

Hegel's Understanding: Absence, Accident, Alienated

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Abstract: This essay is an exegetical work, the primary intention of which is to present and interpret Hegel's notion of the "understanding" in the first chapter of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The presentation and interpretation at hand takes as its starting point the work of Slavoj Žižek, who the author feels has begun a new and exciting era of scholarship on Hegel. The overall aim of the essay is modest: to develop the Žižekian reading of Hegel at the micro level. My thesis is that Hegel's initial development of the "understanding" demonstrates how, from the very first, subjectivity grabs a hold on the incompleteness of reality—a notion that is essential to Žižek's work. Specifically, I show that the understanding realizes itself, against its will, as an accident of the world, upon which it previously depended for its illusory neutrality. The first chapter of the *Phenomenology* culminates in the problem of consciousness confronting itself as an accident. Ultimately, I show how Hegel's accidentality of consciousness, since it is determined by the world, coincides with Žižek's teaching about the identity of the subject precariously established on the incompleteness of reality.

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Consciousness acts. That is the fundamental lesson of Hegel's *Phenomenology*. What appears as the barren field of consciousness's domain, the simplicity of objects in the world, is being *actively* constituted by consciousness itself. That is the truism: consciousness is defined first and foremost by being consciousness of some object or objects. Whatever else, then, we might call consciousness' 'act,' we know for sure that it is *the act of excluding itself from itself in its experience*. It excludes itself such that objects can appear in their barren simplicity, unmediated, immediate. Its activity is initially to constitute the world of objects such that they can be known as objects, full stop. Thus, consciousness *inherently* entails being absent to itself in experiencing the world populated by objects. This self-absence is what will support the development of consciousness into the freedom and truth of *Geist*. Its 'progress' consists in this: to become identical to the absence of itself. Hence, as Hegel proclaims in his preface: "Spirit finds its feet in absolute disruption" (Hegel 2018: 21).¹ The stability and concrete existence of consciousness coincides with its non-being. Consciousness is indeed like a ghost, lingering in its own transparency. But that all comes later.

In the first chapter of the *Phenomenology*, consciousness's 'act' amounts only to the impossibility of an act. It is self-exclusion pure and simple. It is all well and good to praise spirit for its Dionysian qualities, its pure flux of thought with being, the existing non-being of thought, finding its feet in death, but the whole issue turns on how such existence is born out. That is why it is of the utmost importance to begin with consciousness's immediate structure of pure ("sensuous") objectivity. Further, we should not say that sensuous certainty is ultimately illusory. The chapter has been subordinated to what happens in the next, the infamous master-slave dialectic, and accordingly past over. At best, we can hope for a reminder that consciousness is simply hiding from itself in the world of sensuous certainty. But the entire problem resolves around the fact, as we said, that this 'hiding from itself' is *necessary*. It doesn't constitute an illusion to be leapt over, a mortified thought that is washed away by the

vital spirit. On the contrary, sense-certainty provides for the essential theme that the rest of the book carries forward; it shows us how the ossification of thinking is itself a fundamental element of the very “death” that Spirit discovers itself in. Precisely *in* the total (Apollonian) stability of the world, we should expect to see the (Dionysian) negativity of consciousness’s essential activity.

The Understanding and Law: Void of Sense

What will allow us to pry apart this distinction and synthesize them together? Herein lies the infamous “understanding.” The understanding is that faculty of mind that differentiates and organizes the sensory manifold of experience. It can properly be said to behold objects in the world. Things and their properties constitute the immediate domain of the understanding. *Difference* is what allows consciousness to glide over the surface of the world. The perceptual understanding “runs hither and thither through all material and content,” striving to ascertain the essence of every ‘thing’ that it finds in its experience (Hegel 2018: 78).² It apprehends an object but immediately differentiates it according to its properties, these properties likewise possess their own independent existence, and so may belong to other things, and so on. But far from being a domain of pure flux, the understanding, as we said, differentiates and *organizes* its world. It differentiates to stabilize, stabilizing to differentiate. Things and their properties are differentiated for the sake of a schematic understanding of the world. Thus, the ‘essence’ that the understanding is ‘running hither and thither’ for, across the objects of its experience, could only be the very truth that *things are differentiated*. This is why, as Hegel says, the two categories that the understanding “invokes” are the “Also” and the “Insofar” (Hegel 2018: 77).³ The understanding says: ‘this pie is lemon meringue *insofar* as it is sugary and *also* vinegary and *also* creamy, etc.’ Having satisfied itself it immediately moves on to the differentiated properties of, say, lemons themselves—and then, the trees upon which they grow, and so on. What is crucial to understand about the understanding is that it purchases this ability with its absence. That is to say, nothing directs the understanding’s view besides the objective world itself. The *principle* of the differentiation of its experience of the world is not consciousness, not itself, but the *world*—something beyond its experience. The

understanding feels itself as identical to the very differentiation of the world it experiences. Or, it is just this pure zone of consciousness-of-objects. Consequently, the understanding establishes the identity of any particular thing it experiences in the world on the basis of its (the thing's) differentiation. The understanding is only this mere form of the differentiated apprehension of objects that are themselves only the form of a self-differentiating thing (according to properties). The understanding does not *itself* give the lemon meringue pie its qualities, it only understands them according to their presentation in the thing itself.

