

# Philosophy and Courage

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“Philosophy without courage is  
complaint or ... criticism.”

(A. Badiou)<sup>1</sup>

## *I. Courage Today*

Is there any internal reason why a philosopher should talk about courage? Is there any (and if so, what kind of) relation between philosophy and courage? To begin with, it may seem that there is no internal need for philosophy to address or to refer to the affect or concept—whichever it may be—of courage. This is more than just a rhetorical question of which the answer is clear in advance so that raising it would be part of an academic exercise. But these days academic philosophy seems precisely to be very little occupied with the category, affect, concept of courage. Starting off from the contemporary situation of philosophy one could easily assume that philosophy always thinks in cold blood. Does this mean that even if there are philosophers who talk about courage, they talk about it coldly so that no courage is needed to think courage? Very few thinkers today refer to the category of courage, but there are of course exceptions. So, one may start from these exceptions to address the question raised above: What is the link—if there is any—between courage and philosophy? One can

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<sup>1</sup> Badiou (2007–08). He has also once remarked: “For my part, I often have the idea that each philosophy is determined by the definition it gives of courage.” (Badiou 1993–94)

then begin by attempting to answer this question in two ways: either historically or by taking into account the fact that courage never seems to appear alone. It always implies at least one other term and one can immediately see that one of the terms is and must be anxiety (or in a more pedestrian manner that is familiar even to the average Hollywood movie, no courageous act can occur without a bit of fear involved).

In this latter perspective, courage is a supernumerary concept or affect: a concept added to another one, namely anxiety (or fear). Courage in this sense is a way of treating or dealing with anxiety (or fear), a way of working with it or maybe even of putting it to work. But if today philosophers rarely speak about and of courage, this may have to do not only with a general disinterest in courage, but with the fact that one also does not find that many philosophers who talk about anxiety. Since, anxiety has today a very bad reputation. To be anxious, to feel anxiety means to have the feeling that things and the world are not necessarily and immutably the way they are. Anxiety—as the most basic defence mechanism (Freud 1990, pp. 101–38)—makes us aware of a fundamental inconsistency. It indicates the non-necessity of the world as it is, and this is one of the reasons why, as Lacan famously put it, it never deceives (Lacan 2014, pp. 297, 311). Yet the one who feels anxiety also has the insight that there is a fundamental lack of necessity that could explain why the world is how it is. If one feels that there is no such necessity this can generate a profound dislocation, a feeling that all things crumble, a feeling that can be described as one of terror.

Anxiety co-appears with another affect, namely that of terror, resulting from the feeling of being uprooted, displaced, dislocated, and from the “space of placements” (Badiou 2009a, pp. 1–51). The co-appearance of anxiety and terror is the world itself becoming unstable. It may come as no surprise that in a world which seems to be filled by terrorist and nihilistic acts committed by those who are radically excluded from the same world, that is, in a world filled with terror anxiety and its terrorizing effects do have a bad

reputation. Instead, one rather wants to get rid of it, for example by implementing increasing security measures, border controls, police presence, etc. But these security measures seek not to find the root of the terror produced by anxiety, but rather attempt to avoid it and get rid of it altogether. And one way of achieving this is to transpose and translate anxiety into another affect, namely into fear.<sup>2</sup> For, as it is well-known, anxiety and fear are not the same. A trivial, yet fundamental way of distinguishing between the two is to state that fear always comes with an object and is always oriented by and with regard to an object of the world, which is considered to be dangerous or malicious. Fear is always, as Heidegger already elaborated (Heidegger 2008, pp. 184–91), in relation to an object, whereas anxiety does not have an object in this sense of the term. If one feels fear, to use an example from horror movies, at the sight of an uninvited guest with an ice hockey mask and a machete appearing in one's apartment, this is obviously quite understandable and normal. Yet, what one feels in such a moment is fear and not primarily anxiety.

