

Excessive Subjectivity

The Paradox of Autonomy in Hegel and Kierkegaard

Dominik Finkelde

Kierkegaard's famous critique and partial refutation of Hegel's philosophical work focuses repeatedly on one central aspect: the circumstance that Hegel's system makes the actual success of a custom (*Sitte*) a partial and almost performative criterion of the custom's ethical legitimacy.

For Kierkegaard, this is the consequence of a philosophy that proceeds in a deductive manner. Even if it tries to interpret its deductive rationale as *retroactively inductive* and teleological, it can do no justice to what Kierkegaard calls "the singular." Hegel's *Begriff* (concept),¹ as a meta-entity, remains prior to every process in the *Begriff* itself and is supposedly unable to think the singular as an entity incarnating the universal as singularity itself, that is, unattached from the meta-universal frame.²

¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, §§ 160–162, §213. The following references to the works of Hegel refer to the German edition: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Werke*, ed. by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986. When I cite Hegel's *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* I refer to the English edition: *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, Oxford World's Classics, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

² Jon Stewart analyzes the influence of Hegel all the way through Kierkegaard's writings and questions the traditional view of Kierkegaard being in radical opposition to the German philosopher. Stewart lays bare how Kierkegaard targets especially prominent Danish Hegelians like Heiberg or Martensen. Cf. Jon Stewart, *Kierkegaard's Relation to Hegel Reconsidered*, Cambridge: Cambridge

This predicament, which is non-existent for Hegel, shines through the famous and often misinterpreted quotation in the *Philosophy of Right*: “What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational.”³ It can be read in an exclusively materialistic way, in the sense that only what transforms itself into actuality and materializes into an accountable fact receives the status of what has had potential in the first place. What, on the contrary, remained a purely innermost desire without becoming actual has not even had the chance of becoming. (Its non-fulfillment exemplifies its “illegitimacy” in defining what is rational, or better, what would have been rational.) Only the actual has the supranatural ability of defining itself as rational by being factual, even if it is with the help of historical contingency, singular excess and chance. Therefore, only what has been approved by fact *is*. Possible worlds might exist in modal logic but not in the space of reason’s self-consciousness. If we take Hegel’s perspective seriously, then history appears as a chain of evidence of what has had to be anyway, that is, what had proven historical sway. In comparison to this supremacy of facts – as negative and despicable as they may appear from an ever more ethical future – any kind of impotent inwardness appears insubstantial. The desire of *what would have happened if...* (my innermost desires were transformed in a world in favour of my potentialities) is, among others, the desire of the “beautiful soul” as described and criticized by Hegel in the *Phenomenology* at the end of the *Spirit* chapter. It solicits an *in-universal* and pseudo-moral existence with wishful but powerless dreaming, an existence that Kierkegaard, as we will see, tries to focus on, although, of course, with a radical different understanding of it.

Hegel himself was conscious of the abysmal character of his philosophical interpretation of history’s becoming self-consciousness. His concept of history is necessarily, as Walter Benjamin famously commented, a “history of the winner.” Winners of world-history establish criteria of the evaluation of history’s teleological perspective from their fact-establishing actions onward. Even if their judgement of his-

University Press, 2003. See also the study of Lore Hühn who locates Kierkegaard in the broad context of German Idealism. Lore Hühn, *Kierkegaard und der deutsche Idealismus: Konstellationen des Übergangs*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009.

3 Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, p. 14 (Preface).

torical events and accomplishments is not inherited by posterity with its new customs and “historical-critical-methods,” world-history must nevertheless declare them legitimate. The worst tyrant is “sublated” by being the condition of the recognition of his tyranny and thereby giving future generations new, though painstakingly slow, evolving ethical standards. This circumstance can explain that even politics of remembrance cannot fully come to terms with the past. Memory, commemoration and recollection would only be plausible in relation to a metaphysical God-like entity with an everlasting and ethical memory, or if there is – in a strict manner – nothing left to come to terms with. Commemoration appears in secular times more like a strategy of a self-legitimation of the present and not as recompense of past sufferings.⁴ The retrospective reinterpretation brings the newly assessed into the shape of sublation instead of reanimating the dead.⁵

Kierkegaard cannot join Hegel in this historiographical and evolutionary perspective of a reality ever more infused with self-consciousness (and blood). The fact that for Hegel the human being on a micro-level, like the *Begriff* on a macro-level, is the sum total of its deeds represents for Kierkegaard a fundamental distortion of what reality – as bound to individual internal experiences – really is about. Kierkegaard submits a part of his critique in an insightful argument in *Fear and Trembling* where he comments on Hegel’s comparison of a toddler

4 Walter Benjamin and Max Horkheimer discussed the issue of commemoration and redemption. Horkheimer insisted that past injustice is incommensurable, writing in a letter to Benjamin on 16 March 1937: “The dead are really dead.” They cannot be reanimated by commemoration or memory. See Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. V, 1, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985, p. 588.

5 Hegel’s Idealism remains in accordance with Immanuel Kant’s teleological and reflective judgement in the third *Critique*. Kant believes to have demonstrated how the suitability of all nature for our faculty of judgement implies a finality and purposiveness that it obliges us in advance to believe in, even if an objective cognition is impossible for lack of apperception. Hegel interprets Kant’s reflective judgement as an ongoing process of Spirit’s self-determination (see §§ 55–57 in the *Enzyklopädie*). Kant shows in his teleological judgement and in his critical concept of “as if” how reason adopts automatically final cause-and-effect relations to show that what seems possible might also be compulsive to accept.

with a grown man.⁶ The baby is for Hegel the potentiality that must be realized in becoming-a-man. The baby as inwardness of this potentiality “is not” in the same way as the grown man “is.” Only the latter stands for an actuality that proves itself independent of a potentiality. Kierkegaard comments critically: “The Hegelian philosophy assumes no justified hiddenness, no justified incommensurability.”⁷

Kierkegaard advances against this dominance of the concrete and the factual his theory of an absolute interiority exemplified in his concept of individualization. It stands in the centre of his adaptation of the Abraham-Isaac story in *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard develops here an understanding of autonomy that – as an unconditioned singular universal – cannot be integrated in any traditional theory of the subject as a socially mediated and, more important, socially dependent entity. It proves itself as unconditional without being psychotic and incorporates an anti-ontological absolute that sees in ethical universality the temptation of evil. Abraham is the placeholder for this singularity. He is presented as an individual with a stubborn attachment to a void that stands – as void, gap, or simply as an absurdity in the matrix of sense – against “common sense.” Even if Hegel exemplifies in his philosophy repeatedly excessive individuality as well, for example in his comments on Socrates or Antigone,⁸ the difference to Kierkegaard is outstanding. The “principle” Abraham holds on to is none that will be or could be sublated like Hegel’s Socrates – via an irritation in normative inferentiality – into a new shape of common sense. For Hegel the good that “lives” when it is “real” in actions (*Philosophy of Right*, §141) is always in a process that involves competing and contradictory practices and cognitive claims. This process can receive a new impulse from the self-determination of an individual will (Socrates for example) that is at first alien and excessive but then forms a “living good” of a future

6 Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling, Repetition*, ed. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983, pp. 54–55.