What does all of this accomplish? Again, it means that we can live in a stable world. Hegel connects the understanding with “healthy common sense” for the simple reason that the understanding establishes the endurance of diverse worldly existence through its own variety (Hegel 2018: 78).⁴ We are not under threat from the multiplicity of experience—the fact that our conscious experience is always of differentiated and multiple objects—because it is this multiplicity and differentiation that is the found unified singularity. The pie is self-identically singular *insofar* as it possesses a collection of properties. The pie does not explode into its properties, we are not torn apart in the absolute flux of all things, precisely because a unified thing is only this stable explosion-into-properties. Universality is here the same as *generality*. At the moment when the coherency of a thing is about to break down and become reducible to its properties, we suddenly are pushed onto *another* thing. The properties of the pie are possessed by other things (say, the vinegar of the lemon meringue pie is also the vinegar of the pickled vegetable); or, the properties are themselves things with their own properties and *insofar* as this holds then the thing with properties (which is itself a property) *also* maintains self-unity. If all things are properties and properties are themselves collections of properties, then it *generally* holds that a thing is what it is. Generality here resides in functionality; healthy common sense deploys the “insofar” and the “also” to constitute its world of objects in their “every day and constant life,” which also means to constitute *itself* in its everydayness and constancy (Hegel 2018: 78).⁵ It does not try to grasp totalities, but general arrangements. And that is what common sense is at bottom supposed to do. Common sense knows what things are, it knows the right way to evaluate things, without being willing to raise its propositions to

universal necessity. It is imminently practical. The commonsense thing to ‘do’ appears as a command from the world. Common sense is a self-evident compulsion to a certain judgement. It doesn’t concern itself with making rules that hold everywhere; indeed, the ‘everywhere’ of the understanding is embodied in the singular experience it currently has. The universality of the “this,” as Hegel developed at the beginning of the chapter, is incarnated in a certain general organization of its experience, which is full of objects related to each other on a ‘common’ basis (Hegel 2018: 60).⁶ But it is this ‘common basis’ that the understanding cannot grasp as such. Common sense cannot ask itself about itself; it must accept the propositions it has as immediate. If common sense were to be subject to inquiry, it would no longer be common sense. The commonness of the sense would be thrown into question. So, the understanding dives into universality—the world of differentiated objects as such—without thematizing universality. It cannot think a ‘world’ as *itself* an object. It feels the world as the warm sunlight of truth, beyond it, but ever abundant. Hence, common sense also goes along well with a kind of humility and self-effacement; when I abide by common sense, I am not deciding properly what to do. ‘I’ am not there at all, common sense is the sense of all, the sense of the world. I conceive of myself as a superfluous eye, a partiality, that is *given* the sense that I must adopt to make sense of my experience. The generality of common sense is relative universality, or “comparative universality” to use the Kantian phrase, insofar as a certain thing might be taken as a thing with properties from one angle, or a property of a different thing from another angle (Kant 2009: 137-138).⁷ The partiality of my experience, the fact that it is given from something beyond me, constitutes the generality of this universality. It is comparative because it depends on an arrangement of relations between the objects, rather than a universal structure that determines the objects in advance. But, again, these are the ‘angles’ given by the world—or, so the understanding thinks. On the other hand, however, universality as such, the “unconditional universality” that the understanding does not yet grasp, endangers this state of affairs.

Why? For the very same reason that everything ostensibly remains peaceable: universality is the mode of existence that structures the “insofar” and “also” of the understanding’s own experience. It is the mode of the world *per se*; as we mentioned,

and as we'll come back to, the understanding must make the *world* the principle of the differentiation of its experience, rather than itself. Universality is what is operating in the around the understanding; it is what guides the understanding's pure differentiated experience behind its back. We said that a thing is a thing only if it abides by the rules of the "insofar" and the "also;" only if a thing is immediately transferred to the reality of its properties can a thing hold. What is 'transferring,' so to speak, property to thing and thing to property cannot be the understanding itself—according to its own rules of epistemological hygiene: that it only perceives objects—and therefore must be something else. This 'something else' is the universality of the objective world *as such*—it is, as Hegel goes on to show, law. Law is the principle that organizes the world into its differentiated manifold such that understanding can come to apprehend it. But the very thing upon which the understanding's self-exclusion depends will come back with a vengeance. Universality endangers generality because it subsumes the functional unity of experience into the world itself—though the understanding does not initially realize this. At first, the emergence of law is the logical and entirely normal outcome of its (the understanding's) own presuppositions.

