

A Hegelian Reading of the New Science of Consciousness

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My favored plot of crime novels concerns a person (usually a woman) who is in mortal danger: unknown forces try to kill her because she knows something she shouldn't have known; this something is not some big secret or trauma that haunts her - she even doesn't know what this something is... When this formula is brought to extreme, the woman is in danger because she doesn't know something she should have known if the story told by the criminal to maintain his alibi were to be true. (Say: the criminal claims that he couldn't have committed the crime because he was at some place where many people saw him, but the woman was also there and, of course, didn't see him...) The specific experience of a woman in this situation (who knows a dangerous secret but doesn't know what this secret is) renders in a very plastic way what psychoanalysis aims at with notions like divided subject and unconscious knowledge. My premise is that there is no consciousness (no Self aware of itself) without such an unknown knowledge.

Anil Seth: a Cognitivist Account of Consciousness

The topic of (self-)consciousness has a long history in modern philosophy where it reached its peak in Hegel *Phenomenology of Spirit*, a detailed exploration of the dialectics of consciousness. At the opposite end of contemporary thought, cognitive sciences are now also focusing on consciousness, on how consciousness arises in a living organism. How can cognitive sciences deal with the unconscious? What cognitive sciences are telling us about consciousness is perhaps best resumed in Anil Seth's *Being You: A New Science of Consciousness*, a book written in a clear and modest way, without the falseness and pretention that characterizes a lot of popular scientific writing.¹

Seth's basic premise is that "everything in conscious experience is a perception of sorts, and every perception is a kind of controlled – or controlling – hallucination": "Experiences of free will are perceptions. The flow of time is a perception. Perhaps even the three-dimensional structure of our experienced world and the sense that the contents of perceptual experience are objectively real – these may be aspects of perception too." (275) Seth goes to the end in this direction, inverting what appears to us the most basic relationship between an emotion and its bodily expression: an emotion doesn't express itself in a bodily gesture (say, I hit you because I am angry at you), it is just a perception of a process going on in my body (I am angry because I perceive myself striking you) – in this sense,

"emotions are perceptions of 176 changes in bodily state. We don't cry because we are sad, we are sad because we perceive our bodily state in the condition of crying. The emotion of fear is constituted by (interoceptive) perception of a whole gamut of bodily responses set off by the organism recognizing danger in its environment. For /William/ James, the perception of bodily changes as they occur

is the emotion: ‘We feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and not that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful.’”(176)

As we may expect, this counterintuitive view is supplemented by its dialectical opposite: all action (volitional) is self-perception, but perception is in itself action – how, exactly? As Seth’s variation of Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* – “I predict myself therefore I am” – makes it clear, the key role plays here the notion of prediction as an immanent part of every perception: “conscious contents are not merely shaped by perceptual predictions – they *are* these predictions.”(106)

Our mind models the external environment by predicting what kind of perceptual experience is most likely to occur next, given prior experiences, and the result is our familiar subjective world of objects that have three-dimensional shape, size, color, relative position, movement, and so forth. This constructed experience is not a representation of the world “as it actually is,” but, rather, a model that is good enough to allow us to navigate the environment and do the things that biological beings must do to survive and reproduce. Such a model is a *controlled hallucination* in that it is an imaginary representation controlled or constrained by reality-as-it-is (prediction failures demand a re-imagining, so the hallucination cannot go wildly in any direction), but also in the sense that hallucination is the basis for our decisions, controlling our behavior.

Seth’s next and crucial logical step is to extend the concept of perception of external reality as controlled hallucination to the perception of one’s internal reality (our inner sensations and feelings): if perceptions of external reality are controlled hallucinations, conscious perception of our own inner states have to work exactly the same way, and this includes our Self: our sense of selfhood is also just a sensing of our internal state of being, and this internal sensing, like all forms of internal sensing, is an imaginative construction, not a direct perception of some objective reality:

“It may seem as though the self – your self – is the ‘thing’ that does the perceiving. But this is not how things are. The self is another perception, another controlled hallucination, though of a very special kind. From the sense of personal identity – like being a scientist, or a son – to experiences of having a body, and of simply ‘being’ a body, the many and varied elements of selfhood are /.../ designed by evolution to keep you alive.”(147)

Seth’s simplest example is that of body temperature: an organism strives to remain alive, and since it can stay alive only within the narrow limits of its bodily temperature, its self-perception as a living being that will stay

alive contains a prediction that its body temperature will remain within these limits, i.e., that it be constant over time; so when a body notices a gap between this predicted temperature and its factual temperature (or some external influence which may push temperature outside its limits), it intervenes (by raising the outside temperature of a place in which it finds itself, by going to another place where the external temperature is higher, etc.) so that its bodily temperature will remain within the limits that guarantee survival. Prediction thus works as a self-fulfilling prophecy: through active interference, the prediction makes itself true, the body's temperature remains the same:

“The experience of the bodily self as being relatively unchanging therefore stems directly from the need to have precise priors – strong predictions – about stable bodily states, for the purposes of physiological regulation.”(191)

And when this perception is perturbed, you act to diminish the gap that separates the two:

“by minimizing prediction error through active inference, living systems will naturally come to be in states they expect – or predict – themselves to be in. /.../ the picture that emerges is of a living system actively modelling its world and its body, so that the set of states that define it as a living system keep being revisited, over and over again – from the beating of my heart every second to commiserating my birthday every year.” (201)

This is why “action itself is a form of self-fulfilling perceptual inference”: “The perceptual experience of volition is a self-fulfilling perceptual prediction, another distinctive kind of controlled – again perhaps a *controlling* – hallucination.”(219) And the same holds for acts of free will: they are a hallucinatory mode of self-perception or, to use another popular expression, a user's illusion: “experiences of volition are forms of self-related perception”(215) Experiences of volition are not just illusions, they are

“perceptual best guesses, as real as any other kind of conscious perception, whether of the world or of the self. /.../ Whereas color experiences construct features of the world around us, experiences of volition have the metaphysically subversive content that the ‘self’ has causal influence in the world. /.../ Experiences of volition are not only real, they are indispensable to our survival. They are self-fulfilling perceptual inferences that bring about voluntary actions. Without these experiences, we would not be able to navigate the complex environments in which 224we humans thrive, nor would we

be able to learn from previous voluntary actions in order to do better the next time.” (223-4)

To resume, Seth’s theory is grounded in the premise that the primary function of conscious perception does not reside “in representing the world or the body, but in the control and regulation of our physiological condition”: “We perceive the world around us, and ourselves within it, *with, through, and because of* our living bodies.” (273) As a philosopher, my first reaction to this theory concerns the status of Seth’s theory itself: is it – and what it claims about reality – also a controlled hallucination? If yes, why should we take it seriously as truth, as the description of the way things “really are”? If not, how can our mind step out of controlled manipulation?

The paradox is that the very distinction between how we perceive/hallucinate reality and how this reality is in itself is part of our “hallucinatory” thinking (or, as Hegel put it, the distinction between for-us and in-itself is internal to for-us). Isn’t the history of science itself the ultimate proof of it? This, of course, doesn’t mean that there is no external reality, i.e., that what we perceive as reality external to us is just a reified hallucination. We are dealing here with an irreducible loop: yes, science can show how consciousness emerges out of organic processes, but this basic (pre-conscious) level is always by definition described from the standpoint of a subject aware of itself, producing a scientific account of reality.

