

What is Orientation in Thinking, Today?: A Response to Žižek

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Abstract: In 1786, intervening in the controversy on Spinoza’s philosophy involving Mendelssohn, Jacobi and Lessing, Kant argued in “Was Heisst: Sich im Denken Orientieren?” for the *practical necessity*, arising from reason’s own intrinsic needs, of a *subjective* orientation of thinking within the *properly logical general space* of its (otherwise speculative) activity. In this essay, I consider what can helpfully be meant by the idea of a critical “orientation of thought” today, in the sense of a practical possibility of directedness of thought relevant to critical engagement with the largest current problems of planetary life. I argue that such an orientation, today, must take account of the formal implications of the necessarily symbolic structure of any comprehensive thought about the senses of beings and lives in general; and that, viewed in the framework of what I called, in *Politics of Logic*, the “paradoxico-critical” orientation, these implications also motivate a deep-seated critique of the ideological privilege traditionally accorded to the human as the distinctive possessor of (what is imagined as) a unitary rational power of judgment. In the final section of the paper, I respond critically to Žižek’s recent discussion of the paradoxico-critical position in relation to his own (partially similar) “Hegelian” one.

Keywords: Kant, Žižek, Critique, Orientation, Paradoxico-criticism, Thinking, Being

The concern of this paper is not metaphysical or ontological, but rather, in a certain way, ethical. The way in which it is ethical can be indicated by reference to Lacan’s suggestion, near the beginning of Seminar VII (“The Ethics of Psychoanalysis”), that the questions of ethics, after the insights of Freud, be articulated “from the point of view of the location of man in relation to the real.”¹ Although there are certainly other leading references than simply that of the life of “man” (and in particular of “human” subjectivity) that must, today, set the terms for thought’s response to the largest problems of contemporary global life, Lacan’s formulation nevertheless appropriately points to the project of an articulation of these problems in thought and language that has, fundamentally, nothing to do with the conditions of individual action, the systematization of pre-theoretical “intuitions,” or the calculative (pseudo-)problems of the management and distribution of collective goods. Instead, the concern of an ethics of the psychoanalytic real in this sense would – again, following Freud as Lacan interprets him -- locate the concern of ethics within a critical and reflective consideration of the *structure of language* in relation to the real contemporary conditions of life.² Such a project of articulation, I will argue, besides being in its development of the specific structure of the symbolic as an “ethics of the real” in Lacan’s determined sense of that term, could also, I think, amount in its critical engagement with this

structure, to a “*real* ethics”: that is, an ethics actually able to *meet* the real of the determinative forms of contemporary global life with a critical elaboration of the problematic and paradoxical *symbolic* and *imaginary* conditions of their actual and effective ideological support.³

In this paper, I will consider the question or problem of such an ethical approach of linguistically structured thought to life under the specific heading of what can be called, drawing on Kant, an *orientation* of thought. The idea of such an “orientation” is, as I seek to appeal to it here, in part that of a practical possibility of directedness of thought relevant to collective practice with respect to, and critical engagement with, the problems and sources of suffering most broadly characteristic of the global situation of planetary life today. Among these problems is that of the pervasive violence marked in, and enabled by, the privilege of the being that conceives itself as the possessor and master of *language* and hence of the power of the generality, and the mastery of beings in general, whose possibility this possession brings. One part of the question of a contemporary approach of thought to the broadest problems of global life today is thus to find appropriate terms in which to formulate a critique of what can be called *anthropogenic violence*: namely, the systematic violence that pervades global life today in diverse forms such as (anthropogenic) climate change, factory farming and the global destruction of lives, species and environments by the power of capitalism. This includes especially the conversion of the forms of these lives, species and environments into a unitary form of commodification, monetization and exchange for the purpose of the extraction of surplus value; or of the extraction of their sense and meaning in the presumptively unitary medium of a (presumptively human) form of accessibility to their neutral “intelligibility” to (a presumptively human) thought and activity.⁴

In considering the possible forms of a (helpful) orientation of thought toward these problems and others like them today, I will argue that such a consideration can take the initial form of a repetition -- albeit with a kind of essential displacement -- of Kant’s appeal to the figure of “orientation in thinking” which is, for him, already a way of thinking about the possible opening of the theoretical register of critical philosophy onto the practical and the ethical. The determinate repetition, under contemporary conditions, of this appeal can still serve, I will argue, as an essential figure of the possible orientation of thinking toward the problems implicit in the (real as well as ideological) constitution of the *generality* or *totality* of the thinkable senses and lives. But contemporary conditions of thought and practice nevertheless require, here, an essential displacement of Kant’s own thought about the forms and implications of this possible orientation of thought to the real. One aspect of this displacement is that, by contrast with Kant’s thinking of orientation in terms of the relationship of what are for him the distinct subjective “faculties” of sensible intuition and discursive thinking (or understanding), it will be (for us) a characteristic

outcome of a philosophical awareness of the constitutive role of *language*, or of the *symbolic*, in thought's real and imaginary structure. It follows from this displacement that we can make no use of the Kantian framework of faculties or of Kant's characteristic appeal to a distinctively subjective *power* of judgment or understanding as the primary locus of the generality of conceptual thought. Instead, we must today consider the problem of the orientation of thought, rather, as one about the possible articulations of the (plural) forms in which we can think critically about the relationship of the (imaginary) totality of language, or of the symbolic, to the real of shared planetary life.

Within the ambit of this consideration, I argue, the Kantian critical problem of the capacities of thought in relation to the possibilities of empirical knowledge is rather transformed into one about, in part, the structure and limits of linguistic and non-linguistic sense, and the problem of orientation in thinking accordingly becomes the formal problem of our reflexive linguistic orientation toward or in relation to just these limits. Their critical articulation will then be, on the one hand, a way of critically considering the real and ideological forms of the contemporary *global* determination of the senses of lives and events, and on the other, a way of locating the specific points at which the determinacy of this constitution evinces in principle a more general and structurally characteristic undeterminability or undecidability. Here, it becomes relevant especially to consider in formal terms the problem of the *constitution of unity* and most especially of those unities whose existence, assumed or presupposed within the historical thinking of metaphysics and maintained in the imaginary register on the most ordinary level of everyday linguistic presupposition, most define the privilege of what the "human" understanding is considered to be uniquely capable. These are, in particular, the presumed or imagined unities of subject, of substance, and of the world as such and as a whole, with respect to which Kant already makes a decisive move, in the "Transcendental Dialectic" of the first *Critique*, by interrogating their unity as given *only* problematically through their hypostatization as transcendental ideas, and thus as a proper subject for critique of transcendental illusion. As I shall argue here, a contemporary repetition of the Kantian critical project in linguistic terms can evince the contemporary challenge it offers to the coherence of the forms of unity whose presumed coherence and availability to thought has most often defined the privilege of the human in its presumed power of rational thinking, a presumption that has articulated its claim to dominate the beings of the world in general. A genuine contemporary critical orientation of thought is then, in these terms, an orientation that, discerning the formal structure of this claim, also allows for a fundamental critique of its basis, and thereby makes room for a consideration of global life no longer subject to it. In the last section of the paper, I consider the sense and possible directedness of such a contemporary project of

critical orientation in relation to the determinatively “Hegelian” terms and motivation of a project that – whatever its relationship to Kantian critique -- must undoubtedly be considered one of the most forceful and puissant movements of radical thought today: namely Slavoj Žižek’s project of historical-materialist ideology critique and emancipatory politics.

