

Žižek and Hegel - IJŽS Vol 2.2

## Žižek and the Real Hegel

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Žižek and Hegel, the terms and conditions of this relationship are, if anything, complicated and contentious. On the one hand, Žižek—or more precisely Žižek's writings and publications—attempt to affect "a return to Hegel" (Žižek 1989: 7). This return, it seems, responds to and takes account of Michel Foucault's rather ominous warning: "We have to determine the extent to which our anti-Hegelianism is possibly one of his tricks directed against us, at the end of which he stands, motionless, waiting for us" (Foucault 1972: 235). According to Foucault's characterization, the general movement of contemporary philosophy (in post-war France in particular) may be characterized as an attempt to escape from Hegel and the influence exerted by Hegelianism. This endeavor is, however, immediately complicated by the possibility that such an escape may itself be something already comprehended and anticipated by the Hegelian system. This is precisely the kind of argument Žižek mobilizes in *Organs without Bodies*, where he endeavors to demonstrate that the anti-Hegelianism of Gilles Deleuze, for all its concentrated and concerted efforts, remains thoroughly comprehended and controlled by Hegelian dialectic: "Deleuze equals Hegel" (Žižek 2004: 49). It is also evident in his encounters with other well-known poststructuralist readings of Hegel, like that proffered by Jacques Derrida. "What the Derridean deconstruction brings out," Žižek (2008a) argues, "after a great struggle and declares to be the inherent limit of dialectical mediation—the point at which the movement of *Aufhebung* necessarily fails—Hegel posits directly as the crucial moment of this movement" (85).<sup>1</sup> For Žižek, this inescapable "Hegelian remainder" does not (as Foucault's comment seems to imply) so much come back around to bite us on the ass as it always and already is clinging to or hanging off the ass of the poststructuralist or anti-Hegelian project, unable to be effectively eliminated to begin with. And in all of this the excremental language is not simply a clever (albeit somewhat disgusting) metaphor. For Žižek, Hegel is quite literally

something that cannot be easily eliminated despite efforts, claims, and pretensions to the contrary.

On the other hand, Žižek is arguably a poor and less than celebrated champion of Hegel and Hegelianism. His readings are, as he himself is well aware, admittedly unorthodox and deliberately work against "a doxa which is today as commonplace on all sides of the philosophical spectrum, from Adorno to 'post-structuralism'" (Žižek 2008a: 61). As Ian Parker (2004) describes it, "Žižek's Hegel is quite different from the versions of Hegel that usually circulate in Western philosophy" (38). And most of the orthodox "true believers," the avid readers of the *Owl of Minerva* and the staunch defenders of the Hegelian legacy, would not want to be seen in his company. Žižek's Hegel is not their Hegel, and they often resist and criticize his bastardizations and the admittedly monstrous figure that they produce (Rasmussen 2004: unpaginated). As Peter Dews (1995) succinctly characterizes it, the basic problem is that Žižek's "Lacanian reading of Hegel does not do justice to the complexity of Hegel's thought" (247). Noah Horwitz (2005) takes this criticism one step further, arguing that Žižek's mash-up of Hegelian philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis unfortunately gets both sides wrong: "Such a 'return to Hegel' not only risks mis-reading Hegel as Lacan *avant la lettre*, but risks reading Lacan as Hegel" (24). So it appears that Žižek is also the turd in the Hegelian punch bowl—a terrible and potentially embarrassing excrescence that effectively spoils the party for everyone involved.

The relationship between Žižek and Hegel is, therefore, anything but straight forward and simple. And this complexity inevitable generates a number of intertwined and seemingly irresolvable questions:

- Can it be said that Žižek simply gets it wrong? Are his Lacanian influenced readings of Hegel nothing more than truncated perversions and inappropriate deviations from both the letter and spirit of the Hegelian text?
- Or is it the case, to put it in Hegelian terminology, that Žižek turns out to be the truth of Hegel, that his reactualization of Hegelian dialectics via Lacanian psychoanalysis constitutes a sublation of the difference that has opened up between Hegel and the poststructuralist deconstructive anti-Hegelianism of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century?
- Or is it that Žižek, to borrow Heideggerian terminology, "retrieves" something from Hegel, something covered over by the sediment of interpretation, translation, and history that would be, as Žižek (1989: 205) says of Kant, more Hegelian than Hegel himself?

In trying to formulate responses to these questions, we often find ourselves, for better or worse, in the somewhat uncomfortable position of needing to make reference to and relying on what can only be called "the real Hegel." This is because, beginning with at least Platonic philosophy, efforts to demonstrate either faithful adherence to something or inaccurate deviation from it inevitably requires that one posit and/or have access to what is considered to be the real, the true, and the original (Plato 1987). Take for example the evaluation provided in T. M. Knox's review of Herbert Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*: "The Hegel of the many text-books," Knox (1942) writes, "is portrayed as preoccupied with logical abstractions; but *the real Hegel* pursued these only in order to discover a metaphysical framework for the solution of the concrete problems in politics, religion, etc., which were his primary interest" (265, emphasis added). In order to characterize, critique, and eventually dismiss the inaccurate accounts of Hegelian philosophy that have been circulated in the standard text-books, Knox makes reference to and invokes "the real Hegel." This "real Hegel" is, it is argued, not only considerably different from what appears in these text-books but provides a consistent and unquestioned standard against which it is possible to identify these various representations as inaccurate or deceptive. A similar appeal to the "real Hegel" is made by Terry Pinkard, one of Hegel's Anglophone biographers. "You can," Pinkard explains in an interview from 2000, "sum up Hegel quickly, get the impression you understand him, and also dismiss him just as quickly. Looking at *the real Hegel* is harder but more rewarding" (Postel 2000: unpaginated, emphasis added). Even Žižek is not immune to this kind of transaction, which pits inappropriate apparitions against the "real thing." At a crucial juncture in *Organs without Bodies*, for example, Žižek (2004) articulates three different and competing interpretations of Hegel and then asks the obvious question: "So, which of these three positions is the 'real' Hegel?" (57). It is the "real Hegel," then, that is the problem. We appear to need access to this real thing in order to characterize, evaluate, and/or criticize Žižek's particular reading and understanding of Hegel. Yet it is Žižek, "the philosopher of the Real" as Tony Myers (2003: 29) characterizes him, who points out how the very concept of the real (and our seemingly irrepressible desire for access to it) is itself a real philosophical problem.

### **Metaphysical Games**

At the risk of making what is by now a well-known, perhaps even trite, Žižekian gesture, I begin with a television game show. The program, *To Tell the Truth*, was created by Bob Stewart, produced by the highly successful production team of Mark Goodson and Bill Todman (arguably the Rodgers and Hammerstein of the television game show industry), and ran

intermittently on several U.S. television networks since its premier in the mid-1950's. *To Tell the Truth* was a panel show, which like its precursor, *What's My Line* (1950-1967)<sup>2</sup> featured a panel of four celebrities, mainly "television personalities" like Nipsey Russell, Betty White, Gene Rayburn, and Kitty Carlisle. The panelists, who sat side-by-side behind a long desk, were confronted with a group of three individuals, or what the program's host and referee called a "team of challengers." Each member of this trio claimed to be a particular individual who had some unusual background, notable life experience, or unique occupation. The celebrity panel was charged with interrogating the three challengers and deciding, based on the responses to their questions, which one of the three was actually the person s/he purported to be—who, in effect, was telling the truth. In this exchange, two of the challengers engaged in deliberate deception, answering the questions of the celebrity panel by pretending to be someone they were not, while the remaining challenger told the truth. The "moment of truth" came at the game's conclusion, when the program's host asked the pivotal question "Will the real so-and-so please stand up?" at which time one of the three challengers stood. In doing so, this one individual revealed him/herself as the real thing and exposed, by comparison, the other two to be false representations and imposters.