From Life to Self

Although Seth opposes what he calls with irony the “quantum soup” explanations of consciousness, I think that a reference to quantum mechanics might be of some help here. Carlo Rovelli’s perspectival realism (which I interpret through the notion of holography) implies that the whole is a part of its part, i.e. that a part is composed of all the (other) parts of its whole. Capitalism is not only a part of history, a moment in the global narrative, it is itself the prism through which we see all the steps leading to it. True history is thus not a gradual development of parts but a series of shifts in how its ‘whole’ itself is structured. We do not have a Whole which comprises its parts: each part comprises multiple universalities between which we will inevitably choose, without necessarily being aware of doing so. This is how I apply to history Rovelli’s pluralistic and perspectival view of quantum mechanics:

“if we want to get a true idea of what a point of space-time is like we should look outward at the universe /.../ The complete notion of a point of space-time in fact consists of the appearance of the entire universe as seen from that point.”²

This loop described by Rovelli is what is missing in Seth's first general notion of consciousness, the so-called IIT (information integrated theory): "at the core of IIT is a single measure called ' Φ ' which measures how much a system is 'more than the sum' of its parts, in terms of information. How can a system be more than the sum of its parts? A flock of birds provides a loose analogy: the flock seems to be more than the sum of the birds that make it up – it seems to have a 'life of its own'. IIT takes this idea and translates it into the domain of information. In IIT, Φ measures the amount of information a system generates 'as a whole', over and above the amount of information generated by its parts independently. /.../ a system is conscious to the extent that its whole generates more information than its parts."(61) Information in IIT must therefore be treated as *intrinsic* to a system, not as relative to an external observer; it must be information 'for' the system itself – not for anyone or anything else"(64):

"You – as the scientist, the external observer – have to know all the different ways a system *could* behave, even if it never actually behaves in all these ways. The distinction is between knowing what a system *actually does* over time (which is easy, at least in principle, and is observer-relative) and knowing what a system *could do* even if it ~~66~~never does it (which is usually difficult, if not impossible, but is observer-independent)."(65)

I think that an additional distinction has to be introduced here. A system which is more than a sum of its parts is every living system: its Whole cannot be reduced to a sum of its parts since, if it loses some of its parts, sometimes other parts can take over their function. However, a conscious system (or, rather, a system regulated by a symbolic order) is not only more than a sum of its parts: its Whole itself is one of its parts, or, as Seth puts it, it represents to itself its model, and it survives only through this self-representation.

The notion I propose here is exaptation, introduced by Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin.³ There are two types of exaptations: (1) adaptations that initially arose through natural selection and were subsequently co-opted for another function (co-opted adaptations); (2) features that did not arise as adaptations through natural selection but rather as side effects of adaptive processes and that have been co-opted for a biological function. Gould's favorite example is the human chin, whose presence is an incidental consequence of the differential growth rate of two bones in the lower jaw. The dentary bone which carries the teeth elongates more slowly than the jawbone itself, so the chin juts out. In our ape-like ancestors the jawbone grows more slowly so no chin develops. So it is not only that the whole of an organism is more than a sum of its parts – it is also that parts themselves are never fully subordinated to their living Whole (spandrels). Gould's favorite example

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»Consciousness is a product of our brain, which in turn is a product of evolution. But the features of the human brain are emergent, are the result of a series of random acquisitions /.../ that may have been encouraged by natural selection only *after* the brain was formed.«⁴
What this means is that human brain did not develop »in view of« its future uses (because indispensable for some specific biological function); it suddenly exploded in the course of a process in which »a new combination of characteristics randomly produces an entirely unforeseen result.«⁵

There is a more refined dialectical reasoning at work here than it may appear. That is to say, in a first sight, it may seem that there is no big difference between this notion of »ex-aptation« and the standard »hard« Darwinian notion: Dennett himself approvingly refers to Nietzsche's idea of how nature functions as a *bricoleur*, re-using organs which originally evolved for a particular function for another function. The »hard« Darwinians are thus fully aware of how evolutionary adaptation only uses (chooses from) multiple variations which emerge in a contingent aleatory way, with no purpose. However, the difference that separates the »hard« Darwinians from dialecticians proper like Stephen Jay Gould is double. First, the dialectical approach proper is *structural*: the New emerges not as an element, but as a structure. In an aleatory way, all of a sudden, a new Order, new harmony, emerges out of Chaos. Although we can (retroactively) ascertain a long gestation period, one last element triggers the swift shift from chaos to new order - »hard« Darwinists do not talk in the terms of such a structural »totality.« Second difference: this new Order cannot be accounted for in terms of »adaptation« - it is not only that a univocal *ad quem* is missing here (adaptation to *what?*), one also cannot presuppose a univocal agent of it (adaptation of *what?*). A vicious cycle is here irreducible: one cannot explain the very emergence of an organism in the terms of a strategy of adaptation. If an organism is to adapt in order to survive, it must be here in the first place. An organism evolves to survive, but it cannot emerge in order to survive: it is meaningless to say that I live *in order* to adapt myself. In short, a newly emerging Order »creates« (»posits«) its environs - in relating to its other, it relates to itself:

»Regardless of the moment and the place where it happened, the evolution of consciousness was not a gradual process. Some philosophers, refusing to acknowledge great discontinuities in nature, suggested that consciousness had emerged slowly and by degrees, from 'less' conscious animals to other 'more' conscious ones and so on. /.../ Actually, consciousness could not have arisen unless and until the activity of the retroaction loops had reached the level of reverberating activity, and a property of feedback loops is 'all or nothing': either reverberating activity is supported by a significant life span or it dies at birth. /.../ a threshold was reached beyond which consciousness appeared out of the blue, just like there is a threshold beyond which we go from sleeping to being awake.«⁶

However, we are still dealing here with *life*, so how do we pass from life, from living organism, to a *Self*, to subject? My hypothesis is that, to put it bluntly, subjectivity cannot be accounted for in the terms of sustaining the reproduction of life, as yet another evolutionary instrument for strengthening the chances of survival and reproduction. With the rise of subjectivity, an additional reflective turn happens which doesn't involve the intervention of some higher spiritual agency subordinating organic life to its goals; on the contrary, with subjectivity, what was before just a mediating moment becomes a self-aim, a goal in itself. To explain this, let's begin with psychoanalysis whose basic axiom is that, far from providing the natural foundation of human lives, sexuality is the very terrain where humans detach themselves from nature: the idea of sexual perversion or of a deadly sexual passion is foreign to the animal universe. Here, Hegel himself commits a failure with regard to his own standards: he only deploys how, in the process of culture, the natural substance of sexuality is cultivated, sublated, mediated – we, humans, no longer just make love for procreation, we get involved in a complex process of seduction and marriage by means of which sexuality becomes an expression of the spiritual bond between a man and a woman, etc. However, what Hegel misses is how, once we are within the human condition, sexuality is not only transformed/civilized, but, much more radically, *changed in its very substance*: it is no longer the instinctual drive to reproduce, but a drive that gets thwarted as to its natural goal (reproduction) and thereby explodes into an infinite, properly meta-physical, passion.