The same structure holds for the contemporary political situation, such as in Europe where some are afraid of the refugees entering their respective countries (regardless of whether the threat is actual), because they are dangerous (and might be terrorists) or damaging (they might ruin the supposed financial stability), etc. There is a specific politics of fear which has become the dominant parameter of the present situation. Such politics<sup>3</sup> seeks to prevent anxiety (all the time). It entails an operation of the recuperation of anxiety (*cf.* Badiou 2014–15) in terms of fear, and this peculiar kind of translation of the one into the other has an effect on the contemporary status of courage too (since courage is always

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<sup>2</sup> Alain Badiou has spoken of a “politics of fear” and to my mind one should see this as result of a specific translation of anxiety (which I will specify subsequently). *Cf.* Badiou 2008, p. 8 and *passim*.

<sup>3</sup> The question whether the term “politics” can be deployed here at all would require a much more extensive discussion.

“accompanied” by anxiety). Through this operation, anxiety as that which for Heidegger does not have an object (in and of the world), is literally objectified, equipped with an object (whatever this object may be). One inscribes an object into it and turns anxiety into fear. This also has an impact on the contemporary status of anxiety, which one would also have to address.

The following remarks will proceed in two steps: First I will return to the concept of courage and present a highly selective panorama of some positions from the history of philosophy, namely that of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas and Hegel. This will enable us to determine the relevance of the concepts of courage and anxiety—and their linkage—for philosophy. In the second step, I will refer to a holy trinity of thinkers, i.e. to Hegel, Lacan and Badiou (or the father, the son and the holy spirit, so to speak), to draw a consequence of these reflections.

## *II. Four Fundamental Concepts of Courage*

In the history of Western philosophy, courage appears to be a crucial concept from the very beginning. Browsing very quickly through some of the most influential historical positions on the issue in question one discovers that philosophers have always and frequently attempted to find and offer a definition of courage. And maybe one could even go as far as to state that the sort of philosophy one gets and defends is determined by the definition of courage one has given.<sup>4</sup> To cite a few prominent examples: in his last published book, *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes states that only a kind of courage that he calls generosity can free us from our indecision and external determination and lead to a proper usage of our own rational capacities, i.e. of thought as such (Descartes 1985, p. 380). Thus, for the founder of modern

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<sup>4</sup> Alain Badiou has once remarked: “For my part, I often have the idea that each philosophy is determined by the definition it gives of courage.” (Badiou 1993–94)

philosophy, courage is needed to overcome heteronomous determinations, as well as wrong conceptions of deliberation and thought, and to start to think properly. After Descartes, Kant famously took the enlightenment project to ultimately revolve around the “courage to use your *own* understanding,”<sup>5</sup> *Sapere aude*, implying that without courage we simply tend not to make use of what makes us rational beings, that is to say: we tend not to act as the ones we are supposed to be.

After Kant, Hegel stated that “the *courage of truth, faith in the power of spirit is the first condition of philosophical study*” (Hegel 1985, p. 404). At another place he remarks that this courage goes along with a constitutive kind of passivity of its own, following a “method” that “tie[s] thought down, lead[s] it to the matter, and maintain[s] it there” (Hegel 1991, p. 5), adding that courage is needed to follow “the inner necessity that is stronger than the subject, by which his spirit is then driven without rest [...] the impulse of reason [...]” (*Ibid.*, p. 22) After Hegel, Kierkegaard supposedly once hailed courage as being “the only measure in life”<sup>6</sup>: Without acts in which we put everything that is dear to us at stake in a leap of faith which then provides us with a measure, we have no sense of life’s value. After Kierkegaard, Heidegger argued for the liberating effects of anxiety and referred to a necessary “*courage for anxiety*” (Heidegger 1962, p. 298) that is needed to overcome our immediate everyday beliefs, i.e., what one could call the spontaneous ideology of everyday life. And finally, after Heidegger, Badiou made courage into the fundamental element of any process and practice in which one becomes a subject proper. No subject ever comes into being without a crucial operation of courage (*cf.* Badiou 2009, pp. 140–76; Badiou 2009b, p. 86 and *passim*).

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<sup>5</sup> Kant 2003, p. 54. If taken as a technical formula, this formulation gains within the framework of Kant’s philosophy a puzzling character. For, how could one not use one’s own understanding?

<sup>6</sup> There is no such claim, to the best of my knowledge, in Kierkegaard, but there is an ongoing rumour that he mentioned this even several times.

