IS IT STILL POSSIBLE TO BE A HEGELIAN TODAY?

By Slavoj Žižek

Illustration: Ane Steinsholt Hem
The main feature of the historical thought proper is not “mobilism” (the motif of the fluidification or historical relativization of all forms of life), but the full endorsement of a certain impossibility: after a true historical break, one simply cannot return to the past, one cannot go on as if nothing happened - if one does it, the same practice acquires a radically changed meaning. Adorno provided a nice example of Schoenberg’s atonal revolution: after it took place, one can (and one does), of course, go on composing in the traditional tonal way, but the new tonal music has lost its innocence, since it is already “mediated” by the atonal break and thus functions as its negation. This is why there is an irreducible element of kitsch in the twentieth century tonal composers like Rachmaninov – something of a nostalgic clinging to the past, of an artificial fake, like the adult who tries to keep the naïve child in him alive. And the same applies to all domains: after the emergence of philosophical analysis of notions with Plato, mythical thought lost its immediacy, all revival of it is a fake; and after the emergence of Christianity, all revivals of paganism are always nostalgic fakes.

Writing/thinking/composing as if a Rupture didn’t occur is more ambiguous than it may appear and cannot be reduced to a non-historical denial. Badiou once famously wrote that what unites him with Deleuze is that they are both classic philosophers for whom Kant, the Kantian break, didn’t happen – but is this so? Maybe this holds for Deleuze, but definitely not for Badiou.1 Nowhere is this clearer than in their different handling of the Event. For Deleuze, an Event effectively is a pre-Kantian cosmological One which generates multitude, which is why the Event is absolutely immanent to reality, while the Badiouian Event is a break in the order of being (transcendentally constituted phenomenal reality), an intrusion into it of a radically heterogeneous (“noumenal”) level, so that we are clearly in (post-)Kantian space. This is why one can even define Badiou’s systematic philosophy (developed in his last masterpiece The Logics Of the Worlds) as Kantianism reinvented for the epoch of radical contingency. Instead of one transcendently-constituted reality, we get the multiplicity of worlds, each delineated by its transcendental matrix, a multiplicity which cannot be mediated/unified into a single larger transcendental frame; instead of the moral Law, we get fidelity to the Truth-Event which is always specific with regard to a particular situation of a World.

Is Hegel’s speculative idealism not the exemplary case of such a properly historical impossibility? Can one still be a Hegelian after the post-Hegelian break with traditional metaphysics which occurred more or less simultaneously in the works of Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and Marx? After this break, is there not something inherently false in advocating a Hegelian “absolute Idealism”? Isn’t any re-affirmation of Hegel a victim of the same anti-historical illusion, by-passing the impossibility of being a Hegelian after the post-Hegelian break, writing as if the post-Hegelian break did not happen? Here, however, one should complicate things a little bit: in some specific conditions, one can and should write as if a break didn’t happen – but in what conditions? To put it simply and directly: When the break we are referring to is not a true break but a false break, the one which obliterates the true break, the true point of impossibility. Our wager is that this, precisely, is what happened with the “official” post-Hegelian anti-philosophical break (Schopenhauer-Kierkegaard-Marx): although it presents itself as a break with idealism as embodied in its Hegelian climax, it ignores the crucial dimension of Hegel’s thought, i.e., it ultimately amounts to a desperate attempt to go on thinking as if Hegel did not happen – the hole of this absence of Hegel is, of course, filled in with the ridiculous caricature of Hegel the “absolute idealist” who “possessed absolute Knowledge”. The re-assertion of Hegel’s speculative thought is thus not what it may appear to be, the denial of the post-Hegelian break, but the bringing-forth of the dimension whose denial sustains the post-Hegelian break itself.

Hegel versus Nietzsche

Let us develop this point apropos Gerard Lebrun’s post-humously published L’envers de la dialectique (2004) one of the most convincing and forceful attempts to demonstrate the impossibility of being Hegelian today – and, for Lebrun, “today” stands under the sign of Nietzsche.2

Lebrun accepts that one cannot “refute” Hegel: the machinery of Hegel’s dialectics is so all-encompassing that nothing is easier for Hegel than to demonstrate triumphantly how all such refutations are inconsistent, to turn them against themselves – “one cannot refute an eye disease”, as Lebrun approvingly quotes Nietzsche. Most ridiculous among such critical refutations is, of course, the standard Marxist-evolutionist idea that there is a contradiction between Hegel’s dialectical method which demonstrates how every fixed determination is swiped away by the movement of negativity, how every determinate shape finds its truth in its annihilation, and Hegel’s system: if the destiny of everything is to pass away in the eternal movement of self-sublation, doesn’t the same hold for the system itself? Isn’t Hegel’s own system a temporary, historically-relative, formation which will be overcome by

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the progress of knowledge? Anyone who finds such refutation convincing is not to be taken seriously as a reader of Hegel.

How, then, can one move beyond Hegel? Lebrun’s solution is Nietzschean historical philology: one should bring to light the “eminently infra-rational” lexical choices, taking of sides, which are grounded in how living beings are coping with threats to their vital interests. Before Hegel set in motion his dialectical machinery which “swallows” all content and elevates it to its truth by destroying it in its immediate being, imperceptibly a complex network of semantic decisions has already been taken. In this way, one begins to:

Unveil the obverse of the dialectics. Dialectics is also partial. It also obfuscates its presuppositions. It is not the metaphilosophy it pretends to be with regard to the philosophies of Understanding (Lebrun 2004: 23).

Lebrun’s Nietzsche is decidedly anti-Heideggerian: for Lebrun, Heidegger re-philosophizes Nietzsche by way of interpreting the Will to Power as a new ontological First Principle. More than Nietzschean, Lebrun’s approach may appear Foucauldian: what Lebrun tries to provide is the “archaeology of the Hegelian knowledge”, its genealogy in concrete life-practices.

But is Lebrun’s “philological” strategy radical enough in philosophical terms? Does it not amount to a new version of historicist hermeneutics or, rather, of Foucauldian succession of epochal episteme? Does this not – if not legitimize, then at least make understandable Heidegger’s re-philosophization of Nietzsche? That is to say, one should raise the question of the ontological status of the “power” which sustains particular “philological” configurations – for Nietzsche himself, it is the will to power; for Heidegger, it is the abyssal game of “there is” which “sends” different epochal configurations of the disclosure of the world. In any case, one cannot avoid ontology: historicist hermeneutics cannot stand on its own. Heidegger’s history of Being is an attempt to elevate historical (not historicist) hermeneutics directly into transcendental ontology: there is for Heidegger nothing behind or beneath what Lebrun calls infra-rational semantic choices, they are the ultimate fact/horizon of our being. Heidegger, however, leaves open what one might call the ontic question: there are obscure hints all around his work of “reality” which persists out there prior to its ontological disclosure. That is to say, Heidegger in no way equates the epochal disclosure of Being with any kind of “creation” – he repeatedly concedes as an unproblematic fact that, even prior to their epochal disclosure or outside it, things somehow “are” (persist) out there, although they do not yet “exist” in the full sense of being disclosed “as such”, as part of a historical world. But what is the status of this ontic persistence outside ontological disclosure?

