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## The Kantian Limits

It is absolutely not unthinkable to say that from a certain angle [*The Critique of Pure Reason*] can be read as an erotic book [...] I had always allowed myself to be persuaded that it was badly written in German, because first of all the Germans, with certain exceptions, have the reputation of writing badly. It is not true: *The Critique of Pure Reason* is written as well as Freud's books – and that is no small thing.

Jacques Lacan, *L'identification*, 21 February 1962

### Introduction

Celebrating 300 years of Kant, it could be fitting to ask what single word might best capture the debates surrounding his legacy. The word that seems to impose itself is limit(s), or limitation(s). At the core of many sophisticated arguments, both appreciative and critical, lies this simple, fundamental idea that Kant is, above all, the philosopher of limitation(s): of our human limitations, and thus the limitations of our experience, knowledge, understanding and reason. The epitome of this limitation is the divide between phenomena and noumena, that is the proposition

according to which we can only know things as constituted through our cognitive structures, but not things as they are *in themselves*. This limitation appears to be the *price* we pay for access to objective, universally shareable knowledge.

This phrasing is of course far from neutral. It suggests that, as human beings, we need to *give up* or sacrifice certain pretenses or aspirations (“re-nounce the absolute”) in order to preserve some form of rational mastery, objective/universal knowledge, and orientation in the world. In these accounts, which emphasize limitation as the price of knowledge, limitation also resonates with finitude, further associating Kant with a certain, often pathos-driven aspect of the modern *zeitgeist* that finds a nonnegligible *surplus* satisfaction in the poetic assertions of our finitude.

On the other hand, this portrayal of Kant as the philosopher of limitations and finitude is also a primary target of criticism in some other currents of contemporary philosophy. The title of Quentin Meillassoux’s classic, *After Finitude*, which – possibly against his own intent – epitomizes the movements of speculative realism and object-oriented ontology, is particularly telling in this respect.

In response to this emphasis on limitations, I will not argue that Kant is not about limits and limitations. Instead, I would like to raise a simple question: What exactly is a limit or limitation? This question deserves to be raised both as a question intrinsic to Kant and his philosophy, as well as in relation to other philosophers who – also in response to Kant, as is the case of Hegel – proposed a further and different take on this question. Moreover, beyond how Kant understood his notion of limit(s), one can try to make a case for the Kantian configuration itself being possibly understood in a way that differs from Kant’s own understanding of it. In this respect, I am tempted to propose something like a “speculative provocation” regarding the notion of Kantian limit(s).

For example: Does a limit imply containment, even self-containment? Or does it imply a split, a gap? Another question: Does limitation necessarily imply something “smaller”? Does it necessarily imply that something is “left out” or that something “remains” beyond? Is the Kantian universe actually *smaller* than the pre-critical universe, as Meillassoux suggests?

Might it not be possible that limitation actually produces a world that is, in some sense, “bigger” than a world without limitation?

### The (Dis)satisfaction of Reason

The first thing to point out is that the world “limit” is not precise enough to guide us in these considerations. German has two different words available for capturing the semantic, namely *Schranke* and *Grenze*, and Kant makes a point of distinguishing between them. The only extended discussion of this distinction appears in §§57–60 of the *Prolegomena*, a division entitled “On pure reason’s boundary-determination.” In Lewis White Beck’s translation, *Schranke* is rendered as “limit” and *Grenze* as “bound” or “boundary.” We will stick to this translation, which is also consistent with Pluhar’s translation of Kant’s essay *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft* with *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*. (Translators of Hegel tend to render *Grenze* as “limit” and *Schranke* as “restriction,” which makes the dialogue between Hegel and Kant – in English – somewhat confusing.)

