

Hegel and the Opaque Core of History

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Even Hegel's thought, so well aware of the impasses of Kant's philosophy, its dualisms and bad infinities, is not immune to culminating in a "transcendental dialectic" of its own. In his conception of history we get to know Hegel at his best and at his worst: he not only exploits the dynamics of history as the ultimate force to first unsettle and then re-idealize the determinacy of concepts, but also apotheosizes world-history into a manifestation of God's providence, which places him close to the already surpassed substantialist metaphysics. Hegel's entire philosophical enterprise is caught in a time-loop in which the ending is both presupposed and accomplished at the beginning, while the beginning must first be taken up and ventured so that the ending will have been produced at all. This Goethean ambiguity, mirroring the artful structure of *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, made the temporality of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* remarkably fruitful and effective, but then experienced a certain "reification" in Hegel's later writings, for instance in the ill-famed "Preface" to the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, where the whole world is already considered to have been brought to its final, completed state. In this same short text, Hegel uses the metaphor of the owl of Minerva beginning its flight with the onset of dusk, and quotes Aesop's dictum *Hic Rhodus, hic saltus*, or his own version, "Here is the Rose, dance here," (Hegel 1991, p. 22) which might be interpreted as an appeal to immediate action; Marx later quoted these words precisely as a sort of revolutionary cry. It seems that no matter how dull and

dimmed the colors are with which the ageing Hegel paints, the very essence of the Hegelian concept, its truth-form, sneakily continues to require the world to be ever new. And this, if anything, is a case of “transcendental dialectics.”

It seems to be a trademark of every great philosophy to construct its own ultimate range of legitimation, its “final scene” or “last horizon,” toward which the entire argumentative impetus gravitates. It is there that the system of thought manifests itself at the pinnacle of its productivity and originality, and it is there that the danger of falling into ideological dogmatism is the greatest. In Plato, a solid ground can only be achieved by returning to the direct, noetic experience of ideas. In Spinoza, the unshakable telos is the intellectual love of God, in Fichte, the practical appropriation of the world, and in Nietzsche, the birth of the overman. In Hegel, perhaps the most absolute playground of truth bears the mask of history, *Weltgeschichte*, and hence of the world-spirit being gradually externalized in the great succession of kingdoms proceeding from south to north, from east to west. In the *Encyclopedia*, for instance, the concept of “world-history” represents a transition from the objective to the absolute spirit: the real, contingent history is the very process through which the absolute spirit achieves knowledge of itself. Here, the utmost empiricity coincides with the establishment of universality: “The determinate spirit of a people [...] has on this natural side the moment of geographical and climatic determinacy; [...] it has a *history* within itself. [...] the spirit passes over into *universal world-history*, the events of which display the dialectic of the particular national spirits, the judgement of the world” (Hegel 2007, p. 246 [§548]). By including world-history in all particularity into his speculative system as its integral, immanent part, Hegel was indeed capable of putting the abstract theoretical, practical, and social concepts to the test of some purely accidental, unpredictable, and even immoral force. On the other hand, he epitomized history as a secretly purposeful and directed divine plan, an organic development from a nucleus which already contains the

whole (see, for instance, Hegel 2001, p. 31). Accordingly, there are two usages of the concept of “history” in Hegel: the disruptive and the conciliatory, the anti-metaphysical and the metaphysical. Today, the only notion of history that can still hope to be salvaged is that of a contingent and open process rather than a teleological totality. Nevertheless, there seem to be two ways to rehabilitate Hegelian history. One is to envisage it as a neutral vehicle of society gaining its rational self-consciousness. The currently still popular readings of Hegel, those of mostly Anglophone, American philosophers (such as Brandom, Pinkard, even Pippin), who understand Hegel’s social thought in terms of discursive practices and mutual recognition between rational agents, seem to regard history as a somewhat unspecified lever of making the social realm entirely self-transparent. In opposition to this, this paper argues that the inclusion of a historical dimension in the system of thought performs a definite *logical* function, for it reveals the most productive impulse within its speculative edifice, which is what we call *the opaque core of sociality*.

1. Hegel’s Social Opacity

It has become a sort of common knowledge and a matter of tacit consent, especially in Anglophone studies on German idealism, that Hegel liberated us from the conceptual naivety of Hobbesian and utilitarian atomist social theories, fully elaborated the originally Fichtean intuition of the “transcendental dimension of inter-subjectivity,” and shifted the center of gravity of self-consciousness from a solitary self-reflecting individual to the fabric of collectively established and maintained norms. Hegel is credited with having brought the modern subject from the intimate, spiritual seclusion of Descartes or the twilight of Kant’s paralogisms to the intelligible and accountable openness of the public space. Since it is acknowledged that “[t]he theoretical is essentially contained within the practical” (Hegel 1991, p. 36 [§4]), and that

Hegel “thought that [...] practical reasoning always involved a responsiveness to social norms” (Pippin 2008, p. 150), it is this “sociality of reason,” as the subtitle of Pinkard’s book *Hegel’s Phenomenology* goes, in which the world reaches its fullest, most accomplished, most authentic transparency to itself. “As taking position in social space, self-consciousness consists in knowing oneself in terms of knowing where one, as an individual, stands in that space, as a set of potentially universal norms” (Pinkard 2012, p. 69). However, by hinging everything on the process of societies gaining rational self-awareness, history is arguably reduced to a very weak, external role; it poses as a mere passive reservoir, in which the sphere of inter-subjectively established institutional facts is gradually rising to its most manifest surface. Even when the negative, destructive force of history is half-heartedly conceded, it is only after being comprised and disarmed within a universal normative frame. According to Pippin, Hegel “focuses our attention on the experience of normative insufficiency, on a breakdown in a form of life (a situation wherein we cannot make them any longer our own), and thereby, through such a *via negativa*, tries to provide a general theory of re-constituted positive normative authority out of such breakdowns” (Pippin 2008, p. 91). This identification with the process of instituting norms collectively “over time” takes the edge off history considerably. Underhandedly and metaphorically, it perhaps even gives the impression that history is a mere regulative, asymptotic principle with some similarity to Habermas’s “ideal speech situation.” While it can never be infamously “ended,” it nevertheless unfolds within the space of a mere approximation to something ideal. “Hegel’s formulation of this final self-consciousness expressly denies any sort of systematic closure or static finality,” (Pippin 1997, p. 169) Pippin states and then quotes Hegel: “The *identity* of the Idea with itself is one with the *process*” (Hegel 2010, p. 674). This, in a way, seems like a case of having your cake and eating it too; it sounds as if one had smuggled Kant’s idea of perpetual peace into Hegel’s history of warring realms.