From the Nietzschean standpoint, there is more in the “infra-rational” semantic decisions than the fact that every approach to reality has to rely on a pre-existing set of hermeneutic “prejudices” or, as Heidegger would have put it, on a certain epochal disclosure of being; these decisions effectuate the pre-reflexive vital strategy of the Will to Power. To such an approach, Hegel remains a profoundly Christian thinker, a nihilist thinker whose basic strategy is to revamp a profound defeat, a withdrawal from full life in all its painful vitality, as the triumph of the absolute Subject. That is to say, from the standpoint of the Will to Power, the effective content of the Hegelian process is one long story of defeats and withdrawals, of the sacrifices of vital self-assertion: again and again, one has to renounce vital engagement as still “immediate” and “particular”. Exemplary is here Hegel’s passage from the revolutionary Terror to the Kantian morality: the utilitarian subject of the civil society, the subject who wants to reduce the State to the guardian of his private safety and well-being, has to be crushed by the Terror of the revolutionary State which can annihilate him at any moment for no reason whatsoever (which means that the subject is not punished for something he did, for some particular content or act, but for the very fact of being an independent individual opposed to the universal) – this Terror is his “truth”. So how do we pass from revolutionary Terror to the autonomous and free Kantian moral subject? By what one, in more contemporary language, would have called full identification with the aggressor: the subject should recognize in the external Terror, in this negativity which always threatens to annihilate him, the very core of his (universal) subjectivity, i.e., he should fully identify with it. Freedom is thus not freedom from Master, but a replacement of one Master with another: the external Master is replaced with an internal one. The price for this identification is, of course, the sacrifice of all “pathological” particular content – duty should be accomplished “for the sake of duty”. Lebrun demonstrates how this same logic holds also for language:

State and language are two complementary figures of the Subject’s accomplishment: here as well as there, the sense that I am and the sense that I enounce are submitted to the same imperceptible sacrifice of what appeared to be our ‘self’ in the illusion of immediacy (Lebrun 2004: 83).
Hegel was right to point out again and again that, when one talks, one always dwells in the universal – which means that, with its entry into language, the subject loses its roots in the concrete life-world. To put it in more pathetic terms: the moment I start to talk, I am no longer the sensually-concrete I, since I am caught into an impersonal mechanism which always makes me say something different from what I wanted to say – as the early Lacan liked to say: I am not speaking, I am being spoken by language. This is one of the ways to understand what Lacan called “symbolic castration”: the price the subject pays for its “transubstantiation” from the agent of a direct animal vitality to the speaking subject whose identity is kept apart from the direct vitality of passions.

A Nietzschean reading easily discerns in this reversal of Terror into autonomous morality a desperate strategy of turning defeat into triumph: instead of heroically fighting for one’s vital interests and stakes, one pre-emptively declares total surrender, gives up all content. Lebrun is here well aware how unjustified the standard critique of Hegel is, according to which the dialectical reversal of the utter negativity into new higher positivity, of the catastrophe into triumph, functions as a kind of deus ex machina, precluding the possibility that the catastrophe remains the final outcome of the process – the well-known common sense argument: “But what if there is no reversal of negativity into a new positive order?” This argument misses the point, which is that this is, precisely, what happens in the Hegelian reversal: there is no effective reversal of defeat into triumph but only a purely formal shift, change of perspective, which tries to present defeat itself as a triumph. Nietzsche’s point is that this triumph is fake, a cheap magician’s trick, a consolation-prize for losing all that makes life worth living: the real loss of vitality is supplemented by a lifeless spectre. To Lebrun’s Nietzschean reading, Hegel thus appears as a kind of atheist Christian philosopher: like Christianity, he locates the “truth” of all terrestrial finite reality into its (self)annihilation i.e., all reality reaches its truth only through/in its self-destruction; unlike Christianity, Hegel is well aware that there is no Other World in which we would be repaid for our terrestrial losses: transcendence is absolutely immanent, what is “beyond” finite reality is nothing but the immanent process of its self-overcoming. Hegel’s name for this absolute immanence of transcendence is “absolute negativity”, as he makes it clear in an exemplary way in the dialectics of Master and Servant: the Servant’s secured particular/finite identity is unsettled when, in experiencing the fear of death during his confrontation with the Master, he gets the whiff of the infinite power of negativity; through this experience, the Servant is forced to accept the worthlessness of his particular Self:

For this consciousness was not in peril and fear for this element or that, nor for this or that moment of time, it was afraid for its entire being; it felt the fear of death, the sovereign master. It has been in that experience melted to its inmost soul, has trembled throughout its every fibre, and all that was fixed and steadfast has quaked within it. This complete perturbation of its entire substance, this absolute dissolution of all its stability into fluent continuity, is, however, the simple, ultimate nature of self-consciousness, absolute negativity, pure self-relating existence, which consequently is involved in this type of consciousness (Hegel 1977: 117).

What, then, does the Servant get in exchange for renouncing all the wealth of his particular Self? Nothing – in overcoming his particular terrestrial Self, the Servant does not reach a higher level of a spiritual Self; all he has to do is to shift his position and recognize in (what appears to him to be) the overwhelming power of destruction which threatens to obliterate his particular identity the absolute negativity which forms the very core of his own Self. In short, the subject has to fully identify with the force that threatens to wipe him out: what he feared in fearing death was the negative power of his own Self. There is thus no reversal of negativity into positive greatness – the only “greatness” there is, is this negativity itself. Or, with regard to suffering: Hegel’s point is not that the suffering brought about by alienating labour of renunciation is an intermediary moment to pass, so that we should just endure it and patiently wait for the reward at the end of the tunnel – there is no prize or profit to be gained at the end for our patient submission, suffering and renunciation are their own reward, all that is to be done is to change our subjective position, to renounce our desperate clinging to our finite Self with its “pathological” desires, to purify our Self to universality. This is also how Hegel explains the overcoming of tyranny in the history of states: “One says that tyranny is overturned by the people because it is undignified, shameful, etc. In reality, it disappears simply because it is superfluous” (Hegel 1969: 247-8). It becomes superfluous when people no longer need the external force of the tyrant to make them renounce their particular
We are not finite and self-inconsistent because our activity is always thwarted by external obstacles; we are thwarted by external obstacles because we are finite and inconsistent.

Struggle and Reconciliation
This brings us to back to the incompatibility between Hegel's thought and any kind of evolutionary or historicist "mobilism": Hegel's dialectics excludes all "mobilism", it "in no way involves the recognition of the irresistible force of becoming, the épopée of a flux which takes everything with it":

The Hegelian dialectics was often – but superficially – assimilated to a mobilism. And it is undoubtedly true that the critique of the fixity of determinations can give rise to the conviction of an infinite dialectical process: the limited becoming has to disappear again and always, and its destruction extends to the very limit of our sight… However, at this level, we are still dealing with a simple going-on (Geschichte) to which one cannot confer the inner unity of a history (Geschichte) (Lebrun 2004: 11).

To see this, to thoroughly reject the "mobilist" topic of the eternal flux of Becoming which dissolves all fixed forms, is the first step towards dialectical reason in its radical incompatibility with the allegedly "deep" insight into how everything comes out of the primordial Chaos and is again swallowed by it, the Wisdom which persists from ancient cosmologies up to the Stalinist dialectical materialism. The most popular form of "mobilism" is the traditional view of Hegel as the philosopher of "eternal struggle" popularized by Marxists from Engels to Stalin and Mao: the well-known "dialectical" notion of life as an eternal conflict between reaction and progress, old and new, past and future. This belligerent view which advocates our engagement on the "progressive" side is totally foreign to Hegel, for whom "taking sides" is as such illusory (since it is by definition unilateral). Let us take social struggle at its most violent: war. What interests Hegel is not struggle as such, but the way the "truth" of the engaged positions emerges through it, i.e., how the warring parties are "reconciled" through their mutual destruction. The true (spiritual) meaning of war is not honour, victory, defence, etc., but the emergence of absolute negativity (death) as the absolute Master which reminds us of the false stability of our organized finite lives. War serves to elevate individuals to their "truth" by making them obliterate their particular self-interests and identify with the State's universality. The true enemy is not the enemy we are fighting but our own finitude - recall Hegel's acerbic remark on how it is easy to preach the vanity of our finite terrestrial existence, but much more difficult to accept this lesson when it is enforced by a wild enemy soldier who breaks into our home and begins cutting up members of our family with a sabre…

