovikos. Loudovikos, in short, problematically subjects the analogical synergistic account to a *process* reading, claiming a union of human nature with divine nature not now, but *eventually*.

Digging a little deeper, Loudovikos seems to be claiming that what is mistaken about the analogy of being characteristic of the Augustinian-Thomistic tradition in the West is its all-or-nothing presence of divine nature in created nature. Eschatology, Loudovikos insists, is not a historical or existential, but rather an *ontological* mode of being, and the metaxological system—of which Milbank’s is an instance—errs only in endorsing a “mania for finding cures here and now,” which in turn “becomes a therapeutic, supernatural healing, which... interprets eschatology as an existential realization of the person, which underplays history and the continual eschatological process.”⁹⁰ In other words, Loudovikos complains of an all too fully present analogical participation in the Christian theurgic Neo-Platonists under consideration, of which Milbank and Yannaras are, to Loudovikos, complementary but opposite extremes.⁹¹

But the iconographic ontology suggested by John and Theodore clearly disrupts the transitivity between creaturely essence and divine essence variously held common by both Milbank and Loudovikos. Loudovikos therefore misreads “co-essentiality” of Christ’s two natures in one person, typified by John and Theodore, as *itself* a union in accordance with essence: that is, Loudovikos reads the person naturally. To claim that we partake in God’s uncreated nature through synergy, as Loudovikos does, is to read Christ’s hypostatic union as an *essential* union; this is the thrust of his system of consubstantiality.⁹² It is here where 20th-c Orthodox theologian John Romanides puts forward the superior vision: “The term co-essential (*homoousios*) applies to Christ in two respects by reason of the incarnation. He is co-essential with the Father, according to His divine nature, and He is co-essential with us, according to His human nature.”⁹³ Following Romanides, this would entail, by way of participatory relation with Christ, that God’s essence cannot be imparted to creation and it is not participated in. God’s energies, by contrast, are both imparted and participated in.⁹⁴ Humanity, Romanides continues, “is united with the human nature of Christ during Holy Communion,” not with the essence of God, and not with the hypostasis of Christ.⁹⁵ It is Romanides’ notion that “co-essentiality” spells out a mystical, intransitive relation between humankind and God: humans are “like”—analogous to—Christ in his human nature, and Christ is analogous to God in his divine nature; but humans are in no way analogous to God in his divine nature.⁹⁶ Following John and Theodore, Romanides claims that “The Sunday of Orthodoxy marks the memory of the official condemnation of this particular teaching [that of divine archetypes] of Plato and the Neoplatonists.”⁹⁷

The harsh tone is not meant to be reproduced here.⁹⁸ The superiority of Romanides’ position to that of Loudovikos is to be held in a softened twofold sense. The first is that the co-essentiality reading of Chalcedon, as opposed to the consubstantiality reading, fits more snugly

with the dyophysite dogmatics of John and Theodore, outlined above. This is to say that co-essentiality teaches neither an ontological equivocity between God's nature and creaturely nature (Yannaras), nor consubstantiality of creaturely nature with divine nature in the eschaton (Loudovikos); nor yet analogical nature by which creaturely essence already is a borrowed version of the divine (Milbank). Rather, co-essentiality teaches the *pre-ontological*⁹⁹ notion that there is *no ontological reading of Christ's hypostasis*; it is rather, inversely, that Christ's co-essentiality motivates Christian ontology-in-synergy—in other words, which motivates the ontological doctrine of deification. In a word, the hypostatic union according to the Chalcedonian formula is not an ontological construction but that by which an ontology of Orthodox personhood is imparted to humans. This is the point of the iconographic ontology: the wood on which the holy image is depicted is always wood and nothing else; yet it imbibes, soaks up, burns in, its relationship to the figure depicted on it. Taking humans as the “wood,” Christ's union of natures in his hypostasis is not itself a union according to nature; the hypostasis does not have an ontology but rather *effects* an ontology by way of synergistic invitation to cooperation and co-construction of the human with God.

Serbian philosopher and theologian Bogoljub Šijaković explains that the likeness between image and archetype characteristic of co-essentiality uses analogy merely as a literary technique, a metaphoric *façon de parler*, in which an image unites in itself “the visible and the invisible, the physical and the meta-physical” in such a way that, through metaphor, that “which in itself naturally exists as *oneness* (sameness)” is expressed “by means of *otherness* (difference)...”¹⁰⁰ The notion of *light* is explicit here: “Light is... the condition for something even to be, so that the appearance (*ontophania*) light is in fact manifested (*photophania*)...”¹⁰¹ This is what John (and Theodore) mean by “Divine grace is given to material things through the name born by what is

depicted”: it is the Uncreated Light which *shines in* creaturely nature (the immanent) without thereby causing that nature itself to shine, as though it were itself that Light. This is why neither now nor in the eschaton will human nature participate in God’s nature, but why, both now and in the eschaton, our *images* can and might.¹⁰²

And the second reason for the Romanidean superiority is that co-essentiality allows for a reading of analogy particular to Milbank and colleagues (which will be outlined in the chapters to follow), which can be repositioned within the confines of the sharply distinguished natures in the hypostasis of Christ. This means that the entire range of analogical being worked out in these theoretical schemas is active between Christ’s human nature and the essence of created things. In the Orthodox reading of synergy given here, there is no reason to resist this picture, but only to insist that it does not reach beyond the human nature of Christ. Getting to the divine nature of Christ is not a matter of nature’s analogy at all, but rather a leap which is fully pre-ontological, that takes us, mystically, from Christ’s human to the nature of God.¹⁰³ The difference between this picture and Caputo’s is precisely the abandonment not of ontology but of the assumption that it is ontology, if it is to be properly ontological, which must grant us access to the divine nature in the first place.

It is, however, beyond the scope of this inquest to determine just what relation the mystical has with the ontological, beyond the suggestion that it is somehow pre-ontological rather than non-ontological. To employ an amusing line in a recent book on socialist political theory, if we are faced with a system which “works in theory” but not in practice, what this means is that there is something wrong with the theory, not the practice; and if it “works in practice” and yet not in theory this, too, means there is something wrong with the theory. And this is how Orthodox synergistic praxis is supposed to work: it *works*, and if ontology has something to do with this

success, then an ontological account of this synergistic dynamic will always be forthcoming. If this sounds like a beginning, rather than a conclusion, it is because it is—this is precisely the reason the Orthodox account of synergy here is outlined rather than defended. Take an image that will be returned to by the end of the study: a sommelier, call them the Good Sommelier, is someone who must, on the basis of ultra-fine discriminations of the palate, discern, differentiate, trace, relate, the various internal components of foods and wines so as to make discriminations for the purposes of quality control, pairing, and other commercial and culinary activities. The properly pre-ontological import for Orthodox synergy is seen in this figure: quite independently of the atomic composition of wine, or the neurophysiological structure of the wine taster, the sommelier’s job goes on just as before.¹⁰⁴ Just as the sommelier’s craft is practical and empirical in a sense unaffected by the facts of composition, so too Orthodox synergy is practical and empirical in a way that simply leaves underdetermined the ontological composition of reality. Being does not need analogy *to be*, and the synergistic co-operation as a praxis leaves ontology open in a way which carves the middle between Caputo and the participants in the *Monstrosity* debate: ontology matters, but not *that much*.

It is, then, relative to this outline that the ontological schemas of Milbank and Žižek are to be described and evaluated, which are the respective subjects of the following two chapters.

¹ Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011). *Nota bene*: all direct quotations in this study will preserve original emphasis.

² John D. Caputo, “Review: The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?,” in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, September 2009. Accessed March 16, 2021, <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/the-monstrosity-of-christ-paradox-or-dialectic/>.

³ Here I have in mind the analysis given in William Desmond, *Hegel’s God: A Counterfeit Double?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), 3 for the most radical version of the three characterizations of transcendence outlined there: the God beyond the world would be the transcendence not beyond this or that boundary but beyond the notion of boundary as such. See David Bentley Hart, “The Destiny of Christian Metaphysics,” in *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist Or Wisdom of God?* ed. Thomas J. White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 398, that “true transcendence must be beyond all negation.”

⁴ Caputo, “Review.”

⁵ Caputo, “Review.” Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 273-308, and 333-342, as well as Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2013), 905-962, describes this selfsame Google Maps metaphor in terms of quantum indeterminacy.

⁶ Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, 391. All citations from hereon will leave the emphasis as it is in the original.

⁷ Žižek, “Fear of Four Words: A Modest Plea for the Hegelian Reading of Christianity,” in *Monstrosity of Christ*, 33 reads Eckhart’s distinction between God and the Godhead in Lacan’s terminology distinguishing the Real from the Symbolic: “Godhead” = Real, “Nothing”; “God” = Symbolic, “Some(Thing).” Chapter 1 and 2 will parse this formula in much more detail.

⁸ Caputo, “Review.”

⁹ Milbank, “The Double Glory, or Paradox Versus Dialectics,” in *Monstrosity of Christ*, 138.

¹⁰ Caputo, “Review.”

¹¹ This point is borrowed from Rebecca Goldstein’s fascinating popular study, *Incompleteness: The Proof and Paradox of Kurt Gödel* (New York: WW Norton, 2006), 140: The idea is that completeness at the level of text can be guaranteed only on the assumption that there is an external situation which ensures that the text can say everything, that is, that there is an “everything” which the text can say:

If I am truthfully describing my apartment—that it is located in New York City, that it has (alas) only one bathroom—I don't need to stop and worry whether some of these statements contradict each other, whether, for example, I will be able to derive that I live in suburban New Jersey and have four bathrooms. If all my statements are both unambiguous and truly descriptive, then they won't contradict each other, since the objective truth of the matter underpins them all.

The way this is framed here needs refining. This refining will be done in Chapter 2 below, which will present the respective differences between Žižek and Milbank using language borrowed from Gödel’s incompleteness theorems.

¹² Milbank, “Stanton Lecture 5: Participated Transcendence Reconceived,” 14 as part of his “Stanton Lectures 2011,” in *Centre for Theology and Philosophy – University of Nottingham*, March 12, 2011. Accessed: June 8, 2020, <http://theologyphilosophycentre.co.uk/2011/03/12/john-milbanks-stanton-lectures-2011/comment-page-1/>.

¹³ Milbank, “The Double Glory,” 145. Marcus Pound, *Žižek: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 52, for a statement to the same effect, that what is missing in Žižek’s account is the reconciliatory Third, in other words the “resurrection; without it abandonment has the final say.”

¹⁴ Milbank, “The Double Glory,” 112.

¹⁵ Pabst, *Metaphysics: The Creation of Hierarchy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), xviii. Oliver Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary*, trans. Theodore Berkeley and Jeremy Hummerstone (New York: New City Press, 1995), 37 gives a standard reading of *kenosis* as based on Phil 2:7 as a concept tied directly to that of deification, enabling the “full communion between God and humanity...” More on deification in the next section, below. There is a second edition of Clément’s text from the same publisher in 2013.

¹⁶ “Materialism just isn't what it used to be... The battle that is joined today is... between ‘materialist materialism’ and ‘theological materialism,’ between crude soulless materialism and materialism with spirit, a materialism of the spirit, a religious materialism.” See Caputo, “Review.” I intend to soften the content of this description while endorsing it formally: the issue at hand is over the correct character of the *immanent*, safely assumed to be the genus of whatever “matter” is supposed to be in the *Monstrosity* debate.

¹⁷ In point of fact, both thinkers see themselves as the representatives of theological orthodoxy. On Žižek’s side, he claims that “it is Milbank who is in effect guilty of heterodoxy, ultimately of a regression to paganism: in my atheism, I am more Christian than Milbank.” See Žižek, “Dialectical Clarity versus the Misty Conceit of Paradox,” in *Monstrosity of Christ*, 248. Milbank, for his part, has accused Žižek of being a heterodox Christian, something most clearly put in a later debate between the two organized, again, by Creston Davis. Milbank accuses Žižek of being gnostic to the extent that the “Lacanian surpassing of the logic of the exception is only itself opened up by this very logic: the aporetic gap within it is taken by desire to be the missing particular and elected ‘real’ that it seeks. Hence for Žižek redemption and fall, God and godlessness, coincide.” See “Paul against Biopolitics,” in John Milbank, Slavoj Žižek, and Creston Davis, *Paul’s New Moment: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2010), 51 on Note 62. The implication here is that neither is correct on their judgment of their own theological orthodoxy, if orthodoxy is taken in a restrictive sense. The degree to which this restriction calls Milbank, a practicing Anglo-Catholic, to account is not touched on briefly in Note 80 below. The statement there is put forward cautiously; at no point in this study—a study which bolley claims there can be an “Orthodox Žižek”—will it be claimed that there is no “Orthodox Milbank.” Such a figure, to put it without rhetorical ornamentation, would not be such a bold claim at all.

¹⁸ Caputo, “Review.”

¹⁹ Caputo, “Review.” Kevin Hector, *Theology Without Metaphysics: God, Language, and the Spirit of Recognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 20ff. explains that Caputo’s system of Derridean deconstruction is meant to counter a “logocentric” metaphysics which (earlier on p. 14) Hector describes as directly oppositional to a naïve metaphysics of essentialism (ontology) and correspondentism (epistemology). Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida, and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 208 traces Caputo’s Derridean move to Karl Barth’s economy of difference, which Ward claims anticipates Derrida a couple of generations earlier. Paul Tyson, in *De-Fragmenting Modernity: Reintegrating Knowledge with Wisdom, Belief with Truth, and Reality with Being* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 47 Note 7 ferociously questions the validity of this naïve metaphysics taken as the starting point for Caputo through Derrida: “Modern ‘realism’ is actually solipsistic constructivism that incoherently asserts that this outlook is the only realistic way of thinking about what our sensory apparatuses really are.” Tyson is relying on the work of Lloyd Gerson, *Ancient Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 24 (but also *passim*), who explains that, for Plato, sensory inputs can include a category of experience in principle blocked by the naïve metaphysics of the kind Caputo is both rejecting and ascribing to the interlocutors in the *Monstrosity* debate. Gerson explains that sensations can come in varieties which carry internally to themselves the ontological structure commensurate with the structure of the being of which it is an appearance, the rejection of which makes it impossible in principle to distinguish between true and false beliefs. Tyson, in the same place as above, explains that this view dismantles the “belief that knowledge only exists within our skulls... with no value or meaning existing in reality, and no unifying divine mind ordering reality into a meaningful unity.”

²⁰ Tyson, *Returning to Reality: Christian Platonism for Our Times* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 29. I take it that the terminological transference here between metaphysics and ontology is harmless, tracing as it does David Bentley Hart’s notion of “expanded” metaphysics. Hart explains that a metaphysics beyond the privileging of presence/absence in the narrow sense is an expanded project “indicating merely that realm of conjecture that exceeds what is evident in the empirical order of discrete causes, *causae in fieri*, in order to speak of the ontological possibility the *causa in esse*—of a world that is impotent to account for its own being.” Infinity, likewise, is an “expanded” totality: it is what one desires when one seeks to see the totality as the gift of a true transcendence, granting the totality its essences, its existence, its values, and its transcendental properties from beyond itself, by the grace of participation and under the ‘rule’ of analogy.” See *Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 13. In this study “expanded” metaphysics will be taken as including a fundamental ontology without the requirement that this ontology be analogical. More on this in a moment.

²¹ Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 1997), 11f. See also Adrian Pabst, *Metaphysics*, 434ff. for an analogous statement, that the structural systematics of analogical participation entails a political program allegedly able to account for both individuality (Neo-Platonic individuation) and the public good (participation in the One), a kind of politics beyond the left-and-right. This point is simply mentioned here but will no longer be dealt with in any way; the point is that an avoidance of ontology, of the kind we see in Caputo, is not a harmless bromide intended to service a theological orthodoxy but a proposal which comes with a host of serious side effects, side effects which are avoided in the position accepted in this study. The connection between Caputo and Derrida is provided in Note 26 below. But the connection between Derrida and the post-Kantian critique can be seen in D. Smith’s entry “Transcendental Empiricism,” in *The Edinburgh Dictionary of Continental Philosophy*, ed. John Protevi (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 588, where he claims that, “For this reason, the transcendental field must be explored empirically, that is via ‘experiments’ (the French noun *expérience* means both ‘experience’ in the ordinary English sense of the term as well as ‘experiment’). Such experiments are conducted by pushing systems to the thresholds at which their singularities come into play, triggering a qualitatively new behaviour.” Husserl is taken to be among these figures. Milbank, in his “Stanton Lecture 1: The Return of Metaphysics in the 21st Century,” 13, explains that Derrida applies, in Smith’s terms, a “singularity” reading of Husserl’s “phenomena” in his deconstruction of the phenomenological reduction. In short, Derrida argues that, on the one hand, phenomena are *themselves* signs and so must be interpreted along with other signs, and, on the other, that no sign includes a transparent, immediate presence of that which it signifies. It follows that Caputo, in his anti-metaphysicalism, is offering a Kantian solution which is equally rejected by both Milbank and Žižek. Chapter 1 will spell this out in more detail.

²² Davis, “Introduction” in *Paul’s New Moment*, 8.

²³ Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 13.

²⁴ Loudovikos, *Eucharistic Ontology: Maximus the Confessor’s Eschatological Ontology of Being as Dialogical Reciprocity* (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2011), 69. Žižek’s device of a “vanishing mediator” is resisted in this formulation, a notion that Žižek, in “The Fear of Four Words,” 29, explains: “Hegel’s underlying premise is that what dies on the Cross is not only God’s earthly representative-incarnation, but the God of beyond itself: Christ

is the ‘vanishing mediator’ between the substantial transcendent God-in-itself and God qua virtual spiritual community.” Frederick Depoortere has catalogued Žižek’s notion of “vanishing mediator” in *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy: Gianni Vattimo, René Girard, and Slavoj Žižek* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2008), 121ff. See generally 123-134 for a characterization of this notion.

²⁵ Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 18.

²⁶ Conor Cunningham memorably calls Derrida a “Spinozistic Plotinian.” That is, Derrida accepts both the notion that the One is emanationally projected into the visible (immanent), leaving the immanent with no substantial identity other than the One—and the One only as source to the emanational projection—which exists only if we the One does, which assumes the prior existence of its emanational product, which is not. And Derrida accepts Spinoza’s formulation that the immanent is that space of inescapability, wherein the explanatory nexus finds its complete internal closure. There therefore is no outside-text: the text is both closed-in on itself and borrowed in its substance from an emanational “One” beyond the text, which does not exist—and so neither does the text. See Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), 155-166. J. Manoussakis’ entry “Religion, Philosophy of” in *The Edinburgh Dictionary of Continental Philosophy*, 492 connects Caputo’s theological project as one explicitly indebted to and extending Derrida’s “turn to religion.”

²⁷ Loudovikos, *Eucharistic Ontology*, 235.

²⁸ Moore, *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things (The Evolution of Modern Philosophy)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 106.

²⁹ This claim will be assessed by looking at Conor Cunningham’s dichotomy between the nihilistic options of “ontotheology” and “meontotheology” in his *Genealogy of Nihilism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), xiii. This will be unpacked in detail later, but for now the main point is that, for Cunningham, meontotheology is in a sense the “destiny of the West” after the abandonment of the theo-logic in the late medieval period.

³⁰ Grammar will be understood as “a list of symbols or rules for constructing symbols of the logical language...” See Alexander T. Oliver, “Calculus,” in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 1st Ed., ed. Ted Honderich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 114. In terms used here, grammar will be taken to be a coda for interpreting a theoretical framework or ontological structural systematics.

³¹ Referring the Note 29 above, the claim will be that Žižek does not fit into the ontotheological-meontotheological dichotomy accepted by the group of thinkers bundled with Milbank thus far and below. The evidence connecting these authors with one another will be provided in the notes as we go along.

³² Milbank, “The Double Glory,” 113.

³³ The assumption that the analogy of being is central to Catholic theology is perhaps the major factor limiting the scope of this study. I follow Erich Przywara in his insistence that the 13-c Fourth Council of the Lateran grafts the *analogia entis*—the analogy of being—into Catholic ontology. See Przywara, *Analogia Entis: Original Structure and Universal Rhythm*, trans. John Betz and David Bentley Hart (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 234. Przywara claims that this decision is ratified in the 19-c First Vatican Council. See Przywara, *Analogia Entis*, 186. For a contrasting perspective that claims there is a valid Catholicity apart from the analogy of being which is far beyond the scope of this project, see Daniel P. Horan, *Postmodernity and Univocity: A Critical Account of Radical Orthodoxy and John Duns Scotus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

³⁴ Eagleton, *Materialism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 8.

³⁵ Eagleton, *Materialism*, 9.

³⁶ I take it that theurgy, analogy, metaxology, paradox, and “suspended middle” can safely be taken as interchangeable. What I have in mind here is the “theo-logic” outlined by Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, specifically Ch. 9: “The Difference Knowledge Makes: Creation Out of Love,” 219-234, in which he outlines the ontology embracing analogy, participation, transcendentals, and divine ideas. For metaxology see William Desmond, *God and the Between* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 117, where he employs what he calls the hyperbole or plurivocity of being. Desmond claims that “Beyond univocal determination, beyond equivocal difference, beyond self-mediating totality, God is to be thought through the between as given to be, and given to be as good.” This way, the metaxological “shows the fuller truth of the other three...” See also Desmond, *The Voiding of Being: The Doing and Undoing of Metaphysics in Modernity* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 193-225 for an account of this plurivocity as the “hyperbole” of being. I take it that Paul Tyson’s pregnant notion of the metaxological as an “ontopia,” playing on the image of an ideal living condition for thought and being, carries with it the full range of nuance suggested in Desmond or Cunningham. An ontopia, for Tyson, is a pun combining ου-τοπος, no-place, with ευ-τοπος, good-place; these compose the notion that the analogy of being is meant to take us from finite limitation to infinite plenitude, a perfect destination that is at the same time not a particular place. See Paul Tyson, *De-Fragmenting Modernity*, 114. Much more on this will be said below; it is sufficient for now to simply state these connections.

³⁷ Stephen Thomas connects the terms in his entry “Deification,” in *The Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity*, ed. John Anthony McGuckin (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 1:182-187.

³⁸ These are my translations. The Greek is taken from Kurt Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1979).

³⁹ This is to be found in Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* 8.6, cited in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: 1-2 Corinthians*, New Testament series, Vol. 7, ed. Gerald Bray (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 30. Chrysostom is commenting on the verse translated above.

⁴⁰ This is to be understood here somewhat “thinly” as the literary device of analogy, rather than the thick, ontological reading of analogy contrasted with immediately below.

⁴¹ These three are connected in P. J. P. Gonzalez, *Reimagining the Analogia Entis: The Future of Erich Przywara's Christian Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), Chapter 7: “The Resurgence of Analogical Metaphysics: Desmond, Milbank, and Hart,” 246-287.

⁴² Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 250. He continues on 287: “For Christian thought, as much as for Deleuze (indeed, more so), interiority is the deeply folded inside of an outside surface, and as such always folds and unfolds, encloses and discloses the surface of things.”

⁴³ Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth: A New Religious Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 201. Milbank in his *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd Ed (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 361 Note 68 and xx Note 22, where he attributes to Pickstock “exactly the same innovative theurgic emphasis” as his own.

⁴⁴ Loudovikos, *Eucharistic Ontology*, 225. He continues on 231: William Desmond likewise struggles “to keep both ontological sides of God intact, to wit, His unchangeable essence and His many essential realizable potencies *ad extra*, which derive from the essence without being identified with it...” It is possible to complain, with Hart, that it is “total nonsense” to object that the *analogia entis* is simply some Neo-Platonist scheme “that impudently imagines there to be some ground of identity between God and the creature susceptible of human comprehension, and that therefore presumes to lay hold of God in his unutterable transcendence.” See Hart, “Destiny of Christian Metaphysics,” 396. Hart here seems to be reiterating a point about remaining apophatic about transcendence—mirroring his claim, on 398 in the aforementioned essay, that “true transcendence must be beyond all negation.” But the issue is not over the transcendent, but the *immanent*: David Bradshaw has, on this score, written of the systemic *passivity* of the creature in analogical ontological schemes. See Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 253.

⁴⁵ The result of this suspension is a “metaxological or analogical answer, in a new form of realism, namely, a creaturely realism.” The kind of beings we are circumscribe “an inherently contingent, moving, dynamic, and suspended-between being.” See Gonzalez, *Reimagining the Analogia Entis*, 252.

