

Puppeteers and Ventriloquists – Hegel Scholarship, Žižek and the Johnston-Pippin debate

This paper is the culmination of my research into the contemporary debate between American philosophers Adrian Johnston and Robert Pippin, a debate which has roots going back at least a decade (if not 250 years) to the publication of Slavoj Žižek's seminal *Less Than Nothing* (2012). Its most recent forms have been Pippin's scathing review of Johnston's *A New German Idealism* (Pippin 2018), followed by an extended back and forth in subsequent issues of Warwick's journal *Pli* (Johnston 2019b; Pippin 2020).¹ Broadly speaking, Johnston slowly takes over the mantle from Žižek over the course of the decade as the latter becomes disinterested with the subject (minus a slight nod in Žižek 2019). Yet the first equally enters the conversation by "answering the question differently from Žižek" (Johnston 2014). My goal here is threefold: (I) to give an accurate overview of the debate, (II) to identify and clarify its contemporary points of contention (versus those it has left behind) and (III) to explore the overall dynamic (relations, tensions) between Hegel scholarship and the Ljubljana School / Transcendental Materialism.² However, as all three goals are innately linked, I will focus my presentation on the following major themes, where, in my view, they always are all present:

'Deflationism'. Undoubtably, the main crux of the debate is the contention that Pippin advocates for a "deflated Hegel", taken to mean an "avoidance of full ontological commitment" (Žižek 2012, 237). Already contained in this starting shot are also three associated tensions which persist to this day. First, the idea of 'true Hegelian' reading versus a 'weaker', more cowardly one has since become a core argument for many, even outside the Ljubljana school (Jameson 2017, 10). It must be acknowledged that Pippin explicitly challenges

¹ As well as perhaps an even more bizarre interview in a recent issue of arguably the Ljubljana School's most popular journal (*Crisis and Critique*) in which Pippin quite literally refers to the issues of the debate (*Realphilosophie* etc.) without mentioning either Johnston or Žižek by name (Ruda and Hamza 2021).

² Though of course, the differences (to what extent they exist) between these last two is intrinsically linked to the questions at hand.

the fruitfulness of this distinction (Pippin 2018). Second, it is important to note that, despite Pippin being cited by Žižek, it is Robert Brandom and the Pittsburgh School who are first mentioned. To this day nearly always cited in the debate as *another* example of someone making the same ‘mistakes’ as Pippin (Johnston 2019b, 4). Brandom’s secondary response must here be taken into account (Brandom 2021). Lastly, Žižek claim that this “brings us close to Kantian transcendentalism” (Žižek 2012, 237) again sets up a domino effect of discussions regarding Pippin’s (supposed) ‘Kantianism’. I will highlight just highlight two dimensions here: the slow move from a ‘Kantianism’ charge to a disputed Kant/Fichte and Spinoza/Schelling dichotomy (Johnston 2019b, 35), and Pippin’s recent counterclaim that it is Johnston’s reading of Kant which is ‘deflated’ (Pippin 2018).

Hegel’s Ontology. Any sense of ‘debate’ really begins with Pippin’s 2012 review, which in turn prompts a response (Pippin 2012; Žižek 2015), where bystanders would identify Žižek’s “gappy ontology” (Ruda 2015) as the main focus of critique. This is not to say Pippin is the first to have noticed this aspect of Ljubljana philosophy,³ but rather the first scholar of his calibre to approach the Ljubljana School as an “interpretation of Hegel” (Pippin 2015, 93). In turn, Johnston’s first major contribution to the debate is also arguably framing it fully within Hegel scholarship, position the majority of major voices in some relation to it (Johnston 2014). However, he would later abandon this frame as the distinctions between his and Žižek’s views on Schellingian nature came into sharper focus (Johnston 2019a; 2019b).

System. Also striking in Pippin’s original review is its explicitly political points. Johnston identifies early on the potential necessity of these remarks (Johnston 2014), but the matter is mainly picked up later in the writings of another significant American Hegelian (McGowan 2019; 2021), who directly confronts the interplay between contemporary politics and one’s reading of Hegelian State and *Sittlichkeit* (per Pippin 2008). So, echoing Žižek’s contentions with David Bordwell (Bordwell 2005), the debate also provides insights into the entanglement of scholarly and political engagements. Johnston quickly puts this matter

³ Pippin does here cite an early paper of Johnston (then still mainly the first tendrils of Žižek scholarship) here in an arguably positive light, but perhaps over-symbolically spells his name wrong.

to the side when it becomes but a fraction of a classic Hegelian question (to him at least), namely that of *Anfang* ('With what must philosophy begin?'). The main crux of the later Johnston arguments resolves around Pippin's (supposed) denial of Hegel's *Realphilosophie*. This in turn would then be a consequence of an overemphasis of Pippin on Hegel's *Logik* within the System (Johnston 2019b). Pippin in turn disputes this (Pippin 2020).

To bring these three themes together, I conclude with a persistent fourth.⁴ As Johnston puts it, over the decade the debate has turned "to a reversal of Žižek's question 'Is it still possible to be a Hegelian today?'"⁵. What returns time and time again is the question of how one ought to be 'reading' and 'interacting with' not only Hegel, but *the history of philosophy* itself (Johnston 2019a, 73). In order add some potentially fruitful comments to this matter, I draw from sources both new and old (Malabou 2005; Hegel 1986).

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⁴ Arguably, calling this a Hegelian move would be a dangerous choosing of sides (Johnston 2019b).

⁵ Though he of course intends for this quote only to hold for Pippin.

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