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On Application

Let me start in the manner (or the mannerism?) of an old professor – with etymology.¹ The word “application” came to English in the early 15th century, in the sense of “bringing something to bear on something else.”² – One should stop for a moment to fully appreciate this wording. The definition is truly admirable in the purity of its abstraction – what could be more abstract than this mere relationality of somethings, to the point that one could wonder how come that application never featured on the honorable lists of universal categories (from Aristotle to Kant) along with, say, quantity, quality, substance, necessity, possibility, unity, among others. It appears to be missing on every list, while being a prominent candidate for the title of the most abstract. Application as “bringing something to bear on something else” actually has the makings of a meta-category. One can recall that the big problem with categories, in their paramount Kantian framework, was precisely their application. How can the most abstract

¹ The present paper is a revised version of my contribution to the workshop “The Specter of Applied Science” organized by VIA University College Aarhus in January 2025. I would like to express my gratitude to the organizers and other participants for a very memorable workshop.

² For what follows regarding etymology I rely on <https://www.etymonline.com/word/application> and <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/application>.

categories of understanding, *Verstand*, be applied to the sensuous, the empirical, the manifold, to something with which they have no common measure? This was indeed Kant's central problem: the whole key section of his first *Critique*, the notorious transcendental deduction of categories, happens to be Kant's convoluted way of figuring out precisely the tricky question what application is. (And there is a host of Kant scholars closely perusing the so-called B-deduction, devoted precisely to application.) It occurred to me that this could easily turn into a paper devoted to Kant – but this is just an aside, let me not go there.

The word came to English from Old French, where it was in turn inherited from Latin, *applicatio*, “a joining to, an attaching oneself to, connecting to,” stemming from *ad-plicare*, to fold (*plica*³ is a fold, a crease). It is related to the terms “implicit” and “explicit” – in-folded, unfolded; to implicate and to explicate (to explain) – all these are based on *plica*, the fold. Explaining, explicating, is unfolding what has been folded. – As an aside (another one), one can immediately recall two philosophical references of a very different kind: on the one hand, Gilles Deleuze's book *Le pli, The Fold*, with the subtitle *Leibniz and the Baroque*, a book which made famous the metaphor of the fold, highlighting this very baroque object.⁴ It evokes all the intricate folding of textures and fabrics in baroque art, and Deleuze argues that Leibniz's monad figures as its philosophical counterpart, the epitome of the fold of space, movement, and time. On the other hand, there is Robert Brandom's voluminous book *Making It Explicit* (1994, shortly after Deleuze), with the formula of “the explication of the implicit,” proposed as the paramount clue to Hegel's endeavor – is this the formula that could encapsulate Hegel's dialectic? Was Hegel's major feat the unfolding of Leibnizian fold? We'll come back to this.

In comparison to the in-folding and unfolding (out-folding), contained in implication and explication, which all present an in-and-out movement, application presents a traversal and horizontal move of something

³ The word “plica” still exists in contemporary English, but limited to the medical use, a groove or fold of skin.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, 1992 [1988].

getting folded in/with something else,⁵ not just explicating what has been implicit in an entity, not just the coming out of what has been immanent and making it manifest, but presenting a relation to something else, relating to an alterity, to another field, thus producing the fold of the immanent with something other. This is not just unfolding what was implicitly present, but a link to something heterogeneous in relation to the homogeneity of implicit/explicit. Application thus stands in opposition to implication/explication.⁶ Furthermore, application implies a certain hierarchy or temporality, namely that we first have a something which is then in the second step applied to something outside it; we have to have an entity which precedes the application, while the second entity (“something else”) is thus posterior and secondary in relation to the first one which is applied to something external to its realm. There is an ontological precedence, so to speak, of the one over the other.