What one can conclude from this incomplete list is that, in one way or the other, all these different characterizations of courage are linked to the profound idea of courage as providing orientation in one's life or existence. Courage offers a kind of different orientation, a different vision of the world, enabling one to overcome one's indifference and to make use of one's own thinking; courage makes one capable of giving oneself to a movement (of thought). It provides a new orienting measure and thus has to do with what it means to become a subject, that is: something that is fundamentally oriented and directed towards something. Courage is needed to see things differently and sustain such difference. If courage is another name for what it means to gain orientation, then not knowing what courage is implies not knowing what it means to be oriented, or in short: to be disoriented in one's existence and life. But this panoramic overview of philosophical references was only meant to provide some preliminary orientation. Intricate reflections on courage can be found already at the very origin of philosophy, namely in Plato. I will not be referring to his famous *Republic*, which can be read as an extended dialogue on the need for the function and the very understanding of courage.<sup>7</sup> Instead, I will refer to another less famous dialogue, which has the concept of courage as its guiding thread and main theme, namely his *Laches* (Plato 1997).

### *III. Plato's Example: Singularity*

Plato's dialogue begins with the question of proper education of children. Lysimachus and Nicias, who initiate the conversation, are looking for the right teacher for their children. Early on in this search courage starts to play a major role. For, how does

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<sup>7</sup> In the theatre-play version of his hyper-translation of the *Republic*, Badiou brings this out in all clarity (Badiou 2016, pp. 7–284).

one teach courage? Can courage be taught at all, and if so, by whom? Attempting to answer these questions in the course of the dialogue the following elaboration of courage is offered by General Laches. This is how Badiou describes this scene: “General Laches, questioned by Socrates, replies: ‘Courage is when I see the enemy and run towards him to engage him in a fight.’ Socrates is not particularly satisfied with this, of course, and gently takes the General to task: ‘It’s a good example of courage, but an example is not a definition.’” (Badiou 2008, pp. 71–2)

It is a good example. Running towards one’s enemy and thus affirmatively confronting a dangerous situation demands courage. A coward would certainly shy away from it. Such action proves that its agent is not afraid. It is also a good example, because it shows that courage is not a theoretical concept, but one—to state the obvious—that cannot be thought outside practice. But this is also the reason why Socrates is slightly unhappy with this example; one cannot simply generalize this kind of situation by assuming that courageous acts are always acts of confronting an external enemy. Nor is it the case that courageous acts necessarily imply a voluntary engagement in a life and death struggle with such an enemy. This example thus does not enable one to decipher the meaning of courage as such; it only tells us something about the courage of a soldier in a specific situation, but not of courage in general. General Laches replies, confirming Socrates’ reservation: “I still think I know what courage is, but I can’t understand how it has escaped me just now so that I can’t pin it down in words and say what it is.” (Plato 1997, 194b; p. 679) Nearly at the end of the dialogue, Socrates ultimately concludes that “we have not discovered [...] what courage is.” (*Ibid.*, 200a; p. 685)

So, Plato’s dialogue on courage, the *Laches*, does not offer any solid definition of courage. We end up not knowing what courage is. And maybe courage is nothing that one can know. We do, however, get an example of it—and it is important to note that at the very end of the dialogue the two fathers looking

for a teacher to educate their children decide that it is Socrates who should educate them.<sup>8</sup> So, we do not get a definition, but we ultimately get not one but two examples: General Laches' example of the courageous act and Socrates' exemplary gesture, if one may say so, acknowledging that he and the others do not know what courage is—a confession that seems to qualify him as the best teacher. Courage seems to be linked to exemplarity. On one side, there is an exemplary case of courage involved in the practice of radically raising the question of what courage is (Socrates–philosophy): it seems to take a lot of courage to refuse all definitions and admit that one only knows examples but no definition. On the other side, there is the transparent practical example that General Laches gives. If one limits one's knowledge only to the exemplary elaborations of the *Laches*, that is, to the knowledge of examples, one could assume that due to courage's fundamentally practical nature there can be nothing but examples of courage. A definition of courage may be forever impossible.

