



Barbara Hallensleben,  
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# BUILDING THE HOUSE OF WISDOM

Sergii Bulgakov and Contemporary Theology:  
New Approaches and Interpretations

 **Aschendorff**  
Verlag

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Abstract

Sergii Bulgakov (1871–1944) is one of the preeminent theologians of the 20th century whose work is still being discovered and explored in and for the 21st century. The famous rival of Lenin in the field of economics, was, according to Wassily Kandinsky, “one of the deepest experts on religious life” in early twentieth-century Russian art and culture. As economist, publicist, politician, and later Orthodox theologian and priest, he became a significant “global player” in both the Orthodox diaspora and the Ecumenical movement in the interwar period.

This anthology gathers the papers delivered at the international conference on the occasion of Bulgakov’s 150th birthday at the University of Fribourg in September 2021. The chapters, written by established Bulgakov specialists, including Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury (2002–2012), as well as young researchers from different theological disciplines and ecclesial traditions, explore Bulgakov’s way of meeting the challenges in the modern world and of building bridges between East and West. The authors bring forth a wide range of new creative ways to constructively engage with Bulgakov’s theological worldview and cover topics such as personhood, ecology, political theology and Trinitarian ontology.



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## Sergii Bulgakov's Fragile Absolute: Kenosis, Difference, and Positive Disassociation

*Jack Louis Pappas*

### Introduction

A specter is haunting contemporary philosophy and theology, the specter of Kant's transcendental subject. To be sure, according to long-prevailing consensus, we have been assured that Kant's abstracted apperceptive self is but an anachronism belonging to a long-discarded epoch, displaced by subsequent developments in phenomenology, (post)structuralism, and the more liminal discourses of so-called "postmodernity." And yet, the question must be raised as to whether these allergies to Kant and the tradition of post-Kantian idealism themselves betray a residually Kantian dogmatism, presupposing the dependency of knowledge upon the range of possible "lived experiences" of a historically situated, irreducibly finite self. Have we really moved beyond Kant's insistence that the reach of speculative reason terminates only in the scission of insurmountable antinomy, a scission marked by the irreconcilability of a spontaneous subject with an inaccessibly noumenal-Real [*Ding an sich*]?

These questions have been posed with renewed urgency by thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek, Alenka Zupančič, Adrian Johnston, Todd McGowan, and S. J. McGrath, who have each sought to interrogate the traces of transcendental philosophy beneath the surfaces of contemporary theory. Moreover, they have sought to recover the contributions of the speculative idealists J. G. Fichte, F. W. J. Schelling, and G. W. F. Hegel, who attempted not only to overcome the strictures of Kant's transcendental philosophy, but to radicalize its antinomic tensions by enacting a parallax shift that would integrate it within a more comprehensive account of the Absolute as such. Such a retrieval of these idealist sources does not, however, represent an uncritical return to a dogmatic exposition of German idealism. Rather, these theorists have instead offered a reading

of the idealists through the lens of Lacanian, Jungian, and broadly psychoanalytic metapsychology to elaborate what may be called a “meta-transcendental” theory of subjectivity. Whereas the Kantian fracture between phenomenon and noumenon is often taken in purely epistemic terms to be a mere descriptor of the inevitable incompleteness of thought, contemporary metapsychological theorists instead interpret this fracture to be constitutive of reality itself, acting as the underlying condition which shapes human personality and identity formation. The speculative philosophies of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, thus in turn read as diagnostic accounts of the psyche and its emergence.

My wager is that the theology of Sergii Bulgakov at once anticipates this parallax shift in contemporary thought and articulates what may be interpreted as its own unique mode of metapsychology and theory of personality. Like many of the aforementioned contemporary theorists, Bulgakov’s reading of idealist sources (especially Hegel and Schelling) is marked by a distinctive emphasis on the positive and meta-transcendental significance of antinomy as an underlying precondition of (both human and divine) personhood. The aim of this paper therefore is to at once demonstrate how these features of Bulgakov’s theology might be clarified by a metapsychological reading, as well as to explicate how Bulgakov’s theology might provide a crucial intervention within contemporary metapsychological theory more broadly. To this end, I will proceed by placing Bulgakov’s theology in conversation with Slavoj Žižek’s interpretation of Schelling and Hegel. While Žižek may initially appear to be something of a surprising interlocutor for Bulgakov, his metapsychological reading of idealist authors is noteworthy insofar as it foregrounds the explicitly theological aspects of German idealism and directly correlates them to metapsychological accounts of personality formation. Indeed, for Žižek as much as for Bulgakov, antinomic fracture does not simply name a negative aporia which finite thought cannot exceed, but is taken to be reflective of the irreducibility of self-diremption as constitutive of both the Absolute and the human subject. Like Bulgakov, Žižek engages Schelling and Hegel to interrogate how the theological categories of kenosis and self-differentiation operate within a broader diagnostic of the self and its agency. As such, I will initially examine Žižek’s metapsychological interpretation of Schelling and Hegel, before explicating how Bulgakov’s own critical appropriation of these sources might provide the possibility of a different approach to speculative metapsychology than that proffered by Žižek.

