

Article

Encountering Transcendence: Žižek, Liberation Theology and African Thought in Dialogue

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Abstract: The concept of transcendence has been described by various academic disciplines like philosophy, theology, art and literature, but also by various religions and cultures. This has also been the case with the three traditions that are brought into dialogue in this special issue, namely critical theory, African thought and Liberation theology. In this article I will focus on transcendence as it is ‘encountered’ by the philosopher Slavoj Žižek as a postmetaphysical thinker and as a voice from critical theory. Žižek’s emphasis on the ‘gap in immanence’ and its implications for freedom will then be brought into dialogue with African thought and Liberation theology. Transcendence as an entry point in this dialogue has the potential not only to give more insight into these traditions, but also to advance the concept of freedom, which is central in all these traditions.

Keywords: transcendence; liberation theology; critical theory; African thought; Slavoj Žižek; immanence; freedom Gilles Deleuze; religion; metaphysics; gap in immanence

1. Transcendence as Point of Departure for Dialogue

The concept *transcendence* will be taken as the point of departure to initiate and facilitate a dialogue between the three diverse traditions: critical theory, African thought and Liberation theology. The reason is that transcendence is closely connected to the concept of freedom, which is central in each of these traditions. This will be explicated after the concept of transcendence has been clarified.

The word *transcendence* is composed of the prefix *trans-* (from the Latin *trans*, ‘across’) and the action verb *to ascend* (from the Latin *scandere*, ‘to climb across, surmount’), indicating a type of ‘crossing over’, the ‘exceeding of boundaries’. Transcendence can thus refer to ‘some place above or outside the world’—an ascension to an ‘outside’—or to a crossing of borders ‘within this world’—depending on what is being transcended. Epistemological transcendence, for example, refers to whether objects of knowledge transcend the consciousness. It also refers to the boundaries of our knowledge—to enigmas, the unknown, the incomprehensible. This in turn coheres with ontological transcendence: the question whether reality transcends consciousness or whether it is immanent in it (Stoker 2016, p. 1). In monism, for example, various ontological areas are reduced to one principle (Spinoza), while for Plato, transcendence is dominant. Other types of transcendence (or rather boundaries that are crossed) are described as anthropological (how human subjects transcend to other fellow human subjects) or psychological (which refers to “something greater than ourselves, which we should respect and work for” (Layard 2005, p. 91) or self-transcendence). Transcendence as an ascension to an ‘outside world’ or ‘place above’ is described as religious, metaphysical or existential transcendence. In this case the crossing over is from the sensorial observable to the supersensorial; from historical time and place to a future utopia; from the temporary imperfect world to the eternal perfect world. The yearning (or escape from our imperfect world) for fulfilment, salvation, and completion (as that which the true outside world offers) is connected in religious terms to God as the transcendent. In metaphysical terms it can refer to Plato’s true world ‘outside’ the cave, or in existential terms our awareness of moral

values ‘outside’ ourselves. In sum: Transcendence is correlative with immanence and its meaning depends on the context in which it is used.

In African thought¹ the concept *transcendence* is mostly used in the context of the religious or spiritual. Transcendence in African Traditional Religions (ATR) can refer to the fact that human beings “continually surpass themselves in all they are, all they wish and all they have” (Rakotsoane 2010, p. 2)—a type of self-transcendence. Self-transcendence is, however, discouraged in ATR because conformity and uniformity are prioritised: “the ideal person, in relation to nature, is relatively passive fitting himself or herself into the given rhythms” (Cumpsty 1991, p. 120). Transcendence in ATR also refers to God, “the object of their worship” (Rakotsoane 2010, p. 2). Although God’s transcendence is very prominent in ATR, this God is not a *deus remotus* but immanent. The “root of ATR is belief in the existence of the mystical and mysterious power or energy (popularly known as *mysterium tremendum*, *manna*, the life force, the vital force, the life essence or dynamism)” (Rakotsoane 2010, p. 5). This life force is an impersonal power present in everything that exists—animate or inanimate; corporeal or spiritual (Turaki 2006, p. 24). All living beings are interconnected through this life force (Beyers 2010, p. 4) and the whole purpose of ATR is to “preserve and enhance this life force that everyone has received” (Magesa 2002, p. 51). In ATR, God as the Supreme Being “appears to be ontologically transcendent . . . but this transcendence and aloofness must not be interpreted in absolute terms” (Turaki 2006, p. 59). The transcendence (God, powers, spirits) is “just as much part of reality as the visible elements in the world” (Beyers 2010, p. 6) and not part of a different reality. There is a connectedness and unity in life—this life. ATR is “not concerned with metaphysics”, but is “this-worldly” (Maluleke 1998, p. 127). It “hardly, if ever, looks beyond this world and age” (Henry and Malan 2017, p. 1) and salvation is here and now.

The above brief overview of transcendence in African thought—specifically in ATR—reveals that there is not an ‘outside’, not another world or place or time to yearn for, no existential or metaphysical transcendence.² Even God, as the Supreme Being, is transcendental only within this world. This seems like a contradiction, but it means that God as the highest “degree of mystical power . . . the mysterious power or vital force” cannot be approached directly (prayers need to be directed through ancestors and divinities) because going “too close to a being that is believed to be endowed with a massive vital force is considered fatal” (Rakotsoane 2010, p. 9). He (or It as Spirit) is, however, always part of this world.³ It is the impersonal life force itself which creates life and unity. There is thus no differentiation between the sacred and the profane (Thorpe 1992, p. 3; Wernhart 2003, p. 269) and “all of nature is invested with a mystical, religious quality” (Thorpe 1991, p. 28). God’s transcendence is thus completely found within the immanent—the absolute or transcendent is no longer sought outside mundane reality because both realities converge. The concept of transcendence has in effect become redundant. It has lost its power and meaning, and it has virtually disappeared into immanence. Stoker describes this type of ‘transcendence’ as “radical immanence” (Stoker 2012, p. 15). Even on an epistemological and ontological level there is no transcendence, because there is a holistic understanding of reality as one

¹ African thought or philosophy is of course not a single unified tradition of thinking and it remains difficult to define. Philosophers such as Bodunrin (1981, *The question of African Philosophy*), Momoh (1985, *African philosophy . . . Does it exist?*), Wiredu (2004, *A Companion to African Philosophy*) and Oruka (1990, *Trends in contemporary African philosophy*) all debate the concept of African Philosophy itself. Momoh says for example: “The attempt to stablish African Philosophy as a respectable discipline has been impaired by this thought that it is a traditional thought. Scholars are becoming increasingly aware that African pneumatological beliefs, metaphysical and moral doctrines, political and social principles, epistemology, logic, law, science and the scholars own theories and extractions from all of these should not be indiscriminately labelled ‘African traditional thought’.” (Momoh 1985, p. 79).