If there are only singular cases of courage, only exemplarily courageous actions this obviously does not mean that these examples foreclose all universality. Every example constitutes a universal class for which it stands (*cf.* Chiesa and Ruda 2011, pp. 163–80). Any new example (of courage) adds another grain of singularity to the universal class and thereby reconstitutes it. Although each example presents a singular case and not the universal as such, the emphasis on exemplarity in the *Laches* can be read such that one ends with a peculiar concatenation of singularity or even of singularities—one ends with two examples of courage—and universality. And yet, the dialogue leaves the link between the singularities and universality undetermined, which is another way of stating that it does not offer any definition.

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<sup>8</sup> See the instructive comments on this dialogue in Foucault 2011, pp. 117–76.



#### *IV. Aristotle Knows: Fear and Confidence*

While Socrates repeatedly withheld definitions in this dialogue, Plato's student Aristotle has been called *the* philosopher of definitions. Elias Canetti, for one, once remarked that Aristotle is an all-defining omnivore and has a compartment for whatever thinkable being (Canetti 1978, p. 31). Aristotle did much better defining courage than General Laches and Socrates did. Aristotle, who had been educated by the one who raised the question of what it means to educate someone in a courageous way, comes up with a quite clear and refined definition of courage: in the ninth chapter of his *Nicomachean Ethics* he deals with courage and defines it first of all as a virtue (Aristotle 2004, 1108b; p. 34–5). For Aristotle, every virtue is situated in the midst and middle of two extremes. Virtue is what measures the extreme by balancing it. Aristotle claims that “in fear and confidence, courage is the mean” (*ibid.*, 1170b; p. 32). Courage is situated in between what makes us afraid and our own self-confidence, such that we do not have too much confidence or too much fear. Aristotle then specifies that courage does not have to do with all kinds of things that we fear, but rather is the name for confronting very specific things that we are afraid of. For there are certainly things that one cannot help but fear and it is rational to do so, yet it is not virtuous to confront them: things that make us ashamed in the eyes of others are, for example, things that we certainly fear. Yet it makes no sense to confront them confidently, for committing shameful acts has nothing to do with virtue (shameful acts are themselves an extreme). Such a confident way of dealing with what one fears cannot be called courageous. What are then the things that courage deals with, the things one fears but needs to confront with the right amount of confidence?

Aristotle's first answer is death (*ibid.*, 1114b; p. 49). Aristotle is a Heideggerian. Yet, he adds that not just any kind of death can be the aim of courage: it must be a death that is linked to

honor, which is paradigmatically the case with deaths that occur in military battles. As in the military example of General Laches, war here is the paradigm of the courageous act. Aristotle claims that the courageous are as fearless as a human being needs to be, while also fearing things that exceed human power. This is the most rational way of being afraid. Rationalization was invented by Aristotle. Accordingly, fear is a rational matter of degree. The right measure of fear determines the right amount of courage. Only the “madmen or insensible” (*ibid.*, 1115b; p. 50) fear nothing. And he who fears too much is a coward. The courageous person feels the right amount of fear and confronts it with the right amount of confidence (without being or turning mad or insensible) and thus acts in absolute calm. This is what defines the ethically good, whereas its converse is the ethically bad.

Thus, this is the definition of courage we get from Aristotle: Courage is the combination of experience and knowledge that are virtuously put into practice, thus enabling us to confidently overcome the fears in precisely the right, that is to say: rational way. Whereas in Plato’s *Laches* we are given two exemplary figures of courage (that of the philosopher and that of the soldier), in Aristotle we ultimately only get the soldier. This has to do with the function of confidence that Aristotle associates with courage. Confidence derives from a certain kind of knowledge: We know what we have to fear and how we have to fear it, while at the same time knowing and being conscious of our own capacities. We know what we are confronting and we know what we are capable of doing. This is the basic structure of courage. Courage is a concatenation of subjective and objective knowledge. Knowing what is the case provides us with confidence in the case and thereby also with the basis of courage. This basis is the objective knowledge of a situation (and of a subject within it).

