

Mladen Dolar
Hegel and Freud

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Hegel and Freud have nothing in common, it would seem; there is everything to oppose them. On the one hand: the speculative philosopher of absolute spirit whose system encompassed every sphere of being – logic, nature, and spirit – and who is reputed to be the most obscure and difficult in the entire grand philosophical tradition; on the other hand: a man of medical formation, a therapist who in all his work took clinical practice as his guideline and only gradually extended some psychological insights into larger circles of culture, civilization, and history. On the one hand: not only a philosopher, but a philosopher *par excellence*, the paradigmatic example of a philosopher who managed to encapsulate in his system all the themes and achievements of the metaphysical tradition; on the other hand: a man of natural science who adamantly opposed philosophy as such and even saw attempts to turn psychoanalysis into a new philosophical current as one of his discipline's greatest dangers. On the one hand: not only a German, but seemingly a German *par excellence*, a model of German spirit, or even the Prussian state philosopher, as the adage goes; on the other hand: a Jew who already in his young days experienced the pressure of anti-Semitism and eventually, despite his fame, lived his final days in exile, his books burned by a regime that was, ironically, evoking Hegel. And finally, on the one hand the philosopher who relied more than anyone else in the history of philosophy on the powers of reason, concepts, and knowledge; on the other hand someone who more than anyone else took his cue from something that inherently escapes those powers or presents their fissure – this fissure forms the very object of psychoanalysis, of entities such as the unconscious and the drives.

In this last point there is something that strangely connects Hegel and Freud. They both stand in excess, such that when one invokes their names the temperature rises, it seems that there is no way one could speak about one or the other from the point of view of neutral, objective, and impartial knowledge, to allot them a just place in the gallery of great minds, as if both, although for opposing reasons, represented something that established knowledge – what Lacan economically called the university discourse – cannot quite swallow. Both tend to produce either zealous followers or equally zealous enemies; they still retain the capacity to provoke passions, although the nature of their excesses is opposite. Hegel, the vintage university professor if there ever was one, with an excess of knowledge best epitomized by his claim to absolute knowledge – the moment a form of knowledge stakes a claim to the absolute

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Ludwig Sebbers, *Hegel at Age Fifty-Eight*, 1828. Lithograph.

is a neuralgic point that no university discourse can digest if it is to retain its demeanor of neutrality and objectivity. Freud, with the opposite claim to an errant truth with no guarantee and no usual verification, which denies him academic credentials. In brief, absolute knowledge and the unconscious, two boundaries of knowledge, the upper and the lower – on the one hand, the knowledge that strives to overstep its limits by its claim to the absolute; on the other hand, a hole in knowledge, a slippage of knowledge where desires, drives, symptoms, and fantasies start seeping in. If absolute knowledge and the unconscious still function as unplaceable excesses, what could be their link?

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Jean Martin Charcot, *Hysteria*. Chronophotography from the book "Iconographie Photographique de la Salpêtrière," 1878.

Perhaps one could say, *prima facie*, that what Hegel and Freud have in common is that they both swear by science. For Hegel, one needn't look far: he published his first book, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, as the first part of a more general work titled *The System of Science*; his second book was called *The Science of Logic*; his third book was *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*. So "science" is conspicuously his master word. There is a thesis in this: any science worthy of its name should have a philosophical underpinning, and any philosophy worthy of its name should raise the claim to science, so that ultimately, philosophy and science should coincide in synonymy. For Freud, the science that he is after should by no means become philosophy and will only be able to maintain its scientific claims if it stays clear of

philosophy. He saw himself emphatically as a man of science, but of a science as far apart from Hegel's notion as could be.

Their attitudes toward science can be further illustrated by two anecdotal sayings. Hegel notoriously maintained that if facts contradict theory, then "um so schlimmer für die Fakten" – so much the worse for the facts. This can be seen as indicative of the paramount arrogance of a philosophy that takes no notice of such trivialities as empirical data. But for Hegel, facts cannot contradict theory not because of their lowly nature, but because they are always facts only if seized by a concept; a fact can acquire the dignity of a fact only by virtue of a concept that has selected it and represented it as relevant, so that there is no common ground where facts and concepts could meet, no interface between the two, and if there is indeed a confrontation it is only ever between concepts and concepts. Freud's stance is epitomized by a saying of his mentor in psychiatric matters, Charcot: "la théorie, c'est bon, mais ça n'empêche pas d'exister," or theory is all right, but it doesn't prevent something from existing. So something exists in spite of theory, it stubbornly asserts in the face of the concept; the stance would be: do not give way on what presents and re-presents itself in spite of basis of received theories (including Freud's own, for he had no qualms about jeopardizing his own theories if something continued to exist in spite of them), be it as slight as a slip of the tongue or as intrusive as a trauma and symptoms. And what is the unconscious but something that manifests in spite of all the spontaneous theories that frame our understanding? What is, for example, the death drive but a thrust of pure insistence that can never quite be pinned to facts. But how can one make a theory of what exists in spite of theory, of what is recalcitrant to theory? What kind of universality can one construct on the basis of this flimsy, vanishing factuality, something that vanishes the moment it is produced?

There is an opposite trajectory to trace: Hegel places himself in the realm of universality from the outset, but this initial universality can only be an empty one that immediately has to lose itself, has to pass into its other if it is to be universal at all, has to espouse and encompass all factuality in its own movement of self-othering (*Sichanderswerden*), and can be a concept only if it has the power to fully embrace its other, that is, by the process of its mediation – there is no concept outside its mediation with its other. On the other hand, Freud places himself in the cracks of universality, its quirks, something it cannot encompass with any conceptual endeavor, yet something that is not

outside the concept but is rather its inner edge. One has to maintain the stance of science to get to it, but *encore un effort* is called for in order to extend the enterprise of Galilean science into such tiny cracks as dreams, slips, and jokes. Can there be a Galilean science of these tiny things? To arrive at a universality from that position demands a speculative effort no lesser than Hegel's.