Following the etymology, there are more meanings to the word. Chronologically, the second meaning appeared in English around 1600, in Shakespeare’s time,⁷ with the sense of application as “a sincere hard

⁵ There are other terms stemming from the same root or metaphor, like “complicate,” “replicate”... (“supplicate” has a different etymology, stemming from *placare*, to placate, to assuage, to appease, to soothe). There is also an adjective “plicate”: “folded multiple times lengthwise like a fan, pleated.”

⁶ Let me point out a peculiar use of unfolding at the very beginning of *Hamlet* with the change of guard at Elsinore: “*Barnardo*: Who’s there? *Francisco*: Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself.” (I.1.1–2) These are the first two lines of *Hamlet*. – Unfold yourself – but can one ever? Maybe the invention of psychoanalysis, at its minimal, entails precisely that one can never unfold oneself. The unconscious ultimately presents the impossibility of unfolding oneself, the alien kernel at the core of unfolding, of bringing out what was implicit. However much one brings out, there is a kernel that persists through “making it explicit,” but without which we wouldn’t be subjects. We are the subjects of the impossibility of unfolding ourselves (in the two senses, “subject of” and “subject to” this impossibility). – “Stand and unfold yourself” could be taken as a version of the Freudian *Grundregel*, the ground rule of psychoanalysis: Lie down on the couch and unfold yourself, say anything that comes to mind.

⁷ I was trying to find out whether Shakespeare ever used the word “application,” but all I could find was advertisements for the Shakespeare App, offered by the Apple Store, an app to “memorize, edit and publish Shakespeare’s plays, sonnets and monologues,” believe it or not. – It turned out that if Shakespeare didn’t quite

effort, diligence, close thought or attention,” by extension “devotion, commitment.” Doing something with application is doing it seriously. This meaning was there already in Latin, derived from the primary meaning of “joining to, attaching oneself to” – say, in order to attach oneself to otherness one indeed needs “a sincere hard effort” and diligence, it doesn’t come easily, “by itself,” one must make a step beyond oneself. One needs application to perform application, if one is to take seriously applying something to something heterogeneous. Whereas the first meaning of application dwells in pure abstraction (“bringing something to bear on something else”), in neutrality and anonymity, this second meaning brings in the subjective stance, the affective attitude of engagement that one needs to assume, or even an ethical stand. There is an ethics of application. The objective stands opposite to the subjective, both within the semantic extension of the same word. – My old Latin dictionary from my high school days gives the following “neutral” example: *se applicare ad philosophiam*, to devote oneself to philosophy. So “application” seems to involve and call for philosophy (already at the dictionary level). Philosophy figures as a particularly salient case of something that must be practiced with application.

But then there come two further meanings, both fatally common and omnipresent. In chronological order, the third meaning of application would be “a formal request to be hired for a job or paid position,” also for admission to a school, a program, a course, an application for funding, etc.⁸ This meaning was first attested in English in 1851, and the date evokes precisely the emergence (or rather the rapid, wide spread) of the job market, the workforce massively seeking employment on the market. Another name for this is capitalism, the era of job applications. Everybody is subject to applications, everybody is an applicant⁹ – it has become

use the term “application” (except once in the spurious play *Edward III*), he used variations of “apply,” most notably in *Romeo and Juliet*, where Friar Laurence says: “Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied, / And vice sometimes by action dignified” (II. iii. 17–18). I owe this reminder to Kozma Prelević.

⁸ It can have further ramifications with “petition, entreaty, request.” Also in legal sense: “The application for the deferral of the hearing was granted.”

⁹ One can make a conceptual pair supplicant/applicant (the etymology is different, though). “Supplicant” can be taken as a pre-modern stance, it implies begging

a universal condition, gaining a new surge and additional weight in the present times of growing precarity.

