The Master, the Slave, and the Truth upon a Membrane

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Would it be possible to give a new answer to the question of where the iconic status of Hegel's master–slave or, more accurately, lord–bondsman dialectic comes from? Why is it that, more than two hundred years after the publication of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, we still cannot let go of the image of two individuals caught in the struggle for life? What is so magical about this philosophical allegory that it stimulates endless re-interpretation?

I will argue that the archetypal staging in which the master ends the struggle by risking his life is primarily not about providing some sort of "transcendental form of sociality," but rather serves to unfold an entirely novel measure of truth.[1] What really goes on behind the social imagery of hierarchical roles and failed mutual recognition is the breaking apart of the most natural and spontaneous "scene of truth," that of ideas of the mind directly and parallelly corresponding to things of the outside world. As I will try to demonstrate, Hegel invented a new logical space of truth, which neither refers to anything *an sich* nor to anything *für uns*. Instead, it is a truth that requires an event to occur, for only an incident that shatters the coordinates of its own emergence can

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[1] This is not to deny the political implications of the lord-bondsman dialectic. The thesis is rather that the path to "social theory" in Hegel is paved through the detour of pure ontology, that is, through complete devastation of any metaphysical or alethic form.

mark the place where truth ceases to be either simply objective in the sense of referring to the incarnated order of things out there, or simply subjective in the sense of deriving the constitution of reality from the inner set of concepts or cultural and language forms. In my reading, the clash between two consciousnesses, ending in the asymmetry of the master and the slave, represents a *paradigm of an event* in philosophy, an occurrence which is not derivable from any previous principle or state of affairs, but rather changes the game once it takes place. Its evental character consists in forming a membrane between the outside and the inside world, on which both the "objectivist" claims of classical metaphysics and the "subjectivist" prerogatives of Kantianism cancel each other out and lose their hold.[2]

It is precisely in the invention of a new "dimension of truth" that Hegel might prove to be most modern. He could be claimed to have revealed a world so bereaved of any objectively given or subjectively transcendental truth that it condemns us to events in which we, on the one hand, butt against the Real beyond any human form and, on the other hand, are left with nothing but the imperative to create Ideas.

1. Begierde *as the Implosion of Subjectivity*

When speculative realists appeared two decades ago, they seem to have made the entire Western philosophy reducible to one of two grand alternatives: either classical metaphysics or Kantianism, that is, either the daringness of philosophy to think the world

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[2] It should be mentioned that Mladen Dolar's philosophy cultivates this sensitivity for truth in its perhaps inevitable dimension of emerging in *the logical space of neither-nor*, that is, at the interstice of two massive ontological spaces, where both the one and the other collapse and in this mutual offset produce their own surplus of necessity. The argument for the truth upon a membrane could also be said to unfold in this "space of neither-nor."

as it is in itself, full of substances and primary qualities, or the limitation of philosophy to the inner circuits of subjective representations and the confinement of thought to its correlation to things. These options already miss the true point of the Kantian move, which, if understood properly in its historical context, was arguably realist.[3] Hegel was, of course, put in the Kantian slot. However, it could be contended—especially on the basis of the master–slave dialectic—that what distinguishes Hegel from his idealist predecessors is exactly his going beyond the polarity of the metaphysics of things in themselves versus the correlationism of things for us.

To discern the absolute invention at work in this "iconic scene," one might do well to reconstruct in broad stokes the historical process of transitions that led to its emergence. Hegel is commonly said to represent the climax and conclusion of German idealism. He entered the philosophical stage at the moment when the old guarantees of meaning had already bid goodbye, and a new source of truth was being sought after. With Locke's empiricism, the eternal concepts of rationalism, being derived from the ideas in God's mind, had proved to lack any ontological justification. Thereupon, with Hume, the world shirked from manifesting any logical order; one could no longer rely on things being assembled into substances and causal chains. Kant's solution to this predicament was to shift the origin of the ideal conceptual forms to the inside of the subject, and simultaneously to limit their reach solely to the objects of possible experience. Thus, in the aftermath of Kant, the great philosophical alternative was between the metaphysics of the world in itself and the philosophy of the

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[3] Inasmuch as he is placed against the background of the rationalist idealizations of things and the empiricist deconstructions of forms of knowledge, Kant provides the conceptual underpinning of the world acting according to the laws of Newtonian physics, the world of necessary, contiguous causality. I have developed a "realist" reading of Kant, as well as of Hegel, in *The Untruth of Reality: The Unacknowledged Realism of Modern Philosophy* (Simoniti 2016, pp. 7–59).

I, between dogmatism and transcendental philosophy, between theory and practice, between substances and freedom, finally, between Spinoza and Fichte.[4]

The scales were suddenly tipped from the objective order of things toward their subjective appropriation. But just as God's will to create the substances had once been considered to be the first cause and, as such, beyond any other, previous reason, so now Kant's spontaneity and Fichte's *Tathandlung* had to stand out of the chain of sufficient reasons in order to vindicate their necessary ideality. The subject was devised as *grundlos* and a *causa sui*. This, however, raised another set of problems. Hume has bequeathed to us an entirely unfounded, hazardous, desolate world. But if the transcendental subjectivity is the only force to pull us out of this chaos, who entitles it to do so? Who endows it with its innate dispositions and its inner organization? If Kant hinged the determinacy of the world upon a set of *a priori* conceptual forms, ones *subsisting* in the timeless interiority of the subject, then the question might arise as to who vouches for the qualities of this categorical apparatus. Should it be accepted as *given*? And what is it that imbues Fichte's I with the innate right to subdue the outside world? Might it be that Kant's transcendentality and Fichte's practical license fall under the heading *trockenes Versichern*, "bare assurance," in Hegel's terminology?

This is the background against which Hegel's almost literary strategies presumably make most sense. In the reading that I will propose, the master–slave dialectic was contrived precisely so as to *counterbalance* the German idealist slant toward the subjective predetermination and appropriation of being. With regard to Kant's table of categories and Fichte's original positing, the authentic purpose of Hegel's "struggle for life" is to reveal the

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[4] "There are only two systems, the critical and the dogmatic," Fichte stated (Fichte 1982, p. 118, note 5). Critical systems were Kant's and Fichte's, while Spinozism was considered to be the most consistent dogmatic system of philosophy.

initial groundlessness, nullity, and contingency of human conceptuality, which is yet to be constituted and made necessary in the process to follow. To put it differently, the infamous fight for life and death not only discloses a world that allows itself to be conquered by man because it has no ideal value in itself, but also gives insight into the construction site of human ideas that have not always been there.

This, at least, is what the inner dramatic structure of Hegel's own argument seems to intimate. The entire *Phenomenology* is propelled by one long striving toward abolishing the dichotomy between subject and object. Self-consciousness marks the first, provisional end-point. The three forms of consciousness before that, i.e., sense-certainty, perception, and understanding, were still caught in the juxtaposition of the two poles, of the I standing against the world. But now understanding, *Verstand*, steps behind the curtain of phenomena, sees the void there, and fills it itself. The fundamental split of German idealism appears to be superseded. Truth no longer has the form of certainty about something other; instead, the only object of consciousness is now the consciousness itself. As Hegel puts it, "consciousness is to itself the truth" (Hegel 1977, p. 104). And more starkly: "With self-consciousness, then, we have therefore entered the native realm of truth" (ibid.).

