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# Hegel and The Knots of the Understanding

## Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to examine Hegel's account on the "understanding" (*Verstand*). It is my intention to show that it is the central symptomatic knot of Hegel's philosophy, to the extent that it can play the role of the ultimate Rorschach test for determining the choice of neurosis for Hegel's readers: one's perspective on *Verstand* constitutes the decisive clue for what Hegelians think when they think of Hegel. Moreover, considering that, for Hegel, "*the understanding's identity* [is the principle] of metaphysics and of the Enlightenment" (EL§74) and the very vehicle "of our universal scientific culture" (EL5), we could even say that what one thinks of *Verstand* is indicative of one's perspective on philosophy, natural science and the political legacy of the Enlightenment as such.<sup>1</sup> This view about the importance of the understanding has been echoed in various

<sup>1</sup> In this paper I make use of the following abbreviations: EL followed by paragraph number for G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusätze*, with the letters R and A referring to Remarks and Additions, respectively; PhS followed by paragraph number for G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*; SL for G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*. For Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, I make use of the standard references to the A and B pagination from the Cambridge translation. In all instances where a citation does

ways in the literature on Hegel. Brady Bowman, for instance, considers that Hegel's project of thinking substance as subject is one with his critique of the "metaphysics of the understanding": "Taking a broad perspective, we may say that Hegel's project of thinking 'substance' as 'subject' is one with the critique of the metaphysics of the understanding ..."<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, Slavoj Žižek goes as far as to say that "everything turns out on how we are to understand [the] identity-and-difference between Understanding and Reason."<sup>3</sup> However, despite this seeming centrality of the understanding in Hegel's philosophy, the topic of *Verstand* has only been addressed at length in Anglophone literature in a short series of papers by Burbidge (1990), Houlgate (1990), Baur (1991), and in latter essays by Morris (2006) and Limnatis (2006).<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, when the understanding does step into the limelight, it enjoys a rather "bad press amongst Hegelians,"<sup>5</sup> and this usually consists of two claims. First, the understanding is taken to be the manifestation of a reificatory way of thinking that designates a stance of "naïve objectivism"<sup>6</sup> or, as Fredric Jameson puts it, of "common-sense empiricism."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, for Jameson, *Verstand* is the standpoint of ideological thinking par excellence, it is the "conceptual lingua franca of our everyday life."<sup>8</sup> Second, the understanding is regarded as a preparatory stage for fully conceptual thought, akin to a skin that is shed off upon reaching the luminous and perfected heights of reason. This is a common motif amongst a wide range of interpretations: Marxist readers such as György Lukács mention

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not include the paragraph number (§), the number refers to the page instead of the paragraph.

- 2 Brady Bowman, *Hegel and the Metaphysics of Absolute Negativity*, 87.
- 3 Slavoj Žižek, "Intellectual Intuition and *Intellectus Archetypus*: Reflexivity from Kant to Hegel," in: *Subject Lessons: Hegel, Lacan, and the Future of Materialism*, 109.
- 4 For a useful (and short) bibliography about this topic in German, French and Russian scholarship, see Nectarios Limnatis, "Reason and Understanding in Hegelian Philosophy."
- 5 John Burbidge, "Where is the Place of Understanding?," in: *Essays on Hegel's Logic*, 171.
- 6 Michael Baur, "Hegel and the Overcoming of the Understanding."
- 7 Fredric Jameson, *The Hegel Variations: On the Phenomenology of Spirit*, 1.
- 8 Jameson, *The Hegel Variations*, 18.

the “elevation from understanding to reason,”<sup>9</sup> transcendentalists such as Robert Pippin refer to a “synthetic, dynamic, and comprehensive reason” which is the “culmination” of the understanding,<sup>10</sup> Stephen Houlgate, from a Spinozist-immanentist perspective, considers that, through its own activity, thought progresses beyond understanding and becomes “fully rational,”<sup>11</sup> Angelica Nuzzo suggests that understanding “consents to transform itself into reason,”<sup>12</sup> and finally, from the perspective of an Aristotelian reading of Hegel, G. R. G. Mure refers to the “absorption” of the understanding by reason.<sup>13</sup> There is however an exception to this interpretative tradition, namely Slavoj Žižek, who, in *Less Than Nothing*, adds a subchapter titled “In praise of Understanding” in order to challenge its bad reputation among interpreters of Hegel.<sup>14</sup> For Žižek, reason is not a perfected form of the understanding in which the errors of the latter are corrected and integrated into a coherent whole. Instead, according to him, “Reason is, in a way, not more but less than Understanding.”<sup>15</sup>

As we will see, there is certainly an argument to be made that this confusion regarding the understanding stems from a lack of clarity in Hegel’s texts as such, although, as I will suggest, this is not in any way indicative of a systematic inconsistency on Hegel’s part. In this direction, before concretely assessing Hegel’s account on the relation between understanding and reason in the last part of this paper, I will present a genetical account of the understanding in the triad sensibility-understanding-reason, with a particular focus on the chapter “Force and Understanding” from the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In my view, what is not properly emphasized by most interpreters of Hegel is the relationship of the understanding to *sensibility*, the ignorance of which, implicitly and necessarily, also then obscures the

<sup>9</sup> György Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being. Hegel’s False and His Genuine Ontology*, 89.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Pippin, *Hegel’s Realm of Shadows: Logic as Metaphysics in the Science of Logic*, 27.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Houlgate, “A Reply to John Burbidge,” in: *Essays on Hegel’s Logic*, 183.

<sup>12</sup> Angelica Nuzzo, “Dialectic, Understanding, and Reason: How Does Hegel’s *Logic* Begin?”, in: *The Dimensions of Hegel’s Dialectic*, 16.

<sup>13</sup> Geoffrey Reginald Gilchrist Mure, *An Introduction to Hegel*, 75.

<sup>14</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, 269–80.

<sup>15</sup> Žižek, “Intellectual Intuition and *Intellectus Archetypus*,” 109.

relationship of the understanding to reason. To be more specific, I will argue that there is a repressed sensible moment which defines the constitution of the understanding's thought *qua* abstract thought.<sup>16</sup> This will come in contrast to the "ladder to reason" interpretation, in which the understanding is interpreted as subsuming sensibility under it, the implication being that the understanding is, in turn, taken as the sensible support or the presupposition on the basis of which reason perfects itself. However, before I properly unpack this dynamic, I will clarify what Hegel has in mind when he refers to the understanding as a technical term.