7 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 55.

8 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie I, Werke*, vol. 18, ed. by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979, p. 430. Also: Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte, Werke*, vol. 12, ed. by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979, p. 320.

to come. An individual resistance as the one Abraham represents for Kierkegaard and that is not sublated – via language, rationality, or a “normativity to come” – is none for Hegel at all. It is a non-starter in the first place. And it is here that Kierkegaard and Hegel differ in their perspectives on individuality. Kierkegaard criss-crosses Hegel’s ambitious understanding of excessive individuality with an even more radical one. Because when Abraham is willing to obey God’s command, he lays bare also a readiness to shatter his symbolic identity as Isaac’s father, as the patriarch of a new people. Slavoj Žižek sees in this catastrophic potential of an inward disposition to shatter one’s own identity in the mirror of the symbolic, the mirror that *gives* identity, a political disposition of radical politics. For Abraham the temptation is not God’s command, but, as Žižek writes in *The Parallax View*, “the ethical itself.”⁹

Abraham enters a sphere that resembles Hegel’s “night of the world” as a place of psychotic sound and fury. But for Kierkegaard this place represents a non-linguistic beyond that is the basis on which language, normativity and history depends, not vice versa. So when both philosophers focus with metaphysical worldviews in contrasting opposition equally on excessive singularity as the place where the substance, the panpsychic stuff that the universe is made off, recognizes itself in its own non-coincidence, they nevertheless find themselves dislocated from each other. Kierkegaard develops the entanglement of liberation and excess through his theory of a paradoxical leap of faith that shows subjectivity as incommensurable to any sublation. Hegel develops it in reference to individuals like Socrates, whose death is the condition for the rearrangement of a political order. So while Hegel sees in Socrates’s fate a Greek tragedy with the potential for a teleological sublation, Kierkegaard does not see this potential of sublation in Abraham.

When we examine the subject as singular universal – and as the title of this chapter indicates, “excessive subjectivity” – we mean that in Hegel’s thought as well as in Kierkegaard’s this subject is not a *representative* of the universal, but is the universal’s own source and *agent*. The ethical that opens up through the single individual incorpo-

9 Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006, p. 104. See also, Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003, p. 19.

rates a surplus that does not stand for the application of a rule in the sense of what the established law of social normativity understands as a particular exemplification of the universal. The contemporary understanding of morality sees a moral action as a matter of participating on the common ground that can be found through interpretation and hermeneutics in normative cultures. This is what morality is, traditionally speaking, all about: the particular needs the universal, needs ethics, as its own frame of being ethical, the frame of reference of the established common ground, the inferential realm of “giving and asking for reasons” (Robert Brandom). This realm is structured by deontic scorekeeping according to Brandom’s monumental work *Making it Explicit*. The surplus of excessive subjectivity in contrast, that Hegel and Kierkegaard present, develops an alternative relation. Both agree that there is, indeed, solid ground in the social realm, ground for moral considerations and guidance. However, they see that the particular can move out of this space of deontic interhuman scorekeeping. For them the universal is a condition *sine qua non* of normative ethics, but this does not imply that the universal covers the *dimension of the ethical* in its entirety.¹⁰ Hegel and Kierkegaard consider the subject as singular-universal, equipped with the potential to – somehow – eat up the frame. This does not mean that the space of reason is lost with the consequence that chaos and turmoil prevail. It rather means that the border between the particular and the universal (= normative legality) is unstable and that this instability is good and can only be proven through some kind of tragic mutual misperception of both sides.

Nevertheless there is, as I already mentioned and as I will try to show especially in the last paragraph of this article, an important difference. I want to mark out some traces of this difference here, though they might be comprehended fully and better at the end of the article. Hegel understands excessive subjectivity as dependent on being *retrospectively legalized*. The surplus of a normativity has for him validity if it transforms itself into a “principle,” as Socrates’s life attested through the tragic he provoked in ancient Greek society. Kierkegaard goes a step further. The Hegelian point of a retrospective legality misses for him

¹⁰ I refer here to an expression that Alenka Zupančič uses to question Kantian ethics with Kant himself. Alenka Zupančič, *Das Reale einer Illusion. Kant und Lacan*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2001, p. 65.

the militancy of what a single-universal really stands for. Kierkegaard is going to say that the legality of normative ethics as well as Hegel's *illegality* of retrospective normative ethics is more or less the same. For him singularization breaks with both alternatives. And this has something to do with his anti-philosophical understanding of interiority. This interiority is a Christian non-concept for him, a philosophical non-starter, not even worth being compared with a sceptical position. This interiority can only be passively taken upon oneself by someone who has faith. It is "truth" and everything for the faithful. This interiority is, for Kierkegaard, somehow the perverse core of Christianity.

In the following sections the moments of autonomy and liberation in the works of both authors are unfolded, demonstrating how interferences with the essential differences between them enlighten their mutual standpoints. The first section shows how Hegel adopted and commented on the paradox of autonomy and liberation. He is the true heir of the philosophical problem passed on to him by Rousseau and Kant. This section is longer than the one on Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. The complexity and the long history of the discussion in which several generations of German Idealists participated make it necessary to unfold the subject at length. It elucidates how Hegel opened the theoretical stage on which Kierkegaard presents, against Hegel and Danish Hegelians, Abraham as an interiorized character of absolute singularity.

I.

Contemporary Anglo-Saxon and German scholars receive Hegel's theory of the ethical life essentially as a theory of social recognition and focus on questions of normativity in communitarian interactions (Pippin, Honneth, Brandom and others).¹¹ The theoretical problem

¹¹ Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008; Axel Honneth, *Das Recht der Freiheit. Grundriß einer demokratischen Sittlichkeit*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001; Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998. For the renaissance of Hegelian thought see Patrick Eiden-Offe, "Tote Hunde leben länger. Hegel ist zurück," *Merkur*, no. 6 (2012), pp. 510–522.

that Hegel tries to solve in this social theory goes back to the question raised by Rousseau and Kant, namely how autonomy can imply both social normativity and subjective independence from it.¹² The debate focuses on the following inquiry: if autonomy and subordination of oneself under one's self-imposed will refers to the fact that one can be subordinated and "at the same time free," then the question of the grounding of one's autonomy is still open. Why? Because if being free means to follow the law that one gives to oneself and only to oneself, then it is still not clear what criteria the subject of autonomy refers to by being autonomous.¹³ The self-imposition of law cannot be unconditionally free without being lawless and it cannot be unrestrictedly lawful without being coercive, therefore enslaving the subject anew. We can see here already that this question with its diverse epistemological and ethical implications is the background of Kierkegaard's theory of the leap of faith. But before turning to Kierkegaard we have to look closer at the problematization of autonomy in German Idealism itself.