The path of knowledge thus gives the impression of being accomplished and having come to its end. Yet this seemingly successful closure only opens another abyss, one traversed by agitation and negativity. Instead of being happily enclosed in its own self-recourse, Hegel portrays self-consciousness as a character of great inner unrest. Already by definition, the Hegelian self-consciousness is conceived as a "return from its otherness," which is the sensual world, so it can never exist as a pure "worldless" entity in the vein of an immediate sense of selfness, the Cartesian self-evidence of the ego, or an intellectual intuition. On the contrary, self-consciousness is originally processual, reactive, a constant movement of suspension of the opposition between

the outside world and its own inner, hard-won identity. It is for this reason that Hegel gives it a negative name; he calls it *Begierde* or "desire."

Begierde is constantly devouring and annihilating her object, but the more world she eats up, the bigger the hole in her interior. As eternally unfulfilled, she is a veritable image of discontent. Just as Nietzsche named the Earth a hiatus between two nothingnesses, *Begierde* could be said to be an interval between two voids, between the obliteration of the outside world and the growing vacuum of the inside. But why is it that Hegel presents self-consciousness first as *Begierde*? It seems that he needs the dissatisfaction of desire to meet two conditions. On the one hand, the Hegelian subject is originally placed into the world and can never take off from the ground of the earth. She cannot withdraw to the Cartesian quiet chamber, rise to the logically displaced sphere of the Kantian transcendental deduction, or assume Fichte's aprioristic and unabashed stance of the self-positing of the I; she is not even Hume's immobile self as a "theatre of perceptions." *Begierde* is rather akin to the Heideggerian *In-der-Welt-Sein*, a concrete, local embodiment fraught with its *Makel der Bestimmtheit*, the stain of determinacy. On the other hand, she is also essentially a return from her otherness, a movement of sublating her creatural conditions, and as such immanently lacks any substantial identity. Not only is she a mere this-worldly entity, but not even as much as that.[5] *Begierde* expresses precisely the coincidence of worldliness and its deficit, of immanence and something less than it.

In a nutshell, consciousness in the form of *Begierde* is both pronouncedly mundane and, in a sense, out of place. In the process of the world vanishing into its gaping mouth, *Begierde* also experiences that it possesses no intimate place to retreat to, no inner Archimedean point to hold on to, no timeless past. It

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[5] This is a typical Hegelian trick: even though there exists no other world, this world is still lesser than it purports to be.

is this ever-increasing inner vacuity that makes it redouble into two agents, two self-consciousnesses. *Begierde* is structurally dependent on the form of alterity, but it also abolishes every alien thing coming its way. So only a being that is itself endowed with negation and harbors the same void will put forward something *Begierde* will not be able to swallow. This entity is another consciousness: "On account of the independence of the object, therefore, it can achieve satisfaction only when the object itself effects the negation within itself" (ibid., p. 109). From there it notably follows: "*Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness*" (ibid., p. 110).

This configuration then leads to a combat between the two entities that are both self-negating and negating any form of otherness. Since it is not a clash of two simple, animalic desires, but of two essentially self-repudiating beings, it turns into a battle for prestige, or, in Hegel's words, into the struggle for recognition. The winner is not the one who devours the other and stays alive, but, quite the contrary, the one who actually does to herself what she should have done to the other:

> The *presentation* of itself, however, as the pure abstraction of self-consciousness consists in showing itself as the pure negation of its objective mode, or in showing that it is not attached to any specific *existence*, not to the individuality common to existence as such, that it is not attached to life. (Ibid., p. 113)

The one more disposed to accomplish this negation onto oneself, the one willing to risk one's own life and dare one's own death, wins in the end. As a result, the one who goes further in waging one's life becomes the master, and the other, who still clings to the shreds of her biological life, the bondsman or the slave.

The story goes on. The recognition is unequal, the master regresses to a self-indulgent subject, caught in her own barren enjoyment, while the slave, who hangs suspended between her attachment to the empirical world and recognition withheld by

the master, advances to being the heroine of the subsequent ascent to absolute knowledge. But the question to be answered is, what does Hegel really want to convey through this dramatic, almost grandiloquent theatrical scene?

2. Two Worlds Collapsing Into One

Over the last century, we witnessed an abundance of analyses trying to address this very issue. There were the Marxist readings, such as Lukács's, the French, those of Kojève and his disciples Sartre, Lacan, and Derrida, the German of Gadamer and Honneth, the American of McDowell or Brandom, and many, many more. Most of the interpreters could not resist the temptation to place this dialectic into a, let us say, *extra-philosophical* frame of meaning. They recognized in Hegel's metaphor either a deduction of the transcendental form of sociality, an establishment of the primary social nucleus, a prototype of the social contract, or a genealogy of domination and bondage. The interpretations were conducted predominantly in terms of philosophical anthropology, social theory, and some sort of philosophical pragmatics. In this regard, most have perceived it as a theory of the provisionally failed, but ideally to be accomplished recognition between rational beings (partially Kojève, and the tenor of Honneth, McDowell, or Brandom fall under this heading). Some have also read it historically, as a reconstruction of the genesis of the relations of labor, mostly between wageworkers and capitalists (Marx and Lukács), some existentially, as an enactment of the human drama of realizing one's mortality and overcoming it intersubjectively (the deepest layer being explored by Kojève, but Sartre would fit into this category as well), some anthropologically, as the story of the anthropogenesis of man as a creature of lack emerging out of nature as the sphere of fullness (Kojève, Bataille, Sartre, the

early Lacan),[6] some pragmatically, as an account of collectively making sense of and rationalizing the world (McDowell and Brandom certainly go in this direction), some psychologically, as a reconstruction of the emergence of the sense of self and freedom (Gadamer makes some such points), some structurally, as the emergence of two irreducible symbolic positions (Lacan with the master-signifier, but indirectly also Derrida and Bataille).

