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Imbricating the Antagonisms: A Žižekian Mediation of the Hegel-Kierkegaard Opposition

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Abstract

This paper draws together a complex assemblage of analysis, critique, and exemplification in its attempt to provide cogent argumentation for its claim that the notion of subjectivity, as championed by Kierkegaard, is immanent to the Hegelian system despite Kierkegaard's express claims otherwise. By simultaneously resisting and insisting on the schismatic differences between Hegel and Kierkegaard, this paper endeavors to illustrate what I allege to be a definite homology between Hegel's absolute Idea and Kierkegaard's concept of essential knowing, which together posit a subjectivity that is defined by the inherent tension of contradiction, and which makes up a particular "materialism" that inheres at the core of a disjunctive absolutism; the truth of which is the subject as such. The emergence of this consideration is to be located in a critico-theoretical conjunction of my own mustering, involving but not limited to Adrian Johnston's transcendental materialist theory of subjectivity, Kant's Thing-in-itself (Ding an sich), and the radical heterodoxy of Slavoj Žižek's dialectical-materialist hermeneutics of Hegelian philosophy. In fine, the aim of this paper is twofold: (1) to provide an (exegetical) account of Hegel's absolute Idea à la Žižek's newly minted dialectical materialism, and (2) to thereby put forward a "neo-Hegelian" reading of Kierkegaard's concept of essential knowing; a reading, I hope, that will pair nicely Kierkegaard's concept of essential knowing with Hegel's absolute Idea—insofar as the very subjectivity that Kierkegaard claims to be lacking in the Hegelian system is nonetheless central to it.

I. The preliminaries to an extensive argument

Known for being one of Hegel's most ironically scathing critics, Søren Kierkegaard, with his emphasis on identifying truth with subjectivity, decisively set himself apart from Hegel's putatively subject-less Logic. It is my concern, however, that the stock of subjectivity for which Kierkegaard expressly lobbied throughout much of his own work nonetheless inheres at the core of Hegel's system. Accordingly, it is through an extended series of cogent analysis, critique, and exemplification that this paper will both construct, and educe vindication for, the assertion that Kierkegaard's concept of *essential knowing*, of which a detailed account can be found in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*,¹ and which I will briefly elucidate in the latter part of this paper, is distinctly homologous with Hegel's conceptualization of the *absolute Idea*; thus providing a measure of defense for my initial claim: that the notion of subjectivity championed by Kierkegaard is, despite his claims otherwise, immanent to the Hegelian system.

Due to the Gordian nature of my thesis, the present disquisition will snake its way along a tortuous path, one that I have carefully beaten into shape through a forest of apposite scholarship, of which I am decidedly confident will provide adequate justification for the elements I have chosen for the assembly of my argument. The claims advanced by this paper have as their basis an unorthodox though compelling account of Hegel's absolute Idea, an account for which I will cite chiefly from philosopher Slavoj Žižek's hermeneutics of Hegelian philosophy. Additionally, in order to fortify my claims against potential counterargument, this paper will look to various points of contact with other scholarship germane to the themes I will be discussing. Thus hereunder I provide a capsuled summation and minimal critique of Adrian Johnston's doctrine of transcendental materialism, followed by a brief detour through Kant's philosophy of the Thing-in-itself (*Ding an sich*), which shall, propitiously enough, lead to the speculative truth of Hegel's absolute Idea. Subsequently, and finally, I will round everything off with a faithful portrayal of what I insist is an unmistakable homology between Hegel's absolute Idea and Kierkegaard's concept of essential knowing.

In fine, the aim of this paper is twofold: (1) serving as springboard for what follows, to provide an (exegetical) account of Hegel's absolute Idea à la Žižek, and (2) to

thereby put forward a "neo-Hegelian" reading of Kierkegaard's concept of essential knowing; a reading, I hope, that will successfully elevate the concept of essential knowing to the level of the absolute Idea. Thus the overall intent of this paper is to explicate, in quality discursive detail, the sundry ways in which I find Kierkegaard's concept of essential knowing to be evidently comparable to Hegel's absolute Idea, insofar as the very subjectivity Kierkegaard claims to be lacking in the Hegelian system is nonetheless central to it.

II. Situating the subject within Hegel's absolute Idea, with a little help from Žižek

So to prepare what I view as necessary for illustrating the ways in which Kierkegaard's essential knowing is markedly akin to Hegel's absolute Idea, I will begin appropriately enough by invoking Žižek's claim that the absolute Idea—as the apogee of expression of the concept's inner self-realizing movement, often conceived of as the subjective concept's ultimate realization²—is *not* to be conceived in its full actuality as a closed totality (Žižek 2013; Žižek 2014: 378-89). Rather than envisioning it as a "whole" of any closed sort, this viewpoint suggests that Hegel's absolute Idea involves, at the very core of its structure, something akin to an abiding *hole*, which militates against the formational closure presupposed by the conceptual design of a complete whole-formation. This way of thinking thus posits an absolute Idea that is always-already ruptured from within; an absolute framework afflicted with irreconcilable antagonisms, possessed by beastly contradictions and inconsistencies, reflective of a world permeated with an intrinsic ubiquity of individuated rents and ruptures. Such an image of the absolute Idea contains *within itself* its own lack of absolute totality, precisely because what is central to the absolute Idea as such is the "self-repelling Gap" of "absolute Difference"³—i.e., the pure subject "*as such*"—the site of negativity, of determinateness *qua* determinateness.⁴

Before jumping into the philosophico-theoretical minutiae of explaining the above-posed claim, and, in order to place subjectivity in what I consider to be its relevant place, that is, at the core of Hegel's absolute Idea, I find it vital to the overall claims of this paper—as well as for a greater relief of the figure of the subject as such—to provide a definition for subjectivity that will fit nicely within, and thus pertinent to, the

rhetorical boundaries that delineate the corpora associated with our two philosophers, Hegel and Kierkegaard. That being said, subjectivity will be treated in this paper as being synonymous with the Kierkegaardian site of indeterminate Being, which strives towards determinate Being (a formulation that reads so Hegelian, one is almost involuntarily compelled to check the source).⁵ Consequently (and as I will expound on later), the reader is expected to ascertain Hegel's absolute Idea as a framework for thinking a non-reductive, dialectical-materialist ontology that affirms the subject as such as a particular "materialism," and which posits the figure of the subject as a sort of "gap" or "discord" which inheres within, and thereby "introduces dynamism" into, the very world from which, in which, and by which subjectivity as such arises. This paper thus insists that, in order to grasp Hegel's absolute Idea in all its puzzling entirety, one must first come to terms with the dizzying concept of a Nature (i.e., substance) that is constitutively fragmented, spread through with irreducible differences that inhere between legions of incommensurables. This dialectical-materialist account of reality thus posits negativity—that is, the "self-repelling Gap" of "absolute Difference"—as being immanent to its own productive matrices and networks of relation, of which subjectivity and the symbolic universe within which the subject as such is inscribed, are, together, a demonstrable instantiation.

