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Kant, Mysticism, and the Pre-Ontological Real

Sabine Hossenfelder repeatedly formulated in some of her podcasts the extreme sceptic claim that we cannot be absolutely sure that the outside reality really exists, that it is not just a hallucination in my mind. I agree with her, but also at the ontological level. What we perceive in our everyday life as external reality is, as we have abundantly learned from relativity theory and quantum mechanics, an appearance concealing a radically different reality. We try to formulate this different reality through modern science, but there is a radical uncertainty inscribed into the very heart of this reality: the more we try to reach and grasp the real beneath it, the more we are dealing with symbolic constructs that do not fit what we experience as our reality. Just think about how in recent decades, quantum scientists have advocated totally incompatible theories: Multiple Worlds, repeated Big Bangs, etc. It is as if we are cursed by a vicious cycle here: the more we want to grasp how things “really are in themselves,” the more we get caught up in intellectual speculations. My sad conclusion is that, while I fully respect the efforts of quantum physics, the only moments when we are in touch with the Real are the moments of what Lacan called “subjective destitution” and/or what mystics called the “night of the world,” the collapse of the symbolic universe. We should fearlessly *reject* “objective reality”: when reality dissolves into “subjective” fragments, *these fragments*

themselves fall back into the Real, losing their subjective consistency. The paradox of the postmodern rejection of the consistent Self resides in its ultimate result: we lose its opposite, objective reality itself, which is transformed into a set of contingent subjective constructions. A true materialist should do the opposite: refuse to accept “objective reality” in order to undermine consistent subjectivity. The task is not to grasp how reality is “in itself,” independently of our mind, but the task is to locate our mind itself, inclusive of its antagonisms, gaps, and tensions, *and* inclusive of its symbolic constructions of “objective reality,” into a historical Real.

Alain Badiou opposes mysticism and philosophy as the two modes to approach the unity of being and existence (for Badiou, “being” designates the multiplicity grounded in a Void, i. e., a sphere of ontology whose modern secular form is pure mathematics, while “existence” is a transcendental category: a multiplicity “exists” if it has its place in a transcendental horizon that structures a domain of being, transforming meaningless multiplicity into an element of the order of meaning, of a potential subjective engagement) (Badiou, 2025). Mysticism asserts a direct “irrational” (or, rather, pre-rational) unity of being and existence: the unity of being as One is not constructed through a long process of rational development (as is the case with Hegel’s logic, which begins with pure being and ends with the rational totality of absolute Idea), it is immediately “felt” as an intuition. In other words, in mystical experience, beginning and end directly coincide and there is no work of reason needed to mediate them. In my view, however, a mystical experience is not that of the direct-intuitive unity but, on the contrary, the experience of a radical discordance, of a fall from unity, of the pure (pre-dialectical) absolute contradiction that opens up space for every form of rational elaboration. Intuition of failure here paradoxically coincides with the failure of intuition.

In this sense, I endorse John Millbank’s characterization of my stance as that of “mystic materialism” – the “mystic” dimension has nothing to do with some obscure spiritualism, but it simply points towards the “night of the world,” the zero-level, the ground on which our universe thrives. Not only do I endorse Millbank’s characterization, but I also want to emphasize the conjunction of the two terms, “mystical” and “materialism”: since

our perception of external reality is always mediated by the symbolic order and thus has the minimal status of a symbolic fiction, our only contact with what one cannot but naively call “reality as it is in itself” occurs in mystical experiences, which brings us close to the very gap in the Real that establishes us as subjects. We should thus totally reject the equation of an authentic mystical experience with any kind of spiritualism: mystical experience is the only ultimate proof against solipsism, a proof that we are not alone, that we are embedded in material reality.

How are we to understand this? Lacan said in 1969 (a year after the fateful 1968): “You are, however strange this may appear, the cause of yourself. Only there is no self. Rather there is a divided self” (Lacan, 1969). Lacan’s logic is here clear: *objet a* is the object-cause of desire, but this weird object is the subject itself in its objectivized form, so the subject causes itself through *objet a*, and the basic division of the subject is this very division between $\$$ and *a*, which are the same thing in the form of lack and excess. All the paradoxes of human subjectivity are grounded in this incompatibility of subject and *a*: *a* is the obstacle to my identity, a foreign stain in me, but this very obstacle causes me as the subject of desire.