Commonsense can only be the invisible and parasitic layer on the world; it therefore must posit a beyond that gives it its differentiated experience, but which cannot itself be touched by the understanding. This 'beyond' is necessary to posit because it sustains the understanding's unconscious act to exclude itself from its own experience. If what gives me my experience is beyond me, then I can grasp my experience as absolutely certain, without danger of disturbance. The peacefulness of the understanding relies on the neurotic assumption of its guilt *and* innocence; it can rest in the constancy of common sense only to the extent that any possible error or glitch that arises in its experience must be attributed to a breach of that common sense by an *actor*. If there is a misstep in its experience, if I happen upon something eerie, like a distortion of my finger in a glass of water or, broadly speaking, an unrecognized object, the understanding must believe that it has put that error into the world. It must believe that it has intruded upon the sanctity of the objective world. This guilt is the condition for the apprehension of objective existence as the true. The understanding also is supremely innocent; the understanding thinks of itself as a pure observer who

might *accidentally* add something to its experience, but which will be quickly expunged by the independent coherency of the world. What it is guilty for is after all not significant. Its (guilty) partiality is a necessary element to its experience—for its experience is comparatively universal, depending upon what one takes to be a thing or a property—but this partiality is deemed to be superfluous (innocent). The understanding is this custodian of objective experience, this neurotic hygienist scrubbing the stain of itself from its view. This is exactly what Hegel means when he puts the category of “illusion” on the side of the perceiver (Hegel 2018: 71).⁸ The perceiving understanding constitutes the world of objects at the price of his own activity; any active participation in his field of knowledge would trespass against the self-sufficiency of the objective world. With the understanding, consciousness is able to buy back its agential mode of perception but only by accepting itself as an illusion beyond which is the law of the forces in the world. Its functional generality works on the condition of a perpetual self-exclusion.

However, and here we reach the dialectical turn, the exclusion of the understanding from its own experience is grasped as the act of the ‘beyond’ upon which the understanding depends. This is the height of irresponsibility. The act of self-exclusion, fundamental to the understanding, must not be recognized as a *self*-exclusion lest the understanding think that it is doing anything to its experience. On the basis of its own criteria, if it saw itself as the organizing principle of its experience, as the work it attributes to the beyond, then it would lose its grip on reality. The comparative universality of commonsense functions because it depends upon the strict universality of laws—these laws of the objective world that absorbs me. Thus, common sense relies on the fact that what it thinks is commonsensical is just what *is*. It is just the way of the world, the everyday constancy of life. It feels its essential self-exclusion as the ‘way of the world.’ So, the understanding has escaped itself, into the beyond, and locked the door behind it. Yet, as Hegel concludes at the end of the chapter, the consciousness goes behind the curtain and finds only itself. The understanding’s self-escape turns out to be its own undoing. Hegel shows that the law of the world ends up uniting the “other-worldly-beyond,” the realm that super-determines the differentiation of the experienced world, *with* this world of our immediate experience (Hegel 2018: 89).⁹ In brief, the very partial and illusory existence of the understanding becomes an *object*

in the experience of the understanding. Consciousness consequently cannot make itself superfluous because consciousness itself becomes, for itself, a product of the world that is hitherto deemed infallible. How do we get there?

Law entails its own inversion, Hegel tells us: the law of electricity necessitates its positivity and negativity together as one; the law of against murder entails the constituting the crime, the punishment, and the absence of murder as a positively existing condition, all together in one totality (Hegel 2018: 96).¹⁰ Hegel makes a very simple remark about this situation, one which we've already touched on. The beyond is the simple turning-away of immediate objective existence from itself. To say that the laws of the world are beyond the immediately sensible world says nothing else than that this immediate world possesses negativity within itself. Immediate objects automatically exclude us from them; further, *they* (the objects) posit a beyond that mediates the differentiation of themselves. The world *immanently* excludes itself from itself, positing a beyond of itself from within itself. Thus, this supersensible realm that I must by necessity presuppose is not *negatively* nothing. It is the *positive* nothing that belongs to the objective world as such; it is what Hegel calls the "void:"

in the *void*, nothing is known... because it is defined as the very *other-worldly beyond* of consciousness... Suppose we are nonetheless to take there to be something in the void after all; this is a void which came about as the void of objective things but which now must be taken both as *emptiness in itself*, or as the void of all spiritual relations, or even as the void of the differences of consciousness as consciousness – and if the void is taken as this *complete void*, which is also called the *holy*, nonetheless there is supposed to be something with which to fill it out, even if it is only filled out with daydreams, or with *appearances* which consciousness itself creates. If so, then consciousness would just have to rest content with being so badly treated, for it would deserve no better, while daydreams themselves are still better than its emptiness (Hegel 2018: 87).¹¹

The other-worldly-beyond of the understanding is just the negation of this understanding *within the world*. This amounts to everything we have already proposed: the understanding demands its own negation, its own exclusion. But, furthermore, it is the void of consciousness as positively determined in the structure of the objective world. The understanding is slowly approaching its act of self-exclusion, in terms of the self-exclusion of the world. The holy is the daydreaming of the understanding; the real existence of illusion in the world, the truth of which is the frozen night of the world, constitutive of consciousness as such. That emptiness which the understanding wants to fill its own errors with is the nullity of the world to itself. The understanding had to posit the supersensible world of law as the determining principle of its own experience, but the consequence is that the differentiation of objects in the world is the world differentiating itself and thereby explicitly determining the possibility of error, the partiality of objects according to their property-being or their thing-being.