The law that the Kantian subject obliges itself to is but the subject's own moral will. Following the ought that is a must, the subject creates under the banner of the categorical imperative (almost) *ex nihilo* an ethical will in the horizon of the kingdom of ends.¹⁴ It proves itself as unbound and unimpressed from the realm of phenomena, thereby even accepting its own suffering, its own lack of *Glückseligkeit* (happiness). But the aforementioned problem remains. To say, as Kant does, that reason provides a formal determination of the moral will without being affected by any material dimension of the "good" leads to a reason's law-giving, that only "presupposes itself."¹⁵ A purely formalistic

12 See Christoph Menke, "Autonomie und Befreiung," *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 58 (2010), pp. 675–694.

13 See also Paul Stern, "The Problem of History and Temporality in Kantian Ethics," *The Review of Metaphysics* 39, no. 3 (1986), pp. 505–545.

14 See Alenka Zupančič's excellent book *Ethics of the Real: Kant and Lacan*, London and New York: Verso, 2000. She reads Kant against an established Kantianism and uncovers with the help of Lacan disruptive elements of ethics in Kant's works.

15 Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, vol. 5, Akademie-Ausgabe, Berlin: Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1902–, p. 20.

understanding of the subject as moral is therefore according to Hegel's famous critique absolutely mistaken and misses a true understanding of autonomy. Kant's moral philosophy can only repeat what is already a life-world's premise. Consequently, it cannot explain what duty is or what evokes responsibility for rational beings.¹⁶

Problematic as well is Kant's founding of the moral will. Kant admits that according to his deduction, the subject is free only by mandatory and not by theoretical standards of objectivity. As soon as the will tries to find a theoretical ground of its freedom it can only refer to signs in the world of phenomena (the moral law is a *fact of reason*, a *Faktum der Vernunft*) but not prove them as objective in a sense that the epistemological frame of theoretical reason can speak of "objective" free moral judgments. As soon as one asks for the justification of the self-imposed moral will, Kant can only refer back to the will as the premise of freedom. He cannot refer to any cultural custom that somehow structurally favours freedom and ethical life in one society in comparison with another.

Hegel on the contrary understands the subject as part of a life-world's "living good" (*lebendigen Guten*) that is always already permeated by specific events of a realization of freedom that has existed in the past and continues in the present. The "living good" is, in an indirect sense, at every moment in the specific unfolding of time the condition of the subject's autonomy. With it Hegel hopes to deliver what Kant's morality could not: a concept of the morally good that is rooted in the ground of an always established ethical life opened to the future. The justification of the life-world is a temporarily contingent measure that will always be reevaluated by an over-determinate

¹⁶ Hegel repeats in *Faith and Knowledge* a famous critique of Hermann Andreas Pistorius against Kant: he does not give an answer to how a formalistic concept of morality can function without a pre-established concept of the "good." Hegel will refer against Kant to the necessity of a life-world, a living good as precondition of the function of the categorical imperative. Hegel criticizes Kant's concept of duty for remaining exterior to the subject (*Philosophy of Right*, §135) with the effect that it cannot say what duty really is. Only a philosophy that breaks with Kant's duty can establish an understanding of autonomy. See also J. B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

present in confrontation with a retrospectively teleological but always surprising and differentiated future.¹⁷ Hegel writes: the “good” lives, when it is “real” in practice (*wenn es in Handlungen “wirklich ist”*) and practice is real, insofar as it gives plasticity to the “living good.”¹⁸ In demarcating his opposition to Kant (and hinting for us at a difference to Kierkegaard), Hegel emphasizes how inwardness is always determined where it believes falsely in its most inner realm as a shrine of uncorrupted substance. But, on the contrary, the inner space of individual inwardness is always pre-invaded by customs and practices. For example, in an epoch of the civil society, economical conditions provide human beings with options for individual action that other individuals in centuries before had not even thought of. By merging into and rising out of potential sequences of action, an ethical life becomes real as the precondition of autonomy. Ethical life is what is inscribed into the subject as “subjectum” before it can relate to itself and the “living good” within the category of autonomy. Social theorists like Axel Honneth, and analytical Hegelians like John McDowell and Robert Brandom, refer equally in their Hegel lectures to a space of reason where the individual is always already part of an inferential web of normativity in words as well as in actions. Because words and actions are always like the Möbius strip intervened. They are two sides of one and the same inferential normativity through which the subject relates to the world outside and to others. Actions and words go hand in hand. These authors focus on the linguistic nature of experience, underlining that the limits of language are also the limits of mutual recognition. Education makes humans learn and appreciate normative standards and practices. Robert Pippin shows in his book *Hegel’s Practical Philosophy* how being part of practical experiences means having a special status as a condition to cognitively define what inwardness is: to determine purposes and ends, to choose means, to carry out actions, to render a judgement.

These moments are always part of an entanglement between a cultural superstructure and its singular inwardness as its corresponding counterpart. The power of judgement, as a cognitive ability of indi-

¹⁷ See Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality and Dialectic*, New York: Routledge, 2005.

¹⁸ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §141.

viduals, is always linked with some kind of collectively warranted realm of inferential norms that seems – from the individual’s perspective – often to be absolutely independent of the individual’s awareness of truth, authenticity and his own experiences with a world “out there” in front of him. Actions generate conditions of judgement of these actions and can then be judged by them.¹⁹ A dialectical circle is visible. If the “spirit of a people” (*der “Geist eines Volkes”*) is “true ground” of ethical duties,²⁰ then also the individual’s moral, the individual’s individualizing interiority, is invaded by a foreigner: the collective dimension of *Geist*, Spirit. The “spirit of the people” prefigures the individual’s own concept of “good” as materialized in the hardware of everyday life that our actions perform and implement simultaneously, and all of this, for example, occurs in parallel and in contrasting opposition to what the language-game of contemporary ethics on a theoretical level might command. But it also prefigures “formal” structures of judgement as criteria of the application of judgements in general.²¹ The “good” then lives in my time through me insofar as I do not really question this good or revolt against it. Therefore, I have to acknowledge that my autonomy as it is expressed in my life in the midst of the civil society’s “hardware” legitimizes this society *directly*. I do not agree that this society I live in is “ethical,” but by living on without questioning the procedures of everyday life, I show that it is the society that my inner realm of interiority is attuned to. I approve it passively by performing what an ordinary man, that I am, does. (I am still not on the brink of becoming a terrorist.) Ethical life is therefore always already ascertained through a circular interdependence of conditions from the level of the subject to the historically established level of the forms of life and vice versa.²²

19 Menke writes: “To judge a praxis means to judge it in relation to the law that constitutes it” (Menke, “Autonomie und Befreiung,” p. 680).