⁴⁶ Rose, *The Place of the Blessed Augustine in the Orthodox Church* (Platina: St. Herman Press, 1997), 48. I do not have the space to argue this point here, and I imagine the claim would get some serious push-back. Though Rose’s comment does make sense against the backdrop of one of the better descriptions of Augustine’s anti-Pelagian account in Fleming Rutledge’s unforgettable literary commentary, *The Battle for Middle Earth: Tolkien’s Divine Design in The Lord of the Rings* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), e-book loc. 4683f.: someone’s free choice is “in a sense not a choice at all, for it is her destiny from before all time; and yet she is more free in making it than she could ever have been otherwise, because she is wholly within the will of God.” On this Augustinian picture, it is by *replacing* God’s will as my own that I myself become free; or so the Orthodox criticism of this understanding goes.

⁴⁷ Rose, *Blessed Augustine*, 48. John Cassian supports this co-operative vision: “But because we said that it is impossible for the mind not to be approached by thoughts, you must not lay everything to the charge of the assault, or to those spirits who strive to instill them into us, else there would not remain any free will in man, nor would efforts for our improvement be in our power.” See Cassian, “Conference 1: First Conference of Abbot Moses,” in *New Advent*, 2020, 1.17. Accessed: April 12, 2021, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/350801.htm>. Loudovikos applies this in his analysis, saying that the “*synergetic dialogue* which implies both a divine, uncreated logos/energy and a human created logos/energy co-operating with the former, is the ontological foundation of freedom, that in this way concerns not only the divine but also created being and derives from the Incarnation.” See “Appendix 3: An Aquinas for the Future,” in *Analogical Identities*, 346.

⁴⁸ Simonetti, “Chalcedon: II, Council,” in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, eds. Angelo Di Berardino et al. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2014), 1:492.

⁴⁹ Loudovikos, *Analogical Identities: The Creation of the Christian Self: Beyond Spirituality and Mysticism in the Patristic Era* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2020), 75ff.

⁵⁰ Loudovikos, *Eucharistic Ontology*, 217. I will note the possible objection that one sympathetic to Milbank’s reading of the *metaxu*—the suspended middle—may have, following his comments on it in *Suspended Middle*:

Henri de Lubac and the Debate concerning the Supernatural (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 5. The character of the *metaxu*, the analogical or theurgic participation, has been introduced and will be explained in later chapters in more detail. The possible objection here is that, according to the ontology of the transcendentals (see Note 36 above for how these formally fit into the analogical scheme), there is a complete coincidence of the True-Good-Beautiful at the level of the transcendent. This would mean that the intellectual (tracing the True) simply *is* the volitional (tracing the Good) in such a way that would disrupt any potential for separating them the way Loudovikos suggests above. In response—though it must be only a cursory response, given the purposes of this section as outline rather than defense—it might be important to point out that this objection assumes the validity of the classical, Neo-Platonist doctrine of the transcendentals, when this very validity itself is being called into question in the alternative account sketched in this section. For a more sustained argument of this sort, see Loudovikos, “Appendix 3,” in *Analogical Identities*, 347, where he explains that Thomas’ insistence that, “because of the divine simplicity, which entails the full identity of the divine will with the divine essence, it is impossible to admit an external cause of God’s willing.” On Loudovikos’ picture, God’s person or “energies manifest ecstasis of nature itself” rather than a strict identity between God’s act and his energy, as Milbank suggests of Aquinas. See Loudovikos, *Analogical Identities*, 181, and Milbank, “Commentary: Ecumenical Orthodoxy—a Response to Nicholas Loudovikos,” in *Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy: Transfiguring the World Through the Word*, ed. Adrian Pabst et al. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 159ff.

⁵¹ I am taking these from a standard reference text.

⁵² For what I take to be a neutral descriptive claim of Milbank’s Augustinianism, see R. R. Reno, *passim*, in “The Radical Orthodoxy Project,” in *First Things*, February 2000. Accessed: March 29, 2021, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2000/02/the-radical-orthodoxy-project>.

⁵³ For Milbank’s common outlook with Pabst, see Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, xix: “A version of Thomism and aspects of Pico della Mirandola and Nicholas of Cusa’s blending of Dominican and more emphatically theurgic (including Hermetic and Cabbalistic) perspectives can be newly harvested within this *schema*.” On 435, Milbank explains that the “reflection of eternal divine order does not compromise created contingency, which is the utter dependency of finite being as such.” Pabst expands this point in the same way: “particulars do not *resemble* universals; they are *resemblances of* universals: “forms reflect across the *cosmos*, and particulars are ‘refractions of forms’ that stand in analogous relation to the original source. Particulars mark unique manifestations of universals in materiality.” See *Metaphysics*, 43.

⁵⁴ Pabst, *Metaphysics*, 231. Paul Tyson expresses this same three-staged analogy of being in *De-Fragmenting Modernity*, 26.

⁵⁵ John Milbank and Aaron Riches, “Foreword,” in Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, 2nd Ed (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2014), xiii. Loudovikos is sharply critical of this: For Augustine, “Neo-Platonism was an essential factor in the structure of the theology... and not merely a drape to clothe his thought. The result of this was a continuous and profound conflict within himself: the attempt to Christianize philosophy without losing the possibility of a philosophical expression of for theology.” What is left in the systems which identify the two is merely an “ontological scheme.” See *Analogical Identities*, 14.

⁵⁶ Pabst, *Metaphysics*, 60.

⁵⁷ Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 242. Though Protestants like D. Stephen Long hold to a functionally identical theurgic Neo-Platonist model Hart himself does. See Long, *The Perfectly Simple Triune God: Aquinas and His Legacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016).

⁵⁸ Kallistos Ware, “Christian Theology in the East, 600-1453,” in *A History of Christian Doctrine*, ed. Hubert Cunliffe-Jones (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1980), 200 states these two thinkers are the highest expressions of the iconophile position. In this page Ware states that “No doubt behind [their] understanding of icons there is a certain influence of the Platonic Theory of Ideas or Forms...” This should be kept in mind in the discussion in the rest of this section. The claim put forward here is the more modest one that this Platonism is not *convertible*—in the words of Milbank and Riches (see Note 55 above)—with the iconophile theology. The degree to which this calls into question Milbank et al.’s reading of the analogy of being into Plato himself is not going to be questioned here, though James K. A. Smith, *Speech and Theology: Language and logic of incarnation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), 170 makes a compelling case that “recent theological movements have wanted to identify the two, even portraying Plato as a kind of ‘sacramental’ or ‘incarnational’ philosopher—even theologian. John Milbank first sketched a manifesto for rethinking ontology and social theory rooted in ‘Platonism/Christianity.’” Later, on 175, Smith disputes not the incarnational logic of Milbank, Pickstock, and Shaw, which are his targets; “My critique is concerned with locating such an account in Plato.” Smith is citing Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 290, Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 1997), 12,

and Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 10f. The “incarnational logic” Smith speaks of involves the analogical etc. viewpoint spoken of here. See Note 36 for my word on this.

⁵⁹ Theodore the Studite, “Third Refutation of the Iconoclasts,” in *On the Holy Icons*, trans. Catherine P. Roth (Yonkers: SVS Press, 1981), section C1.

⁶⁰ Theodore the Studite, “Third Refutation of the Iconoclasts,” C2.

⁶¹ Theodore the Studite, “Third Refutation of the Iconoclasts,” C7.

⁶² Theodore the Studite, “Third Refutation of the Iconoclasts,” C14.

⁶³ Theodore the Studite, “Third Refutation of the Iconoclasts,” C12.

⁶⁴ I will largely be remaining silent on this point, here. It is a huge topic, and I will already be making bolder claims that I should be in the outline as it progresses. Basically, the idea in mind follows the work of German analytic philosopher John Heil, *From an Ontological Point of View* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 132, 151, 159, and other key places where he argues that an essentialist reading of universals—something Milbank shares, though in a very different conceptual register—necessitates that *some* similarities ought to be cashed out not in terms of shared properties, but that certain shared properties ought to be cashed out in terms of “brute” similarity. The “bruteness” of similarity is the analogical reading I have in mind in what follows. Lurking behind this judgement is that such analogy is not ontological but, in a naked, unmediated way, *empirical*: my person is “like” God’s Persons in terms of brute, unqualified, similarity. Again, I have no space here to make this case.

There is a distinction made in the literature between likeness and similarity. This is found in Przywara, *Analogia Entis*, 289 Note 395, citing Thomas: “The divine essence is a perfect likeness of all things of every sort... as it is the principle of all things.” And, 234, citing the Fourth Lateran formula: “within every ‘similarity, however great’ is an ‘ever greater dissimilarity’...” In the same place, similarity is cashed out as *similitudo*, that is, as a “positive relationship.” See Jonathan P. O’Callaghan, *Thomist Realism and the Linguistic Turn: Toward a More Perfect Form of Existence*, 1st Ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 35, speaks of similitude as “a result of the natural principles of the intellect only insofar as the intellect is a capacity to receive and be in-formed by the principles of things *extra animam*.” We are meant to take from this that things can be like to God while remaining dissimilar, a move which may disrupt the nonessential reading of hypostasis, given here, which assumes that likeness is cashed out in terms of similarity and vice versa. By way of incomplete reply, I do not think this changes the argument developed here. This objection would only work in the case that similarity is cashed out as *identity*, and then likeness as what we would consider to be the ordinary language reading of similarity—in Heil’s terms, that of sharing properties. But then we are back to the question of creatures sharing essential properties with God—something like the “suspended middle” rendition of analogy—which is disputed in this study.

⁶⁵ Cavarnos, *Orthodoxy and Philosophy* (Belmont: Institute for Byzantine & Modern Greek Studies, 2003), 82.

⁶⁶ Milbank and Riches, “Foreword,” xiv.

⁶⁷ Charles C. Twombly, *Perichoresis and Personhood: God, Christ, and Salvation in John of Damascus* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 12 likewise reads into this relationality a relationality of being rather than of person in contrast with being. See Note 64 for the context to this.

⁶⁸ John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. Andrew Louth (Yonkers: SVS Press, 2003), 1.9 (Treatise 1, section 9).

⁶⁹ John of Damascus, *Divine Images*, 1.19.

⁷⁰ John of Damascus, *Divine Images*, 1.36.

⁷¹ John of Damascus, *Divine Images*, 2.5.

⁷² John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, ed. D.P. Curtin, trans. E.W. Watson and L. Pullan (Amazon Digital Services LLC, 2019).

⁷³ John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition*, 1.9.

⁷⁴ These words are suggested by John in *Exact Exposition*, 1.9 and are explained using an Ancient Greek reference text.

⁷⁵ John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition*, 1.10.

⁷⁶ John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition*, 3.3.

⁷⁷ John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition*, 3.7.

⁷⁸ John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition*, 3.15.

⁷⁹ John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition*, 3.15.

⁸⁰ John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition*, 3.15. See also 4.6: “the holy Mother of God engendered a Person who is known in two natures and who in His divinity was timelessly begotten of the Father, but who in the last days became incarnate of her and was born in the flesh.”

⁸¹ John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition*, 3.14.

⁸² This is perhaps the strongest reason supporting Loudovikos' caustic comment that Milbank—and the host of his colleagues he has been bundled with in this outline here—espouse a fundamentally Monophysite Christology, which Loudovikos ascribes to all Neo-Platonist readings of the Fathers. See *Analogical Identities*, 140, and also his discussion of Neo-Platonism in 9-64. Fascinatingly, John Henry Newman, in his famous *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (Shropshire: Cosmo Books, 2007), 90 calls the *via media*—the particularly Anglo-Catholic “middle” road between Catholicism and Protestantism—a “Monophysite” productive formula: it offers, to Newman, nothing but a compromise of Orthodoxy with the Arianism of the time. This “via media” seems to be formally identical with the analogy of being given by Milbank et al. On the topic of Monophysitism, Aaron Riches, *Ecce Homo: On the Divine Unity of Christ* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 8 explains that Monophysitism is the mistaken generation of a *tertium quid*, claiming that a true unity “is no longer quite *verus Deus* or *verus homo*, but a blending into something else.” Later, on 29f. he adds that it is a strange mereological composite, which, on 33, Riches explicitly bases on Cunningham's *Genealogy of Nihilism*. Cunningham's reading will be disputed in Chapter 1, an argument that, if successful, casts a shadow on the Christological accounts shared by Riches, Milbank, and others.

⁸³ Loudovikos, *Analogical Identities*, 87 explains that cashing out hypostasis in terms of image itself, as if this image is ahistorical, impossibly suggests that “the human nature of Christ existed in the Logos from the beginning...” Milbank's *de facto* rejection of Chalcedon—dealt with at the end of Chapter 2 below—confirms this reading.

⁸⁴ Christos Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, trans. Normal Russell (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007), 35.

⁸⁵ Davydov, “Reception of Analogy of Being in Contemporary Eastern Orthodox Theology,” in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, Vol. 56, No. 3, Fall 2017, 295. Of the figures surveyed here, it is only David Bentley Hart that endorses analogy.

⁸⁶ Pabst, *Metaphysics*, 256.

⁸⁷ Loudovikos, “Appendix 3,” in *Analogical Identities*, 352ff. See Note 50 for a contextual reference.

⁸⁸ Loudovikos, *Analogical Identities*, 170.

⁸⁹ Loudovikos, *Analogical Identities*, 185.

⁹⁰ Loudovikos, *Analogical Identities*, 82.

⁹¹ Wynand de Beer, *From Logos to Bios: Evolutionary Theory in Light of Plato, Aristotle & Neoplatonism* (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2018), 142f. cites Yannaras' use of a Neo-Platonist ontology in his writings on the natural world. The point here is that Yannaras simply applies analogy to hypostasis and not nature.

⁹² Loudovikos, *Analogical Identities*, 171 explains that the “hypostatic nature” is the new concept the Church Fathers reveal in the history of ideas. This is not disputed in this study here; rather I attempt to limit the ontological scope of Loudovikos' analysis to the boundaries of Chalcedon, which seem to be stricter than what Loudovikos suggests.

⁹³ Hierotheos Vlachos, *Empirical Dogmatics of the Orthodox Catholic Church: According to the Spoken Teaching of Father John Romanides* (Yonkers: SVS Press, 2011), 2:88. Romanides is criticized by a number of aforementioned authors. Loudovikos says that Romanides' theology “has its undoubted value” but is affected by traces of American pragmatism and psychoanalysis: with Romanides, “eschatology becomes a therapeutic, supernatural healing which... interprets eschatology as an existential realization of the person, which underplays history and the continual eschatological process.” See *Analogical Identities*, 82. And David Bentley Hart, in a more bitter affectation, says that Romanides has an extremely impoverished view of “the West,” St. Augustine in particular: Romanides “has produced expositions of the thought of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas that are almost miraculously devoid of one single correct statement...” See Hart, “The Myth of Schism,” in *Clarion Journal of Religion, Peace & Justice*, July 13, 2014. Accessed Sept. 23, 2020, https://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2014/06/the-myth-of-schism-david-bentley-hart.html. A tentative rejoinder to these claims is coming momentarily in the main text.

⁹⁴ Romanides, *Patristic Theology* (Crete: Uncut Mountain Press, 2008), 175. Though, see Note 101 for Romanides' clarification of his use of participation.

⁹⁵ Romanides, *Patristic Theology*, 144.

⁹⁶ The argument given for this by Romanides, through his interpreter Metropolitan of Nafpaktos, Hierotheos Vlachos, is complex. The central ontological posit, argued over in the First Ecumenical Council, is that *homoiousios* (ὁμοιούσιος) and *homoousios* (ὁμοούσιος) have reciprocal rather than oppositional meanings. Normally, these are pinned against one another, that the *homoousians* hold the identity of Christ's nature with God's nature, and that, over against this, the *homoiousians* assert merely the similar natures, allegedly securing the possibility of, in Arian fashion, calling Christ a creature. Instead, Romanides argues, the “*homoiousians*” are not semi-Arians but “the fanatical wing of the Orthodox, who said that we cannot speak about God's essence, because the essence of God is nameless, incommunicable ad so on. We can only speak about the Persons, the hypostases. According to them, essence and hypostasis are the same thing.” *Homoousios* is therefore not “identical in essence (*tautoousios*)” but

rather indicates the likeness of God's essence is shared only "within" God. *Homoousios* is "co-essential," and therefore means what *homoiousios* means. If it is true that "this is the significance of *homoiousios*, then the issue is not what contemporary theologians suppose. What [then] is meant by 'like the Father in every respect'? It means that there is no likeness at all between created things and uncreated God. As the Word is like the Father in every respect, He cannot be created." See Vlachos, *Empirical Dogmatics*, 2:83ff. See also Romanides, *Patristic Theology*, 81.

⁹⁷ Romanides, *Patristic Theology*, 127.

⁹⁸ Particularly not in Romanides' insistence that Neo-Platonic theurgy is "demonic." See *Patristic Theology*, 70.

⁹⁹ Lacan, in *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book IX* (New York: WW Norton, 1998), 29, explains that "The gap of the unconscious... does not lend itself to ontology." This does not mean—by any stretch of the imagination—that Lacan has anything like Orthodox synergy in mind; it only means that this notion of pre-ontology is prevalent in literature which take the ontological question seriously when compared to the anti-metaphysical school to which Caputo belongs. Marcus Pound has connected Lacan's schema—a topic of the next chapter—subject to a "Kierkegaardian intervention on Lacan." See his *Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma* (London: SCM-Canterbury Press, 2007), 18, 58ff., 101ff., 137. On 111ff., Pound explains that Lacan's Imaginary-Symbolic-Real triad is anticipated in Kierkegaard. Pound continues: "Christianity is the paradoxical set of exceptions. In terms of Žižek, one could say that for Kierkegaard, Christianity corresponds to the feminine logic of the *not-All*." See Pound, *Žižek*, 35f. Žižek see the logic of "non-All," to which I will get to in a later chapter, as common to Hegel and to Lacan. See Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2013), 507-556 for a lengthy discussion of Lacan's extension of Hegel.

Paul Tyson has explained that Kierkegaard expresses this logic of "exception" in therapeutic terms: "To Kierkegaard, everything else in life is a derivative function of the sickness or health of the relation of each individual to their first object of worship." See Tyson, *Kierkegaard's Theological Sociology: Prophetic Fire for the Present Age* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2019), 18. Though Tyson is less willing, *pace* Pound, to connect Kierkegaard with the speculative philosophy of Lacan: "To Kierkegaard, Feuerbach does the Christian world the great service of making it crystal clear how preposterous it is to attempt to be a Christian and also pursue scientific biblicism and Hegelian speculative philosophy." See *Kierkegaard's Theological Sociology*, 9. In any case, I do not mean to suggest any of this to have direct bearing on the pre-ontology claim in the main text above. I would agree with Leo Stan, "Chrysostom: Between the Hermitage and the City," in *Kierkegaard and the Patristic and Medieval Traditions*, ed. Jon Stewart (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 47, when he claims that "John Chrysostom is a telling example which shows that the danish thinker is, theologically, much closer to the Western (i.e., Protestant) Christianity than its oriental version."

¹⁰⁰ Šijaković, "The Problem-Beam of the Metaphysics of Light" in *The Presence of Transcendence: Essays on Facing the Other through Holiness, History, and Text*, trans. Predrag Čičovački, (Alhambra: Sebastian Press Publishing House, 2015), 257. In this Šijaković follows the more modest claim of analogy, that "Metaphors create systems of correspondence." For this citation, see Ward, *Barth, Derrida, and the Language of Theology*, 212 Note 6.

¹⁰¹ Šijaković, "Problem-Beam," 258.

¹⁰² It is here, incidentally, where Chrysostom's formulation of the creature as God's "building" can be read as containing the Orthodox relationship between person and nature: it is the human nature as "stuff," as substance, which *earns* its shining with the reflected light of the divine; these are and remain "parallel" mysteries. Romanides explains that this is not a personalism of the kind objected to by Loudovikos and Pabst: "for the Patristic tradition, God is not a personal God. In fact, God is not even God. God does not correspond to anything that we can conceive or would be able to conceive. The relationship between God and man [therefore] is not a personal relationship..." See *Patristic Theology*, 139f. Later on 166f. Romanides clarifies that both the terms "person" and "nature" equally "do not bear any similarity whatsoever with any kind of [thing: essence or energy]... known in this world."

¹⁰³ For an account of mysticism in the Orthodox tradition, see Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). This mystical reading of theology is necessary, on the Orthodox picture: "All theology must be mystical—something based, as St. Symeon the New Theologian insisted, upon prayer and personal experience: otherwise it becomes an arid intellectual exercise." See Ware, "Christian Theology in the East, 600-1453," 186.

¹⁰⁴ Hierotheos Vlachos reports that "Metaphysics may be true without having any success." See Vlachos, *Empirical Dogmatics*, 1:119. There is a touch of the argument of the famous "Twin Earth" thought experiment by Hilary Putnam, "The Meaning of 'Meaning,'" *Minnesota studies in the philosophy of science* 7, (1975): 139ff. Putnam asks us to envision a substance that in all respects is identical to water only with a chemical composition of XYZ instead of H₂O. Lloyd Gerson would object to this modal analysis, citing the Platonic distinction between epistemic and non-epistemic perception, the former which reveals ontological structure and the latter which does not. Putnam,

Gerson might complain, is stuck in the non-epistemic territory, which would impossibly suggest that the water we interact with in the “real” Earth is not H₂O—that is, does not have an ontological structure which necessitates a chemical composition of just that kind. This should not be an impediment to my position. Gerson’s analysis can be adopted without implying the analogy of being: the ontological structure embedded in certain forms of perception would (vertically) analogically participate with the human nature of God, and not the divine nature. Note 19 above covers some relevant citations on the matter.

CHAPTER 1: Reconstructions of Theoretical Systematics

The purpose of this chapter is to trace the ontological territories particular to John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek as a launch pad for a critical appraisal of both positions in Chapter 2. Once again, both ontological systems will be positioned relative to the synergistic ontology outlined in the Prelude above. The main goals of Chapter 1 here are threefold. The first is to bifurcate the ontological territories using a schema peculiar to Žižek. The point of this is to provide a satellite image of the debate in a way which is both rhetorically effective and, with some latitude, relatively innocuous; that is to say, the contention will be that Milbank's system will not be overly burdened by the Žižekian framework. A stronger reason for this will be revealed here as well: Milbank's own bifurcation of the debate, and his positioning of Žižek relative to that schema, is deeply flawed when pinned against Žižek's conceptual system.¹ This is to say that Milbank gets Žižek more wrong than Žižek gets Milbank; though keeping both inconsistencies in the open will be attempted throughout. Comparatively, Žižek's conceptual cartography, flawed as it will openly be claimed to be, is to be endorsed *only* on the grounds that, for the purposes of this project, Žižek's reveals one single detail in the ontological debate with Milbank which Milbank himself—given his systematic presentation of ontology—seems not to be able to account for.² For now some patience and good humor will be required to allow the presentation to take a form tentatively more favorable to Žižek.

The second and third goals of this chapter will be to lay out an account of the ontologies occupied in the *Monstrosity* debate, Žižek's and then Milbank's, respectively. The strategy here will be to first identify the points of overlap between their respective systems, then to proceed into a detailed description of the divergence afterward. For these descriptions, the contents of the Prelude above will not play any role by way of contextualization, other than by way of anticipation

for the greater role it will play in the critiques in Chapter 2 and the imaginative constructions in Chapter 3. We will turn immediately to Žižek's cartography in what follows.

Žižek, alluding to a 19th-c researcher's account, asks us to imagine a village where the inhabiting tribe is pressed by a visiting anthropologist into depicting how they internally divide themselves into social groups. In response, a cleavage between two major internal divisions is made apparent, distinguished by the form of symbolization each gives of their position in the village relative to the other:

Both perceive the village as a circle; but for one sub-group, there is within this circle another circle of central houses, so that we have two concentric circles, while for the other sub-group, the circle is split into two by a clear dividing line. In other words, a member of the first sub-group (let us call it "conservative-corporatist") perceives the ground-plan of the village as a ring of houses more or less symmetrically disposed around the central temple, whereas a member of the second ("revolutionary-antagonistic") sub-group perceives his/her village as two distinct heaps of houses separated by an invisible frontier...³

What is to be picked up on here is the geometry of the divisions: one group relies on the trope of the *circle* (the "conservative-corporatist" group) to hierarchically organize the social cleavages according to the image of concentric rings whose perimeters represent the borders of in-group and out-ground identity; while the other group relies on the trope of the *line* (the "revolutionary-antagonistic" group) to place a "cut" at the center of the village territory, dividing the groups that way.