I

In 1786, intervening in the famous controversy on the interpretation and significance of Spinoza’s philosophy involving Mendelssohn, Jacobi and Lessing, Kant argued in the essay “Was Heisst: Sich im Denken Orientieren?” for the *practical necessity*, arising from reason’s own intrinsic needs, of a *subjective* orientation of thinking within the *properly logical space* of its (otherwise speculative) activity. In arguing for the possibility of what he here calls “orienting oneself in thinking,” Kant is, most directly, impressed by an analogy between physical or spatial orientation within the sensible world and the concept or practice of a *logical* orientation that allows us to make use of a coherent directedness, this time toward or in relation not to any sensory object perceivable by touch or sight, but toward something which is itself “super-sensory.” Just as, Kant argues, I may use a *felt difference* within my own subject – in particular, that between the right and left hands, as I feel them to differ internally and without exterior sensory input – to to orient myself in *any* “given” space which is not open, as a whole, to my visual oversight (for example, in a dark but familiar room), so I must be capable, in the spontaneous and free directedness of thought, of orienting myself toward a supersensible object *by means of the use of a* subjective sense innate (Kant thinks) to our rational nature itself:

Finally, I can extend this concept [viz., of subjective orientation - PL] even further if I equate it with the ability to orientate oneself not just in space, i.e. mathematically, but also in *thought*, i.e. *logically*. It is easy to guess by analogy that this will be the means whereby pure reason regulates its use when, taking leave of known objects (of experience), it seeks to extend its sphere beyond the frontiers of experience and no longer encounters any objects of intuition whatsoever, but merely a space for the latter to operate in. It will then no longer be in a position, in determining its own faculty of judgement, to subsume its judgments under a specific maxim with the help of objective criteria of knowledge, but only with the help of a subjective distinction.⁵

Such an orientation will be, more specifically, a *directedness* of the power or faculty of judgment – that power which Kant specifies, in the *Critique or Pure Reason*, as the capacity of “**subsuming** under rules,

i.e. of determining whether something stands under a given rule (*casus datae legis*) or not.” (A 132/B171).⁶ Just as spatial orientation is practically necessary if we are actively to find our way among objects and situations in space, it will be possible, or at any rate conceivable, to find orientation with respect to our activity in judgment, even when the case of judgment is one that exceeds the givenness of empirical knowledge, and thus even in cases where one’s knowledge is, as a whole, insufficient to provide any sufficient grounds for judgment at all. In such cases, Kant suggests, the (self-imposed) need of reason to render judgment must nevertheless take the form of a determination of a maxim under which it can act. However, because of the necessary impossibility, here, of this determination’s being provided by anything that can appear in an intuition as an object of actual knowledge, we must be capable of determining such a maxim in the absence of any possible knowledge. Accordingly, reason’s activity must be limited to determining two essentially formal aspects of the concepts with which we operate : first, the freedom of these concepts, in themselves, from contradiction; and second, the conceptual form of the *relationship* of the (supposed or presupposed) super-sensory object of this activity to the objects of ordinary, sensory experience.⁷

In this way, Kant seeks to broaden the subjective phenomenon of the orientation by means of which we navigate spaces from our own position within them, in abeyance of any objectively ascertainable or knowable object, is broadened to a relevant sense of the possibility of orienting ourselves and navigating within the “immeasurable” space of the thinkable, even beyond the bounds of any possible experience. Such a use is, avowedly and markedly, merely *regulative* (in the terminology of the first *Critique*): it does demonstrate the existence, or even give us grounds to think the real possibility of, any actually supersensible unity or thing. But this does not prevent the form of unity which is involved in reason’s practical interest from proposing itself to us as the unitary form of our possible orientation, as the substantively empty form of our subjective orientation of thinking and action itself. And in fact, if we credit the metaphor and the analogy, orientation is not just a way of directing action, but bears a necessity that is practically unavoidable in our activity if we are to determine that activity freely by means of reasons at all.

In the context of a broader reflection on the forms of rational thought and their formal relationship to the possible directions and determinations of life and lived practice, this argument for the practical necessity of orientation in thought is notable for at least two distinct reasons. First, because the argument represents one of the most direct places where Kant argues for, and attempts to effect, the passage from the theoretical use of reason to its practical employment in general -- thereby both echoing and summarizing those other places where he gives an antinomic derivation of the necessity of a postulation of reason’s practical and law-giving ambition relative to necessary limitations of its

knowledge. And second – more broadly -- because its guiding metaphor of orientation stages the passage of thought from the ordinary activity of the understanding with respect to intuitively given objects in space and time to the space that is rather supposed as proper to thinking: “logical space”, or the general space of the constitution of generality itself, drawing out the implications of what he sees as the forms and limits of our possible relationship to this space for what he argues is the necessarily rational determination of practice. The argument is thus relevant to the critical problem, or question, of the constitution and basis of the instituting or law-giving *power* of reason itself, and hence to the problem of the distinctive kind of power possessed by the kind of being that is capable of it. In the Kantian framework, this is none other than the power of that which is able to propose the law to itself and thereby understand itself as bound by it. Distinctively and decisively, this is the power of that which is in definitive possession of a *power of judgment* in general: of a power of the use of reason as the giving of law, and the determination of the individual case, in general, in its form. It is just such a being – and only such a being – that stands under the requirement of orientation, in each particular case of its practice, toward or in relation to the unity of the law it must give itself.

We can gain further insight into the logical form of this requirement of orientation, as well as the form of legality (hence of practice) that it structures, by way of a bit of reflection on the arguments by which Kant most directly derives, elsewhere, the possibility of freedom as autonomy itself. The first of these is, of course, the third antinomy of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which opposes the thesis of a possible determination of causality through freedom with the antithesis of a complete natural determinism without any possibility of free action. The second is the antinomy of pure practical reason in the determination of the will in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, published two years after the appearance of the “Orientation” essay. Here, the antinomy is a version of the more general antinomy, running through Kant’s ethical thought, between the necessity for truly moral action to be determined by the moral law rather than through any pathological motivation, and the impossibility of our ever being able to conclusively verify, by any empirical marks or features, that our action is indeed so determined. As in the speculative antinomies of the first *Critique*, the dilemma is to be resolved by adopting transcendental idealism, and in particular by the possibility it allows for considering the order of efficient causes *uniformly* to be conditioned by a superior and atemporal *noumenal* determining cause in the rational subject, a cause which is to be located, once again, in the intellectual space wherein it can be responsible for the determination of action in accordance with the moral law.⁸

In each of these cases of the antinomy of causality and freedom, the specifically suggested resolution of the antinomic conflict depends

not only on the general solution of transcendental idealism, but more specifically on the possibility that the unitary noumenal conditioning of the phenomena of the world provides for resolving the dispute *in favor* of freedom. In both cases, it is reason's *own* interest that tips the balance in favor of freedom or in favor of the actual possibility of the determination of action by means of the law which reason gives itself. This is the same interest or need as is determinative in Kant's argument, in the "Orientation" essay, for the possibility of reason's orientation toward, and within, the supersensible in general. It is, broadly speaking, reason's specific interest in *unity*, and in particular in the form of unity that is the form of the distinctive activity of the faculty of judgment in determining, of a new case, whether it falls under a *given* law. But where the faculty of judgment has no object, and hence no way of determining any particular law as given, this interest is just the interest in the pure *form* of law itself. This is, formally speaking, no different from an interest in unity as consistency, in the merely consistent form of a possible determination of the will by means of reason's own power to give law to itself.

So, bringing this all together, we can say, summarily: first, that the invocation of the practical as founded in reason's need for unity is Kant's distinctive way of resolving the antinomic and contradictory form which the problems of the determination of the conditions of action in general are presented; and second that they nevertheless constitute this need, and the orientation it yields, as the orientation of, or toward, *consistency* itself. Both the possibility and indeed the necessity of this orientation, moreover, are produced or seen as demanded by reflection on the distinctive logical form of judgment itself, which requires or already implies the form of the rule in general: that is, the unity evident in the consistency of the self-given law by contrast with its various empirically determined instances. Kant's idea of orientation in thought, in which his whole idea of the interest of reason is subsumed, is thus in an exemplary way an outcome of a certain kind of privileging of the One: namely, a privileging of the *formal claim of unity as consistency* that is the *necessary form of subjective activity as subject to rational law*, or is the *actuality of the subject's reason itself as the (empty) form of consistent legality*.

