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HEGEL 250—TOO LATE?



Ljubljana 2020

HEGEL 250—TOO LATE?

ANALECTA

Publisher: Društvo za teoretsko psihoanalizo

Publishing board: Miran Božovič, Mladen Dolar, Rado Riha,
Alenka Zupančič (president), Slavoj Žižek

Edited by Mladen Dolar

Copyedited by Tanja Dominko and Eric Powell

Cover Design by AOOA

Layout by Klemen Ulčakar

Printed by Ulčakar Grafika

First Edition

Circulation 200

Ljubljana 2020

This publication has been co-published
in partnership with the Goethe-Institut Ljubljana.



CIP - Kataložni zapis o publikaciji
Narodna in univerzitetna knjižnica, Ljubljana

1Hegel G.W.F.(082)

HEGEL 250 - too late? / [edited by Mladen Dolar]. - 1st ed. -
Ljubljana : Društvo za teoretsko psihoanalizo : Goethe-Institut,
2020. - (Zbirka Analecta) (Problemi ; let. 58, 11-12) (Problemi
International ; 2020, 4)

ISBN 978-961-6376-94-5 (Društvo za teoretsko psihoanalizo)

COBISS.SI-ID 61238531

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Hegel Reborn. A Brief Introduction to HEGEL 250 — TOO LATE?

Modernity begins with Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. He is the defining philosopher of the transition to the modern world. Today, with the globalization of hyper digital capitalism, we are entering a new massive transition, so on the occasion of Hegel's 250th birthday in 2020 serious attempts were made to rethink Hegel's relevance and to reimagine modern society's debt to Hegel for our contemporary age.

Hegel's immense international influence largely depends on the depth and richness of his thought. For him, history displays a rational process. It has a direction, which we can discern. It is heading towards a goal, which we can welcome. The meaning of history is to develop and to fulfill its purpose: the world-spirit realizing its final goal, the freedom and self-consciousness of humanity. The history of the world is a progression towards the consciousness of freedom. Hegel concluded that a fully rational organization of the world was about to unfold, creating a truly free community. As a consequence, reason and freedom would come to fruition. In our contemporary age, we wish we could share Hegel's unshakeable optimism which causes some bemusement.

In Ljubljana, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* meets French structuralism. It is here that the Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis, whose main goal is to achieve a synthesis between Lacanian psychoanalysis and the philosophy of German idealism, was founded in the early 1980s. Slovenia's capital is, and since

Roman times always has been, not only a magnificent, beautiful, and very picturesque city on the river Ljubljanica; it has also emerged as a real cultural power-house in music, the arts, and philosophy, as is evident from the sheer number of top-notch intellectual heavy-weights and their output in academic discourse and research. Nowhere else, I believe, can one find such a high density and impressive quantity of most exquisite, internationally highly respected and eminent scholars whose expertise is the philosophy of Hegel.

In Western philosophy, Hegel often enjoys the reputation of being the most impenetrable. For many, he remains simply incomprehensible and is frequently regarded as too difficult, a mountain too steep to climb. In order to make this great thinker more accessible, we proudly presented a multi-faceted exhibition on Hegel at the Ljubljana Town Hall together with our Slovenian partners. Visitors even had the unique opportunity to play snooker with (or against) the *Weltgeist*. And whatever some might find almost too complicated to understand in Hegel's writings, his closest friends in Slovenia explained in several entertaining, sometimes even funny videos. Since then, thousands have visited the digital version of the show. As we know, the proof of the pudding is in the eating: it is possible to present Hegel in a playful way from which we all benefit immensely. As a result, we managed to share the treasure box of German idealism also with a younger audience and the wider public.

Gewappnet mit der List der Vernunft and against all odds, against coronavirus-induced uncertainties in times of a worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, international guests from Sweden, Italy, Austria, the Netherlands, and Germany safely arrived and gathered in the summer of 2020, during a brief window of opportunity. These most prolific thinkers joined Hegel's closest local Slovenian friends, famous experts and colleagues, such as Slavoj Žižek, Mladen Dolar, Alenka Zupančič, Zdravko Kobe, and many others, for an exhibition and a great meeting of minds in a symposium

dedicated to freedom, free thinking, and free reasoning in Hegel's thought near the French Revolution Square. This place was wisely and very timely chosen to celebrate Hegel's 250th birthday (and Beethoven's and Hölderlin's, too). The volume in front of you presents the bulk of the conference papers and some other contributions to mark this most remarkable anniversary.¹

My sincerest gratitude to all our partners here in Slovenia and abroad for making this international conference and the exhibition possible: the Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, the Baden-Württemberg Stiftung, the City of Ljubljana, especially Mateja Demšič and Blaž Peršin, Indigo-Festival, the Internationale Hegel-Vereinigung—Aufhebung, the organizing committee (Bara Kolenc, Ana Jovanović, and Goran Vranešević), Miha Kelemina, and of course, last but not least, my colleague Urban Šrimpf. They truly deserve our deepest gratitude and admiration. Needless to say, my team and I, as the newly arrived director of the Goethe-Institut in Slovenia, felt thrilled, honored, and most fortunate indeed to be part of this first-class gathering. *Der Weltgeist schien auf ihrer Seite zu sein.*

In other words, thank you very much, vielen herzlichen Dank, and hvala lepa!

Dr. Árpád-Andreas Sölter
Director of the Goethe-Institut in Ljubljana

¹ The video of the conference is available at <https://www.goethe.de/ins/si/de/kul/sup/heg.html>

Hegel's Time!

This special issue of *Problemi International* arose from Hegel's celebration year 2020, for the largest part from the conference *Hegel's 250th Anniversary: Too Late?*, which took place in Ljubljana in September 2020. The conference was initiated and organized by International Hegelian Association *Aufhebung*, Goethe-Institut in Ljubljana and The Museum and Galleries of Ljubljana.

In the difficult circumstances of the global health crisis, accompanied by outbursts of social unrest and local catastrophes such as the Beirut explosion, conducting an international conference face-to-face, with all the participants physically present in one place, turned out to be a risky undertaking bordering on the impossible. However, despite all the uncertainties, special permits, reduced capacities, and obstacles never heard of before, a powerful gathering and an intense exchange of critical thought finally happened in Ljubljana: live and in person! Because a group event such as a conference felt almost like a miracle in the middle of the pandemic, the celebration of Hegel's anniversary somewhat imperceptibly blended with a celebration of the mere possibility to critically question the established procedures of truth physically gathered in a public space.

The 250th anniversary of Hegel's birth marks the time of a beginning and the time of an end—not because it is an anniversary but because, with Hegel, we can think the relation between the beginning and the end, which is crucial especially in present times. Here, the question does not pertain to this or that end (of history, grand narratives, ideology, art, or philosophy) but

rather to the radical end and our relationship to it, that is, our *too-lateness*. Today, as the world is ever more obviously and unstopably sliding towards its “ultimate end,” and as it seems that, in relation to the speed of our pandemic-ridden reality, thought is increasingly falling behind, the question arises: What now? Is it actually too late?

The logic of expectation, which runs through apocalyptic scenarios, intrudes into this mechanism: we expect the end knowing that we are already too late. In this sense, every beginning is already too late. On the other hand, the logic of delay is also at work here: we are late in order to delay the end. Here, every beginning is too early. Both the logic of expectation (the end of the world is nearing, so nothing can be done anyway) and the logic of delay (this will be done later, so the end will also come later) have a “passivizing and anti-political” effect. But are there also any positive aspects of acting and thinking that can arise from the “as-if-it-is-too-late” perspective?

When we were writing the conference call on the topic of too-lateness in January 2020, none of us could have imagined that it would permeate and even overtake our thoughts so quickly and decisively. What appeared to be a bare conceptual projection in January, turned out to be an existentially inevitable reality in March. A new reality into which we were sinking in the following months: as if too-lateness itself paradoxically, yet irrevocably, came on time, once and for all.

In September, Hegel came to his birthday party through the words and thoughts of the participants of the Ljubljana event. Was he too late? Were we too late? Or does everything actually only begin at a belated celebration or even an after party? Let this special issue think it over: Is it Hegel's time?

Organizing committee of the international conference
Hegel's 250th Anniversary: Too Late?
Ana Jovanović, Bara Kolenc,
Urban Šrmpf, Goran Vranešević

After Too Late: The Endgame of Analysis

Nadia Bou Ali and Ray Brassier

Belated Actuality

Hegel is infamous for maintaining that what is rational is actual, and what is actual is rational. This is perhaps his most notorious and oft-criticized statement. But what Hegel means by actuality is not what is current or ‘present-at-hand’, to use Heideggerian terminology. Against the commonsensical, positivistic conception of actuality as contemporaneity, that which is directly experienced or consciously apprehended, Hegel distinguishes what is actual from what is simply present. He defines actuality as “the unity of essence and concrete existence” (Hegel 2010, p. 465). But this unity is constituted by “the continual activity of conceptual determination.”¹ Actuality as unity of essence and existence manifests the activity of the absolute: not thought thinking itself, but rather, in Sebastian Rödl’s felicitous rendering, *thinking thinking thinking* (2020). The unity of this activity is nothing

¹ “Concept and reality cannot but be in agreement, and the contingency, negativity, and contradiction that arise in the continual activity of conceptual determination are not phenomena that are external to thought, not threats that thought must neurotically repress, violently master, blindly respect, or anxiously fear, but are absolutely necessary, internal to, and constitutive of the Concept as absolute.” Ng (2009), pp. 170–171.

but its self-exposition, an unfolding that *takes time*, but only recognizes itself as such belatedly. Thus, there is a temporality inscribed into thought's acknowledgement of the rationality of the actual: what is actual is what has already happened, or what has just happened. But this is to suggest that, far from actuality realizing a transcendent rationality, or reason accomplishing itself through the medium of actuality, rationality comes after the fact: the actuality of the actual is nothing but its belated rationality. What joins substantial actuality to conceptual rationality is a delay or lapse. This non-coincidence or asynchronicity compels the becoming-subject of substance.

Precisely because actuality is constituted by "the continual activity of conceptual determination," it comprises the totality of determinations in their negativity, contradictoriness, and contingency. Negativity, contradiction, and contingency are not foreign to reason; on the contrary, they are comprehended in the rationality of the actual. Actuality is not a stable achievement but an explosive compound whose integration coalesces at the point of disintegration. It is this integral disintegration that demands to be rationally comprehended. But if philosophy, as its own time comprehended in thought, always comes after the fact, is this to say philosophical reason is fated to belatedness? Is reason always too late? Too late for change yet too soon to attempt it? These questions bring together politics and psychoanalysis. Does the symbolic (or the world of objective spirit) shift only through the displacement of *jouissance*? Is there no way out of the solitude of enjoyment, harbored by philosophy? Must desire always be embarrassed by identifications? These questions point towards another, perhaps more fundamental one: Is belatedness *nachträglich*, retroaction, or something else? Castration perhaps?

The Fantasy of the End

The logic of time governing symbolic crises oscillates between the too-soon and the already too-late. In Lacanian parlance, it is as though there is a temporality that is fated to oscillate between enjoyment and death. Every moment is a potential end, yet it is always too late for a final end; a real end to end all the failed endings. Perhaps the logic of a “fantasy of an end” is that it is too optimistic and refuses to accept that no matter how bad things are, they can always get worse. The fantasy of a final end ignores the fact that there is a potentiality for spurious infinite suffering, or an enjoyment in suffering; that although the wheels of history keep turning and turning, they are effectively going nowhere. The problem of potentiality and temporality here can be stated in terms of Alenka Zupančič’s critique of Paolo Virno: What makes history possible is a gap in potentiality itself. This gap in potentiality is inaccessible beyond appearance, beyond its imitation, which constitutes appearance. Zupančič argues that the gap in potentiality is itself doubled and that the doubling effect is the substance or form of appearance: every historical moment has its moment “with-without” cream (Zupančič 2019). There is a “with-without” status to historical unfolding, or, in Hegelian terms, there is an irreconcilable gap between the in-itself and the in-and-for-itself. But what if it is too late even for these gaps, cuts, and failures? What if it is too late to wait for repetitions or wager on the return of the repressed? If it is indeed too late, then what are we too late for? What is too-lateness?

This problem of appearance can be considered to be the same as the problem of power, or the problem of the Lacanian Other. In capitalist society, labor-power is assumed to have a potentiality – whereas it is a negativity. Labor-power, as we know from Marx, is not the source of value; rather, it is the *form* of the commodity that is the source of value. There is an incommensurability or non-relation between labor-power and its form of appearance

in the commodity-form. Thus, the failure to realize labor-power is embedded in the capitalist structure. This failure is the source of surplus-value. The fantasy of capital is concomitant with its own immanent end: it is always framed through crisis. Capitalism relies on the failures of potentiality to be realized; or the failure *in* potentiality itself. This problem is one that Lacan assumes in his theory of discourse: there is no big other as such but a “form of a big other” that is sustained by the very belief in its nonexistence. The emperor was always a fool, an empty signifier, a naked force; the master lacks and it is this very lack that sustains the symbolic order and strengthens it: it has always been too late for us to have a proper master.

The Dregs of Spirit

Jouissance or enjoyment is the “glue” that carries a repetition structure for the originally missing signifier, the S1, which inaugurates the signifying chain or symbolic function (Zupančič 2008). The status of S1 remains, however, a serious point of contention amongst contemporary interpreters of Lacan.² The contention over the status of S1 poses a set of questions: Is the symbolic unstable (characterized by a “non-existence” of the signifier), while topology and formalization are stable? Or are they both characterized by instability and it is precisely this instability that tethers them to the Real? The symbolic is sustained through the production of a surplus of desire: every chain of signification or discourse operates by encoding the body, petrifying it with meaning; the object of the symbolic is none other than a body arrested by the signifier. But that is not the only possible body; there is

² This disagreement pits Alenka Zupančič and Mladen Dolar against Adrian Johnston and Lorenzo Chiesa. It concerns Lacan’s account of signification or the question of the “emergence of the signifier” and has serious implications for the position of psychoanalysis in relation to modern science, nature, and philosophy.

also a body that dreams while reason sleeps. This is what Hegel would call the left-over dregs of spirit; once spirit realizes that it cannot but leave finitude behind, it demands the simplicity of a concept. The “baits” that lure spirit are love, the beautiful, the holy, and the eternal. In Lacanian terms, we could call these the stuff of enjoyment. Spirit is not driven by the conceptual alone, but also by the non-conceptual, by the thing itself or *das Ding*. “Spirit is time”; consciousness is the identity of thought with itself in its own disintegration and “life is the union of union and non-union.” The “absolute power” of the work of the Understanding proceeds through dissolution, negativity, and opposition: it is akin to Goethe’s Mephistopheles, without whom Faust simply could not be. The principle of negativity, embodied in Mephistopheles, is necessary for the unfolding of consciousness, and it “attains an existence of its own and a separate freedom” (Hegel 1977, Preface, §32–33). The drive, or principle of negativity, breaks from life as it attempts to return unto itself, and culture ensues in this movement of return upon itself. There is life—whose sense for Hegel is not vitalist—and there is moribund speculation; but there is also something else. Life is not some form of infinite productivity without any concrete oppositions or determinations. There is in Hegel a distinction between life and the consciousness of life, or the in-itself and for-itself. Psychoanalysis intervenes at precisely this point: Spirit is not only time; it is also held back by time and in time. Time is always too-late for the moment of apprehension; it is what holds back the possibility of grasping everything all at once. Spirit and its enjoyments can be better off without the astringencies of time; they can dream of annulling time, sublating it once and for all. Rebecca Comay points to Hegel’s mockery of Kant’s transcendental aesthetic as an “oral-sadistic phantasm symptomatic of a disavowed breach between self and world” (Comay and Ruda 2018, p. 67). The unity of apperception attempts to engorge its own failure to apprehend itself in its object and is left with an undigested lump of “cold duty” as its sole enjoyment. Comay

argues that Hegel makes a “hypertranscendental” move—one might add here almost a Schreberian one—whereby he seeks to turn “the critical bite back on itself such that the orifice between inner and outer, container and contents, is in turn involuted” (ibid.). Hegel seeks to consume time; one could even read the whole *Phenomenology* as one long procrastination: procrastination is an anal relationship to time where a sense of omnipotence is retained through a refusal of time. Anxiety, procrastination, mania, obsession, *ennui*, neurosis: all are in different ways indefatigable pursuits of an arrested time.

In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel introduces a postulate of as-if-ness to consciousness. It must always begin *as if* it is too late; as if all that had come before had been lost; as if nothing was learned. This, as Comay puts it, is “the truth of absolute knowing as a recollection of absolute forgetting” (ibid., p. 68). She considers Hegel’s Saturnine image in the figure of Kronos; a figure of obscene enjoyment and privation at once, or a perverse father, a father or worse. Comay meditates extensively on Hegel’s rewriting of a quote from Schiller and asks: Must philosophy return to poetry, as the perverse father returns to his mirror image? Kronos stands for the metaphor of digestion that Hegel employs to think of desire as the movement towards an object; an engorgement of it, a destruction of it, and a reinstatement of it into the circle of life. How do we analyze Hegel’s oral fixations: digestion and desire, Christianity and the Eucharist, the perversions of Christianity, the mouth as the knot of spirit, where both speaking and eating occur? Is the mouth a “speculative knot”? (ibid., p. 77). The oral drive that Hegel points to is our entry point to the psychoanalytic drive, which is always in any case a partial drive. The drive is what bars access to the Other; it is the sexual non-relation. Relation to an other, or self-relating negativity in Hegelian terms, is always possible through a partial drive, an excerpt (like Hegel’s excerpt from Schiller at the close of the *Phenomenology*); an *objet a* which comes into the place of the Other. In the place of a relation to

an Other, Lacan proposes there is only a relation to the object. Both sexes can only have a rapport with an object, the phallus, and not each other. Castration is the marking of negativity in the relation; both man and woman will have the phallus but only through castration, through embarrassment, through lack. In a sense, man and woman will have the phallus but only when it is too late. As Jacques-Alain Miller once put it: “To have it or not to have it, anyway it is not the being” (Miller 2001). Subjectivity is plagued with the attempts to follow desires or to take the bait, in Hegelian terms, but only falls back into the traps of identifications, into the imaginary and *jouissance*.

Stuck in Drive

The drive is precisely what we arrive at from the problem of the belatedness of thought: How do we posit the object of the drive against that of desire? What of the eventual capacity of desire versus the mundane compulsions of *jouissance*? The temporality of the unconscious is not only constituted around a retroaction or *nachträglichkeit*, but also around a second movement of cuts, breaks, and interruptions. In unconscious thought there is a repetition with retroaction and a repetition that reinscribes *jouissance* in a singular manner, but there is also the possibility of a different signifier, a naming of desire beyond *jouissance*.

The idea that the worst has already happened, that it is too late, is always accompanied with a longing for a time when nothing happens, when desire is still. Besides nostalgia for a past where nothing happens and a longing for an end that will put us out of our misery, there is also anxiety, which stands in the way of desire. Anxiety emerges in modernity precisely when it is impossible to finish, to end, to “finally progress,” but it is crucial in psychoanalysis for identifying with the symptom. Once that happens, it becomes very clear for the subject that there really is

no easy way out; that the hardest thing of all is to name a desire beyond the symptom. Anxiety is itself a form of *jouissance* that is separate from desire. Ultimately, psychoanalysis claims that we have to accept that there is no way out in order for something else to be possible.

Is there then a “too-lateness” that is not only a *nachträglichkeit*, but also not only phallic *jouissance* or idiotic enjoyment? Is there something in reality, in the thing-in-itself, that isn’t adequate to the concept? The wager of psychoanalysis has always been that there is a “stuckness,” a something that cannot be worked through, and that only through naming this “stuckness” does some form of politics become possible. Or, in other words, it is only if we really think that it is too late that something can happen. Adorno’s formulations on too-lateness in his essay on Beckett’s *Endgame* are decisive here. The dialogue in *Endgame* “sounds as though the law of its progression were not the rationality of statement and rejoinder, or even their psychological interconnection, but rather a process of hearing something out, akin to the process of listening to music that is emancipated from preexisting forms” (Adorno 2019, p. 257). Hamm’s depiction of the end (“If I can hold my peace, and sit quiet, it will be all over, with sound, and motion, all over and done with”) offers “the imageless image of death [that] is an image of indifference, that is a state prior to differentiation” (ibid., p. 266). But for Adorno (as for Benjamin), it appears that this “stand-still,” or negative ontology, offers yet another absurdity (beyond those that existentialism is stuck in) where the peacefulness of reconciliation and the peacefulness of annihilation can no longer be distinguished. The “imageless” state prior to differentiation indexes the indifference of subject and object and the liquidation of consciousness. Thus the voice through which *Endgame*’s characters speak is not the voice of consciousness or reason; it cannot be squared with the “I” against whose substantiality the ego synthesizes itself. What Beckett’s characters voice is not really something at all, yet nor is it nothing;

it is rather the impossibility of becoming. As Mladen Dolar put it, in Beckett's work: "The voice is an intruder, an alien body, the prosthesis, the *extimate*" (Dolar 2008, p. 10). This *extimate* nature of the voice is precisely what the "eternal life of spirit" hinges on. The drive, as the negation that precedes all determinate negations, cannot be the standstill of the dialectic, the moment where reconciliation and annihilation are rendered equivocal. The drive seems to be more on the side of a movement that has no end, that cannot end, that is without punctuation. In relation to this interminable movement, death becomes the hardest of tasks as what must wrest itself away from the compulsions of the drive. The subject must insist on properly dying despite all the attempts to actualize potentiality, or the crack in potentiality. In a sense, one can say that it is never too-late-to-die anyway, keeping in mind that the final repose promises no reconciliation. Death always comes on time. It is this second death, the true end, that cannot be sublated (*aufgehoben*) or grasped in its concept, but through which the concept must be staged. Beckett's *Endgame* stages this end.

The Fall

Why is *Endgame* so exemplary for Adorno? Three reasons suggest themselves. First, it is a drama about the end of drama, but one that presents drama's impossibility without dramatizing it. Second, it is a text about the end of meaning, but one that configures meaninglessness without ennobling absurdity by turning it into a metaphysical predicament (as existentialism does). Third, it constructs a form that takes the obsolescence of form as its material, without thereby presuming to have superseded it. In this regard, *Endgame's* achievement for Adorno lies in managing to express historical truth at a moment when the disparity between social experience and the resources of meaningful expression threatens

to render truth unintelligible. *Endgame* renders historical truth intelligible by confronting this disparity and reflecting upon the lapse in the conditions of meaning and the end, not of this or that, but of everything:

In *Endgame*, a historical moment unfolds, namely the experience captured in the title of one of the culture industry's cheap novels, *Kaput*. After the Second World War, everything, including a resurrected culture, has been destroyed without realizing it; humankind continues to vegetate, creeping along after events that even the survivors cannot really survive, on a rubbish heap that has made even reflection on one's own damaged state useless. The word *kaput* [finished, defeated, destroyed], the pragmatic presupposition of the play, is snatched back from the marketplace:

CLOV: (He gets up on ladder, turns the telescope on the without.)

Let's see. (He looks, moving the telescope.) Zero . . . (he looks) zero . . . (he looks) . . . and zero.

HAMM: Nothing stirs. All is—

CLOV: Zer—

HAMM: (violently) Wait till you're spoken to. (Normal voice.) All is . . . all is . . . all is what? (Violently.) All is what?

CLOV: What all is? In a word. Is that what you want to know?

Just a moment. (He turns the telescope on the without, looks, lowers the telescope, turns toward Hamm.) Corpsed.

[In the German translation quoted by Adorno, "*Kaputt!*"]

(Beckett 1986, p. 106)

(Adorno 2019, p. 240)

To snatch the meaning of destruction from the marketplace is to return it to its non-equivalence, its un-exchangeability. This requires wresting the concept of destruction free from the metaphysics of the end as accomplishment, fulfilment, completion. But this cannot be done by overturning the sovereignty of completion and turning incompleteness (understood as partial or fragmentary signification) into a new, supposedly desacralized

guarantor of meaning. This would endow the part with the power of expressing infinity previously attributed to the whole. But it is the power of expressing infinity, whether relayed by whole or part, whose termination is at issue here. Metaphysical meaning, writes Adorno, has been “exploded,” and this explosion is historically rather than metaphysically mandated. Thus, “Understanding [*Endgame*] can mean only understanding its unintelligibility, concretely reconstructing the meaning of the fact that it has no meaning” (ibid. p. 243). *Endgame* does not represent the experience of meaninglessness, dramatizing the encounter with nothingness as if it were an eternal verity. Meaninglessness is a historically meaningful fact, not a metaphysical certainty. That “all is finished,” including meaning, cannot be a metaphysical fact, since metaphysics seals allness through meaningfulness, such that meaning and totality are two sides of the same metaphysical coin. The end of meaning cannot be inscribed within a metaphysics of the end; it marks what Adorno calls “the fall” (*Verfall*) of metaphysics, which resists alignment with Heidegger’s “end” of metaphysics. For Heidegger, the end of metaphysical meaning is epochal, which is to say, conditioned by Being’s disclosive withdrawal from humanity. For Adorno, it is historical: it cannot be abstracted from the social ascendancy of capital, of which the Second World War is merely the then (1961) latest catastrophic symptom. This end—the radiant calamity of the enlightened earth—manifests the nadir of the dialectic of enlightenment, understood as nature’s recurrence in the reason that seeks to dominate it. Unbounded subjective domination binds and objectifies subjectivity. Under capital, the identity of subject and object is no longer their reconciliation in and through the Notion; it is their mutual indifference in and through the empty equivalence of the exchange abstraction, which commensurates atomized consciousness and quality-less material. *Endgame* confronts us with this vacuous equivalence: “In order to underbid history and thereby perhaps survive it, *Endgame* takes up a position at the

nadir of what the construction of the subject-object laid claim to at the zenith of philosophy: pure identity becomes the identity of what has been annihilated, the identity of subject and object in a state of complete alienation” (ibid., p. 251). Adorno cites another exchange from the play in support of this claim:

HAMM: Open the window.

CLOV: What for?

HAMM: I want to hear the sea.

CLOV: You wouldn't hear it.

HAMM: Even if you opened the window?

CLOV: No.

HAMM: Then it's not worthwhile opening it?

CLOV: No.

HAMM (violently): Then open it! (Clouvain gets up on the ladder, opens the window. Pause.) Have you opened it?

CLOV: Yes.

(Beckett 1986, p. 123–124)

Here is Adorno's gloss on this passage:

One is almost tempted to see in Hamm's last “then” the key to the play. Because it is not worthwhile to open the window, because Hamm cannot hear the sea—perhaps it has dried up, perhaps it is no longer moving—he insists that Clouvain open it: the senselessness of an action becomes the reason for doing it, a belated legitimation of Fichte's free activity for its own sake. This is how contemporary actions seem, and they arouse the suspicion that it was never much different. The logical figure of the absurd, which presents as stringent the contradictory opposite of stringency, negates all the meaningfulness logic seems to provide in order to convict logic of its own absurdity: to convict it of using subject, predicate, and copula to lay out the nonidentical as though it were identical, as though it could be accommodated with forms. It is not as a *Weltanschauung* that the absurd replaces the worldview of rationality; rather, it is in the absurd that worldview comes into its own (ibid., 265).

Rationality does not falter upon absurdity; it consummates itself in it. Purposelessness is the sole guarantor of rational stringency conceived as pure spontaneity. But the purposelessness common to freedom and compulsion is not solely negative; their equivalence is not only to be indicted. Recognizing this commonality is also the key to breaking the spell of identity, whose compulsion perpetuates history's ensnarement in nature. Taking up a position at the nadir of the subject-object identity also offers the chance of surviving history. By underbidding history, Adorno writes, *Endgame* "perhaps survives it." In laying bare this absolute impoverishment, in rendering the disintegration of historical meaning aesthetically and therefore making it historically legible, *Endgame* carves out a distance through which the calamity can be named. Pointing to the nadir, it reveals its doubling in the zenith. The worst is the culmination of the doubling that has prevailed until now; but naming it as the worst opens up the possibility of staving it off. Where idealism would affirm the difference between zenith and nadir, *Endgame* presents their indifference as the truth masked by their semblance of difference. In doing so, it does not affirm indifference; rather, it negates the semblance of difference. In this way, "*Endgame* moves away from the nadir only by calling its own name, as one does with a sleepwalker: the negation of negativity" (ibid., 254). Through this negation of semblance, history is made apparent, but apparent as *fall*: "The only part of history that is still apparent is its outcome—fall (*Verfall*)" (ibid. p. 247). The difference between fall and decline is worth marking. It distinguishes negative dialectics from metaphysical pessimism. Pessimism is reactionary because it enshrines negativity as principle. All change is deterioration. But the negation of negativity, which Adorno sees exemplified in *Endgame*, dissolves its metaphysical reification, whose affirmation of continual deterioration merely contradicts idealism's affirmation of continual progression. Whether as progressive or regressive, the continuity of metaphysical meaning is maintained.

By way of contrast, *Endgame*'s negation of negativity denies the difference between progressive apex and regressive nadir without affirming their indifference. Its denial registers their distinction, but only in negative, not as a positive datum. Thus *Endgame* does not hypocritically lament a collapse of zenith onto nadir whose inevitability it has already secretly affirmed. Where decline implies the inevitable sequel to a prior state of organic fruition, falling figures a movement in which the division between origin and terminus appears inseparable from their indivision. If the concept of *Verfall* is, as Adorno insists in *Negative Dialectics*, "the secular category pure and simple," (Adorno 1966, p. 351; 1973, p. 360) then there is no fall from grace, and this for the same reason as there is no metaphysical difference between first and second nature, or the given and the made: "Second nature [i.e. what we have made] is, in truth, first nature [i.e. what we take to be given]," which is to say, fatality (Adorno 1984, p. 124). Falling is not fatality because it first makes apparent the difference between fate and freedom, or fatality and redemption. Falling unites progress and regress, rendering their indivisibility apparent, not as something given to us but as something we have made. It reveals the meaninglessness of what has passed for history up until now. What we know as history is only prehistory, which is to say, nature once again. But this failure of realization is not a fatality to be affirmed precisely because it reveals the possibility of history, and therefore of freedom, to depend upon the negation of negativity. Negating is a doing. To take the difference between zenith and nadir as given is to render it indifferent, but recognizing that it is we who have made it indifferent by taking it as given is what allows us to make it different. Yet to allow something is not thereby to realise it. Freedom is possible, but its realization is blocked by the unfreedom of what is actual, society as fatality, ordained by the rule of capital. Rationality persists as possibility, not despite but because of the impossibility of its actuality. This hiatus between reason's actuality and possibility is fundamental to Adorno's quarrel with Hegel.

The Residue of Possibility

Adorno's 1962 essay on the concept of progress, delivered the year after the essay on *Endgame*, pushes further the suggestion that liberation is enciphered within domination, and that reason is harboured by unreason. Adorno credits Kant with the insight that unfreedom is the condition for freedom:

When, in the most sublime passage of his philosophy of history, [Kant] teaches that the antagonism, the entanglement of progress in myth, in nature's hold upon the domination of nature, in short, in the realm of unfreedom, tends by means of its own law toward the realm of freedom—Hegel's "cunning of reason" later came out of this—then this says nothing less than that the conditions for the possibility of reconciliation are its contradiction and that the conditions for the possibility of freedom are unfreedom. [Adorno 2005, p. 149]

Adorno's mention of "conditions of possibility" is significant here. Conditions of possibility are in us, not in things themselves. They are subjective conditions for phenomena, not objective properties of noumena. Thus when Adorno paraphrases Kant to the effect that antagonism is the condition for the possibility of reconciliation, and that unfreedom is the condition for the possibility of freedom, he situates this antagonism and this unfreedom in us, not in things themselves. They are man-made social phenomena, not God-given transcendent realities. The coercive and antagonistic nature of capitalist society is of our own doing. Part of Adorno's point is that recognizing this facticity allows us to see that it could be changed. Allowance here is a minimal condition: it is at least possible to change these phenomena. But of course knowing that something could be otherwise does not suffice for us to make it otherwise; it does not compel us to act. Thus the self-reflection through which reason recognizes that what it took to be given has been made by it, that it is itself

the nature from which it seeks to emancipate itself, that nature continues to dominate it through the domination which it exerts against nature, perpetuates the autarky of spirit unless it is supplemented by a practical act:

The beneficial self-reflection of reason, however, would be its transition to praxis: reason would see through itself as a moment of praxis and would recognize, instead of mistaking itself for the absolute, that it is a mode of behaviour. The anti-mythological element in progress cannot be conceived without the practical act that reins in the delusion of spirit's autarky. [ibid., 153]

This suggests that while reflection is the element within which the dialectic of Enlightenment is cognized, it is not the medium within which it can be overthrown. The element of transformation remains the social actuality (the bad totality of capital) from which reflection has become historically estranged. Thus it is the oppressive forces and conditions wrought by the domination of nature that must be resorted to in the attempt to overcome that domination. More pointedly, Adorno points to regression itself as the condition of progression: the progress of catastrophe and the wreckage of history, watched over by Benjamin's impotent angel, are in fact the only resource for the aversion of disaster and the inception of humanity:

Part of the dialectic of progress is that historical setbacks, which themselves are instigated by the principle of progress [...] also provide the condition needed for humanity to find the means to avert them in the future. The nexus of deception surrounding progress reaches beyond itself. It is mediated to that order in which the category of progress would first gain its justification, in that the devastation wrought by progress can be made good again, if at all, only by its own forces, never by the restoration of the preceding conditions that were its victim. (ibid.)

The realization of progress, understood as freedom from domination, would coincide with the abolition of progress, understood as the domination of first and second nature. But if the domination of domination (also known as the dictatorship of the proletariat) is no longer a condition for communism since it perpetuates what it is supposed to abolish, what practical act could realise the possibility of overthrowing domination? Reflection demythologizes the actual by exposing its subjective facticity. Since what is, has been made so by us, the possibilities latent in its actuality have also been shaped by our activities. But this is not to say that reflection would suffice to render the world wholly amenable to reason. Reflection itself relays compulsive identification.³ For change to be possible, we would have to change the practices that shape thinking together with the thinking that shapes those practices. This would be an impossible task, were it not for the fact that in reproducing itself the social totality reproduces the contradictoriness that stymies it as totality. This is the residue of negativity that must be negated: not just to prevent the reproduction of totality, but to transform it. This negation is the missing link between reflection and practice. Yet Adorno either will not or cannot specify the determination that would render negation practically transformative. He rearticulates the split between immanent and transcendent possibility on one hand, along with the distinction between knowledge and practice on the other. The possibilities recognised by identifying cognition harbour an unrecognised underside: this is not a reservoir of transcendent, metaphysical possibility; rather, it is constituted by the residue of nonidentity within every identification. Conversely, the knowledge governed by identity is conditioned by unidentified utilities

³ “Something compulsive distinguishes animal conduct from human conduct. The animal species *homo* may have inherited it, but in the species it turned into something qualitatively different. And it did so precisely due to the reflective faculty that might break the spell and did enter into its service.” Adorno 1973, p. 345.

(exchange), while the practice compelled by utility is conditioned by pointless identifications (equivalence). Thus knowledge is hemmed in by practical imperatives to which it is blind, just as practice is constrained by cognitive imperatives dictated by social utility. Neither knowledge nor practice exhausts the domain of the possible. But while the difference between the actual and the possible transcends cognitive and practical identification, it does not transcend reflection. Reflection rescues the residue of possibility secreted by the contradictoriness of the actual. Yet so long as it is bound only to point to negativity while resisting the compulsive affirmation of the actual, reflection merely enables the negation of negativity, without carrying it out. Naming the impasse may loosen its grip, but does not suffice to break out of it.

Living Death

Pointing to compulsion, reflection momentarily interrupts it, exercising the spontaneity in whose name it has subjugated itself to fate. This spontaneous nomination is the extremity of reflection, releasing a possibility not programmed by actuality: an impossible possibility, whose actualization requires symbolic death or subjective destitution. After symbolic destitution, after it is too late, comes a different symptom and a new nomination; a new S1 that exceeds what exists. Perhaps the Marxian analogue here is the self-abolition of the proletariat, the impossibility of affirming its identity as the working class, since to be a proletarian is to be reduced to being a bearer of labor-power (whether employed or unemployed) rather than being a laborer. As a social category, the proletariat is the negation of every anthropological predicate; it is the social embodiment of cultural destitution. The proletariat is living-labor forced to mortify itself to stay alive (by turning itself into labor-power); a mortification compelled by the dead-labor which lives from it (capital). It is the life that fuels the death to

which living has unknowingly wedded itself. While knowing this does not suffice to break the mutual reproduction of life and death, the growing impossibility of living by dying—the brute fact that their interdependence destroys its own reproducibility—may yet compel the act that terminates this compact.

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What's the Time? On Being Too Early or Too Late in Hegel's Philosophy

Mladen Dolar

It's too late. It's over, it's finished, it's done with. We've missed it, whatever the "it" was, and if it's too late, what are we waiting for? What's left for us to do? Why did we come to this conference to endlessly discuss it being too late? Maybe we are not taking the title of our conference seriously. Or maybe we are giving in to either one or the other of the two wrong reactions provoked by the title: first, the attitude of mourning, of bemoaning, lamentation over "it" being too late, having missed the right time, over the irretrievable loss; and second, the hasty assertion, the proclaimed assurance that no, no, it's not too late, there's still time, we have to act swiftly, we must hurry up to catch up. So we linger on, either to mournfully do nothing (no doubt enjoying our wretchedness and lamentation) or to engage in hyperactivity to make up for the loss. But if these two reactions are mistaken, what would then be a more proper response? Are these the only alternatives?

"It's too late"—but too late in relation to what? How to establish the scale, the measure, the timeline, the schedule on the basis of which one can proclaim "it" being too late? Hence my title, "What's the time?"—and I have to mention in passing that in German, the language of Hegel, the common expression runs "*Wie spät ist es?*," or "How late is it?," so the terms of the question already presuppose that it's late, it's only a question of

degree, and in German the answer imposes itself quite naturally. Being implied in the question, it merely extends the question, saying “It’s too late,” “*Es ist zu spät.*” The moment one asks, it’s already late; the neutral expression in German presupposes belatedness.¹ But quite apart from the German, maybe there is something in the very idea of time that makes it endemically late, so that the moment we think of time, of “what’s the time,” we have already structurally missed something, we are already too late to capture it. “It” is too late—What is the “it” that we are missing? Before “us” being too late, “it” is already too late, we lag behind its belatedness.

It has been the business of philosophy, one of its essential tasks since its inception, to ask “what’s the time,” in the double meaning of *was ist Zeit* and *wie spät ist es*, asking about the essence of time, and asking about a particular moment and its placement in the scheme of things. It has been its task to establish the schedule by which we are supposed to gauge our lives and according to which we are supposed to deploy our thought. Thought establishes its own temporality, and maybe this is what defines thought from the outset—it sets its temporality apart from common time, the supposed natural temporality, if such a thing ever existed, so thought is “always already” not only the thought of time, but also out of time, *unzeitgemäß*. It sets up a new schedule, and it’s by being placed in this schedule that one can establish one’s timeliness, or one’s out-of-timeness. But once the idea of time was established, as the proper time of thought, it immediately entailed the idea of coming too late for the great times that already passed. Maybe this is what philosophy inherited from the mythic legacy, namely the idea that once there were times when things were in their proper places, and since then things have gone downhill.

¹ Is there any language in which one would neutrally ask, “How early is it?” or “*Wie früh ist es?*” There is actually a song, as I found out on YouTube, performed by Roger Whittaker (the author is Rudolf Müssig), called “*Wie früh ist es zu spät?*” Not that I recommend it.

Time is the corruption of time. In her famous essay “What is authority?” Hannah Arendt started off by asking:

In order to avoid misunderstanding, it might have been wiser to ask in the title: What was—and not what is—authority? For it is my contention that we are tempted and entitled to raise this question because authority has vanished from the modern world. [...] [W]e can no longer fall back upon authentic and undisputable experiences common to all [...] (Arendt 1961, p. 91)

Apart from linking authority to a certain temporality (and there has always been a politics of time, with the conception of time linked to a political script—cf. Osborne 1995), one may well ask the general question whether this was ever different at any point in history, since the beginning. Maybe this is what defines the human condition: there is a crisis, a downfall, we come too late. The supposition is: There once was a time when things were on time, in the rightful order vouchsafed by a proper authority, there were firm foundations of the social, “authentic and undisputable experiences common to all,” but these times are gone, there has been a decline, there is a loss, we are in a crisis. But has it ever been otherwise? Not since Plato’s times, at least (what is Plato’s *Republic*, and the *Laws*, but an attempt to recuperate the lost origin, the way things used to and ought to be?). The history of humanity starts with tales of collapse and the demise of some originary authority in an originary presence—it begins with the supposition that there once was an order, which we missed, so now we live in a time that is already corrupt. There once was a proper past, but the present is diminished, degraded, reduced, decayed in relation to it; it has always begun with degradation. So “it’s too late” sort of defines the human condition, or at least one of its conspicuous facets. To sum up with three slogan-like adages: 1. “There were times when there was time.” 2. “Time is the afterlife of time.” 3. “We are human, so we come too late; we are never on time.”

What follows from this (rather, one of the things that can follow from it, my account is of course grossly simplifying), what lies closest at hand, is a call for a heroic attempt to recapture what was lost, a plea for restoration, the reinstatement of something that went corrupt and that we never witnessed in its full presence, having come too late. This is a past that was never quite present, except as already lost, and it calls for a future as the vindication of the lost past. So the simple question “What’s the time?” tends to imply a whole plot, a narrative from which it is hard to escape, and which held in check so much of the history of philosophy.

Arendt’s quote also implies a twist in this everlasting plot, a turn instigated by modernity. For her, authority is gone from the modern world (this is what ultimately defines its modernity), with the supposition that there used to be times of unalloyed authority, say, times when the big Other still existed and allegedly ruled supreme, not ridden with lack. But even if such times never existed, there was nevertheless a break in this non-existence: time may have always already been doomed to an afterlife, but modernity turned this “in itself” into “for itself,” the reflected afterlife, the (new?) afterlife after the (old?) afterlife. “It’s too late” may have always accompanied the notion of time, but it is only with modernity that it has begun to be reflected on. The time may have always been out of joint, but this condition has become reflected on only once the paradigmatic modern hero declared: the time is out of joint. Maybe this is a handy way to put a date on it.

Of course, there is also another kind of answer to “what’s the time,” also pertaining to the dawn of the history of philosophy. The answer would be, tentatively, “the time is now,” giving rise to what has become known as the notorious metaphysics of presence—or metaphysics *tout court*, since being “of presence” is what allegedly defines metaphysics, which would make the phrase “metaphysics of presence” a pleonasm. If we cannot get hold of the proper time, the time already lost, we can at least take hold of the now and turn it into our foothold. We access time through the

imposing immediacy of presence, the privileged now, in relation to which all other temporality is derivative. Metaphysics, on this view, is based on a certain take on time privileging full presence as the authority of thought, conceiving time as a succession of nows. This is what Heidegger would call the vulgar notion of time, with the claim that this kind of notion largely persisted from Aristotle to Hegel, thus framing metaphysics altogether.² Metaphysical time (if such a thing exists) seems to be suspended between the time always already lost and its elusive counterpart in the hold of the present now.

The two stories about “what’s the time,” the one about coming too late in relation to the great time that is already over, and the other about being on time for the now of pure presence, since time cannot be conceived of without this privileged vantage point—these two stories don’t really and necessarily contradict each other but can rather mutually support each other and actually serve a third one: a recuperation of time lost and degraded is to happen in the future, the advent of a proper “real” presence, the *parousia*, which will ultimately coincide with eternity—and Hegel himself put it bluntly, “The true presence [*Gegenwart*] is thus the eternity” (TWA 9, p. 55). If we come too late for the proper presence, already gone at the time of our arrival (like DOA), there is still the prospect of it being recuperated, not only retrieved, reclaimed, and restored, but produced and constructed so that the loss will turn into a gain. For now to be fully now, it has to

² This is not the place to enter into a convoluted debate about this issue, where one would have to bring in, say, Derrida’s complex and labyrinthine rumination in his seminal “*Ousia* and *grammé*” (1968, 1982) and Catherine Malabou’s lucid comments in her *The Future of Hegel* (1996, 2005). Let me just say, in a cursory manner, that I have always been a bit bemused by the ease with which these sweeping claims were made—both Aristotle’s and Hegel’s enigmatic and dense texts still leave me rather perplexed or, rather, awestruck, as they seem to resist any reduction to a neat and generalized pattern—just as I am, more importantly, bemused by there being so much talk of metaphysics. But this is a far longer story than what can be reasonably treated here.

be relegated to the future. It is because we come too late that we have a future, a future of vindication, where the minus will turn into a plus and the original failure will be doubly rewarded. The now is suspended between the glorious past and the glorious future to come. There can be multiple scenarios for this, religious or secular (or, mostly, secularized theological).

All right, metaphysics, loss, presence, *parousia*, eternity, and everything else that I have given here in a very cursory outline is all very well, but can Hegel be held accountable for such a view? Is there a Hegelian reading of temporality which exceeds this stance, or displaces it, or escapes it, while seemingly remaining within the same parameters?

First, belatedness, the coming-too-late, the slogan of our meeting. The stark criticism directed at Hegel regarding too-lateness has an obvious point of origin—the crown exhibit, the article of indictment, one of Hegel’s most famous quotes, the passage from the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right* (1821), where Hegel states directly and unambiguously:

One word more about giving instruction as to what the world ought to be. Philosophy in any case always comes on the scene too late to give it [*so kommt dazu ohnehin die Philosophie immer zu spät*]. As the *thought* of the world, it appears only when actuality has completed its process of formation and attained its finished state. [...] The owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the falling of dusk [*die Eule der Minerva beginnt erst mit der einbrechenden Dämmerung ihren Flug*]. (Hegel 2008, p. 16; TWA 7, pp. 27–8)

One can only say that he had it coming. There can be no doubt that he is adamantly and explicitly maintaining that it’s too late for philosophy to do anything much apart from knowing [*nur erkennen*], which is perhaps nevertheless quite something. One can, of course, immediately start bemoaning Hegel’s conservatism—everything is already done, finished, completed, fulfilled, there is a call for a reconciliation with the given, and all this is enough to dismiss Hegel’s position altogether.

But maybe one should first stop for a moment to consider the strangeness of this declaration (of defeat?), or its unique nature, its novelty. To my knowledge, nobody in the history of philosophy has ever said anything quite like it. A quarter of a century later, Karl Marx would famously scribble in his notebook: “Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point [however] is to change it.” The odd thing with this quote is that if one starts looking for philosophers who wanted to merely interpret the world, one will find none. They all wanted to change it in various ways, from Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Politics* to the philosophers of the Enlightenment paving the way for the Revolution (and to Fichte’s *Reden an die deutsche Nation* as the closest to Hegel). No philosopher has ever entertained the idea of doing something as innocuous as merely interpreting the world—except for one, who spelled it out in all letters. My hunch would be that Marx’s adage is not directed against the rule (“all philosophers”), but against the exception; it has only one addressee. Everybody thought there was still time (and we would have to seize it and change), only Hegel, seemingly, on the face of it, if we take him literally (which one never can), proclaimed it being too late. (Although, to be sure, Hegel would never use the notion of “interpreting” or entertain the idea of an innocent interpretation; he says “*erkennen*,” which is very different.)³ So instead of bemoaning the arch-conservatism of Hegel’s “too late,” one should perhaps for a change appreciate its novelty, its audacity—shall one say its revolutionary character? What cheek, to say “it’s over, it’s too late.” My proposal would be to read it not as a closure, but as an opening—or perhaps as something that escapes the unsatisfactory binary dilemma of having to choose between “closure” and “opening,” the vocabulary so often used in relation to Hegel, with “closure” usually referring to his cardinal

³ I am here and elsewhere in this paper resuming and expanding the argument of my paper on the owl of Minerva (Dolar 2015).

sin. As the textbook script goes, the major Hegelian fallacy lies in having presented a self-enclosed system, a totality closing upon itself. The axiom of this view is: open is good, closed is bad—a spontaneous assumption that one would have to shift and undo.⁴

The proposition “it’s too late” can have two opposite readings. It can mean “everything is fine, it’s all for the best,” and it seems that this is the direction in which Hegel is heading in his Preface, given his notorious adage “What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational.” The world such as it is actually already *is* the embodiment of reason, the actualization of reason, so in order to know it by reason, one has to come to a match: reason on the part of the knowing subject must find its match in the reason already embodied and actualized in the world. Thus, reason inhabits both the subjective and the objective part, and the two should find reconciliation, *Versöhnung*, in their overlap. One comes too late only to find that it’s all for the best. The other reading of “it’s too late,” which is closer to our sensibility, I suppose, closer to the bone, would be “everything is messed up and bungled.” It’s broken beyond repair, we are helplessly too late to mend it, it’s over. Which is it going to be? Do we have to choose? Can we? Is there a parallax, looking at the same state of affairs and seeing two different pictures? Are the two pictures dialectically connected?

For Hegel, there might ultimately be no dilemma: “Denn erst das ganz Schlechte hat die unmittelbare Notwendigkeit an sich, sich zu verkehren” (TWA 3, p. 257). “For only what is wholly bad [the worst] is implicitly charged with the immediate necessity of changing round into its opposite” (Hegel 1977, p. 206). Only the worst possesses the necessity to change round, so what is bungled is already bungled for the best. Could one say, “It’s too late,

⁴ Agamben’s comment on Kafka’s parable of the law proposes the formula that openness is the modern way of closure, epitomizing our predicament in the face of the gate of the law always being open (Agamben 1998). One could say that nothing is more claustrophobic than openness.

but no matter, the worst will yield the best anyway”? If there is something that separates us from Hegel, 200 years later, it is our inability to quite share this seeming optimism. This is what Slavoj Žižek called the Hölderlin paradigm, to evoke the other birthday boy, the other 250th anniversary we are celebrating this year. It is based on Hölderlin’s famous line, “Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst / Das Rettende auch,” or, “But where danger is, the saving powers grow as well,” as one English translation has it (or “where danger is greatest, deliverance is closest”). One counts on the redemptive reversal of the worst.⁵ Is there a *secret belief in magic* at the bottom of it all, by which the worst would be dialectically overturned by its own inner necessity? Or is it that the worst predicament is in itself already (the beginning of) a solution? The question arises whether the Hölderlin paradigm is also the Hegel paradigm. Or is it rather a certain misreading of the Hegel paradigm (to which Hegel himself was not quite immune)?

