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In Defense of Hegel's Madness

Abstract *The article is a confrontation with Robert Brandom's reading of Hegel's* Phenomenology of Spirit, *his attempt to systematically "renormalize" Hegel, i.e., to reduce his extravagant formulations to the criteria of common sense. The article analyses a number of Brandom's "domestications" of Hegel's speculative concepts: self-relating, determinate negation, mediation, In-itself, action, knowledge, Spirit, reconciliation, history. On the basis of the examples from Marx, Freud, structuralism, Lévi-Strauss, Althusser, Lacan, Adorno, the text defends Hegel's "madness", the irreducible speculative, non-interpretable core of his philosophy. Hegel's statements have to shock us, and this excess cannot be explained away through interpretation since the truth they deliver hinges on that.*

Keywords: *Hegel, Brandom, In-itself, action, history*

Hegel is a notoriously "difficult" writer: many of his statements run against our common sense and cannot but appear as crazy speculations. In his detailed reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Brandom, internet) Robert Brandom attempts to systematically "renormalize" Hegel, i.e., to demonstrate how Hegel's most extravagant formulations, when properly (re)interpreted, make sense in our common space of meaning. I highly appreciate Brandom's attempt – it is a model of clear argumentative reasoning which consistently pursues the basic insight on which it relies. However, I want to argue against such "domestication" of Hegel and defend Hegel's "madness": Hegel's statements *have* to shock us, and this excess cannot be explained away through interpretation since the truth they deliver hinges on that.

The Immediacy of Mediation

What Brandom leaves behind in his "renormalization" of Hegel is primarily the dimension of self-relating. Let's take two basic Hegelian concepts: determinate negation and mediation (*Vermittlung*). Brandom interprets them as the series of exclusions and inclusions that constitute the identity of every object. "Determinate negation" means that if the chair I am sitting on is made of plastic then it is not made of metal or wood; if it is

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white then it is not brown or grey or any other color; etc. "Mediation" encapsulates the intricate relation to other objects and processes which made this chair what it is: the plastic it is made of presupposes industrial production based on scientific knowledge as well as the culture in which it was made; etc. There is nothing specifically "dialectical" in this, just a common sense realist universe:

> Properties stand to one another in relations of modally robust *exclusion*. An object's possessing one property *precludes* it from exhibiting some others, in the sense that it is *impossible* to exhibit the incompatible properties simultaneously. Nothing can be at once both a bivalve and a vertebrate. This *ex*clusion structure induces a corresponding *in*clusion structure: if Coda *were* a dog, then Coda *would be* a mammal, for everything incompatible with being a mammal is incompatible with being a dog. It is these counterfactual-supporting exclusions and inclusions that are codified in laws of nature. (Brandom, internet)

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The dialectics of inclusion and exclusion is here reduced to the interplay of included and excluded properties of a thing: this One-thing is grey, wooden, man-made, with three legs, etc., so it is not red, metallic, four-legged, etc.. What is missing is exclusion brought to self-reference: the One (an entity) excludes also its own properties in the sense that it "is" none of them but achieves its self-identity by way of what Hegel calls negative self-relationship. This is also why Brandom (like Pippin apropos positing and external reflection) remains caught in the infinite game of mediation and immediacy, thereby missing the key passage from determinate negation to negative determination (what structural linguistics calls differentiality): it is not only that what a thing is, its properties, is determined by what it is not, by the properties it excluded, it is also that the very absence of property can count as a property. With regard to the couple of mediation and immediacy, this means that it is not enough to assert the mediated nature of every immediacy – we have to add the immediacy of mediation itself, as Hegel does it, for example, apropos the pure Self: "The 'I,' or becoming in general, this mediation, on account of its simple nature, is just immediacy in the process of becoming, and is the immediate itself." (Hegel 1977: 11, § 21) Brandom deploys the mutual dependence of mediation and immediacy (difference and identity): every identity is mediated, it is sustained by a network of differences from what this object is not, from all other objects; but since he ignores the immediacy of mediation itself, he concludes that mediation cannot count as the ultimate foundation for the simple reason that each of these other objects also possesses its own specific determinate identity, and if

their determinate identities (what distinguishes them one from an-
other) are taken likewise to consist in their relations to others sim-
ilarly conceived, then the whole scheme is threatened by incoherence.
The strategy amounts to seeing each individual as 'borrowing' its
moment of diversity from (depending for the intelligibility of its de-
terminate difference from others upon) that of other, different, indi-
viduals, which stand in diverse determinate relations to the first.
(Brandom, internet)

In short, the totality of interrelated phenomena cannot be grounded
exclusively in differentiality since, in this case, it "hangs in the air": if
every thing, including all others, is grounded differentially, then there is
ultimately no identity from which things are differentiated... This, incid-
entally, is an old reproach to Hegel fomulated already by Schelling (who
dismissed Hegel's thought as a "negative philosophy" in need of an im-
mediate positive Ground) and recently reformulated by Dieter Henrich.
Lacan's answer to this reproach is that the symbolic order precisely is
such a differential structure which "hangs in the air", and, furthermore,
than this "hanging in the air", this lack of roots in any substantial positive
reality, is what subjectivizes the symbolic structure.

In order to elaborate the idea of a subjectivized structure, we need to
radicalize the notion of differentiality, bringing it to self-referentiality.
Ferdinand de Saussure was the first to formulate the notion of differen-
tiality, pointing out that the identity of a signifier resides only in a series
of differences (the features which distinguish it from other signifiers) –
there is no positivity in a signifier, it "is" only a series of what it is *not*. The
crucial consequence of differential identity is that the very absence of a
feature can itself count as a feature, as a positive fact – if every presence
arises only against the background of potential absence, then we can also
talk about the presence of absence as such. For example, something not
happening can also be a positive event – recall the famous dialogue from
"Silver Blaze" between Scotland Yard detective Gregory and Sherlock
Holmes about the "curious incident of the dog in the night-time":

> "Is there any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention?"
> "To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."
> "The dog did nothing in the night-time."
> "That was the curious incident." (Doyle 1981: 347)

This positive existence of the absence itself, the fact that the absence
of a feature is itself a positive feature which defines the thing in ques-
tion, is what characterizes a differential order, and, in this precise sense,
differentiality is the core feature of dialectics proper. Consequently,

Jameson was right to emphasize, against the standard Hegelian-Marxist rejection of structuralism as "undialectical", that the role of the structuralist explosion in the 1960s was "to signal a reawakening or a rediscovery of the dialectic". (Jameson 2010: 48) This is also why, in a nice jab at cultural studies' fashionable rejection of "binary logic", Jameson calls for "a generalized celebration of the binary opposition", (Jameson 2010: 48) which, brought to self-referentiality, is the very matrix of structural relationality or differentiality. Furthermore, insofar as Hegel is *the* dialectician and his *Phenomenology of Spirit* is the unsurpassed model of dialectical analysis, Jameson is fully justified in drawing his non-intuitive conclusion: "it is certain that the *Phenomenology* is a profoundly structuralist work *avant la lettre.*" (Jameson 2010: 48) (The link between this differentialist approach and Hegelian dialectics was clearly perceived by Roman Jakobson.)

