



Hegel's Excess's

Rasmus Ugilt

Aarhus University

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Abstract

In this article I present a reading of the transition from the first to the second books of Hegel's *Logic*, focusing on the *Encyclopedia Logic*. In particular I investigate the notion of the excess (das Maßlose), which is the final concept Hegel discusses in the first book of that version of the *Logic*. I set the stage for this interpretation by briefly introducing the work of two other Hegel scholars: Dieter Henrich and Slavoj Žižek. Each of them presents a reading of the same transition I am focusing on and argue, as I do, that we can find the key to Hegel's *Logic* in it. Henrich focuses on autonomous negation, Žižek on retroactivity. My aim in the article is to manoeuvre between the suggestions of Henrich and Žižek and to provide a new approach to understanding Hegel in doing so.

Keywords

dialectics, Dieter Henrich, excess, Hegel, negativity, retroactivity, Slavoj Žižek, sufficient reason

That Hegel is a metaphysical thinker is well-known. This elementary trait of his philosophy has resulted in strong criticism from many later philosophers of very different persuasions. Few things unite philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze and John Searle, but one that does is a contempt for Hegelian philosophy. Predictably, Hegel has also had his fair share of defenders. A common trend among many of these has been the effort to minimize the most excessively metaphysical elements of his philosophy. Axel Honneth (1994) has argued for taking everything metaphysical out of Hegel and reading him instead as a theoretician of recognition. Robert Pippin (1989; 2011) has sought to recast Hegel's philosophy as one that presents us primarily with a crucial understanding of normativity. Robert Brandom (1999: 166) finds in Hegel a precursor of his own normative pragmatics.¹ Even Jacques Derrida, as he is most critical of Hegel for belonging to the long tradition of metaphysical phonocentrism, nonetheless notes that there might be more to add: "Hegel is also the thinker of irreducible difference" (1976: 26), which for Derrida is great praise, and amounts to saying that not everything in Hegel is a metaphysical crime.

What unites many defenders of Hegel is thus the effort to remove the metaphysics that for better or worse seem to be part of his legacy. Two very prominent interpreters of Hegel go in the opposite direction: Slavoj Žižek and Dieter Henrich.

For Henrich, Hegel offers the best possible idea of how to construct a totalizing philosophical system. He thinks Hegel comes close to fulfilling the Spinozist dream of a philosophy that explains "hen kai pan"—one and all (Henrich 1982a: 145). For Žižek, on the other hand, Hegel (read through the lens of Jacques Lacan) is the ultimate guide to critical philosophy. His reading of Hegel ties in with his overall philosophical project of giving new life to Marxism, both as a philosophical and political movement. While Henrich could thus be said to be defending the official Hegel of the bourgeois university, Žižek understands Hegel as a philosophical revolutionary. But both of them seem unafraid to admit that Hegel is a metaphysical thinker.²

I agree with both Henrich and Žižek that Hegel is at his most interesting when he is most excessively metaphysical. But I depart from them

¹ In *Absolute Recoil* Žižek details his critique of the "deflated" Hegel that emerges once one takes out the metaphysical core of his thought (2014: 15ff.). In particular he focuses on Robert Pippin's account of Hegel and on the critique Pippin made of Žižek's Hegelianism in a review of *Less than Nothing* "Back to Hegel?" (Pippin 2013).

² It should be noted that Žižek is inspired Henrich's interpretation of Hegel. That is obvious from the sheer number of references to Henrich's readings we encounter in books such as *Less than Nothing* (Žižek 2012). As I will make clear below, however, there are still great and important differences between their readings.

by focusing on the excess itself. The excess (das Maßlose)³ is a logical concept that has received little attention in the reception of Hegel. In the present paper I provide an interpretation of this concept and argue it is crucial for our understanding of the overall structure of Hegel's philosophy. I believe that this concept provides us with a precise understanding of the key concept from Žižek's interpretation of Hegel: retroactivity. I take my interpretation one step further, however, as I argue that the original German term *Nachträglichkeit* could be said to offer a better description of the central features of Hegelian dialectics. Before I examine the concept of the excess directly, I set the stage by briefly considering the central tendencies of Henrich's and Žižek's interpretations of Hegel.

Contradictions

In my view, Hegel's fundamental idea is found in the combined criticism and praise he has for Kant's antinomies of pure reason. Famously, Kant argued that there are four necessary antinomies entailed in philosophizing about the world as a whole, antinomies about 1) the world's finitude versus the world's infinity, 2) the indivisibility versus the divisibility of the objects of the world, 3) the reality of a causality of freedom versus the inexistence of freedom, 4) the existence of a necessary being versus the inexistence of such a being. Kant argued that considerations of these big metaphysical questions would inevitably lead human reason into contradictions (1965:A421/B449ff.), and furthermore that this should be seen as evidence of the limited nature of human reason (1965:A501–2/B530–1, A506/B534). Hegel argues that Kant was on the right track when he argued that there are necessary contradictions, when we consider the objects of the world, but that he missed the crucial point by thinking that the contradictions were a sign of human reason being in error. Kant, according to Hegel, exhibited "tenderness for the things of the world." He explained, "the blemish of contradiction, it seems, could not be allowed to mar the essence of the world" (Hegel 1986a: 127). What Kant should have understood instead, according to Hegel, is the point that contradictions are real. What really exists, the most basic elements of ontology, are contradictions. Thus he famously concludes the section as follows:

The main thing to notice is that the Antinomies are not confined to the four special objects taken from Cosmology: they appear in all objects of

³ In A.V. Miller's translation of the longer *Logic*, the concept is translated as "the measureless," which at first glance may seem more correct (Hegel 1989: 371). I think that it is a too literal translation, however, and that the excess in English comes closer to conveying the sense *das Maßlose* has in ordinary German, where it precisely means the boundless, the exorbitant, the immoderate, or something similar.

every kind, in all conceptions, notions, and Ideas. To know this and to have knowledge of objects in terms of this property is essential to the philosophical endeavor. For the property thus indicated is what we shall afterwards describe as the dialectical influence in logic (Hegel 1986a: 127).⁴

Hegel's point is that there is a necessary contradictory element in all things. Anything that can be said to exist is based on a contradiction, and this, according to Hegel, is precisely what constitutes the dialectical moment in the *Logic*. Indeed, the best definition of dialectics to my mind is the idea that identity is the identity of identity and difference (Hegel 1986b: 39).⁵ My aim in this article is to explain how I think we can make sense of this idea. This takes us into a crucial part of the *Wissenschaft der Logic*, a part that has attracted the attention of many of Hegel's readers: the transition from the first book and the doctrine of being to the second book and the doctrine of essence.

Retroactivity and Ground

This transition is central to both Žižek's and Henrich's interpretations of Hegel. It is in this passage that they each find the central concepts in their interpretations of Hegel. Žižek argues that Hegel's idea of retroactivity, or *Nachträglichkeit*, unfolds in this passage. Henrich argues that the concept of autonomous negation and the identification of system and method are presented here.

⁴ Translations from German to English in the present article are my own. I have consulted more widely used translations when available. Thus I have used William Wallace's work from 1975 as a point of departure for the translations of *The Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (Hegel 1975), but I have amended it in a way that (in my mind) is more adequate. I point out the most crucial changes in the footnotes. Here the translation of "Die Hauptsache, die zu bemerken ist" has been altered from "Here it will be sufficient to say" to "The main thing to notice," and the translation of "gehört zum Wesentlichen der philosophisch Betrachtung" has been altered from "makes a vital part in a philosophical theory" to "is essential to the philosophical endeavour." The latter change is important from my perspective not so much because of the translation of "philosophisch Betrachtung," but rather because of the definite article and the understanding of "wesentlichen." In the Wallace translation this comment seems to indicate that dialectics is *an* important *part* of philosophical investigations. I believe on the other hand that Hegel wanted to stress that we are here dealing with *the* crucial part of *the* philosophical endeavour. Hence, I have also italicized the parts of the text that are in italics in the German original, but which are not in the Wallace translation.

⁵ Henrich also recognizes that this point is crucial—and not only for Hegel but for Fichte too (1978: 307).

In the Hegelian context, retroactivity means the posting of presuppositions (“setzen der voraussetzungen” [Hegel 1986d: 24–25]). It can be hard to even imagine what such an idea entails. Žižek’s introduction to the Lacanian concept of retroactivity is very helpful in this regard. For Lacan, linguistic meaning is in general established retroactively. The beginning of a sentence only becomes fully clear once the sentence is completed—it is always possible that something could be added to what I am saying that would fundamentally alter everything I have said. Consider the following example: “I’ll see you... in Hell... on 24th Street.” Here it is clear that the meaning of the entire sentence including the beginning changes retroactively as we read along. It begins as a simple kind good-bye: “I’ll see you.” Then it changes into a threat of the kind one could expect from a poorly written blockbuster: “I’ll see you in Hell!” Finally it changes again into the confirmation of an appointment (where “Hell” is assumed to be an establishment of some sort located on 24th Street). This is a specially designed example, and therefore a clumsy one, but it demonstrates the point regarding retroactivity that Žižek introduces in his reading of Hegel. Žižek understands Hegel as the philosopher who most radically develops such a conception of retroactivity. As Žižek reads Hegel, his is an ontology of retroactivity.

Turning the retroactive establishment of meaning into an ontological principle has immense consequences, however. It constitutes, in the words of Žižek, the break with the principle of sufficient reason.

The key philosophical implication of Hegelian retroactivity is that it undermines the reign of the Principle of Sufficient Reason: this principle only holds in the condition of linear causality where the sum of past causes determines a future event—retroactivity means that the set of (past, given) reasons is never complete and “sufficient,” since the past reasons are retroactively activated by what is, within the linear order, their effect (Žižek 2012: 213).

Being a more traditional Hegelian, Henrich would certainly reject this consequence. Henrich’s point is rather that Hegel, through his system, provides the best explanation for why “reason” is “sufficient.” However, Henrich’s approach to Hegel and “reason” is ambivalent. This is an issue that is complicated by the fact that the principle of sufficient reason in German is rendered as “Das Prinzip der zureichenden Grund,” and for Henrich the notion of “ground/reason” has a very specific meaning.