Theoretically speaking, because the symbolic order takes on a universal character from the very moment it emerges—i.e., as soon as the symbol arrives it brings with it an entire cosmos of symbols, which "retroactively renders its natural (pre-) conditions" into analyzable, readable formalizations—it is impossible to conjecture accurately what precedes it (Žižek 2014: 226-7). It is not in spite of this fact but rather *because of it*, that it can be stated that what precedes the symbolic order is a specific element that, although non-dialectical in its own right, nonetheless serves as the very engine behind the developmental movements and tendencies of dialectical structures. For it can be argued that this inscrutable element sets in rotary motion the very endeavor that takes as its aims the symbolic capturing of said element. This idea is not dissimilar, in my mind, from, say, Schelling's concept of the "infinite potency of being (*Seyn*)," which he posits as the very source of being itself, the movement of which is that of "particular possibilities within this possibility"; or, as he also puts it, as a form of

potency of something that is not found in nature but is rather nature's substratum (Kierkegaard 1989: 337-8). There is intimation here that Schelling is promulgating the assertion of pure possibility as antecedent to reality as such. From this perspective we can surmise the following: that this non-dialectical element gives rise to the symbolic and the latter's infinite trajectories of (speculative/theoretical) mediation. I will argue, then, that Hegel's absolute Idea accounts for this thorny detail in every respect; viz., that there is always a part of the signifier which resists meaning; and that this recalcitrant piece of the pre-symbolic real, to speak in the parlance of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, inheres at the very core of the symbolic order in the guise of presuppositions, the aim of which is to posit the natural (pre-) conditions of the subject and its concomitant symbolic universe. To that extent, and to reiterate what I believe to be one of Žižek's more crucial and incisive claims: the real is thus a kind of *a priori* form which, "in order to actualize itself, needs to be applied to, or encounter, some positive reality (natural, human)" (2014: 224). It is this "non-dialectical" core, I will argue, that is the very pith of the Hegelian negativity that is part and parcel of the absolute Idea. Suffice it to cite the following passage from Žižek's *Absolute Recoil: Towards A New Foundation Of Dialectical Materialism*:

for Hegel, the non-dialectical starting point of the [dialectical] process ... is retroactively sublated/mediated and as such posited, [thus] the non-dialectical aspect is itself dialecticized [...] [In other words,] the aspect of the process which cannot be dialecticized is its very motor, the repetitive [movement] of what Hegel calls "negativity" [...] [viz., the] Kierkegaardian-Freudian pure repetition, [by which] the dialectical movement of sublimation [idealization] thus encounters itself outside itself, in the guise of a "blind" compulsion to repeat (*ibid.* 88-9).

Such a rethinking of Hegel's absolute Idea, the endorsement of which I strongly exhort, allows for a much broader and exciting revision, I think. For it is by these fresh lights, initiated by the scintillating wit of Žižek, and made all the brighter by his burgeoning scholarship, that Hegel's absolute Idea can be conceived as necessarily involving a tireless dialectic propelled by a discordant tension, that is, a constitutive lack. Such a lack, I believe, serves as a sort of non-dialectical armature for the absolute Idea;

or rather, to be more precise, such a formal lack figuratively defines the subject, which is intrinsic to the multifarious pseudo-structures of the absolute Idea as such. This persuasion, it seems to me, opens up a far more expansive vista of thought, which permits one to think both dynamically and inventively beyond the traditional doxa of an absolute totality that systematically encompasses and sublates all its differences. Converse to the more familiar and orthodox variants of Hegelian scholarship, then, the Žižekian restitution of Hegel viably conflates Hegelian philosophy with the ardent pushing-forward of theoretical speculation, taking the latter far beyond the overworked and arguably moribund traditional interpretations of dialectical closure.⁶ In effect, and in the most theoretical-modernist sense, we find a new Hegel emerging out of the old Hegel, a Hegelian enterprise that takes into full account and thus appreciates both the inevitable drive towards, and impossibility of, any total or stable system.

To return to a train of thought I set in motion earlier, this account has its basis in the speculative-ontological claim that material reality—(the processes of) life itself—inevitably gets itself bound up in particularities that are subjacent to the multiplex form of the subjective concept; or, what is the same, that bits of reality get caught up in the causal chain of reason, torn asunder by the categories of the understanding, entangled in the imbrolios of desire, contorted by the méconnaissance of the imagination, and so on. Inversely, the subjective concept itself is always-already caught up in the objective reality it reflects and en-/in-forms. This seemingly metaphysical checkmate therefore points up an irrevocable, irreconcilable, antagonism—an aporia firmly situated at the very core of materiality itself (a reality that is congested with materiality), and, *ceteris paribus*, a deadlock that inheres at the core of the absolute Idea just the same—if not for the sole reason that the absolute Idea is that which grasps this reality in its truth as *such*, viz., a truth that takes on the form of constitutive failure; a truth not just of non-closure but a truth that testifies to the way in which non-closure serves as the very condition for formation and deformation, in the most broad sense, of formal structures. Reality, then, to wax the parlance of Žižek, is constitutively split; and the subjective concept—*the subject itself, even*—is none other than the name for this fissure in the structure of Being, which Hegel transposes directly into the absolute Idea as such. In fact, Hegel alludes to this very insight at the beginning of chapter three of the *Logic*,

where he writes that the "absolute idea, as the rational concept that in its reality only rejoins itself, is [...] a turning back to *life* [...] [which] harbors the most extreme opposition within" (Hegel 2010: 735).

III. Transcendental materialism: a case of dialecticizing the non-dialectical

On the whole, such a dialectical-materialist conception is not entirely dissimilar from Adrian Johnston's concept of transcendental materialism, which borrows heavily, and impressively, from Žižek's own corpus of work, and posits the claim that: although subjectivity (mind, reason, etc.) has its basis in matter (materialism: body, cognition, neuronal networks, etc.), material reality is nonetheless always-already "perforated" by irreducible antagonisms and inconsistencies which mark the traces of a transient subjectivity, an autonomous negating force (in the Kantian sense) that transcends its material restrictions, and which is not reducible to any epiphenomenal activity (Johnston 2008).

The essential thrust here is that, of course, material reality is primary; a necessary condition for subjectivity. But the latter is nonetheless (paradoxically) irreducible to its material cause. When subjectivity looks "inward," so to speak, when we plumb the depths of the human psyche, the horrifying apparition that awaits us, Johnston writes, is not some "thriving, pulsating materiality [lying] beneath the smooth, polished surfaces of Imaginary-Symbolic reality" (*ibid.* 106). Instead, the real terror is the featureless void of our autonomy, a "contractive black hole" that has its basis in an unfathomable abyss whose origin is simply the difference between itself and the seemingly limitless throng of subjectivity emanating from this difference, proliferating against the background of an impossible "One." From this viewpoint, Nature—reality itself, even—is seen as weak, malleable, constantly tending towards its own effacement; susceptible to transformations borne out by human thought and endeavor. Though, for what it's worth, it is also undeniably resilient, nascent, procreative, and enduring. Nature thus comprises both ends of a spectrum that cannot close in on itself on account of its own self-contradictory, self-effacing/self-engendering, disposition. Such a description evinces a material reality that, in its primordial rawness, is perhaps none other than an infinite field of potentialities enmeshed in the disordered undulations

of their own varying trajectories that portend an infinite array of possible outcomes. A pulsating (Schellingian) universe composed of "a plurality of twists, turns, folds, nonlinearities, deviations, exceptions, etc." (Žižek 2014: 388), caught up in its own vicious rotary motion that turns incessantly around an impossible One (Žižek 2007). And subjectivity is none other than the introduction of an arresting autonomy of differentiation and symbolic mediation into this strange ur-state of disorder; the imposition of governing Law and signifierness as such, by which prohibition enkindles the possibility of freedom, of knowledge, and so on. Subjectivity, by these lights, is an intervention that can be succinctly defined as the free movement of negation and determination, a movement that engenders recognition of the thing that is negated in the act of negation as such (Žižek 2014: 125-8). This movement of determinateness, of negation, is simultaneously heralded by, created by, and productive of, the subject's curious endeavor to know, to understand, to transgress, and of course—repeat. The subject qua negativity thus introduces the curving of a subjective space, via the symbolic order, the intendment of which is the investment of meaning and identification, enriched by anguish and enjoyment. The subject as such, arraying its determinations of the manifold world under the ordered concepts of the understanding, subsequently pushes, tests, demarcates, traverses, the boundaries and horizons of its encounters, thereby producing a protean complex of knowledge that is persistently haunted by its own intransigent lack—a lack that is nonetheless the result of this movement of negativity borne in on the subject's determinateness as such. A lack that besets the ongoing endeavor for knowledge of what kind of *Thing* the subject "*is*" in the Real, for the knowledge of origins, of place, and of an uncompromising materiality that unrelentingly resists any full and stable systematization. And so hence the Big Divide: there is no original harmony, no yin-yang consonance between these two domains, Substance and Subject. No sturdy, original ground to stage any actual beginning upon. There is only always-already an "opening up" of a precarious "(im-)balance" between the two, sustained by the "self-repelling" gap of "absolute Difference" *as such*.