But if absence itself can function as presence or as a positive fact – if, for example, women's lack of a penis is in itself a "curious incident" – then presence (man's possession of a penis) can also arise only against the background of its (possible) absence. But how, precisely? Here we need to introduce self-reflexivity into the signifying order: if the identity of a signifier is nothing but the series of its constitutive differences, then every signifying series has to be supplemented – "sutured" – by a reflexive signifier which has no determinate meaning (signified), since it stands only for the presence of meaning as such (as opposed to its absence). The first to fully articulate the necessity of such a signifier was Lévi-Strauss, in his famous interpretation of "*mana*"; his achievement was to de-mystify mana, reducing its irrational connotation of a mythic or magical power to a precise symbolic function. Lévi-Strauss's starting point is that language as a bearer of meaning by definition arises at once, covering the entire horizon: "Whatever may have been the moment and the circumstances of its appearance in the ascent of animal life, language can only have arisen all at once. Things cannot have begun to signify gradually." (Lévi-Strauss 1987: 59) This sudden emergence, however, introduces an imbalance between the two orders of the signifier and the signified: since the signifying network is finite, it cannot adequately cover the endless field of the signified in its entirety. In this way,

> a fundamental situation perseveres which arises out of the human condition: namely, that man has from the start had at his disposition a signifier-totality which he is at a loss to know how to allocate to a signified, given as such, but no less unknown for being given. There is always a non-equivalence or "inadequation" between the two, a

> non-fit and overspill which divine understanding alone can soak up; this generates a signifier-surfeit relative to the signifieds to which it can be fitted. So, in man's effort to understand the world, he always disposes of a surplus of signification ... That distribution of a supplementary ration [...] is absolutely necessary to insure that, in total, the available signifier and the mapped-out signified may remain in the relationship of complementarity which is the very condition of the exercise of symbolic thinking. (Lévi-Strauss 1987: 62–3)

Every signifying field thus has to be "sutured" by a supplementary zero-signifier, "a *zero symbolic value*, that is, a sign marking the necessity of a supplementary symbolic content over and above that which the signified already contains". (Lévi-Strauss 1987: 64) This signifier is "a symbol in its pure state": lacking any determinate meaning, it stands for the presence of meaning *as such* in contrast to its absence; in a further dialectical twist, the mode of appearance of this supplementary signifier which stands for meaning as such is non-sense (Deleuze developed this point in his *Logic of Sense*). Notions like mana thus "represent nothing more or less than that *floating signifier* which is the disability of all finite thought". (Lévi-Strauss 1987: 63)

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The first thing to note here is Lévi-Strauss's commitment to scientific positivism: he grounds the necessity of "mana" in the gap between the constraints of our language and infinite reality. Like the early Badiou and Althusser, he excludes science from the dialectics of lack that generates the need for a suturing element. For Lévi-Strauss, "mana" stands for the "poetic" excess which compensates for the constraints of our finite predicament, while the effort of science is precisely to suspend "mana" and provide direct adequate knowledge. Following Althusser, one can claim that "mana" is an elementary operator of ideology which reverses the lack of our knowledge into the imaginary experience of the ineffable surplus of Meaning. The next step towards "suture" proper consists of three interconnected gestures: the *universalization* of "mana" (the zero-signifier is not just a mark of ideology, but a feature of every signifying structure); its *subjectivization* (re-defining "mana" as the point of the inscription of the subject into the signifying chain); and its *temporalization* (a temporality which is not empirical but logical, inscribed into the very signifying structure). In other words, this zero-signifier is the immediacy of mediation at its purest: a signifier whose identity consists only in its difference, i.e., which gives body to difference as such. This is why it represents the subject for other signifiers: subject is, at its most elementary, difference as such.

The Stick in itself, for us, for itself

Brandom begins his reading of *Phenomenology* with an interpretation of the notion of experience (*Erfahrung*) in the short "Preface"; it is here that he performs his first great act of "renormalization", trying to translate into common sense Hegel's paradoxical claim that when, in an experience, we compare our notion of a thing to this thing itself (which serves as the standard by means of which we measure the adequacy of our notion) and establish that our notion does not fit the thing, we not only have to change our notion of the thing (the way this thing is "for us") – what has to change is also the very standard by means of which we measured the adequacy of our notion, the thing itself. Brandom evokes here the simple example of a straight stick which, half-drowned into water, appears to us as bent: when we pull the stick out of water, we immediately see that the stick is really (in itself) straight – so in what sense does here the experience change also the thing itself? Wasn't the stick all the time the same (straight), we just changed our (erroneous) notion of it? Brandom agrees that "the 'new, true object' which 'emerges to consciousness' is *not* the straight stick. (After all, *it* didn't change; it was straight all along.)" (Brandom, internet) What changed was our notion (representation) of the stick-in-itself: we thought that the stick-in-itself is also bent (like our perception of it), but now we realize that the bent stick was only our wrong representation. This is the sense in which

> in the alteration of the knowledge the object itself becomes to consciousness something which has in fact been altered as well. What alters is the status of the bent-stick representing, what it is to consciousness. It had enjoyed the status of being to consciousness what the stick is in itself. But now its status has changed to being *to* consciousness only what the stick was *for* consciousness: an appearance. [...] The 'new, true object' is the bent-stick representation revealed *as* erroneous, as a *mis*representation of what is now *to* the subject the way things really are: a straight stick. This representing is 'true' not in the sense of representing how things really are, but in the sense that what is now to consciousness is what *it* really is: a mere appearance, a misrepresenting. That is why 'This new object contains the annihilation of the first; it is the experience constituted through that first object.' (Brandom, internet)

Brandom resolves the paradox so that he introduces three levels of the object (stick, in this case): the way the stick is for us, our notion/perception of the stick (it appears bent); the way the stick-in-itself appears to us (i.e., the way we presume the stick is in itself), and the way the stick really is in itself, independently of us (straight). So what changes in our

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experience is not the stick-in-itself but just the second level, the way we perceived its In-itself: what we presumed to be the stick-in-itself now changes into a false appearance:

> the object that was taken to be in itself reveals itself, via incompatibilities, as in fact [...] only what it was for consciousness. That moment of independence of the object, Hegel argues, is essential for the possession by our concepts of determinate content. Incompatibility is significant only for and in this process. (Brandom, internet)

This solution only works if we posit a strict difference between the order of ideas (that compose our knowledge) and the order of things (the way they are in themselves): in the process of knowledge, our ideas change, they gradually approach the way things are in themselves, while things in themselves remain the way they are, unaffected by the process of knowledge. This "asymmetry between the order and connection of ideas and that of things" is formulated by Brandom in the terms of the difference between material incompatibility and deontic incompatibility: the same object (stick) cannot be at the same time straight and bent, the two properties are incompatible; but we can in our mind entertain two incompatible ideas about an object, this is just deontically inappropriate: "It is *impossible* for one object simultaneously to exhibit materially incompatible properties (or for two incompatible states of affairs to obtain), while it is only *inappropriate* for one subject simultaneously to endorse materially incompatible commitments." (Brandom, internet) The progress of knowledge is therefore "the process in and through which more and more of how the world really is, what is actually materially incompatible with what in the objective alethic sense, becomes incorporated in material incompatibilities deontically acknowledged by subjects". (Brandom, internet) In short, our knowledge progresses when, upon discovering incompatibilities in our notion of an object, we discard the inappropriate aspects and in this way bring our notion of the object closer to its reality – contradiction can exist only in our knowledge, not in the thing itself, which is why we progress precisely by way of discarding contradictions:

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> Here "how things objectively are", or are "in themselves" means "always already are anyway", in the sense that how they are *in* themselves swings free of how they are *for* the subject. That sort of independence is presupposed by their functioning as a normative standard for assessment of appearances, a standard which what things are for the subject may or may not satisfy. (Brandom, internet)

Or, to put it in the terms of the classic distinction between reference (that X we are talking about) and sense (what we are saying about it), the

reference is a constant, external standard we are gradually approaching, while sense is constantly changing. Throughout history of humanity, people talk about water, and while the sense of the term gets gradually richer (say, with modern science, we discover the chemical composition of water, H_2O), "the reference is constant":

> It is what ties the whole process together into a unity, grouping a whole class of senses together as representings of the same represented way the world is, more or less explicit expressions of the same implicit content. The senses that (according to the reconstructed genealogy) elaborate, express, and culminate in that constant, unifying content, by contrast, are various and variable, differing in the extent to which and the ways in which they make that implicit content explicit. They are the moment of disparity of form of expressing of the identical content expressed. Up until the very end (the current, temporary culmination), the senses, the ways things are for consciousness, are never quite right, never fully adequate expressions of their content, still subject to error and failure when they are applied to novel particulars. But the way things are in themselves, reality, persists unchanged and unmoved by the flux of its appearances. (Brandom, internet)

But does such a reading not run against Hegel's concise definition of speculative thinking: "*Speculative thinking* consists solely in the fact that thinking holds fast contradiction, and in it, its own self." (Hegel 2010: 440) Does Brandom who, like Kant, is not ready to "hold fast" to contradictions in things themselves, thereby not display a "tenderness for the things of this world", as Hegel put it in his famous comment on Kant's antinomies from his "small" (*Encyclopaedia*) *Logic*:

> What is made explicit here is that it is the content itself, namely, the categories on their own account, that bring about the contradiction. This thought, that the contradiction which is posited by the determinations of the understanding in what is rational is *essential* and *necessary*, has to be considered one of the most important and profound advances of the philosophy of modern times. But the solution is as trivial as the viewpoint is profound; it consists merely in a tenderness for the things of this world. The stain of contradiction ought not to be in the essence of what is in the world; it has to belong *only* to thinking reason, to the *essence* of the *spirit*. It is not considered at all objectionable that the world *as it appears* shows contradictions to the spirit that observes it; the way the world is for subjective spirit, for *sensibility*, and for the *understanding*, is the world as it appears. But when the *essence* of what is in the world is compared with the *essence* of spirit, it may surprise us to see how naively the humble affirmation has been advanced, and repeated, that what is inwardly contradictory is not the essence of the world, but belongs to reason, the thinking essence. (Hegel 1991a: 92, § 48)

To clarify this key passage, let us return to the unfortunate stick. When we are dealing with a straight stick which, when partially submerged into water, falsely appears as a bent stick, one can effectively conceive the process of knowledge as the process of gradually approaching the reality of the stick, the way it exists in itself, independently of our perception. However, one should introduce here the difference between objects which are what they are independently of our notion of them (like a straight stick) and objects which change when their for-itself (or for-us) changes: "For such a being can change what it is *in* itself by changing what it is *for* itself. Call a creature 'essentially self-conscious' if what it is *for* itself, its self-conception, is an essential element of what it is *in* itself. How something that is essentially self-conscious *appears* to itself is part of what it *really* is." (Brandom, internet) Imagine a stick which remains straight in reality (in itself) only insofar as it appears as a bent stick – therein resides the role of ideology, of ideological illusion: an "alienated" society can reproduce itself (in its actuality) only through its illusory/false self-appearance or self-perception – the moment it appears to itself the way it actually is, this actuality disintegrates. In a homologous way, psychoanalysis deals with entities which exist only insofar as they are not adequately self-conscious or "for themselves": for Freud (at least in the early phase of his work), a symptom disappears after the subject (whose symptom it is) gains access to its meaning, i.e., it persists only insofar as its meaning remains unknown. In a closer analysis, we soon realize that things are more complex: are symptoms also not forms of "objectified" self-consciousness, are they not formations in the guise of which I register the truth about myself that remains inaccessible to my consciousness? One should distinguish here simple self-consciousness (being aware of something) from "self-consciousness" as the act of symbolic registration: I can be aware of the meaning of a symptom of mine without really assuming this meaning – while I know what it means, I block the symbolic efficiency of this knowledge, i.e., this knowledge doesn't really affect my subjective position.

For Brandom, the In-itself is by definition non-contradictory, and the entire dynamics (movement) is on the cognitive/subjective side: one passes from one failed concept to another more adequate one which will also fail, etc., but this movement is not the movement in the thing itself... Does Brandom not do here the exact opposite of Hegel? When Hegel confronts an epistemological inconsistency or "contradiction" which appears as an obstacle to our access to the object itself (if we have incompatible notions of an object, they cannot be all true), Hegel resolves this dilemma by way of transposing what appears as epistemological obstacle

into an ontological feature, a "contradiction" in the thing itself. Brandom, on the contrary, resolves an ontological inconsistency by way of transposing it into epistemological illusion/inadequacy, so that reality is saved from contradiction.

Recall Adorno's classic analysis of the antagonistic character of the notion of society. In a first approach, the split between the two notions of society (Anglo-Saxon individualistic-nominalist and Durkheimian organicist notion of society as a totality which preexists individuals) seems irreducible, we seem to be dealing with a true Kantian antinomy which cannot be resolved via a higher "dialectical synthesis", and which elevates society into an inaccessible Thing-in-itself; however, in a second approach, one should merely take note of how this radical antinomy which seems to preclude our access to the Thing ALREADY IS THE THING ITSELF – the fundamental feature of today's society IS the irreconcilable antagonism between Totality and the individual.

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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 reason as the rose in the cross of the present", (Hegel 1991b: 22) 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.

How does truth progress? For Hegel, we do not compare our notion of truth (for us) with the truth in-itself and, in this way, gradually approach the truth in-itself. Hegel is a thinker of radical immanence: in the process of experience, we compare a notion with itself, with its own actualization or exemplification. Hegel is here radically anti-Platonist: in the gap that separates a notion from its examples, the truth is on the side of examples, examples bring out immanent inconsistencies of a notion, so when examples do not fit a notion we should transform this notion itself.

One should problematize here Brandom's opposition of non-normative objective reality and the discursive normative universe: the whole point

of Hegel's idealist reversal of the standard notion of truth as *adequatio ad rem* (the correspondence of our thoughts to things) into *adequatio* of a thing to its own concept (what for a/one – *was für ein* - house is this house? Is it really a house? Does it fit the notion of a house?) is that *a certain normative split characterizes reality itself*: real objects never fully fit their notion. Let us take Hegel's classic example, that of the state. No empirical state is a "true state", fully adequate to its notion, and when we realize this, we have to change also this notion itself. For example, the medieval feudal Christian state was not a failure only when we measure it by the standards of modern democratic state respecting human freedoms and rights, it was a failure in its own terms (it systematically failed to realize the ideal of a harmonious hierarchic social body), and the result of this failure was that we had to change this ideal notion itself. So what happens at the end of this process? Do we finally get the true notion of State with the concept of modern constitutional monarchy described by Hegel in his philosophy of right? No: the ultimate result is that the "contradiction" (antagonism) is internal to the notion of State as such, so that a "true" state is no longer a state. To get a community that would meet the basic criteria of a "true state" (harmonious social body), we have to pass from State to Religion, to a religious community – and here antagonisms explode again... What we get at the end of the entire system is not a final rest but the circularity of the movement itself.