The way Kant sets up the discussion in *Prolegomena* can be summed up as follows: Having established the conditions of something to appear as an object of possible experience, “it would be absurd to hope that we can know more of any object than belongs to the possible experience of it or lay claim to the least knowledge of anything not assumed to be an object of possible experience.” On the other hand, continues Kant, it would be “a still greater absurdity if we conceded no things in themselves or set up our experience as the only possible mode of knowing things, our intuition of them in space and time for the only possible intuition and our discursive understanding for the archetype of every possible understanding.” Why would this be absurd? Not simply on account of the presumptuousness involved in this kind of claim, ignoring something like a healthy modicum of modesty in positing ourselves in the universe, but for a much more precise epistemological reason (with important ontological consequences). Namely, it would imply that the principles of the possibility of experience are “considered universal

conditions of things in themselves (as Hume's *Dialogues* may illustrate)." In other words, the limits (*Schranken*) of our reason might in this way "be set up as limits of the possibility of things in themselves." And the only way to prevent this is a careful critique that "guards the bounds [*Grenzen*] of our reason with respect to its empirical use and sets a limit [*Ziel*] to its pretensions" (Kant 1950, p. 99 [A 163-164]).

Kant attributes here the opposite stance to Hume (namely that what is at stake with limits of reason are the limits of the possibility of things in themselves), but of course much of the Hegelian turn in philosophy and his criticism of Kant implies precisely this allegedly "absurd" consequence, albeit articulated in a much more complex and dialectical way. Hegel detects there the *limit of Kant*, that is of his philosophical proposition, yet at the same time he does not dismiss the question of the limit that Kant introduced in philosophy. His claim (differently from some of the claims coming from object-oriented ontology) is not that we should forget Kant and return to some point(s) of classical metaphysics, but rather that we should radicalize Kant and think of the limit in a way that would abolish the limitations of the Kantian project, without abolishing the concept of the limit (within which Hegel also distinguishes between *Schranke* and *Grenze*, although with an interesting twist).<sup>1</sup>

In this sense, the notion of the limitation is also the *Grenzbegriff* relating and separating Hegel and Kant; it is the very locus or site of the passage, the transition from one to the other. In Hegel's *Logic*, it is also the site of the "Transition of the Finite to the Infinite," as the section is entitled, and then later of the "Transition" as a sublation of the very opposition of the finite and the infinite. This final point is of course the key difference

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<sup>1</sup> See Dolar 2016, pp. 67–68. Another discussion, which we are leaving aside here, would be the discussion of the use that Marx makes of this distinction between *Schranke* and *Grenze*, when describing the capital's ability to transform all *Grenzen* into *Schranken* that can and must be overcome. "Capital is the endless and limitless drive to go beyond its limiting barrier [*Schranke*]. Every boundary [*Grenze*] is and has to be a barrier [*Schranke*] for it [...]. If ever it perceived a certain boundary not as a barrier, but became comfortable within it as a boundary, it would itself have declined from exchange value to use value, from the general form of wealth to a specific, substantial mode of the same" (Marx 1973, p. 334).

between Kant and Hegel: whereas for Kant this opposition or difference is the foundation stone of his system, for Hegel it is only a starting point that leads to its sublation.

There is also a related question that would need to be discussed in this context, and which concerns a specifically Kantian wording, namely that of the boundaries of “the use of our reason,” *Vernunftgebrauch* or *Gebrauch der Vernunft*. The wording is overwhelmingly present in Kant, and opens the obvious question of *who or what* is “using” reason in this or that way, and where does this entity stand in relation to reason, which it “uses” in a good or bad way. In other words, what exactly is it that holds the office of the “border guard”? *Critique*, we are told, but again, critique conducted by what subject, and from where?

The question is all the more pertinent since Kant endows reason itself with a kind of subjectivity, also in the anthropological sense of the term, talking frequently about its “desire,” “needs,” and “satisfaction.” As a matter of fact, this facet of Kant’s argument is quite stunning and persistent if we pay attention to it. The tendency of reason (and consequently of ourselves) to overstep its boundaries is situated by Kant in an ardent desire and insuppressible search for *another satisfaction* (*Befriedigung, Gnüge*). The necessity of limitation comes from something that does not itself belong simply to epistemological considerations, but to a desire or drive that, moreover, “we are not at liberty to abstain from” (Kant 1950, p. 100 [A 166]). There is something unavoidable here, which no critique can prevent or eliminate, and which it even should *not* try to prevent or eliminate, only watch over it and its “boundary.” Kant relates this to “our natural predisposition,” which actually belongs to “anthropology” (*Ibid.*, p. 111, [A 184]).