In philosophical terms, Hegel's point is here the primacy of "self-contradiction" over external obstacle (or enemy). We are not finite and self-inconsistent because our activity is always thwarted by external obstacles; we are thwarted by external obstacles because we are finite and inconsistent. In other words, what the subject engaged in a struggle perceives as the enemy, the external obstacle he has to overcome, is the materialization of the subject's immanent inconsistency: the fighting subject needs the figure of the enemy to sustain the illusion of his own consistency, his very identity hinges on his opposing the enemy, so that his (eventual) victory over the enemy...
is his own defeat, disintegration. As Hegel likes to put it, fighting the external enemy, one (unknowingly) fights one's own essence. So, far from celebrating engaged fighting, Hegel's point is rather that every struggling position, every taking-sides, has to rely on a necessary illusion (the illusion that, once the enemy is annihilated, I will achieve the full realization of my being). This brings us to what would have been a properly Hegelian notion of ideology: The misapprehension of the condition of possibility (of what is an inherent constituent of your position) as the condition of impossibility (as an obstacle which prevents your full realization) – the ideological subject is unable to grasp how his entire identity hinges on what he perceives as the disturbing obstacle. This notion of ideology is not just an abstract mental exercise: it fits perfectly the Fascist anti-Semitism as the most elementary form of ideology, one is even tempted to say: ideology as such, *kat' exochen*. The anti-Semitic figure of the Jew, this foreign intruder who disturbs and corrupts the harmony of the social order, is ultimately a fetishist objectivization, a stand-in, for the “inconsistency” of the social order, for the immanent antagonism (“class struggle”) which generates the dynamic of the social system's instability.

Hegel's interest in the topic of struggle, of the “conflict of the opposites”, is thus that of the neutral dialectical observer who discerns the “Cunning of Reason” at work in struggle: a subject engages in struggle, is defeated (as a rule in his very victory), and this defeat brings him to his truth. We can measure here clearly the distance that separates Hegel from Nietzsche: the innocence of exuberant heroism that Nietzsche wants to resuscitate, the passion of risk, of fully engaging in a struggle, of victory or defeat, they are all gone – the “truth” of the struggle only emerges in and through defeat. This is why the standard Marxist denunciation of the falsity of the Hegelian reconciliation (already made by Schelling) misses the point. According to this critique, the Hegelian reconciliation is false, it occurs only in the Idea, while real antagonists persist - in the “concrete” experience of the “real life” of individuals who cling to their particular identity, state power remains an external compulsion. Therein resides the crux of the young Marx's critique of Hegel's political thought: Hegel presents the modern constitutional monarchy as a rational State in which antagonisms are reconciled, as an organic Whole in which every constituent (can) find(s) its proper place, but he thereby obfuscates the class antagonism which continues in modern societies, generating the working class as the “non-reason of the existing Reason,” as the part of modern society which has no proper part in it, as its “part of no-part” (Ranciere).

What Lebrun rejects in this critique is not its diagnosis (that the proposed reconciliation is dishonest, false, an “enforced reconciliation” (*epresste Versöhnung*) – the title of one of Adorno's essays which obfuscates the antagonisms' continuous persistence in social reality): “what is so admirable in this portrait of the dialectician rendered dishonest by his blindness is the supposition that he could have been honest” (Lebrun 2004: 115). In other words, instead of rejecting the Hegelian false reconciliation, one should reject as illusory the very notion of dialectical reconciliation, i.e., one should renounce the demand for a “true” reconciliation. Hegel was fully aware that reconciliation does not alleviate real suffering and antagonisms – his formulas of reconciliation from the foreword to his *Philosophy of Right* is that one should “recognize the Rose in the Cross of the present”, or, to put it in Marx's terms, in reconciliation, one does not change external reality to fit some Idea, one recognizes this Idea as the inner “truth” of this miserable reality itself. The Marxist reproach that, instead of transforming reality, Hegel only proposes its new interpretation, thus in a way misses the point – it knocks on an open door, since, for Hegel, in order to pass from alienation to reconciliation, one does not have to change reality, but the way we perceive it and relate to it.

The same insight underlies Hegel's analysis of the passage from labour to thought in the subchapter on Master and Servant in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Lebrun is fully justified in emphasising, against Kojève, that Hegel is far from celebrating (collective) labour as the site of the productive self-assertion of human subjectivity, as the process of forceful transformation and appropriation of natural objects, their subordination to human goals. All finite thought remains caught in the “spurious infinity” of the never-ending process of the (trans)formation of objective reality which always resists the full subjective grasp, so that the subject's work is never done: “As an aggressive activity deployed by a finite being, labour signals above all man's impotence to integrally take possession of nature” (Lebrun 2004: 207). This finite thought is the horizon of Kant and Fichte: the endless practico-ethical struggle to overcome the external obstacles as well as the subject's own inner nature. Their philosophies are the philosophies of struggle, while in Hegel's philosophy, the fundamental stance of the
subject towards objective reality is not the one of practical engagement, of confrontation with the inertia of objectivity, but the one of letting-it-be: purified of its pathological particularity, the universal subject is certain of itself, it knows that his thought already is the form of reality, so it can renounce enforcing its project on reality, it can let reality the way it is.

This is why labour gets all the more close to its truth the less I work to satisfy my need, i.e., to produce an object I will consume. This is why industry which produces for the market is spiritually “higher” than production for one’s own needs: in market-production, I manufacture objects with no relation to my needs. The highest form of social production is therefore that of a merchant:

The merchant is the only one who relates to the Good as a perfect universal subject, since the object in no way interests him on behalf of its aesthetic presence or its use value, but only insofar as it contains a desire of an other (Lebrun 2004: 206).

And this is also why, in order to arrive at the “truth” of labour, one should gradually abstract from the (external) goal it strives to realize. The parallel with war is appropriate here: in the same way that the “truth” of the military struggle is not the destruction of the enemy, but the sacrifice of the “pathological” content of the warrior’s particular Self, its purification into the universal Self, the “truth” of labour as the struggle with nature, its stuff, is also not victory over nature, it is not to compel nature to serve human goals, but the self-purification of the labourer itself. Labour is simultaneously the (trans)formation of external objects and the disciplinary self-formation/education (Bildung) of the subject itself. Hegel here celebrates precisely the alienated and alienating character of labour: far from being a direct expression of my creativity, labour forces me to submit to artificial discipline, to renounce my innermost immediate tendencies, to alienate myself from my natural Self:

Desire has reserved to itself the pure negating of the object and thereby unalloyed feeling of self. This satisfaction, however, just for that reason is itself only a state of evanescence, for it lacks objectivity or subsistence. Labour, on the other hand, is desire restrained and checked, evanescence delayed and postponed; in other words, labour shapes and fashions the thing (Hegel 1977: 118).

As such, labour prefigures thought, it achieves its telos in thinking which no longer works on an external stuff, but is already its own stuff, or, which no longer imposes its subjective/finite form onto external reality, but is already in itself the infinite form of reality. For the finite thought, the concept of an object is a mere concept, the subjective goal one actualizes when, by way of labour, one imposes it onto reality. For the speculative thought, on the contrary, thought is not merely subjective, it is in itself already objective, i.e., it renders the objective conceptual form of the object. This is why the inner Spirit, certain of itself,

No longer needs to form/shape nature and to render it spiritual in order to fixate the divine and to make its unity with nature externally visible: insofar as the free thought thinks externality, it can leave it the way it is [kann er es lassen wie er ist] (Hegel 1970a: 323).

This sudden retroactive reversal from not-yet to already-is (we never directly realize a goal – we directly pass from striving to realize a goal to a sudden recognition that the goal already is realized) is what distinguishes Hegel from all kinds of historicist topics, inclusive of the standard Marxist critical reproach that the Hegelian ideal reconciliation is not enough, since it leaves reality (the real pain and suffering) the way it is, so that what is needed is actual reconciliation through radical social transformation. For Hegel, the illusion is not that of the enforced “false reconciliation” which ignores the persisting divisions; the true illusion resides in not seeing that, in what appear to us as the chaos of becoming, the infinite goal is already realized:

Within the finite order, we cannot experience or see that the goal is truly achieved. The accomplishment of the infinite goal resides only in overcoming the illusion [Täuschung – deception] that this goal is not yet achieved (Hegel 1992: 442).