## Schelling's Hysterical God

In Žižek's reading, Schelling's middle period represents an effort to radically invert Kant's Copernican revolution, a refusal to accept the constitutive opposition between the transcendental subject (ideal-phenomenon) and the noumenal-Real.<sup>1</sup> Schelling instead conceives of the noumenal-Real as the anterior Ground [*Grund*] from which subjectivity itself arises. That is, the excessive opacity of the *Ding an sich* not only transcends and resists subjectivity, but also founds and underwrites it. Precisely because the noumenal-Real is the condition of possibility for both subjectivity and discursive reason, Schelling understands it to be an "indivisible remainder" [*der neu aufgehende Rest*], a pre-subjective and pre-logical foundation "which can never be grasped 'as such,' but only glimpsed in the very gesture of its withdrawal."<sup>2</sup> The subject is therefore derivative of the noumenal-Real, parasitic upon its aboriginal Ground, which it cannot comprehend except in the mode of a limit-concept excluded from the domain of possible experience. However, Schelling's identification of the primordial Ground with Kant's *Ding an sich* poses difficulties. First, insofar as Schelling posits an ontogenetic Ground underlying the antinomic scission between the ideal and the real, he is forced to account for how differentiation could possibly emerge from a unitary Absolute. Second, Schelling is confronted with the question of how any significance can be assigned to the Ground at all, given that it is both pre-subjective and pre-discursive.

Schelling confronts these difficulties by way of a speculative theogony which correlates the ontogenesis of subjectivity with the emergence of a personal God from an impersonal Ground. As Žižek summarizes, "[for Schelling] the becoming of the world is the becoming of God himself, his self-creation and self-revelation, such that the human subject's awareness of God is the subjective self-awareness of God himself."<sup>3</sup> Schelling admits that if the Ground is conceived in terms of a self-identical unitary substance, then any subsequent process of division or self-differentiation would be impossible. Following Fichte, Schelling recognizes that if the Ground is identified with a selfsame totality, it would be incapable of positing itself as an "I" because it would have

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1 Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2014), 12.

2 Slavoj Žižek, "The Abyss of Freedom" in *The Abyss of Freedom/Ages of the World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 1–104, 7.

3 Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2014), 256–57.

no exterior other (“Not-I”) against which it could determine itself. “Were the first nature in harmony with itself it would remain so. It would be constantly One and would never become two.”<sup>4</sup> As such, at least in Žižek’s reading, Schelling does not conceive of the Ground as a primal origin [ἀρχή] but rather as an *anarchic* indeterminacy, a pre-ontological black hole of potential being. That is, for Žižek, Schelling’s Ground is ultimately a sheer groundlessness [*Ungrund*], “a chaotic impersonal abyss of blind drives in rotary motion,”<sup>5</sup> an unconscious libidinal economy in conflict with itself. To the degree that the impersonal longing of the groundless Ground is an enclosed feedback loop of indeterminate volatility, it is also on account of its own undifferentiated excessiveness capable of recoiling from itself.

The transition from the horrific unconsciousness of the Ground to self-conscious subjectivity is enacted via what Schelling calls an “un-prethinkable” [*unvordenklich*] “decision” [*Ent-scheidung*], a repression of conflicting drives that serves as the foundational moment of self-determination. The scission between ideal-subject and noumenal-Real is thus symptomatic of a primal diremption, an unconscious (or, better, pre-conscious) *de*-scission, whereby the libidinal chaos of the Ground is ejected into an immemorial past, and consciousness assumes itself in the form of a self-positing subject. The emergence of the subject then coincides with a displacement of drives, a self-sundering of the aboriginal abyss which excretes an “I” in recoil from the condition of its own genesis. Consciousness is predicated of a subject only to the extent that the subject has at once posited itself as grounded and differentiated from its contracted Ground. Žižek writes, “A free subject has to have a Ground that it is not itself; it has first to contract this Ground and then to assume a free distance toward it via the act of primordial decision [*Ent-scheidung*] that opens up time.”<sup>6</sup> That is, the primal undifferentiated Ground is assigned to the unconscious, becoming a noumenal-Real whose opacity imposes the limitation which sustains the personalized consciousness [*Selbstheit*] of the subject itself.

