

Puppeteers and Ventriloquists: The Pippin-Žižek-Johnston Debate and What It Means to Be a Hegelian Today

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This paper investigates the polemics between Hegel scholar Robert Pippin and representatives of the “Ljubljana School,” Slavoj Žižek and Adrian Johnston. Our issue is not to reduce the matter to a political quarrel or decide on the “accuracy” of their Hegel interpretation, as existing literature has done. Rather, we focus on the debate’s developments through the lens of Žižek’s initial signal that what all participants share is an interest in the question “What does it mean to be a Hegelian today?” By analyzing key interactions, we present the argumentative structure of their agreements and differences, most notably on topic of a “need” (or not) for a “mutual redemption” with psychoanalysis. Doing so, we aim to lay the groundwork for a rudimentary positioning of Ljubljana in the landscape of Hegel scholarship (at least) as these authors perceive it.

Keywords: Hegel – Lacan – Žižek – Johnston – Pippin

Introduction

When describing the contemporary Hegelian moment, particularly in terms of broad appeal and broadly academic impact, there is a singular delineated project which one would be remiss to omit. At times called “The Ljubljana School” or “Transcendental Materialism,” it is a specific reconsideration of Hegel through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxist political theory, known through (among others) Slavoj Žižek. Despite its popularity, the relationship between this movement and more “traditional” (or Anglophone) Hegel scholarship has always been fraught with difficulties. One could summon an immediate innocuous explanation here: Transcendental

Materialism's historical origins in the punk literary scene of Ljubljana in the 1980's spurred on a writing style less concerned with "traditional" academic citation standards (see, e.g., Sorenson 2018). Even Žižek's later works still feature "many such errors and slips" which could be said to be "frustrating" to contemporary scholars when they appear (Pippin 2015, 95). This surface-level explanation, which decidedly robs the topic of its philosophical dimension, has even been celebrated as a kind of exceptional feature by some in the Ljubljana tradition:

In Žižek's case it is not only the refusal of a systematic approach that characterizes many of his works, but the celebration of it.... Isn't this...why Neo-Hegelians...with the exception of Robert Pippin, refuse to debate, as do many Hegel Scholars...Žižek's many interpretations of Hegel's philosophy? (Finkelde 2023, 56 – 57).

But as even this quotation highlights, there still exists a trove of material which has gone almost completely unexplored, as also acknowledged by this quotation. Over the past decade, a back-and-forth debate has developed between the eminent American scholar Robert Pippin and two key representatives of Transcendental Materialism, Slavoj Žižek and Adrian Johnston. Insofar as the secondary literature has commented on this, it has been in almost *strictly* political terms, summarizing the matter as:

According to Pippin, [Žižek's] political bent, derived from the influence of Lacan and Marx on Žižek's thought, derails his apprehension of Hegel to no good end.... Žižek's call to revolution steps over Hegel's own politics (Finkelde and McGowan 2023, 18).

Though we do agree that politics play a significant role, this essay seeks to counter such a narrow interpretation. Taking place over years, the debate naturally touches on a multitude of grand philosophical topics and features, and equal number of repetitions, polemical expressions and dropped threads. Yet at its core, a hidden thread connects it all; as Žižek (2012, 392, our emphasis) writes in the very first entry into the debate: "Pippin...means to ask the question: *...how can one be Hegelian today?*"

This essay presses the debate on this "narrow" question, drawing out the implicit (dis)agreements between the participants on the necessary commitments of a contemporary Hegelian philosophy. Doing so has made it necessary to reduce the scope of debate to its most fundamental components. In its totality, a representation ought to contain (in chronological order): Robert

Pippin's review of Žižek's *Less Than Nothing*,¹ followed by replies by Žižek in his *Absolute Recoil* (2014) and *Disparities* (2016), a chapter of Adrian Johnston's *A New German Idealism* (2018),² which in turn is reviewed by Pippin for *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (2018a), to which Johnston then responds with a lengthy meta-review of the dispute for *Pli* (2019), which finally received some brief remarks by Pippin in the same journal (2021). For the purposes of brevity, we will only discuss the essential: the opening debate between Žižek and Pippin, and Johnston's 2019 meta-review.³ Here, we claim that buried under the surface of the discussion lies a continual return to a formulation used by Pippin in his first contribution: "Why would anyone *need* the conceptual framework provided by Lacanian psychoanalysis?"