### Introducing the Understanding

It is first important to emphasize that Hegel takes himself to follow in Kant's footsteps in his technical use of the term understanding and, subsequently, in the critique of what he refers to as the "abstract metaphysics of the understanding" (EL§37A). In Hegel's view, Kant's great philosophical advance consisted in his restriction of the scope of the understanding to the sensible manifold, or, to the form of spatiotemporal experience. Without the givenness of the manifold, established by Kant in the transcendental aesthetic in the first *Critique*, there would be, at least from a genetical perspective, no sensible object to be unified in the synthesis of the manifold which Kant identifies as the very activity of the understanding *qua* synthetic unity of apperception.<sup>17</sup> Kant has therefore philosophically

<sup>16</sup> This dynamic has also been highlighted, although with different consequences than the ones proposed in this paper, in Mure, *An Introduction to Hegel*, 65–76.

<sup>17</sup> Properly developing this interpretation of the relation between the transcendental aesthetic and the transcendental deduction is beyond my purposes here, although it surely can seem contentious. There are many passages in the first *Critique* in which Kant indicates that sensibility has a greater significance than the pure concepts of the understanding, insofar as, without the former, the latter would have no object to "think" (A76–7/B102, B306). Indeed, in A89–91/B121–4, Kant mentions multiple times that sensibility can offer objects without the functions of the understanding, passages which have been disputed as constituting a merely hypothetical scenario proposed by Kant (see Anil Gomes, "Kant on Perception: Naive Realism, Nonconceptualism, and the B-Deduction," and Thomas Land, "Nonconceptualist

established the “finitude of thought” precisely by limiting the sphere of the understanding to a thinking of mere spatiotemporal appearances, *Erscheinungen*, this leap constituting, according to Hegel, a “very important result of the Kantian philosophy” (EL§45A). *Verstand* is then the quintessential manifestation of this finitude of thought, Hegel defining it precisely as the form of thought which thinks in terms of finite determinations: “[the] thinking that brings forth only *finite* determinations and moves within these alone is called *understanding* (in the more precise sense of the word)” (EL§25).

The philosophical implications of this Kantian move are, as we know, monumental. After the Kantian event, a whole philosophical tradition can be retroactively determined as a dogmatic or uncritical type of philosophizing insofar as this philosophy took itself to think the things themselves when, in truth, from the Kantian perspective, it unconsciously adhered to the standpoint of the understanding and thus thought over merely sensible appearances. So, when Hegel makes references to the “pre-Critical” metaphysics, the “metaphysics of the recent past” (EL§27) or to “dogmatic” metaphysics (EL§32), he is strictly referring to *Verstandesphilosophie* or to the metaphysics of the understanding, a tradition in which he includes “especially the Scholastics” (EL§36A), and thinkers as varied as Descartes, Spinoza and Malebranche in its “first” modern

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Readings of Kant and the Transcendental Deduction”). Transcendental logic thus has as its presupposition “that objects are given to us in intuition, to which it can be applied” (A62/B87). It is crucial to emphasize that Hegel *agrees* that the understanding is genetically preceded by sensibility and intuition. G. W. F. Hegel, *Introduction on the Lectures of the History of Philosophy*, 33–35; SL516–20. Nevertheless, the key implication in Hegel’s view is the following: just because they genetically precede the understanding, this does not entail that they are *truthful*. Indeed, the loss of the pure immediacy of the sensible object constitutes the proper content of thought, but the *semblance* of the sheer givenness of this object, its *Schein*, is constitutive for thought qua thought. Hence why the transcendental logic, as preceded by the transcendental aesthetic, and as a thought which dwells in this loss, is a “logic of truth” (A62/B87). This point is implicit in Kant and brought to full fruition by Hegel, but it is fatally overlooked if the immediate givenness of the object is fully subsumed under a self-establishing conceptual mediation, as the purpose of the Deduction is so often interpreted.

period and, in its “second” period, he includes Leibniz, Hobbes, Wolff, and Locke. As he puts it, this metaphysics proceeds “from the general determinations of the understanding.”<sup>18</sup>

Much more could be said about the dimensions of the understanding which prompted Hegel to refer to it as the very principle of finite thought and, secondly, as the philosophical vehicle which, without seeming to waste a breath, he identifies as the definitory characteristic of so many apparently divergent and different philosophers, ranging from the scholastics to rationalists such as Spinoza and empiricists such as Locke. My interest here has solely been to clarify how Hegel follows in Kant’s footsteps in his account of *Verstand*, so that we can now focus on delineating the conflicting dimensions of the understanding that *prima facie* permeate Hegel’s account, to the extent that it has led the editors of the English translation of the *Encyclopaedia Logic* to suggest that Hegel’s perspective in EL§80A, where he refers to the “fixity” of the understanding, “contrasts sharply” (EL323) with his account in the preface to the *Phenomenology*, where he refers to the understanding and “its activity of *division* [*Scheiden*]” as the “absolute power” (PhS§32).<sup>19</sup> There is, to be sure, a certain Manichean flavor to Hegel’s references to the understanding: if at some points he seems to identify a “good” understanding with the very power of the negative (PhS§32), at other points he refers to the “rigidity of being” (SL539) imposed on the content of thought by a “bad” understanding and its “fictions” (EL§126A).

In this rather knotty interpretative context, my purpose is twofold. Firstly, it is to show that Hegel’s views on the understanding are not “ambivalent,”<sup>20</sup> but entirely consistent. Secondly, it is to demonstrate, by

<sup>18</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: The Lectures of 1825–1826*, Vol. 3, 131–70, 170–217, 203.

<sup>19</sup> The rest of the editors’ footnote is indicative of the scholarly confusion and lack of clarification *vis-à-vis* the place of the understanding in Hegel’s philosophy: “Hegel’s *dialectical* conception of the understanding, as itself a unity of opposite values, of fixation and separation, is not generally understood. Often, indeed, it is not even *remembered*. But its importance for Hegel is shown by the way he recurs to this positive evaluation of Understanding in his commentary on §81” (EL323).

