ON THE QUESTION OF THE CONCRETE UNIVERSAL: THE PLURALITY OF LIFE AND DECOLONIAL CRITIQUE

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Abstract. *Hegel's concept of the 'concrete universal' challenges conventional notions of the relationship between the abstract and the concrete. Unlike understandings of universals as exclusively abstract, Hegel's speculative conception posits that true universals embody abstract and concrete qualities. Rather than being static, the concrete universal is dynamic and evolving. Hegel's perspective urges us to envision the concrete universal as transcending the dichotomy between pure abstraction and mere particularity, thereby bringing universality together with concreteness. I contend that such a speculative understanding of the concrete universal can contribute to contemporary and decolonial discourse regarding epistemic politics of identity. Subaltern theories and resistant knowledge projects offer a framework to critique and challenge the partial and exclusionary models of universality propagated by Western philosophical tradition. In actualizing Hegel's speculative dialectic of the concrete universal, we can benefit from this notion in response to the need for a critical reassessment and decolonization of identity, recognition, and epistemic politics. Here, the problem of devalorization and violence by Western predominance is at stake. This problem is not denied but taken as a critical point of departure for decolonial awareness within a culture of conflict, incorporating an epistemic praxis of recognition in the light of a 'normative ideal' of communicative freedom.*

Keywords. *Dialectic; Immanent Critique; Decoloniality; Trust; Communication*

My contribution will comprise three sections. In the first section, I will present two references I will work with to flesh out the speculative notion of the concrete universal. The second section offers an exploration of the systematic core idea, first in terms of a

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political reading of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and then moving on to the reading of the *Science of Logic* for an actualization of the speculative ontology of conceptual emancipation. The very notion of life allows us to clear the form and reality of human freedom. However, this does not mean reducing practical freedom to natural freedom. Instead, it will enable us to better understand modern freedom's internal tensions and challenges as our second nature[1]. My driving idea in this article is to link the phenomenology of recognition with the logical structure of the contradiction. Finally, I will delve into the philosophical ambition behind the engagement with Hegel to rethink universality in the light of epistemic politics and coloniality.

1. *Speculative Dialectic – The Materialism and Life Worldliness of Logics*

Before turning toward contemporaneous epistemic politics and questions of decoloniality, I shall provide conceptual grounds for the following attempt to actualize Hegel's speculative dialectic. Following Michael Theunissen, I consider Hegel's philosophy a philosophy of emancipation, as opposed to *Prima Philosophia*[2]. The *Science of Logic* aims to establish «that everything that is can only be itself in relation and ultimately only as the relation to its other»[3]. According to Theunissen, we can develop the *normative ideal* of communicative freedom as the subject of logic. Theunissen takes the categorical determinations of thought as deposited and embedded in language. Therefore, language is the being from which we must methodically start when it comes to epistemic emancipation. However, they are not consciously present in logical form; instead, they are hidden within it. Moreover, language is the being from which we must start

[1] For an example of such a critical theory of our second nature, see: T. Khurana, *Das Leben der Freiheit: Form und Wirklichkeit der Autonomie*, Berlin, Suhrkamp, 2017.

[2] M. Theunissen, *Hegels Lehre vom absoluten Geist als theologisch-politischer Traktat,* Berlin, de Gruyter, 1970, p 25.

[3] Id., *Sein und Schein. Die kritische Funktion der Hegelschen Logik*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1978, p. 29.

to reveal the logical essence of our thought determinations; language simultaneously denies and renders these logical categorical determinations invisible. Thus, the explication of logical categorical determinations must begin with language. Still, at the same time, it must work against the language from which it starts demonstrating the fundamental categorical determinations of thinking and acting logically. There is no thinking that could avoid using categories of thought such as identity and difference, as all thinking needs to place its objects in continuity and discontinuity to what these objects are not. Hegelian materialism of logic consists of reflecting on the presuppositions and implications of thinking while simultaneously concealing these conditions of thought – the categories of identity and difference are always present and never fully explicit in thinking. These determinations of thinking are also constitutive of everyday human experience but remain unconscious to thinking unless being reflected upon. Thinking about what is unconscious is crucial to achieving conceptual emancipation and communicative freedom. The systematic aim is to rearticulate the phenomenology of recognition in terms of an ontology of the body with the logical framework of the *Science of Logic*, following a dialethic approach.

To explain the idea of communicative freedom, Theunissen adds the notion of an «anthropological archaeology» to characterize the method of Hegel's dialectical logic[4]. Archaeology is Theunissen's proposal for a counter-concept to transcendental philosophy. To conduct materialist logic as archaeology means to start with the notion of pure being to be able to transcend language as being. It sheds light on what is unconscious in thinking and transcends language in this sense. Nevertheless, Hegel's conceptual materialism does not ground thinking in pure form or any transcendental apriorism. According to Hegel, conceptual emancipation is brought about by the archaeology of the historicity of the concept. In this sense, conceptual archaeology is the work of epistemic subjectivity. Therefore, I take it as a starting point for the pursuit of actualization that Hegel's philosophy is a philosophy of emancipation, as opposed to *Prima Philosophia*. This is to say that

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[4] H.F. Fulda, R.-P. Horstmann and M. Theunissen, *Kritische Darstellung der Metaphysik: eine Diskussion über Hegels «Logik»*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1980, p. 90.

as conceptual archaeology of its presuppositions, the *Science of Logic* undertakes an immanent critique of the validity of its categories. It tries to combine the genealogy of categorical forms with the justification of their validity and normative authority within what Hegel calls the «*immanent deduction*» of the concept of the concept[5]. The validity of its categories is shown within the ontological framework of what Theunissen suggests to grasp as Hegel's «generalized theory of communication» and relationality[6].