Why is Christianity opposed to sexuality, accepting it as a necessary evil only if it serves its natural purpose of procreation? Not because in sexuality our lower nature explodes, but precisely because sexuality competes with pure spirituality as the primordial meta-physical activity. The Freudian hypothesis is that the passage from animal instincts (of mating) to sexuality proper (to drives) is the primordial step from physical realm of biological (animal) life to meta-physics, to eternity and immortality, to a level which is heterogeneous with regard to the

biological cycle of generation and corruption. (This is why the Catholic argument that sex without procreation, whose aim is not procreation, is animal is wrong: the exact opposite is true, sex spiritualizes itself only when it abstracts from its natural end and becomes an end-in-itself.) Plato was already aware of this when he wrote about Eros, erotic attachment to a beautiful body, as the first step on the way towards the supreme Good; perspicuous Christians (like Simone Weil) discerned in sexual longing a striving for the Absolute. Human sexuality is characterized by the impossibility to reach its goal, and this constitutive impossibility eternalizes it, as is the case in the myths about great lovers whose love insists beyond life and death. Christianity conceives this properly meta-physical excess of sexuality as a disturbance to be erased, so it is paradoxically Christianity itself (especially Catholicism) which wants to get rid of its competitor by way of reducing sexuality to its animal function of procreation: Christianity wants to “normalize” sexuality, spiritualizing it from without (imposing on it the external envelope of spirituality: sex must be done with love and respect for the partner, in a cultivated way, etc.), and thereby obliterating its immanent spiritual dimension, the dimension of unconditional passion.

Hegel, Marx, Lacan

This reversal is what Hegel calls the development of substance into subject: what was originally a subordinate element of a substantial order of life becomes an autonomous agent subordinating to itself its own external presuppositions out of which it emerged. »Self« is thus not just a model of an organism immanent to it, a self-model through which an organism regulates its life: »self« emerges when this model autonomizes itself and subordinates its organism to itself. As such, Self is no longer just a prolongation of life, it acquires a life of its own – the emergence of a Self therefore necessarily gives rise to a redoubling of life: since subject emerges at a distance from biological life, it has to construct its own mode of life, its own artificial »substance.«

When Marx describes the circulation of capital in *Capital*, Hegelian references abound: with capitalism, value is not a mere abstract “mute” universality, a substantial link between the multiplicity of commodities; from the passive medium of exchange, it turns into the “active factor” of the entire process. Instead of only passively assuming the two different forms of its actual existence (money – commodity), it appears as the subject “endowed with a motion of its own, passing through a life-process of its own”: it differentiates itself from itself, positing its otherness, and then again overcomes this difference – the entire movement is *its own* movement. In this precise sense, “instead of simply representing the relations of commodities, it enters /.../ into private relations with itself”: the “truth” of its relating to its otherness is its self-relating, i.e., in its self-

movement, the capital retroactively “sublates” its own material conditions, changing them into subordinate moments of its own “spontaneous expansion” – in pure Hegelese, it posits its own presuppositions.

Marx’s metaphor for the capital is that of a vampire, a living dead who suck the blood of the living – in the topsy-turvy world of the capital, the dead rule over the living and are more alive than the living. The implicit premise of this metaphor is that the aim of the revolution is to return to normality in which the living rule over the dead. Lacan, however, teaches us that a certain reversal of the relationship between the living and the dead defines the very being-human: the “barred” subject is a living dead, at a distance from its biological substance, since it is caught into the symbolic big Other which is a kind of parasite living off humans who serve it. Enjoyment itself is something that parasitizes upon human pleasures, perverting them so that a subject can draw a surplus-enjoyment from displeasure itself. What characterizes subjectivity is thus a weird redoubling of life – a subject lives not just between the two deaths, as Lacan put it following Sade, but also between the two lives, the biological/organic self-reproduction and the quasi-autonomous life of what Lacan calls the big Other, the symbolic order.

This basic reversal which defines human subjectivity also implies the Freudian notion of the unconscious for which there is simply no space in Seth’s theoretical edifice. Perhaps the best way to describe the status of the unconscious is via a reference to Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* where he introduces a key distinction between negative and indefinite judgment: the positive statement ‘the soul is mortal’ can be negated in two ways. We can either deny a predicate (‘the soul is not mortal’), or affirm a non-predicate (‘the soul is non-mortal’). The difference is exactly the same as the one, known to every reader of Stephen King, between ‘he is not dead’ and ‘he is undead’. The indefinite judgment opens up a third domain which undermines the distinction between dead and non-dead (alive): the ‘undead’ are neither alive nor dead, they are precisely the monstrous ‘living dead’. And the same goes for the Unconscious: one thing is to say “this content is not conscious” (which simply means that it is an objective neuronal process in our body outside the mental sphere, like blood circulation), another thing is to say “this content is unconscious” (which means it is part of our mental (psychic) life, even if we are not consciously aware of it).

This is also one of the ways of specifying the meaning of Lacan’s claim that the subject is always “decentered.” His point is not that my subjective experience is regulated by objective unconscious mechanisms that are decentered with regard to my self-experience and, as such, beyond my control (a point asserted by every materialist), but, rather, something much more unsettling: I am deprived of even my most intimate subjective experience, the way things “really seem to me,” that of the fundamental fantasy that constitutes and guarantees the core of my being, since I can never consciously experience it and assume it. According

to the standard view, the dimension that is constitutive of subjectivity is that of phenomenal (self)experience: I am a subject the moment I can say to myself, “No matter what unknown mechanism governs my acts, perceptions, and thoughts, nobody can take from me what I see and feel now.” Say, when I am passionately in love, and a biochemist informs me that all my intense sentiments are just the result of biochemical processes in my body, I can answer him by clinging to the appearance: “All that you’re saying may be true, but, nonetheless, nothing can take from me the intensity of the passion that I am experiencing now...” Lacan’s point, however, is that the psychoanalyst is the one who, precisely, *can* take this from the subject: the analyst’s ultimate aim is to deprive the subject of the very fundamental fantasy that regulates the universe of his (self) experience. The Freudian subject of the unconscious emerges only when a key aspect of the subject’s (self)experience (his fundamental fantasy) becomes inaccessible to him, primordially repressed. At its most radical, the unconscious is the inaccessible phenomenon, not the objective mechanisms that regulates my phenomenal experience. So, in contrast to the commonplace that we are dealing with a subject the moment an entity displays signs of inner life (of a fantasmatic experience that cannot be reduced to external behavior), one should claim that what characterizes human subjectivity proper is, rather, the gap that separates the two, namely, the fact that fantasy, at its most elementary, becomes inaccessible to the subject – this brings us back to our starting point, the unknown knowledge as constitutive of subjectivity.