Henrich’s interest in Hegel is to establish the best possible Spinozistic system—in the sense of providing a philosophical explanation of *one and all* (in the sense of the Greek “hen kai pan” [Henrich 1982a: 145]). He argues that Hegel shows us how reason, or “Grund,” can be made to be sufficient, or “zureichend.” To provide a sufficient reason in this sense means to explain one and all. However, the ground (in the sense that in-

corporates the notion of reason) is also central to Henrich's critique of Hegel. Henrich believes that a central moment in the development of German idealism is what he calls "Fichte's original insight," which he presented in the article bearing that name ("Fichtes ursprüngliche Einsicht" [Henrich 1966]). For our purposes here, the finer details of Henrich's argument about this insight are less important; the point is that Henrich is convinced that Hegel misses the crucial point Fichte makes, namely that self-consciousness cannot be a reflexive phenomenon. To be self-conscious must be understood in some other way than as a special form of object-oriented consciousness, where the subject, so to speak, takes itself as an object (i.e., *reflects* on itself). Because Hegel, according to Henrich, misses this point, he also misses the necessary progression from Fichte's original insight, which Henrich finds in the work of the poet Hölderlin, which he terms the *ground in consciousness*, and which he discusses at length in the book on the topic (*Grund im Bewusstsein* [Henrich 1992]).

In the present context, only two points about Henrich's ground in consciousness are necessary to comment on. The first follows from what has already been said: ground is the very opposite of reflexivity. Self-consciousness is for Henrich not founded in reflexivity, conceptuality, or any other phenomenon that is linked to understanding or reason. Instead, and this is the second point, the ground of self-consciousness must remain hidden from reflective consciousness. For Henrich, the central element, the ground, of human consciousness can never be raised to the reflective level of thought. A part of me will always remain hidden from me, and paradoxically this is my ground. According to Henrich, Hegel's great philosophical error was never accepting or, for that matter, considering whether self-consciousness can be understood as an original (in the sense of pre-reflexive) unity in consciousness. Instead, Henrich argues, Hegel holds on to the old model of reflection (1982b: 80).

Having formulated this idea, we find another similarity between the works of Henrich and Žižek, who through Lacan remains deeply influenced by Freud. It seems fair to consider Henrich's idea of a ground in consciousness as similar to the Freudian *unconscious*. Henrich, however, would be dismissive of this comparison. He does not discuss psychoanalysis very often, but when he does refer to Freud, he places him in a group of theoreticians (such as, e.g., Marx or Durkheim) who are all rejected for the same reason—namely that they try explain consciousness by reference to some thing, realm, or context that is not explicable in terms of consciousness (Henrich 1982b: 127). To use Henrich's own terms, the problem with these approaches is that the ground of consciousness is placed outside of consciousness. According to Henrich, Freud is guilty of a certain hermeneutic naivety that consists of looking upon consciousness from a third-person perspective, which means explaining what happens in consciousness by something that, in principle, is not experienced in and by consciousness.

Here, the problem for Henrich is that psychoanalysis is far from as naïve as he seems to think. One of Lacan's crucial points is that it does not make sense to explain consciousness from an external point of view. To Lacan, the unconscious is precisely not a force beyond my consciousness that controls my actions behind my back, and which a skilled psychoanalyst from a third-person perspective can decode and explain why I act the way I do. This is not the case in Lacanian psychoanalysis. To put the point briefly, the Lacanian unconscious is a part of me that *thinks*. Briefly put, this is entailed in the famous dictum "l'inconscient est structuré comme un langage" (The unconscious is structured like a language) (Lacan 1973: 23). The unconscious is a form of thought of which I am not fully aware. The job of the psychoanalyst is, therefore, not to explain *why* the analysand is acting as he or she is, but to help him or her become *aware* of what she has already *thought*. In this way, the Lacanian unconscious is something that very much takes place *in* consciousness, and in that way it resembles Henrich's ground to a greater extent than Henrich realizes.⁶

There are limits to the similarities, though. Indeed, they should already be apparent. Lacan's understanding of the unconscious as a form of thought means that it does not fall prey to Henrich's argument about hermeneutic naivety. At the same time, this point posits the Lacanian unconscious in opposition to Henrich's ground, because Henrich's ground is understood as pre-reflexive.

This has some interesting consequences for the philosophical links between Žižek, Henrich, Lacan, and Hegel. While it is clear that Henrich is dissatisfied with Hegel's thoroughly reflexive account of consciousness, and that his reading of Hegel can thus only be a half-hearted endorsement, it is also clear that Hegel's own understanding of consciousness as thoroughly reflexive might be closer to Lacan's—even though Hegel, of course, does not employ the Freudian concept of the unconscious.

System and Method

While Hegel fails in his account of consciousness, for Henrich, he still remains crucial. The most crucial Hegelian insight according to Henrich is the identification of system and method (1982a: 141ff.).⁷ For Henrich, the

⁶ An in depth discussion of the Freudian unconscious and its relation to the notion of ground is found in Mladen Dolar's "Cogito as the Subject of the Unconscious" (1998).

⁷ Henrich's readings of Hegel can be found in "Hegels Logik der Reflexion" ("Hegel's Logic of Reflection") (Henrich 1971: 95–157) and "Hegels Logik der Reflexion. Neue Fassung" ("Hegel's Logic of Reflection. New Version") (Henrich 1978), which constitute detailed textual analyses. He has also produced more overall systematic expositions of the principal points he finds in Hegel's *Logic* in "Hegels Grundoperation. Eine Einleitung in die 'Wissenschaft der Logik'" ("Hegel's fundamental Operation.

system represents the idea that the totality of that which exists can be considered a coherent whole. The problem with this idea is that it should also be possible to consider the very thinking of the system as a part of the systematic whole; however, when thinking a system the activity of thought itself becomes something additional to what was initially thought within the system. In other words, there is a problematic relation between system and method that stems from the very idea of a system as totality. It is this problem that Hegel, according to Henrich, takes seriously in a way no other philosopher has. Hegel solved the problem by developing a logic that is able to identify method and system. He allows the very thinking of the system to be the system. According to Henrich, Hegel constructs his system in such a way that each step in the construction of the system invents the method for making that step and providing reasons for why the step is necessary.