An interesting short circuit appears here, linking the notions of need, desire, drive, and satisfaction to what we usually call the spiritual realm or ambition, rather than to a bodily one. There is something in this realm that makes us “feel compelled” to overstep the empirical boundaries of reason, “notwithstanding all interdictions” (*ibid.*, p. 100 [A 166]). When it comes to reason, its temptations are not oriented toward “mundane,” “base” empirical objects, but toward objects such as the ideas of God, soul, the world

as a whole. What counts as transgression (and hence as illegitimate satisfaction) here is the indulgence in things such as thinking about the true nature of God, making assumptions about the world as a whole, etc.

Let us look at some of these passages which abound in this section of the *Prolegomena*. If it were simply to abstain completely from thinking about things in themselves and forming ideas about them, the *needs of reason* would remain “forever dissatisfied [*unbefriedigt*]” (ibid., p. 101 [A 166]). Metaphysical tendencies (of reason) are part of its “natural predisposition,” and reason “finds no satisfaction” within the sensible based on the concepts of understanding (ibid., p. 202, [A 168]); it can only hope to “satisfy its desire” in the knowledge of things in themselves (ibid. [169]). Without forming these Ideas reason “cannot have any satisfaction” (ibid., p. 203, [A 177]).

For Kant, the tendency towards metaphysics (that is to say the fact that metaphysics is reason’s “favorite child”) is not accidental, it is “not to be ascribed to blind chance but to an original germ,” since “metaphysics, in its fundamental features, perhaps more than any other science, is placed in us by nature itself” (Ibid., p. 102 [A 168]).

It looks like nature planted within us something that derails us from nature itself. In other words, it would seem that nature wants us to think about things in themselves, or at least wants us to know that there is something beyond what we can grasp with the concepts and laws of understanding, yet at the same time prevents us from having a proper grasp or knowledge of this very something. Some interpreters talk in this respect about “reason’s peculiar fate,” which is that its very nature impels it to continually pose questions that it is incapable of answering (Howard 2022, p. 67). This is indeed how Kant sets the scene of reason.

However, while this may come across as a source of permanent and “systemic” frustration and deprivation, an ear tuned to psychoanalytic theory cannot miss here the ring of particular satisfaction that comes with this frustration itself, and particularly with dwelling on this limit, or border, of the impossible.

Also, it would be difficult to miss the proximity that this configuration maintains to the Lacanian configuration of desire and its relation

to satisfaction. The aim of desire is not to be satisfied (and hence be extinguished as desire, as is the case when we satisfy our needs), but it is to remain unsatisfied. In other words, desire is already a response to the structural dissatisfaction of the needs of reason, the dissatisfaction of its demand to know things in themselves. It is not simply that desire is never properly satisfied; rather, desire proper could be seen as a solution to the structural impossibility of reason's demand to become properly satisfied. It is a solution that results in the production of a new and singular object that appears at this limit and that is unlike any other object: the Lacanian *objet petit a*.<sup>2</sup> This gives body (object-like form) to the gap or interval that separates the demand from its satisfaction. The non-satisfaction constitutive of desire is its object-cause (and source of satisfaction), and not simply something like perpetual deprivation and yearning. In this precise sense, the obstacle or limit is the positive condition of desire, it is part of its armature. Could *Critique of Pure Reason* be read as critique of pure desire?