I. Heroism and Deflation – Žižek's Wager in *Less Than Nothing*

Robert Pippin does not feature prominently in the over a thousand pages of *Less Than Nothing*. Nevertheless, there are a few direct engagements with his work, which notably locate themselves in some very crucial passages.⁴ Žižek deploys it, either in support or contrast, to advance three theses on the question of "*being a Hegelian today*" (also the title of the relevant chapter). First, he raises a seemingly quotidian point: the crucial distinction between an "actual, historically limited Hegel" and what Pippin "(once) refers to as the 'eternal Hegel,'" which "is different from trans-historical eternal truth of Hegel" (Žižek 2012, 392). This is already a feature which distinguishes Žižek from some of his allies, such as Alain Badiou, who remain devoted to the Maoist project of finding the "material kernel" in Hegel. After all, a key argument for such a line of thought is Hegel's "inability" to think or pre-empt crucially Hegelian phenomena, such as communism, or the cinematic arts (Badiou 2018, 496 – 497).⁵ But for Žižek, "abstract art, arguably Pippin's most brilliant example" illustrates that "although Hegel did not predict it...one can easily and convincingly extrapolate [it] from Hegel's reflections" (Žižek 2012, 392). Thus,

¹ It was later republished in the Pippin's *Interanimations* (2015). As the paper is unpaginated, we will quote from that version.

² First published as the paper *Where to Start?* (2014) in *Crisis and Critique*.

³ Also, the "middle period" surrounding Johnston's *New German Idealism*, while relevant, gets reiterated quite frequently in the final stage and engages less directly with the previous steps.

⁴ Despite how contemporary literature (such as Finkelde 2023) rewrites history, the source and inspiration for Žižek does not appear to be Pippin's then recent monograph *Hegel's Idealism* (1997), but the later *Persistence of Subjectivity* (2005).

⁵ Žižek (2012, 466) also gives us a list of similar possible "charges."

both authors commit to a Hegel who is “alive,” who can speak to the tensions of today, but who is at the same time “dead,” in that they recognize a clear “break” between his historical condition and the present.

Today, according to Žižek, there are truly only three possible strategies of dealing with this “post-Hegelian break” (2012, 236), later simply “radical break” (between “idealist metaphysics and post-metaphysical historicism”)⁶: (A) by erecting a “scarecrow image of Hegel the Absolute Idealist” (e.g., Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Foucault), (B) with “the predominant Hegelian strategy...best exemplified by the Pittsburgh Hegelians,” but also “Habermas,” or (C) his own “traversal” of the issue “to think this impossibility itself as an ontological fact” (2012, 239). Each of the former two are said to be enslaved by the “naïveté” discussed previously; they refuse to “escape the deadlock” between a historical and an eternal Hegel, either by (A) condemning Hegelianism to the past or (B) arguing for a “deflated image of Hegel...reduced to a general theory on discourse” (Žižek 2012, 237). This warning against a “deflationary” Hegel is certainly not unique to Žižek (e.g., Jameson 2010, 10) and will become staple term throughout both this debate and the development of Transcendental Materialism as a whole (e.g., McGowan 2019, 222n). Žižek’s own position (C) is that the only way forward is by *ontologizing* this very deadlock: the radical break must bring us to think the very “break” or “gap” in reality itself; the titular concept of the “*less than nothing*” signifying “the ontological incompleteness of reality itself” (Žižek 2012, 740 – 741).

This makes Pippin a unique figure for Žižek (2012, 238): he “heroically,” “directly rejects” the other options, rather than “avoiding” them (as e.g., Habermas is said to). Thus, he is *not*, as future literature often would go on to characterize him (e.g., McGowan 2019, 76), one of many “counterparts” to Žižek’s own “ontological materialist” reading, but a uniquely interesting, alternative response to the question: “What does it mean to be a Hegelian today?” Žižek’s own answer to this question is that one “should construct... [an] accounting for how the normative attitude of “accounting itself” have emerged out of nature” (Žižek 2012, 238). Or, to put it (bluntly) in earlier terms: how does something like a subject even arise out of a fundamentally “broken” or “gappy” reality? This question, which has been solidified in contemporary Transcendental Materialism discourse as “ontogenetic emergence” (Chiesa

⁶ Johnston (2018a, 3) restates this as “the proper name *Hegel* lies at the origins of the century-old split between “Continental” and “analytic” philosophical traditions.”