In the present context, I can only discuss at an abstract level what this identification of systematic thought and method amounts to. Henrich's argument is that Hegel can only make this work by giving the system a very specific point of departure: the autonomous negation (1976: 214). The autonomous negation is a negation that according to Henrich entails a logical progression into more and more evolved logical steps. If we begin with the autonomous negation, we are forced to accept a series of logical movements, where each step adds something to the overall system of thought and at the very same time provides the method according to which the step is necessary. Each singular step in the logic provides the method that proves the necessity of making that step.

My question to Henrich does not target the logic of his detailed analysis of Hegel's text. Instead, it is a matter of asking how this identification of method and system is supposed to work at a general level, even if we accept that Henrich proves his point for each of the logical steps. My problem is illustrated by asking the question: when do we know if a certain step is necessary? Before or after it has been taken? If we know before the step is taken, then we can easily say whether the step is necessary or not, but then it appears that the method precedes the system, and thus we miss out on the crucial point Henrich is making about Hegel's identification of system and method. If we only know *after* the step has been taken, then we can possibly have the identification of system and method, because then the step in the construction of the system is truly what creates the method for making that step—but this comes at the price of losing the necessity of taking the step, *as we actually do it*. Each step in the construc-

An Introduction into the 'Science of Logic'" (Henrich 1976) and "Die Formationsbedingungen der Dialektik. Über die Untrennbarkeit der Methode Hegels von Hegels System" ("The Formational Conditions of Dialectics. On the inseparability of Hegel's Method and System") (Henrich 1982a).

tion of the system seems to be a step taken in darkness, if we look at it in this way.

This problem brings us to the theme of retroactivity. The Žižekian way of solving the problem would be to say: precisely! As the step is taken, it is blind, but by taking the step, we retroactively show that it was indeed necessary. Henrich himself seems to go along with this idea, but only to a certain extent. He says of one of the movements he presents in his development: “It is unconditional, which precisely goes to say *pre*-supposed [or *pre*-posited, *voraus*-gesetzt]. In this way we can in a hitherto unknown, but nonetheless valid sense say that it, even though it is posited, it is nonetheless immediate” (1978: 278). In other words, this single movement is precisely established retroactively. But Henrich refuses to turn retroactivity into a general principle. Indeed, the whole point of his reading is that each step must establish its own principle of necessity as I have just pointed out.

In other words, if one chooses the Žižekian explanation for how there can be necessity in each step of the *Logic*, one risks ruining the point Henrich was making from the start of his reading, by focusing on the identity of system and method. One cannot take the explanation involved in making sense of *one* step in the *Logic*, and use that as a general principle for understanding every step in the *Logic*, because that would mean that there is one overarching method to the *Logic* (namely the one prescribed by that general principle), and that in turn would mean that each step in fact does not produce its own method. Thus, from Henrich’s point of view, the solution offered by Žižek is problematic not only because it would destroy the principle of sufficient reason, but also because it destroys the identity of method and system.

This consideration does not solve Henrich’s problem, however. In the end, he explains the relation between method and system by recourse to what I can only consider a hermeneutic cop-out: “In this way the Logic can be understood as a development of sense that *upon completion* makes it possible to understand how it is to be understood” (Henrich 1978: 323, own emphasis added). Here it seems to me that Henrich ends up solving the problems involved in his approach to constructing a Hegelian system by arguing that, once the system is in place, everything will make sense. It is only after the fact of having produced a system that Henrich’s Hegel can tell us how the system made sense, as it was produced. But this does not solve the problem of how we can know that each step taken in the construction of the system is necessary *as we take it*. Offering a promise that it will all make sense *in the end* does not help us make sense of what is going on before we reach the end.

Thus, where Žižek puts stress on an ontological concept of retroactivity that brings him to the point where he gives up on the principle of sufficient reason, Henrich ends up being forced to rely on a certain form of retrospection in order to make his reading of Hegel add up. To my mind,

neither of these options is sufficient. Henrich's position ends up being unable to account for the ontological concept of dialectics. Žižek's position, on the other hand, at one and the same time risks making a general principle out of retroactivity, while perhaps going too far in the dissolution of the principle of sufficient reason. In an attempt to navigate between these positions, I turn, as I have mentioned, to the notion of the excess.

The Excess

Let us begin by considering Hegel's notion of ground.

The Ground is the unity of identity and difference, the truth of what difference and identity have turned out to be—the reflection-into-self, which is equally a reflection-into-other, and vice-versa (Hegel 1986a: 247–48).

This can be understood in more than one way. It can be understood as the denial of the ground Henrich is arguing for when he is discussing the impact of Hölderlin and Fichte. The ground in consciousness is that which is beyond reflection, and in the above passage Hegel argues that the notion of ground is essentially one of reflection. It can also be read along Žižekian lines: there is nothing stable in the notion of ground; it is only produced retroactively by reflection, hence there is no principle of sufficient ground (reason). Henrich thus leaves Hegel behind at this point, and turns instead toward a more robust notion of ground inspired by Hölderlin. Žižek, on the other hand, insists on the Hegelian reflection of the ground, but does so at the price of giving up on the notion of stable ground and sufficient reason.