The Understanding: Sense as Void

Illusion is the necessary gap *in reality* that allows objects to vanish into each other, to have their properties transferred to and from each other. The differentiation of the world entails the world's own void, its own absence to itself, necessitating the figure of the law—which is ultimately the fact that the world's differentiation coincides with a pointing-beyond-itself to a *reason* for the specific way in which it exists (Hegel 2018: 87).¹² Meaning or 'sense' (the functional sense of common sense!) is immanently in the world precisely because the world is separated from itself in its objects; the pointing-beyond from within the world indicates the need for objects to acquire a semantic structure. An object cannot remain still in its existence, it must be related to others in order to be what it is. Meaning enters into the space between objects, linking them to each other on a common basis that shifts depending on context (general universality). The vanishing of the this-world is the reality of the otherworld that the former points towards. Hegel says that "appearance" and only appearance is what exists for the understanding (Hegel 2018: 101).¹³ The world appears to itself as appearance, as that which points beyond, but which is itself this beyond *and* the pointing-beyond. But the world does not simply rejoin itself to itself. Or, and herein lies the crux of

the *Phenomenology*, consciousness is this very rejoining. The introduction of meaning, slipping from one object to another, is the emergence of consciousness on the scene *in its own experience*. The vocation of consciousness is to save the world from its own void. However, that heroic task is only on the horizon for consciousness. In what way does consciousness now grasp the breaking-apart of the world within itself, which is nothing else than the beginning of consciousness' thematization? To put it another way, how does the world's self-separation relate to the self-effacement of the understanding. In order not to succumb to the pretensions of the understanding, and to maintain the originality of Hegel's argument and the independence of sense-certainty, we must conclude that the understanding is in a sense correct: it *is* dependent on the world for its absence to itself, consciousness does not initially decide to hide from itself, the problem is that that *the self-absence of the world is the understanding itself*.

The understanding, as we have emphasized, is only too eager to expel itself from its own experience. This eagerness, however, was covering up the wound of the world. It found out in tracing the logical development of law, that the objective structure of the world has a gap: the existence of the other-worldly-beyond *in this world* not as a balance of harmony or perfect order but the void that the world necessitates in order to give itself law. The law must fall into the multiplicity of reality, it must operate over opposites and determine them *as opposites* in order to be universal. We saw how this worked briefly in the cases of the law of electricity and the law against murder. Both, although wildly different, constitution differentiation and opposition *within* the conceptual universality of legality. It is not as though differences lie outside law; law makes the differences that revolve around it; the rule proves the exception, so to speak. Hegel calls this transition from the supersensible to the sensible, necessarily inverting itself, the "defect" of law (Hegel 2018: 90).¹⁴ Why "defect?" Law as the pure determination of the differentiatedness of the world should be universal and singular. Law itself should not be differentiated. But there are many laws just as accords with the differentiation of existence. There are many laws precisely because law must contain its own differentiates to legislate over all existence universally. We saw that the sensible world contained the supersensible. Now, we see it the other way around. The supersensible world of law contains within itself the sensible world of lawlessness, which is to say that

the actual world gives itself an ordering structure. Again: the supersensibility of the domain of law can only be attached to the actual and sensible world. That is what it means for only appearance to *exist*, for the world to be a void to itself; the law's "defect" is its strength. The multiplicity of reality is constituted from *within* the law thereby allowing it to reach over non-conceptual and contingent material. Law involves the absolute contingency of existence insofar as there are a multiplicity of laws. The world's real contingency is very the condition for its law-giving essence.

We only need to ask a simple question to return to the understanding and its relation to the world. What did the understanding essentially say about itself? It said that it is the inessential, the partial, the superfluous, the illusory—a *defect*. The understanding is always just a general universality which is otherwise contingent upon the strict universality of law. But the tables have become flipped: the contingency of the sensible world is the essence of the supersensible as the core of its self-differentiation as the one world. *The defect of the world is the contingent existence that the understanding necessarily is*. Therefore, in giving itself law, in its absolute self-sufficiency, the world determines the differentiatedness of the understanding to be a mere circumstance of its deployment. Any particular experience of the understanding is a partiality of the law's own activity that contains its invertedness. The understanding is born in the transition from pure lawful determination to differentiation and multiplicity. Or, more precisely, the understanding is born in this descent and is the immediate *turning back* or, to use Hegel's words, "tenacious clinging" of fallen objectivity to its essentiality. The understanding reaches back up from accidentality to substance, from the this-world to the other, from contingency to necessity, having already been constituted in its real illusory existence. This turning back, however, is at first the desperation of the understanding to flee from itself *as an object*. It comes to grips for the first time with itself in its own experience; if the world determines the understanding as *an objective* accident, rather than a merely 'subjective error,' then the understanding by definition must grasp its objective accidentality as a necessarily fallible part of the infallible world.