20 Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §137.

21 Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, vol. I, pp. 488–489.

22 My lack of serious revolt against prevailing customs that my personal habits lay bare could be understood in an indirect manner as my personal expression of legitimation of what is in fact prevailing custom, even if this custom is criticized as unethical and fundamentally flawed on different levels of my private and professional life. Passive acceptance (of immoral shortcomings in the

Hegel emphasizes against Kant that a subject is autonomous insofar as it is already part of an inferential web of options for action. With this argument he believes to have solved the problem of a purely formal interior moral disposition in Kant's philosophy. The subject constitutes itself as part of practical actions that constitute his autonomy. Every judgement is then (at least partly) defined through the established good, within the established power of judgement. Hegel writes:

The *right of individuals* to be *subjectively determined* as free is fulfilled when they belong to an actual ethical order, because their certainty of their freedom finds its truth in such an objective order, and it is in an ethical order that they are actually in possession of their *own* essence or their own inner universality.²³

Dealing with objects “using them, or in being concerned with them” (*Philosophy of Right*, §147 Addition) is “nothing alien to the subject. On the contrary, his spirit bears witness to them as to its *own essence*.”²⁴

The recognition of an action means its being inferentially incorporated into a structure of reasons that explicate the action. (These reasons can be erroneous even if they are collectively accepted.) Reasons are conceptual norms and as such always exactly that which through our employments of these norms in the past has been put into them.²⁵ One could say then with Hegel that an object which is specified in a judgement (*Fx*) is part of this judgement, insofar as the same object is already part of a web of actions.²⁶

society I live in) is part of what constitutes the law of ethical life in its “Gestalt” (shape) of the “living good.”

²³ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §153.

²⁴ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §147.

²⁵ See “Semantik ohne Wahrheit,” an interview with Robert Brandom by Matthias Haase, *Deutsche-Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 54, no. 3, 2006, pp. 449–466, especially p. 459.

²⁶ Hegel's autonomy of the subject is the teleological process of “spirit” with its entanglement in which subjects are constituted by practices and institutions and where practices and institutions are shaped by subjects. While individuals are always in the course of history part of this anonymous process it is only Hegel's “substance as subject” that is, in a strict sense, autonomous. Hegel rec-

II.

But how far have we really come? Does the aforementioned argument not lose the grip on the subject's autonomy as it tries to ground itself in a form of life? If the subject is autonomous on the ground of already-being-part of communal actions, how can it relate to diverging and possibly more objective positions against the established actions? Pippin gives an answer. He sees in Hegel's philosophy the subject as an entity that can only establish a relation to customs if it participates in them critically: if it gives judgements, questions the judgements of others, is judged by others and so finally has already entered into a relation of mutual recognition. This has led Pippin and Honneth to their conclusion of presenting Hegel's philosophy as a theory of social recognition. Participation is the subject's fundamental relation to itself and others. The ruling practices are consequently not to be understood as a dogmatic system of rules where the individual can only accomplish strict courses of action like a programmed computer dummy. The Subject participates rather in

ognizes his own philosophy as decisive in the recognition of this teleology of self-reflexive autonomy. It is not automatically exempt from error and delusion. On the contrary, Hegel underlines how intersubjective and institutional structures can feed illusions until new intuitions of an objective reality enforce them to adapt new epistemological tools to recognize themselves in a relation of fundamental dependence to this objectivity. This does not mean that reality by definition is, as Richard Rorty might say, an effect of epistemological constructions. Hegel does not want, like Rorty, to deduce all normativity from practices. He holds on to a concept of objective truth that cannot be reduced to a purely pragmatic theory of action. Political forms of an established ethical life-form vanish because the entanglement of objective truth and justification cannot, in the particular historical situation in which they take place, be harmonized anymore. Truth is not only an inferentialistic effect. Hegel's inclusive monism gives a primacy of truth as constitutive condition for the revision of epistemology. But this does not leave him to an onto-theological and onto-epistemological concept of truth either, that he rejects resolutely in Schelling's intellectual intuition. "The true" is not for Hegel like it is for Frege or Schelling some kind of heuristic object, but it is a non-relativistic part of the structure of thought itself. (See Tilo Wesche's brilliant article, "Hegel und die Wahrheitstheorien der Gegenwart: ein Streit unter Nachbarn," *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 57, no. 3 (2009), pp. 355–375, here p. 370).

a neverending struggle to pacify the political realm of normativity, a realm that is always in flux. The dialectical process of the political struggle makes, as it unfolds through political subjects, links between opposing moments because the seizure of new forms and the annihilation of old forms are always caught in new contradictions and constellations. As far as one structure of knowledge, one episteme, one hegemonic course of action, is valid there is not yet a frame of rationale to question this course and to judge it from a different perspective.

This last circumstance causes problems since it is not clear how an inferential web of norms in spite of functioning as a condition of reciprocal recognition can be purified from collective misapprehension and error. When action and practical experience is a condition that pre-structures judgements about these practical experiences and constitutes them as legitimate as “common sense,” then a systemic blindness seems to be the condition in the established inferentialist system of normativity itself. Revolutions in world history are speaking examples of this systemic blindness and the consequences they can provoke. They prove how an inferential “living good” of norms is altered only by political upheaval. In other words: if the course of established actions is always already the condition of judgements, how can actions be effectively put into question other than by political crisis? It seems as if the course of action is not at all constituted necessarily via sufficient cognitive justifications like Honneth and Pippin suggest in their interpretations of social recognition according to Hegel.

Hegel, like Kierkegaard, shows that the spirit of a people is not closed in on itself. Individuals might see by their uncommon power of imagination an option not touched by “common sense.” They conceive themselves as entitled because of isolation from the established “living good” with the end to define in a new way what really counts as good. To understand this self-determination correctly is not easy: first, to understand *when* for the individual a time of crisis has finally arrived (it can be missed) and, second, to understand how an individual can be “entitled” and “legitimized” in such a time by its own imagination to dictate or determine what is “right and good.” After all, the subject’s own criteria of judging are generally part of what “common sense” defines as the hegemonic good. Common sense is,

as has already been mentioned, always part of the individual's inner nature.