What is perhaps common to all these readings, or most of them, is that they could be brought under the denominator of "interpretations of immanence." As I see it, the magical X, the never fully accountable surplus that makes us return to Hegel's master and slave time and again is the fact that it is *a story of pure immanence giving birth to its own self-transcendence* without invoking any transcendent element, be it any religious or normative notion, any kind of Platonic or Scholastic idea, any Aristotelian final cause, any intervention of a rationalist God, any of the pseudo-theological concepts of post-metaphysics, such as Kant's perpetual peace or Fichte's conscience, but also any of the post-Hegelian poetic, at times obscure ideas in the vein of Nietzsche's *Übermensch* or Heidegger's *Ereignis*. In contrast to previous as well as later theories of society and subjectivity, the Hegelian narrative seems to be more terrestrial, slender, and constrained: there is only *Begierde* and its self-sacrifice, nothing more. By way of its own negativity, an almost pre-human, biological *Life* spawns

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[6] *Cf.* Dolar: "The way that Kojève reads Hegel, and then Bataille, Sartre and in many respects Lacan largely on the Kojèvian tracks, consists in (tacitly or overtly) setting up a massive opposition. On the one hand there is life, nature, the biological basis etc., which are qualified by continuity, self-reproduction, ultimately a being without a lack or negativity. On the other hand, there is the emergence of the human, of human reality, of the 'for itself' (to speak with Sartre), of sovereignty (to speak with Bataille), of the subject (to speak with Lacan), of desire, and this emergence instills lack and negativity into the previous continuity of being. This is not a stance that Hegel would endorse at any time. First of all, Hegel doesn't start with life as some primary given from which one would have to deduce subjectivity, be it as a cut" (Dolar 2023).

a sort of self-referential closure in its midst and then disgorges a rudimentary form of the social bond. Hegel thereby provides an atheist, albeit artistically unusually appealing account of how a world without gods, without any mythical, ideal, or metaphysical superstructure, can nevertheless produce something well-nigh transcendent, namely the miracle of self-consciousness and inter-subjectivity.

However, it seems that all these "interpretations of imma-nence," as justified as they may be in their own right, are still somewhat undernourished in light of the overly stark accents of the Hegelian drama. The devouring of *Begierde*, her annihilation of everything, the inner discontent, the redoublement into two, the struggle, the risk of death, the severing of all ties with being, "the absolute melting-away of everything stable" (Hegel 1977, p. 117), and the resulting mastership and bondage may be mo-tives too excessive and trenchant to be conceived of within the framework of historical, sociological, anthropological, existential, ethical, pragmatic, psychological, or cognitively subjectivist im-manence alone. To put it bluntly, *Begierde* taken merely in her worldly, intersubjective dimension would probably never come up with the idea of staging the event of her own possible death. So why does she do it? Other "social theories" seem to be content with much gentler metaphors and arguments to perform the rite of passage into sociality. In Hobbes or Spinoza, one only has to sacrifice one's natural freedom by way of rational consideration, and in Fichte, it suffices for the other subject to summon us, and we answer her call. Hegel, on the other hand, demands a destitu-tion of the subject as thorough as this:

> For this consciousness has been fearful, not of this or that particular thing or just at odd moments, but its whole being has been seized with dread; for it has experienced the fear of death, the absolute Lord. In that experience it has been quite unmanned, has trembled in every fiber of its being, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations. (Ibid., p. 117)

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It thus may well be that something else is at work here, something that goes beyond the mere games of mundane interests and intersubjective recognitions. An element should therefore be identified that will be able to gather enough energy to spark off the overwrought theatrics of sacrifice and nothingness in Hegel's narrative. But what element might this be?[7]

My guess is that the key to understanding the entire dynamic of the lord and the bondsman lies in the following passage:

> It is in self-consciousness, in the Notion of Spirit, that consciousness first finds its turning-point, where it leaves behind it the colorful show of the sensuous here-and-now and the nightlike void of the supersensible beyond, and steps out into the spiritual daylight of the present. (Ibid., pp. 110–111)

As this quotation intimates, Hegel's move consists in collapsing two worlds into one, and truth may well be the name of

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[7] This line of questioning brings to mind Jan Assmann's wondering about the brutality and savagery in the Jewish texts of the Bible, where God commands man to commit atrocities as monstrous as murdering his brothers, friends, and neighbors. Assmann famously opens his paper with the question, "Why do the biblical texts describe the foundation and the enforcement of the monotheist religion in such violent images?" (Assmann 2005, p. 18; my translation). He then demonstrates that the semantics of such ferocity come from the political texts of the Assyrians, where the king demanded exclusive submission from his subjects, and were later adopted by the Jewish theologians so as to be projected onto the new bond between God and man. The explanation is that in monotheism God remained alone, deprived of all his relations to other gods, and it was up to man to substitute for the erstwhile company of gods with the utter renunciation of his own person, one achieved by means of conversion and penitence. In short, the monotheist "language of violence" shows that we have gone beyond the common pagan conflation of religion and sociality, and have entered the realm of staking the entirety of the human person. Perhaps there is some similarity to how Hegel demands of *Begierde* her full surrender, for it may be that the desiring consciousness now finds itself standing before the lonely god of philosophy, one who appears solitary and deserted because the new, evental form of truth has deprived him of any fixed and given conceptuality, any traditional universals in the manner of Platonic or Scholastic ideas.

this collapse. Arguably, thus, Hegel does not deliver a story of immanence engendering its own self-transcendence, but rather a story of the indiscriminately intertwined immanence and transcendence dissolving one in the face of the other and unfolding a logical space between the two where a different form of truth can come to life. What the master–slave dialectic actually intends and aspires to might therefore not be some positive form of social recognition or human self-awareness, but a new theory of truth. To support this case, two elements could be discerned that seem rather underexposed in the interpretations proposed so far.

3. The Struggle at the Boundary between the Outside and the Inside

First, it is seldom noticed that in the master's-to-be uncanny risk of death it is not only that an individual puts his life at stake, but behind this there is a certain balance of two spheres crumbling and being reduced to nothingness. What the traditional readings seem to forget is that the entire drama plays out precisely at the interstice of the inner and the outer world.

Initially, *Begierde* turns the realm of objectivity into a formless mass to be swallowed and consumed. Such gluttony might strike us as a metaphorically somewhat more pointed image of the Fichtean I overpowering the world. In Hegel, however, the movement of *Begierde* disintegrating the order of things only sets the stage for the breakdown of her inner world. And therein, at least as seen against the backdrop of a certain historical development, lies the most crucial invention of Hegel. German idealism responded to the empiricist dissolution of the metaphysics of substances with Kant's and then Fichte's shift toward the subjective constitution of being. The world was placed upon the ground of spontaneity and practical action, which infused the subject with some sort of rush of original, impulsive energy. Yet, in return, this subjective

idealist rearrangement inevitably, and for want of a transcendent backing, only brought to light a certain boundless lack within the subject herself, the lack epitomized in the vertiginous void of Kant's infinite tasks and of Fichte's perpetual drive to act and labor. With German idealism, the subject found in herself a hole never to be filled. And in this context, Hegel could be seen as giving a face to the suppressed, obscure *discontent* at the heart of Kant's spontaneity and Fichte's I. What is often overlooked in interpretations of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is that it not only tells an optimistic story of the world becoming subjective in the style of Kant's growth of knowledge and Fichte's frantic world-usurpation, but also has a darker reverse side, one that points to the implosion of the subject and her search for a new fulcrum. To put it starkly, where Fichte's I was artificially, delusionary happy, Hegel's *Begierde* shows that this I just does not know how miserable she really is. Thus, to get to the bottom of the master–slave dialectic, the equilibrium of two processes should be taken into account: on the one hand, the world undergoes a Humean de-substantialization, which is kept in balance by the introduction of the idealist subjectivity; on the other hand, the thereby enthroned I is forced to face her inner hypothec, as it were, and in consequence enact her own symbolic suicide.