In theological terms, Schelling explicates the pre-conscious act of disassociation as the pre-eternal moment in which the unconscious Absolute represses its conflicting potencies and determines itself over and against a true other. The indifferent Ground atemporally “becomes” the personal God, by consciously positing himself [*für sich*] over and against the excremental remainder [*an*

4 F. W. J. Schelling, *Ages of the World: Third Version* (1915), trans. Jason M. Wirth (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 12.

5 Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder* (New York: Verso Books, 2007), 13.

6 Žižek, “The Abyss of Freedom,” 33.

*sich*] which he has jettisoned into an unconscious past. Self-division therefore constitutes God's personalization, and his diminution [κένωσις] enacts both his own self-revelation and the true "beginning" of historical creation. "There is no God prior to his *kenosis*. God emerges through his loss [...] in a case of absolute recoil, the history of God is the story of his loss and the final consummation of this loss."<sup>7</sup> Although this loss is the result of a single decision, it results in a form of divine personality [*Selbstheit*] irreducibly out of sync with itself, fragmented between its self-enunciating entrance into discursive self-determinacy and set in opposition to the excremental fallen world as the residue of its own disavowed past. That is, on the one hand, this self-division constitutes the simultaneous event of the begetting of the Son-Word [λόγος] and the emergence of created materiality. The former acts as the regulative norm which gives the emergent subject its coherence, while the latter remains an irreducible alterity which resists all discursive assimilation, the repressed remainder concealed beneath every semblance of the symbolic order.

Schelling does not simply oppose the dark domain of the pre-ontological drives, the unnamable Real which can never be totally symbolized to the domain of the Logos, of the articulated Word which can never totally "force" it. Rather, the unnamable Unconscious is not external to the Logos, but its obscure background, but *the very act of naming*, the very founding gesture of the Logos [...] the act of imposing a rational necessity on the pre-rational chaos of the Real.<sup>8</sup>

Theogony culminates not in a harmonious synthesis between formerly conflicting drives, but rather in their displacement by an act of discursive supplementation. Divine personality is founded on a persistent antagonism between the self-revelatory pronouncement of God through the Son-Word and the excluded noumenal-Real, manifested in a fallen creation.

The perduring chasm between divine self-revelation and the excreted residue returns us to the question of the relationship between the content of Schelling's theory of subjectivity and the narrative theogony which explicates it. According to Žižek's interpretation, the basic contours of the narrative itself betray the very truth of subjectivity which the narrative aims to conceal. "Schelling's move is not simply to ground the ontologically structured universe in the horrible vortex of the Real [...] rather this terrifying pre-ontological vortex is itself a phantasmic narrative, a lure destined to detract us from the true traumatic cut."<sup>9</sup> Put simply, subjectivity is inherently pathological, enacted by

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7 Žižek, *Absolute Recoil*, 261.

8 *Ibid.*, 185.

9 Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 275.

a symbolic repression of the Real which it relegates to an imagined past. Moreover, the edifice of personality is founded upon a denial of its own groundlessness, reinforced through the artifice of a primordial abyss dispelled by a personalized God. For Žižek, Schelling's mythological pre-history—as much as the very Word pronounced by Schelling's God itself—is an artifact of hysteria, “a comforting fiction which substitutes the horrible truth of constitutive repression.”<sup>10</sup> In turn, as with all hysterics, the truth is confessed through the lie: the primal beginning in which the Son-Word is begotten and the Absolute is personalized, in McGrath's words “unwittingly betrays the primal crime of subjectivity, the murder of the Real.”<sup>11</sup>

### Hegel's Monstrous Christ

Hegel's advance over Schelling, in Žižek's reading, lies in his rejection of the excess of an indivisible remainder altogether.<sup>12</sup> However, in contrast to frequent caricatures of Hegelian dialectics, Žižek maintains that Hegel's thought does not attempt to dispel negativity by resolving in a final unifying synthesis. On the contrary, Žižek's Hegel instead owns up to the persistent contradiction immanent to every identity, including that of the Absolute.<sup>13</sup> Where Schelling attempts to ontologize Kant's antinomic scission for the sake of explicating its genesis, Hegel does the exact opposite. Žižek writes,