We will have reason, below, to challenge this privilege of consistency, within the scope of what will there appear as a broader space of the determination of the space of practice or of relationship within which beings and lives encounter one another in the generality and diversity of their interests, without outside boundary or exception, and without prejudice to the form of law or to the force of its institution. However, it will nevertheless be positively relevant to this consideration of the generality of interests to consider just as deeply the Kantian critique of the distinctive forms in which reason characteristically imagines or hallucinates a substantive One on the "subjective" basis of a hyperbolic application of its own constitutive principles of unity. This is, in other

words, the critique of the transcendental *dialectic*, which begins by implicating in the problem of reason's demand for unity beyond the sphere in which it can actually attain it the whole struggle of our lives with the forms of illusion to which it is distinctively prone. This dialectic is, of course, the logical setting, not only of the antinomies which problematize the concept of the world as the real totality of conditions for a given "now" taken as real in themselves, but also of the characteristically metaphysical assumptions or presuppositions of the possibility of a rational psychology grounded in a phenomenally given being of the soul, and of a rational theology grounded in a phenomenally given first creator.

In fact, according to Kant's suggestion in opening the "Dialectic" of the first *Critique*, all three of these are generated visibly by the distinctive forms of reason's possible operation in inference. Kant here supposes, assuming the Aristotelian syllogistic form as the general form of inference, that every inference from one judgment to another depends upon the subsumption of a "cognition" under a general rule by means of the power of judgment; once this is done, it is possible to determine the specific cognition according to the predicate involved in the general rule.⁹ Further, Kant supposes that there are exactly *three* forms of possible syllogism, what he terms the categorical, hypothetical, and disjunctive ones, and which can be distinguished according to the logical forms of the general rule – the "major" premise – in each case. In each case of the syllogistic inference, therefore, the successful drawing of the inference amounts to the success of the power of judgment in achieving a form of explanatory unity and applying this to the particular case at hand.¹⁰

This function of the power of judgment in the syllogisms inevitably gives rise, however, to a kind of hyperbolic employment or presumption of possible employment, founded in reason's desire to simplify under the *least* number of possible principles overall. According as the three types of syllogistic inference are distinguished, there are also, then, three distinctive sources of illusion, the three that give rise, exactly, to the dialectical illusions of the actual givenness of soul, world, and God.¹¹ All three are forms of the derivation or assumption of an absolute unity, where this assumption is not justified by anything on the side of the actually known or even knowable phenomena, but by "sophistical" inferences which result only from reason's insistence on the necessity reality or actual existence of a distinctive form of unity as a dialectical opposite to a form of disunity. Thus the three transcendental ideas are given *only* as problems for reason to address itself to in its continual activities of synthesis, rather than as substantial realities somehow given in themselves.¹²

What is most important, in the present perspective, about this "derivation" of transcendental illusion from the forms of reason's own distinctive activity is not the specific way these forms are arrived at, but the larger suggestion of a fundamental source of illusion in reason's own

structure, and in the constitutive connection of this with the *ideology* that is thus recognizable as the outcome of this inherent tendency of reason to recognize unities and identities in general. These unities are recognizable, for Kant, as resulting from a *hyperbolic* application of reason's attempt to discover unities, outside the empirical domain in which that attempt could alone yield genuine knowledge. Our tendency, indeed, to suppose a possible intuitive support for each of these ideas is indeed, for Kant, the tendency that is most directly responsible for the liability of our intellects to *fanaticism*, a disorder Kant finds not only in his contemporaries but thinks is characteristic of Spinoza's One as well.¹³ The terms of critique we find here will be important – most of all to diagnosing the deeper sources of some of the ambivalence that is evident, in view of the uncertain combination of the appeal to orientation and the dialectical critique of the Ideas, in Kant's appeals to formal unity and unification. Yet for all this, despite his doubts about the possibility of every having an intuition of the objects of the ideas, Kant never officially doubts the internal *consistency* of the unities that the Ideas are, themselves. Criticizing the unities that these would be if they were actual intuitions or objects of intuition, he nevertheless does not criticize the form of consistency in which reason tries, necessarily fruitlessly, to determine them; and as we have seen above, he indeed requires just this form of consistency, even without any possible content, to determine the direction in which thought as well as rational action are, for him, *necessarily* directed, whatever empirical direction they actually take.

If we combine the two “halves” of Kant's approach to the One as formal unity, then, we may say that the approach points to the basic demand for unity implicit in the idea of a general rational capacity of judgment -- in the standing form of the presupposition or assumption of a power of thought with respect to the logical space of the totality of *thinkable* contents – *and also* gestures toward the possible reflexive use of reason in developing a deep-seated internal critique of just this demand. In this way, Kant points to (without, however, grasping in its more basic logical or metalogical form) the basic ambiguity in the idea of general rational capacity of judgment itself: namely, that of its essential directedness toward a *totality* of possible contents of thought which it must *simultaneously* think or assume to be *consistent* (and self-consistent) overall. These two commitments – to totality and consistency – are combined in Kant's appeal to the directedness of judgment, and together provide the essential structure by which he can also appeal to also appeal to the problematic givenness of the ideas of reason in their antinomical and transcendental-illusory forms. But the two commitments are in irreducible tension with each other, and the idea of unity that underlies that of a unitary faculty of judgment oriented to (even a possible) form of consistency in the law does not survive the attainment of a clear metalogical understanding of this tension. And it is here that the linguistic

setting of the problem which we may rather associate with the twentieth century suffices to displace the critical problematic, evince the deeper logical form of the underlying ambiguity, and thus displace the problem of the form or forms of possible orientation of life that it produces onto a different and transformed plane.

II

As we have seen, Kant's critical conception of orientation in thinking produces, from its guiding conception of the rational faculty of judgment as a power of determining the relationship of the particular case to the rule, a conception of the relationship of thought to unity and contradiction that is in a certain sense ambiguous. In its inherent drive to determine the causes of things or to move toward their more unitary conditions, reason would be threatened with antinomy if this drive were able to proceed to the point of the absoluteness it demands, and it is for this reason that the critical project of reflexive reason must, in its limitative or criteriological modality, move to limit reason's pretensions to that which can be provided with a sensible intuition. But at the same time, both the speculative and, especially, the practical interest of reason permits the *orientation* of thought in the general space of the generality of the intelligible. In fact, this orientation is even demanded, as we have seen, by what Kant understands as the empty form of any possible reasoning about specifics, as well as any possible conception of freedom: that is, by the empty reflexive form of the (consistent) law itself.

In this section, I pose the question how this conception of critical orientation, and accordingly of the project of rational thought in relation to life and practice, is transformed in the context of an understanding of structural reason for which the necessarily *linguistic form* of reasoning is fully recognizable and brought to bear on these problems. This will be a way of asking what sense can be made of the Kantian idea of orientation "of thought" under the condition of a clear-sighted appreciation of the essential materiality of language: of the facts, for example, that language is learned, understood and spoken by essentially finite animals; that it is the necessarily public medium of intersubjective communication and hence of any collective institution or continuity of practice; that in its completeness it neither benefits from, nor essentially allows, any coherent position of a meaningful "outside" from which it would be possible to comment on its forms or structures without already standing within the very field of semantic meaningfulness it defines. Such an understanding is one which we may reasonably see, I would suggest, contemporary philosophy as inheriting from the twentieth century, where it is centrally marked in such diverse projects as those of analytic philosophy, structuralism, and psychoanalysis.¹⁴ Accordingly, I will take it in the following (without further argument) that any contemporary understanding of thought or the human

power of it, in its relation to life, that would inherit these discoveries must be articulated in the form of the understanding that this insight into the materiality of language that we are today provided.

We can begin to gain a sense of what kind of difference this makes for the problem of the critical orientation of thought by considering how the project of Kantian critique is both inherited and structurally transformed in the practice of the transformative “critique of language” proposed by Wittgenstein in the opening pages of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.¹⁵

This book treats philosophical problems and shows – I believe – that the posing of these problems rests on misunderstanding the logic of our language. One can sum up the whole sense of the book somewhat in these words: What allows itself to be said at all, allows itself to be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak, one must keep silent.

Therefore the book will draw a limit to thinking – or rather, not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts: for in order to draw a limit to thinking we would have to be able to think both sides of this limit (and thus we would have to be able to think what does not allow itself to be thought).