<sup>20</sup> Burbidge, “Where is the Place of Understanding?”, 172.

providing a summary of the chapter “Force and Understanding” from the *Phenomenology*, that the key to grasping the proper place of the understanding in Hegel’s philosophy consists in unpacking its relation to the immediate object of sense-perception. My concrete claim is that there is a residual content from sense-perception which is not properly worked through by the understanding, but without which it would not *be* understanding. In other words, as Hegel puts it in the *Phenomenology*, the object of the understanding presents itself in a “sensory covering” [*sinnlicher Hülle*] (PhS§164) of which the understanding is constitutively unaware. The crucial implication is the following: the understanding immediately takes its thoughts *as things* which are “out there,” akin to external sensible beings, and in the same move it reifies the world as such, conceiving of it as a thing. If we follow here Brady Bowman in his affirmation that the “basic characteristic of metaphysics is its *reification* of ‘the true,’”<sup>21</sup> then examining this dynamic will help us demonstrate why understanding is *metaphysical thinking par excellence*. As Hegel himself indicates, it is the understanding which is responsible for the “view that things consist of independent stuffs” (EL§126A) or, in other words, it is the understanding which compulsively posits and fixes metaphysical *transcendence* as an instance of the real which thought, in its finitude, is infinitely separated from. My central purpose in what follows is to properly unpack this claim by showing that the metaphysical compulsion of the understanding consists in its “acting out” of an *unthought* sensible moment imprinted in the very genesis of its thought.

### The Crack of Thought

Before examining “Force and the Understanding,” I first turn to a passage from the *Encyclopaedia Logic*, which succinctly captures Hegel’s account of the relation between sensibility and the understanding: “The thoughtlessness [*Gedankenlosigkeit*] of sensibility, which takes everything limited

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<sup>21</sup> Bowman, *Hegel and the Metaphysics of Absolute Negativity*, 86.

and finite for something *that [simply] is*, passes over into the stubbornness of the understanding, which grasps it as [something] *identical-with-itself, that does not inwardly contradict itself*" (EL§113R; translation modified).

According to this passage, the relationship between sensibility and understanding is not one in which the former is simply "captured" by the latter, in a way in which the immediate singular concreteness of the sensible object is always-already synthesized by, or even *as*, the mediated universal abstraction of the concept of the understanding. Their relationship is far more subtle, in Hegel's view, in the sense that the finitude which characterizes sensibility becomes a constitutive moment in the understanding, however with an important qualitative twist. If the finitude of sensibility consists in an apprehension of objects which are "trivial, external and perishable" (EL§6R), thus referring to a perpetual vanishing that characterizes objecthood in the sphere of being, the finitude at the level of the understanding is one in which the object is *reflected*, i.e., taken as something "identical-with-itself," *als ein mit-sich-identisches*, as possessing an essence or constitutive "depth." In other words, just as vanishing is immediate for sensibility, so is abstract identity immediate for the understanding: for sensibility it is the object which is a vanishing (Ph§98), for the understanding it is the understanding *itself* which vanishes from its implication in the object. As an apprehension of a "something" which self-sufficiently *stands* against it, *Verstand* constitutively relates to its object as an externality, it does not take itself to be implicated in its relating to the object.<sup>22</sup> The consequence to be drawn here is that the understanding does not entirely *overcome* sensibility with its mediation. Rather, its *Aufhebung* of sensibility involves, in truth, a carrying over, a passing of an immediacy by which, for the understanding, its very act of mediation qua abstraction becomes immediate to it. Paragraph 80 in EL very succinctly captures the immediacy *and* the subsistence that this "limited abstraction" has for the understanding: "Thinking as *understanding* stops short at the fixed determinacy and its distinctness *vis-à-vis* other determinacies; such

<sup>22</sup> "Instead of entering into the immanent content of the Thing, the understanding always surveys the whole and stands above the singular Being-there [*Dasein*] of which it speaks, that is, it does not see it at all" (Ph§53).

a limited abstraction [*beschränktes Abstractes*] counts for the understanding as one that subsists and [simply] is [*bestehend und seyend*]” (translation modified).

The understanding is thus a thinking which is constitutively characterized by *eine Gedankenlosigkeit*, a thoughtlessness, an absence or gap in thought. This “cerebral crack in a vigorous body or the crevice of thought,” to quote Gilles Deleuze,<sup>23</sup> expresses the anaesthetic presence of sense in thought, which renders thought at once insensible and unreasonable, it numbs it *vis-à-vis* the thinking that it itself is. Or, the crack is the remainder which parasitizes abstraction and determines the *unthought* dimension of thought, an insensible immediacy in which thinking as such is thrown into the bin, consumed by the rift. This *Gedankenlosigkeit* of *Verstand*, as I will now show through a short exposition of “Force and Understanding,” corresponds, for Hegel, to the initial development of the understanding as “perceptual understanding” or *wahrnehmende Verstand* (PhS§131), a type of consciousness which, as its very name indicates, finds itself in a tension between perceiving and thinking, with this tension making its presence felt all throughout the dialectical movement between the understanding and its object – force.

## Force and Understanding

At the beginning of the chapter, Hegel explicitly mentions that, with the conclusion of the movement of perception, “consciousness has arrived at thoughts” (PhS§132). This arrival occurs due to the main contradiction of perception, which consists precisely in the fact that perception keeps contradiction and negativity away from the thing. The criterion of truth for perception resides in asserting the self-identity of its object: for it, the thing is, out there, externally, and any unessential moment pertaining to it, its *non-being*, is taken by perception as an error that pertains to itself. Perception is therefore caught in a compulsion of enunciating its “insofar”

<sup>23</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 329.

in order to assert *either* the oneness of the thing *or* the manifoldness of the properties which specify the thing: insofar as it is many, the thing is not one, and insofar as it is one, the thing is not many. Similarly, with the emergence of *diverse* things, perception specifies that insofar as a thing is for itself, it is not for another, and insofar as it is for another, it is not for itself. As such, perception constitutively considers that error is always on its *side*, there is neither error nor movement in the thing itself. By contrast, the arrival at thought and at what Hegel refers to as the “unconditioned universal” implies a conception of objecthood in which the movement by which a thing turns out to be other than itself pertains to the thing itself. Or, thinking implies a tarrying with the dissolution of the self-identity of the thing, an apprehending that it is through its own “essential property that the thing goes to ruin” (PhS§125). This was already implicit in the “insofar” of perception: by specifying what the thing *is*, perception, to the contrary of its intentions, merely asserted what the thing is *not*.