Hegel *de*-ontologizes Kant by introducing a gap into the very texture of reality. Hegel's move is not to “overcome” the Kantian division, but rather to assert it “as such,” *to remove the need for its overcoming*, for the additional reconciliation of the opposites, that is to gain the insight into how positing the distinction “as such” already *is* the looked-for “reconciliation.”<sup>14</sup>

In other words, Schelling simply repeats Kant's error, and fails to recognize his own ruse. Rather than reconciling himself to the immanence of contradiction, he projects contradiction into the transcendent “beyond,” of a noumenal-Real. Hegel's dialectics, on the other hand, by unfolding the contradictions immanent to thought, enacts nothing less than an unmasking of the repressed truth concealed

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10 McGrath, *The Dark Ground of Spirit*, 31.

11 *Ibid.*

12 Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder*, 103.

13 Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 17.

14 *Ibid.*, 267–68.



behind Schelling's fiction: there is no abyss excluded from the grasp of Logos, no chimerical unconscious with which the subject cannot be reconciled. In short, for Hegel, the Real is not a noumenal, pre-discursive substantial Ground, but a break within the symbolic economy which both sustains and constitutes it.

For Žižek, the Hegelian dialectical play of opposites and unfolding negations [*Aufhebung*] represents a form of proto-Lacanian therapeutics. Ultimately, the whole range of possible *an sich* entities are exposed as artifacts of the subject's own self-deception, generated by the repression of negativity. Once unmasked, the presupposed domain of the supersensible is made to appear as *mere* appearance. "To unmask the illusion does not mean that there is nothing to see behind: what we must be able to see is this nothing as such—beyond the phenomena, there is nothing but this nothing itself, nothing which is the subject."<sup>15</sup> The phantasm of the supersensible, which had initially appeared as substantial and real, and acted as the exterior impasse that resisted and constituted symbolization, is therefore exposed to be a product of the innate tensions within the process of the subject's own self-idealization.

Nonetheless, this raises the question which haunted Schelling: how does subjectivity arise in contradistinction with its own negativity if negativity itself is a product of the discursive subject?

According to Žižek's view, Hegel sees this question as an effort to retroactively uncover a logical necessity upon an event of inexplicable contingency. Rather than attempting to explicate this emergence as Schelling does, by retreating from the negative by substantializing it as the very Ground of the Absolute, Hegel instead affirms the Absolute as contradictory, a self-relation of identity and difference, a negated subject without a pre-subjective negative. Hegel's ultimate identification of truth with the recognition of "substance as essentially subject, expressed in the representation of the Absolute as *Spirit* [*Geist*],"<sup>16</sup> is taken by Žižek to mean precisely that "substance is not a pre-subjective Ground but a subject, an agent of self-differentiation which posits otherness and then reappropriates it. 'Subject' stands for the non-substantial agency of phenomenalization, appearance, 'illusion,' split, finitude, Understanding and so on, and to conceive Substance as Subject means precisely that appearance and split are inherent to the life of the Absolute itself."<sup>17</sup> The recognition of

15 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 195.

16 G. W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 14 [§25].

17 Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology* (New York: Verso, 1999), 88.

self-splitting [*Entzweiung*] as the inherent and constitutive fact of subjectivity, yields a reconciliation with the traumatic negative which Schelling's pre-conscious decision [*Ent-scheidung*] aims to disavow. Yet, this reconciliation does not suture the underlying "cut" of the negative by way of synthesis so much as it "confesses" and "absolves" the crime of the repressed trauma.

Insofar as Hegel's dialectical therapeutics is understood by Žižek to enact a reconciliation with the intractability of contradiction, then by extension Hegel's affirmation of Christianity, as the summit of "revealed religion,"<sup>18</sup> can be said to enact the very inverse of Schelling's hallucinatory theogony. That is, while Schelling's narrative represents a myth that dissimulates the truth of the negative, Hegel's Christianity represents a true myth that dispels every mythology and "gives up the ghost"<sup>19</sup> of the spectral Real. For Žižek, the "perverse core" of Christianity is confessed in the image [*Vorstellung*] of the crucified Christ who is himself the monstrous truth of contradiction—a self-alienated God—whose death reveals sheer negativity to be constitutive of the Absolute.<sup>20</sup> Žižek's Hegelian *theologia crucis* is thus at once Trinitarian and radically theopaschite, a Christian atheism which identifies the crucified God with an exhaustive diminution [κένωσις] of transcendence into sheer immanence. The transcendent God [*an sich*] is unreservedly incarnated in Christ such that Christ's crucifixion is itself the very death of God, the final dissolution of the supersensible.

