Are All Things Contradictory? Žižek and Brandom on the Materialist Legacy of Hegel's Metaphysics

Dominik Finkelde

Abstract: This paper explores the philosophical debate between Slavoj Žižek and Robert Brandom over Hegel's metaphysics, focusing on their opposing views on reconciliation and negativity. Brandom, through an inferentialist lens, interprets Hegel as advancing a process of normative reconciliation, where conceptual idealism and pragmatic semantics align to resolve contradictions. Žižek, by contrast, argues that Hegel's ontology is one of fundamental antagonism, where contradiction is not merely a step toward resolution but an essential feature of reality itself. This disagreement raises broader issues concerning historical progress, ideology, and the limits of conceptual determination.

Keywords: Inferentialism, determinate negation, antagonism, recollective forgiveness, absolute knowing, parallax

Robert Brandom, the founder of inferentialism—a philosophical approach rooted in pragmatism, analytic philosophy, and German Idealism—ranks alongside Robert Pippin among those Hegelians with whom Žižek has extensively engaged. For the Slovenian philosopher, the very legacy of Hegel's philosophy appears to be at stake, judging by the emphasis he places on interpretative differences throughout numerous publications.[1] The same urgency is not mirrored by Brandom, who has taken up the challenge posed by the left-Hegelian Žižek so far only once.[2]

The debate that emerges in this context is highly interesting, as it reveals a different Hegel within the framework of mutually exclusive intellectual traditions. Žižek, drawing on the influences of Alexandre Kojève, Jacques Lacan, Jean Hyppolite, Gérard Lebrun, and others, primarily situates his reception of Hegel within the tradition of dialectical materialism. Brandom, on the other hand, views Hegel as anticipating insights from a particular school of analytic philosophy. In addition to Wilfrid Sellars and Ludwig Wittgenstein, he particularly emphasizes Gottlob Frege as an important reference. The author of the *Begriffsschrift* and co-founder of predicate logic is known for his analyses of the semantic roles of words and proper names, the logical structure of sentences, and his so-called Platonic conceptual idealism. According to this view, true thoughts reside in a "third realm," situated between subjective opinions and objective facts. It is this realm that guarantees historically contingent beings, such as humans, the ability to anchor their judgments in eternally valid truths about an objectively existing reality.

This aspect of Frege's thought interests Brandom, as it helps him interpret Hegel as a proponent of a pragmatic theory of semantics. In doing so, he challenges Bertrand Russell's infamous judgment that Hegel was a pre-Kantian metaphysician[3]—and he does so using the conceptual tools of certain traditions within analytic philosophy. These traditions not

only link Brandom's semantic pragmatism to previously mentioned figures like Frege, Wittgenstein, and Sellars but also to thinkers such as Donald Davidson and John McDowell. "On this broadly functionalist picture, meaning is understood in terms of use."[4]

Thus, two philosophical frameworks are introduced—dialectical materialism and semantic pragmatism—that could hardly be more different. On one side, we have Brandom's Hegel, who, drawing on the aforementioned thinkers, but especially on Frege, articulates a "conceptual idealism." This Hegel is both engaged in theoretical and practical philosophy. On the other side, Žižek presents us with a Hegel who, alongside Marx, advances an ontology of antagonism. In this perspective, Hegel does not appear as a Fregean conceptual idealist, who gradually reconciles mind and world within a "semantics with an edifying intent,"[5] ultimately culminating in a kind of common-sense realism. Instead, Hegel emerges here as a thinker of radical dialectics and negativity. In this framework, knowledge and truth circulate conflictually within structures of objective relations, in which "no member is not inebriated."[6]

For Žižek, the progression of Spirit does not represent, as Brandom suggests, a teleological reconciliation between mind and world (a point to be elaborated upon later). Rather, it unfolds through conflicts, often waged from positions already lost, challenging the very possibility of reconciliation between mind and world as presented by Brandom. This Marx-inflected Hegel emphasizes the non-identity of things and the inherent antagonisms within them. Thus, a Hegel of reason-guided madness (Žižek speaks of "Hegel's madness") stands opposed to a Hegel who, guided purely by reason, seeks to dispel madness entirely.

The following sections focus on key moments of disagreement between Brandom and Žižek, which concern the concept of "determinate negation," the understanding of "recollective forgiveness," and the notion of "trust."

Inferentialism as Positivism?

Brandom has gained international acclaim for his inferentialism, systematically articulated across several monographs.[7] In these works, he advances a semantic-pragmatic holism rooted in the traditions of analytic philosophy and German Idealism, particularly drawing on Kant and Hegel. A central thesis of this inferentialism—aptly termed "inferential positivism" by Robert Pippin[8]—focuses on the semantic role of concepts. Concepts, in this view, are not mere vehicles for sensory input designed to express facts and truths; rather, they compel their users to acknowledge the inferential chains of meaning within the normative semantic frameworks to which these concepts inherently belong. Accordingly, a speaker who recognizes that the city of Pittsburgh is *west* of Princeton is thereby

committed to the reverse inference: that Princeton is *east* of Pittsburgh.[9] Brandom speaks of deontic-normative commitments, i.e., obligatory liabilities of speakers, which are linked to alethic-modal relations of facts that govern the relationship between language and the world. Human beings, he argues, are creatures who differ from the merely natural "by our subjection to norms"—that is, "by the fact that we can bind ourselves by (make ourselves responsible to) norms, by applying concepts, whose contents settle *what* we have made ourselves responsible for and to."[10]

This holds true even when an individual speaker is unaware of the normative potential inherent in the concepts they use. They may later have to assume responsibility for something they neither consciously chose nor understood at the time. This notion closely aligns with arguments concerning the semantic function of signifiers—the fundamental building blocks of concepts—articulated by Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Lacan, and numerous theorists associated with the linguistic turn, spanning from the Prague School to Jean Piaget and Julia Kristeva. Within this tradition, a distinct understanding of "education" emerges: education involves embedding consciousness within the normative structure of signifiers, such that the inferential, rule-governed chains of signification become second nature to human consciousness.