Philosopher and literary critic Peter Sloterdijk asks us to envision a schema of the sort Žižek has in mind through the lens of a genus of reified metaphor he calls "onto-semiology,"⁴ meant as a way of connecting the history of ontology in terms of what Heidegger called ontotheology: the wager that "the One Being is the epitome of wealth."⁵ Sloterdijk calls onto-semiology a form of "round reason," or what he thinks of as the tendency to construct "the massive globes that present mortals with their comforting roundness [which] have demanded that whatever does not fit into the smooth curvature of the whole should be subordinated to them..."⁶ Following

Bruno Latour,⁷ Sloterdijk seeks an anthropology of philosophical thought, and locates the circle as the dominating metaphor of human artifice.⁸ Sloterdijk sees “positive” and “negative” versions of round reason:

The formula for positive onto-semiology is that if being is the sender, it remains present in the representatives’ messages. (Conversely, the same applies in the negative: if there is no full sender, there can be no full presence in the representative.)⁹

This imagery mirrors Žižek’s report on the two subgroups in the tribe: both envision the village circumscribed in a circle—“round reason”—yet divided in opposing ways. The “positive” partitioning, or the conservative-corporatist group, express the geometry of thought as a circle. To get a feel for what this means it is helpful to picture the old geocentric star-maps, radiating out from the earth into the concentric celestial spheres until the ultimate encasing orb is reached. Being, in this cosmic map, “is either ‘in God’ or ‘in the world,’ possibly both at once. *Tell me what you are immersed in, and I will tell you what you are.*”¹⁰ Sloterdijk sees this circularity as the watermark of correct thought:

Good circular infinity demands well-defined morphological boundaries, while a bad linear infinity would lose itself in the boundless, formless and baseless—Hegel would still use this distinction to support his defense of the all-grasping circle of the spirit (and *eo ipso* rationalize his aversion to everything unconnected, open and fragmentary).¹¹

The watermark of the circle is meant to do the artifactual work of system construction, on Sloterdijk’s account: circles are the way humans allegedly think so as to find ways to fit into the world.¹² And indeed both of Žižek’s tribes start with a circle. Žižek’s “negative” partitioning—the “revolutionary-antagonistic” logic, or the “linear infinity” Sloterdijk ascribes to Hegel—in turn, is a logic of the dividing *line* which provides an outline, in Žižek’s words, of the “minimal coordinates of the subject-object axis, the truly primordial axis of evil: the red line which cuts through the darkness is the subject, and the body its object...”¹³ It is the object here which is “split” along a linear axis. Sloterdijk’s reasoning about what makes the line morphologically challenged

is not the point, here;¹⁴ the point rather is to appeal to the schema to help map the constellations which Milbank and Žižek's thought trace out.

The “onto-semiology” aspect of Sloterdijk's schema will be address in detail in a moment. This has to do with the “sender” moniker he attaches to it in the phrase “if being is the *sender*.”¹⁵ The point for now is that this schema is unintelligible apart from Žižek's. Žižek claims that the years 1781 (the publication of Kant's first *Critique*), and 1831, the death of Hegel, are such that “all of philosophy happened in these fifty years.”¹⁶ What he has in mind is the hunt for what Kant called the “Thing,” which Kant envisions as the inaccessible “breakthrough into independent ‘objective’ reality.”¹⁷ Calling this the “sublime,” Žižek explains that what Kant has in mind is the intractability of the “gap separating phenomenal, empirical objects of experience from the Thing-in-itself... that is, no empirical content, no representation... of it can adequately present... the Thing (the suprasensible Idea)...”¹⁸ Rather, Žižek notes, Hegel intervenes on Kant by *ontologizing* the impossibility of Kantian Thing: “the Sublime is an object in which we can experience this very impossibility, this permanent failure of the representation to reach after the Thing.”¹⁹ Never mind for the moment exactly what this is supposed to mean—Žižek only means that Hegel reads Kant's antinomies as ontological rather than epistemological limitations; i.e., as limitation in being rather than limitations in thought.²⁰

Rather Žižek's schema itself, that Kant and Hegel exhaust the ontological options in the history of philosophy, is for the moment what should be focused on. Notice how closely this conforms to Sloterdijk's positive and negative onto-semiology. The positive side is Kant's: the inaccessible, impossible Thing is envisioned as following the formula, “God is the infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.”²¹ The characteristically Kantian maneuver, in Žižek's description, is to relegate this “center” to an incommunicable

beyond. And the negative side of Sloterdijk's model, by contrast, is Hegel's: properly Hegelian "negation of negation" is, in Žižek's words, "the shift from the *distortion of a notion* to a *distortion constitutive of this notion...*"²² In this "double" negation, "the *level* shifts: first negation directly changes the content within the same horizon, while the second negation of negation, 'nothing really changes,' the horizon is simply turned around, so that 'the same' content appears as its opposite."²³ This is what Žižek means about the ontologizing of the Kantian Thing: the impossible and the real coincide in the Hegelian negation of negation. In Jacques Lacan's words, that which is "impossible is not necessarily the contrary of the possible," but rather, "since the opposite of the possible is certainly the real, we would be led to define the real as impossible."²⁴

The reason Sloterdijk's onto-semiological model is used here rather than Cunningham's ontotheological/meontotheological one²⁵ for understanding the respective positions in the *Monstrosity* dispute is that Sloterdijk's is able to pick up on exactly one feature Cunningham's does not. What this is will have to wait a moment. What is seen in Cunningham's schema, of what he calls ontotheology and meontotheology, revolves around the following question: whether, in Jean Baudrillard's terms, a sign can "refer to the depth of meaning, [whether] a sign could *exchange* for meaning and something could guarantee this exchange—God, of course."²⁶ The ontotheological tradition says "yes," the sign itself exchanges for meaning. Read ontologically, this is the thesis that being is "immediate" in thought. The meontotheological tradition in turn says "no," the sign does not exchange for anything but another sign and being is indefinitely deferred in its mediations in thought. Cunningham's point is that "both traditions are nihilistic"²⁷ in that: the ontotheological simply assumes being—that is, it reads the copula, such as the one in the formula "S is P" as valid *simpliciter* without accounting for how the "is" of being²⁸ should be read into it; and that the meontotheological simply holds that such an "is" of being is impossible, and

that *nothing* can do all the work being can without needing to “be.” Therefore both traditions, in Cunningham’s terms, are “thoughtless” in that they either assume the presence of being in language (ontotheology) or else cash out being in terms which “rest upon its own absence” (meontotheology).²⁹ The meontotheological “absence” Cunningham has in mind is very precise: “If nihilism is the case then it does not lack anything, or more accurately, it does not ‘lack in lacking’... Accompanying any radical absence is an absence of absence, and so to attribute a negativity to nihilism is one-sided.”³⁰ Meontotheology is, Cunningham continues in the same place, a “plenitude” rather anything which could be found wanting: the meontotheological maneuver is precisely that what is missing in nihilism is wanting itself.

What is importantly held in Cunningham’s characterization of meontotheology in plenitudinous terms, as a “lack of a lack of,” is that this move allegedly allows for the proliferation of “somethings” from the nothing in a kind of “creation from no-one.”³¹ Yet this characterization does not adequately capture the relation that Žižek has in mind, particularly in his use of the Lacanian triad Imaginary-Symbolic-Real. It may be easiest to see the differences here in topographical terms: the Imaginary is the illusory impression of the “fullness” or completion of an image, like a painting, the entirety of which is on its surface; the Symbolic is the discursive articulation of the Imaginary in such a way that breaks up the completeness of its presentation—the image is “all there” but what can be said of it always escapes this boundary, that there is always more discourse but not more picture; and the Real then can be glimpsed through select points which necessitate stepping outside of what can be said of something to that something of which it is said.³²

By way of Google Maps illustration of a nostalgic user looking up a childhood town: the Imaginary is the user’s mental image of the town, the alleyways, shops, intersections which

provided the setting of cherished memories; the Symbolic is the Google Map interface itself, with the focus on the antinomies of its presentation—for example, the kitchen of the childhood home is missing from the street view angle looking right at it; and the Real is the “antinomy” of the map writ large—for example, in revisiting those same places scoped out in Google, the user finds that neither the memory nor the map “sit right,” that this cannot really be the place they grew up, it looks so different, etc. In the following section this will be more much more exact; right now what is to be noticed is that there is an incongruity with Cunningham’s characterization of meontotheology vis-à-vis the Lacanian triad: Cunningham, to return to a phrase cited a moment ago, envisions meontotheology as a kind of creation out of nothing, as a nothing which creates somethings out of itself. This suggests a movement from the Symbolic to the Real in a Lacanian “transference,” which can be approximated as a kind of filtering in of the things beyond the text into the text itself.³³ Cunningham intends this to be a parody of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, moving in the direction from God (Real) to world (Symbolic).³⁴

Cunningham’s intention is to show how meontotheology as “lack of a lack of” something (structure, meaning, truth, being, God, what have you) entails the superabundance of this “missing” element precisely in that it is *not even* missing: the very paucity of that element is itself excluded from the space of nothingness such that this state “simulates” the richness of what would be element’s ontological plenitude had it not been missing. It means to show how the Lacanian “Real” functions as a “completed,” pleonastic, ersatz transcendence as a stand-in for the God who creates *ex nihilo*. Yet what Cunningham achieves is markedly different: his picture of meontotheology in fact echoes what Jean Baudrillard has called “seduction,” the very *opposite* of the psychoanalytic motion from the Symbolic to the Real. Seduction is “that which extracts meaning from discourse and detracts it from the truth,”³⁵ meaning that the truth, what Lacan and

Baudrillard agree is the province of the Real, is simply eliminated in favor of a counterfeit “truth” at the level of the image.³⁶ This is a notion suggesting the move not from the Symbolic to the Real but from the Symbolic *back to the Imaginary*. Baudrillard makes this explicit. Seduction is the solidification of a Symbolic system into its own metonymic completion: a discourse “must struggle not so much against the secrets of the unconscious as against the superficial abyss of its own appearance.”³⁷ What appears as the “proper” Lacanian move, one Žižek eagerly seeks to preserve, of passing from the Symbolic directly into the Real (the “secrets of the unconscious”) through the sites of its internal inconsistencies is really—so Baudrillard argues—a peculiarly psychoanalytical “temptation” to “lose itself in its own image at the risk of losing all meaning.”³⁸

The upshot of Baudrillard’s complaint, if we are to follow him on this point, is that the Real never factors into the Symbolic/Imaginary ordered pair; every formalization of the Imaginary by way of the Symbolic is placed back into the Imaginary itself. Frederick Jameson has illustrated this by way of the painting genre of photorealism: what initially appears as a “realist” activity of so faithfully transcribing an object onto canvas that the difference between the painting and the photograph of that object are indistinguishable—and the results often are uncanny—the process really achieves the exact opposite. In rendering the painting so realistic, the photorealist artist does not approximate the object depicted but the *photograph* depicting the object, which is itself, crucially, an interpretive curtain which requires a mysterious (correspondentist) interpretation to claim that this is how that object “really is.”³⁹ The point here is not that “realism” or “objective reality” is anything which can replace or even approximate the Real,⁴⁰ but rather that formalization of the image in what Lacan calls the Symbol itself only ever constitutes a new set of paintings, that is, images, which are then “plugged” back into the imagistic matrix out of which the formalization had been made.

Cunningham's analysis strikingly fits Baudrillard's, and so Baudrillard's mistake on this point is also his. Markus Gabriel has illustrated this reasoning with reference to René Magritte's (in)famous feature, "The Treachery of Images," a realistic depiction of a tobacco pipe with cursive words underneath reading (in translation), "This is not a pipe."⁴¹ Most audiences are confused by the image, Gabriel notes, because the very resources by which they "read" the picture of the pipe as a *picture* of a pipe—that is, as a depiction of what would be a pipe if only it were "real"—with these same resources they fail to read the picture of the sentence as a *picture* of that sentence, as though what is given in the painting is the "real" sentence itself. The familiar shock of Magritte's painting is the incommensurability between these two judgements, simultaneously and impulsively proffered by the viewer. Thus, Gabriel notes, the "very reasons for believing that the mere drawing of a pipe is not a pipe should lead also the believing that the mere drawing of what looks like words is not a sentence." That is, the picture is not "really" telling the audience what is depicted is not a pipe any more than it is suggesting that the figure is "really" a pipe. The reason this exposes Cunningham's "seductive" misreading of Lacan is that, as with Baudrillard's use of seduction, *Cunningham reads the Imaginary into the Symbolic*, that is, confuses the symbol with its image, its painting. The nothing as "lack of the lack of" something is taken by Cunningham to be an ersatz plenitude, a counterfeit of all there could be, when in fact it is no more than the "drawing" of such a counterfeit. Yet it is Lacan's point, as well as Žižek's, *not* to read the Symbolic as an image but to read in it its own impasse, its own inherent self-limitation.⁴² The Imaginary is precisely that which cannot in principle expose this; that is why the Symbolic as symbol must transition, if interpreted correctly, direction into the Real and not "fall" back into its own image. And contra Baudrillard and Cunningham, the Lacanian triplet exposes the real lack: not in lack itself but in the symbolization capable of "filling" the lack.⁴³

Yet Sloterdijk's dichotomy sheds light on something that the (me)ontotheological question does not: if the sender (source) of being is not separable from what is sent (being), then the (me)ontotheological traditions err in leaving out an important ontological consideration in ignoring the status of the sender once the "package" has already been put into transit. It is no wonder then that Cunningham sees the need to re-insert the sender into the message in his repudiation of the (me)ontotheological traditions: the re-inscription of God as radiating source refractively present in the gifts of his sending breaks apart the (me)ontotheological logic whereby some measure of the autonomy of the immanent is meant to be held secure and thus in the "wheelhouse" of a necessarily resultant nihilism.⁴⁴ The logical steps by which nihilism is reached in both ontotheology and meontotheology have been touched on above but cannot be cashed out in too much more detail. But the idea is that either being is or is not present in thought: if it is, then being is presupposed as the basis of thought and so serves as its own ground, which is aporetic and therefore contradictory; if it is not, then being is taken as always absent from thought in which case to think it itself thoughtless activity—again aporetic and contradictory.⁴⁵ The point of focus here is rather that Cunningham resolves the computational standoff producing nihilism at the level of (me)ontotheology with an appeal to a positive onto-semiology, shifting the ontological debate there.

Yet Cunningham—and Milbank et al.—provide only one possible "solution" to this set of onto-semiological problems. They give the positive onto-semiological rendition, simplified in the following series: place Being in the "beyond" as "sender"; include this Being in what is sent; and so disrupt the nihilist logic whereby "nothing is taken *as* something."⁴⁶ This should recall the three levels of relation attributed to Aquinas above. Still there remains the negative onto-semiological option, and this is the one Žižek offers: if the Real is the Void as such, and the immanent the site

of the “cut” which opens to it, the site of its “transference,” then, precisely, the sender of being is *not* present in the representative.⁴⁷ The validity of this hypothesis as an ontological realism (as opposed to nihilism—this point will be discussed in the following section) seems obvious once it is brought to the forefront: if the sender is the Void, and the sender cannot be included in the delivery of the ontological product, then it will straightforwardly be absent from what is delivered. The commitment here is to the notion that the Void is the “sender” of being, so that, paradoxically, its *absence* in the message entails the existence of the things “sent.” The point here is not to claim that Žižek’s system is valid because it escapes Cunningham’s criticism, but only that Žižek’s system is not invalidated on the me/ontotheological schematic. But since that is what Cunningham, and Milbank along with him, bank on, another critique ought to be forthcoming. And such an attempt will be made in Chapters 2 and 3 below, from the standpoint of Orthodox synergy.

It will be openly claimed here that Milbank cannot be fully accounted for in the onto-semiological register in which the *Monstrosity* debate is cashed out through here. These reflections on onto-semiology should be interpreted as nothing more than a rhetorical gloss; the intention of introducing them is meant as a platform for identifying the *kind* of ontological dispute Milbank and Žižek are having in *Monstrosity*. It ought to be obvious that the metaxological, the analogical middle, cuts through the Kant/Hegel axis framing Sloterdijk and Žižek’s taxonomies. One conspicuously missing figure in their proposed bifurcation is that of Johann Georg Hamann, whom John Betz cites as Kant’s non-Kantian, non-Hegelian whistleblower: “the chief problem with Kant’s philosophy [according to Hamann] is a failure seriously to consider the ways in which reason is always already affected by the *impure* historical and cultural operations of language...”⁴⁸ This “post-secular” approach is meant to counter the dominant Kantian thread characterizing philosophy as such, in Žižek’s terms: everything happens, so to speak, within Kant—even Hegel;

yet Hamann, in Betz's characterization, does not operate within Kant. Betz writes that Hamann claims that Kant, in his modesty, covers up the "*pudenda* of 'pure reason,'" those "dark, shameful parts, i.e., the unacknowledged dependence upon tradition, which Kant has covered up." The *pudenda* are specifically "the paralogisms and antinomies, i.e., the inveterate and seemingly insuperable self-contradictions to which reason is prone and which Kant treats in his transcendental dialectic." Therefore, Betz continues of Hamann, all dialectic has a *hamartiological* problem: "it is bound up with the fact of reason's fallenness."⁴⁹ The properly hamartiological point at stake here is that, for Hamann, "there is no such thing as a human *logos* that is free from *mythos*..."⁵⁰ And it is this *mythos* which "fissions" at the very core of dialectic/reason, splitting the dialectical atoms and, in so doing, releasing a stupendous reservoir of energy which in turn splits apart further dialectical units, engulfing reason in its nuclear glow. And it is this fission, this mythological infusion into reason, which is at times deeply ambiguous, bound up in what Christians call sin.

Žižek anticipates this response: the so-called post-secular is merely, he writes, the most recent "rise of irrational religious orientations within philosophy," and "is not a regression into premodern times, but a necessary outcome of Western critical reason." In this sense, Žižek writes, it is a fundamentally Kantian school: it confuses the "rejection of philosophical dogmatism... with the rejection of all philosophical (rational, conceptual) reference to the Absolute, as if the Absolute and radical contingency were incompatible."⁵¹ Yet as Milbank has aptly countered, the transmission of this Absolute through the contingent operations of a "developing tradition" simply "cannot be presented as a universal transcendental claim about how transmission works, but only as a claim of faith and experience that that is how *this* particular tradition works, and that this is the clue to how things really are."⁵² If this is the case the particular traditions simply cannot be grouped into "pure," unsurpassable horizons of thought and being as Žižek needs them to be, and

as Gary Dorrien confirms: “Hamann wrote very little and was forgotten in the triumph of Hegelianism...”⁵³ The notion here is that Hamann is ignorable precisely to the degree that he failed to be loud enough; that the post-secular thinkers are merely swallowed up in the ocean of Kant/Hegel that the droplets of their distinctive dyes simply diminishes through excessive diffusion. This topic must be left off hereafter in this study; the sympathies from a neutral observer however ought to lean to the post-secular insofar as its outlook truly lies outside of the Kant-Hegel axis Žižek sees as inescapable, whether the post-secular is a promising tradition or not.⁵⁴ The worry is that Žižek confuses non-rationality for *irrationality* in summarizing the problem of sin for reason, but this will have to wait until the end of the first section in Chapter 2 below.

Let us move into the two parts of this chapter then, with an outline of the ontological systematics of Žižek and then Milbank, respectively.⁵⁵

Never Quite Everything: Žižek and the dialectical line

This section will stay quite close to the imagery used to frame Žižek thus far, that of ontological incompleteness in the Google Maps metaphor and in the linear trope for cashing out this incompleteness. In this, Žižek is constantly trying to approach, as with a tangent, the ontological, “pre-transcendental gap/ rupture” Lacan formulated as *drive*.⁵⁶ The Hegelian import of what Žižek readily calls a “weird” process mirrors the maneuver of turning Kant against Kant, of ascribing to the antimonies in structural, ontological terms. The drive is not an active process of striving for what can never be attained, as with billionaire who constantly schemes for even more income; it is not a “quest for the lost object.” Rather, Žižek continues, the drive is meant to “*directly to enact the ‘loss’—the gap, cut, distance—itself.*”⁵⁷ This “cut” is the enactment of the linear trope, in Sloterdijk’s terms, that through which being’s incompleteness is assured. The “cut” imagery goes

deeper still, since in Lacan's formulation this gap/cut is "the return by means of signifying substitution of that which is at the end of the drive in the form of an aim..."⁵⁸ That "end of the drive," its goal, is exactly what is sacrificed in the drive, the "pound of flesh" that must be paid as "the good that one pays for the satisfaction of one's desire."⁵⁹

Luis Buñuel's postwar feature, *The Exterminating Angel*, succinctly illustrates the Lacanian therapeutic program and the traumatic trappings of the drive: a bourgeois house party turns into an ordeal when the guests, and the host alike, find themselves unable to leave the mansion's ballroom in the early hours of the morning when the party is over. They remain in that room for days, unable to cross the open, unobstructed threshold, during which the social relations between the acquaintances slowly break down. The "circling" around the room is the drive, whereby the guests almost mindlessly continue their daily activities, amidst growing concerns over hygiene, thirst, and hostile factions among the guests. The trap of the drive is depicted in the film as beginning with a kind of glitch in reality—what Žižek describes as the "loss"—when the scene depicting the host bringing the guests into the mansion is inexplicably repeated, happening twice in succession as though it had never happened in the first place. To the generations familiar with video games, this scene recalls a glitch in the game's graphics, an impossible contortion of the depicted reality which signals to the player a breakdown in the internal rules of the pictorial frame. The guests, in the film, are finally able to leave the mansion only after a bizarre re-enactment of the original evening's goodbye rituals, which then snap them out of their stupor, allowing their exit. This final re-enactment is what Žižek means when he describes the direct enactment of the loss in the drive: the guests at the party are able to leave only once the original glitch has been replicated in a controlled, dramatic performance.

This study will not claim that this is an effective therapeutic program, though Loudovikos has suggested that psychoanalysis bears formal similarity to some branches of Orthodox therapeutics.⁶⁰ The properly ontological point under consideration, for the purposes of describing Žižek's structural systematic, is that a drive brings satisfaction not by delivering the thing desired, but by "turning failure into triumph—in it, the very failure to reach its goal, the repetition of this failure, the endless circulation around the object [of desire], generates a satisfaction of its aim."⁶¹ It is being's very incompleteness or "failure," for Žižek, that is what secures any account of being's failure correct as an ontological program. Adjusted to the Google Maps image, this would mean that the very limitation of the map, the unfinished nature of its depicted items, assures the accuracy of the depiction: should the map have been "finished," smoothed out, completed, it would have turned into a fictional topography, seduced—in Baudrillard's terms—into remaining merely a digital reproduction.

Of this picture there are a number of steps to cover, which will follow hereafter. The first is the need to spend a little time showing that Žižek's is properly a *realist* program, contrary to Milbank's own positioning of Žižek in contemporary ontology. The second is to take a short detour in the history of logic to help position Žižek and Milbank relative to the interwar mathematical incompleteness theorems. The third is meant to build on the first two, laying out in some detail Žižek's ontology of incompleteness using some special terminology unique to his examinations. This terminology is regrettably complex, but the work it does is to demonstrate in more detail the difference it bears from the meontotheological move of treating nothingness as though it were something, showing that negative onto-semiology instead is meant to be a non-nothing which delivers "more than something." We will take these steps in turn.

First, then, to the surprising claim of Žižek’s realism. The claim that there is a sense of ontological realism which is common to both Milbank and Žižek may be unexpected. Michael Hanby explains that realism is a specific interpretation of the gap between subject and object (word and thing, thought and being) in which the very character of the “real,” of the object, carries with it the watermarks of the subjectivity investigating it.⁶² Hanby’s contention is that the cosmos itself includes us (its investigators): “Cosmology and anthropology are always correlative,” and, more precisely, that the “challenge of cosmology is to give an account of the world so comprehensible as to include the possibility of its own truth, which means providing an ontological basis for the meaning in which it is necessarily understood.”⁶³ The heart of realism here is the notion that the human subject is not *necessary* for reality, in that it is not a producer of reality; and conversely that reality is not *sufficient* as a producer of human subjectivity.⁶⁴ Žižek’s proximity to this notion of realism may be surprising: the question “How does reality look without me independently of me?” is a naïve dead end and a pseudo-problem, relying as it does “on a violent abstraction from the very reality it attempts to grasp: ‘objective reality’ ... is a Real which cannot be experienced as reality.”⁶⁵ What Žižek has in mind is the notion that “dialectical materialism transposes back into nature not subjectivity as such but the very gap that separates subjectivity from objective reality.”⁶⁶ For Žižek, too, the Real retains the character of the investigating subject in that the Real is opened up with the breakdown of that subjectivity: that the real is a breakdown *in subjectivity* is the reason a bare objective reality without subject, in Žižek’s phrase, cannot be investigated at all.⁶⁷ The precise reasoning for this will have to wait until later in this section in what will be termed the non-All.