Coming too late, structural belatedness, may most conspicuously be pinned to this one celebrated quote (notorious to the point of entering the *Zeitgeist* and popular culture with the widespread reference to the owl of Minerva), but actually “it’s all over” in Hegel (if I am allowed this pun)—but not as a handicap to be deplored. In a way, in Hegel’s philosophy one always comes too late, and this is coterminous with a structural illusion. The thing was there, in itself, in its splendor, in its full magnificence, inexhaustible in its richness, in its immediacy, in its unrestrained indeterminacy, but the moment we come and want to grasp it with thought we miss it, we lose it, we impoverish it, reduce it, distort it, we are alas too late to get hold of its glory. The first chapter of the *Phenomenology* on sense-certainty is very much to the point here,

⁵ Cf. Žižek 2014, pp. 344–349: “[...] the danger of the catastrophic loss of the essential dimension of being-human also opens up the possibility of a reversal (*Kehre*) [...]” (p. 344). Žižek sees this paradigm at work in very different quarters, from the Judeo-Christian legacy to Marxism and Heidegger. But ultimately not Hegel.

since it deals mainly with the question of “now” in its elusiveness and its relation to language, to logos, to the symbolic. When the natural consciousness opens up its mouth for the first time to say something on its own, it’s to utter: “Now is night” (which oddly happens to be the proper time for philosophy; it comes too late for the daylight, but in good time for philosophy). We are immersed in the wealth and the splendor of the multi-faceted inexhaustible sensible being, in colorful sensuality and perception, but the moment we try to spell it out, it’s gone. The moment we open our mouth to speak, it’s too late, the thing we wanted to capture has escaped, the richest experience turns into the poorest expression. Key here might be the fact that language always comes too late in relation to “real” experience, it misses its target, structurally and necessarily so, and this may appear as the source of all trouble. Language comes too late to capture the experience, but *it is this very inadequacy that ultimately constitutes the experience*—the full presence of experience turns out retrospectively to have been a mirage. This inadequacy will haunt the (natural) consciousness all throughout the *Phenomenology*, to the very last page, for it will always be doomed to saying something else than intended.

This temporal sequence is based on a necessary structural illusion: actually, what comes after constitutes what seemingly went before, it creates a time (a fore-time, a pre-time) that was never actually present but emerges as a pre-time only once it has been missed. Formulaically speaking, missing it retroactively creates what has been missed. Or, more pointedly: *one loses what one never possessed*. Yet this loss, this initial minus, is also the condition not for regaining what was lost, but for creating, constructing something that wasn’t there before. By coming too late, one creates the right time to come, the time that was impossible to establish beforehand. It is the fall that retroactively creates the paradise from which we have fallen and which seemingly preceded the fall (which is, roughly, Hegel’s reading of Genesis in a nutshell). The same kind of logic is also encapsulated in the

title of Žižek's book *Absolute Recoil*, and here is the bottom line on it: "Hegel uses the unique term '*absoluter Gegenstoss*' (recoil, counter-push, counter-thrust [...], counter-punch): a withdrawal that creates what it withdraws from" (Žižek 2014, p. 148). The recoil retroactively brings forth what it recoils from—this is the main argument of Žižek's book. In this light, philosophy coming too late, once an actuality is already seemingly accomplished, is not simply a sign of its impotence—this belatedness is endowed with the retroactive power of bringing forth the actuality in question, which was not yet simply there despite its air of completion. It has the power of changing the very conditions of an accomplished actuality, which is actual only by virtue of us coming seemingly too late and producing what seemed to be already there and accomplished.⁶ Coming too late produces the very conditions in relation to which it came too late, and hence spells them out in construction and anticipation.

In a general way—and I am well aware that I am mixing different levels here, each of which would demand separate and detailed proper treatment, I am just trying to disentangle a very general mechanism, which, I think, is ubiquitous in Hegel—in a general way, this also goes for the Hegelian triad "in itself, for itself, in and for itself." The "in itself" is never simply there, or always deceptively so—it is created retroactively by its turn into "for itself." It's only the second step that constitutes the first, and the third step, "in and for itself," is perhaps nothing but an insight into the constitutive nature of this inadequacy and retroactivity. *Sichanderswerden*, the excellent Hegelian term, as if off-handedly thrown into the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, captures this succinctly: the apt English translation is "self-othering," implying that any "self," any "*sich*" can only be captured through its

⁶ One can imagine Hegel saying something like Clov at the very beginning of Beckett's *Endgame*: "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished" (Beckett 1986, p. 93). These are the first lines of the play, the apparent finish constitutes the beginning.

turning into other than (it)self, thus by being betrayed, in the two senses, first, of being mis-presented, distorted, falsified in relation to what it's supposed to be, and second, to be thus revealed and disclosed. The "self" is empty without self-othering, it cannot be captured by itself, on its own, it's a mirage retroactively produced by its becoming other. Or, in other words, the distortion creates the very measure against which it can be deemed distorted.

As an aside, this inspires some skepticism regarding the formula "making it explicit" (or "the explicitation of the implicit"), proposed as a shorthand for the Hegelian enterprise (which gained notoriety with Robert Brandom's famous book of that title; see Brandom 1994). In short, the implicit is a retroactive creation of the becoming explicit, it is only there in a backward movement, which creates a retroactive illusion that everything was already encapsulated at the outset, lying low, it only had to come out, it had to unfold (in line with the etymology, i.e., *plica*, fold, *ex-plicare*, to unfold what was folded). The forward movement is endowed with the secret power of retrospective production, so that it's only when something lying low comes to light that it is established as having been lying low. It is an unfolding where, strictly speaking, nothing was folded beforehand, it is the unfolding that produces the fold as a backward necessity.

This is what basically counters the cartoonish common criticism of Hegel, which can be put under the heading of "spirit lost and found again." Spirit is there in its initial substantial/substantive unity, then it undergoes a long process of alienation, becoming other than itself, losing itself in its otherness, opposing itself, and then finally all otherness is recuperated, sublated, recovered, re-appropriated, so it can coincide with itself in the final reconciliation, having been enriched by this journey of loss and retrieval, so that ultimately there is no loss at all, all loss has been made good. Spirit has to lose itself in order to find itself, and this constitutes the life of spirit. What is wrong with this widespread story? First, there is no substantive identity to start

with that could be recuperated, it is only produced by its loss, everything is produced on the way, so what is found is not at all what was lost, and the reconciliation can only be a reconciliation the inherent lack of spiritual substance. There is no origin to be recovered, no proper to be re-appropriated (as opposed to what Derrida called the metaphysics of the proper, *la métaphysique du propre*), no identity to be restored. There is a constitutive split, which conditions the whole progression.

With his stance that the origin is empty, the poorest of all, the most dilapidated, impoverished, reduced, scarce, meager, shrunk, devoid of qualities, Hegel is quite unique in the history of philosophy. In relation to our initial scenario of always coming too late, missing the wealth of origin, the proper order of things, witnessing degradation, any time being the corruption of time from the outset, tacitly implied in the very notion of time—in relation to this, Hegel's coming too late entails a reversal of perspective, an inversion of value: we never come too late, it's only by coming too late that the time is created according to whose measure we can be too late at all, and our having missed "it" created "it" in the first place. Belatedness and loss (of what was never possessed in the first place) are positive conditions. In this sense, Hegel is the furthest removed from the standard (always somewhat caricaturized) notion of metaphysics, where things are most precious and richest at their origins, and then incur a subsequent degradation. Degradation is empowering, and more generally speaking, negation is empowering.

The flipside of retroaction is anticipation, precipitation. For if one (always already) comes too late to catch things, to capture the alleged fullness of being, if there is no explicitation which would inexorably follow from the implicit, if one always starts with the second, not the first step (which is retroactively brought about and never had a proper time of its own), then one can only start by precipitation, by anticipating, with a forward thrust that has no proper coverage, no "sufficient reason" that would vouch

for it. There is no first step that would be firmly footed in the thing itself. By coming too late, one also comes too early. This is Hegel's argument in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology*, aimed, on the one hand, against Kant, who wants to come on time (and there are numerous anecdotes about Kant always being on time, be it for his walks), gets entangled in the preliminaries, in considering the conditions of possibility of the first move, and consequently never makes the first move (it's still too early for it)—a strategy doomed to procrastination; Kant is the one who would avoid precipitation (or belatedness) at all cost. On the other hand, Hegel's argument is directed against Schelling (and Fichte), who attempts to reach the absolute already with the first move, precipitating himself into it (like from a pistol, says Hegel), and thus missing it. Very schematically put, one strategy misses precipitation, the other misses belatedness—but the point is not the right measure or the middle ground between the two, i.e., to move in good time, but rather the co-belonging of belatedness and precipitation as the “wrong” temporalities to start with, which can nevertheless produce the “right” time through their inadequacy.⁷ Time is produced by it never being the right time. Thus, one can only start in an inappropriate way, by striking a wrong note, by being too early or too late, or, rather, by being too early and too late “at the same time” (but how could the time be the same?).

Hence, the problems of Hegel's prefaces and introductions, placed at the beginning, which by Hegel's own adamant and explicit proclamations is not the right way to start philosophy, these problems shouldn't be rightfully there at all if what Hegel

⁷ As Comay puts it, “Either the work never gets started or the work gets finished all too soon. These are two sides of the same coin, which for Hegel stake out the outer limits of German Idealism—the evil twins, roughly speaking, of Kant and Schelling: the tepid waters of endless critical reflection versus the skyrockets of rapturous revelation; the bad infinite of interminable postponement versus the ‘bad finite’ of instant gratification; delay versus haste” (Comay 2015, p. 260).

proclaims about them were to be taken seriously. All the preliminaries ought to be dispensed with, they are improper ways to begin, inadequate by their own standards, yet they fulfill an indispensable function, namely to anticipate unduly,⁸ without any proper coverage, to take unwarranted steps, which will hopefully be retroactively recuperated—but can they be?

If there is emptiness at the point of origin, if the origin is nothing but a split, then this is matched at the other end, i.e., at the end, the final point, not by some final fullness in the guise of absolute knowledge, which we are supposed to arrive at, but rather by a final empty point, which is nothing but a reflection of the initial emptiness. Just as the self is nothing without the process of self-othering, so there is no final self that would recuperate all otherness. There is no *parousia*, no epiphany waiting at the end, no revelation, no full presence—the final point is formal and empty in itself, it is the point of interruption: everything has already happened on the way there. While being too late or precipitating oneself forward, one has nevertheless produced time, which only exists, insists, through its violation, the excess over time.

On the face of it, Hegel thus keeps to the traditional script of conceiving of time, its framework, and the fall, the belatedness, the corruption, the recuperation, the *parousia* that it's supposedly leading to, but only by giving it an altogether different orientation and alignment. The empty origin, the empty endpoint, belatedness, and precipitation are regarded not as flaws to be remedied, but as constitutive of temporality; the time of the other is regarded as constitutive of the self, the time of corruption as constitutive of the time of production, and, finally, negativity as constitutive of positive conditions.

⁸ Most spectacularly, the notorious “substance is subject” proposition: “In my view, which can be justified only by the exposition of the system itself, everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *substance*, but equally as *subject*” (Hegel 1977, pp. 9–10). The grand claim is relegated to its future justification; it shouldn't be properly made at all.

I briefly took up the opening chapter of the *Phenomenology*, the chapter on sense-certainty, as providing one simple model of belatedness, and hinted at the problem that the model of belatedness may already be inscribed in language itself, in the vehicle of thought, coming too late to capture being at large, structurally missing it, introducing a basic inadequacy. And I want, at the end, to strike another note and take another step regarding the belatedness of language vs. being. It concerns the status of negativity, taking a cue from Paolo Virno's *An Essay on Negation* (published in Italian in 2013; see also Virno 2018). To put it bluntly and simply: Where does negativity come from? Does it depend on language, is it induced by language (coming too late), or is it somehow inscribed in being before the intervention of language and independent of it?

Negation is no doubt a linguistic entity, it has its linguistic markers, such as “no,” “not,” etc., but it doesn't have a signified, a referent, in the sense that it doesn't refer to or correspond to anything in the world, as apparently other words do—it refers to an absence. Nature arguably doesn't involve negation or the void as a pre-linguistic given (how can it refer to a non-given?). This is an old Parmenidian question, the question with which philosophy started: there can be no non-being out there, or, rather, there should be no non-being, it's not “real.” If we imagine or speak about non-being, then any such non-being is merely induced by language, by its capacity for negation, and the danger is that it might gain a deceptive hold and be taken for something, although it's just a linguistic product and not an entity. We speak of a non-entity as if it was an entity, hence the peril, the threatening abyss, the risk that speech about absence might illusively induce absence, the void. (Or, to put it differently: speaking about nothing comes “too late,” the world is already there in its positivity, hence the danger that one might wrongly imagine that speech could retroactively affect the world and produce the illusion that “nothing is.”) This would be one way of reading Parmenides's warning or, rather,

the prohibition of engaging oneself on the path of non-being. An ontological abyss opens up there, not unrelated to the backdrop of our topic. So, can one imagine an experience of non-being, of negativity as such, “prior” to and independent of the symbolic, of the use of language at large, or is it exclusively brought about by language, produced by the symbolic, by “the linguistic turn”? Does language give an expression to something that “exists,” insists, in-exists independently of language, or does language induce, produce, bring about a negative reality, non-being, or rather the mirage of non-being, which has no other ontological consistency apart from language? Does the symbolic, which is seemingly just an addition to “the order of things,” affect “being” in itself and infuse nothingness into it? Is nature “in itself” without any lack and negativity, so that lack and negativity pertain to the specifically human invention, to the symbolic? (Such was, by the way, the basic claim made by Kojève, then, following in his tracks, by Sartre, and up to a point by Lacan, all of which could be put under the heading “the anthropology of lack”—but no such claim was made by Hegel.)

This is a staggering question, and the entire Hegelian enterprise hinges on it. And let me briefly say, to conclude and before we are engulfed by this abyss, that maybe both answers, both options are insufficient. One cannot simply maintain that there is a prior and primordial experience of non-being, apart from the intervention of the symbolic, but neither can one simply maintain that it is brought about merely by the “linguistic turn” and its vocabulary of negation. One cannot maintain the illusion, either, that there used to be a fullness of being, originally, which we missed and only got in trouble with negativity on the basis of language coming too late; or that the linguistic turn coincides with being and its ontology. What can there be in this intersection, this interface between the sign and the object, logos and being, culture and nature? Is there an ontological break or gap that neither quite pertains to “objective” reality nor is it quite just symbolically

induced? Or is there something in that reality (a real?) that the symbolic negativity brings to the fore, “isolates and concentrates,” to use Virno’s wording? Is this break-gap, which is not simply symbolic but also not simply “objective,” an indication of what Lacan called the Real? This is perhaps where reflection on time, retroactivity, and belatedness should ultimately lead us.

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The contribution is a result of the work conducted within the research program "Philosophical Investigations" (P6-0252) and the research project "Theatricality of Power" (J6-1812), financed by ARRS, the Slovenian Research Agency.

Nature's Externality: Hegel's Non-Naturalistic Naturalism

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In my contribution, I dwell on Hegel's conception of nature as the idea in the form of its externality. What I outline in addressing his position is what I call a non-naturalistic naturalism. To account for the peculiarity of the Hegelian concept of nature, I first propose a sort of prologue on the modern concept of nature and the criticism it is subjected to today.

To introduce a theme as complex and multifaceted as "the modern concept of nature," let me start with some considerations about the notion of landscape.

Alexanderschlacht, or *The Battle of Alexander at Issus*, is the title of a famous painting by Albrecht von Altdorfer from 1529. The wealth of detail in the painting is so massive that it almost leaves one breathless. Altdorfer portrays a battle of crucial importance in world history: the Battle of Issus, fought in 333 BC, when Alexander the Great's troops defeated the Persians, led by Darius III, in southern Anatolia. Commentary on this painting occupies the first pages of the essay *Vergangene Zukunft der frühen Zeitlichkeit: Ein Beitrag zur historiographischen Neuzeit*, which opens the famous collection by Reinhardt Koselleck entitled *Vergangene Zukunft – Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*.

What interests Koselleck about this extraordinary painting is an anachronism:

Viewing the painting in the Pinakothek, we think we see before us the last knights of Maximilian or the serf army at the Battle of

Pavia. From their feet to their turbans, most of the Persians resemble the Turks who, in the same year the picture was painted (1529), unsuccessfully laid siege to Vienna. In other words, the event that Altdorfer captured was for him at once historical and contemporary. (Koselleck 2004, pp. 9–10)



What is impressive about Altdorfer's painting, according to Koselleck, is that in it, "the present and the past were enclosed within a common historical plane" (ibid., p. 10). Koselleck further elaborates that Altdorfer deliberately does not erase the temporal difference. For Altdorfer, that battle is contemporary, out of time, as it were. In so doing, Altdorfer is said to operate outside the temporalization of history, which characterizes the following centuries and marks the birth of the historical consciousness typical of the modern age. In this sense, Altdorfer belongs to a dimension that we can call pre-modern—a dimension that still lives in the eschatological expectation of the end of time. In fact, as Koselleck states, what marks the passage from the pre-modern vision of time to the modern one is precisely a different account of the future.

This being said, the reference to Altdorfer is also relevant because, in addition, he is considered the initiator of a painting tradition that is all modern, namely, landscape painting. His 1518 painting *Landscape with a Bridge* is deemed to be the first painting on canvas where a landscape assumes the centrality of an independent subject.

It is no coincidence that Friedrich Schlegel, admiring *The Battle of Alexander at Issus* in 1803 in Paris, where it had been brought by Napoleon, asked himself, "Should I call it a landscape, or a historical painting, or a battle piece?"

It is clear that Schlegel's conundrum makes sense only to the extent that landscape painting finds its initiator in Altdorfer. Of course, as the American art historian Christopher S. Wood rightly points out in *Albrecht Altdorfer and the Origins of Landscape*, Altdorfer's landscapes are, in a certain sense, also premodern. Unlike Dürer's or Leonardo's naturalistic paintings, they do not seem so much supported by a cognitive instance in which nature is also thought of as Master. Leonardo's landscape backgrounds are, as is well known, illustrations resulting from his research in geology, hydrology, and meteorology. Similarly, for Dürer, as



Wood maintains, “The study of nature was a discipline, and nature itself the foundation of an aesthetic of mimesis” (Wood 2014, p. 14). Altdorfer’s landscapes, by contrast, are neither studies on nature nor the results of scientific investigation: “He was largely indifferent to the measurable or nameable attributes of the natural object” (ibid., p. 18).

Be that as it may, it is in these years that the all-modern genre of landscape painting was born. Symptomatic of this genesis are the words themselves. The terms derived from *land* (landscape, *Landschaft*) are terms that existed before, but simply meant “a part of a territory.” They began to mean something more specific only at the beginning of the sixteenth century, in relation to the progressive emergence of landscape painting. The result is prominent to the point that the very terms that denote “landscape” in Neo-Latin languages (*paesaggio* in Italian, *paysage* in French), which became common words during the eighteenth century, are neologisms that were born between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to indicate not the real landscape, but its pictorial representation.¹

I.

As a typically modern subject, landscape is the invention of a society for which the city, and therefore business, industry and money, progressively became the center of life.

In his *Aesthetics*, Hegel himself associates landscape paintings with modernity, specifically the modern bourgeoisie, and in particular with what he identifies as a typically German mindset embodying the values of the Protestant bourgeoisie: “It is this loyal, comfortable, homely bourgeois type: this remains in house and surroundings simple, attractive, and neat, in a self-respect without pride, in a piety without the mere enthusiasm of a devotee, but in stead concretely pious in mundane affairs and unassuming and content in its wealth” (Hegel 1975, p. 886).

The fact that the city became predominant had a disruptive effect on the rise of a new perspective on nature, which relied on a no less crucial factor that took hold in the same period: the Scientific Revolution. As Heidegger points out in *The Age of the*

¹ See D’Angelo 2010.

World Picture, the tendency towards nature's objectification was rooted in the idea that the human subject's representation could express and deplete the totality of the world's entities in its own reference. In modernity, according to Heidegger, the being as a whole is a being only to the extent to which it is posited by the human who wants to have it before him- or herself (*vor-stellt*). The rise of the very idea of the "picture of the world" is connected, as Heidegger says, to the fact that the being of the end is reduced to its being represented. The age of the world picture, or modernity, is, for Heidegger, the age in which the world becomes a picture for a subject who re-presents it to itself.²

It is above all Georg Simmel who explicitly connects the notion of landscape to a typically modern experience of the outside world:

Landscape painting, which as an art depends upon distance from the object and upon a break in our natural unity with it, has only developed in modern times as has the romantic sense of nature. They are the result of that increasing distancing from nature and that particularly abstract existence that urban life, based on the money economy, has forced upon us. (Simmel 2005, p. 484)

The experience of landscape presupposes, in this sense, a laceration of the harmonious relationship between the human being and nature. Put differently, it presupposes an experience of the extraneousness of nature, its externality with respect to the subject, who stands in front of it as the pivotal point of its objectification. Landscape can therefore be seen as an attempt to shape this rupture, as well as to reconcile a subject that has placed itself outside of nature and a nature that is represented as subjectivity's other.

The point to which I would like to draw attention has to do precisely with the idea of nature as externality, which underlies

² See Heidegger 2002, pp. 66–69.

the representation of the fracture between subject and world, the latter being a fundamental form of otherness.

II.

Much contemporary literature that focuses on the need for a conceptual transformation in relation to ecological issues and climate change tends towards a radical criticism of the conception of nature as externality, that is, as an object that stands before a subject, a form of beyond. Indeed, it is not uncommon that in the attempt to free oneself from this peculiar conception of nature—one that has its genesis in the Judeo-Christian tradition and would gain its full configuration only in the secularization of Christian theology accomplished by modern science—the need to get rid of the notion of nature, reduced to its modern configuration, comes to the fore.

This is, as is well known, the thesis of Carolyn Merchant, who in 1980 published a book that decisively influenced the debate on the concept of nature. In her work, significantly titled *The Death of Nature*, the ecofeminist scholar presents a view of the Scientific Revolution that challenges the hegemony of mechanistic science as a marker of unquestioned progress. Merchant argues that modernity, and in particular Enlightenment culture, is at the origin of the atomization and objectification of nature, which progressively transform it into an inert world governed by pure mechanical relationships, at the total disposal of the human being. Seventeenth-century science can then be implicated as one of the reasons for the ecological crisis, the domination of nature, and the devaluation of women in the production of scientific knowledge.

The need to leave nature behind, understood as an external and inert entity, and to think in its place something different from it is also at the center of Bruno Latour's latest works. In *Facing Gaia*, Latour argues that ecology "clearly is not the irruption of

nature into the public space but the *end of 'nature'* as a concept that would allow us to sum up our relations to the world” (Latour 2017, p. 36). According to Latour, it is necessary to move from nature (a space colonized by the natural sciences and a naturalism that claims to reduce everything to this “nature”) to the world, which is something more encompassing than nature, that is, a space open to various discursive orders that evade the uniformity of a dominant order.³

This is why the former, ancient role of nature must be radically redefined, says Latour. In his reading, nature is one cosmological figure among many. Moreover, it is only one half of the symmetrical definition of culture, subjectivity, and humanity, which has somehow assumed religious connotations, becoming the god of the secularized religion of the modern:

When we claim that there is, on one side, a natural world and, on the other, a human world, we are simply proposing to say, after the fact, that an arbitrary portion of the actors will be *stripped of all action* and that another portion, equally arbitrary, will be *endowed with souls* (or consciousness). But these two secondary operations leave perfectly intact the only interesting phenomenon: the exchange of forms of action through the transactions between agencies of

³ On the same line of argumentation, arguing for a shift from nature to the world, stands Donna J. Haraway. From the death of nature should arise what Haraway calls *Terrapolis* in her *Staying With the Troubles*: “Terrapolis is for companion species, cum panis, with bread, at table together—not ‘posthuman’ but com-post. [...] Finished once and for all with Kantian globalizing cosmopolitics and grumpy human-exceptionalist Heideggerian worlding, Terrapolis is a mongrel word composted with a mycorrhiza of Greek and Latin rootlets and their symbionts. Terrapolis is rich in world inoculated against posthumanism but rich in compost, inoculated against human exceptionalism but rich in humus, ripe for multispecies storytelling. This Terrapolis is not the home world for the human as Homo, that ever parabolic, re- and de-tumescing, phallic self-image of the same” (Haraway 2016, p. 11). By saying that Terrapolis is rich in world, Haraway is evidently critically addressing Heidegger, who argues that the environment of animals is poor in world (see Heidegger 1995, pp. 192–195).

multiple origins and forms at the core of the metamorphic zones. This may appear paradoxical, but, to gain in realism, we have to leave aside the pseudo-realism that purports to be drawing the portrait of humans parading against a background of things. (Ibid., p. 58)

Latour characterizes the customary concept of nature as a series of properties: “it is *external*, *unified*, and *inanimate*; its decrees are *indisputable*, its people is *universal*, and the epoch in which it is situated is *of all time*” (ibid., p. 160). It is exactly these properties that Latour claims must be questioned in the era of climate change. In particular, it is the idea of an external nature that Latour wants to question, that is, a nature that is *out there*, that is indifferent and that in its indifference is opposed to everything that is historical, social, cultural, human. Gaia, a term that Latour obviously takes from Lovelock⁴ as an alternative to the notion of nature, is not external, since it is not indifferent:

Contrary to the old nature, Gaia does not play either the role of inert object that could be appropriated or the role of higher arbiter on which, in the end, one could rely. It was the old Nature that could serve as a general framework for our actions even as She remained *indifferent* to our fate. It was Mother Nature who served as nurse-maid to humans capable of neglecting her as a mere inert and mute object even as they celebrated in her the *ultima ratio*. [...] Gaia is no longer *indifferent* to our actions. Unlike the Humans in Nature, the Earthbound know that they are contending with Gaia. They can neither treat it as an inert and mute object nor as supreme judge and final arbiter. (Ibid., pp. 280–281)

Lastly, even an author who places himself within the horizon of so-called *object-oriented ontology*, Timothy Morton, has advocated in his texts on ecological thinking the need to dispose of the concept of nature that so pervasively marks modernity.

⁴ See Lovelock 1979.

This modern conception of nature, which Morton believes we should free ourselves from—and it is here that the importance of the reference to Altdorfer, from which this contribution initially draws, becomes clear—has to do with the “picturesque”: “In the picturesque, the world is designed to look like a picture – like it’s already been interpreted and packaged by a human. [...] The picturesque is keyed to a fundamental human-centered way of looking at things: it is *anthropocentric*” (Morton 2018, pp. XXXII–XXXIII). For Morton, thinking ecologically means emancipating oneself from an idea of nature that is necessarily flattened and reified. Morton’s proposal, which he calls dark ecology, is precisely that of an ecology without nature, an ecology that has left behind the exteriority of a nature that would find its conditions of possibility in the representational framework of a subject positing “nature” as its other.

Now, if the fundamental character of the traditional notion of nature that we must abandon relies on its externality, Hegel’s account of nature seems well suited as an ideal critical target for the objections so far reconstructed. According to Hegel, in fact, nature is essentially and most fundamentally an externality:

Nature has yielded itself as the Idea in the form of *otherness*. Since the *Idea* is therefore the negative of itself, or *external to itself*, nature is not merely external relative to this Idea (and to the subjective existence of the same, spirit), but is embodied as nature in the determination of *externality*. (Hegel 1970, p. 205.; GW 20, § 247)

Äusserlichkeit is the word that expresses and defines, in Hegel’s conceptual vocabulary, nature’s own way of being. In the following section, I intend to show what is meant when Hegel says that nature is fundamentally external. Starting from this, I suggest that the externality to which Hegel refers is not at all reducible to the one that ecological thinking claims to overcome. More precisely, I show how Hegel’s conception of nature’s exter-

nality can function as a remedy against the risk of contemporary attempts at relinquishing nature's exteriority: that is, the inability to account for the differences that cross reality.

III.

Externality is what distinguishes nature. In Hegelian conceptual-ity, to say that nature's essence is (properly understood) external-ity requires, first of all, recognizing that nature is the dimension in which entities are one outside the other, each external to the other, and in many ways independent. In this respect, nature is the realm of dispersion. In nature, things are always irreducible singularities. There is no natural object that is universal: the stone, the flower, the river we encounter in nature is always a certain stone, a flower in its singularity, that particular river. It is thus clear that to say that nature is external means to say that the natural entity, of whatever type it is, in its real and concrete being, never immediately coincides with the conceptual structure that makes it intelligible.

To understand how externality implies the separation between one's own being and concept and leads to the division between "thing" and "concept," it is worthwhile to analyze the meaning of *idea*. For Hegel, the idea is neither a model that stands outside the world and with which the world should somehow conform, nor something purely subjective, which simply arises from the minds of thinkers: rather, for Hegel, the idea is "*the absolute unity of the concept and objectivity*" (Hegel 2010, p. 282; GW 20, § 213), or the subject-object, the unity of the ideal and the real, of the finite and the infinite, of the soul and the body.⁵ Therefore,

⁵ See GW 13, § 162. For Hegel's refusal to understand philosophy as an activity that gives "instruction as to what the world ought to be," see Hegel 2008, p. 16, and GW 14,1, p. 16.

to claim that nature is the externalized idea does not mean that nature is external to the unity which characterizes the idea. Rather, it means that nature's being is the proper breaking of this unity, the tearing apart of such a bond. This is why Hegel views nature as that which is most difficult to understand, an *enigma*, to say it with Hegel's *Lectures*.⁶ Nature is something that is open as well as closed with respect to its intelligibility, since its essence is both logical and non-logical, rational and non-rational. The externality of the idea marks the specific logical structure of nature. If this is so—and this is the crucial point—nature according to Hegel is external not just with respect to a mind that considers and analyses it; nature is external with respect to its own logical structure.⁷

On this delicate balance rely the originality and difficulties put in place by the Hegelian conception of nature. For Hegel, thinking nature means, first, tracing the idea within a reality that is the shattering of the unity, of the idea. Second, considering nature per its proper essence means recognizing that such a “shattering” represents, in turn, a proper way of being of the idea itself, a specific shape of it. This is what makes Hegel's externality a very special one, such that cannot be assimilated to its different forms that have characterized modernity and that should be overcome according to contemporary ecological literature. Defining nature as an idea in the form of externality demands coming to grips with its duality. On the one hand, nature is not at all extraneous to the idea, to logos, to the subject-object. On the other, nature is never completely reducible to a purely logical discourse, since it is the idea in the form of laceration and singularization, which cannot be purged of its peculiar opacity, contingency, and non-transparency. In other words, nature takes the shape of its own negation, namely, of the negation of what makes the idea what it is.

⁶ See GW 24,2, p. 770. See also the Addition to the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Nature* in the 1830 *Encyclopedia* (Hegel 1970, p. 194).

⁷ On the essential character of exteriority that characterizes nature, see Furlotte 2018.

The extraordinary ambiguity of Hegel's concept of nature finds, in this way, its ground in the fact that nature is simultaneously a manifestation of the idea and a destruction and a fragmentation of it. This ambiguity makes nature—in Hegel's words—"the unresolved contradiction" (Hegel 1970, p. 209; GW 20, § 248 An.); in fact, on the one hand, it is a world of externality and singularized fragmentation—with all the consequences that this implies—but on the other hand, even if only in its interiority and in a form that follows from its specific externality, it is also idea. The contingency, irregularity, and conceptual indeterminacy of the formations of nature are therefore not simply an apparent fact or a veil of Maya that the sciences are called upon to penetrate and that philosophy, with its conceptual power, can tear apart to bring out the hidden essence of nature.

In the sphere of nature, contingency and determinability from without come into their own. (Hegel 1970, p. 215; GW 20, § 250)

This "*impotence* of nature" (ibid.), resulting from the fact that its figures do not correspond to the conceptual structure, is an absolutely decisive element, to the point that it "sets limits to philosophy" (ibid.). Philosophy, in fact, is tasked with finding traces of conceptual determination within nature; meanwhile, in the knowledge that in nature contingency has its proper right, philosophy must understand and respect this contingency so as not to succumb to the error of transmuting these traces into something unnatural, ending with an idealization. By recognizing nature as a way of being characterized primarily as externality, Hegel aims at a rational understanding of nature without assuming that nature is itself the transparent expression of this rationality, while at the same time refusing to think that rationality is simply a subjective network superimposed on nature to make it *rational*—as if nature in its legality were nothing more than a construct of this subjective rationality.

The rationality of nature is thus retrievable only through work that moves from the particular, that is, from the recognition of the fragmentation that constitutes the “*proprium*” of the natural. Thinking about the rationality of nature means being aware that rationality can be grasped only by exploring the detail, assuming it, and recognizing it for what it is. In a certain way, this is precisely what justifies the importance and the necessity of the philosophy of nature in discussions with the empirical sciences of nature. According to Hegel, the sciences of nature are fundamental to understanding the conceptual structure that runs through the natural world. Only from the results of the sciences, which investigate the particular, can philosophy articulate in purely conceptual terms the rational structure of that world. Such a need finds its justification precisely in the fragmentation and disintegration of the natural world. For Hegel, the natural sciences, far from passively recording nature’s ways of being, do the actual work of finding the universal in the singular, the law in the multiplicity. Philosophy of nature can operate only on this basis, since

[...] the empirical sciences do not stand still with the perception of the details of the appearances; instead, by thinking, they have readied this material for philosophy by discovering its universal determinations, genera, and laws. In this way, they prepare this particularized content so that it can be taken up into philosophy. (Hegel 2010, p. 41; GW 20, § 12 An.)

The externality of nature of which Hegel speaks is therefore not trivially the exteriority of an object that stands before a self-contained subject. The externality that indelibly characterizes nature involves, if anything, the subject itself. This is the case not just because the structure of subjectivity finds its first articulated expression in Hegel’s system in the realm of natural exteriority, namely, in the treatment of the animal organism,⁸ but because the

⁸ See Illetterati 1994, 2016, 2017.

externality that radically innervates nature runs through the whole of reality. Reality, in order to exist, always implies externality: to exist, the real cannot but be external, cannot but expose itself, can never remain closed inside a purely logical-noetic plan. Think, for example, at the level of the spirit, about the structure of action: action is really an action, says Hegel, if and only if it becomes other than the intention, than its noetic structure. Action, in order to be, must enter the world, that is, it must make itself other than the intention from which it arises. By entering the world, the action changes alongside it. It takes its peculiar configuration, never completely replicable, its unique profile, its specific consistency necessarily linked to the conditions, time and contingency of its performance. If it does not translate into the world, or if it does not accept the challenge of becoming the world itself, the action is nothing and becomes bogged down in nothing, assuming at most the density of a sleepy neuronal tremor. This is the tragic essence of action: to be, it must accept being something other than itself. And for Hegel, indeed the subject is nothing more than “*the series of his actions*” (Hegel 2008, p. 122; GW 14, § 124), or his exteriorization, the translation of himself in the objective, which in turn implies that without this translation, without this loss of self, the subject is not.

In this sense, if we consider the idea that the key aspect of nature is externality and that being reality is always necessarily external, we can, in a way, say that reality is always and necessarily also nature. It cannot be denied that the actuality of spirit's externality—and finitude, being its correlate—takes a different shape, since it is somehow sublimated through thinking's self-knowledge, which removes what at first seems external to it. But such work never ends with the eradication of externality. There is no actuality, and there is no spirit without externality. Even at the level of absolute spirit, that is, in the physicality of the work of art, in the cultic dimension of the religious symbol or the discursive articulation of philosophy, there is an ineliminable,

necessary remnant of externality and, thus, naturalness. Externality is a condition of possibility of the world. There would be no world if there were no externality. As we know, Hegel takes the prologue of the Gospel of John very seriously: in the beginning was the logos, and the logos was God. However, Hegel knows that logos and God are still nothing concrete until they accept the finiteness within themselves, that is, until they become external:

And so the Word [logos] became flesh
And took a place among us.

IV.

According to Hegel, nature is external not in the trivial sense of being what is in front of the human, beyond it or at its disposal, either as a pure objectivity that can be used and abused, or as a world dominated by laws that are completely autonomous and independent of subjectivity. These two attitudes, which Hegel calls the practical and the theoretical attitude, have dominated modernity and, as Hegel expands, although they appear opposed to each other, they mirror one another.⁹ Rather, nature is external because it is the flesh within which the logos takes shape, because it is the first condition of having something like the real, like the world. This is what makes it possible to speak of Hegel's philosophy as a form of naturalism. This should not be misunderstood as Hegel suggesting that all of reality is to be reduced to the nature investigated by the empirical sciences, implying that therefore the natural sciences are the only valid form of knowledge of reality. Hegelian naturalism instead implies a sort of decolonization

⁹ See GW 24,2, p. 769: "Wir haben ganz äußerlich angefangen, mit theoretischem und praktischem Verhalten. Sie sind abstrakt, einseitig. Beide zusammen machen die Totalität aus."

process in nature, or, in other words, a denaturalization of nature, a process of nature's liberation from its reduction to an ontological space that is regulated by the explanatory model of the natural sciences determined in the course of modernity, and that is thus opposed to the dimension of the human, of history, of freedom.

As a result, such decolonization does not leave the account of the human being itself unaffected, but rather implies a redetermination of it to discuss the human being's naturalness without flattening it based on what is other than it. Hegelian philosophy, then, is naturalism only to the extent to which it is a non-naturalistic naturalism. By non-naturalistic naturalism, I refer to an attitude that, on the one hand, avoids considering reality as divisible into the natural and the cultural world, into one sphere dominated by necessity and the other accounting for freedom; on the other hand, this interpretative position refuses to absolutize any of these sides, whose abstractness it intends to criticize. In this sense, non-naturalistic naturalism is an attempt to break away from the alternative between naturalist monism, which claims to reduce the whole of reality to the way natural science thinks about it, and cultural relativism, for which the natural does not actually exist, being always and only a reflection of symbolic operations and, therefore, cultural constructs. This opposition refers, in its background, to the idea that the world is separated into two realities, each of which is placed by the naturalist and the culturalist at the foundation of the other: in naturalism, the nature of natural science grounds culture, and in culturalism, nature is instead a product of culture, a result of the symbolic stratifications that constitute it. Naturalist monism and cultural relativism are in fact, as Philippe Descola discusses, two positions that, when they clash, ultimately legitimize each other: "They form the two poles of an epistemological continuum along which those trying to make sense of the relations between societies and their environments must position themselves" (Descola 2013, p. 49).

Hegelian non-naturalistic naturalism is a form of monism (i.e., there is only one world) that aims at neither an ontological nor an epistemological *reductio ad unum*, which would imply that the different entities originate from some unitary law able to give a linear and continuous structure to reality (be it a teleology of freedom or evolution by natural selection). This kind of monism would not dismember reality into radically heterogeneous spheres, yet it would be able to account for the infinity of orders and differences that are produced within reality—differences that do not imply any duplication or even multiplication of reality. Consequently, the recognition of difference does not necessarily lead to dualism, just as the idea that reality is one does not imply the denial of differences

In this sense, non-naturalistic naturalism wants to be a more radical naturalism than that of the naturalists; the latter naturalism—belonging to the naturalists—takes as its reference an abstract and limited conception of nature, based precisely on its opposition to another with respect to nature, and, by expelling from nature everything that it cannot account for, nourishes the articulated forms of anti-naturalism and supernaturalism with which it struggles. By contrast, Hegelian non-naturalistic naturalism can be read as an attempt to overcome the conception of nature that Terrence Deacon calls *Incomplete Nature*, or the idea of nature that must exclude a series of phenomena, which are themselves evidently natural, to remain consistent with the conceptualization received within a certain model of natural science.

V.

In 2014, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Rovereto organized a remarkable exhibition titled *Lost in Landscape*. The aim of the exhibition, which was curated by the Cuban art critic Gerardo Mosquera, was to investigate how a typically modern topic

such as landscape is interpreted in the contemporary world. The interesting elements of the exhibition were many: the idea that the landscape of the Anthropocene is one radically marked by a violent and destructive subjectivity; the idea that the contemporary landscape is mostly that of the metropolis; the idea that it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish between what Hegel called *physische Natur* and *sittliche Natur*. Among the various exhibited works, the one by Cuban artist Carlos Garoicoa, entitled *Quando el deseo se parece a nada* (*When Desire Seems Like Nothing*), attracted the most attention.

Looking at this picture, the words of Andrea Zanzotto, one of the greatest Italian poets of the second half of the twentieth century, who never stopped reflecting in prose and poetry on the notion of landscape, come to mind: "The landscape is inhabited not only by one, but by countless walking brains, by a thousand different but contiguous mirrors that create it and that, in turn, are created by it all the time" (Zanzotto 2013, p. 33, my translation).

In Garoicoa's picture, the urban landscape that stands in the background is reproduced with and in a tattoo on the arm of the subject in the foreground. Under the tattooed landscape are the words "in my soul," almost as if to say that this man belongs to that world, just as that world belongs to him. The subject is immersed in the landscape, and at the same time, the landscape is internalized in the subject. The subject is itself the landscape and the landscape is itself the subject. An unthinkable perspective for Albrecht Altdorfer. A perspective from which to rethink the concept of nature today.



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The Time of Philosophy: On Hegel's Conception of Modern Philosophy

Zdravko Kobe

In the Preface to the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel included a couple of iconic formulations, which have agitated his readers ever since. As regards the relationship between philosophy and its time, he famously referred to the now proverbial figure of Minerva's owl:

When philosophy paints its grey in grey, a shape of life has grown old, and it cannot be rejuvenated, but only recognized, by the grey in grey; the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk. (GW 14, p. 16; EPR, p. 23)¹

But nothing compares to the notorious *Doppelsatz*:

*What is rational is actual;
and what is actual is rational.* (GW 14, p. 14; EPR, p. 20)

The two quotations are often read as Hegel's vindication of philosophical quietism and conformism. Since every philosophy is "its time comprehended in thought," and since it appears "only

¹ In general, Hegel's works are cited here according to the reference editions *Gesammelte Werke* (Hegel 1968f.) and *Vorlesungen* (Hegel 1983f.), whereas the letters are cited according to the Hoffmeister edition (Hegel 1952f.). The available English translations are used and cited after the semicolon.

at a time when actuality has [...] attained its completed state,” philosophy simply cannot turn its gaze to the future, let alone assume any significant role in transforming the world. Quite the contrary, by comprehending what is, philosophy is bound to acknowledge the rationality of the actual, to bring about reconciliation with it, and as such, to conform to the existing order.

There are, of course, many other, arguably “less important” places where Hegel seems to affirm the exact opposite. In an 1808 letter to Niethammer, for instance, he writes:

I am daily ever more convinced that theoretical work accomplishes more in the world than practical work. Once the realm of representation is revolutionized, actuality will not hold out. (Br I, p. 253; L, p. 179)

What is more, in the opening lecture on natural and state law, delivered in Berlin on October 22, 1818, Hegel described the situation in Germany at the time as a “middle state” between the reign of the rational idea of freedom and the rest of positive rights. In the ensuing “struggle that [aimed] to equalize the concept of freedom with actuality,” he—programmatically—accorded a special place to philosophy:

Once the spirit of the people has risen to a higher stage, the constitutional elements relating to the previous stages have no footing anymore; they must collapse, and no power is able to hold them. Philosophy thus recognizes that only the rational can happen, whatever external particular phenomena may seem to oppose it. (GW 26, p. 234)

The obvious discrepancy between these formulations and the view expressed in the *Philosophy of Right* has given rise to a number of readings that tried to explain it away by means of an alleged (Ilting) or feigned (d’Hondt) accommodation, which was supposedly prompted by a very concrete fear of political

repression in the wake of Cotzebue's murder. I, on the contrary, would rather maintain that Hegel's basic position remained remarkably stable throughout the period in question. If there was a change, it related to his diminished enthusiasm for direct political engagement, not to his refusal of the inherently political nature of philosophy. But this is not the place to dwell on that.² Instead, I will take the first two formulations as they stand and try to understand their significance. I will start by looking into the *Doppelsatz* in order to elucidate its consequences for the role of philosophy in its time, and then proceed to the alleged belatedness of philosophy. I will try to show that, for Hegel, *true* philosophy, far from being quietist or conformist in any common sense of the word, is inherently political and timely.

In a paper devoted to the *Doppelsatz*, Jean-François Kervégan has shown—exemplarily—that in order to understand it properly, one has to consider the categorical structure of the actual; especially, one has to take into account the fact that, in Hegel, the actual does not belong to the logic of being but to the logic of essence.³ To put it in an extremely simplified way, the actual is simply not something flat and given, as is the case with *Dasein*, it rather includes a certain depth and as such stands for the inherent mediating principle that governs the sequence of temporal events. The actual is that which in the present state, always determined and limited, already points beyond it. By equating the rational and the actual, Hegel therefore not only affirms

² In my view, to put it very briefly, the change in question pertained mainly to Hegel's conception of philosophical practice, which was now more narrowly restricted to philosophical inquiry in the strict sense; and this, in turn, was conditioned by his failed involvement with the *Burschenschaften* as well as with his personal and theoretical confrontation with Fries.

³ Incidentally, this was also emphasized by Hegel: "But when I spoke of actuality, it should have been evident in what sense I am using this expression, since I treated actuality in my more extensive *Logic*, too" (GW 20, § 6, p. 45; Enc I, p. 34).

that, contrary to first impression, the social universe is a fully legitimate object of rational knowledge; he also assigns a specific role to philosophy in the self-sublation of its present state. “As a thinking of the rationality within actuality,” observes Kervégan, “philosophy fixes a limitation to each form or degree of the real world.” Hence, “political philosophy is a *political epistemology*” (Kervégan 2016, p. 41). Without having to comment on current issues or overtly engage in political campaigns, philosophy—at least true philosophy—is political in its very form.

This inherently political nature of philosophy is closely related to Hegel’s conception of knowledge. In contrast to the traditional separation of the subjective and the objective, of knowing and doing, Hegel’s speculative knowledge is essentially *subjectivized*. In Hegel, so-called theory is never merely “theoretical.” In a similar vein, the rational is not only something that pertains to the realm of the subject’s thoughts, but as an “*objective thought*” informs the structure of the world as well. This is worth keeping in mind when we speak about the reconciliation that philosophy is supposed to grant to those who know. When Hegel observes that what prevents us from finding satisfaction in the world is “the fetter of some abstraction or other, which has not been liberated into the concept” (GW 14, p. 15; EPR, p. 22), we tend to understand this in the sense that it is *our* knowledge that has remained defective. This may be the case, of course. It is important to note, however, that the above passage could equally be read the other way round, in the sense that it is the *objective* realm that has *not yet* been liberated into the form of the concept. It is Hegel’s contention that the world, social and natural, is full of contradictions and populated by abstractions. If, therefore, there is a discrepancy between “the self-conscious reason” and “the reason that is,” this lack of agreement can also be ascribed to the present state of the “real world” itself—with the implications being substantially different this time.

Be that as it may, Hegel consistently criticizes *normative thinking*, which steps forth with would-be ideals and measures the present situation against them. Such ideal conceptions lack any grip on the present world that would be needed to transform it effectively. Indeed, they are not only futile, they are dangerous, because in their striving for self-realization, they are bound to clash against the world with inevitably destructive consequences—as was aptly demonstrated in the French Revolution, or in the case of Fries’s ethics of conviction. Nonetheless, Hegel does not confine philosophy to the modest role of merely observing the world, quite the contrary. The point is only that the principles of transformation must not be taken from some abstract normative realm, but have to be recognized in the very objects they apply to. If philosophy has to teach us “how the state should be recognized,” this means, Kervégan argues, that it has “to render evident the presence of both what ‘actually’ structures the real and attests its internal limit” (Kervégan 2016, p. 13). In Hegel, the concept of an object, the famous concrete universal, not only implies a normative dimension that no finite particular can ever express adequately, it also includes the movement of its actualization.⁴

There is one point, though, that complicates Kervégan’s reading. If philosophy is inherently political, and as such always

⁴ In another recent interpretation, R. Stern proposed a “neutral” methodological reading of the passage, claiming—against Kervégan, for instance—that Hegel’s position was fundamentally apolitical: “The *Doppelsatz* can therefore be seen as an expression of Hegel’s faith in a rationalistic conception of philosophy, rather than a claim about the normative status of ‘the actual,’ *however* ‘the actual’ is understood. On this account, then, both the conservative *and* the progressive readings are mistaken; in linking the ‘rational’ with the ‘actual’ in this way, Hegel was not meaning to say anything about whether the ‘actual’ is ‘right’ or ‘good’” (Stern 2006, p. 251). Therein, however, Stern is wrong: in Hegel, the rational or the actual are *bound to be good*, since the rational idea includes the notion of good, together with striving for its realization.

already partakes in transforming the world, how, then, are we to reconcile this position with Hegel's other claim that "philosophy [...] always comes too late to perform this function" (GW 14, p. 16; EPR, p. 23)? To address this problem, Kervégan proposed the example of Plato's *Republic*, put forward by Hegel himself.⁵ However, by using Plato to illustrate philosophy's role, Kervégan, it seems, only made the issue worse. It is true that, according to Hegel, Plato managed to express "the nature of Greek ethics" in his *Republic*, and that he somehow also captured the "deeper principle" of "free infinite personality," which constituted the very pivot "on which the impending world revolution turned" (GW 14, p. 14; EPR, p. 20). To that extent, Plato's philosophy *was* a child of its time. But we are obliged to note that, in Hegel's view, Plato's project was essentially *conservative* (he wanted to *preserve* Greek ethical life against this new principle), *bound to fail* (because nothing can stop the progress of the world-spirit), and *unaware* of its true intentions (obviously). If, indeed, Plato was to be the model, then philosophy can be said to participate in transforming the world only on condition of *not knowing what it is doing*, of *not knowing what it knows*—and this is probably not the role that Hegel would have liked to ascribe to philosophy in the modern world, at least not to true philosophy.

How, then, are we supposed to reconcile the alleged transformative role of philosophy with Hegel's claim about its structural tootlateness, according to which philosophy, "as the thought of the world," is said to appear "only at a time when actuality has gone through its formative process and attained its completed state"?

For Hegel, this is first and foremost a historical fact, a *manifest lesson of history*. The great names of philosophy always, as it were, appeared only after a major breakdown of the respective objective spirit had already occurred—be it in Greece,

⁵ For a closer assessment of Hegel's use of Plato's *Republic*, see Ware 2000.