It is not comprehensible how an individual, in distance to the "common sense" of what is "right and good," could be apprehended by his (blinded) compatriots because the "common sense" as criteria of justification is *itself* in question.²⁷ For Hegel, this conflict can happen insofar as the spirit of a people does not represent its full potential compared to the matrix of what the world-spirit suggests as potential of a new "common sense," a potential that some people (radicals?) might already have in sight. In a politically fragile situation, the "spirit of a people," Hegel writes, can be only an empty shell (*Schale*) hiding an invisible "kernel."²⁸ This kernel can be revealed and unfolded by individuals who bring the "kernel" into a new shape of the spirit, who cause a change of collective scale.²⁹ These kinds of insurgence of indi-

27 It might be possible to reduce this tension by referring to the overdetermination of socio-political complexes that define a political situation. There are always political groups of different convictions. A nation is never totalitarian or one-sided as a signifier like "the American people," "the Danish people," or "the German Volk" assumes. The problem remains nevertheless. A discourse that contradicts the hegemonic mainstream discourses cannot enforce itself. It must present itself as ideological, as in radical opposition to the "common good." At the same time the opponents will underline this ideological stance as the first argument *against* its political impact. An ideology is by definition more fundamentalist than discourse-rationality asserts, though discourse-rationality can, of course, be ideological as well.

28 Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, vol. I, p. 149.

29 Why, for example, did we not separate waste until only ten years ago? Why was this not done earlier? Why do we realize nowadays that we have exploited the environment for too long? One plausible answer could be that consciousness evolves the ability of judgements step by step on a collective scale simultaneously with a slowly evolving course of actions where the majority of people participate only by custom. Then, one day – and almost out of nowhere – courses of action will prove that a collective consciousness simultaneously understands its separation of waste as a rational expression of what it is doing already (though, in reality, it is simply taking part in what is "going on" for everybody). Retrospectively, retardation and belatedness seem to be more part of the "space of reason"'s rationale than our common sense understanding of the power of judgement as being *prior* to action. So what comes first? The rationale or the action?

vidual claims that are not yet part of the people's spirit, and that nevertheless get a chance to break through a systemic blindness of the established, prove that in this kind of historical tilting-point, "a universal of a different kind" (*ein Allgemeines anderer Art*) is the basis" for the advanced spirit of world history. It was already present (as "kernel") and recognized and put into form by individuals that caused the historical change.³⁰

Hegel leads his reader into a wrong direction when he speaks in the quotation above of a "kernel" that already exists potentially in the matrix of world-spirit. The latter seems to hide as concrete potentiality the new shape of a *Volksgeist* (a spirit of the people) *before this new shape took shape* in a process of plasticity. But this is exactly what Hegel does not want to say. His concept of world-spirit never functions as a teleological corrective before the coming of form displays itself *in* formation. World-spirit as the process of different stages of consciousness is always retarded in the "Gestalt" of its own avant-garde. To say that world-spirit has advanced a hiding "kernel" evokes the misunderstanding of an operative process of self-determination that is legitimized before being (f)actual. It is the indeterminate and accidental future of world-spirit's progress that Hegel's *Begriff* as *singulare tantum* is about. What Hegel calls "kernel" is always a virtual moment of recognition and misperception alike that can be missed and captured. The exact moment when practical experiences determine autonomy of subjects in the political order of prevailing customs is fundamentally dependent on contingencies. Even world-spirit itself cannot account for its own Gestalt to come. It is not at all a structured process of normative agreements by participants of discursive procedures.

It seems as if Kierkegaard misses this aspect in his critique of Hegel. He grounds the philosophy of spirit in a concept of the universal, forgetting that this universal for the German philosopher operates by itself with resistance, fluidity and contingency. Contingency is not collateral damage in the matrix of the superstructure's ever more com-

It seems as if they develop together but are nevertheless divided by retardations and fundamental non-coincidences.

³⁰ Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, vol. 1, ed. by J. Hoffmeister, Hamburg: Meiner, 1955, p. 97. See also Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, vol. 1, p. 46.

plex self-consciousness.³¹ Contingency is always part of the interrelation of the subject's autonomy and its practical experience out there in the "living good" of spirit. It guarantees a non-coincidence from where plastic and excessive individuality can give form to self-determination that might be absolutely virtual at the beginning but then becomes plastic in its process. Individuals like Jesus, Antigone and Socrates are for Hegel of great concern because they are "plastic individuals." They represent a gap in inferential normativity and nevertheless give shape to an unknown world. Plastic individualities are substantial personalities, self-made, and anti-social up to a particular point. As such they are "substance-subjects" that determine what world-spirit will have to have accomplished and what to say about them.³²

Abraham is also one of them, according to Kierkegaard. And indeed he is, but only in relation to one perspective. He is a "plastic individual" with a stubborn attachment to a "kernel" that stands against "common sense." The difference to Hegel's individuals stands out where the "kernel" Abraham holds on to is none that will be recognized – via an irritation in normative inferentiality – in the new understanding of common sense. And this is, indeed, a radical difference between these two philosophers. For Hegel the good that "lives" when it is "real" in

³¹ See the introduction in Žižek's book *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, London and New York: Verso, 2012.

³² "The Truth will not run away from us' – this statement by Gottfried Keller indicates exactly the point in historicism's image of history." With this famous phrase from the fifth thesis *On the Concept of History*, Walter Benjamin criticizes nineteenth-century neo-Hegelian historicism (in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, transl. by Edmund Jephcott and others, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003). But what Benjamin criticizes as Hegelian is what Hegel would have criticized himself. Saying that "truth will not run away from us" means missing that truth can run away. Truth can run off when what has shown itself as "kernel" in a socio-political transition is not captured and transformed from virtuality into reality. Retrospectively it can be interpreted in the sense that time is "not yet ripe" for the new. But it can also retrospectively show that world-spirit is on a new path to another tragedy that might have been possible to prevent. World-spirit can "indeed" miss its own potentiality. Or in more radical words: World-spirit misses itself always and always anew. It does not have the inner moments of contradiction under control.

actions³³ is always subject to a process in which there are contradictory practices and competing cognitive claims. This process can receive a new impulse from the self-determination of an individual. It is unfamiliar and extreme with its truth claims but then shapes a “living good” of what individuals do almost more unconsciously as habit and custom. Kierkegaard by contrast sees in Abraham an individual resistance of a different kind, one that is not supposed to be captured, understood or adapted.

Both agree, nevertheless, on the fact that the inferential realm of normativity is dependent on the self-determination of individuals who come too early, or are recognized too late, or cannot be understood at all. Political and philosophical myths of an era always repress their potentiality with normative definitions of “common sense.”³⁴ Abraham is not a personality of “common sense.” Like Jesus, Antigone and Socrates he stands against the common and living good. But in comparison to them he represents a non-teleological and therefore anti-Hegelian life-form of stubborn pertinacity. Kierkegaard’s Abraham could never have been of interest to Hegel.

33 Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §141.