This brings in quite a different angle as to the relation between philosophy and application, one far more trivial and common: not the devotion required for engaging with philosophy, but the masses of job applications that are imposed on all philosophy students in order to survive (as I closely know from personal experience with all my students, at home and internationally), invariably with a low success rate. Furthermore, in the philosophical job applications and the applications for funding of philosophical research, the crucial thing one must display is that philosophy can be applied, “bearing upon something else,” put to practical use, ultimately serve the market (and create the surplus value). In this third sense, one’s skills, the internal capacities, one’s knowledge (no doubt acquired with a lot of application in the second sense, i. e., subjective efforts) have to be applied to this particular kind of the other (the Other?) which is the (job) market, bringing them to bear on this other field, where they can be “evaluated,” not for their intrinsic value, but by the measure of a very different logic of applicability. The market is the other on which the philosophical “something” must bear.

Finally, there is the fourth and last meaning (so far), pertaining to the computer era: “a program designed to carry out specific tasks or solve specific problems within a larger system”; or from another dictionary source, “a computer program that the end user perceives as a single entity; as a tool for a well-defined purpose.” This meaning stems from as early as 1969, when computers were in their infancy, and no doubt at the time (more than half a century ago) nobody could possibly foresee or imagine the brilliant future career of this innocent-looking additional sub-meaning of the

humbly, a deferential petitioning, pleading, entreating, with religious subtext of prayer, displaying one’s humility. With capitalism supplicants have (allegedly) turned into applicants, supposedly free agents on the free market. From supplicant to applicant – maybe not a bad shorthand for the transition from premodernity to modernity. But with growing precarity, aren’t we engaging in the opposite trajectory from applicant to supplicant? With what Maurizio Lazzarato describes as “the indebted man,” or with what Varoufakis describes as the end of the market as we knew it, heading for “techno-feudalism”?

word. The latecomer has taken over and (almost) dwarfed the preceding meanings, particularly with its steep rise during the last two decades. We live in the era of apps, unable to survive any length of time without smartphones and the constant usage of apps, with ever new apps constantly mushrooming for every imaginable purpose – stargazing, diet schemes, fitness, navigation, vacation, Shakespeare quotes, promotion codes, dating, etc., encompassing everything from trivial practicalities to our most intimate (as the truism goes, applications know more about ourselves than we do; do we use apps or do apps use us?).¹⁰ WhatsApp, the epitome of apps, was founded in 2009 by a few guys in California, then bought by Facebook in 2014 for 19.3 billion USD, having 500 million users at the time. Now it has well over 2 billion monthly active users worldwide (including myself). It provides an iconic and most economical answer to the question “What’s up?” (“App is up.”) For this new additional meaning to be successful, the word had to be curtailed, abbreviated, cut off from its history, neutered, as it were, not decapitated but truncated, i.e., keeping just its head and cut off from its trunk – “app” is enough, the shorthand concomitant and coinciding with its application. (The dictionary also offers “applet” as a pet name, diminutive as the sign of intimacy and affect.)

So much for etymology and the dictionary. It is well known that Lacan had a passion for etymologies (a passion that I share) – one of his favorite books was *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue française* by Bloch and von Wartburg, the colossal undertaking published in 1932 (with many revisions and reprints). And so did Heidegger, notoriously so. But their passions point in opposite directions. While Heidegger was trying to dig out and restore the originary meaning, covered by oblivion and multiple layers of ontic concerns, for Lacan etymology was the tell-tale sign of contingency, an archive of the historical vagaries, the depository of their real: “A language ... is nothing else but the sum total of equivocations that its history has allowed to persist there. This is the way that the real ... has

¹⁰ Apps seem to practice a version of what Freud called *die gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit*, the equally distributed attention, paying equal attention to what we don’t pay attention to, surveilling the margins that escape us. They are our quasi-analysts.

made its deposit there in the course of ages."¹¹ It's the contingent vagaries and equivocations that touch upon a real, testify to a real, not the restoration of some supposed originary real, a primordial meaning that one would have to unearth.¹²

