

Hegel: Radical Materialist or Radical Mystic?

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A Hegel has been subjected to a variety of incompatible interpretations in recent times, from absolute idealism to realism, from pro-metaphysical to *sans* metaphysical. One of the more eccentric Hegelian thinkers is Slavoj Žižek, who believes that Hegel must be read as a radical materialist to clear the path to true human liberation. Žižek's highly controversial interpretations of Hegel have gained a celebrity level of exposure and popularity and are mixed with Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalytic themes and post-Marxist anti-capitalist political-social ruminations. This paper will traverse themes in Hegel's early religious writings through to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* to critically assess Žižek's claims. It will support his assertion that Hegel was not an absolute idealist but will reject the claim that Hegel was a materialist. Not only was Hegel strongly opposed to materialism and rejected its most basic assumptions, but his dialectic evolves beyond this into a form of radical mysticism. Hegel considered naïve traditional empiricism, rationalism, and mysticism to be unfit for a new urban landscape in which science and technology were flourishing at an accelerating rate. He also wanted to defend philosophy and religion as independent fields which addressed truth, higher reality, and the greatest consciousness that the human mind could reach in the journey to surpassing its limitations.

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Introduction

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel has always been a controversial philosopher who received severe reprimands from contemporaries, such as Schleiermacher and Schopenhauer, as well as criticism from many 19th and 20th century philosophers including Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Russell, and Popper. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels critically adapted Hegel's thought into dialectical materialism and the British Hegelians interpreted him as an absolute idealist. The entire history of development of analytic philosophy can be read as reaction against Hegel due to Russell and G.E. Moore choosing to reject British Hegelianism (Pinkard, 2014, 556; Baldwin, 2004 [1984], 357-364)¹.

The debate over the metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological aspects of Hegel's thought has matured in the late 20th and early 21st centuries and several trends have been identified: the traditional metaphysical interpretation, the post-Kantian interpretation, and the revised metaphysical approach (Redding, 2025, 2.1-2.3). Outside of these well documented developments is the more iconoclastic reading of Hegel by Slavoj Žižek. Possessing great mass appeal and able to draw large crowds to his speaking engagements, Žižek has become a prominent popular philosopher of our time. His appeal lies in his candidness, humour, charisma, transgressive use of expletives, sexual analogy, and commitment to communicate with the common "uneducated" person, who he considers far saner than most academics (Massey, 2013, online)².

Žižek's ideology is unabashedly Hegelian in nature, though intermixed with Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis and a non-classical anti-capitalist anti-liberal Marxism. So thoroughly Hegelian are his claims that Žižek believes that his criticisms of Hegel are Hegelian-Hegelianism is a circle whose boundaries cannot be traversed (Burman, 2018, 85).

To an extent Žižek's Hegelianism is playful in that he freely acknowledges that he is distorting Hegel's positions by incorporating and assimilating them into his own worldview, perhaps in the way that Plato distorted Socrates (Burman, 2018, 85). On the other hand, Žižek very seriously wishes to reinvigorate and revive Hegelianism as a present-day form of radical materialism. He hopes that this will assist in achieving true socio-political liberation of the type that was unachievable through Marx and Engel's misrepresentations of Hegel. To correct this, Žižek thinks that Hegel must be rethought in the light of later developments, such as Lacanian psychoanalysis and quantum field theory.

This paper will provide an account of Žižek's approach to Hegel from *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*. It will then assess Hegel's theological thought from his early writings on religion through to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and his later *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. It will support Žižek's contention that Hegel has been wrongly portrayed as an absolute idealist; however, it will reject Žižek's defence of Hegel as "a great materialist". It will argue that Hegel was trying to discover a new paradigm beyond

unrestrained rational intuitionism and the new forms of knowledge, especially scientific and technological, that were overwhelming the world after the enlightenment and industrial revolution. Hegel lived at the dawn of the latter in an urbanised environment and witnessed the epoch defining French revolution and Napoleonic wars. These undoubtedly strongly influenced his world-building philosophical dialectics.

Not only was Hegel disinterested in materialism, both theoretically and practically, but it will be argued that his criticisms of naïve empiricism, rationalism, positive religion, and traditional mysticism lead inexorably by dialectic into the territory of *progressive spirituality* and *radical mysticism*. Hegel accomplishes this through a post-Kantian framework of conceptual realism, which is distinct from Kant's transcendental idealism.

Slavoj Žižek's Argument for Hegel's Materialism

Žižek is a proponent of harnessing the power of Hegelianism to solve a wide range of current problems, from the demand for a stimulating new Christian soteriological narrative, the need to resurrect Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis and as an aid to understanding the philosophical implications of quantum mechanics (Žižek, 2012, 6). In fact, as far as religious problems are concerned, he describes Hegel as “*the philosopher of Christianity*”.

Since reality may be “less than nothing”, so empty at bottom that a low energy space must be filled by physicists with a non-zero Higgs's Field, in like manner the metaphysical vacuum of life may have to be enriched with the values of German idealism. Žižek alludes to Hegel's famous double negation approach through suggesting that something less than nothing suitably complements and enlivens a low energy state of reality (Žižek, 2012, 4-5). Eppur si Muove—“and yet it moves”—if what we know about reality is fiction, then to Žižek fiction becomes a useful reality:

“This is why reality has to be supplemented by fiction: to conceal its emptiness... Effectively, one already has to be something in order to be able to achieve pure nothingness and Less Than Nothing discerns this weird logic in the most disparate ontological domains, on different levels, from quantum physics to psychoanalysis” (Žižek, 2012, 4).

Aside from the highly amusing metaphors and analogies, Žižek wants to argue that Hegel was a materialist, and thus his work allows for a “new materialist interpretation” (Žižek, 2012, 6). For him, German idealism is the most important movement in the history of philosophy, without which philosophy would lack philosophical character (Žižek, 2012, 7-8). Hegel adopted Kant's antinomies, seeing them as an indicator towards the limitations of human reasoning rather than imperfections in the fabric of nature itself, which is what Žižek believes (Žižek, 2012, 8).