In the pursuit of actualization, the dialectic of the concept of the concept emerges as a central theme. Rüdiger Bubner provides illuminating insights for a non-transcendental understanding of the pureness of thought, and contends that speculative dialectic constitutes contextual knowledge rather than a priori understanding, emphasizing its roots in lived experience rather than abstract principles[7]. By situating dialectic within the framework of lifeworld or *Lebenswelt*, Bubner underscores its intimate connection to everyday human experience. In this paradigm, Hegel's dialectic transcends its traditional association with mathematical rigor, finding its true essence in the nuanced conversations that unfold within the lifeworld. Through his exploration of dialectic as a *topos* for argumentation, Bubner lays the foundation for a life-worldly theory of rationality, where rational thought is deeply intertwined with the complexities of human existence. In linking Bubner's emphasis on *Lebenswelt* as the precondition of thinking with Theunissens' concept of conceptual materialism, we settle with a notion of the *Science of Logic* as the radical attempt to render conscious what thinking presupposes – the identity and difference of the objects of thought. The actualization of absolute cognition as a method of contextual thinking

[5] G.W.F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik. Zweiter Band. Die subjektive Logik (1816)*, in *Gesammelte Werke* (hereafter *GW*), vol. 12, ed. by F. Hogemann and W. Jaeschke, Hamburg, Felix Meiner, 1981, p. 16; Eng. trans. by G. di Giovanni, *The Science of Logic,* Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 514. Hereafter cited as '*GW* 12'; references indicate the page number of the German edition, with the corresponding page number of the English translation given after it.

[6] Fulda, Horstmann, and Theunissen, *Kritische Darstellung der Metaphysik*, p. 100.

[7] R. Bubner, *Dialektik als Topik: Bausteine zu einer lebensweltlichen Theorie der Rationalität*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1990.

attempts to render self-motion and self-determination as unfolding about the other. Free thinking sets the other free to contradict categories instead of repeating the othering, producing abstract sameness.

2. *Unveiling the Concrete Universal in Hegelian Philosophy*

At the heart of this inquiry lies the systematic core idea encapsulated by the concept of the concrete universal. Contrary to conventional notions of unity based on identity, what drives this inquiry is to understand the Concrete Universal as asserting a unity grounded in difference. Speculation is thinking identity-in-difference. This insight and, to put it with Bubner again, this innovation of Hegel is worth actualizing despite all intrinsic problems with the so-called German idealism – namely that Hegel denied the substantial value of non-European thought. Teshale Tibebu shows in great detail how Hegel's presentation on universalism is intertwined with his philosophy of the historical development of human consciousness. Hegel classified Africans as people arrested at the lowest and most immediate stage of consciousness, that of the senses; Asians as people with divided consciousness, that of the understanding; and Europeans as people of reason.[8] Hegel turns racism from an anthropological into a metaphysical doctrine by claiming that the division of humankind into races follows a «higher necessity»[9].

In the attempt to actualize Hegel's speculative notion of the concrete universal, the aim is not to negate the wrongness of Hegel's philosophy of history but to use his method to develop an understanding of it that integrates and bears responsibility for the fact of the colonial and racist wrongness. This presupposes a contextual and embedded notion of conceptual critique. The core feature of speculative dialectic and the immanent critique of thinking is to grasp identity as binding its constituent elements not through

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[8] T. Tibebu, *Hegel and the Third World: The Making of Eurocentrism in World History*, 1st ed., Syracuse – N.Y., Syracuse University Press, 2011.

[9] D. James and F. Knappik, *Exploring the Metaphysics of Hegel's Racism: The Teleology of the 'Concept' and the Taxonomy of Races*, «Hegel Bulletin», XLIV (1), pp. 99-126.

sameness but through the dynamic interplay of necessity and determinacy. This notion of unity diverges markedly from transcendentalism, highlighting the distinctive features of Hegelian speculative dialectic. Central to this framework is the reconceptualization of absolute cognition as a method of contextual thinking, wherein self-motion and self-determination unfold with the other. According to Hegel, «absolute» denotes neither infallibility nor ultimacy but rather the capacity for dynamic self-motion, a «*universal absolute activity*» (*Allgemeine absolute Thätigkeit*)[10]. By exploring the concrete universal, this paper seeks to elucidate the intricate fabric of Hegelian thought and its implications for understanding the nature of unity and epistemic agency as relational. In articulating relation and communication as the normative core of identity, we gain a standard for an immanent critique of Hegel's racist philosophy of history.

2.1. Hegel's Modern Promise of Trust

The driving ambition of my present engagement with Hegel is to unravel the complexities of Hegel's immanent critique as thinking with Hegel against Hegel. The pivotal question that guides this inquiry is whether, and if so, how we can conceptualize Hegel's speculative dialectical approach to intercultural and decolonial philosophy. Central to this endeavor is openness to dialogue, the exchange of ideas, recognition, and reconciliation, which serve as foundational pillars for intercultural philosophy. In the emerging fields of postcolonial and decolonial studies, critical race theory, and critical philosophy of race, many contributions have engaged with the Hegelian corpus to elucidate the crucial role played by Hegel's philosophy in the conceptualization of racial hierarchies and colonial Eurocentrism that underlie the master narrative of Western modernity[11].