Johnston's wager, then, is that subjectivity is "genetically produced" out of these fragmentary conditions. For him, subjectivity is a contingent consequence qua effort to shore up, *après coup*, some of life's inherent volatility by means of synthetic unification.

Johnston therefore proffers a post-Kantian materialist ontology of the subject; its unique angle being that subjectivity takes the place of its own absence and, like Richard Dawkin's *meme*, "subsequently come[s] to achieve an independence from [and even a dominance over, in some cases] the 'material' ground of genetic factors and immediate environmental influences" (Johnston 2008: 174).

The difference between Johnston's view and Žižek's, however slight it is, is that Johnston's gappy ontology assumes that "*a very precise biological deadlock*" gives rise to subjectivity, i.e., to negativity; whereas for Žižek negativity is always-already there from the beginning as the void of a "non-beginning." As Žižek himself writes (2014: 225), "the Real is a 'pre-ontological' category, an obstacle/impossibility which undermines every project of ontology." It is against this very background, then, that Johnston's project serves as an exemplary case of dialecticizing the non-dialectical; for it "retroactively sublates/mediates" the Real, and, as such posits this non-dialectical aspect into a positive premise that buttresses his own theory of transcendental materialism. Thus, to speak paradoxically, Johnston's enterprise continue to prevail precisely because the ontology he seeks is barred by its own immanent impossibility; his transcendental materialism is thus none other than a philosophical response to—a "defense formation" against—the implacable aggravations bound up with the sheer impossibility of ever there being any real structured ontology whatsoever. It is a perfect case of positivized negativity if ever there was one. That said, contra to Johnston's claims, the *Real* ontology of subjectivity coincides with the very lack of a definitive ontology. In other words: subjectivity is *not* the inevitable result of radical indeterminateness and biological deadlock, but is the *form* (of appearance) of this indeterminateness, of this deadlock itself—an idea which, as I see it, is represented in every respect by Hegel's absolute Idea, and which is not lost in the least on Kierkegaard. For if it is the case that subjectivity is the *form* of this inherent indeterminateness—e.g., as that which cannot be fully articulated in language—then we are dealing with "an oscillation between the clear presentation, of which formal logic is the paradigm ... and the poetic composition, which signifies what cannot be said" (Badiou 2011: 178).⁷ And as Kierkegaard himself writes (1989: 298-9) in *The Concept of Irony*, living poetically "means becoming clear and transparent to oneself ... in one's

absolute and eternal validity [...] [for] either to be human is the absolute, or all life is nonsense." Here, of course, we should apply a "perverse reversal" to Kierkegaard's words, so that the claim is thus: "Because all life is nonsense, to be human is the absolute." That is to say: there is no harmonious relation between the human and the socio-symbolic big Other; the gap between the two is constitutive, all the way "up" to the absolute itself. To appropriate the words of Žižek, the absolute as such "is a form of the reflected void," for "it signals that we have reflexively noted the limitation of what is given, of our situation" (Žižek 2014: 86).

IV. The absolute Idea is not All

What this argumentation so far implies is that the oscillation between subjective and objective thought (poetics and mathematics, respectively)—the zenith of which is Hegel's absolute Idea—is a, if not *the*, result of the (subjective) movement towards (objective) determination; viz., a sort of figuration of the subject's desire for order and consistency, for truth and meaning, which paradoxically only aggravates and increases the degree of an immutable albeit constitutive disorder in which it is essentially grounded. The absolute Idea therefore emerges out of a crucible of failure, namely, the inevitable failure to bridge the gap between the formal structures of subject and object. That is to say: the absolute Idea has as its condition of possibility the very failure to shore up the (constitutive) disorder of which the subject not only represents but also increases and encounters along its tortuous path towards "truth."

Conceptual thought is thus pressed into service by reason, by desire, and so on (Gratton 2014: unpaginated). Or, to view this from a slightly different angle: there is, on the one hand, the mute presence of damp, dense matter: the "inertia of the Real": an interminable domain that stands opposed to the subjective concept that *thinks* this very domain in its imaginary and symbolic forms. And, on the other hand, there is of course situated in this materialism the presence of the subjective concept itself, the categories of logic, the transcendental imagination, and so on, which culminate in the absolute Idea. In its vulgarized conception, the absolute Idea is often seen as the "final conclusion of the dialectic," a final cause that kicks off the endeavor to provide a consistent and coherent understanding of the absolute that is "Becoming"; and thus it is

either portrayed as encompassing, in systematic objective thought, the very reality in which the subject is inscribed, or, as the divine idea from which all of reality unfolds. But as this paper maintains, despite the vulgarized and/or mystical accounts of the absolute Idea (those interpretations that either posit Hegel's absolute Idea as that from which everything unfolds, or as something that seeks to sublimate and resolve all the differences inherent to Being into one consistent, crystallized, systematic totality of idealized objectivity), there persists the following implicit and paradoxical condition of its possibility: that the absolute Idea can exist only insofar as it involves itself in a material reality that is chock full of incommensurate elements which proliferate and transform against the ineluctable impossibility of their totalization, toward which the understanding nevertheless directs itself lest it capitulates to a psychosis of confusion. Thus the absolute Idea is compatible only with a reality that is *not All*; a material reality that includes within its objective coordinates the oblique site of subjective thought itself. With that being said, conscious thought (and all it entails)—the nadir point of a limitative paradox—is none other than a material distortion that cannot be dispensed with. For this distortion not only thwarts the full systematization of any and all objective theories that are aimed at answering the question of subjectivity and idealism's inclosure within the objective manifold—more than just that, this distortion also serves as the very motor behind such theoretical projection and development itself. Thus we are dealing with that non-dialectical piece of the Real, instantiated by the determinative instability of the very theoretical edifices that take shape around it. This, I claim, is how we must conceive of the absolute Idea: what is absolute about it is the "coincidence of the pure antagonistic difference with the excess that blurs the difference" (Žižek 2014: 378); that excess being none other than cognition, the concept, the Idea itself—namely, *subjectivity as such*. In other words, Hegel's absolute Idea stands for the introduction of subjectivity into objective reality; it stands for the fact that objective reality is *not All*.

According to this account, the absolute Idea is something that inevitably fails to close in on itself, failing to fully objectify itself via abstraction and speculation. It cannot be grasped in its entirety by way of objective reflection precisely because, as Kierkegaard would perhaps have put it, the thinking subject cannot get fully outside herself, and thus her every attempt at self-objectification via "objective reflection" is

never without its subjective obverse—for all acts of objective reflection presuppose a conscious subject at work, operating behind such an act, which, as demonstrated above, has its basis in a radical indeterminateness which precipitates the movement of determinate Being. And so, with Hegel, the more desperate I am to apprehend any knowledge of "objective" absoluteness, the sooner this absoluteness melts away, as if I were clenching, in the humid palm of my perspiring hand, a ball of ice destined from the start to dissolve in the resolute firmness of my own grasp, thus leaving in the wake of its saturated absence the lingering afterthoughts of the act of the grasp itself.