Metaphysical claims, though essential to philosophy, are posited in the beginning only to be critically disregarded later, at least in post-Kantian thought (Ibid, 2012, 10). Metaphysical propositions do not capture reality because they produce antinomies. Any complete metaphysical philosophy would hence contain contradiction. This becomes the basis of Hegel's world building; for Kant the system was not external reality but a system of thought to understand it, while for Hegel the system was Being itself (Žižek, 2012, 11).

Hegel starts with absolute being, which amounts to nothing in its abstraction (Žižek, 2012, 12). The journey that follows away from initial intuition of this metaphysical reality returns to unity in Hegel, rather than the separation that would be expected (Žižek, 2012, 15-16). Influenced by Henrich's late 20th century reinterpretation of Hegel as non-metaphysical, Žižek argues that Hegel thus denies the ground of Being beyond self-relation to self-consciousness. By exposing a "crack in the thing itself", Hegel's philosophy thus represents an existential threat to metaphysics, to the perception of absoluteness or totality (Žižek, 2012, 17).

The crack that Žižek refers to manifests as a "gap". This gap indicated a deep schism and divide between traditional ways of life that were about a unified whole and modern notions of individual freedom (Žižek, 2012, 14). Žižek calls this a "pre-transcendental rupture" (Žižek, 2012, 6). It is the distance between "subjective autonomy and the organic whole" (Žižek, 2012, 15) and is the crucial feature of modernity. The chasm appears in a variety of situations, especially those that are too tragic to fully describe in words. For instance, if a traumatised victim were to relate in exact detail their torture or humiliation, in an entirely systematic manner, then this would be dubious testimony; what rather one would expect is some inconsistency, lapse in memory or misjudgement. For Žižek the Hegelian approach allows one to say that the truthfulness of the report lies in its imperfect form; its deficient presentation qualifies as truth (Žižek, 2012, 24).

Žižek believes that his reading of Hegel is the key to a materialist revolt that will eliminate the master-servant relationship, an affiliation that re-establishes itself after every revolution. He rejects a personal spiritual revolution of the type that would result in a better master- Žižek's aim is to destroy the master, to have genuine liberation from the trappings of capitalism and its foleys (Žižek, 2012, 18-19).

In Žižek's materialism ideas are effects, not causes. Material antecedents rooted in space-time cause these events, these "virtual entities". Thus, space-time causality, despite its "generation and corruption", produces ideas. There is no other Platonic realm of forms- there is only space-time. Žižek interprets Hegel as asking the opposite question to Plato- not how to reach a hidden reality behind illusions, but how does the illusion, or the idea, appear in reality? (Žižek, 2012, 36). Hegel thus solves the problem of metaphysics for Žižek by seeing "appearance as appearance" (Žižek, 2012, 37). Hegel's negation of negation is an attempt to

separate essence from ideas- “essence is nothing but appearance reflected into itself” (Žižek, 2012, 37).

Žižek infers the message of Plato’s *Parmenides* to be that “from Nothing through Nothing to Nothing”: “if one is not, then nothing is” (Žižek, 2012, 39). He locates Hegel’s discovery of the dialectical process in nature to be a consequence of dividing a genus into its species. As Plato inferred in *Statesman*, dividing the human genus into Greeks and Barbarians is improper, as Barbarian is a negative category, comprising the non-Greeks. This is not a true species but its negation. Žižek believes that Hegel took away from this Platonic idea the notion that all divisions will produce a negative “pseudo-species” (Žižek, 2012, 39). Conflict that arises from tension between a species and its genus is the basis of Hegelian dialectic for Žižek.

The kind of materialism that Žižek is advocating is materialist dialectics, which he associates with Plato, not democratic materialism of the type advocated by Plato’s 20th century opponents (Žižek, 2012, 41). Inspired by Alain Badiou, Žižek suggests that there is no conflict between idealism and materialism today, rather the choice is between the Platonic ideal of eternal truths and democratic reduction of everything to evolutionary biology and language; both are types of materialism (Žižek, 2012, 41-42). Plato understood the search for truth as opposition to sophistry through words that signify an external reality, while the sophists were content with self-referential talk. But Žižek understands Hegel as improving upon Plato’s approach by reclassifying all self-reference as instantiated truth, as ontologically consequential (Žižek, 2012, 43).

The hallmark of materialism, at least in distinguishing it from idealism, is its affirmation of nothingness as the ultimate being from which all things emerge (Žižek, 2012, 60). Žižek deduces from Democritus’ atomism a “void” at the bottom of all of reality. The “stable forms” that emerge from this are taken by Žižek to be a good compromise between absolute idealism and absolute materialism-a dialectical materialism (Žižek, 2012, 66-67).

Hegel’s position is thought by Žižek to be neither that of Plato nor of sophistry- on the one hand, in opposition to Plato, it holds that we can only talk about unknown knowns¹. On the other hand, these “fictions” do not reduce the truth properties of our statements, which is in opposition to sophistry (Žižek, 2012, 76). Only a radical subjectivism is taken by Žižek to be the basis of universality (Žižek, 2012, 75). Hegel’s concept of truth is not assessed against external reality but within the confines of the “discursive process”, via its contradictions and inconsistencies (Žižek, 2012, 78).

There are different notions of ‘nothing’ in Žižek, with the void being an unlimited dimension. It is a localised nothing, as opposed to the nothing in “there is nothing here” (Žižek, 2012, 68). It is comparable to the multiplier zero, a mathematical function that absorbs all other numbers into itself. This notion of nothing is ‘real’ because ideas are ‘real’-though all ideas are “virtual”, they have real effects, just as the value zero has real effects. Thus, the void has effects. Žižek

calls this the ‘reality of the Virtual’, in contrast to virtual reality (Žižek, 2012, 68-69). It is the emergence of multiplicity out of the void that Žižek regards as real materialism-a multiplicity that cannot be reduced to a unity, like infinite sets of numbers (Žižek, 2012, 227).