2016, 60). *Despite* his rejection, Žižek wagers that this should be intelligible to Pippin.

One might wonder what drives the Slovenian philosopher to say this. Here, it serves to bear in mind that one of the original “wagers” of *Less Than Nothing* is the notion that “psychoanalysis and Hegelian dialectics mutually redeem themselves” (Žižek 2012, 18). A later section then explains that this “mutual redemption” is only possible through a Badiouan, revolutionary act (Žižek 2012, 524). Thus, at the end of the book, he concludes:

What the [radical break] signals is that every ethical and or moral edifice has to [now] be grounded in an abyssal act which is, in the most radical sense imaginable, *political*.... We should therefore pass to the question "Which politics fit psychoanalysis?" (Žižek 2012, 963)

So, the concern “What does it mean to be a Hegelian today?” leads Žižek to a *second* subquestion (the first being the emergentist): what politics can “fit” the whole? To answer that, everything ought to be on the table, as the quotation indicates. It is in this light that he also presents Pippin as someone who finds himself in a unique predicament:

The only thinker today who heroically defines his goal as the promotion of “bourgeois philosophy,” that is, the philosophy of legitimizing and analyzing the “bourgeois” way of life centered on the notion of autonomous and responsible individuals leading a safe life within the confines of civil society (Žižek 2012, 524).

Žižek thus theorizes that the vice he has wagered Pippin into, is the result of the fact that the American philosopher deliberately (and “heroically”) rejects a great potential on political grounds. He wagers that, by limiting what sort of contemporary politics can “fit” a contemporary Hegel, Pippin has found himself in a sort of vice: able to see the contemporary issue of “being a Hegelian today,” but unable to answer the question of ontogenetic emergence.

II. Avoiding Ontological Commitments – Pippin’s Review

Pippin’s *Back to Hegel* review is not a direct reply to this characterization, though it does feature it prominently. Rather, he believes that “Žižek makes a number of salient points about Hegel” (Pippin 2015, 106) and that as such, it is possible to “concentrate on his *interpretation* of Hegel” (2015, 93) as opposed to his overall “critical theory of late-modern capitalism” (2015, 99; our emphasis). Although the text features many corrections and disagreements, it also responds directly Žižek’s wager. Aiming right for center mass, Pippin

argues that, yes, there is such a thing as the “question” or “problem” of a contemporary Hegelianism, but no, this does not raise the emergentist question. Though he declines Žižek’s quick sketch of contemporary philosophy, he broadly agrees that “a [contemporary] Hegelianism, shared by Žižek and most ‘Hegelians’” means first and foremost “a commitment to the historicity of norms, but without a historical relativism” (Pippin 2015, 108). He also goes on to support Žižek’s call for the necessity of a concrete universalist Hegelian politics of the present (rather than restricting oneself to the repetition of Hegel’s *Rechtsphilosophie*) (Pippin 2015, 109). But the question of ontogenetic emergence is to him, of entirely different order.

If Žižek is arguing for an investigation into “a sociohistorical practice,” then Pippin could agree – something like: “Is it plausible to claim that we are getting better at justifying ourselves to each other or not?” (Pippin 2015, 103). But rather, the suspicion is that Žižek *overcorrected* in the face of a perceived (limited) playing field. In his efforts to combat all manner of Hegel readings, from “naturalism” to “historical relativism,” he broadened the problem beyond the very limits which make philosophical inquiry possible, up to and including “why animals with human brains can do these things and animals without human brains cannot” (Pippin 2015, 101). Invoking the Sellarsian distinction between the space of reasons and the space of causes, Pippin now argues that the philosophical “why” of any question is concerned with “doxastic, cognitive and intentional states,” and to do seek to answer something else “to make a category mistake...to offer something we cannot use” (2015, 99 – 100). Yes, perhaps scientists can

with some combination of astrophysics and evolutionary theory...research why humans have ended up with the brains they have. But these are not philosophical problems, and they do not generate any philosophical problems. The problems are: “What *is* a compelling reason and why?” (Pippin 2015, 101)

This rejection is of an entirely different order than what Žižek proposed, and its consequences turn the matter completely upside down. Now, to Pippin, there is fundamentally no *need* for Žižek’s “mutual redemption” with Lacanian psychoanalysis, and all it entails for the necessity of an “ontological” approach. He repeats this point throughout the text:

We do not need [such] an ontology.... We do not need the claim.... No gaps in being need apply....on this way of looking at the matter, there is no need for a paradoxically negative ontology (Pippin 2015, 98 – 101).