Rome, or medieval Europe.⁶ It is significant, however, that when Hegel tries to provide a more detailed explanation of this fact, he comes up not with one but at least *two* different accounts. According to one interpretation, presented in his lectures on the philosophy of right in the autumn of 1819, for instance, Hegel observes that Plato's *Republic* was indeed a "mirror of the true" (GW 26, p. 335). "Plato has recognized the actuality of his world, the principle in the form of simplicity; this is Greek spirit, Greek ethical life" (*ibid.*, p. 336). This ethical life, though, was itself "inadequate" since it contained the "highest principle" of subjective consciousness only in a "concealed" form. And it is in this negative way—as something to be repressed—that Plato incorporated it into his conception of the state. His *Republic* was accordingly a true comprehension of the Greek spirit both in its essence and its limitations, and what eventually led to the demise of this shape of ethical life also explains the mere ideality of Plato's philosophical project. "Had Plato's *Republic* not been something inadequate in itself, it would have necessarily come into actuality" (*ibid.*, p. 335). Its ideality was, as it were, a mark of adequate comprehension of an inadequate ethical life.

Nonetheless, the very form of thought—philosophical reflection as such—implied "a separation" that was alien to the simplicity of the Greek spirit. And in Hegel's view, this separation was not a product of philosophical reflection, but rather a sign that the original harmony had already been lost.

Philosophy comes forward as a spirit that separates itself; when it paints its grey in grey the separation into soul and body has already

⁶ "These are the times of the beginning demise, of people's corruption [...] As Socrates appeared, there was no participation in the public anymore; actuality satisfied him no longer, and he looked for this satisfaction in thought. Thus the Roman philosophy developed under emperors, at the time of empire's misfortune. Thus in the 15th, 16th century upon resurgence of philosophy, the spirit of the peoples was not satisfied in the same manner anymore" (HV 6, p. 296).

ensued; it is not philosophy that brings the break; it has already taken place. (ibid., p. 339)

Commenting on the meaning of this break, Hegel further suggested that philosophy also contains “a moment of reconciliation,” if only a partial one, since it “sublates the separation,” but does so solely in consciousness. This suggestion was later spelled out in Hegel’s lectures on the history of philosophy:

When philosophy comes forward to spread its abstractions, painting its grey in grey, the freshness of youth and liveliness is already over; indeed, it brings about reconciliation, but reconciliation not in the actuality as such, but only in the world of thought. (HV 6, p. 239)

In sum, according to this reading, the existence of philosophical endeavor is itself a mark of separation between the ideal and the real, which in turn indicates that the initial unity of ethical life has already been lost. As a consequence, reconciliation brought about by philosophy can only be ideal, one would say *ideological*, poised to *preserve* the world that is bound to disappear.

According to the interpretation that Hegel proposed in his lectures on the history of philosophy in 1825/26, however, philosophy is supposed to play an *active* role in bringing about a new spirit—and it is supposed to do this despite being too late. Here, Hegel likewise starts with the premise that “philosophy is completely identical with the spirit of its time” (HV 6, p. 237). It cannot but express the essence of the present spirit. However, by being the thinking of what is, “philosophy, on the other hand, in this form stands above its time,” and in this form, as knowledge, “it is out of its time.” This “formal difference,” comments Hegel, is at the same time a “real, actual difference”:

This knowledge is also that which precisely produces a new form in the development of spirit. The formations of spirit are merely modes of knowing; through knowing, spirit posits a difference

between knowledge and that which is; this again contains a new determination, and so a new philosophy appears. (Ibid., pp. 237–238)

The formal difference is real insofar as it opens up a space to overcome the limitations of the present configuration. Philosophy features as “the inner birthplace of spirit which later appears as actuality” (ibid., p. 238). For instance, Hegel continues, “what was in Greek philosophy has later come into actuality in the Christian world.” In any event, in what seems to be the world-spirit version of the method of immanent progression, which Hegel once deployed in the *Phenomenology*, the transition to the new shape is first made in the realm of thought.⁷ Philosophy, which in thinking its time always comes too late to preserve the old, is, according to this interpretation, at the same time the construction site where the first building blocks of the new are laid. Its delay in relation to the closing day coincides with its being ahead in relation to the coming one.

The discrepancy between the above readings is perplexing. It should make us pause in our confidence that we know what the belatedness of philosophy really refers to. What is more, this incongruence suggests that there must be something else involved, which we have somehow failed to consider. And this—such is the thesis I would like to propose—relates to the transformations that occurred both in the shape of ethical life and in the place of philosophy within the absolute spirit from the antiquity to modern times. I would also say that philosophy, too, must change its form in order to be able to perform its task

⁷ This is Ware’s position: “Because philosophical self-consciousness is the product of contradictions in an existing mode of life, it cannot erase those contradictions and rejuvenate a dying culture. But it can, and necessarily does, lead to the birth of a new form” (Ware 1999, p. 15). See also GW 26, p. 579: “When this universal spirit comprehends a particular mode, it makes this its object, and as it does this, it is raised above it. [...] The spirit progresses in this way.” For an overview of the intricate topic of Hegel’s metaphilosophy, see Miolli 2017.

in the modern world: from a philosophy of abstract thought it must develop into a philosophy of the free concept.

Hegel was convinced that he was living in a time of epochal changes, and he had some non-trivial reasons to believe that the modern world is decisively different from the pre-modern one. In his view, the Greek ethical life was defective, since it was not able to accommodate the principle of subjective freedom. It was beautiful, indeed, but it was also inherently fragile, and once a subject appeared in the midst of this seemingly harmonious substance, a subject that was stubborn enough in defending her deed, as was the case with Antigone, it was bound to fail. While the Roman world acknowledged this principle and elevated it into an abstract right, it was plagued by an inability to produce a common ethical substance. Hegel maintained that it was thus only in modern times that the problem of how to integrate the principle of subjective freedom with the universality of the ethical substance was finally solved, first by Luther's Reformation and then by the French Revolution. Hegel was well aware that there remained a lot to be done, that the existing states had oh-so many specific issues still to resolve, and that empirically they may even fail. However, he was confident that in the modern epoch the concept of freedom had found its principled realization.

In addition, we have to consider that, according to Hegel, the historical development of the shape of ethical life goes hand in hand with a parallel progression in the shapes of the absolute spirit, that is, in the privileged modes of consciousness the spirit has of itself. While the ethical community once attained its self-awareness primarily in art, and later in religion, the highest mode is now reserved for science. To put it in an extremely simplified way: If the Greek world was *beautiful*, and the medieval one was *pious*, the modern world is *rational*. The role traditionally performed first by art and then by religion, is now accordingly taken by science, Hegel seems to affirm, up to the

point that instead of priests we now have a “special *estate*” dedicated to the cultivation of “science and philosophy in particular” (GW 18, p. 27).⁸

This progression in the dominant forms of the absolute spirit further produced analogous modifications in the relation between philosophy and the state. To illustrate the change in question Hegel often referred to the case of Frederick II, who was nicknamed “the philosopher-king.” True, he earned this epithet on account of the metaphysical treatises (in the Wolffian style) that he wrote. However, Hegel remarks, “he was called philosophical king also in the sense that he set himself a completely universal purpose, the welfare, the best of the state, as the principle of his acts and all of his rulings” (HV 8, p. 11). And while subsequent princes abided by the same universal principles, they were not called philosophers anymore since by then, according to Hegel, *the time itself had become philosophical*.

If Plato demanded that philosophers should govern, that institutions be formed according to universal principles, in the modern states this is much more realized; essentially, universal principles are the bases of the modern states. [...] Consequently, one may say that what Plato demands is in substance established. (Ibid., pp. 11–12)

⁸ In Hegel’s modern state, the universal estate is composed of those who have made the universal the main object of their activity. As such, it includes not only state officials but also teachers and scientists: “To the universal estate belong also teachers who, for the universal best, devote themselves to the sciences” (GW 26, 118). It is interesting to note that the members of the universal estate do not send their delegates into parliament—not because they are supposed to be apolitical, but because their primary job is considered inherently political already. And let us not forget that for Hegel “the state possesses *knowledge*,” that “the state, too, has its doctrine,” and finally, that “science is to be found on the side of the state, for it has the same element of form as the state” (GW 14, § 270R, pp. 220–222; EPR pp. 299–300). It is therefore not unreasonable to claim that in Hegel’s modern state teachers and scientists, philosophers in particular, *are* state officials.

Again, Hegel did not want to deny that many existing states were still far from being fully rational and free; indeed, in his view, Prussia was in “the middle state.” The important thing, however, was that the fundamental structure was now different. Whereas once, some “30, 40 years before,” public authority used to be based on fear and force, “in the recent time it is the universal principles” that are acknowledged as the source of right. “The culture of the world has taken another turn,” Hegel declares, “the thought has put itself on top of everything that pretends to be valid” (GW 26, p. 773).⁹ And while rationality is a timeless requirement, this epochal shift in the social role of rational knowledge inevitably put philosophy, too, in front of a “more specific” task: “Since it is the culture of the time that has elevated to this form, it is a more specific need [of philosophy] to recognize and conceptualize the thought of right” (ibid., p. 774). Now, philosophy is strictly contemporary to its world.

According to Hegel, Plato was therefore right when he voiced “the highest pretension of philosophy,” insisting that “the governing and philosophizing should coincide” (ibid., p. 334). But at the time of its formulation, this call for reflection went *against* the form of the existing ethical life. In the pre-modern ethical world, philosophy not only came too late to apply the rejuvenating cure, but it actually facilitated its ultimate demise. The modern ethical life, on the contrary, includes not only the principle of subjectivity, so that it does not need to suppress inner differences, it also has rational knowledge as the privileged form of its awareness. Consequently, philosophy (and science in general) not only is not in any structural delay in relation to the world, but now also designates the very place of its concentrated

⁹ The “*power of spirit*” has established itself up to that point, Hegel professed in his inaugural lecture in Berlin, where “it is only *ideas*, and what complies with the *ideas*, that can now maintain itself: what is to be valid, must *justify* itself before *insight* and *thought*” (GW 18, p. 12).

actuality. For Hegel, philosophy now *is* the self-consciousness of the present spirit!¹⁰

If we now return to the grey in grey, we first have to make some qualifications regarding the proper scope of Hegel's declaration. In fact, on this particular occasion Hegel does not aim at philosophy as such, he explicitly refers to the attitude of those philosophers who would like to "*issue instructions* on how the world ought to be" (GW 14, p. 16; EPR, p. 23). It is against such *abstractly normativistic* philosophies—Fries's in particular, we may safely assume—that Hegel *additionally*, in the guise of illustration ("at any rate, always") alludes to the manifest lesson of history.

What used to be the case before does not need to hold any longer, however, especially if a major shift has taken place in between. And in Hegel's view, this is exactly what happened: in recent times, there has been an epochal change in the shape of the ethical substance, which essentially resolved the great task of history and elevated philosophy, and science in general, to become the privileged form of knowledge the spirit has of itself. While philosophy was *once* necessarily out of tune with its non-philosophical world, now, after the world has itself become philosophical, philosophy is in principle in line with it.¹¹

In the modern world, philosophy should therefore fully assume the role that transpires from the *Doppelsatz*. As "its time comprehended in thought," true philosophy is to comprehend

¹⁰ E. Renault developed a reading of what he calls "Hegel's presentism" that comes very close to our own, including in respect to the epochal change in the role of philosophy in the modern time. See Renault 2004 and 2015.

¹¹ The same was affirmed by Jaeschke: "This is the point where the previous relationship between philosophy and actuality is reversed—the relation that philosophical thinking always comes after reality is already complete. Thus world history changes its character after the end of the history of philosophy. Now its content is not the cognition of the principle of freedom, but its realization" (Jaeschke 1984, p. 115).

what is in the present and thereby contribute to its continuous self-sublation. This is not to say that philosophy has essentially become a theory of revolutionary praxis, but it is the place of the self-conscious thought of the actual. In order to perform this function, however, philosophy has to meet at least two requirements. First, since the modern world is itself philosophical, it is only by explicitly wanting to be a child of its time that philosophy can perform its task. True philosophy must now, more than ever, want to reside in what is.¹² And second, and more importantly, along with the modern shift in the shape of the objective spirit, philosophy, too, has to undergo an analogous change in its form. For Hegel, the task of philosophy is “to transform representations into thoughts—and indeed, beyond that, the thought into the concept” (GW 20, § 20R, p. 64; Enc I, p. 52). The major threat accordingly stems from the possibility that philosophy might perform its task only half-way, stopping short at the stage of abstract thought and understanding, which essentially remains enclosed within the same regime of knowledge. It is true that representation is primarily linked to the sensitive material, whose singular determinations appear isolated and external to each other. In Hegel’s view, however, this equally applies to so-called abstract concepts: “In this case, several isolated simple determinations are similarly strung together, remaining outside one another, despite the bond assigned to them in the subject possessing them. Representation here meets with the *understanding*,” (GW 20, § 20R, p. 64; Enc I, p. 52). Abstract thought insofar still stands within the boundaries of representation, and since the latter is the mode of knowledge that is typical of religion, the respective philosophy of understanding could be aptly

¹² The thesis on philosophy always coming too late hereby acquires an additional corroboration. Before the advent of modernity, philosophy was in a structural delay with respect to the world. Now, it still comes too late to issue any instruction on how it should be, but for the opposite reason—because the world now, in principle, already is how it should be.

described as philosophy *under the mark of religion*. For Hegel, the philosophy of understanding is formally authoritarian, religious philosophy. This explains why he was so critical of the Enlightenment, and why he decried the subjective arbitrariness and barbarism that he saw in certain philosophical systems of his time.¹³ Against such phenomena Hegel claimed with particular insistence that philosophy had to go all the way down and transform thoughts into concepts. Only in this way would it finally establish itself as a free science of the modern world.

That philosophy is free of all authority, that it enforces its principle of free thought, independent of all internal and external authority, requires that it has come to the concept of free thought, that it starts from free thought, that this is the principle. (HV 6, p. 303)

If philosophy wants to be on a level with its time, it has to go beyond the religious form of representation. In particular, it has to abandon the standpoint of understanding with its *mos geometricus* and embrace speculative thought, whose concepts inhabit reality. Unless philosophy finally becomes true philosophy, such as Hegel's, a philosophy of the free concept, it will remain external to its world, diverging and deferring the march of

¹³ To be sure, Hegel in no way rejected the political engagement of "enlightened" philosophers, what he deplored was their attachment to abstract understanding, which led them into erroneous battles. For him, the Enlightenment and so-called superstition were two sides of the same coin. This explains why he considered the Church *and* the Enlightenment the two major opponents of true philosophy. "Philosophy has two oppositions. On the one hand, it seems to be opposed to the Church, and it has this in common with education, reflection, that in conceptualization it does not stop at the form of representation [...] However, this opposition is only formal. The second opposition it has against the Enlightenment, against indifference of the content, against opinion, against the despair of giving up the truth [...]" (HV 5, p. 175). For Hegel, the Enlightenment resembled some features of the Christian creed that he considered barbaric because they immediately mixed the highest (the truth revealed in the absolute religion) with the lowest (empty subjectivity, the form of feeling, external authority). See HV 5, p. 267.

the spirit, as was the case with the struggle of the Enlightenment against superstition. And this danger is real.

To conclude, I would claim that Hegel is timely. But we, contemporary philosophers—insofar as we are still entangled in the habits of what Hegel called understanding—it is us that may lag behind Hegel, and consequently also behind our time.

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The contribution is a result of the work conducted within the research projects “Hegel’s political metaphysics” (J6-2590) and “The Possibility of Idealism for the Twenty-First Century” (J6-1811), financed by ARRS, the Slovenian Research Agency.

Is It Too Late?

Bara Kolenc

Is it too late—for the world, for humankind, for philosophy? Yes, it is too late. But this is only the beginning.

1. The Swelling of the End

In the middle of the 1990s, when the peaceful part of the world was discussing the post-historical era, the end of ideology, and the end of grand narratives, a certain systemic failure (a minor failure that would need to be recuperated, in Fukuyama's view¹) was taking place in the Balkans. There was a considerable piece

¹ As the remnant of the dialectical historical process developing towards the end of history, achieving its final state in overcoming all of the world's contradictions in the political system of liberal democracy—a post-historical state already accomplished by the North-Atlantic world and still struggled for in other parts of the world, which are, like the Balkans, still *in* history (cf. Fukuyama 1989, 18). Fukuyama's view (leaning on Kojève's interpretation of Hegel's philosophy of history, promoting the idea of the "universal homogenous state") was widely criticized for being subordinated to the leading ideology of neoliberalism. However, as shown by Alenka Zupančič, the thesis about the end of history became even more vivid on the side of the critics of liberal-democratic capitalism (Deleuze, Lyotard, Badiou, Jameson, Agamben, Virno, Meillassoux, and others), which points out "both its emptiness and non-eventfulness, as well as the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of a breakthrough coming out of it" (Zupančič 2019, p. 12, quote translated by B. Kolenc). What appears to Fukuyama as the end of history, reveals itself as the *impossibility of an ending* on the side of critical theory, notes Zupančič.

of history happening (and being suppressed) on the outskirts of Europe: a fratricidal war of political and religious proportions, a complete disregard of the Geneva Conventions, a genocide—accompanied, in a small irony of history, by the publication of Fukuyama's book *The End of History and the Last Man* coinciding with the beginning of the Bosnian War in 1992.²

The Sarajevo Book of the Dead,³ a collection of poems written by Bosnian-Slovenian poet Josip Osti, is one of the most valuable documents of this suppression, of a disappearing reality that clung in its condemnation and its poor finality to the letters and words of a poet who turned by necessity into a witness of this reality, and whose verses could only have echoed a deep silence. A silence about the vanishing city that changes its image from one minute to the next, about teenage butchers breaking into homes, robbing, killing and massacring families, about corpses that cannot be buried because it is too dangerous outside, so they are kept in their homes, lying in beds next to the living, the dead and the living maintaining their coexistence, the living-dead together with the dead-living, about the blond blue-eyed girl who took refuge in a hall during a sniper attack and who claps merrily at the sight of people on the street jumping on one leg, exclaiming, "Mom, I would also like to play hopscotch with them," about gangs of obnoxious minors playing with hand grenades and blowing up Albanian confectioneries at night, so that baklavas, shedentiles and tulumbas rain from the sky, but children cannot pick them up because they sleep behind lowered blinds, about lovers meeting in parks that have become cemeteries with felled trees, which were cut down to be used as firewood, kissing ever more passionately in the face of snipers, about kids who turned into old men overnight, sitting motionless and pensive as sages,

² Though his notorious article "The End of History?" was published three years earlier, in 1989.

³ A bilingual publication in Bosnian and Slovenian, with the original title *Sarajevska knjiga mrtvih*. Cf. Osti 1993.

and old men who turned into kids, constantly asking questions to which children cannot give satisfactory answers. Today, this document is itself almost forgotten.⁴

One of the poems notes two men playing chess—a friendly habit, arrangement, and necessity—who take turns visiting each other every evening even after the outbreak of the war. When the constant shooting and the curfew limit their visits, they report their moves to each other by phone. They do not interrupt the game even when the telephone connections are severed, each sitting in his own apartment and responding to the presumed moves of the other. And when one day a speck of grenade shatters the head of one of them, the one living in the attic, the other man, who does not know about his comrade's death, still carries on with the game: "without knowing what happened / the other continued to move the figures / defended and attacked / already with a dead opponent / fought" (Osti 1993, pp. 98–99). And as if the man without the head never noticed what had happened either, he sits still in his armchair, leaning over the chessboard, sitting there for the following four days until found by the neighbors, who had been—unlike himself—hiding in the basement when the bombing occurred.

The game of chess continues after the death of one of the players. The one who is left alive keeps anticipating his opponent's moves. In the abidance of the game, the man who is already dead is still present: not in his physical appearance, but in the moves attributed to him. He is present through the function he acquires in what Huizinga calls "the autonomous reality of the play."⁵ In a

⁴ The translations of excerpts from *The Sarajevo Book of the Dead* into English are provisory, made by B. Kolenc.

⁵ With consensus as its founding moment, the play establishes an autonomous reality separated from everyday life: it is a space of freedom, equality, order, and the abolishment of private property with its own spatiotemporal coordinates (cf. Huizinga 1949). In his re-reading of Huizinga's disposition, Gadamer argues that "the purpose of the game is not really the solution of the task, but the ordering and shaping of the movement of the game itself" (Gadamer 1989, p. 97), for which encounter with otherness is essential.

weird way, the role itself acquires some sort of autonomy: it matters little if the other player is alive or not as long as he maintains his part (in a way, this echoes Molière's collapsing onstage while playing the part of the sick man in *The Imaginary Invalid*). From this perspective, we should perhaps reconsider the famous statement by the respected Slovenian theatre director Dušan Jovanović, who passed away recently, the statement that it is impossible to perform death on stage (the ultimate performance therefore being dying for real in front of an audience—as was almost the case with Molière and as happened recently to the stand-up comedian Ian Cognito). What truly *is* impossible, is not performing death on stage (anyone can be shot with a proper bullet or take some cyanide), but *maintaining* the role even after one's death.

The chess player who is left alive keeps playing with his dead colleague as if holding a figure would protect him against dying. The relationship between the game and everyday reality is turned upside down: it is not only true that if I die, the game will end, it is also true that if the game ends, I will die (a subversion common to superstition and to the rituals of obsessional neurosis). He carefully avoids any anticipation of the opponent's move that could end the game. Thereby, he actually plays two games at once, with two opposite goals: one is to win and the other is to not win. Meandering between the conclusion of the game and its hypothetical prolongation into infinity, he is caught in a temporal loop, in some sort of extension of the moment of ending: he pulls forward and backward at the same time. However, it is not just the lonely player who sticks to the game, it is also the game itself that clings to the player—for without him, it would have ended prematurely, before even bringing itself to an end.

In yet another poem, Osti deals with the topic of fire in the theatre, a popular motif of both poetry and theory. But the limits of conceptual curiosity are once again transcended with a sort of blow of the real: watching the Sarajevo National Theatre burning, Osti remembers how he was in this theatre for the first time as a kid with his grandma, pulling her by the hand and wanting

to leave because there was a fire performed onstage (they were playing a dramatization of the notorious Slovenian novella *The Bailiff Yerney and his Rights*, written by Ivan Cankar). He asks himself: “did I then / forty years ago / want to run from the fire in which / these days / burned down the building of the sarajevo [sic.] national theatre?” (Osti 1993, pp. 82–83).

In this book of the dead, something happens with time: the clock spring cracks and the pointers spin back in a flash while children turn into old men and old men back to children. Time is running backward and forward, exploding at moments or lingering like mist over the river Miljacka, in which people are catching fish with bare hands. The fire in the theatre traverses not only the border between fiction and reality, which young Osti is unable to discern, but also the border between the past and the present. The fire is spreading from the memory of a poet to the unsurpassable reality that surrounds him, from sparkles in the performance to the fireworks of the spectacle of war.

What is at work in these poems is not only an uncanny blurring of the boundary between life and death, which Freud explicates through Hoffmann’s *Sandman*⁶ and which is so present in Kantor’s Theatre of Death.⁷ It is not even just the tendency of the existent something to be “driven out and beyond itself,” which Hegel ascribes to simple existence. Rather, it is something much more fundamental and all-encompassing: the city is falling apart, but *something persists*. Something just does not capitulate, no matter how much it is being trampled.

It is common to poetry, art, and philosophy that they aspire to transcend the world’s finitude and the individual’s mortality with an “eternal idea.” Such an eternal idea is, for example, constituted

⁶ Cf. Freud 2013.

⁷ With his performance *The Dead Class* (1975), Tadeusz Kantor proposed—with a radical *tour de force* of theatre conventions—a vision of the Theatre of Death, which explored the persistence of memory and its interplay with time and the construction of history.

through the concept of hope (hope dies last), or through a vision of sacrifice (the revolutionary stance of dying in the name of an idea). It is, especially in ancient Greek art, stated by fate, which is either hopelessly fought against or passively surrendered to, or, in Christianity, by faith in God, supported by the promise of salvation. In this manner, poetry, art, and philosophy attempt to overcome finitude and interconnect it with infinity. Reading Osti's poems, however, we get a very clear impression that what persists is *not* some reality beyond the existent world or something that is believed to emerge after its extinction, but rather something *within the world itself*. It is not hope, nor faith, nor a revolutionary idea that keeps the characters and the poet himself going despite their desperate circumstances, but something much more earthly, even carnal, stripped of any remorse over finitude and the destiny of the existent world.

In this mousetrap-like city, it seems to be too late for everything. However, within the rapid process of destruction on the very edge of the city's existence, it seems not to be too late for too-lateness itself. Something is going on: like some sort of swelling of the end, like some ungraspable extension of the moment of extinction. As if *the end* itself was not a singular and final rupture, but rather *something that lasts*; as if something only *began with the end*, through and over it.

2. *The Sorrow of Finitude*

Existent things are finite. Their determination, states Hegel in his *Science of Logic*, does not go past their *end*. They are caught in a trap.

The existent something (*Etwas*) is determined by its quality, whereby it is also delimited.⁸ An opposition between the existence

⁸ Hegel's premises of existence (*Dasein*) are the following: "Existence is determinate being; its determinateness is existent determinateness, quality. Through

of a thing and a limit immanent to this existence constitutes the thing's *finitude*. Because of this specific constellation, for an existent thing, a denial of its finitude also means a denial of its very existence, that is, a denial of the thing itself. For this reason, a further dialectical move, a negation of finitude, a reach beyond its determination, does not protect the existent thing against its finality, it does not make it infinite or immortal, but, on the contrary, condemns it once more to its inevitable end. It is impossible to escape the vicious circle of finitude: it is not only the immanent opposition between existence and its determination but also the negation of this opposition that brings an existent something to an end.

This is the paradox of existent things: running away from their finitude is possible only under the condition of putting themselves to an end. But this would again be—and this is the trap—a confirmation of their finitude. “Finite things *are*,” claims Hegel, “but in their reference to themselves they refer to themselves *negatively*—in this very self-reference they propel themselves beyond themselves, beyond their being. They *are*, but the truth of this being is (as in Latin) their *finis*, their *end*” (Hegel 2010, p. 101). In the last instance, this means that *it is non-being that constitutes the being of the existent world*: “When we say of things that they are finite, we understand by this that they not only have a determinateness, that their quality is not only reality and existent determination, that they are not merely limited and as such still have existence outside their limit, but rather that non-being constitutes their nature, their being” (ibid.). As soon as an existent thing emerges, it is already doomed to extinction: “The finite does not just alter, as the something in general does, but *perishes* [*vergeht*], and its perishing is not just a mere possibility,

its quality, something is opposed to an other; it is alterable and finite, negatively determined not only towards an other, but absolutely within it” (Hegel 2010, p. 101). And: “Quality, in the distinct value of existent, is reality; when affected by a negating, it is negation in general, still a quality but one that counts as a lack and is further determined as limit, restriction” (Hegel 2010, p. 85).

as if it might be without perishing. Rather, the being as such of finite things is to have the germ of this transgression [*Keim des Vergehens*] in their in-itselfness: the hour of their birth is the hour of their death” (ibid.).

Things cannot catch up with their own beginnings: as soon as they come into existence, it is already too late. For Hegel, an existent thing is not just born, and afterwards it dies, but it *dies as soon as it is born*. The event of death does not only succeed the event of birth, but also directly coincides with it. This means that existence, *Dasein*, is not only *being-towards-death*, as Heidegger puts it, but is at the same time also *death-towards-being*.⁹ What is normally considered to be the event of death is not some empty nothingness that intervenes into the supposed fullness of the being of existence, destroys it, and establishes itself in place of its demolition, but it is rather something that has always already been inscribed in existence itself. From this perspective, we can perceive the coexistence of the dead and the living in the households of Sarajevo not as some sort of transcendence of the unsurpassable (and uncanny) line between life and death, but rather as a paradoxical juxtaposition of life and death in the cohabitation of *the living dead* (everyone who is alive is always already dead—she or he was not only born to die, but was born to death straightaway) and *the dead living* (even those who die still participate in the daily routine, for it matters little if you die or not since you have been dead since birth). Therefore, *The Sarajevo Book of the Dead* is not a book of condolences written by the living to the dead. It is a book of resistance written by the dead to the living.

⁹ If we transfer this supposition from the level of *Dasein* to the level of *Sein* (following Heidegger’s task of philosophy articulated in the last chapter of *Being and Time*), we can say that what is fundamental according to Hegel is not only being, which has always already been temporalized as subjected to dying and finitude, but—simultaneously—also time, which has always already been ontologized, for death itself is nothing but a rupture in the birth of being. Cf. Heidegger 1996 and footnote no. 21 in this article.

It has always already been too late for the world. It is destined to perish. This is what Hegel calls *the sorrow of finitude*.

3. In-Finitude/Un-Endlichkeit

The understanding often clings to the sorrow of finitude, to the fact that existent things are condemned to perish, and is unable to surpass it. This is, Hegel argues, because of one of the most adamant ideas of humankind (and of philosophy): the insistence on a qualitative difference between being and nothing. Being is thought to be eternal and absolute, while nothing is perceived as an absolute negation of being and its attributes. Accordingly, this also means insisting on a qualitative difference between finitude and infinity: the finite is considered to be restricted and perishable, pertaining to nothingness, while the infinite is unlimited and eternal, pertaining to being. Following this, “the official claim is that the finite is incompatible with the infinite and cannot be united with it; that the finite is absolutely opposed to the infinite” (Hegel 2010, p. 102).

“The falsification [*die Verfälschung*],” states Hegel, “that the understanding perpetrates with respect to the finite and the infinite, of holding their reciprocal reference fixed as qualitative differentiation, of maintaining that their determination is separate, indeed, absolutely separate, comes from forgetting what for the understanding itself is the concept of these moments” (ibid., p. 116). In this falsification, which comes from forgetting that nothingness is not something that stands in stark contrast to being, but is rather its inner otherness, it is now the understanding itself that gets caught in a trap. The trouble of this trap is that reflection can assert the unity of finitude and infinity only in their abstraction, for as soon as it wants to determine them by attributing to them a quality, they fall apart, forming an opposition. And the other way round: proceeding from their qualitative incompatibility

(finitude is limited and perishable, infinity is unlimited and eternal), reflection cannot make a transition between the finite and the infinite unless it brings them to the level of abstraction. The relation between finitude and infinity remains external as long as it rests upon the covert assumption that the two differ in their quality. Let us call this trap *the sorrow of thought*.

The most infamous example of such sorrow of thought, which Hegel explicitly criticizes, is the idea that *everything perishes yet it is the very perishing that is eternal*. In this view, the *eternal being of finitude* is insisted on, which is precisely its *transitoriness* [*die Vergänglichkeit*]: “Their transitoriness would only pass away in their other, in the affirmative; their finitude would then be severed from them; but this finitude is their unalterable quality, that is, their quality which does not pass over into their other, that is, not into the affirmative; *and so finitude is eternal*” (ibid., p. 102). “The understanding,” claims Hegel, “persists in this sorrow of finitude, for it makes non-being the determination of things and, at the same time, this non-being imperishable and absolute” (ibid.).

Everything perishes except the perishing itself. The perishing itself, however, does not perish, it endures because of the stubborn declaration that finitude and infinity are incompatible: “The finite remains held fast over against it as its negative; incapable of union with the infinite, it remains absolute on its own side; from the affirmative, from the infinite, it would receive affirmation and thus it would perish; but a union with the infinite is precisely what is declared impossible” (ibid.). The understanding keeps apart the *opposition* of the finite and the infinite on the one hand and their *unity* on the other. But the truth is, Hegel argues, that the unity of the finite and the infinite and their opposition are interconnected in a process of mutual determination through negation: “Thus the finite and the infinite are both this movement of each returning to itself through its negation; they are only as implicit mediation, and the affirmative of each contains the negative of each, and is the negation of the negation” (ibid., p. 117).

The question of how the infinite becomes finite preoccupied philosophy from the Presocratics to Kant. But, stresses Hegel, the key point is that it is *not* the *transition* from finitude to infinity, or the other way round, that is conceptually incomprehensible: it is the very *divide* between them. For the determination of each is implicit in the other. And “to have a simple insight into this inseparability which is theirs, means that we comprehend them conceptually” (ibid., p. 123). It is precisely this *inseparability that is their concept*. The answer to the question “How does the infinite become finite?” is therefore this: “*There is not an infinite which is infinite beforehand, and only afterwards does it find it necessary to become finite, to go forth into finitude; the infinite is rather for itself just as much finite as infinite*” (ibid., p. 123).

Following this consideration, we can see that what opens up and lingers in Osti’s poems is the striking fact that infinity is not something that comes *after* the end, after *finis* (or something that exists in some parallel eternal reality beyond the finite world), but something that is itself essentially interwoven with finitude. One cannot transcend finitude by elevating it to the level of an eternal idea. Firstly, because finitude cannot be preserved through any kind of transcendence—existent things are doomed to perish—, and secondly, because infinity cannot exist without relation to a limit. The brutal truth is that infinity is essentially interwoven with finitude, it cannot get rid of it: something will always pull its wings to the ground. And the other way round (this might well be the beautiful aspect of it): meager existence is itself perforated with eternity—it is through the very process of the world’s extinction that infinity is constituted. It is within the existent world, within the very perishing, within the swelling of the world’s end that something infinite persists: not through an alleged reconciliation of finitude and infinity (which is always a falsification), but rather through their unsurpassable contradiction. The only way one can get to infinity is through the paradox of finitude, which opens

up through the (im)possibility of ending the end,¹⁰ through the absurd task of *killing death*.

“It is an excessive tenderness for the world to keep contradiction away from it,” claims Hegel in his commentary on Kant’s first cosmological antinomy from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, “to transfer it to spirit instead, to reason, and to leave it there unresolved” (Hegel 2010, p. 201). The world is fundamentally contradictory: “nowhere does the so-called world—call it the objective, real world, or, in the manner of transcendental idealism, subjective intuition and sense-content determined by the category of the understanding—nowhere, however you call it, does it escape contradiction” (ibid.). But because the world is not capable of enduring this contradiction, it is “left to the mercy of the coming and ceasing to be” (ibid.). And it is the task of the spirit, of language and of thought, not to ignore the world’s contradictions, but to take them upon itself and to aim at resolving them: “spirit is the one which is strong enough that it can endure contradiction, but it is spirit again which knows how to resolve it” (ibid.).

Let us call the interconnection of finitude and infinity, which stems from the fundamental intertwining of being and nothing, *in-finitude*, Un-Endlichkeit: it is only through enduring the condemnation of the existent world to extinction that the path for reflection towards in-finitude opens up.

¹⁰ According to Hegel, finitude is the most obstinate of the categories of the understanding, because of the specific form of negation inscribed into it: finitude is qualitative negation driven to the extreme. “In the simplicity of such a determination,” states Hegel, “there is no longer left to things an affirmative being distinct from their determination as things destined to ruin” (Hegel 2010, p. 101). Contrary to negation in general, constitution, and limit, which are compatible with their other, finitude is negation *fixed in itself* and, as such, stands in stark contrast to its affirmative: “Its refusal is rather to let itself be brought affirmatively to its affirmative, the infinite, to be associated with it; it is therefore inseparably posited with its nothing, and thereby cut off from any reconciliation with its other, the affirmative” (ibid., p. 102).

4. *The Falsification of Neo-Liberalism and the Morbidity of Capitalism*

It is not hard to see that “absolute boredom,” the suffocating feeling of vacuum and the impossibility of radical change that grew globally from the late ’80s until the 2008 financial crisis, was nothing but an expression (or representation) of the very trap thought gets caught in when proclaiming the reconciliation of finitude and infinity while silently maintaining their qualitative difference. After the end of grand narratives and the bankruptcy of eternal truths, which determined the postmodern era, reflection staked everything on the one single handle that was left: there is a certain truth in the fact that there is no truth, there is something firm in the fact that everything is transitory, there is something unchangeable in the all-encompassing change. The common attitude that prevailed in late twentieth century drew on the idea that things do perish; however, it is the very perishing that persists. Even if every single existent thing is doomed to finitude, the world is nevertheless eternal. Or, more accurately: it is precisely *the inevitable ephemerality of things that makes the world eternal*.

Taking a closer look, we can see that the general worldview of this period, taken up not only by the advocates of the post-historical idea but also by its critics, perpetually swung between two equally abstract and external propositions of a connection between finitude and infinity. The first was the idea of the *eternal return of the same*, leaning on the conception of perishing as the eternal being of finitude (things and events and people will come and go, but the carousel of existence will forever stay on track, turning and returning forevermore). The second was the vision of a limitless expansion of capital (and freedom), of an *infinite production of the new* (that is, of finitude), building upon the idea of infinite progress, which is criticized by Hegel as only

“an abstract transcending which remains incomplete because the transcending itself has not been transcended” (Hegel 2010, p. 113), and is therefore only a “repetitious monotony, the one and the same tedious alternation of this finite and infinite” (ibid.). What might seem like a “beautiful reconciliation” of the post-ideological era is actually nothing but an abstract linking of these two (obviously incompatible) propositions of an external connection between finitude and infinity, both clinging to their qualitative difference, to achieve some unity of a higher order: a unity of *the infinite progress of capital and freedom* on the one hand, and of *the preservation of the existent order* on the other. This is, as it is immediately evident, the ultimate utopia of *neo-liberal conservatism*.

On the surface, it looks like the final reconciliation of perishing and the eternal (it is exactly the production of the new — i.e., the multiplication of things with limited durability — that will last forever), like the ultimate achievement of the Enlightenment (a limitless expansion of freedom, which will bring us eternal peace), while behind-the-scenes there is a terrible stalemate taking place: the perpetual reciprocal reference of two equally abstract notions (finitude and infinity) produces an impasse as soon as the understanding tries to determine either of them. In bringing abstract ideas of finitude and infinity to the ground (by transforming them into measures of work, time, waste production, etc.), it becomes clear that in the era of neo-liberalism, the limitless production of finite things doomed to extinction (the sooner they spoil the better) is made *the eternal being of capitalism*. The idea of novelty promising progress towards the absolute wellbeing of humanity is promoted only to hide the morbid fact that it is decay and breakdown that are the drivers of capital — *capitalism cannot die precisely because it itself feeds on dying*, on finitude.

Marx was not mistaken in the fact that capitalism has its own end inscribed in its very structure (as it is widely known, he ex-

pected capitalism to destroy itself and transform into communism sooner or later), but in the *manner* in which this end is inscribed in its structure. What is crucial is that finitude drives capitalism not in the way of a “proper functioning” of Hegel’s dialectic, in which thought (and, according to Marx’s turn,¹¹ also socio-economic reality) proceeds through sublation, as Marx believed, but in the way of *falsification*, of a trap into which thought (and subsequently also the related world) gets caught, turning in a circle trying to catch its own tail, and failing time and again to surpass its regrettable situation. This failure stems from a certain oblivion (which — this is one of Freud’s essential discoveries — often points to the locus of resistance), from forgetting what for reflection itself are the concepts of being and nothing, of finitude and infinity. It is therein that lies the sorrow of neo-liberalism, the falsification that supports the morbidity of capitalism.

Capitalism cannot end *not* because the end is not inscribed in its very structure, as some critics of Marx’s utopianism would argue, it very much is, but because *the end is inscribed in its structure in such a way that finitude and infinity are held apart in a falsification* that, supported by the ideology of neo-liberal conservatism, deeply represses their fundamental intertwinement. The problem (and the prosperity) of capitalism is therefore *not in its infinity* — any criticism taking this position is itself subject to the misconception that perishing is the eternal being of finitude —, but, just the opposite, in its *finitude*. In finitude (deadlines, expiration dates, unemployment of the elderly, etc.), which is proclaimed to be eternal (as a forced flag bearer of the alleged infinite progress).

Moreover, the trouble with capitalism — why it cannot end — is not that it is too brutal (for it kills everything except capital itself),

¹¹ Articulated most clearly in the famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it” (Marx 1976, p. 8).

as one might suggest, but, on the contrary, that it is too mild, not radical enough. The true malice of capitalism is its tenderness. Capitalism is not only tender towards the consumers, triggering desire and offering different kinds of pleasures while silently putting chains around their necks, it is also too tender towards finitude itself. Its terrible gentility, its soft killing, is a consequence of its incapacity to bring finitude to the extreme, to let the perishing perish instead of crowning it with thorns. It is its inability *to bring the end itself to an end*.

This incapacity, this clinging to falsification, is due to the fact that killing the end would be capitalism's hara-kiri: for only through a radical negation of what thought and reflection and the so-called world are at a certain point can they be sublated and constituted anew. The end of capitalism and neo-liberalism would mean the end of the erroneous idea that perishing is the eternal being of finitude.¹² It would mean raising human self-awareness to a new level, which would no longer celebrate infinity while silently practicing finitude, killing, and mortality, but would celebrate finitude and practice infinity within finitude itself.¹³

¹² The ever more important question of the end of capitalism, discussed by Jameson, Fisher, Žižek, Zupančič, Boldizzoni, and others, is commonly grasped through the perspective of our imagination or a fantasy of The End, wherefrom arguments for its persistence and seeming infinity are derived. Nevertheless, if we are to change the devastating effects of capitalism, it is of crucial importance not only to re-evaluate our utopias and deal with our fantasies (which are, as Žižek shows, inscribed not only in the way we think, but above all in the way we act—this is one of Freud's most important findings discovered through the repetition compulsion), but to re-constitute, both functionally and ideologically, our relation towards finitude and infinity. It is not only a question of our fantasy of the end of capitalism, but, above all, of our fundamental relation towards the end itself.

¹³ Some traces of this new relation towards finitude and infinity can be found in the ideas and practices of sustainable development, self-sufficiency, the circular economy, and similar initiatives, as long as they proceed from the fundamental re-evaluation of the relations between time and work, between life and death, and between the individual and "the other."

5. *The Brutality of the Real: The Perishing of the Perishing*

In the course of dialectics, the condemnation of existent things to finitude is sublated: “The development of the finite will show that, expressly as this contradiction, it collapses internally, but that, in this collapse, it actually resolves the contradiction; it will show that the finite is not just perishable, and that it perishes, but that the perishing, the nothing, is rather not the last of it; that the perishing rather perishes” (Hegel 2010, p. 102). Perishing is not some sort of an eternal being of the existent world, but is itself subject to extinction. It is *perishing itself that perishes*: an unbearable idea that yawns like an abyss in the face of the understanding.

The Sarajevo Book of the Dead not only reminds us that the world is doomed to ruin, avoiding any poetic transgression of this painful truth (it does not cover it with any illusion of the eternal idea), but it also unfolds the fundamental contradiction of the existent world in opening up the rupture of the *perishing of the perishing*, the brutality and the paradox of *ending the end*. The vanishing city on the outskirts of Europe should therefore not be seen as a minor deviation from the existent order of neoliberalism, but rather as its very symptom, which points to the wound: perhaps, the traumatic core of the North-Atlantic world, of philosophy and of the Enlightenment, which shielded itself with the illusion that perishing assures eternity, is nothing but the horrifying truth that the perishing itself might perish.

We may ask ourselves whether it is not the unforeseen confrontation with the long forgotten brutality of the idea that the perishing itself might perish that has recently shaken our perception of reality. Should we not say that it was precisely the abyss of the perishing of the perishing that opened up when the post-historical vision of the world, resting upon the false and sorrowful conception of perishing as the eternal being of the world (a conception that unreasonably put together ideas of the eternal recurrence of the same and of infinite progress on the side of the

advocates of neo-liberalism, and that triggered contra-productive moaning about the impossibility of the end of this constellation on the side of its critics), abruptly faced the probability of its near end? It might be so, for it immediately triggered a new survival strategy. The brutal truth of the perishing of the perishing was quickly covered up with a new phantasmal screen: a fantasy of the final collapse.¹⁴

The general post-historical atmosphere of the late twentieth century has, in the past decade, almost imperceptibly shifted into a very different mode. The all-encompassing feeling that we are living in some kind of a vacuum or void, stuck in an eternal loop of the multifariousness of the same, where any deviation has always already been subsumed under the minotaur of neo-liberalism and

¹⁴ Of course, we are not saying that the ecological crisis is a fantasy. It is a brutal fact. What we need to be aware of, however, is that the nest of fantasies that has been woven around this brutal fact directly affects the fact itself. It is not only the terrible factuality that makes us produce a phantasmal shield (to happily ignore the trauma or to masochistically enjoy the fever of self-victimization): *it is the very phantasmal shield that (co)produces this brutal factuality*. We should recognize that inasmuch as we cause the destruction of the planet through mass technological production, we equally cause it through the mass production of truths and hegemonic discourses. The tectonic break that marks the beginning of the digital age is perhaps exactly the fact that an idea (i.e., language) produces more effects on factuality than factuality does on the idea (a horrifying yet very Hegelian twist, which might constitute—if consciousness is able to take its consequences upon itself—the path towards a new era of the Enlightenment). This awareness is not only an ineffective cynical unmasking of the ideology traced by Sloterdijk, nor is it only digging into the depths of what Žižek calls the “ideological fantasy” in order to unravel the phantasmal traits controlling the way we act. It is equally and above all *intentionally* drawing on the negation of the prevailing discourses and producing their affirmative “other.” Producing this “other” is not denying or questioning factuality (as is the case with conceptions of post-truth or post-reality), but rather opening the “other” nest of discursive realities, which might redirect the course of the effects of ideology on factuality (not beyond, but through ideological fantasy) in such a way that might benefit the so-called world and possibly—this is the task of Hegel’s spirit—solve some of its contradictions.

where nothing new can ever happen, has been—almost all of a sudden—superseded by a completely different mood: the expectation of catastrophe. But this change is less radical than it looks. What seems to be a fundamental twist of perspective is actually only a minor shift performed not with the purpose to change the prevailing neo-liberal state of affairs and the sorrowful state of mind, but to protect and to maintain it.

The thing is that in all the more recent expectations of catastrophe we have not really been waiting for an end. What we have been waiting for (and what we fear) is rather our fantasy of The End. In the rich imaginary of the apocalypse pertaining to what Hegel calls the “contentful nothing,”¹⁵ we imagine nothingness to be something qualitatively different from being. In this way, we are still holding apart finitude and infinity and maintaining the idea of the eternal being of the perishing. We are not taking upon ourselves the possibility of a radical end, of the end of the end, of the perishing of the perishing, risking a radical transformation of all that is known and familiar, including the extinction of what is thought to be our subjectivity. Rather, we are producing an illusion of The End, which will never end, but will be happily (that is, fearfully) postponed forever.¹⁶

For reflection, only facing the brutality of the real, only enduring the rupture of the *perishing of the perishing* and the paradox of *ending the end*, opens up the path out of the sorrow of thought towards a new state of self-awareness. This, however,

¹⁵ Absolute darkness, the great void, and similar, claims Hegel, are “supposed to be not nothing in general, but the nothing rather of light, warmth, and so forth, of something determinate, of a content” (Hegel 2010, p. 78). Thus, he continues, “they are a determinate, ‘contentful nothing’ if one may so speak” (ibid.).

¹⁶ The structural function of fantasy is to collaborate with suppression in covering up the traumatic core of subjectivity and thereby maintaining its “relative normality.” The fantasy is being constantly replaced and postponed to protect the subject from facing the brutal reality or, to be more direct, *the brutality of the real*. Thereby, the fantasy is always projected into the (near) future.

means abandoning the qualitative differentiation of being and nothing, which has led to falsifications such as the idea of the eternal being of perishing or the more recent fantasy of The End. The new state of human self-awareness, which could possibly repair the devastating effects of capitalism, is only achievable through a rudimentary re-constitution of our relation towards finitude and infinity. This is what Hegel's dialectics points to. Through sublation, it turns out that the perishing, the nothing, is not the last of it: it is exactly *within* the contradictory negation of nothingness, of ending the end, or of killing death, that something new also begins.

6. *Happy New Fears! Drawing on the Idea of Expiration*¹⁷

When we speak about too-lateness today—and we speak about it all the more often—we tend to embed reality in a totality of *expiration*: we have failed to pull the brake once and for all, the world is inevitably approaching its end. We are living in a reality that will soon expire. Now, it is already too late.

The logic of postponement is what structures fantasy. The fantasy of an end is the “ultimate fantasy,” for it unravels the hidden paradox driving the very mechanism of fantasy: *it is the impossibility of further postponement that demands postponement*. What triggers fantasy is a certain tension between the finality of the object, which grants this object the aura of uniqueness (“I must see her *now*, or it will be too late once and for all, she will be gone forever, the meeting cannot be postponed”), and the infinite postponement of this finality (“If I see her now, I won't be able to desire *forever* to see her now, so I had better postpone the meeting”). The hidden paradox driving the mechanism of

¹⁷ *Merry Crisis and a Happy New Fear* is a slogan that first appeared as graffiti in Athens during the 2008 Civil Unrest in Greece.

fantasy is unwrapped when the object of desire, which is covertly supposed to be forever postponed, is not something that can last, but *an end*, which is by definition something that cannot be postponed. Because its fundamental paradox has been revealed, the fantasy of the end needs to use a trick. The trick is that what keeps being postponed in the fantasy of the end (i.e., the expectation of a catastrophe) is not the end itself, but the very moment the subject starts to approach it. What keeps being postponed is not the end, but the beginning, the spot marking the beginning of the countdown, the red line defining the entrance of the world into an inevitable state of too-lateness, wherefrom everything will start to diminish into “the great void” — a blurry, undefined, and de-temporalized vision of The End. The idea of expiration is itself nothing but an exposure of this constellation.

Thinking in a Hegelian manner, however, too-lateness has nothing to do with the idea of expiration. There is no breaking point at which one would enter the state of being too late after all the late-comings, latenesses, and belatednesses that have formed and deformed history. There is no borderline where lateness as such would suddenly outrun itself or lag behind itself and turn into an inevitable and irreversible too-lateness. There is no edge over which time and the course of events might start dripping, performing the world’s final countdown. There is no red line marking the moment in which all the *lines of flight* of the world would start shrinking towards the point of final extinction.

If we take a closer look, we can see that there is a certain *doubling* inscribed in our *recognition of too-lateness*: in the very moment we realize that it is too late, we also become aware of the fact that it is our recognition of this too-lateness that has come too late. This immediately leads us to narcissistic self-accusation (which is but a flipside of self-victimization), in the sense that it is all our fault: if we had only realized on time that it will soon be too late, we could have acted differently and prevented the inevitable too-lateness we are now confronted with. We were

too late in realizing it will soon be too late, we were blind to the red line dividing the *not-yet-too-late* state of affairs (where many possibilities of how things could evolve were still open) and the realm of the *too-late-once-and-for-all* (where there is only one single and inevitable path left). Implying that “if we had only become aware of too-lateness on time, we could have prevented the course of events rushing towards the inevitable end.” And for that, because of our ignorance, it is now finally and uncompromisingly too late.