I believe it is possible to manoeuvre between these two positions and argue the following: precisely because ground is reflected, it has a certain stability. Something sticks and remains the same even in the thoroughly reflected notion of ground. But, and this is crucial, what remains stable may not be the notion of ground that most rationalists will be imagining when they speak of the principle of sufficient reason (ground). It is rather something we encounter in the excess.

Let me introduce this notion with a point that concerns the relation between the two different versions of Hegel's *Logic*: the one that can be found in *The Science of Logic* (*Wissenschaft der logik* [1986c, 1986d]) and the one that constitutes the first part of *The Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1986a). Generally, these are very similar versions of the same philosophical thought; nevertheless, there are crucial differences. First, the version in the encyclopedia is much shorter than the so-called "longer" *Logic*, and therefore the *Logic* of the encyclopedia is known as the

“shorter” *Logic*. This and the fact that the full title of the encyclopedia is **Outline of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences** (*Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse*) has meant that the shorter *Logic* is often considered a less comprehensive version of the longer. Henrich even claims that only the longer *Logic* contains arguments (1978: 231, 1982b: 106). He has good strategic reasons for doing so, seeing as the section of the *Logic* on which he bases his entire interpretation—the passage on reflection—is completely absent in the shorter *Logic* (Henrich 1978: 204). Whereas the longer version introduces us to the logical deliberations on reflection that constitute Henrich’s focus, the shorter one proceeds directly to the notion of identity.

Henrich now supports his claim that Hegel provides no argumentation in the shorter *Logic* by pointing out that it makes no sense at all to imagine that Hegel wanted to make an argument for the transition he introduces between the first and second books of that version. Remember here that the doctrine of being ends with the notion of indifference. Arguing against the shorter *Logic*, Henrich claims that in Hegelian terms it makes no sense at all to make a transition from indifference to identity (Henrich 1978: 204). However, Henrich has made a miscalculation here. The problem is really very simple. The first book of the shorter *Logic* does not close with the concept of indifference; only the first book of the longer *Logic* does. In other words, Henrich argues against the shorter *Logic* by cross-reading the shorter and the longer versions. What Henrich fails to consider is whether there may be a meaningful transition between the first and second books of the shorter *Logic*. This is precisely what I claim there is.

The first crucial step of my argument consists in studying the ending of the first book of the shorter *Logic*. Here, instead of the notion of indifference, we find the notion of excess (*Das Maßlose*). In order to understand this notion, it is important to first understand the notion of measure, and in order to understand that, one must at least know something about what happened previously in the first book of the *Logic*. The title of the first part of the first book is “Quality” (Hegel 1986c: 82). Here, Hegel famously addresses the concepts of being, nothing, becoming, *Dasein*, determinate being, and unity. The title of the second part is “Quantity,” (1986c: 209), and it just as famously addresses the concepts of numbers, intensive and extensive magnitude, and the finite and infinite. The third part on “Measure” presents the synthesis of the two previous parts (1986c: 387). That is, measure should be understood as the combination of quality and quantity. The notion that something can be measured means that there is a certain quantity that fits what it qualitatively is. In the shorter *Logic*, Hegel gives a very good example from the world of politics:

The constitution of a little Swiss canton does not suit a great kingdom; and, similarly, the constitution of the Roman republic was unsuitable

when transferred to the small imperial towns of Germany (Hegel 1986a: 227).

Measure means that certain quantities match certain qualities. Hegel points out that this relation is flexible—it has no specific boundaries. It is not necessary to change the constitution of a state because a couple of thousand citizens are added. However, if the state becomes an empire that covers an entire continent, it does become necessary to consider whether the constitution should be changed.

Let me be more specific by introducing another example. It takes a certain number of grains of sand to create a pile of sand. However, an even larger number of grains of sand does not constitute a pile of sand, but rather a beach or a desert. The point of the notion of measure is that it is not possible to say precisely how many grains of sand are needed to make a pile, but at the same time to say that there are limits. Roughly speaking, a certain quantity fits a certain quality. “Speaking roughly,” however, is not something that should satisfy us when we are dealing with Hegelian logic.

This is where the notion of the excess becomes interesting. “The excess is now the instance where a measure through its quantitative nature has moved beyond its qualitative character” (Hegel 1986a: 227). To Hegel, the excessive is not simply a vague term for that which is overwhelming or powerful; it is a very precise term for a disproportion between quality and quantity. The excessive is what happens when the quantity becomes so large that it breaks the quality. If you put too much air into a balloon it eventually turns into a scrap of rubber. To return to the above example, the excessive can be determined by the following statement: “A desert is a pile of sand.”

An important point here is that there is a mutual conditional relationship between measure and excess. The reason why we can say that a certain amount of sand constitutes a pile and that another amount of sand constitutes a desert is precisely that we understand the transgression in saying that “a desert is a pile of sand.” We are unable to say precisely how much sand is too much for a pile, but we can say that “a desert is a pile of sand” is excessive. On the other hand, the very idea of a transgression depends on the boundary that is transgressed. In other words, we can only understand the notion of excess on the basis of the notion of measure. What basis do we have for saying that “a desert is a pile of sand” is excessive? Clearly, it must rely upon our knowledge of what a pile of sand is and is not. But this we have only been able to establish by drawing upon the idea that “a desert is a pile of sand” is excessive. Thus, we appear to be running in a circle where all fixed reference points are lost.