Those who know from their own experience what they can do, what they have to fear, how they have to fear it and are thus confident to the right degree, are deemed courageous. Yet, one

thing is left out in Aristotle. If war is the paradigm for courage, then the paradigmatic figure of courageous acts is the soldier and not the philosopher, who for Aristotle is somewhat of an administrator of all the things that exist, including courage. It is difficult to imagine a courageous administration and bureaucracy. But what about courage in non-militaristic contexts? Plato allowed for the exemplary courage of Socrates, but Aristotle (who is usually seen as a moderate pacifist) turns the military battle into *the* paradigm of courage. But can one not imagine a courageous artist? Aristotle cannot. A courageous lover? Aristotle does not. A courageous philosopher? Aristotle would disagree. A courageous politician? Only if and insofar as he is a military expert. The latter is certainly of crucial importance for Plato as well, who in his *Republic* conceives of the citizens of the community as capable of defending themselves and thus as well-trained experts in defending their very organization. However, for Aristotle, military exercise seems to absorb courage fully. There is yet another problem: Does it not seem also quite plausible that some courageous acts are acts that are performed without any previous knowledge? Could courage—as in Plato—lie not precisely in admitting that one does not know and in nonetheless seeking to deal with a situation? These questions are merely intended to indicate why at one point in history (following Aristotle) the category and concept of courage have become problematic; and they have become problematic not only in the history of philosophy but in history in general. As soon as one starts to give a definitive and stable criterion and definition of courage, and one that even is situated within a military paradigm, it seems one cannot avoid substantializing courage. Courage then becomes the virtue not only of the soldier, but of the male soldier (as all soldiers were male back then). And part and parcel of the critique of courage that occurs at one point is precisely motivated by this identification of courage not only with the actions of the soldier, but also with masculinity (which, at least in principle, differs from Plato's account of courage). The disappearance of

courage from the contemporary philosophical discourses (and from many fields of practice outside of philosophy) thus may have to do with this peculiar kind of substantializing of courage into a militaristic virtue of the male soldier.<sup>9</sup>

### *V. St. Thomas: The Courage to Lose*

A third account of courage can be found in the work of one of the most important Christian interpreters of Aristotle in the Middle Ages, namely Thomas Aquinas. He most explicitly linked courage to a specific understanding of justice. Thus, with Aquinas another element enters the scene after exemplarity and singularity (Plato) and after the concatenation of fear and confidence (Aristotle). For Aquinas courage is also a virtue and one of the most important ones. Taking up a definition of Augustine, namely that to be courageous implies to resist and to attack evil, *sustinendo et aggrediendo* (Augustine 2003, pp. 19, 4), for Aquinas courage constitutively presupposes vulnerability. God can never be courageous because he is not vulnerable. To be courageous means to accept to be hurt.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, for Aquinas courage is courage in the face of death, the ultimate wound. It is the readiness to fall, and any courage that is not ready to risk falling is not courage proper. The paradigm of this definition of courage is therefore the ordeal, the readiness to become a martyr. What Aquinas calls the “joys of courage” is linked to suffering through the pains of the ordeal. But the courageous person does not take the suffering upon herself just for her own sake. By suffering through an ordeal, by dying for one’s faith and belief, one overcomes death and the seeming superiority of evil. And Aquinas goes as far as to say that we only properly win over death and evil, if at the same

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<sup>9</sup> For this see also Badiou 2012, pp. 41–60.

<sup>10</sup> Here and in the following I quote from: Pieper 1959. Translations are mine.

time we seem to lose, namely when we lose our life in fighting it. This is to say, courage's essence does separate the courageous action from the maintenance and subsistence of life's own vitality. As in Aristotle, courage also relies on knowledge, namely the knowledge of what is good. Because courage needs knowledge, courage is not the primary virtue, but wisdom and justice are prior to courage. Without those there is no real courage; courage is not for daredevils.