Now, what I wish to highlight is that, throughout “Force and the Understanding,” this standpoint of perception, which keeps negation outside the thing, is not completely overcome by the understanding. Rather, the fixation on asserting the identity of the thing *insists*, although in a manner specific to the understanding, and with different, strictly metaphysical, consequences: if perception asserts the self-identical oneness of the thing, the understanding asserts the *self-identical wholeness of a world*, a world which transcends the understanding itself. Given the notorious density of this chapter, my reading is here restricted to one purpose, namely that of highlighting the passages in which Hegel explicitly mentions the insistence of a “moment” of sensory immediacy in the abstractions of the understanding, of the crack which renders it thoughtless. Indeed, even though Hegel announces that, at this point, consciousness “has arrived at thoughts,” throughout the chapter, “thought” or “thinking” are almost *nowhere to be seen*, except for three instances at §136 and §141. At these points, force is apprehended not as a sensible thing which is “out there,” but precisely *appears in its disappearance*, as a sheerly vanishing being in the play of forces, the thought of which implies a “loss of reality,” *Verlust der Realität*, for the understanding. The understanding is thus thoughtless

towards this loss that its very act of thought brings into being, and in this regard, it is indicative that the expression used in the above quoted passage of the *Encyclopaedia*, *Gedankenlosigkeit* and its variant *gedankenlose*, occurs twice in this chapter at §150 and §156.

That the understanding is more of a form of thoughtless representation, *gedankenlose Vorstellung*, rather than a form of thought, is announced by Hegel at the end of the chapter on perception, in a striking paragraph (PhS§131) where, as it progresses, the distinction between the “thing” of perception and the “thought” of the understanding becomes increasingly blurred, a fact indicated by the very emergence of “perceptual understanding,” *wahrnehmende Verstand*. Just as perception deprives the thing of negativity, contradiction and movement, so too does understanding relate to its thoughts as to external things between which it can switch and which can be, dualistically, kept apart between the true and the false, the essential and the unessential, the necessary and the unnecessary. The “insofar” of perception is, thus, Hegel specifies, carried over into the understanding: “Yet the understanding resists this with the support of the *Insofar* and of the diverse *respects*, or by taking upon itself the one thought in order to keep the other quarantined as the true thought” (PhS§131).<sup>24</sup>

The entrenchment of understanding in the external standpoint of sense-perception is not present only at this point of transition, but rather manifests itself in different forms all throughout the dialectical movement between the understanding and its object, force, and it is worthwhile to succinctly enumerate those moments: in §132, Hegel mentions that the “unconditioned universal” is “still as *object* of it [i. e., of consciousness],” consciousness does not include *itself* in the universal and thus “is still drawing back from what has emerged”; in §133, force is described as an object which presents itself to the understanding as an immediate object, “as something that simply is,” *als ein Seiendes sich darbietet*; in §136, the relation between understanding and force explicitly regresses to the level of “the perceiver and the perceived”; in §141–142, there is a

<sup>24</sup> Hegel's point is here in strict contrast to Robert Pippin's assertion that “[a]ll thinking is a spontaneity, an activity, not a perceiving or a grasping.” Pippin, *Hegel's Realm of Shadows*, 261.

tension between “sensorily objective force” and the *thought* of force in its negativity as a vanishing being, which implies a loss of its sensorily objective concreteness; in §143, the interior which appears in the vanishing of force stands as “an extreme over against it [i. e., consciousness]”; in §146, the emerging supersensible world presents itself to consciousness “in its immediacy” and will be later described, because of the tension between apprehending law as inhering in its diversification in the sensible world and as originating from somewhere beyond the same world, as “only the *immediate* elevation of the perceived world into the universal element” (PhS§157); finally, in §164, the movement of the understanding is on the whole described as being experienced by it as a mere “happening,” *ein Geschehen*, because its object “is, for the understanding, an object in a sensory covering [*in sinnlicher Hülle*]” which indeed grounds its fundamental dualistic instinct of fixing “two worlds” or “two substantial elements” as separate from each other.

As we can notice, the moment of immediacy repeats itself, each time with a different consequence for the standpoint and the object of consciousness, and the specific consequence for the understanding consists in a grand metaphysical gesture: it fixes a world in its substantiality as against another world, a world of the “beyond” and a world of the “this,” a world of the supersensible and a world of the sensible. This fixation, however, and Hegel does not tire to emphasize this aspect, is *itself* immediate for the understanding, it is the “unthought” moment of its abstraction in which it immediately abstracts from the abstraction that it itself is. The shirking away of the understanding from its inherent negativity is played out most importantly between the passages §143 and §147, which conclude with, perhaps, the Hegelian thesis par excellence: “The supersensible is the sensory and the perceived posited as it is in *truth*; but the *truth* of the *sensory* and the perceived is to be *appearance* [Erscheinung]. The supersensible is therefore *appearance* as *appearance*.” Throughout this whole movement, the understanding compulsively relates first to force, then to the interior and, finally, to the supersensible, as merely *positive* entities cut off from their emergence in the *vanishing* of the being of force – that is, indeed, why the understanding “loses its reality” at this crucial point

of the movement. Each time the understanding is faced with “the developed negative” (PhS§143), the understanding *perceives* mere objectivity and sensible givenness. The understanding therefore cannot face the fact that the supersensible is appearance as appearance, inasmuch as it is oblivious to the *disappearance*, the loss and the negativity which this appearance immanently entails. Instead, the understanding fixates on the beyond which, because of its inherent negativity, *appears as if it did not emerge from appearance*, as if it was already there, ready to be found by the understanding.<sup>25</sup> This constitutes the ultimate misunderstanding of the understanding: it thinks over a whole world from which it thoughtlessly extracts itself, or, it positivises a wholeness which is, in truth, enabled by an act of absolute negation and voiding.