This leads to the idea that God exists because human beings believe in Him, at least as the Holy Spirit of Christianity. The Spirit is the virtual Real, “something more” than individuals; “more than nothing but less than something”. Though Zizek does not believe in a spirit as an instantiated entity beyond man, he rejects the nominalist account of Hegel- in other words Hegel believed in abstractions as entities beyond the mind which exist because of collective participation in them (Žižek, 2012, 96-97). This is the virtual Real, the middle ground between idealism and materialism.

In differentiating between Platonic and Stalinist diaeresis, Žižek asserts that the cosmos can only be seen as a fluctuating whole, in which qualitative leaps happen developmentally. These dramatic changes occur through the conflict of opposites, not via incremental changes in quantitatively measurable attributes of nature (Žižek, 2012, 71-72). However, Stalinism failed because of its idealism. Its materialism was superficial because it did not permeate into its social organisation- it retained a demi-God at its helm (Žižek, 2012, 100). For Žižek what is required is a materialism that is engrained in the social order; this should begin with “the death of God”, which Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection neatly achieve in the Christian collective mind. This represents the death of death, a double negation- it creates the “death drive”, which is really the “undead drive”, the drive for immortality (Žižek, 2012, 100-101). In a version of “religious materialism”, Žižek suggests that man must kill God the transcendent, for God the Holy Spirit to live and to exist (Žižek, 2012, 101-102)¹.

Treating Buddhism also as a materialist faith, Žižek sees Tibetan Buddhism with its emphasis on rituals as the result, in Hegelian terms, of the dialectical conflict that occurred between the Hinayana and Mahayana branches (Žižek, 2012, 108-110). Tibetan rituals function as the reality of the Virtual, or the collective consciousness of the Holy Spirit if compared to Christianity. The “virtual Substance” (the transcendent Father) had to die so that the reality of the Virtual (the Holy Spirit) could be (Žižek, 2012, 104). Likewise in Buddhism, escape to transcendent Nirvana had to die for the rituals of Tibetan Buddhism to be. In the Hegelian dialectic, to fully know is to reject the existence of the big Other, since the big Other comes to assert its own non-existence- it is a movement from God as the subject that knows itself, thought thinking itself², to the subject that knows that it cannot be, that must not be and thus dissolves, leaving behind a radical atheism (Žižek, 2012, 104). This radical atheism grows out of reality, as opposed to the “vulgar” New Atheism, that seeks to give an account of God as emerging from unreality³.

Zizek rejects the criticism that his atheistic Christianity is an empty religion, divested of all its important substance, leaving behind only empty formalities and conventions. Instead, he

feels that his interpretation is the only authentic and honest appraisal of Christianity's contents (Žižek, 2012, 116). If the Trinity were to form the propositions of a syllogism, then it's conclusions would be materialistic¹.

In fact, the radical atheist has been bolder than Pascal, who dared only postulate a thing epistemological. The radical materialist, however, dares wager a thing ontological- they create things in the world based on a collective spirituality without relying on God; and thus, they are the most revolutionary believer for Žižek (Žižek, 2012, 116). "Authentic belief" and "true ethics" is found only with the real atheist, who Žižek asserts has belief in the bottomless act, an act ungrounded by reference to any divine being. (Žižek, 2012, 118). To a materialist, the Absolute Being is just a false appearance (Žižek, 2012, 143).

Idealism for Žižek is merely a commentary on one's fantasies, being disconnected from the outside world. Ordinary materialism on the other hand is deterministic, despite placing a human in a real external reality (Žižek, 2012, 146). How then to know the world and be morally free? Žižek invokes here Kant and Fichte. Kant suggested that we have freedom because we do not have direct access to noumena, while Fichte locates freewill in a "leap of faith", where will and action produce the conditions for the intellect to be useful. Reality outside the mind is not known but accepted on faith, a "quasi-religious faith for wisdom" (Žižek, 2012, 146-149).

The self only becomes a reality in Fichte through its interaction with and conflict with what is outside it, the 'non-I'. The 'I' and the 'non-I' delimit each other. Žižek asserts that this is a form of "abstract materialism" (Žižek, 2012, 157). Hegel improved upon this approach-he saw the limits of human knowledge about external reality as indicative of an ontological defect in the cosmos, not merely as suggestive of our epistemological shortcomings (Žižek, 2012, 149). He saw life properly forming when external obstacles impose self-limitation on beings. Infinity is not a property that grows outside in non-I, but rather an entailment of the growth that follows self-limitation (Žižek, 2012, 157-158). Žižek suggests that interpreting Fichte as a subjective idealist gives rise to the malady of seeing Hegel as an absolute idealist (Žižek, 2012, 60).

A break or "rupture" is necessary in the materialist dialectics that Žižek considers fit for our times. Atonal music negated tonal music and Platonic discourse negated the attraction of preceding mythical narratives (Žižek, 2012, 194). Similarly, Žižek questions whether one can truly go back to being a Hegelian when a rupture took place after him with those thinkers who reacted to him, such as Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Marx. He concludes that one must go back to rehabilitate the true Hegel, the materialist Hegel, as opposed to the false Hegel-the absolute idealist- created out of the misinterpretations of the post-Hegelians. In other words, only after knowing Hegel this way can one truly 'break' in the way that Zizek intends (Žižek, 2012, 194).

A Nietzschean reading of Hegel portrays him as a nihilistic Christian thinker, even atheistic, in whose thoughts the individual is self-annihilated, negation of negativity leading only to

subjugation. However, Žižek suggests that this misses the Mark-Hegel's point was that it is this negation that truly liberates, not subjugates (Žižek, 2012, 197-198). Žižek believes that in this liberation, this "subordination" of the self, lies the solution to political tyranny, which will terminate due to the abrogation of a master-servant relationship (Žižek, 2012, 198-199). This is unpalatable to a Nietzschean thinker, who would desire altercation with the enemy to reassert oneself rather than to achieve self-annihilation (Žižek, 2012, 199).