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[10] *GW* 12, p. 238; p. 737.

[11] For an extensive and apt overview, see: J.M.H. Mascat, *Race, Feminism and Critical Race Theories: What's Hegel Got to Do with It?*, in *The Palgrave Handbook of German Idealism and Feminist Philosophy*, ed. by S. Lettow and T. Pulkkinen, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, pp. 329-349.

Following the French reception, put forward by Kojève[12] and Bataille[13] most prominently, the decolonial critique of Hegel often takes his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, more precisely the infamous dialectic of master and servants, as the access point for disputing Eurocentrism epistemically. The argument could be reconstructed as follows. Hegel's fundamental insight concerns the instability of the subjectivity of the master. As for Hegel, the two main dimensions of subject formation are efficacious in and through work and struggle. The struggles we fight and the labor we execute contribute to the reproduction of the life of spirit. Normatively speaking, we deserve recognition for the work and struggle we bring about in our lives. This normative mechanism, this *promise of trust* – work and struggle as contributions to the reproduction of the spirit – is what the master undermines in not recognizing the servant's subjectivity. The master lives off preconditions, which he neither reproduces nor recognizes. This leads to an unsustainable form of life. In this light, the servant is epistemically in a position more advanced than the master. The inward, spiritual freedom actualizes itself outwardly using labor, an actuality that presupposes the servant to grasp their own and the master's set of desires, plus to understand the complexities of the object of labor within the shared yet divided lifeworld[14].

The servant's knowledge integrates the speculative ontology of interdependency of life and the request of recognition of labor and conflict as forms of social reproduction on behalf of the spirit of trust. The Hegelian community of spirit incorporates the normative mechanism of granting recognition for labor and struggle. Absolute knowledge is contextual knowledge as it can reflect upon its conditions of life. As Hegel envisions it, the community of trust lives up to the *promise of trust. The community of the emancipated spirit will recognize all forms of work and expressivity*. The premise of such an

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[12] A. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the* Phenomenology of Spirit, Ithaca – New York, Cornell University Press, 1980.

[13] G. Bataille, *Hegel, der Tod und das Opfer*, in *Hegel, der Mensch und die Geschichte: die Hegel-Essays*, ed. by R. Bischof, Berlin, Matthes & Seitz, 2018, pp. 31-67.

[14] D. Loick, *Fugitive Freedom and Radical Care: Towards a Standpoint Theory of Normativity*, «Philosophy & Social Criticism», LI (6), 2023, pp. 971-989.

understanding of communal emancipation has been famously argued for as Hegel's uptake of Rousseau's social philosophy[15]. A reference to Judith Butler might help make this tangible. The phenomenology of communal emancipation puts a speculative ontology of the body at stake, which allows us to express both the power and precarity of life. «The boundary of who I am» says Butler, «is the boundary of the body, but the boundary of the body never fully belongs to me»[16]. This interdependency makes all human life precarious but is simultaneously why desire, love, and trust are possible. Despite the existential dimension of precariousness, social and political intuitions «maximize precariousness for some and minimize precariousness for others»[17]. A community of spirit would do justice to the speculative ontology of the body, allowing for the recognition of precariousness and expressive power not differentially but in an egalitarian fashion.

The normative authority within a community of spirit actualizes freedom. However, because norms of freedom are not a given but a result, a historically specific articulation of freedom can lose its authority. In addition to its precariousness, the normative promise of trust and concrete negation is, as Rocío Zambrana has pointed out, ambivalent[18]. A history recollected in light of normative commitments central to a form of life simultaneously forgets, buries, makes invisible, and pathologizes events that do not gain authority within the prevailing frame of recognition[19].

Now, this *promise of trust* is what heteronormative, liberal capitalism of Western modernity notoriously fails to deliver for the racialized and gendered dimensions of marginalized lives. The tremendous amount of care work within the domestic realm and beyond reduces female expressivity and remains an implicit demand

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[15] F. Neuhouser, *Foundations of Hegel's Social Theory: Actualizing Freedom*, Cambridge-London, Harvard University Press, 2003.

[16] J. Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, London-New York, Verso, 2009.

[17] Ivi, p. 3.

[18] R. Zambrana, *Hegel's Theory of Intelligibility*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2015.

[19] Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 53.

without recognition[20]. Care work remains a precondition of the life of spirit. Yet, the predominant forms of labor and expressivity that Hegel has in view are gendered, but they remain unconscious in this thinking. The frames of recognition shape the recognizability of life preceding the actual praxis of recognition: The human condition of relationality and interdependency does not render us equal but is distributed differently.