By way of God's death, the alienation of the subject is made mediate to itself, and through this mediation it is reconciled to the monstrous negativity of contingent being. Žižek observes,

[The difference of substance and subject] has to reflect/inscribes itself into subjectivity itself as the irreducible gap that separates human subjects from Christ, the "more than human" monstrous subject [...] Christ signals the overlapping of two kenoses: man's alienation from/in God is simultaneously God's alienation from himself in Christ. So it is not only that humanity becomes conscious of itself in the alienated figure of God, but in human religion, God becomes self-conscious.<sup>21</sup>

18 Hegel, 456 [§754].

19 Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Why the Christian Legacy is Worth Fighting For* (New York: Verso, 2000), 90.

20 *Ibid.*, 96.

21 Slavoj Žižek, "The Fear of Four Words: A Modest Plea for the Hegelian Reading of Christianity" in *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic* by Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2009), 75.

The double-sided figure of the human subject alienated from a supersensible God, and a self-alienated God abandoned unto death are, in turn, reconciled by their being sublated into a virtualized relation between contingent subjects in community. This community, which Žižek identifies with the Holy Spirit, is one liberated from all projected bonds of significance apart from their own immanent mutual association as expressed in common action. The virtualized horizon of meaning is therefore the flipside of absolute negativity and contingency, the exigent presupposition animating the actions of a community of purely finite individuals. “God” is made conscious in a collective of godless partisans who commit themselves to the realization of an idealized possibility.

### Bulgakov's Metapsychology of Positive Disassociation

Both Žižek and Bulgakov read the post-Kantian idealist tradition as an effort to challenge the constitutive antinomic scission at the heart of Kant's account of the transcendental subject. This challenge is interpreted, by Žižek and Bulgakov alike, in terms of an interrogation of the underlying “structural scaffolding of [Kant's] fully formed account of transcendental subjectivity,”<sup>22</sup> which comes to identify the rupture at the heart of the subject as derivative of an anterior rupture constitutive of the Absolute itself. This similarity between Žižek and Bulgakov not only reflects their common rootedness in the idealist tradition, but also attests to a shared predilection for what might be called a meta-psychological or meta-transcendental interpretation of that tradition. Both Žižek and Bulgakov affirm a continuity between speculative discourse regarding the Absolute and a certain diagnosis of the human personality as such. Indeed, Bulgakov, like Žižek and the idealists, affirms that the Kantian construction of subjectivity remains ultimately incomprehensible on its own terms. The subject [*Ich*] only apprehends itself relative to its other, a predicate which constitutes its limit, but remains unable to exceed the limits of its own identity such that it can know the content of its own predication. Bulgakov writes,

This antinomical task makes the *I* into a riddle for itself, into an insoluble charade. That which [...] appeared [...] to be the most reliable and most self-evident [...] fulcrum turns out to be situated at the point of an antinomical knife, to be a living paradox, which, obviously, cannot be understood from out of itself.<sup>23</sup>

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22 Adrian Johnson, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 71.

23 Sergii Bulgakov, *The Tragedy of Philosophy: Philosophy & Dogma* (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2020), 125.

Moreover, in tandem with Žižek's reading of Schelling and Hegel, Bulgakov approaches this tension not by attempting to dissolve the immanent contradiction at its center, but by affirming polarity itself as his point of departure and ultimate terminus of his thought.

For Bulgakov, the scission between the enclosed field of the subject and the transcendent "Not-I" [*Nicht-Ich*], the *Ding an sich*, is absolute and insurmountable from the standpoint of the subject's own immanence, and can only be overcome by way of the "Not-I"'s own self-disclosure to the "I" by a negation of its own pure exteriority. Conversely, to the extent that the Subject is able to possess itself and know itself, it must always already be presupposed relative to the self-disclosure of its otherwise noumenal predicate. "I" and "Not-I" must somehow be correlated to one another, simultaneously without reserve and without collapse of differentiation. Both the finite subject and its transcendent other must be posited as constitutively split and co-known, with the split in the latter operating as the condition of possibility for the former's own reflexive self-positing:

The task of the absolute with respect to the relative, or of the relative in light of the absolute, is the unification at once of the absolute and the relative of the immanent and the transcendent—such is the nature of the predicate. The relative-absolute or absolute-relative predicate is an antinomy which reason finds intolerable.<sup>24</sup>