Such reasoning, which has recently become a common moralistic stance of different hegemonic discourses (such as the Anthropocene argument, the idea of environmental neo-liberalism, etc.), conceals, as it is instantly evident, the fact that it is structurally impossible to realize on time — say, in the very last moment — that it is (or that it will soon be) too late. Or, to put it the other way round: one is always too late in finding out that it is already too late. It is impossible to get ahead of too-lateness itself: if our recognition comes on time, it is not yet too late; but once it *is* too late, any recognition of it is by necessity also too late: this — and not the practical argument in the sense that philosophy is only interpreting the world — is the idea of the owl of Minerva.

7. It Is Too Late; But This Is Only the Beginning

It has always already been too late for the world. It is destined to perish. It has also always already been too late for the subject: it misses again and again not only its elusive object but also the encounter with itself. Recognition has always already been too late in realizing it was too late. Consciousness has always already been too late in relation to the development of the spirit or world history. This too-lateness, however, is not a vicious circle of some inevitable fate, which cannot be surpassed and can only be surrendered to. On the contrary, it is the very fact that it is too

late and the awareness of this fact that allow development in the direction of a new beginning.

Therein perhaps lies the paradoxical layout of Hegel's dialectics: although it has always already been too late, we are always only at the beginning. *In the beginning, there was too-lateness.* Being and nothing are in a permanent delay with respect to themselves. Hegel writes: "The truth is neither being nor nothing, but rather that being has passed over into nothing and nothing into being—'has passed over,' not passes over" (Hegel 2010, pp. 59–60). The transition of being and nothing into one another is their very unity, but at the same time it is also something separate from them, which means they are distinguished yet indistinguishable, the same but other.¹⁸ Being cannot catch up with itself; it has always already passed into nothing and *at the same time* it has never yet passed into nothing. The same goes for nothing. It is caught up in the "never yet" and the "always already" structure of the missed encounter. But as much as this encounter is missed, it is also realized: "Their truth is therefore this *movement* of the immediate vanishing of the one into the other: *becoming*, a movement in which the two are distinguished, but by a distinction which has just as immediately dissolved itself" (ibid., p. 60).

The first determination of being and nothing, their unity and their otherness, in which they are the same and not the same,

¹⁸ Jure Simoniti has demonstrated that the seemingly self-evident, Heideggerian "preponderance of being over nothing" was subconsciously subverted already in its very first historical appearance, in Parmenides' poem *On Nature*. Simoniti interprets the Parmenidean "Being" as a mere secondary means to neutralize and suppress the primary causality of juxtaposing "is" and "is not," the causality which was most notably manifested in the antagonism of two opinions, one burgeoning in the public space of ancient Greece and making way for the imminent emergence of sophism: "The imperative of affirmative judgments and the prohibition of negative ones does not ensue from some substance of Being, which rather is than is not, but from the preceding antagonisms of 'is'-es and 'is-not'-s, proliferating in the exclusively inter-subjective, proto-sophist space, one which will later be named 'public'" (Simoniti 2013, p. 90).

inseparable yet separated, is *becoming*. In becoming, being and nothing are *temporal yet out of time*.¹⁹ As soon as they are set up (*gesetzt*) as the *beginning*—the absolute beginning, which is itself a doubling, a split²⁰—and thereby also as *becoming, too-lateness is established*.

In too-lateness, it is not only being that “falls” into time, but also time that “falls” into being; into being that *is/is not* nothing. Through the twisted temporality of Hegel’s dialectics, which finds a powerful companion in *The Sarajevo Book of the Dead*, too-lateness not only intrinsically interconnects finitude and infinity, it also intertwines the world and the spirit.²¹

¹⁹ Here, temporality does not refer to the empirical but to the onto-logical notion of time.

²⁰ This is one of the common interpretations of Hegel’s concept of the beginning, also the beginning of his *Science of Logic*, advocated particularly by the Ljubljana school. Cf. *Problemi 3-4/13* (titled *Being, pure being*), especially the contributions by Dolar, Moder, and Simoniti (Dolar 2013, Moder 2013, and Simoniti 2013a).

²¹ Heidegger’s notorious critique of Hegel’s notion of time in *Being and Time* exposes the problem of the primordial temporality of spirit, culminating in the ultimate question of the primordial temporality of being: “Is there a way leading from primordial *time* to the meaning of *being*? Does time itself reveal itself as the horizon of *being*?” (Heidegger 1996, p. 398). Hegel does not clarify what this “falling into time” means *ontologically*, states Heidegger, and also does not explain whether the essential constitution of spirit as a negation of negation is possible in any other way than on the basis of primordial temporality. Regardless of these problems concerning Hegel’s commitment to (yet radicalization of) the “vulgar notion of time,” Hegel’s “construction” is, according to Heidegger, “prompted by his arduous struggle to conceive the ‘concretion of spirit’” (ibid., p. 396). The endeavor of Heidegger’s existential analytic of *Da-sein* is therefore to begin with the “concretion” of factually thrown existence, and to reveal the temporality that would make such existence primordially possible. In the existential analytic of *Da-sein*, “‘spirit’ does not fall into time, but exists as the primordial *temporalizing* of the temporality” (ibid.). Leaving aside the vast literature on Heidegger’s critique of Hegel’s notion of time, let us juxtapose here only the reading of the Ljubljana school, which explicates Hegel’s dialectics through the idea of *Nachträglichkeit* and repetition as conceived by Freud and

What is the excessive tenderness towards the world? It is the nasty and unjust pretending that the world eludes any contradiction. It is imposing on the world the idea of a well-functioning mechanism that is perpetually improving its wellbeing. Now, we are faced with it: it is *not*. Perhaps, the captivity in paradoxes enveloping both world and spirit stems precisely from the all-encompassing too-lateness, from the repeatedly missed encounter, which prevents any violence of a harmonic vision of the world from being projected upon it.

It is the task of the spirit of the twenty-first century to walk in, to embrace and to embody this fundamental too-lateness

Lacan (cf. Zupančič 2007, Dolar 2013, Kolenc 2016 and 2018, Aumiller 2018; Aumiller, for example, finds repetition in the tetradic logic of dialectics, which she calls “twice two”: something new “emerges in the relationship between the split in the first double and the doubling of the split itself in the second double” [Aumiller 2018, pp. 260–61]). Here, it is important to understand that *Nachträglichkeit* is not just about a simple retroactive arrangement of the past, about a simple reversal of causal logic (in the sense that, for example, the trauma didn’t cause the illness, but the illness retroactively produced the trauma as its alleged cause). What retroactivity brings about is a certain slip of causal logic. The point here is that a certain *presence* (the presence of the now, e.g., a present event) *retroactively* produces its own origin, which means that this presence is at the same time the cause *and* the effect of this origin. Thereby, the presence of the now is doubled—it is *the same* (for it is one single presence) but *other* (for it bears two different causal functions). Because of this, *Nachträglichkeit* is not only directed backwards: within the very return to the past, a certain “intentionality” towards the future is established. The paradoxical moving forward through the eventual moving backward is possible because of a slip of causality at work in the constitution of the signifying chain that produces (the subject’s and the world’s) history. On the basis of this reading, we can suggest that it is precisely the slip of causality and the logic of *Nachträglichkeit* which fundamentally temporalize Hegel’s dialectics as its irreparable too-lateness. (In this sense, too-lateness, which is not Hegel’s own concept, must be delimited from Hegel’s more specific notion of belatedness [*Verspätung*].) From this perspective, Hegel seems not to be just half-way in performing Heidegger’s task of the temporalization of being (and its consequent ontologization of time), but rather on the way towards a de-ontologization of time through the temporalization of the original cut as the co-determination of being and nothing/non-being.

by surpassing the alleged reconciliation of finitude and infinity taking place both in the falsification of neo-liberalism and in the fantasy of The End. The end of the world is not something that will happen in the future—it is already here. It is the task of the spirit to take this ending upon itself and to try to resolve the conceptual-existential paradox of what it is.

The end is not the end—not because it never really ends, but exactly because it very much and most radically does, exactly because *the end itself is subjected to the process of ending*—if anywhere, it is there that something also begins. Precisely because it is too late, it is not yet too late. (Hegel was himself a passionate chess player, after all.)

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The contribution is a result of the work conducted within the research project “Theatricality of Power” (J6-1812), financed by ARRS, the Slovenian Research Agency.

“What, If Anything, Has Not Been Called Philosophy or Philosophizing?”¹ On the Relevance of Hegel’s Conception of a Philosophical History of Philosophy

Christian Krijnen

Identity politics and its call for justice for marginalized social groups has also entered academic philosophy. Its curriculum and historiography are criticized for being far from inclusive, and its canon is supposed to be a mere social construct made by white men about dead white men.

It seems to me that in this discourse—which covers only a very small aspect of the expansive and important discourse on diversity and inclusiveness—it is insufficiently reflected that in the call for philosophical diversity and inclusiveness, a certain concept of philosophy and its history is presupposed. I shall show this by analyzing arguments concerning the integration of non-western philosophy as well as female philosophers into the

¹ V 6, p. 14. Hegel is cited as follows: *Wissenschaft der Logik. Erster Teil* = I; *Wissenschaft der Logik. Zweiter Teil* = II; *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse (1830)* = E; *Phänomenologie des Geistes* = PG; *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* = R; *Werke in zwanzig Bänden* = TWA; *System und Geschichte der Philosophie* = SG; *Einleitung in die Geschichte der Philosophie. Orientalische Philosophie*, in *Vorlesungen* Vol. 6 = V 6; *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, Vol. 12 = V 12; *Vorlesungsmanuskripte II (1816-1831)*, in *Gesammelte Werke* Vol. 18 = GW 18. See the bibliography for additional information on the editions used. All translations from German texts into English are mine, although I have benefited from consulting current translations.

historiography of philosophy and confronting them with Hegel's conception of the history of philosophy. It is important to note that my deliberations are solely methodological in nature. I do not deal with the quality of the products of the marginalized groups. As philosophers, we all like to be inspired by the best, and integrating them can only be favorable. But what does it mean to belong to the best?

I. Philosophical Presuppositions of the Contemporary Debate

Let me start with an argument stemming from *social epistemology*. It contains, at its core, the problem of the contemporary debate on philosophical diversity. In its extreme form, the argument even suggests giving up the philosophical canon as such, the reason for this being that philosophy would profit if not everybody possessed the same prior knowledge. By combining diverse insights, more comprehensive knowledge would emerge.²

Obviously, this argument presupposes a certain understanding of what philosophy and its history are. In this case, philosophy is implicitly conceived of as a science that does not

² Bright 2020. As the debate on diversity is strongly politicized and hence dealt with in newspapers, too, I refer to such media. Kocka (2020) pointed out that the standards of good scientific practices (in the broadest sense of the word—referring to the natural sciences, arts and humanities, and the social sciences) should also be taken into account in media aimed at a broader audience. Against this background, consider the following remarks from an interview with philosophers regarding the canon of philosophy (Dutilh Novaes, Heij, and Peels 2020): Whereas one of them (Heij) is of the opinion that Hegel could be deleted from the canon, as he is incomprehensible—merely turning Heij's own lack of understanding into the standard of philosophy—, another (Peels) holds Kant to be overrated and proposes the inclusion of Elizabeth Anscombe in the canon, because of her work about intentionality—an extreme example of how in postmodern times flashes of insight can take the place of philosophical systems of thought. As if we already knew what the place of the problem of intentionality in the edifice of philosophical thought was!

differ fundamentally from the special sciences. That is to say, the development of philosophy consists of adding new knowledge to the already existing bulk of knowledge. Hegel calls this type of progress of knowledge “juxtaposition.” In contrast to this view of development, many idealist philosophers stress that philosophy is a science of principles or foundations and thus not a special science but a science of the whole, or of totality. The history of such a science continuously shows the change of this totality (V 6, p. 12).³ The argument seems to misjudge the specific subject matter, method, and system of philosophy. Rather, it follows the line of reasoning of a sociology of knowledge and is therefore not philosophical but *empirical* in nature.⁴

This non-philosophical, empirical dimension also prevails in discussions about, for instance, the *(non)presence of women in the history of philosophy*. Based on empirical research, it is easy to show that in terms of the quantitative relation of the sexes, women are underrepresented in the canon of philosophy.

³ From the perspective of transcendental philosophy, see, for instance, Rickert’s thorough 1931 study on the differences between the special sciences and a science of totality in light of their relationship to their own history.

⁴ This is, of course, not an objection against addressing the significance of diversity for increasing the quality of scientific research. Intemann (2009, p. 261) distinguishes seven advantages of diversity in scientific research, based upon the idea that the complexity of scientific problems requires a plurality of perspectives of research. His plea for improving the formation conditions of scientific knowledge first presupposes a concept of philosophy, as well as a concept of its relationship to the history of philosophy. Second, improving formation conditions at best systematically leads to a new philosophy (or several new philosophies), which would itself become a part of the history of philosophy. Thirdly, the “great philosophers,” e.g., Plato, Aristotle, Kant, or Hegel, have been the subject matter of diverse research for centuries, millennia even. Radder (2019, pp. 224 ff.) also emphasizes the importance of diversity in scientific research, but with the more elaborate claim that diversity as a means to achieve scientific progress should always be subjected to critical analysis and not become a new dogma. It goes without saying that everybody with sufficient talent is welcome in science in general, and philosophy in particular. What is decisive here is the quality of their contribution.

Nevertheless, this empirical insight is insufficient to justify a modification of the philosophical canon. A modification would require an assessment of whether the underrepresentation is justified by the quality of the respective contributions to philosophy. Thus, it is rather surprising that in important studies which plea for a greater involvement of women, an analysis of the quality of the content of the philosophical thought of women is missing. I refer here to the famous 1998 study by O'Neill or the more recent publication by Ebbersmeyer (2020). Whereas the latter analyzes the reasons for female absence and relates the growing involvement of women to the process of emancipation, and hence to a political and thus an empirical development,⁵ the former additionally presents a model of the historiography of philosophy and, fortunately, intends to address the issue of the truth of the philosophical thought developed by women (O'Neill 1998, pp. 39 ff.). Nevertheless, she does not really analyze those thoughts, and she particularly does not develop a concept of philosophy and its history that might function as a criterion for the assessment of thoughts and, consequently, as the basis for determining the history of philosophy. Such a concept remains presupposed. It is a desideratum of the contemporary debate on diversity and inclusiveness. It should be developed, otherwise integrating women would boil down to mere decisionism. On top of this, if the analysis focuses on the so-called "issues" of philosophy, e.g., the role of feelings and emotions in ethics, the history of

⁵ It is telling that Ebbersmeyer (2020, pp. 451 ff.) praises Brucker for including women in his *Bilder-Sal heutiges Tages lebender und durch Gelahrheit berühmter Schriftsteller*, whereas she reproaches him for not presenting them in his monumental *Historia critica philosophiae*. For Hegel, by contrast, the *Historia* is a deteriorated type of history of philosophy because it is a presentation from the perspective of Wolff's philosophy and therefore "highly unhistorical." The history of philosophy should be historical; it should contain what a philosopher said. "Premises and consequences" belong to the further development of philosophy; they are the "philosophy of somebody else" (V 6, pp. 361, 43 f.). In this respect, Hegel continuously criticizes attempts to renew older philosophies.

philosophy is apparently conceived of as a history of “problems” (*Problemgeschichte*). Philosophical problems, however, only exist within the framework of an overarching concept of philosophy that can account for them as philosophical problems.

This problem of a presupposed concept of philosophy and its history also appears when we switch from the dimension of gender to the *cultural-geographic dimension* of the debate. In 2019, Arnzen published an interesting study on integrating non-western, particularly Arabic-Islamic, philosophy while at the same time shedding the Eurocentric focus. Although in this study concepts such as “philosophy,” “history of philosophy,” “philosophical historiography,” “philosophy in the Islamic world,” etc., are explicitly dealt with, Arnzen’s deliberations have the form of an empirical-historical approach and are characterized by the pragmatic decisionism that goes along with it. Hence, the conceptual clarifications do not result from philosophical thoughts. From a mere historical point of view, the historiographer is confronted with non-identical and even interfering “definitions” of philosophy. Instead of clarifying why this is the case, if there are specific philosophical reasons for it, the historiographer just feels forced to decide or choose what meaning of philosophy suits her purposes best, in particular the purpose of coming to a non-Eurocentric universal history of philosophy (Arnzen 2019, p. 81). The concept of philosophy that results from this decision is not a concept justified philosophically. Such a concept, again, remains presupposed. Moreover, philosophical issues are reduced to social, cultural, and economic constellations; a genuine philosophical determination of philosophy is missing. By contrast, if one focuses on philosophy’s claim to truth, it becomes clear that the basic questions of philosophy also evolve from the normative claims effective in such empirical constellations. The question of what philosophy is, is always also a philosophical question. Moreover, what has been said about the external determination of the concept of philosophy also applies to the concept of the history of philosophy.

It turns out that, finally, the history of philosophy is conceived of as a mere historical appearance, which, like any other human endeavor, can be studied by various disciplines (Arnzen 2019, pp. 83 f.). Obviously, a philosophical concept of the history of philosophy is what is lacking.

Interestingly enough, in this context a philosophical question arises that is very important for Hegel's conception of the history of philosophy and thus in need of a philosophical treatment. Namely the question of whether the historiography of philosophy is itself a philosophical activity and if so, what its method and status are (Arnzen 2019, pp. 85 f.). Any empirical approach to these questions has always already presupposed a philosophical answer—although the empirical approach is not able to justify its answers in a methodical sound way.⁶ A mere decision for a pluralistic and combined approach to the history of philosophy does not suffice. The plea for plurality presupposes a concept of philosophy and the history of philosophy in which the diverse philosophical and non-philosophical approaches have their particular place.⁷

⁶ Beaney, too, offers an empirical approach to the problem of the history of philosophy. From this perspective, history shows a manifoldness of perceptions of the history of philosophy, lines of reception, preferences and styles of philosophy, as well as new discoveries. The last has recently concerned female philosophers, whereas the philosophical canon according to Beaney (2019, p. 727) has for centuries offered merely a “handful of great white dead male Western philosophers.” Beaney, then, presents seven conceptions of philosophical historiography. His presentation presupposes a concept of what it intends to present, without addressing this presupposition explicitly, let alone justifying it philosophically.

⁷ A broader audience has become acquainted with the cultural-geographic dimension of the debate on diversity by the much-discussed article written by Garfield and van Norden (May 11, 2016). They expanded their ideas, including the reactions to their article, in the form of a book (see van Norden and Garfield 2017). Van Norden and Garfield claim that non-western philosophies offer solutions to problems current in western philosophy; however, they do not elaborate on this in detail. For Marchal (2018), *Taking Back Philosophy* is not an

An additional argument for diversity, often mentioned in texts for a broader audience (van Norden and Garfield 2017; Bright 2020) as well as those aimed at academic philosophers (Beaney 2019, p. 727; Bax and Halsema 2017, p. 3) is that it is “interesting,” “inspiring,” “beneficial,” etc., to study ideas beyond the canon. This *argument of the interesting*, however, just presupposes a criterion for assessing ideas as “interesting,” etc., i.e., a determination of the concept of philosophy that is supposed to be enriched by these ideas. This abstract idea of the “interesting” was—with respect to a scientific clarification of the issue at stake—so vapid and cheap even in Hegel’s time that Hegel (V 6, pp. 15 f.) himself sarcastically remarks that it is the common view (in particular of historicism) that the history of philosophy consists of a “stock of philosophical opinions,” having the consequence that studying the history of philosophy is reduced to an idle curiosity or erudition that results in knowing many superfluous things. By contrast, according to the proponents of the argument of the interesting, philosophy can only gain by allowing more perspectives than presently dominate. Again, this argument presupposes a concept of philosophy and its history that is in need of meticulous philosophical determination. For Hegel (V 6, p. 16), the protagonists of this view reduce (be it intentionally or unintentionally) philosophical knowledge to mere opinions. If it is held that it is “beneficial” to become “acquainted” with the “opinions and thoughts of others,” that it “stimulates our thinking power and leads to this or that good thought,” then this is just a more sym-

academic treatise but a book that wants to create a political impact. Yet hymns to multiculturalism are not philosophical arguments speaking for a revision of the philosophical canon. Of course criticism from a multicultural perspective should not be excluded *a priori*, but its claims should be assessed, too, instead of preempting its correctness. Assessing its claims requires a standard, including an adequate concept of philosophy and the history of philosophy. Such a standard is not restricted to a specific culture but emerges from reason and hence from the instance that binds diverse cultures as cultures.

pathetic way of saying that it “initiates another opinion” and that “science consists of unfolding opinions from opinions.” Yet in science as science there are no opinions, no δόξα.

This tendency to make particularity absolute, which is intrinsically related to identity politics and its urge for diversity, is probably most succinctly brought to light in what we could call the *argument of recognizing*. According to this argument, it is supposed to be a disadvantage of the present canon that it discourages (potential) students of philosophy because they do not recognize themselves in a canon of white males (Bax and Halsema 2017, p. 3; Bright 2020).⁸ Hegel (GW 18, p. 141), again, comes to the opposite appraisal: to be eager for rational insight, cognition (*Erkenntnis*), not mere acquaintance (*Kenntnis*), is that which should be presupposed as the “subjective need,” (V 6, p. 9), i.e., the need of the student in studying science. A university is not a wellness center but an institution of education. More precisely, the subjective aim — the aim of the agent studying philosophy — is that the student is introduced to philosophy by studying the history of philosophy. Philosophy (like any other science) is, in its content, independent of subjective preferences and the well-being of the agents studying it. It is the other way around: the history of philosophy is the point of orientation for studying philosophy.

Of course this only concerns the pure content-related, objective dimension of the matter at hand. A concrete canon is never determined fully from the “concept.” For Hegel, here the general, the concept, is directed into empirical singularity, into the realm of “variability and contingency,” in which not the concept but “reasons” (*Gründe*) are asserted, final decisions that are beyond the determination of the concept in and for itself (E, note on § 16; cf. notes on §§ 250 ,214). Also regarding history, the distinction between idea and appearance is relevant, notwithstanding the

⁸ It is noteworthy that even using a supposedly “wrong” word can lead to acts of dismissal, especially in academic contexts. See for instance Allen 2020.

fact that traces of the concept can be diagnosed throughout. This latitude is particularly relevant, as the argument of recognizing is primarily applied with regard to the curriculum of philosophy, whereas the debate about the canon primarily concerns the history and historiography of philosophy. In the design of a philosophical curriculum, it is not only scientific perspectives that are dominant, especially not in our times of neoliberalism, which conceive of a university, basically, as a company aiming for profit and having profit as its standard. But I leave this issue aside here (see instead Krijnen 2011; 2018). To be sure, for idealism—and strictly speaking philosophy is only possible as idealism—the idea is the principle that shapes reality. Therefore, I shall now focus on the idea of a history of philosophy. It is presupposed in any canon of philosophy, our spiritual activities can be more or less in compliance with it.

II. Philosophical and Non-Philosophical Contemplation of History

In light of the non-philosophical character of the contemporary debate and its presupposed concept of philosophy and its history, I will first highlight Hegel’s distinction between philosophical and non-philosophical history. Hegel distinguishes three different types of contemplating history, which interrelate in a systematic and methodical fashion (hence not chronologically or culturally): two non-philosophical types of historiography — “original history” and “reflective history” — and a “philosophical history” (GW 18, pp. 121 f.).⁹

In Hegel’s elaborations, it is of special interest that historical knowledge is guided by interests, or is, so to speak, value-laden. In the course of the development of the different types of

⁹ On Hegel’s conception of historiography, see Rojek 2017 and Winter 2015.

non-philosophical contemplation of history, historiography becomes more sensitive to its own methodical determinacy too. It turns out that a particular content is addressed from general (*allgemeine*) perspectives. Finally, in what Hegel calls a history of particular objects (*Spezialgeschichte*), it seems even possible to determine something historically in a way that, at the same time, its relationship to the whole (of history) becomes clear. In Hegel's philosophical contemplation of world history, then, it is the concept of freedom that functions as the overarching absolute general perspective. The principle of freedom overcomes the relative-generality of the perspectives of an original and reflective history, their "particular generality" (V 12, 14). The philosophy of history determines history in the perspective of freedom and its progression.

Yet not only does the generality of the determining perspective distinguish a philosophical from a non-philosophical contemplation of history, it is the epistemological character of philosophical knowledge too. Like the other sciences, philosophy is a thinking study of objects. More precisely, its thinking is a peculiar mode of thinking: comprehending thought (*begreifendes Denken*) (E, § 2). It is thought that also knows the principles or presuppositions of its own activity, and hence a doctrine of radical foundations. As a science, philosophy is obliged to posit its own presuppositions scientifically (E, § 1). With regard to a non-philosophical contemplation of history, this means that the idea or reason that guides it remains a mere presupposition. Its knowledge remains presupposed and is only conscious on the level of acquaintance, a result of a mere belief or decision. This is not the case in philosophy (GW 18, 140, cf. 146). Philosophy is the science of the idea, of the absolute idea. In history, this absolute idea appears not in the element of pure thought but in the element of spirit (E, §§ 377 ff.). A history of philosophy, as a history of thinking the absolute idea, thus has to present the absolute-ideal determinacy of the idea historically. Strictly speaking, the most

basic problem of philosophy is its own determinacy. It is also the basic problem of a philosophical history of philosophy, whose history is the history of this determinacy.

The perspectives that guide a non-philosophical contemplation of history are addressed in Hegel’s speculative idealism and comprehended from “thought,” the “idea,” the “concept,” or “subjectivity” as the principle of any objectivity. The same applies to philosophical knowledge of the history of philosophy: the perspective of the activity of its determination has to be clarified scientifically. In this respect, Hegel supplies us with a well-thought-out conception of a philosophical history of philosophy (I refer to the conception from the so-called “Berlin lectures”).¹⁰ What are its essentials?

III. Philosophical History of Philosophy

They become clear by taking Hegel’s famous thesis of the parallelism of pure, logical determinations of thought and the historical succession of philosophies into account. This thesis shows the radicality of Hegel’s approach to a philosophical history of philosophy.

The least we should expect from a philosophical history of philosophy is that it recognizes the problems a past philosophy intended to solve, takes into account its claim to truth and the arguments belonging to it, and is finally capable of presenting a comprehensible relationship between the philosophies that have occurred in history. In all these respects, Hegel’s attempt still seems relevant today. Hegel not only justifies the history of philosophy as a philosophical problem, he also shows how historical understanding and philosophical comprehension merge.

¹⁰ Hegel’s Berlin lectures contain the final version of his doctrine of the history of philosophy. On its development from the earlier conceptions, see Düsing 1983, pp. 7 ff.; 1989.

They interrelate conceptually, are founded in the matter at hand in philosophy, not in external factors of a specific age or philosophies in a specific age. Hegel elevated the philosophical history of philosophy to the level of a science: such a history is neither a collection of curious opinions, decorated with the curriculum vitae of their protagonists, nor does it add new insights to an already fixed subject matter, typical of the progress of the special sciences. Rather, the philosophical history of philosophy presents the process of the philosophical self-knowledge of spirit over the course of time, the development of philosophical thought in time.

According to Hegel, the “succession of the systems of philosophy is the same [...] as the succession of the logical deduction of the conceptual determinations of the idea”; the “basic concepts” of the systems of philosophy appearing in history stripped off from “externalities” are shown to be the “various levels of the determination of the idea itself in its logical concept” (V 6, p. 27; cf. E § 14). Conversely, in its “main moments,” the progress of logic taken in itself is the progress of historical appearances.¹¹

¹¹ Hegel’s thesis on parallelism has been criticized from the start. For early criticism, see Düsing 1983, pp. 7 ff.; Schneider 1968, pp. 47 ff.; Schneider 2007. Basically, nothing has changed. It is still rejected widely. See Jaeschke 1993, pp. XV ff.; Jaeschke 2000, pp. 487 ff.; Düsing 1983, pp. 1 f., 38 f. and 244 f.; Düsing 1989, pp. 136 f., 142 ff.; Höhle 1988, p. 211, note 107; Höhle 1984, pp. 85 ff. Although Fulda (2007) emphasizes that Hegel’s parallelism should not be interpreted in a narrow sense, he also criticizes Hegel harshly (Fulda 1999). In his criticism, Fulda focuses so much on historicism as the background of Hegel’s thesis that he underestimates Hegel’s distinction between a non-philosophical and a philosophical contemplation of history. Despite its critical point against historicism, Hegel’s basic concern is to clarify the peculiarity of the historicity of philosophy. His criticism of historicism is a part of this more encompassing project. Historicism, Romanticism, Postmodernism—from Hegel’s perspective they all celebrate a philosophy of a non-binding nature that dissolves itself. Hegel’s “basic point” (*Hauptpunkt*), which he elaborates on in his history of philosophy, is that the history of philosophy, like philosophy itself, is a “system in development” (V 6, p. 25). Hence, the basic point concerns the determinacy of philosophy itself.

It is important to note that Hegel comes up with this thesis in the context of the problem of a philosophical history of philosophy. This presupposes parallelism. Whereas from the perspective of identity politics or a sociology of knowledge this might count as the monstrosity of an unworldly perverse exclusionary desire for power or an unfruitful narrowing of research perspectives respectively, from the perspective of reason Hegel’s parallelism makes good sense.

First, every philosophy has an educational historical dimension in the sense of a *Bildungsgeschichte* (V 6, p. 8; cf. pp. 5–9, 39 f.): it is part of the “holy chain of tradition” (Herder). It absorbs, preserves, and reproduces the tradition on the one hand and transforms it on the other. As a consequence, it elevates the subject matter of philosophy to a new level of its determinacy.

Second, this dimension of determinacy involves any historical appearance being able to be *identified* as philosophy if and only if a concept of philosophy is presupposed. This concept is thus not justifiable in a historical fashion but only systematically by means of philosophical deliberations (V 6, pp. 9, 14, 19 f.; SG, pp. 261 f.). Without a criterion of the matter at hand, a historiographer of philosophy would be unable to identify the manifoldness of appearances as philosophy: “What if anything has not been called philosophy or philosophizing?” (V 6, p. 14; cf. pp. 45 f.). What a philosophical appearance is, is not something at the whim of a philosophical historiography of philosophy, the result of a mere decision or assumption. Rather, “the first question” is, “if something is philosophical or not” (SG, p. 262). More precisely, without presupposing a system of philosophy—as the standard of the matter at hand—it is impossible to write a history of philosophy (*ibid.*, pp. 261 f.).

Third, this applies to the construction of progression in the history of philosophy too. The system of philosophy is not only necessary for identifying philosophical appearances; these appearances also need to *relate* to one another as appearances of one

and the same subject matter (i.e., philosophy). That is to say, the “place” a certain philosophy obtains in the history of philosophy has to be determined (SG, p. 262).¹² The many philosophies in the history of philosophy are ordered according to the measure that is philosophy.

This makes apparent a fourth essential: the *fundamental status of philosophical logic*. For philosophy, taken seriously as “the objective science of truth” (V 6, pp. 9, 18), only the philosophical discipline of logic—from Hegel’s point of view, Hegel’s logic—can supply the principle of identification and ordering of a philosophical history of philosophy. The logical determinations of thought form a system that develops itself in the element of pure thought from the indeterminate immediate of the beginning to its complete determination (in Hegel’s logic, from pure being to the absolute idea). This development is necessary (in Hegel’s logic, organized “speculatively”). Truth, as Hegel says, has the “drive” (*Trieb*) to develop itself. Its development is the development of its own determinacy, self-determination (ibid., pp. 23 f.). The concrete thus develops from the abstract.

In short, philosophy is a “system in development” (ibid., p. 25). The same applies to the history of philosophy. In their main moments, the system and the history of philosophy are identical. Here, too, the beginning is “most abstract,” most indeterminate, the first philosophy “the most general, indeterminate thought,” and the last, the most “concrete, developed” (ibid., p. 40; cf. pp. 44 f.). For Hegel, the history of philosophy as philosophy is the systematization of thought in time, a systematization that is equivalent to a concretization. For this reason, the latest philoso-

¹² For an “external” history of philosophy, not composed according to the standards of philosophy, everything is a historical deed. In contrast to this view, the philosophical one: what a philosophical deed (or fact) is and where it should be placed, is the “*question*” (SG, p. 262). Therefore, without thorough philosophical knowledge, even a system of philosophy, a history of philosophy cannot be written.

phy must sublimate all past philosophy. It needs to be a “mirror of the whole history” (ibid., p. 45).

As the history of philosophy is the development of One idea, it is not merely about something past or an object of mere historical contemplation (V 6, pp. 46 f.). From the perspective of philosophy, philosophy is not at all past; its history is not the history of something past. Rather, the history of philosophy is present in the present as philosophy. Just like in the logical system of thought every determination of thought has its particular place in the whole, every historical appearance of philosophy represents a certain level of development.¹³ Having such a place is exactly what constitutes the “true value and meaning” of a past philosophy (ibid., pp. 47 f.). The history of philosophy is the “systematization of thought” (SG, p. 119) in time according to the system of pure determinations of thought, and its order is only justifiable by the system of logic.

Of course, the idea of a system of philosophy nowadays does not have many friends.¹⁴ Hegel, however, for good reasons, holds that a historiographer of philosophy cannot be “impartial” but is in need of a “system,” must “judge,” and “add” something of his or her own (ibid., p. 261).¹⁵ The requirement of presenting the history of philosophy impartially, put differently in contemporary terminology, in its own right, seems a matter of fairness. Yet the “peculiarity” of the history of philosophy is that only a historiographer “who does not understand anything of the subject matter” can fulfill this condition, resulting in “mere historical acquaintance” (*Kenntnis*) (ibid.). As a science, the historiography of

¹³ “Representation” in the sense of Fulda’s “wide interpretation.” See footnote no. 11.

¹⁴ For a criticism of this tendency, see Krijnen 2008.

¹⁵ Hegel has Tennemann in his mind here, see the hints by Düsing (1983, pp. 24 f.) In the line of a rather extensive note by Hegel (E, § 549), we could say that the historiographer of philosophy has to be interested in truth as his subject matter and the standard for addressing the deeds of spirit.

philosophy presents in the mode of necessity the development of thought, of the idea, of truth in time. For identifying and ordering philosophical appearances, the historiographer needs to have knowledge of the idea (V 6, pp. 28 ff.).¹⁶ The historiography of philosophy is a science not as a doxography of philosophies (let alone philosophers), an “unordered bunch of opinions,” but as a system of the idea or the truth in time: the idea in its “empirical shape” (ibid., pp. 28 ff.).

Fifth, the deliberations so far also imply that philosophies can be traced back to a *basic constellation* that functions as the foundation for everything else. Traditionally, this constellation is logical-ontological in nature. It represents the current status of philosophy as a science of foundations. Hegel identifies it with a principle or a group of principles of his logic. Against this background, Hegel is often reproached for imposing a system to the history of philosophy externally, leading to a distortion of its empirical dimension. This reproach itself, however, does not do justice to Hegel’s deliberations about, among other things, the concreteness of the concept, the presupposedness of the idea, the differences between a philosophical and a non-philosophical history, and the urge for a radical justification of presuppositions.

Finally, Hegel’s distinction between an *internal and an external history* is relevant for capturing what a philosophical history of philosophy is (V 6, pp. 9 ff.). It becomes clear how philosophy, having truth as something eternal and imperishable as its subject matter, can have a history at all. The external history of philosophy is a history of constellations that explain the reality of “emergence, dissemination, flourishing, degeneration, resurgence, a history of its teachers,” etc. (ibid., p. 11). The internal history of philosophy, in contrast, is the history of its subject matter. Whereas the subject matter of Christian faith, for instance, is non-historical and hence

¹⁶ Determining and justifying this idea is a concern of philosophy (see, e.g., V 6, pp. 20, 22, 26).

remains the same (ibid., pp. 10 ff.), the special sciences progress through “juxtaposition” (ibid., p. 12), that is, by attributing new determinations to the same subject matter. Unlike the latter, the subject matter of philosophy is the whole as the principle of everything. In philosophy, everything is at stake, the totality and not a part of the whole. In a philosophical history of philosophy, it is shown that the various philosophies, each of them a conception of totality, turn out to be relative totalities, only moments in the development of philosophy. Thus, the subject matter of philosophy continuously changes fundamentally in its content. No substantial philosophy has ever been refuted, while at the same time they are all refuted by the latest philosophy: their basic principle or constellation is transformed as it is no longer the absolute it was supposed to be (SG, p. 128; cf. TWA, p. 8, § 86, Z 2; II, pp. 217 f.).

IV. Conclusion

The contemporary debate about the canon of philosophy lacks a sufficient clarification of the relationship between philosophy and its history. It may be the case that Hegel’s conception of a philosophical historiography of philosophy is in need of an internal differentiation of several types of philosophical research (see Düsing’s proposal in Düsing 1983, pp. 2 f., 245). Yet understanding past philosophies should not be conducted only historically, in the sense of the discipline of history or, as Hegel says, as a “reflective” contemplation of history. It should also be conducted philosophically. This involves a well-founded concept of philosophy and the schemes of interpretation of the history of philosophy it implies.

Moreover, Hegel’s conception of contemplating history even allows a mere historical, “reflective” approach to the history of philosophy in the perspective of diversity and inclusiveness. It

would concern a history of a particular object (*Spezialgeschichte*). The history of philosophy as a history of philosophy, however, has a different format: the format of a history of conceptions of the totality of objective thought, starting with its most immediate, abstract shape, and becoming more determined and concrete, both in terms of its internal multiplicity and its unity. Unity and multiplicity are, so to speak, the criteria of the progress of philosophy. This refers to logic—the doctrine of objective thought—as the fundamental discipline of philosophy in which its dynamics are developed. Only as a mirror of the history of philosophy can philosophy be what it is supposed to be according to Hegel: “its time captured in thought” (R, § 16 f.). That for this reason the history of philosophy should continuously be scrutinized with regard to its potency to capture our time in thought, is an insight Hegel would wholeheartedly embrace.

The history of philosophy is too important for philosophy to leave it to “reflective” historians. The origin of a philosophical history of philosophy emerges from philosophy itself. A reflective history of philosophy deals with philosophy as an objective shape of spirit, a part of world history. As a shape of philosophy, in contrast, the history of philosophy concerns the truth claim of objective thought. In dealing with this concern, it relates the history of philosophy to contemporary philosophy or, more precisely, to the presupposed system of philosophy of the historiographer. Our beloved Sophia is not a figure of unabashed mores anybody can fiddle around with.¹⁷

¹⁷ Referring to discussions with participants of the conference *Hegel's 250th Anniversary: Too Late?*, which took place in Ljubljana from September 7th to 9th, 2020, it is important to note that to future philosophy, it also applies, for example, that it will be a conception of the absolute idea in the element of spirit, that it will be the science of unity, etc. There is no such radical change of philosophy possible that would transform philosophy as philosophy. It will always be a shape of the absolute idea in the element of spirit. It will consist of comprehending thought, knowledge of spirit as spirit in the mode of the concept

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and thus necessity. In this respect, freedom is the overarching perspective of any future philosophy, both from the logical perspective and that of spirit. For other endeavors of spirit, the label “philosophy” is just misplaced. What if anything has not been called and will be called philosophy! This implies, too, that in Hegel’s philosophy the internal order of the shapes of absolute spirit is not motivated in an empirical historical fashion but in terms of a unity of philosophical logic and the spirit of modernity. Here, spiritual reality is conceived of as the actuality of freedom. Of course, empirically there is always the danger of falling behind the requirements of freedom (on this, see for example Vieweg’s contribution in this volume). A fine example of the latter is the political dominance of neoliberalism since the fall of the Berlin wall: an adulteration of freedom in the name of freedom. Freedom as the principle of thought and action is an adventure with a continuous risk of falling. With regard to the methodology of philosophy, Hegel’s philosophy of spirit argues from the concept, not from empirical constellations (not taking this sufficiently into account is a major flaw in Honneth’s interpretation of Hegel’s philosophy of right and its relevance [see Krijnen 2017]). In his philosophy of the history of philosophy, Hegel emphasizes this continuously, and his “attitudes of thought towards objectivity” (E, §§ 26 ff.) do not concern empirical constellations but constellations of principles.

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What Is to Be Done: On the Theatricality of Power

Gregor Moder

What the World Ought To Be

In the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel famously claims that philosophy comes too late to teach us about what the world ought to be since “philosophy, at any rate, always comes too late to perform this function” (Hegel 1991, p. 23). It appears that Hegel thus condemns philosophy to being a passive observer of world events, never capable of intervening in them. It seems that for Hegel, a philosopher is like a pathologist: by performing an autopsy, he or she can tell us the cause of death, but cannot provide us with anything that would have cured the patient when that patient was still alive. Furthermore, Hegel explicitly separates thought from actuality and places philosophy firmly after the fact: “As the *thought* of the world, [philosophy] appears only at a time when actuality has gone through its formative process and attained its completed state” (ibid.). Is philosophical thinking a kind of an after-thought? Hegel appears to conceive of philosophy as an impotent practice of looking back at actuality, cognizing but never taking part. He writes, “When philosophy paints its grey in grey, a shape of life has grown old, and it cannot be rejuvenated, but only recognized, by the grey in grey of philosophy; the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk” (ibid.). The Hegelian philosopher is perhaps like that angel described by Walter Benjamin with Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* in mind, whose

wings are caught in the wind of history, forever destined to observe the expanding spread of a single catastrophe, never able to look away from the past and never able to intervene.

Unsurprisingly, Marxism forcefully rejected Hegel on this point. Marx himself made this perfectly clear in the infamous thesis eleven, where he claims that philosophers have only ever interpreted the world, but the point is to change it. Mladen Dolar argues that thesis eleven, apparently calling for revolutionary action, is a direct refutation of Hegel's assertion that philosophy always arrives too late: "The owl of Minerva would be the very epitome of philosophy which always comes too late and can merely interpret" (Dolar 2015, p. 885). However, it was not only revolutionaries who criticized Hegel. In fact, the separation of thought from actuality, expressed in the conclusion of the Preface to the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, is inconsistent with Hegel's own assertions elsewhere. It is in the very same Preface, only a few pages back, that we find another equally important and equally far-reaching formula proposed by Hegel: "What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational" (p. 20). Assuming for the time being that philosophy could be described as the business of the rational—an assumption which is certainly not without its consequences—this formula directly opposes the notion of philosophy arriving too late to act. If anything, it puts philosophy, or more precisely thought itself, at the very core of what actually is. At the very least, what the discord between these claims indicates is that Hegel understands the work of philosophy as a complex relationship between actuality and thought. It indicates that the claim about philosophy arriving too late, or only after the fact, is perhaps not simply a condemnation of philosophy. Could it be that this claim "condemns" actuality itself? Could the too-lateness of philosophy indicate a too-lateness of some sort within the fabric of actuality itself, an instability at the very core of (historical, political) reality? If so, what could this ontological too-lateness mean?

But let us not get ahead of ourselves. Instead, let us begin with a very straightforward, even naïve question: What specifically does philosophy, according to Hegel, come too late to do? On this point, Hegel is extremely clear: philosophy comes too late *to teach us, to instruct us* about what is to be done. The first general claim that I wish to make is that, without any doubt, Hegel is *completely correct* in making this point. Not only does it not contradict the claim that the rational is actual and the actual rational, it can, in fact, only be properly understood with and through that claim. The actual is the rational; *therefore*, philosophy cannot but reflect or express rational actuality in the medium of thought. (I employ here language that is very similar to Spinoza's quite deliberately, the reasons for which will become clear soon.) This injunction works *vice versa* as well: it is precisely because thought does not constitute a realm of its own, independent of the world, that philosophical thinking cannot simply subtract itself from actuality and consider such actuality as pure matter which it might shape according to its own design, independent of that matter itself. The thinking subject does not primarily exist in itself and only secondarily intervene in the actual world; this is, I argue, why Hegel evokes the ancient maxim *Hic Rhodus, hic salta* (ibid., p. 21; Hegel writes *saltus*). We cannot save ourselves the trouble of engaging with the world by evoking some counterfactual ideal circumstances on the island of Rhodes.

This is a fundamental lesson for all political philosophy. It is a grave mistake if we expect philosophy to give us a simple set of instructions or guidelines to live by, to tell us what is to be done in each particular historical situation. Hegel writes explicitly about his work: "This treatise, therefore, in so far as it deals with political science, shall be nothing other than an attempt to comprehend and portray the state as an inherently rational entity. As a philosophical composition, it must distance itself as far as possible from the obligation to construct a state as it ought to be; such instruction as it may contain cannot be aimed at instructing the state on how

it ought to be, but rather at showing how the state, as the ethical universe, should be recognized” (ibid., p. 21). Hegel’s point about the nature of political science, or more precisely political philosophy, is almost the same as the point Spinoza makes so brilliantly in the opening of his *Political Treatise*:

Philosophers look upon the passions, by which we are assailed, as vices into which men fall through their own fault. So it is their custom to deride, bewail, berate them, or, if their purpose is to appear more zealous than others, to execrate them. They believe that they are thus performing a sacred duty, and that they are attaining the summit of wisdom when they have learnt how to shower extravagant praise on a human nature that nowhere exists and to revile that which exists in actuality. The fact is that they conceive men not as they are, but as they would like them to be. As a result, for the most part it is not ethics they have written, but satire; and they have never worked out a political theory that can have practical application, only one that borders on fantasy. (Spinoza 2002, p. 680)

Spinoza makes it very clear that we can either become moralists and chastise people, or get involved in what he calls an analysis of “what exists in actuality.” Moralists will always know exactly what ought to be done—but that is why no amount of moralism can ever add up to or lead to a proper political philosophy. In political philosophy, you are either a moralist or a political philosopher in the proper sense of the word. Either you chastise people about what they should be like or what they ought to do, or else you analyze the concrete relationships between men such as they exist in the world.

Spinoza and Hegel thus form a firm block within the field of political philosophy. We should immediately add another pair of authors to this list: Marx and Engels. They make almost exactly the same point in *The German Ideology* when they denounce all attempts made by philosophers to, as they phrase it, “descend from heaven down to earth.” Instead, they propose an analysis

of “real, active men,” and seek to explain people’s ideas and the general ideology of the period from that vantage point:

The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstractions can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity. (Marx and Engels 2016, p. 42)

The theoretical move that Marx and Engels make in *The German Ideology* is actually quite complex and convoluted when compared to that of Spinoza, because they are not simply criticizing moralism in political philosophy; they are criticizing the Young Hegelians, such as Feuerbach, who are actually *themselves* critical, at least to an extent, of the moralist approach. The problem of the Young Hegelians, as Marx and Engels make abundantly clear, is that they attempt to criticize an idea from the standpoint of another idea. In the Preface to *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels make a programmatic claim about the Young Hegelians’ attempts to produce a revolution: “Hitherto men have constantly made up for themselves false conceptions about themselves, about what they are and what they ought to be. [...] Let us revolt against the rule of thoughts. Let us teach men, says one, to exchange these imaginations for thoughts which correspond to the essence of man; says the second, to take up a critical attitude to them; says the third, to knock them out of their heads; and—existing reality will collapse” (Marx and Engels 2016, p. 37). This theoretical move is complex because Marx and Engels do, in principle, agree with Feuerbach that men make false conceptions about themselves. It is just that Marx and Engels do not believe that such false conceptions could be uprooted simply by teaching people the apparent truth about themselves.

With regard to this concern, we can draw another parallel with Spinoza’s philosophy. In *Ethics*, Spinoza makes a distinction

between an adequate and an inadequate idea, where inadequate ideas are ideas that people form spontaneously based on the accidental encounters of their bodies with other bodies in the world. Deleuze explains that “the only ideas we have under the natural conditions of our perception are [thus] the ideas that represent what *happens* to our body, the effect of another body on ours, that is, a mixing of both bodies” (Deleuze 1988, p. 73). Spinoza’s point is that even when we are capable of forming an adequate idea, the inadequate idea—which is our imaginary representation of ourselves and the world we live in—will not simply disperse! Genevieve Lloyd puts this aptly: “the imagination has a resilience which can coexist with the knowledge of its inadequacy” (Lloyd 1996, p. 66). An adequate idea can therefore replace an inadequate idea not simply and solely by virtue of being the truth, but only by virtue of functioning within the constitution of the body as the stronger affect. The notion of the resilience of the imagination and its coexistence with the knowledge of its inadequacy, I claim, opens up the space for a Marxist intervention in Spinoza. What Marx and Engels criticize in Feuerbach and the Young Hegelians is precisely the notion that an organized (yet inadequate) idea could be dispersed simply by pointing out that it is not the truth; or that everything one needs to do in order to be a revolutionary is to perform such unveilings. In addition, Spinoza’s refutation of the Cartesian doctrine of the subject’s free will as the cause of both actions and errors—a doctrine that would allow for true ideas to directly influence the subject’s behavior in the material world—strongly resonates with Hegel’s claim that philosophy cannot simply instruct us on how to act in our historical moment.

In short, even though Marx and Engels explicitly criticize Hegel’s philosophy and Hegel’s dialectics, and even though Hegel is highly suspicious of the Spinozist rationalist project, on this fundamental point about how a proper political philosophy should be practiced, they all firmly agree. On this point, thinkers such as Spinoza, Hegel and Marx form a block within the field of

political philosophy. At the same time, we must also be careful to note the differences between individual formulations of this principle. While Spinoza draws a line between what the world is and what the world ought to be, Hegel introduces a specific category of knowledge, or cognizance: *Erkennen*. For Hegel, philosophical knowledge is never simply an abstract or arbitrary idea about what the world ought to be. It clearly belongs to the realm of actuality, even necessity. However, knowledge is also not simply and immediately that which is. For Hegel, there is some tension between the immediate and that which is actual-and-rational. I will return to this in the conclusion.

What Is to Be Done?

One may protest against the present considerations with the following objection: even if it appears philosophically sound and sensible to argue that philosophy cannot provide instructions on what the world ought to be, the field of political practice cannot afford to take such an impractical position. Political action, whether it is a minor political reform or a revolutionary restructuring of the political power on the grand scale, requires a goal. Now, a political goal can, of course, be either a noble one or an abominable one, but one way or the other, whether the political subject acts with good or bad intentions, they certainly act with their goal in view. Clearly, then, one must be able to suggest a roadmap, a course of action to be taken, or at the very least a general strategy, all of which inevitably amounts to having at least some kind of an answer to the question of what is to be done. For if this were not the case, and if we could imagine a political subject who acts without any goal whatsoever and only improvises his or her moves on the spot, then the very political move they perform “loses the name of action” (as Hamlet puts it) and becomes a mere reaction. And if, furthermore, our imagined political subject never takes matters

into their own hands but only reacts and improvises, this may, granted, provide good material for a theatrical piece, even one of Shakespearean proportions, but it can scarcely serve as a model for political practice in the real world. Moreover, we would be perfectly entitled to claim that what presented itself as a political subject in our little thought experiment is actually anything but, since they have relinquished their right to subjectivity and become a mere pawn in a game played by other people. Indeed, we would have to agree with Hamlet that it is Fortinbras who truly acts, and that Hamlet himself is only a profoundly lacking subject.