The limit will therefore only be able to be drawn in language, and what lies beyond the limit will be simply nonsense.¹⁶

Like Kant’s, Wittgenstein’s project is essentially a critical one: it is a project of the drawing of a boundary and of the critical judgment of the sources and problems of our nearly ubiquitous inclinations and most pervasive institutions, marked in the most everyday projects and standing assumptions of our lives, to substitute illusion for clarity, or to engage and live the fantasy of the hyperbolic power and meaning of a transcendence that would go beyond the structures and relations of a shared life itself. Unlike Kant’s project, however, Wittgenstein’s is explicitly and centrally grounded in formal reflection on the forms of linguistic significance itself – the general and constitutive forms of the very possibilities of linguistic meaning. From the perspective of this methodology, thought itself is essentially understood as bearing linguistic structure (a “thought” [Gedanke] is a logical picture of facts (3); a sentence is that in which a thought finds an expression that is perceived by the senses (3.1); this perceptible sign is the projection of a possible situation, and the way it is projected is to think of the proposition’s *sense* (3.11)). These claims express, at the same time, the sufficient condition under which *logic* can appear, not as a power of thought or of the representational thinking of a subject, but as the universal form of the world which must be shared by language, if language as the general medium of the expression of possibilities should itself be so much as possible.

This already makes a decisive difference in the form of the critical project itself, insofar as it is understandable as a project of limit-drawing at all. Here, the immanent form of reflection on linguistic sense is already sufficient to distinguish the critical project from any reflection on the possibilities of *knowledge*: here, it cannot be the claims of knowledge that are limited or delimited with respect to some further domain of content, thinkable in itself but not available to positive knowledge. As expressed in the preface, the delimitative project thus does *not* operate as a way of “ruling in” certain kinds of contents, and ruling out others: rather, the project is to delimit *from within* the space of possible propositions by clarifying their form, and what lies “on the other side” will *not* be thoughts that go beyond the possibility of our knowledge or empirical verification, but rather *no* thought at all. Here, then, the critical problem of delimitation is, instead of being primarily one for our knowledge of objects or of unities, rather about (in Strawson’s memorable phrase) the bounds of sense. We should note, and appreciate methodologically, the difference that this makes. The delimitative project here is not - decisively not - a matter of demonstrating that “as soon as thought draws a limit, it is already beyond it”. Rather, what Wittgenstein says (and bears out in the analysis itself) is that there is *no* way for “thought” to be beyond the relevant boundary, because there is just nothing “there” to think. The form of critique does not, then, witness a “boundlessness” of thought with respect to its possible objects, but rather an *internal* boundedness of thought that – like the “boundedness” of our visual fields (as in Wittgenstein’s own example) would not define a boundary that is itself visible, either from “within” or from “without”.¹⁷

So the *first* decisive difference that is made by the entry of language into the critical problematic is that the problematic of reflection on the boundaries of knowledge is transformed into a reflectively logico-linguistic problematic of the constitution and limits of sense. This means that the question, or problem, of thought’s access to a “beyond” – for example in the Kantian form of the problem of thought’s access to something or anything “beyond the sensory” – is rendered in a certain way empty; or at any rate that *that* question – i.e., the question of the supersensible -- provides *no help* for any possible question of the orientation or directedness of thought in relation to the things and circumstances of the world.

Similarly, and *secondly*, the critical problematic is thereby shifted away from the problem of the relationship of what Kant supposes to be the distinct subjective *faculties* of the sensibility and the understanding under the overarching heading of reason, and toward the critical investigation of the *unitary* form of logic that underlies language and the world itself. As a result, the relevant critical problematic of the orientation of thought is no longer a problem about the *subject’s* activity or comportment in thinking, and the whole problematic is shifted decisively

away from that of (what Kant supposes to be) the (putatively necessary) imposition of “merely subjective” conditions or forms of unity onto the field of its possible scope. Thus we can no longer understand the critical problematic as one fundamentally about some putative deficiency in our nature or powers of knowledge or essentially finitude residing in the constraints of our sensible, “animal” condition and marked by the passivity of sensory reception we share with non-human animals, as against (as it is supposed), a different and more “spontaneous” power of thought belonging only to us.¹⁸

But if the critical problematic can then no longer be put in terms of any kind of finite limitation supposed to inhere in the conflict in our powers of knowledge, as potentially conflicted between our animal and rational natures, then it is *also* no longer coherent to think this problematic in the form of any kind of problem situated *between* the “perspectives” supposed to be situated by each of them, or to situate it in the place of (what is supposed to be) a “parallax” gap or mismatch between them. Instead, the form of the critical problematic is now evidently that of a problem internal to the constitution of the totality of the thinkable as the totality of what can be expressed by language itself, and it is now possible to pose the main critical problem as that about the *forms in which* reflexive thought proposes to think to itself this totality under determinate forms of unity.

In fact, this problem of unity is a general issue, not limited to Kant. It traces back to the underlying ambiguities and (more importantly) ultimate incoherences of the idea of a *dunamis meta logou*, which underlies thinking in the Western tradition, in various forms, about the soul or subject and its capacities for rationally structured thought, from Aristotle on.¹⁹ Instead, it will be necessary and unavoidable, I believe, to understand the actual capacities of any real subject or agent of rational thinking in the terms provided by a constitutive and internal reflection on the logical and metalogical formal structure of deductive and inductive inference, including the constitutive problems and paradoxes which a mature formalism evinces from its own internal reflection. It is of course implied in this as well that the relevant structure is not to be determined by self-consciousness in the medium of its own languageless reflection, but only by means of a symbolic reflection of symbolic structures back into themselves, of a form characteristic of what is called “metalogical” or “metaformal” reflection.

But if not in the medium of self-consciousness or the form of a “subject’s” unproblematic access to its own constitutive form of unity in apperception, or if not thought as a matter of the subject’s given capacities to reason in accord with the structure of a *logos* already granted from outside, how are we to think the structural and logical form and limits of the field of linguistic articulation and expression itself? Here, I think, the appreciation of the materiality of language points to a *third* and

perhaps most decisive consequence, marked in any possible reflexive thinking of the constitutive structure of language in its actual institution and practice. This third consequence follows, most directly, from the recognition, already central in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and marked in his later work as well, that *there is no outside* to language, no metalanguage position from which it would be meaningfully possible to "get outside" language to bear witness on or pass judgment on its limits or possibilities, and hence that any conception of the act or moment of the constitution or institution of language, as well as any systematic reflection on its structure, must be conceived as "taking place" within the field of linguistic meaning and meaningfulness itself. For a conception at home with the material character of language, there is thus no "linguistic subject" that is not itself, insofar as it is master of language or its possibilities, also deeply and wholly subject to those possibilities. And similarly, there is no institution or constitution of language that is not already involved in a "fundamental" paradox of origin at the point of its being "taken up" into language itself. But this problem of origin or uptake is, at the same time and at by means of the same structure, the problem of the identification or definition of the essential form of (what is supposed by the tradition to be) the "rational animal" – the animal possessed, as a matter of the nature of its soul, mind, or consciousness, of the power of language and its accordant power and privilege; and of the purported delimitation of this animal from all that is without reason, "concepts," or language in general.