In his Seminar XIV, Lacan mentions the “weird correspondence between subject and object” (“l’étrange correspondance entre sujet et objet”) (Lacan, 1967) – why is this correspondence strange? For two interconnected reasons. First, this correspondence is not what philosophers usually mean by the correlation between subject and object – it is almost its opposite, a kind of negative correlation, since the subject is defined precisely by being a non-object. Subject and object are two sides of the same coin, lack and excess; they cannot be “synthesized” so that excess will fill in the lack because they are strictly coexistent, one and the same thing at two different levels – if the lack were to be filled in, there would no longer be a subject, and the subject would fall into reality as one of the objects. Second, this correspondence is not properly dialectical but a non-dialectical foundation, a gap that opens up and sustains the very space of dialectics, in some sense even its non-dialectical presupposition.

To clarify this crucial point, one should venture into the notion of a Thing that is not a part of our (transcendentally constituted) reality. In

Die Frage nach dem Ding, his treatise on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Heidegger restricts himself to "thing" in the sense of an empirical object, part of our transcendently constituted reality, without mentioning the Thing in the more radical Freudian or Lacanian sense needed: the pre-ontological Real, the "immortal" horror not bound by finitude, a feature of imagination prior to fantasy, like Maupassant's *horla* or the alien from Ridley Scott's film of the same name (Heidegger, 2018). We should render here the two opposed philosophical senses of imagination. In Kant, imagination is a synthetic activity that is necessary for reality to manifest itself, a medium in which sensory data and pure reason come together – to quote Ulisses Razzante Vaccari: "This conciliatory function of imagination shows, via a synthesizing action, how the manifold may be then connected by knowledge as it pervades the manifold of the sensitive data and makes it available to the synthetic unity of apperception" (Vaccari, 2008). Imagination is thus transcendental, constitutive even of our perception of actual objects, and Heidegger focuses on this, reading imagination as pre-discursive Manifestness. In Lacan's terms, we could read this imagination as the fantasmatic support of reality.

In Hegel, imagination at its most radical is pre-ontological, the violent activity of tearing things apart, the infinite power of abstraction. One cannot avoid mentioning here two often quoted passages, the first one from *Jenaer Realphilosophie* and the second one from the preface to the *Phenomenology*. There is nothing more foreign to Hegel than the lamentation of the richness of reality that gets lost when we proceed to its conceptual grasping – recall Hegel's already quoted unambiguous celebration of the absolute power of Understanding:

What is thus separated, and in a sense is unreal, is itself an essential moment; for just because the concrete fact is self-divided, and turns into unreality, it is something self-moving, self-active. The action of separating the elements is the exercise of the force of Understanding, the most astonishing and greatest of all powers, or rather the absolute power. The circle, which is self-enclosed and at rest, and, *qua* substance, holds its own moments, is an immediate relation, the immediate, continuous relation of elements with

their unity, and hence arouses no sense of wonderment. But that an accident as such, when out loose from its containing circumference, – that what is bound and held by something else and actual only by being connected with it, – should obtain an existence all its own, gain freedom and independence on its own account – this is the portentous power of the negative; it is the energy of thought, of pure Self. (Hegel 1977, pp. 18-19)

This celebration is in no way qualified, i. e., Hegel's point is not that this power is nonetheless later "sublated" into a subordinate moment of the unifying totality of Reason. The problem with Understanding is rather that it does not unleash this power to the end, that it takes it as external to the thing itself – like, in the above-quoted passage from *Phenomenology*, the standard notion that it is merely *our* Understanding ("mind") that separates in its imagination what in "reality" belongs together, so that the Understanding's "absolute power" is merely the power of our imagination, which in no way concerns the reality of the thing so analyzed. We pass from Understanding to Reason not when this analyzing, tearing apart, is overcome in a synthesis that brings us back to the wealth of reality, but when this power of "tearing apart" is displaced from "merely our mind" into things themselves, as their inherent power of negativity. In this way, the dimension of the Imaginary returns in its grounding role, not as the site of imaginary identifications and self-recognition but as a (possible) name for the violent act of dismembering (the production of *le corps morcele* with its *membra disjecta*), which tears apart every organic unity. In a move further from Kant, imagination is asserted not just as synthesis but also as "analysis," the activity of tearing apart what seemed to belong together. Hegel formulated this process in his *Jenaer Realphilosophie*, where he writes about the "Night of the World":