Hegel and Freud have no common measure, yet there is a point of contingent encounter. There are about half a dozen extant portraits of Hegel, which depict him at various ages. All of them are well known, and they do what portraits were supposed to do: they present his public image, in the somewhat stiff postures that one inevitably assumes when in the public eye. All except one, that is, a conspicuous exception: the lithograph by Ludwig Sebbers, which shows Hegel at home, sitting at his desk, wearing a dressing gown and something like a nightcap. It is a very striking image because of the ironic discrepancy, no doubt intended, between the massive claims of this philosopher of the universal world-spirit and his homely attire.¹ It was with this image in mind that Heinrich Heine wrote (in the late 1820s, while Hegel was still alive) what are no doubt the best verses ever devoted to Hegel; there wasn't much competition for this, for Hegel didn't quite inspire poetry.

Life and the world's too fragmented for me!
A German professor can give me the key.
He puts life in order with skill magisterial,
Builds a rational system for better or worse;
With nightcap and dressing-gown scraps
for material
He chinks up the holes in the universe.²

Heine, somewhat divided between his affection for Hegel and sharp criticisms of him, produced a short-circuit between the rational system of Hegel's philosophy, reputed to be capable of putting life in rational order and providing it with sense, and Hegel's particular, trivial, private apparel, a far cry from concepts, but whose makeshift material is nevertheless put to philosophical use; even more: its secret mission is to hold together the philosophical edifice by filling its cracks. The bottom line is that the dressing gown may figure as the secret truth of the system, or even that there is an equation between the two, in a parody of Hegelian infinite judgment: Hegel famously maintained that "spirit is a bone," thus juxtaposing two entities at maximum distance with no common measure. One could say, following Heine, "spirit is a nightcap."

Freud was extremely fond of Heine and missed no opportunity to quote some line or

witticism of his in his own work. He was particularly fond of the last two lines of the same poem, although he never referred them to Hegel in particular but only to philosophy in general. In *The New Introductory Lectures* (1932), when debating the question of *Weltanschauung*, "the world-view," arguing that psychoanalysis cannot possibly present a world-view and that philosophy cannot escape being one, Freud says the following:

[Philosophy] departs from [science] by clinging to the illusion of being able to present a picture of the universe which is without gaps and is coherent [...]. It goes astray in its method by over-estimating the epistemological value of our logical operations [...]. And it often seems that the poet's derisive comment is not unjustified when he says of the philosopher: "*Mit seinen Nachtmützen und Schlafrockfetzen / Stopft er die Lücken des Weltenbaus.* [With his nightcaps and the tatters of his dressing gown he patches up the gaps in the structure of the universe.]"³

So the philosopher – and Hegel, as the archetypal philosopher, is the target, although Freud was not aware of that – does two things that are seemingly opposed but which actually support each other: he overestimates logic and epistemology, relies on the operations of reason and knowledge, has excessive and self-delusive confidence in their power, and on the other hand he patches up the cracks of this edifice with the means at hand, with the trivial, the homely, literally with the stopgaps, the makeshift scraps – the partial objects? There is a concurrence of the high and the low, of elevated logical and epistemological concerns and the trifling, the frivolous which has to supplement its opposite. The epistemological construction of the universe cannot succeed without the production of gaps, and the philosopher must then endeavor to fill them in with some much lowlier means. To push the paradox further, how can we bring together Hegel's claim to absolute knowledge and the nightcap and the scraps of the dressing gown? Does the secret of reason finally lie in the incongruous nightcap?

Freud uses the same lines by Heine in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), as well, in a very different but also very telling way. The discussion here concerns a tricky point in the theory of dreams, what Freud calls *die sekundäre Bearbeitung*, the secondary revision. The dream proceeds in a haphazard way from one element to the next (this is what constitutes for Freud the primary process), it's all a hodgepodge, but as the dream goes along it continues to revise itself,

it keeps trying to fit the elements that have emerged into a narrative, into a sequence endowed with some logic and sense. The paradox is that this happens while dreaming, as part and parcel of the dream-work itself, so that we are never confronted with a dream pure and simple, but with a version that has “always already” been revised, submitted to secondary adjustment and modification within the dream itself. Interpretation happens during the dream, on the part of the dream, prior to any conscious interpretation. Dreams (some, not all) “might be said to have been already interpreted once, before being submitted to waking interpretation.”⁴

This is where Freud brings in Heine’s lines:

This function behaves in the manner which the poet maliciously ascribes to philosophers: it fills up the gaps in the dream-structure with shreds and patches. As a result of its efforts, the dream loses its appearance of absurdity and disconnectedness and approximates to the model of an intelligible experience.⁵

There is an unconscious philosopher lurking in the midst of the dream, the dreaming philosopher lying low in the primary process, turning the primary into the secondary – and, to put it briefly, there is no primary process without the secondary process. The unalloyed unconscious, the virgin unconscious, never presents itself as such, “in person,” its gaps and inconsistencies are rather always already at least partly filled in and made presentable. Yet the unconscious philosopher, stopping the gaps and providing sense, is usually less successful than his conscious counterpart. The unconscious philosopher is a bad philosopher who doesn’t manage to cover up his traces, he always lets the cat, at least part of the cat, out of the bag. The secondary revision can never quite cover up the marks and vestiges of the primary process – and if in some very rare cases it does, if it manages to come up with a narrative “faultlessly logical and reasonable,” then Freud tells us that those are the toughest cases to interpret:

Dreams which are of such kind have been subjected to a far-reaching revision by this psychical function that is akin to waking thought; they appear to have a meaning, but that meaning is as far removed as possible from their true significance.⁶

There are dreams that appear to make perfect sense because they have been thoroughly shaped and interpreted by a sense-making instance in the dream itself, but this is why their

apparent making-sense is so deceptive. They appear not to be in need of interpretation at all, but it requires maximum effort on the part of the interpreter to debunk what is hidden behind the dream’s façade (so that the biggest delusion pertains to what evidently makes sense and apparently needs no interpretation). If the unconscious philosopher is thorough and leaves no traces, then this is the greatest mirage, the seeming transparency is the greatest opaqueness. One might take philosophy as a dream of this kind: a successfully, utterly revised dream that has allegedly managed to cover up all the traces, to fill in all the cracks, and it therefore presents the toughest nut to crack for analytic interpretation.

To put it in a nutshell, to follow Freud’s image, the unconscious is a gap, and meaning is the stopgap. Meaning provides a narrative, which begins already in the work of “the unconscious philosopher”; the work of meaning is a counterpart to the workings of the unconscious. The unconscious and the philosopher are a couple in an odd division of labor: one makes the holes, the other fills them in. If there is a diagnosis of the philosophical endeavor as such at stake, then this business of philosophy starts already in the unconscious – the philosopher has an accomplice in the unconscious, which starts stopping the gaps even before philosophy starts filling them in. The unconscious is effaced at the same time that it is produced, and the one who effaces it is the unconscious philosopher struggling to make sense and provide a narrative account free of gaps. The philosophical illusion is structural, it has its basis in the unconscious itself as effacement.

Freud never really engages with Hegel, never considers using any of his concepts, as he does with many other philosophers, for better or worse. Yet, there is this unexpected scene of unwitting confrontation, through the bias of Heine, where what is at stake is not merely Hegel, but the nature of philosophical endeavor, Hegel functioning yet again as the model philosopher. The diagnosis: there is a blind spot in philosophy, namely, its incapacity to come to terms with the unconscious, its being prey to a fantasy that it cannot give up as long as it remains philosophy. But this move is not something that happens in the high realms of spirit; rather, it is working already in the unconscious, which can only proceed by effacing itself and which cannot help but make sense. The split is already the inner split of the unconscious, the philosophical fantasy intervenes in the midst of the dream, in the split between the primary and the secondary; the search for stopgaps at hand has always already begun.

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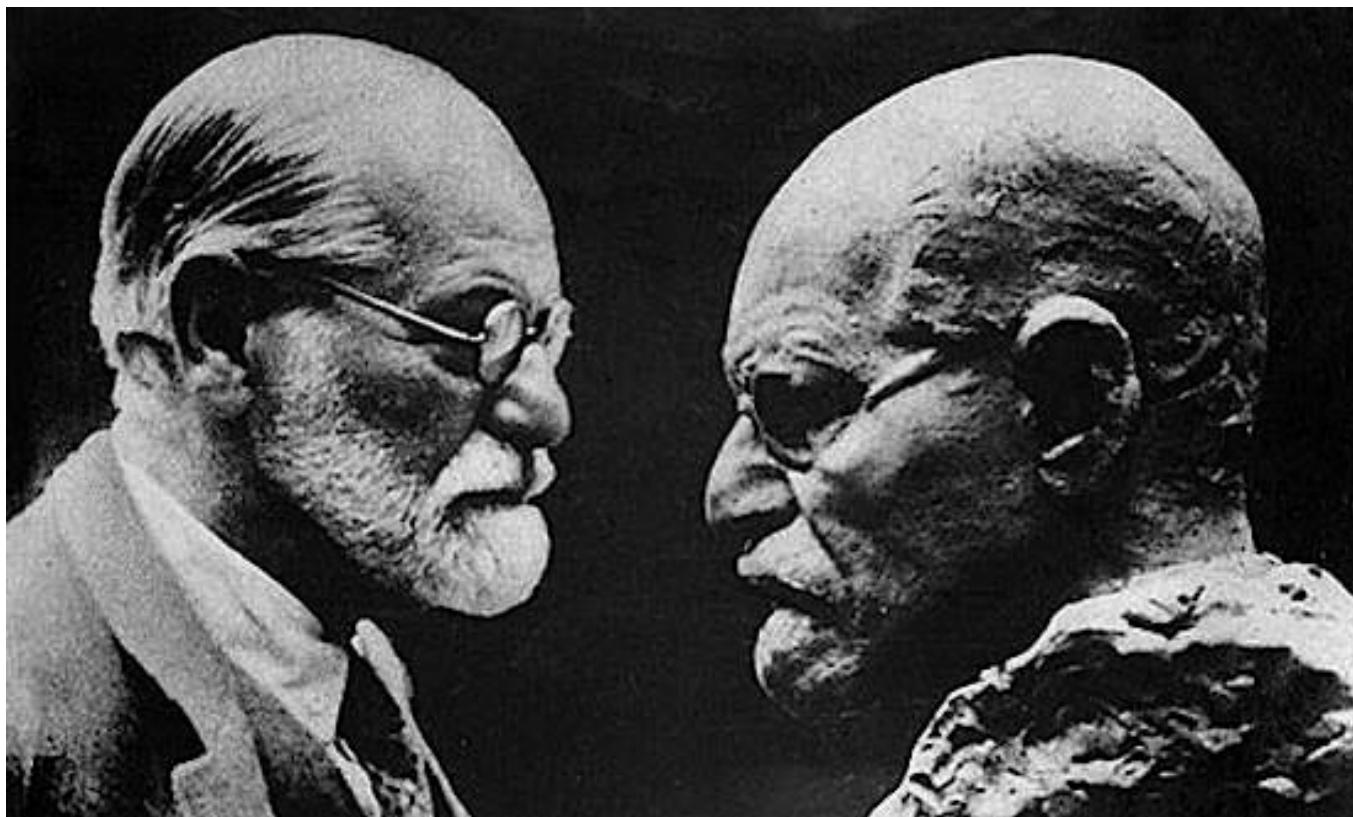
This image of the nightcap and the gaps in the structure of universe, picturesque and entertaining as it is, is no doubt also naïve and reliant on an indiscriminate view of philosophy as a whole, as well as of Hegel in particular. I am using it not to confirm it but because it leads us to something essential. Pursuing this image, one could say that Hegel's great achievement lies in presenting the exact opposite of this image of philosophy, not in patching up the cracks in the universe, but in taking the crack itself as the very principle of the universe, if I may adopt this massive parlance. If there is something bewildering and interesting in Hegel, then it resides in his grandiose effort to pursue the crack not as a failure, a malfunction, but as an enabling principle, to take it as the productivity of the negative. He saw his task not as filling in the cracks, but as producing a scission where there seemed to be none, a scission that enables any positive entity. But here is an edge: are Hegel and Freud speaking about the same crack? If there is a scission, then it is between what and what?⁷