After all, what is (left of) the problem? Pippin considers that the only remaining *raison d'être* for Žižek's "gappy ontology" (considered strictly, again, "as a reading of Hegel"), is to (literally) plug in the gap for two accounts which are claimed to be absent in *Less Than Nothing*, namely "reason" and 'sociality, *Geist*' (Pippin 2015, 105). To the first, Žižek would essentially think that (post-)Kantian philosophy concealed a gap from the get-go: between noumena and phenomena, the I and the not-I, and so on. Taking the concrete charge against Fichte's supposed gap between "being and reason," Pippin (2015, 103 – 105) shows that such an assumption is (A) either provably "wrong" when taken literally, or (B) "mystifying everything needlessly" when taken more broadly. For (A), he shows Žižek's reliance on theses taken from Dieter Henrich's *Between Kant and Hegel* (2008) lectures, which Pippin (2015, 102) considers to be exegetically "proven false." For (B), he argues that this "gap" is in fact Fichte (likewise Kant) affirming the very limitations of the philosophical question, which Žižek, due to his "category mistake" refuses to acknowledge:

Thus, the situation is different for the individual than it is for the philosopher.... When the [philosopher] says, "outside of me," he means "outside of reason"; when the individual says the same thing, he means "outside of my person" (Fichte 1992, 106; quoted from Pippin 2015, 104-105).

Still, Pippin theorizes that Žižek *could* make his "ontological claim" work on *some* occasions. For example, if he was to intend that there is "simply" a 'self-sundering gap' of sorts in the possibility of the capacity of social beings to follow norms. This does indeed require an articulation which is, in some sense, neither strictly materialist or immaterialist, which Pippin deems to be Žižek's primary interest (Pippin 2015, 99 – 100). In that case, one could for example, make use of some aspects of Lacan's Symbolic sphere (pertaining to language, discourse, etc.), strictly contained to the "space of the normative." Pippin curiously cites his future "opponent," Adrian "Johnson"⁷ as an example that "something like this position is available to Žižek" (Pippin 2015, 101n).

This pre-empts the political question. As expected by Žižek, Pippin (2015, 110) disagrees "that bourgeois society is fundamentally self-contradictory, ...'unreformable,'" albeit with some interesting caveats. First, the consequences of the lack of a "need" for the emergentist question or a gappy ontology, cascade further down. The choice is not between a heroic defense of either bourgeois and true "materialist" politics, but rather between the very real

⁷ Over-symbolically, the text misspells Johnston's name.

promises of social progress and a mystical concept, “the abyssal act.” The Badiouan Act is now without a problem to solve, no schemes to “mutually redeem.” Or, as Pippin would put it, we have a choice between a “real dream” (“Sweden in the sixties!”) (2015, 111) and a “Magical word” (2015, 106). Contra Žižek and other commentators (e.g., Frank Ruda), he argues that “the real problem with Hegel’s political philosophy” is not the German’s inability to account for the way bourgeois society was eroded through its own capitalist underpinnings, but rather “the absence of any account of political will and the politics of will formation” (Pippin 2015, 110n). Here, he entertains an idea analogous to (but different from) our previous paragraph, namely that “perhaps we [could] use the help of Lacanians to do this” (Pippin 2015, 111). However, this option is quickly discarded in the footnotes, since what psychoanalysis does, for Pippin, is “provide analyses and diagnoses of various individual and social pathologies” (Pippin 2015, 111n) – locating it fairly outside the realm of reason and unsuited for answering “his [Hegel’s] questions.” This completes Pippin’s main charge: as a Hegel interpreter, Žižek is “too influenced by his picture of Lacan...and so does not allow the true Hegelian alternative...to emerge” (Pippin 2015, 107). Because the question of ontogenetic emergence is a false philosophical question, whatever remains “can easily avoid the sort of commitments Žižek makes” (Pippin 2015, 105n). Thus, this “picture of Lacan” is simply *not needed*.