² I am aware of the danger of generalisation here, but the aim here is to only define transcendence in broad terms in order to start the dialogue with the other traditions and, not to work present a comprehensive understanding of it.

³ Mbiti says: “For most part of their life, African people place God in the transcendental plane, making him seem remote from their daily affairs. But they know that he is immanent . . . Thus for them, God is in theory transcendent, but in practice immanent.” (Mbiti 1970, p. 18).

world, one reality.⁴ Rakotsoane says “Africans have a monistic view of reality. For them, what is out there is a closed system of cause and effect” (Rakotsoane 2010, p. 3) and even chance is ruled out, because “everything that happens is understood to have a specific cause in the system” (Rakotsoane 2010, p. 3).⁵ With such a strong understanding of reality as a closed system of cause and effect, the possibility for freedom and an ethical life are two issues that immediately come to the fore. Du Toit points out in this regard that “For Africans the aim of life is to experience and enhance life force and become part of it. Anything that diminishes this force is evil and anything that increases it is good.” (Du Toit 2009, p. 109) Turaki adds that “[t]he pursuit of cosmic harmony is an ethical principle in traditional Africa” (Turaki 1999, p. 122). This indicates partly how the question of an ethical life is answered, but the question of freedom remains because of the univocity of being and the monistic view of reality. I will return to this question after the discussion of Žižek’s concept of transcendence.

In the discussion of Critical Theory (broadly defined as social theory oriented toward critiquing and changing society as a whole) I will focus mainly on the philosopher Slavoj Žižek. His first book published in English, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), develops a materialist conception of ideology that draws heavily on Lacanian psychoanalysis and Hegelian idealism. In his overview of Žižek’s huge oeuvre, Depoortere observes that Žižek not only returns to Marxist orthodoxy, but also increasingly to Christianity (Depoortere 2008, p. 96). This leads to the interesting question of whether there is any room for transcendence in Žižek’s work, and if so why he regards it as necessary. To answer this, I will focus on Žižek’s essay “The Descent of Transcendence into Immanence, or, Deleuze as a Hegelian” (Žižek 2004).⁶ This essay also brings Deleuze’s concept of the ‘plane of immanence’ into the conversation, which further develops the ideas on transcendence and its link to freedom. Deleuze’s radical immanence has salient similarities with the immanence and univocity of African thought and the critique Žižek raises to Deleuze will have some relevance for African thought and the question of freedom as well.

In Liberation theology⁷ the liberation of the poor and oppressed in society is a main concern. Christian theology is reinterpreted in practical terms to criticise ‘sinful’ socioeconomic structures that cause social inequities, but also to actively participate in changing those structures. Liberation theologians were often criticised as naive purveyors of Marxism and advocates of leftist social activism (clearly linking it with Critical Theory), but their focus were uncompromisingly on the needs and liberation of the poor and oppressed. This involved the political struggle of the poor against wealthy elites, firstly based on the Bible, and not necessarily on Marxist ideas. They emphasised that the voice of the poor should be heard—others cannot speak on their behalf—and that God’s voice can be heard through the poor, and that “God, in a world full of injustice and enmity, is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged” (Belhar Confession 2006).⁸

The focus of Liberation theology is “on action and justice more than on those of belief and truth” (Ogden 1979, p. 21) and allows “Christian faith in God and the contemporary concern for freedom to interpret one another” (Ogden 1979, p. 14). It is a theology of praxis, a political and public theology in which the emancipation and freedom of all people, especially the oppressed and poor, are of main

⁴ An African understanding of reality, however, implies more than a “mere clinical, scientific analysis of the material” (Turaki 1999, p. 122) because part of reality is invisible—the transcendental life force.

⁵ Tempels, for example, says about the African world view that “[n]othing moves in this universe of forces without influencing other forces by its movement. The world of forces is held like a spider’s web of which no single thread can be caused to vibrate without shaking the whole network” (Tempels 1969, p. 60).

⁶ In this essay Žižek highlights the link between transcendence and freedom which I will appropriate in the dialogue between the three traditions in this article. However, it is not possible to discuss his work in detail within the scope and limits of this article.

⁷ As with African thought, Liberation theology is not a simple concept that refers to a single unified tradition or set of beliefs. Liberation theology is a diverse and dynamic ‘movement’ and the discussion here only pertains to one aspect—transcendence—within the broader understanding of Liberation theology, without attempting any generalisations.

⁸ This is a translation of the original Afrikaans text of the confession that was adopted by the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa in 1986.

importance. A “transformed Christian vision of religious transcendence” (McCann 1981, pp. 199–200) takes place in this process in which God is not seen as remote or distanced, but ‘within human touch’. In her engagement with Liberation theology Mayra Rivera, for example, develops a concept of God “as transcendent within” (Rivera 2007, p. 170), where transcendence is seen as a relationship which describes how humans can touch God through others. To find the ‘transcendence within’, an ‘extrawordly transcendence’ is seemingly rejected. This world is important, and not an ‘outside’ world. God is within this world, incarnated in Jesus. He emptied Himself (the Spirit in kenotic form), and is therefore found within the world itself, within humanity as the body of Christ. The biblical term ‘Kingdom of God’ is interpreted as to refer to the presence of God as immanent universal Spirit, and there is a general move to the “absence of the God of pure transcendence” (Altizer 1980, p. 50). In this world, freedom, emancipation and justice are sought by Liberation theology. The emphasis is on the immanent and not on the transcendent. The transcendent is not necessarily rejected,⁹ but the move is toward immanence which raises the questions: Is transcendence still needed and why? To what extent will the ‘project of emancipation’ (liberation) be furthered or hindered with the complete rejection of transcendence?