To repeat, the empiricist deflation of the given world was compensated by the German idealist inflation of the subject, and leverage shifted from the one to the other. But now Hegel recognizes the lopsidedness of this move and tries to even it out. He proposes something much more radical than Kant or Fichte. If the substantial structure of the outside world is crumbling, he seems to be saying, then the inside world loses any justification, any firm support, any transcendental claim as well. Thus, the Humean disintegration of being is not only reciprocated by the introduction of the self-positing subject but also, in a way, compensated by her self-sacrifice; and the megalomania of the Fichtean I now passes over into the master staging his potential

death. Put differently, it is not enough to realize that the world does not stand up to *Begierde*'s appetite; she herself must concede that she possesses no metaphysical right to do so, no preordained role in this universe, no infinite supply of inner vitality, and no perennial logical forms to impress them upon things.

Precisely this is what the master-to-be accomplishes. He could be imagined as someone who allows a glimpse into his inside and admits there is literally nothing there. In gambling with his life, he comes across as some sort of Cartesian subject coming to terms with the fact that he possesses no inner Archimedean point; as the Kantian transcendental subject realizing that he does not carry in himself an already established table of categories; or as the Fichtean I acknowledging that his practical impetus is mortgaged and simulated. The illusion of a timeless set of concepts and the original spontaneity subsisting in our minds can only be maintained as long as the world out there manifests some order; but once things are up for grabs so thoroughly and offer so little resistance, the one grabbing them suddenly stands at the precipice of the presumed creatural necessity, staring down into the abyss of his own contingency. The mirage of the outside and the inside world at least faintly mirroring each other or striving to do so within the ideal limit requires a metaphysical entity to warrant for it, as Kant already knew in his dialectical ideal of God. But when this frame dissolves, it demands a new form of truth. In risking death, Hegel's master reveals that the world could do well without him, that no cosmic plan predestines his presence, and no universal fate depends on him; he makes his own inner untruth known, so to speak. Consequently, truth turns out to be neither something out there, for the objective world melts away in the face of the subject, nor something in here, for the subject herself could well not have existed. In this logical space of neither-nor, truth will therefore be forced to become a projective apparition that will only yet emerge as the result of the double annulment, where the outside catches fire upon the inside, while both end up repealing and offsetting one another.

4. Against Sufficient Reason and Non-contradiction

The second somewhat neglected layer of this dialectic is that it tacitly performs a break with two of the most fundamental rules of classical metaphysics, the law of non-contradiction and the principle of sufficient reason.[8] The entire section on "Self-Consciousness" is fraught with what would traditionally be perceived as *illogical*. *Begierde* wants its object to be and not to be; life, Hegel's *Leben*, is a unity of oppositions, a fluidification of all differences, etc. But it is precisely in the figure of the master that both transgressions of logic coincide explicitly. A succinct definition of Hegel's master could perhaps be that it is *a creature embodying both contradiction and un-reason[9] at the same time*. In staking his life, the master achieves a fleeting moment of both being and not being, and he does that by way of exempting himself from the causality of sufficient reasons, to which the slave still adheres.[10]

In order to illustrate this line of reasoning, one could well parallel Hegel's constitution of self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology* with the beginning of *The Science of Logic*. The dichotomy of being and nothing in the *Logic* is evocative of the antagonism of the master and the slave, and so much so that the former may be envisioned as a repetition of the latter under the criteria of pure thought. "Being" and "nothing" are famously *mere*

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[8] It is Leibniz who called them by their name in elevating them into the structuring precepts of his logical and ontological edifice: "Our reasonings are based upon two great principles: the first the *principle of contradiction*, [...] and the second the *principle of sufficient reason*" (Leibniz 1989 [1714], p. 646).

[9] The term "un-reason" is used for the present purposes only and means solely the violation of the principle of sufficient reason; it is not identical with, but can nonetheless be related to the term *Un-Grund* used by Schelling, who inherited it from Böhme.

[10] In Hegel's own words, the master must show that he "is not attached to life" (Hegel 1977, p. 113), while for the slave the things of the world still represent the "chain from which he could not break free in the struggle" (ibid.).

exclamations, which makes them non-propositional in form and lacking any predicate. This implies that the first element does not entail, motivate, or produce the second, while the second is not derived from the first. The one does not negate, mediate, or sublate the other; rather, they simply stand next to each other as *irreducibly two*. The structural analogy between the two text passages therefore consists in the original duality of two elements, either of the slave and the master, or of being and nothing.

But why must twoness in Hegel logically precede oneness? Only as *essentially two* can they represent entities without any mediation between them, without the one passing into, reflecting, intervening into, corresponding to the other; in short, only as two can they negate each other directly and without any reason whatsoever. What both the master–slave dialectic and the interjections of "being" and "nothing" mark is thus the very entrance into the realm stretching beyond the domain of non-contradiction and sufficient reason.

What role, then, does this suspension of the two principles play? The master seems to represent the instance which will reveal to the slave that there is nothing there behind the veil of subjectivity, and that the logical core of the subject is empty. Perhaps comparably, the function of "nothing" is to declare to "being" that there exists no such thing as an already elaborate logic, a collection of innate ideas, or a table of transcendental forms subsisting latently behind it all. The "nothing" as the second category conveys that every other category, from "becoming" to "existence," from "essence" to "concept," will only have been produced in the following process of pure thinking. Therefore, if Hegel's *Science of Logic* notoriously renders God's thoughts before the creation of the world, this merely means that it exposes God at the moment of ignorance and impotence, when he himself does not know what follows, but instead needs to take the wearisome path of reasoning out the rubrics of logic step by step. Hegel implies here that even the divine mind possesses no logical structure

before creating it itself. By the same token, the master could be imagined as a sort of *Nullpunkt* in the search for truth, one that represents to the slave the unsettling realization that nothing, no certainty, no guarantee, no telos, no safety net to fall back on, no place to rest upholds the manifest surface of their voracious lives from behind. To put it pointedly, the master-to-be stands for the difficult fact that truth does not yet exist.[11]

It is therefore important to define carefully at which point exactly the invalidation of both logical principles takes place. When Hegel, in making the master stake his own life, enacts the collapse of both non-contradiction and sufficient reason, does he do it in order to disclose a completely lawless, erratic, anarchic, inconsistent universe? Does he want to let us know that everything in this world is also its own negation, and anything can happen at any time? Hardly anything misses the spirit and the tone of his philosophy more than such conjurations of some cosmic chaos. Hegel was never a romantic who mystified either nature or the human soul, and he is the last to endow things with ambiguities and absurdities. Whenever he cast a glance at the physical or even the biological environment, he was never prone to recognizing in it anything subversive, unpredictable, or inconstant. Rather, he always seems to have been bored by the prospect of the merely given world. In his conversation with Heine, he called the stars the "luminous leprosy of the sky," and in his hike to the Bernese Alps he only described the tedium of the grey stones and the