We should not identify (what we experience as a free volitional) decision with consciousness: our basic decisions are *unconscious*. In the conceptual space of cognitive sciences there are physical processes and consciousness, with no place for the Freudian unconscious. Recall the case of falling in love: it is never a conscious decision/choice – all of a sudden, I just become aware that I am deeply in love. If we take this into account, we are compelled to cast doubt on Seth’s crucial notion of the “ground-state of conscious selfhood”:

“Despite being firmly rooted in physiological regulation, emotions and moods are still mostly experienced at least in part as relating to things and situations beyond the self, outside the body. When I feel fear, I am usually afraid of some *thing*. But the very 190deepest levels of experienced selfhood – the inchoate feeling of ‘just being’ – seem to lack these external referents altogether. This, for me, is the true ground-state of conscious selfhood: a formless, shapeless, control-oriented perceptual prediction about the present and future physiological condition of the body itself. This is where *being you* begins, and it is here that we find the most profound connections between life and mind, between our beast machine nature and our conscious self.” (190)

Here it is not the place to explore how this ground-state of conscious selfhood relates to the zero-level we reach through meditation (in Buddhism and other approaches); suffice it to note that the two are not the same – *not* in the sense that meditation is somehow “deeper”. Meditation brings its own dangers – no wonder that the US a “Cheetah House” organization exists whose task is “to provide evidence-based information and support to individuals who have experienced negative effects from meditation; experienced unhealthy meditation or spiritual communities; and suffered religious & spiritual abuse or trauma.”⁷ What I want to emphasize is just that this objectless “ground state” of the Self (what mystics call the “night of the world” in which external reality disintegrates) cannot be located within “the whole panorama of human experience and mental life /which/ is sculpted by a deep-seated biological drive to stay alive” – why? For the reason articulated by Seth himself when he points out that “what it means for something to exist is that there must be a difference – a boundary – between that thing and everything else. If there were no boundaries there would be no things – there would be nothing”:

“This boundary must also persist over time, because things that exist maintain their identity over time. If you add a drop of ink to a glass of water it will rapidly disperse, coloring the water and losing its identity. If instead you add a drop of oil, although the oil will spread out over the surface, it will remain recognizably separate from the water. The oil drop continues to exist because it has not dispersed itself evenly throughout the water. After a while, though, it too will lose its identity, just as rocks eventually erode into dust. Things like oil drops and rocks undoubtedly exist, because they have an identity that persists for some period of time – a long time, for rocks. But neither oil drops nor rocks *actively* maintain their boundaries, they just get dispersed slowly enough for us to notice them as existing while this happens. / Living systems are different. Unlike the examples above, living systems actively maintain their boundaries over time – through moving, or sometimes even just through growing. They actively contribute to preserving themselves as distinct from their environment, and this is a key feature of what makes them living. /.../ living systems, simply by virtue of existing, must actively resist the dispersion of their internal states. By the time you end up as a puddle of undifferentiated mush on the floor, you are no longer alive.”(197)

But is the “most profound” level of objectless Selfhood not precisely the level at which the Self no longer exists as a separate entity exempted from external reality? In other words, is it not the point of *death in life*, the point at which the Self *no longer exists as a separate entity*, the point at which the “drive to stay alive” is momentarily suspended? And - to risk even a

step further – is the passage through this zero-point not necessary for the advent of the *ethical* subject, a subject who is ready to risk its life itself for some higher Cause (like honor)? Recall that many national anthems celebrate not just individual sacrifice for its nation but a collective readiness to risk the survival of the nation itself: “We’ll rather all die than to give up our freedom (or land).” Here is the orgasmic finale of the anthem of Argentine: “May the laurels be eternal / that we were able to achieve. / Let’s live crowned in glory / or let’s swear to die with glory / or let’s swear to die with glory!” The final line is repeated – a clear indication that the true object of desire is to achieve glorious death, not victory.

For this reason, the objectless Self can no longer be characterized as a “control-oriented perceptual prediction about the present and future physiological condition of the body itself”: if anything, it is a prediction of one’s disappearance as a living body, i.e., it is a form of what Heidegger called “being-towards-death.” The extreme experience of the objectless Self is thus not the point of closest proximity between body and consciousness, the point at which the conscious Self directly coincides with its body, but, quite the contrary, it is the basic form of the gap that separates them. So it is not simply that “the quest to understand consciousness places us increasingly within nature, not further apart from it” (267): yes, this quest places us within nature, but at a point at which nature breaks with itself, acquires self-distance. And, incidentally, when we descend to this level of objectless Self, do we not also step out of the illusion that we are free agents – which means that this illusion is not necessary.

To justify his stance, Seth evokes the second law of thermodynamics which “tells us that instances of organized matter, like living systems, are intrinsically improbable and unstable, and that – in the long run – we’re all doomed. But somehow, unlike rocks or ink drops, living systems temporarily fend off the second law, persisting in a precarious condition of improbability. They exist out of equilibrium with their environment, and this is what it means to ‘exist’ in the first place. /.../ for a living system to resist the pull of the second law it *must occupy states which it expects to be in.*” (198) But, again, when a Self is ready to risk its life for its honor, does it not precisely follow a higher Law on behalf of which it no longer “resists the pull of the second law”? This means that, at its most basic, freedom is not freedom to do something for a rational reason – such a notion of freedom this can be easily reduced to brain determinism. Freedom if I do something for no reason at all, what E.A. Poe called “the imp of the perverse” – here is Poe’s own description of such a temptation:

“We stand upon the brink of a precipice. We peer into the abyss—we grow sick and dizzy. Our first impulse is to shrink away from the danger. Unaccountably we remain... it is but a thought, although a fearful one, and one which chills the very marrow of our bones with the fierceness of the delight of its horror. It is merely the idea of

what would be our sensations during the sweeping precipitancy of a fall from such a height... for this very cause do we now the most vividly desire it.”

Are such acts which go against our very survival not a manifestation of the Freudian death drive? “The Imp of the Perverse” causes people to commit acts against their self-interest, it tempts a person to do things “merely because we feel we should *not*.” The refined dialectical conclusion of Poe’s story is of special interest: the narrator commits murder to inherit a man’s estate; a coroner attributes the death to an act of God, and the narrator benefits from his crime; several years later, the narrator starts obsessing about a possible confession for his crime - he acts on a self-destructive impulse, and confesses his crime in public, leading to his swift trial and execution... in short, the only truly free perverse act is the compulsion to confess, to be punished.

This brings us to Immanuel Kant who gets involved in a deadlock when he distinguishes between »ordinary« evil (the violation of morality on behalf of some »pathological« motivation, such as greed, lust, ambition, etc.), »radical« evil, and »diabolical« evil. It may seem that we are dealing with a simple linear gradation: »normal« evil, more »radical« evil, and, finally, the unthinkable »diabolical« evil. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that the three species are not at the same level. In other words, Kant confuses different principles of classification. »Radical« evil does not designate a specific type of evil act, but an a priori propensity of human nature (to act egotistically, to give preference to pathological motivations over universal ethical duty) which opens up the very space for »normal« evil acts, which roots them in human nature. In contrast to it, »diabolical« evil does indeed designate a specific type of evil act: acts which are not motivated by any pathological motivation, but are done »just for the sake of it,« elevating evil itself into an apriori *non-pathological* motivation – something akin to Poe’s »imp of the perverse.« While Kant claims that »diabolical evil« cannot actually occur (it is impossible for a human being to elevate evil itself into a universal ethical norm), he nonetheless asserts that one should posit it as an abstract possibility. Interestingly enough, the concrete case he mentions (in Part I of his *Metaphysics of Morals*) is that of judicial regicide, the murder of a king carried out as a punishment pronounced by a court. Kant’s claim is that, in contrast to a simple rebellion in which the mob kills only the person of a king, the judicial process which condemns the king to death (qua embodiment of the rule of law) destroys from within the very form of the (rule of) law, turning it into a terrifying travesty – which is why, as Kant put it, such an act is an »indelible crime« which cannot ever be pardoned. However, in a second step, Kant desperately argues that in the two historical cases of such an act (under Cromwell and in 1793 France), we were dealing just with a mob taking revenge.