Lacan was actually one of the rare readers to notice and accentuate this "positive" substance of the Kantian "negative," "restrictive," limiting core of the *architectonic* (sic!) of pure reason. Desire could be said to have two aspects, or can be looked at from two perspectives. One is indeed reducible to the Hegelian diagnosis of the "bad infinite" or "finitized infinite": no satisfaction is the right one, no empirical object is ever It ("the right one"). On the other hand, we could see this *not-It* as itself forming an object (of desire); the "not-it" (or "notit") is not the opposite of It, its (simple) negation. Not-It is the way of saying that the *It* does not exist, and yet it is something, it has consequences, it has some sort of ex-sistence. What desire is pursuing is not simply the impossible "It," but rather the "not-It" in which the impossible becomes its own tangible trace.

In other terms, the void or absence (of the object) is transformed into the modality of "sliding away" or "eluding our grasp." The boundary, *Grenze*, is the point at which a void becomes a lack, the point where it leaves a trace of its negativity, becomes a "positive" trace of its own negativity.

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<sup>2</sup> For more on this triad of need, demand, and desire in their dialectical movement, see Žižek 1993, p. 121.

And this is precisely what accounts for the “eroticism” that Lacan detects in *The Critique of Pure Reason*: it comes with what we could call a certain erotization of the limit or, rather, of the boundary. Boundary is the space of this eluding, of the negativity leaving a positive trace in evoking its own “absence.” Eroticization is a capture of a beyond at the point of its disappearing, it is a scene of its disappearing or sliding away; or, more precisely, it is a *mise-en-scène* of its disappearing and sliding away.

But before saying more on this, let’s return to Kant’s *Prolegomena* and to the distinction between *Schranke* and *Grenze* that he established there, and which carries in itself this peculiar charge of the negative.

## The Charge of the Negative

Kant writes:

Bounds [*Grenzen*] [...] always presuppose a space existing outside a certain definite place and inclosing it; limits [*Schranken*] do not require this, but are mere negations which affect a quantity so far as it is not absolutely complete. (Kant 1950, p. 101 [A166])

Not many interpreters focus on this distinction, although Kant makes it and insists on it quite explicitly in *Prolegomena*. One of the few (recent) exceptions is Stephen Howard, in his article “Kant on limits, boundaries, and the positive function of Ideas.” Although my conclusions differ from Howard’s, I concur with several of his observations.

Kant first draws our attention to the difference between natural sciences (including mathematics) and philosophy or metaphysics. In natural sciences human reason admits of limits, *Schranken*, but not of bounds or boundaries, *Grenzen*. How should we understand this?

Mathematics and natural science treat only one type of object: respectively, constructions in pure intuition and physical bodies in space. These disciplines can investigate their objects “to infinity”: new theorems can always be



proved and more fine-grained properties of bodies can always be discovered. (Howard 2022, p. 66)

A limit indicates something strictly negative (negation of extension, incompleteness, absence of), and – differently from bound or boundary – posits nothing positive. Limit is something that we can only approach ad infinitum, and never properly “touch” it. There always remains a space between “us” and the limit.

We could also recall here Lacan’s comment concerning Zeno’s paradox of Achilles and the tortoise:<sup>3</sup>

A number has a limit and it is to that extent that it is infinite. It is quite clear that Achilles can only pass the tortoise – he cannot catch up with it. He only catches up with it at infinity. (Lacan 1999, p. 8)

In this comment by Lacan, we also catch a glimpse of the notion of boundary or border, implied in the suggestion that Achilles can only “pass” the tortoise, that is *cross* the point where it finds itself. From this other perspective, the tortoise is no longer just a (negative) limit point of Achilles’ world and his efforts, but becomes something else: an actual other. And the question now becomes the one of their relation, which is also how Lacan picks it up – in the context of the question of the sexual relation and its (non)existence.