It is called "second nature" precisely because its origins do not lie in "first nature." Instead, individuals must endure this second nature externally, internalizing it through habitual practice. This explains, as Freud and Lacan have demonstrated, why meaning-processing involves deeper, intrapsychic layers. The unconscious, in this view, occupies a space that, in Brandom's terminology, lies beyond the deontic-normative and alethic-modal processes of subjectivation.

Brandom's inferentialism explicitly refrains from engaging with the dimension of the unconscious. What interests him in Hegel are the semantic roles of concepts that unite mind and world within a theory of "recognition and recollection"[11] in such a way that—in Žižek's critical words— a "commonsense realist universe" emerges.[12]

A parrot can be trained to squawk "this is red" when presented with a color chart. Yet, unless the animal also recognizes that the use of "red" commits the speaker to the concept of "color," and that red is necessarily and alethically-modally incompatible with yellow, it has not genuinely understood the meaning of "red."[13]

In Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Brandom argues, this insight is foundational. Humans are permeated by deontic-normative attitudes and relate to alethic-modal properties of objective facts. Both aspects of mind and world (deontic-normative and alethic-modal) are "different *forms* that one identical conceptual *content* can take. The contents are thinkables and judgeables, and they can be facts."[14] This means that for Hegel, both human thought and the world of facts to which thought refers are conceptually articulated. In other words, the normative relations

that define the nature of conceptual thinking are identical to the kinds of relations that define the nature of things. Brandom's reception of Frege shapes this conviction. Since relations of meaning to facts can always be revised by errors corrected through better understanding, an objective reality must necessarily be presupposed as the source of such corrections. The objects of reference, in Fregean terms, are the bearers of meaning for our words. They remain so even when the meanings of our words shift through the development of new experiences. Brandom illustrates this with the example of a wooden stick immersed in water.[15] If it first appears bent, our experience is corrected when we pull it out of the water and see that it is straight. "That sort of attitude-dependence is presupposed by their functioning as a normative standard for assessment of appearances, a standard that what things are for the subject may or may not satisfy."[16]

Determinate Negation

Hegel's concept of "determinate negation" plays a crucial role in this context and simultaneously marks a point of divergence from Žižek. According to Brandom, something can only be "conceptually contentful" if it "stands in relation of what he [Hegel] calls relations of 'determinate negation' and 'mediation' to other such things."[17] Brandom interprets Hegel's determinate negation as referring to "relations of exclusion, such as those between 'rectangular' and 'circular' [...] or between the metals 'copper' and 'aluminum'."[18] Kant, according to Brandom, confines determinate negation to the sphere of understanding—that is, to the epistemological level of factual knowledge. Whether knowledge growth through the accumulation and falsification of facts can be understood teleologically remains speculative and, in Kantian terms, exceeds the proper limits of reason. Hegel (and Brandom with him), however, engages in this speculation without restraint. He does not merely reveal reality through a rational process of making its fundamental structures increasingly conceptual (which is what primarily interests Brandom); he also asserts that *Absolute Knowledge* represents the ultimate endpoint of this development.

Hegel characterizes this process through a series of intimately related designations: the "coming-to-itself" of spirit, of the concept, or of the Idea. And just as Hegel deemed Kant dogmatic for his denial of the possibility of knowing things-in-themselves, so Brandom regards Frege as dogmatic for presupposing that our cognitive access to semantic reference operates independently of human sociality and the historical situatedness of conceptual practices.[19] Nonetheless, Brandom aligns himself with Frege in key respects—particularly in his insistence that alethic-modal relations among facts are "nonpsychological": that is, they entail "no essential reference to psychological acts of grasping or conceiving items that are conceptually articulated."[20]

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What is at stake for Brandom is not the subjective mediation of conceptual content but rather the material articulation of the world itself—that is, the truth-value determination of facts as they pertain to being. These facts may be modally contingent, possible, or necessary, but—contra Žižek—they can in no case be internally inconsistent or contradictory. It is precisely at this point that Žižek's dialectical reading of Hegel breaks with Brandom's analytic realism, positing instead that "inconsistency is [...] the very core of any entity," be it conceptual or material.[21] For Žižek, this constitutes a radicalization of dialectical ontology; for Brandom, by contrast, such a claim performatively undermines the very objectivity that one seeks to capture through truth-apt conceptual articulation.

Within this theoretical tension, Brandom articulates a position that is simultaneously an anti-metaphysical and a metaphysical realism: anti-metaphysical in that it presents itself as a holistic, inferentialist-pragmatist account of semantic content, resistant to essentialist or representationalist ontologies; metaphysical in that it affirms the rational legitimacy of concepts such as "trust" or "redemptive recollection" even when they exceed the boundaries of discursively articulable understanding.

Brandom's emphasis on Hegel's determinate negation particularly provokes Žižek's critique. The latter argues that Hegel's concept of negative determination is more fundamental.[22] This concept expresses the insight that an entity must not only distinguish itself negatively from others, but that negativity constitutes the very being of the entity itself. An entity can be internally affected by negation.