III. A Brief Refreshment

In our view, both of Žižek’s responses ignore this structure of Pippin’s argument. *Absolute Recoil* takes him to task on the political dimension, whereas *Disparities* primarily examines the supposed “category mistake.” In the first, Žižek claims the review confirmed his earlier contention from *Less Than Nothing*, that their primary disagreement is over second political subquestion. As a result, he mainly argues against the few explicitly socio-political points raised by Pippin, citing everything from “the general tendency of global capitalism” to how contemporary neo-noir detective novels show that even “Sweden in the Sixties” was anything but a dream (Žižek 2014, 22). The mismatch is noticeable when, in his further defense of the “abyssal act,” Žižek (2014, 20 – 21), assumes that Pippin takes umbrage with this concept because it is “not grounded in rational deliberation,” that it is “magical” simply because it would entail “operating outside of the symbolic texture.” This was not the concern for Pippin; rather he was concerned with why such a concept is needed, what sort of questions it might help us answer. Žižek’s also gives his

first attempt at handling the emergentist question as a “category mistake.” Again, Pippin’s charge is that, insofar as this question is novel and *needs* the influence of, for example, Lacan, it is not philosophical. The response is brief: “True, but such full scientific (self-)naturalization would have consequences for philosophy” (Žižek 2014, 20). Yet, is the crucial question not precisely *how* to think these “consequences”? As indicated in Pippin’s text earlier, he is perfectly fine with investigating any social result of scientific (or even political) upheavals, but this would take place *within* the space of reasons, without “ontologisation.” However, Žižek *does* point out that Pippin’s assumptions on (non-)philosophical questions and their boundaries are themselves “signalling a standard transcendental dualism” (Žižek 2014, 19).

He develops the idea further in *Disparities* by repeating how Pippin’s efforts are a “heroic attempt,” a possible parallel path to his own. This time however, rather than imploring the reader that the choice is between two politics, he sticks with the question of philosophy itself. Now, his response is: “What Pippin performs here is, of course, the basic transcendental turn” (Žižek 2016, 24). Effectively, Žižek (2016, 130) agrees with Pippin: there is no need for ontologisation, for Lacan, *if and only if* we are content with “reducing philosophy to a transcendental analysis of the conditions of account giving and as such totally separated from scientific exploration.” Still, there is some kernel, which, for Žižek, should settle this either-or choice for the contemporary Hegelian. This kernel is *not* political, but rather “one has to concede that some scientific experiments lead to results which cannot simply be dismissed as irrelevant” (Žižek 2016, 25). Žižek unfortunately does not explore the idea any further here. Therefore, this leaves us with a suggestion of what is to come: how (if at all) will these authors seek to “break the stalemate,” or are we left with our own “choice” for one of two contemporary Hegelianisms (“reducing philosophical analysis” or *needing* something such as psychoanalysis)?

IV. Weaponized Perplexity – Johnston’s Meta-Critique

As stated earlier, more pieces were written between Žižek’s response and the final article by Johnston before us now, but it could be argued that not much really changed. Pippin (2018a) effectively re-affirms the very same points just identified in the previous paragraphs. There seemed to be no real mutual recognition on the question of what Hegel *requires* today; Pippin (2018a)⁸ remained “constantly puzzled” by the need for various concepts which do “not

⁸ Unpaginated.

seem philosophically helpful.” Johnston’s “A Response to Robert Pippin” (2019, 15) thus reformulates his previous writings by way of the most dominant recurrence in our discussion: “one of the biggest stakes in debating with Pippin about his portrayal of German idealism: struggling over what philosophy itself is and should be.” But these stakes are anything but neutral ground, nor are they innocent. Johnston (2019, 13) posits that Pippin’s queries concerning the *need* of certain theoretical commitments, not as a sober “puzzlement” but as a deliberate “tactic...of weaponized perplexity.” As such, the true deductive sequence should not be retraced from the elimination of the emergentist question to the uselessness of a “gappy ontology,” but in reverse. Pippin would actually “wish to silence...today’s revivals of dialectical materialism” and therefore produces a “feigned bafflement” (Johnston 2019, 4, 13). But then how did he convince us otherwise? Johnston (2019, 15) argues the Chicagoan “puts forward as a matter of a straightforward, uncontroversial definition of philosophy what is” which is “in actuality, a contentious picture of the discipline.” As a reminder: Pippin’s (2015, 95n) original argument revolved around the notion that the emergentist question does not pose itself today, neither by Hegelian force nor even a modern, “post-Kantian” one (meaning largely, the influences of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud). But in fact, it is the “controversial” “assumed, always-already-there socio-linguistic matrix” of the space of reasons which actively “writes off the ontological concern as unphilosophical” (Johnston 2019, 14, 42). There is no *need* for a “gappy ontology,” because the “mother of all gaps...between the space of reasons and the space of causes” has already been exorcised (Johnston 2019, 39). One could not have arrived at the space of reasons / causes distinction without first passing through “more recent Sellarsian terminology favoured by...the intellectual culture of 20th-century Anglo-American philosophy” (Johnston 2019, 10). Thus, the original point of agreement between Žižek and Pippin, the insistence on a non-relativized, “living” version of Hegel’s system, would be a mirage: they are dealing with a different question. This is also why Johnston still insists on calling Pippin’s work “deflationary,” as