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[11] This might remind us of Jonathan Lear's congenial description of Freud's death drive: "[W]hat lies 'beyond the pleasure principle' isn't another principle, but a lack of principle" (Lear 2000, p. 85). Thanatos is not another, substantial cosmic force next to Eros, but only indicates that the life-drives themselves are already insubstantial, thus falling into their own inertia of endless repetition. The death drive is the "nothing" behind the life drives, and the master is *another* subject beside the slave only insofar as it represents the *subject-in-lack*, that is, the stand-in for the fact that even the slave possesses no Kantian or Fichtean fullness of subjectivity.

unsightliness of the glaciers.[12] Similarly, in Hegel's eyes, man's personality in itself was never something profound, impenetrable, or unfathomable, never an irresolvable Diderotian, romantic, or Nietzschean tangle of irrationalities and multiple roles, but rather something shallow and uninteresting. What must therefore be stressed in this respect is that the principles of logic do not fail as rules that structure either the facts of the outside world or the ideas and representations within our inner world. Instead, *they only break down at the interface* between the complete obliteration of the outside and the utter sacrifice of the inside. Consequently, their abrogation holds neither simply for the world *an sich* nor directly for our subjective world *für uns*, but only for the lamellar domain where the one sphere touches upon the other, presumes to determine or mirror it, but then fails at any attempt to parallelize the two.

The identification of the place where the universe comes undone, so to speak, is crucial. Even though Hegel could at times be seduced into staging the world as a venue for "real contradictions," as they are called—in his philosophy of nature one could certainly find many instances of such philosophical romanticism—, his inauguration of contradiction and un-reason as well-nigh cosmic laws actually applies less to the givenness of either nature or the human soul, and more to the laborious process of constructing concepts and truths. The "illogical" tenor of Hegel's logic, which raises negation into the prime meta-category, is not a flat-out truth about how things are, but rather the truth about how truth will have to become because things, as they are, are untrue.

What, then, does the suspension of the two fundamental principles of logic amount to, if it occurs at the boundary between the

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12 There, he memorably stated: "Neither the eye nor the imagination will in these formless masses find a spot to rest upon, to find occupation or reason to play with. […] The sight of these eternally dead masses gave nothing to me but a monotonous and horribly dull notion: *it is so*" (Hegel 1986, p. 618; translation mine).

outside and the inside world? As I see it, Hegel's move serves to break apart the form of truth that intertwines the order of ideas and the order of things. It is the most natural, spontaneous form of truth as correspondence, one that represents the most instinctive definition of our everyday sense of what is true, and one on which classical metaphysics was based.

Therefore, it would again be worthwhile to place the master–slave dialectic against the historical background of philosophy, against Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume, Kant, and Fichte. The most full-blown ontological expressions of the law of non-contradiction and the principle of sufficient reason are, of course, the two greatest systems of rationalism, Spinoza's monist parallelism of *ordo rerum* coinciding with *ordo idearum*, and Leibniz's preestablished harmony of every simple substance embodying its own complete individual concept. Having lost the prerogative to deal with the substance itself, German idealism aspired to re-justify the logical consistence of the world within the reach of the spontaneous, free subjectivity. Both non-contradiction and sufficient reason were thus saved, but the cost was considerable: the very subject who vouched for them is now not only exempt from the jurisdiction of reasons, but she also exhibits a strange vulnerability to contradiction.

While in Kant "the principle of sufficient reason is the ground of possible experience, namely the objective cognition of appearances with regard to their relation in the successive series of time" (Kant 1998, p. 311; *KrV* A 201/B 264), the primary qualification of the subject, who establishes this field of reasonable objectivity, is, of course, "spontaneity," which means that the activity of *Verstand* (and, *eo ipso*, *Vernunft*) cannot be derived from any previous reason. Furthermore, the subject who holds the world together falls prey to the "paralogisms of the soul": her substance, identity, unity, and simplicity are mere dialectical assumptions, and they could also be the opposite. The moment we apply the category of the substance to the "I think" in order to pinpoint the

soul itself, this subject of "rational psychology" starts to elude our grasp and oscillate between being and non-being.[13] The Kantian world is thereby causally and logically consistent, but the price to be paid for this is that the founding subject now stands beyond any reason, while her ultimate core cannot preclude contradiction.

Along these lines, Fichte then expressly conceived the I as *not* abiding by the logic of reasons,[14] and as simultaneously *embodying* contradiction inasmuch as it comprises herself and her negation, the not-I. In Fichte's transition from *I = I* to *I = not-I*, the explicit *causa sui* of the I immediately prompts an inner negation directed against the not-I. On the face of it, un-reason converges with contradiction in the very foundational act of ontology.

It could be argued that it was precisely this Kantian and Fichtean groundless and self-contradictory spontaneity of the subject that paved the way for Hegel's self-sacrifice of the master. However, Hegel goes a crucial step further. In Kant and Fichte, the autogenetic, from the outside perspective unforeseen and almost miraculous advent of the subject is ontologically necessary, given that the entire order of things depends on it. In Hegel, on the other hand, the very I who is the creator of the world now stakes her own life, as if enacting the fact that she herself is utterly contingent and possesses no inner forms to still vouch for the correspondence between the logic of reason and the ontology of things. Therefore, while Kant and Fichte bracketed the two principles only at the highest pinnacle of world-making, but let

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[13] See for instance: "But I do not thereby know at all whether this consciousness of myself would even be possible without things outside me through which representations are given to me, and thus whether I could exist merely as a thinking being (without being a human being)" (Kant 1998, p. 446; *KrV* B 409).

[14] "A judgment concerning that to which nothing can be equated or opposed is simply not subject to the grounding principle [*Satz des Grundes*, which is the German term for the principle of sufficient reason; my note], for it is not subject to the condition of its validity; [...]; it has no ground, but itself provides the ground for everything that does have a ground. The object of such judgments is the absolute self …" (Fichte 1982, p. 111).

the created world itself still comply with them, Hegel invalidates them at any intersection where either the given world lays claim to determine the content of our ideas, or our ideas purport to synthesize a world of their own. It is in these double waivers that a new form of truth transpires, the truth of the events in which reason and the world clash, so that the concept turns out to no longer correlate with reality, but rather to emerge from the ashes of their failure to match one another.