Although ostensibly a simple form of entertainment designed, like most programs in American broadcast television, to deliver an audience to product advertisers, *To Tell the Truth* is based on and stages some of the fundamental concerns of Western metaphysics. First, the program differentiates and distinguishes between the real thing and its phenomenal appearances. According to the program's structure, the real thing is not only hidden by the various apparitions that are presented to the panel but is situated just below, behind, or outside (the spatial metaphors can be manipulated in a number of different ways) the surface of these apparitions. Consequently, there is a real thing. It is, however, hidden or concealed by various competing and somewhat unreliable appearances. Second, in the face of these different apparitions, the panelists attempt to ascertain what is real by interrogating the appearances and looking for significant inconsistencies, incongruities, and even betrayals within phenomenal reality. The panelists, therefore, scrutinize the appearances in order to determine what is real and what is not. Third, the effectiveness of this particular undertaking can be evaluated by comparing each panelist's final judgment to the real thing. This means that the panelists will, at some point in the program, have access to the real itself, as itself and not as a mere appearance. At some point, then, namely at the end of the program, the real thing can be made to stand up, to show itself as itself, so that the panelists may have direct and unmitigated access to it. Finally, once the real thing is revealed, the four panelists (and the viewing audience) will know which appearances were truthful and which were false. They will come to

perceive, by a kind of retrospective comparison, who among the challengers had been telling the truth and who was lying, who among the four panelists judged correctly and who did not and, most importantly, what is real and what is merely an illusory deception and fiction.

This is, as any student of philosophy will immediately recognize, the basic configuration attributed to Platonic metaphysics. For mainstream Platonism, the real is situated outside of and beyond phenomenal reality. That is, the real things are located in the realm of supersensible ideas and what is perceived by embodied and finite human beings are derivative and deficient apparitions.<sup>3</sup> This "doctrine of the forms," as it eventually comes to be called, is evident, in various forms, throughout the Platonic corpus. It appears, for example, in the final book of *The Republic*, where Socrates distinguishes between the unique idea of something and its multifarious particular appearances: "'Shall we, then, start the inquiry at this point by our customary procedure? We are in the habit, I take it, of positing a single idea or form in the case of the various multiplicities to which we give the same name. Do you not understand?' 'I do.' 'In the present case, then, let us take any multiplicity you please; for example, there are many couches and tables.' 'Of course.' 'But these utensils imply, I suppose, only two ideas or forms, one of a couch and one of a table'" (Plato 1987: 596a-b). According to the exchange that follows, the real thing—the real couch in this particular case—is the unique idea that exists outside of and beyond what would be called experiential reality, while the various things that we do encounter in this world through the mediation of our senses are derived from and secondary to this singular and eternal idea. There is, then, one eternal idea of the couch, of which particular couches are only derived imitations and apparitions.

This distinction between the eternal and unchanging form of the real and its various sensible apparitions, however, introduces an epistemological problem, namely, how and where does one gain access to the real as such. Unlike *To Tell the Truth*, where the revelation of the real takes place at the end of the game, Plato's Socrates situates access at the beginning, or more precisely, prior to and outside of the space and time of lived experience. "For a human being," Plato has Socrates say in the *Phaedrus*, "must understand a general idea formed by collecting into a unity by means of reason the many perceptions of the senses; and this is a recollection of those real things which our soul once beheld, when it journeyed with a god and, lifting its vision above the things which we now say exist, rose up to real being" (Plato 1982: 249b-c). Platonic metaphysics, therefore, seems to invert the structure of *To Tell the Truth*, situating the revelation of the real at the beginning and not the end of the program. In this way, Platonism is actually more in-line with *What's My Line*, Goodson and Todman's initial panel show and the immediate precursor to *To Tell the Truth*. In *What's My Line*, four celebrity panelists interrogated one challenger in an attempt to ascertain this particular individual's

occupation or line of work. Although the true identity of the challenger was concealed from the celebrity panel, it was revealed to both the studio and television audience in advance of the start of game play. In this way, the studio audience and television viewer were given privileged access to the real, while the panel was restricted from knowing such information. This epistemological difference created a kind of dramatic tension that was undeniably entertaining. Like an omniscient being, the audience knew the truth of all things and watched the mere mortal panel try to figure out the truth from their messy involvement in and limitation to particular apparitions. Although Goodson and Todman were most likely unaware of the influence, their game show was thoroughly informed by and functioned according to the protocols of Platonism.

This Platonic structure, although well over 2400 years old, is also operative in contemporary science, especially theoretical physics. For contemporary physicists, what we perceive and call "real" does not, strictly speaking, have anything to do with what actually comprises physical reality. As Brian Greene (2004) explains it, "physicists such as myself are acutely aware that the reality we observe—matter evolving on the stage of space and time—may have little to do with the reality, if any, that is out there" (ix). Greene, who is an advocate of a brand of physics called "string theory," argues that physical reality is actually comprised of vibrating filaments of energy called "strings." The strings, which are estimated to be "some hundred billion billion times smaller than a single atomic nucleus" (Greene 2004: 345), cannot be observed with any conceivable instrument or tested through any currently available form of experiment. Instead their existence is calculated as the hypothetical resolution of a fundamental conflict between the equations of general relativity and quantum mechanics. For string theorists, then, the real of physical reality exists beyond the realm of human perception, and what we call "reality" is only a derived effect and apparition. Like the Platonic forms, the real of string theory is located outside the scope of direct experience and what is given to perception is little more than an apparitional phenomenon that is, strictly speaking, illusory. "If superstring theory is proven correct," Green (2004) concludes, "we will be forced to accept that the reality we have known is but a delicate chiffon draped over a thick and richly textured cosmic fabric" (19).

This point is emphasized by recently published critiques, which specifically target and question the theory's provability. According to its critics, like Lee Smolen (2006) and Peter Woit (2006), string theory, although mathematically elegant and undeniably popular in the academy, lacks one of the basic requirements of science—an empirically verifiable experiment. String theory, on this account, appears to be situated just outside the threshold of what is traditionally considered to be the proper test of scientific truth. This does not mean, however, that string

theorists advocate a new form of "groundless idealism," what one might be tempted to call Platonism 2.0, and that string theory has somehow abandoned the scientific method or is involved in perpetrating another Sokal hoax.<sup>4</sup> Quite the contrary. "Nothing would," Greene (2003) declares, "please string theorist more than to proudly present the world with a list of detailed, experimentally testable predictions. Certainly, there is no way to establish that any theory describes our world without subjecting its predictions to experimental verification" (210). String theorist, then, do not reject experimental validation, they simply postpone its achievement. That is, the empirically verifiable data necessary to prove string theory's predictions, although currently inaccessible to us, will at some point in the not-too-distant future be made available as such. In support of this claim, advocates often point out that new insights in physics have often preceded experimental demonstration by a good number of years. "The history of physics is," Greene (2003) argues, "filled with ideas that when first presented seemed completely untestable but, through various unforeseen developments, were ultimately brought within the realm of experimental verifiability" (226). Whereas Platonism, like the game show *What's my Line*, situates access to the real in a prior revelation that takes place outside the space and time of terrestrial experience, theoretical physics, like the game show *To Tell the Truth*, locates its revelation within the material of empirical reality at a point in the not-too-distant future.