Milbank presents realism in remarkably similar terms. The properly realist position is one which, in Milbank’s words, “consciously imagined things” are taken as having an ontological

status commensurate with the artifactual and creative results of concrete human production. Put another way, what Milbank means is that elves (say, in Tolkien's formulation as aloof and battle-hardened warriors in *The Silmarillion*) or mountains of porridge (as Bruegel the Elder's *Land of Cockaigne* has it) or talking donkeys (of Biblical/Analytic philosophical fame) have an ontological status identical to computer viruses, mortar, or marble statues: "In order to be vulnerable to experience we have ourselves to inscribe new circles in the world; in order to let reality invade us we have to advance into that reality and slightly alter it."⁶⁸ For Milbank, the process of locating the investigating subjectivity in the reality investigated is front and center. And it is this, too, that we see with Žižek. To be sure, this does not imply anything like an ontological equivalence between the content of Milbank's system and that of Žižek's; the thesis that there may be incompatible realisms is not challenged with this suggestion. The implication is merely that there is a formally shared conceptual motivation for both projects in the *Monstrosity* debate, a sharing which will help plot both interlocutors' positions within the same logical matrix.⁶⁹ And this matrix is that made famous by Kurt Gödel.

Milbank and Žižek's realist interpretations of the subject-object relation can be staged as rival responses to the challenge posed by the ontological (rather than strictly logical) reading of Gödel's second incompleteness theorem.⁷⁰ The theorems pin consistency against completeness, where "consistency" is cashed out in terms of the coherence of formulae which appear in the symbolic structure of a network of rules. And where "completeness" in turn is cashed out in terms of correspondence: that everything that can be said in that system can be assigned a symbolic value in the schema. The second incompleteness theorem builds off the first, which demonstrates that any formal symbolic system with the expressive capability at least as sophisticated as arithmetic—even if it is assumed to be consistent—will necessarily be incomplete, that is, generate formulae

which cannot be shown to be true given the formulae and the rules of inference in the symbolic system itself. The consistency of such a formal system here would imply that the combinatorial capacity of a system's axioms and rules of inference do not generate a contradictory result at any stage of its successive application; yet this very consistency, in Heisenbergian fashion, disrupts the ability for the system to show all its theoretical statements to be true. This much is rather obvious, and the reason why the first incompleteness theorem is not considered a monumental discovery: all theoretical systems will rest on at least one "basic" statement implying, but not implied by, another of its discursive products. In comparison, more radically, the second theorem

proves the undecidability within P [such a symbolic system] of a formula expressing the "consistency" of P, thus showing that the "consistency" of P, if P is consistent, cannot be established by a "proof" within P, i.e. a "proof" starting with only the "axioms" of P and using only P's "rules of inference."

To continue this thought, no such purely formal system can be shown to be consistent (even if it is assumed to be), since any meta-language system which has the theorems of P as items in its object-language would be unable to internally prove its own consistency, *ad infinitum*.⁷¹

This selfsame dynamic is "ontologized" in both Milbank and Žižek. For Žižek, the impossibility of demonstrating a system's consistency with the conceptual resources available within the system itself implies, ontologically, that "the Real *is* nothing but an impasse of formalization," that reality is "'out there' *because* of the inconsistencies and gaps in the symbolic order. The Real is nothing but the non-All of formalization, not its external exception."⁷² This is an "incompleteness thesis"⁷³ which lays bare Žižek's notion of the *non-All*: if there is no reconciliation, no "Third" element to reconcile two others, then there is nothing within the immanent which guarantees that its parts are either consistent (able to combine in ways ensuring the construction of "completed" objects) or else complete (extant and locatable within some system requiring them to play certain constructive roles in completed object-formation). For Žižek, what

is to be taken from the second incompleteness theorem is that there cannot be a metasystematic assurance of ontological completeness of the immanent. Caputo's Google Maps image here should be recalled.

Milbank, for his part, does not reject this ontological incompleteness thesis but rather draws from it evidence for a transcendent Third capable of providing completeness to every ontological level. That no formal schema can demonstrate from within its resources its own completeness calls for the perpetual displacement of this demonstration to a meta-level of analysis. Milbank explains that, where Hegel and later Žižek make “the novel move of ontologizing the contradictory itself,” importantly, Eckhart, Cusanus, and others already did the same: “For this paradoxical, nondialectical logic, there is never any contradiction, conflict, or tension. The origin rather coincides with its opposite, which is that which the origin generates, while the reverse also applies.”⁷⁴ These coincidences take place at the highest meta-level. David Bentley Hart helps reveal what Milbank has in mind: “the world groundless in itself and so, in a manner of speaking, gilded the glory of the world with the additional aura of wonderful gratuity and fortuity...”⁷⁵ What is common between Žižek and Milbank vis-à-vis the incompleteness theorems is therefore the basic claim: there are gaps in the immanent; but, *if* they are to be filled, they must be filled by a Third capable of providing reconciliation of conflicts at ever-higher levels of meta-analysis.

Lorenz Puntel expresses Milbank's take on this as follows:

Philosophy relies on but cannot demonstrate that its own presuppositions and bases are “absolutely true.” Thus, we can say of the “absolutely comprehensive (i.e., complete) quantification of the standpoint articulated in the universalizability of the sentence “(It is the case that) ϕ .” This standpoint is objectively universal, but its universalizability cannot be fixated and is in this sense incomplete.⁷⁶

The following dispute concerning the incompleteness schema will be taken as the starting point for what follows in this chapter: is there or is there not a consistent meta-level we can “rely on”? It is Žižek's negative answer which is the subject of the rest of this section.

Žižek has a very particular presentation of the incompleteness he has in mind. This involves diving into some technical terminology, for the purpose of revisiting what has been argued at the beginning of this chapter: that Žižek’s system is not a meontotheology, which in Cunningham’s schema, is taken to be ontological cheating. Somewhat casually, by way of review, meontotheology involves replacing something with nothing, and then showing that nothing can do everything that something can. The point, to drive it home, is simply descriptive right now: nothing about Žižek’s system will be endorsed in what follows. Žižek describes his ontological system of incompleteness by citing the between οὐδέν (*ouden*) and μηδέν (*meden*)—in short, a pair which function as a disambiguation between “nothingness” and what Žižek terms “othingness”: “The ancient Greeks had two words for nothing, *meden* and *ouden*, which stand for two types of negation: *ouden* is a factual negation, something that is not but could have been; *meden* is, on the contrary, something that in principle cannot be.” *Ouden* is a “no-thing,” an absence within the domain of something; *meden* is an “othing”: it is “*a something but still within the domain of nothing...*”⁷⁷ Δεν (*den*) here, for Žižek, is meant to signify a bare negation prior to the proposed disambiguation.

For Žižek, this amounts to what he calls “denontology,” the notion that “If there is no One, just multiplications of multiplications, then the ultimate reality is the void itself; all determinate things ‘are and are not.’”⁷⁸ This notion will receive a critical appraisal in the next chapter; for now notice only that Žižek’s proposal is not a replacement of something by nothing, as Cunningham has complained, but a supplementation of something with nothing, nothing being taken as an *addition*. The crux of the dispute here is easy to see: the issue is not over how Žižek understands “nothing,” but what role this nothing plays in the theoretical nexus. Žižek envisions the gridwork of reality to consist of the ordered triple (Something, Nothing, *Den*), appearing on an internally

inconsistent coordinate lattice, like an Escher painting of a hand drawing itself. Žižek explains that denontology involves the view that “Something is more than Nothing, *den* is more than Something... and Nothing is more than *den* (which is ‘less than nothing’).”⁷⁹

Perhaps it is best to consider denontology as characterized by the literary device not of analogy but of *praecisio*:⁸⁰ a device whereby speech is to be understood as a direct and ultimately futile “filler” for silence itself, that limit case where silence is both the sense and the reference of speaking. William Empson has catalogued a number of employments of literary ambiguity, the notion “that there could be a puzzle as to what the author meant, in that alternative news might be taken without sheer misreading.”⁸¹ Žižek’s denontology corresponds to Empson’s “ambiguity of the seventh type,” that pluripotent meaning by which a full contradiction is employed to signal a complete “division in the author’s mind.”⁸² This contradiction is seen by Žižek as the ontological claim that, in Lacan’s words, “between cause and that which it effects, there is always something wrong.”⁸³ What is wrong, in Žižek’s reading, is that the causal nexus is itself incomplete, exhibiting the contradictions Empson implies present in the authorial mind. To rehash an argument made previously: to read Žižek’s incompleteness as though it is a meontotheological plenitude whereby nothing is given reigns as divine creator, only with a more ontologically modest investment—to recall Cunningham’s “nothing is, something must be”⁸⁴—is to read Žižek exactly backwards. Žižek is not performing the maneuver of “seduction” which, in Baudrillard’s terms, signals the swallowing up of all difference in a pleromatic Imaginary; rather Žižek is performing the properly Lacanian “transference” whereby the Symbolic, understood as formal schemas of the kind at interest in the incompleteness theorems, arrives at its point of inherent limitation and resists any meta-level reconciliation, and Third which can complete the limitations of the formal schema in question. This will be returned to in Chapter 2 below.

Milbank runs into trouble on this point, in that he cannot both hold Žižek to be “a relentlessly accurate interpreter” of Hegel⁸⁵ and at the same time endorse his own analysis of the Hegelian “myth of negation.”⁸⁶ This is because Milbank reads negation as seduction, that is, as culminating in a ersatz plenitude which is in fact reminiscent not of the Lacanian Real but of the Imaginary; and Žižek does not read negation this way. Milbank cannot, in other words, correctly hold that Hegel misconstrues infinitude by saying that “infinity is really nothing other than finitude itself taken as a present totality, as fully subsistent, and not dependent on anything else”⁸⁷ on the grounds that this reading of negation suggests the supremacy of what Hegel called the “bad infinity”—an infinity of endless, quasi-interpretive variations on a basic and already exhausted theme.⁸⁸ If Žižek reads the Hegelian bad infinity in terms of seduction,⁸⁹ then Milbank’s criticisms of Hegelian negation knock down a straw man. Specifically, Milbank misses what Žižek calls the “Prestige” of Hegelian negation.⁹⁰ If the “Pledge” is the initial assertion of the existence or nonexistence of a thing;⁹¹ and if the “Turn” is the “simple” negation, the logical maneuver which takes place when something is in the state of “simple existent self-reference,” in the process of unifying within a thing itself the principles by which it is differentiated from others;⁹² then the “Prestige” is the “double” negation (or “negation of negation”), where something “has entered into unity with its opposite...”⁹³ Žižek explains the Prestige in this way: in

the Hegelian “negation of negation,” the *level* shifts: first negation directly changes the content within the same horizon, while the second negation of negation, “nothing really changes,” the horizon is simply turned around, so that “the same” content appears as its opposite.⁹⁴

What this is implying is that the space between objects is etched into an object itself: the object in the double negation carries *within itself* the coordinate system mapping its relation to other objects. To illustrate what Žižek is after in his denontological schema, a visual schematic may be in order. The purpose of this detour may be apparent only by the end of this chapter; but for now, the present image of the Prestige of negation can profitably be cashed out in terms of the physics of black

holes.⁹⁵ Consider the familiar diagram of the gravitational pull on an object as it enters past the event horizon:

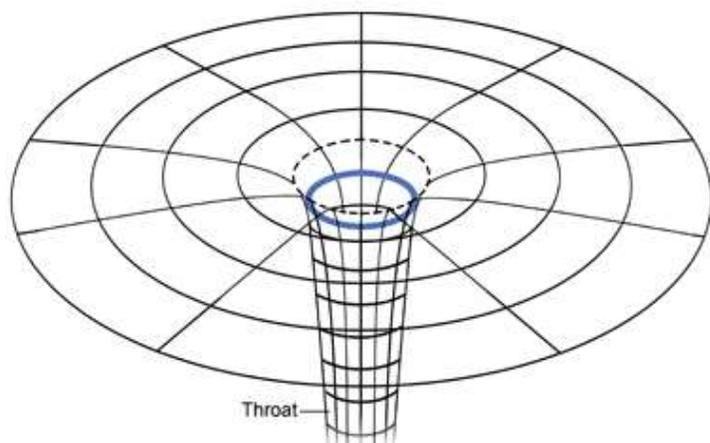


Figure 1: The perimeter of the funnel is the event horizon, the gravitational threshold of “no return.” The blue band represents an arbitrary latitude an object within the horizon can occupy, moving in the vertical direction downwards. Off diagram, at the bottom, would be the “singularity,” mentioned in a moment. As the object moves down the “throat,” its mass increases, and it becomes harder for it to move—that is, the more energy it will take to move it. At the singularity, all movement of the object becomes impossible.⁹⁶

The crux of the matter in a diagram such as this is that the farther an object descends in the pictorially vertical direction,⁹⁷ the more difficult it is for that object to move.⁹⁸ Eventually, the object at the terminal point in the “throat,” the singularity, would need infinite energy to be moved. In plain speech, this is to say that there is nothing that could be done to get that object from one spatial location to another, different location.

Žižek’s denontology involves a similar topography.⁹⁹ The perimeter of the event horizon would represent an assertion, or a positive claim about an object. The blue band would represent the assertion’s simple negation, a negative claim about what the object is not; the not-object.¹⁰⁰ The “throat” would represent the double negation, culminating in *The Prestige* as the “singularity” at the point infinitely far below the bottom border of the diagram. Just as an object at the singularity of a black hole is at the point at which movement is impossible, so too the object subjected to the double negation in the *Prestige* is at the point of ontological impossibility; at the singularity, no movement at all needs to be made to get from that object to another. This is why in the *Prestige*

“nothing really changes,” in Žižek’s terms: here there is no distance between an object and any other, no maneuver through which the difference needs to be bridged. *At the Prestige an object already is its other*. Contrary to Cunningham, the Prestige is not the point at which nothing simply substitutes for something, providing all that something can provide only “cheaper”; it is rather the point at which difference is *itself* an object. This is what Žižek means by *den*, a more-than-something but less-than-nothing sort of object, that which occupies the singularity in the descent of the double negation.¹⁰¹

Milbank’s ontological schema will be described next.

Theurgy as Inner Feminine: Milbank and the analogical sphere

What is important to get clear at the start of this section is the provisional nature of the description offered, as there is only passing textual evidence that Milbank uses the trope of the circle to cash out his ontology.¹⁰² The onto-semiological analogy therefore may seem to have scant application to Milbank, if Milbank is meant to be placed in the “x” position in the schema: Žižek is to negative onto-semiology as x is to positive onto-semiology. But, like any literary analogy, the validity of the comparison is dependent on the valuation proposed as the basis of that comparison. And, for Milbank, the positive (spherical) onto-semiology is meant only to be an adequate framework only for describing the form of Milbank’s ontological system; it is not adequate as the basis on which Milbank’s system can be criticized. This is why Milbank will be criticized on other grounds in the last portion of Chapter 2. The descriptive task here really is appropriately served by the spherical trope, especially in rhetorical contradistinction to Žižek: judged against the incompleteness theorems, Milbank’s drawing on a meta-level which guarantees the completeness of a formal symbolic system of the kind at interest really does resemble a circle—a circle of the kind the

villagers draw in Žižek’s report. This is the work the onto-semiological register is meant to do in this section. It must be reinforced for the final time that no criticism of positive onto-semiology has enough carry over to even begin to graze the side of Milbank’s ontological edifice: the spherical trope simply does not capture enough of the nuance of Milbank’s system to make such critical carry over possible.

With that out of the way, this section will continue with who goals in mind. The first is to describe Milbank’s ontology as the “sphere” of meta-systematic completion, culminating in the Third—the transcendent God—which Žižek resists. The second is to end with a diagrammatic presentation of the ontological territories involved in the *Monstrosity* debate, in hopes that the visual graphic might illustrate the formal similarities but profound constitutive differences in question in this chapter. On this score, the concept of literary ambiguity was employed in the last section to illustrate the onto-semiological relationship between author and text—or, in the ontological register, being and what Sloterdijk calls the “sender.” For Žižek the ambiguity of full contradiction in the authorial mind was likened to his denontological system: the simply is no meta-level reconciliation of incompleteness. Žižek opines, of such a meta-level, that “it is impossible to *occupy* its position.”¹⁰³ For Milbank, in turn, the literary ambiguity which corresponds to his position accepts contradiction at the level of authored text but seeks to reconcile these oppositions in a complex but noncontradictory authorial mind.

To see this, consider the incompleteness theorem challenge from above: what is sought after is a meta-level consistency which could guarantee completeness at a lower rung of the hierarchical symbolic system. For Milbank, the device used to appeal to such meta-level consistency is that of analogy, the literary device which “consists in the unity of its ἀνά and ἄνω: the ἄνω of the ever ‘above-and-beyond’ and yet—and therefore—the ἀνά of ‘inner order,’” in

Erich Przywara's formulation. What Przywara has in mind here is "ana-logy" as the theoretical analytics ("ology") as a twofold progression, both in the forward and in the upward direction. This should be applied to the object-level and meta-level of a symbolic formulation in Gödel's terms. At the object-level the metaphor of forward direction is employed with Przywara: *aná-logy* is meant to capture the sense of the onward "descent" of internal organization, the hierarchical organization of symbols within a sufficiently expressive formal system. And at the meta-level, the metaphor of upward movement is employed: *ãvω-logy* is the upward "ascent" implying rest on a summit.¹⁰⁴

In short, what controls the progression of this forward/upward movement for Przywara¹⁰⁵ is the immanent oscillation of essence (the "what" of a thing) and existence (the "that" of a thing) such that, within the immanent the two are not fully united; there is always a gap between the full arrival of either essence or existence at the object-level theorem. The way this is supposed to work is that, given the "what" of a thing, the more it is "eideticized" and so the more it loses its material substratum; but given the "that" of a thing, the more obvious it becomes that its identity cannot be found in its material basis but in the eidetic form in which it is presented in the mind.¹⁰⁶ For Przywara, the "fulfillment" of this mutually exclusive oscillation arrives in the transcendent identity of both essence and existence: the God who is the Being which is "beyond" this oscillatory play.

Analogy is therefore the ontological device providing a solution to what Empson calls an "ambiguity of the fourth type," roughly that pluripotentiality of meaning in which "alternative meanings combine to make clear a complicated state of mind in the author."¹⁰⁷ This implies that, for Milbank, analogy is the technique of linking object-level and meta-level rungs of the hierarchy of theorems, each rung of which is incomplete and so calls for a meta-level to provide the details

the object-level cannot do for itself. Crucially, this is supposed to be an *ad infinitum* process: analogy secures the ever-upward movement of this symbolic ascent. If “Christian metaphysics,” as Hart has movingly said, is the project whereby “God speaks God, and creation occurs within that speaking, as a rhetorical embellishment, a needless ornament,” and the world is “spoken,” such that “there is no reality or truth prior to language... and that, to borrow a phrase, *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*”¹⁰⁸—then the ambiguity in the text of the world is “cleared up,” combined and finally reconciled, in the purely consistent/complete authorial vision. The language of *metasystematicity* is therefore that which Milbank firmly has in mind: it is the metastatus of the consistent authorial mind which guarantees the completeness of the theoretical structural systematics, to use the hackneyed phrase, “all the way down.”

For Milbank’s ontology, Neo-Platonic theurgy is that which is expressed in this process of completing incomplete lower-level theorems by appealing to meta-level theorems taken to be consistent “all the way up.” This theurgy formally resembles a sphere: where Puntel says that “Analogy is the semantic... articulation of the ontological structure of Being as a whole,”¹⁰⁹ Sloterdijk in turn expresses this as the “positive” onto-semiotic gesture by which “if being is the sender, it remains present in the representatives’ messages.”¹¹⁰ This recalls the theurgic process employed by Milbank, through which the Neo-Platonic radiation of the “emanating” One donates being in the concentric spheres of God’s emanating “fallout zone.”¹¹¹ The aim of the analogical ontology employed by Milbank can be depicted as the drawing of a boundaryless all-encompassing spherical domain. To do so Milbank appropriates Žižek’s “feminine logic” of the “non-All,” the notion by which the antagonisms in the immanent entails a full contradiction in the constitutive order of the Real as such: the inconsistency of the symbol, in Lacan’s terms of the Symbolic, entails the Lacanian Real, the ontological incompleteness that is the impasse of formalization as

such. The move Milbank endorses is to transpose this “feminine logic” to the radical transcendent itself: “In a non-Žižekian sense, God himself is for Eckhart the ‘non-All.’ This explains the femininity of God which several modern Russian theologians have identified... as ‘Sophia.’”¹¹² Elsewhere Milbank expounds this notion: Sophia must be understood ontologically as “the ‘female’ birth of the Creation as non-God that is also the act of God, and therefore in some sense within God,” such that “sexual difference be validated as grounded in God (the relative ‘masculinity’ of the *Verbum*; the relative ‘femininity’ of the *Donum*).”¹¹³

This is to say that the “non-Žižekian” sense of the divine non-All is the notion that the Real is the paradoxical *consistency* of the divine authorial Mind who exemplifies radical *inconsistency* itself. This much can be concluded from Ferdinand Ulrich’s comments on metasytematicity: God as “superessence” internalizes all ontological difference, and so, in a sense, is the authorial Mind who is paradoxically consistent precisely in his inconsistency.¹¹⁴ Marcus Pound expands on this, saying that our predicament is precisely that “meaning” is not a solution but an oppressive crushing pressure, in agreement with Lacan’s feminine logic: “the aim is not to restore meaning as such, but the opposite: to show how meaning is always overdetermined, i.e., informed by a plurality of factors; and that it is meaning that subjugates us, not lack of it.”¹¹⁵ The ana-logical forward/upward implication of this is clear: there are too many variants, too many “textual layers,” such an overabundant ontological richness that leads to symbolic incompleteness cannot but take place. The key is to move beyond them to the musical harmonics of the divine conductor. Christianity, Pound says in the same place, “is the paradoxical set of exceptions.”

Something must be said of the paradox in question in the non-Žižekian non-All. What was said just now is that the upmost meta-level must be a kind of inconsistent consistency where all opposition, limitation, antagonism, incompleteness unites in a single transcendent identity. This

transcendent identity is cashed out by Milbank as Sophia, the non-All feminine essence of God. Marcus Pound explains that, where “Žižek consistently situates women on the side of the *real* and masculinity on the side of the symbolic,”¹¹⁶ Milbank situates this femininity as the fullness of God’s plenitude: as Pound says, “If one is left wanting in the face of a woman, it is not because she is lacking something; it is because her plenitude exposes the lack in man.”¹¹⁷ What this picture draws on is the doctrine of the classical transcendentalists: the “oceanic”¹¹⁸ coincidence of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty such that, in Adrian Pabst’s terms, “Philosophically, the logic of paradox concerns the realm of real relations and the transcendent good, which infuses all things with (a desire for) goodness in which all can share.” This implies, Pabst continues, a contradiction-free, coherent, and purely rational argumentation is set aside in “favor of paradox that infuses *logos* with *mythos*.”¹¹⁹ The femininity of God is thus a continuation of this non-All paradoxical logic of the classical transcendentalists, only now located in the radical transcendence of God. This is the summit of the metasystematic, paradoxical in/consistency: the divine authorial Mind (to use Empson’s terms) makes all object-level symbolic systems consistent *because* it is itself inconsistent; the overlapping transcendentalists ensure the full completeness of the theurgically participatory immanent. The dispute in *Monstrosity* therefore revolves around *where* to place the non-All in the Lacanian matrix: in the Symbolic, as Žižek does; or in the Real, as with Milbank.