The *promise of trust* is encapsulated within the dialectic of master and servant. It is fleshed out during the unfolding of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Yet, Hegel's materialist archeology still leaves out a significant problem of the Western politics of recognition via accumulation through labor. This concerns the intimate association of modernity and slavery as a fundamental conceptual issue. Paul Gilroy holds that starting with Hegel, while having the intimate association of modernity and slavery in view, allows us to understand conflict and the forms of dependency produced in the relationship between master and slave as issues of brutality and terror, which are also too frequently ignored. This offers, following Gilroy here, an opportunity to reject the Eurocentric rationalism that separates the slave experience from its accounts of modernity without having to hold an «equally occidental anti-humanism which locates the origins of modernity's current crises in the shortcomings of the Enlightenment project»[21]. Instead of abstractly rejecting the promise of trust, we can also try to push forward Hegel's materialist archeology of epistemic agency. Standing in the tradition of French Hegelianism, Kojève, Hyppolite, Sartre, and Fanon's decolonial theory argues with Hegel's dialectic of master and servant against Hegel's Eurocentric philosophy of history. In this spirit, yet turning away from his *Phenomenology*, we ask what the *Science of Logic* and the immanent conceptual deduction offer for a critical and decolonial theory of normativity.

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[20] See K. Hutchings, *Living the Contradictions: Wives, Husbands and Children in Hegel's* Elements of the Philosophy of Right, in *Hegel's Elements of the Philosophy of Right: A Critical Guide*, ed. by D. James, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 97-115.

[21] P. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Cambridge – Mass., Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 54.

2.2. The Question of Dialectic

The following section delves into an exploration of the concept of speculative dialectic. This will abstract from the epistemic politics of embodied recognition, but we will return to this level of concreteness after engaging with Hegel's *realm of shadows*. The driving idea is to link the phenomenology of recognition in terms of an ontology of the body with the logical structure of the contradiction, which shapes the recognizability of the body. Recognition and contradiction are not the same. However, recognition presents a contradictory conceptual structure, as to be oneself is to be oneself in the other – to recognize is to become part of the other, land being dismembered in this transition. This also implies that the other is becoming part of oneself. Thus, recognition bears a teleologically contradictory structure: a part that is a whole, a whole that is a part.

In light of contributing to political and decolonial philosophy, this engagement underscores the significance of dialectic as a fundamental aspect of philosophical inquiry. What needs doing is outlining the guiding understanding of dialectic through four lenses that articulate a criticism of dialectical thinking: Firstly, Aristotle's Distinction between Analysis and Dialectic dissects and examines individual components, and dialectical reasoning, which seeks to establish truth through dialogue and debate. The notion of dialectical reasoning is at stake in Hegel's critique of Kant, particularly of Kant's emphasis on the limitations of human knowledge and the noumenal realm, contrasting it with Hegel's dialectical approach to understanding reality as actuality. The third element is dialethism, the theory of the truth of contradiction. This aspect comprises an exploration of dialetheism, a philosophical position that accepts the existence of true contradictions, challenging traditional notions of logical consistency and truth. Dialetheism will eventually bring us back to understanding dialectic as embedded in the lifeworld, which entails broader implications and applications of dialectic as a topic of philosophical inquiry. Most significant here is to make explicit what is often implicit in the criticism of dialectical thinking, namely to imagine contradiction as unthinkable.

Within Hegel's *Science of Logic*, the final standpoint articulates absolute cognition, which means dialectical thinking keeps itself in motion. This is to say that dialectical thinking incorporates analytical, synthetical thinking as its moments, yet transcending their constraints and supposed foundational laws. Hegel holds:

> This no less synthetic than analytic moment of the *judgment* through which the initial universal determines itself from within itself as the *other of itself* is to be called the *dialectical moment*. *Dialectic* is one of those ancient sciences that have been the most misjudged in the metaphysics of the moderns, and in general also by popular philosophy, both ancient and recent[22].

Dialectical thinking is, according to Hegel, nothing but the method of the absolute idea. Yet we shall ask, what do its moments consist of? This brings us to the first interlocutor, Aristotle. According to Aristotle, analysis is intricately linked with deductive reasoning, particularly exemplified in the syllogism of the *modus (ponendo) ponens*. The analysis is distinguished by fundamental laws such as the Law of Non-Contradiction, the Law of Identity, which conceptualizes Identity as Selfsameness, and the Law of the Excluded Middle, rendering analysis monotonic. Aristotle posits that violating these foundational laws in reasoning would collapse essential distinctions, such as that between substance and accident. Consequently, such a breach would culminate in a state where all distinctions dissolve, merging everything into a singular entity. This notion underscores Aristotle's assertion that contradictions transcend mere lack of understanding; they extend into the realm of the unthinkable, challenging the very fabric of intelligibility[23].

Following Aristotle here, Kant's transcendentalism delves into the philosophical terrain inherited from Aristotle, particularly regarding the notion that contradictions constitute the unthinkable. Within the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant grapples with what he

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[22] *GW* 12, p. 242; p. 741.

[23] See Aristoteles, *Metaphysics*, IV 3-6, trans. by C. Kirwan, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998.

terms as a dialectic of the unthinkable. Reason finds itself ensnared in antinomies while attempting to elucidate fundamental cosmological inquiries concerning the infinity of the universe, the indivisibility of elements, the interplay of causal determination and freedom, and the enigmatic question of God. In his first *Critique*, one of Kant's main concerns is the proof that human freedom is possible, i.e., thinkable without contradiction. In the dialectic section in the first *Critique*, the third antinomy articulates the interplay of causal determination and freedom by two opposing theses. Kant tries to show that, despite their seemingly antinomical character, causal determination and freedom are nothing but a dialectical illusion, which meticulous analysis achieves to dissolve. In his thesis, Kant posits that causality by laws of nature does not singularly underpin all world appearances. Instead, he asserts the necessity of assuming the existence of another form of causality: that of spontaneity. Contrarily, Kant's antithesis refutes the notion of spontaneity, advocating instead for a deterministic worldview where everything unfolds solely by the immutable laws of nature.