### **Critical Revisions and Perverse Remakes**

Immanuel Kant, who Žižek (2001a: 160 and 2004: 45) considers to be the critical pivot in the history of Western thought, radicalizes the problem, wresting it away from naïve forms of both idealism and empiricism. Kant, following the Platonic precedent, differentiates between the object as it appears to us (finite and embodied human beings) through the mediation of our senses and the thing as it really is in-itself. "What we have meant to say," Kant (1965) writes in the opening salvo of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, "is that all our intuition is nothing but the representation of appearance; that the things which we intuit are not in themselves what we intuit them as being, nor their relations so constituted in themselves as they appear to us" (A 42/B 59). This differentiation installs a fundamental and irreconcilable split whereby "the object is to be taken in a *two fold sense*, namely as appearance and as thing in itself" (Kant 1965: B xxvii). Human beings are restricted to the former, while the latter remains, for us at least, forever unapproachable. "What objects may be in themselves, and apart from all this receptivity of our sensibility, remains completely unknown to us. We know nothing but our mode of perceiving them—a mode, which is peculiar to us, and not necessarily shared in by every being, though, certainly by every human being" (Kant 1965: A 42/B 59). Despite the

complete and absolute inaccessibility of the thing itself, Kant still "believes" in its existence.<sup>5</sup> "But our further contention must also be duly borne in mind, namely that though we cannot *know* these objects as things in themselves, we must yet be in a position at least to think them as *things* in themselves; otherwise we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearances without anything that appears" (Kant 1965: B xxvi).<sup>6</sup> Consequently, Kant redeploys the Platonic distinction between the real thing and its appearances, adding the further qualification that access to the real thing is, if we are absolutely careful in defining the proper use and limits of our reason, forever restricted and beyond us.

It follows from this that if Kant's critical philosophy had been employed in the design of *To Tell the Truth*, the game show would have been pretty much the same with one crucial difference.<sup>7</sup> There would, of course, be the celebrity panel who would seek to know the truth through interrogation and the three challengers who would present this panel with various and competing appearances. At the moment of truth, however, the final gesture would be truncated. When the host asks the question "will the real so-and-so please stand up?" no one would respond; none of the challenges would stand and be recognized as the real thing. Instead, the panel and the audience would be confronted with fact that finite human beings are unable to know the thing as it truly is in itself. This does not mean, however, that there is no real thing. He/she/it would in fact exist, and Kant would be the first to insist upon it. He would, however, be just as strict in insisting that this real thing, whatever it really is, cannot be made to appear before us in phenomenal reality under the revealing lights of the television studio. It, whatever it is, remains forever off screen, perhaps just outside the frame of televisual phenomena, behind the curtain of the studio set, or held in the green room just down the hall. The Kantian version of the game, therefore, would probably end with a distinctly Kantian admonishment. Something like, "Remember folks, what you see here is all you get. Going further would be a violation of the proper use of our reason. Good night and see you next week." Although perfectly consistent with the stipulations of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, such a program would not last very long, mainly because we would not get the final revelation and pay-off. We would, in effect, be forever denied and barred from the "the money shot."

This outcome is something that Hegel, in particular, would find unsatisfactory, but not for the obvious reason. What Hegel would object to is not the lack of resolution, that is, Kant's seemingly stubborn insistence on the fundamental limitations of human knowledge and its absolute inability to achieve access to the thing-in-itself. Instead Hegel criticizes Kant for pulling punches, for not taking his own innovations far enough. "It is Kant," Žižek (2006) writes, "who goes only halfway in his destruction of metaphysics, still maintaining the reference to the Thing-in-itself as the externally inaccessible entity; Hegel is merely a radicalized Kant, who

takes the step from negative access to the Absolute to the Absolute itself as negativity" (27). According to Žižek's reading, what Hegel finds unsatisfactory is the fact that the Kantian revolution in metaphysics remains, despite and in the face of Kant's own explicit claims, incomplete and unfulfilled. He only goes halfway, providing us with half a metaphysical revolution. For Kant, the thing-in-itself, although forever inaccessible to finite human beings, is still thought of as a positive, substantive thing. "Kant still presupposes that the Thing-in-itself exists as something positively given beyond the field of representation" (Žižek 1989: 205). Hegel finds this both incomplete and inconsistent. He therefore takes up and pushes the Kantian insight further.

The Thing-in-itself expresses the object when we leave out of sight all that consciousness makes of it, all its determinate feelings and thoughts. It is easy to see what is left—utter abstraction, total emptiness, only described still as a beyond—the negative of every representation, feeling, and determination. Nor does it require much reflection to see that this *caput mortuum* is still only a product of thought...that it is the work of the empty I, which makes an object out of this empty self-identity of its own...Hence one can only read with wonder the perpetual remark that we do not know the Thing-in-itself. On the contrary there is nothing we can know so easily (Hegel 1987: 72).

Hegel, therefore, criticizes Kant not for insisting on the necessarily limited capacity of human knowledge or the fundamental inaccessibility of the thing-in-itself, but for wrongly presupposing that the thing-in-itself is some positive, substantive thing and missing the fact that this thing is itself "nothing but the inherent limitation of the intuited phenomena" (Žižek 1993: 39). "Where Kant thinks that he is still dealing only with a negative presentation of the Thing, we are already in the midst of the Thing-in-itself—for *this Thing-in-itself is nothing but this radical negativity*. In other words—in a somewhat overused Hegelian speculative twist—the negative experience of the Thing must change into the experience of the Thing-in-itself as radical negativity" (Žižek 1989: 205-206).

This Hegelian-influenced elaboration results in a much more complicated concept of the real, and Žižek finds Jacques Lacan to be the one thinker who gives it adequate articulation. On Žižek's reading, the Lacanian real is anything but simple, and, beginning with Žižek's earliest works, is characterized as consisting of two, seemingly incompatible aspects. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek's first book in English, the Real (which Žižek almost always distinguishes with a capital letter) is described as "simultaneously both the hard, impenetrable

kernel resisting symbolization *and* a pure chimerical entity which has in itself no ontological consistency" (1989: 169). A similar explanation is provided in *Tarrying with the Negative*, which appeared four years later: "A certain fundamental ambiguity pertains to the notion of the Real in Lacan: the Real designates a substantial hard kernel that precedes and resists symbolization and, simultaneously, it designates the left-over, which is posited or produced by symbolization itself" (Žižek 1993: 36). Žižek's ontology of the Real, therefore, appears, as Adrian Johnston (2008) characterizes it, to *oscillate* between "the (Kantian) Real-as-presupposed (*présupposé*) and the (Hegelian) Real-as-posed (*posé*)" (146).<sup>8</sup> "Oscillation," is an appropriate term in this context insofar as it connotes a continual shifting back and forth. For Žižek, then, it is not a matter of sequential progress, moving, for instance, from the Kantian perspective to the Hegelian. Nor is it a matter of choosing sides, deciding, for example, to back one team in opposition to the other. Nor is this all a result of sloppy or inaccurate thinking on Žižek's part—what one might be tempted to identify as an inability to decide one way or the other. Instead it is a matter of perspective, the ability to see both sides simultaneously. "The Real," Žižek (2003) argues, "is *simultaneously* the Thing to which direct access is not possible and the obstacle that prevents this direct access; the Thing that eludes our grasp and the distorting screen that makes us miss the Thing. More precisely, the Real is ultimately the very shift of perspective from the first standpoint to the second" (77). From one angle the Real is perceived as the Thing to which direct access is not possible—a kind of Kantian thing-in-itself. "On a second approach, however, we should merely take note of how this radical antinomy that seems to preclude our access to the Thing *is already the Thing itself*" (Žižek 2003: 77).