The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity – an unending wealth of many representations, images, of which none belongs to him – or which are not present. This night, the interior of nature, that exists here – pure self – in phantasmagorical representations, is night all around it, in which here shoots a bloody head – there another white ghastly apparition, suddenly here before it, and just so

disappears. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye – into a night that becomes awful. (Hegel 1974, p. 204)¹

One should not be blinded by the poetic power of this description, but read it precisely. The first thing to note is how the objects that freely float around in this “night of the world” are *membra disjecta*, partial objects, objects detached from their organic Whole – is there not a strange echo between this description and Hegel’s description of the negative power of Understanding, which can abstract an entity (a process, a property) from its substantial context and treat it as if it had an existence of its own? It is thus as if, in the ghastly scenery of the “night of the world,” we encounter something like *the power of Understanding in its natural state*, spirit in the guise of a *proto-spirit* – this, perhaps, is the most precise definition of horror: when a higher state of development violently inscribes itself in the lower state, in its ground/presupposition, where it cannot but appear as a monstrous mess, a disintegration of order, a terrifying unnatural combination of natural elements. This is why Hegel does not consider madness an accidental lapse, distortion, or “illness” of human spirit, but something that is inscribed into an individual spirit’s basic ontological constitution: to be a human means to be potentially mad:

This interpretation of insanity as a necessarily occurring form or stage in the development of the soul is naturally not to be understood as if we were asserting that *every mind, every soul*, must go through this stage of extreme derangement. Such an assertion would be as absurd as to assume that because in the *Philosophy of Right* crime is considered as a necessary manifestation of the human will, therefore to commit crime is an inevitable necessity for *every individual*. Crime and insanity are *extremes* which the human mind *in general* has to overcome in the course of its development. (Hegel 1830, §408)

Although not a factual necessity, madness is a formal possibility constitutive of the human mind: it is something whose threat must be overcome

¹ Translation quoted from Donald Phillip Verene (1985, pp. 7-8).

if we are to emerge as “normal” subjects, which means that “normality” can only arise as the overcoming of this threat. This is why, as Hegel put it a couple of pages later, “insanity must be discussed before the healthy, intellectual consciousness, although it has that consciousness for its *pre-supposition*” (*ibid.*). In short, we do not all have to be mad in reality, but madness is the Real of our psychic lives, a point to which our psychic lives necessarily refer in order to assert themselves as “normal.”

Do we encounter this Real of madness in what Heidegger calls “the forgetting of the meaning of being”? But what if metaphysics is precisely the stance of (not just “letting be” what is there in its meaninglessness but) a desperate search to find a meaning that sustains beings? So how does the horizon of meaningfulness/disclosure relate to Sartre’s nausea? Is nausea simply the traumatic experience of being outside a disclosure of meaning? It’s not so simple: the disgusting thick absurd presence is not reality in itself, it remains fully subjective in its substantiality – the true in-itself is closer to quantum waves, their pure non-substantial oscillations. Here is a key passage from Sartre’s *Nausea*:

This moment was extraordinary. I was there, motionless, paralyzed, plunged in a horrible ecstasy. But at the heart of this ecstasy, something new had just appeared; I understood the nausea, I possessed it. To tell the truth, I did not formulate my discoveries to myself. But I think it would be easy for me to put them in words now. The essential point is contingency. I mean that by definition existence is not necessity. To exist is simply ... to be there; existences appear, let themselves be *encountered*, but you can never *deduce* them. (Sartre, 1959)

Sartre is here at the opposite end of Andrei Tarkovsky, whose films enact the impossible combination, a divine experience *and* disgusting wet mud. We should thus get rid of the fear that, once we ascertain that reality is the infinitely divisible, substanceless void within a void, “matter will disappear.” What the digital information revolution, the biogenetic revolution, and the quantum revolution in physics all share is that they mark the reemergence of what, for want of a better term, I am tempted to call