It is the antagonism between objectivity and subjectivity, an antagonism of supreme robustness, that is none other than the "deepest" insight to be attained. The absolute Idea is therefore self-relating insofar as it firmly, unequivocally, grasps in its notion this essential detail of material reality: that the limits to our understanding mark the frontiers of a universe that only the absolute Idea is capable of grasping precisely as *such*—that is, as limited, as inherently contradictory, as *not All*.

What Hegel's absolute Idea presents, then, is a certain trauma: the sheer lack of any original wholeness. And, no less important, it reveals the fact that all attempts at absolutizing are always-already eclipsed by the permanence of a tenacious incompleteness: the transient finitude of the subject. The absolute Idea thus serves as a necessary supplement to an intransigent and partial reality, one that is, for lack of a better term, *not-All*. Thus the absolute Idea is literally the reflection of this (not-All) reality. Thus the absolute Idea is itself *not All*.

To help clarify this, I elect the following passage from Kierkegaard's *CUP*:

God does not think, he creates; God does not exist [*existere*], he is eternal. A human being thinks and exists, and existence [*Existents*] separates thinking and being, holds them apart from each other in succession (1992: 332).

Kierkegaard, as the reader should be apprised, takes issue with Hegel's absolutism; and it is with this preceding passage that he attempts to lay bare what he views as the absurdity behind the Hegelian concept of the absolute Idea. What Kierkegaard is attempting to show here, is that, despite man's penchant for engaging in

systematic, speculative thought, life, for man, cannot be a system to be grasped in the absolute. Furthermore, for Kierkegaard, life does not congeal into a single complete system even for God. Rather, as I understand it, Kierkegaard is attempting to illustrate how, *if life were* a system, then only God Himself would be privileged with the position of presiding over such an omniscient site, a site that would afford Him the *sub specie aeternitatis* perspective of All, since God is the only "(non-) being" conceivable/imaginable by man that can preside over all of existence outside of existence as such. Systematic thinkers, on the other hand, as Kierkegaard views them—being *humans* that *think*—are fully inscribed in the matrices of existence, and are therefore denied access to any actual, authentic, absolute and systematic God's-eye-view. But what I am putting forth in this paper is the claim that Hegel's absolute Idea ought not to be paralleled with any sort of God's-eye view; that the absolute should neither be reduced, nor aggrandized, to any sort of all-knowing/all-seeing position. Instead, what if Hegel's absolute Idea is none other than the very reflection of this Kierkegaardian limit itself? If so, then as such, the Hegelian concept of the absolute Idea simply punctuates the fact that, although only "God" is able to grasp the world absolutely (because He is placed outside of existence, and so on), and that, albeit man is not capable of knowing the absolute knowledge that a God-like position may afford, man is still fully capable of maintaining the conceivability of such a position; and that therefore such a position absolutely exists for man—*though only as an inscrutable place the complete knowledge of which is absolutely barred from mortal thought: i.e., the absolute exists only as a transcendental (regulative) Idea (in the Kantian sense), imbued with the phantasm of the noumenon.*

V. On the road to speculative truth, I encounter the Thing-in-itself

To fully unpack this, of course, requires a return to Kant. And so it is my decision that I take an extremely brief detour through the profundity of some of his philosophical handiwork. For some, a thumbnail recap of Kant's philosophical accomplishments may be old hat; nonetheless, I believe it is crucial to distill the general import of his thought if one is to broach the topic of Hegel's absolute Idea in the manner in which I am aiming to present it.

It is according to Kant that reason has no claim to anything that is beyond phenomena. What you see is what you get. Going any further would be a violation of the proper use of reason. In other words, the categories of logic, and one's thoughts and concepts thereof, can have a determinate content only when they are linked to an intuition that is delivered to the subject via sense perception. Anything beyond phenomena as such pertains to what Kant calls the noumenon: the Thing-in-itself (*Ding an sich*), which, according to Kant, is inaccessible to human knowledge that is derived by the senses through phenomenal characteristics. We can maintain the conceivability of the Thing-in-itself, but we cannot *know* it; the significance behind a statement about an object cannot fully coincide with an adequate truth-claim about the object in itself. However, despite its un-knowability, Kant considers the Thing-in-itself to be a positive, substantive determination—i.e., as an inaccessible albeit deducible guarantor behind the very phenomena we perceive.⁸ Though to reemphasize what I stated above, for Kant a full-dress representation of the Thing-in-itself is not accessible through thought in any way.

For Hegel, however, this is not quite the case. Kant simply does not take things for what they *essentially* are (e.g., noumena are exactly what they seem to be: *nothing, lacunae in the order of the objective manifold*). Hegel pays special attention to the *negative access* to the Thing-in-itself—*negativity as such*—as being part and parcel of the absolute itself. In other words, the Thing-in-itself is to be conceived along Hegelian terms as being none other than radical negativity as such, namely, the activity—if not the very the indispensable condition of possibility—of determinateness, of the self-relating negativity of the subject (of which I will discuss in more detail later).

Now, the categories, Hegel insists, *do* have their own respective content;⁹ thought *does* have a content all its own, irrespective of any external object delivered to and by the senses—for the content of a concept is primarily "that which it must be *opposed* to in order for it to emerge in its clarity and distinctiveness, in order for it to be more than just an empty name" (Williamson 2009: 4). Is this not what Hegel has in mind when he claims that the limit of something inheres in its own excessive transcendence (2010: 104); that a self-standing unity does not, simply because it cannot, coincide with itself, for it already contains within itself its own opposite, which serves as the impetus

behind its own self-determination? It is this Twoness-within-One, as Žižek and others of the Slovene school would have it, that truncates any and all unities from within, foreclosing a given unity from ever achieving identity with itself. And it is this failure, this incompatibility of a thing with itself, this innermost discord that defines the *thing itself*. Which is to also say: it is this immanent tension that accounts for the impetus behind the dialectical movement of something's *per se* determinateness. The best example for this is one that Hegel himself provides: The concept of infinitude is primarily everything that is contained in the concept of finitude, of which it is the negation (*ibid.* 122-4).

Here, some would argue that Hegel is illustrating something not too dissimilar from Saussurean structural linguistics, wherein concepts are "defined not by their positive content, but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the same system" (Saussure 1959: 117). That is to say, the very content of words and the conceptual material involved therewith, "is really fixed only by the concurrence of everything that exists outside it" (*ibid.* 115). But even this conceptualization is not radical enough: for the Hegelian antagonism does not involve two opposing positions; it is not even the case that opposition is *internal* to each position itself. Instead, as Žižek claims (2015: unpaginated): "the 'first element' is a retroactive illusion, it 'becomes first' in the course of the dialectical process." What is "first," then, is opposition, antagonism—that is to say, *difference in itself* precedes any positive position with which common sense would have us start. In other words, there is no inside-versus-outside insofar as the *difference* between the inside and its outside is mapped onto the inside itself. Do we not find resonance of the latter formulation in the latter part of Hegel's section on "Judgment"? "Subject and predicate are *in themselves* the same content"; such "content" being none other than the absolute difference between subject and predicate (Hegel 2010: 586).