Still, the contingent history of the term amounts to a narrative, binding together four different meanings,¹³ a slide from philosophical abstraction to the triviality of apps: first, the highly philosophical folding and weaving of something with something else, with the alterity, the intricate relation of "one" to the "other," ontologically speaking; second, the subjective application, required by application, as diligence, engagement, devotion, commitment; third, job application, the relation to this seemingly trivial other, the unfathomable vagaries of capitalist markets and the inscrutable logic of their requirements; and fourth, the application as the computer program, pertaining to technological wizardry, where the relation to otherness seems to have waned. Namely, one applies a computer program to an area which had to be already made computable, apt for application, adapted to its workings, so that the (seeming) other is ultimately an extension of the "same" (computability), but of an infinitely expanding "same" with the capacity of integrating any otherness into its deployment, an infinitely applicable homogenization of heterogeneity. But if there is the process of progressively integrating all alterity, by myriad applications, of taming it, as it were, domesticating it, making any otherness at our disposal, then on the other hand the process itself appears to be increasingly out of our control. What maximally serves at our disposal may well be beyond our disposal, thus itself becoming "other" in relation to us. The more the computers,

¹¹ Jacques Lacan, "L'étourdit," in: *Autres écrits*, 490.

¹² This real obviously pertains to singularities of particular languages and sticks to them. Although "application" is a Latin word imported into a host of languages, the line that we are pursuing pertains specifically to English. In my own language, Slovenian, the second (diligence, devotion) and third meanings (job application) don't exist at all, while the first and particularly the fourth meaning are widespread. "Application," notwithstanding its international demeanor, is embedded into what Lacan called *lalangue*, and thus ultimately strictly speaking "untranslatable."

¹³ I am simplifying, a dictionary lists no less than twelve different meanings of "application."

apps, AI, etc. resemble “us,” the more they can perform all our tasks (better than we can), the more they seem alien, the Other. There is (perhaps) a new constellation of “the one” and “the other” to be accounted for.

Let me now dwell a bit on the philosophical notion of application, on its philosophical implications. I would argue for two contradictory theses: first, there is no such thing as a simple application; and second, there is nothing but application, application is universally around, constitutively so, though its omnipresence may be hard to conceive.

Let’s first go back to the minimal dictionary definition: “bringing something to bear upon something else.” I have already mentioned that this definition implies a certain hierarchy and precedence, namely that there is a first “something” which is in the second step applied to “something else,” a second “something,” with the assumption of priority of “something” to its application, and with the further assumption that the first “something” is *de iure* independent of its (multiple) applications which are temporally posterior. But can this be? Can there be an application where the initial something can remain unaffected, untainted by its application? Does this implied hierarchy and priority ever hold? Doesn’t the “something else” strike back on the initial “something” and transform it? Isn’t there always a reverse impact of the secondary on the supposed primary?

Let me make a digression and give an example, not just any odd example, but the fate of psychoanalysis. The history of psychoanalysis has been entwined with the question of its application. It’s clear that psychoanalysis emerged as a clinical practice, the practice of a new treatment of psychic ailments, “the talking cure” in the intimacy of a *tête-à-tête*, in a laboratory situation, as it were, but very soon the prospect arose of its wider application. Already in 1908 Freud wrote the paper entitled “‘Civilized’ sexual morality and modern nervous illness,” where already the title proposes the implication (application?) that what causes the modern nervous illness may well be our “civilized” sexual morality (“*kulturelle*” *Sexualmoral*, says Freud, where “cultural” is put in quotation marks), thus making the first move towards the further implication that what’s wrong with the patients is not their private pathology, but a social pathology which conditions their private troubles. The quotation marks encircling “culture” are most

telling – it's rather the culture that becomes the patient on the couch. Now, is this "implication" just the explicitation of the implicit involved in clinical practice? Or is it rather an "application" to another much wider domain, concerning the underpinnings of our culture and social structures at large? From then on, psychoanalysis made a spectacular career precisely as "applied psychoanalysis," increasingly so, with Freud massively devoting his attention to anthropology, history (think of *Totem and Taboo*), sociology (think of *Mass Psychology*), religion (from *The Future of an Illusion* to *Man Moses*), civilization at large (*Civilization and its Discontents*),¹⁴ to art, science, politics, philosophy, etc., applying psychoanalysis to ever wider circles, while at the time the clinical practice remained limited to a rather small number of patients in a handful of countries. By the time Freud died, in 1939, everyone knew about psychoanalysis, worldwide and in a vast number of disciplines, almost in every walk of life, despite the tiny amount of people who actually had a clinical experience of it. The history of psychoanalysis can be conceived as the history of its massive application, the applied psychoanalysis carrying the torch of its spread.