But, one might reply, State is in itself a normative (deontic) entity, so what about simple objects like chairs or tables? Hegel's idealist wager is that even here there is a normative dimension at work in reality itself. That is to say, what is the point of Hegel's dialectical deduction of one form of life or reality to another – for example, how do we pass from plants to animal life in his philosophy of nature? What Hegel proposes is not just a classification of forms of life from lower ones to higher ones: each higher form of life is "deduced" from the lower one as an attempt to resolve its inner inconsistency, so that there definitely is a movement of norm-motivated change in reality itself. If an object doesn't fit its notion, one has to change both, also the notion. There is more in an example of a notion than in a notion of which the example is an example, i.e., the gap between a notion and its example is internal to the notion itself. Here, the opposition between subjective deontic incompatibility and objective incompatibility breaks down: it is not that objective incompatibility means that this cannot happen in reality; reality IS incompatibility embodied. Brandom is right when he locates dynamics into normative contradictions, but he is not ready to follow Hegel's idealism

and locate the normative tension into things themselves. Here is his crucial formulation:

> We are to start with phenomena, with how things are *for* conscious-ness, with how they *seem* or *appear*, with the contents we grasp and express. The idea that there is some way things *really* are, *in* them-selves, the concept of what is represen*ted*, what we are thinking and talking *about* by grasping and expressing those contents, is to be understood in terms of features of those contents themselves. The representational dimension of concept use is to be explained in terms of what it is to take or treat conceptual contents *as* representings, what it is for them to be representings *for* or *to* us. Reference is to be explained as an aspect of sense. The way in which the very idea of noumena is to be explicated and elaborated from features of the his-torical trajectory by which phenomena (conceptual contents) de-velop and are determined is the essence of Hegel's distinctive version of the semantics of sense and reference. (Brandom, internet)

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A certain ambiguity clings to these formulations: is the inconsistency of phenomena, of our approaches/notions, itself the Real, or is the Real, the thing-in-itself, a substantial entity outside the symbolic space, which we approach and (mis)interpret through conflicting notions? For Hegel as well as for Lacan, one touches the Real only in/through the "contradic-tions" (failures, discrepancies) of our notions of the real, not in the sense that we correct our wrong commitments when we encounter contradic-tion, but more radically: this "contradiction" is the Real itself. The subject is inscribed into the real, it touches the real, precisely at the point of the utmost "subjective" excess, in what it adds to the object, in the way it distorts the object. Let's take the most traditional case imaginable: class struggle. There is no neutral "impartial" approach to it, no meta-lan-guage, every apprehension of class struggle is already "distorted" by the subject's engagement in it, and this distortion, far from preventing our direct approach to the actuality of class struggle, IS in itself the real of the class struggle – it is in this very failure to subtract its own partial perspective and reach the object that the Real inscribes itself, that the subject touches the Real. So it is not just that the subject always fails, etc.: *it is through this failure that the subject reaches the Real*.

So, to introduce some order in this proliferation of appearances, first, we begin with naive reality (things simply are what they appear to be); then, "things are not what they seem", the gap between appearance and reality arises; then, we get it that the essence behind appearance is itself an ap-pearance, the appearance of what lies beyond what we see (brought to extreme, this "appearing of essence" functions as "appearing to appear" – a situation in which a mask masks the fact that there is nothing beneath

it: what we (mis)took for a mask is reality itself). At this point, it may appear that all there is are just appearances and their interplay; however, what cannot be reduced to a mere appearance is the very gap that separates a mere appearance from the appearance of essence. At its most radical, the Real is thus not an In-itself beyond illusory appearances but the very gap that separates different levels of appearances.

Action and Responsibility

A tension homologous to that of the process of cognition characterizes also the course of human actions. Hegel's first definition of action sounds surprising:

> Action alters nothing and opposes nothing. It is the pure form of a transition from a state of not being seen to one of being seen, and the content which is brought out into the daylight and displayed is nothing else but what this action already is in itself. (Hegel 1977: 237, § 396)

This aspect of Hegel's theory of action is crucial: there is no tension between the acting agent and the object the agent is acting upon, no "forcing" of the object, no struggle with the material, no heroic effort to impose subjective form on the material, no radical Otherness in the material, no impenetrable X that resists the acting agent. The appearance of struggle and resistance of the material should be reinterpreted as the sign of the immanent contradiction of the action itself. Let us take the Stalinist forced collectivization of land in the late 1920s: the desperate stubborn resistance of individual farmers to this action expressed the inner "contradiction" and weakness of the project of collectivization itself; the tragic consequences of the collectivization – millions of dead farmers in the Ukraine hunger, the loss of the majority of livestock, etc. – "brought out into the daylight and displayed what this action already was in itself". Therein resides what Lebrun called Hegel's "immobilism": there is nothing New that emerges in a dialectical process, everything is already here, the transition is purely formal, things don't change but merely become what they always-already were... So is Hegel a traditional metaphysician who reduces change (development, progress) to the circular movement of absolutely-immanent self-deployment? It is here that Hegel's novelty arises: true, things only become what they always-already were, there is no change here, but there is a change at a much more radical level – not the change from what they things were to what they are now, but the change in what they always-already were. The mechanism is here the one of retroactivity: an expression of the past (determined by it) engenders what it expresses, i.e., things become what they already were – what changes in

a dialectical process is the eternal past itself. We are predetermined by fate, but we can change this fate itself.

To put it in another way, Hegel's point is not that "nothing really changes" in a change, that we only establish (make explicit) what things always-already were. His point is a much more precise one: in order for the things to "really change", we must first accept that they have already changed. One has to turn around here the old evolutionist notion of change which first takes place "in the underground", invisible as such, within the frame of the old form, and finally, when this old form can no longer contain the new content, it falls away and the new form imposes itself. (There is an ambiguity here in Marx: he often describes the tension between forces and relations of production in this evolutionary terms, but he also asserts the primacy of formal subsumption of the forces of production under capital over their material subsumption – first, old (artisanal) forces are subsumed under capital, and then, gradually, they are replaced by modern industrial forces.)

