

Slavoj Žižek's "The Thrilling Romance of Orthodoxy" – a review

As a follow-up text to John D. Caputo's populist political polemic, Slavoj Žižek proves to be a breath of fresh air—despite his characterization as "the Elvis of philosophy", his self-proclaimed status of political animal, and his sympathy for 'the people'. Although his writings are not easy to fathom. Nevertheless, I am under the impression that I have a reasonable idea of what Žižek means to say. That he doesn't really succeed in conveying his ideas accessibly is probably due to his own perpetual maelstrom of thoughts and insights. Still, he has a very clear image of what he wants to convey. The very layeredness of his insights gives the text its characteristic Žižekian flow: misguised in obvious reasoning, but intrinsically complex. I could hear Žižek speak (read: lisp) as I read his text, and as I suspected, his ranting was ahead of my understanding. But and so I forced myself to concentrate on this relatively short text, and I think I got the gist of it.

Žižek refers to "the deadlock of sexuality and art today" (p. 52), with which he starts the journey towards the 'thrilling romance of orthodoxy': the very transgression of so-called borders is not considered to be exciting anymore. These transgressions have shifted boundaries so often that the transgression itself has lost its flair. The true joy of transgression should lie in not transgressing, but the sense of guilt—the thing that is actually enjoyed with transgression—that comes with the transgression. When transgression becomes common, that guilt has no place anymore and thus the joy dissolves into bore. This is why (Christian) orthodoxy is a "thrilling romance": the restrictions of the doctrine allow the increase of happiness, because transgression leads to guilt. And guilt is what provides the joy of transgression.

But only a 'pagan' can understand the joy of the (Christian) restrictions. As Žižek puts it: only a devout Christian like Tolkien can come up with such a rich and thrilling pagan universe as depicted in his Lord of the Rings-saga (p. 63). The atheist knows that giving in to temptations, when there is nothing—or a lot less—in personal ideology that holds him back, reduces the sense of joy and thus decreases happiness. To illustrate this, suppose there is perfect freedom. There is no (ideological) gravity, everything is possible. What would you do? Where would you go? I asked a Christian friend where she would go, and she said she would go up. But there is no up, since there is no gravity. Then she had to think really hard what to do. This is the "hollow semblance of choice", postulated by Harry Frankfurt.¹ Due to lack of a determined framework and the suspension of the dimensions in which our reality takes place, there is no (clear) target, or *telos*, to move towards, which paralyzes us with indecision. Atheism rejects a lot of the borders that Christianity upholds. In contrast, an atheist can see what a Christian is not supposed to do, and do it. To a certain extent he can even enjoy it. But the inevitable boredom does occur at some point. Boredom a Christian, obedient to the doctrine, will never experience.

Žižek calls this atheist transgression of borders "the pursuit of happiness" (p. 59). He accuses the USA of being the "ultimate empire" of this pursuit, possibly fuelled by the American Dream that states anything is possible. Unfortunately, this pursuit can not have a satisfactory synthesis in reality, according to Žižek, because it ends either in disappointment where the synthesis is not realized, or in disappointment where the goal is attained, the border is transgressed and the *telos* loses its value. The true satisfaction only lies in fantasy: the synthesis of desire and reality. Whenever this fantasy becomes reality, the *telos* loses its charm and the desire is satisfied, inevitably fuelling the need for a new desire. It is desire that disturbs the balance that once Czechoslovakia was in, as Žižek explains on page 58: the impossibility of excessive consumption (forced upon parsimony), the other to blame for it and the Other place to measure up with. Capitalism and consumerism do not increase happiness. On the contrary, it only increases desire, the first steps towards the *hollow semblance of choice*. There is too much to choose from, where to start?

Christianity offers a perfect guideline past the attempts at synthesis. Of course there is desire, but by leaving that unfulfilled, it doesn't generate more desire. Therefore, the small or little desires cherished by Christians provide a reason to stick to the Christian doctrine. But they will not know how restful their

¹ Harry Frankfurt, "Rationality and the unthinkable," *The importance of what we care about: philosophical essays* (Cambridge University Press, 1998) 178.

position is, like an atheist knows. The atheist feels the absence of synthesis, the unattainable synthesis he desires. The Christian doctrine doesn't even try to attain the satisfaction of desire, but remains in the desire itself. The very impossibility of satisfying desire pleases the Christian-atheist mind. Only after having transgressed, one understands that transgression itself is not satisfactory. Guilt, or the suspension of it, is.

Žižek made me realize that the pursuit of knowledge, the intellectual transgression of boundaries, is not contributing to happiness (p. 60). As I gained knowledge about knowledge, I realized that this gaining would never ease my mind. Quite the opposite, the gaining of knowledge shows me more doors I should open to create a complete body of knowledge. I have to explore these wells of knowledge to successfully finish my education, but how paradoxical is the knowledge of knowledge decreasing my happiness. Am I not supposed be pursuing knowledge, in the age of information, where there is no knowledge that is not power, to make more of myself? But then there's Žižek, my personal Jesus—oh, the irony—who sacrifices himself in continuously, fiercely and vigorously pursuing all kinds of knowledge to inform me about the unhappiness it entails. He gives me his time and intellect, he has sacrificed his efforts to convey the message of abstinence from knowledge. But how can I know that knowledge doesn't contribute to my happiness, unless I actually try? I am like the child that has to burn its fingers before *knowing* the stove is not to be touched. How can I know that knowledge is "bad" unless I gain that knowledge? How could Adam and Eve know that eating from the Tree of Knowledge was bad when they didn't know what good or evil or the difference between the two was? It was inevitable to happen: only through gaining the knowledge of good and evil, eating the forbidden fruit, they could know they were disobedient (or obedient by not eating it). The concept of obedience is unknown to the innocent mind. Unless that mind accepts an intellectual authority, such as God. The atheist knows about the flipside of this authoritarian coin, and that's what makes him appreciate the Christian framework. He is aware of the fact that his "*Wissenstrieb*" eventually makes him unhappy (p. 60). Philosophy as altruistic masochism?

Jacques Lacan, however, states that the spontaneous attitude of man is "I don't want to know" (p. 60). But he only knows this through trial and error. Žižek concludes with a superficial acquaintance with Georges Bataille, who was an advocate of depravities, but only if they transgress the border. Were these transgressions to be institutionalized, then the *jouissance* would dissolve. A difficult paradoxical position that dooms Bataille the eternal outcast. He can't be integrated in a synthesis, because that would be contrary to his entire philosophy. The Law restricts us from satisfaction of desire, like it should. It should prevent us from knowing too much, due to which some know that knowing doesn't ease the mind. Then, let's obey the thrilling romance of orthodoxy that rehabilitates the joy of desire.