This might sound abstruse and sketchy, but Hegel's philosophy offers an abundance of quite easy to follow examples of the delicacies of this new truth-form. One should only recall the more comprehensible part of his system, the *Philosophy of Right* with its dialectical string of legal and social conceptuality. The transition from "property" to "contract" provides an especially illustrative case; even more so the progression from "family" to "civil society." How, then, does the succession of these categories, the substitution of one with the other, get effectuated in Hegel? As is well known, the one concept develops its inner contradiction and passes over into the other. But, more accurately, the key is that the given reality of the first *notion* founders, thereby evolving into another, higher *notion*, and it is through this conversion that it simultaneously, and retroactively, emerges as a *concept*.[15]

Say, "property," as the external thing that I own, represents the minimal condition of the free will of my person. However, I do not remain free if I stay attached to this particular piece of property, but only if I am capable of alienating it, that is, placing it at the disposal of other free wills. I must exchange its ownership with another person, and I do that by concluding a "contract." The way Hegel puts it is a veritable stylistic exercise in "staging a contradiction":

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[15] The distinction applied here between notion and concept is not Hegelian *per se*. "Notion" is used more in the sense of the German *Vorstellung* (which is otherwise translated as "representation"), and "concept" denotes the *Begriff*.

> This is the process in which the following contradiction is presented and mediated: I *am* and *remain* an owner of property, having being for myself and excluding the will of another, only in so far as, in identifying my will with that of another, I cease to be an owner of property. (Hegel 1991, p. 104, [§72])

Here, both logical principles seem to be outwitted quite vividly. At the moment of signing the contract, I *am* and *am not* the owner at the same time, and I do not enter the exchange of property out of some (sufficient) reason, such as a need or an interest, but only in order to enact the freedom of my will; I am a socially recognized "proprietor" insofar as I am free to sell my belongings away. It is thus the potential alienation of the *reality* of my property by the *reality* of the contract that *post factum* accomplishes and completes the *ideality* of the concept of "property." The logic behind this process is not to make the ideal concept tally with its real correlate. Quite the contrary, it lets the ideal concept arise when its ludicrous failure to correspond to any reality becomes entirely manifest.

In order to carry out this inversion and transition from the concept trying to equal reality to reality giving birth to a concept, precisely the two logical principles that still warranted the correspondence form must be bypassed. Thus, "property" becomes an ideal concept only from the perspective of the contract, because a contract makes the property transcend both the validity of non-contradiction, seeing that it exemplifies the moment when to possess and not to possess coincide, and of sufficient reasons, given that it symbolizes alienation as its original potentiality.

Quite similarly, in *Sittlichkeit*, the third part of the *Elements*, the "family" breaks apart on account of the individual leaving her nest and becoming part of the "civil society." It is another case of a staged contradiction and un-reason, since the purpose of the family is to give birth to the very offspring who causes its demise. Its properly Hegelian function is not to equip the progeny with a set of positive social skills to be applied in the public sphere, but

to disclose to her the essential "voidability" of any primary social form, any inherited tradition or inborn boundedness. Thus, it is in the figure of the free civil subject that the family most *is* and *is not*, and it is there that it experiences its break from the chain of reasons. This situation, however, does not represent a flat-out "real contradiction" in the romantic sense of mysterious self-sown creatures living in conflict with themselves, and it also does not depict some kind of "real un-reason" in the Humean manner of chaotic occurrences. Instead, the contradiction and the un-reason unfold solely at the intersection of the concept and reality. While, for instance, the conventional family considered itself to be an entity that fully embodied its symbolic, even mythical notion, the Hegelian disintegrating household breaks up this organic unity and shows how the *real* kin must perish in order for it to rise as an *ideal* concept, one no longer assuming a place in some natural cosmic order. Similar to Hegel's "contract" disassociating the concept of "property" from any feudal notions of inherited lands, the family, which is dissolved by its own product, makes the concept of "family" emerge only retroactively on account of its old, hereditary unity of idea and thing being sacrificed.

These examples give at least a rough sketch of a certain "new form of truth" that can be derived neither from the outside world nor from subjective reason, for it simply does not exist either out there or in here as something given. In this universe of homeless truth, what one is left with is to *stage an event*[16]—such as a contract

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[16] To avoid any misunderstanding: "staging an event" should not be confused with mere theatrics. It implies a performative action, introducing a new (social) reality into the world. Hegel's concept of the monarch, as discussed in the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, has been traditionally associated with performative utterances. However, as Gregor Moder astutely points out, the monarch is merely a figurehead: "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'" (Moder 2020, p. 162). The idea of "staging an event," by contrast, is the idea of a performative action which produces a historical shift.

being signed, or an individual abandoning his family—, where the traditional concept lives to see its intended object dwindle, performs the double sacrifice of both its real embodiment and its pre-conceptual meaning, and then defines itself anew in the process of leaving its initial reality behind.

5. *The Evental Form of Truth*

In the final analysis, it could be surmised that the ultimate reach of the master–slave dialectic is the invention of the logical space of truth that is neither deductive nor inductive or transcendental, but *historically evental.* In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel seems to be on the track of a fourth dimension of truth after the rationalist deduction from the first principles of the divine mind, the empiricist induction from the order of nature, and the Kantian inference of the transcendental conditions of experience, all of which ultimately relied on a given, fixed, already worked out frame. By contrast, the Hegelian production of truth differs from the previous doctrines in at least three respects:

> 1. Truth is never "incarnated" at some place, but rather *membranate.* Philosophy before Hegel seems to have had a tendency to infer everything from, and then approach the state of "embodied truth," be it in the form of the direct intuition of transcendent ideas, the comprehensive knowledge of nature, or the elaboration of the conditions of possibility. Within this framework, the state of full truth was then typically displaced from the present moment of knowing and acting. In classical idealism, the *ground* of truth dwelled in the Platonic realm of ideas, in the palaces of rationalist gods, and ultimately in the innate concepts of the human mind. The inductive truth of empirical evidence relied on the irreducible, impenetrable givenness of nature. In German idealism, Kant's primary

synthesis or Fichte's *Tathandlung* were admittedly brought down to earth, but these acts were nonetheless conceived as ontologically initiatory, foundational, and "cosmoplastic," and were therefore tinged with connotations of pre-temporality, transcendentality, perhaps even a sort of *Ersatz*-divinity. Hegel's form of truth, by contrast, knows neither first principles nor givenness of facts or inaugural acts, but happens in the here and now and *takes place upon a membrane*. Since it cannot rely on any metaphysical guarantee, any privileged object, any original subjectivity, it transpires solely at the ontologically thinnest, fleeting place where an old idea is thwarted and the intended reality proves inadequate. In this sense, truth occurs essentially on the diaphragm between the two spheres, the outside and the inside, the real and the ideal, and lets them miss the mark and break down in the face of each other.