Before we move on to the next section, it should be noted that the preservation of an immediate sensible residue is explicitly included by Hegel in the definition of *Aufhebung* as such: “Sublation [Das Aufheben] exhibits its veritable twofold significance which we have seen in the negative: it is at the same time a *negating* and a *preserving*; the Nothing, as *Nothing of the This*, preserves immediacy and is itself sensory, but a universal immediacy” (PhS§113). Immediacy is not expelled in sublation, but instead it passes over, as a nothingness, into mediation and universality as such, otherwise it would make no sense for Hegel to refer, at the end of the passage, to immediacy as *both* sensory and universal. Indeed, sensory universality is later defined by Hegel as “the *immediate* unity of Being and the negative” (PhS§115).<sup>26</sup> This should be kept in mind throughout the movement of

<sup>25</sup> I should note that that the central notion of *Erscheinung* bears, for Hegel, the meaning of a shining forth or apparition (as in Ezra Pound’s *In a Station of the Metro*, “The apparition of these faces in the crowd / Petals on a wet, black bough”), while the English word “appearance” can equally mean *Schein*, a seeming or semblance (as in the expression “keeping up appearances”), which risks dangerous confusions. I cannot properly expand on this here, but the dynamic in which the understanding fetishizes the “beyond” of the apparition which, by its very act of appearing, engenders the *semblance* that there is a wholly contained something that appears, is crucial.

<sup>26</sup> In more developed forms, sensory universality emerges as the “sensory objectivity” (PhS§346) in which the being of spirit is singularized in the dead bone or as the “unconscious universality” of the nether world and the departed spirit (PhS§474).

the *Phenomenology* as a whole, insofar as, because of this immediate nothingness or crack that insists in its standpoint, consciousness is structurally unaware, or indeed unconscious, *bewusstlos*, of what is *actually* implied in its own standpoint and relation to its object. The immanent reversal of consciousness due to its very obliviousness towards its immediate standpoint is at the heart of the dialectical movement in the *Phenomenology*, and is emphasized by Hegel at the end of “Force and the Understanding,” right after describing the vanishing of the “sensory covering” of its object in the transition to self-consciousness: “The exposition of the concept of infinity belongs to science; but consciousness, now that it has this concept *immediately*, comes on the scene again as a form of its own, or as a new shape of consciousness, which does not recognize its essence in what has gone before, but regards it as another thing altogether” (PhS§164).<sup>27</sup> In other words, *consciousness is most beyond itself precisely when it takes to understand itself.*

## Frozen Thoughts

The dynamic that we have unpacked so far between understanding and sensory immediacy is completely obscured if we follow Jameson in placing abstraction “behind and beyond [the initial] sensory experience”<sup>28</sup> or

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<sup>27</sup> This point is also emphasized by Žižek with reference to PhS§87, where Hegel describes how the “*origination* of the new object ... offers itself to consciousness without consciousness knowing how it comes by it.” Žižek, *Less than Nothing*, 485. This formal nothingness implicated in the immediate givenness of the object, or the immanent gap between the object for consciousness and the object for us or in-itself, is a most “succinct definition” of what Žižek describes as the “Hegelian unconscious,” in contrast to the “Freudian” one. Besides the very important §233, where Hegel refers to the “forgotten path of reason,” and §467, where he describes the “forgetfulness” of the Stygian water qua absolute substance, see also the following passages for the immanent differential repetition of a moment of immediacy in the standpoint of consciousness: §167, §186, §208, §300, §346, §355–356, §398, §441, §476, §492, §529, §558, §577, §599, §603, §622, §632, §647, §668, §683, §688, §692, §706, §737, §758, §762, §783, §799.

<sup>28</sup> Jameson, *The Hegel Variations*, 8.

Pippin in considering that every immediacy is always-already mediated by the concept of the understanding. Indeed, Pippin goes as far as to say that the “notion of a ‘mediated immediacy’ has a good claim to count as the single most important notion in Hegel.”<sup>29</sup> Such a reading misses the more subtle point that *thought as such is immediate to itself*, an immediacy which consists in the sensory manner that abstraction presents itself to the understanding, namely, “as something that *simply is*” (PhS§133). The anaesthetic field in which thinking dwells is thus constituted by an immediate abstraction which fundamentally obscures itself as the abstraction that it is, and that is precisely what *makes it* an abstraction. At the same time, in contrast to the vanishing finitude of sensibility, the abstract finitude of the understanding is far more fatal to its content: it consists in the *immediate* repetition of a mortifying gesture by which the understanding “houses what is dead” in its abstract crystallizations (PhS§706), yet it wants nothing to know about the death-dealing power that it inherently displays.<sup>30</sup> This is why Hegel suggests that the finitude of the object in sense-perception becomes, with the understanding, a most “infinite abyss” (EL32§A).

We now find ourselves in a better place to grasp why Hegel regards the “view that things consist of *independent stuffs*” (EL§126A) as specific to the understanding. For example, as the quantitative and scientific instrument par excellence, the understanding is the “worldly” thought of the one, the thought which thinks *everything all at once*: everything is evolution (evolutionary science), everything is data (computational ontology), everything is the brain (neuroscientific materialism), and so on. In this hypostatization, the understanding posits the *whole* sensible world

<sup>29</sup> Pippin, *Hegel's Realm of Shadows*, 261, n. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Žižek refers here to the understanding's “power to create fictions,” insofar as the understanding has the power to freeze or mortify an object away from its immediate context, which thus “obtains a separate existence of its own.” Slavoj Žižek, *Surplus-Enjoyment: A Guide for the Non-Perplexed*, 41–42. The fact that Hegel refers to the “fictions” of the understanding (EL§126A) and to the “dreams of its abstractions” (EL6R) brings to the fore this fundamental import of *Verstand* in establishing the frame of fantasy.

under the auspices of *one* thought.<sup>31</sup> The condition of possibility for this hypostatizing gesture stems from the thoughtless moment in which the understanding *immediately* relates to the world as to a given “thing,” when it does not realize that it is its own thought which mediates, in an act of abyssal negativity, its relating to a world that, in truth, has already been lost. The oft-invoked fixity and abstract identity imparted on its content by the understanding thus implies that the objects which are left mortified in the wake of abstractive thought become, as Hegel puts it, “unalterable” (SL538): it is not only a mere thing which is enclosed in a sealed box, but a world as such which gets stored in a hermetic crypt.