In the attempt to dissolve the illusion of determination and freedom, Kant's transcendental idealism, the distinction between the thing in itself and its appearance, becomes a pivotal concept. Kant attempts to dismantle the dialectical illusion of the third antinomy by illustrating its subcontrary character. Indeed, dialectic is defined by Kant as «the logic of illusion [*Schein*]»[24]. While humans are perceived as unfree in the realm of appearance, according to Kant, we possess freedom as noumenal beings existing in the realm of the thing in itself. The transcendental idealism and the split of appearance and thing in itself renders the antinomy thinkable, for it introduces an analytical distinction. As noumena, we are free; as phenomena, we are bound by the laws of nature. Kant's transcendental idealism can also be read in a more anthropological and even political way. Kantians suggest that the gap between noumena and phenomena might offer a wellspring for normative insights and critical analysis of modernity's shortcomings. Red Kantians such as

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[24] I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by P. Guyer and A.W. Wood, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 384; A293/B350.

Herman Cohen or Kantian Marxists such as Otto Bauer applied transcendental idealism to social theory, arguing that the antagonism of capital and labor violates the categorical imperative and realms of ends[25].

From Hegel's perspective, Kant's transcendental dialectic fall prey to the fallacy of *petitio principii*, wherein it assumes the very unity it seeks to demonstrate – the unity of noumena and phenomena. Contrary to the notion of the contradiction being unthinkable, Hegel delves into the intricate framework of thought determinations, diverging from Kant's stance. Instead of following Aristotle's metaphysics, Hegel questions the doctrine of the unthinkability of the contradiction. This statement sets the stage for a departure from Aristotle's perspective and introduces Hegel's critical inquiry into the traditional understanding of the contradiction as unthinkable. Hegel tells us:

> *Speculative thought* consists only in this, in holding firm to contradiction and to itself in the contradiction, but not in the sense that, as it happens in ordinary thought, it would let itself be ruled by it and allow it to dissolve its determinations into just other determinations or into nothing[26].

This passage challenges the traditional notion that contradiction is inherently unthinkable and proposes a reevaluation, suggesting that contradiction is intrinsic to life and that life is a dynamic process of relation and communication. Instead of repeating the «basic prejudice» of the unthinkability of the contradiction[27], Hegel turns things upside down: Contradiction is life. Life is one

[25] For an actualization of red Kantianism, see L. Ypi, *From Revelation to Revolution: The Critique of Religion in Kant and Marx*, «Kantian Review», XXII (4), 2017, pp. 661-681; Ead., *Democratic Dictatorship: Political Legitimacy in Marxist Perspective*, «European Journal of Philosophy», XXVIII (2), 2020, pp. 277-291.

[26] G.W.F. Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik. Erster Band. Die objektive Logik (1812/1813)*, in *GW*, vol. 11, ed. by, F. Hogemann and W. Jaeschke, Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 1978, p. 288; henceforth *GW 11*; Eng. trans. by G. di Giovanni, *The Science of Logic*, p. 383.

[27] *GW* 11, p. 286; p. 381.

when it becomes itself in its other. Life is a relation. Life attains a form of universality not through mechanical relations, but through «communication»[28]. Dialethism thus challenges the traditional assumption that contradictions are necessarily false. Dialethism proposes that there can be true contradictions, asserting that some statements can simultaneously be both true and false. This idea starkly contrasts with classical logic, which upholds the principle of non-contradiction, stating that contradictory propositions cannot both be true in the same sense simultaneously. Dialethism opens up new avenues of philosophical inquiry, prompting us to reconsider the nature of truth, logic, and reality, and invites deep reflection on the limits of our understanding and the complexity of the world around us.

2.3. A Typology of Differences

Hegel presents a structured and abstract elucidation of the thinkability of contradiction through a typology of differences termed *Denkbestimmungen* or determinations of thought[29]. The first category is Diversity (*Verschiedenheit*), which presents a contrarian negation. The Law of Non-Contradiction characterizes this type of negation. However, the Law of Excluded Middle does not hold as other possibilities are feasible. Consequently, Hegel concludes that relations of Diversity fail to establish a comprehensive totality, underscoring the nuanced nature of contradiction within philosophical discourse. Secondly, Hegel's typology of differences characterizes the Opposition (*Gegensatz*) as contradictory negation. The Law of Non-Contradiction applies, whereas this determination of thought is not determinate by the Law of Excluded Middle. Hegel argues that Relations of Opposition form a totality, which he defines as a comprehensive entity going «out of itself and sets its alteration in motion»[30]. Within this totality, contradictory negations maintain

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[28] *GW* 12, p. 137; p. 635.

[29] See T. Wieland, *Die Pluralität des Absoluten: Hegels Theorie sozialen Wandels*, Frankfurt a.M., Klostermann, 2022, pp. 305-335.

[30] *GW* 11, p. 287; p. 382.

their inherent identities despite their oppositional relation, illustrating the intricate nature of contradiction within Hegelian dialectic.