Why is there this oscillation and classificatory confusion in Kant? Because, if he were to assert the actual possibility of »diabolical evil,« he would be utterly unable to distinguish it from the Good – since both acts would be non-pathologically motivated, the travesty of justice would become indistinguishable from justice itself. And, the shift from Kant to Hegel is simply the shift from this Kantian inconsistency to Hegel's reckless assumption of the identity of "diabolical" evil with the Good itself. Far from involving a clear classification, the distinction between »radical« and »diabolical« evil is thus the distinction between the general irreducible propensity of human nature and a series of particular acts (which, although impossible, are thinkable). Why, then, does Kant need this excess over the »normal« pathological evil? Because, without it, his theory would amount to no more than the traditional notion of the conflict between good and evil as the conflict between two tendencies in human nature: the tendency to act freely and autonomously, and the tendency to act out of pathological, egotistic motivations – from this perspective, the choice between good and evil is not itself a free choice, since we only act in a truly free way when we act autonomously for the sake of duty (when we follow pathological motivations, we are enslaved to our nature). However, this goes against the fundamental thrust of Kantian ethics, according to which *the very choice of evil is an autonomous free decision*.⁸ No wonder that Hegel goes here to the end and clearly posits that self-awareness as such (cognition) is in itself evil:

“Abstractly, being evil means singularizing myself in a way that cuts me off from the universal (which is the rational the laws, the determinations of spirit). But along with this separation there arises being-for-itself and for the first time the universally spiritual, laws – what ought to be. So it is not the case that /rational/ consideration has an external relationship to evil: it is itself what is evil.”⁹ “It is the consideration or the cognition that *makes* people evil, so that consideration and cognition /themselves/ are what is evil, and that / therefore/ such cognition is what ought not to exist /because it/ is the *source* of evil.”¹⁰

When we do things for reasons, we experience our decision as a free choice (when I feel thirst, I choose between water, beer, fruit juice, coke...); the experience of choice implies a minimal distance towards objects of choice, and – this is the key fact – such an experience of choice opens up a potential space of doing something *just for the sake of it, for no determinate reason at all*. As we have seen from Poe's »the Imp of the Perverse,« this reflexivity of reasons where no-reason itself can function as a reason is the ground of »pure« evil, not an evil done for pathological reasons. This is why the philosophical reproach to Freud according to which »death drive« is already a substantial objectivization and as such

cannot be the zero level of subjectivity misses the point: »death drive« names the very gap that subtracts a subject from reality of reasons.

A Hegelian approach thus enables us to identify four interconnected features that characterize a Self but are ignored by a cognitive approach. First, there is a move from Substance to Subject: a subordinate part of an organic substance (a living body) regains autonomy, takes control over the organism and steers it beyond the goal of its survival and reproduction. Second, we thereby enter a dimension Freud called "death drive." Third, this death drive cannot persist without creating its own form of life, a virtual life beyond organic life (symbolic order). And fourth, because of this redoubling, every Self is divided, its consciousness is supplemented by the dimension of the unconscious - animals may have awareness and instinctual knowledge, but not an unconscious.

Donald D. Hoffman: Consciousness as a Primary Fact

However, these conclusions in no way imply that cognitive approach is by definition, in its very notion, unable to analyze in a more appropriate way the phenomenon of a conscious Self – science is far from saying its last word about a conscious Self. The space for a dialogue with science is opened up by the fact that the negative gesture of distancing oneself from the pursuit of life (what Freud calls "death drive" and what Hegel called "self-relating negativity") does not take place due to the intervention of some higher spiritual force which stands above mere reproduction of life; it happens within life itself, as its self-negation which occurs due to some totally contingent anomaly, through the ex-aptation of what was in itself a misfortune. Our entire spiritual edifice comes second, it is a reaction to this disturbance, an attempt to cope with it. The ultimate irony of »becoming-human af apes« is that the reason was utterly contingent and without any meaning – in all probability some pathological neuronal short-circuit, a meaningless malfunctioning. At the organic level, something went wrong, a living being got caught into a repetitive loop of self-destructive acts, and out of this weird accident all of our ethics and the symbolic order itself arouse. If, then, science will discover how self-awareness emerged, the result will not be perceived as the clarification of a deep mystery, as an act of bringing out a deep secret that, perhaps, should better remain hidden, but as something profoundly disappointing, outrageous in its stupidity.

But which science can play a key role here? My answer is: quantum mechanics. I am not the first to propose this. In contrast to Seth, who – as we have already seen – mockingly mentions "quantum soup," Donald D. Hoffman, in his *The Case Against Reality*¹¹, grounds his vision of consciousness in quantum mechanics: not only are the cognitive scientists

“ignoring the progress in fundamental physics, they are often explicit about it. They’ll say openly that quantum physics is not relevant to the aspects of brain function that are causally involved in consciousness. They are certain that it’s got to be classical properties of neural activity, which exist independent of any observers – spiking rates, connection strengths at synapses, perhaps dynamical properties as well. These are all very classical notions under Newtonian physics, where time is absolute and objects exist absolutely. And then [neuroscientists] are mystified as to why they don’t make progress. They don’t avail themselves of the incredible insights and breakthroughs that physics has made.”¹²

Consequently, in contrast to Seth who remains a materialist, Hoffman rejects materialism and turns around the naturalist approach: instead of trying to explain how consciousness arises out of material reality, we should focus on how (what we experience as) reality arises out of consciousness: “Experiment after experiment has shown – defying common sense – that if we assume that the particles that make up ordinary objects have an objective, observer-independent existence, we get the wrong answers.”

Hoffman’s next step resides in another reversal. He grounds his position in evolutionary theory: “The classic argument is that those of our ancestors who saw more accurately had a competitive advantage over those who saw less accurately and thus were more likely to pass on their genes that coded for those more accurate perceptions, so after thousands of generations we can be quite confident that we’re the offspring of those who saw accurately, and so we see accurately.” But this common sense notion “misunderstands the fundamental fact about evolution, which is that it’s about fitness function”: “According to evolution by natural selection, an organism that sees reality as it is will never be more fit than an organism of equal complexity that sees none of reality but is just tuned to fitness.” Why? Hoffman explains this by way of a desktop interface metaphor:

“Suppose there’s a blue rectangular icon on the lower right corner of your computer’s desktop – does that mean that the file itself is blue and rectangular and lives in the lower right corner of your computer? Of course not. But those are the only things that can be asserted about anything on the desktop – it has color, position and shape. Those are the only categories available to you, and yet none of them are true about the file itself or anything in the computer. /.../ That blue rectangular icon guides my behavior, and it hides a complex reality that I don’t need to know. That’s the key idea. Evolution has shaped us with perceptions that allow us to survive. They guide adaptive behaviors. But part of that involves hiding from

us the stuff we don't need to know. And that's pretty much all of reality, whatever reality might be. If you had to spend all that time figuring it out, the tiger would eat you. /.../ Snakes and trains, like the particles of physics, have no objective, observer-independent features. The snake I see is a description created by my sensory system to inform me of the fitness consequences of my actions."

Now comes the next and final step towards subjective idealism. Hoffman's answer to the question "What is reality?" is: "The quick – and right – answer is I don't know. To understand and see reality, we have to first fully understand consciousness." Hoffman's claim is that it is not necessary to suppose that somehow the world (W) affects my perceptions: "I can pull the *W* out of the model and stick a conscious agent in its place and get a circuit of conscious agents. In fact, you can have whole networks of arbitrary complexity. And that's the world." Hoffman calls this view "conscious realism": "Objective reality is just conscious agents, just points of view. /.../ the idea that objectivity results from the fact that you and I can measure the same object in the exact same situation and get the same results – it's very clear from quantum mechanics that that idea has to go. Physics tells us that there are no public physical objects."