For Žižek, then, the Real is parallaxic. "It has no substantial density in itself, it is just a gap between two points of perspective, perceptible only in the shift from the one to the other" (Žižek 2006: 26). This alternative account of the Real, as Žižek points out on more than one occasion, bears a certain resemblance (without necessarily being the same) to a more sophisticated understanding of theoretical physics. Although Žižek (1996) pursues an interesting game of connect the dots with quantum mechanics, it is string theory that provides what is perhaps the best demonstration. As pointed out previously, string theory lacks any kind of experiment that would prove its insights and this lack has, as one might expect, fueled the efforts expended by the theory's adherents and critics alike. The Real of string theory—the imperceptible strings of energy that supposedly vibrate in nine or more dimensions—are not directly accessible with any currently available or foreseeable process, technology, or experimental apparatus. Like Žižek's account of the Lacanian Real, these strings are posited as the "hard kernel" that subtends and precedes the statements of theory. At the same time, however, these strings do not have any substantial density, cannot be directly observed with any

conceivable instrument, and cannot be tested through any currently available form of experiment. They are, at least as things currently stand, nothing more than a lack or gap that appears within the texture of the theory itself. This does not mean, however, that anything goes—that anything and everything can be legitimately situated under the banner of "string theory." String theorists neither tolerate this kind of epistemological relativism nor endorse, as Žižek (2003) characterizes it, the "'postmodern' notion that appearance is more valuable than stupid reality: that, ultimately, there is no final Reality, just the interplay between multiple appearances" (78). Žižek's position on this is as strict as any physical scientist: "Everything is not just the interplay of appearance, there is a Real—this Real, however, is not the inaccessible Thing, but the *gap* that prevents our access to it" (78).

This changes not so much the structure but the outcome of the metaphysical game. In what would be a Žižekian remake of *To Tell the Truth*, things would begin and proceed with little or no significant alteration. A celebrity panel would confront and interrogate three challengers, all of whom would make competing claims to be the real thing. The truth of the matter would, as in the Goodson/Todman production, be withheld. And because of this, the panel can only attempt to gain access to the real through an engagement with the manifold and often conflicting representations provided by the three challengers. The real difference becomes evident at the game's end, when the real thing is asked to stand and reveal itself as such. Here, as in the Kantian version, we do not get the naïve gratification of the real making a final and revealing appearance in phenomenal reality. As with the Kantian conclusion, no one stands up. The difference—the "minimal difference," as Žižek often calls it—comes immediately after or alongside this apparent failure or lack of resolution. The Žižekian game, unlike the Kantian version, would not conclude with a rather unsatisfactory and somewhat disappointing admonishment. In order for the game's ending to be construed in this way, we would need, like Kant to presuppose and place value in the positive existence of the thing itself. We would still need to "believe" in the thing-in-itself. Žižek's version, however, would insist on "tarrying with the negative," with the fact that this apparent lack of resolution is itself a resolution. Or to put it another way, at the end of the program, when no one stands up, there is no final and absolute revelation of the thing itself. This lack of revelation, however, is itself revealing. Through it, we come to see that the so-called real thing, which had been presupposed from the very beginning of the program and that had directed its very movement, is a kind of posed or posited fiction. "This unique procedure," Žižek (2008a) writes in a passage that appears to address itself to the operations of the game show, "is the opposite of the standard revelation of the illusory status of (what we previously misperceived as) part of reality: what is thereby asserted is rather, in a paradoxical tautological move, *the illusory status*

*of the illusion itself*—the illusion that there is some suprasensible noumenal Entity is shown precisely to be an 'illusion', a fleeting apparition" (xxxv). Consequently, what is revealed in the Žižekian version of the game is not a real thing standing above, behind, or outside of the play of appearances and comprehending everything. What is revealed is that this very expectation—an expectation that has been inherited from Plato and that has, since that time, held an important and controlling interest in Western intellectual history—is itself a metaphysical fantasy and fabrication.

### **Will the Real Hegel Please Stand Up?**

Žižek's insights, although clearly influenced by Kant, Lacan, and others, are often referred to the philosophical innovations introduced by Hegel. When push comes to shove, it is Hegel who occupies the privileged position: "Ultimately if I am," Žižek admits in an interview from 2004, "to choose just one thinker, it's Hegel. He's the one for me" (Ramussen 2004: unpaginated). The question that remains, then, is how accurate and attentive are Žižek's readings of Hegel? How faithful are his interpretations, representations, and characterizations in comparison to the thing we call and would recognize as being Hegel? Are what Žižek says and writes about Hegel and Hegelianism valid, truthful, and credible? Or do they show evidence of imprecise representations, deficient mischaracterizations, or perhaps even deliberate perversions? In order to answer these questions, we appear to need access to Hegel—not just this or that particular representation of Hegel but the real thing. In the parlance of the game show, we seem to need the real Hegel to stand up so that he can be recognized as such and we can, by comparison, evaluate Žižek's representations to be accurate, flawed, or deceptive. In fact, we are in no position either to credit Žižek for getting it right or to criticize him for screwing it up without some form of appeal to this real thing that would anchor, substantiate, and authorize such a judgment. This all seems to be rather simple and straight forward. It is, however, anything but simple. Everything depends on how one understands and characterizes "the real."

The typical understanding and approach provides what appears to be immediate and satisfactory answers to these kinds of questions. In order to appraise Žižek's representations of Hegel (or those of any other philosopher, for that matter), it is assumed that one would have unmitigated access to the real in itself, outside of and apart from the representations that are to be evaluated. Such access has been customarily situated in either in some fantastic past encounter or future revelation. The former, which comprises the party-line of mainstream Platonism and is exemplified in *What's My Line*, is evident in those approaches to reading and literary criticism that are informed by and patronize communication theory. According to this

formulation, there was a real Hegel to whom one could have had access at some point. That time, however, is now past. The real Hegel, the person and the author, is dead and gone. As a result of this, we are now limited to dealing with the manifold and multifarious appearances of Hegel that occur within phenomenal reality. This is comprised not only of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* but of all of the texts, notes, letters, and course transcripts that bear the authorizing signature of Hegel. Also included would be the numerous translations of this *oeuvre*, critical evaluations and interpretations by noted scholars like T. M. Knox or Alexandre Kojève, and, of course, the reactualization that is Žižek's particular contribution. In the face of these different and often times competing versions/visions of Hegel, the reader is in the position of having to recollect what Hegel actually thought or really wanted to say from an engagement with what appears before him/her. And in the various debates and discussions that arise, one often finds oneself leveraging and making reference to this real Hegel, who would, it is assumed, be the final word, ultimate authority, and conclusive arbiter of any disagreement. As Roland Barthes (1967: unpaginated) characterized it, "the Author, when we believe in him, is always conceived as the past of his own book: the book and the author take their places of their own accord on the same line, cast as a *before* and an *after*: the Author is supposed to feed the book — that is, he pre-exists it, thinks, suffers, lives for it; he maintains with his work the same relation of antecedence a father maintains with his child." This paternal metaphor has a long and venerable history within Western philosophy and is rooted in what is arguably the first articulation of a theory of reading and writing—Plato's *Phaedrus*. According to an exchange that occurs towards this dialogue's end, the written word is a kind of abandoned and wayward child who always needs the authority of its father to legitimize what it says (Plato 1982: 275d-e).

