

BOOK REVIEW

Slavoj Žižek. *Sex and the Failed Absolute*. Bloomsbury, 2019, pp.499. ₹1540

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The “minimal reflexivity that cuts from within every immediate orgasmic One” is the theme of *Sex and the Failed Absolute*. The title suggests intersection of readings: “1) when religion or any other belief in an Absolute fails, unbridled hedonism imposes itself as a way to some kind of ersatz Absolute; 2) because of the inconsistent nature of sexuality, its elevation into the new Absolute necessarily fails” (1). The formal nature of reflexivity, discussed in the text, is complex. It exhibits an unorientable structure. The unorientable surface does not allow any stable position because anything that passes on to it is reverted to its originary position as a mirror image. The primary proposition of the book is that the theoretical space of dialectical materialism is a complex space involving an auto-associative circular motion, reverting to itself and differentiating it with other pseudo-dialectical materialism that affirms the nature of reality as perpetual labour of contradictions. Žižek invokes materialism because the dynamics of the intangible immaterial can be understood as “totally contingent, aleatoric, inorganic, purposeless, and in this sense non-spiritual” (7). * ISSN: 2581-9526 *

The unorientables associate with warped and arched surfaces. The book explains the fundamental structures of unorientable surfaces in four parts, each beginning with a theorem and followed by a corollary and a sequence of scholia. Each Theorem articulates a philosophical thesis and the thesis is mentioned in a corollary that exposes the outcomes. The ensuing sequence of scholia carries the explanatory comments applying the fundamental thesis to a specified topic. Explaining the structure of the book as replicating the fundamental ontological matrix, Žižek writes: “a theorem stands for the universal genus, a universal axiom; its corollary stands for its species (following Hegel’s claim that, ultimately every genus has only one species); this one species is in antagonism with its genus, there is imbalance between the genus and its species

because there is no second species that would complement the first one so that the two would form a balanced Whole. This lack of the second species is then filled in by the multiplicity of contingent scholia” (12).

The fate of contemporary ontology and the foundational elements of parallax are explained in Theorem I. The new millennium has seen the emergence of new ontologies following the inspiration of anti-deconstruction. These ontologies attempt to part from deconstructionist self-reflexive investigation to articulate an affirmative posture of reality. Žižek rejects this by cautioning and emphasizing the failure of these ontologies based on the stalling nature of reality that can be perceived in the intricate parallax gap between the ontic and the transcendental. The idea of reality as a Whole of being and the concept of transcendental horizon arbitrate our entrée to reality. The Kantian gap differentiating the world of actualizations from the thing-in-itself is positioned in reality. The ontologically represented epistemic fissure can be located in Hegel. Parallax ontology is Hegelian proposition that the substance poses as a subject.

Reality is configured in the intuitive disengagement of realist and transcendental aspects. The contradictions encircled within the antinomies of reason transpire as humans endeavour to perceive transcendental reality. Given the manner of subjective significations, Kantian noumenal “things-in-themselves” are incomprehensible. Between absolute freedom and causal regulations, our cognition enters an impossible deadlock. Kantian antinomies signify our limitations in comprehending the transcendent absolute. Moving from Kant to Hegel, Žižek explains these boundaries as coextensive with the manners of the Absolute. The interconnection does not merely end between antinomies and reason and its transcendental position. It is part of transcendental reality itself. Our understanding is not exceeded by antinomies as lack of reason but by recognizing our lack as embedded into reality itself. Is the completeness of reality real? How do we imagine the Absolute with the presence of ethico-political possibilities of freedom?

In Corollary I, Žižek explores the progression from Kant to Hegel accentuating on intellectual perception and intellectual archetypes. Invoking German Idealism, Žižek explains self-reflexivity as a complex schematic of subjectivity appropriate to logical perception. Hegel is placed in opposition to Kantian transcendental idealism. Fichte’s and Schelling’s intellectual intuition is presented as the proximate distinctiveness of subject and object. Kantian notion of the