This brings us back to Hoffman's rejection of materialist neuroscientists: "It's not that there's a classical brain that does some quantum magic. It's that there's no brain! Quantum mechanics says that classical objects – including brains – don't exist." Here is then Hoffman's recapitulation of his basic ontological stance: "As a conscious realist, I am postulating conscious experiences as ontological primitives, the most basic ingredients of the world. I'm claiming that experiences are the real coin of the realm. The experiences of everyday life – my real feeling of a headache, my real taste of chocolate – that really is the ultimate nature of reality." The idea is that

"reality is a vast social network of interacting consciousnesses. Each conscious agent has experience and can make freewill actions. So it's a very vast social network. Think of the Twitterverse. There are millions of users and billions of tweets. Trying to see and understand it all is too much. In big data, we use graphical interfaces that hide all of the chatter and instead give summaries. Evolution did that for us. Spacetime and physical objects are just our visualization tools that help us to interact within this vast social network without even seeing it."

However, there is a dimension ignored here by Hoffman, the already-mentioned dimension of the "big Other," the symbolic order which provides the space for "interacting consciousness." None other than Friedrich Hayek saw this clearly, and that's why Simon Griffiths (see "What

can the Left learn from Friedrich Hayek?"¹³) is right in arguing that Hayek offers the Left three important insights. First, the limits of knowledge:

"Socialism, which Hayek understood largely as central economic planning, requires planners to make use of information which, because it exists in our heads only fleetingly and is never fully articulated, simply cannot be collected. For Hayek, only the market can make use of this diffused knowledge: state planning is bound to fail. However, for some on the left, Hayek's account of knowledge has very different implications. For example, Hilary Wainwright /.../ argues that Hayek mistakenly treats knowledge as 'an individual attribute, rather than as a social product'. Understood socially, knowledge can be shared by people taking action to overcome the limits of their individual perspectives. Wainwright's work is full of examples of organizations – trade unions, women's groups and co-ops – that have come together to pool knowledge in order to solve collective problems that cannot be solved by the market or by remote bureaucrats. Hayek's argument over the dispersed nature of knowledge can be used to support a form of radical social movement politics, not simply a scepticism about socialist planning."

Second, the idea of the spontaneous order: "some 'orders' emerge 'as a result of human action, but not of human design': language, common law, morality and markets are all examples. To Hayek, the state's role should be largely limited to protecting the spontaneous orders on which civilization is based." Third, markets as a space of freedom: markets allow greater freedom of choice over purchases; when and where to work; and freedom of expression. However,

"while Hayek was right about the importance of these freedoms, his views are incomplete because he never explained why freedom is valuable to us. This must be because of our desire to act autonomously. In order to do this, we need certain resources – food, shelter, and education, for example. The state is crucial in providing these. Market freedoms are important, but so is the autonomy needed to pursue them. Hayek's argument for freedom can end, not simply with a case for the free market, but with an account of those resources needed to make freedom valuable to us."

Hayek's "spontaneous order" points towards the same as Lacan's "big Other," something that has no "objective" existence in itself but just persists as a presupposition posited by the activity of subjects. Hayek here wisely insists on the irreducibility of alienation: his point is not anarchist individualism but the necessity for the "spontaneous" interaction of

individuals to be perceived as related to a transcendent “objective” order. Seth and Hoffman move in the space of the opposition between self-awareness and neuronal process, they both miss this dimension of the big Other, an order of objective fictions that is not part of external reality and also cannot be reduced to my inner experience.

How does then Hoffman account for the main argument of materialist cognitivists, the correlation between brain activity in its specific regions and specific conscious experiences – say, if I stimulate area V4 of your brain with a magnet, I can make you lose all color experience? “There are hundreds of correlations like this – specific patterns of activity. This is important data, *but it’s just data*. It’s not a theory. And we don’t have one. Why? Because most approaches assume that brain activity causes a conscious experience.”¹⁴ This answer is all too quick: if I approach your brain with a magnet without you knowing about it and you lose your color experience, doesn’t this indicate some kind of causal link, although the precise nature of this link remains unclear?

But the main problem resides elsewhere: to arrive at his conclusion, Hoffman evokes as a self-evident fact a very problematic interpretation of quantum mechanics advocated by a tiny minority of quantum scientists (there is no reality independent of our conscious observation because our external reality emerges only through observation). First, the whole point of quantum mechanics is that there is another level of being which obeys laws different from our ordinary reality, the real of quantum waves, of quantum superpositions which collapse into our reality; this level is indeterminate, but still deterministic: the probability of a collapse is determined by very precise Schroedinger’s equation. At this quantum level, our standard notion of time and space as universal containers of all reality also has to be abandoned. To interpret this quantum domain as the final refutation of materialism and as a proof that reality is spiritual succeeds only if we restrain ourselves to the classic deterministic notion of reality as small material particles jumping around in the all-encompassing space and time. Furthermore, the role of observation is much more complex: it is proven experimentally that a collapse occurs if a quantum process is “observed” by a measuring machine with no awareness whatsoever. Hoffman thus dismisses as a pseudo-problem the most interesting part of quantum mechanics from a philosophical standpoint, namely the exact ontological nature of quantum waves and of their collapse, plus the retroactive causation implied by such a collapse – his reasoning is “we don’t know enough about it, so let’s pretend it doesn’t exist and there is nothing outside consciousness.”

Incompleteness or Hyper-Completeness?

This loop of retroactive causation (something emerges which retroactively causes its own causes or, in Hegelese, posits its own presuppositions) is

missed by my severe critic Rafael Holmberg who claims that I misread not only Hegel, Lacan and quantum mechanics but also Deleuze, Nietzsche and Jung:

“The Real is not a simple remainder of the process of symbolisation, an abnormal x that forever fails to find its place in the Symbolic (which is how Žižek describes it in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*). This view of the Real implies that the Symbolic is a consistent totality - yet if Lacan insists on anything, it is that the Symbolic, or language, is irreconcilable with itself. It produces enigmas and contradictions that are only possible *because* language is already there, and inevitably fails to account for its own consequences. /.../ The Real is for Lacan a distortion of the Symbolic that is produced by the Symbolic itself. Much like rules can't be broken if the game itself is thrown away, if the Symbolic is taken away, so is the Real.”¹⁵

The coordinates of this critique are clear: for me, the Real is simply external to the Symbolic which forms a consistent totality, an excessive element for which there is no place in the Symbolic,

“reality is ontologically incomplete. Yet it is exactly this conclusion which seems to betray Hegel, Lacan, *and* quantum physics. These ontological systems are not incomplete, they are what I would call *hyper-complete*: they are structured by conceptual systems that are in a perpetual overestimation, or non-identity, with themselves, and from this they produce indeterminate excesses that are entirely *superordinate* to the very planes on which they operate. In other words, if Hegel and quantum physics stand for anything, it is not incompleteness, but /.../ an indeterminacy that presupposes a determined, yet self-contradictory, totality.”¹⁶

In his text, Holmberg mentions three other names of thinkers who also outlined a hyper-complete ontology: Nietzsche, Deleuze, and – surprise, surprise! – Jung. Especially the last name bears witness to the fact that Holmberg notion of hyper-complete systems is not Lacanian at all but belongs to the space of the other three thinkers – recall that Deleuze admired not only Nietzsche but also Jung whom he preferred over Freud. So let me begin by pointing out that I repeatedly insist how the Real is a distortion produced by the Symbolic itself – or, as I wrote in my *Sex and the Failed Absolute* apropos the constitutive failure of the subject to represent itself in the Symbolic:

“There is nothing outside this failure, subject and language are themselves the outcome of this primordial failure. As Lacan put

it, the real is an impasse of formalization, and this is to be taken literally: not that the real is an external substantial domain that resists formalization (or symbolization, although they are not the same, of course), but that the real is totally immanent to the symbolic – it is nothing but its immanent failure.”