In becoming an object to itself, the understanding has violated the one boundary it forswore to respect: it has located itself in the objective world, it can no longer naively hold objects in their pure non-subjective form. The understanding realizes that the very

differentiation of objects which it *is* is the result of something beyond itself—that is, the differentiated totality of the understanding’s experience is given to it by something beyond it and thereby made into a determinate point of view. The relative universality of the understanding becomes concrete and can be apprehended as such. My relative position in the world now explicitly becomes an object in my view.

What results is nothing less than a rupture of the givenness of myself. I realize that what I took to be the naïve and pure view of the world was in fact a result of something else entirely. I thought I knew how things were, now I see that my consciousness is just a thing like any other thing; it is determined by reality, I am the toy of my own experience, I am no longer master in my own house. The ‘way of the world’ suddenly becomes hostile: *the world was having its way with me*. I look back at myself with dismay and all the certainty of the past falls away. This is the primal scene of the understanding, its essentially traumatic core, coinciding with the wound of the world. The world is a question to itself, which must first take the form of the understanding’s catastrophic falling away from its naïve simplicity. It doesn’t want to understand anymore, if it must understand itself. Hence, Hegel says that the understanding’s “explanatory” function, its running hither and thither through its material and content, was just a narcissistic conversation with itself—and narcissism always takes the form of a self-exclusion, a transparency of myself to myself, an inability to implicate myself in the world that I experience.

there is so much self-satisfaction in explanation because the consciousness involved in it is, to put it this way, in an immediate conversation with itself, enjoying only itself. While it undeniably seems to be pursuing something else, it is really just consorting with itself (Hegel 2018: 100).¹⁵

The whole logic of common sense now appears to be a gratuitous plot to protect itself from the fact that the world casts it aside into the garbage heap of itself. The subjective dimension of the self-exclusion of the understanding is in fact a way to *cover up* the objective trauma of the world’s exclusion of the understanding from it. If the

understanding can throw itself away, it doesn't have to feel the terrible force of the world making it into an irremediable illusion.

The understanding's self-exclusion now is seen to be a result of the world in which the understanding is a part—a part in the literal sense: a partiality of the whole and the true. The understanding is not a harmonious link in the great chain of being. The understanding is this impossible gap that issues forth from the rage of the world; it is the impossibility of this world itself to exist—the absolute defect that nonetheless gives the world the inconsistency it requires in order to contain both the holy and the mortal, the infinite and the finite, in one complete unity.¹⁶

Raised above perception, consciousness exhibits itself as merged with the supersensible world through the mediating middle of appearance through which it gazes into this background. The two extremes, the one of the purely inner, the other of the inner gazing into the purely inner, have now merged together, and just as they have vanished as extremes, the mediating middle, as something other than these extremes, has also vanished.

Consciousness is the world's vanishing to itself; it is the pure appearance of the world's pointing beyond itself.

The curtain is therefore lifted away from the inner, and what is present is the gazing of the inner into the inner,

The understanding consciousness is that proverbial abyss, staring *back*: the inner gazing into the inner. This is nothing else than the turning back of the understanding from the wretched, worldly condition it finds itself in and towards the realm of the true. Yet, as we saw, the realm of the true and the realm of the sensible are in one self-differentiation unity. Thus, the understanding gazes into its own depths, which is in fact the most shallow and flat existence: the world separating itself from itself, on the basis of simple contingency.

the gazing of the *non-distinguished* "like pole," which repels itself from itself, positing itself as a *distinguished* inner, but *for which* there is present just as

immediately the *non-difference* of both of them, *self-consciousness*. It turns out that behind the so-called curtain, which is supposed to hide what is inner, there is nothing to be seen if we ourselves do not go behind it, and one can see something behind the curtain only if there is something behind the curtain to be seen (Hegel 2018: 101).¹⁷

Consciousness is the irritating Dr. Oz, the clown behind the curtain, the empty chest at the end of a lifetime of treasure-hunting: the failure of the self-sufficiency of the world that the understanding always hoped to inoculate itself against. The understanding *is* the inconsistency of the other-worldly-beyond-as-this-world—that is what is so untenable. It cannot get away from itself in the apprehension of the world, it cannot anymore hide from its act, though this act is not its own. It is the terrible fate it must carry out on the instruction of the world, to piece it back together. Like a child who must become a parent, the understanding begrudgingly faces its shadowy accidentality in the harsh light of the truth. It is forever stuck in a place of non-belonging. The *desire* that self-consciousness *is* is only this impossible desire of the understanding to get its secure place back in the harmony of the world; or, it is the simple search of the world of its lost unity, the pursuit to eliminate its defect (Hegel 2018: 103).¹⁸