Only wisdom provides a measure by receiving measure from the real world. It receives its measure from reality toward which it is oriented, while at the same time giving measure to will and action (like in Malabou's concept of plasticity). And to find the right measure for one's actions in relation to the situation in which that very action takes place is precisely the definition of justice. One does justice to oneself and to the circumstances of one's actions, if one finds the right measure. Courage is thus secondary, because courage without justice is a lever of evil. Therefore, to be courageous also does not imply the absence of fear. The courageous person is not indifferent; rather, she sees that the wound that she is ready to take upon herself is an evil, but she is nonetheless ready to face the wound for the sake of a higher good. For, whoever fears God will tremble in front of nothing. While the two principles of courage are both to withstand and to attack, the former is more determinant. One withstands and adheres to the good whatever one may encounter. Aquinas is all about endurance. What is crucial is that Aquinas does not defend a form of courage that is indifferent to one's life. Rather, it is a courage that seeks to avoid losing what is essential in one's life. He formulates this by stating that she who loves her life is ready to lose it. One only has a life, if one is ready to risk it, otherwise one reifies life and has thus already lost it.

From Aquinas' perspective, the lack of courage is therefore a sickness. If one is overly attached to one's own life, this very attachment that leads one into the lack of courage is precisely

what is defined as sickness: a life that is ill, somehow a life that is ill of itself. Against the negative version of a life reifying itself, Aquinas distinguishes three different types of perfecting the virtue of courage. The first one is political and everyday courage (civil courage, as one could say): It takes courage to do good things within a socio-political community. The second one is completely purified from the everyday aspects and creates the very image of the good and of god in oneself by simply withdrawing from action: It takes even more courage not to act and withdraw. The third and most complete kind of perfecting courage is the so-called *fortitudo purgatori animi*, the complete purification of the soul, which acts such that the world here is already the very beginning of eternity. What takes courage is to let go, to let oneself be guided by the one who created it all, that is God—Heidegger will later call this letting it be. For Aquinas, this act of a purifying or letting go entails a kind of heroism, by which the agent becomes part of the holy ghost of courage. It is an act of complete de-securing oneself, an internal negation of any kind of security. But this can only be done against the background of hope—one reason why for Aquinas courage is not primary, but constitutively derivative of faith. For only if one hopes and has faith that there is eternal life, one will be able to sacrifice all security in this one. Through true hope and true faith alone one is able to risk everything one cares for. Aquinas thus gives us a Christian reformulation of Aristotle, which seeks to democratize and demilitarize courage. Everyone can be courageous, if only one commences to live truly—in faith—and to be constantly ready to sacrifice one's life in the name of this very life.

## VI. Hegel: *Courage for Truth*

The fourth figure I will consider in this overview is Hegel. Hegel was often attacked for being a militaristic defender of courage; a symptom of this was, *inter alia*, seen in his logical deduction of

the necessity of war.<sup>11</sup> And he indeed argued from his early work onwards that war can teach us something, namely that the state of the world is not a given and hence not immutably how it is. It is precisely in times of war that we comprehend—through facing a certain anxiety of full-blown collapse of the world—that things are how they are because we accept them, yet also that they can be different.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, he also argued that within a functioning socio-political community there need to be people whose primary occupation is to protect this very community, the military. A peculiar profession as they must protect the status quo but they need to have “courage, the negative side of infinity” (Hegel 1975, p. 450), that is to say: they are constantly facing the “absolute insecurity of all enjoyment, possession, and law” (*ibid.*, p. 458), which turns them into an institution, a class or estate that peculiarly embodies the fact that things could be fundamentally different, so much so that they would not be in the picture any longer. But it is important for Hegel that, in modern societies, these people voluntarily choose their profession—even though in times of war everyone might be called to the weapons. Hegel is thus not a militarist. There is even a certain institutional need for military courage, but this does not exhaust the relevance of courage at all.

Hegel also speaks of courage in a fundamentally different manner; and here one may recognize a certain repetition of Plato’s position, namely of “the will and courage for the truth”

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<sup>11</sup> For a different reading—emphasizing the overcoming of the ossifications and indifferences of freedom—see Žižek 2012, pp. 417–54.

<sup>12</sup> The early Hegel argues that there is an emancipatory dimension in the “ability to die” (the ability to commit suicide), namely in the insight that no one is just a member of a socio-political commonwealth; rather, if one is a member of it, one decided—even if not consciously—to be and remain its member. Nothing, not even what seems most natural to us (our embeddedness in a family or community or state) is just a given, but it relies on an act of freedom. In this sense, “the ability to die” (*Fähigkeit des Todes*) is not at all different from one crucial aspect of freedom properly understood—and it takes courage to uphold this aspect (*cf.* Hegel 1975, p. 448).

