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FROM KANT TO HEGEL

Slavoj Žižek

The Ontic Question

While the transcendental turn is a specific move that characterizes the core of Kant's philosophical revolution, it is, at a deeper level, a name – arguably *the* name – for the move that characterizes, constitutes even, philosophy as such, i.e., philosophy in its difference from knowledge about positive reality. Heidegger saw this very clearly when, in his *Being and Time*, he proposes his redefinition of hermeneutics as ontology proper, as fundamental ontology, not only as a science about understanding and interpreting texts. Let us take the example of life: the proper topic of philosophy is not the real nature of life as a natural phenomenon (how did life evolve out of complex chemical processes, what are the minimal scientific characteristics of a living organism, etc.). Philosophy raises a different question: when we encounter living entities, when we treat them as such, we already have to possess a certain pre-understanding which enables us to recognize them as alive, and philosophy focuses on this pre-understanding. The same goes, say, for freedom: in what way do we understand “freedom” when we ask the question “Are we free or not?”. The basic transcendental-hermeneutic move is the move towards this horizon of pre-understanding which is always-already here, and this is what

Heidegger means with the Event of the disclosure of being: history at its most radical is not the change in reality, but the shift in how things appear to us, in our fundamental pre-understanding of reality. Recall the classical topic of the change of frame in our understanding of motion in early modernity:

»Mediaeval physics believed that motion was caused by an impetus. Things are naturally at rest. An impetus makes something move; but then it runs out, leaving the object to slow down and stop. Something that continues moving therefore has to keep being pushed, and pushing is something you can feel. (This was even an argument for the existence of God, since something very big - like God - had to be pushing to keep the heavens going.) So if the Earth is moving, why don't we feel it? Copernicus could not answer that question. /... Galileo had an answer for Copernicus: simple velocity is *not* felt, only acceleration is. So the earth can be moving without our feeling it. Also, velocity does not change until a force changes it. That is the idea of *inertia*, which then replaced the old idea of an impetus.«¹

This shift from impetus to inertia is properly transcendental: it changes the very basic mode of how we relate to reality. As such, it is an event: at its most elementary, event is not something that occurs within the world, but such a change of the very frame through which we perceive the world and engage in it. In its response to the cognitivist challenge, the neo-Kantian state philosophy (whose exemplary case today is Habermas) refers to this same dimension: our self-perception as free and responsible agents is not just a necessary illusion, but the transcendental a priori of very scientific knowledge. Habermas developed his position in response to a manifesto in which eleven distinguished German neuroscientists claim that our ordinary concept of free-will is on the verge of being overthrown by recent advances in neurobiology: »We stand at the threshold of seeing our image of ourselves considerably shaken in the foreseeable future.«² For Habermas,

“the attempt to study first-person subjective experience from the third-person, objectifying viewpoint, involves the theorist in a performative contradiction, since objectification presupposes participation in an intersubjectively instituted system of linguistic practices whose normative valence conditions the scientist's cognitive activity.”³

Habermas characterizes this intersubjective domain of rational validity as the dimension of “objective mind” which cannot be understood in terms of the phenomenological profiles of the community of conscious selves comprised in it: it is the intrinsically intersubjective status of the

normative realm that precludes any attempt to account for its operation or genesis in terms of entities or processes simpler than the system itself. (Lacan's term for this "objective mind" irreducible to the Real of raw reality as well as to the Imaginary of our self-experience is, of course, the big Other.) Neither the phenomenological (imaginary) nor neurobiological (real) profiling of participants can be cited as a constituting condition for this socially "objective mind":

"The resistance to a naturalistic self-description stemming from our self-understanding as persons is explained by the fact that there is no getting round a dualism of epistemic perspectives that must interlock in order to make it possible for the mind, situated as it is within the world, to get an orienting overview of its own situation. Even the gaze of a purportedly absolute observer cannot sever the ties to one standpoint in particular, namely that of a counterfactually extended argumentation community."⁴

Perhaps, this transcendental stance is also what ultimately distinguishes Western Marxism from the Soviet "dialectical materialism." Dialectical materialism considers historical materialism as a specific ontology, a kind of *metaphysica specialis* of the social being, as the application of the universal laws of dialectics to the social sphere, in contrast to Western Marxists for whom collective human *praxis* is the unsurpassable transcendental horizon of our approach to reality, something from which we cannot abstract even in our purest considerations of natural laws. As they used to say, even if humanity did emerge out of natural evolution, the humanity's practical collective engagement with nature always-already "frames" our understanding of nature – or, to quote young Lukacs's succinct formula, nature is a historical category.