Every action is characterized by the tension between the explicit goal pursued by the agent and its unintended consequences. Brandon interprets Hegel here with reference to Davidson: when I press a bell button which is (unknown to me) connected to a bomb and thereby trigger a catastrophic explosion, "I am responsible for it in the sense that it is 'mine': I did it. But it is *imputed* to me only under the intentional descriptions: the ones appearing in a specification of my purpose, the descriptions that specify the deed as something I had reason to do". (Brandom, internet) So although I am responsible for the explosion (since I triggered it), what can be imputed to me is only the act of pressing the bell button with the intention of ringing the bell...[1] The first thing to do here is to include unconscious motivations: I commit an act with a clear conscious intention, but its unintended consequence realizes my unconsciously-desired goal? It is weird that, in his long and detailed analyses of responsibility without conscious intention, and while he repeatedly talks about Oedipus, Brandom never mentions Freud and psychoanalysis, although, for Freud, Oedipus's murder of his father and incest with his mother are exemplary cases of unconsciously motivated acts. Freud returns to the "heroic" position: a subject is responsible also for the unintended consequences of his

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1   In order to designate the act of the self-positing of the absolute I, Fichte is fully justified in using his neologism *Tat-Handlung* which unites the two aspects of *Handlung* and *Tat* – it is only in this primordial act that that *Handlung* and *Tat* fully overlap, i.e., that there is no gap between its intended goal and its actual consequences.

acts (slips of tongue, dreams, etc.) since they were motivated by unconscious desires. I bring you a glass of wine and I slip in front of you, spilling it on your shirt – thereby expressing my concealed hatred of you?

Even without considering unconscious motivations, we should also introduce here the difference between consequences which are non-intended in the sense of simple externality and consequences which, although not intended, proceed immanently from the process triggered by the agent. Let's return to the bell at the entrance to a house which is connected to a bomb – when I press it, the explosion ruins the building; but since I had no idea of this connection and just wanted to visit a friend in the house, I am in no way responsible for the catastrophic consequence. The case of Stalinism is fundamentally different: let's imagine an honest Communist fully engaged in working for the Soviet state in the 1920s – even if his sincere intention is to bring about a new just and free society, the actual outcome (Stalinist terror, gulags, etc.) is an immanent consequence of his activity, i.e., it was inscribed into the very immanent logic of the Soviet Communism. (Let us take an extreme case of the gap that separates *Handlung* from *Tat*: the Chinese Cultural Revolution. As a *Handlung*, it intended to revolutionize social relations in the direction of Communism, while as a Tat, its unintended ultimate consequence for which Mao was "objectively responsible" was the explosion of capitalism in China.)

True, Hegel insists that the purpose and the end of an action must by their very nature be *general*, and so abstract, while what is actually accomplished must by its very nature be *fully determinate*, that is, concrete. But contingency does not only enter at the level of the circumstances of the actualization of an end: what if the contingent aspects of an action are the very inner intentions of its agents? It is in this sense that Hegel speaks about the "spiritual animal kingdom", his term for the complex interaction of individuals in a market society: each individual participating in it is moved by egotist concerns (personal wealth, pleasures, power...), but the Whole of it regulated by the "invisible hand" of the Market actualizes universal welfare and progress. The further point here is that individual motivations and universal goal are necessarily disparate: common Good can realize itself only if individuals follow their particular egotist ends – if they directly want to act for he common Good, the result is ad a rule catastrophic... So it is not just that contingent individual goals reveal themselves to be means of the higher universal Goal, or, as Hegel put it, "the immediate character of the action in its further

content is reduced to a means. In so far as such an end is a finite one, it may in turn be reduced to a means to some further intention, and so on in an infinite progression". (Hegel 1991b: 150, § 122) One should make a step further here: what appears from the individual's standpoint a mere means is the true goal of the entire movement. As Marx put it, individuals engage in social productivity and develop means of production in order to satisfy their private needs and desires; but, from the standpoint of totality, their private needs and desires are themselves mere means to achieve the true goal, the development of social productivity.

Recollection, Forgiveness, Reconciliation

Here enters the Hegelian narrative of forgiveness through recollection: once a course of action is accomplished and its consequences, intended and unintended, laid out, it becomes possible to tell the story of how the initial intention got transformed in the course of its execution. There is no higher Idea which regulates the interaction between the initial idea-goal and its transformations through corrections: retroactively, the original goal has to be changed to fit the process, and unilateral acts are "forgiven" insofar as they can be shown to play a role in a wider process which actualizes a more fundamental goal.

Brandom's formula of reconciliation is the unity (mutual dependence) of creating and finding, of positing and presupposing. In a traditional universe, normative structures are presupposed as objective fact, while in modern alienation, they are reduced to expressions of subjective attitudes. The "reconciliation" is achieved when both aspects are perceived in their interaction and mutual dependence: there is no normative substance in itself, normative structures exist only through the constant (interaction) of individuals engaged in them; however, the necessary result of this interaction is what Dupuy calls the "self-transcendence" of a symbolic structure – to be operative, a normative system has to be perceived as autonomous and in this sense "alienated". A somewhat pathetic example: when a group of people fights for Communism, they of course know that this Idea exists only through their engagement, but they nonetheless relate to it as to a transcendent entity which regulates their lives and for which they may be even ready to sacrifice their lives. One should note here that, for Hegel, alienation is precisely the view which conceives objective normative structures as mere expressions/ products of subjective activity, as its "reified" or "alienated" effects. In other words, overcoming alienation is for Hegel not the act of dissolving

the illusion of autonomy of normative structures but accepting this "alienation" as necessary. Spiritual Substance is Hegel's name for the "big Other", and insofar as the illusion of "big Other" is necessary for the functioning of the symbolic order, one should reject as pseudo-materialist the thought that want to dismiss this dimension. The big Other is effective, it exerts its efficiency in regulating real social processes, not in spite of its non-existence but *because* it doesn't exist – only an inexistent virtual order can do the job.

As expected, Brandom devalues the entire "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Marx-Nietzsche-Freud) as a version of the naturalist reduction of norms to causality, as the relativization of norms to the expression or effect of some non-normative actual process: for Marx, normative structures are part of ideological superstructure and as such conditioned by objective economic processes; for Freud, normative structures are conditioned by unconscious libidinal processes. In Hegel's terms, Freud thus (following Nietzsche) reduces "noble" consciousness to its "low" pathological motivations: moral altruism is sustained by envy and spirit of revenge, etc. But does Freud really do this? Here is how Brandom describes the judge who practices a hermeneutics of suspicion: "The judge exercises his own authority, attributing and holding the agent responsible for the action under a different kind of description, seeing it not as the acknowledgment of a norm but only the evincing of a desire or inclination." (Brandom, internet) Is the psychoanalyst (a psychoanalytic interpreter) such a judge? No, for a simple reason: psychoanalytic interpretation is not objective knowledge about what goes on in the patient – the proof of its truth is precisely and only in how the patient subjectively assumes it. In his (unpublished) Seminar XVIII on a "discourse which would not be that of a semblance", Lacan provided a succinct definition of the truth of interpretation in psychoanalysis: "Interpretation is not tested by a truth that would decide by yes or no, it unleashes truth as such. It is only true inasmuch as it is truly followed." (Lacan 1971) There is nothing "theological" in this precise formulation, only the insight into the properly dialectical unity of theory and practice in (not only) psychoanalytic interpretation: the "test" of the analyst's interpretation is in the truth effect it unleashes in the patient. This is how we should also (re)read Marx's Thesis XI: the "test" of Marxist theory is the truth effect it unleashes in its addressee (the proletarians), in transforming them into emancipatory revolutionary subjects. The *locus communis* "You have to see it to believe it!" should always be read together with its inversion "You have to believe [in] it to see it!" Although one may be tempted to oppose them as the

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dogmatism of blind faith versus openness toward the unexpected, one should insist also on the truth of the second version: truth, as opposed to knowledge, is, like a Badiouian Event, something that only an engaged gaze, the gaze of a subject who "believes in it", can see. Think of love: in love, only the lover sees in the object of love that X which causes love, so the structure of love is the same as that of the Badiouian Event which also exists only for those who recognize themselves in it: there is no Event for a non-engaged objective observer.