deflationists take it for granted that the various postmetaphysical turns... should be historical points of no return. For them [the question] is: “Where does Hegel stand with respect to the present?” ...[But] a true engagement with Hegel means...: “Where does the present stand with respect to Hegel?.” This amounts to a reversal of Žižek’s question “Is it still possible to be a Hegelian today?” (Johnston 2018, 73)

“Reversing the question” as it pertains to science, Johnston builds on Žižek’s first response from *Absolute Recoil*, deeming it much more profound. Yes, it is the very fact that some scientific results impact philosophy which is significant.⁹ Would Pippin not say that philosophy should account for, say, evolutionary theory? If so, should he not “explain what would be involved with his own version of philosophically registering...the relevance and import of any [(if not)] all scientific discoveries” (Johnston 2019, 57)? As to his own positive claim, Johnston (2019, 56) thinks Transcendental Materialism argues for (nothing more or less than) the same relation as that which is at play when Hegel’s *Realphilosophie* “draws upon and even anticipate advances in biology” and “the psychological sciences.”

In the text’s “coda,” Johnston returns to the very first topic raised, politics, and with it Žižek’s notion of “bourgeois philosophy.” However, rather than consider it as Pippin’s “heroic” starting point, he reverses the structure: “his subjective idealism¹⁰ ...is a metaphysical position that leads him...to misidentify individual mental states (especially psychopathological ones) as responsible for current political situations” (Johnston 2019, 60). To support this, he raises two points. First, he continues Žižek’s critique in *Absolute Recoil*: Pippin *should* be swayed by current political events (the failure of Swedish Social democracy, the US legal system, and so on) if indeed he is committed to a political, “concrete universal” Hegelian political philosophy of the moment. But unlike Žižek, Johnston does not read this as a theoretical heroism. Rather, he argues this is the exact same position as held by Habermas and the “Pittsburgh Hegelians” – these names were, as one might recall, the examples of what Žižek considered a more “basic” deflationism in *Less Than Nothing*. All are said to oscillate in the same way, jumping from one leg to the other depending on what is required: defending a “liberal” politics based on a seemingly neutral “ordinary” concept of philosophy, which is in turn justified, ultimately, but a decidedly anti-Marxist conviction. Thus, Pippin’s rejection of the Badiouan “abyssal act” should not be read as a sober argument of non-necessity, but rather the symptom of a knee-jerk impulse against the dangers of the “vague pseudo-concept of totalitarianism,” “a rhetoric rooted in the combative

⁹ A Lacanian phrasing would be that science has its consequences “in the Real.”

¹⁰ Pippin has repeatedly repudiated this description: “of course, Hegel is not a subjective idealist...none of this has anything whatsoever to do with the position I have attributed to Hegel” (2018a).

partisan thinking of the Marxist legacy” and “various other pathologies” (Johnston 2019, 60 – 61).

These three retorts should now convince us to *choose* the Transcendental Materialism approach to Hegelianism today *over* Pippin’s, which, to Johnston (2019, 2) downright “fails to remain truly Hegelian” as it buckles under the weight of a Sellarsian present. If we are still not convinced, he implores us to return to Pippin’s first review, and in particular the potential olive branch he extends there to Lacan. As noted in Section III, though Pippin theorized there might be a space for Lacanianism in the sense of “providing a theory of political will,” the accompanying footnote smothered that possibility. This, it is argued, should be the final straw, as it demonstrates precisely how the ‘space of reasons’ barred a “mutual redemption” of Hegel and Lacan from the very beginning; by barring the very pathologies which are the bread and butter of Transcendental Materialism. This debate was always “a reductive gesture” (Johnston 2019, 65).