In short, the ultimate deception is not to see that one already has what one is looking for – like Christ’s disciples who were awaiting his “real” reincarnation, blind to the fact that their collective already was the Holy Spirit, the return of the living Christ.

A Story to Tell
How are we to counter this diagnosis of the “disease called Hegel” which centers on the dialectical reversal as the
empty/formal gesture of presenting defeat as victory? The first observation that imposes itself is, of course, that reading the “infra-rational” semantic choices as expressing a strategy of coping with obstacles to the assertion of life is in itself already an “infra-rational” semantic choice. But more important is to note how such a reading subtly imposes a narrow version of Hegel which obliterates many key dimensions of his thought. Is it not possible to read Hegel's systematic “sublation” of each and every shape of consciousness or social life-form as, precisely, the description of all possible life-forms, vital “semantic choices,” and of their inherent antagonisms (“contradictions”)? If there is a “semantic choice” that underlies Hegel's thought, it is not the desperate wager that, retroactively, one will be able to tell a consistent all-encompassing meaningful story within which each detail will be allotted its proper place, but, on the contrary, the weird certainty (comparable to the psychoanalyst's certainty that the repressed will always return, that a symptom will always spoil every figure of harmony) that, with every figure of consciousness or form of life, things will always somehow “go wrong”, that each position will generate an excess which will augur its self-destruction.

Does this mean that Hegel does not advocate any determinate “semantic choice,” since, for him, the only “truth” is the very endless process of “generation of corruption” of all determinate “semantic choices”? Yes, but on condition that we do not conceive this process in the usual “mobilist” sense.

How, then, does the truly historical thought break with such universalized “mobilism”? In what precise sense is it historical and not simply the rejection of “mobilism” on behalf of some eternal Principles exempted from the flow of generation and corruption? Here, one should again differentiate historicity proper from organic evolution. In the latter, a universal Principle is slowly and gradually differentiating itself; as such, it remains the calm underlying all-encompassing ground that unifies the bustling activity of struggling individuals, their endless process of generation and corruption that is the “cycle of life”. In history proper, on the contrary, the universal Principle is caught into the “infinite” struggle with itself, i.e., the struggle is each time the struggle for the fate of the universality itself. This is why the eminently “historical” moments are those of great collisions when a whole form of life is threatened, when the reference to the established social and cultural norms no longer guarantees the minimum of stability and cohesion; in such open situations, a new form of life has to be invented, and it is at this point that Hegel locates the role of great heroes. They operate in a pre-legal, stateless zone: their violence is not bound by the usual moral rules, they enforce a new order with the subterranean vitality which shatters all established forms. According to the usual doxa on Hegel, heroes follow their instinctual passions, their true motifs and goals are not clear to themselves, they are unconscious instruments of the deeper historical necessity of giving birth to a new spiritual life form, however, as Lebrun points out, one should not impute to Hegel the standard teleological notion of a hidden Reason which pulls the strings of the historical process, following a plan established in advance and using individuals’ passions as the instruments of its implementation. First, since the meaning of one's acts is a priori inaccessible to individuals who accomplish them, heroes included, there is no “science of politics” able to predict the course of events: “nobody has ever the right to declare himself depositary of the Spirit's self-knowledge” (Lebrun 2004:40), and this impossibility “spares Hegel the fanaticism of objective responsibility” (Lebrun 2004: 41) – in other words, there is no place in Hegel for the Marxist-Stalinist figure of the Communist revolutionary who knows the historical necessity and posits himself as the instrument of its implementation. However, it is crucial to add a further twist here: if we merely assert this impossibility, we are still “conceiving the Absolute as Substance, not as Subject” – we still surmise that there is some pre-existing Spirit imposing its substantial Necessity on history, we just accept that the insight into this Necessity is inaccessible to us. From a consequent Hegelian standpoint, one should go a crucial step further and realize that no historical Necessity pre-exists the contingent process of its actualization, i.e., that the historical process is also in itself “open”, undecided – this confused mixture “generates sense insofar as it unravels itself”:

It is people, and they only, who make history, while Spirit explicates itself through this making. [...] The point is not, as in a naïve theodicy, to find a justification for every event. In actual time, no heavenly harmony resonates in the sound and fury. It is only once this tumult recollects itself in the past, once what took place is conceived, that we can say, to put it briefly, that the “course of History” is a little bit better outlined. History runs forward only for those who look at it backwards; it is linear progression only in retrospect. [...] The Hegelian “providential necessity” has so little authority that it seems as if it learns from the run of things in the world which were its goals (Lebrun 2004: 41-44).

This is how one should read Hegel’s thesis that, in the co-
It is not enough to say that crossing Rubicon is part of the complete notion of Caesar. One should rather say that Caesar is defined by the fact that he crossed Rubicon. His life didn’t follow a scenario written in the book of some goddess: there is no book which would already have contained the relations of Caesar’s life, for the simple reason that his life itself is this book, and that, at every moment, an event is in itself its own narrative (Lebrun 2004: 87).

But why shouldn’t we then say that there is simply no atemporal conceptual structure, that all there is is the gradual temporal deployment? Here we encounter the properly dialectical paradox which defines true historicity as opposed to evolutionist historicism, and which was formulated much later in French structuralism as the “primacy of synchrony over diachrony”. Usually, this primacy was taken to mean the ultimate denial of historicity in structuralism: a historical development can be reduced to the (imperfect) temporal deployment of a pre-existing atemporal matrix of all possible variations/combinations. This simplistic notion of the “primacy of synchrony over diachrony” overlooks the (properly dialectical) point, made long ago by (among others) T. S. Eliot in his Tradition and Individual Talent, on how each truly new artistic phenomenon not only designates a break from the entire past, but retroactively changes this past itself. At every historical conjuncture, present is not only present, it also encompasses a perspective on the past immanent to it – say, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, the October Revolution is no longer the same historical event, i.e., it is (for the triumphant liberal-capitalist view) no longer the beginning of a new progressive epoch in the history of humanity, but the beginning of a catastrophic misdirection of history which reached its end in 1991. Or, back to Caesar, once he crossed Rubicon, his previous life appeared in a new way, as a preparation for his later world-historical role, i.e., it was transformed into the part of a totally different life-story. This is what Hegel calls “totality”, or what structuralism calls “synchronic structure”: a historical moment which is not limited to the present but includes its own past and future, i.e., the way the past and the future appeared to and from this moment.