In this precise sense, Heidegger is the ultimate transcendental philosopher: his achievement is to *historicize* the transcendental dimension. For Heidegger, an Event has nothing to do with ontic processes; it designates the "event" of a new epochal disclosure of Being, the emergence of a new "world" (as the horizon of meaning within which all entities appear). Catastrophe thus occurs before the (f)act: catastrophe is not the atomic self-destruction of humanity, but the ontological relating to nature which reduces it to its techno-scientific exploitation. Catastrophe is not our ecological ruin, but the loss of home-roots which renders possible the ruthless exploitation of the earth. Catastrophe is not that we are reduced to automata manipulated by biogenetics, but the very ontological approach which renders this prospect possible. Even in the case of a total self-destruction, ontology maintains priority over the ontic: the possibility of total self-destruction is just an ontic consequence of our relating to nature as a collection of objects of technological exploitation – the catastrophe occurs when

nature appears to us within the frame of technology. *Gestell*, Heidegger's name for the essence of technology, is usually translated into English as "enframing." At its most radical, technology does not designate the complex network of machines and activities, but the attitude towards reality which we assume when we are engaged in such activities: technology is the way reality discloses itself to us in modern times when reality a "standing-reserve":

»Enframing means the gathering together of that setting-upon which sets upon man, i.e., challenges him forth, to reveal the real in the mode of ordering, as standing-reserve. Enframing means that way of revealing which holds sway in the essence of modern technology and which is itself nothing technological.«⁵

The paradox of technology as the concluding moment of Western metaphysics is that it is a mode of enframing which poses a danger to enframing itself: the human being reduced to an object of technological manipulation is no longer properly human, it loses the very feature of being ecstatically open to reality. However, this danger also contains the potential for salvation: the moment we become aware and fully assume the fact that technology itself is, in its essence, a mode of enframing, we overcome it... Giving such a priority to ontological over the ontic dimension leads Heidegger to dismiss gigantic human catastrophies (like the holocaust) as mere »ontic« events, it brings him to obliterate as secondary differences between, say, democracy and fascism, as ontologically irrelevant (and some critics hastened to add that this obliteration of ontic differences is not only the consequence but also the hidden cause of his emphasis on the ontological dimension – his own Nazi engagement thus becomes an insignificant error, etc.).

However, even at the immanently philosophical level, what one is tempted to call the "ontic question" continues to persist and to lead an underground life in Heidegger's thought: which is the status of ontic reality outside the ontological horizon, prior to eventual disclosure? Heidegger makes it clear that things »were there« in some sense before the disclosure of Being, they just didn't *exist* in the full ontological sense of the term - but HOW were they there? Here is Heidegger's ambiguous formulation of this obscure point: "I often ask myself – this has for a long time been a fundamental question for me – what nature would be without man - must it not resonate through him in order to attain its ownmost potency."⁶ Does this passage not recall Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, where he quotes the French historian André Monglond: "The past has left images of itself in literary texts, images comparable to those which are imprinted by light on a photosensitive plate. The future alone possesses developers active

enough to scan such surfaces perfectly.”⁷ Far from being just a neutral observation about the complex interdependence of literary texts, this notion of past texts pointing towards future is grounded in Benjamin’s basic notion of revolutionary act as the retroactive redemption of the past failed attempts:

“The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim.”⁸

The question here is: how far should we go along this way? Do we limit the logic of retroactive redemption to human history, or are we ready to take the risk of applying this logic to nature itself which calls for humanity, human speech, to redeem it from its mute suffering? More generally, are such speculations about the pain in pre-human nature not simply mythic fables? One of the signs that we are dealing with a transcendental approach is the recourse to a myth: after describing a rational structure which goes as far as our thinking can go, thinkers from Plato to Lacan then propose a mythic fable, claiming that we cannot really go beyond the rational structure, we can only speculate about what went on prior to it in the form of a fable. The classic Lacan thus claims that the fact of the symbolic order, of *logos*, is the ultimate horizon of our thinking: we cannot really go further back, every story of the »origins of language« is a circular myth which secretly already presupposes what it purports to explain, so all we can do is to concoct amusing fables.

Back to the quoted passage from Heidegger, one should note that this passage is from the time immediately after Heidegger’s lectures on *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* from 1929-30, where is also formulated a Schellingian hypothesis that, perhaps, animals are, in a hitherto unknown way, aware of their lack, of the "poorness" of their relating to the world - perhaps, there is an infinite pain pervading the entire living nature: "if deprivation in certain forms is a kind of suffering, and poverty and deprivation of world belongs to the animal's being, then a kind of pain and suffering would have to permeate the whole animal realm and the realm of life in general."⁹

The choice Heidegger is confronting here is the following one. According to his basic position, the reproach that the definition of animal as *weltarm* and of stone as *weltlos* imply reference to the human opened up to a world is obviously true, but it simply means that we always-already understand reality through the way it is disclosed to us, so that we cannot

abstract our own position from it. However, as if himself doubting the sufficiency of this transcendental reply (i.e., admitting that the question of what reality is “in itself,” independently of us, persists), he hints at another position: not that things are simply there in the worldless reality, but that their deprived-of-the-world status is not just the way we perceive them from our anthropic position – it is something that characterizes them immanently, in themselves. Heidegger here refers to an old motif of German Romanticism and Schelling taken over also by Benjamin, the motif of the “great sorrow of nature”: “It is in the hope of requiting that /sorrow/, of redemption from that suffering, that humans live and speak in nature.”¹⁰ Derrida rejects this Schellingian-Benjaminian-Heideggerian motif of the sadness of nature, the idea that nature’s numbness and muteness signals an infinite pain, as teleologically logo-centric: language becomes a *telos* of nature, nature strives towards the Word to release its sadness, to reach its redemption.