In sum, the Americans successfully incorporated the practical dimension in the theoretical and then thoroughly underpinned the practical with the social, but they perhaps failed at integrating history in the social sphere, leaving it outside as a subsidiary supply of contingencies, which may stimulate but not too immanently determine the growing rationality of social norms. By contrast, it may be more in the spirit of Hegel to “inoculate” the social realm with history as its most immanent pivot since, as cited above, the spirit of a people “has a *history* within itself.” In opposition to Hegelian “recognitionists” and “normativists,” we will argue, first, that history is not a monotonously temporal medium of the world becoming rational; rather, its function is to provide the negative, destructive force, the right to intervene in the workings of a particular society and dissolve all its institutions so as to spread out the opaque core of sociality. Second, we will maintain that the said “sociality” is not an illuminated stage of the world’s ultimate transparency to itself but the site of its greatest opacity. Only the unfolding of the “opaque core” serves as a condition for the categories of the social sphere (such as the legal notions of property, contract, and punishment, the moral notions of good and evil, and the social notions of family, civil society, and the state) to lay claim to forming a system of inner logical consistency. Third, and most importantly, we will contend that the scope and aspiration of Hegel’s social philosophy is not normative but logical. It does not offer a prescriptive, inevitably moralized account of what societies should become like by way of mutual recognition between individuals; instead, the practical, social, and historical dimensions are used as momenta to unsettle the traditional anchors of all conceptuality and, finally, to produce a *necessitarianism of the essentially theoretical idealization*. It is thus not Hegel’s logic that might help us expound a viable social theory; it is rather his account of society and history that serves as a means to realize why we are ultimately condemned to the pure thoughts of logic.

2. Kant's Invention of the Subject's Opacity

What is meant by the “opaque core of sociality”?

To answer that, let us return to the philosopher who first designed the space of fundamental opacity within the subject. Kant's theoretical subject is an entity not aware of itself directly but only indirectly by means of its own particular experience. The “transcendental subjectivity” was conceived first and foremost in opposition to the pure, immediate self-evidence of the Cartesian *ego*. The notorious Kantian *de-centerment* of the I, “[t]he *I think* must *be able* to accompany all my representations,” (Kant 1998, p. 246 [B 131]) fulfills a very specific function: the move away from the self-transparency of the I unfolds a *space of opacity*, in which the categorization, classification, and, to an extent, logification of the concepts of understanding can be performed. Kant not only transferred the root of theoretical concepts, such as substance, causality, qualities, quantities, and relations, from the outside world of empiricism to the spontaneous subject of German idealism. He also added to this operation another twist, which is just as crucial: the concepts that once referred to ontological entities in the given world now only have meaning by way of forming a total and exhaustive system of concepts, that is, by constituting the famous table of twelve categories. This shift from presumed reference to differential logification is what we call *idealization*, a well-defined operation abiding by certain logical conditions and harboring a specific relation to reality. Only by means of submitting the once empirically trackable concepts to idealization will Kant finally prove to be not an antirealist, as is commonly believed, but a realist who laid down the basic philosophical principles of modern physics, hence, its propedeutics, and outlined the conceptual coordinates of Newtonian space. Let us, then, turn to this operation of idealization.

In the pre-Kantian world, the order of ideas and the order of things were under great pressure to interpenetrate, parallelize,

and coincide. The ideal concepts were only as good as it was possible for them to be incarnated in immediate reality. In a certain mental proximity to pre-modern physics, where every created thing possessed a “substance,” whose inner force was then imposed on other things, early-modern philosophy still, in one way or another, advocated a “metaphysics of substances.” “Cause” and “effect,” for instance, could still make their presence felt as locally embodied ontological entities; they either materialized through Malebranche’s *concursus Dei* in place of human occasional causes, or were exemplified in Spinoza’s parallel correspondences between the ideal and the real order, or were at least enacted by way of idealist circumvention in Leibniz’s individual substances and monads. For the price of progressively diminishing the scale of contact between the ideal and the real, until, in Leibniz, the substances became infinitesimal, the world was constructed so as to be perpetually discontinued and punctuated by the boundaries of the concepts. And since the substances behaved as if they had a will of their own, it was up to a benevolent God to keep everything in check, either by way of direct divine intervention in the style of Malebranche, or by way of a thorough ideal pre-determination in the vein of Spinoza, or by way of fine-tuning the universe before its creation along the lines of Leibniz. It was, in short, a world in which the ideal had to put some effort into keeping the real within bounds.

This vast reliance on divine maintenance might point to a certain fear that the world, so fraught with substances, could at any time start acting this or that way. And the less any metaphysical warranty, any epitome of law, any divine entity could be discerned behind the veil of phenomena, the more the world was at risk of being plunged into chaos. It was Hume who derived this kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of the pre-Kantian compulsion that the order of ideas had to be constantly projected upon and synchronized with the order of reality. Hume lived almost a century after Newton, but only within the pre-Newtonian,

“substantialist” framework could he still pretend to aspire to catch the notions of “substance,” “cause,” and “effect” *in the act*, and then, after failing to perceive them in, say, a clash of two billiard balls, begin to doubt the universal causality of the universe. Will the balls roll in the same direction every time? Is the world lawlessly contingent? From the philosophically early-modern yet scientifically pre-modern perspective, this question was still ontologically relevant. It was the *pre-modern* billiard ball, although one already uncertain of its divine mark, which was about to turn the universe into chaos.