Hegel further elaborates on the typology of differences with the concept of Contradiction (*Widerspruch*). Here, he introduces the notion of concrete negation, neither denoted by the Law of Non-Contradiction nor by the Law of Excluded Middle. This formulation encapsulates the idea that both, A and non-A, can simultaneously be true, emphasizing the complex nature of contradiction. Hegel argues that relations of contradiction form a totality of concrete determinations, illustrating the intricate interplay between opposing elements within his dialectical framework. He presents an alternative perspective to the conventional doctrine of the unthinkability of contradiction by delineating the intelligible boundaries of contradiction through his typology of differences. This approach challenges the notion of a *Prima Philosophia*, suggesting instead a philosophy of emancipation, as noted by Theunissen. In this framework, no singular first principle exists akin to A=A; instead, the totality manifests as life, symbolized as a *circle of circles*. Emancipation, therefore, involves embracing the discomfort of contradictions and transforming them into productive forces. This becomes tangible in the ultimate determination of thought, which Hegel discusses, as well as in the determination of ground, and remarks the following:

> Consequently, *ground* is itself *one of the reflected determinations* of essence, but it is the last, or rather, it is determination determined as sublated determination. In foundering to the ground, the determination of reflection receives its true meaning – that it is the absolute repelling of itself within itself; or again, that the positedness that accrues to essence is such only as sublated, and conversely that only the self-sublating positedness is the positedness of essence. In determining itself as ground, essence determines itself as the not-determined, and only the sublating of its being determined is its determining[31].

The ground of all being is the negation of being determined. The interdependency of identity and difference intertwines one

[31] *GW* 11, p. 291; p. 386.

side's self-determination with the other. Putting relationality and communication at the core of identity, Hegel rejects the Leibnizian idea of sufficient reason. There is no positive, supreme being that entails all possibilities. Hegel explicitly dismisses Leibniz's proposition of «a *characteristica universalis* of concepts – a standard language» (*Schriftsprache)*, emphasizing the inadequacy of such a notion[32]. Yet, against any notion of a mystical and irrational *élan vital*, Hegel's category of the ground of life about communication is depicted as intelligible within Hegel's dialectical framework. It emphasizes the necessity for a profound reevaluation of the «realm of shadows», indicating a deeper understanding of the actuality of life. Dialectic, in this context, represents contextual knowledge rather than a priori knowledge, highlighting its reliance on the specific circumstances and conditions of the situation[33]. The circle that closes is the circle that opens. Following Rocío Zambrana, we are to understand Hegelian actualization (*Verwirklichung*) as a process of determinate negation. Yet, one in which the result must be understood as «precarious and ambivalent»[34]. The whole that is never one, but always-already remains a process. Hegel's typology of differences neither presents an unthinkable antagonism nor an unsolvable tragedy but rather a tension, invoking the idea of reconciliation as rendering productive the complexities of life. Concrete negation puts neither paradox on display. The notion of contradiction puts forward the inner tension of the life of spirit as being spontaneous and receptive, free and bound by laws. Therefore, ambivalence, openness, and nonclosure lay at the core of Hegel's notion of reflection.

In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel treats the reflection problem (*Reflexion*) and ties it to '*Entäußerung*' (externalization). In Hegel's words, reflection is the «movement of becoming and transition that remains within itself»[35]. As Christopher Yeomans has aptly argued, reflection must be understood in terms of the problem of

[32] *GW* 12, p. 109; p. 608.

[33] E. Ficara, *Dialectic and Dialetheism*, «History and Philosophy of Logic», XXXIV (1), 2013, pp. 35-52.

[34] Zambrana, *Hegel's Theory of Intelligibility*, p. 41.

[35] *GW* 11, p. 249; p. 345.

expression: «Expression is a doing, and therefore some kind of change or transformation; expression is generally hard work»[36]. It is, accordingly, a matter of actuality. Expressivity contains an outward movement, and it returns. Such a deflection, the turning or bending-backward-into-self distinctive of reflection, turns out to be the manifestation of actuality. The manifestation of actuality, in turn, is correctly understood in terms of '*Wechselwirkung*' (reciprocity).

Reflection is thereby only adequately conceived of as the reflexivity of actuality. This indicates that the truth of essence is the concept, which requires an account of the idea (*die Idee*), which Hegel glosses as the unity of concept and reality.

That something has actual identity means that it establishes itself in self-determination, but in self-determination, it relates itself substantially to something else. Thus, a boundary is always both transcendent and open, making everything less clear-cut – the good, true, and beautiful bear ambivalence. Reflection along the lines of Hegel takes a stance and does not happen in the void of observing reason. Reflection also determines the object and hence changes itself in relation to its object. Therefore, we cannot provide simple answers and must acknowledge the ethics of ambiguity, borrowing a term from Simone de Beauvoir[37].

Leaving behind the idea of logic as a standard language, we envision why dialectical thinking is the model for context-sensitive rational combination: the life of spirit. The isomorphy of subject and object, i.e., Hegel's conceptual and absolute idealism, invites us to give up the idea of the monotonic standard language. Logic is not a canonical method of proving *doxa* but an organon of knowledge, of *episteme*. Logic is what enables the subjective spirit to see more and more profoundly than sensual intuition. Recall Kant's notion of «intellectual intuition» here[38]. Now, we can situate our

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[36] C. Yeomans, *Freedom and Reflection: Hegel and the Logic of Agency*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 38.