The dialectical implication of the ground covered so far is as follows: the understanding, as the negation of sensible content and the opening of thought as such, is *thoughtless* of the negation that it itself is and thus takes its thoughts as being simply *immediately* given things, these in turn being taken to designate a full, abstractly identical, unalterable and fixed wholeness. This frozen dynamic is what properly expresses the restless finitude of the understanding and makes it the vehicle of transcendence and of ideological reification par excellence: it takes itself as constitutive-ly separated from its content and therefore, in a perhaps comedic curse, it epitomizes the very agency of separation which cannot separate itself from the separation that it is. The understanding cannot engender or immanentize within itself its own negation, this in turn being the free activity of reason, which, as we will see, brings out the “positive” moment in the “negative” abstraction of the understanding (EL§182A). In and of

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<sup>31</sup> Hegel considers that the metaphysical culmination of the understanding is the “abstract spiritless identity” of the “*Identity-System, or Philosophy of Identity*” which proclaims, in a Spinozist gesture, “*All is One*” (EL§7). In this hypostatization of the world as a self-contained abstract one, Hegel regards *number* as being the most essential logical determination of the understanding: “By the name ‘Trinity,’ ‘tri-unity,’ nobody expected that one and number would be considered by the understanding as the *essential determinateness* of the content” (SL180). Number, for Hegel, is the conceptual determination in which “the senses are ... brought closest to thought” (SL178), a further indication that the immediate thought of the understanding, “clinging to the one and number as such” (SL180), is enmeshed in sense-perception.

itself, the understanding is stuck in bad infinity, also referred to by Hegel as “sensory infinity” (PhS§238), as the agency which obsessively shuffles its explanation whenever it encounters a contradiction between thought and reality. *Verstand* moves from 1 to 2 to 3 to  $n+1$ , always in search of the *one more*, considering each of these determinations as inherently separate from each other and attempting to puzzle them out in the search for the complete set.<sup>32</sup> In other words, the understanding is the power which concerns itself with puzzles only insofar *it does not let itself be puzzled*.

Before we move on, I must also point out that in this account of the influence of sensibility on the understanding, Hegel is not too far from Kant himself. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant states that *error* in thought arises “through the unnoticed influence of sensibility on understanding” (A294/B350), with reason too being “deceived often enough by sensibility” (A641/B669).<sup>33</sup> Kant further refers to this unnoticed influence of sensibility as a “force that meddles in [*der Kraft, die sich mit einmengt*]” with the “proper action of the understanding” (A294–5/B351). This is a significant mention by Kant, as it is the very influence of the play of forces which, in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, turns out to undermine the understanding’s standpoint of external reflection. The jump from Kant to Hegel will, nevertheless, consist in conceiving force not only as something immediately outside understanding which both escapes and undermines its grasp, but rather in acknowledging that what escapes the understanding is precisely that *understanding itself is this force which undermines itself*. What is kept at distance by *Verstand* is that its immediate exteriority is precisely the beyond of its own interiority which is thus, in truth, no beyond but the constitutive formal nothingness of its own being. In Hegel’s words, the understanding is the “infinite force [*die unendliche Kraft*],” namely the “force which alone is at the same time the mighty power causing the

<sup>32</sup> “This uniform colouring of the schema and of its lifeless determinations, this absolute identity, and the transition from one to the other, are all alike dead understanding [*totter Verstand*] and all alike external cognition” (PhS§51).

<sup>33</sup> Kant describes this influence in terms of an unnoticed slip, a surprising and subtle movement from “the field of sensibility to the insecure territory of pure and even transcendental concepts” (A725/B753).

transition of the determinacies" (SL539). What Kant posited as a sensible transcendence that is "out there" and undermines the self-containment of thought, Hegel, in a Spinozist gesture, immanentizes as the self-splitting of thought from within itself, this diremption constituting the very negativity or loss of the substantial being of thought. Or: thought is a being which is *at home in the loss of being*, and thus as the thinking beings we are, as Hegel puts it, "with nothing under us and nothing over us, in solitude, alone by ourselves," and only so "we are purely at home with ourselves" (EL§31A).

### **Transcendence in *Verstandesphilosophie***

The picture presented so far about the connection between sense-perception and understanding will hopefully allow for a better grasp of the various characteristics that Hegel ascribes to the understanding, especially of his seemingly ambivalent oscillation between the "good" and the "bad" ones. In the latter respect, Hegel identifies the understanding with the manifestation of "abstract spiritless identity" (EL7), the binary standpoint of the logic of the either-or (EL§32A), or with the metaphysical commitment to an atomistic standpoint (EL§103A). As already noted, these "charges" are subsumed by Hegel under a systematic critique of the metaphysics of the understanding, which, in his account, remained too empirical vis-à-vis its thought determinations. According to Hegel, this metaphysics did not question "whether the form of judgment could be the form of truth" (EL§28R), and thus it related to the subject and the predicate of the judgment form as to sensible "things" which directly *encapsulate* what they refer to. Indeed, this constitutes the error in which one thinks "that by one word one thinks precisely this" (EL§33).

