

What, For Hegel, Is Dialectic?

It seems to me that, in Hegel, for a philosophical construct to be true, it must be *self-similar*: for the presence of a substructure within the whole but not structurally congruent to it is exactly an opposition between part and whole, a *crisis* which until resolved discredits the entire apparatus. As such, an account of the dialectic is an account of negation in all its generality. In the sequel, I will argue that this negation can be understood as *critique* as the Enlightenment thinkers practice it, but, *pace* Jaeggi, is *not* reflected in psychoanalytic procedure. I will conclude with a brief point on the difficulty of chaining together negations, as it were, in the manner which Hegel understands as dialectical.

i.

Critique *is* crisis.¹ That is, critique does not merely emerge in response to an objective crisis, as proposing a way out of it; in fact, the critique has no intention toward *resolution* of a crisis in any way; instead, critique manufactures crisis, forces it, by seizing onto and exploiting a point of difficulty within or entry into a system. No crisis could come to fruition without the existence of such a point of difficulty, a glaring one, in the way-things-are, but the presence of such a point does not by itself a crisis make, not until a criticism targeted at that point comes to be. (Of course, the argument may be made that the presence of such a point in the way-things-are *invites* critique, and as such that in some sense the way-things-are is *morally* responsible, in its imperfection, for the crisis engendered—but this does not indicate any sort of *causal* responsibility on the part of way-things-are for the crisis. If one refuses a vaccine, it is not implausible to accuse one of being morally implicated in one's subsequent illness, but it is

¹ The account given in this section follows Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis*, esp. ch. 8-10.

certainly untrue that one *caused* one's illness by that act.)

Enlightenment critique was the forcing of such a crisis in and upon the absolutist political structure of the time: after all, there can be no crisis without a dualism between whose poles the conflict is to play out, a dualism which was freshly articulated by Enlightenment thinkers in their separation of a sphere of political activity from a sphere of morality. The parallel hierarchies of government and of the "republic of letters" were not in the image of, for example, the parallel hierarchies of the Chalcedonian and anti-Chalcedonian churches in the sixth century: for the latter, despite their doctrinal conflicts, did not meaningfully disagree on *what legitimacy consisted in*: the Chalcedonian and anti-Chalcedonian worked from the same corpus of scriptures and texts of the Church Fathers, and both understood legitimacy as an orthodoxy with respect to this corpus. On the other hand, the anti-absolutist thinkers of the Enlightenment, understanding that, in the absolutist, aristocratic conception, their bourgeois class identity precluded them from participation in political decision-making—and believing this exclusion, this comparative illegitimacy, to be *unjust*—put forth and argued for the universality of an entirely different standard of legitimacy: one asserted to be generically *moral*, but really one advancing a quite specific classical liberal morality heretofore foreign. The monarch was no longer unifiedly a monarch: he was superposition of human and sovereign, not born above but elevated, subject at once to the laws of fellow-feeling and those of impartial justice.

In particular, it is only with Schiller, Lessing, Goethe, and their contemporaries that art becomes critique. This is not to say that art had not been used to what might be familiarly called critical ends before the eighteenth century; Plato was famously quite aware of the insurrectionary (to him, distortionary) potential of literature,² and the Iconoclasms were as much aesthetic controversies as theological ones. But, until the Enlightenment, there was no *ideology of art*:

² Most notably in the *Republic*.

insofar as controversies involving art were political, they were already-existent political controversies in which artists either took sides or *en masse* joined with one party, and never involved any conception of *the essence of art* constituting its own distinct party. Schiller, on the other hand, treated art not merely as a force of order but also as a force imposing and eventually universalizing an order of its own making—a moral order—against the political one which to him had proved so insufficient.

We are thus provided with a historical account of what Hegel thinks of as the "first negation" of the dialectical process. What Hegel knows as true *skepticism*³ and finds present in Sextus Empiricus but lacking in Kant is much more thoroughly exhibited in Rousseau, Voltaire, and the like; it is an attack on the totalizing social order by means of the promulgation of a manufactured totalizing social order—a *utopia*—and a new standard by which this order is legitimate and the present order illegitimate. The crisis is directly forced by the encounter between this new standard (i.e. system of norms) and the way-of-things to which it is opposed: in this sense Jaeggi is right to name the instantiation of a crisis "constructivist-performative."⁴

It is not difficult to read other examples of negation as forcings-of-crises, though it must be recalled that these are always crises to which thought arrives—terminological crises, "social" crises—rather than real ones. It is not that there is some substance called *pure being* which presents itself to us as contradictory; it is that we are introduced to some phenomenon under the name *pure being*, realize that this naming entails that the phenomenon is a *nothing*, but that the nothingness of the phenomenon reciprocally entails its being pure being. Importantly, both these entailments constitute the "first negation"; the "second negation" is a negation of this "adjoint" entailing, this opposition, into a non-opposition. We see by the instability of both notions

³ *The Encyclopedia Logic*, s. 81.