[37] S. de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. by B. Frechtman, New York – NY, Philosophical Library, 2015.

[38] See E. Förster, *The Twenty-Five Years of Philosophy: A Systematic Reconstruction*, Cambridge – Mass., Harvard University Press, 2012.

discussion again and ask questions regarding the applicability of the dialectic. What would be the place of dialectic in the lifeworld? What are the guidelines of free, dialectical cognition? What are the norms of the «absolute idea», which is Hegel's term for dialectical cognition? What happens if we transfer the abstract reflection of thought back to the phenomenology of spirit, to the realm of the politics of trust, with the painstaking presence of colonial wrongness?

3. *A Spirit of Trust?*

In his *A Spirit of Trust*, Robert B. Brandom offers an insightful interpretation of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit,* proposing a conception of normativity that transcends the limitations of modernity and its critics. Brandom's Hegel advocates for a «hermeneutics of magnanimity» by linking trust and «Magnanimous Agency»[39], emphasizing the importance of an expansive and generous interpretive framework in the light of a post-analytical understanding of logic. Brandom contrasts Hegel's immanent deduction of conceptual norms with the genealogical critique of Nietzsche and Foucault, who challenge conventional notions of normativity by highlighting its dependence on contingent factors that undermine its stability. Central to the normativity of spirit are the fundamental principles of trusting, magnanimity, and reconciliation. These principles form the basis for Hegel's vision of normativity, guiding the dialectical process toward a deeper understanding of human agency and societal reconciliation. Brandom's exploration of dialectical hermeneutics sheds light on its crucial aspect of trust and normativity, which concerns its transitivity. If A trusts B, B trusts C; therefore, there is a relation of trust between A and C. Friends of friends are friends, as it were. By emphasizing the relational nature of substance-building, Brandom challenges the notion of self-determination as mere independence and helps to spell out the idea of self-determination as reflexive and communicative reflection. What

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[39] R. Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*, Cambridge – Mass., The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019, p. 621.

is particularly helpful is the idea that self-determination necessitates the integration of external influences and contingencies, leveraging them for personal development. In this view, openness and trust towards the perspectives of others become foundational for reflexive self-determination.

However, a critical perspective arises when considering magnanimity. While Brandom extols its virtues, it is essential to recognize that magnanimity often operates within a privilege framework. The ability to forgive and transcend violence may be contingent upon one's social standing and power relations. Therefore, while magnanimity is laudable, its application and accessibility are deeply entwined with broader social dynamics and inequalities. This critical lens prompts us to question the underlying assumptions and implications of magnanimity within societal structures and power hierarchies.

3.1. The Politics of Trust and Human Freedom?

There is a potential clash between a normativity based on trust and the reality of moral wrongness. This presents a significant challenge. A normativity based on the transitivity of trust encounters a severe objection, the existence of moral wrongness. What if the friend of a friend is the perpetrator? What could a Hegelian answer to this problem look like?

From the perspective of moral liberalism, exemplified by Kant, freedom is perceived as dominion. According to this view, morally wrong actions are not truly free, as the categorical imperative does not bind them. Instead, human behavior is constrained by innate desires and inclinations. Kant acknowledges that individuals often act based on prudential (hypothetical) reasons, aiming to achieve personal happiness. However, he cautions against expecting all individuals, especially those in positions of power, to adhere to categorical reasoning in their actions consistently. In this sense, we may rearticulate the difference between noumena and phenomena as a radical form of universalism. Omri Boehm's radical universalism for example advocates, based on the regulative idea of the categorical imperative, a form of universalism that opposes the established view

that human rights are constructs arising from a specific sociopolitical condition of the liberal West and henceforth impositions on non-Western societies and communities. Based on three human rights constellations – the American Civil War and slavery, the story of Abraham who is supposed to sacrifice his son, and the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians – Boehm argues that human rights are not legal stipulations but universally valid truths grounded in philosophy. Only when we truly understand the humanistic appeal of the biblical prophets and Kant can we uncompromisingly fight injustice – in the name of radical universalism, not in the name of identity[40].

Contrastingly, speculative humanism, as articulated by Hegel, emphasizes communicative freedom as concrete universalism. Here, freedom encompasses the capacity to succeed and the freedom to fail and negate ethical norms. Hegel's theory of punishment reflects this perspective, asserting that moral wrongness warrants appropriate legal consequences – an instance of the negation of the negation[41]. In essence, speculative humanism acknowledges the complexity of human freedom, recognizing that it entails both the potential for ethical action and the possibility of transgression. Hegel's philosophy elucidates the intricate relationship between negation, freedom, and societal progress. While the negation of negation serves as a mechanism for the advancement of spirit's objective, the realization of communicative freedom necessitates the cultivation of practices within civil society. Moreover, Hegel's notion of speculation transcends mere philosophical inquiry; it embodies a philosophy of emancipation, wherein accepting contradictions fosters growth and development. Hegel's circle of circles symbolizes the potential for emancipation through acknowledging, setting free and rendering productive the transformative power of contradiction. In Hegel's framework, art, religion, and philosophy emerge as vehicles for forgiveness, offering avenues for commemorating wrongdoing and pursuing reconciliation. Individuals can find catharsis and satisfaction

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[40] O. Boehm, *Radikaler Universalismus: Jenseits von Identität*, trans. by M. Adrian, Berlin, Propyläen, 2022.