Žižek’s critique on Deleuze’s radical immanence, and his pursuing of transcendence (or rather the gap in immanence) for the sake of freedom itself, will shed some light on the above questions. The aim of this article, however, is not to argue for an uncritical rehabilitation of transcendence, especially not as a power, logos or authority. Too many dangers of and problems with transcendence have been exposed and experienced through history to endeavour such an argument. Some of these problems will be discussed next, before the discussion proceeds to Deleuze and Žižek.

2. Dangers and Problems of Transcendence

The concept *transcendence* signals what is beyond—beyond what can be known, represented or experienced—but it “has also been linked to unfashionable concepts like presence, being, power, an argument beyond recourse, an authority beyond reason, the tyranny of the most excellent, the hegemony of the west, and of course a totalitarian deity” (Schwartz 2004, p. vii). The problem and danger with transcendence is that “crimes have been committed in the name of transcendental principles—principles held beyond question, beyond critique—and even in the name of a transcendent God” (Schwartz 2004, p. vii). This is why it is argued today that transcendence is a relic of former mistakes.

Especially the metaphysical understanding of transcendence (as God, the Supreme Being, the divine, something outside this world, the cause of being) was immensely criticised in the modern period, by amongst others Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. They all argued in different ways that there is no ‘true’ foundation, no ontotheology, no other reality that determines our reality. Nietzsche, for example, indicated clearly that the concept of a transcendent world (separated from this world) and the concept of God as being radical transcendent are very problematic, because it may lead to a devaluation of this world, and of this life. Other problems with transcendence (apart from the critique of metaphysics) include that it creates a ‘too distant’ transcendent (an unknowable, unreachable, and eventually irrelevant transcendent); it creates a nihilistic world because it is ‘the other/outside’ world which has true meaning; it devalues the immanent on a bodily level (only the spiritual becomes important as it connects with the transcendent); and it locates the transcendent in brief moments of experiences (with the rest of our lives doomed as being less important). It is some of these problems which African thought and Liberation theology address (and overcome) in their more immanent concept of transcendence.

⁹ There remains a tension in Liberation theology between emancipation (liberation in the political sense) and redemption (as that which God alone can do). In Liberation theology there are long standing debates and different interpretations concerning these issues (see Davis 1980; Hennelly 1979) and my intention is merely to introduce the problem of transcendence in this tradition.

The aim of this article is not to re-establish transcendence in a 'remote', ontotheological, authoritarian form as a ground for oppression, but the opposite. It is to explore transcendence as a potential and even a condition for human freedom. It is to conceive of transcendence as "the ground of humility: epistemological, ethical, aesthetic, and political" (Schwartz 2004, p. vii).¹⁰ The philosophical line that runs from Spinoza to Deleuze stands for absolute immanence and it suggests a freedom in its break from transcendence. The restricted 'absoluteness' of this immanence, however, is exposed by Žižek, amongst others.¹¹ In response to the radical immanence of Gilles Deleuze, he argues that a gap in immanence is needed to maintain our human freedom.

3. The Radical Immanence of Deleuze

Absolute immanence means a 'closed world' with no escape to the 'outside', no 'crossing over', a denial even of the limits or boundaries itself. A radical immanence renders the concept of transcendence redundant, because it virtually disappears into immanence:¹² all transcendence is completely within this world, within our experience, within our grasp, and there is nothing 'more'. It positively acknowledges our interconnectedness as human beings with the material world we find ourselves in, and our connectedness to nature. In this regard the philosopher Deleuze represents one of the most radical positions of immanence with his concept of 'the plane of immanence'.¹³ Žižek argues that "[i]f there ever was, in the twentieth century, a philosopher of absolute immanence, it was Gilles Deleuze, with his notion of life as 'the immanence of immanence, absolute immanence: it is sheer power, utter beatitude'" (Žižek 2004, p. 235).

Deleuze defended the notion of immanence explicitly and passionately. He considered immanence not as a concept but as the pre-philosophical horizon against which thinking can be creative and productive. He calls this horizon the "plane of immanence" (Deleuze 2007, p. 386). With his passionate acceptance of immanence, Deleuze rejects any form of transcendence, connecting it with "the poisonous logic of representation" (Deleuze and Guattari 1991, p. 35). With his notion of pure immanence, he wishes to move beyond the dualism of form-matter that brings with it a transcendent judgement of mind over matter.¹⁴ Deleuze rejects not only epistemological transcendence, but also all types of transcendence, and of the metaphysical in particular. The reason is that Deleuze believes that 'Being' should be liberated from the chains of representation and that we must relocate ourselves on the plane of immanence, where we will discover that "Being necessarily only expresses Itself in all beings, because Being is all there is" (Justaert 2012, p. 98).

Because Being is all there is, Deleuze argues that there is no antonym (like transcendence) for immanence and that immanence should be thought of independently: "Absolute immanence is in itself: it is not in anything, nor can it be attributed to something; it does not depend on an object or belong to a subject. [...] Only when immanence is immanent to nothing except itself, can we speak of a plane of immanence." (Deleuze 2007, p. 389). In other words, for Deleuze, the world of representation is "a site of transcendental illusion" (Deleuze 2004, p. 334); it is "a fake dualism, albeit a very persistent one" (Justaert 2012, p. 102). Deleuze connects the absolute/infinite with pure immanence, and this

¹⁰ This transcendence is not a recovery of previous figures of transcendence. It is rather a "delirious rupture in immanence, an erotic claim made by it, a gap in the Real, a question put to subjectivity, a realm of the impossible that breaks into possibility" (Schwartz 2004, p. xi).

¹¹ John Milbank argues for example for the recovering of the relation between the sublime and the beautiful, because in absolute immanence there is a sundering of the sublime from the beautiful. There remains a 'gap' in immanence because the sublime is "that *within* representation which nonetheless *exceeds* the possibility of representation" (Milbank 2004, p. 212).