Let me proceed from a single quote. In the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel sinned, for once, against his own principle that any fundamental principle of philosophy is flawed in the very fact of being a fundamental principle.

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The worth of a philosophy cannot be measured in any foundational claim or proposition, a principle can prove its worth only through its mediation, by leaving behind and thus negating the foundational moment through a development, a deployment, a production, which alone can spell out what the principle was supposed to be. Yet for once, Hegel proposed the fundamental adage that everything depends on a single statement, namely, that the true is not to be comprehended only as a substance but equally as a subject – in brief, substance is subject. This operates as a meta-principle which disqualifies and renders inoperative all foundational principles. I will not dwell on interpretation of this here – volumes have been written on this single sentence (in particular by Slavoj Žižek) – I will have to assume some of that. I will try to clarify matters somewhat through a particular angle, the quote I have in mind, which follows soon after:

The disparity which takes place in consciousness between the I and the substance which is its object is their distinction, the *negative* itself. It can be viewed as the *lack* [*Mangel*] of the two, but it is their very soul, that is, it is what moves them. This is why certain ancients conceived of the *void* [*das Leere*] as what



moved things [das Bewegende] since they conceived of what moves things as the *negative*, but they did not yet grasp this negative as the self [das Selbst].⁸

So what holds together the two terms of this notorious proposition, the substance and the subject? The substance as the supposed unitary principle underlying being, and subjectivity? Hegel's statement claims that both terms are affected by a lack, a void, a negativity. The very soul of each is a lack, their soul is a lack in the soul that moves them. Substance and subject overlap in lack as the only point they have in common – but how to understand this? Hegel, in order to illustrate it and give this stance a pedigree stretching back to the very beginnings of the history of philosophy, links it to ancient atomism. Hegel, the arch-idealist, always sees in atomism a crucial speculative turn. He writes in his *Logic*,

The atomistic principle, with these first thinkers, didn't remain in exteriority, but apart from its abstraction contained a speculative determination, that the void was recognized as the source of movement. This implies a completely different relation between atoms and the void than the mere one-beside-the-other [*Nebeneinander*] and mutual indifference of the two. [...] The view that the cause of movement lies in the void contains that deeper thought that the cause of becoming pertains to the negative.⁹

The greatness of atomism, for Hegel, lies in what it introduced as the object of thought, the way the minimal element is always split into itself and a void. Atomization is a simple and radical way to submit matter to count, to reduce it to indivisible countable elements (which can be counted as one), but in the very same move this atomic element, this elementary particle, introduces the void, in which atoms move and which is indeed the very principle of their movement, *das Bewegende*. An element and the void don't simply exist one beside the other, they belong together to the point of forming a single redoubled entity composed of the atom and the void, one and lack. However far and wide we seek a minimal element, we never arrive at one minimal and indivisible, but rather at the division as irreducible. The minimal element is this division itself, not any positive entity. The void is, as it were, the Platonic missing half of the element as one, and it answers this description by indeed being missing. Hegel's atom, his elementary particle, is thus the atom itself in this precise sense: that which cannot be divided any

further is the division, the split on which any unity is premised.

But, Hegel pursues in this passage, while the ancients saw well the principle of negativity in the void, splitting any element at its root, they failed to grasp in this negativity the very place of the self, the subject. They saw that substance is permeated by the void, enfolding the lack in its bosom, but they had no inkling that this would have a relation to the place of the subject. This is Hegel at his most minimal – the place of the subject, in the adage “substance is subject,” is nothing other than this scission itself, this cut in being introduced by the void as the moving principle. It is in the void that being and thought intersect. As he states in the *History of Philosophy*,

This break [interruption, *Unterbrechung*] is the other side of atoms, the *void*. The movement of thought is such a movement that has in itself the break (thought is in man precisely what atoms and the void are in things, the inner [das Denken ist im Menschen eben das, was die Atome und das Leere in den Dingen, sein Inneres]).¹⁰

So thinking is the break of being, its *Unterbrechung*, its interruption, and what thought and its objects have in common is the break that interrupts objectivity through void. Thought and world intersect in the void. It is not a question here of whether atomism is a good theory – Hegel will not endorse it in his own account of being – nor of whether this is a good interpretation of atomism; the point is that atomism includes a certain insight which Hegel sees as valid and far-reaching, namely, that there is a principle of negativity which moves both thought and being, that this principle forms the inside of both at their core, *sein Inneres*, and that the way in which substance and subject hang together should be pinned to this principle.