Thus, we might now reinterpret the two sides of a common sense: the communalism of a functional existence and the insanity of having-no-part. The understanding experiences itself as forced into the part of a whole and realizes that this partiality is completely dispensable. Common sense is the togetherness of everyone who agrees that they are a mistake *and* the conceit of those who take this principle to its extreme and purge themselves from the whole. One of Slavoj Žižek's illustrative jokes cannot but help us here:

There is an old Jewish joke, loved by Derrida, about a group of Jews in a synagogue publicly admitting their nullity in the eyes of God. First, a rabbi stands up and says: "O God, I know I am worthless. I am nothing!" After he has finished, a rich businessman stands up and says, beating himself on the chest: "O God, I am also worthless, obsessed with material wealth. I am nothing!" After this spectacle, a poor ordinary Jew also stands up and also proclaims: "O God, I am

nothing.” The rich businessman kicks the rabbi and whispers in his ear with scorn: “What insolence! Who is that guy who dares to claim that he is nothing too!” (Žižek 2018: 52) ¹⁹

The understanding cast out from itself is nothing else than this poor and nameless Jew, the one scorned by the world for simply abiding by the world’s own demand for self-effacement.

Night and Event

Hegel calls the vertiginous swoon of the understanding before itself an “event” (Hegel 2018: 100). ²⁰ We can see why. After it becomes an objective accident in the world to itself, it is reconstituted in its entirety. It is now consciousness of itself, as a mistake responsible for itself. Even if it will continue to try to erase itself (which is what much of the chapter on “Self-consciousness” consists in), it can never get past the jamming, the blockage, of itself in its world. It cannot hide either in its presumed guilt (for it is explicitly guilty; the understanding has been made a concrete element of the world against its will) nor can it cling to its innocence (since it is now and forever an implicated part of the world). Any further attempt to efface itself will be an act of a second order, on top of its knowledge that it is an element in its own experience. It will *try* to forget, it will *repress*, but it will not fail to *repeat* what it cannot escape. It is, as we said before, a thing to itself. It grasps itself with utter disdain and confusion. It sees itself as this partiality that is a result of the world’s order, this defect, and it is told: *you are that*. The “estrangement” of consciousness is only this (Hegel 2018: 99).²¹ It is told by the world that it is an unhappy accident. Consciousness is an other to itself. It is stuck in the need to be what it once was, absent to itself, and now it is *really* absent to itself. It thought it could play peek-a-boo with itself forever and now, when it opens its eyes, it cannot be found. Or, it is found in plain view as the void of itself. It is present before itself as an *other*—this necessary accident that it is forced to be. The “event” of consciousness, therefore, is the coming-to-be of itself as an other *through* the self-equality of the world’s contradiction. The world, as we saw, inverts itself; it requires an internal void upon which it builds its lawful completeness. In the first chapter of Hegel

Phenomenology, consciousness comes to grips most immediately with this fact, which he outlines elsewhere in the famous passage from his Jena lectures of 1805-1806:

[Spirit] takes its first self as an object, i.e., the *image, Being as mine*, as negated (*als aufgehobnes*). This image belongs to Spirit. Spirit is in possession of the image, is master of it. It is stored in the Spirit's treasury, in its Night. The image is unconscious, i.e., it is not displayed as an object for representation. The human being is this Night, this empty nothing which contains everything in its simplicity – a wealth of infinitely many representations, images, none of which occur to it directly, and none of which are not present. This [is] the Night, the interior of [human] nature, existing here – pure Self – [and] in phantasmagoric representations it is night everywhere: here a bloody head suddenly shoots up and there another white shape, only to disappear as suddenly. We see this Night when we look a human being in the eye, looking into a Night which turns terrifying. [For from his eyes] the night of the world hangs out toward us. (Hegel 1983; 96-87) ²²

Of course, Hegel is here appealing to that enigmatic notion of “Spirit.” But it should not frighten us. Spirit differs from the understanding only insofar as it recognizes that image of itself, that accidental object in the world, as *its own*. Spirit lingers with the negative; it finds its feet in absolute disruption; the consciousness of spirit is tasked with becoming identical to itself *as failure*. And like a phoenix it raises itself up—“joyously,” as Hegel says—out of and through its ashes (Hegel 2018: 125). ²³ The “night of the world” = the void *in* the world that the understanding *is*; the human being is the night of the world. It is this night not as a pure nothingness or as a death of the given, contra the existentialists, but the very accidentality and negativity of what is ‘given’ by the world. Herein lies the kernel of Slavoj Žižek’s Hegel against that of Alexandre Kojève. For Kojève, human existence posits nothingness over the completeness of being. The “*hic et nunc*” of nature is undermined by the cultural mediation of humanity. On the other hand, Žižek asserts the immanent negativity in being that produces human existence. Thus, together with Žižek, we should say that by the givenness of the world, consciousness locates itself as accidental; what the understanding sought as the

principle of the given, the lawful supersensible, transformed that very understanding into the necessary defect of the world.