But this mystical topos nonetheless raises the right question by turning around the standard perspective: not “what is nature for language? can we grasp nature adequately in/through language?” but “what language is for nature? How does its emergence affect nature?”. Far from belonging to logo-centrism, such a reversal is the strongest suspension of logo-centrism and teleology, in the same way that Marx’s thesis on the anatomy of man as the key to the anatomy of ape subverts any teleological evolutionism. Or, in Hegelese, instead of asking what is Substance for Subject, how can Subject grasp the Substance, one should ask the obverse question: what is (the rise of the) Subject for (pre-subjective) Substance? G.K. Chesterton proposed such a Hegelian reversal precisely apropos man and animals: instead of asking what are animals for humans, for our experience, one should ask what man is for animals – in his less known *Everlasting Man*, Chesterton makes a wonderful mental experiment along these lines, imagining the monster that man might have seemed at first to the merely natural animals around him:

“The simplest truth about man is that he is a very strange being; almost in the sense of being a stranger on the earth. In all sobriety, he has much more of the external appearance of one bringing alien habits from another land than of a mere growth of this one. He has an unfair advantage and an unfair disadvantage. He cannot sleep in his own skin; he cannot trust his own instincts. He is at once a creator moving miraculous hands and fingers and a kind of cripple. He is wrapped in artificial bandages called clothes; he is propped on artificial crutches called furniture. His mind has the same doubtful liberties and the same wild limitations. Alone among the animals, he is shaken with the beautiful madness called laughter; as if he had caught sight

of some secret in the very shape of the universe hidden from the universe itself. Alone among the animals he feels the need of averting his thought from the root realities of his own bodily being; of hiding them as in the presence of some higher possibility which creates the mystery of shame. Whether we praise these things as natural to man or abuse them as artificial in nature, they remain in the same sense unique.”¹¹

This is what Chesterton called “thinking backwards”: we have to put ourselves back in time, before the fateful decisions were made or before the accidents occurred that generated the state which now seems normal to us, and the royal way to do it, to render palpable this open moment of decision, is to imagine how, at that point, history may have taken a different turn. With regard to Christianity, instead of losing time with probing into how Christianity related to Judaism, how does it misunderstand the Old Testament when it incorporates it as announcing the arrival of Christ, and trying to reconstruct how Jews were prior to Christianity, unaffected by the retroactive Christian perspective, one should rather turn the perspective around and “extraneate” Christianity itself, treat it as Christianity-in-becoming and focus on what a strange beast, what a scandalous monstrosity Christ must have appeared to be in the eyes of the Jewish ideological establishment. The hyperbolic case is here provided by those rare societies which, till now, succeeded avoiding contact with “civilization.” On May 2008, media reported on the discovery of an “uncontacted tribe” in the thick rainforest along the Brazilian-Peruvian frontier: they never had any contact with the “outside world” of global civilization; their life was probably unchanged for over 10000 years. Photos of their village were released, taken from a plane. When anthropologists first overflew the area, they saw women and children in the open and no one appeared to be painted. It was only when the plane returned a few hours later that they saw these individuals covered head-to-toe in red: “Skin painted bright red, heads partially shaved, arrows drawn back in the longbows and aimed square at the aircraft buzzing overhead. The gesture is unmistakable: Stay Away.” They are right: contact is usually a disaster for such remote tribes. Even if the loggers do not shoot them or force them off their land, diseases against which these isolated humans have no resistance typically wipe out half an uncontacted tribe's numbers in a year or two. Our civilization is for them literally a melting pot – they melt and disappear in it, like the ancient underground frescoes in *Fellini's Roma* which were protected as long as they were isolated in the underground vacuum; the moment (very careful and respectful) researchers penetrated their domain, frescoes got pale and started to disappear... We often ask ourselves how we would react to meeting aliens much more developed than ourselves – in the photos of the uncontacted tribe, we ourselves are their aliens.

Therein resides the horror of these pictures: we see the terrified natives observing an inhuman Other, and we ourselves are this Other... and the moment we raise the question in this way, we move beyond (or, rather, beneath) the transcendental dimension. The key philosophical problem today is: is the transcendental dimension the ultimate horizon of our thinking, is it *unhintergehbare*? If not, how are we to reach beyond/beneath the transcendental? There seem to be three main options at our disposal:

(1) FICHTE - the radicalization of the transcendental itself, i.e., the deduction of the entire content, inclusive of the empirical multiplicity, from the transcendental principle (Fichte, not Hegel, tries this way in his first phase with his notion of the self-positing absolute I);

(2) SCHELLING - the meta-transcendental genesis of the transcendental, i.e., the move beyond the transcendental to the arche-transcendental, from late Schelling (his notion of *Ungrund*, the self-withdrawing abyss out which everything emerges as the pre-transcendental Real) up to Derrida whose *differance* names the meta-transcendental conditions of the transcendental itself.