The relation between phenomena and noumena in Kant corresponds rather well to this model. On the one hand, noumena or things in themselves, are just a limiting concept. Yet, on the other hand, reason cannot abstain from thinking and making propositions about the things in themselves, for this belongs to its “natural” disposition. And in this sense, reason’s first step is already that of “passing,” transgressing the “limit,” which *thus turns into a boundary*, since it now delimits (separates and connects)

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<sup>3</sup> In this paradox, Zeno argues that a swift runner like Achilles cannot overtake a slower moving tortoise with a head start, because the distance between them can be infinitely subdivided, implying Achilles would require an infinite number of steps to catch the tortoise.

two different, heterogenous types of objects: phenomena and noumena. Noumena here do not have just a limiting role as the negation of phenomena but are themselves an object (of reason). In this precise sense, reason “creates” noumena as *something*: a positive *notion* of things in themselves is created.

This has interesting consequences for the perspective from which Kant’s “Copernican turn” is viewed, for example, by Meillassoux:

[...] it could be that contemporary philosophers have lost the *great outdoors*, the *absolute* outside of pre-critical thinkers [...]. (Meillassoux 2008, p. 7, emphasis in original)

It makes sense to ask whether what was allegedly “lost” ever truly existed. Could we not say, with equal justification, that noumena, or “things as they are in themselves,” are not in fact something we lost but rather something we first found with Kant? Noumena are there, so to speak, on *top* of the precritical universe, as an addition to it. In the precritical universe, the question of things as they are in themselves makes no sense (the Platonic distinction between appearance and essence differs radically, in its logic, from the difference between phenomena and noumena). And this is precisely why Hegel, in spite of his criticism of Kant and his notion of noumena, does not simply reject it and return to the precritical tradition. Instead, he maintains the difference between “in itself” and “for consciousness” (or “for itself”), and takes it a step further in the dialectical movement that brings us to the (possibility of) “in itself and for itself.”

In other words, the story does not necessarily go like this: we start with a vast space, draw a line within it, and thus exclude part of it, limiting ourselves to a smaller, contained portion. Wouldn’t it be equally plausible to say that it was Kant’s conception of the transcendental that created, for the first time, what we now refer to as “the beyond” or the “great outdoors”? In this view, nothing was strictly lost. Or, if something was lost, it is not synonymous with the “beyond.” A beyond was created, noumena got some kind of positive existence, based on the fact that reason is, by its nature, dialectical, and hence keeps moving between here and beyond,

keeps transgressing the boundary between phenomena and noumena. Critique, which is there to determine and guard this boundary or border, *does not prevent it from being crossed*. On the contrary, what it does is that it changes the status of reason's conclusions once they pass this border: they do not refer to any objects, but to *Gedankenwesen* or *Gedankendinge*.

Kant talks about the difference between a limit and a boundary, but we could also talk about the moment (and movement) in which a limit becomes a boundary through reason's "overstepping" or "overtaking" negativity (the space that always separates us from the limit point), which is now included in the "here" as its "beyond." Negativity is no longer ahead of reason but is within reason (as desire?), indicating its split.

Howard correctly emphasizes that the way Kant distinguishes in *Prolegomena* between limit and bound(ary) implies that with the notion of boundary, *Grenze*, we already start with a *two*. Yet we need to be more precise here: this "two" does not simply refer to two things, or "two heterogeneous objects" (as Howard suggests), but rather to *an object and a void*, that is to say, an object and its inherent impossibility that constitutes its ground, so to speak. Transcendental ideas lead us "to the spot where the occupied space (namely, experience), *touches the void* (that of which we can know nothing, namely, *noumena*)" (Kant 1950, p. 103 [A 107], our emphasis).

This is a very interesting and intriguing formulation by Kant: noumena are but the void (*die Leere*, also *der leere Raum*) that bounds phenomena. And, even more precisely, that binds them from within. This at least is the difference between the perspective of the natural sciences and that of philosophy. Whereas the former are not split in themselves, the latter is.