This form of negativity connects closely with the notion of differentiality articulated by Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida—namely, that difference precedes identity and constitutes its very condition of possibility. Beyond the straightforward impossibility of a wooden chair simultaneously being a metal table, no entity can be entirely reduced to the mere sum of its properties. This issue has roots in the modern philosophical debate initiated, among others, by John Locke's "substratum"-theory. It continues today, notably in critiques of bundle theories that conceive of objects purely as aggregates of properties. If, however, properties alone do not exhaust what an object is, something beyond mere bundles of properties must necessarily be assumed.[23] Thus, negation is embedded within the self-referentiality of any entity. It points to an indeterminate differentiality, a "je ne sais quoi"—a "something" that remains unknowable in itself. "[An entity] excludes also its own properties in the sense that it 'is' none of them but achieves its self-identity by way of what Hegel calls negative self-relationship [...] the very absence of property can count as a property."[24]

In the 20th century, Claude Lévi-Strauss paved, roughly speaking, one of the pathways toward this insight in his discussion of the concept

of "mana".[25] Discovered by Marcel Mauss among indigenous Polynesian populations, this term is considered magical, overdetermined, and meaningful precisely because, in its overdetermination, it marks a zero point of meaning within conceptual meaning formations. From this, a conclusion can be drawn regarding Žižek: For Žižek, concepts and states of affairs are "excessive" in such a way that they evade any ordering format. No perspective on an object can translate it into complete transparency. Žižek writes: "[M]atter is that which 'disappears' when we try to squeeze it into a definite conceptual frame." For Hegel, "[m]aterial reality [...] is Idea itself in its externality, in its reality."[26]

For Žižek, this undermines any conceptual idealism or commonsense realism. Any ontology, however conceived, must account for the problem of meaning-generating zero points of meaning. From Žižek's perspective, Brandom cannot provide such an answer.[27]

Retrospective Transubstantiation

But does this truly undermine Brandom's philosophical stance and his interpretation of idealism? After all, Brandom himself acknowledges that individuals can become subjected to the normative contents inherent within their concepts, thus prompting the critical question of whether humans genuinely remain the 'masters and mistresses' of their own inferential networks. "It is up to us, as knowers and agents, what norms we bring into force. For it is up to us what concepts we apply. But, it is *not* then up to us what the content of those norms is—the details of *what* we have committed ourselves to by applying the concepts we did, rather than some others."[28]

As an example of retrospective inscription into a concept's potential for obligation, Brandom mentions in *Making It Explicit* an old custom of recruiting sailors for the British Royal Navy. Representatives of the Navy would encourage young men to drink heavily in harbor taverns until, intoxicated and out of money, they agreed to accept the "Queen's shilling" as payment for their outstanding bills.[29] Acceptance of this shilling marked the completion of their enlistment. Thus, we can become bound by normative commitments even without being fully conscious of their implications at the time.

The realm of the "giving and taking of reasons" is necessarily larger than the sum of all our known intentions. Just like the aforementioned press-ganged sailors, we can find ourselves in an obligation we never agreed to. The symbolic domain reveals itself as a spectral, ghostly realm of—using Daniel Dennett's phrase—"free floating rationals."[30] At first glance, this seems counterintuitive. Generally, we consider individuals as the instances that determine the meanings of concepts in judgments and practices. And yet they are not entirely so: In Jacques Lacan's words, a big Other always precedes them. The big Other is not to be identified as an

autonomous individual but is more comparable to the representative site of an unpredictable swarm intelligence. As such, it wields more power than the sum of the individuals it comprises and can thus dominate not only individuals like the aforementioned sailors but entire political communities. Consequently, these communities must take responsibility for things they are, in many cases, only retrospectively held accountable for. This closely aligns with Žižek's reference to the autonomy of the symbolic, "a differential structure which 'hangs in the air'".[31] Following Lacan, the symbolic rests on no sufficient ground—not even on the teleology of Spirit (*Geist*). Where this Spirit originates from and what it achieves remains open to perpetual reinterpretation. "[T]his lack of roots in any substantial positive reality, is what subjectivizes the symbolic structure."[32]

Like his colleague John McDowell, Brandom cannot accept the idea of a conceptual or normative structure simply "hanging in the air." For him, there must be friction between concepts and facts, a thesis he grounds explicitly in Hegel.

Nevertheless, Brandom recognizes that subjects may be driven by the implicit normative force of their concepts to reconsider—and sometimes revise—the very facts they previously accepted, occasionally even against their own convictions. Žižek, in contrast, insists that it is precisely the symbolic order which opens up a radical gap between facts and values. This gap enables symbolic beings, such as humans, to retroactively transform their understanding of the past. Something that once appeared as an arbitrary imposition (such as gender equality) can thus retroactively become recognized as ethically necessary. This transformative process—what Žižek refers to as "retroactive transubstantiation"—reveals how historical developments, in hindsight labeled as "progress," entail an implicit judgment against the past. "What we encounter here is the key feature of the Symbolic: it renders the fundamental 'openness' the Symbolic introduces into reality. Once we enter the Symbolic, things never simply are, they all 'will have been,' they as it were borrow (part of) their being from the future. This decentering introduces an irreducible contingency: there is no deeper teleology at work here, no secret power that guarantees the happy outcome."[33]

Brandom is well aware of this structure, recognizing that a series of contingent historical facts may "retrospectively [be] necessary."[34] Nevertheless, this insight does not alter his commitment to the concept of reconciliation.

Žižek, however, considers Brandom's transition from acknowledging the retrospective transformation of values into facts toward a metaphysics of reconciliation to be inconsistent. He states: "I find this jump to the future, this 'trust' into progress, totally unwarranted and at odds with Hegel's basic metaphysical stance."[35] In Brandom's approach, Žižek identifies an instance of infinite conceptual structure ("spurious infinity,"[36]), a concept criticized by Hegel as "bad infinity." But what exactly

constitutes this infinite structure in Brandom's thinking? According to Žižek, it emerges from an endless "recognitive cycle of confession, trust, and recollective forgiveness,"[37] in which one form of "recollective forgiveness"[38] continually gives way to another on a higher level.