All of this is to say, in Lacan's terms, that it is to the character of the *signifier* in relation to what we imagine as the totality of its field that we must trace whatever origin and structure of unity we find to characterize the activity or comportment of thinking in relation to life.²⁰ And at the same time, and just as essentially, that the structure of this comportment is thinkable only as an outcome of a formal/structural reflection on this character of the signifier, as it appears and manifests within the structural (quasi-)totality of language, that separates it completely from the phenomena of its signifying or meaning effects, and considers it purely in the ("material") form of the structural dynamics and properly formal structures of paradox and impasse that it introduces there. It is from the position of such a recognition that, indeed, Lacan writes in seminar XX, in close connection with the axiom that "there is no metalanguage," that "the real can be inscribed only on the basis of an impasse of formalization," alluding there to the irreducibility of the signification of the psychoanalytic object-small-a by means of the mathematical formalization of the letter: a formalization that will be useful to analysis, he says, by way of "centering the symbolic" in order to retain a "contiguous truth."²¹

Such a recognition of the essentiality of the structure of the signifier is, for Lacan, just another expression of the insight of Freud in his discovery of the unconscious and of the consequences of its being structured like a language; and it is subsequently, for psychoanalysis,

unavoidable that any analysis of (what is called) thinking or its powers be situated within this structure.²² This does not mean, of course, that Lacan does not discuss thinking subjects or their subjectivity, but rather that any possible analytic treatment or investigation of a “subject”’s knowledge and self-understanding must be conducted from the standpoint, not of what are supposed to be its own powers or faculties, but its positional *location* within the symbolic field of language itself. Here, it is in particular the symbolic and structural position of any possible articulation of oneself in relation to the totality of structure – what Lacan calls the “position of enunciation” – that situates in a decisive way any positive account we can give of the activity or power of thinking in relation to the real that it encounters as symbolic impasse. The “constitutive” paradox that must then henceforth accompany any reasonable discussion of the structure, overall unity, or orientation of thought, is, then, the positional paradox of a position from which the totality of language or of the symbolic as such is available, but which is itself located, as a matter of its definition or self-definition, within the field of meaningful language itself. It is here that the “constitutive” demand of reason for unity, or for the unification of the conditions of its own existence under a synthetic form of its rational (self-)understanding, must today be addressed. However, rather than implying the necessity of orientation *toward* the imagined unity of a first condition of beings, a subjective form of synthetic unification in the soul, a unitary world in general, or indeed *any form of unity posited or imagined as consistent*, this demand today takes the shape of a need to orient ourselves toward the undecidability of sense at its limits that is witnessed in the formally demonstrable *incapacity* of thought to determine being consistently as a whole.

III

In *The Politics of Logic* in 2012, drawing on Badiou’s use of the terminology and general framework in *Being and Event* and *Briefings on Existence*, I proposed what I there called the “paradoxico-critical” orientation of thought as one among four positions which were intended, differentially, as expressing positional and substantive commitments characteristic of representative thinkers of historical and contemporary philosophy, especially with respect to problems of totality, limits, and the infinite. The positions that define the orientations in general were understood as differential positions about the relationship of *thinking* and *being*, and in particular of the possibility of thinking to capture being in its totality, and the two contemporary positions that I called “post-Cantorian” were seen as, decisively, drawing out the implications for the question of this possibility of the series of paradoxes and ‘limitative’ results that can be seen as historically coming to light through Cantor’s development of set theory and its related developments of the formalization of language,

which prescribe the rigorous formalization of mathematical logic as the appropriate medium for figuring them. The paradoxico-critical orientation, in particular, drew on and developed the consequences of what can be taken as a formally demonstrable *dissymmetry* or mutual *non-adequacy* of thinking and being, once the problems of rational thinking in relation to totality and consistency are understood, as above, thoroughly and exclusively in the medium of formalizable symbolism. The most basic reason for this dissymmetry, from a paradoxico-critical perspective, is that the position from which any articulation or expression of thinking (and hence any approach of thinking to the real) is possible is, itself – necessarily and constitutively – situated *within* the field of signifiers toward which it thereby relates, and thereby necessarily encounters, and must traverse, the interconnected paradoxes of incompleteness and undecidability that formally characterize this field in its own reflexive totality.

Now, in the context of the problem of critical orientation and Kant's development of the problem of orientation as the problem of the consequences for the *practical* of the rational structure of thought, what does the paradoxico-critical orientation have to offer by way of distinctive implications for the critical approach of contemporary thought to the problems of collective life? As is probably already clear, the paradoxico-critical orientation witnesses, in its relationship to the totality of what can be said or thought, a basic structure of formal paradox that echoes the structure of the Kantian antinomies. As in the antinomies, we witness here a formally demonstrable structure of contradiction which depends on the extension of particular relations of conditioning to the consideration of the *totality* of conditions for a given conditioned, and it is at the (imagined or projected point) of this totality that the contradiction results. However, by contrast with the *setting and resolution* of the antinomies, in the original Kantian context, by means of transcendental idealism about the constitution of the “merely regulative” employment of the transcendental ideas of unity, paradoxico-criticism instead comprehends the underlying structure of contradiction as *general* and, as such, characteristic of the structural real of language and thought itself. Nevertheless, at the same time and for this very structural reason, the paradoxico-critical orientation inherits from the Kantian project its rigorous and radical critique of the imaginary forms of unity that constitute our ordinary sense of the univocal “meaning” of our lives and practices and also are understandable, as for Kant, on the level of the ideological and imaginary productions that they represent. From this position, we can comprehend the production of these unities as indeed the ideological productions that they are, up to and including the production of *any* overall consistency in general as an organizing principle or higher value of life, meaning, or presumed truth.²³

In terms suggested by the *Politics of Logic*, already, this means that thinking and being are not the same: that there is no position from

which thinking can purport to determine without contradiction the totality of beings, or that one can any longer see the power of human thinking in relation to an (assumed or imagined) totality of all that is thinkable, or its historical development or progress as the progress toward such an (actually imagined or fantasized) totality. It is in this way that the paradoxico-critical orientation (along with (what I called) the “generic” orientation characteristic of the project of Badiou and the mathematical ontologies of Lautman and Gödel) comprehends the implications of the irreducible tension introduced to linguistic-symbolic thought by its twentieth-century formalization, and in particular the incompatibility or duality between *totality* and *consistency* that is thereby introduced into the question of thought’s orientation toward the real of being in itself.²⁴ In so comprehending the overall incompatibility of totality with consistency, these two orientations differ from (what I treated there as) the two “pre-Cantorian” orientations (of ontotheology or of criteriology/constructivism) in recognizing that it is impossible today to think that thinking and being are the same in the sense that that thinking can have access to everything – all that is the case as well as all that is not, but could be – without running into *fundamental* contradictions or aporias about its own position in doing that.

Thus, the divide between the pre-Cantorian and post-Cantorian positions also draws the distinction between positions that maintain on a fundamental level the sameness of thinking and being (including those from Parmenides and Aristotle and then up through the early moderns and Spinoza), and those that reject it on formally motivated grounds. From this perspective, Kant is also certainly someone who thinks that thought in itself – i.e. reason – has to be both total and consistent with respect to the totality of the thinkable, and this is why his own orientation – the “criteriological” one – remains pre-Cantorian. But as we have seen, the Kantian critical problematic nevertheless introduces a kind of gap or caesura here by letting us think that there is a problem about the completeness of our knowledge, given the finitude of our condition, and also showing how we can see certain kinds of figures of complete knowledge (in particular the transcendental ideas of God, world, and soul) as ideological illusions in those terms. The paradoxico-critical orientation then, distinctively, inherits and develops this sense of ideology critique in the displaced context which is produced by a thoroughgoing understanding of the linguistic form of thought, and in this way produces a critical and decisive displacement of the “metaphysical” subject of thought with its assumed power of self-conscious judgment. Alongside that, we also seem to have the formal basis for a critique of the power of the self-determining agent of freedom, or indeed of “ethics” in the sense in which it imagines such an agent or subject to be the center of relevant ethical questions. It gives us the critical position from which we can see the construction of such an imagined subject or subject position

as basically ideological, and even (as with Althusser) how the ideology of subjectivity is determined out of a positional misrecognition on the level of the symbolic which creates a certain kind of fantasy of one's relation to the (fantasized) totality of relations of production.