¹² Some philosophers argue that radical immanence is basically similar to atheism and that it is philosophically a move to nihilism. See, for example, Jonkers's (2012, p. 33) analyses of Jacobi's critique of philosophy's annihilation of transcendence in the wake of the pantheism controversy of 1785 and the atheism controversy of 1799. Jonkers discusses these two controversies in detail.

¹³ My discussion of Deleuze here follows my previous work on him in, "Embodied religion's radicalization of immanence and the consequent question of transcendence" (Verhoef 2013).

¹⁴ For Deleuze, transcendence implies a superiority of thinking over Being and he wants to unify these two poles and to "let Being speak loudly and clearly through thought and life once more" (Justaert 2012, p. 97).

immanence, according to him, allows or calls one to be creatively ethical and not to be bound to a prescribed morality (Smith 2001, p. 178). In order to do so, one must discover the true power and beauty in immanence, in Being, and live a life not divided in categories or hierarchies. For Deleuze, this immanent life is impersonal—“life is Being itself, a power that runs through every being” (Justaert 2012, p. 97); not divided into categories—“a human being’s life is literally equal to a life of a rock” (Pearson 2001, p. 141), and has the state of mind of beatitude—the realisation that it is not we who think, but “Being (God) who thinks through us; Being has absorbed us as it were: our life has become a Life, an expression of Being.” (Justaert 2012, p. 97).

To live on this plane of immanence intends to be liberating (free from the illusion of transcendence, hierarchy and dualism, free to be truly creative and ethical), but the question is whether this position is philosophically tenable. A paradox in Deleuze’s philosophy is that his plane of immanence somehow transcends the world of representation. The plane of immanence is indeed wholly other than this world.¹⁵ Deleuze hereby creates a new dualism between the ‘old world of representation’ and the ‘new world of the creative plane of immanence’. Deleuze’s philosophy is still an “affair of transcendence” (Pearson 2001, p. 141), and the paradox in Deleuze’s philosophy is that the plane of immanence becomes the ‘transcendent’.¹⁶

So ironically, even in this radical plane of immanence there is no denial of transcendence, but rather a notion that the absolute empties itself in the mundane reality. ‘God’ is now the impersonal Being of the plane of immanence (Life itself). It is a move away from hierarchy and dualism to the creative life of pure immanence. Life itself seems to attain meaning/value on this plane, but not the personal life. The human being’s life is literally like that of a rock, something completely physical, a body—and by implication determined by causality.

Žižek criticises Deleuze’s plane of immanence for its inability to allow for human freedom. Again this is ironic, because freedom is exactly what Deleuze intends to promote with his plane of immanence and critique on representation. Žižek does not want to restore or argue for some metaphysical transcendence or God in his critique against Deleuze, but emphasises the need for epistemological and ontological transcendence, for a ‘gap in the immanence’ in *immanence*. This gap implies that immanence is not completely closed off, not all totalising, but that there is space for something ‘more’, a ‘transcendental dimension’, and an “immanent transcendence” (Žižek 2001b, p. 99) within immanence. To clarify this, I will first explicate Žižek’s understanding of transcendence in Christianity (his rejection of radical or metaphysical transcendence) and then move to his critique on Deleuze.

4. Žižek: Transcendence and Freedom

In Žižek’s understanding of Christianity the incarnation of God in Christ should be understood as the complete abolishment of God’s transcendence.¹⁷ In this regard there are some similarities between Žižek and Liberation theology to which I will return in the last section. Žižek argues that Christianity rejects the ‘God of the Beyond’ and thus can be described as a radical desublimation, “in the sense of the descendance of the sublime Beyond to the everyday level” (Žižek 2001b, p. 90). For him, Christianity makes the transition from God “as the wholly Other Thing to the Divine as barely

¹⁵ Justaert says for example: “The radically immanent can be understood as transcending our lives, because the whole interpretation of the plane of immanence as a goal to strive for, away from the world of representation, pictures this form of immanence as quasi unattainable. To reach it, we have to transcend our own ego, give up our own personality.” (Justaert 2012, p. 102).

¹⁶ According to Justaert transcendence does have a meaning in Deleuze’s philosophy, namely as “the dynamic meaning of transcending as an act of human beings [...] Their static form transcends towards a more dynamic constellation in which they can be creative, in which they can produce again. This is what happens on the plane of immanence: all these moving lines produce different intensities of Being” (Justaert 2012, p. 102).

¹⁷ Žižek says Christianity accepts God “as just another human being, as a miserable man indiscernible from other humans with regards to his intrinsic properties” (Žižek 2001b, p. 90). See also Depoortere’s “The End of God’s Transcendence? On Incarnation in the Work of Slavoj Žižek” (Depoortere 2007).

nothing” (Žižek 2001b, p. 89). *Barely* nothing is not ‘nothing’, because “the imperceptible something” (Žižek 2001b, p. 90) remains. He points out that since the coming of Christ “there is no longer any transcendent God with whom to communicate” and that “God has passed into the Holy Spirit as the (spirit of the) community of believers” (Žižek 2001a, pp. 50–51)—to the everyday level. Here the “split between man and man-Christ [is a] minimal difference” (Žižek 2004, p. 246).

There is no ‘Divine Thing’ as something transcendent, or ‘God as the wholly other Thing’ left for Žižek. Following the Lacanian psychoanalysis, he argues that such a notion is part of our ‘tragic desire’ or ‘stubborn attachment’ to the impossible object. The coming of Christ implies for Žižek the death of this Divine Thing and consequently of our tragic desire. The ‘Divine’ is rather that what we find in the immanent that makes us ‘more’ than animals. It is that “imperceptible something”, the “X or excess of human life” (Žižek 2001b, p. 89), that distinguishes human beings from animals. It is not something beyond the world of visible phenomena, but the ‘surplus’ human life in this world. Žižek explains that divinity is “that unfathomable X, on account of which man cannot ever fully become MAN, self-identical” (Žižek 2001b, p. 90), because “God is the unique case of full humanity” (Žižek 2001b, p. 91). God is thus not the God of the Beyond in the transcendent sense, but the “coincidence, identity even, between the sublime and the everyday object” (Žižek 2001b, p. 92). God, or Christ-man, is what makes man hu-man. God is just the immanent imperceptible X: the X which makes man (animal) X-man (human). It is not a substantial property, but the excess of human life—an example of the *gap in immanence*.