As for the Marxist reading of Hegel, it suggested an inevitable progressive march into the future based on the incompatibility between "reaction and progress, old and new, past and future" (Žižek, 2012, 200). It advocated taking the side of progress, while Hegel did not. He was more concerned with what truths emerge from self-contradiction than with defeating an enemy. In war, Žižek argues that Hegel cared more about how death brings about a negative outcome for both sides, uniting them- the sequelae of mortality. Destroying the obstacle does not bring success or knowledge of oneself-rather defeat is what brings one closer to truth, through realisation that establishing one's identity through the enemy is a faulty pursuit (Žižek, 2012, 200-201). It is not about altering the external world but our discernment of it (Žižek, 2012, 202).

Hegel's dialectic is a process of becoming, not of being- it is hence not a determinate system borne out of causal necessities (Žižek, 2012, 227) but a system that is dependent entirely on contingencies (Žižek, 2012, 229). There is no principle of sufficient reason, epistemologically or ontologically:

"That is to say, it is not only that we can never get to know the entire network of causal determinations, but this chain is in itself inconclusive; opening up the space for the immanent contingency of becoming-such a chaos of becoming, subjected to no pre-existing order, is what defines radical materialism" (Žižek, 2012, 229).

This completes a non-exhaustive account of themes in Žižek's *Less Than Nothing* in defence of Hegelian materialism. We will now look at some criticisms of Žižek's claims.

Assessment of Žižek's Argument for Hegelian Materialism

Žižek is right that Hegel's philosophy is a journey into subjectivity, and he provides some important insights into how Hegel's thought differs from that of other German idealists. He also rescues Hegel's thought from nihilistic and absolute idealist interpretations. He defends Hegelian thought as non-deterministic and rejects the view that he was an absolute idealist and Nominalist-Hegel believed in the existence of abstractions. He has also correctly pointed out that Hegel's philosophy achieves a form of self-annihilation- followed by a spiritual resurrection.

Žižek's "pre-transcendental rupture" is an important insight into Hegel's problem situation. Hegel witnessed the entry of Napoleon into Jena in 1806, while he was writing the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. It is no surprise that he called Napoleon the "World Soul" (Hegel, 1984 [1806], 114). He also was acutely aware of the vast chasm between complex scientific and technological advancements shaping the sophisticated city life he led and the traditional restrictive worldviews of naïve empiricism, rationalism and positivist religion, which appeared outdated and untenable for the pursuit of truth.

However, Žižek contradicts himself as to what Hegel's dialectic represents- at first Hegel is said to be suggesting inconsistencies in human reasoning only, as per Kant's antinomies; but then Žižek transforms Hegel into an advocate of a fracture in nature itself- an ontological materialist rather than a critical monistic idealist.

Žižek's 'nothing' is not the usual 'nothing' of realist philosophers. Realists employ 'nothing' as a metaphorical placeholder for non-existence. Hence, by definition, nothing does not exist in a realist framework- it is not 'a thing' ontologically. However, in Žižek, 'nothing' is a thing. It is a void, an absolute category from which all things emerge, or at least from where all things begin. Noting appears in a different sense in Hegel's absolute negative, the point at which his dialectic begins.

It is not clear how Žižek's account of origins in nothingness improves on a traditional speculative account of origins from a metaphysical absolute, such as God. His approach is reductionist and deems 'nothing' to be a void by virtue of comparison to the origins of the number zero, as well as phenomena that are somehow non-zero but cause an increase in potential states e.g. the Higgs field. However, this materialist reductionist analogical approach affords Žižek's theory with a lower explanatory power than some of its traditional rivals. Since his void is deprived of attributes that would explain how it gave rise to the apparent multiplicity of the cosmos, a metaphysical explanation that does explain the arising of complex attributes from non-existence would seem to be a better explanation.

Žižek's worldview incorporates elements of antirealism-when reality is fiction, then fiction becomes a reality. He playfully alludes to Hegel not going far enough by which he shows awareness of the fact that Hegel would not have shared his views on radical materialism or radical atheism. Žižek's agenda is to alter the trajectory of Hegel's thought by refracting it through the prism of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Gunkel (2008, 12-18) points out astutely that there are so many versions of Hegel that Žižek might allege that we cannot know the true Hegel; instead, he considers it his right to move forward with an interpretation that he considers in society's current best interest.

Žižek's engagement with psychoanalytic ideas and desire to overcome the follies of capitalism are absent in Hegel-these simply did not exist as concerns in Hegel's time. Likewise, his claim that all ideas are effects of material causes is also a non-Hegelian notion. For Hegel

ideas emerge through the development of the World Spirit. He did not believe like Žižek that life contains a metaphysical vacuum-rather he regarded metaphysical propositions taken alone as epistemologically futile and thus only the beginning of the dialectic that leads to true knowledge.

We will now consider some of Hegel's arguments and preoccupations before concluding with a second critical assessment of how his ideas correspond to Žižek.

Assessing Hegel's Religious Writings

Hegel observed that religion was of great concern for human societies. He wanted to question whether people could move beyond inherited conventions to understand the true nature of God. Religion was easy to grasp practically but he felt that people wavered easily due to sensuality. He expressed cynicism over whether human will be driven by reason, reason being essential to success. The animating power of reason gave human life its worth for Hegel, not sensuality. Motivations were born out of reason (Hegel, 1984 [1793], 30-31).

He felt that religion's true purpose was to engage the heart and to protect against baser instincts. It achieved this through duties and feelings that related to morality, such as gratitude; but the unseemly force of sensuality was not so easily defeated by morality alone. To fully counter it religious aspirations needed to also be sensualised (Hegel, 1984 [1793], 32). This was an early hallmark of Hegel's religious philosophy-that religion must compromise reason to defeat instincts. This "folk religion" would be one that could appeal to all, while theology held only elitist appeal¹.