Perhaps this disagreement between Milbank and Žižek can be unpacked visually. Consider the following schematic, which attempts to pictorially represent the formal similarity between the positions in question:

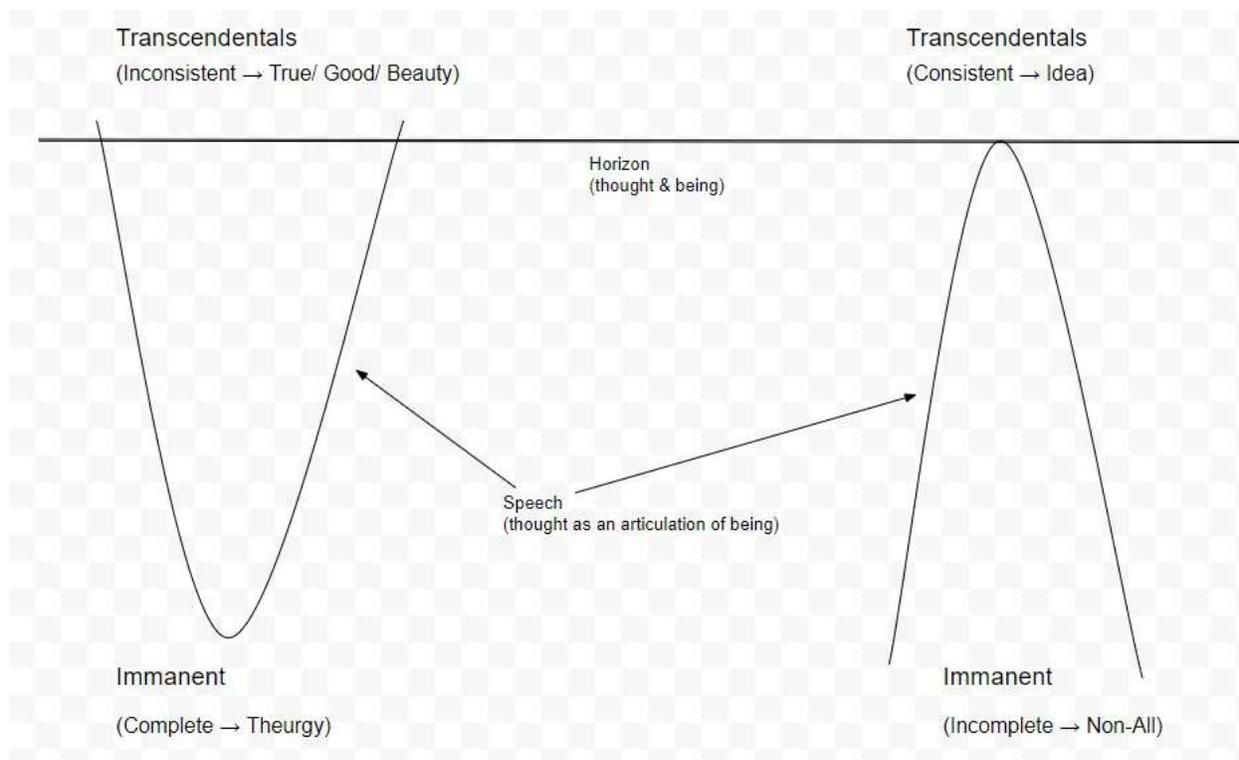


Figure 2: The left column is the schematic representation of Milbank’s theurgic Neo-Platonism, and the right Žižek’s Quantum Platonism (see Note 95 in this chapter). The bold horizontal bar at the top, labeled “horizon” is the threshold between immanent (Symbolic) and transcendent (Real). The parabolic borders in the bottom half (the immanent) represent any given symbolic system. Ascent along the y-axis represents ascent between object-level and meta-level symbolic systems. Notice that, with Milbank (left), the parabola opens up beyond the threshold, pictorially representing Sophia, the feminine non-All in the Real (which Milbank connects to the classical transcendentals); and that, with Žižek, the parabola closes at the very tangent of the threshold—the Real beyond it is Void (what Hegel calls the Idea).¹²⁰ Toward the bottom of the schematic, the closed curve for Milbank represents the notion of completeness: the Real as non-All theurgically sends/donates being down into the Symbolic. The open curve for Žižek implies the non-All as the impasse of symbolic formalization, and incompleteness at every level of discourse.¹²¹

The purpose here is mainly to highlight the formal similarity between Milbank and Žižek, centered around the Lacanian triad Imaginary-Symbolic-Real. The main axis of contention between the two thinkers, once again, is the location of the non-All, the paradoxically inconsistent meta-level: if in the Symbolic, as Žižek contends, the non-All implies being’s incompleteness as the grammar of the immanent; if in the Real, as Milbank contends, the non-All implies being’s completeness as this grammar.

Both err from the standpoint of Orthodox synergy, and the purpose of the next chapter is to show why this is the case.

¹ I have in mind the ontotheology/ meontotheology schema mentioned in the Prelude notes and dealt with at length in the main text later.

² Otherwise, to be clear, my sympathies lie far closer to Milbank's historical genealogies, something outside the scope of this study. For a look into this, Catherine Pickstock's notion that philosophy, as Platonic activity, assumes "a primacy of liturgical theory and practice," a partiality to theological saturation and impression, rather than a primacy of purely metaphysical presence. See Pickstock, *After Writing*, xii. In *Theology and Social Theory*, xx Note 22, Milbank attributes to Pickstock, specifically in her work in *After Writing*, that she "offers exactly the same innovative theurgic emphasis" he is himself.

³ Žižek, "Inside the Matrix, or, the Two Sides of Perversion," in *Inside the Matrix: International Symposium at the Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe*, October 28, 1999. Accessed Jan. 30, 2020, <https://www.lacan.com/zizek-matrix.htm>.

⁴ Umberto Eco identifies two aspects of semiotics which will be continued in the usage of Sloterdijk's terminology here: (1) a theory of codes, indicating meaning and translation; and (2) a theory of "*sign production*," indicating the range of sign usage as communicative interactivity. It is (2) which is most relevant here, something explained later. See *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 3. The term more distantly relates to the work of Lévi-Strauss who was interested in "the role of language (semiotics) and discourse in the construction of reality," and "the analytical model[s]" used to express these constructions. See Gary Roth, "Kinship, structuralism and the savage mind: Lévi-Strauss," in *The Edinburgh Encyclopedia of Continental Philosophy*, ed. Simon Glendinning (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 535.

⁵ Sloterdijk, *Globes, Macrospherology: Spheres II* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014), 28. It is here where I ask patience from the reader sympathetic to Milbank, since this "history" of Heidegger's demonstrably does not characterize the period of classical ontology. Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, xiii correctly calls ontotheology "nihilistic," a point Milbank acknowledges holds a central position in his own ontology. For this, see *Theology and Social Theory*, 435, Note 131, and also on xix. In both places Milbank attributes to Cunningham the correct view of the degeneration of ontology in modernity, which Milbank traces to a fourfold root on which he pins most of the corruptions of the modern world. These roots, spanning substitutions of classical ontological formulae for "flattened," ontic versions spanning four substitutions: (1) univocity for analogy; (2) knowledge as mirroring representation and not identity; (3) possibility's primacy over actuality; and (4) causality as simultaneous temporal concurrence rather than synergic cooperation between cause and effect operating at different ontological levels yet communicating across them. See *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 28. In doing this, Milbank claims that "When I talk about 'the analogizing process,' I am trying to give a Catholic theological equivalent to Heidegger's temporalizing of Being." See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 308.

⁶ Sloterdijk, *Bubbles, Microspherology: Spheres I* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), 62.

⁷ Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 7: "Once she has been sent into the field, even the most rationalist ethnographer is perfectly capable of bringing together in a single monograph the myths, ethnosciences, genealogies, political forms, techniques, religions, epics and rites of the people she is studying." Latour's emphasis is on providing such a unified, anthropological account of the present time, which he claims to be internally resistant to such an account.

⁸ Sloterdijk, *Spheres I*, 28: "The sphere is the interior, disclosed, shared realm inhabited by humans... Because living always means building spheres, both on a small and a large scale, humans are the beings that establish globes and look out into horizons. Living in spheres means creating the dimension in which humans can be contained." I am not wedded to this anthropological notion, as though it is the sieve for filtering true accounts of what Douglas Adams called "life, the universe, and everything." I am employing this imagery here precisely as *imagery*, and will indicate what work I intend it to do as we go along in this chapter.

⁹ Sloterdijk, *Spheres II*, 640. To anticipate and lay to rest a question which may arise as this chapter moves forward, Sloterdijk's own system reifies neither the circular nor the linear metaphor. His is something more akin to the monadology of the *point*: like Bruno Latour's "parliament of things," Sloterdijk's geometry of the point is that "Life articulates itself on nested simultaneous stages; it produces and devours itself in interconnected workshops." See Sloterdijk, *Foams, Plural Spherology: Spheres III* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2016), 23. The "point" solution is that of a swarm, a "foam": "a foam capable of conceiving and bearing children with the properties of a matrix." See 41. A foam is "neo-monadological in its orientation; its monads, however, have the basic form of dyads or more complex soul-space, communal and team structures." See 58. Milbank, in "The Surprise of the Imagined," 21, rightfully complains that "Latour is stuck in an aporetic shuttle between the fundamental character of random, isolated things and the equally fundamental character of accidental, external relations." Perhaps Sloterdijk seals this

worry in his “dyadic” pointillisms; there the communal structures are “within” and modulate into “foam cities.” See Chapter 2, section C4., “Foam City—About Urban Spatial Multiplicities,” 610-626. Badiou, in *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 1ff. complains that this “democratic” thesis, that “*There are only bodies and languages*,” amounts to nothing more than a “bio-materialism,” an “overstretched vision of animality” which, “in recognizing a plurality of languages, presupposes their juridical equality.” It leaves no room for the starting point of the properly realist inquest that the incompleteness theorems call for a rupturing of the democratic hypothesis, that “truths” are made possible only through impasses of formalization. See also Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 22ff. Thus, Sloterdijk’s solution need not be given appraisal here in the main text; it is enough for the purposes here to note that neither Milbank nor Žižek take it to be a legitimate rival to the ontological systems cashed out in terms of the circle or the line.

¹⁰ Sloterdijk, *Foams, Plural Spherology: Spheres III* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2016), 17.

¹¹ Sloterdijk, *Spheres II*, 383f.

¹² “But the *sphaira*, the One as a form, is the God who makes humans think.” See Sloterdijk, *Spheres II*, 16.

¹³ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 60.

¹⁴ But see Sloterdijk, *Spheres II*, 335-404 in the chapter, “The Ontological Proof of the Orb.” Note 9 in this chapter gives the backbone of the critical appraisal that not only Milbank, but also both Žižek and Badiou, mobilize against Sloterdijk’s system. My use of Sloterdijk here, once again, is merely illustrative. Interestingly, Ferdinand Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus: The Drama of the Question of Being*, trans. D. C. Schindler (Washington: Humanum Academic Press, 2018), 12-21 on sections of the “circling” movement of thought, mentioned again below. As an analogical ontologist who draws his inspiration from Przywara, Ulrich helps illustrate Milbank’s own “round reason.” This picture will be attenuated heavily, but the critique of Milbank in Chapter 2 would survive even if this “spherical” visual arrangement is abandoned.

¹⁵ Emphasis here is added. See Note 9 for the reference.

¹⁶ Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 6.

¹⁷ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 643.

¹⁸ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2009), 229.

¹⁹ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 229. Later we will see that what Žižek has in mind is Lacan’s “*objet a*.”

²⁰ Milbank expresses this point well: Hegel and later Žižek make “the novel move of ontologizing the contradictory itself...” See “The Double Glory,” 137. Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 24f. explains this point succinctly: “the limitation of Kant was that he was not able fully to assume this paradox of finitude as constitutive of the ontological horizon: ultimately, he reduced the transcendental horizon to a way in which reality appears to a finite being (man), with all of it located in a wider encompassing realm of noumenal reality.” Hegel is, Žižek continues, thus “is not external to Kant: the problem with Kant was that he produced the shift but was unable, for structural reasons, to formulate it explicitly—he ‘knew’ that the place of freedom is in fact not noumenal, but the gap between phenomenal and noumenal, but he could not put it so explicitly, since, had he done so, his transcendental edifice would have collapsed.” This is to be read against the ontological limitation of Caputo’s Google Maps imagery in the Prelude.

²¹ Sloterdijk, *Spheres II*, 523.

²² Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” 70. See Note 5 for a contextualization of this comment: Žižek would most certainly dispute that Sloterdijk has properly seen the Hegelian double negation in his negative onto-semiology. But the logic of the line, as I have framed it here, is closely enough approximated to the negative side of Sloterdijk’s model—in this I hope the loose approximations are forgivable.

²³ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 311.

²⁴ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 164.

²⁵ See Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism, passim*. Note 5 in Chapter 1 above explains Milbank’s relation to Cunningham’s dichotomy.

²⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Phil Beitchman, Paul Foss, and Paul Patton (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1983), 10.

²⁷ Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, xiii. “But I suggest,” he continues, “that the first leads to nihilism, while the latter is the realised *logic* of nihilism.”

²⁸ Claire Ortiz Hill, in *Rethinking Identity and Metaphysics: On the Foundations of Analytic Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 43-53 discusses the various disambiguations between identity (the “is” of being) and other forms of equivalence, such as the “is” of predication, the “is” of substitution ($x=y$), the “is” of possession (a fetus *is/ is not* instantiating the property of being a person), and so on. Milbank, “The Thomistic Telescope: Truth and Identity,” in *Transcendence and Phenomenology*, eds. Peter M. Candler and Conor Cunningham (London: SCM-Canterbury Press, 2007) makes use of Ortiz Hill’s work in his own disambiguation

between robust identity and mere correspondence. This is to be understood relative to his “fourfold root” described briefly in Note 5 above.

²⁹ Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, xii.

³⁰ Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 170.

³¹ Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 170. See also “Nothing Is, Something Must Be: Lacan and Creation from No One,” in *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), especially pg. 91.

³² Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2009), 118ff. See also Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 171ff. See also Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 5.

³³ Lacan speaks of a presence of the Other infiltrating the space of the self. See Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 123, 186f. for formulations.

³⁴ “...every creation from nothing remains nothing; nothing as something. For example, the subject, according to Lacan, is a creation from nothing, in so far as it does not have being (*manque-à-être*). Consequently, it is a nothing as something, which means that the idea of a creator is otiose.” See Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 247.

³⁵ See Baudrillard, “Seduction,” in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings, 2nd Ed* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002), especially pg. 152.

³⁶ Jean Baudrillard calls this the *hyperreal*, a notion he connects explicitly to the Lacanian Imaginary. See Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 12ff.

³⁷ “Seduction,” 153. Baudrillard thinks Lacan’s move from Symbolic to Real, through the generation of the “crisis point” of Symbolic breakdown Lacan calls the *objet a*, is a “specious form of seduction.” See a bit later on 156.

³⁸ Baudrillard, “Seduction,” 156f.

³⁹ See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 30. Cornel West has connected realism of the kind considered here to hinge on the concept of correspondence. See West, “Nietzsche’s Prefiguration of Postmodern American Philosophy,” in *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Civitas Books, 2000), 190.

⁴⁰ In fact, Žižek states explicitly that the Real cannot be cashed out in these terms. He complains of a naïve realism which asks the question, “How does reality look without me independently of me?... relies on a violent abstraction from the very reality it attempts to grasp: ‘objective reality’... is a Real which cannot be experienced as reality.” See Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 924. The next section will try to spell this out. Notice, however, how closely Žižek’s formulation conforms to Tyson’s in Note 19 in the Prelude.

⁴¹ This is found in Gabriel, *Fields of Sense: A New Realist Ontology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 119.

⁴² Once again, this is supposed to be an anticipation of the “non-All,” a notion that will be cashed out in the following section.

⁴³ Indeed this is why Žižek calls the “Word-Picture,” the seductive confusion of Symbolic with Imaginary, the main enemy of the psychoanalytic therapeutics and its attendant denontological structural systematics. See Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, 13.

⁴⁴ See Ch. 9: “The Difference Knowledge Makes: Creation Out of Love,” in Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 219-234, where he develops the “theo-logic” of analogy, participation, transcendentals, and divine ideas.

⁴⁵ Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, xii, and Przywara, *Analogia Entis*, 164, especially Translator’s Note 24.

⁴⁶ Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, xiii-xviii.

⁴⁷ Lacan has called this “transference,” the presence of another on one’s act of self expression. In its positive guise, it is a communication of love in which the other is “touching,” a “soft spot for the individual concerned.” In its negative guise, it manifests in aloofness, a distance of the lover from the self: “when you have to keep your eye on him.” See Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 123.

⁴⁸ Betz, *After Enlightenment: The Post-Secular Vision of J. G. Hamann*, 1st ed. (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 231. Milbank writes of Hamann: “if, as Johann Georg Hamann realized, one advances against Kant a ‘metacritique,’ according to which the categories of knowledge are linguistically and historically determined... then the very grounds of a clear distinction between a ‘necessary’ finite knowledge and a superfluous and pretended transcendent knowledge are undermined.” See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 65f.

⁴⁹ Betz, *After Enlightenment*, 240f.

⁵⁰ Betz, *After Enlightenment*, 257.

⁵¹ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 626f.

⁵² Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 423.

⁵³ Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit: The Idealistic Logic of Modern Theology* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 282.

⁵⁴ For much more on the notion that Kant-Hegel provide the unsurpassable horizon of thought and being as such, see Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2009). For a fascinating critique of this “marginalizing of dissenting voices,” see the four-part blog series Hoon Lee, “Socrates, Metacriticism, and Enlightenment,” in *History and Philosophy Blog*, April 10, 2019. Accessed: April 6, 2021, <https://historyandphilosophy.com/socrates-metacriticism-and-the-enlightenment/>.

⁵⁵ The language of “theoretical systematics,” “ontological structural systematics,” “theoretical framework,” “analytics,” and like expressions are borrowed from Lorenz Puntel, *Structure and Being: A Theoretical Framework for a Systematic Philosophy* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2013), especially Chs. 1-4. Basically, what Puntel has in mind concerns “the development of any serious philosophical theory. These factors include the precise specification of concepts, clarification of the status of philosophy as theory, consequential argumentativity, and the like.” See *Structure and Being*, 35.

⁵⁶ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 6.

⁵⁷ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 497.

⁵⁸ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, trans. Dennis Porter, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: WW Norton, 1997), 110f.

⁵⁹ Lacan, *Ethics*, 322.

⁶⁰ Loudovikos, *Analogical Identities*, 82. He targets the therapeutic theology of Romanides here. For an account of such Orthodox therapeutics, see Archbishop Chrysostomos, *A Guide to Orthodox Psychotherapy: The Science, Theology, and Spiritual Practice Behind It and Its Clinical Applications* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2006).

⁶¹ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 497. Lacan explains that an object here means “a point of imaginary fixation which gives satisfaction to a drive in any register whatsoever.” See Lacan, *Ethics*, 113.

⁶² Paul Tyson has prompted me to consult Augustine’s text *The Teacher* for a profitable account of the kind of realism that Milbank is interested in and which presents something like a canonical account of Christian subjectivity. See Augustine, *Against the Academicians and The Teacher*, trans. Peter King (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1995). Smith, *Speech and Theology*, 114-150, gives a lucid account of this Augustinian ontology of the self. By contrast, Loudovikos, *Analogical Identities*, 25, suggests that the reading may not be so canonical. He claims that Augustine’s theory of knowledge in *The Teacher* ends up denying that anyone can learn anything, since the senses themselves cannot affect the soul: “Everything already exists in the soul, not because the soul pre-existed, as Plato thought, but because it has an internal teacher which is forever instructing it.” This dispute need not be settled here, though the Prelude’s account of co-essentiality would place me closer to Loudovikos than to Smith or Augustine, on this point.

⁶³ Hanby, *No God, No Science?: Theology, Cosmology, Biology* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 52f.

⁶⁴ I take this point from one of David Berlinski’s endlessly entertaining studies, *Human Nature* (Seattle: Discovery Institute Press, 2019), 116.

⁶⁵ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 924. See Note 40 immediately above for a further reference. In this Žižek follows Hegel, *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: The Science of Logic*, ed. trans. George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 734, that the “absolute idea” is what is reached when “the previously discovered reality is... no longer an object of investigation, a merely objective world without the subjectivity of the concept, but as an objective world whose inner ground and actual subsistence is rather the concept.”

⁶⁶ Žižek, *Absolute Recoil*, 12. Pickstock’s definition of idealism, in *Aspects of Truth*, 5, as nineteenth-century system which argues that “truth is... something constituted by the structures of the subjective mind” is therefore not characteristic of what Žižek has in mind. Žižek claims that “it is meaningless to call Hegel’s philosophy ‘absolute idealism’: his point is precisely that *there is no need for a Third element*” which would harmonize subject and object into a composite whole. The realist position proper is rather, for Žižek, the orchestration by which “subjectivity is re-inscribed into reality, but not simply reduced to a part of objective reality.” See Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 144. This move blocks Desmond’s interpretation of Hegel, as well, since his reading ascribes to Hegel the quest for this composite Third in the form of “the Whole.” Desmond claims that Hegel’s “speculative system will think God as a God of the whole... [but what] could there be beyond the Whole? Nothing it seems.” See Desmond, *Hegel’s God*, 25.

⁶⁷ Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, 21: “subjectivity emerges when substance cannot achieve full identity with itself, when substance is in itself ‘barred,’ traversed by an immanent impossibility or antagonism.” See Chapter 1, Note 13 above for the citation in Lacan which Žižek has in mind here.

⁶⁸ Milbank, “Surprise of the Imagined,” 6ff. It is in this discussion where Milbank places Žižek as an *idealist*, which in its boldest form is a philosophy which “variously claims that correlation becomes through time a total translucency, such that mind grasps the material randomness of reality, in such a fashion that it can, nevertheless,

something exotically allow for the possibility of alternative accidentally arising worlds which might even include gods and immortal human life.” See Milbank, “Surprise of the Imagined,” 5. Žižek disputes this in *Absolute Recoil: Towards A New Foundation Of Dialectical Materialism* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2014), 5 and *Less Than Nothing*, 144. I believe that the descriptions in the main text satisfy the need to include this discussion there.

⁶⁹ Thanks to Paul Tyson for forcing this clarification.

⁷⁰ A very profitable discussion on this topic can be found in Vladimir Tasić, *Mathematics and the Roots of Postmodern Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 75f.: “Either mathematics is false, or there are true mathematical statements that are not provable (in a chosen formalization). This is usually referred to as ‘incompleteness.’”

⁷¹ The block quote and its follow up are taken from R. B. Braithwaite’s “Introduction” in Kurt Gödel, *On Formally Undecidable Propositions of Principia Mathematica and Related Systems* (New York: Dover Publications, 1992), 23. On a historical discussion of this, see Milbank, “The Thomistic Telescope,” especially 304ff. Claire Ortiz Hill, in *Rethinking Identity and Metaphysics*, 74, points out that “Paradoxes analogous to the ones Russell, Zermelo, and others discovered as being derivable within set theory can easily be fashioned out of natural languages and have been known since antiquity.” One such is the liar’s paradox, another is Plato’s “Third Man.”

⁷² Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 645.

⁷³ Žižek, *Absolute Recoil*, 19.

⁷⁴ See Milbank, “The Double Glory, or Paradox Versus Dialectics,” 137 and 185, respectively.

⁷⁵ Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 134.

⁷⁶ Puntel, *Structure and Being*, 117. Puntel’s proximity to Milbank can be traced through Hart. Hart recommends Puntel, along with Desmond whose analogical system Hart sees Puntel providing the Analytic philosophical version: “some readers who, due to some peculiarity of temperament or the tragic privations of a misspent youth, prefer their metaphysics to come wrapped in the language of analytic philosophy...” See Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 344. The proximity of Milbank and Hart to Desmond has been traced in Note 41 in the Prelude.

⁷⁷ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 58f. Žižek gets this from Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 128f.

⁷⁸ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 67. This is, to note briefly, *not* a kind of pleromatic nihilist logic of “lack of lack itself” as a kind of “realised logic of nihilism” in Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, xiii—although, Žižek, “Fear of Four Words,” 42 concedes that “In a way, everything turns around the inner tension of ‘nothingness.’” In this sense Milbank, “The Double Glory,” 147, explains that the Christian *ex nihilo* is a way of hyperbolically confirming the principle “out of nothing, nothing comes” by “claiming that an infinite actuality can radically originate the finite, without any preexisting finite principle...” and that the Hegelian *ex nihilo* is a something which “comes from nothing alone, [because] nothingness negates itself... without positive supplement...”

⁷⁹ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 495. Markus Gabriel, *Why the World Does Not Exist* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), 12 employs a similar version of this schema.

⁸⁰ Though this is not exactly right: Žižek gives his precise understanding of this term in *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, 23f. in his modification of Beckett’s praecisio: “This is where even Beckett misses the point in his often-quoted statement: ‘Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness.’ What Beckett doesn’t get is that when a stain appears as unnecessary, superfluous, it remains unavoidable—it creates retroactively the silence it stains/disturbs.” On this point, see Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 20: “...the cry does not stand out against a background of silence, but on the contrary makes the silence emerge as silence.”

⁸¹ Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1949), x.

⁸² See the seventh chapter of Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 192-233.

⁸³ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 22.

⁸⁴ Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 105ff. See Note 31 in Chapter 1 above as well.

⁸⁵ Milbank, “The Double Glory,” 112.

⁸⁶ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 154-161.

⁸⁷ See also Chapter 5, “Hegel’s consummate philosophy: The univocity of Geist” in Cunningham’s *Genealogy of Nihilism* for a similar reading of Hegel.

⁸⁸ See Žižek’s *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 171ff. for a discussion on this.

⁸⁹ And he does. Once again, see Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 171ff. for this discussion. This is an important stretch for Žižek, and will be returned to in Chapter 2 during the appraisal.

⁹⁰ Žižek, “Dialectical Clarity,” 286.