In his paper, titled "Hegel Among the Quantum Physicists," Roland Williamson (2009: 5) contends that Hegel is essentially putting forth the suggestion that "the presence of the categories in our minds enable us to cognize reality insofar as these categories are already implicitly within reality itself and thus structure it [for us]." In other words (and much different from Kant's view of things), "for Hegel, the categories are on *both sides* of empirical reality, *in* the subject in the mode of pure thoughts and *beyond*

the transient phenomena as the supersensible concepts which structure them from within and which must be presupposed if these phenomena are to emerge at all" (*ibid.*). Still and all, the common refutation of this entails yet another return to Kant: without any external object that is delivered to the senses, so the standard rebuttal goes, the logical categories would mean absolutely nothing.

What this paper suggests, however, is that none of this is lost on Hegel. In fact, arguably, it may be the case that Hegel completely agrees with Kant, if not for the sole reason that the above consideration (that the logical categories would be null and void in the absence of any external objects to be delivered via the senses) only galvanizes Hegel to think more deeply than Kant himself did about the outcome of his—that is, Kant's—own philosophical thinking. The crucial difference, the point that should not be overlooked here, is that perhaps Hegel detects something in Kant's work to which Kant himself was unwittingly heedless: the fact that, by means of a dialectical reversal, one is able to posit the following claim: that it is not the noumenal, it is not the Thing-in-itself, that can be deduced from phenomena, but rather: *it is phenomena itself that is deducible from noumena.*

In other words, it is the impossible Thing-in-itself, the enigmatic and elusive *X* that lies impenetrably behind phenomena—e.g., the Kierkegaardian impossible God that lies outside existence—that is none other than the subjective condition for the very possibility of thought and the categories. The Thing-in-itself, the form of an obstacle par excellence, is thus the substratum of subjectivity as such, the subjective condition of possibility for that which allows the subject to grasp the phenomenal world and to envisage its illusive beyond. For the Thing-in-itself is none other than the experience of radical negativity, the *pure* concept as such: a "nothing in the form of something." Thus the unfathomable and elusive Thing-in-itself is none other than the castrating experience of never having in the first place that which seems to elude one's grasp: an original and absolute lack of understanding against which all knowledge inexhaustibly accrues; a radical loss of unfathomable depth, which opens up the very conceptual space to be filled out by objects; a "groundless" beginning as it were.

As Hegel puts it (2010: 738): it is there, at the very start of the method that is involved in aligning the concept with its connections, where one is dealing with

something that "is not an immediate of *sense-intuition* or of *representation*, but of *thought*, which because of its immediacy can also be called a super-sensuous, *inner intuiting*." What we are dealing with here, this "inner intuiting," *is*, I argue, the Thing-in-itself, which, as Hegel quips early on in the "General Division of the Logic," is "only the product of thought and of merely abstract thought at that" (*ibid.* 38). And, a little further on, in his section on Judgment, Hegel tells us that the concept *is* the true Thing-in-itself (*ibid.* 564). And, again, further along in the text, he will tell us in "The idea of cognition" that: the Thing-in-itself is the purely subjective "I" (the apperceptive "I") that cannot be fully grasped conceptually, that cannot be adequately represented to itself as an object—*unless it is conceived of as the very activity of negation it is involved in*: i.e., the "I" as such is none other than "abstract self-determination"; self-relating negativity as such; which posits itself through thinking *something*, by realizing itself through the determinateness it deploys in and toward the objective world (*ibid.* 690-6). Thus self-consciousness is, in this strict sense, the empirical (ideological) form of the pure concept; and Kant, as Hegel puts it, failed to take account of this precisely because he

simply abided by the Humean style of skepticism; that is to say, he fixes on how the "I" appears in self-consciousness, but from this "I," since it is [the Thing-in-itself] that we want to cognize, [Kant] removes everything empirical; nothing then remains but this appearance of the "I think" that accompanies all representations and of which we do *not have the slightest concept* [...] The "I" that *makes use* of self-consciousness [...] is indeed an *x* of which [...] we cannot possibly have the slightest concept. But surely it is laughable to label the nature of this self-consciousness, namely that the "I" thinks itself, that the "I" cannot be thought without the "I" thinking it, an *awkwardness* and [...] a *circle*. The [...] circle is in fact the relation by which the eternal nature of self-consciousness and of the concept is revealed in immediate, empirical self-consciousness—[...] revealed because self-consciousness is precisely *the existent* and therefore [the] *empirically perceivable pure concept*; [...] [I]t is the absolute self-reference that, as parting judgment, makes itself into an intended object and consists in simply making itself thereby into a circle (*ibid.* 691).

What Hegel is getting at here, I gather, is that one would be foolish to balk at the prospect of arriving at a conceptual determination of the thinking "I" if, and only if, for

this balking individual it would seem as if all attempts to conceptually determine the apperceptive "I" only result in a vicious circle. For what Hegel is essentially pointing out here, is that it is precisely this circle *itself* that is none other than the *description* of the subjective "I"'s movement—its trajectory of self-determination *by which it is able to present itself to itself objectively as such*. In other words, we are dealing here with the pure subjective concept *determining itself, through itself*. Is this not an exemplary case of the way in which, by means of a dialectical reversal, the impossible Thing-in-itself, the noumenon, as *something* that is impossible, something radically unknowable (the apperceptive "I"), *becomes* the very condition of possibility by which the concept is able to realize itself through itself as such?

To reiterate a crucial point that reverberates throughout many if not all of Žižek's texts: the proper dialectical reversal discussed above is not simply this passage from impossibility to possibility, from the negative (the inaccessible Thing-in-itself) into a positive (the condition for the categories which serve as the condition of possibility for man's knowledge). At a deeper, far more radical level, this reversal also entails the way in which the subject is included in its predicate (in which "the subject of enunciation is included in the enunciated content"). That is to say, what we have here is also the reversal of transcendence back into immanence. One should thus refer the Thing-in-itself to the abyssal point of thought itself, the *pure* concept, the very power of negativity: the zero-point at which the concept is decanted of all its content, destitute of any presuppositions—as that "*which has come into existence in the very domain of its determinations,*" namely *the subject as such* (Žižek 2008: 47).

In other words, one can rightly claim that what Hegel's Logic reveals is precisely this idea that Kant's Thing-in-itself—that void which insists behind the unsurpassable veil of illusory appearances—is none other than the inverted mode of appearance of the subject's own immanence in the object as such: as an "externalization" (*kinesis*) of the empty form of the subjective concept itself. The Thing-in-itself, as impossibility, is none other than the very condition of possibility within impossibility; what appears as the ultimate obstacle is, in itself, a positive condition of possibility *as such*. The concept, then, in its simple immediacy, is perhaps *less than nothingness*: namely, the subtractive

force of determinateness that is none other than the power of self-relating negativity itself.

VI. Arriving at the speculative truth of the absolute

At this juncture, the questions we are left wanting to ask are: How does one go from this strange form of (less than) nothing to something? How does meaning, determinate thought itself, arise against the background of its own annihilation? A worthy attempt at answering this is undertaken by Žižek himself when he writes (2007: 229): "Hegel's 'determinate negation' [...] is the speculative reformulation of the old theological notion of *creatio ex nihilo* [...] the miraculous emergence of a new symbol against the background of the void of the Thing [...] Does not 'vacuum fluctuation'," Žižek challenges, "provide a perfect case of *creatio ex nihilo*? In quantum physics, 'vacuum' is conceived as Nothingness, as a void, but a void which is nonetheless 'determinate,' that is to say, [it] contains a whole set of potential entities. Vacuum 'fluctuation' refers to the very process by means of which something (a particle) emerges out of the void and then again evaporates, disappears in it—here quantum physics suddenly speaks the language of Hegelian dialectics."