This brings us back to a previous point. If "sensibility and understanding in its empirical use have limits, whereas the pure understanding and reason have boundaries" (Howard 2022, p. 75), it is because their activity can be directed toward what Howard calls two heterogeneous objects: objects of experience and ideas of reason as thoughts of things in themselves. If sensibility and empirical understanding have a limit, but no boundary, it is because, as Kant puts it quite explicitly, in the case of understanding its boundary "lies without it," outside it (Kant 1950, p. 109

[A 181]). It is not even an object of its thought; *it is not a thing* (for it), as the contemporary colloquial expression has it. What Kant means is that metaphysics and morals lie entirely outside of the sphere of natural sciences, that there is “not a continual progress and approximation towards these sciences [metaphysics and morals], and there is not, as it were, any point or line of contact” (ibid., p. 101 [A 167]). With boundary, *Grenze*, on the other hand, the negativity becomes *touchable*.

This also presents us with the idea that, if it is only reason (as opposed to sensibility and empirical understanding) that has a boundary, this boundary is strictly intrinsic and immanent to reason; it constitutes its part and produces a split in it. Sensibility and empirical understanding have a limit, but no boundary.

To say that in natural sciences the boundary of something lies without understanding, as opposed to the boundary of reason that lies within it, further implies – for Kant – that sensibility and empirical understanding *never touch* this boundary. It is only the concept of phenomena that touches it, because, in order to talk about phenomena, we must be led “to the spot where the occupied space (namely, experience) touches the void (that of which we can know nothing, namely, *noumena*),” which is why we can now speak of the bounds or boundaries of pure reason, namely boundary between phenomena and noumena.

We have to be careful to notice the additional distinction that appears here, and its consequences, namely the distinction or difference between empirical knowledge and experience that ground that which is called phenomenal, and the notion of the *realm* or domain of phenomena, of appearances. The determination of the latter (as appearances) lies outside them. “Phenomenon” (or the realm of phenomena) is not a notion based on experience.

Boundary only exists between phenomena and noumena, specifically because they are set as distinct to begin with, even if we identify the noumena with nothing but a void. But this Kantian dualism gets a peculiar further twist with Kant’s meditation on what a bound or a boundary actually is.

## The With-Without

Kant writes:

[...] in all bounds there is something positive (for example, a surface is the boundary of corporeal space, and is therefore itself a space; a line is a space, which is the boundary of the surface, a point the boundary of the line, but yet always a place in space) [...]. (Ibid., p. 103 [A 170])

Boundary itself is a space, a thing in its own right. Boundary suggests a point, or line, or surface of touch, of contact, and this point or line or surface has a peculiar status that, strictly speaking, is neither that of a phenomenon nor that of a thing in itself or a void. As the zone of their *touching*, it is a paradoxical extension, a space with a certain – why not use the expression – singular “charge of the negative.” As we put it earlier, a boundary is the space of the negativity leaving a positive trace, evoking its own “absence” or beyond. As such, boundary is a capture of a beyond at the point of its disappearing.

This further suggests that, strictly speaking, noumena are not what bounds the phenomena, but what bounds them are *boundaries* that belong to both and form a space of their own, an in-between that is neither a thing nor a non-thing. This is also what lies behind a peculiar bit of Kantian wording, namely that there are concepts that exist “on the boundary” (*auf der Grenze*). Now, what Kant calls a legitimate use of reason is not simply a use that stays on this side of the boundary, but rather a use that *includes the boundary*. And this is finally what the “critique” achieves.

The notion of the boundary in Kant introduces something third in relation both to the idea of limit as a purely negative determination and to the (inadmissible) positivization of things in themselves as “suprasensible objects” or objects of “nonsensible intuition.” In a way, Hegel is right when in his criticism of Kant he talks of a “fixed negation” or “negation *fixed in itself*” (Hegel 2010, p. 102). But what a Lacanian perspective adds here, and allows us to see, is that, with it, Kant has discovered the fixation and the split proper to desire and its unconscious dialectics. Moreover, do we not encounter a very similar structure in Freud’s discussion of *Verneinung*: a “negation” that

is not simply the opposite of what it negates, but that carries in itself the positive charge of what it negates? “Without” becomes a “with-without,” or simply “with-out.” In the famous example discussed by Freud, “This is not my mother” thus becomes something like “this is not-mother.”