However, it is precisely here that Bulgakov's account of a ruptured Absolute at once most closely approximates but ultimately diverges from those proffered by Žižek's reading of Schelling and Hegel. On the one hand, with Žižek's Schelling, Bulgakov explicates the relationship between the relative-Absolute and Absolute-relative as founded upon a primal decision [*Ent-Scheidung*], an act of disassociative self-sundering and a refusal of totality. On the other hand, with Žižek's Hegel, Bulgakov takes this foundational fracture to be irreducible and immanent to the Absolute itself, and thus refuses to substantialize it into a pre-subjective groundless Ground.<sup>25</sup> And yet, Bulgakov's Absolute cannot be identified with Žižek's traumatized Hegelian subject, condemned to a per-

24 Bulgakov, *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, 127.

25 Ibid., "Schelling's error lies in his putting the nature [s. c. *Grund*] of the hypostasis before the hypostasis, and deducing hypostasis from that nature. In other words, he takes the predicate, understood as a dark potentiality, *apart from and before* the subject, and forces it to engender its own hypostasis from out of itself [...] he does not merely distinguish God's nature from God himself, but directly opposes the two." 99.

verse enjoyment of the symptoms of its woundedness, any more than it can be identified with Žižek's Schellingian hysteric, in repressed denial of its own groundlessness.

According to Bulgakov, the primal decision of the Absolute to enact its own diminution [κένωσις] is indicative neither of a repression of anhypostatic drives, nor of a parasitic subject that derives its personality from self-deception by positing an anarchic noumenal-Real. Rather, for Bulgakov, there is no Absolute "behind" the Absolute-relative, no unconscious Ground which is not always already the predicate of a self-conscious subject. Put theologically, Bulgakov's God is not pure transcendence, but an immanent-transcendence who is eternally and irreducibly sundered, known to himself in being co-known, relative to a genuine other with whom he has placed himself in correlation.

The Absolute is never thought, never known, never exists in its *abstract* absoluteness [...]. Even abstracting thought must have something from which it might be reflected and thus acquire content; and the transcendent never remains only in its transcendence but has a *trans* which not only conceals but defines it. In other words, the Absolute itself is *relative* in its absoluteness, just as the transcendent is *immanent* in its transcendence.<sup>26</sup>

Bulgakov describes God's aboriginal diremption as the very enactment of the eternal *ad intra* self-revelation of divine personality in the communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as well as the ultimate foundation of its *ad extra* repetition in the temporal unfolding of created Being.<sup>27</sup>

Even as this self-revelation is constituted by a self-sacrificial Urkenosis, an eternally pre-established "Golgotha of the Absolute,"<sup>28</sup> it is in no way taken to represent an instance of negativity or loss. For Bulgakov, the reality of the Absolute's self-sundering is instead an eternal, atemporal event of loving donation which inscribes difference with the utmost positivity, rather than a mode of dialectical contradiction or antagonism.<sup>29</sup> That is, the Absolute is always already correlated not only to his creation [*ad extra*] but rationally knows and loves himself as the Trinity. The Absolute is pre-eternally the Father who bestows and receives himself through the Son-Word, and who in the mutuality of the Father

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26 Sergius Bulgakov, *The Comforter* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004), 360.

27 *Ibid.*, 361.

28 Cf. Sergius Bulgakov, *Unfading Light* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2012), 185.

29 Cf. Bulgakov, *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, 61–62.

and the Son-Word is transparent to himself in the “We” of the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and rests upon the Son-Word.<sup>30</sup>

The ultimate identity of substance with subject is therefore not a product of pure self-mediated immanence which, like Žižek’s Hegelian subject, could be said to suffer alienation for the sake of its self-virtualization. Rather, for Bulgakov, substance is identified with a unitary Not-All, a living antinomy that is always comprehended relative to predicate and copula. This antinomic unitary-difference names nothing less than the trinity of Father, Son, and Spirit and their three-fold hypostatization of a singular divine substance. This tri-hypostatized substance is rendered transparent and self-conscious, just as subject, predicate, and copula express an organically self-differentiated whole.

