

Žižek and Hegel: the Courage to Hold on to Paradox

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1 The Paradox of Philosophy: Closure and Openness Arguably the most frequently cited passage in the history of Hegel's reception is the line from the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right* where he declares that philosophy 'is its own time comprehended in thoughts.;' (Hegel 1821, p. 21) And yet its precise meaning remains a subject of ongoing debate. Traditionally it has been read alongside another one from the same Preface—almost equally renowned—which states that philosophy, like the owl of Minerva, takes flight only at *Dämmerung*;; commonly translated as 'dusk,' that is, when a day, or a world, has already run its course. And from this parallel, it has been inferred that for Hegel, philosophical work consists merely in registering what has already taken place, and that therefore philosophy has no other task but bringing the present to a close (by acknowledging its own closure). In line with this interpretation, Hegel's remark in the same context about philosophy 'painting its grey in grey' has been understood as a frank admission of its passive and abstract character, in contrast to the colorful richness of life. The conclusion has therefore been drawn that, for Hegel, philosophy's role is simply to reproduce reality as it is—or, more precisely, as it has ultimately come to be. However, the 'apprehension in thought' at stake here is what Hegel elsewhere—such as in the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*;;—calls an 'elevation to the concept.' Thus, it seems undeniable that taking its own time, by means of thought, into what it presupposes at the same time connecting it to something that is not (yet or no longer);, thereby taking up a conflict or a tension that—inasmuch as the concept is the concept of the present—must belong constitutively to the present itself. It follows then that the philosophical apprehension of the present cannot consist in fixing it as a monolithic and static image. And indeed, when we consider Hegel's portrayals of present reality (including what, from its standpoint, has become the past present), we generally encounter the exposition of a leap in which that reality actually renounces itself. If, for example, we approach Hegel's account of the State in the *Philosophy of Right* expecting to find a faithful, detailed, and complete representation of the political reality of Prussia at the time, we are so struck by its distance from that reality that we cannot help but suspect whether the State described in those pages is not, rather than what the present is, what it ought to be;—or even, given that the

exposition immediately inverts it into the state of war, that its truth may lie, in fact, in the other of what it is; in its collapse or, in any case, in what it (still) is not. The standard interpretation of Hegel, which has prevailed in various forms for more than one hundred and fifty years, has interpreted that, in presenting his philosophy as ‘absolute knowing,’ Hegel—in apparent harmony with the image of the owl of Minerva—expressed his claim that it had not merely brought a historical episode to its closure but the entire course of history. Understanding his principle as a subject that is absolute in the sense that, leaving ultimately nothing outside itself, achieves full self-coincidence—as a sub-jectum in the proper sense—, these readings have indeed interpreted that Hegel claimed that his philosophy, by referring history back to that principle as both its alpha and omega, had depicted it as a closed circle. Thus, the philosophical elevation to the concept of present reality would consist, in the end, merely in sanctioning reality as the finally adequate expression of spirit—the positive sub-jectum that, according to this interpretation, Hegel’s philosophy presupposes as both the origin and the telos of history—and thus in bringing history as such to a close. And so, in the end, philosophy would not be called upon to project or transform anything. However, the revival of Hegel’s thought over the past forty years has sought, from various angles, to defend his philosophy as a thought of openness, open toward the future and, therefore, unlike the traditional view, still ‘relevant,’ capable of helping us to project our own future. These more recent readings, paying more attention to Hegel’s depictions of the present—which, in truth, do not coincide with any actual present—than to those passages that stress the merely contemplative attitude of the owl of Minerva, have generally understood that the distance Hegel establishes between what merely exists and its concept somehow serves the design of what is to come, of another, ‘better’ existence; that in Hegel’s philosophy, the exposition of the (past) present is complemented by the projection of a future present that will be superior, that will ‘sublate’ it. They insist, for this very reason, that it is no coincidence that Hegel’s term for the philosophical hour in the aforementioned passage is *Dämmerung*;, which does not only refer to dusk but also to dawn—the beginning of a new day. Inclining to read Hegel’s principle not as a positive sub-jectum; but as negativity itself, these interpretations

generally understand the philosophical act of elevating the present to the concept as an unveiling of its distance from what it is not (yet) but ought to be, and thus take Hegel to be already indicating, in a positive way, the direction of rational progress—pointing the way to a more rational future. Žižek's position—frequently insisting that Hegel's description of the present consists precisely in revealing the rupture or fracture that the present is—is, in this regard, unique.¹ His entire work is, of course, marked by his opposition to the conventional interpretation of Hegel, but for quite some time now, he has also resisted the more recent revivals of Hegel's thought, especially those by Pippin and Brandom. Yet his position should not be mistaken for a middle path, a 'third way' between these two extremes, nor for a standpoint that seeks to encompass or reconcile them from a neutral outside. On the contrary, Žižek opposes both interpretations because he detects in each the same fundamental flaw: the attempt to 'resolve' Hegelian ambivalence. This effort is misguided, because it presupposes that reality—also for Hegel—must coincide with itself, and that, therefore, philosophy, which apprehends it by grasping the unity of its identity, will also exhibit that unity. Accordingly, when philosophical exposition—such as Hegel's sometimes—falls into ambiguity, this is to be treated as a deficiency, often merely provisional or apparent, in its approach—one that, in any case, can eventually be 'resolved.' Against this, Žižek's idea is rather that these very ambiguities in Hegelian thought are the 'indicator' of its truth. Since reality is essentially contradictory, they prove that Hegel's philosophy reflects the deepest truth of reality. Žižek's position, then, is to affirm these ambiguities as irreducible paradoxes by rooting them in reality itself. In fact, for this phenomenon—the coexistence of two irreconcilable standpoints that correspond likewise to two dimensions of reality that cannot be integrated into a single 'ontological edifice'—Žižek has coined the term 'parallax' and defended its irreducibility.²

This explains why his own work, far from overcoming the ambiguity we began with, continues to repeat it. Again and again, we encounter in his writings the simultaneous affirmation that philosophy is to merely 'take note' or 'register' what is—that is, the present in which we are already

¹See, e.g., Žižek/Ruda/Hamza 2022, pp. 15–17.

²See, e.g., Žižek 2019, p. 17.

always situated—and that it also demonstrates the necessity of action in the most radical sense, of truly transformative or revolutionary activity. More than this, Žižek asserts that philosophy itself, if it is true philosophy, properly ‘acts,’ that it transforms its own presuppositions—just as Hegel’s philosophy does.³ But what I wish to emphasize now is that this Žižekian way of viewing (Hegelian) ambiguity—which roots it in reality and leads him to repeat it—is itself Hegelian. That is to say: as Žižek insists, it is Hegel himself who transposes the contradictions of our standpoint into reality itself and thereby affirms the reality of contradiction.⁴ And this is precisely what defines the perspective they share—the one Žižek finds in Hegel and adopts for himself—namely, the properly dialectical one. Thus, if we understand the precise terms in which Žižek interprets the relationship between the two sides of this (or these) paradox(es), we will also grasp his general interpretation of Hegel’s position—the reason why he simultaneously rejects both the ‘Hegel of pacifying closure’ and the ‘Hegel of infinite openness.’ We will understand why Žižek’s reading, by understanding in truly dialectical terms the relationship between closure and openness produced by philosophy—refusing both to choose between them and to harmonize them—corrects both dominant hermeneutic lines at once. Žižek’s idea is that true philosophy—philosophy that, like Hegel’s, regards reality dialectically—does nothing more than describe the present reality and yet, at the same time, transforms it, because in doing the former it already does the latter.⁵ That philosophy works only in the dark means that it portrays reality only once it is complete—taking it, therefore, as a totality, as the

³On the idea that true philosophy introduces a radical rupture in the history of thought, see for example Žižek 2014c, ch. 4; Žižek 2012, pp. 193–194. On how such a rupture can emerge from the mere act of ‘taking note,’ see Žižek 2014c, ch. 7.