This is a line of reasoning that is no longer required with Kant, when it effectively becomes redundant. It could well be said that following the Kantian turn, the world has become a world without surprises, without the threat that in the absence of God reality might descend into anarchy. Perhaps a new concept of universality has been evolving. Contra Hume, *it is because cause and effect can no longer be incarnated that their validity is universal*. Had the Kantian subject caught a glimpse of the separate ontological entities of “cause” and “effect” in the clash of two billiard balls, then reality would be placed under the great strain of not knowing when and where to expect another such phantom, such an incursion from the transcendent sphere, such meddling of the hand of the Malebranchean God. The world would thereby forfeit precisely its claim to universality. Thus, it is another kind of conformity to law that comes into effect. The balls roll predictably only as long as cause and effect remain imperceptible. It is hence not a causality guaranteed by a law, but one which remains after any *representative guarantee* has been subtracted from it.

To give another example, before Copernicus, the sun was endowed with a substance and hence with a certain surplus of self-will. Accordingly, it was justifiable to fear that were it not for an additional amount of spiritual, divine energy moving it, it might become whimsical and not rise the next morning. After Copernicus, the sun became a material body merely occupying,

perhaps even approximating to the ideal point of the center of the solar system, and was later, with Newton, reduced to a quantity of mass at one of the foci of the many imperfect ellipses. And since no higher authority was propelling the celestial movements, suddenly the necessity of the sun rising every day in the morning and setting in the evening became universal, ordinary, and—if the possibility of some even larger cosmic event, say, of the sun exploding, is to be ignored—absolute. The regularity of sunrise and sunset is the effect of the earth's inertial rotation around its axis; the necessity of this quotidian revolution lies precisely in *no one standing behind it*. The modern “universality” is not one which requires a metaphysical license to assure its validity everywhere; quite the contrary, it is *a universality of an ontological remainder* after the existence of any such license was deducted from it. There is presumably less god in a world occurring according to necessity than in one violating the rules. And modern physics has merely revealed a cosmic tedium whose regularity expresses that in the opposite case, in the event of an aberration, the existence of someone pulling the strings would nonetheless have to be assumed. In sum, it is God, and the concomitant threat of his remoteness, indifference, or absence, who might potentially render the universe erratic; once God, even in the form of his possible non-being, is removed from the equation entirely, physics can return to its predictable uniformity.

In this sense, by identifying the suspense of God with the possibility of universal contingency, Hume may seem modern in his agnostic answer, but he remains pre-modern in the way he conceives the question. By contrast, it was Kant who performed the last, long overdue turn, thereby making philosophy catch up with science, insofar as he realized that the lack of any metaphysical buttress opens the space of lawful universality in the first place. A world of gods is capricious; a world without god is regular in its dull inertia. It is not homonomous, i.e., governed by a single set of laws, due to some innate principle, primal vitality, or divine

will; rather, its homonymy is the very effect of any such power lacking. What the Kantian transcendental turn unfolds is a space of modern, and not pre-modern, causality, a universe of Galilean inertia and Newtonian laws, in which things are no longer immanently substantial, endowed with innate forces, and causally active out of themselves, but exist relationally and can be reduced to mere quantities of interaction between multiple bodies. The resting billiard ball, being hit by the moving ball, will always roll in the expected, mathematically calculable course not because there is a “personified law” moving it but because there is none. The resting ball has no inner substance to oppose the moving ball except its quantity of resistance, so every abrupt and unforeseen pseudo-Humean change in direction would presuppose an intervention of an additional entity, an excluded, transcendent cause. However, in modernity one can no longer assume the existence of any such apparition from the ideal realm, for in this monist physical cosmos, the only order of ideas is the one historically produced in the terrestrial process of idealization. Therefore, cause and effect are not something to be embodied in a clash of two billiard balls; they are the *subsequent* symbolic names for balls moving as if the world had no inner causal will, no substance, no purpose left. To put it starkly, the Newtonian ball is too dreary and bland, too deprived of its metaphysical stamina to seek any other path than the path of least resistance; and therein lies the disenchanting necessity of its trajectory. This is how the concept of universality should be understood in the modern sense: causality becomes universal *after* there is no one left to animate it. When Kant postulates a universe without gaps, leaps, chance, and fate—*in mundo non datur hiatus, saltus, casus, fatum* (see Kant 1998, pp. 329–330 [*KrV* A 228–229/B 280–281])—it is emphatically *not* a world permeated and carried by some auxiliary positive, substantial epitome of law, but a deflated *remainder-world* in which no ideality, neither substance nor cause, effect, or the whim of any kind of deity, can ever interrupt the uniformity of

the overall ontological idleness. While Hume feared that from the furtiveness of cause and effect universal contingency might ensue, Kant rather suppressed any discrete appearance of cause and effect in order to establish universal necessity. In short, what Kant finally provided is a philosophical justification of *a physics without the big Other*.¹

In this “universalization via de-substantialization” lies the crux of the operation of idealization. Here, Kant’s antirealist turn can be re-interpreted as an act of realism. Before Kant, the givenness of the world was put under the eye of a perpetual conceptual or perceptive attentiveness, so to speak; in Spinoza or Leibniz, every mode, every infinitesimal substance was meticulously ideally pre-determined, and in Berkeley, the divine gaze constantly maintained every sensual thing in its being. In this setting, the (human) subject could perhaps be envisaged as a draughty interface quivering between the two orders, a forcibly self-transparent medium of projecting ideas onto things and copying ideas from things. With Kant, on the other hand, the subject begins retreating from perceptive immediacy, contracting in itself, and developing a non-conscious core on the inside. Its origin lies in having inherited a number of traditional concepts which had lost their metaphysical foundation in empiricism; the pure concepts of theoretical understanding, the true heirs of the empiricist primary qualities, were now in need of a new ground. Kant’s revolutionary insight was that it was only possible to rehabilitate and re-justify them within the sphere of the subject’s spontaneity. Of course, the transfer of the root of the semantic content of pure concepts from the outside world of the metaphysics of substances to the inner space of German idealism does, at first sight, come across as a blatant case of antirealism. However, two moves are conflated