The flipside of this arrangement is that kind of exacting realism often attributed to the "hard sciences" and exemplified in a game show like *To Tell the Truth*. In this case, access to the real is not something that recedes into an irrecoverable past but is projected into a future that is yet to come. Although string theory currently lacks a suitable experiment that would confirm its insights with empirically verifiable information, many physicists anticipate that such an experiment will, at some time in the not-too-distant future, be available and will yield the appropriate empirical data. At some point in the future, then, the real thing will, in the idiom of the game show, be made to stand and reveal itself as itself. Consequently the real Hegel, although not currently available, will at some future moment be made to stand up and be identified as such. This could occur, for instance, with the discovery a text, a letter, or a lecture transcript that had not been widely available or read, like the recent interest in Hegel's (fortuitously titled) *Realphilosophie* of 1805/06; a new translation of one of the canonical works that not only transforms Hegel's 19<sup>th</sup> century German into something more readable but in doing

so illuminates some previously inaccessible corner of his thought; or an insightful commentary or interpretation that brings Hegelian philosophy into contact with contemporary issues and that reveals aspects of Hegelianism that have until this time gone largely unnoticed or underappreciated. No matter how or where it takes place, this revelation of the real is not something that had occurred and is now past; it is something that is anticipated and still to come.

This approach is particularly evident in that brand of philosophy that would be, as Kant (1965) had described it, "raised to the dignity of a science" (B xxxvi). In these cases, the real authority is not situated in the individual (more-often-than-not dead) philosopher who wrote this or that particular treatise but is situated elsewhere. "This shift," as Žižek (2008b) describes it, "is the shift from 'I speak the truth' to 'the truth itself speaks (in/through me),' to the point at which I can say, like Meister Eckhart, 'it is true, and the truth says it itself'" (2). Already with Plato, responsibility for what Socrates says and does is referred elsewhere and placed in the service of another authorizing agent (Plato 1990: 23b-c). As Nietzsche (1974) characterized this rather distinctive rhetorical gesture, "It wasn't I! Not I! But a god through me" (191). Similarly the real authority in the physical sciences rests not in the particular expressions and opinions of this or that individual physicist, but with, for lack of a better description, Nature herself. And the real authority in philosophy is, according to Hegel's own explanations, situated likewise. The real truth of Hegelianism, therefore, rests not in G. W. F. Hegel's personal opinions, thoughts, or intentions. It is instead a matter of the Concept's self-development and its own self-expression to which the philosopher Hegel contributes. This means, of course, that Hegel, the individual person and philosopher, is not necessarily the final and complete authority on Hegelianism, which is an insight that is explicitly mobilized and further developed by 20<sup>th</sup> century literary criticism in the wake of what Roland Barthes (1967) called "the death of the author." In the Hegelian text, recognition of this particular situation is, as one would expect from a thinker (or thinking) so dedicated to self-conscious reflectivity, explicitly documented and identified as such: "The share in the total work of Spirit which falls to the individual can only be very small. Because of this, the individual must all the more forget himself, as the nature of Science implies and requires. Of course, he must make of himself and achieve what he can; but less must be demanded of him, just as he in turn can expect less of himself, and may demand less for himself" (Hegel 1977: 45).

Although seemingly opposed, these two approaches share at least one fundamental assumption, namely, that the real thing (whether that consist in the thoughts of an individual philosopher or the philosophical truth of the matter) can, at some point (no matter how impossible that might seem at this current point in time), be revealed. What both agree upon,

therefore, is a dedication to the real and the desire to have the real stand up and be recognized as such. Kant, of course, complicates things by demonstrating how access to this real thing-in-itself is forever restricted and inaccessible. There is, on his account, no privileged past or future revelation (or, what for Kant, at least, amounts to the same, no suitable way of knowing one way or the other) where the real thing would be given to us directly. When considered in this fashion, all we can ever have access to are the various appearances that occur in phenomenal reality and the real thing, whatever that might be, is something that remains forever, at least for us, restricted, withdrawn, and unknown. When the ultimate question is asked—Will the real Hegel please stand up?—we get nothing; there is no final, definitive, or authoritative revelation. "We know," Barthes (1967: unpaginated) writes in a passage that appears to be indebted to this Kantian insight, "that a text does not consist of a line of words, releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God), but is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of which is original."

This approach although seemingly more sophisticated and attentive to the facts on the ground (we can, it seems, no more go back in time to meet the real G. W. F. Hegel<sup>9</sup> nor is there much hope that some final and definitive revelation will be made about the truth of Hegelianism in the future) has the potential to devolve into two kinds of abuses—abuses that Žižek identifies with the terms "democracy" and "totalitarianism." "Both liberal-political democracy and 'totalitarianism.'" Žižek (2002) writes, "foreclose a politics of truth. Democracy, of course, is the reign of sophists: there are only opinions; any reference by a political agent to some ultimate truth is denounced as 'totalitarian.' What 'totalitarianism' regimes impose, however, is also a mere semblance of truth: an arbitrary Teaching whose function is simply to legitimize the pragmatic decisions of the Rulers" (176). Since we are, as Kant insists, restricted to the manifold of appearances and forever barred from accessing the thing-in-itself, there is, strictly speaking, no suitable access to a final and ultimate authority situated outside of and beyond this particular engagement with the phenomena. Consequently, any version of reality appears to be just as valid as any other. And when it comes to reading the work of a particular philosopher, like Hegel, any interpretation would, it seems, be just as good as any other. "Thus literature," Barthes (1967: unpaginated) argues, "by refusing to assign to the text (and to the world as text) a 'secret:' that is, an ultimate meaning, liberates an activity which we might call counter-theological, properly revolutionary, for to refuse to arrest meaning is finally to refuse God and his hypostases, reason, science, the law." Since there is no final and absolute authority on the matter, anyone and everyone it seems would be entitled to their opinion. And when these various opinions come into conflict with each other, the resolution would be the

rather unsatisfactory platitude that is all-too-often the outcome of this kind of relativism—"we'll just have to agree to disagree."

Conversely the same critical insights also have the potential to lead, in what appears to be the absolute opposite direction, to forms of intolerant totalitarianism. If access to the real thing is forever lacking, then authority is ultimately a transient matter and is available to whoever stakes a claim to it and is able to defend this claim against the competition.<sup>10</sup> This approach is often mobilized in religion, especially fundamentalist traditions. Since God is that entity who cannot appear before us or show himself as himself, one man or a group of men (and it has been almost always a matter of *men*) claim to speak for and on behalf of the divine. And when one claim inevitably butts up against and comes into conflict with another, resolution is all too often a matter of violent confrontation. This politicization of truth, however, is not limited to religious conflicts. It is also a rather common practice in the academy. Because the real Hegel is withdrawn from the scene, some noted expert, like T. M. Knox (1942) for instance, proclaims that it is Herbert Marcuse who "gives us the real Hegel" (265). This claim's legitimacy is not based on some unique and privileged access to the real but is ultimately an arbitrary and capricious decision. And when this particular claim runs up against other, just as legitimate claims, resolution is a matter of force—not necessarily physical confrontation but forceful argumentation and persuasive debate. In this way, then, "moral majority fundamentalists and tolerant multiculturalists are," as Žižek (2001) points out, "two sides of the same coin" (68).

Žižek's own innovations contest these outcomes. He clearly opposes the rather naïve solutions provided by those traditional approaches that presume some kind of fantastic access to the thing-in-itself. At the same time, however, he is also not entirely satisfied with the Kantian outcome and its insistence on an inaccessible yet extant thing. He therefore proposes an alternative, and this alternative avoids both the Scylla of fundamentalist adherence to a privileged thing that is presumably stripped bare of the distorting sediment of intellectual history and the Charibdis of epistemological relativism—a kind of anything goes attitude that tolerates different and competing interpretations as "all things being equal." "This means," Žižek (2003) writes, "neither an epistemologically 'naïve' reliance on 'objective knowledge' available when we get rid of our partial prejudices and preconception, and adopt a 'neutral' view, nor the (complementary) relativist view that there is no ultimate truth, only multiple subjective perspectives" (78). Žižek charts a different course. This alternative is not a kind of "middle ground," which is explicitly rejected as a "worst case" scenario (Žižek 2003: 156). Rather it may be characterized, as Žižek often asserts, as consisting in two complementary maneuvers. In a first move, "the Real is the impossible hard core which we cannot confront directly, but only through the lenses of a multitude of symbolic fictions, virtual formations. In a second move this

very hard core is purely virtual, actually nonexistent, an X that can be reconstructed only retroactively, from the multitude of symbolic formations which are 'all there actually is'" (Žižek 2006: 26).