(3) RETURN TO REALISM – not primarily to the pre-critical realist ontology, but to the radical scientific naturalization which tries to account for the rise of the very transcendental horizon from the ontic evolutionary process. However, the vicious cycle between the transcendental and the empirical ontology remains unsurpassed in this version: scientific naturalization has to rely on an already-given transcendental horizon.

The Hegelian Move

Where does Hegel stand here? His position is unique: he re-inscribes the transcendental frame back into the thing itself... how? Let us begin with the triad of naïve, transcendental, and Hegelian position: in a naïve position, reality is accepted as simply being out there; the transcendental turn renders visible how reality is always constituted through a (narrative) frame, how this frame is irreducible to its object since it is always-already pre-supposed... how can we move beyond the interplay of these two dimensions, the transcendental and the empirical? Let us take another case of a theory for which the transcendental dimension is always-already presupposed: the structuralism of Claude Levi-Strauss who designates his position as transcendentalism without transcendental subject. The structuralist idea is that one cannot think the genesis of the symbolic (order) – one should not here, as a curiosity, that in 1866, the *Societe linguistique de Paris* formally prohibited to its members any research into the origins of language, claiming that it exceeds the cognitive capacities of men: “The society will not admit

any communication which concerns the origins of language.”¹² The symbolic order is, once it is here, always-already here, one cannot step outside it, all one can do is to tell myths about its genesis (which Lacan engages in occasionally). Recall the wonderful title of Alexei Yurchak’s book about the last Soviet generation: *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* – the point we are looking for is its exact inversion of this rupture: nothing of it (the symbolic order) was here, until all of it was all of a sudden *always-already* here. The problem is here the emergence of a self-relating “closed” system which has no outside: it cannot be explained from outside because its constitutive act is self-relating, i.e., the system fully emerges once it starts to cause itself, to posit its presuppositions in a closed loop. So it’s not just that the symbolic order is all of a sudden fully here – there was nothing, and a moment later it is all here -, but there is nothing and then, all of a sudden, it is as if the symbolic order was always already here, as if there was never a time without it. (Marx deals with this problem apropos the myth of the “primitive accumulation”: what he is looking for is not the origins of capitalism but its contingent genealogy sustained by no teleological push, which is why “the anatomy of man is the key to the anatomy of ape.”) The Hegelian wager is that one *can* account for such emergences: the dialectical reversal is precisely such an emergence of a new order without an outside. So how can we imagine such emergence within the space of Levi-Strauss’s theory? In a famous passage from *Du miel aux cendres*, Levi-Strauss tries to define the relationship between his structuralism and history – the passage makes it clear what he meant when he characterized his own thought as “Kantianism without the transcendental subject”:

“structural analysis does not reject history. On the contrary, it grants it a preeminent place, one owing to the irreducible contingency without which we could not even conceive necessity. For insofar as behind the apparent diversity of human societies, structural analysis claims to go back to fundamental and common properties, it foregoes explaining not particular differences which it can account for by specifying in each ethnographic context the laws of invariance that govern their production, but rather the fact that these differences given *virtually as compossibles* are not all confirmed by experience and that only some of them have been *actualized*. To be viable, an investigation completely focused on structures begins by bowing to the power and inanity of the event.”¹³

The basic idea is clear: structural analysis deploys the matrix of all possible variations, and history adds the external contingency on account of which only some variations are realized... But is such a concept enough, does it fit Levi-Strauss’s own practice? Do we not find in Levi-Strauss’s work indications of a more complex relation between structure and history? His first

step was the introduction of self-reflexivity into the signifying order: if the identity of a signifier is nothing but the series of its constitutive differences, then every signifying series has to be supplemented – “sutured” - by a reflexive signifier which has no determinate meaning (signified), since it stands only for the presence of meaning as such (as opposed to its absence). The first to fully articulate the necessity of such a signifier was Claude Levi-Strauss in his famous interpretation of “*mana*”; his achievement was to de-mystify *mana*, reducing its irrational connotation of a mythic/magic power to a precise symbolic function. Levi-Strauss’s starting point is that the language as a bearer of meaning by definition arises at once, covering the entire horizon: “Whatever may have been the moment and the circumstances of its appearance in the ascent of animal life, language can only have arisen all at once. Things cannot have begun to signify gradually.”¹⁴ This sudden emergence, however, introduces an imbalance between the two orders of the signifier and the signified: since the signifying network is finite, it cannot adequately cover the entire endless field of the signified. In this way,

»a fundamental situation perseveres which arises out of the human condition: namely, that man has from the start had at his disposition a signifier-totality which he is at a loss to know how to allocate to a signified, given as such, but no less unknown for being given. There is always a non-equivalence or 'inadequation' between the two, a non-fit and overflow which divine understanding alone can soak up; this generates a signifier-surfeit relative to the signifieds to which it can be fitted. So, in man's effort to understand the world, he always disposes of a surplus of signification /.../ That distribution of a supplementary ration /.../ is absolutely necessary to insure that, in total, the available signifier and the mapped-out signified may remain in the relationship of complementarity which is the very condition of the exercise of symbolic thinking.«¹⁵