Reason based theology coupled with sensualised folk religion would raise "the spirit of a nation" (Hegel, 1984 [1793], 32). Just being humanistic was insufficient- one had to use religion to attain self-worth and a nobler group identity². Christianity must be presented to youths in its "full-blooded enjoyment" before tradition set in and filtered out the sensual parts.

Hegel saw the wonder of religion in its subjective aspects, in the performative decision-making and feelings of the religious actor-this engendered closeness to God. It would not be discovered in the objective knowledge of theological books. The life of true faith compared to text was like a living ecosystem juxtaposed with a cabinet of curiosities.

The love of God directed one's senses to feel love, while theology instilled fear, fire, and brimstone. Love must be coupled with duty, with conscience informing the latter, to take one away from pure self-interest (Hegel, 1984 [1793], 34). Religious education should train children to be attuned to their moral sense instead of relating doctrinal facts, lest they fail to develop those religious sentiments that can control sensuality. Theological ideas should be taught after attachment to folk sensibilities had been established (Hegel, 1984 [1793], 35).

Separating theology from religion led to subjective religion, which responded to practical reason³. Religion became attached to human emotions and 'the heart' in such a manner that even the subconscious became a locus of liberation from negative traits such as envy and guilt.

The result was a return to innocence that precluded the violation of the rights of others. Theology is unable to achieve this, though Hegel accepted its importance as the starting point of discursive understanding, being based on metaphysical abstractions; but he believed in a higher good that was actualised through religious actions and guided by conscience (Hegel, 1984 [1793], 35).

By contrast the person who had not overcome sensuality performed actions merely to placate God, or out of fear. This bred superstition, the attribution of false causes to events. A true personal connection to God was a moral one where God was invoked to help in achieving certain outcomes in life. Nurturing the heart created love of God for Hegel, which overcame sensuality. Real knowledge was “a genuine consciousness acquired through experience” (Hegel, 1984 [1793], 39). Religion was in the innocence of action, not in the perfection of intellectual claims.

Morality extended far beyond the law and required experiential questioning of right and wrong. Though theology created true propositions based on valid universal notions, these had to be supported by faith-based customs that appealed to the senses. It is the realisation of duty that such pious obligations imposed on a person that ultimately led to best disposition and conduct. Just as Hegel linked rationality to understanding, he associated wisdom with morality. Understanding emerged from use of reason but it did not lead to wisdom. Wisdom emerged out of moral experience, which was a matter of the heart and hence an entirely non-scientific procedure (Hegel, 1984 [1793], 42-43).

Knowledge without wisdom created obscurantist arrogance. Hence Hegel wanted to build faith that relied on a virtuous soul and mind, a rational religion. Though morality could not be perfected, the aspiration to be like saints was important as it aided in overcoming animal instincts and stimulated moral development (Hegel, 1984 [1793], 45-46). Both love and reason were needed and were rooted in universal interests that went beyond the individual. But it was the benign human instincts, like love and sympathy, that a folk religion would primarily engage with to fill the human heart and imagination, which otherwise would be occupied with an infinite variety of wayward attachments. Not only must folk religion be based on reason and the needs of imagination, but it must also become incorporated into public life (Hegel, 1984 [1793], 47-48).

Folk religion must also be simple, to have universal appeal and applicability. It should have ceremonies to inspire followers, but these should not be self-indulgent in seeking forgiveness for sin or the favour of God. The ceremonies most fit for this were “sacred music” and festivals. Hegel thus dreamt that a folk religion would not restrict people’s happiness and celebration but would nevertheless keep them attached to the heavens “gazing ever upward” (Hegel, 1984 [1793], 55-56).

Jesus fought for a morality freed from blind obedience to the law. The later authoritarian religion that developed out of church dogma was for Hegel an accident of history and circumstance and contaminated by mixed motives (Hegel, 1996 [1795], 69-73). Though Jesus brought a faith of moral virtue, Hegel thought he was forced to propound it in a form that was based on authority to compete with the rival Israelite traditions amongst the Jews. He understandably preached miracles and his status as a Messiah to appeal to a popular Jewish theological conception¹. Christianity thus divided into sects that called to morality based on miracles rather than reason. It devolved into empty ecclesiastical rituals rather than empowering people to become virtuous by their own hand (Hegel, 1996 [1795], 78-79).

Ecumenical councils were justified by Jesus having twelve disciples, though the disciples had not developed his thought in Hegel's estimation. Socrates' school of thought held no such dogmas as his disciples were indeterminate in number and did develop his ideas (Hegel, 1996 [1795], 81-83). The Gospel of Mark portrayed Jesus' faith as one of authority, where what mattered most was being baptised and believing, not virtue of action. This made reason passive and subservient to a kind of divine command theory based on acceptance of Jesus. This became increasingly unsuitable for wide application as the Christian diaspora grew and became a body politic, with Christians losing the close kinship and ties they had held as a small group (Hegel, 1996 (1795, 83-87).

By consenting to the authority of religious morality, people gave up their right to determine what is true and moral for themselves- whereas a philosopher would not do this. Hegel felt this morality could succeed if applied to a small community of friends who confessed their sins and trusted each other to keep confidence (Hegel, 1996 [1795], 86-87, 102-103). It failed to work as the society expanded to incorporate members whose virtues were unknown. The problem escalated when the Church became part of the state; religious duties were imposed in such a manner that their non-performance would lead to deprivation of civil rights, which Hegel considered to be decadence (Hegel, 1996 [1795], 105).

