

The Object of Philosophy

Hegel and the Object, Or, the Idea's Constipation

Slavoj Žižek

One of the standard motifs of the pseudo-Freudian dismissal of Hegel is to characterize his System as the highest and most over-blown expression of oral economy: is the Hegelian Idea not a voracious eater which "swallows" every object it stumbles upon? As Hegel likes to point out, however, we can only grasp the object if this object itself already "wants to be with/by us." The standard critical reading constructs the Hegelian absolute Substance-Subject as thoroughly *constipated* - keeping in itself the swallowed content. But what about the counter-movement, the Hegelian shitting, excrementation? Is the subject of what Hegel calls "absolute Knowing" not also a thoroughly *emptied* subject, a subject reduced to the role of pure observer of the self-movement of the content itself?

One of the standard motifs of the pseudo-Freudian dismissal of Hegel is to characterize his System as the highest and most over-blown expression of oral economy: is the Hegelian Idea not a voracious eater which "swallows" every object it stumbles upon? No wonder Hegel perceived himself as Christian: for him, the ritual eating of bread transubstantiated into Christ's meat signals that the Christian subject can integrate and digest without remainder God himself. Is, consequently, the Hegelian conceiving/grasping not a sublimated version of digestion? So when Hegel writes:

If the individual human being does something, achieves something, attains a goal, this fact must be grounded in the way the thing itself, in its concept, acts and behaves. If I eat an apple, I destroy its organic self-identity and assimilate it to myself. That I can do this entails that the apple in itself, already, in advance, before I take hold of it, has in its nature the determination of being subject to destruction, having

in itself a homogeneity with my digestive organs such that I can make it homogeneous with myself. (*Lectures* 127)

is not what he offers here a lower version of the cognition process itself in which, as Hegel likes to point out, we can only grasp the object if this object itself already “wants to be with/by us”? One should carry this metaphor to the end: the standard critical reading constructs the Hegelian absolute Substance-Subject as thoroughly *constipated* - keeping in itself the swallowed content. But what about the counter-movement, the Hegelian shitting, excrementation? Is the subject of what Hegel calls “absolute Knowing” not also a thoroughly *emptied* subject, a subject reduced to the role of pure observer of the self-movement of the content itself?

The richest is therefore the most concrete and most *subjective*, and that which withdraws itself into the simplest depth is the mightiest and most all-embracing. The highest, most concentrated point is the pure personality which, solely through the absolute dialectic which is its nature, no less *embraces and holds everything within itself*. (*Hegel's Science of Logic* 841)

In this strict sense the subject itself is the abrogated/cleansed substance, a substance reduced to the void of the empty form of self-relating negativity, emptied of all the wealth of “personality” - in Lacanese, the move from substance to subject is the one from S to \$, i.e., subject is the barred substance. (Adorno and Horkheimer, in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, make the critical point of how the Self bent on mere survival has to scarify all content that would make survival worthy; this very move is what Hegel asserts.) Schelling referred to this same move as *contraction* (again, with the excremental connotation of squeezing the shit out of oneself, dropping it out): the subject is the contracted substance.

Does then the final subjective position of the Hegelian System not compel us to turn around the digestive metaphor? The supreme (and, for many, the most problematic) case of this counter-movement occurs at the very end of *Logic*, when, after the notional deployment is completed, reaching the full circle of the absolute Idea, the Idea, in its resolve/decision, “freely releases itself” (843) into Nature, lets Nature go, leaves it off, discards it, pushes it away from itself, and thus liberates it.

The same move is accomplished by God himself who, in the guise of Christ, this finite mortal, also “freely releases itself” into temporal existence. The same goes for early modern art, where this is how Hegel accounts for the rise of “dead nature” (still life) paintings (not only landscapes, flow-

ers, etc., but even pieces of food and dead animals): precisely because, in the development of art, subjectivity no longer needs the visual medium as the principal medium of its expression, i.e., because the accent shifted to poetry as a more direct presentation of the subject's inner life, the natural environs is "released" of the burden to express subjectivity and thus gains freedom, can be asserted on its own. And, furthermore, as some perspicuous readers of Hegel have already pointed out, the very sublation of art itself in philosophical sciences (in conceptual thought), the fact that art is no longer obliged to serve as the principal medium of the expression of the spirit, frees it, allows it to gain autonomy and stand on its own - is this not the very definition of the birth of modern art proper, no longer subordinated to the task of representing spiritual reality?

The way abrogation relates to sublation is not that of a simple succession or external opposition, not "first you eat, then you shit." Shitting is the immanent CONCLUSION of the entire process: without it, we would be dealing with the "spurious infinity" of an endless process of sublation. The process of sublation itself can only reach its end by the counter-move:

contrary to what one would initially imagine, these two processes of sublation and abrogation are completely interdependent. Considering the last moment of absolute spirit (*Philosophy*), one readily notes the synonymy between the verbs *aufheben* and *befreien* ("to liberate"), as well as *ablegen* ("to discard," "to remove," "to take away"). Speculative abrogation, in no way alien to the process of *Aufhebung*, is indeed its fulfillment. Abrogation is a *sublation of sublation*, the result of the *Aufhebung's* work on itself and, as such, its transformation. The movement of suppression and preservation produces this transformation at a certain moment in history, the moment of Absolute Knowledge. Speculative abrogation is the *absolute sublation*, if by "absolute" we mean a relief or sublation that frees from a certain type of attachment. (Malabou 156)