At the same time, the various phenomena of undecidability that emerge from the formal consideration of the positional paradox of language already thereby begin to evince the formal determinants of a life that is no longer committed to the privilege of the possessor of what is traditionally imagined as the power of thought, and no longer thereby capable of submitting the totality of beings to the assumption of this comprehensive power. In this way, paradoxico-criticism (as I already pointed out in *The Politics of Logic*, and further developed along the lines of some of its temporal and aletheiological implications in *The Logic of Being*) witnesses to the "possibility" of a contemporary reflective awareness of the undecidability of the senses of lives and, accordingly, to the ultimate *incapacity* of thought to master beings in the totality of their becoming by means of its (consistent) comprehension of this totality. As is borne out by the formal and metaformal results, and witnessed in the paradoxico-critical orientation, there is no position from which and no procedure according to which the totality of senses could be rendered consistently decidable, even with respect to the non-contradictory extensional decision of the truth-values of sentences themselves. Even first-order logical consequence is, according to a decisive and radically important result reached near-simultaneously by Church and Turing and closely related to Godel's "incompleteness" results, demonstrably undecidable. Accordingly, it is here that there comes into view the possibility of a life that is no longer determined out of the presumed or assumed privilege of the possession of such a univocal power of decision.

Such a life, no longer determined by the power of the possession of reason, the power of judgment in general or as such, or the guardianship of the law or principle of noncontradiction, is no longer a life that is in any *logically* important way determined or determinable as "human" at all. In this way, the paradoxico-critical orientation already amounts to a deeply seated and lived critique, on the level of the direction and constitution of the activities and interests of a life, of the attempt to draw a constitutive distinction between the "human" and the "non-human", and hence of the distinctive violence of the human against the totality of non-human beings and lives, which today pervades the world. It is in this way, I think, that the paradoxico-critical orientation can operate today – perhaps uniquely – to formulate terms and practical schemas for a radical critique of anthropogenic violence, and so to begin to determine an appropriate response of critical thinking to this violence today.

This invites the question, however, of the relationship of paradoxico-criticism to other contemporary projects of thought about ideology and its foundations, most of all where they intersect with and offer terms for

the understanding of the largest determinants of ideologically guided practice and habitual forms of life today. For decades, one of the most prominent and forceful of these projects has been the Lacanian-Hegelian one of Slavoj Žižek, and so I wish to consider, briefly and in closing, the relationship of the paradoxico-critical orientation of thought to that project and to the terms of application of reflective thought about totality, consistency, and ideology that it offers. Here it is also perhaps relevant to say something more general, at least briefly, about the relationship of paradoxico-criticism to at least some of the forms of Hegelianism or purported application of Hegel's thought to the prevailing forms and problems of contemporary social organization and politics. My aim here is not to contribute to the "Kant to Hegel" genre of historiography, and I will not engage in detail with an interpretation of Hegel or with the true significance of the dialectic. But it will perhaps be possible nevertheless to discern here some aspects of the kind of difference that is made to the problem of the orientation of critical thought today by the specific formal consequences that, I have argued, follow from the thoroughgoing recognition of the essentially structuring role played by language and the symbolic in anything recognizable in contemporary terms as the real process of thought itself.

In the introductory chapter of his 2020 *Hegel in a Wired Brain*, Slavoj Žižek discusses paradoxico-criticism, as presented in *The Politics of Logic*, and responds to some claims I made there about the form of its applicability to contemporary geopolitical problems and relationship to other contemporary positions. The heading of the discussion overall asks whether it is *possible* to be a Hegelian today, and one of Žižek's overall aims is to defend this possibility over against (what he supposes to be) the paradoxico-critic's rejection of it. For Žižek in particular, as is made clear in the book, the necessary stake of a defense of Hegelianism today is the possibility of seeing Hegel's thought as standing for "a radical opening toward the future": we should see, in particular in the way that Hegel teaches us to understand the constitutive structure of inconsistency and its relationship to the constitution of any One, the radical possibility of comprehending our own, twenty-first century situation in thought, and thus comprehending within it the real possibilities or promises of a future to be realized. In this respect, Žižek holds that "Hegel's outline of an inconsistent totality is the ultimate stand of thinking, and we should also not be afraid to apply to it Hegel's [own] claim that philosophy can only paint "grey on grey," that it can only grasp the notional truth of an epoch when this epoch is approaching its end."²⁵

From the beginning of his discussion, Žižek expresses on behalf of the Hegelian position he sets out to defend a high degree of agreement, on method and detail, with the organizing principles of paradoxico-criticism. As paradoxico-criticism recognizes clearly, we necessarily today live and orient our lives, Žižek says, within the "Cantor-Goedel universe," where the

recognition of the unavoidability of paradox and constitutive undecidability which compels us on wholly rational grounds (Žižek says) forever to leave behind the “notion of a consistent view of (all of) reality.”²⁶ Žižek appears to endorse, as well, the relative advantages of paradoxico-criticism over what I called, in *Politics of Logic*, the “generic” orientation, as exemplified most of all by the project of Alain Badiou. By contrast with Badiou’s theorization of the order of Being in itself as essentially characterized by an overall consistency, to be interrupted only by the “miraculous intrusion” of the Event, paradoxico-criticism gives us the logical resources to think, along with Hegel, that the “order of Being” is “constitutively pulverized and disturbed from within,” “branded by a basic impossibility,” or subject to an internal “disruptive force of non-being” at its heart, a force that Žižek further compares to Freud’s death drive.²⁷

So much, so good for the paradoxico-critic’s fundamental agreement with (and even apparently endorsement of) the Hegelian position, according to Žižek. However, it is at this point that, according to Žižek, Hegel takes a “step further” from the paradoxico-critical position.²⁸ For the rigorous Hegelian, not only is being overall inconsistent or rent with fundamental paradox, but fundamental inconsistency and antagonism basically and fundamentally affects the (self-)identity of any (identifiable) thing at all.²⁹ In this sense, for Hegel: “identity, the unity of the One, is a form of self-differentiation. Identity is difference brought to the extreme of self-relating.”³⁰ For Žižek, this way in which differentiation or even antagonism is “already” involved in the identity of any individual thing also requires that the Hegelian position, by contrast with the paradoxico-critical one, is already such as to include within the positivity of its own assertions about the constitution and identity of things the disruptive undertow that contests these claims from within: in this sense, for Hegel, “power is its own transgression, grounded in violations of its own founding principles.”³¹ It follows from this, according to Žižek, that “Hegel is *not* a critical thinker;” by contrast with the conception of the paradoxico-critic, the “Hegelian totality is paradoxical, inconsistent, but not ‘critical’ in the sense of resisting the power center; it is not caught in the eternal struggle to undermine or displace the power center, in search of cracks and ‘undecidable’ excesses that disturb and deconstruct the power edifice.”³² Instead of any such spirit or practice of critical pursuit of the undecidable, according to Žižek, Hegel’s stance is (paradoxically or ironically) that of an ambivalent or indeed actually recurrently tragic “reconciliation” that is not the realization of a teleological goal of history but rather the repeatedly *realized* “fact” which “confronts us with the unexpected bitter truth of the actualized ideal.”³³ According to Žižek, it is in this sense, for instance, that “every large human project goes wrong and only in this way attests to its truth:” in this sense, for example, “The French Revolution wanted universal freedom and climaxed in terror,” and “Communism wanted global emancipation and gave birth to Stalinist terror...” (p. 10). The same

lesson is the one we should draw, Žižek suggests, for the contemporary situation of global politics, and the prospects today for a genuine “optimism” and a real possibility of finding “truth” in the “way things” repeatedly “go wrong”:

The Hegelian lesson with regard to the attempt to change the world is thus desperately optimistic: such attempts never reach their goal, but through their repeated failure a new form of being can arise. Yes, Chavismo failed in Venezuela, Syriza failed in Greece, Chinese Communism cannot be our ideal, but all these processes do contribute to the subterranean weaving of the Spirit which might give birth to unpredictable new visions ... or horrors.³⁴

In this way, Žižek finds in the introduction of the logical structure of essential paradox, and especially in what he supposes to be its implication for the Hegelian account of (self)-identity, the ground for a somewhat ambiguous (and avowedly *uncritical*) rhetoric of the contemporary possibilities of historical development and transformation. Such possibilities as these are for contemporary thought and practice are further, whatever the extent or scale of the failures and disasters relevantly evident in their actual realization or in the perception of their actual “truth,” to be attributed ultimately (in classical Hegelian fashion) to the hidden and “subterranean” historical process of the Absolute in the progressively realized “new forms of being” that it alone is ultimately responsible for bringing about.