⁴Hence Hegel’s critique of Kant for treating the antinomies as merely subjective; see, e.g., Hegel 1830a, §48. For Žižek’s explanation of how Hegel’s internalization of noumenal reality entails the recognition of reality as contradictory, see for example Žižek 1999, pp. 95–98.

⁵‘In other words, the truly New emerges through the narrative, the apparently purely reproductive retelling of what had happened –it is this retelling that opens up the space (the possibility) of acting in a new way.’ (Žižek 2014b, p. 195).

rational order in which we are always already immersed and which constitutes our inescapable point of departure. Unlike other disciplines, philosophy neither concentrates on one of its particular aspects nor considers reality as a mere sum of particulars; instead, it sees it as a whole of mediations or interactions and, in this sense, contemplates it in its universality and its immanent necessity. To describe it in this way is, without doubt, to close it upon itself, to draw it in the form of a circle. However, if this is done rigorously—‘to the end’—one necessarily discovers within it something that resists mediation, something immediate, which is therefore always already excluded from the totality of mediations that the order is in itself—something within it that it excludes. The dialectical gaze is precisely that which grasps the necessity of this exclusion—that the order must exclude one of its elements—and which furthermore recognizes in this necessity the order’s own need to negate its internal conflict. That is, the perspective that apprehends the order of reality in its totality in order to expose its necessity is precisely the one that perceives in the excluded element its own cleft and, in its exclusion or negation, the very condition of possibility of the order as such—that is, of reality’s self-understanding and self-presentation as a whole. It sees how reality—the reality to be portrayed—can only be what it claims to be insofar as it inverts itself into its other, insofar as it leaps into pure immediacy. And thus, it sees in this element the negative of that order that expresses its truth: in that immediate, particular, and contingent element, it discerns the totality of mediations—appearing as necessary universality—in its inverted form. Žižek’s favorite Hegelian example of this structure, taken from the *Philosophy of Right*, is the monarch. He is the element of the State who, chosen by blood, is ‘legitimated’ solely by contingent, arbitrary, and im-mediate nature; but precisely because—according to his nonrational legitimation—he performs nothing more than the empty gesture of signing—because he himself is merely ‘the dot on the i;’ within the State—he constitutes the suture that renders the State a closed circle of mediations, the rational totality of a network of necessary connections, and thus proves to be its ultimate pillar.⁶

⁶See Hegel 1821, §§ 278–80, Žižek 1991, pp. 82–83, and Žižek 2012, p. 425.

In short: to describe reality in its full scope, to close it in the form of a circle, necessarily entails also recognizing the element that, by externalizing and inverting its internal fracture, makes its positive being possible—that allows it to order itself precisely in the form of a totality. But the paradox lies in the fact that this element must also be recognized as preventing it, at the same time, from being such a consistent and complete circle—as breaking the very circle it closes or the very closure it sustains. As Žižek repeatedly puts it, this element is revealed as both the condition of possibility and of impossibility of reality (as a rational or symbolic order).⁷ Accordingly, the dialectical gaze that uncovers it can only complete the circle by opening it; it can only portray the present by pushing it beyond itself—by hollowing it out and transcending it, transforming it into something other. In merely registering what is, it already re-inscribes within it something whose exclusion was its support; it already reveals that the truth of its network of mediations entirely depends on an immediate element—that, in fact, the network itself is nothing other than this marginalized element: ‘spirit is a bone.’⁸ At that point, philosophy has already redoubled the self-negation enacted by reality itself: it has negated the negation of its rupture. This redoubling is nothing other than the repetition of reality’s own selfnegation—the way in which, to constitute itself as a positive order, reality must negate itself (negate the fracture that is its non-origin) or leap to what it is not, into the other of what it is. If philosophy remains faithful to reality only by carrying it beyond itself, this is because reality is only what it is by negating itself. This is its contradiction—and philosophy, indeed, merely registers it. Returning to our example: the moment the Philosophy of Right recognizes the monarch at the summit of the State in order to register the completeness of its innere Verfassung and to ‘sanction’ it, it simultaneously discloses its internal cleft and delivers it over to war—or rather, reveals it as always already resting on the (possibility of) war. This is the sense in which the formal, merely constative, gesture of ‘taking note’ is revealed to be, in itself, performative—indeed,

⁷See Žižek 1991, p. 70.

⁸See Žižek/Ruda/Hamza 2022, p. 18. Ultimately, this element gives form to absolute negativity, and it is therefore articulated in Hegel in the form of the so-called ‘infinite judgment’; see Žižek 1989, pp. 206–209.

the only gesture capable of enacting a true transformation, one that is inscribed in the innermost structure of reality itself, in its very contradiction.⁹ The internalization of the (apparently) external limit effected by this mere ‘registration’ accomplishes two things: on the one hand, it abolishes the tension between the portrayed reality and the external alterity signaled by that limiting element; on the other, it reinscribes that external distance as the internal antagonism of reality itself—as its non-origin or its ‘zero point’; it reclaims the external tension as immanent contradiction. This is the sense in which philosophy only reconciles—or closes the circle of reality—insofar as it destroys its identity or reveals it as a non-totality, and the sense in which Žižek affirms that reconciliation consists in nothing other than the recognition of the irreducibility of antagonism, of the impossibility of any positive reconciliation.¹⁰ For this reason, when Žižek—provocatively echoing Marxist discourse—says, for example, that it is time to stop transforming the world and instead to interpret it, he is not, in my view, capitulating or renouncing transformation, but rather offering the very key by which it might finally become real.¹¹

2 The Paradox of Symbolic Reality: Mediation and Immediacy Philosophy, in short, opens the future by closing the present, because it finds the present’s point of suture precisely in what exceeds it. To clarify the reason for this constitutive excess of reality, we must understand precisely how mediation—what lends reality the appearance of a rational totality—and immediacy—that dimension embodied by the point of suture as its internal limit—are articulated within it. To that end, let us look more closely at what dialectical

⁹Both the gesture of the monarch, the gesture of the ‘master signifier’ more generally, and that of philosophy itself in recognizing within a symbolic totality the excluded element, are constative acts that nonetheless change everything: see Žižek 2014c, sect. 5.2, and Žižek 2014a, pp. 21–24. The ‘zero level’ of symbolization—the mere act of naming—also illustrates paradigmatically how a purely tautological gesture can have performative force; see Žižek 1993, pp. 150–153.

¹⁰See Žižek/Ruda/Hamza 2022, pp. 21, 25, 52–53, and Žižek 2019, p. 60. Reconciliation is presented here as the reduction of both sides of the conflict to the ‘zero level,’ to the nothingness in which they overlap.

