

From Hegel to Lacan or from Ego to Agora

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Abstract

We comment on the last chapter of Henrich (2003, ch. 21) where the author offers a 'key' to Hegel's Logic focusing on the problem of the passage from self-reference to determination (meaning) in the beginning of the Logic. We argue that what he offers as a 'key' is actually a reduction of Hegel to the logic of understanding from the point of view of an autonomous Ego; consequently, he excludes dialectics. Contrarily, we present Hegel's own solution, eliciting the remark where he shows that the proposition "Being and Nothing are the same" negates itself insofar as it is uttered and reflected on the Other's understanding (Hegel 1929:102). We conjecture that this remark offers a privileged point from which to consider the connection Hegel-Lacan, provided we recognize the Absolute in Hegel as the big Other in Lacan. We suggest that the dialectical identity of identity and difference is actually an operation in the Agora and that the Hegel-Marx-Lacan theory can be properly denominated *dialectical materialism*. We also offer an answer to Žižek's (2013) question of how a "neutral medium of designation" can emerge within a "life-world practice" (7) or out of a "universe of matter (905).

Introduction

In 1973, Dieter Henrich gave a series of lectures as a visiting professor at Harvard, aimed at introducing the philosophers of German Idealism to the New World. Class notes circulated during a few decades and finally resulted in a book: *Between Kant and Hegel* (Henrich, 2003). Žižek (2013) evokes an excerpt of this book in support of the assertion that, in Hegel, “the narrative already does the job of intellectual intuition of uniting us with Being” (Žižek, 2013:16). Indeed, in the mentioned excerpt we read, for instance that “in the subject there is nothing underlying its self-reference (...) there is only the process and nothing underlying it” (ibid). Initially, we took “process” in Henrich as meaning “narrative” in Žižek and wrongly thought that Henrich (2003) would provide a valid interpretation of Hegel. We started reading his book by the last two chapters, dedicated to Hegel, immediately engaging with the Logic of Negation in the last one. Nevertheless, our reading revealed a philosopher of understanding, either unable or unwilling to consider dialectics.

What Henrich says

In chapter 21, Henrich (2003) presents the “key to Hegel’s *Logic*” and adds: “I believe that without the key I am offering to you the system remains ultimately inaccessible” (Henrich 2003: 4183¹). Henrich focuses on the problem of emergence of meaning (determinateness) in the beginning of Logic. “According to the prevailing ideal of what a philosophical system should be, Hegel would have to found his procedure on one single term” (4173). He argues that this term should sustain self-reference and amalgamation of opposites and claims that this term is “negation”. According to him, Hegel “wants to construct self-reference *and determinateness* as direct implications of one elementary,

¹ Locations in this book refer to the Kindle edition.

independent, and autonomous term: negation” (4207). The problem remains, then, to explain the emergence of determination from autonomous negation.

Henrich explicitly recognizes the relational nature of ‘negation’. Having nothing else to negate, this “autonomous” negation negates itself and disappears, leaving behind two opposite states: having negation and not having negation. This original situation of self-reference has to pass into determination. Henrich remarks that both states are characterized in negative terms: (having) ‘*negation*’ and ‘*not*’ (having negation), but at this point he does not notice that the signifier (not) refers to itself (negation). He does not notice that the basic postulate of speech has already been violated: “it is peculiar of the signifier not to be able to signify itself without generating a logical flaw” (Lacan 1973: 225²). This logical flaw indicates the presence of the subject but cannot be deduced from the *dialectic of the Subject and the Other* (ibid, 205). It only produces a state of unrest in this dialectic so that the discourse has to repeat itself aiming at avoiding paradoxes stemming from the violated postulate. The flaw “inscribes itself in the central failure where the subject experiences itself as wish” (ibid, 239).

Hence, what Henrich describes, namely, the self-reference of ‘not’ in “not having negation” is already the *process of determination*, but he does not see it. Instead, he attributes the emergence of determination to an *external action* of Hegel himself: “This is the place where Hegel introduces a second structure. He tries to describe opposition as a structure between these two states whose relation is *determinateness*” (4197). So Henrich grounds the process of signification on the will and action of the subject, thereby avoiding the emergence of the dialectics of identity and difference that would result from the logical flaw: *not having* and having *not*.

In summary, when Henrich says that “there is only the process and nothing underlying it” we should understand the ‘process’ as referring to the subject’s will, and when he says that “in the subject there is nothing underlying its self-reference” we should understand that there is nothing *constraining* this will. Therefore, in Henrich, *it is the Ego, not the ‘negation’ that is autonomous*.