postmetaphysical idealism. It is as if Chesterton's insight into how the materialist struggle for the full assertion of reality, against its subordination to any "higher" metaphysical order, culminates in the loss of reality itself: what began as the assertion of material reality in modern sciences ended up in the realm of the pure formulas of quantum physics. Is this really, however, a form of idealism? Since the radical materialist stance asserts that there is no World, that the World in its Whole is Nothing, materialism has nothing to do with the presence of damp, dense matter – its proper figures are, rather, constellations in which matter seems to "disappear," like the pure oscillations of superstrings or quantum vibrations. On the contrary, if we see in raw, inert matter more than an imaginary screen, we have always secretly endorsed some kind of spiritualism. As we have already mentioned, the supreme expression of such spiritual materialism is found in the films of Tarkovsky: when one of their heroes has a spiritual experience, it is not by way of an effort to elevate himself above the earthly reality, gazing up towards heaven or a distant horizon; on the contrary, he lies flat on the humid earth, soaking his face into mud and dirty water. It is needless to add that such a spiritualization of matter is the very opposite of the basic stance of modern science, in which "matter" is also "spiritualized," but in a totally different way: matter becomes an abstraction formalized in mathematical formulas. Here we encounter another crucial aspect of the opposition in the idealism/materialism dichotomy: materialism is not the assertion of inert material density in its humid heaviness – such a "materialism" can always serve as a support for gnostic spiritualist obscurantism. In contrast, true materialism joyously assumes the "disappearance of matter," the fact that there is only void.

I recently stumbled upon a rather imbecilic rightist podcast against Hegel, which nonetheless got one point right: this origin of the entire line of thought from Hegel to Marx and Communism resides in the Rhine mystics, from Meister Eckhart to Jacob Boehme (TIKhistory, 2024). In contrast to previous (and later) mystics (like the Neo-Platonists) who practiced the bottom-up approach (our material reality emerges through the gradual process of the fall from the supreme divine Absolute), the Rhine mystics practiced a top-down one: their starting point is humans as fallen beings

since, god himself needs humans to become actual god (even though, or, rather, precisely because humans stand for fall, sin). As Eckhart put it: not only is god the origin of man but god in his full actuality is at the same time born in man. Especially important is here Jacob Böhme whom Hegel described as “the first German philosopher.” Boehme asserts the embrace of the *Ungrund*, the Nothing considered as a pure ungrounding – it is this nothing which generates a tragedy in god Himself, and in so doing generates in the divine justice the tragedy of its own undoing in actuality. Everything, from the Godhead down, is comprehended as enclosing within it already the seed of its undoing.

The notion of the *Ungrund*, of the abyss, without foundation, dark and irrational, prior to being, is an attempt to provide an answer to the basic question of all questions, the question concerning the origin of the world and of the arising of evil. The *Ungrund* is interwoven with freedom: it is impossible to separate them, the *Ungrund* as a primordial freedom is indeterminate even for God. Boehme’s teaching about the *Ungrund* and freedom is an attempt to apperceive the world-creation from the inner life of the Divinity: the world-creation bears a relationship to the inner life of the Divine Trinity, and cannot be for It something completely external. The principle of evil thus acquires an actual seriousness and tragic aspect. Boehme senses God not only as love, but also as anger and wrath. He senses within God a poignant and harsh quality: the God the Old Testament is wrath, while Christ is love. Boehme teaches about torment in the dark abyss, which the light of Christ has to conquer. Along these lines, Badiou perspicuously turns around the theological premise that god created the world out of nothing:

In the theological discourse this is how God created the world: out of nothing. But I’d still say that the greatest example of creation ex nihilo is the creation of God. It was God, rather than the world, that was created out of nothing! Because if God had existed, the creation of the world wouldn’t have been a problem. God is, by definition, limitless. His power is infinite, so he could well have created something out of nothing. The problem lies rather with us: how could we, poor finite, mortal humans, create something out of nothing? (Badiou, 2025)

My putative reply to this claim is: God as infinitely powerful precisely could NOT create something out of nothing (if we ignore the thesis that “nothing” is not just nothing but an unformed mass, like Plato’s *khora*). God as infinitely powerful stands for unconditional actuality where there is no space for creation – already in the *Talmud* we can read that god should first contract himself and create the nothing itself, and this contraction is a kind of self-limitation of god. But did we now not regress to a crazy mixture of Gnosticism and Hegelian speculation, ending up in a topic of the Absolute that is clearly out of place in our post-Hegelian universe? Was Hegel not the last one who dared to talk about the Absolute in this way? Further, in what precise sense *did* Hegel talk about the Absolute? In his short text “*The Return of Metaphysics: Hegel vs Kant*,” Robert Pippin provides a succinct description of his (Kantian, in my view) reading of Hegel:

Hegel’s basic claim had three components. The first is the claim that a priori knowledge of the world, the ordinary spatio-temporal world, is possible; knowledge about that world, but achieved independently of empirical experience. The second component is where all the interpretive controversies begin. It is the claim that this a priori knowledge, while in some sense ultimately about the world, consists in thinking’s or reason’s *knowledge of itself*; thinking’s understanding of thinking or, as Hegel designates, a ‘science of pure thinking.’ ... Hegel’s enterprise takes as its topic the categories or ‘thought determinations’ (*Denkbestimmungen*) necessary for thought to have determinate objective content, *an enterprise that at the same time specifies the determinations inherent in the possible determinacy of being itself*. That means it is a metaphysics, one based on the ‘identity’ in this sense, of ‘thinking and being.’ This is not a knowledge of any nonsensible reality, it is a knowledge of any intelligible reality, the only kind there is. It is a revival of the great principle of classical philosophy: to be is to be intelligible. Thinking’s knowledge of itself is knowing what could be intelligible and therewith a knowledge of what could be. (Pippin, 2022)

Sum ergo cogito is thus the formula of transcendental idealism: whatever there is has to appear within the structure of *Denkbestimmungen* deployed

in logic, so that “I am” is already a statement within the space of thinking, i. e., only a thinking being can say “I am.” But is this the ultimate limit of our thought? Does Hegel really follow Kant’s insight that, even if our thinking cannot reach reality in itself, it has one object fully accessible to it – thinking itself? Pippin’s idea is that, based on this insight, Hegel simply extends it to all possible objects and thus elevates it into metaphysics: whatever we think is circumscribed by the form-determinations of our thinking.

However, Hegel’s “reversal” of Kant is much more refined and radical. Kant’s position is that the intractable thing that resists our cognitive grasp is reality “in itself,” while thinking can clearly analyze itself and bring out its own immanent structure – antinomies and inconsistencies only arise when thinking is applied to reality beyond the scope of our experience. Hegel’s position is that inconsistencies and “contradictions” are immanent to thinking, so that they emerge already when thinking tries to think itself, its own immanent structure – our thinking “reaches” reality precisely because its immanent “contradictions” mirror contradictions in/of reality itself. Thinking’s failure to grasp reality is immanent to reality itself.

In a way that is parallel though not identical to Hegel’s, Schelling radicalizes Kant’s notion of a primordial, atemporal, transcendental act by means of which we choose our “eternal character,” the elementary contours of our ethical identity. And the link with Freud’s notion of an *unconscious* decision is clear here: this absolute beginning is never made in the present, i. e., its status is that of a pure presupposition, of something that always-already took place. The topic of radical Evil, from Kant to Schelling, is an attempt to solve the enigma of how it is that we hold an evil person responsible for his deeds (although it is clear to us that the propensity to Evil is part of this person’s “nature,” i. e. that he cannot but “follow his nature” and accomplish his deeds with an absolute necessity), Kant and Schelling postulate a non-phenomenal, transcendental, atemporal act of primordial choice, by means of which, each of us, prior to our temporal bodily existence, chooses our eternal character. Within our temporal phenomenal existence, this act of choice is experienced as an imposed necessity, which means that the subject, in his phenomenal self-awareness,

is not conscious of the free choice that grounds his character (his ethical “nature”) – that is to say, this act is radically unconscious.

Kant gets involved here in a difficult predicament: for him, we are not free when we just do what we want, but only when we follow the moral law AGAINST our spontaneous tendencies (which enslave us to our pathological nature). However, in his detailed analysis of evil, Kant is compelled to distinguish between “ordinary” evil (the violation of morality on behalf of some “pathological” motivation, like greed, lust, ambition, etc.), “radical,” evil and “diabolical” evil. It may seem that we are dealing with a simple linear graduation: “normal” evil, more “radical” evil, and, finally, the unthinkable “diabolical” evil. However, upon closer look, it becomes clear that the three species are not at the same level, i. e., that Kant confuses different principles of classification. “Radical” evil does not designate a specific type of evil acts, but an a priori propensity of human nature (to act egotistically, to give preference to pathological motivations over universal ethical duty) which opens up the very space for “normal” evil acts, i. e., which roots them in human nature. In contrast to it, “diabolical” evil does designate a specific type of evil act: acts that are not motivated by any pathological motivation, but are done “just for the sake of it,” elevating evil itself into an a priori *non-pathological* motivation – something akin to Poe’s “imp of perversity.”