¹¹See, e.g., Žižek 2019, pp. 54–55.

thought does and uncovers in the gesture just described—namely, the move of referring mediation back to immediacy. That philosophy is the apprehension of the present means, as we have already said, that it is always directed toward understanding the ‘rational order’ to which we belong: the symbolic—linguistic and historical—or, in Hegelian terms, spiritual totality in which we are always already embedded. It is this totality that constitutes the reality of our present—our reality—and, along with it, constitutes us. It grants us an identity by assigning us a place within the network of language and binding us, thereby, to a particular historical time. We call it ‘rational’ in the sense that it understands itself as a consistent and complete whole of mediations—or, in Hegelian terms, as a reality that is ‘for-itself’, subjective (in the broad sense) or spiritual—as opposed to what merely is ‘in-itself’, that is, substantial or merely natural. Accordingly, what was stated in the previous section implies that the dialectical perspective—the one Žižek finds in Hegel and he himself adopts—ultimately refers both the linguistic and historical dimensions of symbolic reality back to a moment of immediacy. On the one hand, it refers the linguistic network back to one of its elements: a ‘signifier’ which, by virtue of its immediacy—its non-relation to other signifiers—cannot have acquired any meaning and thus coincides with Lacan’s ‘empty signifier.’ On the other hand, it traces each historical narrative of the present back to its constitutive presupposition of an origin which, insofar as it is ‘posited’ as given or immediate, likewise escapes the historical fabric, and thus reveals that origin, every origin, as a myth. Dialectical thought thus recognizes that symbolic reality—mediated, subjective, or negative—rests upon its absolute other: a pure positive immediacy, or a purely substantial moment. In seeking to portray it as it is, the dialectical perspective uncovers its very condition of impossibility—the element that prevents it from being what it claims to be. Yet insofar as, as we have seen, this element merely expresses (and simultaneously displaces) the gap within the symbolic order itself—that is, within the network of sense of the present—inasmuch as it results solely from the immediate inversion of that non-being into being, it becomes clear that the pure positivity that this element harbors only a void and that it can only emerge from a leap that conceals itself, from a deception. In other words, this immediate element is, in itself, a fetish. Its dis-

covery exposes not only the incompleteness, inconsistency, and contingency of the order it supports—its character as a non-totality—but also its fundamentally deceptive, ideological nature: it disqualifies it as a genuinely rational and total order. At the same time, however, this immediate element is also revealed as the condition of possibility of the (linguistic and historical) order to which it belongs—and which it simultaneously exceeds. It is the signifier through which all others are mediated and gain meaning (or symbolic identity), and it is the past against which any present is constituted. That it is the condition of possibility of the symbolic order—what enables the order to be what it is—and at the same time that which that order must displace beyond itself—as its outside or its limit—also in order to be what it is, confirms that it merely gives expression to the internal breach that constitutes the order and that the order itself cannot tolerate. For this reason, the dialectical approach alone can discern in this element the ultimate truth of the symbolic order. It sees that this element expresses the void of the order's origin and, simultaneously, the order's original need to negate that origin in order to attain a positive identity—by opposing itself to it and thereby constituting itself as a consistent totality. This element, precisely insofar as it is the inversion of the totality of mediations, is that totality itself in its truth: it is this totality that, in order to be what it is, must posit itself in its inverted form—and at the same time negate this positing (negating what has been posited as merely 'posited', that is, presupposing it (as prior to the act of positing)). Or, to put it in a single formula: it is the totality that must pre-suppose itself as the other of itself.¹²

We are thus confronted with a concrete realization of the 'dialectical principle'—central for Žižek—according to which substance—any immediate instance taken as given or 'in-itself'—ultimately expresses nothing other than the subject's non-coincidence with itself (understanding here 'subject' in a broad sense, as the mediating movement that defines the mode of being 'for-itself'). But in claiming that this 'substantial' element is in fact the result of the negation that the 'subjective' order performs upon the breach

¹²Žižek explains this logic in connection with Hegel's 'Doctrine of Essence'—in particular, with regard to 'external reflection' (see Žižek 1989, p. 225), and also to the opposition between 'ground' and 'condition' (see Žižek 1993, pp. 146 ff.).

or inconsistency that originally constitutes it, we are also recognizing that immediacy, as such, always arises from mediation—that it is mediation which ‘posits’ it (as both its presupposition and its opposite). From this vantage point, we can understand both the origin and the grain, or better the ‘moment’ of truth contained in the more conventional readings of Hegel—those that have presented his philosophy as the culmination of modern idealism. These interpretations begin from the uncontested insight that Hegel demonstrated how any entity that appears to be ‘in-itself’, as immediate or substantial, is in fact ‘posited’ or produced by a mediating process. But they have used this insight to dismiss Hegel’s philosophy as a form of panlogism: a system that, by laying out the mediating movement of the absolute subject, reduces all alterity—all substantial immediacy—to a mere moment within that order of mediations, to a moment of its own;. On this basis, these readings conclude that Hegel’s thought achieves—or claims to have achieved—the final self-coincidence of subjectivity, and of philosophy itself insofar as it merely exposes that subjectivity. The circle that (symbolic) reality— language and history— always already tries to draw would come to its definitive closure, and with it, the circle of philosophy. This reading applies not only to simplistic and outdated versions, such as the early Charles Taylor, but more broadly to the tradition that stretches from classical Marxism to Habermas’s Critical Theory, as well as to the line that runs from Heidegger (especially the early Heidegger) to deconstruction—not necessarily to Derrida’s own, but certainly to that of many of his followers (for instance, Gasché).¹³ Even a philosopher like Adorno, who recognized the truth and subversive potential of Hegel’s unmasking of immediacy as a product of mediation, ultimately viewed this move as forcing Hegel into idealism. Accordingly, Adorno found himself trapped in a dilemma that might well be considered the central impasse of his own philosophy: the difficulty of remaining faithful to Hegel’s insight— one he regarded as irrefutable— without abandoning his commitment to materialism, that is, to the affirmation of the ‘right of the object’— ultimately of

¹³ Žižek himself distinguishes between Derrida’s more nuanced reading and that of Gasché; see Žižek 1991, pp. 72–80.

the irreducibility of a certain form of in-mediacy.¹⁴

What all these interpretations have in common is the claim that the immediacy which constitutes the Other of the order affirmed as a consistent totality—or, equivalently, of the subject that claims full selfidentity—is, for Hegel, something merely ‘posited’, and, certainly, posited by the (mediation of the) subject: ultimately, a property of subjectivity itself. To grasp the implications of this conclusion, the full scope of what this ‘other’ refers to should be kept in view: it encompasses everything that resists the movement of mediation or subjectivity—be it a given or ‘first’ nature, a transcendent God, a noumenal ‘thing-in-itself’, a signifier whose identity does not derive from its relation to others and thus carries no meaning, or a myth that insists on its exteriority with respect to the weave of rational history. These interpretations, to the extent that they attribute to Hegel a conception of this alterity that guarantees the subject’s eventual reappropriation of it, treat the persistence of such alterity in his system as no more than a provisional remainder—not yet mediated or integrated— and take the central aspiration of the system to be the overcoming of such remnants: the sublation of every residue of opacity in language (not to mention its ideological nature, had such a notion been available in his time) and every mythical shadow in history—every trace of contingency. In short, they interpret Hegel’s project as seeking to bring about the definitive closure of language into a fully self-transparent totality and of history into a final, completed narrative. And this also becomes the key to their interpretation of one of the passages from Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* cited at the beginning: that philosophy takes flight at the onset of dusk has, for many decades, been taken to mean that his philosophy saw itself as having sanctioned the reality of its own time precisely because it judged reality to have already fulfilled that aspiration—and thus that there remained no space for the new, and a fortiori, no space to think it. As we anticipated, more recent interpretations, paying attention to the fact that, in Hegel’s philosophy, immediacy is never fully reduced— that there is always something that resists mediation—, have sought to avoid that conclusion. And, by doing so, these interpretations