(Hegel 1991, p. 5) that are constitutive of any thinking proper. And in the very beginning (even before its proper beginning, to be precise) one finds a similar claim in his *Science of Logic*. There is an implicit and hidden, yet constitutive and crucial reference to courage before the book even begins properly; and just to remind the reader: this is the book that claims no less than to depict from the immanence of thought what happens in the creation of the world and with the advent of (the conditions of) history.<sup>13</sup> Before beginning with his actual exposition, Hegel states that something extraordinary had happened: Kant. Kant has founded philosophy (anew or, depending on the reading, for the very first time<sup>14</sup>) because he demonstrated that philosophy is and can only be, if it overcomes all kinds of dogmatisms and unjustifiable beliefs, while being at the same time able to stand firm against the dangers of scepticism and indifferentism. Philosophy has to do with reason alone. For Hegel, this is a new and fundamental idea. Yet Kant has failed to derive a proper philosophy from it. Hegel therefore gives a surprising depiction of Kant's achievement. In his introduction to the *Science of Logic*, he states that "critical philosophy did indeed already turn *metaphysics* into *logic* but, like subsequent idealism, it gave to the logical determinations an essentially subjective significance out of fear of the object [*Angst vor dem Objekt*]" (Hegel 2010, p. 30). Usually this claim is read as proof of Hegel attacking Kant's subjectivism. Yet one rarely considers the reason why, for Hegel, Kantian philosophy regresses to such a subjective standpoint, namely, out of anxiety: Kant was anxious in face of the object of thought.

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<sup>13</sup> Hegel famously states that the Logic is "*the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature and of a finite spirit*" (Hegel 2010, p. 29), which also implies that the end must also give an account of the creation of nature and of finite spirit and that at its end this creation will reach an end.

<sup>14</sup> Eckart Förster claims that Kant—in his own understanding—was the first to ever properly do philosophy, while twenty-five years later Hegel declared to have ended it (*cf.* Förster 2012).



What happened with Kant was a true novelty, because Kant was the first to introduce anxiety into philosophy (thereby demonstrating that the safe distance of philosophy to its object cannot be upheld); Kant was the first to feel anxious with regard to philosophy's proper object, namely truth. My rendering of Hegel's formula (Kant was anxious in face of the object of thought) is in this sense an accolade; Hegel credits Kant for being the first anxious philosopher. Yet Kant was not courageous. He did not have what it takes to be a thinker of the enlightenment. This is the reason why in some sense one might claim that for Hegel there is not much to revisit in Kant apart from this very introduction of anxiety and the peculiar object it comes with. One may forget Kant, but one should never forget what he has done for and to philosophy in terms of anxiety. This is to say that after Kant one must have the courage to think what Kant discovered but shied away from. The first step is to conceptually re-introduce anxiety, not only into philosophy (where it is also certainly needed), but into thought in general. This re-introduction will allow us to distinguish between two different types of objects, to introduce a split between the objective realm and the realm of objectivity. But this is only the first step. One is also in need of courage to think the object which differs from all other objects.

### *VII. Lacan / Badiou: Un-Anxiety*

To end, and to begin with the task mentioned above, one should raise the following question: If Kant's anxiety is the signal or the mark of Kant's greatness, what was his anxiety all about? What was he afraid of? The obvious answer is truth, or, to move in a slightly different direction, freedom (even though this answer makes the setting even more paradoxical by suggesting that one of the most important philosophers of freedom was anxious vis-à-vis freedom; yet again, this was precisely his greatness). But

truth is not an object in the same sense that a tree or a phone is an object. This means, as indicated, that there are at least two kinds of objects, and Hegel claims that philosophy's business is with the object that is not an object in the common sense of the term. It is not an object of the world, something that one can see or touch (although one sees something of it and one feels touched by it). Lacan revises Heidegger's claim that fear does have an object in the world, while anxiety does not have an object in the world. In contrast to Heidegger, Lacan stated that anxiety does not have an object, but that it is at the same time not without object (Lacan 2014, pp. 69–70). In French this formula reads: *n'est pas sans objet*. In its French version, the formula indicates that even though anxiety is not without an (*pas sans*) object, the object of anxiety must be specified as a passing (*pas-sans*) object. It is something which passes, something that indicates a passing, in short: something that happens or an event.<sup>15</sup>