V. Conclusion

So, there never was a real shared question and thus never truly a debate. At least, that is what Johnston’s conclusions would have us believe. But of course, his analysis need not be final, nor is this even a settled matter. In a short response to it, Pippin (2020, 2) largely repeats what can be expected: that he “does not recognize himself in the characterization,” that “to ask how it ‘emerges’ is not a philosophical question” (2020, 5) and that there is no reason to “risk the abandon of the principal achievements of bourgeois society” (2012, 11). Or, to put it simply: “I am still puzzled” (Pippin 2020, 6). Nevertheless, we hold that this brief presentation demonstrates how the question of what it means to be a Hegelian today has not only animated an ongoing debate between Transcendental Materialism and Robert Pippin, but also how its shape and contours has shifted and transformed throughout. Reducing the matter to a political disagreement remains, in our view, an incomplete insight. In this sense, Johnston (2019, 59) is right to point out in his final remarks that the debate “however intentionally or not, echoes a set of interrelated conflicts going back to the time of Hegel’s death; ...the split between...right and left Hegelians” (Johnston 2019, 59). There are many reflections, specifications and corrections which would not be out of place here, but in the interest of brevity, we want to highlight just a few.

Another recurring lament of Pippin’s is how this debate (and the language it employs) has grown increasingly polemical over the years. Arguing

“Johnston’s dismissive talk about...a “phony Hegelianism” has effectively transformed a shared question (“What does it mean to be a Hegelian today?”) into “an intra-party squabble about purity (‘Who is the *true* dialectical materialist?’)” (Pippin 2018a). Johnston (2019, 13) in turn firmly believes that, ultimately, to start with Žižek’s original question from a supposed “neutral” ground, advantages the deflationist and that “the most fitting response to Pippin’s feigned bafflement is to fight fire with fire.” However, surely all would agree that we do not want to end up “survey of [Hegel’s] work from such a high altitude that one ends trading in catch phrases, jargon, arbitrary interventions in and citations from isolated texts, repetitive formulae” (Pippin 2018a). As Pippin (2018a) writes, “in that case we end up with a ventriloquist’s dummy.” Despite its brevity and pace, that is indeed not what this essay hopes to contribute to. So, doing our part, we would like to correct at least *one* repeated formulation, potentially caused by this debate, which is still in use.

The reader might have noticed how, over the course of our chronology, Pippin as a “heroic,” uniquely placed reference point (in Žižek) was turned into the “leading representative of ‘deflation’” (Johnston 2018, 3). This is because, as we have attempted to show, to Johnston, he remains primarily committed to a set of external, contingent demands (philosophy as operating strictly in the space of reasons, etc.). But this is a developed conceptualization of “deflated Hegelianism” and no longer strictly refers to, as it did in the early *Less Than Nothing*, the “non-metaphysical” reading of Hegel that Žižek ascribed to Brandom. The conflation of the two, and in particular, the terminology of “anti-metaphysical Hegelians such as Brandom and Pippin” is still quite prevalent in both Transcendental Materialism literature (e.g., McGowan 2019, 88) and Hegel scholarship, albeit in a different form.¹¹ As Pippin (2018a) points out extensively, “of *course* Hegel has his own ‘metaphysics’” (just not the “rationalist dogmatist” project of metaphysics as critiqued by Kant). He laments that Hegel is frequently “characterized as Brandomian...even though I reject Brandom’s account of Hegel” (Pippin 2020, 6). This phrasing is also particularly odd considering what contemporary Hegel scholarship considers the *Logic* as a Metaphysics versus the *Logic* as an Ontology divide, where Pippin is representative of the first and Stephen

¹¹ Partly due to Pippin’s occasional, very specific use of the term “anti-metaphysical.” See, for example, Redding (2018) on the conflation of Pippin’s “anti-metaphysical” claims with Hartmann’s “non metaphysical” claims – something Johnston (2019, 16) can also said to be guilty of.

Houlgate of the second (see, e.g., Suther 2023). In fact, further connection to this divide would open an interesting pathway forward. On a few counts, Johnston (2018, 41, 59) considers the possibility of a proximity between Žižek's and Houlgate's readings of the *Logic*, but dismisses it because it would leave too much "up to consensus" and he can "arrive by it through other means," namely by "decentring" the *Logic* (as the ground for Hegel's system) as a whole. But perhaps this sort of engagement could be precisely what drives the curious relationship between Hegel scholarship and Transcendental Materialism forward. At least, it would put at the forefront who the ventriloquist is and what (or who) is animating the dummy.

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