¹⁴Žižek argues that ‘negative dialectics,’ which undoubtedly was designed to overcome this impasse, ultimately fails to do so; see Žižek 2001, pp. 120–124, and also Žižek 2012, pp. 262–264.

have highlighted the one-sidedness of the standard reading. In general, they argue that even though Hegel affirms that immediacy always arises from mediation, he also acknowledges that there is no rational, universal, and necessary order that is not haunted and disrupted by a contingent, particular remainder. More specifically, they maintain that for Hegel, history cannot reach a final endpoint, because he recognized that spirit can never fully or definitively reduce (first) nature. If the negating or mediating movement never ceases in his system—if every closure gives way to a new beginning—it must be because Hegel himself understood the irreducibility of its other. The recognition of this irreducibility—generally claimed by contemporary thought in opposition to Hegelian dialectics (as conventionally interpreted) and reflected in the ‘bad infinity’ that characterizes certain philosophical tendencies (think, for instance, of the open-ended movement of negative dialectics or the ongoing labor of deconstruction)—is precisely what these revivalist interpretations, especially in the Anglosphere, seem to find already in Hegel’s philosophy. However, the risk these readings run is that of ‘re-Kantianizing’ Hegel—reanchoring him in the dualism between subjectivity as mediating force and a substantial remainder as immediacy, or, as Žižek sometimes puts it, between logos and reality. Indeed, judging by the criticisms the various versions of this revival direct at one another, one might say that the point they all agree on is that Hegel must not be read as a monist, and that the only way to secure this is by interpreting him as a sophisticated variant of Kantianism. McDowell, for instance, has sought to challenge the image of Hegel as a panlogician—as the idealist monist depicted in the conventional reading—by emphasizing the persistence of nature in Hegel’s work. To do so, however, he has had to insist on the difference between this nature and the ‘thick’ modern or Kantian nature, which is wholly external to spirit—that is, on how Hegel redefines nature so that it can persist. But then Pippin, observing that this redefinition risks reenchanting nature in a way that threatens the specificity of subjectivity, has warned that such a reading may end up attributing to Hegel the ‘complementary’ form of monism—namely, the materialist one. In response, Pippin reasserts the primacy of the subject (or mediation) in Hegel’s philosophy and can only avoid falling back into the conventional view by stressing Hegel’s redefinition of subjectivity—emphasizing

the opacity and dynamism proper to the Hegelian subject. It is then only this trace of immediacy or naturalness within subjectivity, that would save us from the purely idealist monism traditionally ascribed to Hegel. All this makes clear, in my view, that the underlying assumption uniting these interpretations is that Hegel's thought deserves to be redeemed only insofar as it preserves a certain exteriority between the subject and its other—that is, insofar as it remains within a broadly Kantian framework.¹⁵

Žižek, of course, does not share this position. To begin with, his aim is not to rescue Hegel from the conventional interpretation by arguing that Hegel gave more weight to immediacy, or to the 'right of the object,' than has generally been assumed. His project is more ambitious. It is not simply to show that Hegel—before Adorno or Derrida—recognized that necessary persistence of the other of the subject that denies the subject the possibility of achieving full autonomy or sovereignty, that prevents it from closing in on itself once and for all. Rather, Žižek contends that Hegel went much further—toward the recognition that this other, without being anything positively given, inhabits the subject at its innermost core and denies it its own identity. We can now anticipate what Žižek has to say to each of the two major 'solutions' to Hegel's ambiguity concerning the relationship between mediation and immediacy. To the first, he insists on the irreducibility of immediacy in Hegel: even if mediation is what 'posits' every immediate instance, this positing is, for mediation itself, inescapable—it is something that is 'given,' stemming from an inconsistency that both belongs to and precedes mediation. To the second, he responds that Hegelian immediacy is not an external limit to mediation, but its most internal other—that it finds its truth precisely at the very heart of mediation, in mediation's constitutive failure. How, then, shall we further specify the properly dialectical relation between these two moments—between subjectivity

¹⁵On this debate, see Pippin 2002, in which he engages with McDowell's *Mind and World* (McDowell 1994). Pippin's evolving reading of Hegel has, according to Žižek, recently brought him even closer to the standard interpretation and made him more critical of Hegel. Žižek argues that this shift stems from Pippin's attraction to Heidegger and his reading of Hegel, which has led Pippin to conclude that Hegel is further from Kant than he had previously believed (see Žižek 2024).

and substance? What follows will attempt to present the shape of this relation in positive terms, no longer merely in reaction to other interpretations.³ **The Paradoxical Relation Between Subject and Substance, or the Subversion of Transcendentalism** One might say that neither of the two ‘ideal positions’ we have sketched in order to organize the main interpretations of Hegel ever truly breaks with the Kantian framework. For Žižek, this is precisely why they ‘miss’ Hegel, why they fail to recognize ‘the new’ his philosophy introduces. The first, focusing solely on the claim that ‘all immediacy arises from mediation,’ understands Hegel as simply pushing to its extreme the transcendental insight that reality is always framed, mediated by conditions of possibility (or by the transcendental subject), and that, by absolutizing the frame (as mediation), he sought to strip the thing-in-itself of its indeterminacy and unknowability—to reduce it as immediacy. The second interpretive line, as we have seen, in affirming the persistence in Hegel’s work of a certain positive immediacy (which has ‘not yet’ been mediated), brings his thought back—although without explicitly acknowledging it—to a more or less softened, fluidified, or blurred version of Kant’s dualism. In both cases, then, Hegel is read through Kant in the sense that the interpretive horizon remains bound to the coordinates—and the dilemma—that Kant established and, as a result, these readings cannot seriously consider the possibility that Hegel may have moved beyond them. Thus, in the first case, Hegel would have attempted—according to most interpreters, unsuccessfully—to resolve the Kantian dilemma by choosing one of its horns, while in the second, he would have ‘resolved’ it merely by repeating it in a more sophisticated and ‘digestible’ version. In the first, Hegel would be mistaken for going beyond Kant (and thus falling back into pre-critical metaphysics), while in the second, he would be right only insofar as he actually made only minimal—in reality merely apparent—modifications to Kantianism. But the real problem lies in the fact that these very interpreters of Hegel are unable to think—or read—him from any framework that is not the Kantian one. In various texts, Žižek shows that the Kantian duality between reality and the transcendental horizon is itself the ‘transcendental framework’ of contemporary thought as a whole—it serves as the organizing axis for all the major philosophical trends of the last two centuries. Its persistence explains that thinkers have either radicalized