While Kant claims that “diabolical evil” cannot actually occur (it is not possible for a human being to elevate evil itself into a universal ethical norm), he nonetheless asserts that one should posit it as an abstract possibility. Interestingly enough, the concrete case he mentions (in Part I of his *Metaphysics of Mores*) is that of a judicial regicide, the murder of a king executed as a punishment pronounced by a court: Kant’s claim is that, in contrast to a simple rebellion in which the mob kills only the person of a king, the judicial process that condemns to death the king (this embodiment of the rule of law) destroys from within the very form of the (rule of) law, turning it into a terrifying travesty – which is why, as Kant put it, such an act is an “indelible crime” that cannot ever be pardoned. However, in a second step, Kant desperately argues that in the two historical cases of such an act (the killing of Charles I under Cromwell and the execution of the king in 1793 France), we were dealing just with a mob taking revenge. Why this oscillation and clas-

sificatory confusion in Kant? Because, if he were to assert the actual possibility of “diabolical evil,” he would find it impossible to distinguish it from the Good – since both acts would be non-pathologically motivated, the *travesty* of justice would become indistinguishable from *justice itself*.

This deadlock present in Kant demonstrates how right Lacan was when he pointed out that the idea of progressive evolution is a new form of teleology. The only way to break from teleology is to adopt a top-down reading of history that conceives of linear progress as a retroactive fact, as the outcome of a backward projection of our standpoint into the past. In a quantum-holographic history, this retroactivity is rendered visible, and all superpositions that were present in the past and were erased through their collapse are rendered visible again. In this sense, one can even say that Walter Benjamin, in his *Theses on History*, proposes a holographic notion of history in contrast to the predominant progressist-evolutionary version. A revolution in the present redeems the past in that it reactualizes past superpositions lost in their collapse towards a ruling ideology. Such a direct contact between the present and the past is timeless in the sense that it bypasses the network of causality and temporality connecting the past and the present. As Walter Benjamin put it in *The Concept of History*, “The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth” (Benjamin 2005).

How can we read this claim without collapsing back into anthropocentric, teleological thinking? Perhaps the supreme example of what we might call ‘holographic history’ is provided by none other than Marx. Marx is not an evolutionist, he writes history ‘top-down’: his starting point is the contemporary global capitalist order and, from this position, he reads the entire history of human society as a gradual approach towards capitalism. Recall Marx’s top-down reading of history in the introduction to *Grundrisse*: “Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape. The intimations of higher development among the subordinate animal species, however, can be understood only after the higher development is already known” (Marx 1973, p. 38). There is no teleology here; the effect of teleology is strictly retroactive: *once capitalism is here* (emerging in a

wholly contingent way), it provides the key to understanding all the other possible formations. Teleology resides precisely in evolutionary progressivism where the key to the anatomy of man is the anatomy of apes. In a holographic, top-down history, the key to the anatomy of the ape is the anatomy of man that it anticipates.

This sense of radical contingency (brought about by awareness of the hologram images of what *could* have been) is also present in Kant, who claims that, in some sense, the world was created so that we can fight our moral struggles in it: when we are in the midst of an intense struggle, one that means everything to us, we experience it as if the whole world could collapse if we were to fail. A similar feeling occurs when we fear the failure of an intense love affair. There is no direct teleology here; our love is the result of a contingent encounter, so it could easily also not have happened – once it does happen, though, it decides how we experience the whole of reality. When Benjamin wrote that a big revolutionary battle decides not only the fate of the present but also of all past failed struggles, he mobilized the same retroactive mechanism epitomized by religious claims that, in a crucial battle, not only the fate of mortals but the fate of God himself is decided.

It is against this background that we should appreciate Peter Sloterdijk's reply to my brutal question about how he relates to god: "It wasn't me who abandoned god, god abandoned me, he pushed me away, he lost interest in me."² Far from a joke, this statement must be taken very seriously even (or even especially) by an atheist: becoming atheist is not a simple, subjective, free decision. Rather, my entire symbolic space is transformed, or, to repeat Deleuze, you can only choose (to drop god) if you are already chosen (i. e. if god has dropped you). Abandoning god is thus at its most basic not a primordial act but a *reaction* to "being abandoned by god." And this is what the naïve direct Enlightenment failed to see: in order for us to enter the space of rational argumentation, something has to happen in the space of the big Other in which we dwell – this is a crucial moment of the dialectics of Enlightenment.

² Private conversation.

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