Subject, as Hegel understands this entity, is no positive being and has no being, it is to be placed in the break, and this is what pushes each entity into unrest (eben diese Unruhe ist das Selbst) – the self is nothing but the unrest of one, its split, it dwells in the impossibility of any entity being equal to itself. The subject is what pushes it beyond itself, it is nothing but this disparity, the invisible part that causes disparity (*Ungleichheit*). If one wanted to spell out Hegel's project in a phrase, to give it an atomic form, to arrive at the atom of Hegel's thought, one could say: *from atom to cogito*. There is a short-circuit in this phrase that immediately links the atomists' introduction of the void, the speculative unity of the one and the void, with the figure of subjectivity as it emerged with the

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Paul Nougé, *The Birth of the Object* (*La Naissance de l'Objet*), 1929-30. Gelatin Silver Print.

Cartesian cogito. The novelty of cogito was precisely that it discarded the previous modes of thought about subjectivity (soul, consciousness, individuality) and introduced the subject at the point of a break in the great chain of being. (Žižek has put it many times over, “cogito is the crack in the edifice of being.”) It is not a substance, although Descartes himself pinned it the very next moment to *res cogitans*, but is quite the opposite, at least in Hegel’s radical understanding of it, it is what prevents any substance, any underlying principle of unity, to ever persist in equality with itself. There is a crack in being, already encapsulated by the void in ancient atomism, like a place that was waiting for the subject, as it were. To simplify matters utterly, if *substance* was the keyword of philosophy, the guiding idea of bringing multiplicity to one underlying principle, beyond appearances and change, then one could say that the subject, in Hegel, is the name of one splitting into two, of the impossibility of any substance being one. But which two? Are the atom and the void enough for this split?

Hegel treats the notion of *clinamen* with some contempt. He says in the *History of Philosophy* that Epicurus takes the atoms as equal in weight and therefore as moving in the same way until their straightforward movement is slanted

in a curbed line [in einer krummen Linie] which somewhat departs from the straight direction, so that they collide with each other, thus forming a merely superficial unity, not stemming from their essence.¹¹

In a way, all of Hegel’s ambiguity is contained in this passage. We could ask the following question: Does *clinamen* belong to essence? Or is it merely an external addition? Is it atom’s essential or external fate? Let me bring in Deleuze, who is not exactly a Hegelian but who gives to this question a very Hegelian answer, more Hegelian even than Hegel. This is from the appendix on Lucretius in *The Logic of Sense*:

Clinamen or declination has nothing to do with the slanting movement which would come to modify by accident a vertical fall. It is present since always: it is not a secondary movement nor a secondary determination of movement which would occur at a certain moment at a particular place. Clinamen is the originary determination of the direction of movement of an atom.¹²

So *clinamen* has always already happened, it is the disparity inscribed in the definition of the

atom from the outset, its disparity with itself. The atom is its own declination, the divided unity not merely of one and the void, but also in this and through this the unity of the entity with its own declination, straying away from itself. It is not a secondary fate that would befall the atom in itself in its supposed straight path – once one has departed from the path, one supposes the straight direction, but a direction that doesn’t exist in itself. Straying retroactively produces the in-itself, and this is where the subject comes in. One could summarily say, bringing things together, that the subject is the clinamen of substance, the way that it always necessarily strays from itself.¹³

Hence, it cannot be isolated in itself, it is the deviation of “in-itself,” always retroactively effaced in its effects, the vanishing mediator. Clinamen is neither the atom nor the void nor something third, but the very going-astray which conditions them. So we could say that in order to understand the single notion of *clinamen*, one brings together the various threads of one, void, substance, subject, and negativity.

We are coming to the essential question: How does this conception of Hegelian negativity relate to psychoanalysis? What happened to the negativity and the split between Hegel and Freud? Let me take *clinamen* as a simple red thread. The way to understand what is at stake in *clinamen* is perhaps the discriminating factor.

Freudian negativity is a vocabulary of six *Ver-* words: *Verneinung*, negation; *Verdrängung*, repression; *Verwerfung*, foreclosure; *Verleugnung*, disavowal; *Verdichtung*, condensation; *Verschiebung*, displacement. What these six words have in common, at first glance, is the prefix *Ver-*, which the Wahrig dictionary defines first as *Abweichen*, or deviation, digression, straying away. From *Ver-* to *clinamen* there is only a step, a step astray, a step off track. There is a deviation of negation at stake, and if Hegelian negation is already a deviation, one deviating from its track and splitting into two, then what is at stake here we could describe as a deviation of deviation, a *clinamen* of *clinamen*, a redoubling of *clinamen*. *Ver-* is like a *clinamen* of *nein*, something inside and within the Hegelian negation of negation, yet slightly off track. Freud, who was so fond of puns and contingent word encounters, never spent any time pondering this *Ver-* which brings together his key terms as in a dream condensation.

But on top of the chance link *Ver-*, these concepts are related through a common aim. They name various modes of negativity, but a negativity that fails. Negativity doesn’t succeed in fulfilling its function of negating a certain entity. They evoke something that persists in

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spite of negation and through negation, or more precisely, something that negation produces in the first place. In all of them, negation produces something that it cannot itself negate. There is a persistence of negativity in the very failure of negativity.