Was the clinical practice, the supposed "something" that bears on something else, affected by these applications? Of course it was. Psychoanalysis is unique as a cure by the fact that what happens on the couch has (implicitly), so to speak, world-historical implications. Through the practice of the cure virtually everything is at stake, from the most bodily to the most abstract (and particularly the intersection of the two), from the singular vagaries of enjoyment to philosophical speculation, from the individual symptoms to the social fabric and its tear. Were the psychoanalytic clinical concepts affected by these applications? Of course they were. Take *Totem and Taboo* (1912–13), first published under the title *Some Points of Agreement (Übereinstimmungen, overlaps) between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*.¹⁵ It massively used the clinical entity of obsessional neurosis in the attempt to explain the very origins of religion, and of course obsessional neurosis will never be the same the moment one can

¹⁴ All the abovementioned Freud's texts are gathered in two volumes, Sigmund Freud, *Civilization, Society and Religion*, and *The Origins of Religion*.

¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, *The Origins of Religion*, 45.

apply it to the most “primitive” societies and the earliest structures of our culture. The “savages,” *die Wilden*, turn out to be not quite savage through the lens of this application, while the obsessionals appear more “savage” than what could be assumed. The fact that the concept of obsessional neurosis can be applied to such a distant domain – distant in time, space, and content – changes its very nature and conceptual impact.

In sum, it can be argued that psychoanalysis, such as we know it, is the child of its application – as opposed to the parent of its applications. It’s the multiple applications to other fields, far away from the clinical, that shaped its fate. Its multifaceted applicability changed its inherent nature just as it changed, in several ways, the nature of the fields where it was applied. To be sure, there has always been a lot of harsh opposition to it, but the telling fact is that nobody could quite ignore it. (The critical question is: has this changed, is this still the case in the past few decades? Has psychoanalysis lost its critical edge?) As to the inherent clinical practice, doubts were always raised as to its effectiveness, its therapeutical success rate as a cure (how does one measure the success of a cure which posits that society is sick, not just the individual?), but one cannot doubt the successfulness of its applications.¹⁶

Jacques Lacan made a curious reverse move as to application and gave it another twist. After having been excommunicated from the official psychoanalytic organization (IPA), he founded, in June 1964, his own organization, *École freudienne de Paris*, an organization which will subsequently meet with huge success and which Lacan will later dissolve at the height of its glory, in January 1980 – seeing it as a victim of its own success (to make it short). In founding EFP he had to determine its organizational structure, and we learn from its founding act¹⁷ that EFP is to be divided

¹⁶ There is something paradoxical in this situation: namely, when dealing with application one usually starts with a theory and then considers its application to practice, but here we start with a clinical practice and its conceptual grasp and then consider its applications to other distant domains. The applications of practice spread out to theory, so to speak.

¹⁷ Lacan, *Autres écrits*, 230–32. The best source for all the documents concerning this is Jacques-Alain Miller, *L'excommunication*. – See also Lacan, *Autres écrits*, 232: “The ethics of psychoanalysis is the practice of its theory.”