2 (...) le propre du signifiant étant de ne pas pouvoir se signifier lui-même sans engendrer quelque faute de logique.

What Hegel wrote

Hegel dedicated ten pages of the Greater Logic exactly to the question “with what must Science begin?” He does not begin with “autonomous negation”, but with “pure Being”. He considers, but explicitly rejects, the possibility of beginning with a relational term. The object of Logic is thought, knowledge and cognition in their wider sense, therefore “the beginning [of Logic] is logical, in that it has to be made in the sphere of Thought, existing freely for itself; in other words, in pure Knowledge” (Hegel 1929:80). Hegel understands ‘pure knowledge’ as the standpoint attained by the conscience that has undergone the development described in his Phenomenology of Spirit. Therefore, a “standpoint which is pure knowledge, is presupposed by Logic” (ibid.).

The beginning must be an absolute (...) an abstract beginning; it must presuppose nothing, must be mediated by nothing, must have no foundation; itself must be the foundation of the whole science. (...) The Beginning, therefore, is Pure Being. (Hegel 1929: 82).

Hegel explicitly asserts that, at this stage of indeterminateness, “Being and Nothing are the same”. This statement unleashes the process of determination/signification through a dialectic that Hegel carefully explains in the second remark of the Doctrine of Being.

Pure Being and pure Nothing are, then, the same; the truth is not either Being or Nothing, but that Being – not passes – but has passed over into Nothing and Nothing into Being. But equally, the truth is not their lack of distinction, but that they are not the same, that they are absolutely distinct and yet unseparated and inseparable, each disappearing immediately in the opposite. Their truth is therefore this movement [Bewegung], this immediate disappearance of one into the other, in a word, Becoming [Werden]; a movement wherein both are distinct, but in virtue of a distinction which has equally immediately dissolved itself. (Hegel 1929: 102).

At the level of statements, Being and Nothing *are the same* and are *not the same* sounds like an infinite negative judgement like ‘the Spirit is a bone’,

l'État c'est moi. However, in the second remark after this paragraph, Hegel presents us with the dialectics engendered by this statement.

Now, in so far as the proposition, “Being and Nothing are the same”, asserts the identity of these determinations, while yet containing both as distinct, it is self-contradictory and dissolves itself. If we look more closely we find that a proposition has here been asserted which, carefully considered, has a movement by which, through its proper nature it disappears. But in so doing, it does what must be held to constitute its true content, it *undergoes Becoming*. The proposition thus contains the result, it in itself is the result (Hegel 1929: 102, our emphasis).

A proposition undergoes becoming and through this movement, it realizes its true content: it “disappears”. In order to elicit the full meaning of this remark we propose the following hypothetical dialogue:

Hegel: Being and Nothing are the same.

Big Other: How come? You have just distinguished them with the conjunction “and”.

Hegel: Of course, they are distinct.

Big Other: Then you contradict yourself.

Hegel: Yes, of course, I embrace this contradiction.

Big Other: I understand.

This dialogue condenses the remark, shows the logical process of signification and leads to determinate Being. It is essential to remark that it occurs in the Agora, the environment (element) of the dialectics of the subject and the other whose formula would be $\mathcal{S} \diamond \mathcal{A}$. From Lacan's point of view, the dialogue is a clear example of how the enunciation denies the enunciate. From Hegel's point of view, the dialogue rebuffs the conception of dialectics vulgarly expressed in terms of understanding: I assert, I deny, I synthesize. Dialectics is fully a movement *in the Agora* (see paragraphs 79-82 of Hegel 1994). The subject affirms, the Other denies, both coalesce. The dialogue also contains an example of the three reflections: positing reflection ('are the same'), external reflection ('are not the same') and determining reflection

(‘embrace/understand’). It also illustrates what happens when the discourse reaches the point of self-reference: contrarily to Henrich’s position, self-reference in Hegel appears as reflection on the Other, not as result of an Ego’s fancy of reason.