Every signifying field thus has to be “sutured” by a supplementary zero-signifier, »a *zero symbolic value*, that is, a sign marking the necessity of a supplementary symbolic content over and above that which the signified already contains.«¹⁶ This signifier is »a symbol in its pure state«: lacking any determinate meaning, it stands for the presence of meaning AS SUCH in contrast to its absence; in a further dialectical twist, one should add that the mode of appearance of this supplementary signifier which stands for meaning as such is non-sense (Gilles Deleuze developed this point in his *Logic of Sense*). Notions like *mana* thus »represent nothing more or less than that *floating signifier*.¹⁷ And, to go back to the quote from *Du miel aux cendres*: is this “floating signifier” not precisely the signifier which represents, WITHIN the symbolic structural matrix of all possible virtualities, its very opposite, the EXTERNALITY of

pure factual contingency – or, to put it in Hegelese, in the floating signifier, the universality of the symbolic function encounters itself in its “oppositional determination”?

There is a further complication in Levi-Strauss’s procedure which renders problematic the simple opposition of structure and history. His basic thesis is that human history consists in a series of contingent catastrophes or falls: the invention of writing, the “Greek miracle,” the rise of monotheism, Descartes and modern industrial-scientific civilization... Levi-Strauss insists on the contingency of these falls – say, there is no necessity in the “Greek miracle” which took place due to a thoroughly contingent overlapping of multiple conditions. These Falls are thus not simply variations within an ahistorical structural matrix, they are cuts, contingent explosions of the New. Levi-Strauss’s dream is here the idea of possible virtual alternate histories: not that nothing New would have emerged and that we would have remained within the old universe of *pensee sauvage*, but that *each new Fall is accompanied by (or gives rise to) a virtual shadow of alternate possibilities*: “Indeed, one invariant trait of Levi-Strauss’s catastrophic history is that, at each turning point, at each bifurcation, there is the shadow of an alternative history, the phantom of what has never existed, but might have existed.”¹⁸ These alternate possibilities are not simply variations within an eternal matrix; the point is rather that each historical event, each emergence of the New, each Fall, is always split between what actually happened and its failed alternatives.¹⁹

The key problem is thus the umbilical cord that connects a formal-transcendental structure to its contingent historical content: how is the Real of history inscribed into a structure? Let’s approach this problem at its most abstract, apropos historiography itself. Hayden White²⁰ defines the historical work as a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that classifies past structures and processes in order to explain what they were by representing them as models: a historian doesn’t just find history: he historian takes events that have happened and makes a story out of them, i.e., he reorganizes them into a narrative prose discourse. He does this by arranging events in a certain order, deciding which events in the chronicle to include and exclude, and stressing some events and subordinating others, all this in order to answer the questions: what happened? when? how? why? In his answers, a historian relies on three types of explanations: Emplotment, Argument, Ideological implication. For each of these three explanations, there are four types of forms from which the historian can choose.

Emplotment - “every history, even the most ‘synchronic’ of them, will be emplotted in some way”. The four types of emplotment are: Romance (the drama of self-identification, including a

hero's triumph over evil), Satire (the opposite of romance: people are captives in the world until they die), Comedy (harmony between the natural and the social; causes for celebration), Tragedy (a hero, through a fall or test, learns through resignation to work within the limitations of the world, and the audience learns as well).

Argument - the four types of argument are: Formalist (identification of objects by classifying, labelling, categorizing: "any historiography in which the depiction of the variety, color, and vividness of the historical field is taken as the central aim of the work" (White, 14); Organicist (individual part of the whole is more than the sum of the parts; goal oriented, the principles are not laws but are an integral part of human freedom); Mechanistic (finding laws that govern the operations of human activities); Contextualism (events explained by their relationships to similar events; traces threads back to origins).

Ideology - reflects ethics and assumptions the historian has about life, how past events effect the present, and how we ought to act in the present; claims the authority of "science" or "realism". There are again four types: Conservative (history evolves; we can hope for utopia, but change occurs slowly as part of the natural rhythm); Liberal (progression of social history is the result of changes in law and government); Radical (utopia is imminent and must be effected by revolutionary means); Anarchist (the state is corrupt and therefore it must be destroyed and a new community must be started).

The historian also "prefigures" the act of writing history by writing within a particular trope, one of four deep poetic structures: metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, and irony. "[Tropes] are especially useful for understanding the operations by which the contents of experience which resist description in unambiguous prose representations can be prefiguratively grasped and prepared for conscious apprehension." (White, 34) The four tropes are: metaphor (one phenomena is compared or contrasted to another in the manner of analogy or simile); synecdoche (use a part of something to symbolize the quality of the whole; for example, "He is all heart"); metonymy (substitution of the name of a thing for the whole, eg., "sail" for "ship"); irony (literal meaning makes no sense figuratively--examples are paradox (oxymoron) or the "manifestly absurd expression" (catachresis). Metaphor is representational, metonymy is reductionist, synecdoche is integrative, and irony is negational. - Furthermore, White has broken down each of the four modes into four categories, so that we get a complex proto-Kantian a priori formal scheme:

<u>emplotment</u>	<u>Argument</u>	<u>Ideology</u>	<u>poetic structure</u>
Romantic	Formalist	Anarchist	Synecdoche
Tragic	Mechanistic	Radical	Metaphor
Comic	Organicist	Conservative	Metonymy
Satirical	Contextualist	Liberal	Irony

White himself denies being a relativist or post-modernist, asserting that the reality of events in the past is not contradicted by literary portrayals of those events. But he nonetheless remains within a Kantian space, opposing the Kantian formal-transcendental apriori of an atemporal scheme or matrix and the contingent reality which actualizes possibilities prescribed by the a priori scheme – the real is for White the contingent event which affects the scheme from outside. This model can go wrong in two ways:

--- First, reality doesn't fit it, doesn't fill in all its places, all the options it allows, so that some options remain blank, empty possibilities with no actualization. This notion is Levi-Straussian, it asserts the deficit of reality with regard to structural matrix.

--- Second, the empiricist shift of perspective: there is too much of reality, reality is too rich, it eludes any matrix. This is the commonsense notion: every conceptual network is too rough and abstract to catch the fine texture of reality out there.

The proper Hegelian way is the third one: what if there is an immanent structural inconsistency, so that the formal matrix is thwarted/twisted/coiled immanently, on account of an inherent antagonism, not because of the excess of reality? What if we were to discover that the fact that some options remain blank, empty possibilities with no actualization, indicates that the matrix proposed by White is an attempt to bring together two other different matrixes and to obliterate their antagonism. It is HERE that we touch the real: the real is not external reality too rich to be captured by a formal matrix, but the antagonism causing the formal split of matrixes. We cannot locate this real directly in reality but only through the dealock of the structural formalization of reality. This real (antagonism) is not relative, it is the »absolute« of a given historical constellation, its fixed impossibility/point of reference. This is how we can avoid relativism even if we accept that historical stuff is always organized into a narrative which is partial and

engaged: there is a conflict of narratives, and the Real is touched by this conflict that maintains a distance of narratives from reality – the Real is inaccessible, and the Real is the very obstacle which makes it inaccessible – this is how the (narrative) form itself falls into its content.

Recall Claude Levi-Strauss's exemplary analysis, from his *Structural Anthropology*, of the spatial disposition of buildings in the Winnebago, one of the Great Lake tribes, might be of some help here. The tribe is divided into two sub-groups ("moieties"), "those who are from above" and "those who are from below"; when we ask an individual to draw on a piece of paper, or on sand, the ground-plan of his/her village (the spatial disposition of cottages), we obtain two quite different answers, depending on his/her belonging to one or the other sub-group. Both perceive the village as a circle; but for one sub-group, there is within this circle another circle of central houses, so that we have two concentric circles, while for the other sub-group, the circle is split into two by a clear dividing line. In other words, a member of the first sub-group (let us call it "conservative-corporatist") perceives the ground-plan of the village as a ring of houses more or less symmetrically disposed around the central temple, whereas a member of the second ("revolutionary-antagonistic") sub-group perceives his/her village as two distinct heaps of houses separated by an invisible frontier...²¹ The point Levi-Strauss wants to make is that this example should in no way entice us into cultural relativism, according to which the perception of social space depends on the observer's group-belonging: the very splitting into the two "relative" perceptions implies a hidden reference to a constant - not the objective, "actual" disposition of buildings but a traumatic kernel, a fundamental antagonism the inhabitants of the village were unable to symbolize, to account for, to "internalize", to come to terms with, an imbalance in social relations that prevented the community from stabilizing itself into a harmonious whole. The two perceptions of the ground-plan are simply two mutually exclusive endeavors to cope with this traumatic antagonism, to heal its wound via the imposition of a balanced symbolic structure. It is here that one can see it what precise sense the Real intervenes through anamorphosis. We have first the "actual," "objective," arrangement of the houses, and then its two different symbolizations which both distort in an anamorphic way the actual arrangement. However, the "real" is here not the actual arrangement, but the traumatic core of some social antagonism which distorts the tribe members' view of the actual arrangement of the houses in their village.²²

At this level, truth is no longer something that depends on the faithful reproduction of facts. One should introduce here the difference between (factual) truth and truthfulness: what makes a report of a raped woman (or any other narrative of a trauma) truthful is its very factual

unreliability, confusion, inconsistency. If the victim were able to report on her painful and humiliating experience in a clear way, with all the data arranged into a consistent order of exposition, this very quality would make us suspicious. The same holds for the unreliability of the verbal reports given by Holocaust survivors: a witness who was able to offer a clear narrative of his camp experience would thereby disqualify himself. In a Hegelian way, the problem is here part of the solution: the very deficiencies of the traumatized subject's report on the facts bear witness to the truthfulness of his report, since they signal that the reported content has contaminated the very form in which it is reported.

