

## FRIARS' BOOKSHELF



PIETRO DELLA VECCHIA - ST. DOMINIC AND THE DEVIL

## NEGATING THE NEGATIVE

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK TO ST. THOMAS

Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*. New York: Verso, 2012.

Slavoj Žižek is something of a sensation. Known as the “the Elvis of cultural theory,” this Slovenian philosopher is adored and abhorred by the political right and left. *Less than Nothing*, which he describes as his “true life’s work,” is something of a culmination of his thought up to this point. In the book one finds everything that makes Žižek so interesting, for good or ill. Refreshing politically incorrect positions: “OK, enough of this muddle about neo-colonialism, the responsibility of the West, and

so on—do you want to do something to really help the millions suffering in Africa, or do you just want to use them to score points in your ideologico-political struggle?” Paradoxical yet significant statements: “The first gesture of a genuine materialism is not to deny the divine, but, on the contrary, to deny that there is such a thing as ‘mere (animal) life.’” Unabashed overstatement: “The whole art of Thomas Aquinas culminates in a form of sophistry designed to reconcile the literal meaning of the Bible with the demands of a hierarchical society.” And inappropriately violent rhetoric: “Crazy, tasteless even, as it may sound, the problem with Hitler was that *he was ‘not violent enough,’* his violence was not ‘essential’ enough.” What you will unfortunately not find in this book is an editor. The work reads as if Žižek kept a tape recorder around him while reading aloud various books on a whole tapestry of topics: Christianity, Communism, Marxism, quantum physics, cognitive science, political theory, sexology, psychiatry, “and so on and so on.”

But as longwinded and unnecessary as much of the book is, there is a theme and guiding principle: the dialectic of Hegel as fundamental to reality. This is the reference of the title, Hegel’s notion of “the negation of negation” as a positive return of an original position in a new way. And Žižek does, for the most part, make this dialectic intelligible through interpretations of two important thinkers: G. W. F. Hegel (1770—1831) and Jacques Lacan (1901—1981).

#### THESIS – FOR HEGEL AND LACAN

**A**lthough separated by time, nationality, and discipline, Žižek shows that both Hegel and Lacan develop their ideas through the dialectic, that three-part system of thesis—antithesis—synthesis illuminated by Hegel himself. With Hegel we learn about the dialectic; with Lacan we learn how to use it in our lives.

Žižek spends much of this work, in good didactic style, teaching and giving examples of what Hegel’s dialectic is all about.

According to a standard school yarn, Hegel's dialectic is about a compromise of two opposing views: the combination of a thesis and an antithesis brings about synthesis. Žižek calls this the "synthesis of opposites" view and opposes it to a correct reading of Hegel:

When, in Hegel's dialectics, we have a couple of opposites, their unity is not a Third, an underlying medium, but *one of the two*: a genus is its own species, or, a genus ultimately has only one species. (144)

**I**n simpler terms: first there is a position (something), then it is negated by its opposite (nothing), then this negation is itself negated, reinstating the position in a different way (less than nothing as something, but differently).

An example makes this clear(er): For Žižek, Hegel is "the ultimate Christian philosopher" precisely because Christianity to Hegel is this negation of a negation. It is the dialectical synthesis of the Jews and the Gentiles. According to him, before Christ, God was known as a transcendent Lawgiver, who created and ruled the world as the Supreme Being (the position of the ancient Israelites). This form of theism can be submitted to negation, to an antithesis: there is no transcendent being, there is no God: atheism (the pagans). Until Christ's coming these two options were in eternal strife with one another: the Jews and the Gentiles. But Christ brings about their true synthesis through Hegel's "speculative Good Friday": God must declare himself dead in order to be re-experienced as the Holy Spirit. Jesus' death on the cross, for Hegel, is this self-declaration of God's death; it allows for the Spirit to go beyond the theism-atheism duality, for God to be re-inscribed into history *as something different*.

The monstrosity of Christ, this contingent singularity interceding between God and man, is proof that the Holy Ghost is not the big Other surviving as the spirit of the



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community after the death of the substantial God, but a collective link of love without any support in the big Other. (232)

If Hegel denies the God outside of us in order to make room for the coming of the Spirit, Jacques Lacan denies the God in us, the unconscious, in order to make room for the Subject. The dialectic goes like this. The basic position of psychology is of a stable self: we are in control of our thoughts and desires (thesis). Then Freud showed that our egos are anything but stable. Rather, they are

in constant tension with our *superego* (the moralistic norms we inherit) and our *id* (the pleasure-principles we are born with). Our thoughts and actions are the various victories of these two entities of our unconscious (antithesis). Finally, Lacan makes the properly Hegelian move of affirming this negation by going beyond it in a negation of the negation; he believes in the unconscious, not as external forces from nature or nurture, but as a fundamental split *in the subject himself* (Lacan's symbol for this is \$). Unlike Freud, Lacan makes the split between conscious and unconscious desires *internal* to the subject, not subject (*ego* in Freud) versus unconscious, but subject that *is* unconscious *and* conscious.