⁹¹ Hegel, *Logic*, 87f.

⁹² Hegel, *Logic*, 88f.

⁹³ Hegel, *Logic*, 341.

⁹⁴ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 311.

⁹⁵ Žižek invites a detour of this kind in his illustration of his system as a “Quantum Platonism.” See Note 5 in the Prelude for the reference. This picture of Quantum Platonism will be returned to by the end of this chapter.

⁹⁶ The image is found in Vijay Balasubramanian, “Are Black Holes Really Two Dimensional?” in *APS Physics*, December 7, 2009. Access April 12, 2021, <https://physics.aps.org/articles/v2/102>.

⁹⁷ Though this is not a picture of what is “inside” a black hole: it is rather a representation of the pull acting on an object as it passes the event horizon threshold; an object caught in the web moves “forward.”

⁹⁸ Motion is a loaded term, most adequately unpacked in Simon Oliver, *Philosophy, God, and Motion* (London: Routledge, 2006). Given that the function of this diagram is as illustration, I will neither try to unpack Oliver’s convincing analysis of the history of motion in philosophy and theology, nor situation the present schematics within that history. But maybe Oliver’s recounting of the Aristotelian distinction between “natural” and “violent” motion might make a difference to the analysis here: the natural are “those characteristic patterns of behavior which are produced by a being in a given environment,” while the violent is that “in which there is no intrinsic intentionality of that motion within or by the being itself.” What I have in mind in this picture, in my attempt to unpack Žižek, is violent motion—since this is the kind Žižek seems to be interested in. Perhaps Giorgio Agamben’s *What is Real?* trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), besides being original and charmingly entertaining, is a good place to look for a convincing account of what reality would be like if the quantum world were *not* cashed out solely in terms of “violent” motion.

⁹⁹ A diagrammatical representation will be given at the end of this chapter.

¹⁰⁰ See Terry Pinkard, “Introduction,” in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed., trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), xl, where he explains that the simple negation is loosely illustrated with the sentence: “We take your point and deny it, but because there is something to it, we preserve it in a changed format in our ongoing discussion.”

¹⁰¹ Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, 291: “Nothingness itself arises in the pre-ontological swarm of LTN’s [less than nothings] and opens up the space for Somethings to exist.”

¹⁰² The only direct evidence for this that I could find is documented in Note 68 in this chapter above, and the attendant quotation in the main text.

¹⁰³ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 175. Meta-level positions are impossible in principle, for Žižek: “every notion of ‘objective reality’ is bound to a subjective point, and... it’s not possible to locate our reality in an overall constellation.” See Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, 57f.

¹⁰⁴ Przywara, *Analogia Entis*, 314. I am getting these “disambiguations” from a Greek reference text.

¹⁰⁵ Recall that this applies to Milbank’s ontology as well. See Notes 41 and 45 of the Prelude.

¹⁰⁶ Przywara, *Analogia Entis*, 258.

¹⁰⁷ See the fourth Chapter of Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (Plano: Seabrook Press, 2016), 133-154.

¹⁰⁸ Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 291f.

¹⁰⁹ Puntel, *Being and God: A Systematic Approach in Confrontation with Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Luc Marion* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 257.

¹¹⁰ Sloterdijk, *Spheres II*, 640. Adrian Pabst has offered analysis which confirms this picture: particulars do not resemble universals; they are *resemblances of universals*: “forms reflect across the *cosmos*, and particulars are ‘refractions of forms’ that stand in analogous relation to the original source. Particulars mark unique manifestations of universals in materiality.” See Pabst, *Metaphysics: The Creation of Hierarchy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 43.

¹¹¹ For something like this point see Sloterdijk, *Spheres II*, 673.

¹¹² Milbank, “The Double Glory,” 185f. and 191 respectively. This is an appropriation of what Žižek helpfully explains” that “masculine and feminine are not simply two out-of-sync entities, but... sexual difference in a way precedes the two sexes (the difference of which it is), so that the two sexes somehow come (logically) later, they react to, endeavor to resolve or symbolize, the deadlock of the Difference...” See Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 796.

¹¹³ Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), 208.

¹¹⁴ See Schindler’s entry, “Superessentiality,” in the Lexicon in Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus*, 507. David Bentley Hart says this, as usually only he can:

...the truly unexpected implication of trinitarian dogma is that Christian thought has no metaphysics of the one and the many, the same and the different, because that is a polarity that has no place in the Christian narrative... for Christian thought difference does not eventuate at all, but is... Created difference “corresponds” to God, is analogous to the divine life, precisely in differing from God...

See Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 180.

¹¹⁵ Pound, *Žižek: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 35f. Pound claims that this can be found in Thomas: “in Lacan’s terms, Aquinas situates religion on the side of the symbolic and God on the side of the real.” See page 63f. Elsewhere Pound calls this the “Kierkegaardian intervention on Lacan.” See Pound, *Theology, Psychoanalysis, Trauma* (London: SCM-Canterbury Press, 2007), 18, 58ff., 101ff., 137.

¹¹⁶ Pound, *Žižek*, 112.

¹¹⁷ Pound, *Žižek*, 68. Pound, agreeing with Milbank here, is countering Lacan’s move in *On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge: The Seminar Of Jacques Lacan Book XX Encore* (New York: WW Norton, 1999), 33: “... the woman is not-whole—there is always something in her that escapes discourse.” Pound, *Žižek*, 32 explains more generally that Christianity, in praising moments of material imperfection over perfection of eternal ideas, “makes incompleteness higher than completion,” thus the “contrast with Neoplatonism could not be sharper: love is not an integral form in itself, transcendently securing our love; love emerges from its opposite, the failure of all such attempts.”

¹¹⁸ See Ermanno Bencivenga, *Theories of the Logos* (Manhattan: Springer, 2017), 44.

¹¹⁹ Pabst, *Metaphysics*, 441.

¹²⁰ Hegel, *Logic*, 733f. calls the “absolute idea” the infusion of form and content, subject and object: “... the subject now exists as *free, universal self-identity* for which the objectivity of the concept is a *given*, just as immediately *present* to the subject as the subject immediately knows itself to be the concept determined in and for itself.” Object and subject come together at this point: “... the previously discovered reality is at the same time determined as the realized absolute purpose, no longer an object of investigation, a merely objective world without the subjectivity of the concept, but as an objective world where inner ground and actual subsistence is rather the concept.”

¹²¹ The diagram is mine.

CHAPTER 2: Critical Appraisals

The aim of this chapter is to provide critical appraisals to the ontological systematics of Žižek and Milbank. The method of criticism will be to situate both thinkers at some distance from a central position, that of Orthodox synergy outlined in the Prelude. In doing this, the framework of onto-semiology will be dropped; this has been employed as a formal tool for the purpose of description and will not figure in the arguments put forward here. The groundwork for what will emerge from this discussion has largely already been laid; the resultant claim will be that Žižek and Milbank are not equidistant from the ontology suggested in Orthodox synergy. Žižek, due to his system's rejection of the analogy of being, is marginally more proximal than Milbank. This is mostly concluded based on the judgment that Milbank's rejection of Chalcedonian Christology leaves him with a grammar of the immanent which cannot capture the co-essentiality criterion central to Orthodox synergy. Žižek, in comparison, portrays an impoverished immanent, though one that is mobilizable for the purpose of an Orthodox ontology, outlined in Chapter 3 to follow. Once again, this coming outline is more rhetorical than substantive; at no point will it be suggested, here or in the next chapter, that a dialectical materialist ontology is a "good idea"—the only suggestion will be that, should somebody already espouse an ontology such as this, then it is no ontological impediment to Orthodoxy. The same cannot be said of Milbank's brand of theurgic Neo-Platonism. First Žižek's ontology, and then Milbank's, will be evaluated in turn.

Grammars of the Immanent, I: Žižek's impoverished Symbol

This section will lay out the following two-tier objection to Žižek's denontology. The first tier involves seeing in Žižek's statement that "The lesson of Hegel and Lacan is that... we can only speak about things that *do not* exist... or, more modestly and precisely, speech (presup)poses a

lack/ hole in the positive order, of being”¹ leads to the very odd conclusion that words can only be truthfully mentioned but never truthfully used. This would make it in principle impossible to distinguish the referent of the noun in “Kabul is in Afghanistan” from “‘Kabul’ is the name of a city.” All nouns on Žižek’s picture have the exact same referent, a move which destabilizes speaking. The second tier will argue that, given the first tier, Žižek’s ontology is iatrogenic: it causes the disturbance of the wound which its therapeutic techniques seek to heal. This is because, if incompleteness (wound) is a feature of the symbol/word itself, then healing (completeness) cannot take place because the wound, so to speak, is permanent. But then the wound cannot be permanent because healing is impossible; this has been barred in the premise of Žižek’s argument and not its conclusion. This defect leaves room for the account of healing in Orthodox synergy through co-operation with God.

The use/mention distinction is typically cashed out in the following way:

Using an expression involves putting it to service in a way that exploits whatever meaning it has, in order to draw attention to some aspect of reality. Mentioning an expression involves putting it to service in a way that waives whatever meaning it has, in order to draw attention to the expression itself.²

The upshot is that the use of a word occupies, in Gödel’s framework, the object-level utterance, and the mention the meta-level. This distinction comes in stronger and softer variants,³ the stronger of which must hold that there is something fundamentally different taking place at the level of syntax between a singular noun phrase’s use and its mentioning. That is to say that the difference between a term’s use and its mention is not a difference in meaning, which would be a difference in use, but rather a difference in sentential positioning. But this is impossible to maintain, since the syntactical reading of the distinction could work only on the assumption that there is a difference in meaning, which in the strong variant is denied. George Steiner has persuasively argued that it is not meaning as such which is in question in the use/mention distinction, but the

question of whether it means anything at all for a word to have meaning: “The issue is, quite simply, that of the meaning of meaning as it is re-insured by the postulate of the existence of God. ‘In the beginning was the Word.’”⁴ The simple act of syntactically deferring a word’s meaning from its use to its mention does not transform the central postulate on which a word’s involvement in a sentence operates: if a word’s meaning does not have meaning then there is, plainly, nothing to “waive” in its mere mention. Rather, the softer version of the distinction⁵ does not require any such syntactical shift: Moore cites a sentence in which a mentioned word retains its meaning as a canonical case.⁶

Žižek embraces the softer version of this distinction. To see why, recall how Gödel’s incompleteness theorems establish that there are true theoretical statements that are not provable in a given formalization.⁷ The incompleteness pointed to here is meant to stimulate the need to stabilize formalizations in that which is not merely formal.⁸ Žižek, recalling again, provides this stability in the Void, arguing that it ontologizes the incompleteness accompanying sophisticated formal schematics; while Milbank provides this stability metasystematically, in the God who radiates, or donates, being to the immanent, completing its limitations. The stronger version of the use/mention distinction, Žižek argues, involves a post-structuralist reading of the notion that “there is no metalanguage” in that the use of a word is ultimately its own mention, since there is no meta-level vantage needed for mentioning. Žižek argues that this entails the problematic conclusion that the sentence which says that “there is no metalanguage” must itself be spoken from “*the position of metalanguage* in its purest, most radical form”: all that is offered here is a text which cannot comment on anything because it is caught up in itself as its own commentary.⁹

Yet, in its softer garb, the use/mention distinction is useful, for Žižek, in that both the use and the mention of a word can be distilled in the Lacanian “lying truth,” the notion whereby a

speaker can assert a false sentence truthfully, such as the sentence “I am lying right now.”¹⁰ The false sentence is *used*: the content of my sentence cannot be true. But the lie is *mentioned*: I am in fact formally lying when I say I am. In Žižek’s reading, this entails that “In Lacan’s teaching... the proposition ‘there is no metalanguage’ is to be taken literally. It means that all language is in a way an object-language: *there is no language without object*.”¹¹ This is to be understood against the backdrop of Gödel’s theorems: the incompleteness in any object-level formalization is also ontological precisely because there is no meta-level position.¹² This is why Žižek can say that “we can only speak about things that *do not exist*”: signification is “a self-referential movement... not that of a closed circle, but an elliptical movement around a certain void” which Lacan calls the *objet a*.¹³ The *objet a* is the direct embodiment of this void.¹⁴

Yet, in claiming that we can only speak about things that do not exist, that is, that all speech speaks about the *objet a*, this means that all words signify the void, specifically, the void-as-object.¹⁵ But, in signifying the void, there is a total referential coincidence between using and mentioning which would in principle make it impossible to disambiguate referents of terms: for any provision of a word—say, a singular noun—it would be indeterminate whether its referent is external to it (via use) or whether its referent is itself (via mention).¹⁶ A noun like “Kabul” occurring in any sentence would leave it indeterminate whether it refers to the Capital of Afghanistan or the singular proper noun with five letters, two syllables, and so on. In fact, Žižek’s use of the Hegelian Prestige necessitates this use-mention blending precisely because it seeks to show that there is nothing more to a word’s use than its mere mention: speakers either lie about *the something*, saying nothing, or speak truthfully about the void—they are left with the lack/hole, either way. Žižek puts it this way: “the proper name... operates so that all descriptions attributed to the name’s bearer make sense or at least provide an illusion of a meaningful entity.”¹⁷

Perhaps this is not an objection so much as it is a description of Žižek's understanding of the symbol. But even as a description, Desmond's is still a pregnant complaint when he says that Žižek is "already on the threshold of gibberish" in that he is performing a "speaking that is not speaking. It speaks to none."¹⁸ This can be expanded: Žižek's speaking speaks to none specifically by way of having nothing at all to say. But of course, gibberish is practically defined as that which straddles the border between speaking and nonspeaking. Orwell's satirical examples of bullshit come to mind, one of which goes: "Above all, we cannot play ducks and drakes with a native battery of idioms which prescribes egregious collocations of vocables as the Basic *put up with* for *tolerate*, or *put at a loss* for *bewilder*."¹⁹ A statement such as this is designed, Orwell can be read as saying a little later on, to have something like an impossible object as its referent: in saying such things, Orwell claims, you "don't have to bother with the rhythms of your sentences, since these phrases are generally so arranged as to be more or less euphonious." Speaking and singing—perhaps just blabbering—here are identical; yet a word sung is also a word mentioned.

To be sure, Žižek spends time objecting to just this charge of gibberish, that he speaks from beyond truth-or-falsity:

This is why the Hegelian-Lacanian position is neither that of Plato nor that of his sophist opponents: against Plato, it asserts that we not only *can* talk about things that we do not understand or think, but that ultimately we talk *only* about them, about fictions; while against the sophists it asserts that this in no way de-values truth, since, as Lacan put it, truth has the structure of a fiction.²⁰

His contention here is that the Lacanian position that there are only object-languages produces no barrier to a substantive interpretation of truth: that some sentences really are true, others really are false, etc. It is unclear, however, why it cannot be an adequate translation of Žižek's position to claim that people can truthfully talk gibberish only on the presupposition that there is nothing other than gibberish to say. It is as though Žižek intends the use/mention distinction to do the work of saying: to speak in a way that uses gibberish is indeed false, but to speak in a way which

systemically mentions gibberish—and which can only mention gibberish—is true. That this mentioning is also gibberish makes mentioning gibberish true, and in turn makes it true that using gibberish is false.

This is the therapeutic import Lacan's notion that "there is no big Other"—by which Lacan means, in the tableaux provided in this study, that there is no completeness in the Symbolic—on Žižek's reading: namely, that there is no goal external to the system meant to produce it; the system delivers its own failure as goal. Žižek explains this in the ethical register: the Lacanian motto "there is no big Other" is meant to take us "to the very core of the ethical problematic: what is excluded is precisely this 'perspective of the Last Judgment,' the idea that somewhere... there must be a standard which would allow us to take the measure of our acts and pronounce on their 'true meaning,' their true ethical status."²¹ In the therapeutic index, this translates to the notion that there is no healing—occupying the position of the "Last Judgment"—to be found in the convalescence process. Healing is instead a matter of getting rid of the body in which the wound is found, in Kevorkian fashion: it is not the self that is wounded, and the self that is healed; rather it is the wound that is given a self, and the self which must be seen as nothing but the embodiment of the wound. Lacan explains: "The 'I' is not a being, but rather something attributed to that which speaks... That solitude, as a break in knowledge, not only can be written but it is that which is written par excellence, for it is that which leaves a trace of a break in being."²² This is what is meant by the Lacanian (Kevorkian) cure: it is not the wound which needs healing, but the patient who needs killing. Both, as Dr. Kevorkian famously argued, lead to the cessation of neurophysiological torment. And this is what the patient asked for in the first place.

Žižek reads in this the very heart of the Incarnation narrative: "When Deleuze writes that 'my wound existed before me; I was born to embody it,' does not this... provide a perfect formula

for Christ's sacrifice: Christ was born to embody his wound, to be crucified?"²³ It is here where Žižek's suggestions are most apparently iatrogenic. The healing therapy which delivers health through the proposal that it is the patient that needs to go, and not the ailment, itself directly produces the wound that it says is unhealable. And it is no wonder the wound is unhealable, given that there is no state of health to which it can be restored to. But then it cannot be claimed that no such state of health can be achieved on the grounds that the wound is unhealable: both health and injury—as it is with nouns writ large—simply mask the illusion that anything but the void/wound can be signified through their employment.

And it is on this matter that Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann has most convincingly argued²⁴ that words and healing are intimately related. Wounds, in other words, are closed at the word. Any position that intimates the opposite champion a "'rupture' between word and sacrament [that] has pernicious consequences[:] the sacrament ceases to be biblical and, in the deepest sense of the word, *evangelical*."²⁵ There is, in the word-as-sacrament, the "witness... in which there is an inseparable link between the so-called liturgy of the catechumens, dedicated primarily to the word of God, and the liturgy of the faithful, consisting of the offering, consecration and distribution of the holy gifts."²⁶ The defect present in Žižek's writing on the wound is that it cannot in principle call Schmemmann's reading into question: the non-All, for Žižek, when placed in the Symbolic, presupposes the insurmountable wound. But then such a wound is simply asserted without evidence. Conversely, the non-All, when placed in the Real, as for Milbank, presupposes the insurmountable healing.²⁷ It is only the Orthodox vision, given here by Schmemmann, which allows for both surmountable wound and optional healing—for it is a healing which is co-operated in.

Žižek’s denontological grammar of the immanent is therefore powerless to counter the claim of the Orthodox dogma of synergy, the notion that creation can, on certain conditions, “burn” as the bush on Sinai burned. If creation (the immanent) does not “burn,” so this argument would go, it is not deified; and if it is not *deifiable*, that is, able to be so burned, it is not really created, i.e., it is not really *immanent*. In this respect Cunningham (through Hamann) gets it exactly right: “Hamann would surely have disagreed with Žižek’s pejorative interpretation of the Real, because for Hamann all that is made is clean, in so far as what God makes is clean, so we must not call it profane.”²⁸

Grammars of the Immanent, II: Milbank’s divine Symbol

This section targets Milbank’s theurgic Neo-Platonist ontology in the specific guise in which it is endorsed in his writings; and its critical conclusions, if sound, need not be endorsed as having a scope wider than this.²⁹ Milbank’s ontology will be taken to be the intersection of the following two positions: that God is the feminine non-All; and that the immanent has a trinitarian ontological structure. There is evidence to think these two positions are co-dependent: that is, that those placing the non-All in the Real endorse a trinitarian trace in the immanent; and that those proffering a trinitarian ontology appeal to the feminine non-All to do so.³⁰ This connection will not be made, here; rather, it is the hybrid as it is present in Milbank which will be taken as the starting point. The argument will likewise be

Recall that the crux of Gödel’s incompleteness theorems, in Milbank’s reading of them, places the non-All in an ever-higher meta-level, allowing the inconsistency at any object-level formalization to open up to a meta-level which in turn guarantees the completeness at the object-level, repeated *ad infinitum*. The buck here stops at a kind of “optical infinity,” in fact a kind of

ontological optical infinity: God’s radical inconsistency would permit the set-theoretical contradictions to benignly apply, taking away their “sting,” as it were, allowing for an immanent “completeness” through theurgic intercommunication. Put another way, the radical inconsistency in the divine transcendentals—the non-All when placed in the Real—“radiates” being into a perfect completeness in the theurgically participatory immanent. God, to use the spherical trope useful for the purpose of description, is the “sender” of being which supplies the immanent with always-more being and ever-fewer gaps, filling in all object-level incompleteness. Against this background, Milbank claims that Hegel offers a sort of “reverse theurgy” which

ironically generates a kind of parody of a neoplatonic chain of being... Like the plenitudinous Catholic God, Hegel’s being-nothing is supremely simple and generates all complexity out of itself in a fashion that requires a certain order and a certain return.³¹

That is, Hegel can only borrow from the magisterial, Neo-Platonist tradition, at best producing defective clones of the ontological analytics perfected there. No doubt this is an allusion to the vision offered a century ago with the analogical ontology of Sergei Bulgakov, who offers a view of the history of philosophy as “heresiological” deviations from an originary “orthodox” Neo-Platonic plenitude.³² Bulgakov suggests that the entire history of philosophy is observed as a series of “choices” made from the whole: the ontological mistake as such consists in “the arbitrary election, the choice, of some single thing or part instead of the whole: that is, precisely, a one-sidedness.”³³ As “partial,” Hegel’s system is parasitic on the full articulation of being and so cannot but seem as “heresy” from this standpoint. Evidently, once the metasystematic ascension has begun, the only place to stop is at that “ontological optical infinity,” the spiraling forward/upward characteristic of Milbank’s analogical non-All.

It must be stressed, one final time, that the analogical solution to the incompleteness theorems are metasystematic rather than systematic in form. This will help present what Bulgakov and Milbank have in mind with a little more precision than what has been offered thus far. Puntel

understands the metasystematicity Milbank has in mind this way.³⁴ Take “structure” to be a triple of: (i) a non-empty set, a domain of objects; (ii) an immanent, possibly empty, family of finite relations in the set; and (iii) an external, possibly empty, family of finite operations on the set.³⁵ The “externality” of structures ensures that a structure is always subject to a “*limiting concept*” in the sense of a *regulative idea*” of there being external and more general structures captured by other theoretical frameworks containing its own structural framework as a member: thus the “application of the concept of absolute truth [i.e. the all-encompassing truth] is similar to that of the concept of uncountable sets in mathematics.”³⁶ There is therefore a theoretical “openness” to the analogical framework which comprises a “*meta-structural-systematic*” thesis that acknowledges explicitly that within the absolutely adequate theoretical framework *or already in any superior theoretical framework, more* structural moments and *more* truths are explainable.”³⁷ True to the second incompleteness theorem, perhaps an appropriate saying is “there is always a bigger set.”

Puntel labels this notion that “there is always a bigger set” as analogy: “Analogy is the semantic... articulation of the ontological structure of Being as a whole.”³⁸ This ever-ascending meta-level of this progression culminating in God is what Puntel terms “auto-immanence,” the notion of a space of internality without substantive external qualification. Immanence, Puntel observes, “connotes a correlativity to something outer or other, but the prefix ‘auto-’ denies anything outer or other...” God as the non-All assumes the emptiness of this external set containing God. Puntel continues: “there simply is no outer or other to which that dimension could relate even by negation.”³⁹ Bulgakov’s insistence of an “orthodox” philosophy of primal fullness, typified by the Neo-Platonic formulae, must likewise be seen as metasystematic in the same way: we cannot stop at a point coinciding with a part of the whole precisely because the whole has a *metastatus* such that it “is absolutely comprehensive in the sense that it coincides with that dimension that is

absolute in that it includes all theoretical frameworks.”⁴⁰ We are, in short, compelled to move up the meta-structural pecking order. Stopping somewhere along the forward/upward movement constitutes a theoretical *sin*: a choosing of a part of the whole and blowing it out of proportion. On this score, Desmond’s “transdialectical” schematic is among the most sophisticated versions of this same metasytematic project, and perhaps better than most illustrates Bulgakov and Milbank’s proffered analytics.