Following Henrich’s reading of this part, it makes good sense to conclude that this leads to the notion of indifference, which would mean that it is necessary to take his path into the doctrine of essence. In this way,

the result of the mutual conditional relationship between measure and excess would be that everything eventually dissolves into indifference—at least until we take the next step and begin again with the autonomous negation. However, this conclusion is too hasty, I believe.

The point is that the mutual dependence between measure and excess not only tells us that all categories eventually dissolve and leave us with indifference. It also tells us something important about what it actually means to use and apply concepts of measure once we have learned about the dissolution, namely that *the very act of using concepts of measure is excessive*. The mutual conditional relationship between measure and excess is not an equal relationship (the consequence of which could be said to be indifference), but a relationship that tilts to one side. Due to the mutual conditional relationship between measure and excess, there is no logical founding for the use of concepts of measure, and therefore using them is excessive. The truth about measure is not just indifference, but excess. To say that “a desert is a pile of sand” is no more excessive than to say that “a pile of sand is a pile of sand.” The latter statement also involves a fringe, something unfounded. To say that a pile of sand is a pile of sand is in a way to assert that the phenomenon is more determinable than it actually is.

The important point, however, is not to simply conclude by saying that all use of concepts of measure is violent and unreasonable. Because the interesting thing about the notion of excess is, as we saw above, that it does not merely refer to something that is overwhelmingly undeterminable or immense; it is, instead, a very precise notion of the disproportion between quality and quantity. In other words, it is possible to say something concrete about the kind of excess that constitutes the truth about measure. The point is not that the analysis of measure leaves us in a chaotic blur; the point is that it leaves us in a position of disproportion. That the use of empirical concepts such as “desert” or “pile of sand” is excessive means not that everything is indifferent, only that something in these concepts is slightly skewed. Let us take a closer look at Hegel’s text to clarify this point.

The process of measure, instead of being only the bad infinite of an endless progression, in the shape of an ever-recurrent shift from quality to quantity and from quantity to quality, is also a true infinity of merging with itself in its other (Hegel 1986a: 229).⁸

⁸ I have here taken care to make the final formula “is also a true infinity of merging with itself in its other” as close to the German original as possible “die wahre Unendlichkeit des in seinem Anderen mit sich selbst Zusammengehens.” The Wallace translation reads: “is also a true infinity of coincidence with self in other.” I explain the importance of this formula below.

My interpretation of the relation between measure and excess can help us greatly in making sense of this passage. The shift (*Umschlag*) from quantity to quality (and vice versa) takes place at the point of the excess. When too great a quantity of air is added to a balloon, it undergoes a qualitative shift from balloon to scrap of rubber. When too much sand is added to a pile, it shifts from pile to desert. Quantitative changes shift into qualitative ones. However, when the relationship between measure and excess appears to be based only on the fact that they mutually condition each other, the statement “a pile of sand is a pile of sand” is, as mentioned above, just as excessive as the statement “a desert is a pile of sand.” This means that the shift from quality to quantity does not merely happen once—as soon as it has happened, it happens again. This is precisely what Hegel calls bad infinity (*schlechte Unendlichkeit*) here, and it ends with the total indifference of the notion of measure. All uses of concepts of measure, even tautological ones like “a pile of sand is a pile of sand,” encompass an infinite exchange of ordered measure and excess. “A pile of sand is a pile of sand” is at once a matter of course and completely crazy.

However, Hegel does not merely argue that the situation ends with bad infinity. He also says that a truth occurs in this process. He describes this truth as “merging with itself in its other” (“in seinem Anderen mit sich selbst Zusammengehen”). This is a classic Hegelian statement that says that something only becomes what it is by being reflected in its otherness. Central to this statement is the possessive pronoun “its” (“in *seinem* Anderen”). This otherness in which something is reflected and becomes itself is not just any otherness. It can be understood by drawing upon the notion of the excess. Recall again the idea that “a desert is a pile of sand.” The excess that is expressed here is very different from the otherness that may, for example, be expressed in “a desert is a pair of shoes.” The difference lies in the affiliation, in the fact that a pile of sand represents the otherness *of the* desert, whereas “a pair of shoes” is just something other than a desert. This difference between the desert’s *own* otherness, which is a pile of sand, and what is merely something other than a desert, such as, for example, a pair of shoes, is precisely the difference between, on the one hand, the dissolution of all concepts of measure into indifference, and on the other, the establishment of the truth of measure in the excess.

It is in fact possible to establish a truth in the notion of measure that is not dissolved into indifference, but this truth is the excessive. The excessive as the truth about measure is the transgressive, but at the same time (almost) meaningful affiliation between a notion and *its* otherness. The point is, in other words, that measured conceptions are based on the misconception that is the excess.

The importance of these considerations of the relation between excess and measure is clearly indicated by a passage that follows shortly after the one I have just discussed:

In the process of measure, therefore, these two [quality and quantity] pass into each other [...] and thus we get Being that is negated in its characteristics, which is the sublated Being, or *Essence* (Hegel 1986a: 229).