It is, however, at this very point, after fully conceding Hegel’s radical break with traditional metaphysical theodicy, that Lebrun makes his critical move. The fundamental Nietzschean strategy of Lebrun is first to admit the radicality of Hegel’s undermining of the traditional metaphysics, but then, in the crucial second step, to demonstrate how this very radical sacrifice of the metaphysical content saves the minimal form of metaphysics. The accusations which concern Hegel’s theodicy, of course, fall too short: there is no substantial God who in advance writes the script of History and watches over its realization, the situation is open, truth emerges only through the very process of its deployment, etc.. But what Hegel nonetheless maintains is the much deeper presupposition that, at the end, when the dusk falls over the events of the day, the Owl of Minerva will take off, i.e., that there always is a story to be told at the end, the story which (“retroactively” and “contingently” as much as one wants) reconstitutes the Sense of the preceding process. Hegel is of course against every form of despotic domination, so the critique of his thought as the divinization of the Prussian monarchy is ridiculous; however, his assertion of subjective freedom comes with a catch: It is the freedom of the subject who undergoes a violent “transubstantiation” from the individual stuck onto his particularity to the universal subject who recognizes in the State the substance of his own being. The mirror-obverse of this mortification of individuality as the price to be paid for the rise of the “truly” free universal subject is that the State’s power retains its full authority – the only change is that this authority (as in the entire tradition from Plato onwards) loses its tyrannical-contingent character and becomes a rationally-justified power. The question is thus: is Hegel effectively enacting a desperate strategy of sacrificing everything, all the metaphysical content, in order to save the essential, the form itself (the form of a retrospective rational reconstruction, the form of authority which imposes onto the subject the sacrifice of all particular content, etc.)? Or is the question rather that Lebrun himself, in making these types of reproaches, enacts the fetishist strategy of je sais bien, mais quand meme: “I know very well that Hegel goes to the end in destroying metaphysical presuppositions, but nonetheless…”? The answer to this reproach should be a pure tautology which marks the passage from contingency to necessity: There is a story to be told if there is a story to be told. That is to say, if there is a story to be told (if, due to contingency, a story emerges at the end), then this story will appear as necessary. Yes, the story is necessary, but its necessity itself is contingent.
Is there nonetheless not a grain of truth in Lebrun's critical point – does Hegel effectively not presuppose that, contingent and open as the history may be, a consistent story can always be told afterwards? Or, to put it in Lacan's terms, is the entire edifice of the Hegelian historiography not based on the premise that, no matter how confused the events, a subject supposed to know will emerge at the end, magically converting nonsense into sense, chaos into new order? Recall just his philosophy of history with its narrative of world history as the story of the progress of freedom... And is it not true that, if there is a lesson of the twentieth century, it is that all the extreme phenomena that took place in it cannot ever be unified in a single encompassing philosophical narrative? One simply cannot write a "phenomenology of the twentieth century Spirit", uniting technological progress, the rise of democracy, the failed Communist attempt with its Stalinist catastrophe, the horrors of Fascism, the gradual end of colonialism... But is this really so? What if, precisely, one can and should write a Hegelian history of the twentieth century, this "age of extremes" (Eric Hobsbawn), as a global narrative delimited by two epochal constellations: the (relatively) long peaceful period of capitalist expansion from 1848 till 1914 as its substantial starting point whose subterranean antagonisms then exploded with the First World War, and the ongoing global-capitalist "New World Order" emerging after 1990 as its conclusion, the return to a new all-encompassing system signalling to some a Hegelian "end of history", but whose antagonisms already announce new explosions? Are the great reversals and unexpected explosions of the topsy-turvy twentieth century, its numerous "coincidences of the opposites" – the reversal of liberal capitalism into Fascism, the even more weird reversal of the October Revolution into the Stalinist nightmare – not the very privileged stuff which seems to call for a Hegelian reading? What would Hegel have made of today's struggle of Liberalism against fundamentalist Faith? One thing is sure: he would not simply take the side of liberalism, but of Liberalism against fundamentalist Faith? One thing is sure: he would not simply take the side of liberalism, but... Of course, Hegel himself otherwise... Not only did Hegel have no problem with taking sides (with an often very violent partiality) in the political debates of his time; his entire mode of thinking is deeply "polemical", always intervening, attacking, taking sides, and, as such as far as possible from a detached position of Wisdom which observes the ongoing struggles from a neutral distance, aware of their nullity sub specie aeternitatis. For Hegel, the true ("concrete") universality is accessible only from an engaged "partial" standpoint.

The way one usually reads the Hegelian relationship between necessity and freedom is that they ultimately coincide: for Hegel, true freedom has nothing to do with capricious choices; it means the priority of self-relating to relating-to-other, i.e., an entity is free when it can deploy its immanent potentials without being impeded by any external obstacle. From here, it is easy to develop the standard argument against Hegel: his system is a fully "saturated" set of categories, with no place for contingency and indeterminacy, i.e., in Hegel's logic, each category follows with inexorable immanent-logical necessity from the preceding one, and the entire series of categories forms a self-enclosed Whole... We can see now what this argument misses: the Hegelian dialectical process is not such a "saturated" self-contained necessary Whole, but the open-contingent process through which such a Whole forms itself. In other words, the reproach confuses being with becoming: it perceives as a fixed order of Being (the network of categories) what is for Hegel the process of Becoming which, retroactively, engenders its necessity. The same point can also be made in the terms of the distinction between potentiality and virtuality. Quentin Meillassoux outlined the contours of a post-metaphysical materialist ontology whose basic premise is the Cantorian multiplicity of infinities which cannot be totalized into an all-encompassing One. Such an ontology of non-All asserts radical contingency: not only are there no laws which

Potentiality versus Virtuality

Convincing as it may appear, Lebrun's critical diagnosis of the Hegelian wager that there is always a story to tell nonetheless again falls short: Lebrun misses an additional twist which complicates his image of Hegel. Yes, Hegel sublates time in eternity – but this sublation itself has to appear as (hinges on) a contingent temporal event. Yes, Hegel sublates contingency in a universal rational order – but this order itself hinges on a contingent excess (say, the

State as a rational totality can only actualize itself through the "irrational" figure of the King at its head). Yes, struggle is sublated in the peace of reconciliation (mutual annihilation) of the opposites, but this reconciliation itself has to appear as its opposite, as an act of extreme violence. So Lebrun is right in emphasizing that Hegel's topic of the dialectical struggle of the opposites is as far as possible from an engaged attitude of "taking sides": For Hegel, the "truth" of the struggle is always, with an inexorable necessity, the mutual destruction of the opposites – the "truth" of a phenomenon always resides in its self-annihilation, in the destruction of its immediate being. Does, however, Lebrun here nonetheless not miss the proper paradox? Not only did Hegel have no problem with taking sides (with an often very violent partiality) in the political debates of his time; his entire mode of thinking is deeply "polemical", always intervening, attacking, taking sides, and, as such as far as possible from a detached position of Wisdom which observes the ongoing struggles from a neutral distance, aware of their nullity sub specie aeternitatis. For Hegel, the true ("concrete") universality is accessible only from an engaged "partial" standpoint.

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hold with necessity, every law is in itself contingent, it can be overturned at any moment. What this amounts to is the suspension of the Principle of Sufficient Reason: not only the epistemological suspension, but also the ontological one. That is to say, it is not only that we cannot ever get to know the entire network of causal determinations, this chain is in itself “inconclusive”, opening up the space for the immanent contingency of becoming – such a chaos of becoming subjected to no pre-existing order is what defines radical materialism. Along these lines, Meillassoux proposes a precise distinction between contingency and chance, linking it to the distinction between virtuality and potentiality:

Potentialities are the non-actualized cases of an indexed set of possibilities under the condition of a given law (whether aleatory or not). Chance is every actualization of a potentiality for which there is no univocal instance of determination on the basis of the initial given conditions. Therefore I will call contingency the property of an indexed set of cases (not of a case belonging to an indexed set) of not itself being a case of sets of cases; and virtuality the property of every set of cases of emerging within a becoming which is not dominated by any pre-constituted totality of possibles (Meillassoux 2008: 71-72).

A clear case of potentiality is the throw of a die through which what was already a possible case becomes a real case: it was determined by the pre-existing order of possibilities that there is a 1/6 chance for number 6 to turn up, so when number 6 does turn up, a pre-existing possible is realized. Virtuality, on the contrary, designates a situation in which one cannot totalize the set of possibles, so that something new emerges, a case is realized for which there was no place in the pre-existing set of possibles: “Time creates the possible at the very moment it makes it come to pass, it brings forth the possible as it does the real, it inserts itself in the very throw of the die, to bring forth a seventh case, in principle unforeseeable, which breaks the fixity of potentialities” (Meillassoux 2008: 74). One should note here Meillassoux’s precise formulation: the New arises when an X emerges which does not merely actualize a pre-existing possibility, but whose actualization creates (retroactively opens up) its own possibility:

If we maintain that becoming is not only capable of bringing forth cases on the basis of a pre-given universe of cases, we must then understand that it follows that such cases irrupt, properly speaking, from nothing, since no structure contains them as eternal potentialities before their emergence: we thus make irruption ex nihilo the very concept of a temporality delivered to its pure immanence (Meillassoux 2008: 72).