Incidentally, the same point can be made about traumatic experiences as the main figure of the external cause of a pathological development of a subject. In his analysis of "Wolfsman", Freud isolated as the early traumatic event that marked his life the fact that, as a child of 1 ½ years, he witnessed the parental *coitus a tergo* (sexual act in which the man penetrates the woman from behind). However, originally, when this scene took place, there was nothing traumatic in it: far from shattering the child, he just inscribed it into his memory as an event the sense of which was not clear at all to him. Only years later, when the child became obsessed with the question "where do children come from" and started to develop infantile sexual theories, did he draw out this memory in order to use it as a traumatic scene embodying the mystery of sexuality. The scene was traumatized, elevated into a traumatic Real, only retroactively, in order to help the child to cope with the impasse of his symbolic universe (his inability to find answers to the enigma of sexuality). So, again, the external cause (the traumatic experience) does not exert its causal power directly, its efficiency is always mediated by a subjectivized symbolic space which cannot be reduced to objective facts.

In the domain of politics, the hermeneutics of suspicion reaches its climax in Stalinism. The passage from Leninism to Stalinism also concerns the relationship between intended goal and unintended consequences. The Leninist category of "objective meaning" of your acts refers to the unintended but necessary consequences, as in "you may have acted out of your best humanitarian intentions, but your acts objectively served the class enemy" – the Party is an agent which has direct and privileged access to this "objective meaning". Stalinism brings us back to a perverted version of the pre-modern "heroic" attitude, i.e., it again closes the gap between subjective intentions and objective consequences: objective consequences are projected back into the agent as his/her (secret) intentions, as in "you pretended to act out of the best humanitarian intentions, but secretly you wanted to serve the class enemy".

With regard to the relationship between noble consciousness (taking the other's statements in the spirit of trust, accepting the normative commitment they declare) and the vicious consciousness (interpreting other's statements from the standpoint of irony, discerning beneath them "pathological" motivations (egotism, utilitarian interest, search for pleasures) or reducing them to effects of objective mechanisms), Brandom pulls the standard transcendental trick: in order to be taken seriously, even the most suspicious interpretation of our acts reducing them to lower motivations or objectively-determined mechanism already has to presuppose an attitude of trust, i.e., it has to presume that this interpretation itself is not just an expression of "lower" motivations but a deployment of serious rational argumentation:

> we have always already implicitly committed ourselves to adopting the edelmütig stance, to identifying with the unity that action and consciousness involve, to understanding ourselves as genuinely binding ourselves by conceptual norms that we apply in acting intentionally and making judgments. [...] the determinate contentfulness of the thoughts and intentions even of the niederträchtig is in fact intelligible *only* from an edelmütig perspective. (Brandom, internet)

Hegel and Brandom are here opposed in a way which is far from concerning just an accent: Brandom asserts the transcendental primacy of trust which is always-already presupposed by any reductionist-suspicious ironic attitude, while Hegel's entire effort goes into explaining why trust needs the detour through irony and suspicion to assert itself – it cannot stand on its own. The consequences of this shift are radical: when Brandom claims that Absolute Knowing stands for "a move from the relations between individuals and their conceptually articulated norms exhibiting the structure of *irony* to exhibiting the structure of *trust*", he thereby opens up the way to conceive Absolute Knowing as a promise of a future state of humanity in which modern alienation will be left behind and harmony will be reestablished. In his periodization of history, after traditional societies in which norms are taken as a substantial In-itself, and modern alienated societies in which norms are reduced to expressions of subjective attitudes, there comes the projected post-modern "final form of mutual recognition as reciprocal confession and forgiveness"[2]:

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2   Incidentally, what Hegel means by "recognition" is also something much more radical and disturbing than the liberal beauty of mutually recognizing free individuals: in his extreme but crucial case, execution (death punishment) of a criminal is the recognition of him/her as a free responsible human being – if we do not punish him arguing that he was a victim of circumstances, we deprive him of his rational freedom.

> Unlike the earlier stories, this one outlines something that hasn't happened yet: a future development of Spirit, of which Hegel is the prophet: the making explicit of something already implicit, whose occurrence is to usher in the next phase in our history. (Brandom, internet)

So what, precisely, is supposed to happen in this post-modern third stage? Here is Brandom's formula: "finding and making show up as two sides of one coin, two aspects of one process, whose two phases – experience and its recollection, lived forward and comprehended backward, the inhalation and exhalation that sustain the life of Spirit – are each both makings and findings." (Brandom, internet) The basic idea seems clear: traditional culture accepts norms (our normative substance) as substantially given, so they pre-exist us, we just have to find them; modern culture of alienation reduces them to an expression of our subjective attitudes, i.e., norms are something that we make, create; what is needed is a synthetic view which sees how our reality is "at once the institution and the application of conceptual norms, both a making and a finding of conceptual contents" (Brandom, internet): "Spirit exists insofar as we *make* it exist by *taking* it to exist." (Brandom, internet) But does this last proposition not indicate a necessary illusion? If we make it exist by taking it to exist, does this not mean that we can only make it exist by way of pretending that it already exists? It is as in the old Yugoslav joke about the conscript who pleaded insanity in order to avoid military service; his "symptom" was to compulsively examine every paper at his reach and exclaim "That's not it!"; when he is examined by the military psychiatrists, he does the same, so the psychiatrists finally give him a paper confirming that he is released from military service. The conscript reaches for it, examines it, and exclaims: "That's it!" Here, also, the search for an object itself generates this object.

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Brandom is right to point out: "Geist as a whole has a history, and it is Hegel's view that in an important sense, that history boils down to one grand event. That event – the *only* thing that has ever really happened to Geist – is its structural transformation from a traditional to a modern form." (Brandom, internet) In a consequently Hegelian way, we should apply this insight also to what Brandom describes as the passage from modernity to post-modernity: post-modernity is not a "synthesis" of both extremes, traditional realism and modern subjectivism, it is not the unity of both one-sided positions; it is a self-relating repetition of the modernist break, its application to itself, it is modernity brought to conclusion.