34 The partly absurd virtuality of (erroneous) life-forms is collectively sustained with what Lacan calls the God-like “sujet supposé savoir.” This subject has a virtual function to pacify the conflicting and stress-provoking overdeterminations of socio-political interrelations. In situations, in which the individual is unsure about the status of normative values he can rely nevertheless on the “sujet supposé savoir”, the virtuality of collective blindness maintained by a virtual guarantor. The common god appears therefore partly as a pseudo-inferentialistic construction of mutual misrecognition or of mutual lying. The “sujet supposé savoir” makes me believe what I want to believe with the utilitarian purpose of ‘Angst’-reduction. Normativity receives a passive acceptance of validity that has no justification anymore. The “sujet supposé savoir” stands for a normative validated peer-pressure with the aim of cognitively coping with aporias through a passive recommitment with an anonymous crowd of unjustified believers. In times of political turmoil this belief begins to vacillate and shows the debility of collective forms of convictions that might have been erroneous from the beginning. But political turmoil may also push the Angst-driven collective to hold even more firmly on to the virtual.

III.

Through a command given by Yahweh, Abraham is justified to sacrifice his son Isaac. He does not want to sacrifice him. But he knows that God has given him the command. Knowledge presupposes an internal conviction. But the internal conviction that p can only have objective validity, if p is, epistemologically speaking, justified true belief. But for Kierkegaard the Abraham-Isaac story stages exactly a knowledge that cannot ground itself in a propositional objectivity shared by others. Abraham's knowledge of the horrific command cannot be accounted for in a procedural objectification that transforms a subjective conviction into a universal norm. Abraham knows that he has to slaughter his son by God's command and he knows that God will not have him kill his son. But in order to be faithful he has to hold on to both contradicting convictions at the same time. If he falters he could lose all: son, faith and his mind. "This was indeed a piece of folly, but Abraham did not laugh at it as Sarah did."³⁵ Kierkegaard writes: Abraham "resigned everything infinitely, and then he grasped everything again by virtue of the absurd. He is continually making the movement of infinity, but he does it with such precision and assurance that he continually gets finitude out of it, and no one ever suspects anything else."³⁶

³⁵ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 19.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41. Christianity incorporates in the works of Kant and Hegel a salvific dimension of history (German: "Heilsgeschichte") that exemplifies a distance and a break from orthodox Judaism. The latter has for both of them as for many philosophers in the late eighteenth century not the same teleological potentiality as Christianity does. Kant, for example, sees religion always exclusively in a relationship with a subject's conviction in relation to an increasing inner morality. He calls Judaism "not really a religion" ("eigentlich gar keine Religion") because it lacks a basic sense of this inner morality. See Immanuel Kant, *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*, Akademie-Ausgabe Berlin, 1914, vol. 6, p. 125. His argument is based on his sceptic interpretation of archaic rituals as superficial and without any link to an inner progress. See also Maximilian Forschner, "Das Ideal des Moralischen Glaubens. Religionsphilosophie in Kants Reflexionen," in Friedo Ricken and Francois Marty (eds.), *Kant über Religion*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1992, pp. 83–99. What Kierkegaard sees in Abraham may therefore also be seen as some kind of reappropriation of the old covenant to foster an anti-salvific, anti-progressive understanding of faith that somehow loses, for Kierkegaard, faith altogether to "Vernunftglaube" (Kant) and

The God he, Abraham, is obedient to is not the Greek “*nous*” who, as an entity of the highest incorporation of the good could not have asked – by Platonic definition – for this kind of sacrifice. Immanuel Kant says similarly in a famous quote that the ancient God could not have given Abraham such a command. This would have contradicted from an educational and universal philosophical perspective the a priori conditions of God’s being.³⁷ But the God of Abraham is also incomparable with the gods of Greek tragedy, though this is the most plausible allusion for the reader to refer to. From their perspective, Abraham, at least, could have been venerated as a tragic hero if he would have killed his son (like Agamemnon killed his daughter for the welfare of the nation), or if he had killed himself. In confrontation with a devastating fate he would have proven defiance to the gods even in his downfall. His actions would have served universal causes: the nation, or, through resistance, critique of the obscene desires of the gods. But tragic heroes like Agamemnon, Jephthah and Brutus³⁸ are – as well as Socrates is for Hegel – only heroes in the ethical sense. Compared

“Geist” (Hegel). Judaism is of course not an unhistorical community of faith but it may nevertheless be more concerned with a focus on the here and now. While from the Protestant perspective of a salvific history even the material conditions of life can be imposed as guilt on the faithful, the Jewish understanding of history with its attachment to one Jewish identity in history incorporates not the same understanding of advancement. (Especially in Protestantism, history as such appears as the spiritual extrapolation of the divine out of the secular.) The radical inwardness of Abraham can be seen as a way in which Kierkegaard takes history out of the context of the enlightenment and reinterprets it with another understanding of salvation, a salvation that is inside the individual and not outside of it. See Michael Städtler, *Kant und die Aporetik moderner Subjektivität*, Berlin 2011, p. 64.

³⁷ Kant writes: “Denn in Ansehung der theistischen [Wunder] würde sie [die Vernunft] doch wenigstens noch ein negatives Merkmal für ihren Gebrauch haben können, nämlich daß, wenn etwas als von Gott in einer unmittelbaren Erscheinung derselben geboten vorgestellt wird, das doch geradezu der Moralität widerstreitet, bei allem Anschein eines göttlichen Wunders es doch nicht ein solches sein könne (z.B. wenn einem Vater befohlen würde, er solle seinen, so viel er weiß, ganz unschuldigen Sohn tödten)” (Kant, *Religion innerhalb der bloßen Vernunft*, vol. 6, p. 87).

³⁸ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 58.

with these alternatives the Abrahamic God only appears archaic and absurd, not even as fateful. Against Yahweh's command the individual does not defy and rebel or prove his autonomy. Abraham is faithful to a lost cause, but only from this standpoint does he, according to Kierkegaard, incorporate a life that is not absorbed by the universal. Thereupon rests the paradox of faith.³⁹

The paradox of faith, then, is this, that the single individual is higher than the universal, that the single individual – to recall a distinction in dogmatics rather rare these days – determines his relation to the universal by his relation to the absolute, not his relation to the absolute by his relation to the universal.⁴⁰

The absurdity of this twist can only be endured via a movement of infinity, as Kierkegaard writes, which as incommensurability is part of the text's hyperbolic enactment.

The opposite position is represented by the universality of ethics. "The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone, which from another angle means that it applies at all times."⁴¹ Kierkegaard defines the ethical in the traditional way as the realm of universal substantial morality. This morality defines universal standards of human behaviour. The ethical thus includes both the normative aspects of how people should ideally behave and how they are called to improve constantly their "ethical life." The human being has to behave normatively because it is a rational being and as such always on the road to the universal itself. Salvation is fulfillment in the universal that Kant famously called the "kingdom of ends." A suspension of the ethical on this neverending road is unthinkable because it would contradict the ethical as the universally binding end in itself. The paradox of faith in comparison has – at least for Kierkegaard – nothing to do with a concept of a life dedicated to ethical universal standards. Faith also stands as incommensurable to every good that for Hegel is

39 Alastair Hannay: "He [Abraham] places himself outside the self-sufficient universalistic ethics." See Alastair Hannay, *Kierkegaard*, London: Routledge 1982, p. 78.