This transition of God from the ‘sublime to the everyday object’ corresponds for Žižek (in the Lacanian sense) to the transition from desire to drive. Desire for the impossible Thing (for the God of Beyond) is tragic because the impossible Thing is placed in an inaccessible Beyond. Desire becomes an endless movement, from one substitute to the next, without reaching it. With ‘the coming of Christ’ the domain of ‘tragic desire’ is, however, left behind¹⁸ and the ‘domain of drive’ is entered.¹⁹ Drive is orientated towards some particular object: an “object that is also the support of something in the object that is more than the object itself” (Depoortere 2008, p. 113). That the object can be ‘something more’ than the object itself, has to do with the gap in immanence for Žižek.

Žižek’s emphasis on the gap in immanence brings an important point of critique on Deleuze’s radical immanence to the fore: the question whether absolute immanence abolishes freedom. Žižek explains that Deleuze follows Spinoza as the philosopher of ‘Substance’. Substance means that there is no mediation between attributes and only a *univocity of being*—the “motif on which Deleuze insists so much” (Žižek 2004, p. 235). Spinoza understands this univocity of being as purely positive: “all that he admits is a purely positive network of causes and effect in which, by definition, an absence cannot play any positive role” (Žižek 2004, p. 236).²⁰ There is no absence, gap or crack in the Real for Spinoza.

This strong assertion of Spinoza of the positivity and univocity of Being grounds his equation of ‘power’ and ‘right’ in a radical way. A ‘right’ is for Spinoza to act upon things according to one’s nature. In other words “justice means that every entity is allowed to freely deploy its inherent power-potentials, that is, the amount of justice owed to me equals my power” (Žižek 2004, p. 236). In a closed network of cause and effect, my power equals my right. This is an anti-legalistic notion of rights as not something

¹⁸ In contrast, both “pagans and Jews . . . share the belief in a sublime beyond. To put it differently, they both believe in God as the Thing and thus both share the fantasy that the Divine Thing is far too sublime, far too elevated for human beings to be able to handle direct confrontation with it” (Depoortere 2008, p. 111). This link to the concept of ‘Supreme Being’ in ATR which Rakotsoane describes as something that cannot be approached directly because going “too close to a being that is believed to be endowed with a massive vital force is considered fatal” (Rakotsoane 2010, p. 9).

¹⁹ For Žižek, Christ figures as the exemplary figure which frees us from the Divine Thing (and our tragic desire for it) and this liberation must lead to the abolishment of all superior transcendences (and consequence tragic desires). Radical ‘desublimation’ in all forms is thus necessary.

²⁰ For Spinoza reality is what we can positively describes with causes and effects. Any absence, any negativity, should not be filled by a notion that merely fills the lacunae within our knowledge. Such negativity is ‘imaginary’ and “the result of our anthropomorphic, limited, false knowledge that fails to grasp the actual causal chain” (Žižek 2004, p. 236). Žižek, however, disagrees and says there are always some lacks with regard to positive measures—it can be a generative absence.

which one has, but something one ‘does’ according to one’s nature. Spinoza uses this, for example, as his key argument for the ‘natural inferiority’ of women. He contends that “. . . women have not *by nature* equal right with men” (Spinoza 1951, p. 387; my emphasis). What this equation of rights and power eventually culminates to in Spinoza’s work, is the radical suspension of any ‘deontological’ ethical dimension (norms that prescribe how we should act when we have a choice). He proposes an ethic of ‘is’ and not of ‘ought’. Ethical laws have only been given, he argues, because of our limited connection to see the true causal connection in things (or in our acts), because of our lack of knowledge. There is, however, only necessity involved and not freedom and choice: “. . . in reality God acts and directs all things simply by the necessity of His nature and perfection, and that His decrees and volitions are eternal truths, and always involve necessity” (Spinoza 1951, p. 65).

In such a universe of necessity which Spinoza portrays, there is only pure positivity of forces—no life-denying negativity, but only the joyful assertion of life. True freedom is here “not the freedom of choice, but the accurate insights into the necessities which determine us” (Žižek 2004, p. 237). With the suspension of the ethical dimension (“of commandment, of the Master Signifier” (Žižek 2004, p. 238), Spinoza leaves us only with ‘accurate insight’ or knowledge into cause and effect to determine our actions. This very indifference and pure assertion of life can be described in the psychoanalytic language of today as the superego (Žižek 2004, p. 239). Žižek construes that the superego (who is on the side of knowledge) wants nothing from you when you decide about actions, but only informs you of the causal link. The health warnings printed on a cigarette packet may serve as an example: the superego (as an awareness or knowledge about causal links) has an indifference about human interests and is elevated above feelings of guilt and moral outrage.

In this purely positive network and universe of causes and effect, of necessity, of closed immanence, the first question for Žižek is whether we really can have ‘accurate insight’ or ‘full knowledge’; and secondly whether this knowledge will restrict our freedom rather than enhance it. Put differently: Is there not a gap in the One-Whole Real of Spinoza, in this ‘closed immanence’? And is a gap not perhaps necessary to uphold our human freedom? It is on this point that Žižek examines Kant’s break with Spinoza. Kant argues that the Spinozan position of knowledge, without the deontological ‘ought’, is impossible to sustain. Kant says that there are some things we cannot know: there is a gap between appearance (phenomena) and reality (noumena). For Kant, as Žižek formulates it, there is “an irreducible crack in the edifice of Being, and it is through this crack that the ‘deontological’ dimension of ‘Ought’ intervenes—the ‘Ought’ fills in the incompleteness of ‘Is’, of Being” (Žižek 2004, p. 239). The substantial order of being is for Kant inaccessible (out of bounds for reason), but this opens up the space for morality, religious faith and ethical freedom.