From a Hegelian perspective, therefore, the *metaphysics* of the understanding is a metaphysics of the *understanding* because it relates to the discursivity of thought in an *immediate* manner: "we should note that [the older metaphysics] did not go beyond the thinking of mere *understanding*. It took up the abstract determinations of thought immediately, and let

them count in their immediacy as predicates of what is true" (EL§28A). The perspective developed in this essay can help us render explicit how this metaphysical compulsion stems from the insistence of a repressed moment of sensibility in understanding, so that when this sensible finite moment is acted out by the abstractive "freeze-frame" of *Verstand*, the content at hand becomes altogether insensible and untouchable. The content appears as a transcendent, imperishable and unalterable infinite One and, for Hegel, it is of no surprise that *Verstandesphilosophie* culminated, in rational theology, in positing God as the "Supremely Real Essence" of a "mere beyond" (EL§36A), namely as the *fixed* entity deprived of all negation and movement, hovering over and beyond the totality of the sensible world.<sup>34</sup> Here we can grasp the full (anti)theological import of Hegel's point in the *Phenomenology* according to which "the first supersensible world was only the *immediate* elevation of the perceived world into the universal element" (PhS§157).<sup>35</sup>

Hegel's critique of *Verstandesphilosophie* is therefore grounded in his charge that it takes discursivity, the judgment form and, indeed, the very givenness of words themselves, as its ultimate presuppositions. This is precisely what makes it a dogmatic type of philosophizing, and the ulti-

<sup>34</sup> It is not only rational theology and monotheism which make themselves guilty of this fixation, but also, albeit in a different form, the pantheism of "the plant and the animal," as Hegel refers to it in terms which are evocative for the argument I present here: "It is of no use to have taken from the things of perception the *death of abstraction* [*den Tod der Abstraktion*] and to have elevated them to essences of spiritual perception; the ensouling of this realm of spirits has this death in it owing to the determinacy and the negativity which encroach on its innocent indifference" (PhS§689).

<sup>35</sup> This point is also made by Žižek when he characterizes the basic procedure of idealism as being that of fetishizing a moment of sensibility, the "sense-effect," into a self-generated entity: "Idealism ... denies that the sense-effect is an effect of bodily depth; it fetishizes the sense-effect into a self-generated entity; the price it pays for this denial is the *substantialization* of the sense-effect: idealism covertly qualifies sense-effect as a new Body (the immaterial body of Platonic forms, for example)." Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality*, 126. This idealism is in direct contrast to a Hegelian materialist logic of sense, in which "the revealed that has emerged entirely on the *surface* is precisely therein the *most profound*" (PhS§760).

mate metaphysical implication of *Verstandesphilosophie* is a system of transcendence, which consists in the hypostatization of the sensible relation that philosophy unconsciously holds to the very “stuff” of its business: the word. From a Hegelian perspective, Kant did not go to the end with his critique of this metaphysics, insofar as Kant too adhered to the reduction of thought to discursivity and to the form of judgement (A68/B93). For Kant, the instrument of philosophy consists in “discursive *a priori* concepts” (A725/B753), or, as he puts it in different terms, philosophy is “conducted by means of mere words (the object in thought)” (A735/B763). Hegel thus criticizes Kant for not fulfilling his critical aim of rendering the understanding finite because, to the extent that he takes the understanding *at its word*, he absolutizes its external standpoint and too hastily forbids philosophy to tarry with the negative movement of the speculative, namely, with the inherent self-transcendence of the discursive form (EL§60A1; EL§81R).<sup>36</sup> With this point, I arrive at the last part of the essay, in which I will evaluate the understanding as the “absolute power” (PhS§32) and its position *vis-à-vis* reason, a task which hopefully will be easier to delineate if we keep in mind the moment of sensibility repressed – thoughtlessly – by the understanding.

## Understanding and Reason

It is first important to pay attention to the context of the *Phenomenology* in which Hegel referred to the understanding as “the most astonishing and mightiest of powers” (PhS§32), while also keeping in mind that this is not the only place where he reminds us of the powers of the understanding (the passages at SL538–540 are also instructive). In the preceding paragraphs, Hegel describes how spiritual determinations are historical achievements which have become the *inorganic* nature in which the individual unconsciously dwells: “This past Being-there [*Dasein*] is already acquired property of the universal spirit that constitutes the substance

<sup>36</sup> In psychoanalysis, the name for the immanent de-substantialization of the discursive being of the understanding is, of course, *Einfall* or *free association*.

of the individual and so, in appearing externally to him, constitutes his inorganic nature" (PhS§30). The wording in this passage is indicative: Hegel suggests that the historical achievements of *thought* present themselves, to the individual, as external *substance*, as mere sensible being. In Hegel's words, these frozen determinations possess a form of "unconceptualized immediacy, of immobile indifference, as Being-there itself has" (PhS§30). They are thus determinations historically produced by spirit in its self-conscious and thinking activity, but which immediately display a "rigidity of being" (SL539). Such a rigidity is, of course, a semblance to spirit, but this semblance of transcendence and fixity constitutes the all-too-real materialization of the moment of imperishable abstraction which is imprinted by the understanding on its content. It is thus in this context that Hegel mentions, in PhS§32, that understanding is the activity which separates its content, namely, it separates it from the vanishing concreteness of sensible being and *fixes* it into determinations as *one*. As such, the understanding produces an infinity of such "one" determinations which, as uncomprehended, retroactively materialize the moment of sensible being that they contain, but which are in truth related by their inner negativity. The understanding must thus recognize its own work, its own labor of the negative, in the rigidity that faces it as the most damning exteriority, in order to actualize the negative that the determinations already are. Yet to be able do so, *it must dare to lose itself*, and it is at this point that reason steps into the picture.

For Hegel, dialectic implies that the understanding "must fall into the negative of itself" (EL§11R). What is incomprehensible to the understanding, as Žižek points out with the notion of "downward-synthesis," consists in the moment of immediacy that singularizes its abstract universality and confronts it with the danger of fall and loss: "while the Understanding can well grasp the universal mediation of a living totality, what it cannot grasp is that this totality, in order to actualize itself, has to acquire *actual* existence in the guise of an immediate *contingent* natural singularity."<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism*, 26. In *Absolute Recoil*, Žižek's discussion of Robert Pippin and what he identifies as the "deflated Hegel," concludes with this passage (15–26), which further points

The understanding therefore wants, as Hegel puts it, to cling to “the immediacy [which is] outside thought” (SL76), even though thought itself has a moment of immediacy superseded within it, which is unconsciously materialized precisely in the abstract fixity which it imparts onto its determinations. The import of reason is, thus, to point out to the understanding the finitude that it inherently displays in its very being, this rendering explicit of the *finitude of the finite* constituting the very *infinite* movement of reason. For Hegel, the “speculative” moment of reason is the proper negative moment, precisely because it is that “which dissolves the determinations of the understanding into nothing” (SL10). In other words, reason is the shining forth of a terrifying freedom which stares the mortifying negation in its voided face and *recognizes* itself in it; it willfully and courageously admits it as its very own being.