40 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 70.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

“real” and universally rational as it is lived⁴² and it is the only way to understand the singular as more important than the universal.

“In our age,” Johannes de Silentio writes, “everyone is unwilling to stop with faith but wants to go further.”⁴³ And he means with going further the beginning of propositional thought that is concerned with finding ever more objective conditions of truth-claims. Kierkegaard criticizes this as fleeting and losing individualizing singularization in favour of ever more “conceptual form.” But *Fear and Trembling* also shows that the one who, going further, looks back on the faithful of ancient times will not understand them. “Even if someone were able to transpose the whole content of faith into conceptual form, it does not follow that he has comprehended faith, comprehended how he entered into it or how it entered into him.”⁴⁴ The author Johannes de Silentio who underlines his own lack of faith thereby makes the reader embrace a rationality that already on the basis of its premise cannot be deciphered. It amounts to the question of how the brutal founder of a religion incorporates a conduct of life in an absolute that is not to be understood as universal, but as an anti-categorical individuality as absolute in the singular.

In relation to this stands Abraham’s silence and muteness. Kierkegaard repeatedly presents it as some kind of “speaking void” of the leap of faith, as if his goal were to underline – analogous to the early Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* – that the limits of the world must remain (by condition) mystical to language users. At the same time he shows how in language itself lingers the tacit idea of “the whole” of language, its future to come, its mystical beyond. Language is totalitarian in the sense that it is already a little bit beyond “what is the case” (Wittgenstein) as soon as it defines “the case.” This mystical beyond expresses Abraham’s silence. It is more than the lack of a proposition. It is meaningful via taciturnity. Kierkegaard knows this and builds the dramatic impact of his narrative exactly in the double-bind of silence and linguistic essence to depict an emblem of his concept of the singular that is universal. Abraham stands in the middle of some totality he cannot express and yet it must be taken to somehow be there so that

42 Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §141.

43 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 7.

44 Ibid.

his muteness can function as a part of it. By hiding a *je ne sais quoi* Kierkegaard gives his reader a tacit illusion, as if he, as well as Abraham, had a coherent unpropositional understanding of a whole, before the “light dawns gradually over the whole” (Wittgenstein).⁴⁵ This silence appears to be an abyss that language regularly evades, promising often instead the totality of propositional truth as one might see it even in Hegel’s procedural development of the *Begriff* or as it dominates antimetaphysical debates in contemporary naturalism and physicalism today. Kierkegaard exemplifies the mystical silence and the ethical as that which somehow lingers on the edge of the world.⁴⁶ Abraham’s silence⁴⁷ is an emblem of this “edge” and it stands in an intimate relation to the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio,⁴⁸ who as pseudo-author wants to silence philosophy in its relation to faith.⁴⁹

In a similar way Kierkegaard suggests that it is impossible to see faith as a form of life in a different perspective than in its opaqueness and virtuality. The gesture of the text, its repetitions and explanations,

45 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. by G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991, p. 145. What we believe, according to Wittgenstein, is not a single proposition, but a “whole system of propositions.” Propositions are dependent on an entire web of beliefs.

46 For C. Stephen Evans the “point of the book [*Fear and Trembling*] is not to help us get clearer about ethics, but to help us get clearer about faith” (p. 75). Evans sees no link between the topic of an ethical act and faith as both lingering at the edge of the world. He reads Kierkegaard as underlying the inadequacy of reducing faith to ethical customs of the living good. “The main targets of both the Preface and Epilogue are those who think faith is something easy and natural, those who think that if one wants to be special one must ‘go further’” (p. 75). Kierkegaard questions *Sittlichkeit* being the holding place of the divine, where ethical participation in social practices is true religion. But Evans does not go far enough. Kierkegaard is not simply showing how faith and ethical custom cannot be harmonized. Abraham’s “act” as hyperbolic is not even in harmony with faith either.

47 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 60, 115.

48 See also Žižek, *The Parallax View*, pp. 68–124. Slavoj Žižek and Boris Gunjević, *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse*, New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012.

49 See Olivia Blanchette, “The Silencing of Philosophy,” in *International Kierkegaard Commentary – “Fear and Trembling” and “Repetition,”* ed. by Robert L. Perkins, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993, pp. 29–66.

perform exactly the contrary of what it tries to shed light on: the leap of faith.⁵⁰ The hyperbolic drama of the text rests similarly to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* in the image of a ladder. The text's proceeding is presented as the ascent of an ever more insightful perception at whose end the media itself (the text as ladder) is supposed to be pushed out of the way. Compared to the way the reader has already dealt with the media, it suddenly proves itself as deficient in its own enterprise though only after the way has been chosen or the ladder has been climbed.⁵¹ The movement of faith is presented as a liberating gesture that acquits the individual not only in a trivial way from outer structures of oppression, but also, essentially, extricating the individual from an inner world that – as we have seen in the section on Hegel – can always be prefigured via an unconscious interconnection with the world of the symbolic order. Psychoanalytical theory is acquainted with this subject matter of a “second choice” in the context of what it defines as “Neurosenwahl.” The “choice of neurosis” incorporates the claim that the subject, as Alenka Zupančič writes, “chooses her unconscious – which might be called the ‘psychoanalytic postulate of freedom.’”⁵² If psychoanalysis has any means and incorporates an ethics of the singular universal, as Jacques Lacan maintains (not an ethics of the universal), then it lies in this very belief of an unconditioned choice through which the subject, as singular universal, enters into the symbolic world via the threshold of its second entrance into the symbolic. Abraham's leap is similar to this choice because it has no proof beyond the choice in

50 Even if *Fear and Trembling* can be characterized through a dichotomy of faith and ethics, the book is not, as Elmer H. Duncan suggests, a dispute with the limits of moral philosophy. Elmer H. Duncan, “Kierkegaards teleologische Suspension des Ethischen. Eine Studie über Ausnahmefälle,” in Michael Theunissen and Wilfried Greve (eds.), *Materialien zur Philosophie Søren Kierkegaards*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979, pp. 262–279. The kernel of faith is not to be clarified through ethics or concepts of the universal. Duncan does not see this and therefore summarizes “that Kierkegaard's project to prove the necessity of a religious sphere failed” (p. 278).

51 See the excellent article by John Lippitt and Daniel Hutto, “Making Sense of Nonsense: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 98 (1998), pp. 263–286.