[41] For apt interpretation within Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, see: T. Brooks, *Hegel on Crime and Punishment*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017.

by expressing and confronting anger, while self-reflection practices reveal our true nature and capabilities. Art, in its social function, serves to illuminate the multifaceted and inherently human aspects of the spirit, showcasing its noble aspirations and fallible tendencies.

3.2. And the Colonial Wrong?

Magnanimity is inherently entwined with social power dynamics, serving as a privilege afforded to those who can forgive and transcend negation. Learning to accommodate contradictions within our societal fabric becomes imperative in navigating substantial and persistent wrongs and grappling with historical guilt. Reflecting on the Enlightenment's legacy prompts critical inquiry into its contributions to slavery and colonialism. The racial hierarchy in the nature/spirit distinction structures the onto-epistemic coordinates of Hegel's account of the world history[42], and geography in the lectures inscribe a form of anti-Blackness[43].

The onto-epistemic priority of violence and displacement in the Middle Passage over the experience of conquest stems from the Portuguese expeditions in Africa during the first half of the 15th century, despite its transformation by the conquest and the supposed labor needs that would generate the imperative to obtain African labor in the New World[44].

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[42] R. Zambrana, *Boundary, Ambivalence, Jaibería, or, How to Appropriate Hegel*, in *Creolizing Hegel*, ed. by M.J. Monahan, London-New York, Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017, pp. 24-35.

[43] See V. Lloyd, *Hegel, Blackness, Sovereignty*, in *Nothing Absolute: German Idealism and the Question of Political Theology*, ed. by K. Chepurin and A. Dubilet, New York, Fordham University Press, 2021, pp. 174-187. See also the discussion in R. Bernasconi, *With What Must the Philosophy of World History Begin? On the Racial Basis of Hegel's Eurocentrism*, «Nineteenth-Century Contexts», XXII (2), 2000, pp. 171-201; T. Serequeberhan, *The Idea of Colonialism in Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, «International Philosophical Quarterly», XXIX (3), 1989, pp. 301-318; and A. Stone, *Hegel and Colonialism*, «Hegel Bulletin» XLI (2), 2020, pp. 247-270.

[44] See S. Wynter, *1492: A New World View*, in *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the Americas: a New World View*, ed. by V. Lawrence Hyatt und R.M. Nettleford, Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995, pp. 5-57.

Suppose the problem of colonial violence and its persistence is linked to displacement and dispossession. In that case, the suggestion is tempting of a 'cure', 'healing', or 'recovery', which comes from finding or returning. Hartman is the most skeptical of return and reparation since the Middle Passage is a case of permanent rupture. A more reparative sense of attachment to ancestors and place is present in invocations of indigenous spiritualities. Taking these ideas of negation seriously also reminds us of tensions between indigenous and diasporic perspectives that cannot and should not be easily papered over, between being displaced or dispossessed of one's land being substantially different, despite being forms of violent exploitation. To borrow a phrase from Ann Cvecovic, politically at stake here is a «sense of place as marked by multiple histories»[45].

Can we appreciate Hegel's merits while acknowledging the Eurocentrism and anti-Blackness in his account of world history? The notion of emancipation from slavery evolves beyond a narrative of noblesse oblige to one rooted in struggle, risk, and sacrifice on the part of the enslaved. Thinkers like Marx, Fanon, Butler offer insights into these complex issues, challenging conventional perspectives and advocating for a more nuanced understanding of liberation and social justice. Based on the idea of contradiction as the logical structure of life, can we understand Hegelian actualization (*Verwirklichung*) as a process of determinate negation leading to norms that can be understood as precarious and ambivalent, yet granting trust and reconciliation?

It is crucial and aligns with Hegel's spirit, if not letter, to not conflate forgiving with forgetting. Merely forgetting wrongs leads to abstract negation, which does not break the circle of violence. What would its concrete negation entail? If we are to uphold the idea of critical and speculative humanism, the very idea of a concrete universal based on trust and respect needs actualization. This requires putting into praxis the notion of communicative reflection as self-criticism. The actuality of Western norms of freedom is held captive by a conception of freedom tied to an idea of self-sufficiency and its

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[45] A. Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, Durham, NC – Duke University Press, 2012, p. 152.

institutions based on exploitation. Along the lines of immanent critique, it is held captive by varieties of abstractions. The possibilities of critical intervention, to follow Zambrana here again, reside in the insight into the necessity of the continuous «production and resilience of such unintelligibility, of such unreason, hence of such unfreedom»[46].

Self-criticism takes the materialism of a spirit of trust seriously, i.e., the question of gendered and racialized capitalism. The idealism of a plurality of life as the actuality of the community of trust is the idea that gives life to the concreteness of the spirit as a reciprocal, communicative being that is bound to a common world. Therefore, we must continue to reframe the frame of recognition. In other words, the time is urgent. Why, then, read Hegel in these times? To love the world despite its problems and contradictions, to cultivate, as Arendt would say, an attitude of *Amor Mundi*, means to grasp it conceptually. We must cultivate *Amor Mundi* if the world of spirit is to endure.

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[46] R. Zambrana, *Actuality in Hegel and Marx*, «Hegel Bulletin», XL (1), 2019, pp. 74-91, p. 89.