The premise of the objection is the claim that political philosophy should not be confused with political practice. To an extent, this takes us back to what Marx argues in thesis eleven and to many controversies within, as well as outside of, Marxist thought. As suggested above, one should note that Marx's argument cannot be reduced to a simplistic and naïve distinction between theory and practice, or thought and action, and that we should consider it as a distinction between two types of political analyses. Spinoza, Hegel and Marx would certainly not subscribe to such a simplistic distinction, and they would not consider their political analyses as "mere thought" without any immediate consequence for political practice. The precise relationship between theory and practice is another hefty affair within materialist philosophy, a relationship that Louis Althusser painstakingly tried to bring to light throughout his work. Instead of trailing these long debates, let us plunge into the discussion with a straightforward question: How would someone like Fortinbras, someone who is deeply involved in political, revolutionary practice, respond to the question of "what is to be done"?

As it turns out, we have to look no further than Lenin, who published his response in the notorious essay titled *What is to be done?* As one would expect, Lenin did provide some practical advice—for instance, he called for unity and the consolidation of revolutionary forces, especially of voices published in the revolu-

tionary press. However, Lenin's concluding remarks to the essay are actually, and perhaps surprisingly, not a list of things to be done, but rather a brief historical overview of social democracy in Russia. Lenin describes this history as falling into three distinct periods and claims that the contemporary, third period is a period of great advances but also of some discord among the leaders. Specifically, he evokes the image of a youth whose voice starts to change during adolescence; the current state of affairs, the third period, is thus compared to adolescence, and it is clear that Lenin wants to argue for some sort of "growing up," for "becoming an adult." At least from Kant's text on the Enlightenment onward, it is clear that the metaphor of growing up is an extremely powerful political metaphor.¹ In the brief Conclusion, Lenin finishes his text by summing up his historical periodization and looking into the future.

When the third period will come to an end and the fourth (now heralded by many portents) will begin we do not know. We are passing from the sphere of history to the sphere of the present and, partly, of the future. But we firmly believe that the fourth period will lead to the consolidation of militant Marxism, that Russian Social-Democracy will emerge from the crisis in the full flower of manhood, that the opportunist rearguard will be "replaced" by the genuine vanguard of the most revolutionary class. (Lenin 1902)

As Lenin imagines them, with a host of military metaphors, the historical periods are changing places one after another in a manner similar to a change of guards. Clearly, he wants to convince his readers that the moment for such a change (смена) has come, that "the third period" of social democracy in Russia is at an end and that the fourth is on the horizon. This allows him to summarize his text in a truly fascinating finale:

¹ Of course, this move by Lenin was extremely controversial at the time, but this is not the subject of this paper.

In the sense of calling for such a “replacement” (смена) and by way of summing up what has been expounded above, we may meet the question, What is to be done? with the brief reply:

Put an End to (Ликвидировать) the Third Period. (Ibid.)

I find this abrupt, curt, but also absolutely clear and direct conclusion stunning, because it suggests that the answer to the burning political question of the day requires the work of a *historian* rather than a policy maker. Better yet, it seems that for Lenin, political action in the proper meaning of the term, at least in the final move of this text, is a gesture of the historian, a gesture of the writer, a formal gesture of placing a full stop at the end of a historical period. What is needed is precisely for our own historical period to be recognized as such, *and thus liquidated*. The abrupt response is also clearly paradoxical inasmuch as it demands from us to be our own historians, the historians of our own present moment. It seems that Lenin’s answer rejects the very premise of the question asking what is to be done. It says something along the lines of the famous political slogan, “*We are the ones we have been waiting for.*”

My point here is that not even a revolutionary such as Lenin, who clearly had a goal and a plan, and who stood with both feet in the very nexus of world events, can truly instruct us, in a manner of writing a manual, in what is to be done. The very question is wrong, because what is to be done is not an action we could abstractly choose among many; rather, it is the realization that we ourselves are the actual political subject and the actual historical agent. The solid, factual texture of our social and political *status quo* cracks open from within, not from without; the future intervenes from within the present itself.

I claim that Hegel had precisely this intervention of historical destiny in the actuality of the present in mind when he recalled the Latin proverb *Hic Rhodus, hic salta*. On this point, we can

therefore read Hegel's Preface to the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* through Lenin's Conclusion to *What Is to Be Done*? When Hegel says that philosophy cannot rejuvenate a historical period, a specific "shape of life," that it can only recognize it, he is not expounding a certain defect of philosophy, but precisely its politically important task. "When philosophy paints its grey in grey, then has a shape of life grown old," writes Hegel. Is this not precisely what Lenin says is required: to recognize the third period for what it is, to paint it grey in grey, and by this very action to allow it to pass away, *to liquidate it*? To articulate this crucial point once more: when Hegel tells us that philosophy comes too late to instruct us on what is to be done, this is not a declaration of its political impotence, but quite the opposite. I opened this paper with a metaphor implying that, for Hegel, philosophy is only ever able to perform an autopsy, a *post festum* analysis of world affairs, but it is inevitably too late on the scene to cure the patient. With Lenin, we can now be more specific about what this image gets right: the task of philosophy has never been to cure our present moment, as sorrowful as it may present itself to us, but precisely, through the labor of cognizing it, to let it grow old and let it pass away. The English language has a beautiful word, *execution*, which expresses the performative action of carrying something into effect as well as the notion of carrying out a death sentence. I therefore suggest that philosophy, according to Hegel, is precisely the delicate art of execution.

A Matter of Life and Death

Comparing the work of philosophy to the work of anatomy is, of course, not coincidental. Hegel himself makes this comparison in the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. He writes that, in philosophy, one cannot simply state one's aims, nor can one skip the process of cognizance itself (*Erkenntnis*) and directly list the

results. He draws parallels with the science of anatomy in the very first paragraph and argues that “if a person were to have only a general notion of, for example, anatomy, or, to put it roughly, if he were to have an acquaintance with the parts of the body taken in accordance with their lifeless existence, nobody would thereby think that he has come into full possession of the salient subject matter of that science” (Hegel 2019, p. 3). It is a somewhat perplexing example, because the science of anatomy has in fact made great advances precisely by studying the lifeless existence of cadavers and corpses. Hegel further explains that philosophy, too, must proceed by treating its subject matter as some sort of a living organism. Various philosophical systems in history are not competitors in an abstract game of grasping a timeless and immutable truth, wherein some are correct and score points while others are not and miss their shots. Instead, Hegel argues that they are (all) historically necessary; he famously compares the contradictions between them to the organic process of a plant, where the bud is refuted by the blossom, which is in turn refuted by the fruit. In the third paragraph, Hegel writes that in philosophy, the subject matter is not simply exhausted in its aims, its end results:

The aim for itself is the lifeless universal in the way that the tendency of the work itself is a mere drive that still lacks actuality; the unadorned result is just the corpse that has left the tendency behind. (Hegel 2019, p. 5)

Assuming that the work of philosophy could be distilled into a bulleted list of results would be like assuming that we might grasp the functioning of a living organism by quartering a body and displaying its parts for view. In philosophy, a result—or, for that matter, a political instruction—is like a dead organ. Philosophy aims to capture life, and bare results are nothing but cadavers; on this point, Hegel is clearly repeating the gesture of Fichte. However, as I hope to demonstrate, the difference between Hegel and Fichte is nevertheless quite significant. Recall how

Fichte argues that his *System of Knowledge* is a completely novel philosophical enterprise:

The Science of Knowledge is a very different matter [from other philosophical systems]. Its chosen topic of consideration is not a lifeless concept, passively exposed to its inquiry merely, of which it makes something only by its own thought, but a living and active thing which engenders insights from and through itself, and which the philosopher merely contemplates. His role in the affair goes no further than to translate this living force into purposeful activity, to observe the activity in question, to apprehend it and grasp it as a unity. (Fichte 1982, p. 30)

In short, Fichte argues that the novelty of his system lies in the fact that it treats the object of knowledge as a living thing. By contrast, what other philosophical systems are doing is not unlike the work of Dr. Frankenstein:

The philosopher of the first type, by contrast, is fashioning an artefact. In the object of his labours he reckons only upon the matter, not upon an inner, self-active force thereof. Before he goes to work, this inner force must already have been killed, or it would offer resistance to his efforts. From this dead mass he fashions something, purely through his own powers, and in accordance only with his own concept, already devised beforehand. (Ibid.)

What Fichte articulates so clearly, and so well, is that philosophy, insofar as it follows an already devised concept, is merely fashioning an artifact from a dead mass; what is thereby lost is precisely the living “self-active” force of the philosopher’s object. It seems that Fichte and Hegel both argue that the proper philosophical perspective is to treat the topic of concern as a living force, and they both seem to refer, explicitly or not, to the science of anatomy. “Science may organize itself only through the proper life of the concept,” writes Hegel in no uncertain terms (Hegel 2019, p. 33).

And yet, as it turns out especially in the later passages of the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, for Hegel, philosophy's relationship to the work of a pathologist, and to life itself, is much more complicated. At some point, it seems that life and death change places, so that true philosophy no longer stands on the side of life, but rather on the side of death. Hegel's point is not that a scientific object should be killed before it can be properly observed, but that theoretical observation itself is an act of execution, the very act of bringing death. In this sense, Hegel writes about understanding as "the most astonishing and the greatest of all the powers" (Hegel 2019, p. 20). It is understanding itself that is to be considered as the activity of separating the actual (*das Wirkliche*) from its immediate context. He describes this power in the following way:

However, that the accidental, separated from its surroundings, being bound to other actualities and only existing in their context, attains an isolated freedom and its own proper existence — this is the tremendous power of the negative. It is the energy of thinking, of the pure I. Death, if that is what we wish to call that non-actuality (*Unwirklichkeit*), is the most fearful thing of all, and to keep and hold fast to what is dead requires only the greatest force. (Hegel 2019, p. 20, corrected translation)

The power of thought, the power of the pure I as Hegel understands it, is the tremendous power to detach a contingency from its immediate context and set it free. It is thought itself, this non-actuality itself, that gives to something contingent an existence and freedom of its own. It picks it up from its immediate context and raises it to the level of an idea. And this power is what Hegel calls "death," and he further claims that "this power is the same as what in the preceding was called the subject" (Hegel 2019, p. 21).

This is a very complex argument, compressed in a very short paragraph. I take the passage to mean that pure subjectivity, which is the same as thought itself, is the absolute power of the negative,

or death itself. If this account of the passage is correct, it allows us to argue that the relationship of philosophy to its subject matter is, for Hegel, neither like that of the science of anatomy, which proceeds by examining cadavers and corpses, nor like that of Fichte's science of knowledge, which only translates the living force to purposeful activity. For Hegel, the work of the philosopher is precisely the work of the liquidator, the executor. Philosophy is not simply too-late to intervene in actuality (*das Wirkliche*); rather, its power is precisely the power of the non-actual, the power of setting actuality free and grasping it as an idea. This is what Hegel properly calls the subject. We thus come back to the question of the utmost political urgency, to the question of what is to be done—which is why I believe Hegel's answer could be paraphrased with Lenin. What our historical period demands that we do is that we grasp it as a historical period both in its necessity and its unity, to set it free and thus to liquidate it.

By reading Hegel through Lenin it becomes clear that the materialist approach to political philosophy does not eradicate political subjectivity (at least not necessarily; for the purposes of this paper, we will leave the question of subjectivity in Spinoza unanswered).² However, in materialist analyses, the political

²The discussion surrounding Spinoza's concept of the subject is very much alive. Caroline Williams, for instance, distinguishes between the subject and the place (or the scene) of the subject and presents the idea of a "subjectivity without the subject" in Spinoza (Williams 2012, p. 172). Williams makes it quite clear that, for her, "the matter of subjectivity is always a political matter" and argues for the necessity of a (new) materialist concept of subjectivity, a concept beyond the metaphysical construction of the subject: "If it is the case that human subjects can no longer be understood to stand alone as the single principle or fulcrum of organisation for collective life, a stronger materialist account is required of the morphology of subjectivity, its coming into being as an arrangement of parts or as a temporary formation that might be subject to capture or combination, containment, exchange, and transformation. It is these political relations of figuration and mutation that my own engagement with Spinoza intends to develop" (Williams 2016).

subject does not appear as the Cartesian subject of thinking, as an external agent for whom engagement with the world appears as one option among many. Instead, the world of Cartesian subjects is part of the objective world of political analysis itself. This explains why such analysis inevitably comes “too late” to help those particular subjects in question. At the same time, this philosophical position produces an even more astonishing consequence, one that I have been hinting at from the very beginning: the structure of actuality itself appears as something cracked from within, as something already affected by, or even infected with, subjectivity.

Monarchy, Subjectivity, Performativity

Let us return to Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*. As is well known, Hegel argued that the state, precisely insofar as it is an entity of reason, requires a monarch. Perhaps surprisingly, Hegel adds that what is required of the monarch is not wisdom in making just universal laws, but solely to appear as a contingent subjectivity that formally declares the law. Hegel writes, “In a fully organized state, it is only a question of the highest instance of formal decision, and all that is required in a monarch is someone to say ‘yes’ and to dot the ‘i’; for the supreme office should be such that the particular character of its occupant is of no significance” (Hegel 1991, p. 323). This purely formal instance of sanctioning the law, with no affirmative content that would depend on the monarch’s character, is what Hegel believes is required for a law to become an actual law. This idea has been widely commented on in Hegel scholarship, but two of the central claims made are especially interesting for our analysis. First, this office, whose occupant’s particular character is of no significance, is exemplary of the subject. Jean-Luc Nancy writes that the “necessity of the monarch follows from the very necessity, the most absolute and compelling there is, of subjectivity or of Spirit” (Nancy 1982,

p. 486). For Žižek, “the Monarch is thus a subject par excellence” (Žižek 2008, p. 252). Second, the formal gesture of saying “yes” or “I will it” or “dotting the i’s” is widely recognized as a performative gesture. “This transformation of abstract will into concrete will is a performative (*performance*)” (Nancy 1982, p. 505). Žižek writes, for instance, that “the monarch’s authority is purely ‘performative’” (Žižek 2014b, p. 33); he argues that the monarch’s addition to the law “adds no new content, it just performatively registers something that is already here” (Žižek 2012, p. 236). Nancy argues that the instant of the declaration of the law is also the instant of making the decision: “Not only does his mouth open, but he himself—and not the councils or the assemblies—decides” (Nancy 1982, p. 510). Following Nancy, Žižek describes the instantaneous nature of the monarch’s declaration as “the moment of enunciation with regard to a series of statements: through his act, statements prepared by the state bureaucracy acquire performative power, become actualized” (Žižek 2012, p. 461). Let me comment on both of these claims.

The claim that the monarch constitutes the perfect example of (Hegelian) subjectivity is fully supported by the text itself, since Hegel writes that “in a well-ordered monarchy, the objective aspect is solely the concern of the law, to which the monarch merely has to add his subjective ‘I will’” (Hegel 1991, p. 323). Hegel overwhelmingly binds the notion of subjectivity in reference to the monarch to the purely formal instant of an individual making a decision, such as in the description of “subjectivity as the ultimate decision of the will (*die letzte Willensentscheidung*)” (Hegel 1991, p. 308). This means that not only does the subjectivity of the state reside in the monarch’s act of making the decision (in the purely formal “yes”), but this decision is, in addition, merely an expression of the monarch’s will, and not his or her conscience or feeling (“I will it so,” without any moral or other justification). The monarch lacks any positive aspect, and we may truly surmise that this purely formal, void instance of sovereignty

is indeed what Hegel elsewhere determines as the negative power of the subject. The monarch, by recognizing the (objective) law as his own (subjective) will, even though he has not contributed to its content in any meaningful way, performs the function of the subject.

However, we can hardly accept the notion of a purely ceremonial monarch as our own modern concept of political subjectivity. It obviously lacks the dimension of agency. Contemporary monarchs, as well as heads of state with virtually no executive or legislative duties except signing bills into laws (such as in “chancellor democracies”), do indeed partake in a socially required performance or ceremony, yet this “dotting of the i’s” clearly doesn’t amount to anything close to historical agency. Contemporary examples of constitutional monarchies could perhaps serve as models of well-ordered states, at least some of them, at least sometimes, but it is completely clear that the ceremonial monarchs of these countries do not appear to us as historical agents. They are not what Hegel refers to as “world historical individuals,” leaders of men, such as Caesar or Napoleon. Apparently, there is a difference between a purely ceremonial act and a performance or execution of a political action.

The function of the monarch, his ceremonial “I do,” fits J. L. Austin’s description of performative utterances; the declaration of a law, often a publicized ceremony, is precisely what inaugurates that law as a law. But with Austin’s theory of performative utterances alone, there is no way for us to distinguish between a ceremony and a ceremony, that is to say, between a ceremony *within* the domain of the law (for instance, a wedding ceremony) and a ceremony which *constitutes* the lawful order itself (the declaration of Law). In other words, if the law—moral or political—is the ultimate authority that must support an utterance in order for it to count as performative, then by what measure do we validate the context of the declaration of the Law as such? We can only assert tautologies such as “the law is the law,” “the king

is the king,” etc., which led Hegel to claim that the declaration of law is nothing but a mere formality, a formality as such, and that the king is nothing but his own performance. Hegel, arguing for a constitutional monarchy of reason, denies that the monarch’s authority should ultimately reside in the authority of God and that it is consequent enough to reject any other authority, including the authority of reason. The authority of Hegel’s monarch is thus purely performative. Here, we can clearly observe an element of what is known in another context as the doctrine of papal infallibility; Hegel’s monarch retains (or perhaps embodies the perfect form of) the central characteristic of the feudal monarchy, the principle of *l’État, c’est moi*.³

This allows us to determine what exactly is unsatisfactory about Hegel’s idea of the constitutional monarch: it says too much, but at the same time, it does not say enough. It says too much, because Hegel argues that this function must be executed by a contingent individuality, which he understands as *one* individual (a *mon*-arch). Why not a class of individuals, as Marx suggested? In addition, Hegel presupposes that this contingent individuality is self-identical, performed by one and the same person over a substantial period of time. Hegel’s reasons for these theoretical choices are certainly insufficient. At the same time, and perhaps even more importantly, Hegel’s notion of the constitutional monarch does not go far enough. I suspect that it is precisely by identifying the category of political subjectivity with the person of a contingent individuality (with “this” particular monarch) that Hegel fails

³ Zdravko Kobe points out, albeit with criticism, that Hegel consistently understood the figure of the monarch as “*the political version of the ontological proof of God’s existence*,” which means that the political decision is ultimately “*immediate and groundless*” (Kobe 2015, pp. 169–170, italics in the original). The groundlessness of the law is precisely what makes it purely performative, though, and it is thus *actually* true precisely inasmuch as it is *potentially* true. This groundlessness of the law is also that which allows Jure Simoniti to articulate the notion of “the opaque core of sociality” (Simoniti 2020, p. 203).

to make a distinction between a merely ceremonial sanctioning of a particular law and the truly historical event of the inauguration of the order of Law itself. Hegel's constitutional monarch is a ceremonial figurehead, a mascot, a professional actor. He is the embodiment of that which can never become what Hegel so pompously described as the "world historical individual." In fact, as long as the ceremonial monarch rules (or "rules"), as long as he or she remains on the scene, we can be quite certain that nothing will disturb the usual process of the well-oiled machine, the state.

The Theatricality of Power

Hegel's concept of the ceremonial monarch brings to the fore of political analysis a dimension which I suggest we call *the theatricality of power*. This term denotes the performative character of the order of the law, or the groundlessness of the order of the political reality of any given historical social formation. Political power is theatrical precisely inasmuch as its functioning is not grounded in or supported by any natural entity or force, but exists solely through and in its own performances and declarations. We could also paraphrase Hegel and claim that political power has the structure of ontotheology. It would be trivial to note that animals and plants do not care about political borders or concepts; the claim here is precisely the opposite: the constitution of political reality is in the ultimate analysis completely independent of the world of natural forces and inclinations. This is why all political philosophy that limits itself to proscribing a more or less effective set of tools to regulate natural human interests, needs and passions remains solely on the level of giving us moral advice, clueless as to why it may appear that people are not behaving with their best rational interests in mind.

Is the theatricality of power irreconcilable with Hegel's notion of world historical individuals, such as Caesar or Napoleon, who are precisely not mere figureheads of the political community

but men of action, men who took the risk and crossed the Rubicon, leaders and drivers of historical change? Inasmuch as their power is not purely ceremonial but emphatically executive, one could assume that they somehow fall outside of the regime of the theatricality of power. Did we relapse, in a certain sense, back to the dubious dichotomy of thesis eleven, only that it is now no longer a question of interpretation versus change, but a question of political performance and the performance of the political? According not only to Marx of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* but also to Hegel himself, this would be a mistake. This is where the notion of historical repetition becomes crucial: for Hegel, Caesar's historical importance lies not so much in the great feats he has accomplished, but rather beyond them, beyond his own death even, in the fact that even though he has died, the idea of "Caesar" has survived, the idea of one individual reigning over the entire Roman state. Commenting on Caesar's demise at the hands of the Roman aristocracy, Hegel says, "Clearly the reigning in of one individual personality did not succeed. [...] Such a great change had to take place twice, the fact that one person came to be the ruler. We say that 'once does not count', in the sense that what takes place once can happen by chance. Thus Augustus had to follow, just as Napoleon had to be dethroned twice. Augustus first of all, and then Tiberius, brought about the continuance of the form of the state" (Hegel 2011, p. 446). The mention of Napoleon in this context gives us a clear idea why Marx thought of this passage (most probably) when commenting on the coup staged by his nephew, Napoleon III. In the TWA edition of Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, the link between chance and repetition is even clearer: "The noblest men of Rome believed Caesar's reign to be a matter of chance (*etwas zufälliges*). [...] That which only seemed contingent (*zufällig*) and possible (*möglich*) in the beginning, becomes something actual (*Wirkliche*) and confirmed (*Bestätigte*) through repetition" (Hegel TWA 12, p. 380, my translation). The notion of the world historical individual breaks down into two distinct moments. The first moment is occupied by

the physical body of Caesar, the immense sum of all his political and military feats, uniting Rome and the world under the rule of one. It is, however, only the second moment, the repetition of Caesar in Octavian Augustus, which *retroactively* makes and confirms Caesar as a world historical individual, as the physical embodiment of the idea of the rule of one. We also notice a third moment appear in the shadows of this exchange of the physical body of Caesar with the idea of Caesar's rule of one, the instance that confirms and actualizes, the instance that is presented with the minimal possible description: the instance of *repetition*. We must read this passage, I argue, in combination with the passage from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* on the power of pure thought, which tears (historical) contingency out of its immediate context and gives it an independent freedom and an isolated existence (of a historical event). This instance, referred to in the *Lectures* simply as repetition, is Hegel's true notion of historical agency, of true political subjectivity. Caesar is a contingent possibility, it is his repetition in "Caesar" that makes the contingency actual, that constitutes a historical actuality. Caesar is a matter for chronicles; "Caesar" is a matter of the philosophy of history.⁴

Thus it seems that the performative subjectivity of the ceremonial monarch and the executive action of the world historical individual are nevertheless related to one another. The work of Caesar, fully immersed in the nexus of world events, requires an instance of "repetition," an instance of the official sanctioning of that work, which isolates it and gives it formal recognition. The actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) of Caesar, insofar as it is immediate and bound to its circumstances, remains contingent and a matter of

⁴ In a slightly different context, Bara Kolenc remarks that "Hegel's dialectics as such is nothing but repetition *par excellence*" (Kolenc 2015, p. 207). Kolenc writes this with regard to Hegel's *Science of Logic*, but it is perhaps even clearer in Hegel's philosophy of history, precisely insofar as we understand repetition in the sense described here, as the name for the very operation of reason which transforms a contingent possibility into a conceptual necessity.

chance; what is required in order to grasp it in its necessity is precisely the recognition that it *was*, indeed, the actual (*das Wirkliche*). Every Napoleon requires his Hegel to be recognized as a historical necessity and sanctioned as an avatar of the world spirit. Hegel is correct, in the Preface to the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, to emphasize that the act of recognition (*Erkenntnis*) can only come “too late” with regard to that which is recognized in its gaze. At the same time, however, this too-lateness is inscribed in the very structure of (political, historical) reality itself, because actuality is constituted as such only retroactively, only through the performative, purely formal confirmation that it is “indeed” the actuality.

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The contribution is a result of the work conducted within the research project “Theatricality of Power” (J6-1812) and research program “Philosophical Investigations” (P6-0252), financed by ARRS, the Slovenian Research Agency.

Thinking Nothing

Sebastian Rödl

1. Absolute Knowledge

It is a commonplace that the tradition of German Idealism, and specifically Hegel, recognized self-consciousness—the character of thought by which, in thinking what it does, thought thinks itself—to be the principle and the medium of philosophy. The medium: philosophy is the endeavor to express in language what is understood in self-consciousness, in thought's thinking itself. The principle: what is understood in philosophy is understood to have no ground outside that very understanding of it and in this sense to be its own principle.

Hegel presents philosophical understanding—the exposition of the self-consciousness of thought, of thinking thinking thinking—as absolute knowledge. While it seems to me that this is a commonplace in broad strands of the tradition of philosophy, it is not easily received today. Knowledge, people say, is fallible, reversible, forever transforming, a dynamic interminable process. Moreover, knowledge is pluriform, local, embedded. And it is shot through with blind spots, blurred with impurities, muddled by uncontrollable external conditions. Hegel did not appreciate this and hankered after an eternal, uniform, and self-transparent system of knowledge.

It seems to me that the conception of knowledge as reversible, situated, and intransparent, and its alleged superiority to the

idea that allegedly animates Hegel's philosophy, manifests a lack of familiarity with the idea of knowledge, namely, with the idea of absolute knowledge. This lack of familiarity is the deed of a pervasive naturalism, a naturalism by no means confined to the Anglo-American mainstream discourse. As it is pervasive, it is hard to remove. I think a good way to begin with the task of removing it, a good way to provide an opening for absolute knowledge and thus for philosophy and thus for Hegel, is to explain what it means and why it is that absolute knowledge is not knowledge of something, but knowledge of nothing. When it is seen that what is known in absolute knowledge is nothing, it will be a little more difficult to get the debunking discourse going, according to which it should be fallible, embedded, and blind to itself.

Nowadays, the main obstacle to the comprehension of the idea of absolute knowledge is naturalism. While naturalism is pervasive, there are tendencies today that reject it. It seems, however, that these are still too much in its thrall in order fully to break free from it. The tendencies I speak of are philosophical quietism, often presented as a radical realism, and formal idealism, a tendency in the wake of Kant and Kantianism. My exposition of the idea of absolute knowledge as knowing nothing thus will proceed by way of a passage through naturalism, formal idealism, and quietism.

2. *The Absolute Abstraction*

It is hard to introduce the self-consciousness of thought. For it is everywhere. Let us catch it somewhere. Suppose I think snow is white. Indeed, I do think that. Now, in thinking snow is white, I understand myself to think that. No further act of the mind, specifically no further thought, is needed on the part of her who thinks snow is white in order for her to be conscious of thinking that snow is white. Thinking that snow is white is thinking oneself to think that. We may put this by saying that the thought

expressed by *snow is white* is the same as the one expressed by *I think snow is white*.

Now, when we say what we just did about *snow is white* and *I think snow is white*, we are not interested in what is expressed by *snow is white* specifically. Any sentence other than *snow is white*, as long as it expresses something capable of being thought, will do equally well. Thus, we may present our concern as one with *I think p* and *p*, using *p*, as is customary, in order indeterminately to indicate something thinkable. Then our thought is: thinking something, thinking *p*, and understanding oneself to think it, thinking *I think p*, are but one thought; *p* and *I think p* signify but one thing thought. Now our thought neither employs the idea of snow nor that of whiteness. It considers what is such as to be thought and the thinking of it. The only idea that figures in our thought is that of thought.

I said I would use the letter *p* in order indeterminately to indicate something thinkable. This is a familiar use of that letter. Let us consider the idea expressed by the letter so used.

Thinking something, we use concepts, concepts of something about which, using these concepts, we think. For example, we deploy the concept *white*. Such a concept has a content: it is determinate and so determines what we think through it, thinking it to be so. Here, the term “so” indeterminately signifies the concept’s content.

A concept’s determinacy may be considered from two sides: the concept is determinate, and it is determining. As a concept is determinate, *it* differs from *other concepts*: being white is not the same as being heavy; being snow is not the same as being grass. As a concept determines, namely, what is thought through it, it is a capacity to distinguish *one thing* from *other things*: what is heavy, in being heavy, differs from what is not heavy. Thus the determinacy of a concept is a double difference: the difference of the concept from other concepts, the difference of one “so” from other “so”s; and the difference of what is thought through

the concept from what cannot be thought through it, the difference of what is so from what is not so. The consciousness of this double difference is but one consciousness; it is the determinacy of the concept, the consciousness of it as determinate and thereby determining, or as determining by being determinate. A concept not understood to differ from other concepts—a concept that is not determinate—would not be a capacity to distinguish what is thought through it from other things—it would not determine. Conversely, a concept that did not provide for its use to distinguish something from something—a concept that did not determine—would therein prove not to be a consciousness of it as different from other concepts—it would not be determinate.

A determinate concept, a concept with content, may be more or less general. We ascend from a given concept to a more general one as we strip away determinations that the former contains; we abstract from these, as it may be put, or, perhaps better, we abstract (*abziehen*) the more general concept from the less general one. Just as the concept from which it is abstracted, the abstracted concept has a content. Its content is thinner. Yet it has a content: it differs from other concepts and is a capacity to distinguish one thing from another. Abstraction moves from content to content.

We may contemplate stripping a concept not of certain of its determinations, but of all determinacy. Call this the absolute abstraction. It may seem that the absolute abstraction is an especially thorough form of abstraction: it carries abstraction as far as it is at all possible. However, precisely because it takes abstraction to its limit, the absolute abstraction is no abstraction. Absolute abstraction annihilates all content and thus all difference of one concept from another. Hence, it does not proceed from any particular concept. It does not use, and therefore does not require, anything that a particular concept would give. On the contrary: it repels any determination that would be so given.

The absolute abstraction abstracts from any determination and thus annihilates all difference of one concept from another.

Therefore, in contrast to an abstracted concept, the absolute abstraction has no content. It is not a concept differing from other concepts. Hence, it does not distinguish one thing from another; thinking something through the absolute abstraction is not thinking it not to be otherwise than therein it is thought to be.

The absolute abstraction is not a particularly thorough form of abstraction. It is no abstraction at all. It is not an element, and therefore not the last element, in a series of concepts of ascending generality, developed by abstraction. It is not more general than concepts falling within such a series. Indeed, the absolute abstraction is not general at all. It cannot be introduced by examples, presented so as to draw attention to something they have in common. For it abstracts from all determination and thus from everything that something could have in common with something. In this way, the absolute abstraction is unique. I shall mark its uniqueness by calling it not “general” but “universal.” The absolute abstraction is the universal idea.

The universal idea does not arise from a particular concept. If it did arise from a particular concept, then any concept, no matter what its content, would give rise to it in the same way. Hence, what is thought in this idea is not this or that content. What is thought in this idea is content überhaupt, content as such. Content, here, is content thought. In the absolute abstraction, embracing the universal idea, thought turns to itself.

The letter *p*, indeterminately indicating something thinkable, signifies the universal idea; it expresses the absolute abstraction. Ordinary language supplies expressions that serve the purpose that *p* is called upon to serve in philosophical writing: “so it is”, “it is so”, “things are so”, “things are thus-and-so”. We can present the self-consciousness of thought by means of that ordinary locution: thinking that things are so, and thinking oneself to think that they are, is but one thought; there is but one thing thought in this thought. So the expression that, in ordinary language, gives voice to the absolute abstraction is “what is” or “being”, or, in

Ancient Greek, *to on* or *einai*. The absolute abstraction is the idea of being. Aristotle asserts that being is not a *genos*. This is the point I made above: the absolute abstraction is not a general concept. It is unique.

The absolute abstraction is thought thinking itself. Hegel describes Parmenides, who announces that being alone is and not-being not at all, as expressing the excitement of thought's embracing itself in its absolute abstraction. The idea of being that Parmenides announces is the universal idea. Hegel says this idea is thought embracing itself; it is thinking thinking thinking. Parmenides does not present himself, in so many words, as speaking thought's thought of itself. Yet that is what he does.

3. Naturalism, Formal Idealism, Quietism

I want to distinguish three ways of understanding the turn of thought to itself, which can be encountered in the history of philosophy, as well as in today's discourse. These are three ways of understanding philosophy and the understanding it seeks. Thus they are three ways of understanding knowledge and thought.

It may seem that thought as it turns to itself turns to a certain thing. Thought is one among the many things that may be thought. Then, the idea of concept, thought, judgment has a content: it is determinate, differing from other concepts; and it determines, distinguishing what can be thought through it from what cannot. Thought thinking itself is not the absolute abstraction. It is an abstraction. It is a general concept, which isolates something that is common to many things (processes, states, acts, whatever term is felt to fit best). Accordingly, it makes sense to contemplate the possibility, or assert the actuality, of a special science whose object is circumscribed by this concept. One may want to call it thought-science, knowledge-science, cognition-science. Further, insofar as philosophy is different from science and is called, in order to

mark that difference, metaphysics, there will be a special branch of metaphysics that treats of thought: a metaphysics of thought or the mind. I refer to this conception of thought as naturalism, for it places thought among the objects of theoretical knowledge and in this sense in nature.

The second understanding of thought turning to itself recognizes that this turn is an abstraction from all content. Consequently, and in contrast to naturalism, it does not understand thought to be one among the many things that may be thought. Yet that second understanding of thought turning to itself maintains that something survives the abstraction in which thought thinks itself: as we abstract from all content of concepts, we are left with the form of a concept. There is something for thought to think as it thinks itself: its form; there are concepts deployed in thought thinking itself: formal concepts. So while the absolute abstraction remains an abstraction, a discontinuity is marked between the concept of thought and any concept that has content. A formal concept is not a general concept: it cannot be placed within a series of concepts of ascending generality, and it cannot be introduced by judiciously chosen examples. I call this understanding of thought thinking itself formal idealism. In contrast to naturalism, formal idealism does not allow for a science of thought. The form of thought is a necessary form of all knowledge and thus of any science. But the mere form of a science is not a science. Nor does formal idealism have room for a metaphysics of thought. It does allow for metaphysics, for the formal concept may acquire a content, which will be a pure content, pure, because it does not reflect any particular content, but a mere form according to which content is given. The exposition of that content then is metaphysics, of nature and of morals. Yet neither of these is a metaphysics of thought.

The third response to the idea of thought thinking itself is to deny that there is such a thing; it is to assert that the idea of absolute abstraction is incoherent. The absolute abstraction is said to

abstract from everything. Hence, nothing remains to be thought in this abstraction, not even a form. The absolute abstraction thinks nothing. This means that what presents itself as the absolute abstraction is an illusion of a thought and no thought at all. This response may be elaborated in the claim that the appearance of an absolute abstraction is generated by a misuse of language. In this misuse, expressions are presumed to say something, even while the conditions under which alone these expressions have a content are rejected. What they are then presumed to say is bound to be a queer sort of content. In the face of this, the task of the philosopher is to provide neither a metaphysics of nature and morals nor indeed a metaphysics of thought. Rather, the work of the philosopher is to dissolve the illusion that there is an intellectual activity that answers to these incoherent notions by unmasking the forms of expression used in the service of the imaginary task as saying nothing at all. I shall refer to that stance toward the universal idea as quietism, for it wants to heed what it understands to be Wittgenstein's injunction in the *Tractatus* and be quiet.

Hegel rejects all of these notions of thought thinking itself. Hegel rejects naturalism in the broadest possible sense: he rejects any conception that treats thought as one among the manifold objects of theoretical knowledge and in this way places thought in nature. For thought thinking itself is the absolute abstraction. Hence, the idea of thought is not a general concept. Therefore, there is no such thing as a science of thought, nor is there a metaphysics of thought.

Hegel equally rejects formal idealism. Formal idealism appreciates that thought thinking itself expels all content. Yet it conceives the absolute abstraction as an abstraction: it isolates something that all thoughts have in common. This is to be not a content, but a form. That form is a determination that thought possesses independently of all content. Laying out that form in a table of judgments or categories, we describe the intellect. Thought

thus appears to be a determinate power, its determination being captured by these tables. However, the absolute abstraction is no abstraction. Hence, thought is not a power distinguished from other powers. It transcends the concepts of substance, power, act.

Hegel insists that thought thinking itself thinks nothing. This does not mean he embraces quietism. For he rejects the notion that thinking nothing is not thinking. Seeing nothing is not seeing. This reflects that seeing needs something: something it sees. For that reason, seeing nothing can only be being without what one would need in order to see. Now, it happens that people think nothing in this way, that is, because they lack something that they would need in order to think. But this is not the absolute abstraction. The absolute abstraction thinks nothing not because it lacks content, but because it has shed all content. The absolute abstraction, precisely in thinking nothing, is so far from lacking something that it is the knowledge that thought does not need anything at all. This is to say that the absolute abstraction is absolute knowledge. Consequently, while there is not *a* metaphysics, no metaphysics *of something*, there is metaphysics: the absolute abstraction—thought thinking itself—is knowledge of being as such. And while there are sciences, there is no science of thought. For thought is understood through itself, which understanding is not a science, but philosophy.

These three responses to the universal idea along with Hegel's rejection of them can be represented as four ways of understanding self-consciousness. For the "itself" in "thought thinking itself" is the indirect reflexive that appears as prefix in "self-consciousness". The first response understands the self-consciousness of thought to be a consciousness with a determinate content: *I think* is a consciousness of, a reference to, a certain object, signified by *I*, applying to it a certain concept, signified by *think*. Its peculiarity as *self*-consciousness resides in its being a special form of reference to that object, which provides a special perspective on it, allowing a special manner of applying the predicate. The second response

understands self-consciousness to be a mere form and thus empty. *I think* does not represent anything and thus is not knowledge of anything. Rather, it is the mere form of a representation or of knowledge. The third response warns against understanding the first-person pronoun, insofar as it signifies the subjectivity of thought, to refer to a particular object and insists on its difference from any thought of an object. Yet it holds that there is no positive specification of the difference, which might constitute knowledge. Statements that present themselves as providing such a specification will at best have a therapeutic value. Absolute idealism, in contrast to all three of these responses, shows self-consciousness—thought thinking itself—to think nothing, therein thinking the whole. Absolute idealism understands self-consciousness to be absolute knowledge.

4. *The Determinacy of the Universal*

Thought's thought of itself thinks nothing: it is not a general concept, something that particulars may have in common and which distinguishes those that have it from those that do not. It may seem that, as nothing is thought in the universal idea, the exposition of it as absolute knowledge is meaningless. We fall silent. Yet the opposite is true. Philosophy thinks nothing. This means that it does not think this or that. It does not mean it does not think. Precisely not. Philosophy is thinking. It is not thinking this or that, but thinking. Equivalently, we may say, philosophy does not say this or that; rather, philosophy says. So far from being mute, philosophy is the opening up of speech as such. Therefore there is, in philosophy, not speech and counter-speech, *dictio* and *contra-dictio*. There is speech. Aristotle assigns to philosophy the office of expounding the law of non-contradiction, because that law is a principle of what is insofar as it is. When he engages the attempt to deny the law of non-contradiction, he does not refute

that denial. Rather, he shows the one who denies the law of non-contradiction to be mute, indeed, to mute himself. And Plato, in the *Sophistes*, is horrified by the idea of a loss of language on the ground that the loss of language would amount to the loss of philosophy. This is peculiar, for one might want to come up with a lot of other things that are lost as language is lost. When Plato mentions none of these, but does mention philosophy, this suggests that he considers philosophy to be wherever language is.

Quietism is the notion that what I said philosophy is is not: there is only thinking this or that, the quietist submits, there is no such thing as thinking. Now, the quietist cannot be refuted. Nor need they be, as long as they speak. This requires further elaboration. But we can say provisionally why it is an error to hold that the absolute abstraction is incapable of articulation, why it is an error to hold that there is no such thing as thinking, which is not thinking this or that, but thinking. The absolute abstraction is thought's turn to itself. Now, this turn, and here we return to our starting point, is the opening of a difference; it opens up the difference of I think p from p. This difference is not a difference of contents thought; it is the difference that thought, judgment, knowledge is. It is the difference of the universal idea, the difference that the universal idea itself is. The universal idea is difference and therewith determinacy: this, I submit, is Hegel's *Grundgedanke*. We encountered it above, when we observed that thinking something is thinking oneself to think it: the determinacy of thought, or its thinking something, is its universality, or its thinking itself.

Thought thinking itself thinks nothing. This rejects naturalism. Yet thinking nothing is not, precisely not, not thinking. The universal idea is determinacy. This rejects quietism. The determinacy of the universal idea is not provided from outside it, through its being given a content in the exercise of a separate faculty, sensibility. It is itself determinacy. This rejects formal idealism. Philosophy is the determinacy of the universal.

What I said here is not, not yet, anyway, an introduction to the idea of absolute knowledge. Perhaps it qualifies as the introduction to an introduction. For it may serve us in this way: when we encounter assertions that Hegel is a degenerate metaphysician of a bygone age, or, conversely, that he can provide us with the conceptual means by which we shall comprehend and overcome the travails of our present times, we should probe these assertions by asking whether, by their own understanding of themselves, they say something, or nothing. If they say something, we know they have nothing to do with Hegel, nor indeed with philosophy.

The Purlieu Letter. Toward a Hegelian Theory of Conditioning

Frank Ruda

“In him, connection is not a matter of unbroken transition [Übergang] but a matter of sudden change [*Umschlag*], and the process takes place not through the moments approaching one another but through rupture.” (Adorno)

“The later spirit is that it knows what the earlier was.” (Hegel)

1. Some Like It (Too) Late

How to know when it is too late? It seems it can hardly get any more trivial than this. Just look at the clock, obviously. Check the appointment, check the time and there you go. If you are too late this means, as the English expression goes, you are not on time. But what if it were not so easy to find the right clock? With the previous empirical procedure, we can easily determine objective belatedness, within the framework of objective and objectively measurable time. But this method does not give us the means to determine all sorts of delay. What if some things happen within the framework of objective history that then and only belatedly can be registered and thought and worked through elsewhere? What if this means there could be a kind of structural belatedness even regarding or within objective time? How to measure

such a lag if it were to precede all temporal registers? Does such delay necessitate another kind of chronometer, an absolute kind of knowing that would be able to bridge the gaps of time? Is this what absolute knowing was always about: knowing when it is really or rather absolutely too late?

The famous Hegelian account of philosophy's constitutive belatedness can, as is more than well-known, be found in the *Vorrede* or *Vorwort*—Hegel uses both terms—to his *Philosophy of Right*.¹ It can be found in the discourse that precedes the beginning of the proper philosophical discourse. If the *Vorrede* is structurally placed before the book that it prefaces, what is said about philosophy in it must be said structurally too early or pre-philosophically. Hegel begins to close the preface of the *Philosophy of Right* by stating: “But it is time to close this preface [*Vorwort*]. After all, as preface, its only business has been to make some external and subjective remarks about the standpoint of the book it introduces” (Hegel 2008, p. 16). This is what Hegel states right after he uses the (in) famous owl of Minerva image and thus after he indicates that philosophy begins when “a shape of life has grown old” (ibid.). It seems that as soon as one records that philosophy always comes too late, it is immediately time to close that which precedes philosophy. When one states that philosophy always comes too late, it seems the right time to begin with philosophy. If philosophy comes too late, it seems its very own belatedness can only be addressed from outside of philosophy or too early. There seems to be a paradox here: if philosophy always comes too late, it seems to come too late to say that it comes too late and hence there is no philosophical way to say anything about philosophy's belatedness. Maybe philosophy can even only realize too late what philosophy is. Does it realize too late what it is to come too late?

¹ *Vorrede* is used in the table of contents and as title of the preface, *Vorwort* is used at the end. I will return to this almost immediately. Cf. Hegel 1986, pp. 4, 11, 27

Philosophy, this seems clear, comes too late. It comes structurally so late that it could never admit to this on time. It is therefore constitutively *Nachwort*, epilogue, unavoidably postscript. After the preface is the obituary — *nach der Vorrede der Nachruf*. Philosophy is not the language of the young and living, but of the old, of the almost dead or of those who are no longer alive but who still need to be understood and, in this sense, still have something to say; of those *die nach uns rufen*, who are, and maybe silently, calling out to us. Philosophy as *Nachruf*, as epilogue is then not silent, but it speaks the language of what is at the end of its life, of the life grown old: it is the language of old men — and one should here remember that Hegel's nickname from when he was in the Tübingen seminary was precisely that: the old man. So, he might have learned this language already rather early in his life. Philosophy's language therefore might ultimately even be the language of the cripple.² Philosophy is thus not simply reminiscing about how great it was before, when there was no philosophy. Philosophy is not — or maybe not only — the cigarette after, but the word, the calling after the act, it is *Nachwort*, *Nachruf*, or *Nachrede*. The *Nachrede* which might also describe philosophy's status — a term that literally means postface in the sense in which the preface is the *Vorrede* — is used in the German language as a noun only in the sense of libel, ill-speech, as üble *Nachrede*, slander or defamation.³ But if philosophy has a relation to slander, this is less the case because it itself would be the speaking ill about the preceding historical discourse, act or deed after whose end philosophy begins its flight. It rather seems to be linked to the

² Adorno remarked somewhere that one can even see efforts of thoughts manifesting in the deep wrinkles in Hegel's face on some of his portraits. From here one might find an obvious connection with the old man in Beckett's work (just think of *Krapp's Last Tape* for example).

³ One can use it as a verb and then it means that one repeats acoustically (*nachreden*) what someone else said, so it presents us with a discourse that redoubles what precedes it. It is like an echo of its precedent.

very practice of philosophy itself. It is a practice attracting üble *Nachrede auf den Nachruf*, slander about philosophy's status as epilogue, always coming late.

It is like a less funny version of the famous joke cited by Lacan about my fiancé who is never late because the moment she is late, she is no longer my fiancé. Philosophy is always too late, because the moment it is not too late, it would no longer be philosophy (for example, journalism or politics). Already the early Marx derived from this a desire for philosophy to arrive on time. But timing is nevertheless a defining criterion of philosophy. It must arrive on time, but its time is too late. All of this is obviously complicated by the need for philosophy to miss the right appointment and not the wrong one. In coming too late, even though this might sound surprising, there is always a wager involved: the wager that decides that now the time is ripe to punctuate the world with an intervention, because a shape of spirit has grown old. Sometimes shapes of spirit might look younger and more alive than they are and some old shapes might drag on forever, even though their time has already come.⁴ This may amount to a complex way of waiting in the centre of philosophy's proceedings, but it may also remind us of Hegel's depiction of the dialectics of sense certainty in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where every attempt to grasp the "now" in the "now" just leads us to an endless process of missing the "now" and thereby an insight into a pre-structural belatedness of empirical temporality itself.⁵ The wager of philosophy is that it is now the right time for it to arrive too late.

⁴ This is an argument that can easily be applied to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* itself, for which it can be claimed that it can only depict the state it depicts because this very state has grown old and is about to disappear (and the book also ends with the transition into world-history). In Žižek's words: "Robert Pippin noted that, if Hegel is minimally consistent, this has to apply also to the notion of State deployed in his own *Philosophy of Right*: the fact that Hegel was able to deploy its concept means that dusk is falling on what readers of Hegel usually perceive as a normative description of a model rational state" Žižek 2016, p. 113.

⁵ Cf. Hegel 2018, pp. 60–8.

2. *Biographies of the Afterlife*

Ernst Bloch insinuated that one can compare philosophy's operation to that of a detective—something not foreign to Freudian psychoanalysis—since the latter also always comes after the crime.⁶ In this image it is the crime, even if and maybe especially when there is no corpse and when it is hard to detect if something happened at all, that brings the detective onto the scene. Philosophy also seeks to detect what truly happened. Therein it may often be unclear what the crime is. Some may, with Brecht, just identify it as the founding (or perhaps more adequate these days, the bailing out) of a yet another bank. Philosophy, due to its belatedness, has always been a rather disastrous crime-preventer. But this ought not lead anyone to believe it to be the ultimate criminal in the vein of Popper and the like. Adorno famously begins his *Negative Dialectics* with a claim addressing philosophy's present temporality. He argued that the only reason why there still is philosophy is because it came so late, it even missed “the moment” to be “realize(d)” (Adorno 2007, p. 3). After missing an appointment, it really should have attended, it began leading a strange afterlife, a *Nachleben*. Now, it must come to terms with the problems newly created by missing its own realization. Therefore, it must “ruthlessly criticize itself” (ibid.). Philosophy's only task is to offer a critical account of its own failure not to fail, whereby ultimately philosophy stops being philosophy and turns into critical theory. Philosophy came too late, whereby it is led to perform its own funeral of which it as the sole survivor now has to mourn that philosophy never did what it never could. This is what Cioran once called an original mourning (Cioran 1992, p. 31).

This is not Hegel's position. Neither is philosophy a criminal doing the deed, nor is it the supposed hero that turns out to be a

⁶ Bloch therefore claims that the detective novel (as philosophy) has “the crime [*Untat*] as something that already happened still outside of it, before it, it blurts out with the corpse [*fällt mit der Leiche ins Haus*].” Bloch 1985, p. 254.

crippled disappointment. Hegel claims that “philosophy in any case always arrives on the scene too late to give it” (Hegel 2008, p. 16). “It” here being “instructions as to what the world ought to be” (ibid.), “das Belehren, wie die Welt sein soll” (Hegel 1986, p. 27). Philosophy does not arrive early enough to offer prescriptions of how the world out to be or what to do. But it must draw a line of demarcation, namely between what seems to be and what truly *is*. This does not mean—as a Heideggerian would argue—that it aims to conceive of the truth of being (even though, in Heidegger, *Dasein* also always comes too late⁷). It rather means that philosophy’s task is to think being from the perspective of truth or the absolute. And the latter’s time is that of constitutive belatedness, of the delay. Whenever philosophy seeks to give instructions and solve problems, this expresses a rather problematic understanding of the relation between philosophy and actuality. Philosophy shall aim at the “*comprehension [Erfassen] of the present and the actual*” (Hegel 2008, p. 13), but when it tells people what to do, it takes the present to be “something vacuous [*ein Eitles*] and looks beyond it with the eyes of superior wisdom” (ibid., p. 14). When philosophy does not comprehend the present-actual, it begins too early and cannot but help to speak about and aim at a “beyond, supposed to exist” (ibid., p. 13). There are right forms of coming too late and certainly coming too early does not seem an option either. Timing is thus of the essence.