As Hegel puts it, we finally encounter the notion of essence (*Wesen*) in the transitions from quality to quantity and vice versa. The way in which essence emerges from these transitions is, of course, crucial. Here, Hegel turns once again to the formulation that focuses on the relation of something to *its* otherness:

In the sphere of Being, when something becomes another, the something has vanished. Not so in Essence: here there is no real other, but only difference, relation of the one to *its* other (Hegel 1986a: 229).⁹

The logical steps of the doctrine of being are characterized by being transitions. That means that nothing remains of what existed before the transition. When “being” turns into “nothingness” in the first step of the first book of the *Logic*, “being” disappears. The logical steps of the doctrine of essence, however, are here characterized as “relations of the one to *its* other.” This kind of relation is just the one we have seen unfolded in the notion of the excess. The relation of the doctrine of essence is the kind that exists between a desert and a pile of sand in “a desert is a pile of sand.”

This clarifies the way we should approach the doctrine of essence. Following my argument, the structure of this part of the *Logic* is given to us in the excessive relation. In the present context, I can only show how this relates to the first notion of essence Hegel introduces in the shorter *Logic*: identity. This, however, accomplishes quite a lot. First of all, it proves that Henrich is mistaken in his dismissal of the shorter *Logic*. Second of all, by showing how the excess is at work in the notion of identity, I present my understanding of the Hegelian formula of dialectics announced above—the identity of identity and difference, because this is exactly the notion of identity he offers in the beginning of the doctrine of essence: “The identity is thus in it-self absolute non-identity” (Hegel 1986d: 41).

The discussion of the relation between measure and excess taught us that the truth about measure is an excess and, in continuation thereof, that the statement, “a desert is a pile of sand,” is no more excessive than the—on the face of it more innocent—statement, “a pile of sand is a pile of sand.” Now, the latter statement is merely an example of the identity sentence: “A = A.” This means that reading the passage on identity against

⁹ Hegel himself emphasizes the word *its* (*seinem*).

the backdrop of the notion of the excess makes a lot of sense. In so many words, it is precisely the excess within identity that tells us that identity is always identity and non-identity. The paradoxical way in which excess attaches itself to the measured provides us with the fundamental logical idea that Hegel pursues in the doctrine of essence. The identity of identity and difference can be understood through the excess.

When Hegel is arguing that there are contradictions in *all* objects of *all* kinds, and that this is what constitutes the dialectical moment in logic (1986a: 127), he is not merely arguing that everything is always both itself and its own contradiction; that would lead to a generalized and rather uninteresting form of indifference, where everything is stuck in a puddle of difference and identity at the same time. On the contrary, there is a structure (described by the excess) to the contradictions which, according to Hegel, are everywhere. This does not dissolve everything into meaninglessness; instead, it forces us to keep on thinking. There is a tension in the use of concepts that does not dissolve conceptual meaning, but rather constitutes it. What constitutes meaning is not the absolute certainty that we know exactly what we mean when we say “pile of sand” or “desert,” but rather the very uncertainty involved in conceptuality. An ordered and meaningful universe does not emerge whenever we are able to say, “I know precisely what this is all about,” but rather as a result of a slight worry, “something doesn’t quite add up here.”

Having formulated this point in terms of conceptuality and meaning, the reader might think that this point about the excess of identity only concerns the *concept* of identity. In other words, what I am arguing here only concerns our conceptual access to the world and not the world itself. That, however, would be to repeat the Kantian mistake of showing too much tenderness (*Zärtlichkeit*) for the world. What is entailed in the dialectical conception of identity does not stop at the border of the realm of concepts. Everything that *is* has a logical structure that somehow involves identity. The table I am sitting in front of is no less and no more identical than the concept I use to describe it; the same goes for my computer, my home, my family, or for that matter an atom, or a cluster of galaxies. The interesting thing about setting out from a dialectical thought that identity is the identity of identity and difference is that it is restrained neither from the point of view of conceptuality, nor from that of objectivity, nor from any other possible realm of ontological demarcation. Seen in this way, Hegel is neither an idealist, nor a realist, neither a subjectivist, nor an objectivist. He is a monist, precisely in the sense pointed out by Henrich above: Hegel’s dialectic encompasses one and all. In this way, to argue that there is somehow a limit to the dialectical structure, that it only concerns conceptuality and not the things of the world (as they are in themselves) is itself to make an extra conceptual assumption—one that is legitimized first of all by tenderness. The commonsensical assumption that a thing is a thing and not something else is, in this view, the genu-

inely idealist (and mistaken) position. Assuming that there is a reality of stable objects beyond the ontological structure of identity is the truly (and problematic) idealist gesture. It is precisely to project certain inherited, even commonsensical, conceptual structures (of identity) onto the world itself.

Rather than assuming that the world is perfectly all right as it is, and thinking that the unease introduced by the notion of the excess is merely something that pertains to our flawed access to the world, the Hegelian position would be to accept that nothing escapes the points I have made here about measure, excess, and identity. The thorough Hegelian ontologist is the one who accepts and sets out from the idea that it is not only the times that are “out of joint,” as Hamlet famously put it, but indeed everything.