Nevertheless, he felt that the Church must be given the task by the state of educating the child in faith from the earliest age, a faith rarely accepted in adulthood. But it should be taught in a way that preserved that individual's right to dissent from the faith later (Hegel, 1996 [1795], 114-116). Hegel felt that the Church had gone too far by prescribing not only laws but also emotions and feelings that the follower had to experience -this went further than Judaism, which prescribed only law. This spawned self-delusion-a false spirituality that co-existed with a negative morality. The conflict between desires and spirit spiralled into loss of unity and opportunity for perfection. Any virtues produced were "mechanical" (Hegel, 1996 [1795], 139-140).

Ultimately Hegel felt that the Christian Church had cut itself off from nurturing of human reason and this had forced Emmanuel Kant to rescue reason for the sake of science (Hegel,

1984 [1795], 143). Yet Hegel argued that morality had to remain subjective since it arose out of individual experience and then was applied to daily life using reason. Christianity's mistake was to treat morality as entirely objective, a codified law that came by revelation down to man and thus could be followed as learnt ecclesiastical edicts (Hegel, 1984 [1795], 143-144). This splintered Christianity into numerous sects, each realising that they could determine morality for themselves without suffocating clerical commandments¹.

Hegel believed that the modern search for universality had ruined interest in The Old Testament and the tapping of its imaginative potential, aside from two groups who continued to keenly study it- fundamentalists and figurative interpreters who saw it as metaphor (Hegel, 1984 [1795], 150). He found it strange that the more creative intensity of Greek and Roman paganism was defeated by Christianity. He inferred that their communitarian culture had become individualistic and futile to the extent that the Christian ideal of Messianic salvation held appeal (Hegel, 1984 [1795], 152-153). Self-loathing made the doctrine of original sin attractive.

But after this conversion, excessive focus on the transcendence of God and theoretical perfection stifled improvement of real morality. Terrible wars were waged between Christians over matters of doctrine. This and the renunciation of worldly pleasures led inevitably to reprisals against Christianity for centuries of suppression of human nature. The horror of the rule of emperors made an otherworldly God seem like the best option for Romans. But this God was so objectified and removed from subjective human life that He became the justification for every crime committed by Church allied despots (Hegel, 1984 [1795], 161-163).

At the turn of the 19th century Hegel's dialectical framework started to reveal itself in discussion about the conflict between faith and knowledge. Through this battle reason had seemed to gain the upper hand-yet it had become altered beyond recognition every much as faith had- a pyrrhic victory. By separating itself out as distinct and independent, reason had sought support from a new faith rather than the old faith it cast out (Hegel, 1977 [1802], 55-56)¹. This negation resulted in a new faith and a new type of reason.

By limiting reason, Hegel felt that Kant and Fichte had made the absolute beyond the reach of rationality. The eternal thus became an "infinite void of knowledge" that could only be approached with subjective feelings- only the "finite and empirical" could be known. The Enlightenment was aware of its association with "nothingness", its negative relation to the absolute, and was able to "turn nothingness into a system" (Hegel, 1977 [1802], 56). An imperfect philosophy because of granting primacy to empiricism, it lacked the "mighty spiritual form" of Kant, Fichte, and Jacobi, who through their focus on the 'the subjective principle' achieved "perfect self-consciousness" (Hegel, 1977 [1802], 57).

Hegel's obsession with subjective religion started to become tied to the World Spirit, a new idea of his at the dawn of the 19th century, missing in his earlier work. The spirit achieves self-

realisation in philosophies like Kant, a product of Protestantism. Beauty and truth start to be seen subjectively, mirroring religion's conquest of the heart. Though religion must be objectified by action, Hegel argued that its subjective aspects must escape objectivization and intuition. God known by intellect would just be a worthless thing, like "timber", while beauty known by precise mystical intuition rather than by feeling would be a superstition (Hegel, 1977 [1802], 57).

Hegel regarded this running of subjective things through rigorous intellectual procedures to be superstition-either it would give rise to concrete but worthless objects, or to fictions, "play without substance" (Hegel, 1977 [1802], 57-58). The very reality of the Virtual that Žižek seeks to create and venerate through the symbolism of Christianity is what Hegel abhorred as superstition and fickle.

Hegel's famous thesis-antithesis-synthesis manoeuvre starts to also appear in his 1802 work *Faith and Knowledge*. Through Kant, Fichte and Jacobi he argued that the juxtaposition of finitude/empirical things (the thesis) against the infinite/rationally inferred things (the antithesis) changed the form of both- reason is grounded and trapped in finitude and empirical things are idealised (i.e., become absolute). After this comes "what is truly real and absolute"- as this cannot be known, the synthesis of the finite and infinite leads to a "finite ideality" (Hegel, 1977 [1802], 61-64).

Here tellingly it becomes apparent that Hegel is neither an absolute idealist nor a radical materialist. For him idealism implies that "pure thinking is objective thinking" while radical materialism would mean that all consciousness is reducible to matter as substance and its constituent interactions (Hegel, 1977 [1802], 64). However, Hegel considered the synthesis to what is beyond these assumptions to be more important. He criticised the Kantian tendency to keep philosophy "impaled on the stake of the absolute antithesis" (Hegel, 1977 [1802], 65), meaning restricting discussion to man as creature with limited reason -what existed beyond reason's discernment was treated as faith, not truth. Hegel felt truth existed in states of spirit and consciousness beyond this and is reached through dialectic.

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel saw religion as "consciousness of absolute Being" (Hegel, 1977 [1807], 410). This failed by itself to achieve "Self-consciousness of Spirit" or "spirit knowing itself as spirit" and was nullified by the Enlightenment, a new religion, which was uninterested in the "beyond" (Hegel, 1977 [1807], 411). The World Spirit was equivalent for Hegel to the spirit conscious of itself through religion, by which the religious and non-religious domains of spirit become united. Specific developments of religion reflected specific developments of form of spirit (Hegel, 1977 [1807], 411-416). His concept of spirit here was not materialistic, as it could not be reduced to its constituents (physical or otherwise), nor was it entirely idealism since its initial negative absolutes were negated through contact with external reality. Hegel's philosophy aimed to achieve consciousness of authentic reality after

the dialectical process-the “actual World-Spirit has attained to this knowledge of itself” (Hegel, 1977 [1807], 458). The death of God is a passing phase in the dialectical process, which is negated (Hegel, 1977 [1807], 475-476), unlike for Žižek who considers it a surviving remnant of the final synthesis.