The moment philosophy arrives on the scene too early its proposals are projected into an eternal future, always to come. Instruction-giving falls prey to “the vanity of superior wisdom [*die Eitelkeit der Besserwisserei*]” (Hegel 2008, p. 14; Hegel 1985, p. 26). Arriving too early comes with the temptation that one already has all (knowledge) one needs, but this is, obviously,

⁷ And in the notorious conversation with the *Spiegel*, he claimed: “philosophy will be unable to effect any immediate change in the current state of the world. This is true not only of philosophy but of all purely human reflection and endeavor.” Heidegger 1981, p. 57.

premature. It will then never end to claim things for which it will never be late enough to realize them. There must always come a better crisis. It is like a conversation in which philosophy is the only one talking. To grasp “the eternal which is present” (Hegel 2008, p. 14), it must discriminate between what is and what is not (in truth). Against philosophy turning into premature and empty wisdom chatter, Hegel’s allows the “things themselves [to] speak in a philosophy that focuses its energies on proving that it is itself one with them” (Adorno 1993, p. 6). Philosophy must come too late to avoid voiding its own discourse in advance.⁸ When it gives instructions and converts, when it *belehrt und bekehrt*, it concedes to a problematic form of dogmatic religion — and something similar happens when it takes the present to be the only measure that counts. As one of the rather amusing reviews of the *Philosophy of Right* introduces into one of Hegel’s famous formulas: nothing is “verkehrter” (Anonymous 1973, p. 465), nothing is more wrong, or more inverted, or upside down, or perverse “than to expect from a philosophical writing that it constructs a state how it *ought to be*.” It “can only show how the state, the ethical universe, should be understood” (Hegel 2008, p. 15). Philosophy is a demonstration of a way of understanding the realm of objectivity. But to do so philosophy needs its proper distance: philosophy must therefore operate at a distance from the state (of things). This implies that philosophy can easily fail to be philosophy — and this is part of the history of previous philosophy.

3. *Revolutionizing*

Starting to paint the grey in grey always implies a wager. It might always happen that philosophy starts painting too early. If philosophy provides a grasp — *eine Fassung* — of its time in the

⁸ Since otherwise it only produces empty promises that it can never fulfill. This is what in Hegel’s account happened with Kant. Cf. Ruda 2018.

form of thought, as the famous adage goes, the wager concerns this very time, namely that it reached an end, that one can get a hold of it. “There is no right time or ‘ripe time’ for revolution (or there would be no need of one)” (Comay 2011, p. 7). When things are too ripe and decaying, it is time for philosophy. “The Revolution always arrives too soon (conditions are never ready) and too late (it lags forever behind its own initiative)” (ibid). Has Hegel’s philosophy inherited this paradoxical temporality from the French revolution? Rebecca Comay read Hegel’s *Phenomenology* so that it depicts all possible ways in which one can attempt to ward off a revolution, Kantian philosophy being one of those attempts (Ibid., pp. 81ff). For Hegel who never gave up on his commitment to the French Revolution—despite his fundamental critique of the terror—it cannot be a surprise that philosophy is conditioned by the revolutionary untimely temporality:⁹ always at risk of arriving too early, never knowing in advance, when precisely it is too late. This, again, is no surprise as Hegel already early on identified Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* as a “revolution in the system of ideas” (Hegel 1984, p. 35) but insisted—in line with Schelling and Fichte—that it needs a radicalized continuation, a *Fortgang*.

Hegel’s philosophy is conditioned by the revolution. What follows is an attempt to examine what precisely this means. As Jean-Claude Milner claimed, “in classic French, each mutation in human affairs could be called a revolution, if it is about medicine, politics, literature or each other field of activity” (Milner 2016, p. 76): This includes even the planetary orbit that (recall Polybius) stands for stability. But the revolution that Hegel’s thought is conditioned by is one that obviously breaks with natural cycles. Michael Theunissen noted that in Hegel’s account of religion, which is itself placed in the centre, e.g., in the position of the copula in absolute spirit (e.g. art, religion, philosophy), Christianity

⁹ Cf. the extraordinary text by Hamacher: Hamacher 2006.

was revolutionary (Theunissen 1970). Hegel himself remarked “that nowhere are to be found such revolutionary utterances as in the Gospels” (Hegel 1991, p. 345). Christianity thereby, as Slavoj Žižek has also shown repeatedly throughout his oeuvre, provides not only the form of revolution in the sphere of religion, so that God is ultimately nothing but the collective practice of the community of believers, it also offers a template that structures all kinds of operations of spirit—which is why it is crucial that religion stands in the position of the copula. Wherever it copulates, there is religion. And religion stands in the midst of spirit only revolving around itself. Theunissen: “Hegel understands Christianity as the pervasive centre—*Mittelpunkt*—and in no way as isolated point of passage. From the centre, Christianity radiates into the beginning and end of the whole development” (Theunissen 1970, p. 94). Christianity is revolution in the form of religion. It is revolutionary because it is for Hegel the religion of the dissolution of religion, the religion of the end of religion, atheistic religion, as it were. He therefore also calls it the “great turning point” (Hegel 1973, p. 517).

4. Thought-Revolution

Hegel’s thought is conditioned by revolution, meaning he thinks from the perspective of the revolution. But this does not mean that thinking is constantly thinking *about* revolution nor that there was a revolution *in* our ways of thinking. Rather it means to revolutionize what we mean by thinking, whereby thinking must itself revolutionize what it means to think thinking. This does not mean that a political revolution is over-determining Hegel’s thought, as if there were a subterranean politicality in it. Rather it means that if Hegel’s thought is conditioned by the revolution this can neither mean that it takes the revolution as content nor as form alone, but that revolution becomes the way of relating

form and content and thus of thinking itself. This implies that all concepts in Hegel must be conceived of from the affirmative point of view of the revolution.¹⁰ In the *Logic* the high conceptual demands of this become clear already when Hegel elaborates the concepts of “something” and of “the other” and “of othering” as something that then confronts us with concerns about how (not) to remain identical in a process of differentiation.¹¹ If one can read this just as one example of what it means to conceive of revolution as a way of thinking, we are in this case—because it is the *Logic*—talking about a revolution that even precedes time and is pre-phenomenal, but that nonetheless creates a new world of its own.

Hegel thinks from the standpoint of the revolution and creation of novelty. But this also means to conceive of the problems and “dead branches” (Badiou 2009, p. 10f.) revolutionary creation runs into, of the resistances it cannot but produce and of the repetitions (good or bad) that enable or hinder its unfolding. His perspective is that of the immanence of truths, of the immanence of the revolution. This unavoidably implies that even counter-revolution or resistance to revolution is part of thinking—one must in this sense always also think Kant’s philosophy warding off the revolution from the standpoint of revolution, as Hegel does in the *Phenomenology*. One must think from this standpoint, as this standpoint is the only standpoint of thinking: “the whole transition [*Übergang*]*—from the older to the newer times—turns around this—the revolution in the world”* (Hegel 1986, p. 158); a revolution so novel, that “never since the sun had stood in the firmament and the planet revolved around him had it been perceived that man’s existence centres in his head, i.e. in *Thought*, inspired by which he builds up the world of reality” (Hegel 1991, p. 466).

¹⁰ Cf. Hamacher 1994.

¹¹ Cf. Hegel 2010, pp. 83ff.

But if Hegel's thought is conditioned by the revolution, how to read Hegel's comment that has been brought to mind by others before about the present status of the French Revolution? He indicates that it is strangely still too early for philosophy to comprehend what it is conditioned by and that it poses a problem for later generations to solve. In the following, Hegel's remark will be elucidated by turning to what I want to call the German debate about Hegel and the French revolution. It means returning to two classical texts, one by Joachim Ritter, the other by Jürgen Habermas. I will demonstrate in what way both present unsatisfying solutions regarding philosophy's status vis-à-vis the problem that is the revolution.

5. The Revolution as Problem

Almost at the end of his *Philosophy of History*—and thus by implication, at the end of history—one finds one of the few passages in which Hegel talks about the future. This passage is located in Hegel's discussion of the French Revolution and the crucial problem is brought forth, namely that it put into practice and operated such a purified and thus abstract form of freedom that it “allows no political organization to be firmly established” (Hegel 1991, p. 473). The concept of freedom put into practice by the French Revolution confronts the thinker and the world with a problem. This problem is the problem of organization: how to organize the equality of the free—and this means of everyone—when it is by definition impossible to exclude anyone in advance from participating and one must persistently sustain and reproduce the *equaliberty* (Balibar 2014) of all its members? The revolution has undone any assumption of natural inequality by spiriting away also any assumption that there are any shared given natural properties, except that everyone can be killed and is hence mortal. The French Revolution thus posed a problem and

this problem is the way its persistent actuality appears. How to organize freedom, collectively? The French Revolution persists as a problem and this is why “agitation and unrest are perpetuated. This collision ... this problem is that with which history is now occupied” (Hegel 1991, p. 473). Against the background of philosophy always arriving too late, this is a surprising claim: history is now, in the present occupied with the problem that is the French Revolution. And it is this problem “whose solution [history] has to work out in the future” (ibid.). History after the revolution is conditioned by the problem that is the revolution and remains under its spell unless it finds a solution.

This is the verdict of a philosophy that tries to come appropriately too late. It can now only acknowledge that what there is, is a persistent, as yet unsolved problem. But the problem is not only a problem for history. It is also a problem for philosophy since it directly pertains to the main concept of (Hegelian) philosophy: freedom. Some aspects of this problem can be pointedly reconstructed by recourse to what Walter Benjamin termed destructive character—which also implies a specific interpretation of freedom. It “knows only one watchword: make room [*räumen*]. And only one activity: clearing away.... For destroying rejuvenates, because it clears away the traces of our own age” (Benjamin 1999, 541). The destructive character tries to rejuvenate when it is too late. Hegel’s name for this destructive aspect is fanaticism which “recognizes in all Dasein a limitation and wants to destroy it to be free, it is...only the greatness of destruction measures the greatness of freedom” (Hegel 1974, p. 113). The French Revolution revolutionized the understanding of freedom, liberated it from all given and thus not freely chosen determinations. But it got stuck in revolutionizing. Like a compulsion to revolutionize that therefore ultimately became destructive and in self-negating, destructively restorative. But to avoid falling back to the position of common sense one must see therein more than just destructive negativity. Because otherwise one sees in it, similar to what one

would see in speculative thought, “only... its nullifying activity [*Vernichten*]; and even its nullification is not visible in its entire scope” (Hegel 1977, 102f).

The problem that is the revolution is how to think the revolution, how to think the revolution in a revolutionary way. The problem is thus already how to organize thought such that it really thinks the revolution (so thinking the revolution is a problem that concerns the *Logic* of thinking). We are thus here not only encountering a problem vis-à-vis a general concept, but rather one that pertains to the practice of the concept (of freedom), a problem of its *Vollzugsweise*, its performative or affirmative realization. How to think and, therefore, organize the concrete universality of singular and singularly collective freedom affirmatively? The problem of organization is thus a question of how to stabilize the revolution. It is what Žižek so insistently (Žižek 2006, p. 157) called the problem of the day after; how to make the revolution last without ending in an endless compulsion to revolutionize or betray its very principles?

6. Conditioning: The German Debate

The relation between Hegel and the French Revolution has been commented on endlessly. There are many affirmative, negative and critical accounts of this relation. One that is systematically interesting in the present context is the account offered by the rather liberal conservative German philosopher Ritter. He argued that the reason of the revolution is for Hegel identical to reason as such. This is to say, a historical event can embody reason tout court, which is what “is encountered [in Hegel]...for the first time in the history of philosophy [because he] equates traditional metaphysical theory directly as such with knowledge of the age and the present” (Ritter 1986, p. 39f). Hegel’s philosophy is rigorously modern, because it is inherently nothing but a theory of time,

of its own time grasped in thought. Thereby it cannot but raise the question of what constitutes its present and this is especially pressing when traditional answers of how to conceive of one's own time—romantic or naturalistic ones—became problematic. Hegel is the first who attempted to think history historically, in him “the present has emancipated itself from the philosophical tradition” (ibid., p. 41). That he witnessed the French Revolution during his lifetime is even better for the facts. “For Hegel, the French Revolution is that event around which all the determinations of philosophy in relation to its time are clustered, with philosophy marking out the problem through attacks on and defenses of the Revolution. Conversely, there is no other philosophy that is a philosophy of revolution to such a degree and so profoundly, in its innermost drive, as that of Hegel” (ibid., p. 43).

Hegel is the philosopher of the revolution. He is the philosopher of the revolution as an unfinished project, as ongoing. The revolution constitutes modern time and, according to Ritter, is what must be thought to be a true contemporary. But it is ongoing as a problem. A problem that is constitutive of history as the search for its solution is what drives history forward. This is why Ritter speaks of the revolution as a “new era [*Zeitwende*]” (ibid., p. 50), as a temporal turning point, and Hegel refers to it as “the nodus [*der Knoten*]” (Hegel 1991, p. 472), where history stands. This knot, the English term is even more fitting than the German, not yet untied, not yet unravelled, it is a knot not unknotted. Unknottting the knot is the task and maybe one should risk claiming that Hegel's thought because of this knot in general resolves around unnot-ting the not? The (k)not is what makes history, what history must shoulder. It must cut the knot, follow the strings, and more concretely solve the problem immanent to the political realization of singular collective freedom (that is therefore proclaimed a universal right). Even in its problematic form, as Ritter argues, Hegel defends the revolution against all restorative tendencies: it is an event, already because going back

behind what it achieved even in failing cannot but appear regressive. But Ritter suggests that the medium in which Hegel seeks to solve the problem that is the revolution is ultimately that of civil society. There might be arguments for this reading, but it remains, and Ritter clearly indicates this, too, unconvincing. Civil society as concept can certainly be read as a kind of answer to the question of how to realize a necessarily singular freedom in an also necessarily collective form and interaction. The problem is that it does not solve the problem of how to make this freedom actual for all.

Civil society is not an adequate organizational form for singular collective freedom to be realized, which is why inequality and structural violence keep resurging in it. This is in part because civil society, as capitalism in general, never solves problems. It simply invents new forms of how to delay dealing with them (colonies, for example). Civil society is, as Hegel demonstrates, inherently contradictory. These contradictions appear in the antagonism of the rich and the poor, and their respective rabble-types¹² and even the state is not able to resolve these kinds of contradictions (which is one reason as to why, in the end, even the state disappears in the ocean of history). For Ritter, this is a symptom that the problem that is the revolution is not yet solved by history and therefore could not have been solved by Hegel. Hegel's greatness consists, then, in having transformed philosophy into a theory of its own time. Because this is what being conditioned by the revolution means for philosophy: a new conception of and relation to time. The constitution of a new present, the present of the revolution, forces philosophy to reshape the constitution of time, e.g. its concept of time. Conditioned by the French Revolution, philosophy thinks its time by conceiving of what constitutes (properly historical) time—this is the eternal in the present. Ritter claimed that “there is no other philosophy that is

¹² Cf. Ruda 2011.

a philosophy of revolution to such a degree and so profoundly, in its innermost drive, as that of Hegel” (Ritter 1982, p. 43), but it is slightly oblivious of the grandiosity of its own claim after all, since it only detects its effects in the domain of objective spirit. He claims that Hegel’s thinking is conditioned by the revolution, yet he only traces in what way the problem that is the revolution conditions his political thought. There the problem remains a problem. Ritter does not account for what being conditioned by the revolution means for the sphere of absolute spirit and thereby he does ultimately not account at all for what it means for a philosophy to be conditioned by a historico-political event. He has no theory of conditioning.¹³ Therefore it remains unclear how objective and absolute spirit are supposed to be mediated. But if this remains unclear, it remains unclear what is supposed by saying that Hegel’s is a philosophy conditioned by and thus a philosophy of the revolution, even though Ritter’s remark points in the right direction.

Jürgen Habermas has taken up Ritter’s reading of Hegel and modified what Ritter articulated as praise into a structural critique. It goes like this: the form in which Hegel endorses the French Revolution is what makes him part of the restoration. It is an example of what Adorno with Anna Freud called “identification with the aggressor” (Adorno 1993a, p. 37). Habermas states: “Hegel celebrates the revolution because he fears it” and “Hegel’s philosophy of revolution is his philosophy *as* the critique of the revolution” (Habermas 1973, p. 121). His point is that Hegel argues that the revolution is the world historical event in which abstract right is claimed in its universality for the first time, but – as his praise of Napoleon for Habermas indicates – he thereby ultimately argues that this was only part of an *evolution* of the concept of abstract right. Thereby what for Ritter appeared to be a new account of temporality and historicity, e.g., of philosophy’s

¹³ It should be obvious that I use the term following Badiou 2009a.

being-conditioned by non-philosophical practices, is for Habermas always already conceived against the background of a stable form of historical transformation, i.e., evolution. Hegel endorses the revolution as an element of an overarching historic-evolutionary process within which the former is in the last instance but a cog in the grand machine of history. Hegel thereby in advance sublates the revolution and through its very endorsement turns out to be the defender of a higher stability and order. Philosophy overcomes its own being-conditioning by what happens outside of it by identifying in it the sign of a grand scheme. Philosophy is therefore never conditioned by historical events in Hegel, but is rather a megalomaniac practice of *Belehren*, of instructing how to read conceptual signs. Hegel's ingenuity is that in his very endorsement of history he sublated historicity, in endorsing the revolution he opts for restoration, a tendency that Habermas detects in Hegel's philosophy of the state. Habermas's reading is problematic for a number of reasons that are not relevant to the present argument. But it is also crucial that he emphasizes how Hegel's very account of temporality and of philosophical practice gains an intelligibility and hence must be thought from the perspective of the historical event of the revolution, even though he sees in it a defence mechanism against it that is so defensive it dehistoricizes history itself.

Rebecca Comay formulates another option of how to conceive of philosophy's conditioning by the revolution. She emphasizes the fact, disregarded by both Ritter and Habermas, that in the *Phenomenology* Hegel's dissection of absolute freedom and terror is followed by a reflection on morality and ultimately on Kant (Comay 2011). She demonstrates how Kant is what people in Germany got instead of a revolution. This means that Kant's revolution of the way of thinking, is a way of philosophy being conditioned by the revolution. But it is precisely as Habermas sought to criticize Hegel for, a way of warding off the revolution by endorsing it. Kant is a defence mechanism against revolution

through its endorsement. As Comay shows, Hegel develops how Kantian morality can be read as an internalization of the terror of the French Revolution in the form of a moral law that does not stop demanding more the more we fulfil it. But this cannot but mean that whatever follows afterwards in the *Phenomenology* must be read as philosophy already thinking through the lens of the revolution. This is to say that even the revolution not happening (in Germany) will be thought through from the perspective of the revolution.¹⁴ This is significant for the present purposes, because Comay thereby clearly indicates what it means that philosophy—the *Phenomenology* was for some time conceived as introduction to the system—thinks in the mode and through the eyes of the revolution.

Whatever is and also whatever is not is an effect of what happens. Even its concepts of being and not-being are thus a result of thinking from the standpoint of the (historical) event. In consequence this means that what happens in the transition from the *Phenomenology* into the *Logic* can be read as a depiction of a revolutionary act of creation—revolutionary in the sense of massively historical, namely the creation of a new “nature and a [novel] finite spirit” (Hegel 2010, p. 29). Hegel’s philosophy is conditioned by the revolution. Therefore he presents us with the immanence of the revolution, after depicting what it means to work through all our defences against it, including the endorsement of a revolution in our ways of thinking (Kant). Even a revolution in thought can serve as protective shield against history proper. But philosophy can also, and this is what Hegel’s *Logic* will do, enable a fully immanent perspective: *thinking in modus revolutionarii*.¹⁵ This obviously does not mean that the problem

¹⁴ This is why for Comay the *Phenomenology* depicts an elaborate process of mourning running through all possible defense mechanisms by means of which we attempt to avoid revolutionizing.

¹⁵ I began elaborating such a reading in Ruda 2019.

that is the revolution is thereby solved. But it indicates that thinking cannot avoid thinking in terms of incompleteness (and explore different forms of consistency). The French Revolution as problem is the purlieu not in- but affirming Hegel's thought. An *Umschlag*. Its condition and envelope. Like a historical letter. Sent and received.

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Hegel and the Opaque Core of History

Jure Simoniti

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?

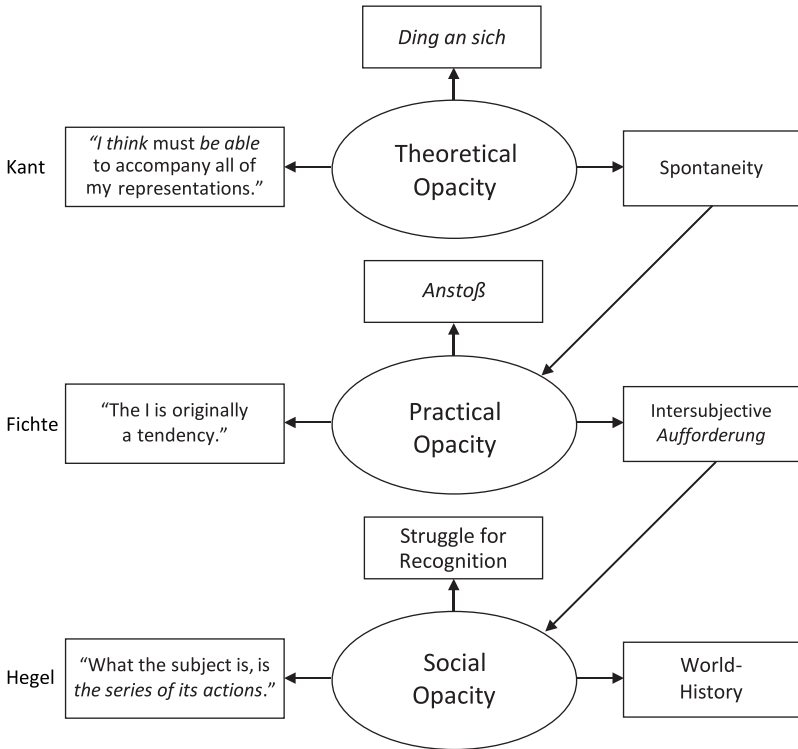
4. History as the Ground of Hegelian Idealization

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

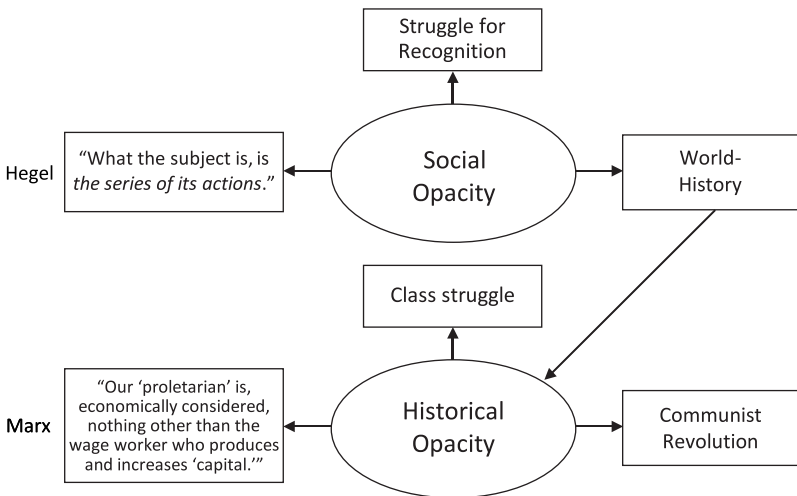
be carried out in dialogue, in a public place or agora, but rather resembles a private effort of logical thinking beyond the yoke of communication and consensus.

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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The contribution is a result of the work conducted within the research project “The Possibility of Idealism for the Twenty-First Century” (J6-1811), financed by ARRS, the Slovenian Research Agency.

Against Leviathan: Hegel's, Fichte's, and Schiller's Critique of Modernity, Alienation, and the State

Árpád-Andreas Sölter

As Adorno once put it in one of his *bon mots*, it does not matter what *we* think of the classics (Adorno 1963, p. 13). Contrary to us, they withstood the great test of time. Therefore, it would be much more auspicious to consider what the classics would think of *us* (Žižek 2015). In order to engage in this counterfactual experiment of thought, I will first present Hegel's, Fichte's, and Schiller's spectacular radicalism and political imagery. They express an outspoken desire for fundamental political change and urge a radical rethinking of the state and our entire modern age. This will be discussed as a cultural diagnosis of art, machinery, and the state at the dawn of modernity. I will then argue that the underlying terms of cultural criticism deserve to be questioned, but nevertheless conclude with a brief outline of how their critique remains significant for contemporary social and political theory, even for global present-day problems, in times that are widely perceived by many as a new crossroads in history.

Every turning point, every beginning of a new era triggers its own new reactions in thought. The radical upheaval of the French Revolution triggered a boost of the imagination and intellectual innovation. In the early 1790s, many political visionaries, philosophers, and poets saw an opportunity to rethink all concepts in terms of social theory. They addressed key questions, such as: What would a rationally organized society look like? What is a

truly rational state? Which state do we want? And do we really need one at all? These questions are far from being outdated (Singer 1983, p. 22; Habermas, 1984; Jaeggi 2018; Sölter 2021a). With an “explosion of the political,” the *Zeitgeist* prompted an anarchistic “impulse” (Safranski 2010, pp. 155, 35). With their impetus, they wished to balance out the relationships between the individual and freedom, culture and art, state and society, so that humanity would finally find its way onto the right track leading to an enlightened modernity. Since then, autonomy has had a critical function in any given society. Massive criticism of alienation, the state, and modernity was emphatically proclaimed and inspired by autonomous thinking [*Autonomiedenken*] around the year 1800. Long before the German nation-state was actually founded in 1871, a radical counterpoint within the criticism of the state arose in the context of the absolutism of the princely territorial lordship in Germany.

Let us turn to the brief manifesto presented in the “Oldest Systematic Programme of German Idealism” [*Systemprogramm*] by the young Hegel,¹ before we move on to Fichte and Schiller, so that we may consult with them on the present. At this historical juncture, their common denominators are the fundamental rejection of a coercive state, anti-statism, and a tendency towards radical anarchism.

¹ In 1917, this fragment was first published by Franz Rosenzweig, with a misleading title. He assumed that the author was Schelling. But the handwriting on both sides of the folio can be ascribed to Hegel. Some controversy centered around the proper attribution of the paper’s authorship ensued. According to Dolar (2020, p. 487) and Habermas, the text expresses the “common belief” of Hegel, Schelling, and Hölderlin (1988, p. 43). After being attributed to various authors, the discussion seems to currently focus on Hegel as the original author (Düsing 2013 and 1973, p. 89, Kaube 2020, p. 119). This view, however, is shared neither by Vieweg (2020a, 2012) nor Förster (2004). As a result, there is no real consensus. See also Bubner (1973), Jamme and Schneider (1984), p. 190f., and Hansen (1989) for the history and reception of this fragment. I am referring to Dolar’s (2015) English translation and the versions available online.

The State "Must Cease To Exist" (Hegel)

The *Systemprogramm* (1796/97) was written in the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution. The consequence drawn from the events was that this was a great historical break that opened, for the first time in history, the perspective of humanity as an ideal, in which the state as such must be overcome and abolished — not that a better or ideal state should be proposed. In essence, the state is seen as something deeply mechanical, and as such inhuman. From this point of view, it is only a means on humanity's ultimate path towards establishing a truly human society as an association of free, self-determining, autonomous human beings. It is an "immodest proposal" in order to "define precisely the nature of the state and the nature of art" (Dolar 2015):

Given the idea of humankind, I want to show that there is no idea of the *state* because the state is something *mechanical*, just as little as there is an idea of a *machine*. Only that which is the object of *freedom* is called *idea*. We must therefore go beyond the state [über *den Staat hinaus*]! — For every state must treat free human beings like mechanical cogwheels [*Räderwerk*]; and it should not do that; therefore it must *cease* to exist [*also soll er aufhören*]. (Hegel 1986a, pp. 234–35)

One must realize what this radicality broke away from and what it is in contrast to. Clearly, the state discussed here is not (yet) "the actuality of the ethical idea" (Hegel 1986b, p. 398). The actually existing absolutist state is rejected, i.e., the authority in power connected with it, but not because it is a dominion with a monopoly on violence. According to this thinking, the state neither can nor should be improved on its evolutionary path, because it is absolutely not worth subjecting it to an optimization program. No reformism, no *piecemeal engineering* of taking small steps towards better conditions is proclaimed here. We should not even try to transform the state into a new social democracy

that would replace the old authoritarian system. In this view, the state is not considered to be a guarantor of freedom, but rather its adversary. Furthermore, the state should not abandon this or that practice. None of it would be sufficient. Rather, we should dismantle the state as such. In this radical perception driven by a romantic thrust in terms of the criticism of the state, something is in opposition to the state that, in principle, overcomes and abolishes its shortcomings as a destructive force. Basically, according to this understanding, the state causes a single massive deficit of the individual. As a result, the crucial question is not how an ideal state could be achieved or formed. The author's approach is more fundamental, it is about whether a state can even exist in an ideal situation. No, it cannot, not at all.

How does Hegel justify his thesis that one should dismantle the state? Should the state only "cease" and wither away entirely because it is superfluous in a society of free beings? Hegel uses a strong political metaphor to make his point: he sees the state as a machine. He indicates implicitly that the current state is not built like a body or a living organism. Rather, it operates like a machine because it is mechanical by its substance. The underlying assumption is that every state has something machine-like at its very core. Machines, mechanical wheelworks as devices with an artificial, mechanical intelligence based on algorithms are unable to determine themselves. They are unable to operate autonomously. "Only that which is an object of freedom is called an Idea." The completely autonomous self-determination of people represents the complete essence of the idea only. "The first idea is naturally the representation of myself as an absolutely free being," argues Hegel. The machine metaphor serves as an argument which suggests that the individual should function obligingly, without protest. As Dolar says in conversation with Hamza and Ruda, "there can be no idea of the state since it contradicts the very idea of an idea, it contradicts freedom, it treats human beings mechanically as cogwheels" (Dolar 2020, p. 487). Therefore, it must cease,

because the individual cannot carry the superior idea of the whole, the element of freedom. “The state as such is a machine to stifle freedom, there can only be an idea of freedom, but there can be no idea of a machine” (Dolar 2015). With art, literature, especially poetry, which is regarded as the most dignified art, Hölderlin’s influence becomes visible in the following paragraph:

Finally the idea which unites all, the idea of *beauty*, the word taken in the higher Platonic sense. I am convinced that the highest act of reason, which, in that it comprises all ideas, is an aesthetic act. [...] The philosopher must possess just as much aesthetic power as the poet. [...] The philosophy of the spirit is an aesthetic philosophy. One cannot be clever in anything, one cannot even reason cleverly in history—without aesthetic sense. [...] Poetry thereby obtains a higher dignity; it becomes again in the end what it was in the beginning—*teacher of the humankind* [*Lehrerin der Menschheit*]; for there is no longer any philosophy, any history, the poetic art alone will outlive all other sciences and arts. (Ibid.)

Art is “the universal unifying idea, subsuming all others, and an idea can exert power only insofar as it is aesthetically embodied, and hence addressed and available to everyone. Art stands for the universality of humankind, whereas the state is its mechanical limitation. The goal would be that art should” take “the place previously occupied” by the state (Dolar 2015). From this point of view “art is itself a utopian state without boundaries”, which “can supplant the mechanical state”, and there is “universal citizenship only in art” (Dolar 2015). Art “should also come to supplant religion, for the continuation of the fragment calls for a new ‘mythology of reason’—reason by itself is powerless unless it employs mythological, sensuous, and sensual means, hence the call for the philosopher endowed with aesthetic powers. Reason by itself is empty, and mythology divorced from reason is blind, so one should strive for the happy unification of the two. Instead of philosopher kings,” as is the case in Plato,

“the poets are leaders. The fragment invokes the Platonic idea of beauty, but as completely divorced from the Platonic idea of the state: art is the anti-state *par excellence*. If in Plato state art makes all other art redundant, then here art is what should make the state redundant” (Dolar 2015). “At the same time I want here to establish the principles for a History of Mankind and to completely expose the whole miserable human creation of state, constitution, government, legislature” (Hegel 1986a). Ideas of government and legislation, as well as ideas of “a moral world” with its own legislation, fall under the rubric human creation [*Menschenwerk*], and are as such declared to be subsumed under a higher idea that unites them all (Förster 2004, p. 474). The fragment concludes with a promise. The author will present the public with something that can establish “universal freedom and equality” of spirits and provide a key to “the last, the greatest work of mankind.” This shows contemporary parallels to Schiller’s letters, which I will discuss below. The *Systemprogramm* offers a program of the education of mankind with the goal of “universal freedom and equality” of all spirits: “Until we render the ideas aesthetic, that is, mythological, they are of no interest to the *people*, and conversely until mythology is rational, the philosopher must be ashamed of it.” In its concluding passage, the author demands a new mythology, a mythology of reason, as the greatest work of mankind to reach its crucial target group, the people.

When are people free? People are free when they do not depend on anything other than themselves. Therefore, not even God and immortality can be sought outside of self-consciousness. The intellectual force of this argument originates from Kant’s initial view of the autonomous and completely self-determining subject of reason, which theoretically and methodically achieves cognition and has, in a practical and moral sense, self-determining qualities, i.e., it acts as its own lawgiver. “In this precise sense, at truly enlightened ‘mature’ human being is a subject who no longer needs a master, who can fully assume the heavy burden of defin-

ing his own limitations” (Žižek 2013, p. 340). In this respect, the political thought of German idealism is based on the intellectual architecture instituted by Kant. The idea of absolutely autonomous self-determination, however, is confronted with the stark reality of the feudal system. As early as in 1800, Hegel noticed signs of a development in which men end up like “cogwheels,” a trend that would ultimately lead them into modernity’s “iron cage,” a shell as hard as steel [*stahlhartes Gehäuse*] in a system based purely on teleological efficiency, utility, rational calculation, and control (Weber 2002, p. xxiv). Humanity’s fate as described in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is caught in “the polar night of icy darkness” (Weber 1994, p. xvi), in a totally “administered world” based on the “automation of society and of human behavior” (Horkheimer 1985, p. 340; Horkheimer and Adorno 1978, p. IX; Horkheimer 1986, p. 9). According to such political perception, the mighty state apparatus, its Kafkaesque bureaucracy and administrative forces on the one hand and the individual claiming its autonomy on the other are antagonists. This means that the self-determining person, on the one hand, is opposed to the far-reaching state as “something mechanical” on the other. This antagonism is not only incompatible, but also remains incommensurable. The two continue to be each other’s opponents. The opposition is and remains, in principle, irreconcilable. What is even worse, the free, conscious being is treated extremely badly. This is a relationship that is detrimental to the individual, exceedingly damaging and downright toxic even. A “mechanical wheelwork,” which is completely alien to the individual and even contradicts its very purpose, is imposed on the autonomous, self-determining person. The state uses people as mechanical wheels in the gear mechanism of the whole. As such, individuals are treated merely as instruments or objects in the functional structure of the society and the state. “The legal and political forms which have been solidified for positivity have turned into an alien force” (Habermas 1988, p. 38). Around 1800,

Hegel found that the state had “been reduced to something that was merely mechanical, a wheelwork, a machine” (Habermas 1988, p. 38). Today, one could say that the individual has succumbed to the “pull of technocracy” (Habermas 2013). However, according to Hegel (and early Critical Theory would agree), this completely misses the essential determination of human existence. Man should not be a passive object or a mere function within the structure of the social order. Instead, the cultivation of a pure, self-determined person into a whole person is required.

The author of the fragment ranks beauty, the highest act of reason, which comprises all ideas, even higher than truth and goodness. For Hegel, the practice of the state is nothing less than a violation. The consequence that can be drawn from this articulates his imperative with full clarity, without any alternative. The state should “cease,” it must completely disappear so that subjugation can finally end. “We must [...] transcend the state!” This urgent wish to “expose the whole miserable human work of state, constitution, government, legislature—down to the skin” in order to ultimately overcome it boils down to a *tabula rasa* approach. How can this process actually take place? What would this transcendence, that which is new and beyond the current state, look like? In order to answer these questions, we turn to two of Hegel’s contemporaries. Fichte answers the first question, while Schiller also answers the second. Just like the “Oldest Systematic Programme,” his philosophical writings elevate art to a future-oriented force of aesthetic reconciliation in “disunited modernity” (Habermas, 1988, p. 45).

Living in the “Age of Absolute Sinfulness” (Fichte)

Fichte’s *Foundations of the Science of Knowledge* (1794) was published at the height of the Reign of Terror. Without the French Revolution, this work would have been inconceivable, as it drew

theoretically from what had happened in Paris. It was about self-determination and emancipation. Nothing should prevail any longer that cannot endure before the high court of human reason. Institutions and relationships were no longer divinely given, but were considered a result of human actions and history, and were therefore changeable. Fichte was a philosopher of deeds even more so than Kant and others. Everything that there is, in the sphere of knowledge as well as in practical life, is the result of human actions. The Self is sovereign, creative. Fichte actually ascribes to it the traits of an old God, which the Self dethrones, just like princes. Friedrich Schlegel and the early romanticists immediately recognized the most prominent tendencies of the modern age: the French Revolution, Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. Fichte welcomed the major changes happening in the world with enthusiasm. However, he did not have any illusions about them. He considered the time in which he lived to be a time of decline, depravity, unrest, and disarray. For him, it was the "age of absolute sinfulness," entangled in self-interest and institutionalized egoism, which would ultimately lead to Hobbes's *bellum omnium contra omnes*. Fichte did not lose sight of the ultimate purpose: Total independence from everything which is not our self, which is not our pure ego. However, he mistrusted the individuality and the cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment, also due to the influence of the Napoleonic Wars.

Fichte developed his philosophy of history in the *Characteristics of the Present Age* (1806). His primary idea in this work was the development of humanity away from oppression and slavery towards freedom. Parallel to the development of the individual, the external development of their position in the state moves away from the role of subject towards a free citizen. At the forefront is the development model which divides history into five ages. In this context, Fichte understands his own age as a disastrous one, finding itself in the position of maximum alienation. At the center of this development is the age in which we have freed ourselves

of all authority, but have not yet arrived at true knowledge; the characteristics of this age should, however, usher us into better future ages. In other words, the point of origin is virtually a biblical den of iniquity. In this age, we are living in “complete sinfulness.” Fichte defines the meaning of culture and the state as an effort to overcome the forces that stand in the way of the perfection of humankind. The meaning of the state is to align individuals with their life and the goal of their kind. This allows people to no longer be subjects, but become free citizens.

Fichte also tackles the idea—perhaps even without being familiar with Hegel’s fragment—that the state needs to be overcome because it acts as and is perceived as a coercive state only based on needs. In his diagnosis of modernity, Fichte also uses the metaphor of the state as a machine, which plays a central role. He adds to this idea the point that the state works on ensuring that its citizens perceive themselves as machines instead of independent beings (Fichte 1962, p. 286). This is why the state “aims at its own destruction. It is the purpose of government to make itself superfluous” (Fichte 1794, p. 40). According to Fichte’s prediction, the state will simply slowly cease to be, it will crumble as if decrepit, come to the end of its power, and ultimately die out. Fichte, optimistically, finds that this development will actually take place without any revolutions, excesses of violence, and similar external effects: “So, the former coercive state will quietly wither away into nothingness brought about by time, without any expression of force against it” (Fichte 1813, p. 599). How long until this happens? A lot of patience will be required, warns Fichte. For this project to materialize, for this condition following the automatic withering away of the state, we will have to wait for “myriads of years or myriads of myriads of years” (Fichte 1966, p. 37).

In the set of issues concerning the state and the individual, the subject of reason is opposed to the state, which mechanically imposes on this subject an external legal system and enforces it

in an oppressive way. In contrast, the non-repressive state based on reason, a realm unifying everyone as true rational beings, is pitted against the real, bare state based on need: "Everyone has the same convictions, and the conviction of any single person is the conviction of every person" (Fichte 1798, p. 253). This consensus euphoria with maximum conformity between opinion and conviction aims at unifying everyone by means of superior reason, which is based on the principles of rationality. It is an early form of the ideal, domination-free social community of communication (Frank 1983, p. 26). However, this is obviously not a modern state in the sense of *Realpolitik*.

"Why Are We Still Barbarians?" (Schiller, Eighth Letter)

Schiller's social analyses and his theoretical conclusions were formulated against the backdrop of political upheaval in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795). As manifests of the ideals of freedom, equality, and brotherhood, these letters are considered to be among the founding documents of the European theory of modernity (Alt 2000, p. 132; Safranski 2004, p. 409). In contrast to the *Systemprogramm*, Schiller's counterproposal is a better or ideal state. Clearly, Schiller develops his cultural criticism and his aesthetic theory, particularly the aesthetic education of humanity, with a utopian perspective. He deals with the French Revolution and is, despite his support for its goals, i.e., the overturning of the ruling political system, disappointed with the outcome of terror (Borchmeyer 1980, p. 204). By 1793, Schiller is horrified by the bloody events and assumes the French Revolution has failed. In his attempt to explain its failure, he considers whether and how revolutionary ideas could be achieved without a real revolution. According to Schiller, the derailments and aberrations of the French Revolution, its escalation into an excess of violence culminating in the decapitation of the king in public, demonstrate that

it is impossible for pure philosophy to establish a society or an ideal state solely through logical deductions. It will not succeed in causing people to gain insight into what is ethically good just by circulating a friendly reminder of the categorical imperative among them or sharing with them strict philosophical logic. Schiller seeks a non-violent, long-term solution to cope with a most dangerous political situation in order to institute a government of reason. His response to the French Revolution as the political crisis of the time sums up its cultural challenges: “All improvement in the political sphere has to proceed from the ennobling of the character” to avoid any new outbreak violence (ninth letter). Schiller’s apodictic postulate reads as follows: “If man is ever to solve the problem of politics in practice, he will have to approach it through aesthetics, because it is only through beauty that man makes his way to Freedom” (second letter). The individual is led through art and its beauty to liberty.

Schiller sees the process of civilization as the main cause of the deplorable, sad state of cultural and political affairs (sixth letter). The crisis of modern civilization came about through the alienation of reason from nature (Berghahn 2004). This is a process in which human reason increasingly dominates by repressing inner nature and exploiting outside nature. In his journey of cultural criticism, Schiller reaches a violence-free and idealistic response to killings elsewhere. Art is supposed to replace revolution (Borchmeyer 1980, p. 205). Art should be the venue for accomplishing a massive change of consciousness and conduct, which will precede future social and political change. He turns against the despotism of an aristocratic state as well as against the rule of the people, which cannot meet the demands of reason called for during the Enlightenment. Schiller’s whole-hearted concern is to advance humanity, “human dignity” (third letter), and “the nobility of human nature” (first letter) in order to “honour man at length as an end, and to make true freedom the basis of political union. Vain hope!” (fifth letter). Before Schiller, Immanuel Kant

already postulated freedom as an ideal condition. Schiller adopts this impetus. He wants to ensure that, for a person, “the freedom to be what he ought to be is restored perfectly to him” (twenty-first letter). For Schiller, it is about ending the “tyranny against the individual” (seventh letter). According to Schiller, “the ideal of society” (third letter) is nothing less than “a structure of a true political freedom” (second letter). For this purpose, it is necessary “to exchange the state of necessity for that of freedom” (fourth letter). He wishes to promote the critical “spirit of free inquiry,” i.e., scientific analyses, and in this way expose “fanaticism,” “erroneous opinions,” and “deception” for what they really are (eighth letter). Schiller wishes to point to a human condition in which “the blind law of the stronger” no longer applies (second letter).

Schiller poses a rhetorical question: “But can man’s destiny be to neglect himself for any end whatever?” (sixth letter). Not at all. Art is supposed to compensate for damage to heal “one-sidedness” and “splitting up” (ibid.). However, mutilation, disintegration, fragmentation, and instrumental reason are a sign of the times (ibid.). People are impoverished as “fragments,” the “totality of the species” disassociates itself in a rationalization process of a “derailed modernity” (Habermas 2005, p. 26). The goal is the “the restoration of the broken totality” (Habermas 1988, p. 41). Reconciliation can be achieved by a restored totality and “by a superior art” (sixth letter), because art reaches people with all of its powers, with its imagination, realizations, impressions, feelings, and sensuality. Thus, man can become whole again, a totality in a narrower sense. The connection between the aesthetics of autonomy and anthropology is as follows: The definition of the work of art as its own sole purpose in itself, i.e., the “idea of the whole that is made complete in itself” is transformed by Schiller into “the conception of humanity” in order to “bring about the missing totality” and to redeem the alienated individual from the “fragmentary character of man” (Bernauer 1995, p. 159). Through contemplation the aesthetic experience allows, at least momentarily, for a sense

of human completeness. It fulfils quasi-therapeutic, healing, and liberating tasks. It inspires, strengthens, and motivates the individual. In this respect, art has a compensatory function both for the individual and for humanity as a species. With its anticipation of future perspectives, art illuminates humanity's path and opens up new possibilities. "Totality is no longer experienced through love and friendship, but through art" (ibid.). In this sense, art is integrated into Schiller's model with three forms of the state: first, "the state of necessity" or the natural state, second is the "aesthetic state," and third the "state of reason." What Schiller is ultimately striving for is a "state based on reason." That is to say, an "ethical" state in which moral self-commitment applies alone and under all circumstances, because the moral law, as the command of reason, obliges and directs individuals. Such a state no longer needs any external coercive measures. The transition from a *de facto* state based on need to a moral state based on reason is, however, an extraordinarily difficult undertaking: the *modus operandi* of the state cannot simply be stopped and calmly improved. Schiller argues that the "clockwork of the state" (third letter)—again, mechanics is also used for political imagery—cannot first be shut down or even destroyed, only to then gradually develop a better alternative. It is like a clockwork which must be worked on and reformed while its cogwheels continue running mechanically. Therefore, it is true that "the revolving wheel must be repaired while it is in motion" (ibid.). Great social upheaval takes place in the process of transition. Schiller asks himself how this change in political conditions can be advanced, even "ennobled," under barbaric conditions and harmful influences (ninth letter). Only literature, art, and cultural products are able to address people, both in their sensuous perception and in a spiritually inspiring way. Because it is only beauty that offers the path to salvation. "Beauty is nothing but freedom in appearance" (twenty-third letter). "In a word, there is no other way to make the sensuous man rational than by first making him aesthetic" (ibid.). Only on this

basis, i.e., through such an evolutionary overcoming of the previous state, can the moral state be founded, in which the promise of true political freedom is honored and redeemed. Only art, the emancipatory effect of literature, art, and beauty, can give man his freedom. In this respect, the “aesthetic state” is characterized by special qualities. “The ideal of equality” is “fulfilled” here (twenty-seventh letter). Such a state is able “to bestow freedom by means of freedom” (ibid.). As an alternative to the French Revolution, Schiller recommends a collective aesthetic, spiritual, and sensuous therapy in order to reach a “reconciliation of a modernity that has fallen out with itself” (Habermas 1988, p. 59). He formulates an unprecedented appreciation of the beauty of art, an unprecedented advancement of aesthetics and culture. However, can this state ever really exist as an aesthetic utopian vision? It already exists, insists Schiller, but not as a political organizational structure. “In the Aesthetic State everybody is a free citizen, having equal rights with the noblest. [...] As a need, it exists in every finely tuned soul; as a realized fact, we are likely to find it, like the pure church and the pure republic, only in some few chosen circles” (twenty-seventh letter). This state of beauty exists only among the happy few who contrast the existing world with a better one, i.e., in select social-aesthetic circles that are based on the manners characteristic of a “good society,” politeness norms, and “pleasant conversation” (ibid.). The final passage indicates the resigned assumption that man cannot be educated to humanity per se, but that humanity is only to be found by a select few, i.e., an elite that is already trained and ennobled for humanity “by their own lovely nature” (ibid.; Hamburger 1965). Soon thereafter, Schiller was accused of elitism.

Schiller’s aesthetic model of the state and education offers an idealistic, even utopian, and certainly peculiar German model of harmony among humans, in which alienation has disappeared. He replaces political education with an aesthetic one. As a result, the antagonistic forces of nature and freedom, reason and

sensuousness, state and individual are in balance. Are such propositions driven by political realism? Should today's state really be aestheticized? Today, Schiller's utopian vision of an educational aesthetic state as an exquisite "realm of aesthetic appearance," in which "the ideal of equality" of all people, i.e., the goal of the French Revolution, is fulfilled so that, in the "state of beauty in appearance," "the chains of thralldom drop away" for everyone (twenty-seventh letter), is seen as anything but contemporary. Schiller can neither logically nor methodically explain in a satisfactory manner "the aesthetic path to the healing of an alienated society" and "the reconciliation of man with modern social reality" (Alt 2000, p. 151).

Leviathan Must Be Tamed

Let us get back to the original question of what the intellectuals of the time would think of *us* today in view of excessive government activity, astronomical government debt, unchecked bureaucratic growth, increasing juridification, and current emergency measures imposing massive restrictions on our civil liberties, including a ban on attending cultural events, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The expansion of supranational entities makes things more difficult, especially when they are largely beyond democratic control. Could we really manage, however, without the state entirely? Is the state not also an authority with advantages, as it guarantees our basic rights and civil liberties, acts as a regulatory authority, provides security, and ensures public welfare services? Should it really "cease" completely? Would we not be, then, at the mercy of unregulated, digitally driven hyper-surveillance capitalism? Is "the withering away of the state in the process of globalization, the old leftist dream" as outlined in Marxism not a recipe for disaster bound to turn into a catastrophic "nightmare" (Dolar 2015)? Let us consider the arguments aimed at overcoming the state and its shortcomings.

Firstly, the thought processes of the three intellectual giants began around 1800 with an analysis of the deficits in the contemporary human condition. They share the conviction that humanity suffers from a profound alienation, which is yet to be overcome:

- Hegel's postulate on the state that "treats free people as a mechanical wheelwork" and should therefore "cease,"
- Fichte's testimony of "absolute sinfulness" and his prediction of the self-dissolution of the state through "withering away," as well as
- Schiller's transformation program focused on overcoming the state based on need through "ennoblement" and the aestheticization of the political sphere to improve human relations.

The central notion in this process is autonomous art. Its autonomy and art's utopian function becomes one of transforming humanity in order to make freedom possible. As a counterweight to the political and social reality it requires the vision of a better world in anticipation. Thus, it establishes liberty from external restraints. However, since beauty is a subjective quality, freedom will only be an inner experience, even if the world outside is still ruled by chains and oppression. Thus, it compensates for everything that is missing in society—a lack of freedom, justice, and equality—but without truly changing it.