the transcendental horizon, as Heidegger did; or attempted to reclaim an ontological perspective, as in the case of the natural sciences, by reasserting a discourse about reality 'itself'; or else, like McDowell, reaffirmed the Kantian dualism in updated form, by acknowledging an (immediate) reality that is nevertheless always apprehended within a pre-given horizon—that is, always mediated. It is no surprise, then, that Žižek attaches such importance to the transition from Kant to Hegel. To truly understand what is at stake in Hegel's shift away from the transcendental framework is not only to understand what makes Hegel genuinely original, but also to glimpse—through Hegel—a way out of the conceptual straitjacket that constrains contemporary thought. It opens the possibility of a genuinely new philosophical position. It means understanding the paradoxical relationship that, for Hegel, both binds and separates the transcendental horizon and reality, mediation and immediacy, or ultimately, subject and substance. And we shall see that it is from within this paradox that the very ambiguities which, in the manner of 'parallax,' traverse dialectical thought can be explained—above all, how that thought can be described simultaneously as both idealist and materialist, and thus how its work can be presented as at once passive and active, descriptive and performative, reconciliatory and subversive. For Žižek, the mere fact that Hegelian philosophy affirms—as we have already noted—that we can only think reality from within the 'rational order' in which it is always already framed, and within which we are always already embedded, proves that it has internalized the Kantian turn. Philosophy can only consist in the apprehension of the present—linguistic and historical—because we can never leap beyond it, never place ourselves in an 'outside' position with respect to the symbolic order that this present constitutes. This is why Žižek argues that it is the dialectical approach that leaves no room for any kind of metalanguage or for the projection of a (political) future to be realized. Both of these options rest on the fantasy of escaping the present, of stepping outside our standpoint in order to observe it from some beyond.¹⁶

¹⁶It is from this radicalization of Kant's discovery of the framed character of reality that Hegel, in many places, launches his critique of the 'externality' that nevertheless defines the transcendental approach (see, e.g., Hegel 1807, pp. 49 ff.). Žižek often emphasizes this Hegelian rejection of the presupposition of an outside (for

At this point, Žižek also acknowledges the impasse of contemporary thought, whose different strands have, on the one hand, often claimed the merit of having finally eradicated the ‘outside’ that lingered in Kant’s transcendentalism—the possibility of a metalanguage—but which, on the other hand, in order to avoid falling into the supposedly circular logic of Hegelian thought, and to preserve, against it, the openness of language and history, have ended up reintroducing that outside through the back door. In this sense, Žižek turns, for example, against Gasché’s version of deconstruction, which ultimately posits the exteriority of an infrastructural ‘outside’ in order to prevent the movement of *différance*;—which already always re-marques itself—from closing upon itself.¹⁷ For the same reason, he also rejects contemporary philosophical efforts—Habermas being the paradigmatic case—that aim to maintain the possibility of positively projecting a realizable future. For Žižek, to take seriously the fact that the standpoint we are in belongs to the present entails accepting that the (true) future—the emergence of something that is not (yet)—can only arise from the collapse of our present and its coordinates, of what now is and of what we now are. And, because of this, it is impossible to anticipate its positive content. This is also why Žižek turns against interpretations of Hegel like Brandom’s, which, although they avoid accusing Hegel of closing off history, attempt to find in his thought support for thinking the future from within our present—as a progression toward greater rationality. Žižek sees clearly that insofar as Brandom does not confront the fact that, from the Hegelian perspective, the future can only break in as an ‘event’, he is implicitly presupposing a metalanguage—the possibility of stepping back to adopt a standpoint above the present from which to define what is rational and desirable.¹⁸

instance, as expressed in his depiction of the ‘beautiful soul’—see Žižek 2014a, pp. 79–80), and uses it as the basis for reinterpreting Hegel’s notion of the ‘cunning of reason’ (see, e.g., Žižek 2014a, pp. 83–87, and Žižek 1991, pp. 167 ff.).

¹⁷See Žižek 1991, p. 79. Since his doctoral thesis, Žižek has argued that it is in deconstruction and poststructuralism more broadly (and not in Lacan) where a metalanguage persists—albeit covertly (see Žižek 2014a, pp. 202–208, and Žižek 1989, pp. 153–155).

¹⁸See Žižek/Ruda/Hamza 2022, pp. 35–40. Cf. Brandom 2019, p. 608.

Let us return, then, to Žižek's interpretation of the shift Hegel makes beyond Kant. What is most interesting about Hegel's radical embrace of the transcendental turn is that it ultimately leads him to 'violate' Kant—to transgress Kant's prohibition on asking about reality (in itself). Žižek repeatedly emphasizes that Hegel dares to do 'metaphysics' by posing the forbidden question of how reality itself must be structured in order for something like subjectivity to appear—that is, the very (transcendental) framework within which reality is already always given to us. From his earliest work on Hegel, Žižek has described this bold move made by Hegel as the crucial gesture that must be repeated: to 'reframe the frame', to reinscribe the subjective horizon back into reality or substance.¹⁹

Now, this might seem to entail—contrary to what we have just said—a leap outside the framework itself. And this is precisely why it is so important, for Žižek, to insist that this operation can only be carried out from within—by descending into the framework that we are until we 'hit bottom,' until we reach the 'blind spot' of our own standpoint, the point at which our subjectivity 'excesses' itself. It is in the very core of subjectivity that it breaks, that it ceases to be what it is and reveals itself as the other of itself.²⁰ The question, then, is oriented toward the point where subjectivity confronts both its own lack and its own excess. At no point does it involve stepping into an external territory, nor does it even presuppose the positive existence of such an outside. What matters here is remaining in the rupture—that is, understanding that the excess of the subject, that carries it toward its Other, coincides with its own lack. It matters because it then becomes clear that this Other—which, as the other of the subject (of being-for-itself or mediation), is necessarily substance (being-in-itself or immediacy)—is nothing but a void. Since subjectivity, broadly conceived, is the movement of mediation that makes up the whole of (symbolic) reality, that which inhabits it as its Other can have

¹⁹For the first formulation, see Žižek 2019, p. 32; for the second, Žižek 2014b, pp. 97, 109–116.

²⁰See, for example, Žižek 2019, pp. 59–60. This also explains the title of the book: since it is in this gap that the opposites (mis)encounter one another, it is the site of the absolute—and, at the same time, the site that reveals that the absolute is nothing but the failure of the encounter, the very failure that constitutes sex.

no positive content; it can only be (for subjectivity), in fact, a nothingness. And yet, insofar as it is also what lies 'at its bottom,' the nothing on which the totality rests, it appears as its very ground—and thereby reveals the ground of this subjective totality, or of this subject, as a lack of ground. This is important because it shows that the reality which exceeds the subject—the substance Hegel dared to pursue—is indeed the truth of the subject, what lies at its core, and yet it is nothing other than the subject's own fracture. Put differently: the substance we find is purely negative, the breach of substance, or substance as breach. From his earliest readings of the 'reflection' chapter in the 'Doctrine of Essence,' Žižek has consistently argued—against the standard interpretation—that substance (which initially appears in 'external reflection' as essence opposed to appearance) is ultimately, in 'determinate reflection,' revealed to be internally broken, and therefore already subjective in itself;. This is how he reinterprets the fact that, of course, in this final moment, substance becomes subjectivized. The traditional reading, by contrast, holds that this simply means substance is revealed as a mere moment of the subject, and thus interprets this outcome as the confirmation of the absolute character of the subject, in the sense that nothing would remain truly other to the reflexive movement—the activity of mediating, negating, or positing—that subjectivity is. But Žižek has shown that the insight that any (positive) substance is 'posited' by the subject—that, in our terms, all immediacy arises from mediation—emerges already in the moment of 'external reflection,' and that, for this reason, it cannot be taken as the final truth. That final insight, grasped only from the dialectical standpoint (of 'determinate reflection'), tells us something entirely different: that substance is subjective in itself;, such that the subject's own positing activity—the 'subjective subjectivity' that posits all external and positive substance—must have behind itself this deeper, 'substantial subjectivity,' this fracture inherent to immediacy or this broken immediacy.²¹