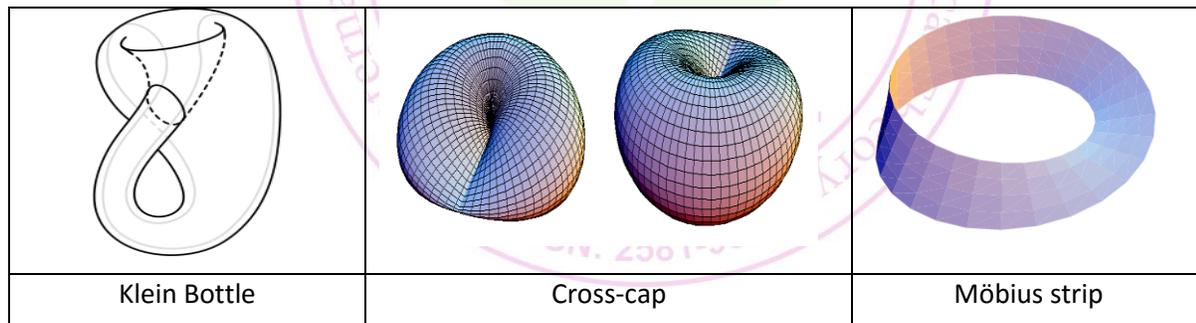
impossibility of intellectual perception refers to the impracticality of accessing the noumenal. It is the causation of a free subject. The fissure between actualization and thing-in-itself is foundational to the freedom of a subject. Ignoring Fichte and Schelling, Žižek highlights Hegel's supposition that emphasizes substance as subject. Accordingly, the gap is representative of an ontologized subject and the ensuing freedom. The gap embodied in the substance shapes a subject without parallax gap.

In Theorem II, Žižek attempts to answer to impasse he identifies in Theorem I. One redoubles the parallax gap by transforming it into the substance it yearns to be. The space in which the redoubling takes place, for humans, is sexuality. For him, sexuality is the "privileged contact with the Absolute." Truthful to Lacan, Žižek deciphers sexuality as a negative force disrupting the ontological. Sexual difference as "pure" difference is an intricate space that evades any binaries. Žižek analyses sexual difference from the stand point of Kantian antinomies of pure reason and the related difference between mathematical and dynamic Sublime. Kant emphasizes the intricate antinomic nature of reason and "sexualizes pure Reason" to infect it with sexual difference.

Žižek also demonstrates the association between parallax ontology and sexuality. While in Theorem I he reorders the epistemological into ontological, in Theorem II Lacanian sexualisation and Kant's antinomies are parallelly placed. In Lacanian psychoanalytic presentation, sexuality lacks completeness. Sexuality is the immediate experience and imaginary universe of incompleteness with which we encounter the absolute. It is a conspicuous moment where schematic configurations are challenged and we witness the impossible nature of reality. Lacanian principles of sexualisation is characterized into two fundamental impossibilities: masculine and feminine. These two foundational impossibilities affirm the Whole without foreclosure. The assertion of the Non-all occurs as part of being the Whole. The experience of these impossibilities transpire in the phenomenal as sublime. Here, Žižek underlines the association between Freudian pleasure principle and death drive. Identifying the difference within the fissure of genus, he reminds that the segregation of Lacanian *objet a* is representative of the fissure.

Corollary 2 emphasizes the complex structure of sexualized time, a time that returns repetitively to the starting point. Žižek recognizes this subjective circular temporality in the realm of video games and films.

Theorem III enunciates the outlines of this complex space in three forms (*unorientables*), “the Möbius strip, the cross-cap, and the Klein bottle” mirroring the triad of Hegelian Logic: being, essence, notion. The Möbius strip, representative of notional coincidence, with its opposite, offers the perpetual trajectory of an idea into its opposite. Möbius strip is a prototype of ontological impossibility/unorientable, the locus of inconclusiveness invoking figurative choice. The cross-cap, the parallax ontological space with a break, interfaces a break in this perpetuity allowing a relationship between contradictions of reflection. Cross-cap, the incoherent position—the *objet a*, the +, allows the entry of pure difference, the difference between actualization and essence. The Klein bottle, the reflexive reversal of the fissure, introduces subjectivity where the sphere of reflexivity is carried to the Absolute, the cause is nullified. The reversal flips the inside into its opposite, outside through the “snout” reaching that two forms of universal genus, a sub genus and its self.