into three sections: first, the section for pure psychoanalysis, which deals with the practice and doctrine of psychoanalysis in the proper sense of the word – and this proper sense concerns above all the didactical analysis, i. e., the process of formation of analysts (the analysis whose aim is not the cure, but the passage, *la passe*, of the patient, the analysand, to the position of the analyst), with the specific proviso that psychoanalysis *per se*, in itself, is not a therapeutical technique. Second, the section of applied psychoanalysis, which concerns therapy and clinical practice. Third, the connections of the Freudian field to other domains and sciences (structuralism is specifically mentioned). The surprising part of this proposal is that therapy, the cure, the treatment, now figure as the application of pure psychoanalysis. Treating psychic ailments in clinical practice – the birthplace of psychoanalysis – is seen as its (secondary?) application as if the pure psychoanalysis (if such a thing exists) also happens to involve a contingent side-effect of possibly healing psychic troubles. (As though it is not in itself made for helping people, but it can accidentally also have that beneficial effect.) One can see the paradoxical nature of this move: it's not that pure psychoanalysis would precede its therapeutical application, it's rather its retroactive effect; its purity is the result of retroaction. It initially had to start with therapeutic aims before it could be extrapolated and distilled in its purity, not subservient to well-being (not to what Lacan frequently called *le service des biens*, the service of goods, which involves adaptation to reality), not serving anything, just being done for its own sake (*ad maiorem Dei gloriam*, as the Jesuit slogan ran) and for no other purpose. Pure practice, pure thought? The intersection or coincidence of the two? The therapy, the treatment, the cure, they are already applications bearing upon another domain (as opposed to “pure psychoanalysis’ whose purity is retrospective).

Let me now go back to the main line of argument. I proposed to argue, first, that there is no such thing as a simple or innocent application. Once one applies “something” to “something else,” to another domain, then the “something else” strikes back, it affects and reshapes the initial something, thus putting into question its ontological precedence, independence and self-identity. Precedence turns into interaction, *Wechselwirkung*, the one

and the other mutually affecting each other. The retroactive effect of what comes second demotes the priority. – But maybe a further, bolder and more speculative move is needed (maybe already alluded to by Lacan’s move of retrospective purity). One should conceive a constellation where there is ultimately no prior something that is then applied in a second step, but where the first something is a pure retroactive effect of its application. The initial entity that we start with would thus be empty, just a mirage, it would only get its consistency and positivity retroactively once the move to the other has been accomplished. Its entire reality would thus consist in its application (“bearing on something else”) which enables its retroactive constitution. What appeared to be the second is actually the first, which became the first only by virtue of the second. This may sound like a highly speculative exercise – but isn’t this what stands at the heart of the Hegelian dialectic? Maybe at the heart of thought *tout court*?

Hegel proposed this excellent word, which maybe summarizes his endeavor, namely *Sichanderswerden*, the good English translation (proposed by A. V. Miller) is “self-othering.”¹⁸ Any self becomes itself only by passing into its other, through becoming other than itself. We cannot grasp any “itself” independently in its immediacy without its passage into its other. Any immediacy is already mediated by otherness. The simple point I am getting at can be summed up like this: What we call dialectic is universal application, the universalization of application. In dialectic, only applications exist (or rather insist). No entity exists apart from its application. Bearing upon an other is the core of any self. The ontological priority and temporal precedence are thus gone; we are caught in a temporal loop where the second retroactively becomes the first. A long tradition had it that the origin is where things are at their fullest and their purest, then they get degraded, diminished, compromised, affected by their fall into otherness, their application. But with Hegel the origin is empty, it’s where things are at their poorest (as opposed to purest), at their most vacant – it’s only the application, the evolvment into otherness that retroactively constitutes the alleged origin. – To briefly come back to Brandom, and to

¹⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 10.