Are we not, then, at least analogically speaking, touching upon the empty framework of the pure concept? As a determinate nothingness, or, as a "less-than-nothingness," the pure concept as such is the very act of the subject determining itself through the mode of its opposite. Hegel writes at the beginning of the section "The Idea of the Good" (2010: 729): "As subjective [the concept] is the *impulse* to realize itself, the purpose that *on its own* wants to give itself objectivity in the objective world and realize itself [...] [T]he subjective concept, as a *universal* that in and for itself *lacks determination*, stands opposed to the *objective* world from which it derives determinate content and filling."

Hegel also tells us, at the beginning of Section III, titled "*The idea*," that "If anything has truth, it has it by virtue of its idea, or *something has truth only in so far as it is idea*" (*ibid.* 670). And in the preceding sentence, he writes that the idea is the "*adequate concept*, the objectively true" (*ibid.*). As translator George di Giovanni puts it, "It is in the 'idea' that [...] conformity of objectivity and subjectivity is achieved" (*ibid.*

fn.1). Thus what is "true" is the fact that subject and predicate are, in themselves, the same content. One should be careful, however, to not misread this as subject *really* being its predicate, or that Substance is "really Subject," or that the Subject is "ground" for all "Substance," and so on. As Žižek writes in *For They Know Not What They Do* (2008: 119), the "truth" we are uncovering here is the fact that "substance can never 'catch up with' the Subject, [it] can never encompass in itself the negative power of the Subject; and that the 'Subject' is none other than this inability of the Substance to 'contain' the Subject within itself, this internal self-split of the Substance, the lack of its identity-with-itself."

Hegel himself illustrates this with an acute shrewdness in his section on judgment, in which he reveals that the act of judging "is the *determining* of the concept through itself" (Hegel 2010: 550). It is therefore appropriate that we take a brief look at Hegel's *judgment of existence*, with the help of Žižek's reading of it, if only to grasp what is meant by the claim: "Subject" is "the lack of identity-with-itself." And this, I assure the reader, will bring us face to face with Kierkegaard's concept of essential knowing.

It is in this judgment, then, i.e., the *judgment of existence*, that we are dealing with the construct: "*the singular is the universal*" (Hegel 2010: 558; Žižek 2008: 117-21). Hegel uses the example, "The rose is red." Now, if we look at the expression "The rose is red," as Žižek states (2008: 117), "all the substantial content is here on the side of the subject: that which is presupposed as having 'actual existence' [...] is the subject, the individual" itself—the rose; "and the predicate is only some abstract-universal property which [the subject] acquires"; which is to also say: the predicate, i.e., *red*, "has no self-subsistent existence" in the strict manner that the rose does. As Žižek explains (*ibid.*), "the relationship between subject and predicate is here completely external: the predicate is some completely indifferent abstract-universal property, acquired by the subject; [it is] not something dependent on the subject's inner nature." Moreover, it is the second form of the judgment of existence, the *negative judgment*, that posits this indifferent external relationship by negating the first form of judgment: for "if the substantial nature of the rose is entirely indifferent to whether or not the rose is red," Žižek tells us, "then we could just as reasonably posit the claim 'The rose is not red'" (Žižek 2008: 117-18). Here, if we turn to the text of the *Logic*, Hegel emphasizes that we

are *not* negating the *relationship* between subject and predicate; on the contrary, the claim "The rose is not red" is to be considered against the background of the rose having *some (other) color*, perhaps blue, perhaps white, or whatever. It is here, Žižek tells us (*ibid.* 118), that "the negative judgment thus proceeds from the universal into the particular: [in other words,] the determinateness of the predicate that was initially posited as an abstract universal [that the rose is *red*] is now specified as something particular, as a particular determination [the rose *is* red]"; and thus the positive expression of the negative judgment is: "the subject (this individual [rose]) is a particularity": viz., the rose has some *particular* color (it is red, blue, green, whatever...).

In the third form of the judgment, the *infinite judgment*, the negation that was previously at work in the *negative judgment* is redoubled, thereby resulting, Žižek explicates, in its self-reference, which is to say that: "the universal domain [that] was present in the negation of the particular predicate" is, itself, negated, thereby resulting in a *senseless* form; and thus we end up with stupid utterances like "The rose is not a banana," "Thoughts are not red," etc. As Žižek puts it (*ibid.*), these judgments may be "accurate or true, but nevertheless 'senseless and tasteless'." And, as he spells out, the positive form of this infinite judgment "is no longer a particular judgment implied by the negation"—not only because the infinite judgment negates the particular predicate, but because it also negates the very universal domain in which the predicate is able to forge its relation with the subject (*ibid.*). In other words, if, before, one was able to determine that the rose could be some other color, any other color, because one had determined in the *negative judgment* that "the rose is not red," then it likewise follows that in the *infinite judgment*, one is thus able to derive from the negative expression "the rose is not a banana" its only positive, opposite, expression, that being the tautology: the "rose is a rose." (For if the rose is not a banana, then what is it? The rose is a rose!) This tautology, in effect, reveals that the only adequate predicate for the subject is the *subject itself*, which essentially coincides with emptiness, with *nothing*. And why nothing? Because a subject that has as its only *essential* content itself is thus a subject without predication, that is, a subject without any determinate content, and thus it is a subject lacking any defining attributes by which it would receive an identity; for a

predicate tells us what a subject is.¹⁰ And a subject that has itself as a predicate thus provides us with *nothing* definitive about itself other than its own (empty) name as such.

To better understand this, suffice it to recall what Hegel writes in the Preface to the Second Edition of the *Logic* regarding the law of identity: A tautology (e.g., $A = A$, or, "a rose is a rose") does not at first blush give us any determination of what the subject actually *is*. We are left with an empty self-relation, a contradiction *par excellence*, which reveals an intrinsic split between the subject and its empty place of inscription. It is this empty place of inscription, however, that is the very conceptual space that comes to be filled out by objects, by predicates, *for the subject*, by means of the subjective concept's own inner determinateness, i.e., the movement of negativity as such. To paraphrase Heidegger's paraphrasing of Hegel, the pure concept is the essence of Spirit: the "apophatic" movement and form of the very framework of thought that thinks itself "as the grasping of the *not-I*" (Heidegger 1962: 484).

In fine, for Hegel, what is "true" is this radical non-coincidence of the subject with itself, which reveals the subject as being a site of (quasi Freud-Althusserian) "overdetermination": "a determination of the Whole by one of its elements which [...] should be [...] a subordinated part [...] of the structure [that] 'envelops' its whole" (Žižek 2008: 45). As Žižek formulates it (*ibid.* 47), the subject as such is "the dialectic of lack and excess": as "negative universality" the subject comes to embody, i.e., identify with, the series of determinations and indeterminations it encounters and appropriates from the larger domain in which it is inscribed. In its particularity, however, the subject "is this abstract power of negativity *which has come into existence in the very domain of its determinations.*" In other words, as a void that gets "filled out" by means of "overdetermination" as such, the subject encounters itself in its "determinate oppositions" (*ibid.*).

Thus, on the one hand, just like the apperceptive 'I', the subjective concept is, as Žižek writes (*ibid.*): "pure negative universality: an identity-with-itself which 'repels,' makes abstractions of, all its determinate content ('I am not any of my determinations but the universality which simultaneously encompasses and negates them); yet on the other hand, [the subjective concept] is this abstract power of negativity *which has come*

into existence in the very domain of its determinations; which has acquired 'determinate being'."