¹ We owe such use of the Lacanian “big Other” to Mladen Dolar, who in personal conversation once said something along the lines of Wittgenstein demonstrating that “there is no big Other in language.”

here, the subjectivization of the meaning of concepts and the subjectivization of the factuality of sensual experience. Kant himself, the great scientific realist of his time, tended to misunderstand himself as a near antirealist. But, by way of comprehending the operation of idealization, it is possible to hold the realist move and its antirealist misconception apart. Kant's more logically binding operation, one better comprising the scope of his entire critical enterprise, consists precisely in relieving the "order of ideas" from the hysterical wakefulness of early-modern ontologies and performing a certain *de-projection* of concepts from immediate reality. Insofar as we set them against the still Humean outlook, substance, cause, and effect are no longer "subjectively projected" upon but rather "subjectively subtracted" from the world. The subject's function is not to create reality *in toto*, as some misconstrue Kant's transcendental turn, but to *dissociate* the reference point of the concepts from the immediate wealth of sensuality and perform their categorical redefinition.

In brief, the table of categories, no matter how dated it may look today, is an endeavor to place the pure concepts of understanding into a web of logical, differential relations, so that they might allow a view upon the world bereaved of any arbitrary, self-possessed substances and any distinct, intervening causes. Kant's seemingly "antirealist" subjectivization of conceptuality is but an effort to withdraw the concepts into the subject for the purpose of enabling a realist disclosure of objective reality, one pervaded by a lack of substances and a negative, subtractive causality. In other words, the only aim of Kant's so-called "subjective idealism" is to purge the concepts of their traditional, still objectified burden, and to expose the quantifiable, measurable reality of modern science.

This, precisely, is what we call the operation of idealization. "Cause" and "effect," for instance, are *idealized* by way of becoming a category of "relation," so that they no longer need to intervene in reality as forces revealing an additional agent acting behind them. Idealization works on at least three fronts simultaneously. With regard to the world, it performs a logification of

concepts in order to relieve reality from the compulsion of incarnating them. With respect to the meaning of concepts, it outlines a historical process leading from the traditionally substantial to the newly differential, logical definition. And concerning the subject, this historical process performs a de-centerment of the I, an opening of the space of opacity at its core, where the idealizing redefinition is carried out. Therefore, the opacity within Kant's theoretical subject is not an expression of some psychological or existential nature of the ego; on the contrary, the subject itself is merely a logical effect of the world creating a blind spot in its center, of the symbolic categories no longer having the substantial support they once enjoyed and striving toward a new justification in another, subjectively contracted sphere. In short, the subject's opacity is the name of this gap between a concept forfeiting its claim to refer to something real and it being redefined logically; it is the logical space of idealization.

As we will try to show, the most crucial invention and impetus of Hegel's philosophy cannot be properly grasped outside this matrix stretching between the idealization of concepts, the disclosure of reality no longer embodying any metaphysical order, and the opacity at the core of the subject.

3. Fichte's Introduction of Inter-Subjectivity

The founding gesture of German idealism was Kant's derivation of the determinacy of all concepts of understanding and reason from the primordial activity of the subject. With this spontaneity, the original impulse of the theoretical sphere already assumed some practical connotations, and it was Fichte who then accomplished this shift in full. We will more or less pass over Fichte here and only say that the central tenet of his *Wissenschaftslehre*, *Science of Knowledge*, was to undertake the practical underpinning of theoretical conceptuality in its entirety. The crucial point is that Fichte extended the Kantian invention of the opacity of the theoretical

subject to the practical sphere, and it is now the practical I who assumes the logical function of non-transparency to itself. As opposed to Kant's practical subject, who in hearing the voice of the moral law still experienced a moment of self-transparency perhaps similar to the punctual self-evidence of the Cartesian ego, Fichte's I is emphatically one who does not know who she is before her entanglement with the not-I, that is, one who is becoming herself only after having acted in concrete situations of the empirical world. As Fichte notes in *Sittenlehre, The System of Ethics*: "Without the consciousness of my efficacy [*Wirksamkeit*], there is no self-consciousness" (Fichte 2005, pp. 8–9). And further: "The I is originally supposed to be a tendency" (ibid., p. 43).

Moreover, Fichte executed another imposing shift. He not only placed the entire theoretical sphere on a practical ground, but later opened a third domain of justification; as sometimes noted, he invented the "transcendental dimension of inter-subjectivity," the logical necessity of other subjects in the constitution of the I. The title of the second theorem of his *Foundation of Natural Right* says it in no uncertain terms: "The finite rational being cannot ascribe to itself a free efficacy in the sensible world without also ascribing such efficacy to others, and thus also without presupposing the existence of other finite rational beings outside of itself" (Fichte 2000, p. 29 [§3]). The logical problem of the circularity of consciousness, whereby its efficacy must both posit its object and be constrained by it, hence presupposing a prior act of consciousness positing an object, is resolved by introducing another rational being addressing its summons to the first one. In this sense, Fichte's early *Anstoß*, the external impulse of the I's identity, can be re-interpreted as the later *Aufforderung*, the intersubjective instigation or summons.

Fichte delivers a formal proof of the necessity of inter-subjectivity, but this purely logical proceeding is perhaps already sustained by the insight that the seemingly self-justifying practical concepts of desires, interests, and goals would implode on their own if not

for having always already been embedded in a larger realm of social relations. To put it simply, only society can give a determinate content to what we practically desire—this unexploited, implicit intuition of Fichte was then picked up and made manifest by Hegel.

While Fichte never really developed a full theory of intersubjectivity, Hegel finally elaborated the famously lacking Kantian fourth *Critique*. His *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, which aim to deliver an accomplished and comprehensive logification of practical and social conceptuality, perhaps the greatest in the history of thought, could well be regarded as the long-time missing *Critique of Social Reason*. But the question arises, what is this *logification*? Whence the need to interweave concepts differentially, idealistically, and, in Hegel's case, dialectically and developmentally in the first place?