The key conclusion to be drawn from [the] self-limitation of phenomena is that it is strictly correlative to subjectivity²⁴: there is a (transcendental) subject only as correlative to the inconsistency, self-limitation, or, more radically, “ontological incompleteness,” of phenomenal reality. The moment we conceive the inconsistency and self-limitation of phenomenal reality as secondary, as the effect of the subject’s inability to experience the transcendent In-itself the way it “really is,” the subject (as autonomous-spontaneous) becomes a mere epi-phenomenon, its freedom becomes a “mere appearance” conditioned by the fact that noumena are inaccessible to it (to put it in a somewhat simplified way: I experience myself as free insofar as the causality which effectively determines me is inaccessible to me). In other words, the subject’s freedom can be ontologically grounded only in the ontological incompleteness of reality itself. (Žižek 2013: 283) ²⁵

Here, we merely add to this already rich proposition that consciousness can indeed apprehend the structure reality beyond itself, the “ontological incompleteness” of being, but *initially* only as its own accidentality. Or: Žižek’s emphasis that, for Hegel, the ‘madness’ of reason always entails “*an accident elevated to an ‘essence,’ to universal necessity*” in fact celebrates rationality because of consciousness’s universal necessity to be an accident (Žižek 2013: 358). ²⁶ The beginning of free thought is the catastrophe of being reduced to an ineradicable stain on the world, an accident, a mistake. That is what the authenticity of human existence means. Further, we specify that the incompleteness of reality has the structure not of lacking something besides itself, say, consciousness, but of lacking *itself*. Consciousness is not the missing piece that reality culminates in, but the necessary faltering of reality to itself. Consciousness is the dispossession of the world from the world and thereby consciousness is dispossessed of itself—that is, *free*.

For the nascent understanding, the world ‘gives’ consciousness as a defect—a defect that nonetheless is absolutely necessary. The bloody heads, the flashing lights,

are the sparks of the human being's contingency exploding onto the world. The night "hangs" out from the eyes of the understanding, the accidental human existence, because it is constantly running away from the latter. This night is the world's self-diremption, which can only be caught by the spirit that finds itself in the blindness of humanity—a blindness caused by the absolute darkness of the world, the double shadow cast across itself, by reality's splitting against itself. This self-separation, the overlapping of the world's shadow upon itself, is nothing other than the birth of history. Once again, the understanding is not yet in the position of grasping its historical being, let alone thematizing its historicity, which it can indeed do. Here, we merely come to the break between consciousness from its immediacy, actuality from itself. The world turns itself over, inverts itself, into its own night: consciousness. Spirit grasps itself as such and raises the accidentality of the human being to a universal moment. It rends truth, justice, and beauty out of the grave of the world, which is always also of itself.

With the first "event" of consciousness, however, the understanding is stuck (jammed, blocked, etc.) by the first contact with its own terrible image. Hegel is telling us that one cannot simply pass from immediate consciousness to the dark triumph of spirit. No, consciousness must descend, unknowingly (that is key), into the night of the world that it *is*. The non-knowledge of its fate—it's freedom of thought—is precisely the condition for grasping, later on, the night *as night*. Hegel does not just want to illuminate what consciousness cannot see, which would only forestall the darkness of consciousness knowledge, pushing it away. Instead, he wants to make the very principle of consciousness's illumination its own darkness. Hence, the "image is unconscious": what consciousness *is in the world* is always beyond it, but his point is that consciousness can know this 'beyond.' Or, more radically, knowing *is only knowing of this beyond*. Against his accusers, therefore, Hegel is profoundly concerned with consciousness's relation to reality. Consciousness can only get a hold on the real by first facing up to the fact that it (consciousness) is constituted by something outside of itself (the world). Consciousness does not begin with a co-relation or harmony between it and the world; the opposite: it initially feels an immediate and immanent presence in the world, which took the form of an absence to itself—or, the world was the presence that it was too. Now, however, since that absence was converted into the presence of

the accidental, the understanding is stuck in itself, in its partiality and superfluousness. Consequently, it must grapple with itself as this universal accident that cannot be redeemed. As we said, it cannot retreat inward. The only choice is to die to itself, escaping its awkward existence, *in* the world. It does not go there because it finds solace, but because there is nowhere else to go. Its hope is that the world might kill it, and thereby illuminate the world's splendor. That *desire*, Hegel ultimately shows us, is the very failure that spirit grasps as a necessary moment of *reason*.