Consequently, the real Hegel is, in the first place, that thing—the presumed hard kernel—that exists outside of and beyond the seemingly endless circulation of representations that appear in texts, interpretations, translations, and readings of Hegelian philosophy. At the same time, this apparently substantial and independent hard kernel, if we are strict in our understanding of human finitude and its proper epistemological restrictions, turns out to be entirely virtual. It does not actually exist as such; it is instead a byproduct or virtual projection of our entanglement with these different textual formations and appearances. The real Hegel, then, is a retroactively reconstructed virtuality that is fashioned from out of what was thought to be derivative and subsequent symbolic formations. Consequently, when the decisive question—"Will the real Hegel please stand up?"—is asked, what we get is not necessarily what was expected. What comes to be revealed is neither the thing-in-itself available to us in some unmitigated immediacy nor the disappointment of its inability to make an appearance. What is revealed is the lack of this kind of revelation and the way such expectations and assumptions are always and already misguided and fantastic. And it is on this point that Žižek once again comes into close proximity to Foucault: "It is not enough," Foucault (1984) writes, "to repeat the empty affirmation that the author has disappeared. For the same reason, it is not enough to keep repeating (after Nietzsche) that God and man have died a common death. Instead, we must locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings that this disappearance uncovers" (105).

### **Truth or Consequences**

This has, at least, three related consequences. First, what Žižek describes appears to have a circular configuration: The real Hegel is the impossible "thing" which subtends, proceeds, and exists outside what comes to appear in the various texts that bear his signature. At the same time, this "thing" is purely virtual and only able to be reconstructed retroactively from the multitude of this diverse textual material. This is not, despite initial appearances, some kind of deficient "circular reasoning." It is, as Hegel himself points out, the proper configuration of any "speculative" mode of cognition. For Hegel, "speculative" is not, as is often the case in colloquial discourse, a pejorative term meaning groundless consideration or idle review of something that is often inconclusive and indeterminate. It is not, therefore, to be construed as a kind of pointless exercise in navel gazing. Instead, Hegel understands and utilizes the word "speculative" in its strict etymological sense, which is derived from the Latin noun *speculum*.

"Speculative," therefore, designates a form of self-reflective knowing. It is a manner of cognition that makes its own cognizing an object of its consideration. The crucial task in the face of this kind of speculative circularity is not to break out of the circle and to substantiate what Brianle Chang (1996) calls the "naïve empiricist picture" (x) but to recognize the systemic necessity of the circularity and to learn to enter into it and to work through it in a way that is attentive to its structure and configuration. For Žižek, this means explicitly recognizing the way what comes to be enunciated is always and already conditioned by the situation or place of enunciation. "At the level of positive knowledge," Žižek (2008b) writes, "it is, of course, never possible to (be sure that we have) attain(ed) the truth—one can only endlessly approach it, because language is ultimately self-referential, there is no way to draw a definitive line of separation between sophism, sophistic exercises, and Truth itself (this is Plato's problem). Lacan's wager is here the Pascalean one: the wager of Truth. But how? Not by running after 'objective' truth, but by holding onto the truth about the position from which one speaks" (3). The strategic advantage of a speculative mode of knowing is not that it provides one with privileged and immediate access to the object in its raw or naked state but that it continually conceptualizes the place from which one claims to know anything and submits to investigation the position from which one makes any claim whatsoever.

Second, this speculative structure, as Žižek points out, necessarily entails a transformed understanding of truth and affects the attempt to tell the truth. "There are," as Martin Heidegger (1962) described it, "three theses which characterize the way in which the essence of truth has been traditionally taken and the way it is supposed to have been first defined: (1) that the 'locus' of truth is the statement (judgment); (2) that the essence of truth lies in the 'agreement' of the judgment with its object; (3) that *Aristotle*, the father of logic, not only has assigned truth to the judgment as its primordial locus but has set going the definition of 'truth' as 'agreement'" (257). According to this characterization, *truth* is not something that resides in objects but is located in statements about objects. In other words, truth is not "out there" to be discovered in things but is essentially a relative concept. It subsists in the agreement or correspondence between a statement about something, what is commonly called a "judgment," and the object about which the statement is made. Heidegger (1962) illustrates this characterization with a simple example: "Let us suppose that someone with his back turned to the wall makes the true statement that 'the picture on the wall is hanging askew.' This statement demonstrates itself when the man who makes it, turns around and perceives the picture hanging askew on the wall" (260). The truth of the statement, "the picture is hanging askew," is evaluated by "turning around" and comparing the content of the statement to the state of the actual object. If the statement agrees with or corresponds to the object, then it is true; if not, it is false. According to Heidegger's analysis (1962), this

particular understanding of truth—truth as agreement or correspondence—dominates "the history of Western humanity" (184) and can therefore be found throughout the Western philosophical and scientific traditions.<sup>11</sup> Žižek's understanding of the real complicates this formulation. Since the real cannot ever be presented to us as such, truth cannot be evaluated by comparing a statement made about some thing to the real thing. Truth, therefore, can no longer be conceptualized and evaluated as simple, linear correspondence.

The 'truth,' is not the 'real' state of things, that is, the 'direct' view of the object without perspectival distortion, but the very Real of the antagonism that causes perspectival distortion. The site of truth is not the way 'things really are in themselves,' beyond their perspectival distortions, but the very gap, passage, that separates one perspective from another, the gap that makes the two perspectives radically incommensurable.... There is a truth; everything is not relative—but this truth is the truth of the perspectival distortion as such, not the truth distorted by the partial view of a one-sided perspective (Žižek 2003: 79 and Žižek 2006: 281).

For Žižek, then, truth no longer resides in and can be evaluated by measuring the correspondence of a statement about something to the real thing itself. This kind of basic one-to-one correspondence, which is the standard operating presumption of both *To Tell the Truth* and *What's My Line*, has been and remains a mere metaphysical game. To put it in Heideggerian language, no matter how many times one turns around, s/he does not ever get direct and unmitigated access to the real thing as it is in itself. Like the experiences of the subterranean prisoner who is described in Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" (Plato 1987: 514a-517a), the encounter with reality never achieves direct and immediate access to the thing itself but is limited to what appears to be an endless succession of different and competing representations, a kind of on-going and recursive mediation. Or as Žižek describes it, "the Real is the appearance as appearance; it not only appears within appearances, it also is *nothing but* its own appearance—it is simply a certain *grimace* of reality, a certain imperceptible, unfathomable, ultimately illusory feature that accounts for the absolute difference within identity. This Real is not the inaccessible beyond of phenomena, simply their doubling, the gap between two inconsistent phenomena, a perspective shift" (Žižek 2008a: p. xxvii; see also Žižek 2001a: 80). Consequently, what we encounter in phenomenal reality is not derived from some independent and pre-existing real thing but the order of precedence should be reversed. "The multiple perspectival inconsistencies between phenomena are not an effect of the impact of the

transcendental Thing—on the contrary, the Thing is nothing but the ontologization of the inconsistency between phenomena" (Žižek 2008a: xxix-xxx). For this reason, if we could ever peek behind the scenes or turn around fast enough to catch a glimpse of the real, what we would encounter is not the real thing with its pants down. We would discover, as Žižek (2008a) writes with reference to a passage from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, "only what we put there" (liv).