Leibniz, mentioned before: this is not the explicitation of the implicit nor the unfolding of what was folded. Rather, what seemed to be implicit and folded is in the first place produced by this process of self-othering. It's an optical illusion that everything was implicitly already there before its being unfolded and explicated. As I pointed out before, application stands opposite to implicit-explicit, to explication and explicitation. Instead of making it explicit, shall we say making it applicite?¹⁹

One can read Hegel's entire *Phenomenology of Spirit* as a theory of application. When the natural consciousness, *natürliches Bewußtsein*, a non-philosophical consciousness – and the aim of the *Phenomenology* is to bring the non-philosophical consciousness to philosophy –proposes a certain theory, it is simply invited to apply it to see whether it can stand the test of “bearing upon something else.” And each time it does this it turns out that the application transforms the initial theory and that it has very different consequences from what it purported. Consciousness produces certain concepts and entertains various theories, different at each stage, but the moment one applies them, it turns out that these concepts and theories entail a very different message from what one surmised or imagined. Say, in the beginning, when consciousness which swears by sense certainty as the criterion of truth – the allegedly richest, manifold and immediate sensual experience – is invited to say something about it,

¹⁹ I cannot enter here into the massive debate about whether Hegel thereby actually espoused the otherness or whether this move rather served to make otherness subservient to the same, and thus neutralized, sublated, *aufgehoben*, rather than engaging in proper application (“bearing upon an other”). All controversies surrounding Hegel's legacy turn around this thin line. Most tellingly, Kierkegaard, in the immediate aftermath, saw Hegel as the last proponent of anamnesis, the Platonic reminiscence, the deployment and coming out of what had already been there, thus a mere unfolding. He sought the remedy to counter this in repetition, a most ingenious proposal. Can repetition be the way to proper application? There is a paradox. Against Hegel's domesticating the otherness, Kierkegaard proposes “more of the same” (namely repetition) as the best way to break out of the vicious circle of “sameness” and get to alterity. The same, when repeated, when properly applied, turns out to produce otherness. This would be the proper application that could counter the move towards the progression of *Aufhebung*. – I can remind that Lacan opted for Kierkegaard and repetition, against both Freud and Hegel. See Mladen Dolar, *Remembrance and Repetition: Kierkegaard and Psychoanalysis*.

it turns out that the alleged riches evaporate and get caught in the web of language as the realm of abstraction, not adapted to the immediate experience, so that the consciousness can only come up with the emptiest of concepts and the most abstract statements (“here,” “now,” etc.).²⁰ What is apparently the most concrete theory runs out into the biggest abstraction – could we say that it was submitted to the talking cure? – Most generally, if one reads the *Phenomenology* as a theory of application, it can be said that every theory proposed in the course of the book – and the *Phenomenology*’s grand ambition is to put to the test the exhaustive list of all possible theories – every theory produces its symptom the moment it is applied, and their truth lies in the symptoms they produce, not in the laudable intentions. Here is another theme to ponder on: application and symptom – the symptom produced precisely at the point where no application is mere application but engages otherness in a way that one cannot quite foresee and control. – But this doesn’t go for Hegel alone, one can argue that every philosophy worthy of its name calls for application and presents, in one form or another, a theory of application. This is why the requirement of application, obligatory in any application for funding – the call for applied science etc. – is completely off-mark. It is a call for adaptation, not application, the demand to adapt theory to the given realities, making it useful for the *service des biens*. While a proper application would require the transformation of what it applies to as well as the transformation of the theory that is being applied.

I grew fond of this word “application” while I was writing this paper. It allows, and even calls for, a speculative turn, highly abstract reflections (what is the one, what is the other, what is a relation), and at the same time linking speculation at the other end to the trivial and the practical, the stern reality of job (and funding) applications and the avalanche of computer apps. Application can serve as a makeshift synonym for the

²⁰ Note that the situation is here the reverse of what we are usually faced with – usually one has to apply a theory to the sensual empirical experience, while here the assumption which takes the empirical experience as the starting point and the source of truth is tested against the possibility of its (linguistic) expression and is found wanting.

Hegelian dialectic (and even as an illuminating clue to his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the most difficult book in the philosophical canon – I am aware that this is stretching it); and at the same time it can serve as a clue to our modern, postmodern, or post-post- condition, where we are all put in the double position of being applicants (for jobs, for funding) and app users. Application offers an inner trajectory where the spirit (of application as self-othering) as if meets the bone (of anything but dialectical inconsequentiality of the present habitus).²¹ But can one instill dialectic into their relation?