To develop the rhetoric of this realization, as Žižek does, as applicable to the largest and most pressing problems posed by the events and circumstances of contemporary sociopolitical life is to place confidence (as I believe Žižek also does) in the power of a unitary thinking of being to make sense of these events and circumstances. I will not comment on the actual logical rigor of this argumentation in relation to the metaphysical or logical problem of the constitution or nature of identity itself, but it is nevertheless possible, I think, to comment briefly from the paradoxico-critical position that have developed here on the logical form and thus the practical and really determining commitment of the “Hegelian” position on the relationship of this constitution and the power of thought that is thereby maintained. Put broadly and in a summary formulation, I believe this commitment might be described as a kind of contemporary insistence on the power of abstract, self-conscious thought to determine comprehensively the true sense of identities and possibilities, up to and including the very sense of what is here the “total” (even if never actually “totalized”) process of historical development itself.

From the perspective of the (post-linguistic turn) concerns that, I have argued here, by contrast essentially articulate the relevance of any actually available critical position on the large-scale global

determinants of collective thought and action with relation to the being and lives of the earth today, the varieties of the Hegelian position on offer in contemporary philosophical discussion are largely perceptible as themselves continued demands for the extraction of sense from these circumstances and lives in the unitary form of a presumed neutral “intelligibility”. This is, of course, the “intelligibility” that, for the longstanding tradition, uniquely characterizes *human* thought (as distinct from the activities or lives of non-humans) and we can, in fact, witness the common form of this demand in several of the recent prominent projects of the overall interpretation of Hegel’s thought: it is evident, for instance, in the forms and projects that interpret Hegel’s project as that of the (internal) “satisfactions” of self-conscious thought in its progressive self-realization;³⁵ in the interpretation of Hegel’s logic as the project of a broad and comprehensive theorization of the historically conditioned norms underlying the situated achievement of mutual intelligibility;³⁶ or in the reading of the *Phenomenology* as developing the necessarily social form of a “spirit of trust” whose possibility is grounded in the reciprocal capacities for recognition thought to be possessed alone by beings capable of “sapience” rather than mere “sentience.”³⁷

From this perspective and recognizing the plausibility of all of these recent interpretations of Hegel, it is hardly surprising to learn that the project of a philosopher who, perhaps more than any other in the tradition, commits himself to the relentless process of the domination and destruction of the “natural” by means of the power and resources of human thought in the assumed medium of a unitary constitutive (even if historically developing and socially collective) subjectivity and understanding does not provide grounds for a genuinely and helpfully *critical* response to the global projects of the extraction of intelligibility from life or provide helpful terms for beginning to think about a form of life no longer subject to this extraction.³⁸ But reflection on the global form and overall logical determinants of this process nevertheless gives, at least, a sharpened sense of the space of the problems here, and points to other ways for them to be addressed.

What, then, about the idea of inconsistent totality, which Žižek sees as common to the ultimate consequences of Hegel’s position and the framework of paradoxico-criticism, and which he also positions as “the ultimate stand of thinking” today? Of course, any contemporary invocation or treatment of Hegel or his project will inevitably accord a prominent place to (what Hegel calls) contradiction in its development of the dialectic as both the intrinsic form of progressive thinking and the real logic of historical development. But it is to be asked, from the perspective we have developed here, whether the kinds of “contradiction” that Hegel countenances and interprets in his descriptions of the historical development of thinking are really the same as that which (as I have argued) witnesses the ultimate dissymmetry or non-identity of thinking

and being for the paradoxico-critic. As we saw above, this mutual dissymmetry results, in the context of the post-Cantorian orientations of thought, ultimately from the formal dynamics of the symbolic and from the formally positional paradox of the placement of any possible position of enunciation within the specific effects of the signifier and the (imaginary or virtual) totality of the symbolic itself, something of which (whatever the extent of his development of ideas of totality as expressive, “organic” wholeness), Hegel himself has barely any idea.³⁹ To whatever degree Hegel develops a logic of inconsistency at the level of various constituted totalities, his logic nevertheless does not suffice to evince the basic disjunction or duality of totality and consistency which renders unavoidable what is (in terms of the framework of the four orientations) the pre-Cantorian standing assumption of the sameness of thinking and being. In fact this is (again) unsurprising for the philosopher who programmatically announces this sameness in multiple characteristic formulas: for example, with his declaration of the identity of the real/actual with the rational and, indeed, with his development of the dialectic of their identity as the project of “thinking the Absolute not only as substance but also as subject”.

In the actually practical matter of the concrete “handling of contradiction” to which this leads, moreover, the actual recommendations of paradoxico-criticism and of Žižek’s Hegelian position are again starkly different. Where, as we have seen, the implications of the kind of necessary inconsistency of the (ideological) totality that the paradoxico-critical orientation witness go all the way to the *necessarily* and formal undecidable of the senses of lives, the Hegelian contradiction is (notoriously) always one that is to be overcome, sublated, or periodized in the sense of a progressively reconciling appreciation of a larger or broader context of thought’s progressive and reflexive consideration of itself. Even if this reconciliation does not ever finally attain a “higher” or more inclusive reality wholly purged of contradiction, it is nevertheless the index of the progress of thought in relation to the contingency of situations and events, and thus gives, in a Hegelian context, the thinkable dialectic its specifically historical-progressivist sense. For the paradoxico-critic, by contrast, the forms or actualizations of an actually non-contradictory unity of thought and being are not to be found or hoped for; what is recommended on the level of the actual conduct of life is rather a lived practice of the undecidability of lives and beings in their becoming. This recommendation is the actual core of the accusation standardly lodged against the paradoxico-critic (in his discussion, Žižek, in particular, makes it against Derrida) that paradoxico-criticism must always “defer”, that it cannot move to a real solution, that the thought of the undecidable simply postpones decision, and is thereby (fatally) ineffective. But in a context where the very terms and idea of what may with justice be called the traditional logic of the effectivity of thought are themselves radically

under critical question, the accusation of “ineffectivity” is not exactly (or rather, exactly not) to the point.⁴⁰

Within this logic and project, indeed, I believe we may thus understand the recurrent capacity of thought successively to understand or comprehend the ‘truth’ of events as that which, in other words, allows history and its presumed temporality recurrently to dominate the “non-historical” in general. This domination is what goes by the name of effectivity, or actualization, in the tradition that Hegel represents and that Žižek replicates; and putting it in these terms at least may help to bring out the possibility of an alternative set of projects for critical thinking today. So in closing, I would like to note just one aspect of the way in which the position that Žižek finds recommended through this (purportedly Hegelian) development of the implications of paradox “beyond” that of the paradoxico-critical position does markedly differ from the position of orientation with respect to the contemporary problems of the global organization of life that, on behalf of paradoxico-criticism, I have tried to sketch here. To see this difference, it is sufficient to notice that, whatever disasters the Hegelian (Žižekian) position finds or purports to find in its analysis of historical causality and the repeated meaning of a realized but failed reconciliation, the Hegelian in Žižek’s sense *nevertheless* evidently retains *one* central commitment: namely, to “learn” from these disasters some kind of lesson, or even to extract from them some revealing and helpful kind of “truth” relevant to our contemporary situation and the possibilities of anticipating or “producing” the radically “new”.

What this commitment evidences is, I think, more than anything else a basic and somewhat unargued (and certainly, by Žižek’s own admission, basically uncritical) commitment to an underlying *historicism*; in other words, to the pervasively Hegelian value or construction of (presumably Western) history as (whatever else it is) the necessary medium for any human development or radical global change. However, it would be easy to show that “history” thus understood as the history of society, culture or the economic or political forms of human organization and commerce, is itself obviously predicated on the ongoing suppression – as indeed is indicated by a fundamental movement of Hegel’s thought – of all that is conceived as “natural” in opposition to the avowedly human development in thought of a distinctively historical self-consciousness of humanity itself. The Hegelian sense of history (as well as Žižek’s gloss on it) is thus inseparable from a humanism whose other side can be seen, in critical terms, as nothing other than the pervasiveness throughout it of anthropogenic violence itself. This is, among other things, also the history of violence that we may rather read as produced, not from the abstracted self-conception of the human power of thought, but from the real relations of exploitation and domination among human beings and between human beings and non-human beings, communities, and lives.