For Žižek, then, just as important as affirming the irreducibility of immediacy or substance in Hegel's philosophy is recognizing its strictly negative character. The former affirmation refutes the conventional reading that presents

²¹For Žižek's repeated emphasis on how this demonstrates that substance is in itself subjective, see 246 Berta M. Pérez

Hegel's absolute as the totality of mediations that annihilates all immediacy and, in doing so, ascribes to his thought the flawed idealism of panlogism. But the latter recognition—that of substance's radical negativity—shows not only that it is a mistake to accuse Hegel of relapsing into pre-critical metaphysics (i.e., affirming a positive foundational substance), but also that it is misguided to 'rescue' him from the conventional interpretation by insisting that he retains some residual, external, and positive immediacy that simply has not yet been subjectivized. More than that: the assertion of the radically negative nature of Hegelian substance allows us to distinguish the properly dialectical stance from others that only reduce substance to a purely formal framework—as it happens, for example, in Heidegger's thought *à propos* of the notion of Being. The fracture of Hegelian substance, in expressing ultimately absolute or doubled negativity, must curve back upon itself—it must place itself outside itself in order to look at itself. And this is precisely what produces the standpoint of the subject. Unlike Heideggerian Being, then, Hegelian substance makes it possible to understand the emergence of the subject—of how something like subjectivity can arise. As the blind spot at the core of the subject, this (negative) substance is both the origin and ground of being-for-itself—of the reflexivity that subjectivity is. Yet only through the re-flection that the subject performs, through its gaze, can this substance reflect itself and take on a determinate shape, become a (positive or determinate) substance. That is, it becomes the external, positive substance which—as 'external reflection' already showed—is always posited by the (external) subject.²²

In the *Encyclopedia*, the transition from Nature to Spirit—ultimately, from substance to subject—leaves no doubt that for Hegel, nature is subjective in itself: it is internally fractured and, for that very reason, withdraws from itself and reflexively turns back upon itself. Specifically, at the beginning of the *Philosophy of Spirit*, in the *Anthropology*, the emergence of the (spiritual) 'I' out of the (natural) soul is explained through habit as the operation by which the immediate (the soul) breaks with itself, producing a pure void that then turns back to re-appropriate the immediacy it has abandoned. It is only here that the subject is born, and,

²²See Žižek 2024, pp. 5–6.

consequently, it is nothing other than that gap in nature. And yet, in reappropriating nature from the outside, the subject becomes something else entirely: second nature.²³ But what I wish to emphasize now is that nature enacts this reflexive movement by itself—it performs the double negation that defines subjectivity as such.²⁴

Now, at this point, we must not overlook the consequences this has for our understanding of subjectivity, or for a dialectical conception of the subject. First, as we already anticipated, it now becomes entirely clear that its inscription in substance—this gesture by which (HegelianŽižekian) dialectics challenges Kant—does not ground the subject in a positive in-itself; it merely reveals that the subject's fracture comes from behind itself—that it is 'grounded' in the fracture of reality itself and is, in this sense, incurable.²⁵ But above all, what must now be understood—and this is the other side of Žižek's innovation in his reading of 'reflection' in the 'Doctrine of Essence'—is that subjectivity turns out to be in fact redoubled.²⁶ We have just seen that the subject proper—as opposed to substance, or, in the Encyclopedia terms, to nature—emerges only from a prior subjectivity or reflexivity which, belonging to substance, could rightly be called 'substantive subjectivity'. As such, it is other than the subject's

²³See Hegel 1830b, §§409–410. Many Hegel scholars—Žižek among them, but also Malabou and Menke—have studied these passages in detail, identifying in them, indeed, the hinge between nature and spirit. See Malabou 2004 and Menke 2018.

²⁴In fact, this double negation takes place even before habit—in the soul's 'self-feeling' or 'feeling of self,' in which a particular feeling abstracts itself in order to become the "frame" that retroactively totalizes the rest, and even at the end of the Philosophy of Nature, in connection with the animal organism. One must therefore accept that nature separates itself from itself in/as spirit because it is already always divided. Žižek refers to this conclusion of the Philosophy of Nature—specifically, to the point at which the production of the organism is revealed as always already re-production—in order to link it to F. Varela's notion of autopoiesis and to argue that the act of 'positing one's own presuppositions,' which simultaneously transforms both origin and identity—the movement proper to subjectivity—is already present in nature. See Gabriel/Žižek 2009, pp. 104–112.

²⁵See, e.g., Žižek 2019, p. 56.

²⁶See Žižek 1989, pp. 214–215. Its reduplication ultimately stems from the fact that 'the Hegelian subject is nothing but a name for the externality of the substance to itself' (Žižek 1993, p. 30).

own subjectivity, and yet it constitutes the subject's ground—the origin from which it emerges—and in this sense, it is also its innermost core. In other words, the subject only becomes what it is at the moment it opposes—negates and leaves behind—this substantial subjectivity. And yet, it not only begins from it, but also depends on it for its reality. As Hegel puts it, the subject only overcomes its own abstraction—the mere emptiness it is at first—by re-appropriating the immediacy it has left behind: the substance or nature that, precisely by being left behind, allows it to be what it is: subject. By this I mean that the redoubling of subjectivity should not be interpreted as its decomposition into two independent strata. Rather, it means that the subject is always already split within itself. In the *Encyclopedia*, the habit arises precisely to calm the madness that results from the soul's 'self-feeling'. Since the first self—the one that appears in the paragraphs on 'self-feeling'—emerges from the reflexivity of the (natural) soul, in which a particular feeling negates its own content in order to become the formal framework encompassing the others, it is clear that this self exists only as form, only insofar as it negates immediacy. And yet, it can only become real through that very content, through that immediacy which it has left behind. That is, it can only become real by encompassing what its own constitution required it to erase. Before the 'I' that results from habit, and at the very basis of habit itself, we thus find a division within selfhood—between the self as framework or point of view and the content that always escapes it but can never be relinquished: in short, between the I and its unconscious.²⁷

Thus, Hegel's boldness in asking, against Kant, the metaphysical question of how reality must be constituted for the subject to emerge leads him along this paradoxical path, where substance and subject, immediacy and mediation, are shown to presuppose each other. To 'go deep' into the subject

²⁷See Hegel 1830b, §§407–408. Žižek has explored how this Hegelian transition shows that, for Hegel, madness is the origin of consciousness, in Žižek 2012, pp. 340–358. He shares with Malabou the view that these paragraphs demonstrate that the identity of the subject can never constitute 'the principle'; it always results from a prior and double movement—from a habituation that belongs to no one, and that, for Žižek, ultimately expresses self-relating negativity, and for Malabou, plasticity. See Malabou 2004, pp. 24 ff., 35–36, and 76.

is to reach its fracture—what negates it, constitutes it, and precedes it—and thus to reach substance as the fracture that negates itself (by reflecting or ‘subjectivizing’ itself) in the subject, who in turn must negate it (in order to create the external opposition that grants both of them a positive identity). The subject is always preceded by the void of substance (the form of ‘being-in-itself’), but substance is likewise preceded by the pure self-negation of subjectivity (the form of ‘being-for-itself’). Thus, for Žižek, it is precisely in the affirmation of this paradox—which previous interpreters of Hegel have refused to acknowledge—that Hegel’s philosophy truly leaves the transcendental framework behind (without falling back into a pre-critical position).