The failure of negation is clearest in the first form, the case presented in *Verneinung* (1925), where Freud, in a single breathtaking stroke, accomplishes the trajectory from the grammatical form of negation to the death drive. Freud starts off with the elementary, notorious case of the patient who says,

“You ask me who this person in the dream can be. It’s *not* my mother.” In the interpretation, we take the liberty of disregarding the negation [...]. It is as though the patient had said: “It’s true that my mother came into my mind as I thought of this person, but I don’t feel inclined to let the association count.”¹⁴

This is the model example of negation which has turned into a proverb, “this is not my mother,” a negation that doesn’t hit its mark, doesn’t manage to negate the mother. But is this ground sufficient for a reading of affirmation? Is the truth of “this is not my mother” the opposite affirmative statement “this is my mother?” Freud takes the negation as a sign of repression, *Verdrängung*, the next item on our list.

Thus the content of a repressed image or idea can make its way into consciousness, on condition that it is *negated*. Negation is a way of taking cognizance of what is repressed [...]. The outcome of this is a kind of intellectual acceptance of the repressed, while at the same time what is essential to the repression persists.¹⁵

So “this is not my mother” can be translated into “this is my mother,” and the patient may well accept this as the true content of his statement, but that doesn’t affect the form of repression itself. Negation may well enable the acceptance of certain content, but what persists as recalcitrant to negation and its lifting is the very gap into which the content is placed. This gap is not exhausted by the alternatives “this is not my mother” and “this is my mother.” Negation and affirmation are placed on the same level without affecting the form of repression, irreducible to its content.¹⁶

To negate something in a judgment is, at bottom, to say: “This is something which I should prefer to repress.” A negative judgment is the intellectual substitute for

repression; its “no” is the hallmark of repression, a certificate of origin – like, let’s say, “Made in Germany.” With the help of the symbol of negation, thinking frees itself from the restrictions of repression.¹⁷

Negation is like a certificate of origin, it testifies to the origin of repression, and if there is indeed a negation made in Germany, of all places, it must be the Hegelian negation. One could say, with all the ambiguity of the statement: “this is not Hegelian negation,” on the model of “this is not my mother.” Is Hegelian negation thus accepted or rejected? Do we have to decide between “this is a Hegelian negation” and “this is not a Hegelian negation?” Perhaps, in accordance with Freud’s reading, both statements miss a form of negation that springs up among these alternatives and is not exhausted by them. There is a gap in the Hegelian negation (of negation), lurking at the very same spot, not somewhere else.

Negation in *Verneinung*, as Freud reads it, is a special instance of repression, the second concept on the list. Repression presents, even at first blush, an enlarged case of the thread I have been following, the failure of negation. Repression means: something is negated and rejected, but only at the price of its return. It is repression only insofar as the negation doesn’t succeed, insofar as it fails. Of course, one can find all kinds of reasons for repression, one can invoke the repressive sexual morality that tries to prevent a certain content from being accepted in consciousness, determined by sanctions and taboos, but in this way one would focus on the content of repression and overlook its form. (And there is the massive fact that most of the prohibitions and moral injunctions Freud had to deal with have lost their validity and impact during the past century, but that hasn’t done away with the predicament that has in a way become more intractable. Psychoanalysis, which has contributed so much to sexual emancipation, has always also been skeptical of that as a salutary solution.) If we concentrate on the form of repression, then Freud’s key term is not just repression, but *Urverdrängung*, primary, originary repression, not concerning this or that particular content, also not reducible to the particular grounds for social repression, but instituting the very form of repression which can then be filled by particular contents and justifications. Repression prior to sufficient reason.

The concept of repression entails two further *Ver-* concepts, that of *Verdichtung* and *Verschiebung*, condensation and displacement, which for Freud name the basic mechanism of the dream-work, *Traumarbeit*. If dreams appear as a hodgepodge, this is due to the fact that each

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of their elements presents a condensation and displacement of various elements. With a crucial addition that determines the fate of Freudian negation and on which Freud insists again and again: the dream knows no “no,” there is no “no” in its vocabulary.

The way in which dreams treat the category of contraries and contradictories is highly remarkable. It is simply disregarded. “No” seems not to exist so far as dreams are concerned. They show a particular preference for combining contraries into a unity or for representing them as one and the same thing. Dreams feel themselves at liberty, moreover, to represent any element by its wishful contrary; so that there is no way of deciding at a first glance whether any element that admits of a contrary is present in the dream-thought as a positive or a negative.¹⁸

Dreams have a vast vocabulary, but one word seems to be conspicuously missing from it, the word “no.” Negation, contrariness, contradiction – all this exists in dreams either by simple juxtaposition, where contradictory or contrary entities appear side by side, or else by immediate coincidence, condensation of the opposites in one element, so that we cannot tell whether it is meant positively or negatively. Each positive element is endowed with reversibility, so that negation cannot be isolated, it only exists in the web of substitutions, condensations, and displacements. This web of ubiquitous negativity is paradoxically premised on the elision, the omission of “no” as a singular marker of negation. This very literal “negation of negation” makes negation omnipresent; precisely in its absence “no” is present in every word. This “negation of negation” in the unconscious gets stuck in something seemingly far too childish for dialectics, in contingent similarities, puns, homonymic reverberations, makeshift slips. What could be further from the stringency of the conceptual concatenation in Hegel’s *Logic*, each step inherently linked to the previous by self-reflexive negativity, than the infinite sliding over homonyms, similarities, and slips? The former is determined by a “no” at every step, the latter ignores “no” altogether.