⁴ Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*, ch. 6.3.

involved that the presentation of the two as a dyad, a dipole, a duality is simply unsustainable, has nothing to do with the truth; and so we come to a "more true" understanding of the phenomenon involved by denying the independent existence of each pole while preserving something of their character in a single name: *becoming*. In its historical context, then, Hegelian thought reads as an apprehension of the crisis which Enlightenment critique has presented, and an attempt to critique the duality in whose terms this crisis has played out in turn.

ii.

Jaeggi says: "the psychoanalytic conversation can be understood as a version of immanent criticism."⁵ It is clear that she intends that *immanent criticism* name a practice that, if not Hegel's own, is at very least strongly Hegelian; it is my contention that this case-study of hers obscures Hegel in two important ways.

a. Hegelian critique must be spatially non-incremental

Psychoanalysis is *spatially incremental* by necessity: the analyst is analyst of an individual subject, and not of society at large. As such, any "cure" the analyst offers the analysand is inherently nondialectical, as it involves a concession made by the analysand to society, and no reciprocal concession made by society to the analysand. That is, no negation of the analysand-society polarity is accomplished, since *cure* simply means a reintegration of the analysand into society, and so simply their abandoning of their own pole for the opposite one, the position of which remains unchanging. Specifically, the *Spaltung* within the subject—which Jaeggi seems implicitly to be positing as that contradiction, resolution of the crisis associated with which is the dialectical motion, the "second negation"—is, as Lacan observed, not actually

⁵ Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*, ch. 6.2.

within the subject: it is engendered by the subject's subjection to the Symbolic order, to, roughly speaking, the received linguistic structures (including socio-cultural and economic structures) in which we are installed from birth, which clearly cannot be bargained with in the analyst's office. Only large-scale praxis, then, can hope to compel a reconsidering of the societal position—a pulling of society away from its pure opposition to one—and thus any possibility of sublation.

b. Hegelian critique must be temporally non-incremental

More problematic is the idea of Hegelian critique as an incremental working toward some point-at-infinity—as Neoplatonic in this vague sense, perhaps even more indicatively aligned with Lacan's account of our chasing-after the ever-unattainable object of desire (again, this is very roughly put). In Jaeggi's account, analysis is governed by the supposedly Freudian axiom that there is "no such thing as health but only pathological and less pathological ways of dealing with conflicts":⁶ that is, analysis, to Jaeggi, presents as a continued pursuit of *better health*. This is, to put it bluntly, not Freudian in the slightest—it is a point he nears a disavowal of in e.g. the late paper "Analysis Terminable and Interminable," a disavowal which Lacan is able to emphatically complete—rather, it is an axiom of cognitive-behavioral therapy and related approaches, assuming a moralizing concept of what are called mental illnesses as antisocial behaviors to be stamped out just as crime might be. And, more importantly, Hegel is quite clear that the dialectic does not simply motor along, transporting us from where we are to a slightly better vantage point to one slightly better than that, *ad infinitum*: this, for him, is "bad or negative infinity."⁷ There is no sublation here, sublation being precisely the conceptual attainment of the *in-and-for-itself*, which is not itself then input to a new negation, a new

⁶ Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*, ch. 6.3.

⁷ Hegel, *The Encyclopedia Logic*, s. 94.

critique; if it were, Hegel's system would be incomplete in a way he would not miss.

iii.

This last point is the difficulty of grasping the Hegelian dialectic, its unique character: it is not at all clear why the "second negation" should provide oneself with the *right* concept, with a concept that itself cannot be negated, thus participating in and legitimizing a dialectical process that runs off to infinity. The theoretical argument seems to me to hinge on an emphasizing of the fact that the "second negation" is a negating of *negation, contradiction itself*, and so cannot itself be pregnant with its own ensuing collapse-into-negation; however, I do not comprehend how this stability would be practically evidenced, for example in historical applications of the dialectic. I believe this is due to me missing something in Hegel—and it is certainly not as if I am alone in this—and not due to some glaring omission in his system, but ultimately I cannot seem to figure out what this missing piece would be.