In his later religious thought Hegel is explicit about the Spirit in its infinite absoluteness being God. Man, also is spirit, and it is what makes him man (Hegel, 1895, 1-2). Spirit mediates with itself, which is why it is not mere substance (Hegel, 1895, 74). The spirit in its finite developing form which manifests in ‘moments’ is the most completely expressed religion for Hegel, most perfectly of all achieved in Christianity (Hegel, 1895, 83-84). Spirit is an actual thing that had “entered into the world to bring itself to consciousness of itself” (Hegel, 1895, 79). He argued that philosophy did not deal with “nothing”, only with things. For Hegel there is something beyond external objects and thought- the spirit.

Hegel was opposed to the inconsistency that arose from following an irrational positivist faith¹ as well as a sterile path of reason that ignored the sublime journey of faith. The integrative negation of the two was necessary. The alternatives of attacking faith or showing apathy to it were feeble in his view (Hegel, 1895, 48-50). He was explicitly opposed to atheism, which maintained that “thought and spirit” were but the product of matter alone (Hegel, 1895, 51-52). He considered religion to be the highest form of philosophy and human consciousness (Hegel, 1895, 54).

Hegel also felt that arguments for immediacy of knowledge were in opposition to philosophy and that such claims exhibited a mediocre obsession with the finite (Hegel, 1895, 44). Philosophy was concerned with both the finite and infinite and their mutual annihilation through oppositional dialectic. Thus, philosophy is dealing with “reality” (Hegel, 1895, 57). Hegel hence rejected the approach of empiricists, intuitionist rationalists, and traditional mystics as immature self-absorption. Philosophical dialectics was the only path to knowing reality.

Final Remarks on Hegel in Relation to Žižek’s Materialism

Hegel’s early work on religion shows a strain and tension in trying to reconcile the gulf between rational and sensual approaches to the socialization of religion. He wanted to widely socialise faith through replacing what appealed to base desires with a natural religion that contained sensuous elements. Though reason held the highest position for Hegel in its potential to aid the growth of human morality, it was worthless if suppressed by infatuation with desires. Reason could only be victorious by the initial abdication of reason. In this peculiar paradox lies an early seed that would develop into Hegel’s later dialectic.

Theological rationale with its inference to absolutes had to be initially negated in favour of material interests. Would this then support Žižek’s thesis that Hegel was a materialist? Despite his attempt to rescue some materialism out of Hegel, Hegel was an anti-materialist. This is why after negating metaphysical absolutism (the infinite thesis), Hegel then also negates sensual

folk religion (the finite empirical-social antithesis) to return to reintegration of theological metaphysics post-taming of sensual desires (synthesis).

His religious “spirit of a nation” that follows this synthesis would morph into the World Spirit in his later thought. Despite Hegel’s emphasis on subjective religious and moral development, he seems to have been a conceptual realist at this early stage, corroborating Žižek’s Hegelian rejection of absolute idealism. Hegel believed that abstract notions that are inferred in metaphysics exist independently of mind. The belief in God, the spirit (both individual and collective) and spirituality all coalesced well together for Hegel, as they interacted with the entity of the Holy Spirit in Trinitarian Christianity. The appeal to reason of an infinite transcendent being (the Father) and the appeal to senses of The Holy Spirit suggests that Trinitarian thought strongly influenced Hegel’s dialectical process.

The third party in this- Jesus the man- emerges in Hegel to teach virtue ethics and natural law. Dealing with an unfit and unprepared audience, he is forced to make concessions to blind conformity, which is manipulated by the rising powers of the Catholic Church to forge a positive law-based theology. This destroyed conscience, morality, the rational search for truth and enabled the growth of superstitions and injustice. Hegel now faced a new problem- after the downfall of the Church’s reputation, post-reformation, could morality and real wisdom be reclaimed using reason alone? Again, his answer was in the negative- reason had to itself be negated in favour of moral experience, a non-rational journey which would end in acquiring wisdom. This wisdom would be part of a rational religion-implying that the conflict between developing morality and reason would have a transformative effect on both. This illustrates the dialectical implications of Hegel’s early non-dialectical thought.

For Hegel, a Christianity of positive law also created a dialectic through the conflict of reason and morality, but it ended in a “mechanical” counterfeit spirituality. Thus, Hegel continued to believe throughout his life that natural law discovered with the free use of conscience and by experience was the key to a successful faith. Dialectics were not fated automatically to succeed, supporting Žižek’s view that Hegel is an indeterminist. To preserve freewill, Hegel chose to sacrifice moral objectivity- moral choice and the journey to virtues was inherently subjective. The objectification of morality and a transcendent God were anathema to Hegel, as he considered these as facilitating the crimes of malicious Church actors.

After properly forging his system building dialectic and the World Spirit, Hegel continued to criticise naïve rationalism and empiricism and to praise Kant and Fichte’s rejection of both. He also excoriated the idea of immediate knowledge, which he probably associated with Jacobi. The worthlessness of this type of knowledge claim meant that Hegel also opposed traditional mystical epistemology, which is heavily dependent on immediate knowledge or knowledge by presence as it came to be known in Eastern thought¹.