If there is a subject of the unconscious – something that Lacan adamantly insisted on throughout his work, against the grain of the ambient structuralism, then this subject is, strictly speaking, correlative to the elision of “no.” But “no” is not a word like any other, it epitomizes a basic property of language. One could say, rather simply and massively, that “no” stands at the very kernel of language, that is,

that it is something that exists only in language and has no “natural” counterpart. With it, language names something that is not, and its capacity to name non-being is what makes it language. The most massive testimony of this is Plato’s *Sophist*, which hinges entirely on the capacity of language to infuse being with non-being. (Producing holes and gaps had already started with Plato, after all.) Language brings negation into the world, not merely a contrast or contrariness, a conflict or tension, but the possibility of inducing non-being. The symbolic itself, by extension, is like a “no” in the great chain of being, the very possibility of negativity, something that introduces a gap, a split, a break, on which, for Hegel, the very capacity of thought depends – but after all this was what haunted philosophy at its pre-Socratic dawn, the question of whether negative entities are merely creatures of language or rather have an ontological counterpart in being (see Plato’s *Parmenides*). It is with this question that philosophy started.

To round off this quick panorama of the rest of the Freudian *Ver-* words, I can only give some hasty hints about the remaining two. Foreclosure, *Verwerfung*, is the mechanism that for Freud defines psychosis. If psychosis is based on foreclosure, it cannot be on foreclosure of the word “no,” since psychosis disposes of the entire vocabulary and lacks nothing – that is, it lacks precisely nothing. It doesn’t lack “no,” but rather its symbolic impact, the gap that could keep apart reality from itself, reality from the real. What was foreclosed then returns as the real emerging in reality, coinciding with reality, with no gap – hallucinations, voices, conspiracies, persecutors, divine rays, miracles. Psychosis literally enacts negation of negation, dismantling the powers of negativity, not merely negation of negation, but its dismissal and elimination. If we follow the line of the failure of negation, then in psychosis negation fails by spectacular success, it succeeds in annihilating itself to such an extent that reality itself emerges as the embodiment of negativity, with no possible escape. The foreclosed negation materializes itself in the very positivity of reality. The triumph of negation of negation in psychosis is its grandest failure, it vindicates itself in more grandiose ways than anywhere else.

Last, *Verleugnung*, disavowal. Freud posits it as the basic mechanism of perversion, in its technical meaning, and one should mark from the outset that *per-vertō* is a Latin version of *Ver-*. There is a constitutive *Ver-* in the very nature of human sexuality, it is a *Ver-* nature, its deviation. Freud starts his argument in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) by considering sexual aberrations, *Abirrungen*, and then

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proceeds to consider sexual *Abweichungen*, deviations regarding the sexual object and the sexual goal. Starting from there, we could say that sexuality as such is for Freud defined by *Abirrung*, *Abweichung*, in one word, by a clinamen from the path of natural causality and the satisfaction of physiological needs. There is a clinamen in the very concept of sexuality, the very concept of the drive that is drive only by virtue of its deviation and cannot be grasped independent of it. There is the famous adage from Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*: What is a bank robbery compared to the establishment of a bank? What are all these petty thieves compared to the systematic, legalized, long-term robbery perpetrated by banks? By analogy, one could say that Freud's treatment of perversion in the *Three Essays* poses the following question: What are all the perversions, all the deviations from the usual sexual object or goal, compared to sexuality as such, which is in itself nothing but a massive deviation? As far as perversion is concerned, in a more limited and technical sense, disavowal can be understood in the Freudian account of fetishism, the fetish as something that fills the void by its fascinating presence, disavows castration and lack by clinging to the object veiling the void, as in Freud's famous scenario. Negativity is disavowed by clinging to the object that covers it up in the splendor of its positive existence, clinging to a belief against better knowledge ("I know very well, but nevertheless..."). Here we would actually come to an attitude that would embody Heine's and Freud's image of philosophy as filling in the cracks – the pervert would be someone who would not merely use the nightcap as a means at hand to fill the cracks, but would even turn it into an object of veneration. Not the desperate haphazard means of filling the crack, but the object to be savored, the partial object rendered whole. (And here one can give the singular example of the Marquis de Sade, the greatest philosopher among perverts – there was not much competition in this category, for structural reasons – whose *Philosophy in the Boudoir* is a demonstration of a quite drastic and literal patching-up of the gap.)

Three of the *Ver-* words, *Verdrängung*, *Verwerfung*, and *Verleugnung*, serve as the basis of the three clinical structures singled out by Freud – neurosis, psychosis, and perversion – as the basis of his clinical classification. One could say that they present the three ways of tackling negation, three ways in which negation fails and vindicates itself or works through its own deviations. They are like Freud's versions of what Hegel called, in the beginning of his *Encyclopedia*, "drei Stellungen des Gedanken zur Objektivität."

If I now try to bring together all the threads and come to a provisional conclusion, I would say that the distance between Hegel and Freud can perhaps be most economically encapsulated by the distance between two words, or rather a word and a partial word, *nein* and *Ver-*. Like in a dream condensation, the two words are fused together in a single German word, *Verneinung*. It is curiously not really in Hegel's vocabulary; he prefers the Latin *Negation*. *Ver-* and *nein*: the negation of *nein* in the immediate contiguity with *Ver-*, which deviates it. *Ver-* is not something else – completely different than *nein*, it inhabits negation from the inside and gives it another turn of the screw. If for Hegel each positive entity is always already marked by negativity, always in disparity with itself, a deviation from itself, then the Freudian operation could be seen as a deviation within this deviation, a clinamen of its clinamen. *Ver-* corrodes the "no," yet it operates only in its bosom. The (Hegelian) negation is the *sine qua non* of *Ver-*. In this sense, Hegel, by bringing the question of negation to a pinnacle, is the *sine qua non* of the Freudian take on negativity. Or to give it another turn: there is a Hegelian negation which is already a *Ver-*, the *Ver-* of *Verstand* and *Vernunft*, which are nothing but the realms of deployment of the Hegelian negativity, and the Freudian *Ver-* is but its extension, which changes everything.