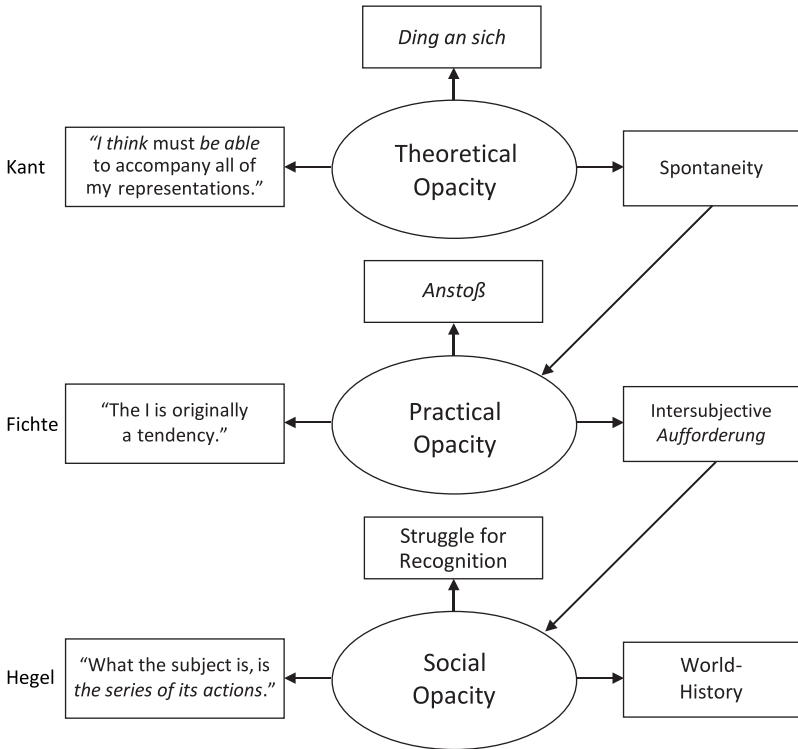
4. History as the Ground of Hegelian Idealization

In the reading that we propose, the motive behind Kant's categorical redefinition of concepts is the revelation that the physical reality is unmoved by the hand of the big Other. As we will try to demonstrate, the impulse behind Hegel's dialectical idealization is, *mutatis mutandis*, the justification of a "sociality without the big Other," one entirely deprived of any possible metaphysical warranties and intrusions. However, it will be shown that Hegel not only transferred the Kantian invention from the realm of theory to that of sociality. In hindsight, his "dialectical idealization" alone provided a foundation to Kant's transcendental grounding of theoretical conceptuality, thereby bringing the original momentum of German idealism to its deserved conclusion.

Let us, then, reconstruct the workings of the operation of idealization in its Hegelian form. As we have learned from Kant's invention of spontaneity, and even more poignantly from Fichte's shift to practical self-positing, the idealist logification

of concepts only emerges in the specific logical space outlined by the opacity of the subject. The crucial feature of this new procedure of legitimizing conceptuality in the logically coherent domain of the self-opaque subject is that it is no longer carried out in the old abstract, other-worldly, detached sphere of pure thought, but arises hanging suspended between two focal points. On the one hand—and this is absolutely essential—the subject does not know itself before getting its hands dirty with the contingencies of its concrete situation. As we recall, Kant’s subject of knowledge can no longer withdraw to the Cartesian spiritual soul of innate ideas but must engage in empirical experience, and Fichte’s I must always already have acted in order to be. On the other hand, in being immersed in its own particular environment, the self-opaque subject realizes that its re-definition of concepts relies on assuming a new, broader perspective; seen from Fichte’s angle, the knowledge of the theoretical subject is predetermined by the subject’s practical interests, and the actions of the practical subject by its social position. Precisely this double suspension, which was still only half-baked and dormant in Kant and Fichte, was then brought to completion by Hegel. For what is the *Phenomenology of Spirit* if not a full explication of the insight that, first, there can be no pure theoretical knowledge outside practical prerogatives (this insight marks the transition from understanding to self-consciousness in the form of desire and life; see Hegel 1977, pp. 106–107), second, there can be no determinate practical interests outside relations to other subjects (this is the transition from one self-consciousness to two; see *ibid.*, pp. 110 ff.), and, finally, introducing the fourth sphere, there are no social forms except those evolving in the progression of history (the resolution of self-consciousness consists in the opening of the space of history, and the historical motives culminate in the section “Spirit,” chapter “The absolute Freedom and the Terror,” where the most brutal and abrupt disintegration of social forms is rendered; see *ibid.*, pp. 355 ff.).

In order to demonstrate a certain tendency in how German idealism was constructed step-by-step, the progression of four domains can be captured as follows:



Here, in a way, the phylogeny of German classical philosophy is recapitulated in the ontogeny of Hegel's *Phenomenology*. The central position is occupied by the opacity of the respective area, on top of every oval is the un-reflected element that sustains the opacity from the outside, on the left there is the definition of each de-centered subjectivity, and on the right the Archimedean point of idealization taking place within the space of opacity.