So the Symbolic order is inconsistent, and that’s why, as Lacan put it, *il n’y a pas de grand Autre* (there is no big Other), and why the Symbolic implies a subject. So where is our difference? Holmberg would probably reject the notion of a basic failure which evokes lack and incompleteness. My reply is that, for a Lacanian, lack and excess are two sides of the same coin, like subject and object. In his Seminar XIV¹⁷, Lacan mentions the “weird correspondence between subject and object” (“l’étrange correspondance entre sujet et objet”) – why is this correspondence strange? For two interconnected reasons. First, this correspondence is not what philosophers usually mean by the correlation between subject and object – it is almost its opposite, a kind of negative correlation, since subject is defined precisely by being a non-object. Subject and object are two sides of the same coin, lack and excess; they cannot be “synthesized” so that excess will fill in the lack because they are strictly co-existent, one and the same thing at two different levels – if the lack were to be filled in, there would no longer be a subject, the subject would fall into reality as one of the objects. Second, this correspondence is not properly dialectical but a non-dialectical foundation, a gap which opens up and sustains the very space of dialectics, in some sense even its non-dialectical presupposition. Subject is thus a lack, but a lack that arises in a reaction to the excess in the Other, to an impenetrable object that is another subject – my basic experience of lack is the enigma of “what does the Other see in me, what does it want from me.”

This correspondence between lack and surplus, between incompleteness and “hyper,” is one of the numerous cases of what I refer to as the parallax structure; another case is that of desire and drive. On the one hand, as Lacan put it, “desire is a defense, a defense against going beyond a limit in *jouissance*”¹⁸: since desire is always non-satisfied, since it always aims at something beyond every available object which is “never that,” desire protects us from the suffocating over-presence of enjoyment. But... but shouldn’t we add that *jouissance* is also a defense against desire? Enjoyment, understood as partial satisfaction, is what renders the subject’s alienation in the symbolic order livable – one’s very own alienation – even though this is not pleasing or fulfilling in any straightforward manner. Enjoyment is an excess that gives bodily form to a symbolic lack.

Enjoyment is thus at the same time a defense against (or an escape from) the void or pure transcendence of desire: if desire is by definition never fully satisfied, enjoyment enacts a reflexive turn by means of which

we get stuck on finite form the repetition by means of which, while still missing the absent Thing, we achieve satisfaction. This duality is at the same time the duality between desire and drive: desire stands for lack, non-satisfaction, while drive's circular movement generates satisfaction. Desire and drive are co-dependent: each of them can be understood as a reaction to the other. Desire is metonymic, always sliding from one to another object, again and again experiencing that "this is not that," and drive resolves this endless movement of desire by way of elevating the endless circulation around a lost object into a source of satisfaction.

Consequently, the difference between Holmberg and me does not reside in the opposition between incompleteness and hyper-completeness: they are for me the two sides of a parallax structure, in contrast to Holmberg (and Deleuze) who rejects the idea that the hyper-dimension of a structure is grounded in its constitutive lack and therefore end in a productivist version of an Absolute in excess with regard to itself.

Hegel: the Loop of Retroactivity

This distinction doesn't concern only abstract theory – it is relevant for the proper understanding of our predicament. Something new will definitely emerge out of our current predicament with its multiple crises which pose a threat to our very survival, but the possible resolutions are themselves multiple, there is no higher destiny that guarantees the outcome. The resolution that will win will have the form of a Hegelian dialectical passage – this sounds strange for those who presume that the Hegelian dialectical progress is a smooth and necessary flow of passage from one form of spirit to another without any unexpected contingent breaks. Hegel himself here and there evokes possible alternative outcomes: the struggle to death between a future master and slave could end with mutual destruction or death of one of the two (if none of them is ready to concede defeat); the struggle which divides an immediate substantial starting point against itself can end up in a resigned return to this starting point, so that we would find ourselves in a cyclic universe – Hegel outlines this option in his *Phenomenology*, in the chapter on absolute freedom and terror:

»Out of this tumult spirit would be, hurled back upon its starting point, the ethical world and the real world of spiritual culture, which would thus have been merely refreshed and rejuvenated by the fear of the lord, that has again entered men's hearts. Spirit would have anew to traverse and continually repeat this cycle of necessity, if only complete interpenetration of self-consciousness and the substance were the final result: an interpenetration in which self-consciousness, which has experienced the force of its universal nature operating negatively upon it, would try to know and find itself not as this particular self-consciousness but only as universal, and hence, too, would be able to endure the objective reality of universal spirit, a reality, excluding self-consciousness *qua* particular.«¹⁹

In short, revolutionary terror should made it clear to the singular consciousness the destructive consequences of keeping oneself separate from the universal substance, so – to apply here one of Hegel's famous word plays, the ambiguity of the German expression *zugrundegehen*, which means to disintegrate, fall apart, but literally also *zu Grunde gehen*, to reach one's ground – the positive outcome of the terror could be that the subject again reaches its ground, locates itself in the ethical substance, accepts one's unity with it; since, however, substance necessarily gets caught in the divisive process of self-mediation, the same development repeats itself indefinitely... Here, however, enters the inevitable »but,« articulated in a precise line of argumentation:

»But this is not the form the final result assumed. For in absolute freedom there was no reciprocal interaction either between an external world and consciousness, which is absorbed in manifold existence or sets itself determinate purposes and ideas, or between consciousness and an external objective world, be it a world of reality or of thought. What that freedom contained was the world absolutely in the form of consciousness, as a universal will, and, along with that, self-consciousness gathered out of all the dispersion and manifoldness of existence or all the manifold ends and judgments of mind, and concentrated into the bare and simple self. /.../ In the sphere of culture itself it does not get the length of viewing its negation or alienation in this form of pure abstraction; its negation is negation with a filling and a content – either honour and wealth, which it gains in the place of the self that it has alienated from itself; or the language of *esprit* and insight, which the distraught consciousness acquires; or, again, the negation is the heaven of belief or the principle of utility belonging to the stage of enlightenment. All these determinate elements disappear with the disaster and ruin that overtake the self in the state of absolute freedom; its negation is meaningless death, sheer horror of the negative which has nothing positive in it, nothing that gives a filling.