So when Brandom evokes "a hypothetical future third age of Spirit", one should raise the obvious Hegelian question: does such a reading not directly contradict Hegel's emphatic dismissal of the "desire to teach the world what it ought to be" from the "Preface" of his *Philosophy of Right*:

> Philosophy, at any rate, always comes too late to perform this function. As the *thought* of the world, it appears only at a time when actuality has gone through its formative process and attained its completed state. [...] When philosophy paints its grey in grey, a shape of life has grown old, and it cannot be rejuvenated, but only recognized, by the grey in grey of philosophy; the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk. (Hegel 1991b: 23)

Robert Pippin noted that, if Hegel is minimally consistent, this has to apply also to the notion of State deployed in his own *Philosophy of Right*: the fact that Hegel was able to deploy its concept means that "the onset of dusk" on what readers of Hegel usually perceive as a normative description of a model rational state. And the same should hold for any extrapolation of a non-alienated future from present tendencies: such mode of thinking (the logic of "now we are in a critical moment of utter alienation, and the possibility is open for us to act as agents of overcoming alienation") is utterly foreign to Hegel who repeatedly emphasizes the retroactive nature of overcoming alienation: we overcome alienation through realizing that we've already overcome it. In other words, nothing "really changes" in overcoming alienation, we just shift our perspective and gain the insight into how what appears as alienation is the immanent condition of dis-alienation, is in itself already dis-alienation. It is in this sense that, in his "small" (*Encyclopaedia*) *Logic*, Hegel proposes his own version of *la vérité surgit de la méprise*, ambiguously asserting that "only out of this error does the truth arise":

> In the sphere of the finite we can neither experience nor see that the purpose is genuinely attained. The accomplishing of the infinite purpose consists therefore only in sublating the illusion that it has not yet been accomplished. The good, the absolute good, fulfills itself eternally in the world, and the result is that it is already fulfilled in and for itself, and does not need to wait upon us for this to happen. This is the illusion in which we live, and at the same time it is this illusion alone that is the activating element upon which our interest in the world rests. It is within its own process that the Idea produces that illusion for itself; it posits an other confronting itself, and its action consists in sublating that illusion. Only from this error does the truth come forth, and herein lies our reconciliation with error and with finitude. Otherness or error, as sublated, is itself a necessary moment of the truth, which can only be in that it makes itself into its own result. (Hegel 1991a: 286, § 212, add.)

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 for the fact that their collective already was the Holy Spirit, the return of the living Christ. Lebrun is thus justified in noting that the final reversal of the dialectical process, far from being a magic intervention of a *deus ex machina*, is a purely formal turnaround, a shift of perspective: the only thing that changes in the final reconciliation is the subject's standpoint, i.e., the subject endorses the loss, re-inscribes it as its triumph. Reconciliation is thus simultaneously less and more than the standard idea of overcoming an antagonism: less, because nothing "really changes"; more, because the subject of the process is deprived of its very (particular) substance. Recall the paradox of the process of apologizing: if I hurt someone with a rude remark, the proper thing for me to do is to offer him a sincere apology, and the proper thing for him to do is to say something like "Thanks, I appreciate it, but I wasn't offended, I knew you didn't mean it, so you really owe me no apology!" The point is, of course, that, although the final result is that no apology is needed, one has to go through the entire process of offering it: "you owe me no apology" can only be said after I DO offer an apology, so that, although, formally, "nothing happens", the offer of apology is proclaimed unnecessary, there is a gain at the end of the process (perhaps, even, the friendship is saved).

Out of which error, exactly, does the truth arise? Or, another version of the same question, "this is the illusion under which we live" – which illusion, exactly? The ambiguity is here radical. The predominant reading would have been the standard idealist-teleological one: the error resides in assuming that the infinite End is not already accomplished, that we are caught in an open-ended struggle with a real substantial enemy. In short, the illusion resides here in the perception of those caught in the struggle who think that the struggle is for the real and not already decided in advance – they don't see that what we, finite agents, perceive as an open struggle is, from the standpoint of the absolute Idea just a game the Idea is playing with itself. The Idea "posits" – builds – an external obstacle in order to overcome it and unite with itself... This, however, is only one aspect of the illusion, and the opposite illusion is no less wrong: the illusion that Truth is already here, that everything is fully predestined, decided in advance, that our struggles are just a game of no substantial importance – in this case, the Absolute remains a Substance which predetermines all subjective agency, it is not yet conceived also as Subject. In other words: to remove the illusion that the infinite goal is not already accomplished, to ascertain that truth is already here, is in itself a performative

act: declaring something to be the case makes it the case. So both illusions are worse, to paraphrase Stalin – but how could both opposed versions be wrong? Is it not that either things are predetermined, decided in advance, or not? The solution is retroactivity: Truth is the process of its own becoming, it becomes what it is (or, rather, what it always-already was), not in the sense that it just deploys its immanent potentials, but in the more radical sense of gradually forming (building, constructing) its own "eternal" past. A thing becomes – not what it IS or what it will be but – what it always-already WAS, its Aristotelian essence (*to ti en einai*, "the what-it-was-to-be", **or** *das zeitlos-gewesene Sein*, the "timelessly past being", as Hegel translated it).

The obverse of this vision of a future state beyond alienation is that Brandom gets caught into a spurious infinite of recognition: the gap between intention and consequences of our actions is constitutive, we cannot ever reach full reconciliation, we are condemned to the infinite progress towards overcoming disparity, every agent has to trust forgiveness from the future figures of big Other. At every moment, we build a story of recollection which reconciles us with the past, but

> no such story is final. None anoints as concepts conceptions whose correct (according to the norms they are taken by their users, including the ones producing the retrospective rational reconstruction, to embody) application will not lead to incompatible commitments, the experience of error and failure showing the disparity between what things are for consciousness and what they are in themselves that must be confessed and forgiven anew. Each such story will itself eventually turn out to have crowned a defective conception with the label: what things are *in* themselves, the real concepts. The sense in which there is and can be no finally adequate set of determinate concepts (or conceptions) is visible prospectively, in the space *between* recollections, in the need of each forgiving judge himself to be forgiven in turn. (Brandom, internet)

The recognitive authority of the present judge with respect to past judges is thus conditioned on its recognition by future ones, implying "an implicit *confession* of the only partial success of each particular exercise of generous recollection": "Such a confession is an invitation for us who come after him concretely to forgive him for the partial failure of his attempt to forgive, by telling a still better story. He trusts us to continue the conceptually magnanimous enterprise." (Brandom, internet) Such a simple self-historicization/self-relativization is thoroughly non-Hegelian – it forgets that one overcomes disparity not by effectively overcoming it but by a shift of perspective which render visible disparity itself in its positive, enabling dimension.

Here is Brandom's concise description of the progress of knowledge as a continuous revision of what the object is for us: "one must exhibit the result of one's revision as *finding out* how things all along already were in themselves, what one was really talking and thinking *about*, what one was referring to by deploying the earlier, variously defective senses, the reality that was all along appearing, though in some aspects incompletely or incorrectly." (Brandom, internet) I find this passage profoundly ambiguous: is it to be read in the standard realist way (we are gradually approaching the object which is out there, all the time the same), or does the phrase "one must exhibit the result of one's revision as *finding out* how things all along already were in themselves" indicate a more refined position: "finding" how the object really is (and always-already was) in itself is a retroactive illusion, a way we necessarily (mis)perceive our process of knowledge:

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> One of Hegel's most fundamental ideas is that the notion of content is intelligible in principle only in terms of the sort of *friction* between normative attitudes that shows up in cognitive experience in the collision of incompatible commitments *acknowledged* by one knower, and which we have come to see is rooted in the social-perspectival collision of commitments *acknowledged* and those *attributed* in practical experience of the disparity of Handlung and Tat. (Brandom, internet)

Brandom sees clearly the retroactive nature of the Hegelian teleology, i.e., he is well aware that the rational totality which emerges through historical recollection is a "retrospectively imputed plan":

> the role of a given event in the evolving plan depends on *what else happens*. [...] As new consequences occur, the plan is altered, and with it the status of the earlier event as aiding in the successful execution of the plan. That status can be altered by other doings, which, in the context of the earlier one, open up some new practical possibilities and close others off. The significance of one event is never fully and finally settled. It is always open to influence by later events. (Brandom, internet)

The unsurpassable case of such a retroactive reversal of contingency into necessity in popular culture remains the ending of *Casablanca*: according to the popular myth, the main actors (Bergman, Bogart) didn't know to the very last days of shooting what the ending will be (will Bergman leave with her husband to Portugal, will she remain in Casablanca with Bogart, or will one of her male partners die?), but once the ending that we know now was chosen all preceding action seemed to lead to it, i.e., it appeared as the only "natural" ending. What this means is that the progression is "*retrospectively* necessary": "It is not the case that a given stage could have evolved in no other way than as to produce what appears as its successor."