In this way, we obtain a precise definition of time in its irreducibility: time is not only the “space” of future realization of possibilities, but the “space” of the emergence of something radically new, outside the scope of the possibilities inscribed into any atemporal matrix. The emergence of a phenomenon ex nihilo, not fully covered by the sufficient chain of reasons, is thus no longer – as in traditional metaphysics – the sign of the direct intervention of some super-natural power (God) into nature, but, on the contrary, the sign of the inexistence of God, i.e., a proof that nature is not-All, not “covered” by any transcendent Order or Power which regulates it. A “miracle” (whose formal definition is the emergence of something not covered by the existing causal network) is thus converted into a materialist concept:

Every “miracle” thus becomes the manifestation of the inexistence of God, in so far as every radical rupture of the present in relation to the past becomes the manifestation of the absence of any order capable of overseeing the chaotic power of becoming (Meillassoux 2008: 75).

On the base of these insights, Meillassoux brilliantly underlines the standard argument against the radical contingency of nature and its laws (in both senses: of the hold of laws and of the laws themselves): how come that nature is so permanent, that it (mostly) conforms to laws? Is this not highly improbable, the same improbability as that of the die always falling 6 up? This argument relies on a possible totalization of possibilities/probabilities, with regard to which the uniformity is improbable: if there is no standard, nothing is more improbable than anything else. This is also why the “astonishment” on which the Strong Anthropic Principle in cosmology counts is false: we start from human life, which could have evolved only within a set of very precise preconditions, and then, moving backwards, we cannot but be astonished at how our universe was furnished with precisely the right set of characteristics for the emergence of life – just a slightly different chemical composition, density, etc., would have made life impossible... This “astonishment” again relies on the probabilistic reasoning which presupposes a pre-existing totality of possibilities.

This is how one should read Marx’s well-known statement, from his introduction to Grundrisse manuscripts, about the anatomy of man as a key to the anatomy of the ape: it is profoundly materialist, i.e., it does not involve any teleology (man is “in germ” already present in...
Illustration: Stine Schwebs
ape, ape immanently tends towards man). It is precisely because the passage from ape to man is radically contingent/imprevisible, because there is no inherent “progress” in it, that one can only retroactively determine/discern the conditions (not “sufficient reasons”) for man in ape. And, again, it is crucial to bear in mind here that the non-All is ontological, not only epistemological: when we stumble upon “indeterminacy” in nature, when the rise of the New cannot be fully accounted for by the set of its pre-existing conditions, this does not mean that we encountered the limitation of our knowledge, our inability to understand the “higher” reason at work here, but, on the contrary, that we demonstrated the ability of our mind to grasp the non-All of reality:

The notion of virtuality permits us [...] to reverse the signs, making of every radical irruption the manifestation, not of a transcendent principle of becoming (a miracle, the sign of a Creator), but of a time that nothing subtends (an emergence, the sign of non-All). We can then grasp what is signified by the impossibility of tracing a genealogy of novelties directly to a time before their emergence: not the incapacity of reason to discern hidden potentialities, but, quite on the contrary, the capacity of reason to accede to the ineffectivity of an All of potentialities which would pre-exist their emergence. In every radical novelty, time makes manifest that it does not actualize a germ of the past, but that it brings forth a virtuality which did not pre-exist in any way, in any totality inaccessible to time, its own advent (Meillassoux 2008: 80).

For us Hegelians the crucial question here is: where is Hegel with regard to this distinction between potentiality and virtuality? In a first approach, there is a massive evidence that Hegel is the philosopher of potentiality: is not the whole point of the dialectical development as the development from In-itself to For-itself that, in the process of becoming, things merely “become what they already are” (or, rather, were from all eternity)? Is the dialectical process not the temporal deployment of an eternal set of potentialities, which is why the Hegelian System is a self-enclosed set of necessary passages? However, this mirage of overwhelming evidence dissipates the moment we fully take into account the radical retroactivity of the dialectical process: the process of becoming is not in itself necessary, but the becoming (the gradual contingent emergence) of necessity itself. This is (also, among other things) what “to conceive substance as subject” means: subject as the Void, the Nothingness of self-relating negativity, is the very nihil out of which every new figure emerges, i.e., every dialectical passage/reversal is a passage in which the new figure emerges ex nihilo and retroactively posits/creates its necessity.

The Hegelian Circle of Circles

The stakes of this debate – is Hegel a thinker of potentiality or a thinker of virtuality? - are extremely high: they concern the (in)existence of the “big Other” itself. That is to say, the atemporal matrix which contains the scope of the possibilities is one of the names of the “big Other,” and another name is the totalizing story we can tell after the fact, i.e., the certainty that such a story will always emerge. What Nietzsche reproaches to modern atheism is precisely that, in it, the “big Other” survives – true, no longer as the substantial God, but as the totalizing symbolic frame of reference. This is why Lebrun emphasizes that Hegel is not an atheist conveniently presenting himself as Christian, but effectively the ultimate Christian philosopher. Hegel always insisted on the deep truth of the Protestant saying “God is dead”: In his own thought, the substantial-transcendent God dies, but is resurrected as the symbolic totality which guarantees the meaningful consistency of the universe – in a strict homology with the passage from God qua substance to the Holy Spirit as the community of believers in Christianity. When Nietzsche talks about the death of God, he does not have in mind the pagan living God, but precisely THIS God qua Holy Spirit, the community of believers. Although this community no longer relies on a transcendent Guarantee of a substantial big Other, the big Other (and thereby the theological dimension) is still here as the symbolic frame of reference (say, in Stalinism in the guise of the big Other of History which guarantees the meaningfulness of our acts. Did Lacan himself not point in this direction when, in 1956, he proposed a short and clear definition of the Holy Ghost: “The Holy Ghost is the entry of the signifier into the world. This is certainly what Freud brought us under the title of death drive” (Lacan 1994: 48). What Lacan means, at this moment of his thought, is that the Holy Ghost stands for the symbolic order as that which cancels (or, rather, suspends) the entire domain of “life” – lived experience, the libidinal flux, the wealth of emotions, or, to put it in Kant’s terms, the “pathological”: when we locate ourselves within the Holy Ghost, we are transubstantiated, we enter another life beyond the biological one.

But is this shift from the living gods of the real to the dead God of the Law really what happens in Christianity? Is it not that this shift already takes place in Judaism, so that the death of Christ cannot stand for this shift, but for something much more radical – precisely the death of
the symbolic “dead”, big Other itself? The key question is thus: is the Holy Spirit still a figure of the big Other, or is it possible to conceive it outside this frame? If the dead God were to morph directly into the Holy Ghost, then we would still have the symbolic big Other. But the monstrosity of Christ, this contingent singularity interceding between God and man, is the proof that the Holy Ghost is not the big Other which survives as the spirit of the community after the death of the substantial God, but a collective link of love without any support in the big Other. Therein resides the properly Hegelian paradox of the death of God: if God dies directly, as God, he survives as the virtualized big Other; only if he dies in the guise of Christ, his earthly embodiment, he also disintegrates as the big Other.

When Christ was dying on the cross, earthquake and storm broke out, a sign that the heavenly order itself – the big Other – was disturbed: not only did something horrible happen in the world, the very coordinates of the world were shaken. It was as if the sinthome, the knot tying the world together, was unravelled. And the audacity of the Christians was to take this as a good omen, or, as Mao put it much later: “there is great disorder under heaven, the situation is excellent”. Therein resides what Hegel calls the “monstrosity” of Christ: The insertion of Christ between God and man is strictly equivalent to the fact that “there is no big Other” – Christ is inserted as the singular contingency on which the universal necessity of the “big Other” itself hinges. In claiming that Hegel is the ultimate Christian philosopher, Lebrun is thus – to paraphrase T. S. Eliot – right for the wrong reason.