We could say that the particular emphasis in Kant on the topology and the *spatial* dimension/rendering of the configuration at stake is also what makes Kant Kant and distinguishes him from Hegel, for whom the crucial emphasis is on temporality and its paradoxical movement.

This could be seen most clearly in the way Hegel picks up Kant’s example of the boundary as something in itself positive, occupying some space (a point, a line, a surface), and “liquefies” it into a temporal movement of reversal (removes its “fixation,” we could say). In his *Science of Logic* Hegel first posits, in agreement with Kant, that, since *Grenze* “and immediate existence are each at the same time the negative of each other, the something, which is now only in its *Grenze*, equally separates itself from itself, points beyond itself to its non-being and declares it to be its being, and so it passes over into it” (Hegel 2010, p. 100). The basic agreement with Kant would be that the *Grenze* of two things is their “common distinguishedness” and that it “points beyond itself to its non-being and declares it to be its being, and so it passes over into it.” This last point, however, already introduces Hegel’s further temporal twist and movement, which he introduces with (implicit) reference to Kant’s spatial example (“a surface is the boundary [*Grenze*] of corporeal space, and is therefore itself a space; a line is a space, which is the boundary of the surface, a point the boundary of the line, but yet always a place in space”). Hegel now points out that:

the point is the *Grenze*<sup>4</sup> of line, not because the latter just ceases at the point and has existence outside it; the line is the *Grenze* of plane, not because the plane just ceases at it; and the same goes for the plane as the *Grenze* of solid. Rather, at the point the line also begins; the point is its absolute beginning,

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<sup>4</sup> I’m quoting the German term, because in the translation *Grenze* is rendered as “limit,” which can be confusing in respect to our previous discussion and could prevent us from seeing that Hegel is discussing here what Kant calls (in the English translation) the bound(ary).

and if the line is represented as unlimited on both its two sides, or, as is said, as extended to infinity, the point still constitutes its element, just as the line constitutes the element of the plane, and the plane that of the solid. These *Grenzen* are the principle of that which they delimit (*begrenzen*); just as one, for instance, is as hundredth the *Grenze*, but also the element, of the whole hundred. (Hegel 2010, p. 100)

This passage very nicely renders both the proximity and distance between Kant and Hegel, what distinguishes them. Hegel goes on to speak about the *unrest* of the something in its *Grenze*, of the contradiction that propels it beyond itself. We thus get a specific temporality of the dialectical movement, that of *becoming*: “the point is this dialectic of itself becoming line; the line, the dialectic of becoming plane; the plane, of becoming total space” (Ibid.). We could say that for Kant the inner limit (or *Grenze* as the inner limit) is a split, whereas for Hegel it is a movement, and this captures rather well the difference between the two philosophers. (Of course, we could also argue that for Hegel, movement itself is the form of the split.)

Without going into any more details of this discussion, I would just like to insist on this difference between the Kantian “fixation” of the *Grenze* (and the “erotic” movement contained in what happens at this *Grenze*, the satisfaction in dwelling on it and exploring it), and the Hegelian move of transforming the *Grenze* into the internal infinite movement that breaks down its own finitude.

There may be something at stake here in Kant that – regardless of our affinities – is not reducible to the passage from Kant to Hegel as a simply logical passage, that is to Hegel as a step further from and radicalization of Kant. Although I agree with this later assessment in many ways, there is also something resulting from the Kantian fixation on *Grenze* that captures a dimension of reality (signifying reality included) that is as real as the Hegelian movement and yet distinct from it: the emphasis on the in-between as a peculiar space with its own dialectic, a dialectic within dialectic, as it were. In a certain sense, the “dialectics of desire,” as formulated by Lacan, is perhaps just such “dialectics within dialectics,” but this would demand a more specific and elaborate argument.