Kant is anti-Spinozist, because from Kant’s perspective “Spinoza’s position appears as a nightmarish vision of subjects reduced to marionettes” (Žižek 2004, p. 239); a loss of our human freedom. To have full knowledge (as Spinoza envisions) will mean that we have access to the ‘ding an sich’, to the *noumenal*, as Kant formulates it. Such knowledge is not only impossible according to Kant, but it will be knowledge that will change us into mere mechanisms or puppets because:

. . . instead of the conflict which now the moral disposition has to wage with inclinations and in which, after some defeats, moral strength of mind may be gradually won, God and eternity in their awful majesty would stand unceasingly before our eyes . . . Thus most actions conforming to the law would be done from fear, few would be done from hope, none from duty . . . The conduct of man, so long as his nature remained as it is now, would be changed into mere mechanism, where, as in a puppet show, everything would gesticulate well but no life would be found in the figures. (Kant 1956, pp. 152–53)

For Kant, direct access to the noumenal would mean that we would be deprived of “the very ‘spontaneity’ which forms the kernel of transcendental freedom” (Žižek 2004, p. 239). We will become lifeless automata, thinking machines or mere mechanism with no autonomy and freedom. In other words, we need the space, the gap or crack, between the noumenal and the phenomenal. Kant’s argument is that we are only free (autonomous agents) insofar as “our horizon is that of the

phenomenal, insofar as the noumenal domain remains inaccessible to us" (Žižek 2004, p. 240). The Kantian Real thus remains the noumenal Thing beyond phenomena, and it is here where Deleuze (following Spinoza and Hegel) proposes an alternative, a more open, dynamic and free 'Real' than the noumenal Real that Kant describes, as well as the closed system of causality of Spinoza's immanence (a One-Whole all totalising Real).

Deleuze follows Hegel's critique of Kant in emphasising the absolute immanence that underlies the experiential appearances of the difference between noumenal and phenomena. Hegel argues that it is in the immanence of our thought that we experience the distinction between the way things appear to us and the way they are in themselves. This inherent-immanent refraction (or contradictory) experience of a Thing is for Hegel what brings us into direct contact with it (instead of denying us access to it, as Kant argues). Hegel hereby asserts the univocity of being and effectively abolishes the tension "between the ordinary phenomenal reality and the transgressive Excess of the Real Thing" (Žižek 2004, p. 243). Deleuze develops this idea further with his 'plane of immanence', and with his insistence on the univocity of being. This plane of immanence implies a 'flat ontology'—in line with Spinoza—in which all heterogeneous entities can be conceived at the same level, without ontological exceptions or priorities. The question is, however, whether this is not a move back to the Spinozan One-Whole totalizing Real. How, in this plane of immanence and univocity of Being, does Deleuze find space for freedom, an escape from the implied deterministic closed network of causality?

Deleuze, following Hegel, leaves the opposition of epistemology and ontology behind and does not see reality as something 'out there' (as something fully constituted and given) that we as subjects should investigate by gradually approaching it (the Kantian noumenal). Rather, we as subjects and the objects are both constituted by each other; both are 'becoming' in this univocity of being. What "seems to *separate* us from the way reality really is out there—is already the innermost constituent of reality itself" (Žižek 2004, p. 244). That we cannot ever fully know reality, is not a sign of the limitation of our knowledge, but "the sign that reality itself is 'incomplete', open, an actualization of the underlying virtual process of Becoming" (Žižek 2004, p. 244). There is thus an openness, a dynamic 'becoming' on this 'plane of immanence', within this univocity of Being. This differentiates Deleuze from Spinoza—but does this allow for freedom, for a non-totalising One-World?

Žižek would respond that it at least allows more freedom than Kant's noumenal 'Real' as the full and exhaustive ontological domain. Significantly, Hegel did not fill the gaps in the Kantian system (closed it in that sense), but shifted the perspective from the Kantian impossibility of 'knowing everything' to 'absolute knowing', as the "path towards Truth is already Truth itself" (Žižek 2004, p. 245). This is crucial for the notion of freedom, because of the short circuit between epistemology and ontology. With a strict epistemology we reduce our process of knowledge to a process external to the thing itself (and an endless approximation of the thing). Reality is then conceived of as a completed, inaccessible ontological domain. Because we do not have access to this completed noumenal Real, we will never know if we really have freedom (on the noumenal level). Kant accepts that we are free on the noumenal level in that space between the noumenal and phenomenal—but because the phenomenal is always only as it appears to us, it is still possible that we may not be free and that we may indeed be 'puppets' on the noumenal level (in 'reality'), without knowing it. This inconsistency of Kant is overcome by Hegel and Deleuze, who "transpose the incompleteness and openness . . . *into the thing itself*" (Žižek 2004, p. 245). The Thing is not closed—to fill the Kantian gap will be too Spinozan—but incomplete in itself. Being itself is incomplete. The Kantian gap is not the problem but the solution. Žižek maintains that this is what Hegel's motto means: "one should conceive the Absolute not only as Substance, but also as Subject", where *subject* refers to "the name for a crack in the edifice of Being" (Žižek 2004, p. 242).²¹

²¹ To conceive the Absolute as Subject means that the split that is found within the subject—as an inner-worldly entity (the empirical person, the object) and the transcendental subject (the constitutive agent of the world itself)—is also found

While Hegel and Deleuze are both philosophers of immanence, Hegel emphasises the ‘crack’ in Being (with his notion of Subject), while Deleuze emphasises the ‘Substance’, the univocity of Being. Žižek describes the difference between them as culminating in Deleuze’s emphasis of the continuous *flux* of pure becoming as absolute immanence; whereas for Hegel there is an “irreducible *rupture* of/in immanence” (Žižek 2004, p. 245). This difference between ‘flux’ and ‘rupture’ (gap) is significant for Žižek, who sides with Hegel in terms of insisting on this ‘gap or crack’ in immanence. This gap is, however, not a gap to transcendence. The gap in immanence is for Hegel something that is present in the phenomena themselves. It is an *immanent* gap and transcendence is only the “illusory reflection of the fact that the immanence of phenomena is ruptured, broken, inconsistent” (Žižek 2004, p. 245). It is a gap in immanence not in the sense that some ‘outside’ transcendence (a superior transcendent; final truth; ultimate Being) can shine through, but a crack in immanence *as immanence*. Žižek explains that the gap in immanence is not that “phenomena are broken” or that “the transcendent Thing eludes our grasp”, but rather that “the spectre of this Thing is the ‘reified’ *effect* of the inconsistencies of the phenomena” (Žižek 2004, p. 245). Transcendence is not on the other side of the gap, but in immanence, in the ‘inconsistent’ phenomena. The experience of the gap in immanence is not a pointing to a transcendent Beyond—such an understanding is just a “fetishized misperception-effect of the gap in immanence” (Žižek 2004, p. 246)—but to immanence, the gap is within phenomena itself.