It is therefore too simple to just distinguish two ontological levels, natural objects which are what they are independently of how they are "for us", and spiritual objects which are created through our approach. This is the price that both Pippin and Brandom pay for their "renormalization" of Hegel as a thinker of discursive recognition: a regression into Kantian dualism of the domain/level of empirical reality and the separate normative domain of rational argumentation. Whatever Hegel is, such dualism is incompatible with his thought.

Healing the Wound

Hegel's radical claim about the power of Spirit is that it can make our deeds "as if they had never happened" (Hegel 1977: 406, § 667): "The wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind. The deed is not imperishable; it is taken back by Spirit into itself, and the aspect of individuality present in it, whether as intention or as an existent negativity and limitation, straightway vanishes." (Hegel 1997: 407, § 669) Brandom again puts all his effort into the "renormalization" of this "crazy" claim; however, his version of recollection as healing the wounds generates a series of problems. First, in this version, recollection "ignores expressively retrograde experiences and instead traces out a trajectory of expressively progressive improvements in how things were for us that culminates in the way we currently take them to be in themselves". (Brandom, internet) But what about extreme self-destructive moments that are part of Hegel's recollective narrative? What about self-destructive revolutionnary terror as the outcome of absolute Freedom? What about the absurd infinite judgment "Spirit is a bone"? They are both a deadlock, clearly superfluous, but precisely as such – as superfluous – they are necessary. We have to commit an error, to make a wrong choice, in order to be able to establish retroactively that it was superfluous to do it. In other words, the Hegelian recollection is not just the narrative structure in its retroactive "inner necessity", purified of meaningless contingencies. On the contrary, the Hegelian recollection brings life back into a dead scheme by way of resuscitating it "in its becoming", as Kierkegaard would have put it. It does not reduce the contingency of a process to its notional necessity, it restores the contingent process out of which necessity arose.

But the main point is that, for Hegel, wounds are healed in a much stronger sense than just as steps towards a higher unity: they literally disappear, they are "undone" – how? Recall Wagner's "*Die Wunde schließt der Speer*

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nur der sie schlug" from the finale of *Parsifal* – Hegel says the same thing, although with the accent shifted in the opposite direction: the Spirit is itself the wound it tries to heal, i.e., the wound is self-inflicted. That is to say, what is "Spirit" at its most elementary? The "wound" of nature: subject is the immense – absolute – power of negativity, of introducing a gap/cut into the given-immediate substantial unity, the power of differentiating, of "abstracting", of tearing apart and treating as self-standing what in reality is part of an organic unity. Consequently, the Spirit heals its wound not by directly healing it, but by getting rid of the very full and sane Body into which the wound was cut. It is in this precise sense that, according to Hegel, »the wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind«: Hegel's point is not that the Spirit heals its wounds so perfectly that, in a magic gesture of retroactive sublation, even their scars disappear; the point is rather that, in the course of a dialectical process, a shift of perspective occurs which makes the wound itself appear as its opposite – the wound itself is its own healing when perceived from another standpoint.

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Was Malcolm X not following the same insight when he adopted X as his family name? The point of choosing X as his family name and thereby signaling that the slave traders who brought the enslaved Africans from their homeland brutally deprived them of their family and ethnic roots, of their entire cultural life-world, was not to mobilize the blacks to fight for the return to some primordial African roots, but precisely to seize the opening provided by X, an unknown new (lack of) identity engendered by the very process of slavery which made the African roots forever lost. The idea is that this X which deprives the blacks of their particular tradition offers a unique chance to redefine (reinvent) themselves, to freely form a new identity much more universal than white people's professed universality. – And does a homologous reversal not define the very core of the Christian experience? When a believer feels alone, abandoned by god, the Christian answer is not that he should purify himself and rejoin god, but that, in this very abandonment, he is already identified with god (the god who is abandoned by itself). It is also in this sense that, from the Christian standpoint, god gives humanity the supreme gift of freedom: when I feel alone, abandoned by god, lacking any protection and support from god, left to myself, to my own devices, I have to turn around the entire perspective and recognize in this lack of support and protection, in this being-left-to-one's-own-devices, the very figure of human autonomy and freedom.

Furthermore, we should test Brandom's reading of forgiveness and re-conciliation at history's extreme phenomena: what would it have meant to forgive holocaust and get reconciled with it? Can we also imagine that this terrifying "wound" gets fully healed and disappears by way of becoming a moment of rationally-reconstructed history? Should Jews pardon the Nazis because, although in its direct intention, holocaust meant the total destruction of the Jews, its unintended consequence was the emergence of the state of Israel plus the prohibition of anti-Semitism (in parts of the world, at least)? Or, even more obscenely, should the Jews recognize their own complicity with holocaust (Heidegger's reading)? The easy way out is, of course, to claim that the rational recollection of history included only moments which contributed to the progress and ignore blind accidental deadlocks. But this easy way out obviously doesn't work: violent anti-Semitism is all too clearly part of Western spiritual history to be ignored like that, plus the unintended consequence of holocaust effectively was some level of ethical progress (higher awareness of the dangers of racism), so that, in a weird way, it did contribute to the ethical progress which wouldn't take place without it. Which means one cannot squeeze out of this deadlock by way of reading the phrase "wounds of the Spirit" literally, as referring openly to spiritual wounds proper (and dismissing holocaust as a pathology that doesn't really belong to the domain of spirit): holocaust IS part of the innermost history of our Spirit, of our collective spiritual substance.

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Slavoj Žižek

U odbranu Hegelovog ludila

Rezime

Članak predstavlja suočavanje sa Brendomovim čitanjem Hegelove *Fenomenologije duha*, odnosno sa njegovim pokušajem da sistematski „renormalizuje" Hegela, t.j. da svede njegove ekstravagntne formulacije na kriterijume zdravog razuma. Članak analizira brojne Brendomove „domestifikacije" Hegelovih spekulativnih pojmova: samosvest, određenu negaciju, posredovanje, stvar samu, delanje, spoznaju, Duh, izmirenje, istoriju. Na osnovu primera iz Marksa, Frojda, strukturalizma, Levi-Strosa, Altisera, Lakana, Adorna, tekst brani Hegelovo „ludilo", kao ireduktibilno spekulativno i neinterpretativno jezgro njegove filozofije. Hegelove izjave nas moraju šokirati i taj ekses ne može biti objašnjen kroz interpretaciju, jer istina koju te izjave saopštavaju zavisi upravo od njega.

Ključne reči: Hegel, Brendom, stvar sama, delanje, istorija