Conclusion: *Nachträglichkeit*

This brings me to the concluding point. What I have argued above is the following: Hegelian dialectics can helpfully be understood through recourse to the notion of the excess that we encounter at the end of the first book of the shorter *Logic*. In making this argument, I have drawn upon the works of Žižek and Henrich. I have noted some of the crucial similarities and differences between their approaches and detailed how I position myself between them. Both Žižek and Henrich argue that Hegel’s *Logic* should be read in the sense that it was written: as a work of fundamental ontology. Thus, they agree that there is a metaphysical core to Hegel’s philosophy, which, therefore, should not be reduced to reflections on normativity, conceptuality, or sociality. On this point, I can only agree. Furthermore, I have pointed out that Henrich and Žižek have highly dissimilar views on the functioning of retroactivity and ground/reason in Hegel’s *Logic*. Žižek takes retroactivity to be the guiding idea of the work, and he follows through on this idea to the point where he argues that it means the sacrifice of the principle of sufficient reason.¹⁰ Henrich, on the one hand, argues that Hegel’s *Logic* provides the best possible systematic proof of how reason (*Grund*) is sufficient (*zureichend*), but on the other hand, he argues that there is a crucial understanding of ground (*Grund im Bewusstsein*) that Hegel never accepted or perhaps even understood. What I would like to do in conclusion is, therefore, to spell out in a few

¹⁰ In this way, classifying Žižek as a metaphysical thinker might seem odd. Indeed, if a fundamental gesture of metaphysics is the positing of an absolute “Ground,” an ultimate explainer, then Žižek’s Hegelianism could be characterized as an anti-metaphysical one. I believe, however, that Žižek’s core ontological claim, that reality is incomplete, qualifies as a genuine metaphysical position (see, e.g., Žižek 2014: 192ff.). It may be a modernist metaphysics, but it is still metaphysics.

reflections how I think my reading relates to the two crucial themes of ground and retroactivity. Here, the Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, which Žižek translates as retroactivity, is central.

Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* can serve quite well to describe what I have been discussing in terms of the excess. The original German is important, because even though it can be translated as retroactivity, it is in other contexts translated as "belatedness" or "afterwardsness," which comes closer to the definition I am looking for here.

When Žižek speaks of retroactivity, he often speaks of events or acts that retroactively posit their own conditions for emergence. The trauma is a good example. In psychoanalytic theory, we can roughly say that the trauma is the cause of the symptom. In other words, I act in a certain symptomatic way because of some traumatic experience. It is a crucial point, however, that the trauma does not need to have actually happened. In many cases, it is being retroactively produced by the symptomatic behavior itself. In other words, the trauma is "belated." It only begins to exist as trauma "too late."

Žižek has used this notion of retroactivity to describe for instance a certain feature of the genuine ethical (revolutionary) act that creates the conditions for its own emergence. What differentiates the Žižekian concept of retroactivity from that of *Nachträglichkeit*, which I prefer, can be made clear by considering that they offer quite different perspectives on the act. In *retroactivity* emphasis is put on the *activity* of establishing the conditions for the act itself. Here, we can also see the contours of Žižek's at times very radical understanding of freedom; to be free in this light means to be able to alter the very conditions for one's own actions. The point of my reading of the transition from the first to the second book of Hegel's *Logic* is to take a different perspective, namely that of the element that appears "too late." In this part of the *Logic*, I think it is too early to look for understandings of freedom and actions. Instead, what I think we can find here is a description of what could be termed the structure of the dialectic inherent in being.

Nachträglichkeit is a term I think can capture this dynamic quite nicely, although "belatedness" also works. One could argue that what happens in the statement "a desert is a pile of sand" is that "pile of sand" is "too late"—as though "desert" settled down long ago, and suddenly "pile of sand" arrives and wants in. The German word *Tragen* means dragging or pulling and *nach* means after. Thus, *Nachträglichkeit* can be understood as the thing that one drags along: a kind of ontological backlog. The relation between a desert and a pile of sand in the excessive relation that "a desert is a pile of sand" is *Nachträglichkeit*: no matter where it goes, the desert is always dragging along a "pile of sand."

Being is not structured on the basis of a stable ground that is identical to itself, and thus capable of supporting the rest of the ontological edifice. Instead, it is structured around something rather more dynamic:

a slight mistake. The dynamic structure of being can be described as the excess inherent in the notion of identity understood as the identity of identity and difference.

To argue in this way does not mean that we have to discard the principle of sufficient reason (Ground), but it does mean that it should be understood in a rather special way. What could be said to remain stable when everything is understood as moving dialectically between identity and difference? I think a good answer to this question would be the very *Nachträglichkeit* of the excess itself. Ground should be understood as an excessive backlog.

Ground is of course not “a pile of sand.” In Hegelian philosophy, ground is certainly not a ghost of universal proportions either (even though his “Spirit” at times has been misunderstood in this way). Ground is neither subject nor object. In Hegelian philosophy, there cannot be given any one “thing” that is truly “it,” that is, which truly serves as THE sufficient reason. Instead, ground is, as we recall, thoroughly reflected. But that does not mean that there is no ground at all; it does not mean that ground (or reason) is completely dissolved. The Hegelian notion of ground is, rather, captured by the notion that there is always “a pile of sand” that is dragged along by any desert. There is always an appendix to being, a something that never quite fits the bill. Something extra. In other words, if the principle of sufficient reason is challenged by Hegelian philosophy, it is not because we cannot give a reason for all there is. We can. The problem is, rather, that there tends to be an excess of reason. There is always the extra element that seems to be out of place.

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