A similar critique can be found in Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, where he challenges the optimistic teleology of the Social Democracy of his time. According to this optimistic vision, past injustices would be redeemed by a brighter future—an ideal for which, according to Benjamin, the German Social Democrats had fought. Unable to accept such teleological certainty regarding historical salvation, Benjamin developed his own messianic conception of history. Brandom, by contrast, invokes a "cycle of recognition," which simultaneously arises from the "confession of the inadequacy of that forgiveness and trust in the subsequent forgiveness of that failure."[39]

Are, however, the deontic and alethic determinations of various facts within their contexts always as clear and unambiguous as Brandom suggests? Numerous everyday concepts—much like the judgments in which they appear—are embedded in chains of justification that are often overdetermined. Certainly, there is little difficulty in determining relationships of exclusion when dealing with natural kinds, such as aluminum and copper. No wars have been fought over the meaning of these terms, at most only over the resources they represent. But does this exhaust the full scope of conceptual analysis? Consider a trivial but contrasting example: when exactly does a stone in a dried-up riverbed cease to be a boulder and become a pebble? Here, it appears, boundaries become blurred—not just in terms of meaning, but also in terms of objects of reference themselves.

Or consider the relative sizes of countries, such as Switzerland and Argentina. Are these genuinely modally exclusive as facts in their sheer materiality? In Ferdinand von Schirach's novel *Tabu*, one of the protagonists provocatively claims otherwise, suggesting that if one were to roll out the Swiss Alps like pastry dough, Switzerland's surface area could rival Argentina's. Admittedly, these are intellectual games; however, if we apply such reasoning to social facts, the seriousness of the matter intensifies. Our theoretical constructions aim to epistemically individuate objects until they correspond precisely to their ontic conditions of individuation. Yet regarding various social facts, it remains contentious who is ultimately entitled to determine the truth values of judgments, for instance in political matters.

And are all rational beings equally convinced by an impartial distribution of "commitments" and "entitlements"—central terms in Brandom's vocabulary—as results of teleological processes of progress in "spirit"? Or are such processes, following Marx, always potentially subverted by questions related to class struggle, or, following Ernesto Laclau, by social antagonisms? Likewise, progress in Benjamin's sense

could always represent the progress of "the victors of history,"[40] which would commit us to a fundamental mistrust toward the idea of normative advancement itself.

Trust, Distrust, Negation, and Reconciliation

The examples above demonstrate that negativity is already at work, even in apparently simple facts. According to Žižek, the true legacy of Hegel's philosophy lies not primarily in "determinate negation," as Brandom suggests, but in a broader understanding of negativity—as antagonism or inconsistency—which is an inherent characteristic of objects and states of affairs. According to Žižek's interpretation of Hegel, such connections exist precisely because an inherent antagonism is inscribed within them. In everyday life, we continuously experience ambivalences, encountering justice as well as injustice, truth and lies, appearance and reality. Following Žižek, we must presuppose such ambiguities even— and especially—in the objects surrounding us. "Inconsistency" concerns "the real of the object—inconsistency is not something to be overcome or left behind but the very core of any entity."[41] This has implications for the concept of reconciliation, which guides Brandom's reading of Hegel. Žižek points out that reconciliation in Hegel's sense should not, as Brandom suggests, be interpreted primarily as an act of decision-making by responsible concept users. For Hegel, reconciliation often involves coming to terms with new conditions through resigned acceptance. It includes an element of simply accepting things as they are ("just-take-it"). In contrast, Brandom regards reconciliation as akin to a performative speech act—a decision through which people actively intervene in reality and establish facts, exemplified by declarations such as "This session is closed!" According to Žižek, however, what Hegel means by reconciliation does not primarily conform to this pattern. Instead, as mentioned earlier, it corresponds more closely to experiences of resigned acceptance. Reconciliation highlights the fact that the new epoch, whose arrival one may have fought against, is already "here." The widely lamented economization of daily life serves as an example: a new analysis might reveal that behind evil capital there need not necessarily be evil capitalists, but simply individuals forced to invest their capital somewhere. "[R]eality [...is] not just what there is, but also its ideological supplements, symbolic fictions that structure reality, false hopes and fears."[42]

Social conditions don't change only because of our deliberate actions—they also evolve due to broader forces at play in the background. These include complex social dynamics, historical processes, and shared cultural ideas that shape the world around us, often without individuals even realizing it. In many cases, people are not just active participants in these processes but also shaped by them, much like objects that interact with other objects in a larger networks.

Hegel argued that both objects and actions become meaningful within specific practices—structured ways of doing things in a society.[43] But these practices don't exist in isolation; they are influenced by other, larger systems. Some practices operate at a more immediate, everyday level (let's call them first-order practices), while others function at a higher level, shaping entire societies over time. These different levels don't always align, meaning that what makes sense in one context might not fit neatly into another. Philosopher Timothy Morton uses the term "hyperobjects"[44] to describe such large-scale, complex structures. They can't be separated from the smaller systems they influence, and they sometimes include conflicting ideas or beliefs.

Because of this, the systems we rely on—our social norms, our shared ideas—can change without those directly involved even noticing. People responsible for upholding certain rules (those with "entitlements" in Brandom's terms) might not realize that the meaning of those rules has already shifted.

This presents a challenge. Suppose the "game of giving and asking for reasons" is heavily influenced by complex background forces. Can we ever truly feel in control of them? Brandom suggests that we can, but examples like the "Queen's shilling" show how people can be committed to obligations without fully understanding what they agreed to. Compared to this, Brandom's other examples—like the logical difference between a rectangle and a circle or the scientific distinction between aluminum and copper—seem almost too simple. Real-world social facts exist in much more complicated networks, making it challenging to apply Brandom's inferentialist approach.

Žižek doesn't frame the issue in exactly the same way, but his ideas help clarify the challenge. He argues that, for Hegel, every object and idea contains a fundamental contradiction ("inconsistency is... the very core of any entity"[45]). This perspective adds another layer to the debate: Brandom believes in a process of "recollective forgiveness," where history allows for reconciliation and understanding. But can such reconciliation be meaningfully placed within the larger unfolding of history? Or does the very structure of reality—filled with contradictions and unexpected shifts—make it impossible to determine exactly when and how true reconciliation can occur?