Furthermore, the dialogue elicits the concept of *dialectical* or *speculative* identity that Žižek identifies with the Lacanian Real: dialectical identity coincides with the surplus that escapes mediation; it “designates this unmediated remainder that supports the symbolic structure in its formal purity” (Žižek 1993: 75). Žižek gives three examples of dialectical identity: 1) the apparently “vulgarly sociological” expressions occurring in Adorno, 2) the King’s body that assures the state’s rational totality and 3) Hegel’s negative infinite judgement: ‘the Spirit is a bone’. What we have to add is that these examples may be expressed in the form of the above dialogue. In so doing, their proper way of functioning in Hegel’s remark comes to the fore. Someone has to say ‘*L’État c’est moi*’ so that the enunciation of this claim can deny itself and fulfil its role of dialectical identity. Adorno must have a reader, in this case Žižek himself, to recognize the dialectical role of his “socially vulgar” expressions. ‘The spirit is the skull’ condenses all these instances: it is the absolute negativity whose rejection by the Other opens up the way to signification. In one word, dialectical identity *is an operation in the Agora*.

The sublation (*Aufhebung*) of this operation is “the act of subjectivation through which the subject ‘forgets’ how much his own existence is tied to an exterior part of contingent reality and consequently poses himself as an essence present to himself” (Žižek 1993: 79³). In oblivion of this dependence, philosophers have sought the solution of the problem of emergence of meaning in the level of statements; in one way or the other, they all stumbled into metaphysics. Our argument shows that what Hegel calls reflection-in-itself is the sublation of external reflection in the Agora. Only now can we make sense of Žižek’s statement: “The step that Hegel accomplishes consists in conceiving

3 Le geste de ‘subjectivation’ par lequel le sujet ‘oublie’ combien sa propre existence est noué à une part extérieure de la réalité contingente e par conséquent, se pose lui-même comme l’essence présente à soi même.

Fichte's deadlock as its own solution" (ibid⁴). In one word: the only reality is the dialectic of the Subject and the Other $\S \diamond \mathcal{A}$.

The dialogue also confirms that the Absolute (or the big Other) is essentially a *result*, since through the discursive intervention of Hegel, the big Other has undergone change. It now incorporates the contradiction (embraced/understood) and makes it available to a further signifying process. It is at this level that identity and difference are identical: either identity or difference may equally serve further processes of signification. This is why a "neutral medium of designation can nonetheless emerge" (Žižek 2013: 7).

Evaluation

Becoming (Werden) is the dialectical outcome of the identification of Being and Nothing that Hegel calls *movement* (Bewegung). These concepts are basic to the most elementary approach to Hegel. Nevertheless, "becoming" occurs nine times in Henrich (2003), *none with the Hegelian meaning*. "Hegel starts from the term Being which is more dubious than most of what we find in his *Logic*" (4222).

People have much surpassed Hegel, without indeed passing through him. It is easier to surpass him asserting that one understands him better than himself, than to surpass him through the dangerous work of trying to understand what he has actually said. (B. Bourgeois in Hegel 1994: 7⁵)

Besides, after exposing his 'key', Henrich asserts: "we cannot find it in the *Logic* itself" (4211). This is false; Hegel foresaw Henrich's "key" but refused to follow it:

If it were held more correct to oppose Not-being, instead for Nothing, to Being, no objection could be made as far as the result is concerned (...). Primarily, however, we are not concerned to have formal opposition (that is a relation) so much as abstract and immediate negation, Nothing purely

⁴ Le pas qu'accomplit Hegel consiste donc à concevoir l'impasse de Fichte comme sa propre solution.

⁵ On a beaucoup dépassé Hegel, mais en vérité sans passer par lui; (...) il est plus facile de le dépasser en affirmant qu'on le comprend mieux que lui, que le dépasser par le si redoutable travail de chercher à comprendre ce qu'il a effectivement dit.

for itself, unrelated repudiation, or what one might express if one so wished, merely by “Not”. (95).

Hegel foresaw the possibility of starting with the relational term “Not”, but refused to carry it out. He said that as far as the result is concerned, it would be the same. However, the process leading to it would be entirely different. Instead, *Hegel chose to submit the Ego to the Agora*.

Conjectures

We conjecture that Hegel’s remark discussed above (Hegel 1929: 102) gives a privileged bottleneck connecting Hegel to Lacan, provided we read what Hegel calls the Absolute as what Lacan calls the big Other. Consequently, the ‘Absolute’ does not live in heaven, as Engels thought, but in the Agora. From this point of view, Hegel-Marx-Lacan theory as elicited by Žižek appears as a discursive materialism where language is not a biased mediation but acquires neutral full primacy. This approach extirpates metaphysics by its root and leads to a system that can be properly called *dialectical materialism*. As a consequence of our identification of the Absolute with the big Other, truth becomes that which is proved in the Agora and as such becomes incorporated in the Absolute.

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