The question is, of course, what is gained by assuming ever new domains and shifting the center of gravity from the theoretical

to the practical, the social, and the historical? The most concise answer lies in the fact that the operation of idealization, contrary to its reputation, is not only *not* perennially trans-social and trans-historical, but represents a socio-historical product in its purest form. Its necessity always arises in an emphatically time-bound context, where the outmoded idols must be substituted with new ideas. The most important intra-philosophical incentive of German idealism was the circumstance of both rationalism and empiricism having reached a certain limit, a dead-end, thereby rendering the traditional forms of knowledge inadequate. Philosophy had suddenly experienced a loss of two principal instances of legitimatizing the semantic determinacy of concepts. First, the retreat to a spiritual, transcendent, even divine mind, where pure concepts could still be deduced from one another, was no longer an option. Second, the outside world refused to embody any ideal structure, so the concepts defied being induced from empirical data. In short, with the end of classical metaphysics, two methods of defining concepts, the deductive and the inductive, became obsolete. German idealism as a whole is an answer to this very *crisis of conceptuality* in the second half of the 18th century, a crisis which philosophically ensues most immediately from Hume's rebuttal of epistemological substances and forms, but perhaps also echoes the upheavals surrounding the transition from a feudalist to a bourgeois society, one shattering the hierarchical structure of society. Because of the loss of both reality manifesting an ideal order and God standing behind it, a completely new and different methodology had to be invented. In this gap of conceptual justification, Kant proposed his transcendental logic of the conditions of possibility, and Hegel went even further with his dialectical, processual, finally encyclopedic development of concepts. In a sense, Hegel brought the original methodological impetus of German idealism to its fullest fruition. In what way?

The matrix of four logical spaces, where each subsequent sphere encapsulates the one that came before, is what best explains

the stringency of idealization. The vital point, which becomes entirely explicit and effective in Hegel, is that the links between them are strictly negative and disruptive. To predetermine the theoretical sphere with the practical, the practical with the social, and the social with the historical, first sounds like a rather commonplace anthropological thesis. It seems self-evident that our theoretical notions are a product of our practical involvement with the world, that our practical interests and desires are socially acquired, and that all the social forms were formed in the advancement of history. But what Hegel is after is precisely not this kind of “anthropologism,” but a veritable philosophical gesture. Where scientific reason sees a positive continuity of mediation between the levels, Hegel hinges his method solely on the negativity of transitions. In the *Phenomenology*, the practical perspective on the world is only assumed by the subject so as to annihilate the theoretical autonomy of the object; the consciousness sets its foot into the empty inside of the thing, thus becoming an all-devouring desire, which consumes everything coming its way. Similarly, inter-subjectivity is introduced in order to bring about the collapse of our practical identity; the winner in the struggle for recognition is the one who dares to risk her own life, that is, her death. Lastly, history, specifically in Hegel’s account of the French revolution, is used as a force to dissolve all social forms and identities. In a nutshell, the function of introducing new, larger logical spaces is to subvert the smaller, enclosed ones for the purpose of producing a crisis within their conceptuality and exposing their empty core. Only in this historically unfolded “semantic opacity” can the operation of idealization gain a foothold: it is here that the subject emerges as the agent who removes the reference of the concepts, which have lost their metaphysical backing, from putative embodiments within reality and places them in a logical web of other concepts.

In sum, the negativity of transitions and the self-opacity of the subject alone can elevate idealization into an operation

with a logical claim. The true Hegelian insight does not consist in investing, or even adorning, the theoretical conceptuality of Kant with a more palpable practical drive, a more colorful social life, or a more abundant historical serendipity. Hegel does not argue that our subjectivity is always already practically engaged, socially mediated, historically relative, and that the richness of all these associations precedes our theoretical outlook. This would be more reminiscent of Heidegger's attempt in *Being and Time* to predetermine the entire realm of modern, scientific, quantified relations with the categories of the average reason of everyday life.² By contrast, the Hegelian idealization strives for a logical purity, which inaugurates higher perspectives for the sole purpose of semantically unsettling lower-level concepts and forcing them to be fixed in their idealizing redefinition. It is thus the *logical yearning* of theoretical concepts to achieve *definitional closure*—and not end up in a Wittgensteinian semantic pluralism—which demands a practical, and then social or historical, perturbation. It is probably less in the spirit of Hegel to claim that, say, the theoretical concepts of one and many, reality and negation, necessity and freedom, cause and effect are only to be semantically *filled out* by having them placed within the frame of the actual, pragmatic, ordinary communal life. He rather seems to intimate that, without exposing them to the coarse and muddy havoc of the factual world, the concepts will never be *evacuated* enough to be idealized into the theoretical categories of “reality,” “necessity,” or “causality.” It is thus the non-pragmatic, non-Wittgensteinian

² Although this reading does not preclude or oppose the identification of some affinity between Heidegger's and Hegel's anti-humanism of being. In Gregor Moder's words: “The relationship between logical categories of being and existence (*Sein* and *Dasein*) is principally the same for Hegel and Heidegger: being is pure void, nothingness, while existence is the there-ness of being, its determinateness. This detour through Hegel hopefully underscores the logical nature of the relationship between being and *Dasein* that Heidegger renders explicit in his analysis of the formal structure of the question of being; there is no place here for the human stain” (Moder 2013, p. 105).

theoricity which must be saved by submitting the construction of concepts to practice, society, and history. And once this “theoricity,” this entitlement to logic, is ensured, it spills over to the entire range of conceptuality, so finally even the concepts of the practical, social, and historical spheres can be included in the encyclopedic system.

This is where the Hegelian dialectic offers a certain advantage over the Kantian transcendental logic. While Kant relied on a timeless framework of concepts constituting the table of categories, which are loosely connected by an unspecific ambition of being deduced from one another and can possibly be imagined as God-given, Hegel seems to have incorporated the process of the idealization of concepts via practical, social, and historical de-substantializations into the logical procedure itself.³ His notorious dialectical method is nothing but an enactment of this predicament, in which the fact that reality proves unable to represent a concept propels the latter to free itself of its presumed incarnation and produce another concept to be sustained by it retroactively. Perhaps the greatest beauty of Hegelian speculation lies precisely in its ability to stage a twist between the ontological devaluation of reality and the reactive idealization of concepts. The legendary *Begriff* is always thrown into a sort of rite of passage, in which it arises from the ashes of the former concept, engages a certain reality, fails at it, realizes that it is no longer supported by the given immediacy of things, and brings forth the next concept, for only in assuming a place in the chain of concepts can it lay claim