Reconciliation Through the Inconsistency of Objects
Žižek argues that accepting certain facts—even reluctantly—can still count as a form of reconciliation. A good example is the idea of the American Dream: the belief that capitalism offers prosperity and happiness for all.

"If we subtract this false opening, if we realize that this false opening (what, in the US, they call 'the American dream') is part of reality

itself, condemned to remain just a dream, reality is no longer what it was—this subtraction works like a 'mute' button, which allows us to see what we see in all its ridiculous misery, deprived of the false depth of its vocal supplement. And once we do this, once reality is exposed in all its misery, it opens itself up to an actual change."[46]

In this sense, reconciliation involves a surprising realization: seeing things differently, sometimes in ways that challenge our expectations. According to Žižek, this realization comes from the fact that objects and ideas themselves contain inconsistencies. He believes Brandom fails to recognize a key difference between everyday thinking and Hegel's approach, which is why he calls the philosopher from Pittsburgh a "not-yet-there Hegelian"[47]:

"[I]n the common-sense approach, when inconsistence ('contradiction') arises it signals that we missed the object we wanted to grasp—object in itself is by definition consistent, this is the definition of reality. For Hegel, on the contrary, an insurmountable inconsistency signals that we touched the real of the object—inconsistency is not something to be overcome [...] but the very core of any entity."[48]

Brandom's understanding of reconciliation departs from this insight. He sees "free subjectivity"—the idea of individuals being able to think and act freely—as something that emerges from the combination of traditional ethical values and modern experiences of alienation. He illustrates this with three historical "epochs of Geist,"[49] which he sees as key stages in the development of human freedom. The first stage is the world of ancient ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*), where people share a strong sense of community and moral values. However, this comes at the cost of individual freedom.[50] The second stage is the modern era of Enlightenment. While people gain more personal freedom, this also leads to alienation—they become disconnected from society, and individuals and communities start to see each other as opposing forces. The third stage is the "postmodern phase of the development."[51] Here, ethical values and individual freedom are finally reconciled. Through ongoing self-reflection, democratic institutions develop, allowing people to recognize one another as equals. This mutual recognition creates a new form of reconciliation. In short, while Žižek sees contradiction and inconsistency as unavoidable parts of reality, Brandom presents reconciliation as a historical process where individuals and society gradually learn to coexist in balance.

"Hegel's account of the nature of the expressively progressive development he can envisage, by which the modern alienated structure of self-conscious subjectivity and social substance can

give rise to a new, better structure, which overcomes alienation, and so reachieves *Sittlichkeit*, while retaining the advance in self-conscious subjectivity characteristic of modernity accordingly encompasses a nonreductive account of how we should understand the place of norms in the natural world. The aim of the rest of this book is tell that story."[52]

This thesis has significant consequences for Hegel's discussion of Absolute Knowing, a key concept with which Hegel concludes the long experiential journey of Spirit at the end of the *Phenomenology*. For Brandom, Absolute Knowing represents an ideal state postulated by Hegel—one that awaits us at the end of our journey through errors and learning. Brandom rejects the criticism that his emphasis on a "*retrospective, forgiving, recollective phase of experience*" is merely an idiosyncratic projection of Hegel. He argues that Hegel himself highlights this aspect: "After all, he [Hegel] closes the final chapter of the *Phenomenology*, triumphantly titled 'Absolute Knowing,' by highlighting just this feature of this ultimate, finally expressively adequate form of self-consciousness. It lines up with his ringing pronouncement that 'The wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind'."[53]

　　In contrast, Žižek interprets Hegel's discussion of Absolute Knowing and the notion of healed wounds as a particular form of ignorance. For Žižek, the wounds of history are not truly healed by what Brandom identifies as recollective reconciliation in Hegel.[54] Rather, at the level of Absolute Knowing, these wounds are simply forgotten. In Žižek's view, Hegel's Spirit suffers from a kind of amnesia: "[the wound] disappears, when we reach the standpoint of Absolute Knowing." This leads to a crucial consequence: upon reaching Absolute Knowing, we inevitably fall back into the journey toward it: "we fall back on repeating the path to truth since we realize that truth is nothing but the path to truth."[55] Thus, the supposed final goal of the *Phenomenology* actually marks a return to its beginning—but now with an awareness of its own self-reflexive limitation. This is closely connected to Žižek's broader claim that reality only fully becomes itself when it is revealed as a battleground of falsifiable ideologies.

　　The mediation between concept and reality, according to Žižek, does not represent a postmodern conceptual relativism, as argued by thinkers from Donald Davidson to Sebastian Rödl and Andrea Kern, where reality can simply be interpreted in different ways. The widely criticized idea of a *gap* between *mind* and *world* is not Žižek's position. Instead, he argues that the world is, in itself, inconsistent. What exists *in itself* is not unified within itself. The issue is not that our concepts fail to grasp reality and thus lead to unexpected catastrophes; rather, reality itself fails—so to speak—due to an inherent lack of being. Žižek repeatedly identifies this lack with Hegel's claim that *the True must not only be conceived*

as Substance but equally as Subject.[56] Substance contains within itself a moment in which it encounters itself in the spectral, ghostly form of its own non-coincidence. So, Absolute Knowing, in Hegel's philosophy, involves recognizing a fundamental lack or inconsistency in reality. Žižek explains this by arguing that reality itself can be "wrong" if it follows a mistaken concept. He states: "If reality follows (or refers to) a wrong concept, this reality can be wrong in itself, so it's not just that concepts more or less faithfully 'mirror' reality—reality itself is 'mediated' by concepts."[57] In other words, our understanding of reality does not just reflect what is real—reality itself is shaped by our concepts. This leads Žižek to an important conclusion: "[T]here are realities that can only exist insofar as they incorporate / actualize a wrong notion." "'[M]istakes' (ideological misconceptions) do not (wrongly) 'reflect' social reality: they are inscribed into social reality itself, they sustain social practices and institutions."[58] This idea is particularly relevant to major historical events. For example, Žižek argues that fascism is based on a false idea—the belief in the "organic unity" of a nation, which hides the real conflicts within society. Yet, despite being false, this belief can still shape reality, leading to large political movements: "[T]he fascist notion of organic unity of a nation is false, it obfuscates immanent antagonism, but this falsity can get embodied in a large political movement, which is part of social reality. Or, liberal individualism is 'wrong' as a theory of what society is, but this 'mistake' can be realized in liberal societies."[59]