For Hegel, Kant was in this sense unable to think the passing, the passage, the pass of an event, as he only arrived at indicating that this is the proper object of thought. But to think it one needs courage. In this sense, anxiety is always an occasion for courage. Anxiety indicates that something can come to pass, that one can change the world; it indicates the fundamental non-necessity of the world as it is, and it is courage which introduces this very change. But Hegel (and one could suspect, as many did, that at this point things go wrong or become reactionary again) also indicates that one must be courageous to do philosophy. Why? Because philosophy basically thinks the constitution of the world, and thus that the world has been (and thus can be again) constituted. But what kind of courage does one need to effectively inscribe the impossible possibility of change into the world? Hegel answers that one has to do one simple thing which is at the same time the

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<sup>15</sup>This is why—contra Aristotle—knowledge as such does not help. Hegel's account of courage exceeds deducing courage from knowledge of the objective (subjective-objective) situation.

most difficult one: One has to “set aside every reflection, [and] simply [...] take up, *what is there before us*” (Hegel 2010, p. 47). The German term for “taking up” is *aufnehmen*, not *aufheben*. And what is there before us? Hegel again: “There is only present the resolve, which can also be viewed as arbitrary, of considering *thinking as such*.” (*Ibid.*, p. 48)

Hegel emphasizes in these lines that one cannot simply and voluntarily decide to change the world. Rather, this has always already been decided, and his *Science of Logic* will describe what happens in *the immanence of (the creation of) truth*.<sup>16</sup> One does not decide to transform the world because one thinks this is a nice and convincing idea. One transforms the world when there is something that passes, when one is not without an object and when one’s object is a passing object; when there is a decision to investigate the consequences of such a passing and such a decision. Love is a cheesy but good example; and it is no accident that Lacan’s seminar on anxiety includes a whole session on love (Lacan 2014, pp. 170–81). Nobody decides to fall in love. It is decided for us in us, and then we can see what follows from such a decision. It takes courage to make a decision that one did not make consciously or voluntarily as an orientation in one’s life. But this seems to be not only a possible definition of courage, but also a possible definition of freedom (that exceeds all the closet liberalism).

At some point, Lacan has also defined the goal of psychoanalytic cure as an elevation of an incapacity to a point of impossibility, and Alain Badiou’s thinking of the event has been constitutively informed by this formula, notably because an event occurs when the impossible *qua* impossible happens. It seems to me that there is a lot of labour to be done to unfold what it means to be courageous today, what a courage of the impossible, an impossible courage might look like. It certainly cannot be a virtue

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<sup>16</sup> The reader will perhaps know that this is the title of the third and final volume of Badiou’s “Being and Event”-series.

and it certainly cannot be (mainly) militaristic. A valid starting point seems to be to ask what it means to take up the decisions that are before us (when they are before us); decisions we did not make but which nonetheless abruptly appear before our eyes, yet remain invisible. Being confronted with such decisions cannot but produce anxiety. However, it seems to me that what is first and foremost needed today is the courage to find that which makes us anxious. Because then, and only then, one can experiment with what may be the means of becoming un-anxious or to de-angstify again. To become un-anxious is not simply to overcome anxiety; rather it is an attempt to translate a term that Lacan introduced into the French language: *se désangoisser*. To become un-anxious implies starting by finding that which produces anxiety and then working with it. What exactly this could mean is a complicated story; to start with anxiety to then become un-anxious and to repeatedly re-introduce “bits” of anxiety to keep on going and to avoid any objective recuperation of courage. Courage in this sense is not a virtue, but a way of working with, putting to work, working through anxiety. Therefore, courage cannot have an object in the world, but at the same time is not without an object. This might be a starting point for a contemporary conception of courage, but this remains to be seen.

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