Only if we bear in mind this dimension, can we really see why the Darwinian (or other evolutionary) critics of Hegel miss the point when they ridicule Hegel’s claim that there is no history in nature, that there is history only in human societies: Hegel does not imply that nature is always the same, that forms of vegetal and animal life are forever fixed, so that there is no evolution in nature – what he claims is that there is no history proper in nature: “The living conserves itself, it is the beginning and the end; the product in itself is also the principle, it is always as such active” (Hegel 1970b: 525-526). Life eternally repeats its cycle and returns to itself: substance is again and again reasserted, children become parents, etc. The circle is here perfect, at peace with itself. It is often perturbed – from without: in nature, we, of course, do have gradual transformations of one species into another, and we do get clashes and catastrophes which obliterate entire species; what one does not get in nature is the Universal appearing (posited) as such, in contrast to its own particular content, a Universal in conflict with itself. In other words, what is missing in nature is what Hegel called the “monstrosity” of Christ: the direct embodiment of the arkhe of the entire universe (God) in a singular individual which walks around as one among the mortals. It is in this precise sense that, in order to distinguish natural from spiritual movement, Hegel uses the strange term “insertion”: in an organic process: “Nothing can insert itself between the Notion and its realization, between the nature of the genus determined in itself and the existence which is conformed to this nature; in the domain of the Spirit, things are wholly different” (Hegel 1970a: 90).

Christ is such a figure which “inserts itself” between God and its creation. Natural development is dominated-regulated by a principle, arkhe, which remains the same through the movement of its actualization, be it the development of an organism from its conception to its maturity or the continuity of a species through generation and decay of its individual members – there is no tension here between the universal principle and its exemplification, the universal principle is the calm universal force which totalizes/encompasses the wealth of its particular content; however, “life doesn’t have history because it is totalizing only externally” (Lebrun 2004: 250) – it is a universal genus which encompasses the multitude of individuals who struggle, but this unity is not posited in an individual. In spiritual history, on the contrary, this totalization occurs for itself, it is posited as such in the singular figures which embody universality against its own particular content.

Or, to put it in a different way, in organic life, substance (the universal Life) is the encompassing unity of the interplay of its subordinate moments, that which remains the same through the eternal process of generation and corruption, that which returns to itself through this movement; with subjectivity, however, predicate passes into subject: substance doesn’t return to itself, it is re-totalized by what was at the beginning its predicate, its subordinated moment. This is how the key moment in a dialectical process is the “transubstantiation” of its focal point: what was first just a predicate, a subordinate moment of the process (say, money in the development of capitalism), becomes its central moment, retroactively degrading its presuppositions, the elements out of which it emerged, into its subordinate moments, elements of its self-propelling circulation. And this is also how one should approach Hegel’s outrageously “speculative” formulations about Spirit as its own result, a product of itself:
Spirit has its beginnings in nature in general […] the extreme to which spirit tends is its freedom, its infinity, its being in and for itself. These are the two aspects but if we ask what Spirit is, the immediate answer is that it is this motion, this process of proceeding from, of freeing itself from, nature; this is the being, the substance of spirit itself (Hegel 1978: 6-7).

Spirit is thus radically de-substantialized: Spirit is not a positive counter-force to nature, a different substance which gradually breaks and shines through the inert natural stuff; it is nothing but this process of freeing-itself-from. Hegel directly disowns the notion of Spirit as some kind of positive Agent which underlies the process:

Spirit is usually spoken of as subject, as doing something, and apart from what it does, as this motion, this process, as still something particular, its activity being more or less contingent […] it is of the very nature of spirit to be this absolute liveliness, this process, to proceed forth from naturality, immediacy, to sublate, to quit its naturality, and to come to itself, and to free itself, it being itself only as it comes to itself as such a product of itself; its actuality being merely that it has made itself into what it is (Hegel 1978: 6-7).

If, then, it is only as a result of itself that it is spirit (Hegel 1978: 6-7), this means that the standard talk about the Hegelian Spirit which alienates itself to itself and then recognizes itself in its otherness and thus reappropriates its content, is deeply misleading: The Self to which spirit returns is produced in the very movement of this return, or, that to which the process of return is returning to is produced by the very process of returning. In a subjective process, there is no “absolute subject”, no permanent central agent which plays with itself the game of alienation and desalienation, losing/dispersing itself and then re-appropriating its alienated content: after a substantial totality is dispersed, it is another agent – previously its subordinated moment – which re-totalizes it. It is this shifting of the center of the process from one to another moment which distinguishes a dialectical process from the circular movement of alienation and its overcoming; it is because of this shift that the “return to itself” coincides with accomplished alienation (when a subject re-totalizes the process, its substantial unity is fully lost). In this precise sense, substance returns to itself as subject, and this trans-substantiation is what substantial life cannot accomplish.

Perhaps, what is missing in Lebrun is the proper image of a circle that would render the unique circularity of the dialectical process. For pages, he fights with different images to differentiate the Hegelian “circle of circles” from the circularity of traditional (pre-modern) Wisdom, from the ancient topic of the “cycle of life,” its generation and corruption. How, then, are we to read Hegel’s description which seems to evoke a full circle in which a thing merely becomes what it is?

Necessity only shows itself at the end, but in such a way precisely that this end reveals how it was equally the First. Or, the end reveals this priority of itself by the fact that, in the change actualized by it, nothing emerges which was not already there (Hegel 1977: 297).

The problem with this full circle is that it is too perfect, that its self-enclosure is double – its very circularity is remarked in yet another circular mark. In other words, the very repetition of the circle undermines its closure and surreptitiously introduces a gap into which radical contingency is inscribed: if the circular closure, in order to be fully actual, has to be re-asserted as closure, it means that, in itself, it is not yet truly a closure, i.e., that it is only the (contingent excess of) its repetition which makes it a closure. (Recall again the paradox of the Monarch in Hegel’s theory of rational State: one needs this contingent excess to actualize State as rational totality. This excess is, in Lacanese: the excess of the signer without signified, adds no new content, it just performatively enregisters something that is already here.) As such, this circle undermines itself: it only works if we supplement it with an additional inside-circle, so that we get the figure of the “inside-inverted eight” (regularly referred to by Lacan, and also once invoked by Hegel). This is the true figure of the Hegelian dialectical process, a figure missing in Lebrun’s book.

**Hegel and Repetition**

Perhaps, however, we do encounter here the limit of Hegel, although not in the Nietzschean sense deployed by Lebrun. If life is a substantial universality, is then what inserts itself in the gap between its Notion and the Notion’s actualization, and what thereby breaks the substantial circularity of life, not death? To put it bluntly: If Substance is Life, is Subject not Death? Insofar as, for Hegel, the basic feature of pre-subjective Life is the “spurious infinity” of the eternal reproduction of the life-substance through the incessant movement of the generation and corruption of its elements, i.e., the “spurious infinity” of a repeti-
tion with no progress, the ultimate irony we encounter here is that Freud, who called this excess of death over life “death drive”, conceived it precisely as repetition, as a compulsion-to-repeat. Can Hegel think this weird repetition which is not progress, but also not natural repetition through which substantial life reproduces itself? A repetition which, by its excessive insistence, precisely breaks the cycle of natural repetition?

As it was indicated already by Deleuze, the true move “beyond Hegel” is thus not to be sought in the post-Hege- lian return to the positivity of “real life”, but in the strange affirmation of death in the guise of pure repetition – the affirmation which puts into the same line two strange bedfellows, Kierkegaard and Freud. In Hegel, repetition plays a crucial role, but within the economy of Aufhebung: Through a mere repetition, an immediacy is elevated into universality, a contingency is transformed into necessity – after his death, Caesar repeats itself as “caesar,” i.e., no longer the designation of a particular individual, but the name of a universal title. Hegel was unable to think “pure” repetition, a repetition not yet caught into the movement of Aufhebung.