Rocío Zambrana offers a similar way to think about Hegel's Absolute Knowing—she compares it to a gallery of images. Hegel himself describes this as "a gallery of images, each of which is equipped with the full richness of Spirit."[60] This metaphor suggests that history does not follow a simple, step-by-step progression, where each stage builds directly upon the previous one like rungs on a ladder. Instead, history is more like an art gallery, where different periods of time exist side by side, without a single universal way to judge them. As Zambrana explains: "The work of recollection cannot secure the fate of the finite beyond all destruction and loss. Normative authority is never final and fully authorized. It is precarious and ambivalent."[61] This means that there is no ultimate standard for judging historical events—not even through reconciliation, which Brandom sees as a balance between the ethical life of the past (*Sittlichkeit*) and modern ideas of individual freedom. Because of this, Žižek criticizes Brandom's interpretation of Hegel as too optimistic—just as Robert Pippin has critiqued Brandom's inferentialism for being too positivistic. Žižek argues that the recognition of actual change in history is not always something that people freely embrace. Instead, reconciliation often comes from a feeling of resignation, only becoming clear when it is too late. As he puts it: "[O]ne has to accept that *la vérité surgit de la méprise*, that the Good arises only through egotist evil, that there is no way of bypassing this. This is why historical reality is a space of resignation."[62] Brandom

does acknowledge that Hegel saw history as a mix of contingency (randomness) and necessity (inevitability). However, in Brandom's reading, this process is framed in a more positive way, as a movement toward progress, rather than as a struggle marked by antagonism.

Kammerdiener vs. Hero

Brandom briefly mentions Žižek in a 2020 article but does not reference him at all in his book on Hegel. However, when he critiques the so-called *three masters of suspicion*—"Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud"[63]—his argument indirectly applies to Žižek as well.

Brandom draws on a passage from Hegel's *Phenomenology*, where Hegel describes the perspective of a *valet* (*Kammerdiener*).[64] The valet serves his master, a historically significant figure, but he only sees his master's personal flaws and everyday habits. He does not recognize his master's larger historical role. As such, the valet remains, according to Brandom, trapped in a limited way of thinking, unable to grasp the deeper rational perspective that Hegel calls *reason* (*Vernunft*), as opposed to mere *understanding* (*Verstand*). Similarly, Brandom suggests that Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—like the valet—fail to appreciate the deeper normative structure of human culture and its achievements. Instead, they focus only on underlying power struggles, desires, or economic forces, framing everything with suspicion. This kind of criticism has also been directed at Žižek. Some argue that his focus on negativity and contradiction ultimately undermines the very idea that any belief can be justified as true—pulling the ground out from under our feet, so to speak.[65] For the valet, values are merely "useful[...] to private purposes". A value such a duty, cannot be "*unconditionally* obligatory."[66] In other words, the valet sees values as subjective judgments rather than part of a shared moral framework. Because the valet operates with mere *understanding* (*Verstand*) rather than true *reason* (*Vernunft*), values seem temporary and instrumental, without lasting significance. As Brandom explains, "as Nietzsche and the British utilitarians would say", values are simply tools used in struggles for power and survival.[67] They have no inherent worth in terms of recognition or moral obligation. The valet's problem is that he is too close to his master's everyday life—his flaws, his habits, his imperfections. This prevents him from recognizing his master's true historical impact. Because of this, the valet—like Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—becomes what Brandom calls a "reductive naturalist."[68]

Brandom sees a similar pattern in how these philosophers explain human life: Nietzsche reduces humans to the will to power—the drive to dominate and control. Marx reduces economics to a natural, mechanical process that disregards ethical norms. Freud sees humans as driven by unconscious forces that overpower rational self-awareness and agency. In each case, human thought and action are stripped of their deeper

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normative dimension—the role of reason, ethics, and shared recognition. For Brandom, this is the key mistake of the valet's perspective. The valet sees the hero of duty—a person acting out of moral commitment— "merely [as a] *natural* being,"[69] reducing him to mere instincts or external influences. In the same way, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud treat people as shaped by power, economics, or unconscious drives, rather than as rational, self-conscious agents. Thus, Brandom describes the base "meta-*attitude*" of the valet "as a pure form of *alienation* because it makes unintelligible the very acculturating, conceptual norms subjection to which makes even the *Kammerdiener* a discursive, *geistig* being: a knower, agent, and self."[70] The valet's way of thinking is a form of self-imposed blindness. He does not understand the very norms that allow him to think and act as a rational subject. As Brandom puts it: The valet "cannot make sense of normative *force*."[71] The same problem applies, from a Pittsburghian perspective, not only to Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud but to Žižek as well.

Brandom embarks on his discussion of the masters of suspicion to present Hegel as a thinker of normative orders—one whose philosophy cannot be reduced to naturalistic causal processes. This distinguishes Hegel as a thinker of reason (*Vernunft*), as opposed to the lower faculty of mere understanding (*Verstand*). In Hegel's recollective semantics of representation, things as they "are in themselves (what we are really talking and thinking about)" serve as a "normative standard of correctness for how things are for knowers and agents (what we say and think about those things) as aspects of the process of experience: the social-practical activity of adopting, assessing, and revising possibly materially incompatible commitments."[72] The valet and his intellectual descendants, however, are incapable of adopting this perspective.