While Deleuze emphasises the continuous flux of becoming in radical immanence, Žižek emphasises Hegel’s gap in immanence because it allows for a greater understanding of the Real and consequently for possible freedom. To explain: For Deleuze the continuous flux of pure becoming involves a ‘flat ontology’, it takes place on the ‘plane of immanence’, on the ‘plane of consistency’. With this absolute immanence, there is a univocity of being. It is, however, dynamic and everything is ‘becoming’—an openness which aims to avoid the deterministic, all-totalising, Spinozan One-Whole Real. Žižek argues that this dynamic Real of Deleuze is still restrictive and reductive because it is exclusive. Deleuze’s plane of immanence implies consistency between all entities without ontological exceptions and priorities. Žižek counters this with the Lacanian Real, which “is precisely that which resist inclusion within the plane of consistency, the absent Cause of heterogeneity of the assemblage” (Žižek 2004, p. 242). If something is excluded from this plane of consistency, it becomes all totalising. This is the problem with Deleuze’s ‘flux’ in contrast to Hegel’s ‘rupture’: Deleuze ‘limits’ the Real with his insistence of ‘consistency’, whereas Hegel broadens the Real (and by implication freedom) with his acceptance of the irreducible *rupture* of/in immanence which is in phenomena themselves and which amounts to an *inconsistency* within phenomena. By accepting this inconsistency within phenomena and the inconsistency within immanence itself, a gap or crack is allowed (albeit immanent) which disturbs the ‘plane of consistency’, the ‘flat ontology’. In this way the all totalising Real is ‘ruptured’, becomes more inclusive for the transcendental dimension, and allows for the ‘transcendent Beyond’ (as immanence) to ‘shine through’. In other words, it allows for the Truth, the Symbolic,²² the Sublime, the Beyond—that imperceptible something in the immanent *as* the immanent—to show itself, to ‘shine through’. There is not only a flux in immanence, but a gap, because of the inconsistencies of phenomena. This more radical openness of and within immanence is important for freedom, because it moves away from an all totalising One-Whole Real. It always allows for more. Truth, for example, is not a big

within the Absolute. The ‘crack’ is in Being itself. Žižek says the ‘split of the subject’ (in the modern philosophy of subjectivity) and the pre-Kantian metaphysical problem or ‘split of humankind’ (between the particular/sensual/animal and the universal/rational/divine) are something that should be insisted on, because this is what is missing from Spinoza’s Substance. The split of the Subject acknowledges that there is more in the Real (the Absolute), more than Substance, and more to humankind than the animal/sensual. This ‘more’ is, however, not outside immanence, outside the empirical/temporal/finite, because the split (Kantian transcendental) is “the trans-phenomenal *as it appears within the finite horizon of temporality*” (Žižek 2004, p. 241). The split is within the noumenal itself, within the real, within immanence, within Being. It is a transcendental dimension that Hegel accepts, but which Deleuze (like Spinoza) does not, thereby moving back to a totalising One-Whole (deterministic) Real.

²² This is an important point for Žižek because of the fundamental thesis of Lacan: “the Real is not simply external to the Symbolic, but, rather, the Symbolic itself deprived of its externality, of its founding exception” (Žižek 2004, p. 243).

metaphysical truth, posited as the inaccessible Beyond, and neither is it in the ‘slip of the tongue’ (in a flat ontology), but ‘truth itself speaks’.²³ To have such a notion of truth, the transcendental dimension (or gap in immanence) needs to be maintained. The same applies for what humankind is. What makes us different than animals is not that we are divine; but neither are we just animals. There is something more; there is an “imperceptible X” that differentiates us, a minimal difference. This minimal difference separates Deleuze’s immanence (as a flat ontology) from Hegel and Žižek’s gap in immanence (as still being immanent). The importance of this minimal difference (gap in immanence)²⁴ is that it avoids a completed full totalising Real (plane of consistency), which can be interpreted as the deterministic Spinozan One-Whole Real.

5. Žižek’s Gap in Immanence, Liberation Theology and African Thought

The notion of transcendence in Liberation theology is in many ways attuned to Žižek’s gap in immanence. A first resemblance is the emphasis on the incarnated nature of God in the world. Žižek argues that in Christianity the ‘God of the Beyond’ is left beyond and that a radical desublimation takes place, “in the sense of the descendance of the sublime Beyond to the everyday level” (Žižek 2001b, p. 90). While this is perhaps not the case in all the different Christian theologies, it is one of the accents of Liberation theology. McCann, for example, speaks of the “transformed Christian vision of religious transcendence” (McCann 1981, pp. 199–200) of Liberation Theology; and Mayra argues that God is not seen as remote or distanced, but ‘within human touch’. With Liberation theology’s emphasis on social justice and on the emancipation of the poor and oppressed, it focuses less on the ‘beliefs and truths’ of Christianity and the transcendence superiority of God, but more on social action. The ‘Thing Beyond’ and the ‘tragic desire’ for it are thus, in Žižek’s terms, left behind, and the transition has taken place to the drive towards the object. In Liberation theology, however, this object is not closed because, for example, God’s voice is still sought, but now through the voices of the poor that should be heard. In Žižek’s terms it means that the gap in immanence is maintained, the ‘excess’, the ‘symbolic’, the ‘voice of God’ is found within the immanent—the voices of the poor. God’s voice, though, is not heard as a final truth from Beyond, but within this reality, within immanence.