In the same sense, the unconscious can be seen as a clinamen of cogito. Lacan caused some scandal with his claim that cogito is the subject of the unconscious, which is in direct opposition to the general view that no two things could be further apart than the Cartesian rational subject and the vagaries of the unconscious. Yet one of Lacan's key claims is that the subject of the unconscious can only be grasped on the basis of cogito, within the framework of cogito and modern subjectivity, not as its irrational counterpart. One could say that the subject of the unconscious is the *Ver-* of cogito, presenting just such a turn as *Ver-* does in relation to Hegelian negation. And if Hegelian absolute knowledge is to be conceived not as an ultimate filling-in of the crack – the gap in the structure of the universe – but as the way to ultimately maintain it, in a gesture where the crack would be self-reflexively predicated upon itself, then the Freudian unconscious is a crack within this crack itself.

"Ça n'empêche pas d'exister," says Freud, following Charcot: it doesn't prevent the existence of something that insists in spite of negation, through negation, in its bosom, but something that is not reducible to some positive factuality and has ultimately no being – but that something cannot be conceived without negation, moreover, without a clinamen of

negation of negation. One could slightly alter the sentence: “l’être n’empêche pas d’exister,” or being doesn’t prevent something from existing and insisting. The Hegelian notion of being entirely depended on negativity and scission, and the step implied by *Ver-* is the scission of the very scission. It is by this scission that thought clings to being, in the double figure of absolute knowledge and the unconscious, this excess and deficiency, or flaw, of knowledge. More pointedly: the subject of psychoanalysis is not only the *Ver-* of cogito, but the *Ver-* of that understanding of cogito brought to extremity, at the end of the grand philosophical tradition, by absolute knowledge.

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1
Heinrich Heine, *Heimkehr* LVIII. There is also a subtext that this attire pertains to night use. In a famous section of the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel describes evening as the proper time for the fulfillment of philosophy. "The owl of Minerva starts its flight at dusk [mit der einbrechenden Dämmerung]." So it is only appropriate to picture Hegel at the apical moment of philosophy, between dusk and turning in for sleep.

2
Heinrich Heine, *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine: A Modern English Version*, trans. Hal Draper (Boston: Suhrkamp / Insel, 1982), 99. "Zu fragmentarisch ist Welt und Leben! / Ich will mich zum deutschen Professor begeben. / Der weiss das Leben zusammensetzen, / Und er macht ein verständlich System daraus; / Mit seinen Nachtmützen und Schlafrockfetzen / Stopft er die Lücken des Weltenbaus."

3
Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, (Penguin Freud Library, vol. 2), 196.

4
Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, (Penguin Freud Library, vol. 4), 631.

5
Ibid., 630.

6
Ibid., 630–1.

7
Badiou starts off his *Théorie du sujet* by claiming that "at the heart of Hegelian dialectics one has to disentangle two processes, two concepts of movement, and not only a just insight into becoming which is corrupted/distorted by a subjective system of knowledge. Let's say, e.g.: a) a dialectical matrix covered by the word alienation, the idea of a simple term which deploys itself by its becoming-other in order to come back to itself as a fulfilled concept; b) a dialectical matrix whose operator is the scission, the theme 'there is no unity except a ruptured one' [*il n'y a d'unité que scindée*]. Without the least return upon itself, without the connection between the final and the initial (inaugural)." Alain Badiou, *Théorie du sujet* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), 21–2. The good Hegel would be the Hegel of scission, i.e. of a non-symmetrical contradiction which cannot be sublated into a higher unity.

8
Modified from G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard (2010), 20. See http://web.mac.com/titpa ul/Site/Phenomenology_of_Spirit_page.html. "Die Ungleichheit, die im Bewußtsein zwischen

dem Ich und der Substanz, die sein Gegenstand ist, stattfindet, ist ihr Unterschied, das *Negative* überhaupt. Es kann als der *Mangel* beider angesehen werden, ist aber ihre Seele oder das Bewegende derselben; weswegen einige Alte das *Leere* als das Bewegende begriffen, indem sie das Bewegende zwar als das *Negative*, aber dieses noch nicht als das Selbst erfaßten."

9
G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic* (TWA 5), 185–6.

10
G. W. F. Hegel, *History of Philosophy* (TWA 19), str. 311.

11
Ibid., 313.

12
Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia UP, 1990), 311.

13
One can read here Deleuze with Badiou, who is aware of the Hegelian twist: "[Clinamen] pertains neither to the void nor to the atoms nor to the causal action of the one on the other. Neither is it a third component, a third principle. [...] Clinamen is the atom as the out-of-place [*hors-lieu*] of the void. Let's say in a broader view, and far from the Greeks, that clinamen is the subject, or more precisely subjectivation." Alain Badiou, *Théorie du sujet*, 77. "It is absolutely necessary that clinamen be abolished in its own turn. [...] Any particular explanation of any particular thing must not require clinamen, although the existence of a thing in general is unthinkable without it." *Ibid.*, 79. "The atom affected by deviation engenders the Whole without any rest or trace of this affection. Better still: the effect is the retroactive effacement of the cause [...] the deviation, being neither the atom nor the void nor the action of the void nor the system of atoms, is unintelligible." *Ibid.*, 80.

14
Sigmund Freud, "Negation," in *On Metapsychology*, The Pelican Freud Library, vol. 11 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), 437.

15
Ibid., 437–8.

16
For this line of argument I am indebted to Alenka Zupančič. See also Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours, Figure*.

17
Sigmund Freud, "Negation," 438–9.

18
Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 429–30. Cf. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation*

to the Unconscious (Penguin Freud Library, vol. 6), 233.

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