4 The Truth of Paradox, or the Materialism of the Dialectical Gaze We can say, then, that we have traversed the Möbius strip that binds and separates substance and subject in both directions—that we have redoubled it. And it is surely this doubled movement, enacted by the dialectical gaze, that enables it to overcome both the externality of the transcendental standpoint and the rigid, external opposition it affirms between the mediation of logos and the immediacy of reality—or, in the terms favored by post-Kantian idealism, between substance and subject. By making explicit that this back-and-forth path reveals that each pole contains the other at its core, and that the presupposition between them is therefore reciprocal, I have sought to make clear that this traversal cannot take the form of a circle. That is: the overcoming of the external difference between the opposites this double movement produces does not result in any mutual completion or positive synthesis, nor does it eliminate the internal non-coincidence of each with itself. The (double) encounter between the two sides of the strip rests on each one’s dis-encounter with itself—and, for this reason, it is impossible that the encounter (truly, without ‘trickery’) erases the disencounter.²⁸ That is why Žižek stresses that

²⁸See, for example, Žižek 1991, p. 119. This is the conclusion already offered by Žižek’s reading of absolute reflection in the *Science of Logic* (see Hegel 1812–16/1832, pp. 345 ff.). The discovery that substance is always already broken and that the subject is always already redoubled results from the fact that both are referred back to the absolute negativity of positing reflection—which, far from unifying them, merely reveals that the rupture which externally opposed them actually constitutes the internal fracture of each.

the two movements are not two immediate transitions; that we do not pass directly from subject to substance and back again without disruption, without noticing any kind of ‘cut.’ On the contrary, the movement happens through an anomalous element—something that, in each domain, represents the other, and in doing so, gives form to and renders visible its internal fracture.²⁹ On the level of subjectivity, there is always a (subjective) element that is at once substantial, and on the level of substance, a (substantial) element that is at once subjective. Beginning from subjectivity, understood as the mediation proper to the rational order, we encountered that signifier (S_1) which—while belonging to the symbolic or subjective reality of language—nonetheless resists mediation and introduces immediacy into it. And beginning from natural immediacy, from substance, we encountered the void of that discarded content which reflexively, or subjectively, negates itself and becomes the (unconscious) motor of the spiritual mediation. For this substantial element, which is nonetheless the very void of the self, its innermost truth, Žižek adopts the Lacanian term *objet petit a*;. The fact that this crossing from one side to the other occurs through two different anomalous elements—that the ‘anomaly’ of substance does not coincide with that of the subject, that each domain is anomalous in a different way—shows that the two paths traversed are not symmetrical.³⁰ Both subject and substance require an element that exceeds them in order to become what they are. But while subjective mediation must exile S_1 in order to repress its rupture and become a totality, substance needs to produce an empty object, the *objet petit a*;, in order to curve back upon itself through it. This is why the dialectical gaze—which binds the opposites together by grasping in each its other—on the one hand, reinscribes the (substantial) immediacy of the empty signifier into the totality of subjective mediations and, in doing so, reveals it as a non-totality; and on the other, it discovers the (subjective) void as the truth of substance, thereby stripping it of any original positivity. In ‘reconciling’ the extremes, the dialectical gaze not only dissolves the identity of each but must do it through a double blow that, ultimately, reveals its

²⁹See Žižek 2019, pp. 239–245. This is why, to illustrate the redoubling of the Möbius strip, Žižek proposes the figure of the cross-cap—which, in Hegelian terms, we might say appears as its truth.

³⁰See Žižek 2019, p. 238.

own lack of coincidence with itself. This is the ultimate reason why it is in itself a deranged gaze—one that dislocates what it sees, but in doing so restores it to its truth. Let us take a closer look at the passages in the *Encyclopedia* on habit, which, as we have said, function as the hinge between nature and spirit—or between substance and subject—to consider, now as a whole, the double movement we have traced and to recognize its asymmetrical character. We can now confirm that it does not, in the end, form a circle, but instead outlines a broken loop—an impossible figure that shatters the (unity of the) gaze that seeks to capture it. We already saw that, although on a first reading of the text—as it is nature itself that ‘gets habituated’ (even already as animal nature, before entering the realm of spirit), and that it accounts for subjectivity from within itself—we might be tempted to read this in Spinozist or naturalist terms, as an expression of a simple or crude materialist monism, this reading is immediately refuted by the text itself. A closer look reveals that nature can only do this insofar as it reflects itself in a double negation, or behaves ‘subjectively’—that is, insofar as it is for-itself; in the mode of being contrary to substance, the one that negates substance’s own mode of being or negates substance (as in-itself;). In other words, it becomes clear that nature can only appear as ‘the principle’ (of its other) to the extent that it separates from itself, places itself outside itself, and then turns back upon itself—and, in doing so, it already reveals itself to be more than substance, to exceed itself as substance. To be precise, then, it seems we would have to concede that the true principle lies rather in the subjectivity that animates nature itself. This would explain why the subject that emerges from the movement of nature can nonetheless erase nature—why it leaves it behind at the very moment it emerges. As we saw, the self that arises from habituated nature emerges precisely as its erasure (as a given principle): it is directly free thought, a universality that determines itself, that gives itself its own conditions and presuppositions.³¹ The nature from which it has arisen is now called ‘first’ (nature) because it is only from (or in relation to) the second, because, in this sense, it is born from second nature—or, in the terms we used earlier, because, as a determinate form of immediacy, it proceeds from the (subjective) mediation of spirit. Even if we acknowledge, as we did earlier,

³¹See Hegel 1830b, §410 Remark.