2. Truth is neither derivative nor approximative, but secularly current, urgent, in a word, *reactive*. In Hegel, there exists no horizon where the ideal concepts could hope to coincide with reality.[17] Thus, truth can neither be consequent and resultant nor regulative and teleological, for it neither proceeds from, nor does it approximate to anything. What one is left with is to assume the labor of disengaging the ideal order from the real, let the conventional interpenetration of transcendence and immanence collapse, and then, on the one hand, release reality from the constraint of directly manifesting the forms of reason, and, on the other hand, set in motion a dialectical redefinition of concepts. Since one can never take recourse

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[17] Or else, this horizon is deferred to the very last chord, as in Hegel's perhaps maladroit concept of "the end of history," where reality could finally be said to embody the Idea. However, truth at the height of its operability takes quite different paths.

to any pre-guaranteed frame of meaning, this ultimately means that one is forced to assume a place within the world, which is already symbolically structured and socially and historically mediated, to detect its inconsistencies, tensions, and antagonisms, and only amidst these massive reactions find a way out of its labyrinth. In a nutshell, one has to *create an event* and elaborate its consequences.[18]

3. Truth is *ontologically minimalist* instead of maximalist. The deductive, the inductive, and the transcendental forms of truth put in motion vast programs of converging the ideal with the real, be it in the form of a recollection of ideas, an intuitive union with the transcendent mind, the infinite growth of knowledge, or the program of making the world one's own. Truth tended to assume the narrative of setting itself a maximalist goal. Indeed, Hegel was not free of the German idealist claim to know the world in its entirety in the vein of Kant, or to appropriate it in the vein of Fichte, but the very technique of his truth-making functions differently. In Fichte one still has to subdue the earth, while in Hegel it is enough to create this or that truth. For truth does not strive toward the grand ultimate fusion of the subject with the object, but consists in the spatially and temporally *minimal* events of truth, where the concept detaches itself from reality and vice versa, and with this mutual abdication

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[18] This resonates with Bara Kolenc's fourth matrix of repetition, the matrix of formation or creation, where she argues that a certain reality (i.e., an event) comes into being within a doubling, within a split into two events. The relation between the two establishes a specific causality, which can be perceived through the perspective of retroactivity or *Nachträglichkeit*: "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" (Kolenc 2020, p. 115).

creates a surplus that can no longer be undone. The habitat of truth is the minimalism of irreversibility rather than the maximalism of totalization. The master may have staked his life, making his ontological substitutability explicit, but he thereby elevated himself into an irrevocable benchmark of the slave's future journey.[19]

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[19] This conception of a membranate, reactive, minimalist form of truth might finally throw some light on the issue whether the dialectic of the master and the slave is about providing a rudimentary social theory or whether it exceeds the immediately ethical and political scope. As I have hypothesized, it is not an exercise in philosophical sociology, but delivers a new theory of truth. The question remains, why the manifest *sociality* of Hegel's self-consciousness? What is the purpose of the inter-subjective structure of two consciousnesses? What does the proto-social vocabulary of mutual recognition serve?

In my view, the distinctively *social* metaphors only draw the contours of the place most *in medias res* that this world can offer. Hegel never, not even in *The Science of Logic*, begins in the ivory tower of pure thought or in the state of innocence of a worldless, exempt perspective. The great lesson of the *Phenomenology* is precisely that we are plunged into an already constituted, impure, heterogeneous world, traversed with communal mores, prejudice, illusions, frictions, and aversions. From "sense-certainty" on, we are never epistemologically naïve, and the entire momentum of the *Phenomenology* emanates from the mess of symbolic forms and conventions blending with the givenness of the world, colliding with it, and working these collisions off. From this perspective, it seems that only the highly reactive junction of the always already socially mediated desires, as knotted together in the master–slave dialectic, can accomplish the needed concretion to unfold the original scene of making truth. The unmistakably inter-subjective setting of the struggle for life outlines the only position we are entitled to occupy, for every other site would already be too abstract. Therefore, "sociality" seems to refer to the greatest possible range of what must be untangled so that the purity of truth, one purged of any ideal warranty or external support, can come forth. Hegel's social metaphoric is thus a mere means, albeit the most convoluted one, to extract the *metaphysically least assuming form of truth* from the world that itself harbors no pre-given truth.

This finally indicates that the Hegelian drama is not about what logic can teach us about society, but more about what social obstacles must be overcome in order to get hold of something like logic itself. To the question whether the master–slave dialectic offers anything valuable in terms of social theory, the answer could be: it does, but indirectly. Hegel's struggle for recognition delivers

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moment.[20] Meillassoux then nevertheless defended the relative stability of things, which he justified with an argument that has been repeatedly accused of being merely rhetorical and sophistic.[21]

In comparison, Hegel's moves appear somewhat more refined. Of course, he was not aware of the entire reach of his intuitions, so it is up to us to think them through to the end. What Hegel's philosophy seems to be suggesting is that the world is neither outright chaotic nor downright reasonable; but it is nonetheless all right as it is, and it will remain so indefinitely. Consequently, his unsaid goal might be to indicate that our traditional under-standing of the nature and validity of laws is fallacious; it is our concept of "law" that must change. When he, within his systemic dialectic of concepts, orchestrates the events which overrule both non-contradiction and sufficient reason, he only invalidates them within the range of these dramatic climaxes, and not outside of it. He does it in order to demonstrate how the logical consistency of the one realm, the realm of ideas, is not directly coextensive with the other realm, the realm of things. There are thus two warnings that must be heeded on how *not* to grasp the scope of this invalidation.

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[20] "We must grasp how the ultimate absence of reason, which we will refer to as 'unreason,' is an absolute ontological property, and not the mark of the finitude of our knowledge. […] Everything could actually collapse: from trees to stars, from stars to laws, from physical laws to logical laws; and this not by virtue of some superior law whereby everything is destined to perish, but by virtue of the absence of any superior law capable of preserving anything, no matter what, from perishing" (Meillassoux 2007, p. 53).

[21] The argument distinguishes "contingency" as a global logical law and "chance" as an intra-worldly occurrence. And since "contingency" is so abso-lute and transcendental, it cannot differentiate between its more or less probable worldly applications, so it is also *not incompatible* with the apparent stability of the world. What "contingency" entails is a bare assurance that a stable world is *just as probable* as an unstable one. But this logical "non-incompatibility" does not necessarily involve any ontological claim about how the world really is. As Brassier cautions, Meillassoux "leaves the ontological status of stability entirely unclear. Is uniformity a real feature of things-in-themselves or merely a phenom-enal illusion generated by our relation to things?" (Brassier 2007, p. 82).

On the one hand, just because the laws of non-contradiction and sufficient reason are suspended, this does not mean that the world suddenly becomes absurd and erratic. In this context, Hegel's break with logic is not about disclosing some intrinsically chaotic world in the fashion of Hume (and today Meillassoux), and he does not plunge us into a world of some sort of embodied natural paradoxes, as romantic philosophy in the style of Schelling perhaps does. Hegel's specific, highly constricted circumvention of logical laws serves to unveil that even when the world seems orderly or, from Hegel's perspective, dull and drab, it does not abide by any metaphysically decreed Law in the sense of the classical metaphysics of Leibniz or Spinoza. Hegel should not be mistaken for Meillassoux, according to whom the world, for want of any transcendent Ordinance, can at any time fall into chaos. His point is rather that the universe can be regular, inert, unsurprising, or even dreary *without relying on any positive fundamental principle*; this seems to be the tacit hint behind Hegel's dialectical circumvolutions.