Hegel's absolute Idea, then, to come full circle with all of this, is the truth of the self-realization of this specious self-unity, an over-determining self-unity that is realized against the background of its own original absence; a unity that is always-already "constitutively split" between its acts of determination and, its determinations "as such." The drive-like encircling of the determinations that constitute the absolute Idea are therefore always-already barred from attaining and/or conducing to any complete universalization because the absolute Idea, as such, cannot determine its own determination without making a detour through something that is other than itself. In other words, as Žižek puts it: "'absolute knowledge' implies the recognition of an absolute, insurmountable *impossibility*: the impossibility of accordance between knowledge and being" (*ibid.* 68). Thus the absolute Idea, in its *truth*, is *not whole*, grasping itself as that which is unable to bridge the irreducible gap between knowledge and being.

VII. The gap that divides Hegel and Kierkegaard is the gap that unites them

It is this radical lack of accordance between knowledge and being, the fact that the former and latter are radically incommensurate with each other—an impossibility *par excellence*—that is the very impetus behind the dialectical movement of self-relating negativity. This irreducible gap between being and knowing is none other than the very engine that generates thought's oscillation between being and knowing. And it is the very impossibility of their encounter with each other that gives rise to the productive drive that aims directly at this impossibility. As Hegel puts it (2010: 735), the absolute Idea is thus the union of "the identity of the theoretical idea with the practical idea" *insofar* as each "possesses the idea only as a sought-for beyond and unattained goal"; each possesses and *not* possesses "the idea within it, passing over from one thought to the other [an oscillation] without bringing the two together but remaining fixed in the contradiction of the two." Thus the absolute Idea is a "constitutively-split" unity, so to speak, comprising "the identity of the theoretical idea with the practical idea," insofar as these two separate ideas are not brought together, but remain fixed "in the contradiction

of the two" (*ibid.*). And it is perhaps worth considering that the absolute difference that separates both of these ideas from each other is that which precipitates the absolute Idea as "a sought-for beyond and unattained goal." This latter attitude towards the absolute Idea (as a "sought-for beyond and unattained goal") can be likened to what Kierkegaard, in *CUP*, calls "objective uncertainty." And it is here where I will now attempt to link up the analogical similarities between Hegel's absolute Idea and Kierkegaard's concept of essential knowing.

It is in *CUP* that Kierkegaard writes (1992: 203): "*An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth, the highest truth there is for an existing person,*" and that "truth is precisely the daring venture of choosing the objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite." Here we have the classic Kierkegaardian dialectic of faith, presented to us nonetheless in the form of a classic Hegelian triad: First (1) one begins to observe the world around herself in an attempt to find this "sought-for beyond"; call it "God." Then (2) the sum total of what she finds as regards the searched-for-object, the object in question—God—nonetheless amounts to an "objective uncertainty," which, experienced as a limitation, as an impossibility, is reflected back into God as being His own "free act" of self-limitation, i.e., as a way for God to voluntarily restrict the scope of his own power, precisely in order to leave open the space necessary for human freedom and thus man's free choice to seek out His, God's, eternal truth; and this encounter with God's self-limitation as such, which only intensifies "objective uncertainty," thereby heightens one's inner passion. For as Kierkegaard puts it (*ibid.* 204): "the inwardness is so very great, precisely because it grasps this objective uncertainty with all the passion of the infinite." And so lastly (3) the eternal truth is revealed and realized in its parallax, that is, as *faith*, which is to say: the two moments (1) and (2) are "united" in and by this final term (faith); for it is faith alone, and only faith alone, Kierkegaard insists, that reconciles the subject with the impasse of objective uncertainty, insofar as this reconciliation amounts to an acceptance of truth as non-truth: viz., that what is *absolutely true* is only ever "objectively uncertain." Faith, then, for Kierkegaard, thus attests to the very power of God's grace that endows the subject with the strength necessary for accepting and thereby sustaining one's passionate relation with an inscrutable objective uncertainty. Hence Kierkegaard tells us

that, "faith is the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am to apprehend God objectively, I do not have faith; but because I cannot do this, I must have faith" (*ibid.*). As Žižek aptly puts it (2009: 79), Kierkegaard is simply claiming that God is nothing but *how* we relate to him: one does not relate to God, but rather: God *is* this relating.¹¹

Here we touch upon the very essence of Kierkegaard's concept of essential knowing, a knowledge that is directly related to existence. And it is this conceptualization of essential knowing that I find to be homologous with Hegel's absolute Idea. For essential knowing is related to existence *not* in the form of a direct relationship between thinking and being, "nor does it signify that the knowledge is objectively related to something existent as its object" (Kierkegaard 1992: 197); rather, essential knowing, as I read it, is a kind of *self-relating subjective truth*; it is "*essentially*" related to existence in the form of the *non-relation* between thinking and being, insofar as essential knowing indicates that its knowledge relates directly to the knower qua "existing person," and that, as Kierkegaard puts it, "all essential knowing is therefore essentially related to existence and to existing" as such, that is, as "the contradiction between the infinite passion of the inwardness and the objective uncertainty" (*ibid.* 197-8, 204).

To unpack what this means, one ought to separate out from Kierkegaard's concept of essential knowing two different levels of meaning. On one level—which I will enumerate as *essential knowing (i)*—essential knowing "is essentially a relating to the existing of the knower" (*ibid.* 198); that is to say, it can refer to the fact that, although there exist bits of information that are inseparable from an object or entity (properties that belong to a thing as it is without me, even when I no longer apprehend it), my knowledge of this or that particular form of objective reality is nonetheless indicative of a certain comportment that I, as a thinking subject, have towards the world: it presupposes that I have a desire to know certain information about the world, and that this desire is always at the forefront of my projects of knowledge (being the obstinate vanguard that it is). Kierkegaardian essential knowing, at this level, serves as a sort of "conceptual index" of the subjective processes that are involved in my symbolic determinations of the world. Accordingly, it delineates not only the contours and limits of

the relationship between my thought and its object but, moreover, *essential knowing (i)* is indicative of how my conceptions of the world are shaped and influenced by the paradigmatic social networks (ideologies) in which I am inscribed. In this strict sense, Kierkegaard's concept of essential knowing overlaps with Hegel's absolute Idea insofar as both designate a *self-relating subjective truth*, a speculative truth that pertains to the way in which inter-subjective social forces give rise to the very quasi-transcendental ideological structures that compel and sustain the production and acquisition of a knowledge aimed at "filling" the void of which it takes the place. Furthermore, I consider essential knowing and the absolute Idea to overlap with each other at this level (the level of *essential knowing (i)*) insofar as both pertain to a self-knowledge that succeeds in apprising the subject of his own situatedness in the very socio-symbolic order in which he is given access to a particular epistemology; viz., *how I am always-already involved in the (ideological/ethico-political) truth of my own situatedness*.

This brings us to the other conceptualization of Kierkegaardian essential knowing, which I will call, of course, *essential knowing (ii)*, and which is positioned at a deeper, more radical level than that of *essential knowing (i)*: that of "ethical-religious knowing."¹² *Essential knowing (ii)* thus concerns the question of how subjectivity even fits within objective reality. In other words, if I define objective reality as, say, a mathematical set of relations, the result of which entails a long process of conceptual abstraction, this does not, as Žižek puts it (2013: 924), "devalue the result, making it simply dependent on [my] 'subjective standpoint'; but it does involve a paradox: objective reality (the way we construct it in science) is a Real which cannot be experienced as [human] reality. In its efforts to grasp reality independently of me, mathematized science erases 'me' from reality, ignoring (not the transcendental way I constitute reality, but) the way I am *part of* this reality." And so the crucial question at the crux of the "ethical-religious" dimension of *essential knowing (ii)* is not in the business of objectively answering the questions of what is *this* or what is *that*? But rather: What does it mean to say that *this* subjectivity, *my* subjective viewpoint, objectively exists? How do I (as the site where reality appears to itself within itself) emerge in "objective reality"?—and contrary to how it may seem, this has nothing to do with subjective relativism. Rather, it has everything to do with the subject being the truth

of the non-closure of all formal, objective systems. And this is precisely Kierkegaard's "thesis" in *CUP*: "That subjectivity, inwardness, is truth" (1992: 281).