Desmond speaks of the “hyperboles”⁴¹ of being, the originary plenitude of being which comprises exactly the relevant sort of metasytematic vantage explored by Puntel. Desmond speaks of a fourfold “plurivocity” of being (hence the hyperbole), mirroring Bulgakov’s heresiological conception of ontology. Desmond’s plurivocity is staged as a progression of levels—a sort of metaphysical Jacob’s Ladder—culminating in the full hyperbole of what he calls the *metaxu*—the analogical “middle”: as has been intimated above, this suggests that the immanent as not quite God, not quite nothing, but a suspension between. Desmond states: “Beyond univocal determination, beyond equivocal difference, beyond self-mediating totality, God is to be thought through the between as given to be, and given to be as good.” This way “shows the fuller truth of the other three...”⁴² The *metaxu* therefore functions as a metastatus whereby there is a metasytemic guarantee that there will always be a more general structure which shows the embedded systematic structures to have “really” been complete/consistent all along. Ulrich elaborates: “Being *is* not the other to God, but it ‘is’ the *being* of what is other to God.” God is in himself then the “Not Other,” that through which being can be diversified by means of something other than itself (transcendentals): God is, in this sense, his own “wholly other.”⁴³ Hegel, in this picture, is understood as a thinker having gotten off the ontological train at the penultimate stop,

and this is taken by the above thinkers to be a heresiological move stunting the full growth of what could be its own plurivocal plenitude.⁴⁴

This plurivocity/hyperbole is meant to function as a complete grammar of being. And it is here where Milbank claims that Bulgakov's "'*grammatical ontology*'... cannot seriously [be refuted] without lapsing into incoherence" because the "subject-predicate-copula structure of all human language reveals indeed that we can only perceive the world at all by animating it..."⁴⁵ For the feminine logic of the non-All, when placed in the divine, produces a grammatical account of God as Sophia. This is because this feminine logic allows for a co-incidence of subject and predicate: "In the predicate, the hypostatic spirit recognizes its own self; through the predicate are disclosed the spirit's own nature and its inexhaustible riches."⁴⁶ That is, God is both creating subject (divine Sophia) and created predicate ("creaturely" Sophia).⁴⁷ In ontological terms, what Bulgakov offers is "a Trinitarian ontology"⁴⁸ which, in his own words, features the subject-predicate-copula as the "universal logico-grammatical" structure as the triune ontological character of reality.⁴⁹ It is this resultant trinitarian ontology that Milbank puts forward as the ontological implication of what he calls the divine non-All.

The connection here with the analogy of being is crucial.⁵⁰ Of the Sophiological thinkers who have not accepted the *analogia entis*, Robert Slesinski suggests they are missing an important piece of their puzzle: those Sophiologists who do not develop an analogical systematics already catalogue and use the tools needed to construct a robust analogics and could benefit from the development of this system at large.⁵¹ The upshot then of the transcendent feminine logic of the non-All is that the immanent is in some sense already "present in" the transcendent, as it is said, "from before the foundation of the world." As Nikolaos Loudovikos has explained, the Sophiologists (Solovyov, Florensky, Berdyaev, Bulgakov, et al.) develop a "Personalist

Triadology” which entails that the existence of any subject necessarily implies—from within that subject itself—the presence of a community of kenotic love and belonging, culminating in a Trinitarian grammatical systematics structured as an “‘I-You-It’ for each of the Triadic Persons,” a community which includes the “it” of the immanent from within the selfsame transcendent divine life.⁵²

This picture has Christological implications, Loudovikos suggests. Bulgakov and like-minded ontologists are stuck with the vision that the creaturely image of, and likeness to, God is an ahistorical superimposed “double”: “the ‘image’ [is interpreted] as the existence within people of something divine,” as though “the human nature of Christ existed in the Logos from the beginning...”⁵³ This notion of the creature existing in the transcendent “from the beginning” is the Sophiological postulate.⁵⁴ The specifically ontological relevance of this is clearly seen in the dialectical contradiction⁵⁵ present in the Trinitarian ontology of Bulgakov, Milbank, and ilk: if the immanent is meant to carry vestiges of the transcendent, triune dynamic in its ontological-grammatical structure, then this dynamic must be present in both the *explanans* and *explanandum* of the theoretical edifice accounting for these immanent structures. In other words, the principles by which the “gulf” between immanent and transcendent is explanatorily crossed must be applicable to both sides of the bridge by which that gulf is crossed, if the triune grammar is to function as *explanans* in the first place. This is what Loudovikos means when he says that “there is no immediate relationship between the mystery of the Holy Trinity and these triadic structures. The Triune God in Himself is entirely separate from any possible ‘traces’ of Himself.”⁵⁶

Therefore, if immanent and transcendent share in a Trinitarian structural systematics, then this implies the transcendent, like the immanent, possesses such a structure. But it does not: the transcendent, more appropriately, already *is* such a structure. The Trinitarian ontology is therefore

not evidence for the Sophiological femininity of God, but is, in fact, identical to it. Trinitarian ontology is Sophiology's own restatement: for God to possess such a Trinitarian structure (which in turn echoes into the immanent), he must already have within himself this immanent "trinity." That is, he must have within himself the "I-You-It" dynamic which *already includes* the immanent within the transcendent plenitude. But this is simply the Sophiological hypothesis in different words. Sophiology is therefore left without any evidential base in the triune grammar—but, as the original argument implies, it is precisely this grammar which is held to be the basis for appealing to the Sophiological non-All to begin with. Milbank then cannot appeal to the triune grammar in explicating the Sophiological feminine logic of God because this feminine logic is already the Sophia by which he explicates his vision of the trinitarian ontology. It is simply no wonder that the Sophiologists, in Loudovikos' words, have systemic difficulty distinguishing between God and the world, their unshakeable pantheistic tendency: perhaps the "greatest error of the sophiologists [is] their inability to preserve the transcendence of God..."⁵⁷ Milbank's placing of the non-All in the Real—to use the Lacanian framework—in a word, leads him to the position whereby the immanent is *already* deified, in contrast to the co-essentiality notion which maintains that the immanent is merely deifiable, subject to voluntary cooperation with God.

Milbank anticipates this position, but in doing so merely illustrates rather than responds to the issue at hand. "A thing which depends through constitutive relation entirely on something else," Milbank claims, "would seem actually to be that something else even though it is not."⁵⁸ Milbank here counters the objection with the claim that the triune grammatical immanent in fact cannot entail such a pantheistic conclusion, on the grounds that there is a distinction between something like an *analogical* relation and a *metonymic* relation, that co-dependence does not entail co-incidence. In Sophiological terms, this may amount to the claim that Loudovikos' "pantheist"

objection confuses the created with the divine Sophia: it is precisely as divine that the feminine non-All of God is differentiated from the creaturely it always-already anticipates. And Milbank is probably right in this; it would be an overreach to suggest that analogical ontology as such entails pantheism. Yet Milbank's own brand of analogy, which places the non-All in the divine, plausibly does confuse the transcendent with the immanent. Even if Milbank is right that his notion of analogy does not slide into metonymy, the observation would still be a red herring: the distinction between divine and created Sophia does not clarify the confusion between immanent and transcendent but rather displaces it. The problem is not determining where divine Sophia ends and the created Sophia begins, but that the distinction itself rests on the prior coherence of the transcendent/immanent otherness already compromised by placing femininity in the Real—the Sophiological move proper. Milbank therefore divinizes creation by placing creation in the divinity in his Sophiological, trinitarian ontology. In doing so, then, Milbank divinizes the Symbolic.

Milbank's counter above all fails to escape the dogmatic theological tangles it entwines itself in, particularly in terms of Christology. This tangle is centered around the notion of "perichoresis." Christian theological notion of *περιχώρησις* (*perichoresis*), commonly translated as "mutual indwelling" and normally applied to solve the puzzles of unity-in-difference,⁵⁹ cannot be read identically in its Christological and Trinitarian registers. Critically, in Christology, the immanent and transcendent are united hypostatically; but, in the Trinity, perichoresis does not speak of a hypostatic union of divergent essences. To place this Christological immanent-transcendent unity in the Trinity is to read the immanent as though it is always already in the transcendent—that is, it is to read the Trinity Christologically. This is why Loudovikos can claim of Milbank, Hart, or Desmond,⁶⁰ that they err in speaking of a nature possessing no substance and no essence of its own: for them, it is as if "only one essence or substance is real; what is touched

by God exists only without a real essential otherness.” Consequently, Loudovikos continues, these thinkers struggle “to keep both ontological sides of God intact, to wit, His unchangeable essence and His many essential realizable potencies *ad extra*, which derive from the essence without being identified with it...”⁶¹ The Trinity also becomes a union of Creator and created when couched in the Christological union of the two.⁶²

It is therefore in connection to this that Loudovikos mentions that Sophiology as practiced in the Russian religious philosophical school at the end of the nineteenth century—from which Milbank and other colleagues freely identify with—is not Patristic.⁶³ Milbank seems to concur:

Christ as in two natures has finally blended the divine and the created Sophia... [such that] What this adds to Chalcedon is subtle but crucial[:] it is not satisfactory merely to say, with Chalcedon, that Christ is divided by nature and united by person or character. For this suggests that he is in one aspect (the personal) the God-Man or incarnate, but in another aspect (the natural), he is not.⁶⁴

Loudovikos’ judgment must be shared here, given that this appraisal is meant to position Milbank relative to the Orthodox synergistic picture outlined before. From a dogmatic, Patristic, standpoint, it should be obvious that, of all dogmas, Chalcedon is particularly important to preserve in the form in which it is presented and should not be modified in any way. It is a mistake to think that the dogmatic formulation suggests a passivity on behalf of the immanent which destabilizes the creature and threatens to remove its status as independent and responsive to God on its own terms.⁶⁵ The God-Man is not a union of divine and human natures, because the dyophysite—that is, Orthodox—picture necessitates it. Recall the words of John of Damascus: “if Christ had one compound nature after the union... then He is neither consubstantial with His Father, who has a simple nature, nor with His Mother, because she was not composed of divinity and humanity.”⁶⁶ The various confident and penetrating responses Milbank gives to Loudovikos⁶⁷ therefore simply cannot be entertained as dogmatically legitimate. If the Chalcedonian creedal statement leads to

such an unacceptable ontological result as Milbank suggests, the Church would have erred in accepting it, and in so doing would have problematized its very status as Church.

What would be dogmatically valid would be the analogical systematics which follows the words of Theodore the Studite, to take but a sample from the Prelude's discussion. The transcendent and the immanent, he says, do not share a nature or an essence, and in this respect the analogy/hyperbole of being cannot be entertained as Patristic: "Just as Christ is distinguished from the Father by His hypostasis, so He is distinguished from His image by His essence."⁶⁸ As image, creation does not participate in God's essence; this is the Patristic contention. As Loudovikos expounds, "No other presupposition is required here, as the divine creative act is radical, unexpected, and groundbreaking—God puts his freedom in the core of a radically new and different being."⁶⁹ Analogy, he continues in the same place, "ultimately functions as dialogue between man and God and not as a kind of passive reflection of divine harmony upon creation." Analogy is "finally linked with synergy" in that "analogy reveals us a God Who acts dialogically, i.e., analogously, proportionately to His creatures' needs and capacities and does not impose Himself upon them as a distanced supreme Being."⁷⁰ The broad significance of these statements to Milbank's ontology is that the Trinity simply does not function explanatorily; the transcendent does not radiate its own internal structure into the immanent, but stands as a synergistic invitation for the immanent (for creatures) to take up.

With these critical appraisals in place, it is now time to move into a much more playful tone. This has to do with what relation is left between Orthodox synergy and Žižek's denontology. The following chapter will outline a proposal for how the Mother of God—the very quintessence of the immanent in Patristic terms—cuts through the notion that the Žižekian has sound ontological grounds on which to reject Orthodoxy.

¹ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 75.

² Moore, *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics*, 540.

³ Moore, following the previous Note, favors the softer variant.

⁴ Steiner, *Real Presences: Is there anything in what we say?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 120.

⁵ This is the one Moore favors in *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics*, 539ff.

⁶ It is “The only word for this is ‘preposterous.’” See Moore, *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics*, 541.

⁷ The reference to this close paraphrase is found in Note 70 in Chapter 1 above.

⁸ See Note 11 in the Prelude for helpful background for this comment.

⁹ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 173. In this Žižek is in complete agreement with Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing*, xiii: post-structuralism is “predicated upon language as an instrument of control by a detached ‘spiritualized’ human self.” It is this which Žižek complains of when he says, in the same place, that “the ironic self-commentary and self-distance” of the post-structuralist poetic style “exists only to embellish some basic theoretical presuppositions.” Namely, that there is something, i.e. the speaking subject, *not* caught up in the “endless quasi-poetical variation[s]...”

¹⁰ The example is mind. The idea is found in Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ix. Lacan sees all truth as having the form of the Liar’s Paradox.

¹¹ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 177.

¹² To be sure, Milbank argues this much, too. Only that, here, the meta-level is not a static destination but an infinite ascent, and endless analogical progression.

¹³ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 178. The non-All, on Žižek’s formulation, is that which generates the *objet a*. “The *objet a*,” Žižek explains, “is thus the name for the ultimate unity of the opposites,” the unity between the ineffable and the effable, between noble and profane, visible and invisible, etc. See Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 39. This is the combination of Žižek’s Hegelian-Lacanian ontology: at the core of Hegel’s project is “a purely formal shift of transposing the tragic gap that separates the reflecting subject from pre-reflexive Being into this Being itself... [The] ultimate division is not the Subject-Object division, but the very division between division (of Subject-Object) and unity.” See Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 15.

¹⁴ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 495.

¹⁵ Perhaps, more precisely, this should go: all words signify each other until they signify the void. I have just cut the middleman, as the saying goes.

¹⁶ The example assumes the stronger version of the distinction which Žižek plausibly avoids; nevertheless, Žižek’s own position that there are only object-languages ends up complicating matters, as I will try to show.

¹⁷ Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, 241.

¹⁸ Desmond, *The Voiding of Being*, 260f. Paul Tyson picks up on this thesis in *Kierkegaard’s Theological Sociology*, 74, when he mentioned Harry Frankfurt’s (in)famous work on bullshitting: someone who speaks without regard to true/false is bullshitting, a notion that fits well with Desmond’s notion of “gibberish.”

¹⁹ Whatever this means, it is found in George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” in *The Orwell Foundation*, 2021. Accessed: April 18, 2021, <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/politics-and-the-english-language/>.

²⁰ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 76.

²¹ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 127.

²² Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality*, 120.

²³ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 213f. This is an elegant thesis for Žižek’s essays in his *Monstrosity* contributions.

²⁴ The following description will look a lot like the “Eucharistic ontology” employed by Pickstock in *After Writing*, with the caveat that Schemann’s formulae follow the co-essentiality criterion rather than the analogy of being or consubstantiality. See the Prelude for these disambiguations.

²⁵ Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, trans. Paul Kachur (Yonkers: SVS Press, 1987), 67.

²⁶ Schmemmann, *The Eucharist*, 66. Brian A. Butcher has recently published a study on the intersection of this liturgical theology with Western philosophical categories, particularly that of Paul Ricoeur, in Butcher, *Liturgical Theology After Schmemmann: An Orthodox Reading of Paul Ricoeur* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018). If Butcher’s project is successful, it provides evidence to the thesis in this study here: co-essentiality of the particularly Orthodox stripe—should this be what Butcher is after—allows for a range of dynamic readings of Western sources as a philosophical presentation of the liturgical theology in question here.

²⁷ Milbank’s fondness for universal salvation is obvious to anybody who reads his Twitter account. Milbank’s support for Hart’s recent argument in Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019) is likewise well-known. Milbank writes on Twitter, Feb 23, 2021: “Belief in

universal salvation does not [force us into] the trad[itional] assumption that most are damned [, which] encouraged people to write-off those they disliked as probably damned anyway. But if you realise God will never write anyone off, you can't either." And on July 27, 2020: "Eschatological teaching should also be looked at and ideally any notion of the eternity of hell be denied," adding in the following Tweet that "I see a link here between DB Hart's advocacy of universal salvation, Charles Taylor's diagnosis of hell doctrine as part of an inversion that institutionalised the personal rather than the initial revolutionary reverse (I. Illich) and the RO genealogy of decline after Scotus." See Milbank's Tweets on his page, accessed April 14, 2021, <https://twitter.com/johnmilbank3>.

For Hart, I fear that his analysis, too, is iatrogenic: if you take a look at the starting points of his discussion, freedom, personhood, or the doctrine of creation's historical development, *akolouthia*, you will see that each premise is sufficient—rather than necessary—to make his case for universal salvation. To take Hart's doctrine on freedom, as a sample, given in *That All Shall Be Saved*, 159-195: for Hart, to be free is inalienably tied to the good such that, should a creature not do good, they are thus not free. And if not free, the creature did not "do" it, in the morally thick sense of the term. Hart says: "if rational liberty consisted in simple indeterminacy of the will, then no fruitful distinction could be made between personal agency and pure impersonal impulse or pure chance." See Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, 173. God, on this picture, could not allow a creature to be damned, since it is not possible to be free in occupying such a damnable position. Yet this premise alone is sufficient for the universalist conclusion.²⁸ Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 258.

²⁹ Though, I take it that their scope is considerably wider; how wide, I am not sure.

³⁰ Loudovikos spends time, in a number of texts, making just this connection. Some of these citations will be provided in the argument in this section as they are necessary.

³¹ Milbank, "The Double Glory," 153. The diagram at the end of the previous chapter schematically presents this.

³² Bulgakov, *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, trans. Stephen Churchyard (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2020). Milbank supplies the introduction to the work, cited shortly.

³³ Bulgakov, *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, 3.

³⁴ Note 76 in Chapter 1 offers a partial tracing of the relevance of Puntel's analysis to Milbank.

³⁵ Puntel, *Structure and Being*, 28.

³⁶ Puntel, *Structure and Being*, 243.

³⁷ Puntel, *Structure and Being*, 430.

³⁸ Puntel, *Being and God*, 257.

³⁹ Puntel, *Being and God*, 261. To be sure, this set is never "reached"—it is metasystematic "all the way up."

⁴⁰ Puntel, *Structure and Being*, 244. Ortiz Hill, in *Rethinking Identity and Metaphysics*, 84ff., suggests that Russell's solution to the problem is to introduce a theory of types of variables such that, when an analytic contradiction arises, a meta-level of predication not included in the predication of the object-level function is introduced to "off set" or defer the contradiction: "According to the theory, no totality of any kind could be a member of itself. Therefore, the totality of classes in the world could not be a class in the same sense in which a class is a class." These classes cannot then be thought of as extensional. Markus Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology: Essays in German Idealism* (New York: Continuum, 2011), xxx, endorses Russell's theory of types for a conclusion similar to that of Žižek. "There can be no complete theory of anything," Gabriel says, "because every (rule bound) theory is constituted by a blind spot: it cannot both refer to the object of its domains and the rules that constitute it, because the constituting rules can only ever be the object of a higher-order theory." And so on, *ad infinitum*.

⁴¹ See Ch. 6 in Desmond, *The Voiding of Being: The Doing and Undoing of Metaphysics in Modernity* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 193-225. These are not to be understood as emendations of the "analogy" of being spoken of, but as the very upwardness/forwardness of the analogical movement as such. This picture is validated by Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, xvii: "It is possible to read this [transdialectical] metaphysics as the completion of Hegel's metaphysics as already a nihilism (as he himself sometimes describes it) in which final identity is only actual... as the infinite production of an unmediated residue of meaningless difference." Pickstock in *Aspects of Truth*, 111f. expresses the same viewpoint: Hegel's own background theoretical framework is both "patristic and Thomistic"; Hegel is one who "really" speaks "in favour of analogy, paradox, and the ultimacy of artistic representation."

⁴² Desmond, *God and the Between* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 117. Milbank offers analysis basically in agreement with this picture: "one should split the interpretive difference between Desmond and Žižek : in *formal* terms Hegel reduces all to unity, but in *substantive* terms he reduces all to difference." See "The Double Glory," 146. On 112, Milbank gives a broader evaluation: Žižek treats paradox—by which Milbank means "'analogy,' 'real relation,' 'realism' (regarding universals), or (after William Desmond) the 'metaxological'"—as though it were "merely a logical moment to be surpassed: its stasis must advance toward the dynamism of negative dialectics."

⁴³ Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus*, 79f.

⁴⁴ Indeed, both Ricoeur and Gadamer read Hegel this way as well. Ricoeur reflects that if we were to follow Hegel we must understand the history of hermeneutics itself differently—that is, we would be unable to locate, given Hegel’s hermeneutics, a historical position for Hegel himself. Hegel’s system cannot account for its own historicity: “we have never refute Hegel with arguments that reproduce moments recognized and surpassed in his speculative enterprise...” Hegel must simply be abandoned and not conquered through criticism: following Gadamer, there is no “absolute fusion” between history and truth and so the grounds on which Hegel’s counter would dig its heels in itself does not exist—that is, history and truth can never be fused even in such a way that this could function as the basis of a *reductio ad absurdum*. See Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* Vol. 3, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellaur (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 206 Note 14.

⁴⁵ See Milbank, “Foreword,” in Bulgakov, *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, xxiii.

⁴⁶ Bulgakov, *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, 97.

⁴⁷ See Ch. 3 in Bulgakov, *Sophia, the Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology*, trans. Patrick Thompson et al. (Hudson: Lindisfarne Press, 1993), 54-81. Loudovikos in *Church in the Making*, 191ff. cites also Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and the Ground of Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 252, and Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 196f. for statements to the effect that there is a fourth hypostasis in God, an eternal creature (the “divine Sophia”) which is the feminine aspect of the Godhead as creative, kenotic love, culminating in an actualized temporal creation (“creaturely Sophia”) as the realized and concretized love of God manifested *as immanent*.

⁴⁸ Milbank, “Foreword,” xxxiif.

⁴⁹ Bulgakov, *Tragedy of Philosophy*, 9. To connect this to the “heresiological” understanding of philosophy, Bulgakov claims that any attempt to make of this tri-unity (S-P-cop) a primordial unity is the untrue axiom making all of philosophy a tragedy. This is confirmed by Cunningham’s analysis in *Genealogy of Nihilism*, xxiif of the *aporia* of such “primordial unities”: all “philosophical dualisms “rest within a monism that governs their generation.”

⁵⁰ Once again, I take it that hyperbole, metaxology, theurgy, etc. are all equivalent restatements of analogy, for the purposes of this study. The proliferation of terms in the literature is difficult to synthesize into a single vocabulary.

⁵¹ See Slesinski, *Pavel Florensky: A Metaphysics of Love* (Yonkers: SVS Press, 1984), 206ff.

⁵² Loudovikos, *Church in the Making*, 19f.

⁵³ Loudovikos, *Analogical Identities*, 87.

⁵⁴ See Note 48 immediately above for the reference.

⁵⁵ See Markus Gabriel, *Transcendental Ontology*, 5: such a contradiction “arises when the motivational structure of a theory is incompatible with its manifest propositions,” whether at the level of axioms or of theorems, “without a direct, logical contradiction arising *within* the already established structure of the theory.”

⁵⁶ Note 31 above provides the reference.

⁵⁷ Loudovikos, *Church in the Making*, 202ff.

⁵⁸ Milbank, “Stanton Lecture 5: Participated Transcendence Reconceived,” 16.

⁵⁹ As in the unity-in-difference of the soul to the body, the natures of Jesus, or the “inseparable but not confused” unity of the divine persons. See B. Studer, “Perichoresis,” in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, eds. Angelo Di Berardino et al. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2014), 3:143.

⁶⁰ Loudovikos combines them, and Note 41 in the Prelude provides an external confirmation of their relevant mutual affinities.

⁶¹ See Loudovikos, *Eucharistic Ontology: Maximus the Confessor's Eschatological Ontology of Being as Dialogical Reciprocity* (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2011), 225 and 231 respectively. Milbank in *The Word Made Strange*, 85, confirms the reading: non-violent semiosis is truly “without substance.”

⁶² See Loudovikos, *Analogical Identities*, 24f. Loudovikos claims here that this picture is not so much pantheistic as *Monophysite*, asymmetrically eclipsing the essence of creation with the essence of the divine. See Aaron Riches, *Ecce Homo: On the Divine Unity of Christ*, 8, for an alternative reading of Monophysitism. Riches claims that Monophysitism is the mistaken generation of a *tertium quid*, claiming that a true unity “is no longer quite *verus Deus* or *verus homo*, but a blending into something else.” It is a strange mereological composite of divine-human (29f.). On 33, Riches couches his conclusions in Cunningham’s ontotheology/meontotheology dichotomy in his *Genealogy of Nihilism*. I have disputed the universality of this analysis, and intend this criticism to extend to Riches’ Christological analysis as well. See Note 82 in the Prelude for more.

⁶³ Loudovikos, *Church in the Making*, 179.

⁶⁴ See Milbank, “Sophiology and Theurgy,” in *Encounter Between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy*, 80. This is concurred by Henry Novello, *Passionate Deification: The Integral Role of the Emotions in Christ's Life and in Christian Life* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2019), 153, where he mentions that Bulgakov in *Lamb of God* correctly

raises the issue of how hypostasis and nature can be so clearly separated in Maximus' or Damascene's Christology. The question for Bulgakov is how divine kenosis can permit active, rather than simply receptive, communication between Christ's natures. In Novello's words, "What is essentially lacking is an adequately developed idea of kenosis that acknowledges the becoming of Christ's divine humanity through a process of interaction and mutual reception of the two natures." There is much in these reflections that are worth exploring further, but the conclusion of the co-essentiality criterion for Orthodoxy must maintain that the Council of Chalcedon not be modified or rejected; and this is exactly what Milbank and his Sophiological heirs do.