For the purposes of the present argument, I would just like to conclude by relating this discussion of *Grenze* to another specifically Kantian move and point, namely his discussion of the difference between negative and indefinite judgement (in the *Critique of Pure Reason*), as it has been emphasized and exemplified particularly in the work of Slavoj Žižek. This is the difference between saying, for example, that something is “not dead” and saying that it is “undead” – in the first we negate a predicate, in the other we affirm a certain non-predicate. Žižek pointed out the specifically “spectral,” “ghostly” dimension of the latter (Žižek 1993, pp. 112-114), strikingly visible in the “undead” example and its relations to creatures that populate the popular margins of modernity, such as vampires. Lacan refers to this space in his commentary on Antigone (and of the desire that animates her) as the space *between two -deaths*, also emphasizing Antigone’s position at the “frontier,” which gets its spatial materialization in her punishment: being buried alive in a tomb (Lacan 1997, p. 224). The fact that Kant is a central philosophical reference in the *Ethics* seminar where Lacan developed this is hardly a coincidence. And, indeed, it could be argued that, in some ways, for Kant *Grenze* is also a liminal space:

As a boundary itself is something positive, which belongs to that which lies within as well as to the space that lies without the given content, it is still an actual positive cognition which reason only acquires by enlarging itself to this boundary, yet without attempting to pass it because it there finds itself in the presence of an empty space in which it can conceive forms of things, but not things themselves. (Kant 1950, p. 109 [A 181])

There is clearly a metaphor of restriction here: we can only go so far and no further. But at the same time, there is also what Kant describes as reason finding itself *in the presence of* an empty space of void, populated by “beings” that are in fact non-beings. What we encounter at the very boundary of reason could thus also be seen as a kind of (projection of?) a pre-ontological gap, the gap of things for which we cannot say that they are “not (yet) born,” but rather that they are “unborn.” This is precisely the term Lacan uses when discussing the status of the unconscious: “the area



of the unborn," of the "unrealized" (Lacan 1998, p. 23). One should not miss here the echo of the Kantian indefinite judgment: unborn and unrealized are not the opposite (or simple negation) of the born and realized, but rather they fall out from this distinction or opposition; they refer to a "limbo" and are pre-ontological in the Lacanian sense.<sup>5</sup>

Lacan often speaks of the unfortunate use of the negative prefix in the Freudian term *Unbewußte*, or "unconscious", insisting that what is at stake is not a simple negation or opposition. Unconscious thoughts are "eternally unborn"; what happens through analysis is not that they get to be "born," but they are rather taken up and discussed with all seriousness precisely *as unborn*. Becoming conscious of unconscious thoughts does not amount to their "realization" and they do not exactly lose the status of liminal beings; rather, this process of becoming conscious helps the subject orient (map) herself at the gaps of her reality and its contradictions.

Kant was not insensible to this peculiar dimension of being, to which also the Freudian unconscious belongs. He was not interested in the question of the unconscious; he came to think about this dimension from the other end, so to say, namely from the perspective of universal knowledge and its possibility. And what he arrived at was also not the unconscious, but a paradoxical ontological status of *Gedankendinge*.

The Freudian Thing is not the Kantian *Ding an sich*, or Thing-in-itself. Yet this statement should not be taken as a simple negation, for there also is something of the Kantian *Ding* in the Freudian *Ding*. It is just a thought; "just a thought," which, in its critical examination, points to the necessity of its appearing at a certain locus in the chain of thinking, and marks a gap, a double gap. It is the point at which epistemology, or the question of knowledge, falls into an ontological gap (the "lack of being"), and where ontology, or the question of being, falls into the gap in the structuring of knowledge. Hegel was quite right to insist on their speculative identity, yet dwelling on this gap as such, fixating on it and exploring it, designs the contours of a Thing that still remains with us.

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<sup>5</sup> "The gap of the unconscious may be said to be pre-ontological" (Lacan 1998, p. 29).

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