Brandom's conclusions leave little room for alternative interpretations. His Frege-inspired reading of Hegel insists on the determinacy of meanings and their referents. In this framework, memories must necessarily be progressive acts that transform contingency into necessity. However, this raises an unresolved issue—one already touched upon earlier: Who holds the authority to determine and define values? The social-semantic antagonism Brandom describes does not, by virtue of the triumph of the better argument, determine who qualifies as part of the community of authorized (*entitled*) speakers. This question has been at the center of works by thinkers such as Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Jacques Rancière, to name just a few, for more than three decades. Yet, within the intellectual environment of the Pittsburgh School, these figures are largely absent from the discussion. In overlooking them, the representatives of this school miss out on a crucial theoretical dimension.

Brandom's philosophy remains silent on fundamental questions of power, domination, and violence—issues that Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud placed at the forefront of their thought. By assigning these thinkers the

role of the *valet*, Brandom avoids engaging with the limitations of reason in relation to his theory of holistic semantics. Yet, in a certain sense, these three thinkers are precisely the ones capable of addressing those limits. As Žižek reveals, Marx does not view capitalism as a naturalistic causal process but rather as a narrative that undermines its own conditions of existence due to the repression of internal contradictions. Similarly, Freud's concept of the unconscious as the source of symptoms does not reduce human beings to mere puppets. On the contrary, the unconscious is conceived as an instance of rationality that operates beyond conscious awareness. This is precisely the foundation of Freud's definition of a symptom: "it can articulate (give expression to) an unconscious norm [...] of which the subject is not even aware."[73] For this reason, Žižek argues that Freud's and Lacan's notion of the return of the repressed does not imply an eliminative reduction of psychic life. Rather, it points to the "*immanent inconsistency of our reasoning*". "[U]nconscious causes are reasons, which are disavowed but continue to haunt us."[74]

Gray on Gray

Žižek refers to Hegel's famous quote from the preface of the *Phenomenology* in which Hegel describes his view on the nature of philosophy and its relation to history as being confined to a landscape of "gray on gray". It underlines his insight that philosophy can only fully understand an era after the latter has already ended. In other words, philosophy is not capable of predicting the future. This idea challenges Brandom's interpretation of trust and reconciliation as central themes in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. The fundamental problem is that we do not have access to the point from which such judgments about reconciliation and progress could be made.

For instance, Brandom describes reconciliation as a process between a "confessor" and a self-reflective "judge."[75] But what if this reconciliation is not what we typically think of as genuine forgiveness? What if it instead becomes a distorted version of it from our historical perspective? Brandom argues that forgiveness takes place within an act of recollection,[76] but should we trust this process? Or should we be suspicious of it? Is, for example, Germany's reconciliation with Israel over the horrors of the Holocaust truly genuine if it comes at the cost of Palestinian suffering? Is "trust" and "forgiveness" granted here or still in the making? And how do we interpret conflicting memory narratives? Concepts like forgiveness, remembrance, and penitence risk becoming cynical justifications for new injustices. Put simply, philosophy cannot give a definite answer to what confession, forgiveness, and recollection really mean or under what conditions they truly apply. Žižek comments on this by saying: "Brandom talks here like Marx: Absolute Knowing is for him (as Marx put it about the revolutionary thought) like the singing of a Gallic

cock in the new dawn, it 'ushers' in a new social age when new practices and institutions will also be required to overcome the structural alienation of modern life."[77]

Brandom holds a strong belief in historical progress and maintains that there is no real alternative to the postmodern era. For him, postmodernity has resolved the problem of alienation by "reachiev[ing] *Sittlichkeit*, while retaining the advance in self-conscious subjectivity characteristic of modernity."[78] But this raises a critical question: Why should we assume that spirit—as Hegel conceived it—must develop in the way Brandom envisions? What if history doesn't move toward reconciliation at all? What if the evolution of Spirit takes a radically different path?

Consider a possible future in which human subjectivity is no longer characterized by freedom but is instead shaped by a new form of totalitarianism. Imagine that this shift is still perceived as a form of progress by those living through it. In that case, has progress truly occurred—or has it become a parody of itself?

Žižek offers a provocative example of such a future: "digitalized authoritarianism."[79] He refers to a society in which digitalization pervades work and daily life, ultimately reinforcing authoritarian power structures. Could this not represent "a properly Hegelian insight into a dialectics of modernity"? In such a world, humanity would not experience reconciliation, but rather the erosion of precisely those social categories Brandom sees as essential to ethical life. What initially looks like regression may, from another perspective, be seen as an advance. And that's precisely the point: whether something is labeled progress or decline depends on how future societies interpret it.

Žižek draws a historical parallel to this logic: "Did Stalinism not promise to implement the synthesis between a strong communal spirit and free individuality... and was the result not the loss of freedom itself in conditions of total alienation?"[80] History has shown that leaders who claimed to realize reconciliation sometimes delivered the opposite: systems of near-total control. What might seem like reconciliation today may, in hindsight, appear as a form of domination.