Finally, if all this is true (to use a colloquialism that is now somewhat more complicated than initially appears), how is one to decide whether a particular reading of Hegel (or any other philosopher, for that matter) is appropriate or not? Does this suggest that anything goes and, as Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov puts it, "all things are permitted?" Does it mean, in the final analysis, that Žižek's reading of Hegel is just as good as any other and that a decision one way or the other is ultimately capricious, tentative, and inconclusive? If what we want in response to these kinds of questions is evidence of truthful correspondence, that is, the demonstration of an accurate reproduction and exacting fidelity to the real thing, we clearly will not get it. Žižek's texts not only question and undermine this procedure, but he also deliberately violates its assumptions and stipulations in practice. In fact, he advocates and engages in what he calls, in reference to Deleuze's reading of the history of philosophy, "productive misreading" (Žižek 2004: ix). From the perspective of traditional ways of understanding the task of reading and the truth of interpretation, such "misreading" can only appear to be transgressive, monstrous, and deficient. It fails to achieve adequate correspondence and gets most, if not everything, wrong. From another perspective, however, the situation can be interpreted otherwise. In this case, "misreading" should not be construed as inadequate reproduction or inaccurate interpretation but constitutes an informed betrayal and calculated intervention. "One can," as Žižek (2004) argues, "only remain faithful to an author by way of betraying him (the actual letter of his thought)" (13). This betrayal, however, is not mere infidelity with regards to some original thing. "Infidelity" is not adequate insofar as it remains the mere negative and inverse of "fidelity"—a word that has metaphysical, technical, and even conjugal connotations. Instead this "betrayal," in a way that is similar to Donna Haraway's (1991: 149) deployment of the concept of "blasphemy," is generated through a kind of excessive and unrestrained faithfulness. "One can," Žižek (2004) continues, "only truly betray an author by way of repeating him, by way of remaining faithful to the core of his thought" (13). "Productive misreading," then, is not simply a mistake, an error, or a kind of infidelity.<sup>12</sup> It is a deliberately blasphemous form of excessive faithfulness that follows an author's text carefully and literally, even to the point, as Derrida (1978) says of Georges Bataille, "of agreeing with him against himself" (260).

This does not mean, however, that anything goes and everything is permitted. Žižek is as allergic to postmodern relativisms as he is to pre-modern dogmatism.<sup>13</sup> The question before us, therefore, is not whether and to what extent Žižek's readings of Hegel are accurate reproductions of what Hegel actually thought and wrote or more or less faithful representations of the Concept of Hegelian philosophy. This kind of inquiry, although supported by over 2400 years of tradition, remains governed by deep-seated metaphysical assumptions about the real that Žižek demonstrates to be problematic, fantastic, and even illusory. The question, therefore, must be articulated and situated otherwise. The question, then, is not simply "how accurate are Žižek's readings of Hegel?" but "on the basis of what kind of reading do we deploy and value this concept of accuracy?" and "how has this expectation already determined critical procedures and outcomes?" Žižek, therefore, turns the initial question around and asks us to reconsider the very ontological assumptions that already inform and shape our mode of investigation. He would, in effect, respond to the question, "will the real Hegel please stand up?" with another question—one which reverses the inquiry and asks about the expectations and presumptions that already underlie and determine the question itself. Therefore, instead of asking the somewhat naïve and direct question "will the real Hegel please stand up?" his inquiry would be something like "why, how, and on the basis of what authority does a particular articulation of Hegelian philosophy already present itself as and claim to be the real Hegel?"

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Žižek's engagement with the work of Jacques Derrida, which is given its most sustained and extended treatment in *For They Know not What They Do* (2008a), is complicated by the fact that Žižek says little or nothing in response to Derrida's own writing but relies heavily on its subsequent representation in Rodolphe Gasché's *The Tain of the Mirror* (1986). This transaction mirrors the problem that motivates and is addressed by this essay. Namely, when it comes to dealing with different representations of something, how are we to decide which one is an accurate portrayal of the real thing and which ones are impostors? Clearly one way to critique and to contest Žižek's reading of Derrida would be to show how Gasché's interpretation, although not entirely wrong, is nevertheless not entirely consistent with Derrida as such. This kind of demonstration, however, immediately falls back on and mobilize the very issue that is to be addressed—the presumption of some pure and real original that is then distorted by subsequent representation and proxy. Instead of mobilizing this common and often unquestioned metaphysical assumption, the following endeavors to question its very structure, procedure, and operation.

<sup>2</sup> For more on both *To Tell the Truth* and *What's My Line*, see what is arguably the definitive resource for information regarding popular culture and related phenomena, Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/To\\_Tell\\_the\\_Truth](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/To_Tell_the_Truth)). Although there is considerable debate concerning the validity of data contained in this online, open source encyclopedia, it is undoubtedly one of the best depositories of information on pop culture. Likewise various clips of both game shows can be viewed at <http://youtube.com>. See, in particular, <http://youtube.com/watch?v=p26yXdr4fLY> for a 1966 version of *To Tell the Truth* and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXT2E9Ccc8A> for Salvador Dali's appearance as a contestant on *What's My Line*.

<sup>3</sup> The characteristic distrust of sensation that is evident in Platonism is not Plato's innovation; it is informed by and the product of a general attitude that was rather pervasive throughout ancient Greece. "There was," as Debra Hawhee (2004) points out, "among the poets and philosophers of ancient Greece a general distrust of sensation, for the eyes and ears as bodily instruments were thought to be inherently deceptive, never reaching the truth, *aletheia*" (173).

<sup>4</sup> In May of 1996, Alan Sokal, a physicist at NYU, published an article in the journal *Social Text*. The article, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" was composed as a deliberate parody of the prevailing "postmodernist jargon" that had, in Sokal's estimations, taken root in some corners of the academy. "For some years," Sokal wrote in a *Lingua Franca* article that sought to expose and explain his parody, "I've been troubled by an apparent decline in the standards of rigor in certain precincts of the academic humanities...So to test the prevailing intellectual standards, I decided to try a modest (though admittedly uncontrolled) experiment: Would a leading North American journal of cultural studies—whose editorial collective includes such luminaries as Fredric Jameson and Andrew Ross—publish an article liberally salted with nonsense if (a) it sounded good and (b) it flattered the editor's ideological preconceptions?" (Editors of *Lingua Franca* 2000: 49). Once exhibited as such, the Sokal Hoax, as it came to be called, ignited a firestorm of commentary and criticism that eventually landed on the front page of the *New York Times*.

<sup>5</sup> In this way, Kantian philosophy anticipates a gesture that has become increasingly operative in contemporary science. Serious practitioners of both the "hard" and social sciences often find themselves asking and/or responding to what appears to be strange and somewhat surprising questions, like the one to which Bruno Latour (1999) addresses himself at the beginning of

*Pandora's Hope*: "Do you believe in reality?" (1). This question, which, if one believes Latour, was articulated by a social scientist, manifests both the uneasy position of the real in contemporary science and reveals the "faith-based initiatives" that some researchers have found themselves employing in order to solidify and protect scientific knowledge. Despite the fact that this question of "faith" is now often associated with the so-called "science wars," it is actually much older and comprises one of the founding gestures of modern epistemology. In the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1988), for example, Descartes's search for a certain and secure foundation for scientific thought leads him to doubt the veracity of everything that comes to him through the mediation of the senses. In order to dispel this doubt and to secure access to the real world outside the potentially solipsistic *cogito ergo sum*, he finds it necessary to posit the existence of God, whose eternal goodness is such that He would not permit deception of any kind. In Cartesian metaphysics, therefore, it is belief in a particular Christian understanding of God that ensures both the existence of external reality and our access to it.