For Kierkegaard, Hegel is someone who epitomizes "objective thinking," and who "does not understand history from the point of view of becoming, but with the illusion attached to pastness understands it from the point of view of a finality that excludes all becoming"; and thus "much less has speculative thought taken the time to comprehend what it means [for becoming] to be *situated* in existence" (Žižek 2009: 76).

Kierkegaard's point here seems to be that, "only subjective experience is in fact 'becoming,' and any notion of objective reality as an open-ended process with no fixed finality still remains within the confines of being"; thus: "only subjectivity designates a domain which is *in itself* 'open'" (*ibid.*). Kierkegaard himself states (1992: 118-19):

when an existence is a thing of the past, it is complete, it is indeed finished, it is indeed concluded, and to that extent it is turned over to the systematic view. Quite so—but for whom? Whoever is himself existing cannot gain this conclusiveness outside existence, a conclusiveness that corresponds to the eternity into which the past has entered.

On one hand, we have Kierkegaard's depiction of Hegel's dialectical process: a totalized whole in which what is circumscribed realizes its potential and becomes what it always-already was; for Hegel (according to Kierkegaard) though comes after being—everything has already happened, and thought is the recollection of what has happened; thus the subject amounts to a dispassionate moment in an objective process. On the other hand we have Kierkegaard's anti-Hegelianism: an insistence on the subject as preceding any theoretical system, and thus an effort to break the self-enclosure of the Hegelian system by placing an emphasis on the primacy of subjectivity qua becoming, a subjective domain that is not closed but "open," and therefore a history that is open towards the future. But here, I believe Žižek offers some key insight that turns all this around on itself: "we should avoid a key misunderstanding about Hegel's dialectics," he writes, for "its wager is not to adopt toward the present the 'point of view of finality,' viewing it as if it were already past, but, precisely, to *reintroduce the openness of the future into the past, to grasp that-which-was in its process of becoming*"

(Žižek 2009: 78). Thus it is not enough to say that the Hegelian system is a self-enclosed circle in which the passage from possibility to necessity occurs, viz., "inside the dialectical closure, things actualize their potential and become what they always-already were destined to be..." On the contrary, Hegel's dialectic insists on the passage from impossibility to contingency—namely that: the impossible *can* happen—precisely because the negative autonomy of the subject inheres at the very core the Hegelian system.

With that being said, the following summation of the Hegelian absolute Idea overlaps nicely, I believe, with Kierkegaard's concept of essential knowing: for it is, *as if*, via access to the self-relating depth of essential knowing, one is able to recognize that existence is none other than the subjective form (of appearance) of the privileged site in which reality appears to itself, within itself, as separate from itself. The question of *how* this comes to be is nonetheless a question that is fraught with *inherent* ontological failure, an insurmountable objective uncertainty in the form of existential contradiction, which serves as the form of the very horizon of finitude, i.e., the existential frontier qua restraint which yields the acknowledgement of a limitative absence immanent to the "whole" of existence, and whereby existence, in the form of a particular subjective expression, effectively projects back into itself the absolute Idea that universal existence is itself constitutively split as such. This, I propose, is the neo-Hegelian articulation of Kierkegaard's concept of essential knowing: that subjectivity, the "self-repelling gap" of "absolute Difference" as such, is immanent to the Hegelian system insofar as the Hegelian system is absolutely reflective of this constitutive fissure which inheres at the core of Being.

Put differently—or rather, viewed from a different angle altogether—both Hegel's absolute Idea and Kierkegaard's essential knowing pertain to the subject's movement of self-relating negativity, a dialectical movement aimed at the immutable background of finitude, of an inevitable incompleteness that precedes, accompanies, and proceeds the subject as such. Thus it is against this perduring void that existence recognizes itself as a nothing that is something, and thereby takes possession of its own limited facticity, in its realization, in order to make possible its own possibilities. We are thus dealing with a sort of principle of *ex falso quodlibet*, whereby existential possibilities endlessly circulate

around and proliferate against the impossibility of a totalized and stable absolute. Kierkegaard's essential knowing and Hegel's absolute Idea, together in their absolute difference from each other, cast the reflection of this interminable state of impermanence whence the inevitable drive towards, and impossibility of, any total or stable system derive. In other words, both essential knowing and the absolute Idea represent the introduction of subjectivity into objectivity, thereby indicating that objective reality is not All.

Notes

¹. Referred to hereafter as, *CUP*.

². I.e., the totality of the categories that Hegel elaborates in *The Science of Logic*.

³. Both terms—"self-repelling Gap" and "absolute Difference"—are borrowed from Žižek (2013: 378-9).

⁴. Žižek writes to this effect, claiming: "The eternal Absolute [as the totality of the categories] is the immobile point of reference around which temporal figurations circulate, [the Absolute is] their presupposition; however, precisely as such, it is *posited* by these temporal figurations, *since it* [the Absolute] *does not pre-exist them*"; see: "Deleuze's Platonism: Ideas as Real".

⁵. Kierkegaard writes: "Whereas objective thinking invests everything in the result [...] subjective thinking invests everything in the process of becoming and omits the result [...] partly because he as existing is continually in process of becoming..." (Kierkegaard 1992: 73). Does this critique of Hegel, however, not hinge on somewhat of a Hegelian opposition between "objective" and "subjective" thought? It is this radical antagonism, so this paper will argue, that is at the very heart of Hegel's absolute Idea.

⁶. With the necessary proviso, of course, that such conjectural activity should steer clear of any raceways by which the widest speculation triumphs. Such forms of pre-Kantianesque pursuits (e.g., speculative realism, OOO, etc.) often end up mired in baseless fantasy, a sort of commodity fetishism endemic to academe and its para-academic offshoots.

⁷. As Badiou puts it on the previous page (2011: 177): "A poetic composition is an assemblage that makes language say what it does not say, or shows materially the unsaid of the saying."

⁸. See, for instance, Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

⁹. Hegel observes, on multiple occasion, that Kant had failed to notice that the categories themselves have their own respective content, see: Hegel, *Science of Logic*, pp. 40-41, 56, 525, 541. No less important, it should be noted that Kant had mapped out only 12 categories, while Hegel provides over 80, including fundamental terms such as being, essence, actuality, necessity, and universality.

¹⁰. "... as is the case in judgment generally, where the predicate says what the subject *is*" (Hegel 2010: 66).

¹¹. Here, to say that: "God *is* this relating" is perhaps best to be read in direct reference to the following quote from Kierkegaard (1992: 199) if we are to make any sense of it: "Let us take the knowledge of God as an example. Objectively, what is reflected upon is that this is the true God; subjectively, that the individual relates himself to a something *in such a way* that his relation is in truth a God-relation."

¹². "Therefore," writes Kierkegaard (1992: 198), "only ethical and ethical-religious knowing is essential knowing [namely, what I have designated as *essential knowing (ii)*]. But all ethical and ethical-religious knowing is essentially a relating to the existing of the knower [which pertains to

essential knowing (i)]"; hence my two tiers of Kierkegaard's concept of essential knowing, which serves to expose its very own "Twoness-within-One" constitution.

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