This is why the Lacanian 'decentered subject' does not imply the kind of de-centering usually associated with psychoanalysis: 'there is something in me more than myself, some foreign power which runs the show, so that I am not responsible for my acts...' If anything, Lacan insists on the subject's total responsibility: I am responsible even for acts and decisions of which I am not aware. (551)

Here we find the Hegelian third as a negation of the negation: a return to the absolute responsibility of the subject/self by means of the immanentization of the unconscious. The eternal strife between consciousness and unconsciousness is dialectized in Lacan's \$.

#### ANTITHESIS – AGAINST HEGEL AND LACAN

This is fine and good and interesting ... but what of the truth? Are Hegel and Lacan compatible with Catholicism, or even Christianity? The answer seems to be a resounding "No," any attempt at recognition a ruinous project undertaken only by those already atheist at least in their unconscious thought.

Take Hegel for instance. He champions Christianity as the "absolute religion," and his theory of crucifixion is intriguing, but

what about the resurrection? Did not St. Paul say that if Christ was not raised, then our faith is in vain, that we are to be counted as the most pitiable of men (cf. 1 Cor 15:13-19)? Hegel's Trinitarian thought leaves the Second Person in the grave to make way for the Third; yet one of the mysteries of our faith is that "Christ will come again," not to mention his current reign as the resurrected, living King. In short, the negation of the Father by the Son cannot be merely a negation. Hegel's thought appears to fall into some form of modernist modalism.

And Lacan? His notion of God as the big Other, the unconscious symbolic authority behind our immediate desires, may explain some neurotic religious practice and morality; but is it true that there is no "big Other" outside of us at all? This new formula of atheism is impossible for a Christian to accept or believe.

#### SYNTHESIS – BEYOND HEGEL AND LACAN TO ST. THOMAS

One of the definitions of *aggiornamento* is "to update." And this updating process is by no means new; in fact, St. Thomas is a good example of how exactly it should work. One part of his genius was to take previous knowledge and develop it through an infusion of the truths of the Catholic faith. His synthesis of Aristotle and the Catholic faith is a perfect example: St. Thomas took up the impressive metaphysical thought of Aristotle, removed what was irreconcilable with the faith, and purified what was left. While Thomism is not the only way of doing theology, it is not without reason that the Church refers to St. Thomas as the *doctor communis*, the Common Doctor. In a similar way, perhaps both Hegel and Lacan can be "updated" with the thought of St. Thomas, bringing out what is beneficial and true in their thought.

Hegel's "speculative Friday" is not necessarily a denial of God *per se*, but a denial of a god, a god that shows up frequently in the polemics of atheists. This is a god who is a mere inflation of one's own understanding, a god after one's own image. In the *Prima pars* of the *Summa theologiae* St. Thomas insists that God is not



a finite being like us, but is *ipse esse per se subsistens*: subsisting being itself. God is not an entity that can be categorized or collected under some classificatory system; he is the very act of being itself, a verb, so to say, who is the source of all nouns. God is not a thing among others, no matter how superior or special; he is wholly Other. Hegel's notion of crucifixion admits as much: his speculation on the cross is aimed at putting this idea of a finite god to eternal rest. But Hegel must be updated; the death of this god does not herald atheism but the presence of the real God, the one Christians call Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is we who are made towards his image, not the other way around. Hegel's insight into Christianity's absolute truth remains correct: only Christianity, with its notion of a God beyond our limited imaginations, avoids idolatry.

Lacan too, although with more difficulty, can be of help with his notion of the split subject (\$). St. Thomas's *Prima secundae* revolutionized Christian ethics by including as principles of human morality the Beatitudes as well as the Gifts and Fruits of the Holy Spirit. Human morality is not a law-following endeavor, whether the laws come from external (Freud) or internal (modern subjectivist ethics) sources. The moral life of one person living virtuously is the work of two: the human person and the Holy Spirit. By the grace of God working through the Spirit in one's life, the Christian does the things that he cannot do by himself. Lacan's \$ provides a model of this interpersonal psychology even though he denies its specifically Christian content.

Hegel and Lacan, and perhaps even Žižek, are not necessarily our intellectual enemies, but merely modern partners searching for Truth and in need of correction and assistance. Happily, St. Thomas, the Common Doctor, is also the *Dottore di aggiornamento*, the Updating Doctor. He continues to provide salubrious wisdom to all those lost in their own finite thoughts.

*Bonaventure Chapman entered the Order of Preachers in 2010.*