A true cognition is thus not only the notional "appropriation" of its object: the process of appropriation goes on only as long as cognition remains incomplete. The sign of its completion is that it liberates its object, lets it be, drops it. This is why and how the movement of sublation has to culminate in the self-relating gesture of sublating itself. So what about the obvious counter-argument: is the part which is abrogated, released, not precisely the arbitrary, passing, aspect of the object, that which the notional mediation/reduction can afford to drop as the part which is in itself worthless? This, pre-

cisely, is the illusion to be avoided, on two points. First, the released part is, on the contrary, if one may be permitted to insist on the excremental metaphors, precisely (as discarded) the *manure* of the spiritual development, the ground out of which further development will grow. The release of Nature into its own thus lays the foundation of Spirit proper which can develop itself only out of Nature, as its inherent self-sublation. Second (and more fundamentally), what is released into its own being in speculative cognition is ultimately the object of cognition itself which, when truly grasped (*begriffen*), no longer has to rely on the subject's active intervention, but develops itself following its own conceptual automatism, with the subject reduced to a passive observer who, without its contribution (*Zutun*), lets the thing deploy its potentials and merely registers the process. Which is why the Hegelian cognition is simultaneously active and passive, but both in a sense which radically displaces the Kantian notion of cognition as the unity of activity and passivity. In Kant, the subject actively synthesizes (confers unity on) the content (the sensuous multiplicity) by which he is passively affected. For Hegel, on the contrary, at the level of Absolute Knowing, the cognizing subject is thoroughly passivized: he no longer intervenes into the object, but merely registers the immanent movement of the subject's self-differentiation/self-determination (or, to use a more contemporary term, the object's autopoietic self-organization). The subject is thus, at its most radical, not the agent of the process: the agent is the System (of knowledge) itself which "automatically" deploys itself, without any need for external pushes or impetuses. However, this utter passivity simultaneously involves the greatest activity: it takes the most strenuous effort for the subject to "erase himself" in its particular content, as the agent intervening into the object, and to expose oneself as a neutral medium, the site of the System's self-deployment. Hegel thereby overcomes the standard dualism between System and Freedom, between the Spinozist notion of a substantial *deus sive natura* whose part I am, caught in its determinism, and the Fichtean notion of the subject as the agent opposed to the inert stuff, trying to dominate and appropriate it: *the supreme moment of the subject's freedom is to set free its object*, to leave it to freely deploy itself: "The Idea's absolute freedom consists in . . . that it resolves to freely let go out of itself the moment of its particularity" (Hegel, *Encyclopaedic Knowledge* par. 244). "Absolute freedom" is here literally absolute in the etymological meaning of *absolvere*, releasing, letting it go. Schelling was the first to criticize this move as illegitimate: after Hegel completed the circle of logical self-development of the Notion, being aware that all this development took place in the abstract medium of

thought, outside real life, he had to somehow make the passage to real life - however, there were no categories in his logic to accomplish this passage, which is why he had to resort to terms like "decision" (the Idea "decides" to release Nature from itself), which are not categories of logic, but of will and practical, actual life. This critique clearly misses the way this act of releasing the other is thoroughly *immanent* to the dialectical process, its conclusive moment, the sign of the conclusion of a dialectical circle.

Which is how one should read Hegel's "third syllogism of Philosophy," Spirit-Logic-Nature: the starting point of the speculative movement rendered by this syllogism is spiritual substance into which subjects are immersed; then, through strenuous conceptual work, the wealth of this substance is reduced to its underlying elementary logical/notional structure; once this task is accomplished, the fully developed logical Idea can release Nature out of itself.

So, to pursue the rather tasteless metaphor, Hegel was not a sublimated shit-eater, as the usual notion of the dialectical process would lead us to believe. The matrix of the dialectical process is not that of excrementation-externalization followed up by swallowing up (re-appropriation) of the externalized content, but, on the contrary, of appropriation followed up by the excremental move of dropping it, releasing it, letting it go. What this means is that one should not equate externalization with alienation: the externalization which concludes a cycle of dialectical process is not alienation, it is the highest point of dis-alienation: one really reconciles oneself with some objective content not when one still has to strive to master and control it, but when one can afford the supreme sovereign gesture of releasing this content from oneself, of setting it free. Which is why, incidentally, as some perspicacious interpreters have pointed out, far from subduing nature totally to man, Hegel opens up an unexpected space for ecological awareness: for Hegel, the drive to technologically exploit nature is still a mark of man's finitude; in such an attitude, nature is perceived as an external object, an opposing force to be dominated, while a philosopher, from his standpoint of Absolute Knowing, does not experience nature as a threatening foreign field to be controlled and dominated, but as something to be left to follow its inherent path.

What this means is that the Hegelian Subject-Substance has nothing to do with some kind of mega-Subject who controls the dialectical process, pulling its strings: there is no one pulling the strings and controlling the process - the Hegelian System is a plane without a pilot. Here Louis Althusser was wrong when he opposed the Hegelian Subject-Substance, the "teleo-

logical” process-with-a-subject, to the materialist-dialectical “process without a subject.” Not only is the Hegelian dialectical process the most radical version of a “process without a subject” in the sense of an agent controlling and directing it, be it God or humanity or class as a collective subject - in his late writings, Althusser seems to be aware of this. What Althusser is thoroughly unaware of is how the fact that the Hegelian dialectical process is a “process without a subject” (in the sense of a controlling agent) means exactly the same as Hegel’s fundamental thesis that “it is crucial to grasp the Absolute not only as Substance, but also as Subject”: the emergence of a pure subject *qua* void is strictly correlative to the notion of “System” as the self-deployment of the object itself with no need for any subjective agent to push it forward or to direct it.

So what critics of Hegel’s voracity need is, perhaps, a dose of a good laxative.

University of Ljubljana, Slovenia
and
Birkbeck College, London UK

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