Žižek elaborates his political ontology with different examples (politics of fascism, institutional orders of Church and state, quest for identities) to suggest that Hegelian metaphysics of immanent incongruences of object is placed outside of auto-impossibility. Integrating ontological incompleteness with intangibility is a fundamental nature of reality whose organic accord is stated by dereliction. If reality is not complete, any significations attempted has to be an “excess of abstract negativity.” This “excess of abstract negativity” cannot be assimilated into tangible totality. Žižek also highlights the Lacanian “barred subject” which is symbolically castrated so as

to dissociate from any possible ontology. It is constitutive of subjectivity and not the subjugative unconscious paving the trajectory for representation. This subject is an interpellated subject. The symbolically castrated subject is the directly accessible presence of this metaphysical lack.

Corollary 3 explains the unorientable structure in quantum physics, the differences that detaches reality from the “virtual Real of quantum waves.” This difference challenges the established ontologies forming an (anti)ontological version of reality following Klein bottle model. The sequence of paradoxical objects actualizes a lack and the excess and their unperceivable relationship. Žižek also deliberates quantum physics as a parallax ontology from the Klein bottle perspective. Similar to his discussion on Kant’s transposed antinomies from the epistemological to the ontological, in quantum physics, the wave function explains epistemic possibilities of levels of quantum configuration. Following Rovelli, Žižek argues that these possibilities are indited in actuality as ontological possibilities.

Theorem IV summarizes the philosophical intention of the book, the impotency of abstraction (“of radical negativity which cannot be “sublated” into a subordinated moment of concrete totality”) in three ways: the excess of madness as the perpetual source of human reason, the excess of sexual passion that jeopardizes any steady relationship, the excess of war which challenges the ethics of communal life. By stating these, Žižek introduces the irreducibility of subjectivity into assemblage theory. Hegel’s “concrete universality” assumed to have grounded both in perceptibles and in reality. Reality is embedded with empirical and perceptual certainties alongside epistemic reflections.

Corollary 4 presents a theologico-political deliberation on the ethical inferences of dialectical materialism.

Anyone acquainted with Žižek’s Hegelian interpretations might find many of the propositions discussed in his previous works. Has Žižek’s repeated propositions developed and refined his contribution? Yes and no. Nevertheless, he has offered us a compelling perspective on dialectical materialism. Is the book “rigorous” and “new” as it proposes? With the mention of popculture, presence of Žižekian habitual dark jokes and Wikipediaean paraphrasing, the text is not entirely “rigorous” or “new.”

Žižek presents reality, invoking Hegel, Lacan and Marx, as the outcome of incompleteness, a forceful inadequacy with which the cul-de-sac of sexuality is the proximate locus of contact. He explores the interchange of epistemological gap into reality. He identifies a fissure in reality that produces a segregation of the universal into particular and remainder, together signifying universal genus. Inclining on Hegelian and Lacanian scholarship, he challenges Kantian and neo-Kantian interpretations. While following metaphysical method in his text, Žižek criticizes existent metaphysical discourses. Žižek's "unorientables" does not contribute to the orientation to parallax ontology in its elucidatory form. While some of these unorientables were used by Hegel and Lacan, it further contributes to the convoluted nature of the argument Žižek puts forward. Moreover, his discussion on quantum physics in Corollary 3 can be considered incomplete in the light of contemporary propositions, debates and interpretations.

Is Žižek's new materialism politically viable? Dialectical materialism is the operative of a constitutive impossibility which is positioned at the abstract core of things, an incompleteness which function as a paradoxical condition for self-production. Dialectical materialism is a viewpoint recognized for being inconclusive about the dithering essence of the universe. The author recognizes disjointedness and incompleteness augmented by conditional alterations that transpire out of clear schematics resulting in lapses or imperfections. Incongruences remain pervasive and are irreducible to binaries. They are constitutive as it is the essence of inconsistent elements. Assuming reality in totality circumvents its own impossibility. Reality is perceived as a failure so as to appropriate itself and its incompleteness. The transcendental, however, actualizes the coordinates of reality. Kant reminds that reality is configured by cognition of the subject. Accordingly, the fundamental reality of elements, the thing-in-itself, is irreducible and unperceivable.

The four Theorems schematically challenges the ontological question. The introductory phase offers the explanation of the fissure in the affirmative order of being and the manner in which the rupture is augmented by the transcendental. The first phase is a rounded movement of intensifying the fissure as the singular nodal point of connection with the Absolute (for humans sexual experience as a point of contact is a let-down experience). The second phase sketches the

topological configuration of this complex intensifying of the rupture in unorientable surfaces. The third phase deals with the concept of inhuman subject limited within the impersonal collective of elements and processes.