A further paradox here is that this limitation of Hegel points not only towards Freud but also towards Marx. In a certain sense, the speculative movement of the Capital can also be said to indicate a limit of the Hegelian dialectical process, something that eludes Hegel’s grasp. It is in this sense that Lebrun mentions the “fascinating image” of the Capital presented by Marx (especially in his Grundrisse):

A monstrous mixture of the good infinity and the bad infinity, the good infinity which creates its presuppositions and the conditions of its growth, the bad infinity which never ceases to surmount its crises, and which finds its limit in its own nature (Lebrun 2004: 311).

Note how Hegelian references abound here: With capitalism, value is not a mere abstract “mute” universality, a substantial link between the multiplicity of commodities; from the passive medium of exchange, it turns into the “active factor” of the entire process. Instead of only passively assuming the two different forms of its actual existence (money – commodity), it appears as the subject “endowed with a motion of its own, passing through a life-process of its own”: it differentiates itself from itself, positing its otherness, and then again overcomes this difference - the entire movement is its own movement. In this precise sense, “instead of simply representing the relations of commodities, it enters [...] into private relations with itself: the “truth” of its relating to its otherness is its self-relating, i.e., in its self-movement, the capital retroactively “sublates” its own material conditions, changing them into subordinate moments of its own “spontaneous expansion” – in pure Hegelian: it posits its own presuppositions.

Crucial in the quoted passage is the expression “an automatically active character,” an inadequate translation of the German words used by Marx to characterize capital as “automatischem Subjekt”, an “automatic subject”, the oxy-moron uniting living subjectivity and dead automatism. This is what capital is: a subject, but an automatic one, not a living one – and, again, can Hegel think this “monstrous mixture”, a process of subjective self-mediation and retroactive positing of presuppositions which, as it were, gets caught in a substantial “spurious infinity”, a subject which itself becomes an alienated substance? (This, perhaps, is also the reason why Marx’s reference to Hegel’s dialectics in his “critique of political economy” is ambiguous, oscillating between taking it as the model for the revolutionary process of emancipation and taking it as the mystified expression of the logic of the Capital.)
But there is a paradox which complicates this critique of Hegel: is the absolute negativity, this central notion of Hegel’s thought, not precisely a philosophical figure of what Freud called “death drive”? Is, then, insofar as—following Lacan—the core of Kant’s thought can be defined as the “critique of pure desire,” the passage from Kant to Hegel not precisely the passage from desire to drive? Do the very concluding lines of Hegel’s *Encyclopaedia* (on the Idea which enjoys to repeatedly transverse its circle) not point in this direction? Is the answer to the standard critical question addressed to Hegel—“But why does the dialectical process always go on? Why does dialectical mediation always continue its work?”—not precisely the *eppur si muove* of pure drive? This structure of negativity also accounts for the quasi-“automatic” character of the dialectical process—one often reproaches Hegel the “mechanical” character of dialectics: belying all the assurances that dialectics is open to the true life of reality, the dialectical process is like a processing machine which indifferently swallows and processes all possible contents, from nature to history, from politics to art, delivering them packed in the same triadic form…

The underlying true problem is the following one: the standard “Hegelian” scheme of death (negativity) as the subordinate/mediating moment of Life can only be sustained if we remain within the category of Life whose dialectic is that of the self-mediating Substance returning to itself from its otherness. The moment we effectively pass from Life(-principle) to Death(-principle), there is no encompassing “synthesis”, death in its “abstract negativity” forever remains a threat, an excess which cannot be economized. In social life, this means that Kant’s universal peace is a vain hope, that war forever remains a threat of total disruption of organized state Life; in individual subjective life, that madness always lurks as a possibility.

Does this mean that we are back at the standard *topos* of the excess of negativity which cannot be “sublated” in any reconciling “synthesis”, or even at the naïve Engelsian view of the alleged contradiction between the openness of Hegel’s “method” and the enforced closure of his “system”? There are indications which point in this direction: as it was noted by many perspicuous commentators, Hegel’s “conservative” political writings of his last years (like his critique of the English Reform Bill) betray a fear of any further development which will assert the “abstract” freedom of the civil society at the expense of the State’s organic unity, and open up a way to new revolutionary violence. Why did Hegel shirk back here, why did he not dare to follow his basic dialectical rule, courageously embracing “abstract” negativity as the only path to a higher stage of freedom? Furthermore, do Hegel’s clear indications of the historical limitations of his system (things to be discovered in natural sciences; the impossibility to grasp the spiritual essence of countries like North America and Russia which will deploy its potentials only in the next century) not point in the same direction?

Hegel may appear to celebrate the prosaic character of life in a well-organized modern state where the heroic disturbances are overcome in the tranquillity of private rights and the security of the satisfaction of needs: private property is guaranteed, sexuality is restricted to marriage, the future is safe… In this organic order, universality and particular interests appear reconciled: the “infinite right” of subjective singularity is given its due, individuals no longer experience the objective state order as a foreign power intruding onto their rights, they recognize in it the substance and frame of their very freedom. Lebrun here asks the fateful question: “Can the sentiment of the Universal be dissociated from this appeasement?” (Lebrun 2004: 214). Against Lebrun, our answer should be: yes, and this is why war is necessary—in war, universality reasserts its right against and over the concrete-organic appeasement in the prosaic social life. Is thus the necessity of war not the ultimate proof that, for Hegel, every social reconciliation is doomed to fail, that no organic social order can effectively contain the force of abstract-universal negativity? This is why social life is condemned to the “spurious infinity” of the eternal oscillation between stable civic life and wartime perturbations.
1 Even with Deleuze, one can claim that his Spinoza is a post-Kantian Spinoza, a Spinoza imperceptibly re-read through post-Kantian frame. Deleuze does something like Fellini in Satyricon, where he stages the Roman pagan universe the way it appears retrospectively, from the Christian standpoint – with the underlying idea that one can really grasp what paganism was only in this retrospective way.

2 The irony is that, three decades earlier, Lebrun published one of the greatest books on Hegel, defending him from his critics: La patience du concept (Paris: Gallimard 1973).

3 And, incidentally, Lacan's prima facie weird decision to stick to the term "subject" in spite of Heidegger's well-known critique of subjectivity is grounded precisely in this obscure excess of the ontic over its ontological disclosure: "subject" is for Lacan not the self-present autonomous agent reducing entire reality to its object, but a pathetic subject, that which suffers, which pays the price for being the site of the ontological disclosure in ontic flesh – the price whose Freudian name is, of course, "castration."

4 In this precise sense, the eight hypotheses in part II of Plato's Parmenides form a Hegelian systematic exercise: they deploy the matrix of all possible "semantic choices" in the relationship between the One and Being, with the final "nihilistic" outcome that there is no ultimate Ground guaranteeing the consistent unity of reality, i.e., that the ultimate reality is the Void itself.

5 And, let us not forget that, for Hegel himself, his philosophical reconstruction of history in no way pretends to "cover everything," but consciously leaves blanks: the medieval time, for example, is for Hegel one big regression – no wonder that, in his lectures on the history of philosophy, he dismisses the entire medieval thought in a couple of pages, flatly denying any historical greatness to figures like Thomas Aquinas. Not even to mention the destructions of great civilizations like the Mongols' wiping out so much of the Muslim world (the destruction of Baghdad, etc.) in the 13th century – there is no "meaning" in this destruction, the negativity unleashed here did not create the space for a new shape of historical life.


7 And, perhaps, this same limitation of Hegel also accounts for his inadequate understanding of mathematics, i.e., for his reduction of mathematics to the very model of the abstract "spurious infinity." What Hegel was unable to see is how, like the speculative movement of the capital in Marx, modern mathematics also displays the same "monstrous mixture of the good infinity and the bad infinity": the "bad infinity" of repetition gets combined with the "good infinity" of self-relating paradoxes.

8 Hegel died a year after the French revolution of 1830.

NOTES

LITERATURE