At the same time, however, this negation in its actual manifestation is not something alien and external. It is neither that universal background of necessity in which the moral world is swamped, nor the particular accident of private possession, the whims and humours of the owner, on which the distraught consciousness finds itself dependent; it is universal will, which in this its last abstraction has nothing positive, and hence can give nothing in return for the sacrifice. But just on that account this will is in unmediated oneness with self-consciousness, it is the pure positive because it is the pure negative; and that meaningless death, the unfilled, vacuous negativity of self, in its inner constitutive principle, turns round into absolute positivity.«²⁰

In an uncanny act of what Pierre Bayard calls “plagiarizing the future,” Hegel seems to quote Lacan here: how can “negation with a filling» not evoke all the Lacanian formulas of filling the lack, of an object which serves as the place-holder of the lack /*le tenant-lieu du manque*/,

etc.? The infamous reversal of the negative into the positive occurs here at a very precise point: at the point when the exchange breaks down. Throughout the whole period of what Hegel calls *Bildung* (culture/ education through alienation), the subject is deprived of (a part of) its substantial content, yet he gets something in exchange for this deprivation, »either honour and wealth, which it gains in the place of the self that it has alienated from itself; or the language of *esprit* and insight, which the distraught consciousness acquires; or, again, the negation is the heaven of belief or the principle of utility belonging to the stage of enlightenment.« In revolutionary terror, this exchange breaks down, the subject is exposed to the destructive abstract negativity (embodied in the State) which deprives it even of its biological substance (of life itself), without giving anything in return – death is here utterly meaningless, »the most cold-blooded and meaningless death of all, with no more significance than cleaving a head of cabbage or swallowing a draught of water,« without even surviving as a noble memory in the circle of one's friends of family.

How, then, does this pure negativity/loss »magically« turn into new positivity? What do we get when we get nothing in exchange? There is only one consequent answer: *this nothingness itself*. When there is no filling of the negation, when we are forced to confront the power of negativity in its naked purity and are swallowed by it, the only way to continue is to realize that this negativity is the very core of our being, that subject »is« the void of negativity – the core of my being is not some positive feature, but the very capacity to mediate/negate all fixed determinations; it is not what I am, but the negative way I am able to relate to what(ever) I am. This power is not a merely negative one, but the positive power of negativity itself, the power to generate new forms, to create entities *ex nihilo*.

The (rather obvious) problem here is: how is this power of pure negativity to be located into Hegel's big triad of Logic, Nature and Spirit? The only solution is: it cannot be. It is a power traversing all three (or, more precisely, functioning as a gap that separates them), like what Hegel calls the (pre-ontological) "night of the world," or, in quantum mechanics, the universe of quantum waves as distinct from our reality. At all levels, the infamous Hegelian triad has thus to be supplemented, so that its formula is 3 + 1. Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda²¹ elaborated the role of this gap in their path-breaking analysis of the gap that separates objective spirit (social life regulated by a state) and absolute spirit (art, religion, philosophy) in Hegel's *Encyclopaedia*.

The passage from objective to absolute spirit is profoundly ambiguous and sudden, with no proper "deduction" of the latter from the former; why does objective spirit (social life) need absolute spirit to fully actualize itself? Plus why are there three forms of absolute spirit? The answer to the last question is clear: we are gradually moving away from objective social reality. Art still operates with objective reality accessible

through direct sensual intuition, restructuring it in a way that a spiritual dimension directly echoes (a stone becomes a statue, voices become music, etc.). In religion, we move from intuition to representation: a representation of reality is used to evoke a different reality, the divine outside social life. A cathedral as a work of art is just a beautiful object, while a cathedral as religious object evokes another higher domain (of the divine). Finally, philosophy dispenses with the material world and directly focuses on the spiritual dimension as it is in itself.

In early Hegel, his account of objective spirit ends with post-revolutionary deadlock which implies the possibility of a passage to some different higher form of social life; in mature Hegel it ends with a modern rational state which then dissolves into a multiplicity of states overshadowed by a permanent threat of war. Only religion is present in the sphere of objective spirit as an organized social body subordinated to state – Hegel never deals with the objective social reality of art (museums) and of philosophy (universities). The conclusion is nonetheless that objective spirit (social life) cannot bring about full reconciliation, so a move to another higher (absolute) sphere is necessary – but how does this higher sphere at a distance from social reality retroactively affect social life itself? Does it push towards a renovation of social life? Comay and Ruda emphasize the negative role of the forms of absolute spirit: they don't bring about a new order, they undo the existing order, they bring out its failure, its antagonisms, they open up a gap in it.

Although forms of absolute spirit are not in themselves political, the very gap that separates them from the social life opens up a space for politics, i.e., it prompts political acts which cannot fully be grounded in any form of knowledge about the existing social order. Maybe, a difference between philosophy and religion is at work here: philosophy paints grey on grey, it analyses the past, it undoes a given social order, it shows the reasons for its decay, while – as Hegel himself hints at some points – only religion (in its prophetic dimension) can provide some vision of a new future. Revolution (or any radical social change) thus begins with a new religious vision, and when the attempt to actualize this vision in social life necessarily fails (in its first form, at least), philosophy again enters, analyzing the causes of this failure.

The inescapable conclusion is thus not only that a dialectical passage is not a smooth necessary logical flow, i.e., that a deadlock is resolved by way of a contingent invention of something new, but also that (as in the collapse of a wave function in quantum mechanics) this new form *retroactively creates its own necessity*.²² If techno-feudalism or “soft Fascism” will win, Enlightenment will be rewritten as a modern blind alley; if we will end up in an even more direct barbarism, modernity will be rewritten as a utopia in discord with the violent human nature; etc. So, again, our struggle for the future is simultaneously our struggle for the past.

- 1 See Anil Seth, *Being You: A New Science of Consciousness*, London: Dutton 2021. Numbers in brackets refer to pages in this book.
- 2 Barbour J. (1982), "Relational concepts of space and time", *Brit. J. Phil. Sci.* 33, p. 265.
- 3 See Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin, »The spandrels of San Marco and the Panglossian paradigm: A critique of the adaptationist programme« (1979), reprinted in *The Richness of Life: The Essential Stephen Jay Gould*, New York: W.W.Norton 2007.
- 4 Nicholas Humphrey, *A History of the Mind*, New York: Simon and Schuster 1992, p. 171.
- 5 Ian Taterstall, *Becoming Human*, New York: harvest Press 1998, p. 170.
- 6 Humphrey, op.cit., p. 268.
- 7 See Cheetahhouse.org.
- 8 There is another implication avoided by Kant: if we, mortal humans, cannot be diabolically evil, there is only one candidate that remains: God himself?
- 9 G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen ueber die Philosophie der Religion II*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag 1969, p. 206.
- 10 Op.cit., p. 205.
- 11 Donald D. Hoffman, *The Case Against Reality*, London: Penguin Books 2019.
- 12 [The Evolutionary Argument Against Reality | Quanta Magazine.](#)
- 13 [What can the left learn from Friedrich Hayek? | British Politics and Policy at LSE.](#)
- 14 [The case against reality | School of Social Sciences | UCL Social Sciences.](#)
- 15 [Žižek is Wrong \(Again\) - by Rafael Holmberg.](#) (Substack)
- 16 Op.cit.
- 17 See [S14 LOGIQUE.docx \(live.com\)](#)
- 18 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, New York: Norton, 2006, p. 699.
- 19 G.W.H. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1966, p. 361-362.
- 20 Op.cit., p. 362.
- 21 See Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda , "On Gaps. Is There a Politics of Absolute Knowing?", in *Hegel Bulletin*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2025.
- 22 I described this process in detail in the first part of my *Quantum History* (London: Bloomsbury 2025).