Secondly, this kind of political thinking is state-centered, especially in rejecting the state in its current form. In this sense, the political is perceived and understood exclusively from the perspective of the state. In any case, the "state" is "the key word" around which this political and cultural perception and its understanding of the situation revolve in a negative way. This "ideal political" conception of the political remains fixed on the concept and phenomenon of the state, albeit with a negative connotation (Vollrath 2003, pp. 120, 126). In other words, the political is identified with the state and thus equated with it. In this sense, the state as a sovereign, potent legal system and form of government completely

absorbs political thought as a negative pole. The understanding of politics is narrowed down in a reductionist manner to statehood and its phenomena. “German political thinking is fundamentally and typically characterised by statist views”; it is “the result of a lack of specific identity, which the political has experienced in Germany due to historical circumstances” (Vollrath 1987, p. 103f). Can a large-scale social structure *without* the character of a factual state ever be the result of the self-reflection and self-realization processes that all subjects of reason go through as rational beings? If the ultimate goal is a state-free zone, a realm of unconstrained, non-violent, and domination-free association, in which the free development of everyone is the condition for the free development of all others, then no modern state is compatible with this anarchist impetus. Fichte’s consensus model (in which everyone not only comes to the same conclusion guided by human reason but even shares the same convictions!) and Schiller’s alleged solutions (the aesthetic state to overcome the bad, factual state based on need) are tantamount to a social mini-unit in the form of a free, beautiful community of associations. The construct of a state based on reason is certainly no longer a state in the true sense of the word.

Thirdly, it is not only Hegel who denounces the real-world institutional structure, “the whole miserable human work of state, constitution, government, legislature” as evil (Sölter 2021b). When it comes to the state based on need or the state of understanding, standards are applied against which such a state can only be regarded as irrational—and must therefore be abolished. Such an approach “constructs, being the rational form for the unification of all, a structure that exhibits all of the qualities of the state, above all that of being the universal legal personality of all, without having its compulsory character, a state without statehood, i.e. without a state” (Vollrath 1987, p. 136).

“*Modernity Is The Crisis*” (Habermas)

Habermas's dictum regarding the “theories of the twentieth century dealing with the diagnosis of the times” signifies the crux of the paradigm of cultural criticism (Habermas 2019, p. 41). It is condensed into a philosophical diagnosis of the crisis-laden modernity, fueled by an acute consciousness of disruption, which is reconfigured within a mentality of alienation and expanded into a radical criticism of the state and the society as a system. Radical cultural criticism defines the essence of these paradigmatic views and perceptions because, in them, the *conditio moderna* is interpreted as overall ambivalent and as the phenomenon of a deep crisis. In the course of a modernity that has become reflexive and that problematizes itself in terms of cultural criticism, philosophy offers a mode of communication for its burning questions (Bollenbeck 2007, p. 28; Sölter 2021c). Ideally, it also makes a constructive contribution to overcoming its shortcomings. However, the following double aspect is problematic: philosophy is “at the same time, believed and trusted to have comprehensive competence, and this also applies to the political” (Vollrath 2003, p. 171). By assigning this specific task to philosophy, significant weaknesses in the eccentric German cultural awareness become evident on the levels of both political perception and political practice. In summary, the following aspects of the inner connection between philosophy and the diagnoses of the contemporary age within cultural criticism, as it significantly shapes political perception in Germany, must be taken into account (Sölter 2019, 2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b):

Firstly, the paradigm of cultural criticism indicates a fundamental awareness of crises and a sense of alienation. On the basis of such a perception of crises, which developed into a diagnosis of systemically generated “pathologies” and a functionalistically curtailed reason (as a deeply one-sided, reduced mode of instrumental thinking), a critique of occidental modernity, its ambivalences,

defects, and shortcomings, was formulated. According to this diagnosis, serious social, systemically induced “pathologies,” even destruction, arise “in the triumphant march of capitalist modernization” (Habermas 2009, p. 250; Habermas 2005, p. 31). Imperatives of the “system,” such as power and money, invade and colonize “the life-world” in a process of “monetization and bureaucratisation,” causing a massive “deformation” and destructive tendencies in it (Habermas 1981, p. 593). Such diagnoses sound like a distant echo of the early *Systemprogramm*.

Secondly, in their proposals both the author of the *Systemprogramm* and Schiller rely on a single binary opposition. The reduced terms of the fragment are liberty versus the machine, free expressivity and maximum individual creativity versus the state apparatus, its ideology and its mechanism of repression. The choice we are confronted with is either the state or art. The freedom of spirit found in art is incommensurate with the mechanical in the state. Both Hegel and Schiller are horrified by the cogwheels of the state. The aestheticization of politics is portrayed as an antidote to the *Räderwerk*, which they bitterly reject. The celebration of art with a spiritual and aesthetic elevation of the individual is seen as a remedy against its opposite, the ills of modernity. Of course, this thought is being accused of “simplicity and naivety” (Dolar 2015).

Thirdly, the radical perception patterns within cultural criticism in Germany led to deeply deficient political misjudgments, which even became catastrophic in the twentieth century (Lepenies 2006; Sölter 2019, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b). What all versions of the paradigm of cultural criticism have in common is complete disproportionality with respect to the civil-political concept of the political in the West (Vollrath 2003). In hindsight, the lack of a theory and an adequate concept of the state and the political turned out to be a fundamental basic historical flaw. This includes the inability to exercise pragmatism, a contempt for reality as it is presented with all of its faults, imperfections,

and unevenness, and an intellectual radicalism that tends to move towards philosophical extremism and reveals apocalyptic perspectives, such as those in *tabula rasa* approaches. In this view, catastrophic scenarios are favored, complexity-reducing thinking is applied, shaped by dualisms, antagonisms, and binary distinctions. As a consequence, in the further development of the history of ideas, democratic institutions and liberal state systems are generally degraded as such. This is often connected with a disdain for politics, its processes and mechanisms in general, and with an aesthetic interpretation of politics. This misguided impetus leads large portions of the population into mythological or aesthetic substitutions especially in Germany. As a result, political thinking is dominated by genuinely apolitical images, metaphors, and categories, as well as by the need for “apolitical politics” or “metapolitics” (Vollrath 1987, 2003). In the past, this has given German culture a special eccentricity and intellectual radicalism. Certainly, this has significantly contributed to its international reputation, its importance, charisma, and its attractiveness and appeal for people from other cultures. “However, the greatness of German culture is connected with a serious shortcoming: it is missing a sense for the political, precisely in its moderate civilized form—as H. Plessner put it: ‘the specifically Western spirit of normalised mediocrity’” (Vollrath 2003, p. 176). If greatness of mind and political weakness were directly related to one another in Germany, the taming of the very intellectual radicalism that has brought about bravado, admiration, and greatness to the German spirit would perhaps result in a loss of substance, the lowering of standards, and the degradation of cultural depth. Nevertheless, the perception of politics, not only in Germany, needs to be de-radicalized in order to reintegrate it into the sphere of overall Western cultural understanding. Therefore, politics must neither be dismissed as banal nor assigned exceptional expectations that turn out to be unrealizable or ignore fundamental, inevitable conflicts of interest.

In the fight against authoritarian regimes, against tyranny and oppression, the ideas of autonomous reason and critical thinking are still of the utmost importance. According to them, everyone is entitled to decide which beliefs they accept and how they want to live their life, regardless of pseudo-authorities. The same applies to the idea of the freedom of expression — i.e., the right to be able to stand up publicly for one's own convictions — and also to the ideas of equality of all citizens before the law and the right of all citizens to be involved in reaching decisions regarding legislation and measures implemented by the government, which has been elected for a limited time. Neither the “stabilization or strengthening of domination” nor the preservation of the existing power system are at the center of this idea of reason and freedom, but rather the domestication of the state, the limitation and “control of the ruling authority,” and considerations about how institutional regulations are created in order to achieve this goal effectively (Albert 1977, p. 194).

What would the enthusiastic protagonists of the idea of freedom and radical criticism of the state think of *us* today, facing a global crisis in the midst of our ongoing struggle with a coronavirus outbreak (Dolar 2020, Vieweg 2020b)? We can only guess. The pandemic — most likely triggered by a zoonotic disease jumping the species barrier — may be just the tip of the iceberg if we continue to encroach on natural habitats. Does this require a comprehensive systemic overhaul? “COVID-19: The Great Reset” (Schwab/Malleret 2020)? With many of our natural systems now on the verge of breakdown, we can no longer afford for nature to be absent from economics, argues Dasgupta (2021), who recommends a move away from Gross Domestic Product as a measure of progress — to rebalance our planet's natural systems, we must “include Nature as an ingredient” when judging the economic health of nations. Even if we concede that the current situation during the pandemic may require special measures, such as the current restrictions on freedom and contact, until COVID-19 is

contained in order to avoid overburdening intensive care units and causing the collapse of national healthcare systems, what should give us more reason to be concerned are the long-term consequences. The current state economic recovery policy may be necessary, but it is certainly not sustainable. The key question is: Whom do we trust to reduce the enormous expansion of government spending, government debt, government intervention, and government activity casting long shadows of public control over the individual's private existence and movements? Who do we wish to fully restore all civil liberties of individuals as well as regular parliamentary procedures, which have been temporarily overridden by ordinances? What kind of freedom is supposed to open up at the end of the day? "What if the only viable solution is to change the entire system?" (Žižek 2013, p. 303). What if "the role of the people is ultimately a negative one: 'free elections' (or a referendum) serve as a check on the party movements"? [...] "This is all that electoral democracy can do; the positive step into a new order is beyond its scope. [...] Even in a radical protest movement, people *do not* know what they want, they demand a new Master to tell them. But if the people do not know, does the Party?" (Žižek 2013, pp. 998–1000). In contradicting the Enlightenment's self-determination program, Žižek makes a strong case for rational ignorance among ordinary citizens (Sölter 1993).

Today, no reasonable blueprint for true radical change—the kind of comprehensive makeover of our entire social, cultural, economic, and political system—towards a new and better global order is yet available. Whether or not the historical period around 1800, with its transition to modernity, shares startling similarities with our own times remains to be seen. Those who do believe we are at a crossroads again, facing the beginning of a new era, for which they pose (just like in 1800) "the new key question about a rational society as such" (Rödder 2020), should consider Hegel's dictum: "Reason and freedom remain our watchword" (Hegel 1969, p. 18). Ultimately, we each have to serve as judge and jury

with respect to our own actions. Understanding, critical thought, boldness, and courage are crucial notions, signaling the mode used in the self-determined progress of knowledge and self-liberation. A systemic overhaul also means empowering citizens to make informed choices and to demand change. The social question is back on the agenda. Those thinkers who, more than 200 years ago, placed the idea of reasonable freedom at the very center of their thinking in order to raise the question of a more liberal system, would probably encourage or exhort us to devise more reasonable and more liberal alternatives to those already existing in our intellectual considerations, i.e., to be bolder in upsetting the status quo rather than simply rely on an expansionary interventionist state. In this context, there is no need to overstretch the emancipatory potential of art and culture's critical stance towards social, political, and economic reality. Neither should we, however, underestimate the thought-provoking, sometimes life-changing impulses arising from cultural events, experiences, and insights, or ignore their lasting artistic inspiration and the imprint they leave on our lives in the long run, and thus their liberating power during the great test of time.

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The Athenian Owl and the Gallic Rooster—Dusk or Dawn?

Klaus Vieweg

When Zeus, the father of the gods, once suffered from a severe headache, the blacksmith Hephaestus split the head of Zeus with an axe and a woman emerged from it. The headache was followed by the proverbial headbirth. Minerva or, as the Greeks called her, Pallas Athena was an extremely powerful figure in mythology – she once defeated Poseidon in competition and hurled Sicily against the enemy. When aggrieved, she turned into a poisonous spider. Heracles gave her the apples of the Hesperides, Perseus the head of Medusa. And because Paris had disdain for her, she fully sided with Athens against Troy and thus provided a decisive contribution to the downfall of the Trojans. She symbolizes the political unity of the polis and, last but not least, she gave people knowledge at the request of Prometheus and is considered to be the goddess of wisdom and protector of philosophers and poets. As is well known, she was the basis for Hegel’s favorite metaphor. The goddess of science sits enthroned on the old bridge in Heidelberg and is the patron of Heidelberg University. Together with the painting *Pallas Athene* by Ferdinand Keller, which can be seen in the entrance hall of Heidelberg University, and perhaps also together with Archenholtz’s famous *Minerva* magazine, this inspired Hegel’s illustration of the owl of Minerva’s flight at dusk. Famously, the holy animal was given one of Pallas Athena’s favorite places on the Acropolis. In the sharp and glinting eye of the owl, the wisest bird, the ancient Athenians saw an image of the owl-eyed goddess’s essential characteristics.

In Hegel's metaphor, the thought is represented using the images of a *goddess*, an *animal*, with a time of day, *dusk*, or the color *grey in grey*. World history must first reach a certain stage of its development before sufficient knowledge is possible. The general, universalistic concept of freedom, the idea of the freedom of all, could not dominate in the ancient world. Mere notice of the seedling alone does not ensure sufficient knowledge about a tree, a newly created political formation does not yet ensure knowledge of its developed form. According to Hegel, the idea of freedom is still to be formed internally in the mind and to be externalized in the world. Hegel alludes to the idea that his time represents the actual *beginning* of the modern world, although he also uses the metaphor of ages with regard to history — childhood, adulthood, and old age. Hegel claims that he presented a philosophical theory of this world, of a time in which the basic patterns of this modern period, especially the key concept of freedom, developed, thus allowing the owl of science to begin its flight. This substantiates the interpretation of the French Revolution: For the first time, a constitution is based on law, man turned his head, i.e., his mind, upside down, and this Minerva-like headbirth is what the prelude of modernity is based on.

Rousseau established pure thinking as a principle, in the domain of the will, the practical, and he established free will as the concept of man. Therefore, the polis is based on thinking. "It is only as having the power of thinking that the will is free." With Rousseau, the principle of freedom emerged; again, the metaphor of rising, of beginning — the dawn of the eve of history. Rousseau was considered a fool by many, but proclaimed 'tis folly to be wise, the massive effect of which unfolded before the revolution. With the revolution as a glorious sunrise, the beautiful dawn of freedom, man had come to recognize that thinking should rule spiritual reality. The modern world is to be understood as the "dusk" of history. It is the beginning of the possible realization of individual freedom in a free community.

Metaphors and Ideas

It is about the meaning of metaphors, images, or ideas in philosophy. The metaphor represents a short symbol that is concentrated in an image, an imagery which the content “shines through.” The meaning is illustrated in the form of a related, similar externality. The visualization results from a translation, a paraphrase. It is a brief comparison. Only the picture is shown, but the intended meaning must remain dubious or ambiguous.

The deliberations are based on Hegel’s famous metaphor of the flight of Minerva’s owl, which begins at dusk. This places us at the crux of the topic, with the relationship between imagery and thought, in Hegelian terminology with the relationship between idea and concept.¹ For deliberations of the subsequent problem areas of the relationship between philosophy on the one hand and poetry and religion on the other, between imagery and logic, between argumentation and narration, between figurative and discursive recognition, the confrontation between Hegel and Nietzsche seems to be a fruitful approach—between Hegel’s *phalanx of the concept* and Nietzsche’s *army of metaphors*. The question about the form of representation, the expression, the mode of communication turns out to be a central challenge for philosophy and is not just a matter of design or external decoration.

Kant, whom Hegel follows here, clearly formulated this in his famous essay “On a Newly Arisen Superior Tone in Philosophy”: “The essence of a thing consists in its form [...] insofar as this essence is supposed to be known by reason” (Kant 1993, p. 70). It is thus a question of the possibility of distinguishing between literary and philosophical texts, of the possibility of differentiating between the various forms or “languages,” of the problem of a possible transformation, of *translating* between these forms of expression, and a question of transitional or mixed forms. What

¹ The following deliberations are based on Vieweg 2007 and Vieweg 2011.

about the presence of concepts in mythological literary texts, what about the presence of metaphors in philosophical argumentation? To illustrate this using a picture of a bridge: 1) Can you understand the two sides as different bridgeheads? 2) Is there a safe transition, one-way or two-way? 3) What type of text must camp out on the bridge?

To approach the question of the status of mythopoetic texts and philosophical texts, let us take a brief look back at Kant and Hegel, who were sufficiently confronted with such *boundary crossings* and attempts to *blur boundaries*: In the said essay, Kant sharply rejected attempts to transfer the *aesthetic mode of representation* to philosophy. The only philosophical thing is to bring the matter “into clear concepts according to logical methodology” (ibid., p. 71). Kant confronts the alleged philosophy of the oracle, which, like men of genius, grasps the object through “a single piercing glance within them,” with the philosophy of work à la Aristotle, characterized by the discursive endeavors based on the ability of knowledge through concepts, which must laboriously climb many levels to achieve progress in knowledge: Philosophy as the “Herculean labour of self-knowledge,” which has to justify its positions “before they are allowed to celebrate the truth of their assertions” (ibid., p. 58). The “enthusiast” can neither make his thoughts understandable nor communicate them, he needs—like Jacobi—a mystical touch, an overleap (*salto mortale*) from concepts to the unthinkable, a power of seizing upon that which no concept attains to and therefore arrives to no true knowledge of the object, but to a surrogate thereof, to “supernatural information” or “mystical illumination,” which he simply accepts. Due to the absence of “precise proofs,” analogies, figurative expressions, and “probabilities” are offered as arguments (pp. 62–63). According to Kant, the proposal to begin philosophizing poetically is just like “the suggestion that a businessman should in the future no longer write his account books in prose but rather in verse” (p. 72).

Philosophers who poetize with concepts prefer the pyrrhonic modes of representation as mixed forms between argument and visualization—tropes, hypotyposes, stories, parables, and the essay as a literary philosophical experiment. However, Hegel considers his *Phenomenology of Spirit* unmistakably as the completion, *sublation of scepticism*, both in terms of content and form, the special *language of scepticism*. Since he considers irony to be the modern variation of the sceptical, this is also sublated. Hegel proved to be the most astute and powerful critic of scepticism and irony and relied on argumentation, discourse, application, and knowledge, he legitimized in a new way the relevance of conceptual thinking, which is, in a way, essentially different from the previous concepts of metaphysics and cannot simply be thrown into this old pot.

According to Montaigne, the way out for the sceptic lies in a *completely new language*. Nietzsche rebels in a similar way: Philosophy is “trapped in the webs of language.” Derrida also calls for such *new vocabulary*, e.g., the clear opposition of metaphors and concepts must be replaced by a different connection, because the *metaphor is a concept typical for metaphysics*, the use of which signifies accepting the rules of the game of the old, i.e., argumentation. It can be concluded from this astute observation that even Nietzsche’s commendable approach to generalizing the metaphorical falls into this trap of conceptual thinking. In principle, the “boundaries” would have to be shifted and metaphysics would first have to be unmasked as *white mythology*. It should be denied its discursive-argumentative requirement and it should be read as a literary mythological text. In this metaphysics, the “white man” takes his own mythology, i.e. Indo-European mythology; his logos, that is, the mythos: “White mythology—metaphysics has erased within itself the fabulous scene that has produced it, the scene that nevertheless remains active and stirring, inscribed in white ink, an invisible design covered over in the palimpsest” (Derrida 1982, p. 213). All sceptics and ironists advocate poetic

philosophemes, philosophical poems, and therefore out themselves as inhabitants of the bridge, following in the footsteps of their Pyrrhonical ancestors, such as Timon, Montaigne, Schlegel, and Nietzsche.

*The Pit (Shaft) and the Pyramid—
Derrida on Hegel's Understanding of Representations*

In his striking essay “The Pit and the Pyramid,” Derrida gives extraordinary credit to Hegel for providing clarification regarding our subject (1982, pp. 69–108). Hegel’s thoughts on the subjective spirit in the *Encyclopaedia* are considered to be the foundation of modern semiology—*the basic features of a new theory of the sign and linguistics are supposed to be laid down there.* (By the way: This should be written in the registry of those analytical philosophers who are ignorant of Hegel and who think they are the only custodians of language.) R.-P. Horstmann emphasizes that not only in Nietzsche’s but also in Hegel’s criticism of ancient metaphysics “the role of language has a special function,” that Hegel’s diagnosis of the efficiency of traditional metaphysics is closely tied “to his excursions in the philosophy of language” (Horstmann 1993, p. 299). However, Derrida’s illuminating study, the title of which alludes to two metaphors by Hegel, is limited to the passages on philosophical psychology and thus leaves aside the equally substantial thoughts on the relationship between literature, religion, and philosophy, and, therefore, also the question of *objectivity*. It is limited to the *formal*, although Derrida quotes the following passage from Hegel himself: “The creations of imagination are on all hands recognized as such combinations of the mind’s own and inward with *the matter of intuition*; what further and more definite aspects they have is a matter for other departments” (TWA 10, p. 268; Derrida 1993, p. 80). He is indifferent to the creations of imagination. Therefore,

Derrida's criticism of Hegel's positions discussed here does not adequately focus on Hegel's significant texts.

To examine the Hegelian concept, however, it is essential to refer to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the final chapter of the *Encyclopaedia*, the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, and the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, so that the question of the *content* and the *objectivity* of those forms can be raised. To present the thesis in a somewhat striking and provocative way: Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is not an ironic change of vocabulary, not an ever-changing army of metaphors, it is not an odyssey and certainly not a theodicy, not a journey of a Gulliver or Wilhelm Meister, not a career in an ascending line [*Lebenslauf nach aufsteigender Linie*], and also not a story of divine history; although Hegel's *Phenomenology* includes all these forms and links them together, it represents, through its *final and decisive transition*, the attempt to *sublate* the mythopoetic contents and forms in the language of the concept.

Transferring or Translating as Sublation

For Hegel, the category that connects the textual status of the poetic with that of the mythological and religious is *representation*. Ricoeur rightly identified the term *representation* as an "enormous nebula" and reminded us of the different meanings of its determination in various philosophies (Ricoeur 1986, p. 300). A precise clarification is also needed for Hegel's use of this word, and with regard to its history, Sextus Empiricus should, in addition to Hume and Kant, also not be forgotten. Individual determinations of representations, as they can be found in the chapter of the *Encyclopaedia* titled *Subjective Spirit* (§§ 387–482), are not specifically reconstructed here but should be inherently demonstrated as the higher language of the representation, as inscribed in the forms *art* and *religion*. This is particularly legitimized by the weight of

the content—the decisive content must be considered during the assessment of art and religion as *objectivity*, as the objective spirit precedes art and religion. The representations of the objective contain Hegel’s philosophy of freedom in the narrower sense; it is precisely such thinking of freedom that is an empty position for all protagonists of the aesthetic mode of representation, which is why those who are concerned try to bypass this step to the content. One cannot leave the realm of ideas or metaphors; of all things, this is what echoes in the old idioms of “rigid, insurmountable necessity” and in the mentality of setting boundaries, which is a clear relapse into old metaphysics and dogmatism.

First, a short, provisional definition of Hegel’s understanding of representations: Representations stand between the sensuous-descriptive and the concept, they represent the *middle*, the *in-between*, the *transition*, the transfer between the *individual of the intuition* and the *universality of the concept*. They are primarily visualizations of the universal and generalizations of the figurative, illustrations of meanings, and metaphors of concepts. They are expressions, representations in the sense of visualizations, the verbalization of the figurative. Language gives representations “a second and higher existence than they naturally possess—invests them with the right of existence in the *ideational realm*” (TWA 10, p. 271, my emphasis). 1) The image, 2) imagination,² and 3) memory are discussed as stages in the coherent development of the representation conceived by Hegel whereby the latter, mostly as the name-creating, creates the transition from the figurative to the free concept in its essential “non-representational” dimension. Finally, the unity of the individual, the particular, and the universal is not achieved in the representation; due to its oscillation, it (itself) forms a transition, a bridge, and, for this reason, remains in the *antinomic*, in *ambiguity*, in the *either-or*. The ironist Schlegel

² Productive imagination forms the “formal of art,” and art presents the “true universal in the form of *sensuous Dasein*” (TWA 10, p. 267).

formulated this excellently when he discussed the impossibility and the necessity of a complete message. This was the basis for the corresponding intermediate forms, the hybrids, such as tropes, hypotyposes, fragments, aphorisms, and essays.

In addition to the outlined concept of translation, the precise distinction between philosophy and literature, between argumentation and narrative, remains of utmost importance. The elixir of life in philosophy is conceptual thinking; it finds its expression in the concept and its systematic genesis, not even in “complementary” literary forms—philosophy is not *a story* of “what happens, but knowledge of what is true in it, and from the truth, it should further understand what appears in the story as a mere event” (TWA 6, p. 260). There is a danger that arises from the fascination with the colorful variety of images originating from the infinite trove of memories and with the visualizations of the universal and the generalization of the figurative, and this danger is that one will succumb to the “seduction of the representation.” But the dubiousness or ambiguity cannot be pushed away.

Kant and Hegel vehemently point out that the use of analogies, metaphors, fragments, aphorisms, the “aesthetic mode of representation” is (plainly) an indication of a shortcoming, a sign of an “*absence of precise proofs*.” All of those who poetize with concepts believe that they are, *at crucial points, freed from their reasoning in the form of providing proof, justification and argument*, and thus find themselves in the replacement of truth by something accepted as truth, the affirmation or enthusiastic visions, the death of all philosophy.

In contrast to this, Hegel developed a concept of translating the aesthetic-mythological mode of representation into conceptual thinking and vice versa. When performing back-translation from a concept into a representation, philosophy uses the literary-mythical form to bring philosophemes closer to the imagination, to clarify the imagination using various visualizations to improve comprehensibility.

As was said initially regarding Hegel: There is still a difference between us *being* thinkers and *imagining* ourselves as such or *knowing* that we are thinkers. Hegel demands arduous work on a concept, the necessary sublation of representations in conceptual thinking. He aptly identifies the differences between art, religion, and philosophy, and outlines the shortcomings and limits “of poetizing with concepts.” The literary and religious form, however, “is not suitable to Philosophy. Thought which has itself as an object must have raised itself to its own form, to the form of thought.” The protagonists of the “army of metaphors” have an Achilles heel: They operate with a concept of a metaphor rather than a metaphor of a metaphor.

Hegel and the “End of History”

For Hegel, the basic object and, therefore, the guiding principle of the historical is the spirit, according to its essence, the concept of freedom.³ The history of the world presents “the gradation in the development of that principle whose substantial purport is the consciousness of Freedom” (TWA 12, p. 76f). The analysis of the successive grades, in their abstract form, belongs to Logic. The fixation of the three main stages of the world history orient themselves according to the status of freedom: 1) the freedom of the particular individual (only the isolated, the particular—the emperor’s principle or autocracy), 2) the freedom of the particular (“some” particulars, such as politicians), 3) universal freedom (“all”). The goal or end purpose of history was considered to be *universal freedom*, the *freedom of all*, the modern world as the “end of history,” the freedom of everybody. The principle of modern states as “last states” has “enormous strength and depth because it allows the principle of subjectivity to attain fulfilment

³ For more on the topic see Vieweg 2012, pp. 499–521.

in the *self-sufficient extreme* of personal particularity, while at the same time *bringing it back to substantial unity* and so preserving this unity in the principle of subjectivity itself” (TWA 7, p. 407). Free will is considered to be the substantial basis for all rights, for this principle of freedom, the last stage of the history of the world, the modern world. These represent the *end of history*, the last historical world formation. This neither implies a “utopian moratorium” (Ernst Bloch) nor an “elimination of future” (Ortega y Gasset) nor an opening to new stages. Hegel’s concept of history is opposed to the idea of the world development of the principle of freedom that is higher than that of modern freedom, a concept that does not refer generally to human events but to a gradation, to a “*layering*,” and that significantly differs from world history as it is used today. One could call this historical “*world-layering*” if perceived from the geological point of view; this layering has reached its *final, concluding* “layer”—through the universal consciousness of freedom, history reaches, with this highest stage, *its own reason and then*—as a finite process, as a gradation—it also falls to its own ruin.

The modern state must follow its concept. Regarding this, Hegel noted: “Man must form himself. He is historical, i.e. he belongs in time, in *history before freedom*—this is where history is.” (TWA 7, p. 124, my emphasis). What Hegel calls history is, technically speaking, *the prehistory of humankind*. Hegel’s writings about the end of history do not, by any means, contain a definitive conclusion of human events in the sense of a status of perfection, in the sense of the actual presence of the best of all worlds or this-worldly paradise. In modern times, human events take place within the achieved framework of the world in the form of *globalization* as the internationalization of essential day-to-day life. The modern principle of freedom can be formed internally in the mind and externally in the world. The end of history is about the global shaping of universal freedom. The recognized concept of freedom can be given its appropriate, adequate shape.

The peak of the gradation has been reached, and now, according to the principle of freedom, it is about the formation of this plateau that has been clambered onto. Metaphorically, the realization of the concept of freedom begins its true flight, which is now very fast. After the previous slowness, after the previous snail's crawl, the spirit has now picked up its stride. A shape of life, namely history in its form as a gradation, has become "ripe"; it can no longer return to its earlier, supposedly idyllic forms, there can be no departure to substantially new stages. People are "only" left with knowledge and the global realization of the idea of freedom as the true principle for the human community.

The end is in no way death or a standstill; Hegel uses this word in the sense of Friedrich Schiller, whose inaugural lecture at Jena University was titled *What does it mean and to what end does one study universal history*—the end as the purpose. Even in his every-day speech, Hegel used the word in the following sense: "I expect you, to this end, at around 3 o'clock." The end of history can be interpreted—and this is the main intention of Hegelian thinking—as the actual beginning of human existence, as the beginning of an age in which a human, every person is considered to be a *new, highest, and ultimate saint*. This is the central point of this conception, the understanding of modernity as the beginning of a truly human-designed, free existence. The ideas of freedom, law, and humanity are to be developed as basic principles of self-understanding and self-interpretation as well as of institutional and cultural formations. Freedom should become the principle based on which the moral cosmos is oriented; this is probably the only thing that Hegel says about the future. He delivers neither a utopian promise of an earthly paradise, for the establishment of which final holy battles are fought nor a consolation of a heavenly kingdom. It is not about a prophetic whisper or mystical visions of the future in the form of belief in a future world or age or utopian communist empires. Understanding and shaping freedom, *conditio humana*—these are the challenges that humanity faces. From a Hegelian perspective, this

is not a comfortable undertaking, a simple stroll, a walk through the beautiful groves of ancient Greece, a quick stop at St Peter's Basilica, it is no walk through the gentle wine-growing hills of Tuscany or the gardens of Buddhist monasteries in Kyoto, it is not a stroll through Ljubljana or Jena, but rather it is the most difficult and riskiest challenge for humanity. This undertaking is like a big dare, like a tightrope walk without a safety net, climbing Mount Everest without a roped party, or us jumping from the ski jump in Planica. It is similar to a company that has already made great strides but is moving as if it was still in its infancy, still at the beginning—this was painfully evident in the 20th century—and the success of which cannot be certain.

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Adorno's Beethoven: Undoing Hegel From Within

Sven-Olov Wallenstein

The year 2020 marks the 250th anniversary not just of Hegel, but also of Beethoven and Hölderlin—a constellation of names that signal a threshold, the end of classical form and the beginning of a modernity that we still inhabit. I will approach this constellation from out of Adorno's take on it, and what he terms the "late style," which he locates in Beethoven and to some extent in Hölderlin, and which pits both of them against Hegel. For Adorno, late style implies a process of disintegration, not just of inherited forms, but also, and perhaps more importantly, of the mediating power of the subject that held them together: the weight of objective moments turns organic form into a landscape of ruins, but also leaves a subjective void that remains to be filled.

Here the problem of subjective mediation emerges, and it will haunt modern art up to the present. Important here, although less noticed, is also the connection to Hölderlin's translations of Greek tragedy and his late poetry, which are crucial to Adorno's understanding of modern poetry and art in general, but also have an important bearing on his interpretation of Beethoven.

The General Question of Late Style

"Art's substance," Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory*, "could be its transitoriness. It is thinkable, and not merely an abstract

possibility, that great music—a late development (*ein Spätes*)—was possible only during a limited phase of humanity” (Adorno 1973, p. 13; 2004, p. 4). The phrase appears in the beginning of the book, in the context of a discussion of Hegel’s theory of art’s historical nature, and of why Hegel’s historicizing of art as a moment in the history of spirit may be insufficient. How should we understand such a claim? What is this *lateness*—here perhaps somewhat normalized by the translation “late development,” which seems to place it within a linear chronology—if we understand it outside of the Hegelian theorem of art as a thing of the past with respect to philosophy, to which Adorno undoubtedly did not subscribe? Might this lateness, in a way that seems to contradict the obvious meaning of term, in fact be something that belongs to the *present*, and even to the *future*, as a possibility?

Put in terms of a somewhat crude alternative, the idea of lateness, or of a late style, seems to point in two directions.

1) The first is indicated by the passage just cited: great music, perhaps great art as such, and maybe also great philosophy, belongs to a unique historical moment that can never be retrieved. In this first version, the idea of lateness thus points to some historically singular event, an *Einmaligkeit* that condemns all that will follow to repeat, or more precisely, to unfold and radicalize a “logic of disintegration,” as it is called in *Negative Dialectics*. For Adorno, this is one of the basic features of modernism in philosophy as well as the arts, although it is undoubtedly always in conflict with other tendencies.

2) The second direction is that of continually present possibility, which cannot be tied to any particular moment in time. In this version, lateness discloses a dimension that belongs to an individual oeuvre as such, it is a limit of art that is also its highest possibility, and although it is always instantiated in precise historical contexts, it cannot be identified with any one of them.

Beethoven's Lateness

Before moving on the Adorno's writings on late style, we must note that the idea of there being something particularly enigmatic, enticing, and challenging in Beethoven's late work is not a perception unique to Adorno.¹ For many historians and musicologists of various creeds and theoretical persuasions, Beethoven's position in these pieces is a singular one. This is perhaps in an astral sense: that the work curves the very fabric of time and historical succession, as Michael Spitzer suggests in his rich study of the idea of late style in Adorno when he says that Beethoven is "so heavy that he bends light" (Spitzer 2006, p. 17).

The question hinges upon Beethoven's position in relation to the "Classical Style," as Charles Rosen has called it (Rosen 1997). For some, this classical style, which, as Rosen acknowledges, is less a set of rigid technical criteria and more like a general attitude, is malleable enough to encompass even the deviations of a late style like Beethoven's; for others, these late works disrupt the categories and structural models inherited from Mozart and Haydn (the two main protagonists of the classical style in Rosen's study), and late Beethoven becomes a proto-romantic, or even proto-modernist. Disunity, disintegration, fragmentation, and other such categories have established themselves as key concepts in the discussion of these works, although they are by no means uncontested, especially among formalist scholars for whom the analysis of pure musical structure seems to preclude all such themes as irrelevant to music proper.

Outside of musicology, the idea of a radical breakthrough in Beethoven's late work has become almost a literary trope or even cliché. The most prominent case is of course Thomas Mann, whose

¹ For a brief survey of earlier views of Beethoven's late style, see Blumenröder 1983, pp. 24–37.

Doktor Faustus, published in 1947, drew heavily on discussions with Adorno, as Mann acknowledges in his companion book *Die Entstehung des Doktor Faustus*, published two years after the novel (Mann 1960, pp. 171–77). Mann was familiar with both the ideas of Adorno’s *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (1949), as well as the 1934 essay on Beethoven’s late style, and he builds them into his literary narrative in a way that has made them familiar to a large audience long before Adorno’s own writings on the topic were published.

In the novel, the composer Wendell Kretzschmar famously explains why Beethoven’s Piano Sonata op. 111 breaks off after the second movement. It is a “process of dissolution, estrangement, a step into the sphere of the foreign and no longer familiar,” that finally loses itself in the “vertiginous height” that could be called “transcendent or abstract” (Mann 1973, p. 73). Unlike in his middle phase, Kretzschmar suggests, Beethoven here allows conventions to emerge in naked form, and subjectivity and convention enter into a new relation determined by death, which transcends the merely personal and moves into the realm of the mythical and the collective. This also puts an end to art, and the absence of the third movement is a farewell to art, to its *Schein*, in favor of “crystal spheres in which hot and cold, calm and ecstasy, are one and the same” (*ibid.*, p. 75).

It has often been noted that Mann—to the extent that we see his novel in the light of Adorno’s idea of lateness (which obviously does not exhaust the novel as such, whose major concern is not the break-up of classical forms at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but the rise of fascism in Germany)²—while picking up several motifs and concepts from Adorno, also misrepresents him. The breakthrough achieved in Beethoven, where music has to stop, opens in Mann’s version onto a divine and transcendent

² Cobley 2002, pp. 43–70.

sphere, whereas in Adorno this is only present as a faint glimpse. And the music produced by the composer Leverkühn in fact seems closer to romanticism than to the twelve-tone technique of Schönberg.

The popularity and presence of late style as a literary trope no doubt derives from Mann's novel, and the sublime, transcendent, and quasi-religious quality that was ascribed to Beethoven's late work, especially op. 111, for a long time made them sacrosanct. As Jost Hermand notes, when included in piano recitals in Germany in the late 1940s and '50s, op. 111 was always placed last, and applause was forbidden, so as to underscore the work's wholly singular and unique position (Hermand 1999, pp. 85–100). But let us now turn to Adorno himself, and see what he has to say about the idea of a late style.

Late Style in Adorno's Beethoven

"Spätstil Beethovens," Adorno's first essay on Beethoven's late style, was written in 1934 but published much later in the 1964 collection of essays *Moments Musicaux*. It forms a part of a larger, systematic but unfinished work on Beethoven, which has been posthumously published as *Beethoven: Philosophie der Musik* (Adorno 2004).³ Apart from the 1934 essay and the much later essay from 1957, "Verfremdetes Hauptwerk: Zur *Missa Solemnis*," the book comprises notes and reflections on Beethoven, which Adorno was collecting for a systematic work that never materialized. These are fragments, and yet they display a remarkable continuity. They cover virtually all facets of Beethoven's work, and give us a picture of thought that is always underway and ready

³ The text was first published in (Adorno 1993). Henceforth cited with fragment number or pagination.

to question its own results, and even begins by retracing its steps back to the author's early childhood experiences.⁴

The material on late style has been assembled in two chapters (9 and 11), between which the tenth chapter presents us with the idea of "Spätwerk ohne Spätstil," i.e. the analysis of the *Missa Solemnis* that develops many themes from the first essay, while also subverting them—the inability to come to terms with the *Missa* was the key problem that prevented the book from taking on a definite shape, as Adorno notes in the preface to *Moments Musicaux*. A close reading of this material would no doubt detect a multiplicity of problems and interpretative angles, and perhaps it would be possible to here follow a thread that runs through Adorno's development up to the final major works, *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory*, which would show the problem of lateness to be not just an aside, but in fact something like a nucleus or formative figure in his thought. Such a systematic reading obviously falls outside of my scope here, and I will mainly focus

⁴ This is how the text opens: "Reconstruct how I heard Beethoven as a child" (fr. 1). The following three fragments develop the same theme. In a review essay on the Beethoven book, Colin Sample suggests that "Adorno's philosophy of music is essentially contained in his remembrance of the child who would give to nature the tongue to speak as it wished" (Sample 1994, pp. 378–93, 380). Given that late style seems to reopen the question of nature and subjectivity in a more tragic fashion, it is tempting to develop the question further and ask if there might be a link between lateness and childhood, perhaps in the sense of something that remained unmastered from the beginning, and propagates its effects over all later phases. This is the sense of childhood proposed by Lyotard, for instance in his essay on Hannah Arendt: childhood is "the condition of a soul inhabited by something to which no answer could ever be given. The activities of this childhood are guided by an arrogant fidelity to this unknown guest, whose hostage it feels itself to be. The childhood of Antigone. Childhood should here be understood in the sense of obedience towards a debt that could be called a debt to life, time, or the event—the debt of being there in spite of everything; and it is only the constant feeling of this debt, and the respect towards it, that can save the adult from being a mere survivor, from living under a postponed sentence of annihilation" (Lyotard 1991, p. 66).

on outlining the basic ideas of the first essay in 1934, and only give a few hints as to how they may be aligned with Adorno's subsequent work.

Late style, Adorno suggests, is not like a fruit that becomes ripe; it resists being tasted, it is furrowed and ravaged, and in rejecting the unity demanded by classical aesthetics, it points to the power of history rather than to the idea of growth and maturing. It is a process, but not a development towards a completion, in a sense that leads these two terms, development and completion, into a profound antagonism.

This laceration is normally understood as a subjectivity that breaks through the crust of form and imbues harmony with passionate dissonance, which can then be related to the composer's biography, even a kind of abdication of mastery in the face of death. But for Adorno, the inverse is true: the law of form here resists being subsumed by expression, and instead we encounter forms that are distanced and seem devoid of expression, a form that is just as objective as it is subjective. Rather than an encounter with death, or something demonic, this music seems often enigmatically idyllic.

Subjectivity is indeed there, first in a Kantian fashion, not in order to disrupt form, but to create form; but then, in a second moment, there is a profound questioning of subjectivity, beginning in Hegel, but also going beyond Hegel, as we will see. These two gestures are played out against each other, in a process that is also at the center of Adorno's own philosophical development, which gives this analysis a paradigmatic value.

Conventions are the center of late style, which is what distinguishes it from Beethoven's middle period, which was in fact more subjective, in the sense that it did not tolerate conventions that had not been broken down and integrated into the subjective dynamic. In the late style, they inversely appear almost as if naked, in a way that would have been unacceptable earlier. These are conventions in the state of ruin, although not in the sense of

a psychological failure or trauma; rather they pose the question of subjectivity and convention in a new way.

It is true that the relation to death plays a role, but not as the theme of the work: it discloses the law of form, and deprives us of the right to art, which is why death cannot become a theme; it is only given in broken form, as allegory, otherwise it becomes a deceptive metaphysics (here one may probably detect a polemic against Heidegger). If subjectivity disrupts the works, it is not in order to express itself, but to shake off the appearance or semblance, the *Schein*, of art (the frequent translation “semblance,” while not simply incorrect, makes it difficult to hear the positive quality of *Schein* as the process of appearing, i.e., the essential proximity between *Schein* and *Erscheinung*, which is essential to Adorno, whose concept is modeled on Hegel’s “logic of essence”).

In this destruction of *Schein*, the material is as it were emancipated from the process of forming, and there is a profusion and overabundance of material, just as the conventions are left standing, to the effect that they themselves become expressive. This, Adorno suggests, is the role of abbreviation in Beethoven: not to purify music of clichés, but to liberate them, in their disparity, while still projecting intentions onto them. For instance, the frequent crescendos and diminuendos that often appear independent of the musical construction, the fiorituras, the substitution of polyphony for thematic development, and the absence of modulations in favor of abrupt transitions, all testify to this coming-apart—or negative dialectic, to use one of Adorno’s later terms—of intention and material.

If these later works can be taken as a kind of landscape, then Beethoven does not gather all of its details into a unified image, but rather, Adorno suggests, he lights it up with a fire that ignites subjectivity, a spark transmitted between extremes that remain in a state of tension. Subjectivity is what forces these extremes together, but only so as to itself appear as petrified. The caesuras and breaks are moments of a breaking through or out,

Durchbruch.⁵ The resulting parts are forced together through the command of subjectivity, but the secret, the enigma of late style, is that which occurs between, it is the secret of their constellation, the figure formed by the discordant parts. In this way, Beethoven's late work is both subjective and objective: the ruinous landscape is the objective moment, the light cast over it is the subjective moment, and what the late style does is to dissociate them, to tear these moments apart in time—but maybe in order to finally preserve them in eternity (and here we can glimpse the utopian moment of redemption in Adorno, although in this early text, just as in the later, it is struck by the ban on images). In fragment 363, dating from 1948, Adorno writes: “hope in Beethoven is so decisive a secularized and therefore not neutralized category [...] The image of hope without the lie of religion. NB hope is one of the imageless images that specifically and immediately belongs to music, i.e., it belongs in general to music.”

These late works are catastrophes, he concludes, but we should undoubtedly not hear this in the sense of failures, or simple disasters, but in the Greek sense: *katastrophe*, the sudden moment of reversal and overturning, when something is revealed, as in tragedy, the final part when we move towards the resolution of the plot.

⁵ The concept of caesura is used in several senses in the Beethoven study, ranging from formal musical analysis to a more philosophically laden sense of temporal expectation and disruption, and to the explicit references to Hölderlin's analysis of tragedy, see fr. 154, 222, 232, text 3 (“Spätstil Beethovens”), 180, and text 4 (“Ludwig van Beethoven: Sechs Bagatellen für Klavier, op. 126”), 190 and 192. *Durchbuch* is also a key term in the interpretation of Mahler (Adorno 1960), where it is set against *Erfüllung* and *Suspension*, at once signaling the power of music to promise something else than music and yet being unable to deliver it, which provides Mahler's music with its utopian energy.

With and Against Hegel

Two important extra-musical references that take the idea of late style beyond the confines of an analysis of a single artist, no matter how dense and astronomically singular, are Kant, but more profoundly Hegel, in particular his *Logic*; and, seemingly more incidentally, but in way that throws considerable light on the historical conjuncture of Beethoven, Hölderlin's late poetry. Let us begin with Hegel, who unquestionably remains the key philosophical reference throughout Adorno's entire work on Beethoven.

First of all, what is the relation between music and concept? Obviously music is not simply identical to concepts, and it has no direct reference—it is the “the logic of the judgmentless synthesis” (fr. 26), which is why the true synthesis occurs in the interplay between subjectivity and inherited forms; the “matter” of music is the history of accumulated conventions, as in Beethoven's treatment of the sonata form, with its theme and variation; there is both an internal and an external dialectic, both a development of a theme and a subjectivizing of a convention, so that they eventually are sublated, *aufgehoben*, on a higher level.

We noted that Adorno detects in Beethoven a move from a Kantian version of the concept, in which it generates form out of a fixed subjectivity that accounts for the unity of experience, to a Hegelian version, in which the concept has a movement of its own and inscribes the position of the earlier subject as a limited one, and where there rather is an experience *of* subjectivity as an object, as an appearance. The Kantian movement corresponds to Beethoven's move into the second phase of his work, where the system of tonality is brought back into subjectivity in the form of the musical subject that lets the formal structure develop organically out of the development of the thematic material. The symphonies are a great testimony to this, as well as the sonatas. The subsequent Hegelian step, where a full mediation of particular and universal is achieved, crowns the second phase, but is then

pursued in the third phase, in such a way that it goes beyond its own confines. This is the crucial critical move, and it is here that Beethoven's singularity comes to the fore. In a rather hyperbolic fragment that summarizes Beethoven's second phase, Adorno exclaims: "In a sense similar to that in which there is only Hegel's philosophy, there is in the history of Western music only Beethoven" (fr. 24); but to this we must also add the subsequent step, where Beethoven is "more Hegelian than Hegel" (fr. 320)—it is only through the late works that we see the limit of Hegel, and where the circular time of completion opens onto the reversal of catastrophe.

How should we understand this process, where totality is achieved only to be broken down? In Hegel, the objective forms first become historicized and are set in motion, they are understood both as points of departure and results, just as individual and particular musical elements mean something only in and through their contradiction and mediation through the whole. This is the outcome of the second phase, where "the sensuous, non-qualified and yet in itself mediated, and that which sets the whole in movement, is the motivistic-thematic," whereas "spirit, mediation, is the whole as form" (fr. 27). On the one hand, as Adorno suggests in a letter to Rudolf Kolisch, "the formal meaning essentially consists in disclosing the nothingness [of the particular] brought about by the whole" (appendix, p. 256); on the other hand, "the whole is never external to the particular, but only proceeds out of its movement, or rather, is this movement" (fr. 57). Tonality is thus both what is always *presupposed*, as well as what *results* from self-development and self-reflection, in the movement of a negation that returns to its point of departure. The analyses of the Waldstein Sonata (fr. 131) would be the most clear-cut and pedagogical case, even to the point of displaying the kind of ternary thesis-antithesis-synthesis model that Adorno in many other places rejects as a cartoon or "claptrap" version of Hegel, and rightly so; the third movement in the C-major Sonata op. 101,

he says later, is, “were one not ashamed to write it down—the synthesis” (fr. 265).

But this fully worked out synthesis is also the moment of *untruth* in this music, which also, in a sense, points towards *truth*: the whole, the totality that seems to flow seamlessly from the movement of the particular and yet is violently forced onto it, reflects the emergence of an administered society, although not just as a static image, but already as an interpretation of it (for comments on the link between musical and social totality, see for instance fr. 87, 88, 92, 113). But beyond this, and as a latent consequence of this interpretation, the supreme greatness—or *lateness*—lies in the next step, where Beethoven unleashes the “mimetic” power inherent in the second phase and becomes “more Hegelian than Hegel,” pursuing a negative dialectics, with *and* against Hegel. This is not simply a critique of Hegel; as Adorno will say much later, rather than abandon metaphysics as a false theory, we must attempt to think systematicity in a fractured form, as “constellations” and “micrologies,” i.e. develop a mode of thought that remains “in solidarity with metaphysics in the moment of its downfall” (*im Augenblick ihres Sturzes*), as the final line in *Negative Dialectics* reads (Adorno 1984a, 6:396). Thus, if Beethoven finally explodes the Hegelian model, he does so not by opposing it to some other system, but from *within*, which is why his late style contains the seeds of an immanent critique that will become paradigmatic for modernism in the arts and in philosophy. If Hegel is the last moment of security, metaphysics thinking itself in the form of a system that would be able to ground itself, then this also corresponds to the summit of a “classical style” that claims to derive particulars from form, and form from particulars, in a total mediation. Consequently, the downfall of the Hegelian system not only signals a crisis for the possibility of metaphysics, but also an opening toward modernism in the arts, within which Beethoven’s late style would be not only the initial envoi, but

also that which already in advance anticipates the impossibility of ever again achieving something like the classical mediation and totality out of which it emerged.

Hölderlin's Paratactic Form

The proximity to Hölderlin, on the other hand, only comes across in a few passages in the Beethoven book, and in a somewhat inconclusive fashion. In fr. 152, Hölderlin's "calculable law tragedy" is compared to the "symphonic exposition of Beethoven's type," and the "caesura" Hölderlin famously locates in tragedy, and expounds in his "Remarks on Oedipus," is seen as analogous to the "moment when subjectivity breaks into form," which seems to enclose the relation to Hölderlin squarely in Beethoven's second period. It is only in the radio lecture from 1966—sublimely enough broadcast under the title "avant-gardism of old men" ("Avantgardismus der Greisen")—that Adorno makes the connection explicit: "In these late works, the language of music or the material itself speaks, and the composing subject only properly speaks through the gaps in this language, perhaps not wholly dissimilarly to that which occurs with poetic language in the late style of Hölderlin" (Appendix, text 9, 268).