The Real is thus not in what is the same, the transcendent hard core beyond our narratives, it resides in the very gap of narratives - why? Because this gap between narratives (narrative forms) brings out what is *ur-verdraengt* from/in the content. Commenting on a short dream of one of his patients (a woman who first refused altogether to tell Freud the dream "because it was so indistinct and muddled") which revealed itself to refer to the fact that the patient was pregnant but was in doubts as to who is the baby's father (i.e., the parenthood was "indistinct and muddled"), Freud draws a key dialectical conclusion:

"the lack of clarity shown by the dream was a part of the material which instigated the dream: part of this material, that is, was represented in the *form* of the dream. *The form of a dream or the form in which it is dreamt is used with quite surprising frequency for representing its concealed subject-matter.*"²³

The gap between form and content is here properly dialectical, in contrast to the transcendental gap whose point is that every content appears within an a priori formal frame, and we should always be aware of the invisible transcendental frame which "constitutes" the content we perceive – or, in structural terms, we should distinguish between elements and formal places these elements occupy. We only attain the level of proper dialectical analysis of a form when we conceive a certain formal procedure not as expressing a certain aspect of the (narrative) content, but as marking/signalling the part of content that is excluded from the explicit narrative line, so that - therein resides the proper theoretical point - if we want to reconstruct "all" of the narrative content, we must reach beyond the explicit narrative content as such, and include some formal features which act as the stand-in for the "repressed" aspect of the content. In melodramas, the emotional excess that cannot express itself directly in the narrative line, finds its outlet in the ridiculously sentimental musical accompaniment or in other formal features. In

this respect, standard melodramas are to be opposed to Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves*: in both cases, we are dealing with the tension between form and content; however, in *Breaking the Waves*, the excess is located in the content (the subdued pseudo-documentary form makes palpable the excessive content), while in a melodrama, the excess in the form obfuscates and thus renders palpable the flaw in content. Therein resides the key consequence of the move from Kant to Hegel: the very gap between content and form is to be reflected back into content itself, as an indication that this content is not all, that something was repressed/excluded from it.

But why does such a reflexive move bring us beyond the transcendental dimension? By way of reflecting the ideological or cognitive antinomy back into reality, does it not simply establish a homology between the inconsistency in ideology and the antagonisms in reality, and does it thereby not provide a new case of the Marxist-Leninist ridiculous »theory of reflection«? No, since the parallel runs between *transcendental* antinomy and – not reality, but – the Real: the distance from reality registers the real, the real that is a gap in reality, making it non-all. So the solution is not to reach to the In-Itself beyond the gap that separates subject(ive appearance) from it, but to perceive how this gap itself is In-Itself, how it is a feature of the Real. To clarify this key point, we should first leave behind the cognitivist naturalization of language which follows Chomsky's axiom that language is a biological organ of our body, obeying the same evolutionary logic like all other organs; Lacan's axiom is, on the contrary,

“*the ontological break between language and the living being which speaks*. It is the fact that language, far from being a product of spontaneous maturation, falls on the living being which speaks and deregulates it in its enjoyment. It is the fact that the major effect of language is the sexual non-relationship, except if language is on the contrary the effect of this non-relationship: ‘Is it the absence of this relationship which exiles humans into the habitat of language? Or is it because humans dwell in language that this relationship can only be half-spoken (*inter-dit*: prohibited)?”²⁴

Is, however, the abyss of this circular interdependence the last horizon of our thinking? Is the cognitivist naturalization-normalization of language really the only alternative? Should we not make a step further beyond the ontological break between language and the living body and ask: how must the real be structured so that the break between language and living body can emerge in it? In other words, language colonizing the living body from without cannot be the last word since, in some sense, language itself has to be part of the real – and how to think this

belonging outside naturalization of language? There is only one consistent answer: by way of de-naturalizing nature itself.

Aaron Schuster drew attention to how Lacan himself oscillates here between the (predominant) transcendental approach and timid hints to its beyond. Lacan's standard topos is the radical discontinuity between (biological) life and the Symbolic: the Symbolic tortures/derails life, it subordinates life to a foreign compulsion, depriving it forever of its homeostasis – the move from instinct to drive, from need to desire. Within this perspective, the symbolic order is “always-already here” as our unsurpassable horizon, every account of its genesis amounts to a fantasmatic obfuscation of its constitutive gap. In this Lacanian-structuralist version of “hermeneutic circle,” all we can do is to circumscribe the void/impossibility which makes the Symbolic non-all and inconsistent, the void in which external limit coincides with the internal one (the void delimitates the Symbolic from the real; however, this limitation cuts into the Symbolic itself). However, from time to time, and more times the later we follow Lacan's teaching, we find echoes of the Schelling-Benjamin-Heidegger topic of a pain in nature itself, the pain which gets expressed/resolved in human speech – the Freudian *Unbehagen in der Kultur* gets thus supplemented by an uncanny *Unbehagen in der Natur* itself:

"imagine all of nature waiting for the gift of speech so it can express how bad it is to be a vegetable or a fish. Is it not the special torment of nature to be deprived of the means of conveying its pent-up aggravation, unable to articulate even the simplest lament, 'Ah me! I am the sea'? And does not the emergence on earth of the speaking being effectively release this terrible organic tension and bring it to a higher level of non-resolution? While there are some intriguing passages in Lacan's seminars where he speculates on the infinite pain of being a plant, raising the possibility of an *Unbehagen in Der Natur*, for the most part he conceives the relationship between nature and culture to be one of radical discontinuity."²⁵