If Liberation theology gave up completely on the transcendence of God as a superior ‘outside’ being—transcendence in the metaphysical sense—it does not mean that there is only radical immanence left. It does not necessarily imply a move to the One-Whole deterministic Real of Spinoza, or the flat ontology with continuous flux of Deleuze’s immanence. In its quest for freedom, Liberation theology can find in Žižek’s ‘gap of immanence’ a space to keep on insisting on the ‘more’, the excess, the ‘imperceptible something’, the ‘minimal difference’ between Christ-man and man. The insistence is needed in order not to close off this world as pure consistency, as a flat ontology. If God is not described as the God of the Beyond in the transcendent sense in Liberation theology, all is not necessarily lost. God—as the gap in immanence—is the “coincidence, identity even, between the sublime and the everyday object” (Žižek 2001b, p. 92) and the “unique case of full humanity” (Žižek 2001b, p. 91). Such an immanent understanding of God (in Žižek’s sense) allows for a move away from the radical transcendence of God—which Liberation theology by nature tends to do—but it is also not a move to an absolute immanence where freedom—that which Liberation theology prioritises—is put at risk.

The univocity of being which is emphasised in African thought (highlighted in ATR) has strong similarities with Deleuze’s plane of immanence. For both, life is Being itself, a power that runs through every being. Deleuze will say we have a flat ontology with no division into categories—“a human

²³ Žižek follows Lacan by saying truth can only be half-spoken, and that “the inconsistencies and slip of my speech directly connect to the inconsistencies and the non-all of the Truth itself” (Žižek 2004, p. 247).

²⁴ Žižek describes this gap in immanence also as the Symbolic gap. Myers says that in Žižek’s work, the “Symbolic and the Real are intimately bound up with each other. The Symbolic works upon the Real; it introduces a cut into it, as Lacan claims, carving it up in a myriad different ways. Indeed, one of the ways in which you can recognize the Real is by noting when something is indifferent to Symbolization” (Myers 2003, p. 24).

being's life is literally equal to a life of a rock" (Pearson 2001, p. 141), and it is Being "who thinks through us; Being has absorbed us as it were: our life has become a Life, an expression of Being" (Justaert 2012, p. 97). ATR will in similar vein say that the Supreme Being is transcendental only in this world, as the highest "degree of mystical power . . . the mysterious power or vital force" (Rakotsoane 2010, p. 9). The life force is always part of this world. It is an impersonal life force which creates life and unity. There is no differentiation between the sacred and the profane and "all of nature is invested with a mystical, religious quality" (Thorpe 1991, p. 28).

Whereas Deleuze emphasises the flux of continuous becoming on the plane of immanence, in ATR there is a stronger affinity to Spinoza's immanence of One-Whole Real. This difference inhibits the possibility of human freedom in African thought. Africans have a monistic view of reality, which means that "what is out there is a closed system of cause and effect" (Rakotsoane 2010, p. 3). Even chance is ruled out, because "everything that happens is understood to have a specific cause in the system" (Rakotsoane 2010, p. 3). Reality as a closed system of cause and effect is—as indicated with Spinoza—a restriction to autonomous human freedom, because it is all totalising and deterministic. All that is left in such a world is to find your place in this system of causality, or as Du Toit points out, "[f]or Africans the aim of life is to experience and enhance life force and become part of it" (Du Toit 2009, p. 109). Turaki adds that "[t]he pursuit of cosmic harmony is an ethical principle in traditional Africa" (Turaki 1999, p. 122). With no real transcendence in a metaphysical sense, Žižek's notion of the gap in transcendence may create space in such a closed world of causality for freedom, though. There are some pointers to this Žižekian 'gap in immanence' in ATR, for example the references to the mysterious dimension in reality, the spiritual, and even the transcendent nature of the Supreme Being. The problem is that the univocity of Being seems to be getting such strong priority that the gap in immanence is lost.

6. Conclusions

In this article, the concept *transcendence* was used as a departure point for a dialogue between the three traditions of Critical theory, African thought and Liberation theology. The aim was not to offer a detailed discussion of the notion of transcendence in all these traditions, but rather to see how transcendence in African thought (ATR) and in Liberation theology can be understood from Žižek's critique on Deleuze's absolute immanence and from his own concept of the 'gap in immanence'. It was pointed out that the aim was not to achieve a re-establishment of transcendence, and some dangers and problems associated with transcendence were indicated. Neither was the aim to uncritically move to a notion of radical immanence. Deleuze's radical transcendence was discussed in order to indicate some problems with this position.

Although Žižek's gap in immanence is not a return to transcendence—since it remains an immanent gap—it was discussed in more detail to elucidate the relation between freedom, transcendence and immanence. Žižek follows Hegel in maintaining a gap in immanence; whereas Spinoza and Deleuze opt for a univocity of Being and a flat ontology. The Spinozan position is problematic for autonomous human freedom, though, because it understands reality as a closed network of cause and effect. In such a world, human actions are only part of bigger forces of causality; and the deterministic all-totalising character of this Spinozan One-Whole Real is threatening human freedom. African thought (specifically ATR) has many similarities with Spinoza's univocity of being and tends to move toward the same deterministic outcome. Hegel's insistence on the 'inconsistencies of phenomena' allows Žižek to understand immanence not as a flat ontology, but as one with a gap or crack. This remains a gap in *immanence*, but it allows for a disruption of the flat ontology. In other words, everything is not simply reduced to causality—'something imperceptible', a transcendental dimension, is allowed for within immanence. This gap in immanence is needed to allow for more human freedom. The concept of immanence in Liberation theology has similarities with Žižek's gap in the immanence. These similarities actualise the concept of freedom in Liberation theology: not to move back to complete immanence (a move into a relentless eternal deterministic process of liberation),

but neither to move to radical transcendence (with its tragic desire for the Thing in an inaccessible Beyond), with no connection to the emancipation of the poor and oppressed.

Although Žižek is a postmetaphysical thinker (or perhaps because of this) his concept of the ‘gap in immanence’ served well as an entry point for the dialogue with traditions that include apparent notions of transcendence. This entry point gave more insight into these traditions, and into the conditions that are necessary to advance freedom in these traditions. The concept of transcendence is therefore of the utmost importance in the continuation of this dialogue.

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