Finally, there is a key passage in the introduction to the *Science of Logic* which clarifies the place of the understanding in the triad sensibility-understanding-reason. When it turns itself against reason, the understanding behaves “in the manner of *ordinary common sense*, giving credence to the latter’s view that truth rests on sensuous reality, that thoughts are *only* thoughts, that is, that only sense perception gives filling and reality to them” (SL25). Thus, *vis-à-vis* reason, the understanding is a more *stubborn* form of sense-perception, which relates to its thoughts as to things that it does not want to give up. By contrast, *vis-à-vis* sense-perception, the understanding is the absolute power, it subtracts the “true” notional determination and unveils the universal import of its content. The understanding is thus tormented by the instability between the violent rupture it enacts on its sensible content and the cowardly comfort of keeping its thoughts close to itself, with Hegel himself mentioning that the determinations of the understanding find themselves in a “necessary

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to the central symptomatic spot that the relationship between understanding and immediacy occupies in interpretations of Hegel. For Žižek’s elaboration of “downward-synthesis,” see also Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 50–53, and Žižek, *Absolute Recoil*, 336–44. For his most recent restatement of this notion in terms of a quantum “collapse of superpositions,” see Slavoj Žižek, *Quantum History. A New Materialist Philosophy*, 363–65.

conflict" (SL26): they are at once both abstract (universal and mediated) and concrete (singular and immediate). The understanding therefore inherently finds itself in a contradiction and it shies away from it so as not to lose its very being. Reason shows to the understanding, however, that there is *nothing* to shy away from, there is no innocence to be kept, insofar as understanding is in its very being the loss of being. This releases the immediacy to which it unconsciously clings to and brings it *to its senses*, reconciling the understanding with the misunderstanding constitutive of its very being and returning to it a world in which there is nothing to return to and nothing to expect, except *the very abyss of freedom itself*.

## Conclusion

One of the implications of the argument developed in this paper is that it contributes to casting serious doubts on transcendentalist interpretations which hold that immediacy and sensibility constitute the arch nemeses of Hegel. We find this expressed in interpretations such as Fredric Jameson's, who holds that the "whole of Hegel's philosophical production is an elaborate refutation of all possible concepts of immediacy,"<sup>38</sup> or Robert Pippin's, who holds that Hegel wages war on "immediacy and givenness in all its forms."<sup>39</sup> It should be clear that, in fact, such interpretations revert to the standpoint of the metaphysics of the understanding, which presupposes mediation under its various guises (intelligibility, the judgment form, social totality, etc.) as self-establishing. I would even venture to say that such interpretations occur from within the standpoint of the understanding itself, insofar as they obscure, "in sensory covering" (PhS§164), the immediacy of mediacy itself or, following Žižek, they expel the stain which is constitutive of thought as such. Through this expelling, perhaps ironically, such interpretations unconsciously repeat the very founding gesture of the understanding, which is haunted by "the sensory

<sup>38</sup> Jameson, *The Hegel Variations*, 13.

<sup>39</sup> Pippin, *Hegel's Realm of Shadows*, 38.

representation of the consolidation of the differences in a distinct element of subsistence" (PhS§160), a sensuous remainder which, in a Fichtean regression, is acted out in the dualistic positing of an immediate, irrational, and frustrating obstacle which thought must at once both internalize and keep at a distance. What is thus self-consciously taken as mere fleeting empirical content is secretly, behind the back of consciousness, posited as immovable transcendent form. Or, by constituting themselves against sensibility, such interpretations take, in truth, "the sensory world as itself real actuality" (PhS§147): yet another confirmation of the Lacanian formula that repression is the return of the repressed.

Secondly, this essay contributes towards a reading of Hegel as a thinker of the unconscious. Such a reading is strictly related to the way in which we interpret the dialectical play between immediacy and mediacy, or between *transcendental aesthetics* and *transcendental logic*. Therefore, this interpretation does not place Hegel against Kant, nor takes him to be advocating for a return to pre-Kantian ontology but instead suggests that Hegel closely follows Kant's footsteps in formulating a systematic critique of the metaphysics of the understanding and, implicitly, of the compulsion towards *transcendence* in philosophy. In this precise sense, I regard Žižek's statement that "Hegel was literally 'more Kantian than Kant himself'" as fully justified.<sup>40</sup> Philosophizing after the transcendental turn requires a commitment to accounting for the generation of transcendence from within the immanent field of sense, or, in the terms of this paper, to interpreting the *constitutively repressed* moment of sensibility in the knotty and seemingly insensible abstractions of the understanding. My main intention in this essay is therefore neither to praise the understanding as the absolute power nor to admonish it as the ideological organ of thought, but rather to suggest that, in the end, it is not even clear that the understanding is understanding. As we have seen, the very idea that understanding is to be opposed to sensibility (which it purportedly sublates) or to reason (in which it is purportedly absorbed) is an idea which is posited from within the standpoint of the understanding itself, with this

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<sup>40</sup> Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 281.

positing itself acting out a dualistic sensory representation immanent to its abstract thought.

Finally, many of Hegel's formulations regarding the understanding and the "sensory covering" of its object (PhS§164) bring into serious doubt that abstraction as such is *beyond* sensibility. Instead, these indicate that there is a thoughtlessness, *eine Gedankenlosigkeit*, specific to sensibility, which passes over into and presents itself as the "stubbornness" of the understanding, with this stubbornness ultimately manifesting itself as the metaphysical compulsion of *Verstand* to hypostatizing the transcendence of the One. This fundamentally informs Hegel's diagnosis about modernity, in which, as he suggests, "the individual finds the abstract form ready-made" (PhS§33). The heart of the Kantian-Hegelian philosophical procedure of *transcendental genesis*, at work both in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is thus the tireless transparentizing of the "unnoticed influence of sensibility on understanding" (A294/B350), which constitutes the condition of possibility for these fixed thoughts, the knots of the understanding, to weave the anaesthetic substance of modernity. Ultimately, the goal of this paper has been to turn our attention to how the greatest knot of the understanding, *its fundamental fantasy*, is nothing but the sensory representation that there is, in the close distance of eternity, a knot to be untied.

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