I have tried to show, in the above, that the paradoxico-critical

position offers relevant terms with which, exactly, not only to criticize radically and structurally the constitution of this position of anthropogenic violence that is, in these terms, the very meaning of “history”, but even, beyond this, to at least begin to imagine the fragile possibility of a global life that is purged of it. By contrast with the Hegelian/Žižekian position, then, for the real paradoxico-critic the tragedy of history is not a series of lessons to be learned from but – as for Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses* – a nightmare from which we are trying to awaken. The prospect of this awakening or enlightenment is, similarly, not the reorganization or progressive or discontinuous dynamic of the rationalization or disaster of human relations of power and domination over each other or over the non-human world, but the radical claim of the emancipation of all sentient beings from the suffering to which the contemporary conditions of life consign them.

- 1 Lacan 1992, p. 11.
- 2 “That the unconscious is structured as a function of the symbolic ... that that which one seeks and finds again is the trace rather than the trail – one has to appreciate the great importance of all this in Freud’s thought, if one is to understand the function of reality.” (Lacan 1992, pp. 12-13). And on Bentham: “Bentham’s effort is located in the dialectic of the relationship of language to the real so as to situate the good – pleasure in this case, which, as we will see, he articulates in a manner that is very different from Aristotle – on the side of the real.” (Lacan 1992, p. 12)
- 3 For a trenchant consideration of an “ethics of the real” that brings Lacan into dialogue with Kant, see Zupančič 2000.
- 4 For a trenchant critique of this project of the extraction of intelligibility as a main project of Western metaphysics culminating in today’s developments of AI, see Bensusan (2021), especially chapter 3.
- 5 Kant 1970, pp. 239-40.
- 6 Kant 1998 (A 132/B171). The sense of this capacity, and hence of the idea of orientation implied in its directedness toward the sensible, is of course subsequently complicated by the introduction, in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, of the idea of “reflective” judgment, which (rather than placing particulars under general concepts taken as given) is held to be capable of supplying concepts for given particulars on reflective grounds. However, I do not think the complication introduces anything essentially new relative to the argument of “What is Orientation?,” since this argument is already committed to the essential idea of a directedness of the faculty of judgment with respect to the (self-constituted) logical space of (all) *possible* grounds for judgment itself.
- 7 Kant 1970, p. 240.
- 8 Kant 1996, 5:114-5.115.
- 9 Kant (1998), A304/B360-61.
- 10 Kant (1998), A 304-5/B361.
- 11 Kant (1998), A 338-40/B396-98.
- 12 Kant (1998), A 327-328/B384-85.
- 13 As Allison usefully points out in Allison (1980), p. 208, Kant in fact sees Platonism, Neoplatonism, and Spinozism as “three connected stages in the history of ‘philosophical fanaticism’.” See also Kant’s late essay “On a Newly Arisen Superior Tone in Philosophy” and *Reflexionen* 6050, “On Philosophical Exaltation.”
- 14 If, as Alain Badiou argues in *The Century*, the twentieth century was about the projects of uncompromising formalization predicated on the passion of the real; we can say, in these terms, that for all of these projects, the necessary medium and material of this formalization is the materiality of language.
- 15 Cf. TLP 4.0031: “All philosophy is a ‘critique of language’...”
- 16 TLP, preface (translation modified).
- 17 For “the boundlessness of thought”, cf. McDowell (1992), chapter 1. On the form of the visual field as analogous to the form of linguistic sense, see TLP 5.633-5.6331.
- 18 As I have developed elsewhere, there is still, for the new critical problematic that Wittgenstein’s concern with logical form and the syntax of language represents, a relevant form of essential finitude: but this is, instead of the finitude implicit in (what is supposed to be in the tradition developing from Aristotle) the constraints and spatiotemporal locatedness characteristic of our *sensory* “faculties”, rather the finitude of *signification* already expressed by the young Wittgenstein in the 1914 *Notebooks* in connection with the question of the mathematical infinite: “Remember that the ‘propositions about infinite numbers’ are all represented by means of finite signs!” (Wittgenstein 1979, p. 10). See (Livingston 2010) for some development of this theme.
- 19 For the classical and inaugural theorization of the *dunamis meta logou*, see Aristotle, *Metaphysics* book 9 (©), 1046a36ff.
- 20 Compare Lacan in Seminar XX: “We know of no other basis by which the One may have been introduced into the world if not by the signifier as such, that is, the signifier insofar as we learn to separate it from its meaning effects.” (Lacan 1998, p. 50)
- 21 Lacan (1998), p. 93
- 22 “But biological metaphors cannot reassure us here – they reassure us here still less than elsewhere. If the unconscious is truly what I say it is, being structured like a language, it is at the level of language (*langue*) that we must investigate this One.” (Lacan 1998, p. 67).
- 23 The paradoxico-critical orientation is, first and foremost, a *critical* orientation, and therefore *not* a metaphysical (or ontological) one. In particular, because its sole aim is to interrogate the constitution of consistency, in this sense, including the “ideological” construction or constitution of the (supposed) *consistent unity* of the “thinking subject,” it is no part or aim of it to posit or positively *theorize* the One of totality (either as the totality of all that exists, or can exist, or all that is thinkable, etc.), even as a “paradoxical” one or one “rent by fundamental contradictions.” And as it is not a metaphysics, it is also (*a fortiori*, and for the same reasons) not a *dialetheist* metaphysics either.

24 The relevant overall duality was first suggested to me, in these terms, by John Bova.

25 Žižek 2020, p. 11.

26 Žižek 2020, p. 3.

27 Žižek 2020, p. 7.

28 Žižek 2020, p. 9.

29 “For Hegel, the One of self-identity is not just always inconsistent, fractured, antagonistic, etc. – identity itself is the assertion of radical (self-)difference: to say that something is identical with itself means that is distinct from all its particular properties, that it cannot be reduced to them.”

30 Žižek 2020, pp. 9-10.

31 Žižek 2020, p. 10.

32 Žižek 2020, p. 11.

33 Žižek 2020, p. 10.

34 Žižek 2020, p. 11.

35 Pippin (1989).

36 Zambrana (2015).

37 Brandom (2019).

38 “The ‘I’ is as it were the crucible and the fire which consumes the loose plurality of sense and reduces it to unity...The tendency of all man’s endeavors is to understand the world, to appropriate and subdue it to himself: and to this end the positive reality of the world must be as it were crushed and pounded [zerquetscht], in other words, subdued.” (*Encyclopedia Logic*, 69; quoted in Pippin (1989), p. 34.) (There are, of course, many other passages in Hegel that could equally well illustrate this theme).

39 Compare, again, Lacan from seminar XX: “And yet, compared to a philosophy that culminates in Hegel’s discourse – a plenitude of contrasts dialecticized in the idea of an historical progression, which, it must be said, nothing substantiates for us – can’t the formalization of mathematical logic, which is based only on writing (l’écrit), serve us in the analytic process, in that what invisibly holds (retient) bodies is designated therein?” (Lacan 1998, p. 93)

40 There is a somewhat symptomatic point in Žižek’s treatment of paradoxico-criticism in *Hegel in a Wired Brain* that illustrates this issue, as between the Hegelian and the paradoxico-critic, when Žižek writes that: “Although the paradoxico-critical approach brings out the inconsistencies that are constitutive of our identities, its critical stance commits it to the goal of overcoming these inconsistencies.” In fact this is false: while, on the one hand, paradoxico-criticism, in its adumbration of the consequences of the metalogical duality between totality and consistency, is *not* committed to the radically distributive (and logically unmotivated) claim that “every identity” is somehow constitutively “inconsistent”, it is also no part of the commitments of paradoxico-criticism to imagine or propose that the real contradictions involved in the constitution of (what are for it) the primarily *ideological* totalities of worlds and “communities” can, must, or even should be “overcome”.

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