52 Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real*, p. 35.

inferential norms. The leap is a creation “ex nihilo” that gives rise to his subjectivity as “second choice.” Like Kant’s famous “Gesinnungsrevolution” (revolution in disposition) it is not intellegibly accessible to the subject, but it is also, contrary to Kant, not accessible to the phenomenal either. According to Silentio, Abraham at every moment “makes the movement of faith,”⁵³ and Louis Mackey writes appropriately that Abraham’s “whole life after faith is a new creation, in which he does not the least thing but ‘by the virtue of the absurd.’”⁵⁴

When I referred in the first part of the text to the dilemma of autonomy and liberation in Hegel’s writings, the intention was to find an answer to this predicament in Kierkegaard. There is a sense in which Abraham’s leap of faith is an act of liberation in relation to the two important moments we mentioned earlier: liberation from the subject’s own socially transmitted inward disposition and liberation from social structures in which the subject is enmeshed. To be sure, Abraham cuts his inward disposition loose. And this is what Kierkegaard seems to have impressed. Abraham exemplifies a drastic abandonment of all that he holds dear in the world and only this radical gesture liberates him from the existing social reality. This liberation is violent and disruptive as it is anti-ethical. It is accompanied by consequences that leave Abraham as a potential murderer because his disposition is by definition in contrast with a collectivist political project which lays claim to universal historical validity. For Slavoj Žižek it is the Danish philosopher who in *Fear and Trembling* exposed most thoroughly that the “properly modern post- or meta-tragic situation occurs when a higher necessity compels me to betray the very ethical substance of my being.”⁵⁵ Žižek adapts in his interpretation Alain Badiou’s account of truth as an unforeseen and transformative event that breaks into the unstable field of political struggle. Abraham is in this sense a *subject to truth* because he reestablishes in his act the coordinates of subjectivity as such. Badiou’s understanding of a subject to truth is fundamentally militant in the establishment of what retroac-

53 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 115.

54 Louis Mackey, “The View from Pisgah,” in Josiah Thompson (ed.), *Kierkegaard: A Collection of Critical Essays*, New York: Anchor Books, 1972, p. 407.

55 Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)Use of a Notion*, London and New York: Verso 2002, p. 14.

tively is appropriated by norms that have not been there in the first place before the subject erupted through his own act. Žižek himself sees in Kierkegaard not a theologian but a radical materialist.

A further aspect is important in this context to see the difference with Hegel more clearly. Abraham's movement of infinity has no "anundfürsichseiende Allgemeinheit" (universality being in and for itself) that gives plastic individuality to Socrates in Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. Socrates's "Allgemeinheit" is an objection to the common sense of the Greek world of his day.⁵⁶ By not realizing that his understanding of the universal could not be part of the Greek "living good," Socrates expelled himself and accepted his death. But as such, Hegel sees in him a great individual who opened up a new historical epoch. His irony, which fascinated both Hegel and Kierkegaard, and his "anundfürsich seiende Allgemeinheit" (universality being in and for itself), which overcomes and accomplishes Greek culture with a summit of a new universal self-consciousness, is not equivalent with Abraham's faith.⁵⁷ The universal that Socrates gives plasticity to through his self-determination has both a formative and normative impact. It is "Prinzip."⁵⁸ As such it will forcefully be recognized by posterity. Abraham does not similarly open up this kind of a new era, at least not in terms that are relevant to Kierkegaard's focus on

56 For Hegel, Socrates is the one who accomplishes as the summit of Greek culture sophistic reflection, but who inaugurates the Greeks' downfall at the same time by thinking sophistic reflection as objective from a subjective standpoint. Socrates cannot yet be incorporated into the Greek culture because of the incompatibility of his dialectics with the "living good" of Greek life. But the future can readapt his claim and it has, at least in Hegel's interpretation.

57 It is important to note that Abraham is as excessive as Socrates, but in comparison with the latter he is not a "radical challenge to existing values" in a political dimension, as Evans underlines (C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard's Ethics of Love*, p. 79). Socrates can open up the end of history, but Abraham cannot be sublated that way.

58 Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie I*, vol. 18, in Hegel, *Werke*, p. 512. Hegel talks in different contexts of what he calls the impact of a "Prinzip." He mentions the abstract "Prinzip der Perser" (vol. 12, p. 274), and he talks of a "Prinzip des Protestantismus" (vol. 19, p. 331). The "Prinzip" that Socrates incorporates is revolutionary: "revolutionär gegen den athenischen Staat" (Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, p. 329).

inwardness. Abraham does not bring to light a “Prinzip.” His silence in the third Problemata does not even stand for an inner reflection. “Abraham *cannot* speak, because he cannot say that which would explain everything (that is, so it is understandable).”⁵⁹ Abraham’s interiority seems absolutely blank and not absorbed by thought. Unlike a philosopher’s capacity to enter like Socrates into a dialectical definition of universals, he leaves only silence behind.⁶⁰ His “movement of infinity” is atemporal for Kierkegaard and as such something that excludes itself from comprehension, progress or an ever more complex self-conscious self-transparency. “Temporality, finitude – that is what it is all about.”⁶¹ Abraham’s movement of absolute interiority with its infinite leap can by definition not be recognized. It is not universal. It is only a leap of blank singularity as such, a choice of singularity in the midst of life. Žižek describes with precision the “void” of Abraham’s inwardness as the *collapse* of what distinguishes the inside from the outside as such:

When Kierkegaard determines faith as the pure internality which the believer is unable to symbolize/socialize, to share with others (Abraham is absolutely alone in the face of God’s horrible command to slaughter his son Isaac, he is unable even to share his pain with others); this means that what, in his faith, is absolutely inner, what resists intersubjective symbolic mediation, is the very radical *externality* of the religious Call: Abraham is unable to share God’s horrible injunction with others precisely insofar as this injunction in no way expresses his ‘inner nature’, but is experienced as a radically traumatic intrusion which attacks the subject from outside and which the subject can never internalize, assume as ‘his own’ The point is that the subject cannot externalize God’s injunction *precisely because he cannot internalize it*.⁶²

59 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 115.

60 Unlike Socrates, because “[i]f Socrates had been silent in the crisis of death, he would have diminished the effect of his life” (*Fear and Trembling*, 117).

61 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 49.

62 Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology*, London: Verso, 1999, pp. 252–253.

Were Abraham like Socrates and as such the bearer of a “principle,” he might have “plunged the knife into his own breast” in the same way that Socrates drank from his cup of hemlock. “He would have been admired in the world, and his name would not have been forgotten; but it is one thing to be admired, and another to become a guiding star that saves the anguished.”⁶³ The freedom Abraham seems to aim at appears in a clinical sense as a loss of reason and therefore as psychotic. Nevertheless the leap of faith is for Kierkegaard no collapse of reality of a sick mind but the emblem of a utopic singularization that reestablishes in his act the coordinates of subjectivity as such. This, for Kierkegaard, makes Abraham unchallenged in comparison with an absolute contingent world and he thus remains incomparable with a genius like Socrates.

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⁶³ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 21.

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