In order not to mistake this shift for an outright regression into natural mysticism, one should read it in a strictly Hegelian way: we do not magically overcome the impossibility which cuts across the Symbolic – what we do is to grasp how this impossibility which seemed to keep us apart from the Real, which rendered the Real impossible, is the very feature which locates the Symbolic into the Real. The Real is not beyond the Symbolic, it is the impossibility inscribed into the very heart of the Symbolic. Hegel's term for this impossibility inscribed into the very heart of the Real is “weakness of nature,” the “impotence of nature to obey the concept”: nature resists

conceptualization not because it is too strong, in excess over every conceptual frame, but because it is too weak, impotent:

“The infinite wealth and variety of forms and, what is most irrational, the contingency which enters into the external arrangement of natural things, have been extolled as the sublime freedom of nature, even as the divinity of nature, or at least the divinity present in it. This confusion of contingency, caprice, and disorder, with freedom and rationality is characteristic of sensuous and unphilosophical thinking. This impotence /*Ohnmacht*/ of nature sets limits to philosophy /.../. In the impotence of nature to adhere strictly to the notion in its realization, lies the difficulty and, in many cases, the impossibility of finding fixed distinctions for classes and orders from an empirical consideration of nature. Nature everywhere blurs the essential limits of species and genera by intermediate and defective forms, which continually furnish counter examples to every fixed distinction; this even occurs within a specific genus, that of man, for example, where monstrous births /.../ must be considered as belonging to the genus.”²⁶

This is the classic Hegelian reversal: what at first appears as the impotence or limitation of our knowledge, i.e., as the impossibility of grasping conceptually the wealth of natural phenomena, is effectively the impotence of nature itself. And, effectively, do we not find exactly the same constellation in quantum physics where indeterminacy (complementarity) points towards a “weakness of nature,” its inability to fully determine itself?

¹ Quoted from <http://www.friesian.com/hist-2.htm>.

² C. E. Elger, A. D. Friederici, C. Koch, H. Luhmann, C. von der Malsburg, R. Menzel, H. Monyer, F. Rösler, G. Roth, H. Scheich and W. Singer, »Das Manifest: Elf führende Neurowissenschaftler über Gegenwart und Zukunft der Hirnforschung,« *Gehirn und Geist*, Vol. 6, 2004: 37.

³ Jürgen Habermas ‘The Language Game of Responsible Agency and the Problem of Free Will: How Can Epistemic Dualism be Reconciled with Ontological Monism?’ in *Philosophical Explorations*, Vol. 10, No. 1, March 2007, p. 31.

⁴ Habermas, op.cit., p. 35.

⁵ Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, New York: Harper 1977, p. 20.

⁶ Letter from 11 October 1931, *Martin Heidegger – Elisabeth Blochmann. Briefwechsel 1918-1969*, Marbach: Deutsches Literatur-Archiv 1990, p. 44.

⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999.p. 482.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books, 2007. p. 254.

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1995, p. 271.

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, New York: Fordham University Press 2008, p. 19.

¹¹ G.K.Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*,

http://www.dur.ac.uk/martin.ward/gkc/books/everlasting_man.html#chap-l-i.

¹² Quoted from Etienne Klein, *Discours sur l'origine de l'univers*, Paris: Flammarion 2010, p. 157.

¹³ Claude Levi-Strauss, *Mythologiques, Tome 2: Du miel aux cendres*, Paris: Plon 2009, p. 408.

¹⁴ Claude Levi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, London: Routledge, Kegan & Paul 1987, p. 59.

¹⁵ Op.cit., p. 62-63.

¹⁶ Op. cit., p. 64.

¹⁷ For a more detailed account of this reflexivity, see Chapter 9 of Slavoj Žizek, *Less Than Nothing*, London: Verso Books 2012.

¹⁸ Christopher Johnson, "All Played Out? Levi-Strauss's Philosophy of History", *New Left Review* 79 (Jan/Feb 2013), p. 65.

¹⁹ Along these lines, John Millbank proposed an alternate modernity: if, instead of the rise of Protestantism, a Catholic renewal outlined by Meister Eckhart and Nicolaus de Cusa were to prevail, we would have gotten a much "softer" capitalism, with less individualist competitiveness and more social solidarity.

²⁰ See Hayden White, *Metahistory*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP 1973.

²¹ Claude Levi-Strauss, "Do Dual Organizations Exist?", in *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books 1963), p. 131-163; the drawings are on pages 133-134. For a more detailed analysis of this example, see Chapter III of Slavoj Žizek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, Cambridge (Ma): MIT Press 2003.

²² For a more detailed analysis of this example from Levi-Strauss, see Chapter 3 of Slavoj Žizek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, Cambridge: MIT Press 2003.

²³ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1976, p. 446.

²⁴ Francois Balmes, *Structure, logique, alienation*, Toulouse: eres 2011, p. 15. The quote within the quote is from Jacques Lacan, "L'etourdit," in *Autres Ecrits*, Paris: Editions du Seuil 2001, p. 455.

²⁵ Aaron Schuster, *The Third Kind of Complaint* (unpublished manuscript).

²⁶ *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 2004, p. 23-24.