It may seem that in our contemporary role of applicants we are in a subordinate position of entreaty, a plea, imploring the unfathomable Other for pity or mercy (or at least for favor) in an inscrutable world, while as app users we are in the active position of touchscreen scrollers, where everything is at our disposal, literally at our fingertips (and there has never been so much information and possibilities at our disposal in the whole history of mankind, all thanks to apps). But it's clear that this is a false opposition. As apps users we are as much serving the unfathomable Other and voluntarily catering for the accumulation of surplus value (as “cloud-serfs,” to use the expression promoted by Varoufakis), subservient to the twin conglomerate of informational and financial capital.²² Our constant free and willing use of apps is the token of our serfdom (hence Varoufakis proposed the term techno-feudalism to encapsulate our predicament).²³ If application is essentially a relation to an other, to alterity (“bringing some-

²¹ Here is a further very illuminating reflection by Simon Hajdini, concerning the Marxist analysis of commodity universe: “Primitive accumulation can be seen as preparing the ground for capitalist application; if the former is a process of separating the capacity for labor from the means of its realization, then capitalist production is a process by which labor meets the means of production as the means of application (of labor). The idea also fits your point regarding the retroactive constitution of the (supposedly initial) “something” brought to bear on “something else”: in the process of capitalist application, the initial purely abstract and hence empty capacity for labor is retroactively re-constituted as labor-power to be applied in the production process, etc. Here, too, application has clear ontological priority.” (Quoted from personal correspondence.)

²² See Joseph Vogl, *Capital and Ressentiment*.

²³ See Yannis Varoufakis, *Techno-feudalism*.

thing to bear on something else”), then the term itself raises the question about the nature of the other that is involved, enfolded/out-folded, with the application. Which other? What is the “eliveness” of something else? We saw that application can be conceived as a formidable tool whereby an entity can espouse otherness in order to be itself, a dialectical move that can hopefully break the circle of the reproduction of the same and enable the experience of alterity at the core of any self.²⁴ But the evolution of the meaning of the term application testifies to a new predicament, spelling out two forms of submission: the experience of a radically opaque Other beyond our reach, which we try to sway as applicants (in the third sense), and on the other hand the Other which we (willingly) serve as app users. The Other of the market, the Other of the global financial order, the Other to which we send our applications or which we serve with our apps – in either case this is not the Other with which we could dialectically interfold to be ourselves.

If there is this inscrutable Other which now presides over the sense of application, there is on the other hand also the prevailing sense that we cannot make an experience of alterity any longer. Any heterogeneity is being homogenized, made computable,²⁵ subsumed in the universe of universal commodification which reaches deep into our intimacy. There is a paradox: there is both an omnipresent radical Other beyond our reach, and the absent other that we can no longer experience. Is there too much otherness, is there a lack of otherness? The Other is lacking, but fatefully not in the sense in which Lacan speaks about the lack in the Other. It is as if there is too much Other, to the point of it being unbearable, and there is too much sameness, to the point of it being unbearable. In the universe of universal application, what seems to be missing is precisely the proper

²⁴ Experience etymologically stems from *peras*, “border” – it is essentially the experience of engaging with the border, crossing the border, going beyond the border. The German *Erfahrung* evokes *Gefahr*, “danger,” and *fahren*, “a trajectory.”

²⁵ Maybe there is something wrong with this image of the world of total computation. One can argue that everything can be computed except the computation itself, which provides a structural loophole in any closed totalized universe and can have practical consequences. A line to be developed. See, e.g., McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto*.

application. Is there a way in which we could reinvent application, restore proper application, imagine another kind of application? This is a task that requires a lot of application in the second sense (devotion, commitment), and I can't quite find a better way than a re-engagement with the resources of, say, Hegel and Lacan, persevering on their path.

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