The hypostasis, the person, the I, exists in so far as it has a nature of its own, that is, an unceasing predication, a revelation of its own, which it can never exhaustively utter. “Substance” exists not only “in itself” [*an sich*], as subject, but also “for itself” [*für sich*] as a predicate, and moreover, “in and for itself” [*an und für sich*], in the copula as existence. And these three beginnings are by no means merely dialectical moments of a unity, negating each other and being sublated into synthesis: no, they are, simultaneously and with equal dignity [...] three [...] which in their joint make up the life of substance.<sup>31</sup>

The life of personality is thus a dynamic movement of donative self-positing whereby the “I” is constituted by its own self-abnegation, its unreserved self-abandonment to the “Not-I.” This is illustrated by the self-determination of the Father as subject in relation to his predicate, the donation of his very substance through the begetting of the Son-Word. In turn, insofar as the Urkenosis of the Father’s self-donation enacts his self-revelation in the Son-Word, the self-determination of the Son-Word consists in his own self-renunciation and reciprocal self-offering to the Father.<sup>32</sup> As such, the self-positing of each of the co-divine hypostases, while singular in the self-consciousness of their transparent and wholly realized substance, is personally distinguished according to

30 Cf. Sergius Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2008): “This reality of the divine nature, already revealing itself in an ideal manner in the fatherhood of the Father and the sonhood of the Son, is accomplished by the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father, reposes upon the Son and unites the two of them. This is the mutual love of the Father and the Son [...]; it is the accomplished self-revelation of Divinity in its nature.” 100.

31 Bulgakov, *The Tragedy of Philosophy*, 11.

32 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 97–100.

the manner in which they each enact their donative love in relation to their co-divine other.

The mutual self-sacrificial determination of the Father and the Son is described by Bulgakov in continuity with his affirmation of an aboriginal Golgotha as a “pre-eternal suffering,”<sup>33</sup> but remains differentiated from the mere pathos of tragic, finite limitation, on account of its resolution in the third co-divine other, the Holy Spirit. As copula, the Holy Spirit manifests and actualizes the positive content of divine substance, which he shares in mutually-donative communion with Father as subject and the Son-Word as predicate. The *ideal* revelation of the Father in the begetting of the Son-Word is made *real* in the procession of the Holy Spirit, who in his repose upon the Son-Word, and together with him, forms the “revealing dyad”<sup>34</sup> of predicate and copula which expresses the substance of the Father as subject. This actualized expression is not merely a virtualized reciprocity of self-identification in self-differentiating love (“I am Thou and Thou art I; I am We.”<sup>35</sup>) but is realized *hypostatically* in the Holy Spirit as co-divine person, together with the Father and Son-Word. The content of this triune revelation of the divine personality is identified by Bulgakov with the divine wisdom, Sophia. As Brandon Gallaher summarizes, “as God the Father’s revealed nature, Sophia is transparent to the hypostases who reveal her, the dyad of the Son and Spirit, and they live in and by their self-revelation in and as her. Sophia, in this way, becomes hypostatically characterized by the Father as Wisdom (for the Logos) and Glory (for the Spirit).”<sup>36</sup> Putting to one side its obvious idiosyncrasy, Bulgakov’s quasi-personal appellation of the divine substance signals the extent to which his speculative theology can be interpreted as a form of metapsychology, albeit in a decidedly different register than the Lacanian approach elaborated by Žižek in his reading of the idealists.

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33 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 99.

34 See, Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, 183–86. Bulgakov writes, “This mutuality is expressed in the depths of the Holy Trinity by the Fact that there is a Revealed hypostasis, the Father, and there is a Dyad of Revealing hypostases, the engendered Son and the proceeding Holy Spirit. The inseparability of these two hypostases is based not only on the fact that both of them have a common ‘principle’ in the Father but also on the fact that both of them *together* reveal Him in the Divine Sophia, by a unified concrete act determined by their interrelation.” 183.

35 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 100.

36 Cf. Brandon Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity in Modern Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) 78.

Bulgakov's metapsychological orientation can be interpreted as representing a form of what S. J. McGrath has called "positive disassociation."<sup>37</sup> McGrath sharply differentiates positive disassociation from any form of repression or psychosis. While repression takes any constitutive split within personality to be a mode of psychotic denial, such that self-consciousness is defined in conflict with its unconscious drives, McGrath conversely describes "positive disassociation" as a form of productive self-contraction and relational openness:

Positive disassociation must be distinguished from negative association. Where the former enlivens personality, the latter encloses it. Negative disassociation is willful unconsciousness [...] [Positive disassociation] affirms that to be a personality is to be involved in disassociation for the sake of re-identification, of dialoguing with difference.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, for Bulgakov, the split within the Absolute is not taken to be something inherently pathological or an indication of a personality that is constitutively disjointed. Rather it is the loving self-donation of the Father's very substance to the Son-Word and the Spirit, a dynamic upsurge of desire whose *ens realissimum* finds expression in loving relation to others. The outpouring of the sacrificial gift of the Father's substance in no way enacts a self-deceptive ejection of an unconscious abyss but is instead a consummation of his subjectivity in relation to predicate and copula, a completely self-transparent personality in the mode of a "nured nature" [*natura naturata*]. Sophia as the substance of divine self-consciousness is itself the eternal reality of the Absolute in its self-revelation, the identification of the differentiated Father, Son, and Spirit in mutual recognition.

This positive disassociation and virtualized reidentification in otherness is ultimately the basis of human personality, which repeats the personalization and self-revelation of God's own substance as Sophia *ad extra*.<sup>39</sup> Although God's personality is eternally realized in the reciprocal donation of the Trinitarian

37 McGrath, *The Dark Ground of Spirit*, 27.

38 Ibid.

39 Sophia is simultaneously the Divine nature ("divine Sophia" or "substance-Sophia") and the fundamental entelechy and fulfillment of creation ("creaturely Sophia"), which by extension is the principle of God's self-revelation both *ad intra* and *ad extra*, as well as the very foundation of created material-historical being and its ultimate fulfillment. In both cases, difference is not dissolved, but rather fulfilled by a fundamental unity and identification. This one Divine-created—or Divine-Human—Sophia ultimately belongs to God, representing a pantheistic rather than pantheistic view. The difference



life, Bulgakov nonetheless grounds creation in the very same unprethinkable event of his self-sundering, gratuitously positing his own substance outside himself in creaturely being.<sup>40</sup> In positing Sophia as the foundation of creation, God's self-bifurcation further extends for the sake of ever greater love and reciprocity. Likewise, in receiving Sophia as its foundation, creation possesses Sophia as a potency to be realized as its own [*natura naturans*], an entelechy to be attained. The realization (i. e. "sophianization"<sup>41</sup>) of this potency is both the gift and the task of the human person.

### Conclusion

For Žižek subjectivity is constitutively disjointed, its "substance" consists in the innate contradiction between the wound of the unconscious and the projection of a symbolic-imagined economy. Whether in the Schellingian mode of an unconscious "indivisible remainder" or as the immanent trauma of the Hegelian negative, Žižek perceives the split within personality as inherently pathological, a tragic dissonance of conflicting drives. To speak of any production of a higher standpoint of possible reconciliation, whereby otherness and identity are brought into a dynamic relation, can only inevitably be identified with a kind of ideological artifice. Even if the lie of ideology is exigent and noble—as it is for Žižek's Holy Spirit as the self-consciously godless community-in-solidarity—it is nonetheless a virtualized loss of reality, an alienation from the contingency and brutality of the real that lurks beneath every surface. In the end, the question is posed to us whether we can accept the wound of selfhood and come to abandon ourselves to the pure immanence of a utopian expectation without guarantees.

Bulgakov offers a counterproposal to Žižek's question, one which refuses to identify self-sacrifice with loss and fragility with negation. Indeed, Bulgakov's Sophia indicates that the essential fracture which yields differentiation is not merely an open wound concealed by a veneer of hysterical self-deception, but rather a donative self-offer that produces the possibility of relation and expressive re-identification in otherness. As the "organic image"<sup>42</sup> or mirror of the

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between "Divine" and "Creaturely" Sophias is not one of being, but one of reception. Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 119–23.

40 Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 195–99.

41 Sergii Bulgakov, *Philosophy of Economy: The World as Household* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2000), 145–50.

42 Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 98.

self-differentiated, antinomic identity that constitutes both the Trinitarian God and the relation between Creator and creature, Bulgakov's Sophia is neither a flight into illusory fantasy nor a virtualized projection of a repressed subject. On the contrary, Sophia names nothing less than the self-transparent personality which has disavowed the deluded temptation of solipsism and attained itself by embracing the other as its utmost condition of self-revelation. Bulgakov's metapsychology of positive disassociation, as expressed in his sophiology, thus represents the precise inverse of the psychosis which Žižek aims to alleviate by "unmasking" the truth of negativity. For Bulgakov, the irreducible fracture which bruises the heart of the Absolute is "the life-creating power of trihypostatic love"<sup>43</sup> and as such attains the utmost positivity, serving as the very wellspring of personhood.

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43 Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 217.