³ This is how a bond between Hegel’s destructive, accidental historicity and his logic, which allows us to think God’s thoughts, can be established. Hegel, to an extent, integrated the developmental dynamics of the emphatically this-worldly idealization into the logical constitution of concepts itself. This does not mean, however, that one cannot go further in the endeavor to converge terrestrial contingency with idealization, say, by taking into account (and overcoming) the future methods of semantic unsettlement, such as Marx’s critique of ideology, Nietzsche’s genealogy, Wittgenstein’s language therapy, or Foucault’s archeology.

to possessing an ideal meaning. Let us recall the famous triad of family, civil society, and state from the *Philosophy of Right*. In opposition to the theorists of recognition, who are always tempted to identify some positive mediation between the familiar, public, and national realms, the Hegelian linking between the three is one of destruction and rebirth. Hegel is quite adamant about the fact that the real family must perish when an individual leaves the nest so that the ideal “family” can arise in hindsight from the perspective of the concept of “civil society” (see Hegel 1991, pp. 214–218 [§ 177–180]). By analogy, the real civil society must disintegrate in the multitude of individual wills and develop its paradoxes so that the concept of “state” can ensue from it (see *ibid.*, pp. 273–274 [§ 256]). And, finally, the devastation of world-history must abolish the existing states so that the ideal “state” can achieve its full conceptuality (see *ibid.*, p. 371 [§ 340]). In this way, civil society hangs suspended between the dissolution of real families and its own retrospective idealization from the standpoint of the state; and the state hovers between the dissipation of the public sphere and its ideality gained in the historical progress.

It is this procedure of interlacing the shortcomings of reality with the emergence of ideality that represents the ultimate disclosure of “sociality without the big Other.”⁴ In Kant, as we have seen, substance, cause, and effect were never to be caught sight of, but instead had to be *subtracted* from the sensual reality, so that the landscape of necessary, contiguous, exclusively physical

⁴ Perhaps Hegel’s ingeniously contrived “monarch” in his *Philosophy of Right* could be regarded as the true placeholder of this lack of the big Other, this social opacity in times not threatened by the interventions of the world-historical individuals, hence, in the long periods of peace. As Zdravko Kobe puts it: “The Monarch precisely in his groundlessness, as ‘the ultimate ungrounded self of the will, and its existence which is consequently also ungrounded’ (Hegel 1991, p. 323 [§ 281]), simultaneously represents the symbol of the openness of the political sphere” (Kobe 2015, p. 169; translation mine). In this manner, Frank Ruda concludes his paper on the monarch: “Or more accurately: perhaps we do not want a leader, but we still need her” (Ruda 2015, p. 191; translation mine).

causality could come to the fore. Similarly, Hegel's method showed that no such thing as a "family," a "society," or a "state" exists in the real world, approximating to its normative ideal. Within the given reality, one only finds people entering flawed and diffuse domestic, public, or national relations where biological facts and conditions mix with geographical and ethnic peculiarities and culturally established values. However, analogous to Kant, "family," "society," and "state" must be subtracted from the reality of life so that the inconsistent and motley social formations can, in the course of their quotidian fortuity, appeal to the ideal claim of their concepts. In other words, Kant's causality is an assurance that no cause or effect will ever intermit the contiguity of experience; and Hegel's *Begriff* poses as a safeguard that things will never inhabit and fill an idea, but only refer to it from the vantage point of their own defects. In love, to take a very distant example, we are hardly required to personify the ideal picture our lover harbors of a person to be loved; instead, it is our inadequacy to embody this ideal that somehow obliges our lover to counter it with the ideality of "love." And in Hegel, it is no longer the function of ideas to act as Platonic norms in relation to reality; instead, it is the duty of reality to construct ideas on the very ground of failing to manifest them.

Thus, in the style of the Kantian "subtractive causality," the link between the concept and reality in Hegel could be said to be one of *non-normative ideality*. Its characteristic trait is that it reverses the usual metaphysical direction of the conceptual structuring of reality. The objective of Hegelian idealization is not to produce an ontological force which will coerce reality into corresponding to it; quite the opposite, the ideal concept is something to be logically redefined precisely when reality proves incapable of carrying its semantic substance. Words do not pack the world in boxes; it is the unboxed world that has a right to exclaim the words. In the same vein, Hegel's concept neither mirrors the world as it is nor projects its ideal form upon it, but develops its ideality in the process of setting itself apart from the given things and overcoming them.

To illustrate, Hegel's philosophy is usually placed in one of the two seemingly most authentic, albeit mutually exclusive historical settings: either the existing state form of the Prussian empire, where world-history finally comes to an end, or the circumstances a decade and a half earlier, when Europe was falling prey to the ravages of the Napoleonic wars, which pushed the entire domain of sociality into a state of disarray. As the story goes, Hegel was still revising his *Phenomenology* in 1806, when Jena was besieged by the French army. He saw Napoleon riding in the streets and even gave him the nickname *die Weltseele zu Pferde*, "the world-soul on a horse." But then the situation became so precarious that he entrusted the only copy of his early masterpiece to the last envoy who could still flee from the town. Shortly after, the French soldiers actually plundered Hegel's apartment. Thus, it could be imagined that the world-soul of the moment, Napoleon, was about to destroy the highest achievement of the current world-spirit, Hegel's *Phenomenology*. And it appears as if this great attempt at passing through all forms of knowledge at first had to be *hidden from the world itself*, which was then concentrated in Napoleon as *the* single force of destruction. Of course, fourteen years later, in 1820, Hegel himself made the very mistake of which we want to absolve him; he proclaimed the full embodiment of the Idea in Protestant Christianity and the Prussian state. But, by the very nature of his logic, he never needed this apotheosis of immediate reality. For his endeavor of idealization does precisely not gain momentum from the concepts being incarnated, but, on the contrary, by them losing their foothold in reality. Thus, the true success of Hegelianism might not lie in the world finally corresponding to its conceptual edifice, as Hegel in his old age possibly believed that it did, but in the fact that, in the midst of Europe being at the brink of a complete social collapse, it was still possible for someone in his private chambers to give birth to a system of idealism. According to this reading, the function of Hegelian history is not to discern some hidden purpose behind

the chaotic contingency of the world; rather, history performs a systemic function of undercutting the self-complacency of sociality being incarnated once and for all in this or that community. Instead of making particular social formations, states, and nations justify themselves in front of some detached, overarching tribunal of world-history, which today seems to be personified in the idea of discursive rationality, the contingency of history merely exhibits that no such tribunal can ever take form, and it is precisely on account of any superstructure of rationality lacking that the concepts must idealize and start forming a logical system.