that nature's reflexivity is in some respects distinct from that of the subject that arises from it—and that the clearest sign of this is the fact that there is a purely animal habit already in place before the emergence of the 'I'—one might still counter that it is only in its 'human version' that the general structure of habit becomes realized, and therefore that it is there where the 'animal version' ultimately finds its truth. And would this not mean that the subjectivity of nature finds its truth in that of spirit—in properly subjective spirit—and that, in the end, subjectivity comes first? Shouldn't we then accept that nature (as 'first') is nothing but what is 'posited' by spirit, that a careful reading of the transition from nature to spirit reveals it to be a transition from spirit to nature, and that even the Philosophy of Nature—inasmuch as it is, after all, a discourse—should be read as the myth that spirit writes retroactively? And wouldn't this finally close the circle? In short: shouldn't we ultimately recognize the idealist monism of Hegel, the idealist nature of dialectical thought? Now, at this point, what really matters is to notice that, in fact, despite everything said, the self that arises from habit does not succeed in leaving natural immediacy behind. It's not only that free thought—or the freedom of thought, the form in which spirit emerges—can arise only from the automatization of bodily behaviors, or that linguistic creativity only emerges from submission to the mechanisms of grammar. It is also that universality itself and the autonomy of logos can only become real—can only shed the abstraction with which they originate—in the (given or immediate) materiality of language—and, more generally, that spirit, second nature, as Žižek puts it, not only comes from nature but is nature redoubled.³² This is what explains why it is constitutively contradictory—why it is always already in contradiction with itself. Indeed, what happens is not simply that spirit tries and fails to leave nature behind (definitively), but more precisely that it can only succeed in leaving nature behind through nature—that it needs nature in order to negate it. For this

³²Even before addressing the sign, Hegel writes: 'Thinking;, too, though wholly free, and active in the pure element of itself, likewise requires habit and familiarity, this form of immediacy;, by which it is the unimpeded, pervaded possession of my individual self;.' (Hegel 1830b, §410 Remark). Žižek explains that spirit is the redoubling of nature and, at the same time, part of nature; see Gabriel/Žižek, pp. 99–100, 117.

reason, spirit only manages to erase nature insofar as nature persists as what cannot be erased, as an obstacle; and also for that very reason, it never erases it fully or once and for all. Since spirit is, then, nothing but this erasing of nature, and nature itself is the condition of possibility for this activity, nature resides within spirit's own interior and is, at the same time, its radical other. The antagonism that opposes spirit to nature is therefore its internal antagonism. This also explains why Hegel sees language—the first realization of the 'I' born from habit—as constitutively 'problematic,' and why Žižek, as we have seen, interprets this problematic condition as the fundamental inconsistency of a totality of mediations whose truth lies in an immediate element (that negates it).³³ In this emergence of (universal) language, we clearly see how (the form of) universality always already finds within itself a (content) particularity that, by definition, negates it, and yet is nothing other than itself.³⁴ And from this we can now understand that the creativity of language—the fact that it cannot cease transforming itself—and, more broadly, the openness of the mediating or spiritual movement of symbolic reality—the fact that it unfolds in the form of 'bad infinity'—does not, for Hegel, point to the stubborn persistence of a positive and fully consistent outside, of an infrastructure that precedes language, or of a normative ideal that transcends the present, but rather to this internal contradiction. This contradiction is the innermost core of spirit and, at the same time, what exceeds it—what prevents it from coinciding with itself. It is this contradiction that grants spirit its absolute specific difference: the universality and freedom that separate it once and for all from nature, making it an entirely new kind of reality—something no longer natural. But it is also this contradiction that binds it to its other, to nature, in its most originary truth—not to nature as the positive reality that emerges precisely from spirit, but to nature as broken in itself, to the rupture that also lies at nature's core. Let us recall that the internal contradiction that defines this first 'I' in the *Anthropology* results only from the domestication—through habit—of a contradiction that was already present in nature. We saw, in fact, that the 'natural self' of 'self-

³³See Hegel 1830b, §411, and Gabriel/Žižek, pp. 118–119.

³⁴This idea of the universal runs throughout Žižek's work; see, for example, Žižek 2014a, pp. 40–46, and Žižek 2019, pp. 219–220, 255–256.

feeling,' which precedes 'habit,' arises because the natural soul leaves behind its own content to become a hollow framework—one that can only find reality in what it has left behind. And for that very reason, this 'self,' which is not yet properly spirit, is already insane—literally beside itself. To sum up: spirit emerges in order to 'resolve' a contradiction that belongs to nature itself—to an immediacy that is already derailed—and it resolves it, radically negates it, to the extent that it constitutes itself as a radically new reality. But at the same time, as we have seen, it reproduces that contradiction in its own 'problematic' form, as the inconsistency of its own universality; it repeats it by internalizing it. It is thus this internal contradiction—what allows spirit to part from nature—that also binds it to nature, insofar as nature is already internally contradictory. What is proper and new to spirit is precisely its capacity to innovate, to leap into the new, to symbolize—but this very gesture already refers back to a prior leap into the new, one that is not its own, that comes from behind, that belongs to the nature it leaves behind, and that it merely repeats. Its exit from nature's impasse, its 'resolution' of the contradiction of nature—which, insofar as its specific mode of being consists in resting 'in itself,' had already gone beyond itself—has therefore consisted only in affirming the leap that nature itself already performed as a new mode of being. This is the sense in which the reinscription of the subject into substance means simply referring its breach back to the breach of the real. Because nature is already beside itself, because it cannot bear itself and contradicts what it is, spirit becomes necessary—that is, the leap into a radically new reality that precisely consists in negating nature. But at the same time, because that (substantial) contradiction is original—because it is the origin itself—the new reality, spirit, can only repeat it in a different way: by (re-)symbolizing it always again. In fact, spirit is nothing but this activity. Thus, in the end, it has become clear that the truth of the paradoxes we have encountered does not lie simply in the contradictory relation between substance and subject, or nature and spirit, as if between two positive instances, but rather in the contradictory relation between two contradictions—in an internal contradiction whose 'adequate' realization cannot have other form than that of an impossible loop between substance and subject in which there is no (positive) origin because each pole precedes the

other. It is for that reason, that if one of those poles is taken for ‘what comes first,’ it is immediately subverted.³⁵

From here, the precise sense in which the dialectical perspective is materialist becomes apparent. Žižek, of course, rejects reductionist, naturalist readings of Hegel—the crude materialism we have already ruled out above. It is obvious that nature can only appear as a ‘principle’ from the standpoint of spirit, that substance only exists properly or positively insofar as it is observed (by the subject), named and identified by language, and ultimately ‘posited’ by spirit. In short: that there is only a ‘first nature’ from the standpoint of second nature. This confirms that every positive form of immediacy is indeed born of mediation and necessarily has the form of a myth. This is the truth of Hegel’s idealism—or the (true) sense in which one can call his philosophy idealist. But if, with Hegel himself, we notice that this seeing and this saying (these subjective operations) are themselves ontological facts—and can only be explained by recognizing that they arise from the gap within substance itself, or from the derailment of nature—then it becomes evident that the very myth-making activity of spirit, the ‘positing’ of the subject that constitutes its specific difference, stems from a rupture that precedes it—one that is given, ontological or substantial. And so, we must recognize that this breach is in a strict sense, that it is not merely something posited by the subject, but rather in itself;. And this is the full content of Žižek’s materialism—the materialism he attributes to the dialectical gaze. It is, as he puts it, a ‘materialism without matter,’ one that affirms only the rupture as principle—but a rupture that is real, the truth, indeed, that lies at the basis of all paradoxes and of our need to resolve them—to ‘successfully’ symbolize the rupture itself. Žižek 1989, pp. 224–231, especially 228–229, and Žižek 2014b, pp. 129–132.

³⁵This is why, ultimately, to refer to the properly dialectical relationship between substance and subject, Žižek chooses the figure of the Klein bottle—the result of folding the Möbius strip back onto itself in an impossible loop: the subject exists only within substance, but substance appears as such only once the subject looks at it (from within). See Žižek 2019, pp. 263–269.

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