<sup>6</sup>This Kantian insight, which for many years remained at the level of a philosophical argument, was experimentally confirmed in the late 1950's and reported in a paper written by Humberto Maturana, Jerry Lettvin, Warren McCulloch, and Walter Pitts. The paper, "What the Frog's Eye Tells the Frog's Brain," describes an experiment where microelectrodes were implanted in the visual cortex of a frog in order to measure the strength of neural responses to different visual stimuli. "From the wired-up brain," N. Katherine Hayles (1999) explains, "the researchers discovered that small objects in fast, erratic motion elicited maximum response, whereas large, slow-moving objects evoked little or no response. It is easy to see how such perceptual equipment is adaptive from the frog's point of view, because it allows the frog to perceive flies while ignoring other phenomena irrelevant to its interests" (135). From this experimental data, Maturana and his co-investigators, concluded that the frog's perceptual system does not so much register reality as it is but constructs reality as it needs to be for the animal in question. "What are the consequences of this work?" the authors ask at the end of the article. "Fundamentally, it shows that the eye speaks to the brain in a language already highly organized and interpreted instead of transmitting some more or less accurate copy of the distribution of light upon the receptors" (Lettvin et al. 1965: 251). Like any good experimental scientist, however, Maturana and company were careful to restrict their conclusions to the particular animal upon which they operated. In fact, the article begins with an explicit caution against generalizing the findings: "This work has been done on the frog, and our interpretation applies only to the frog" (Lettvin et al. 1965: 230). Despite this reservation, the insights the experiment offered were far too compelling to remain restricted to this one amphibian.

Maturana, in particular, thought the work had wider application, and he eventually employed the experiment as a spring board to revolutionize the simple empiricism that had governed observational research. In subsequent publications, most notably the essays collected in *Autopoiesis and Cognition* (1980), which was co-authored with Francisco Varela, Maturana argued "that perception should not be viewed as a grasping of an external reality, but rather as the specification of one" (xv) and, because of this, "no description of an absolute reality is possible" (121). As Hayles (1999) summarizes it, "Maturana concluded that perception is not fundamentally representational. He argued that to speak of an objectively existing world is misleading, for the very idea of a world implies a realm that preexists its construction by an observer. Certainly there is something 'out there,' which for lack of a better word we can call 'reality.' But it comes into existence for us, and for all living creatures, *only through interactive processes determined solely by the organism's own organization*" (136). Maturana called this new epistemology *autopoiesis*, because what is known about the world, although perhaps triggered by something like an external event, is in fact "self-made" by the organism. According to this innovative and radical theory of knowledge, an organism, whether it be an amphibian in a laboratory or a primate observing that amphibian, never has immediate access to what is "really real"—the thing itself—but only perceives the object that is constructed through the activity of its own particular perceptual equipment.

<sup>7</sup> This would not be the first time that Kant has become involved (fictionally, at least) with American television game shows. His name and moral authority are also invoked in the Robert Redford film *Quiz Show* (1994), which dramatizes the events surrounding the quiz show scandal of the mid-1950s. At a crucial moment in the film's narrative, the protagonist, Charles Van Dorn (Ralph Fiennes), is presented with a compelling but morally questionable opportunity by the show's producers. They propose that Van Dorn be given the correct answers to the quiz show questions in advance of the game in an attempt to better manipulate its presentation and outcome. Van Dorn, who is visibly concerned about the ethical implications of such a proposal, does not immediately respond. When asked the reason for his hesitation, he replies: "I was just wondering what Kant would think of all this." To which one of the hopelessly uninformed producers says, "I don't think he'd have a problem with it, do you?"

<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere this oscillation between "presupposed" and "posited" is marked with the term "(presup)posited" (Žižek 2008a: 209).

<sup>9</sup> This is, of course, one of the animating fantasies behind a good deal of time travel narratives from Jay Ward's cartoon *Peabody's Improbable History* (1959), in which Sherman, a young child, and his bespectacled brainiac dog Peabody use the "wayback machine" to meet the great figures of history, to *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (DEG 1989), in which two clueless slackers travel backwards in time to meet the real Napoleon Bonaparte, Socrates, Beethoven, and other historical figures in an attempt to complete their high school history project.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Colbert, the comedic political pundit of Comedy Central's *Colbert Report*, has recently coined two words that address this development: "truthiness" and "wikiality." *Truthiness*, which was named word of the year by the American Dialect Society in 2005 and was incorporated into the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* in 2006, was introduced during the program's inaugural episode (*Comedy Central*, 17 October 2005). It designates, according to Merriam-Webster, "the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true" (Merriam-Webster 2006: unpaginated). *Wikiality* was introduced in episode 128 (31 July 2006) and is derived from the experience and features of the online encyclopedia, Wikipedia. As Colbert explained, on Wikipedia "any user can change any entry, and if enough users agree with them, it becomes true." Wikiality, then, is an agreed upon reality that, although not necessarily real and true, becomes real and true simply through user decision and agreement. These two concepts have come together in "Wikiality.com, the Truthiness Encyclopedia." According to the site's welcome page, Wikiality.com is similar to Wikipedia but "unlike Wikipedia, entries here are judged on their truthiness; if it feels right it's probably truthy" (Wikiality.com 2008: unpaginated).

<sup>11</sup> This "correspondence theory of truth" is evident in the scholastic definition of truth as *adaequatio intellectus et rei*, the adequation of thought to things (Heidegger 1962: 257); René Descartes's (1991) claim that "the word 'truth,' in the strict sense, denotes the conformity of thought with its object" (139); and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1965), which grants, without any critical hesitation whatsoever (a somewhat ironic gesture in a text that is all about "critique"), that truth is "the agreement of knowledge with its object" (A 58/B 82). In the text of *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1962) traces this concept to an assertion that has been attributed to Aristotle's *De Interpretatione*: "the soul's 'experiences,' its νοήματα ('representations'), are likenings of things" (257). Elsewhere, namely in the essay "Plato's Doctrine of Truth," he demonstrates that the concept originates with Plato's "Allegory of the Cave." It is in this imaginative fable, Heidegger (1978) argues, that one can perceive the point

at which western thought began "taking the essence of truth as the correctness of representation" (237).

<sup>12</sup>One way to produce these kinds of "misreadings" is to engage in what Žižek calls, again borrowing from Deleuze, "philosophical buggery." This practice comprises a kind of intellectual promiscuity, whereby one takes an author from behind and gives him a child that would be his own offspring, yet monstrous (Deleuze 1995: 6 and Žižek 2004: 46).

<sup>13</sup>In fact, when push comes to shove, Žižek has sided with "totalitarian" and "fundamentalist" positions against the seemingly excessive and unrestrained relativisms that currently proliferate in the both the academy and contemporary politics. This decision can be seen in particular in the concluding lines of his published response to Claudia Breger's (2001) critique: "What one sees today is a kind of 'suspended' belief, a belief that can thrive only as not fully (publicly) admitted, as a private obscene secret. This suspended status of our beliefs accounts for the predominant 'antidogmatic' stance: one should modestly accept that all our positions are relative, conditioned by contingent historical constellations, so that no one has definitive Solutions, just pragmatic temporary solutions...Compare the struggle and pain of the 'fundamentalist' with the serene peace of the liberal democrat who, from a safe subjective position, ironically dismisses every fully pledged engagement, every 'dogmatic' taking sides. Consequently, yes, I plead guilty: in this choice, I without hesitation opt for the 'fundamentalist'" (Žižek 2001b: 103).

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