Hegel argued that philosophy did not deal with “nothing”, only with things (Hegel, 1895, 78-79) which goes back to the criticism of Žižek that his nothing is in fact a thing. Thus, Hegel can be used to criticise Žižek’s materialism, rather than to support it. Metaphysical abstractions do not play the role of a void with Hegel, a nothingness from which multiplicity emerges, nor does a space-time material void that is “less than nothing” as in Žižek. Hegel’s initial negation is due to abstractions having no meaningful role in developing human consciousness-conceived by reason as pure abstraction, they interact negligibly with human experience. However, after the dialectical conflict has cleared, after the individual has undertaken their spiritual and moral journey, the abstract infinite is reintroduced back into the self-referential self-consciousness of the moral agent, in their attainment of wisdom, or closeness to God or to the final development of the World Spirit. It is a diachronic theory of the growth of human knowledge, morality, and spirituality, from naïve metaphysical propositions to more complex and sophisticated true knowledge and wisdom.

Žižek’s concern is with how to remove the tyranny of the master-slave relationship, which persists in both totalitarian and democratic societies; he is also concerned with providing a philosophical worldview that is consistent with the rising reductionist materialism that characterises contemporary science and psychoanalysis. His Hegelian dialectic is designed to make a breakthrough in addressing these challenges. However, these were not Hegel’s concerns- though he was a great admirer of the French Revolution, Napoleon, and the apparent progress in rebutting a stifling monarchy and Church, Hegel wanted man to recover his natural state, the state exemplified by Jesus in his early thought, and embodied through the World Spirit in his later thought.

This could not be achieved by following commands, nor by rational intuition, nor yet by recourse to the scientific method that Hegel saw with great pleasure had opened new vistas and horizons of self-consciousness to people. Influenced by Kant’s view that we know not things in and of themselves, he designed an objective dialectic that sought to nurture subjective wisdom, heuristic self-consciousness, and mitigation of scholastic abstractions. He saw the opportunity, even the necessity, for the human spirit and consciousness to grow to perfection- this could only happen through conflict of apparent opposing notions.

It is not a materialist philosophy as it exhibits irreducibility-it does not imply that the highest human consciousness can be broken down into constituents. It is a form of intra-conscious dialectics that ends in the knowledge of Being, in which the movements and moments coalesce and absorb ultimately into the World Spirit. One cannot reduce the endpoint of the spiritual dialectic- it is a collective whole, something more than its individually describable movements or “moments” as Hegel prefers to call them. The final state of Being in Hegel’s dialectic is not a composite of the negated stages that preceded it. Reality is not conceived as something built out of fundamental units, but rather something known by gestalt inferences. Žižek agrees with

this to an extent in his notion that the universe in flux discloses qualitative changes, not simple quantifiable ones.

Though Žižek wants to return to the true Hegel, his Hegel is, ironically, a reality of the Virtual, a reimagining of Hegel as a materialist because materialism happens to be fashionable in scientific and philosophical circles currently. It is a kind of philosophical excavation of Hegel's grave, a retrospective necromancy, a resurrection of Hegel the undead materialist zombie¹. But Hegel's Spirit is not something created by projected virtual ideas as in Žižek. Though Žižek is strongly opposed to postmodernism and is not a truth relativist, he borrows the tendency of postmodernists to treat one metanarrative as equally valuable (or worthless) as another. Hence his substitution of Hegel's conceptual realism and theistic spirituality with antirealist tropes and radical atheistic materialism is described as a Hegelian manoeuvre. It is inconceivable that Hegel would have agreed.

In his later phase of his thought, Hegel became disenchanted with the conflict between idealism and realism and felt they could be reconciled. This turned out to be a challenging task and he spent much of the rest of his career trying to find a way to explain why his framework contained elements of both idealism and realism without contradiction ([Guyer, 2021, Section 5](#)). Hegel's boldness went beyond attempting to eliminate the opposition of idealism and realism with dialectic- he also tried to remove the contrast between ontology and epistemology through it ([Guyer, 2021, Section 5](#)). As Guyer points out, in Hegel "the world is the unique (because all-encompassing) Concept (written with a capital "C") that is engaged in the process of its own self-realization (its objective expression.)". Hegel's subjective process aims to end in objective territory, the products of self-realization being relatable concepts.

Not only is Hegel aiming for a non-materialistic spiritual end in which the ontological-epistemological divide is annihilated, but his objectives situate him also into the categories of progressive spirituality and radical mysticism. Love, achievement of unity and wisdom- all common tropes of traditional mysticism- reverberate throughout Hegel's oeuvre¹. These are universal interests that extend beyond the moral agent. As Žižek states, "Hegel's obsession, or rather "problem", is love" ([Žižek, 2012, 9](#)). Yet Hegel is no traditional mystic- he derided the immediate knowledge claims of such an epistemology.

Though Hegel was unlike the current progressive Christians who are influenced by postmodern liberalism, he like them shared an interest in criticism of tradition, promoting individual spiritual and moral development independent of doctrine, emphasis on justice and rights and conceding that non-Christian faiths possessed virtues and closeness to God ([Hegel, 1984 \[1793\] 35](#)).

The end of Hegel's dialectic of self-relation to self-consciousness in the World Spirit involves a belief in a unifying whole, both ontologically and epistemologically. Perfection is reached in the ultimate unity with the collective. This could not be accomplished by shortcuts-

it involves reconciling conflicting inner qualities with what is forced upon it by the material world-science, technology, sensuality, authoritarian laws etc. To reach heightened consciousness or spiritual perfection one cannot live in the negative absolute but must traverse a material path to find spiritual reconciliation-this is not materialism but spiritual realism. It is also a form of radical mysticism-it goes beyond tradition and seeks spiritual enlightenment through both personal and societal changes, as well as through transcendent and immanent forms of divinity. Though Hegel considered Christianity to be the best path for this process, he did not limit it to Christian tradition, which meant that he took moral and spiritual development to be a universal or shared human activity of all faiths.

In summary this paper has argued that Hegel was initially a conceptual realist. After creating his world building system of dynamic dialectics, he became a spiritual realist and attempted to eliminate tensions between idealism/realism and ontology/epistemology in his philosophical framework. His ideas can be classified as a radical form of mysticism and indicate that he subscribed to a form of progressive spirituality. He cannot be classified as a radical materialist in the Žižekian sense.

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