⁶⁵ Loudovikos makes this point in *Church in the Making*, 221f.

⁶⁶ John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition*, 3.3.

⁶⁷ Milbank, "Commentary: Ecumenical Orthodoxy—A Response to Nicholas Loudovikos," in *Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy*, 156-64.

⁶⁸ See Theodore the Studite, "Third Refutation of the Iconoclasts," C7.

⁶⁹ Loudovikos, *Church in the Making*, 215.

⁷⁰ Loudovikos, *Eucharistic Ontology*, 218f. Recall from the Prelude that this formulation was amended away from Loudovikos' favored "consubstantiality" to what Romanides calls "co-essentiality."

CHAPTER 3: Will the Real Orthodox Žižek, Please Stand Up?

Rapper and cultural icon Eminem (Marshall Mathers) released a song a generation ago titled “The Real Slim Shady,” where he (comically) details a selective process for filtering authentic from imitative versions of his troublemaking alter-ego, Slim Shady. But the point is not just comic, not proffered just as some goal for cultural posturing, ego-boosting, or commercial branding. The piece is rather more about the proper channels of communication in society: the “real” Slim Shady is not so much a packaged countercultural figure used as a platform for the “acting out” of teenage angst but instead a figure embodying something like the generational disconnect between children and their parents. Mary Eberstadt¹ marks the split in the following way: Mathers, rather than representing concerned parents’ accusations that he is the embodiment of social dysfunction and of what is going “wrong” with their kids, turns the tables on those parents themselves.

Mathers, in Eberstadt’s reading, poignantly points out the underlying hysteron-proteron in the parents’ claims: their children come to him and his music already thoroughly “gone wrong,” gone wrong because of their parents’ divorces, abuses, drug uses, neglect. His musical themes, Mathers argues, have already saturated the lives of these kids well before they ever bought one of his albums. Any attempt from these parents to “fix” these kids, Mathers implies, is self-defeating: their “return” to their family life and away from the likes of him and his music would be a return to the very conditions that lead those children to seek him out in the first place. The “split” is not between these parents and their children but with the parents themselves: their children function merely as “embodiments” of the strife which produced them, strife which now appears relational, but which really masks a deeper non-relation, the axis along which the parents cut (divorced?) their own lives in two.²

More accurately, it is in the ontological register that the “real” Slim Shady, in Mathers’ reading, is embodied by what for Žižek is the “line,” the fragmented nature of the formal systematics which “splits” being. Recall that this, for Žižek, signals the incompleteness of being itself. Recall, once again, that Žižek’s picture here is, at least in the valuation proposed here, deeply flawed. Yet something of his negative project can be endorsed by Orthodoxy, namely his position countering theurgic Neo-Platonism. Chiefly, by way of review, Žižek exposes a glitch in this structure by offering an alternative to the (me)ontotheological dichotomy Milbank and co. deem universal; it is this which John Caputo finds so objectionable in the Milbankian position, that ontology is a total disjunction between analogy of being or nihilism.

Milbank, in asserting an analogical superstructure which is meant to hyperbolically encapsulate the dialectical model, believes that Žižek can keep enough of his dialectical edifice intact while embracing the analogy of being—what Milbank in his *Monstrosity* contribution calls paradox. Milbank asks us to consider the “Catholic Žižek,” in

that there is a different, latent Žižek: a Žižek who does not see Chesterton as sub-Hegel, but Hegel as sub-Chesterton. A Žižek therefore who has remained with paradox, or rather moved back into paradox from dialectic. And this remaining would be sufficient to engender a Catholic Žižek, a Žižek able fully to endorse a transcendent God, in whom creatures analogically participate.³

It would stand to reason that the real Catholic Žižek, in Milbank’s terms, should be analogous to the real Slim Shady, whose formal features seem to conform to the “splitting” of being Žižek is so insistent on. But Milbank’s Catholic Žižek is an analogical ontologist, and as such it is implausible to consider such a figure to be the least part Žižekian. This is because it is this split which is the true import of Žižek’s position in his debate with Milbank: it is not that his position “wins out” over against Milbank’s, full stop, as by consuming it in its narrative scope or theoretical simplicity, but that the truth of the matter is the *difference between* their two views themselves. Since this is

Žižek's own position, he asserts his dominance precisely in that *his* position is the position that asserts this difference, perhaps as his own adjusted version of Desmond's *metaxu*.⁴

There therefore cannot be a Catholic Žižek of the kind Milbank is looking for. Such a position would synthesize competing views into a reconciling Third in a way which Žižek's system bars. This is the thrust of Žižek's reply to Marcus Pound's criticism that what is missing in Žižek's account is the "resurrection; without it abandonment has the final say. When this happens, one can identify with the other only in terms of abandonment, i.e., with a victim as victim."⁵ Pound here, like Milbank, is seeking to integrate Žižek into the analogical framework.⁶ To this Žižek responds that the critique still remains epistemological, failing to see the incompleteness as ontological: "in the 'negation of negation,' Spirit's negativity is not relativized, subsumed under an encompassing positivity; it is, on the contrary, the 'simple negation' that remains attached to the presupposed positivity it negated..."⁷ This is to say that the Žižek that moves into the Patristic experience is not a Žižek that requires such a drastic ontological makeover: since Orthodox synergy plausibly rejects the analogy of being, as Žižek does, the door is open, so to speak, for an exploration of what such a figure—an Orthodox rather than a Catholic Žižek—might look like.

At this point a return to the words of Terry Eagleton may be necessary: "Historical materialism is not an ontological affair... In theory, you could look forward to the inevitable triumph of the proletariat while spending several hours a day prostrate before a statue of the Virgin Mary."⁸ What is being claimed here is that even the dialectical materialist can venerate the Virgin Mother, too. The key to unlock this vault lies in the fecund words of Orthodox theologian Carrie Frederick Frost, who explains that the key to ontology is pregnancy: "In the pregnant maternal body, a mother cannot escape her embodied, incarnate nature... Pregnancy *is* physicality."⁹ Against this backdrop, the Orthodox Žižek is meant to be a two-storey construction, the ground

level consisting of the denial of the analogy of being, and the second floor consisting of the synergistic adjustment of Žižek’s system. Recall that the point here is not to suggest that dialectical materialism is a desirable ontology for Orthodox theology—far from it. It will not even be claimed that it is a plausible one; rather the claim is that, for the purposes of motivating a synergistic ontology as a third option between Žižek and Milbank, an Orthodox Žižek is a fruitful rhetorical project which makes good on Milbank’s search for a dogmatic piety somewhere in Žižek. It is just not what Milbank says it is; and the topic of this final, more playful chapter is to propose exactly what might be.

The Good Sommelier, II, or, The Orthodox Žižek: Pregnancy as objet a?

Nearly one hundred years ago Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali directed the short film *Un Chien Andalou*, a film made deliberately to obliterate causal and narrative connections between one scene and any other. Roger Ebert in a review of the piece explains its novelty, two sections of which are worth quoting at length:

The image of the moon was followed by the image of a man with a razor (Bunuel) slicing a woman's eye (actually a calf's eye—although legend has transformed it into a pig). The hand crawling with ants was followed by a transvestite on a bicycle, a hairy armpit, a severed hand on the sidewalk, a stick poking the hand, a silent-movie style sexual assault, a woman protecting herself with a tennis racket, the would-be rapist pulling the piano with its bizarre load, two apparently living statues in sand from the torso up, and so on. To describe the movie is simply to list its shots, since there is no story line to link them.

“No idea or image that might lend itself to a rational explanation of any kind would be accepted,” Bunuel remembered. “We had to open all doors to the irrational and keep only those images that surprised us, without trying to explain why.”¹⁰

It is not unreasonable to recruit Lacan or Žižek in unpacking this absurdist technique to develop what Graham Ward calls a “radically anti-narrativist” position: “for the [Real] remains forever excessive and anarchic to the symbolic order.”¹¹ The notion of an untellable tale calls to mind something like Tertullian’s infamous line: “And the Son of God died; it is by all means to be

believed, because it is absurd. And He was buried, and rose again; the fact is certain, because it is impossible.”¹² Much has been made of these lines, not to be surveyed here. However, the ontological result of relevance should be interpreted against the backdrop of Žižek’s impasse of formalization in the Symbolic: it is in the breakdown of the signifying system that the “unnameable object” (*objet a*) is paradoxically at once released and simultaneously blocked, repressed. The repression, this is to say, is no more repressed than it is in the very indulgence of its own enactment.¹³ This is the point of the drive, in Žižek’s terms, that it is an “elliptical movement around a certain void”:¹⁴ the void, when embodied in the *objet a*, cannot satisfy the drive since it is the very insatiability of the drive itself.

In parallel, Tertullian’s pregnant phrase can be taken as a lesson in dogmatic theology: Church dogma is never so true as it is when professed by one in the grip of the sin of spiritual delusion.¹⁵ The connotations of correction-in-delusion in the Russian прелесть or Serbian прелест (*prelest*), bring this reading to mind. In short, it is precisely when (say) I am in such delusion that the dogmatic pillars of the Church show their true sturdiness. In the synergistic register, it is exactly here when I cannot “see” the truth of the dogma, when I cannot be confronted by its immediate embodiment (the Real), where I require its symbolic formulation. But recall that what functions as the Real here—the breakdown of this symbolic formulation of a dogma—does not call for its reading as Void. Rather, what should instead be pinpointed is just this excessiveness to the symbolic order, only now in an entirely different theological index. It is, so this reading of Tertullian goes, my requiring the symbolic formulation which indicates a previous break down in my comportment to reality which is the very substance, and basis, of my delusion. And it is the symbolic formulation which corrects me and brings me to the excess beyond the symbol through synergistic co-labor with God. This is Schmemmann’s “sacramental word.”

It is in this theological index where *pregnancy* is open to bear ontological fruit sweet enough for Žižek's taste. Pregnancy has a *protractive* quality which Žižek has identified as a technique capable of producing an impasse of formalization which generates a glimpse of the Real.¹⁶ According to Žižek, protraction takes place when a scenario involves the extensive exposure to something, an overextended unfolding of that something, which prompts three stages of response. The initial curiosity stemming from the anticipation that the drawn-out exposure will be “recompensed” with a dramatic reward first turns to an overfamiliarity, frustration, banality, boredom—the reward is just not coming. This in turn forces the viewer to confront not what is shown in the scene but what is not, to interpret the anticipation of reward itself as the deficiency—what is extraordinary has been right here all the while. There is somewhat of an “uncanny valley” effect here: the ultralong exposure ends up stimulating the indwelling of the observer in the scene to the point at which a disruption occurs, one more intriguing than the initial curiosity inclining viewership of the piece.

Let us take a case that Žižek might recognize as his own.¹⁷ This protractive break down is illustrated perfectly in the 2008 film *Zack and Miri Make a Porno*, where the main characters, budding entrepreneurs (really, socially awkward and unwittingly in love flatmates who are broke and desperate) looking to make a quick fortune on the pornography circuit. After recruiting friends and hiring experienced actors, they proceed to clumsily shoot the scenes, one of which is between Zack and Miri themselves. Yet, shooting their own scene, the roommates, while in the act, discover their mutual love and end up not merely shooting an unmarketable scene—it is slow, tepid, eerily quiet, agonizingly intimate, uncomfortably vulnerable, from the viewer's point of view almost schizoid—a scene so utterly repugnant to the consumer that no “retake” could possibly correct it. It is precisely the imposition of the slow, prolonged, and amorous quietude characteristic of a long-

married couple which confronts the video editors with the unbearable and unformalizable truth: the distribution of ersatz intimacies on the sex trafficking market simply cannot survive the arrival of even the momentary glimpse at a true love, utterly unwatchable and, as such, unsellable. Yet more deeply it also exposes the pornographic at its most absurd, a mathematical cusp without unique existing tangent: it is the arrival of the genuine intimacy which in pornography can only ever be counterfeited that, in turn, renders the “sellable” scenes just as unwatchable; the real banality turns out to be not intimacy but its ineffectual, impotent, spectacular supplement. The unbearable moment embodying real intimacy, “true love,” is, perhaps in its most definitive presentation, a story which, like the Andalusian dog, is entirely untellable: the link between the lovers is unformalizable, unreproducible, always excessive to the voyeuristic distortion.¹⁸ And pregnancy is a prolongation which resists symbolization in just this sense, that the protractive overexposure to and plodding labor of the internal community it produces—the only of its kind¹⁹—repeats the three-stage, protractive progression. The initial shock turns into a feat of slow, difficult endurance, which in turn produces the protractive overexposure. This moment oxymoronically stabilizes only at the point where no coherence can be made, the realization that in its very commonality what is to be found is that exactly nothing else quite like it.

Žižek has in many places articulated the notion of Christ as *objet a*, the Symbolic’s own impasse, the cutting open of the Real. As this crisis point itself, Christ is the “vanishing mediator” who is the locus of the very disappearance of the transcendent: “the Christian Crucifixion confronts us with the absolute contradiction between content and form: its content (the self-annihilation of God, of any substantial Truth) is asserted in the form of a crucial act, a cut between ‘before’ and ‘after.’”²⁰ Christ as God Incarnate, to make Žižek’s case quite short, *cannot but* be misread, being in the position of formal impasse as he is: if there was a “true” reading, Christ cannot have the

status of *objet a*, of the Real as such; but Christ does have this status, and so there is no true reading. This is what Lacan means—and what Žižek picks up on—in his cryptic passage, that, if eating the book, as in the New Testament’s finale, *Revelation*, was the internalization of the symbol, then we can ask “Of him who ate the book and the mystery within it... the question: ‘Is he good, is he bad?’ That question now seems unimportant. The important thing is not knowing whether man is good or bad in the beginning; the important thing is what will transpire once the book has been eaten.”²¹ What Lacan is getting at is the obligatory misreading of the *objet a*, simply on the grounds that, as unsymbolizable, no authentically correct reading is conceivable. Frederick Depoortere summarizes Žižek’s point succinctly: “Translated into theological terms, this means, in Žižek’s view, that we should not expect any divine help anymore.”²² That is, Žižek takes this obligatory misreading to mean a *counter*-reading of the standard orthodox account.²³

Yet if what Žižek is approximating in his notion is the mere impossibility of symbolizing God, then there may lurk behind his atheism a Catholicism ready and able to be called forward—this is Milbank’s hope. Marcus Pound has in this vein proposed that Žižek “is best read as a Catholic feminist.”²⁴ Though it is, to recall the argument from earlier, Pound who seems to be “cheating” in his construction of a Catholic Žižek, since this makes the mistake of identifying the feminine as the pleromatic “excess” of the Real itself, essentializing the divine in the direction of the feminine divine Sophia. Žižek has clearly warned that the Lacanian program blocks just this move: “what Lacan aims at in his claim that *la femme n’existe pas*: although a woman is not defined by the negation of being-man, there is no substantial feminine identity.”²⁵ Pound’s formulation therefore incorrectly implies that what is lacking in the Symbolic is merely a lack of symbols, as if what was at stake in Žižek is a dire shortage of appropriate expressive devices to “capture” the divine, as though he was secretly Augustinian—that is, already Catholic—in his insistence of a

divine “Incarnational logic” of “confession” and “praise.”²⁶ This mistake is specifically Mariological: Bulgakov too insists that what is lacking in the Symbolic is just this shortage of appropriate symbols. Bulgakov incorrectly adjusts for this by suggesting that, in the Real, the symbols standing in for finitude itself—for the immanent—are included in the transcendent itself.²⁷

As “an object whose status is purely virtual, with no positive consistency of its own,” the *objet a* is “only a positivization of a lack in the symbolic order,”²⁸ and thus the shift to synergy is not substantive but rather a shift of direction. It is not that the Real is arrived at through the breakdown internal to the Symbolic, but that the Symbolic is formulated only after a prior disruption in someone’s relationship with the Real.²⁹ The Slavic notion of *prelest* is employed for just this reason: it is the prior estrangement from God (the Real) which calls for the inconsistent/incomplete supplementation of the Symbolic, which is itself always-already inadequate, self-limited. In Lacanian terms, the situation in which he sees “transference” as the movement from the unconscious (Real) into the conscious (Symbolic),³⁰ is simply inverted: the prior delusion, relational disruption, of someone with God (Real) is healed through the dogmatic formulations (Symbolic), bringing the deluded one back to God. The Symbolic, on this reversal, “transfers” to the Real. This functions as the therapeutic intervention meant to bring the deluded one into proper comportment with God, that is, into Communion with the human nature of Christ. In Tertullian’s words, we believe because it is absurd/impossible.

Here the Slavic *prelest* or spiritual delusion finds its proper place: it is the very misreading, not of Christ, but of his Virgin Mother which produces the theological error seen with Žižek. More precisely, it is his insistence that the “impossible” is a *misreading*. The “impossible” reading is rather, in Tertullian fashion, simply the correct one. This is why the “impossibility” of the Mother’s

Virginity is exactly what signals Christ to be not the self-annihilating God, as Žižek contends, but the God of dogmatic theology. In other words, the “misreading” of Mary simply *is* the correct reading of Christ, and it is the very failure to make sense of the Virgin Mother, the very “delusion” which obstructs her status as virgin-mother that necessitates the “impossible” reading’s accuracy. And this doubles against Milbank’s resistance to Chalcedonian Christology: the feminine is and always was simply in creation, not in God; and it is the human nature of God which is “impossibly” granted by Mary. But this impossibility is not God’s but rather Mary’s: as Christ’s only human parent, it is her humanity which is God’s humanity. To miss this, as the Sophiologists do, is to read all of creation as though it is Mary—reading her impossibility into the world as such—by placing the world (the created Sophia) as always-already in God (divine Sophia). And this is why Milbank cannot construct a Catholic Žižek: because the analogy of being disrupts the *carne* in Incarnation; it does not offer the grammar of the immanent. By contrast, co-essentiality does: it is Christ in his two natures which resists the analogy from his human to his divine nature. The relation between the natures, as it was stated in the Prelude above, is hypostatic, not essential.

It is therefore to be concluded that the real Orthodox Žižek can stand up, but only when offered a hand by the real Catholic Milbank.

¹ See Eberstadt, “Eminem is right: the primal scream of teenage music,” in *Policy Review*, no. 128 (2004), 19ff. Available:

<https://go.gale.com/ps/anonymouse?id=GALE%7CA126927388&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=01465945&p=AONE&sw=w>.

² Alenka Zupančič has called this the “shortest shadow.” The target here is the “split” in the One, the internal cut which produces not an Other but simply more of the same: “What follows from the logic of the One is, to put it simply, a non-relationship to the Other.” See the chapter “...via Double Affirmation...” in *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche’s Philosophy of the Two* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 132-149, especially 133.

³ Milbank, “The Double Glory,” 113. Note 33 in the Prelude explains the putative relation between Catholicism and the analogy of being.

⁴ Žižek makes this a little more palatable in *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 4: the “parallax view” is an illusion which features a “constantly shifting perspective between two points between which no synthesis or mediation is possible.” And in Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 47: “There is a truth, and not everything is relative—but this truth is the truth of the perspectival distortion *as such*, not a truth distorted by the partial view from a one-sided perspective.” Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth*, 111f. says that Hegel’s own background theoretical

framework is both “patristic and Thomistic” that there is a Hegel who speaks “in favour of analogy, paradox, and the ultimacy of artistic representation.”

⁵ Pound, *Žižek*, 52.

⁶ Pound’s approach is to relocate the “secondary contradiction” of Žižek’s challenge to doxological Christianity *into the Church itself*: that is, to transpose the full range of difference separating him from “Catholicity” back within that Catholicity itself—not to recover from Žižek a workable system, but to forge *in Žižek* a Catholic worth the name. See Pound, *Žižek*, 1.

⁷ Žižek, “Afterword,” in Pound, *Žižek*, 155. Pages 46ff. in the main text above and appended Notes dispute this Kantian reading of Pound. The point here is rather that Žižek’s ideas cannot be synthesized into a greater ontological harmony—this is the purpose of the barred “Third.”

⁸ Eagleton, *Materialism*, 8.

⁹ Frost, *Maternal Body: A Theology of Incarnation from the Christian East* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2019), 33. There are differences, of course, between physicality, materiality, and immanence, all of which have been clumped in this study. I ask this to be excuse; the focus on immanence here is meant to cut through the terminological variance.

¹⁰ Roger Ebert, “Un Chien Andalou,” *Ebert Co.*, April 16, 2000, accessed Nov. 24, 2020. Available: <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-un-chien-andalou-1928>.

¹¹ Ward, *Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 162.

¹² Tertullian, “On the Flesh of Christ,” 5.4, in Philip Schaff, *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume III. Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1885), 525. This is quoted also in Creston Davis’ “Introduction,” 15, in *Paul’s New Moment*.

¹³ See Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, 143.

¹⁴ See Note 13 in Chapter 2.

¹⁵ Perhaps one of the more dramatic moments in C.S. Lewis’ career—at least to me—run in parallel to this claim: “Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy’s will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.” See Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (HarperCollins e-books), 40.

¹⁶ Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2009), xiiiiff. Protraction is one of three identified techniques capable of producing an *objet a*, the other two of which are not useful here. Note that protraction is not about capturing *duration*, as though Neo-Platonist ontology cannot handle temporal passage.

¹⁷ Žižek’s examples are so often not for the weak of stomach. See Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 19f. for a particularly raunchy one. I hope my appeal to Žižek’s sense of humor is forgivable.

¹⁸ From an opposing theological perspective quite a similar point is made in Alain Badiou and Nicholas Truong’s *In Praise of Love*, trans. Peter Bush (New York: The New Press, 2012), especially 5-11.

¹⁹ This is, in itself, a mark of the Real, the genus with only one species. See Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2009), 103: “This is why—as Hegel puts it—the Universal genus is always *one of its own species*: there is universality only in so far as there is a gap, a hole, in the midst of the particular content of the universality in question, that is, in so far as, among the species of a genus, there is always one species missing: namely, the species that would adequately embody the genus itself.”

²⁰ Žižek, “Dialectical Clarity,” 266. Frederick Depoortere has catalogued Žižek’s notion of “vanishing mediator” in *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy: Gianni Vattimo, René Girard, and Slavoj Žižek* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2008), specifically 121ff. See generally 123-134 for a characterization of this notion. The vanishing mediator is one which connects two separate entities, only to end up, through their connection, disrupting their very separateness. The mediated entities then blend into one another. For Christ as *objet a*, see Žižek’s comments in *Less Than Nothing*, 112: “Christ is not a Master Signifier, but the *objet a*, occupying the position of the analyst: an embarrassing excess, answering questions with jokes and riddles that only confound his listeners further, already acting as his own blasphemy.” And on 619: Christ is to be understood as the “pure individual, not characterized by positive properties which would make him ‘more’ than an ordinary human; the difference between Christ and other humans is purely virtual.”

²¹ Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 325.

²² Depoortere, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy*, 123.

²³ Milbank is therefore exactly right when he says that “What matters is not so much that Žižek is endorsing a demythologized, disenchanting Christianity without transcendence, as that he is offering in the end (despite what he sometimes claims) a heterodox version of Christian belief.” See Milbank, “The Double Glory,” 111.

²⁴ Pound, Žižek, 20. The rationale for this was given in Ch. 1, *The (White) Magic of Theurgy: Milbank and the analogical restoration*, above.

²⁵ Žižek, *Hegel in a Wired Brain* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 183.

²⁶ These points are borrowed from James K. A. Smith in *Speech and Theology*, 116. My intention has been to use “Catholic” with the full range of ambiguity it carries today: both as a proper name for the confessionally Catholic Church and as an abstract noun for the universal body of believers. It is in the latter form which I employ it here, the form which must be advocated by Milbank, as well.

²⁷ See Thomas Allan Smith’s introduction in Sergei Bulgakov, *The Burning Bush: On the Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God*, trans., ed., Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), xxi: Bulgakov “wants to understand what it is in matter itself, and specifically in the human being, that permits, facilitates and in an indirect sense brings about direction communication and communion with God.” Bulgakov’s unsatisfying rationale for this has already been discussed.

²⁸ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 598.

²⁹ Christos Yannaras makes this point in *Relational Ontology*, trans. Normal Russell (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2011), 9.3.1, that the ontological horizon of interpretation is the “realization of the rational subject in the space of the Other.” Yannaras’ analysis here provides much of the unspoken underpinning of this chapter.

³⁰ See Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 123ff. for a longer discussion on the matter.

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