So, before consciousness can “linger with the negative,” before it might rationally take hold of the world in its night, in the freedom of humanity through and over the world, consciousness must lose its mind. That is what follows in the next chapter of the *Phenomenology*, “Self-Consciousness.” Hence, self-consciousness is the birth of true thinking, but not at first. Or, this failure of thought, the failure of the understanding's return to its imaginary unity with the world, will be converted into free thought. It is, I hope, abundantly clear how crucial Hegel's first discussion of the understanding is. We can only see its truth coming to fruition with self-consciousness when we have recognized the impasse that is constitutive of the operation of consciousness. If we do not see how the *world* that the understanding takes as its own spits out consciousness as an object, and if we instead mindlessly assert that ‘consciousness of an object is always self-consciousness,’ which is the typical neo-Kantian summation of Hegel's second chapter, we will have no ability to comprehend the persistence of the understanding in the *Phenomenology*. More than that, we will have no idea how to make sense of the role of the understanding in dialectical reason or in spirit, which, to many scholars, is the mere overcoming of the understanding's fixedness. Any further investigation into Hegel's dialect must take into account the necessity of the accident that the understanding is and how, as the “absolute power of thinking,” it transmutes its experience into *abstract truth* (Hegel 2018: 20-21).²⁷

Notes

1 Hegel, G. F. (2018). *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1266366227 935842350 T. Pinkard, Trans.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press (21)

2 Ibid., 78.

3 Ibid., 77.

4 Ibid., 78.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 60.

7 “Experience never gives its judgments true or strict, but merely assumed or comparative *universality* (through induction), so that, properly speaking, it must be formulated: so far as we have observed until now, no exception has been found to this or that rule. If, therefore, a judgment is thought with strict universality, i.e., so that no exception at all is allowed to be possible, then it is not derived from experience, but is valid absolutely a priori. Empirical universality is thus only an arbitrary augmentation of validity from that which is valid in most cases to that which is valid in all—as, e.g., in the proposition: all bodies are heavy. By contrast, where strict universality essentially belongs to a judgment, this [universality] indicates a special source of cognition for [the judgment], namely a faculty of a priori cognition. Necessity and strict universality are thus secure criteria of an a priori cognition, and also inseparably belong together.”

Kant, I. (2009). *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1211567028 902799451 P. Guyer & 1211567029 902799451 A. W. Wood, Eds.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

8 Ibid., 71.

9 Ibid., 89.

10 Ibid., 96.

11 Ibid., 87.

12 As Hegel says repeatedly, the “supersensible” is the primitive appearance of rationality: “...there is disclosed an enduring *other-worldly beyond*, an in-itself which is the first and for that reason incomplete appearance of reason, or the pure element in which the truth has its *essence*.” (Ibid.)

13 “We see that the understanding in truth experiences in the inner of appearance nothing but appearance itself, but not appearance in the way it is as the play of forces; rather, it experiences the play of forces within their absolutely universal moments and their movement; in fact, the understanding experiences only *itself*.” (Ibid., 101.)

14 Ibid., 90.

15 Ibid., 100.

16 Trading contradiction for completeness.

17 Ibid., 101.

18 Ibid., 103.

19 Žižek, S. (2018). *Žižek's jokes: (did you hear the one about Hegel and negation?)* (1266445334 935891796 A. Mortensen, Ed.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

20 “In the opposite law as the inversion of the first law, or in the inner difference, infinity indeed becomes itself the *object* of the understanding, but again the understanding fails to notice it as such, while the understanding again distributes to two worlds, or to two substantial elements, the difference in itself, the self-repulsion of like poles and the self-attraction of what is unlike; for the understanding, the movement as it is here in experience, is an event, and like poles and the unlike are *predicates* whose essence is an existing substrate. What is an object in sensuous covering for the understanding is now there for us in its essential shape as the pure concept. This grasping of the difference as it is *in truth*, or the grasping of *infinity* as such, is *for us*, or *in itself*. The exposition of its concept belongs to science. However, consciousness as it *immediately* has this concept again comes on the scene as its own form or as a new shape of consciousness that does not recognize its essence in what has gone before but instead regards it as something wholly different.”

Hegel, G. F. (2018). *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1266366227 935842350 T. Pinkard, Trans.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press (100)

21 Ibid., 99.

22 Hegel, G. F. (1983). *Hegel and the human spirit: A translation of the Jena lectures on the philosophy of spirit (1805-6) with commentary* (1302639659 958581919 L. Rauch, Ed.). Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press.

23 “To consciousness, the *first* unchangeable is only the *alien* essence passing sentence on it. While the *other* unchangeable is a *shape of singular individuality* like itself, consciousness becomes, *thirdly*, spirit. It has the joy of finding itself therein, and it is aware that its singular individuality is reconciled with the universal.”

Hegel, G. F. (2018). *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1266366227 935842350 T. Pinkard, Trans.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press (125)

24 as in the accidentality of the understanding’s phenomenal existence.

25 Žižek, S. (2013). *Less than nothing: Hegel and the shadow of dialectical materialism*. London, UK: Verso.

26 Ibid., 358.

27 Hegel, G. F. (2018). *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1266366227 935842350 T. Pinkard, Trans.). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press (20-21)

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