On the other hand, Hegel's alleged "illogic" does also not mean that while the two principles are admittedly disabled at the intersection between the outside and the inside, they somehow *keep governing* the things out there in the world and the ideas in here in my soul. The argument is probably subtler and implies that both logical laws have actually never been simple algorithms according to which things in themselves instinctively occurred, or according to which representations of the mind obediently concatenated. Hegel might be on the track of the realization that the two principles could succeed as laws only within the presupposed metaphysical frame of *ordo idearum*, the mind, and *ordo rerum*, the world, running in parallel. Outside this frame, there exists no "lack of contradiction" and no "chain of sufficient reasons" pulsating through the universe. From this perspective, sufficient reason and non-contradiction no longer pose as some kind of "instant laws" that are evident enough to make things naturally

comply with them. Instead, they are massively metaphysically overdetermined in order to be logical at all. They are, to put it briefly, conceptual values and not some anonymous guardians of cosmic facticity. And it is this ideal, valuative underpinning of logic that Hegel's new form of truth perhaps sets out to shatter.

What, then, does Hegel's stringently localized and controlled bracketing of the two principles ultimately amount to if it neither plunges the world into chaos, nor hinges it on some definite cosmic Law? In my view, it serves to provide a vision of an utterly *de-metaphysicized reality*. But what is to be gained by such a removal of any transcendent, ideal meaning from the given things? What would a world without any warranted value look like?

Behind the "staged events" strewn over Hegel's system, there might lurk a faint inkling that the traditional, pre-Kantian conflation of sufficient reasons with causality and of non-contradiction with relations among things is only possible where the real order is fully pre-established within the ideal order, and the ideas constantly intermit and punctuate reality. The world in which no master ever stakes his life in order to display his inner nullity is an aseptic, rigid land, one in which Malebranche's occasionalist deity continuously intervenes, or the circumstances of which are thoroughly thought ahead by Leibniz's clockmaker-God. This locked-in universe, however, presents us with a problem: it is not a world of *real* causal relations among things, but, quite the contrary, either a redundant Malebranchean or a sterile and immobile Leibnizian cosmos of total divine control on account of infinitesimally incarnated ideas. It is quite telling that the most elaborate system of sufficient reason and non-contradiction, Leibniz's monadology, is also the one without any effective relations, any hustle and bustle, any touching and rubbing between things. Each individual substance, or monad, directly incarnates its own "complete individual concept," so any kind of causal interaction between two substances is already predetermined, and thus sidestepped in the space of ideal reasons. The identity of every entity

is so sequestered that it derives all its virtual relations to other entities from its own set of *ideal* determinants, and never from any direct, *real* contact with them. Leibniz's monadology thus represents the most pointed, preposterous, though sublime image of an *entirely ideally inhibited reality*. And it is against these very compulsions, these argumentative deadlocks of metaphysics, that Hegel's membrane truth-form, one founded upon the risk of death, seems to do its best work.

Thus, in an attempt to carry his work forward, we might do well to recognize in the form of "truth upon the membrane" the implementation of two momentous operations. First, such a truth-form may be presumed to detach the metaphysical form of sufficient reasons from the physical chains of causes and effects, thereby freeing causality from the rationalist constraint of determinative reasons; that is, from the duress of either the intermitting, occasionalist divine acts or the forethought divine ideas of pre-established harmony. Second, a truth-form like this releases things from the ideal mold of a self-identical substance after the fashion of Spinoza's conatus or Leibniz's monad, thereby stretching out a new ontological landscape where relations precede any stable, essential identity. In short, such pro-Hegelian conceptuality could help disclose the modern world, not of romantic contradictions or of Meillassoux's un-reason, but of real causality and real relationality.

This is where the Hegelian anthropogenic logic of staking one's life nevertheless trickles down to something that might be called *Realontologie*. His "epistemology of membrane events," in which the (implicitly human) subject surrenders her inner array of seemingly fixed ideal forms to evental redefinition, perhaps promises a new ontology whose prospects may well be more far-reaching than what contemporary realists propose. The great ambition of the latter has been to paint portraits of the universe without man. Ray Brassier even deduced the necessity

of "transcendental extinction."[22] By contrast, I have argued in this paper that the Hegelian truth occurs neither in the outside world nor within the subject, but upon the diaphragm between the two, where the one side somehow takes the wind out of the sails of the other, and vice versa. Does this mean, then, that the Hegelian form of truth is still *humanist*, still caught in the correlation of human thought and being? I would say that it is precisely not so. What Hegel makes clear with his membranate truth is neither that reality depends on the gaze of man, nor that reality outside this gaze is unattainable in principle. Rather, the new form of truth—although Hegel has only left us with a few clues about this—could be said to imply that cosmic *reality* can do well without man, but it is *truth* that requires a place where an ideal surplus can emerge, one which no longer strives to be embodied in reality, but rather persists in its ideality of the event that reveals the world beyond any ideal form. And the only site of the production of such not-to-be-incarnated idealities that we can cling to is the membrane at the boundary between the inner and the outer world, where both sides can sacrifice the illusion of possessing any truth on their own. In view of this, the Hegelian doctrine may represent a more anti-humanist vision of the world than speculative realists could ever dream of. While they tend to finally resort to some sort of eliminativism of man's share in the quality of things, which, however, only turns the world into a negative image of man, Hegel makes the human being lend her body to the world's own revelation that it simply possesses no truth and knows no truth about itself before it enacts an event where such truth can come forth.

If the most radical purview of Hegel's still inchoate intuitions is to discover *a world that must give birth to its truth in the first place*, then the coincidental biological and intersubjective structure

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[22] See the last chapter of *Nihil Unbound*, "The Truth of Extinction" (Brassier 2007, pp. 205–239).

of the human being, her drives, her sociability, her sense organs, ultimately her skin, merely provide the initial membrane from where she as, alas, human can set off. The inevitably corporeal boundary between the mind and the world, to which we are stuck due to our contingent nature, is thus nothing more than a starting point where, in and for our eyes, the mutual collapse of the ideal and the real can come about; for only such an offset can outline a place where the world can divulge its secrets. This does arguably not amount to closeted anthropomorphism, where man still projects his fortuitous forms upon the universe, for the event of giving up one's inner nature (which, in Hegel, is aggravated into the act of staking one's life) is itself accidental and cannot be derived from some higher cosmic necessity. But the question now poses itself, what kind of ontology ensues from this staging of human self-abnegation?

The answer is a story for another time, but let me conclude with a hint. What can only be called an "event" seems to take place within a topology that entirely rearranges the functions of the real and the ideal. The Hegelian truth-form does not make the ideas of the mind mirror the world, nor does it expect the world to incarnate the ideas of God's mind. Quite the contrary, the membranate truth has no ground under its feet, but it none-theless has two legs, or maybe two tentacles, with which it keeps its balance: on the one side, it touches the Real, and on the other, it creates an Idea. And in this, the sudden possibility of truth converging with reality as it is in itself flickers on the horizon. For such a truth might reveal that even the inhuman reality itself only occurs and unfolds by way of constantly contracting so as to release idealities of its own.

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