It is no doubt possible to make a connection to the 1963 essay on Hölderlin, "Parataxis," where the poet's encounter with language in many respects seems similar to Beethoven's struggle with the inherited language of musical form. And beyond the exegesis of historical material, the idea of parataxis finally has profound implications for Adorno's understanding of his own philosophical discourse, as in the letters to Rolf Tiedemann cited in the latter's editorial postface to *Aesthetic Theory*, where he suggests that the architecture of the treatise, with its hierarchies and prescribed order of reading, which still organized *Negative Dialectics*, has finally become impossible, and that "the book must,

so to speak, be written in equally weighted, paratactical parts that are arranged around a midpoint that they express through their constellation” (Adorno 1973, p. 541; 2004, p. 462).

Parataxis, in philosophy as in poetry, points to a loosening of the joints, an unbinding of discourse, which is also a foregrounding of its materiality. We find such a “disjoint” at many levels in Hölderlin: theoretically, in his analysis of “caesura” in Greek tragedy; on the level of poetic content, in his invocations of the Greek gods precisely as departed and absent; textually, in the aberrant use of logical connectives (*dann*, *nämlich*, *also*, etc.) that instead of binding his poems together cause them to fracture, destroy the hierarchical links of hypotaxis, and leave us with a paratactical landscape of ruins. “With parataxis, we should not only think of the transitions that juxtapose micrological shapes. Just as in music, the tendency takes hold of larger structures. [...] In a way similar to Hegel, mediations of a vulgar type, a middle outside of the moments, should be eliminated as external and unessential, as is often the case in Beethoven’s late style” (Adorno 1984b, 2:473).⁶

Here too, the ruinous landscape can be seen as the objective moment, the light cast over them as the subjective moment, and if the late style is what dissociates them, in Hölderlin it is even more the case that it tears them apart in time—the temporal and historical caesura, in tragedy, poetry, as well as in modernity’s task of translating the ancients into our own language, is one of

⁶ The concept of parataxis as opposed to hypotaxis to me seems at least partially misleading, which is what Adorno in fact shows. Just as little as the loosening of joints in Beethoven’s late work does Hölderlin provide us with a juxtaposition of unconnected elements, but rather a hypotaxis blocked from within by hypotactic-logical particles that normally signal subordination, premise, conclusion, etc., but whose sense remains suspended, which in turn produces the tension. This seems to be what is claimed in the 1934 sketch for a theory of late style when Adorno writes that the conventions are as it were left unmediated, like splinters severed from the subject and themselves become expressive.

the great themes of Hölderlin—but perhaps in order to preserve them in eternity.⁷

Lateness and Modernism

In a certain sense it would be relatively easy to transpose Adorno's analysis of late style as a particular historical moment to other arts, such as painting. Beethoven's lateness as the effect of a historical caesura or disintegration brought about by the downfall of something like a "classical style" would have as its equivalent in painting the crumbling of the authority of the Academy at the beginning of the nineteenth century, which is perhaps not just the beginning of a new style, but the beginning of a modern idea of style as such. As such, this idea is obviously not specific to Adorno. In 1932, Paul Valéry (who always remained a key reference in Adorno's analysis of modern art) writes not about Turner or Monet, but about Delacroix: "The transition from the earlier grandeur of Painting to its present state appears in the works and writings of Eugène Delacroix. Unrest and the sense of impotence is what tears apart this modern artist, so full of ideas, at each moment running up against the limits of his own means in his attempts to equal the masters of the past." Delacroix, Valéry continues, is "fighting with himself, and he engages feverishly in the last battle of the grand style in art" (Valéry 1984, p. 1323).

⁷ Many of Adorno's claims must here be understood as systematically opposed to Heidegger: the impossibility of retrieving an origin, Hölderlin's dialectical relation to German Idealism, the resistance of poetic language as *Schein* to translation into philosophical statements. As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe notes, these differences notwithstanding, we should not overlook that Adorno and Heidegger share the problem of how to account for a philosophical truth of poetry that cannot be reduced to philological, biographical, and literary-historical categories; see Lacoue-Labarthe 2002, p. 93ff. For a discussion of this relation that focuses on the idea of parataxis, see Wilke 1987, pp. 627–647.

Here the language of art falls apart, unleashing a multiplicity of styles and formal features that all claim to be the new language, although without ever succeeding in attaining the authority of the language of the Academy. This would in a sense come close to Adorno, although without the heavy Hegelian architecture that subtends his idea.

But as we have noted, the most important facets of Adorno's theory point in the opposite direction: late style is not so much the emergence of a subjectivity that breaks free in order to upset an inherited, objectivized formal canon, rather it is the irruption of the objective, the force of the world, inside a subject whose former freedom now proves to have been an illusion and thus in fact unfreedom, and it registers the impact of history, or "the law of form" in the aesthetic register, on expressivity, in the sense that mediation no longer appears possible between them. It is not a sheer destruction of the subject, but a petrifying of its former capacities, an immobilization that at the same time lets them live on in the constellation of fragments that points, albeit in a veiled, obscure, oblique manner, towards eternity and a reconciliation between history and subject. The ruinous landscape of lateness emerges in the recognition of the *limit* of art, the boundaries set for its *Schein*, but precisely in order to preserve the imageless image of redemption beyond all empirical forms into which it might be prematurely sealed.

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Hegel In the Future, Hegel On the Future

Slavoj Žižek

The claim I want to defend is that Hegel is the philosopher most open to the future precisely because he explicitly prohibits any project of how our future should look—as he says toward the end of the “Preface” to his *Philosophy of Right*, like the owl of Minerva, which takes off at dusk, philosophy can only paint “grey in grey,” i.e., it only translates into a “grey” (lifeless) conceptual scheme a form of life which has already reached its peak and entered its decline (is becoming “grey” itself) (Hegel 2008, p. 16). To put it very simply and brutally, this is why we should reject all those readings of Hegel which see in his thought an implicit model of a future society reconciled with itself, leaving behind the alienations of modernity—I call them the “not-yet-there Hegelians.” With his latest masterpiece *The Spirit of Trust* (2019), Robert Brandom asserted himself as perhaps the most prominent “not-yet-there Hegelian”: for him, Hegel outlines an ideal (formulated in the liberal terms of mutual recognition) which we have not yet reached. In a short text on Hegel, Judith Butler provides a succinct version of this “not-yet-there” stance:

In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, [Hegel] shows us that we are not simply solitary creatures, disconnected from one another, although he knows very well that we sometimes see ourselves precisely in that way. [...] [O]nly as a social being can I begin to reflect upon myself. It is in the course of encountering another that I stand a chance to become self-conscious.

Hegel reviews for us a dramatic scene in which one human subject seeks to destroy another, and then another extended scene in which one human subject seeks to destroy another, and then another extended scene in which one human subject seeks to dominate another. Destruction and domination turn out not to work very well. One reason they fail is that modes of acting seek to deny both social interdependency and reciprocal ethical obligation. It turns out that if the other can be destroyed, so too can the first, that their fates are in that sense interlinked, and that the strategy of destruction inevitably imperils them both. But there is a problem of self-knowledge here as well: one cannot have certain knowledge of the self without being recognized by another. So if we thought we could know ourselves by turning inward, away from the social world, we were mistaken, for only in the context of the social world is it possible to gain certainty about oneself. Only as alive and social do we stand a chance of knowing ourselves, and once we come to know ourselves, we grasp the way in which we are fundamentally tied to others and the sensuous conditions of our own existence: the earth as a network of living processes.

[...] And this means that I cannot destroy another's life without attacking a set of living processes of which I am a part. In other words, in destroying another's life, I destroy my own [...] [T]his idea of a living socius is a possible argument for non-violence that emerges from Hegel's text.

Only by turning away from violence as a viable alternative do the social bonds that define our lives appear for the first time. Violence emerges as a distinct possibility, but recognition that violence will not work is what inaugurates the sense of an ethical imperative to find a way of keeping oneself and the other alive, regardless of the conflict between us. Hegel takes account of angry and destructive relations as well as the lethal ruse of social domination. He understands the fury of the individual who wants no one to be like him or equal to him. And yet, he leads us to the realization that I cannot do away with this other without also doing away with myself, that I cannot dominate another without losing track of the social equality that ideally defines us both. At the moment that destroying or dominating the other are ruled out as possibilities, I realize that I am bound to this other who is bound to me, and that my life is bound up with the other's life. (Butler 2019)

Yes, but it is only THROUGH destroying/dominating that mutual recognition emerges: we arrive at mutual solidarity only through acting as solitary creatures and suffering the consequences. It is not that once we realize this mutual dependence we can then enjoy it forever and go on living in a blissful state of mutual recognition. The path to truth is part of the truth, *la vérité surgit de la méprise*, all there is is struggle, violence, domination, and the story of how it fails, the calvary of the spirit. Butler begins with the claim that “we are not simply solitary creatures, disconnected from one another.” OK, but who exactly is saying that we are “simply solitary creatures, disconnected from one another”? My answer is: Hegel himself posits this as a thesis, which he then undermines through its immanent self-deployment. The only way to truth is to go through such extremes which cannot but appear ridiculous. And what about the claim that “I cannot destroy another’s life without attacking a set of living processes of which I am a part. In other words, in destroying another’s life, I destroy my own”—really? An obvious example: What about fighting Hitler, trying to defeat Nazi Germany? At a more general level, is it not Hegel’s point that wars are necessary, that they are the culminating point of our ethical lives?

This long passage was worth quoting because it resumes the future-oriented reading of Hegel—which is why I find it problematic. In Hegel’s thought, violence does not emerge as a possibility but as an ethical necessity, and remains there up to the end—the end of Hegel’s philosophy of right is WAR as the ultimate point of reference of the ethical order. To make this key point clear, let’s recall the well-known passage from the *Phenomenology* in which, analyzing the infinite judgment of phrenology “the Spirit is a bone,” Hegel draws a parallel with the double function of the penis:

The *depth* which the Spirit brings forth from within—but only as far as its picture-thinking consciousness where it lets it remain—

and the *ignorance* of this consciousness about what it really is saying, are the same conjunction of the high and the low which, in the living being, Nature naïvely expresses when it combines the organ of its highest fulfilment, the organ of generation, with the organ of urination. The infinite judgement, *qua* infinite, would be the fulfilment of life that comprehends itself; the consciousness of the infinite judgement that remains at the level of picture-thinking behaves as urination. (Hegel 1977, p. 210)

A close reading of this passage makes it clear that Hegel's point is not that, in contrast to the vulgar empiricist mind which sees only urination, the proper speculative attitude has to choose insemination. The paradox is that the direct choice of insemination is the infallible way to miss it: it is not possible to choose the "true meaning" directly, i.e., one has to begin by making the "wrong" choice (of urination)—the true speculative meaning emerges only through a repeated reading, as the after-effect (or by-product) of the first, "wrong," reading. And the same goes for social life, in which the direct choice of the "concrete universality" of a particular ethical life-world can only end in a regression to pre-modern organic society, which denies the infinite right of subjectivity as the fundamental feature of modernity. Since the subject-citizen of a modern state can no longer accept his immersion in some particular social role that confers on him a determinate place within the organic social Whole, the only way to the rational totality of the modern State leads through the horror of the revolutionary Terror: one should ruthlessly tear up the constraints of the pre-modern organic "concrete universality" and fully assert the infinite right of subjectivity in its abstract negativity. In other words, the point of Hegel's deservedly famous analysis of the revolutionary Terror in his *Phenomenology* is not the rather obvious insight into how the revolutionary project involved a unilateral direct assertion of abstract Universal Reason, and was as such doomed to perish in self-destructive fury, since it was unable to organize the transposition of its revolutionary energy into

a concrete stable and differentiated social order; Hegel's point is rather the enigma of why, in spite of the fact that revolutionary Terror was a historical deadlock, we have to pass through it in order to arrive at the modern rational State.

But is it not obvious how the whole point of Hegel is that, through all these deadlocks, a final reconciliation arises? Therein resides the crux of the matter. The wonderful title of Gérard Lebrun's first book on Hegel—*La patience du Concept, The Patience of the Concept* (Lebrun 1972)—can be read in two opposite ways: as trust in the teleology of history (when you think you are caught in a chaotic meaningless mess of events, be patient, wait and analyze, and you will see that there is a deeper meaning behind this mess), or as an assertion of radical contingency (the stories that we tell ourselves about the chaotic mess we're in always come too late, after the fact, they are themselves contingent attempts to organize our experience into a meaningful Whole). Although the first reading is the usual one, the second one is the only option if one wants to assert Hegel as our contemporary. Here, everything is decided—if we make the second choice, we should reject what Brandom sees as the “principal positive practical lesson of Hegel's analysis of the nature of modernity, the fruit of his understanding of the One Great Event in human history”: “If we properly digest the achievements and failures of modernity, we can build on them new, better kinds of institutions, practices, and self-conscious selves—ones that are normatively superior because they embody a greater self-consciousness, a deeper understanding of the kind of being we are” (Brandom 2019, p. 456).

Along these lines, Brandom proposes three stages of socio-ethical development: in Stage One (traditional societies), we get *Sittlichkeit* (the order of mores accepted as a natural fact) but no modern subjectivity; in Stage Two, we get alienation—modern subjectivity gains its freedom but is alienated from the substantial ethical order; finally, in Stage Three, which is on the horizon, we get a new form of *Sittlichkeit*, compatible with free subjectivity:

As he is writing the *Phenomenology*, Hegel sees *Geist* as beginning to consolidate itself at Stage Two. The book is intended to make possible for its readers the postmodern form of self-consciousness Hegel calls ‘Absolute Knowing,’ and thereby to begin to usher in Stage Three. The new form of explicit philosophical self-consciousness is only the beginning of the process, because new practices and institutions will also be required to overcome the structural alienation of modern life. (Ibid., p. 458)

Really? So what about Hegel’s insistence that philosophy can only paint “grey in grey,” since, like the owl of Minerva, it only takes off at dusk? Here, Brandom talks like Marx: Absolute Knowing is for him (as Marx put it about revolutionary thought) like the crowing of the Gallic cock at the beginning of a new dawn. It ushers in a new social age, when “new practices and institutions will also be required to overcome the structural alienation of modern life.”

The three stages are generated along two axes, *Sittlichkeit* or no *Sittlichkeit* and modern free subjectivity or no subjectivity, so that we get traditional society (*Sittlichkeit* without free subjectivity), modern society (free subjectivity without *Sittlichkeit*), and the forthcoming postmodern society (*Sittlichkeit* with free subjectivity). Brandom immediately raises the question of the status of the fourth option in his scheme, which fits none of the three stages, the situation with no *Sittlichkeit* and no free subjectivity: “What is wrong with the idea of pre-modern alienation?” (ibid.). But why does he automatically read the absence of free subjectivity as “pre-modern”? What about a properly “postmodern” option of losing free subjectivity and nonetheless remaining in a state of alienation? Is this not what so-called “totalitarianism” is about? And is this not the state we are approaching with so-called “digitalized authoritarianism”? Would this not be the properly Hegelian insight into the dialectics of modernity—we want to overcome the gap of alienation between substantial *Sittlichkeit* and a free subjectivity that no longer recognizes the mores as its

own, but instead of bringing them together in a kind of higher synthetic unity we *lose both*? Did Stalinism not promise to implement a synthesis between a strong communal spirit and free individuality, promising actual freedom as opposed to alienated formal freedom—and was the result not the loss of freedom itself in conditions of total alienation?

More precisely, there are three levels to be distinguished here: norms as such (the ethical substance, the “big Other”); subjective attitudes toward norms; and institutions and social practices which embody the norms. Brandom mentions this in passing when he claims that pure consciousness “reflects on the relations between norms and the institutions that embody them, on the one hand, and their relations to the subjective normative attitudes of those whose practice they govern, on the other” (ibid., p. 488). In a system which functions in a cynical way, we have public norms, we have individuals who participate in rituals and institutions that enact these norms, but participation and enactment not only do not imply the appropriate inner acceptance of these norms—there are also systems of norms and ideological rituals in place which function only on condition that they are not “taken seriously” by the participating individuals.¹

Brandom sees the key to the Third Stage in the notion of “forgiving recollection,” deployed by Hegel towards the end of the chapter on Spirit in his *Phenomenology*: the gap that separates the acting subject and its severe judge is there overcome through their reconciliation, when not only the agent confesses his sin but

¹ In a more refined approach, one should distinguish two levels of distance here. First, there is the widespread stance of distance, which only confirms our inner belonging—say, true patriots are not stupid fanatic zealots, they love to make fun of their country, etc. Then, there is the more radical cynical distance, such as, for example, the one that prevailed in the Soviet Union in Brezhnev’s time of “stagnation”—after the fall of Khrushchev, the *nomenklatura* no longer took its own ideology seriously; Khrushchev was the last Soviet leader who really believed in Communism.

the judge also confesses the unilateral nature of his own position, his participation in what he condemns: “Evil is also the gaze which sees evil everywhere around it.” Brandom’s notion of forgiving recollection is very useful today: it enables us to see what is false in precisely those who advocate tolerance and reject “hate speech.” Is an exemplary case of rigid moral judgment today not the Politically Correct subject who sternly condemns those who are accused of practicing “hate speech”? We all know how swift and cruel such judgments can be—one wrong word, one joke considered inappropriate, and your career can be ruined

Remember what happened to the film critic David Edelstein.² Edelstein made a rather tasteless joke on his private Facebook page regarding the death of *Last Tango in Paris* director Bernardo Bertolucci: “Even grief is better with butter,” accompanied by a still of Maria Schneider and Marlon Brando from *Last Tango in Paris* (the infamous anal rape scene). He quickly deleted it (before the public outcry broke out, not as a reaction to it!). Actress Martha Plimpton immediately tweeted to her followers: “Fire him. Immediately.” Which happened the next day: Fresh Air and NPR announced that they were cutting ties with Edelstein because the post had been “offensive and unacceptable, especially given Maria Schneider’s experience during the filming of *Last Tango in Paris*.” So what are the implications of (or, rather, the unstated rules to be inferred from) this incident? Laura Kipnis notes that, first, “there’s nothing inadvertent about inadvertent offense”: it cannot be excused as a momentary mistake, since it is treated as revelatory of the true character of the offender. This is why one such offense is a permanent black mark against you, however apologetic you might be: “One flub and you’re out. An unthinking social media post will outweigh a 16-year track record.” The only thing that might help is a long permanent process of self-critical self-examination: “Failure to keep re-proving it implicates you

² For all of the following paragraph, see Kipnis 2018.

in crimes against women.” You have to prove it again and again, since, as a man, you are *a priori* not trusted: “men are not to be believed, they will say anything.”

What would “forgiving recollection” have meant here? The accuser would not only have had to forgive the offender the “hate speech” act he was responsible for, she would also have had to confess and renounce *her own hatred*—great hatred is easily discernible in such Politically Correct inexorable demands for swift punishment, definitely more hatred than in the condemned act itself. A paraphrase of Hegel’s dictum about Evil fits perfectly here: “Hatred resides in the gaze which recognizes hatred everywhere.” Most of “hate speech” definitely displays patronizing superiority, brutal irony, etc., but only rarely pure hatred, which, in the case of PC condemnation, (mis)perceives itself as a well-grounded exercise of justice. Such condemnation doesn’t bother to reconstruct the reasoning that guided the offender, who perhaps perceived his post as a tasteless but inoffensive display of humor. As a result, we get a duality of how things were for the (offender’s) consciousness and how they were “in themselves” (in the eyes of the judge or the victim who was offended). However, the same gap was also at work in the PC judge’s condemnation: a gap between how things stood for his consciousness (I am just passing righteous judgment) and how they were in themselves (a display of hatred aimed at destroying the life or career of the offender).

But there are clear limits to this notion of forgiving recollection. “Hegel incorporates, adapts, and transforms the traditions he inherits—what we will come to recognize as the way he recollectively forgives them” (Brandom 2019, p. 514). To be brutal in a simplified way: Can we also “recollectively forgive” Hitler? And if the answer is no, is this because Hitler cannot be forgiven in this sense or because we ourselves are not yet at a high enough level of ethical reflection to do it? The only way to avoid regression to the position of a “beautiful soul” (which passes judgment from an external position, exempted from its object) is

to endorse the second option—that our castigation of Hitler as evil must be a reflexive determination of the Evil that persists in ourselves, i.e., of the non-reflected particularity that persists in our own position, from which we pass judgments. Let us note that many rightist revisionists today try to enact precisely such a recollective forgiving of Hitler: yes, he made terrible mistakes, he committed horrible crimes, but in doing so, he was just fighting for the ultimately good cause (against capitalist corruption, for him embodied in the Jews) in the wrong way. (It is easy to construct a more rational and not rightist-revisionist version of how we who condemn Nazism should also ask forgiveness: not only was anti-Semitism by no means limited to Germany, it was also very strong in nations at war with Germany, and not only did the obvious injustice of the treaty of Versailles as an act of revenge against the defeated Germany contribute to the Nazis' rise to power, at a more general level, Fascism grew out of the dynamics and antagonisms of Western capitalism, in which those who were its victims also fully participated.) These revisionists also try to balance responsibility in a pseudo-Hegelian way: Were Hitler's crimes not mirrored in the one-sidedness of the Jewish position (their exclusive stance, their unwillingness to integrate themselves into the German nation)? While we should totally reject this line of reasoning, the solution is definitely not to draw a line between sins that can be recollectively forgiven and those that are too great and cannot be—such a procedure introduces a duality which is totally at odds with Hegel's approach. What one should do is to change the very notion of recollective forgiving: to deprive this notion of any echoes of “you are now forgiven, you are no longer really bad.” Brandom, of course, raises this issue:

Some things people have done strike us, even upon due reflection, as simply unforgivable. In these cases, though we might try to mitigate the consequences of evil doings, we have no idea at all how to go about discerning the emergence of a governing norm we could ourselves endorse. (Ibid., p. 716)

His answer is:

But now we must ask: Whose fault is it that the doing, or some aspect of it, is unforgivable — the doer or the forgiver? Is the failure that of the bad agent or of the bad recollector? Is whose fault it is a matter of how things anyway just are? Or is it at least partly reflective of the recollector's failure to come up with a more norm-responsive narrative? (Ibid.)

But, again, should we “acknowledge at least equal responsibility on the part of the unsuccessful forgiver” (ibid., p. 717) even in the case of the Holocaust? And should we, in this case, *also* claim that “one must trust that this recollective-recognitive failure, too—like the failure of the original, inadequately forgiven doer—will be more successfully forgiven by future assessors (who know more and are better at it)” (ibid., p. 718)? Furthermore, what about cases such as cliterodectomy (or torture, or slavery in general), which we today experience as atrocities, but for which it is easy to reconstruct a normative background that makes them acceptable not only to the perpetrators but even to their victims? What about such cases where the retroactive view makes them more unacceptable than they were in their original context? Here, also, we are dealing with the unity of making and finding: if we sternly judge and reject such cases, we not only make new norms and impose them onto past acts; in a sense, we also find that such acts were always unacceptable, even if they appeared acceptable to those committing them.

Let's once again take the example of Hitler and the Holocaust. The way to deal with it is perhaps indicated by the biblical story of Habakkuk's complaint, the most poignant expression of what one might call “the silence of the gods,” of the big question addressed to God since Job: “Where were you when that horror [the Holocaust, etc.] happened? Why were you silent, why didn't you intervene?” Here are the words of this complaint:

How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, ‘Violence!’ but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted. (Hab 1, 2–4)

So how does God answer? One should read his reply very carefully: “Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told” (Hab 1, 5). There is no simple teleological justification here in the style of “be patient, strange are the ways of the Lord, your suffering serves a purpose in the wider divine plan, which you cannot grasp from your narrow finite standpoint,” etc. To say that the Holocaust (or anything similar to it) serves some higher purpose unknown to us is an anti-Christian obscenity, since the whole point of Christ’s compassion is unconditional solidarity with those who suffer. To use Agamben’s expression, one should gather here the full courage of hopelessness.

Back to the Holocaust. What does it mean that we should be “utterly amazed,” and that something will happen that we “would not believe, even if we were told”? While utter amazement can be read as referring to the incomprehensible horror of the Holocaust, the unbelievable thing that happened later was the founding of the state of Israel, which, one might surmise, would not have happened without the Holocaust, and only in this sense could Hitler be retroactively “forgiven,” by the existence of Israel, which his crimes contributed to. But, again, one has to be very precise here: this in no way justifies the Holocaust as a sacrifice the Jews were ready to make for returning to their land (the thesis of some anti-Semites), or the claim that the Holocaust was part of a secret divine plan to make possible the return of the Jews to their homeland (also the thesis of some anti-Semites)—it just means that the founding of Israel was an unexpected and

unplanned consequence of the Holocaust. And it also says nothing about other injustices that resulted from this set of acts: the land to which the Jews returned has for a long time been inhabited by other people and cannot be simply designated as “theirs.”

The main trap to be avoided here is that of holistic teleology: something that appears to us as a horror can, from a larger perspective, be an element which contributes to global harmony, in the same way that a tiny stain in a large painting contributes to its beauty if we look at the painting from a proper distance. The legacy of Job prohibits us from taking any such refuge in the standard transcendent figure of God as a secret Master who knows the meaning of what appears to us as a meaningless catastrophe, who sees the entire picture, in which what we perceive as a stain contributes to global harmony. When confronted with an event such as the Holocaust or the death of millions in the Congo in recent years, is it not obscene to claim that these stains have a deeper meaning in that they contribute to the harmony of the Whole? Is there a Whole which can teleologically justify and thus redeem/sublate an event such as the Holocaust? Christ’s death on the cross means that one should drop without restraint the notion of God as a transcendent caretaker who guarantees the happy outcome of our acts, the guarantee of historical teleology—Christ’s death on the cross is the death of *this* God, it repeats Job’s stance, it refuses any “deeper meaning” that would obfuscate the brutal real of historical catastrophes. Even a strong version of this logic—that forgiving does not mean the sacrifice/erasure of a particular content, but the recognition that that particular content is necessary for the actualization of the universal Good—is not strong enough: recollective forgiving remains an ambiguous notion. In the ethical sphere, it can be read as “trying to understand what appears to us as evil,” reconstructing a hidden positive motivation that just got expressed in a perverted way. However, retroactivity implies a much more radical dimension of contingency—things are not what they are, they “will have been,” their truth is decided retroactively:

Concrete practical forgiveness involves doing things to change what the consequences of the act turn out to be. For example, one might trust one's successors to make it the case that one's inadvertent revelation, one's sacrifice, or the decision to go to war was worthwhile, because of what it eventually led to—because of what we made of it by doing things differently afterward. Something I have done should not be treated as an error or a crime, as the hard-hearted *niederträchtig* judge does, because it is not yet settled what I have done. Subsequent actions by others can affect its consequences, and hence the content of what I have done. The hard-hearted judgment wrongly assumes that the action is a finished thing, sitting there fully formed, as a possible object of assessment independent of what is done later. The *Kammerdiener's* minifying ascription of the hero's action to low, self-interested motives rather than acknowledgment of a norm as binding in the situation depends on a defective atomistic conception of what an intention is. Recall the model of agency discussed in connection with the Reason section. Whether any particular event that occurs consequentially downstream from the adoption of a practical attitude (*Vorsatz*) makes an expressively progressive contribution to the fulfilment of an intention depends on its role in the development of a retrospectively imputed plan. And the role of a given event in the evolving plan depends on what else happens." (Brandom 2019, p. 602)

At the level of immediate facts, things are what they are—millions died in the Holocaust, nothing can retroactively change this, the past can only be changed at the level of its symbolic mediation. But here, things get complicated: What about the opposite case (evoked by Hegel himself)? What if an agent acts with the best intentions in mind, but the unpredictable consequences of his act are catastrophic? How does recollective forgiving/forgiving recollection work here? Can the judge construct a partial forgiving by way of proving that the most probable consequence would have been benevolent and that the catastrophe was due to a contingent, unpredictable accident? And what if we introduce a third level on top of the duality of one's subjective intention in performing an act and the actual outcome of the act: that of

unconscious motivations? This third level should in no way be limited to “base” motifs as the concealed truth of the publicly-professed “noble” motifs (say, when a person who claims to have performed an act out of a sense of duty was effectively motivated by personal revenge)—it should also include the opposite case (while I thought I acted out of some private “pathological” inclination, it was actually a deeper sense of justice that motivated me).

If we concede that the actual significance of an act “will have been,” we touch here the paradoxical nerve of morality, termed by Bernard Williams “moral luck” (see Williams 1981). Williams evokes the case of a painter ironically called “Gauguin,” who left his wife and children and moved to Tahiti in order to fully develop his artistic genius. Was he morally justified in doing this or not? Williams’s answer is that we can only answer this question *in retrospect*, after we learn the final outcome of his risky decision. Did he develop into a painting genius or not? Exactly the same holds for the legal status of a rebellion against (legal) power in Kant: the proposition “what the rebels are doing is a crime which deserves to be punished” is true if pronounced when the rebellion is still going on; however, once the rebellion wins and establishes a new legal order, this statement about the legal status of the same past acts no longer applies. Here is Kant’s answer to the question, “Is rebellion a rightful means for a people to cast off the oppressive authority of a so-called tyrant [...]?”:

The rights of a people have been injured and it would be no wrong to him (the tyrant) to be dethroned, there is no doubt about that. Nonetheless it is wrong in the highest degree for the subjects to pursue their rights in this way, and they therefore would have no cause to complain of injustice if they were defeated in their endeavor and subsequently subjected to the most extreme punishment. [...] And it is fully consistent with this view that, if the revolt of the people succeeds, then that head of state will withdraw to the position of subject, and will thus likewise not be permitted to initiate any attempt to regain power, but also ought not fear being held accountable for his earlier government. (Kant 2006, pp. 105–106)

Does Kant not offer here his own version of “moral luck” (or, rather, “legal luck”)? The (not ethical, but legal) status of a rebellion is decided retroactively: if a rebellion succeeds and establishes a new legal order, then it brings about its own *circulus vitiosus*, i.e., it erases into the ontological void its own illegal origins, it enacts the paradox of retroactively grounding itself. Kant states this paradox even more clearly a couple of pages earlier: “If a violent revolution, engendered by a bad constitution, introduces by illegal means a more legal constitution, to lead the people back to the earlier constitution would not be permitted; but, while the revolution lasted, each person who openly or covertly shared in it would have justly incurred the punishment due to those who rebel” (ibid.). One cannot be clearer: the legal status of the same act changes with time. What is a punishable crime while the rebellion is underway, becomes, its opposite after a new legal order is established — more precisely, it simply disappears, as a vanishing mediator that retroactively cancels/erases itself in its result.

Let’s take an extreme case of “forgiving recollection” (without too much forgiving, more with a retroactive attribution of responsibility and guilt). Someone made the simple, perspicuous observation that until somewhere around the early or even mid-twentieth century, most sex would be considered rape by today’s standards — this is a definitive sign of some kind of progress. What we encounter here is the key feature of the Symbolic: it renders visible the fundamental “openness” the Symbolic introduces into reality. Once we enter the Symbolic, things never simply are, they all “will have been,” they, as it were, borrow (part of) their being from the future. This de-centering introduces an irreducible contingency: there is no deeper teleology at work here, no secret power that guarantees a happy outcome. Due to his true knowledge of Hegel, Brandom has to admit this retrospective nature of historical progress:

The progression is retrospectively necessary. It is not the case that a given stage could have evolved in no other way than as to produce

what appears as its successor. Rather, that successor (and ultimately, the final—so far—triumphant, culminating conception) could not have arisen except as a development from the earlier ones. Necessity is always retrospective in Hegel: the Owl of Minerva flies only at dusk. (Brandom 2019, p. 608)

So far so good—but Brandom continues this quote with: “The passage closes with Hegel’s expression of trust: his summons to the next generation to do for its time what he has done for his: to take on the forgiving recollective labor of explicitation that makes a rational history” (ibid.). I find this jump into the future, this “trust” in progress, totally unwarranted and at odds with Hegel’s basic metaphysical stance. Why? It implies a gap between two levels: Hegel’s actual thought (constrained to its time, painting grey in grey), and a more basic universal view (meta-language), which locates Hegel’s thought in a progressive series, in a “recognitive cycle of confession, trust, and recollective forgiveness, followed by confession of the inadequacy of that forgiveness and trust in subsequent forgiveness of that failure” (ibid., p. 610). We are thereby fully back to what Hegel called “spurious infinity”: what Hegel did for the entire past up to his time (recollecting it into a rational totality), Brandom himself tries to do with Hegel (paraphrasing his thought with contemporary terms, etc.), and he invites his future readers to do the same with his work.

There is another aspect of the same inconsistency: If necessity is always retrospective, what legitimizes Brandom to read Hegel’s idea of Absolute Knowing as going well beyond the retrospective “painting grey in grey,” as pointing towards a more emancipated social future beyond the antagonisms of alienated modernity, which Brandom calls the Third Phase? “Hegel’s astonishing aspiration is for a morally edifying semantics. The truth shall set us free, and guide us to a new age of Geist whose normative structure is as much an improvement over the modern as the modern was over the traditional” (ibid., p. 614). But wouldn’t the proper Hegelian move be precisely to leave open a space for

the retroactive realization that this bright(er) future (the Third Phase) will bring out new unpredictable antagonisms and forms of violence? What if we should be forgiven exactly for that—for the illusory hope that progress will go on and that we can already do more than just paint grey in grey to outline the basic contours of a new future epoch of full emancipation? Would it not be much more in Hegel’s spirit to presuppose that this phase will also somehow go terribly wrong (as it did with Fascism, Stalinism, etc.)? For example, what Marx should be “forgiven” for is that he remained blind to how his vision of Communism inspired new forms of political oppression and terror: from today’s perspective of forgiving recollection, it is not enough to play the usual game of how Marx’s noble vision was misused, and how he shouldn’t be held accountable for this misuse.

Rocío Zambrana (2020) contrasted the standard Hegelian-Marxist notion of immanent critique with “a conception of critique that, rather than being guided by normative criteria that can be distilled from the socio-historical phenomenon at hand, is attuned to, following Adorno, the ‘undiminished persistence of suffering’ that remains in a world ‘which could be paradise here and now—[yet] can become hell itself tomorrow’. It is a form of ongoing critique that remains vigilant of the inversion of any normative criteria immanent to social reality” (Zambrana 2020, p. 110). Does this form of critique not resuscitate the deepest lesson of Hegelian critical analysis, i.e., that it is not enough to criticize the present on behalf of its own immanent norms or, more broadly, emancipatory potentials, but that one should remain vigilant of how these emancipatory potentials reproduce the (antagonist) structure of the present at a deeper level, so that their actualization can turn into its opposite? “The object of critique not only remains the modes of suffering distinctive to a given form of life, but also the normative commitments implicated in these forms of suffering. [...] It tracks not how these commitments are distorted by contingent conditions. Rather, it tracks how suffering is an effect of the work of those commitments” (ibid., p. 112). Is the

fate of the October Revolution not an exemplary case of how a world “which could be paradise here and now [...] can become hell itself tomorrow”? The emancipatory dream of a Communist paradise turned into the hell of Stalinist terror.

So, to conclude, should we not turn around Brandom’s motif of the “spirit of trust,” i.e., is the deepest feature of a truly Hegelian approach not a spirit of *distrust*? That is to say, Hegel’s basic axiom is not the teleological premise that, no matter how terrible an event is, at the end it will turn out to be a subordinated moment that contributes to the overall harmony; his axiom is that no matter how well-planned and well-meant an idea or a project is, it will somehow go wrong: the Greek organic community of the *polis* turns to fratricidal war, the medieval fidelity based on honor turns into empty flattery, the revolutionary striving for universal freedom turns into terror, etc. Hegel’s point is not that these bad turns could have been avoided (say, if only the French revolutionaries had constrained themselves to realizing the concrete freedom of an organic social order of the estates, and not the abstract freedom and equality of all, the bloodshed could have been prevented)—we have to accept that there is no direct path to concrete freedom, the “reconciliation” resides just in the fact that we resign ourselves to the permanent threat of destruction, which is a positive condition of our freedom. For example, Hegel’s vision of the state is that of a hierarchic order of estates ethically held together by the permanent threat of war. So what if we consider progress which goes further, towards a post-Hegelian parliamentary liberal democracy? It would have been easy for Hegel to point out how the unheard-of carnage of the Great War emerged as the truth of the gradual peaceful progress of the nineteenth century. It is easy to imagine the glee with which Hegel would have analyzed the immanent logic of how a liberal society leads to Fascism, or how a radical emancipatory project ends up in Stalinism, or how the triumph of global capitalism in 1990 paved the way for the populist New Right. This is the task of us, Hegelians, today.

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The contribution is a result of the work conducted within the research program "Philosophical Investigations" (P6-0252), financed by ARRS, the Slovenian Research Agency.

Abstracts

After Too Late: The Endgame of Analysis

Nadia Bou Ali and Ray Brassier

If philosophy, as its own time comprehended in thought, always comes after the fact, is philosophical reason fated to belatedness? Is there a “too-lateness” that is not only a *Nachträglichkeit*, but also not only phallic *jouissance* or idiotic enjoyment? These questions bring together politics and psychoanalysis. The wager of psychoanalysis has always been that there is a “stuckness” that cannot be worked through; only by naming the deadlock does something else become possible. Adorno credits Beckett’s *Endgame* with naming the deadlock of capitalist modernity: the indiscernibility of subject and object negates the difference between freedom and fatality. By calling this negation by its name, aesthetic reflection negates it, thereby rescuing the residue of possibility secreted by the contradictoriness of the actual. Yet so long as it is bound only to point to negativity, reflection enables its negation without carrying it out. The negation of negativity must be practiced. After it is too late, after the subjective destitution incurred through the nomination of negation, only the negation of nomination can exceed what exists and make something else possible.

Key words: Hegel, psychoanalysis, Adorno, Beckett, negativity, possibility.

What's the Time? On Being Too Early or Too Late in Hegel's Philosophy

Mladen Dolar

The paper deals with temporality in Hegel's philosophy, starting from the notion of being too late—but too late in relation to what? The paper argues that belatedness is already inscribed in the usual assumptions about time, which was traditionally so often conceived as the time of corruption and degradation in relation to an originary past time, a corruption to be vindicated and redeemed by the future. Hegel, by introducing a radical view of structural belatedness, retroactivity, and precipitation/anticipation, turns the traditional schema upside down while seemingly retaining its framework. The paper concludes with some reflections on the ontological status of negativity in relation to temporality and language.

Key words: Hegel, temporality, belatedness, anticipation, negativity.

Nature's Externality: Hegel's Non-Naturalistic Naturalism

Luca Illetterati

The contribution focuses on the Hegelian conception of nature as “the idea in the form of its externality.” The paper takes as its background the attempt made by much of the literature of contemporary ecological thought to consider externality as a problem to be eliminated in order to properly rethink the relationship between subject and nature. The aim is to show in what sense the Hegelian position can provide a critical framework against this background. In its conclusion, the paper also attempts to outline Hegel's position as a non-naturalistic naturalism.

Key words: Hegel, nature, externality, naturalism, landscape, ecology.

The Time of Philosophy: On Hegel's Conception of Modern Philosophy

Zdravko Kobe

In Hegel's view, the modern age is shaped by the fact that science has replaced religion as the privileged mode of knowledge the spirit has of itself. As a consequence, and contrary to the usual reading of Minerva's owl, it is my contention that philosophy, at least true philosophy, is now inherently political and inherently timely. Hegel is on time.

Key words: Hegel, absolute spirit, metaphilosophy, philosophy of history, history of philosophy.

Is It Too Late?

Bara Kolenc

In this paper, I address the increasingly topical issue of too-lateness as present in the political, environmental, and other public discourses of our time from the perspective of Hegel's onto-logic, focusing especially on his conception of the relationship between finitude and infinity in the section on "Existence [Dasein]" from the *Science of Logic*. Given the general change of perspective after the 2008 global financial crisis, which—this is the initial hypothesis—ended the so-called post-historical era (1968–2008), I argue that although this change appears to be radical, it is actually only a minor shift, which has not changed the prevailing neo-liberal state of affairs, but protects and maintains it. My line of argument leans on Hegel's critique of the qualitative differentiation of being and nothing, and subsequently also of finitude and infinity, which understanding (and the history of philosophy) clings to in a variety of falsifications [*Verfälschungen*], the most adamant of them being the idea of the *eternal being of perishing*. Raising the question of the end of capitalism and its supposed infinity, which has been ever more advocated recently, I claim that capitalism cannot end *not* because the end is not inscribed in its very structure, as some critics of Marx's utopianism would argue, it very much is, but because the end *is* inscribed in

its structure in such a way that finitude and infinity are held apart in a falsification that, supported by the ideology of neo-liberal conservatism, deeply represses their fundamental intertwinement. The problem (and the prosperity) of capitalism is therefore *not in its infinity* but, just the opposite, in its *finitude*. It is a morbid practice, which cannot escape the vicious circle of finitude because it clings to the falsification that perishing is the eternal being of finitude. Similarly, both the posture of the post-historical era and the recent atmosphere of the expectation of a catastrophe keep on holding finitude and infinity apart, and thereby maintain the existent state of affairs. If we are to change the devastating effects of capitalism, it is of crucial importance not only to re-evaluate our utopias and deal with our fantasies, but to re-constitute, both functionally and ideologically, our relation towards finitude and infinity. This means raising human self-awareness to a new level, which would no longer celebrate infinity while silently practicing finitude, killing, and mortality, but would celebrate finitude and practice infinity within finitude itself. This, precisely, is the idea of too-lateness.

Key words: too-lateness, finitude, infinity, capitalism, neo-liberalism, apocalypse.

“What, If Anything, Has Not Been Called Philosophizing?”
On the Relevance of Hegel’s Conception of a Philosophical
History of Philosophy
Christian Krijnen

Identity politics and its call for justice for marginalized social groups have also entered academic philosophy. Its curriculum and historiography are criticized for being far from inclusive. In this discourse, however, it is insufficiently reflected that in the call for philosophical diversity and inclusiveness, a particular concept of philosophy and its history is presupposed. The author shows this by analyzing current arguments and confronting them with Hegel’s conception of the history of philosophy. In this conception, it is important to take into account the

distinction between philosophical and non-philosophical history, as well as Hegel's famous thesis of the parallelism of the logical determinations of thought and the historical succession of philosophies, decisive for a philosophical history.

Key words: Hegel, philosophy of history, history of philosophy, identity politics.

What Is to Be Done: On the Theatricality of Power

Gregor Moder

The paper examines Hegel's claim in the *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* that philosophy always comes too late to instruct us as to what the world ought to be from a dual perspective. In the first move, Hegel's intervention in the field of political philosophy is compared to that of Spinoza, who similarly criticized philosophers who describe men from a moralist perspective and thus fail to write a political theory because they "conceive men not as they are, but as they would like them to be" (*Political Treatise*). Similarly, Marx writes that a proper historical enterprise sets out from "real, active men," and demonstrates that "morality, religion, metaphysics, and the rest of ideology" (*The German Ideology*) depend on the material processes of those real, active men. In the second move, the article discusses Hegel's concept of history and philosophy's late arrival from the perspective of the metaphor consistently used not only by Hegel and Marx, but also by critics such as Louis Althusser: the metaphor of stage performance. The aim of this contribution is to tackle the intricate relationship between thinking and acting by way of a detour through the metaphor of theatricality.

Key words: Hegel, Spinoza, Marx, theatre, theatricality, power, political philosophy, subject.

Thinking Nothing

Sebastian Rödl

Hegel presents philosophical understanding as absolute knowledge. Therewith, it seems, he is obsolete. As we have learned and know today, knowledge is fallible and reversible, local and embedded, shot through with blind spots and blurred with impurities. Hegel did not appreciate this and hankered after an eternal, uniform, and self-transparent system of knowledge. This essay undertakes to unsettle this conception of Hegel and our allegedly superior understanding by suggesting that absolute knowledge knows nothing. Its exposition of the idea of absolute knowledge proceeds by way of a passage through naturalism, which is the mainstream of philosophy today, and through formal idealism and quietism, which attempt to break free of this naturalism.

Key words: Hegel, absolute knowledge, naturalism, idealism, quietism.

The Purlieu Letter.

Toward a Hegelian Theory of Conditioning

Frank Ruda

It is almost a cliché that Hegel's philosophy is conditioned by the French Revolution. But what does this mean? What is it to think from the perspective of the revolution? It cannot simply be to constantly think and talk about the revolution nor can it consist in performing a revolution in our ways of thinking. Rather, it must imply that we revolutionize what we mean by thinking and think in a *modo revolutionarii*. The French Revolution therein becomes the affirmative point from which one can unfold a Hegelian theory of philosophy's conditioning.

Keywords: Hegel, belatedness, French revolution, Habermas, Ritter.

Hegel and the Opaque Core of History

Jure Simoniti

In opposition to regarding the subject as a function of full self-transparency, of Cartesian self-evidence (in this vein, Anglophone readings still tend to present the Hegelian subject as a function of the social world achieving its final manifestation and externalization in mutual recognition between rational agents), this paper will interpret the Hegelian subject as an effect and a placeholder of the opaque core of sociality, exposed to the contingencies of history. It was Kant who invented the self-opacity of the theoretical subject, which enabled him to perform a categorical redefinition of the pure concepts of understanding. Fichte extended this opacity to the practical and Hegel to the social sphere, thus outlining a specific logical space of the possible idealizations of concepts. Just as Kant, in his implicit realism, provided a philosophical justification of a “physics without the big Other,” the ultimate scope of Hegel’s method of dialectical idealization is to conceptually underpin a “sociality without the big Other,” one entirely deprived of any possible metaphysical warranties.

Key words: Hegel, Kant, Fichte, idealization, history.

Against Leviathan: Hegel’s, Fichte’s, and Schiller’s Critique of Modernity, Alienation, and the State

Árpád-Andreas Sölter

The paper discusses Hegel’s, Fichte’s, and Schiller’s political radicalism in their fundamental critique of modernity, of the human condition defined by alienation, and of the state. They express an outspoken desire for fundamental political change and urge a radical rethinking of the state and our entire modern age. This is discussed through a cultural diagnosis of art, machinery, and the state at the dawn of modernity. Hegel’s, Fichte’s, and Schiller’s claims address key questions, such as: What would a rationally organized society look like? What is a truly rational state? Which

state do we actually want? Do we really need one at all? The author argues that Leviathan must be tamed again. The relationships between the individual and freedom, culture and art, and the state and society, need to be balanced out in a fresh manner. In view of curtailed civil liberties, with digitally driven hyper-surveillance capitalism unleashing market forces largely beyond democratic control, overcoming the state of the state in the process of globalization calls for new alternatives and approaches. The current enormous expansion of government spending and government intervention, casting long shadows of public control over the individual's private existence and movements, is not sustainable. Excessive government activity, astronomical government debt, unchecked bureaucratic growth in combination with monetization and increasing juridification, and current emergency measures imposing massive restrictions on basic democratic rights, including bans on cultural events, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic—all these tendencies lead us to one crucial question: Are we facing “the final countdown”? Is an immediate and comprehensive systemic overhaul required? Even a “Great Reset”? What kind of freedom do we wish to open up for ourselves at the end of the day?

Key words: Hegel, Fichte, Schiller, state, Leviathan, modernity, freedom, crisis.

The Athenian Owl and the Gallic Rooster— Dusk or Dawn?

Klaus Vieweg

In Hegel's metaphor of the owl of Minerva, thought is represented using the images of a *goddess*, an *animal*, together with a time of day, *dusk*. World history must first reach a certain stage of development before sufficient knowledge is possible. The general, universalistic concept of freedom, the idea of the freedom of all, could not dominate in the ancient world. Hegel alludes to the idea that his time represents the actual *beginning* of the modern world. The key concept of freedom allows the owl of science to begin its flight. This substantiates Hegel's interpretation of the

French Revolution: For the first time, a constitution is based on law, and this Minerva-like “headbirth” is what the prelude to modernity is based on. The revolution is a glorious sunrise, the beautiful dawn of freedom. It is the beginning of the possible realization of individual freedom in a free community. The goal or end purpose of history was considered to be *universal freedom*, the *freedom of all*, the modern world as the “end of history,” the freedom of everybody. The end of history can be interpreted—and this is the main intention of Hegelian thinking—as the actual beginning of human existence.

Key words: Hegel, belatedness, the owl of Minerva, French Revolution, end of history.

Adorno’s Beethoven: Undoing Hegel from Within

Sven-Olov Wallenstein

Adorno’s idea of “late style,” which he developed in his interpretation of Beethoven, also unfolds as a debate with Hegel. Late style signals a process of disintegration of the mediating power of the subject that held the classical form together, and leads into a landscape of ruins, where the status of the subject remains undecided. The problem of subjective mediation would continue to haunt modern art up to the present. Important here is also the connection to Hölderlin’s translations and interpretations of Greek tragedy, as well as his late poetry, which are crucial to Adorno’s view of modern art in general, but also form a counterpart to his interpretation of Beethoven.

Key words: Hegel, Beethoven, Hölderlin, Adorno, late style, mediation, modern art.

Hegel In the Future, Hegel On the Future Slavoj Žižek

Hegel is the philosopher most open to the future precisely because he explicitly prohibits any project of how our future should look—as he says towards the end of the “Preface” to his *Philosophy of Right*, like the owl of Minerva, which takes off at dusk, philosophy can only paint “grey in grey,” i.e., it only translates into a “grey” (lifeless) conceptual scheme a form of life which has already reached its peak and entered its decline (is becoming “grey” itself). Hegel’s basic axiom is not the teleological premise that, no matter how terrible an event is, at the end it will turn out to be a subordinated moment that contributes to the overall harmony; his axiom is that no matter how well-planned and well-meant an idea or a project is, it will somehow go wrong.

Key words: Hegel, belatedness, teleology, future, openness.

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Problemi (Vol. LVIII, Nos. 11–12/2020)
ISSN 0555–2419

Problemi International (Vol. 4/2020)

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Publisher
Društvo za teoretsko psihoanalizo / Society for Theoretical Psychoanalysis
Igriška ulica 2
1000 Ljubljana
SI – Slovenia

Cover Design: AOOA
Layout: Klemen Ulčakar

Problemi International is available online for free download at
www.problemi.si.

This publication has been co-published
in partnership with the Goethe-Institut Ljubljana.