Needless to say, it is here that the difference between this interpretation and that of Hegelian “normativists” and “recognitionists” is most obvious. The latter always seems to set up a normative frame of collectively negotiated conceptuality, in the sense that “communities are the way they are fundamentally because of how they have come to regard and evaluate themselves” (Pippin 1997, p. 167). The meaning of social notions, those pertaining to family life, public space, national state, or even international law, depend on what we reflectively *take them to mean* by way of rational deliberation. However, as paradoxical as it may sound, this open, never to be accomplished, emphatically secular process of the inter-subjective institution of conceptual order might still be regarded as the last representative of the big Other within the sphere of sociality, since it relies on the idea of a detached, neutral sphere of discursive rationality, where the consciously endorsed, communally shared values can be normatively imposed on our lives. In comparison, Hegel’s logic is much more worldly and much more unearthly at the same time. It brings the concept to its normative collapse by means of revealing the impotence of reality to accord with it; but in this failure it finds the audacity to define the concept logically and presume its semantic definiteness. Hence, it performs idealization. A concept is thus not foremost an institutional fact, but a logical product and an idealist emergence. And finally, Hegel’s *Anstrengung des Begriffs* is perchance not to

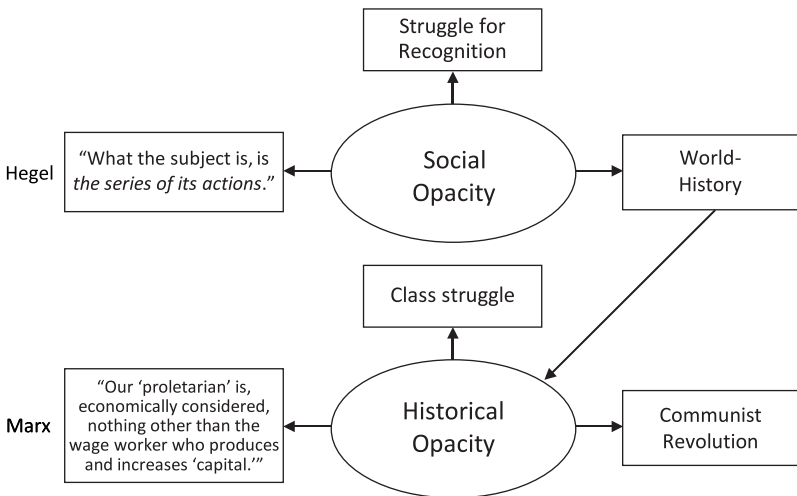
be carried out in dialogue, in a public place or agora, but rather resembles a private effort of logical thinking beyond the yoke of communication and consensus.

5. *After Hegel, the Opaque Core of History*

Eventually the question arises, why Hegel nonetheless did succumb to the temptation of apotheosizing the world in its current state in the early nineteenth century, of equating world history with theodicy, and even proclaiming its end. The answer might not be that difficult to find. As we have seen, the origins of subjectivity lie in the opaque core extending between the contingencies of reality and the compulsion to idealize concepts. But in order to fully circumscribe this opacity, the subject must, so to speak, grab hold of an outside pivot, which in its fixity puts on the mask of a certain transparency. In this sense, early Fichte underpinned the theoretical sphere with the practical impetus, but then he, perhaps necessarily so, too readily *substantialized* this practical claim; the ultimate scope of his philosophy was the conspicuous, optimistic program of an aspired incorporation of the world, the *Verichlichung* of the not-I. And late Fichte, who shifted the emphasis from the practical to the social sphere, willy-nilly substantialized this social claim; accordingly, he presented the world's most overt state as that of being subdued into the last corner by the collective effort of humanity. Similarly, Hegel also needed a leverage point firm enough to unsettle the realm of sociality, but then he inevitably elevated history, this force of liquidation of all social forms, into a substance of a sort, and hence a state of full reconciliation endowed with divine predicates. In history, Hegel's world seems to have achieved its final transparency to itself. However, this excessive deification of history is perhaps only a "constitutive illusion" of stipulating a means to disclose the opaque core of sociality. Thus, the final diagnosis of Hegel could hint at the fact that what his

system unavoidably albeit regrettably obscures, is precisely the *opaque core of history*. It is this observation which might open the door to the future. One way to bring post-Hegelian philosophy under the common denominator is to interpret it as a series of attempts to discern the non-transparent historical core.

Karl Marx certainly provides the most beautiful example for this thesis. The innermost knot of his thought is precisely the identification of a still invisible subject of future historical change. Proletarians as wage workers without private property could be viewed as an economic version of our concept of “self-opaque subjectivity” insofar as they must work and sell their labor-power in order to exist at all. Marx himself defines the proletariat as the product of the historical world developing a blind spot, thereby outlining the opacity at the center of socio-economic relations, which confers the mandate to make history to the working class. Our scheme of three philosophers establishing four logical spaces could thus perhaps be enriched with the fourth philosopher, bringing in the causality of economy, class struggle, and the formation of a future collective subject:



Another example of engaging the opaque core of history is Nietzsche's concept of the "master race," the still unborn, much-awaited overman, or perhaps Heidegger's *Ereignis*, the fateful eventfulness of being. Be that as it may, it must be pointed out that Hegel himself once had a talent for the temporal negativity, and that he only later sacrificed them for a more substantial, directed, and teleological plan of world-history. Therefore, the Hegel to whom we must return is presumably the one still capable of keeping the opaque core of history open. Of course, for this opacity to be sustained, one must only insist on the unfillable gap extending between reality failing to embody ideas and concepts being reactively idealized. It is ultimately a space in which idealist logic is still possible.

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