Žižek's critique of Brandom also applies to Judith Butler's reading of Hegel. Butler believes that Hegel shows how structures of injustice can be dismantled when we recognize that individuals exist within a shared social space. This interpretation is similar to Brandom's idea that history moves toward greater mutual recognition. Butler writes: "He [Hegel] leads us to the realization that I cannot do away with this other [which I dominate] without also doing away with myself, that I cannot dominate another without losing track of the social equality that ideally defines us both."[81] Žižek, however, argues that for Hegel, emancipation can only happen through a process that includes domination. This directly challenges Butler's and Brandom's assumption that history moves toward

a more ethical way of living. According to Žižek, there is no direct path to an ethical society, not even in postmodernity. Instead, any attempt to create such a society would only lead to what he calls a "*regression to pre-modern organic society*."[82] Hegel saw the revolutionary violence of the French Revolution as both an abstract and ultimately destructive idea of universalism. However, at the same time, it was also necessary for the creation of the modern rational state. Žižek explains this paradox as follows: "Hegel's point is [...] the enigma of why, in spite of the fact that revolutionary Terror was a historical deadlock, we have to pass through it in order to arrive at the modern state."[83] According to Žižek, this idea— that we cannot bypass difficult or even violent historical developments— is the necessary condition for any true form of reconciliation.[84] He expresses it in the following way: "So, if Evil is particularity as opposed to the Universal, absolute Evil is the universal Good itself as exclusive of particularity, of its particular content—therein resides for Hegel the lesson of the French revolutionary terror. The same can be said for the October Revolution."[85] In other words, Žižek challenges Brandom's optimistic belief in historical progress. If history truly moves according to dialectical logic, then the process of reconciliation might not lead to an ideal society. Instead, it could result in a situation that—while appearing as progress from within its own time—could actually represent a major loss from another perspective.

Parallax

According to Žižek, only the concept of *parallax*, rather than the notion of recollective forgiveness, adequately accounts for the developments that may arise from social catastrophes.[86] Parallax allows us to conceive of positive developments without balancing them against catastrophes on a higher plane of reconciliation. "[T]he fact that holocaust helped to establish the state of Israel doesn't justify it, the fact that the British colonization of India brought it on the path to modernity in no way justifies its horrors. More precisely, what is impossible to occupy is a neutral place, which would allow us to 'objectively judge' a historical period and provide a balanced view of it."[87] For this reason, Žižek rejects Brandom's belief in a higher synthesis. "In short, there is no higher 'synthesis' between the objective view of history and ethical judgment—here also, the parallax is irreducible. So, we should contest Brandom's claim that Hegel's ultimate goal is to elaborate the transition from modernity to a form of normativity structured by self-consciousness with the form of Absolute Knowing. Absolute Knowing is not 'a form of normativity,' it is a position of 'absolute rest' arrived at through accepting the gap (between facts and norms) as irreducible and constitutive."[88] In other words, Brandom's insight into the progress of Spirit remains conceivable only on a purely formal level. It disregards the empirical content of history. What becomes *more explicit*

is not necessarily rational, for the very standard of reason itself is subject to change. Žižek, by contrast, seeks to preserve the unsettling challenge that Hegel's work presents, resisting the temptation to combine a formal ontology with an entirely opaque concept of progress. The standpoint of trust, which Brandom invokes, cannot be adopted by any empirical subject. Consequently, Brandom's philosophy remains confined to the vocabulary of a *metastructure*, a *meta-consciousness*—a perspective that empirical subjects, such as we are, cannot inhabit.

1 Žižek 2008, 2016, 2020, 2022.
2 Brandom 2020.
3 Russell 2004, pp.780-796.
4 Brandom 2019, p.3.
5 Ibid., p.636.
6 Hegel 1986, p.46; trans. D. F.
7 Brandom 1994, 2001.
8 Pippin 2005, p.392.
9 Brandom 2015 p.208.
10 Brandom 2019, p.556.
11 Ibid., pp.636-758.
12 Žižek 2016, p.91.
13 Brandom 2015, pp.114-115.
14 Brandom 2019, p.3.
15 Ibid., pp.76-79.
16 Ibid., p.434.
17 Ibid., p.2.
18 Brandom 2021, p.14.
19 Brandom 2019, pp.422-431.
20 Ibid., p.2.
21 Žižek 2022, p.25.
22 Žižek 2016, p.91.
23 Amstrong 1978; Bennett 1987.
24 Žižek 2016, pp.91-92.
25 Lévi-Strauss 1987.
26 Žižek 2022, p.48.
27 See on this topic also Cutrofello 2020.
28 Brandom 2019, p.559.
29 Brandom 1994, pp. 162-164.
30 Dennett 1998, pp.283-284.
31 Žižek 2016, p.92.
32 Ibid.
33 Žižek 2022, p.39.
34 Brandom 2019, p.631.
35 Žižek 2022, p.39.
36 Ibid.
37 Brandom 2019, p.634.
38 Ibid., p.616.
39 Brandom 2021, p.634.
40 Benjamin 1980, p.695.
41 Žižek 2022, p.25.
42 Ibid.
43 Pippin 2008.
44 Morton 2013.
45 Žižek 2022, p.25.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., p.22.
48 Ibid., p.25.
49 Brandom 2019, pp.469-476.
50 Ibid., p.472.
51 Ibid. p.538.
52 Ibid., p.499.
53 Brandom 2020, p.36.
54 See Brandom 2019, chapter 16.
55 Žižek 2016, p.26.
56 Hegel 1986, p.23, trans. D. F.
57 Žižek 2016, p.71.
58 Ibid., p.72.
59 Ibid.
60 Hegel 1986, p.590, trans. D. F.; see Zambrana 2015, p.46.
61 Zambrana 2015, p.46.
62 Žižek 2016, p.26.

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63 Brandom 2019, p.564.
64 See Hegel 1986, p.489.
65 See Bou Ali 2023; Finkelde 2023.
66 Brandom 2019, pp.545-555.
67 Ibid., p.555.
68 Ibid., p.572.
69 Ibid., p.556.
70 Ibid., p.555.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid., p.557.
73 Žižek 2016, p.61.
74 Ibid., p.60.
75 Brandom 2019, p.601.
76 Ibid., p.600.
77 Žižek 2022, p.28.
78 Brandom 2019, p.499.
79 Žižek 2022, p.28.
80 Ibid.
81 Žižek 2022, p.23.
82 Ibid., p.24.
83 Ibid.
84 Ibid., p.25.
85 Ibid., p.32.
86 See Žižek 2009 and Finkelde, Menke, Žižek 2022.
87 Žižek 2022, p.35.
88 Ibid., p.36.

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