



KNOBLOCH · LUCCI (Hg.)
Gegen das Leben, gegen die Welt,
gegen mich selbst

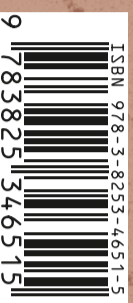
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LUCCI
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Figuren der Negativität

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Was ist gemeint, wenn wir von Negativität sprechen? Mag der Begriff in seiner Geschichte auch viele unterschiedliche Bestimmungen erfahren haben, so ist diesen doch eines gemeinsam: die Betonung einer gesteigerten Form der Verneinung. Der vorliegende Band versammelt Beiträge aus Philosophie, Literatur-, Religions- und Kulturwissenschaft, um diesem Aspekt von Negativität systematisch sowie in begriffs- und sachgeschichtlicher Hinsicht nachzugehen. Neu ist dabei der Ansatz, den Negativitätsbegriff gezielt zu pluralisieren: einerseits durch Herauslösung aus seiner Bindung an (nach-)hegelianische Lesarten, andererseits durch Konkretisierung. Dies bedeutet, Negativität in ihre diskursiven, medialen und kulturellen Kontexte einzuordnen, sie an Beispielen zu veranschaulichen sowie theoretische Positionen in Bezug zu kulturellen Artefakten zu setzen. In den Blick rücken so nicht nur Texte, sondern auch Figuren, Narrative, Bilder und Praktiken, in denen sich Negativität manifestiert.



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Danksagung

Dank gilt all denen, ohne die es dieses Buch nicht gäbe: Den Teilnehmer*innen des Doktorandenkolloquiums, das Iris Därmann und Thomas Macho am Institut für Kulturwissenschaft der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin leiten; den Studierenden des Seminars zur „Kulturgeschichte der Negativität“, die uns im Wintersemester 2017/18 wertvolle Anregungen geliefert haben; den zahlreichen Kolleginnen und Kollegen, Freundinnen und Freunden für die ausdauernden Gespräche, die nie im Negativen versunken sind.

Der vorliegende Band geht auf eine gleichnamige Tagung zurück, die vom 16.–18. Januar am Internationalen Forschungszentrum Kulturwissenschaften (IFK) in Wien stattfand. Für die großzügige Unterstützung sind wir dem IFK sowie dem Institut für Romanistik der Humboldt-Universität zu Dank verpflichtet. Wir bedanken uns außerdem sehr herzlich beim IFK-Team, insbesondere bei Thomas Macho, Johanna Richter und Julia Boog-Kaminski, die mit ihrer fachlichen wie organisatorischen Expertise die Veranstaltung erst ermöglicht haben. Danken möchten wir außerdem für den Druckkostenzuschuss, den das IFK, das Forschungsinstitut für Philosophie Hannover und das Institut für Romanistik der Universität Kassel übernommen haben. Dank schulden wir auch Antonia Kruse und Marta Lietti für ihre wertvolle Mitarbeit an der Redaktion des Bandes; ebenso dem SFMoMA und der Rauschenberg Foundation für die Erlaubnis, Robert Rauschenbergs *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) auf das Tagungsplakat und das Buchcover zu drucken: Es verleiht unserer Vorstellung von Figuren der Negativität paradigmatischen Ausdruck.

Last but certainly not least sei den Autorinnen und Autoren, die an diesem Buch mitgewirkt haben, dafür gedankt, dass sie so wertvolle Texte beige-steuert und uns stets mit Geduld und Offenheit auf unserer *via negativa* begleitet haben.

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FRANCESCA BRENCIO (Sevilla)

The Algebra of Negativity. Hegel, Heidegger and their Legacy in the Contemporary Scenario

I Introduction

Through this essay I aim to offer some insights into the notion of negativity in order to show its mutual relations with the broader themes of nothingness and subjectivity. At the core of this work there are two goals. Firstly, it is to show how the western metaphysical tradition for many centuries has swept the notion of nothingness and its implications under the carpet, favouring the notion of 'being' as the speculative central theme that underlies both our philosophical and religious tradition. Obviously, this has had important consequences that affect not only philosophy but also science, medicine, literature, and arts. This has also affected, to some extent, the way we conceive life in general and the way we live our personal life in particular. Secondly, this essay intends to stress how a different way of thinking about negativity may contribute to a radical change in understanding subjectivity (that is, who we are, our place in the world, our relationships and our knowledge) enriching the movement toward otherness. To achieve these aims, this contribution will be split into two sections. The first section will be a clarification of the notion of negativity according to three fundamental aspects (logical, metaphysical and ontological) with a specific focus on Hegel and Heidegger. In the second section, I will provide an interpretation of subjectivity from the point of view of the so-called negativity. In this regard, my interpretation of negativity is inclined to look at it as a modal property, a *modus essendi*, which means that negativity deals with the logic of possibility and as such can inaugurate new philosophical pathways. These can enlarge the relationship between man and word overcoming the dualistic distinction between being and nothingness.

Before commencing with the first part of this work, I would like to recall very briefly the role that negativity and nothingness have played in the history of western philosophy. For many centuries they have been underestimated by the western philosophical tradition in favour of the priority to understand the notion of 'being' and its meanings because, according to this tradition, nothingness cannot exist: it exists only and always in terms of 'not being'. Likewise, negativity and negation don't exist *per se*, but only as the negativity and the negation of something, or of an affirmation. In ancient philosophy, from Parmenides to Aristotle, this theme assumed a central role in every philosophical assumption, work and debate. During the first centuries of Christianity and in the middle ages, the notions of nothingness and negativity were solely the interest of some mystics and theological philosophers, sometimes with reference to the issue of evil. In fact, often the notion of negativity has been interpreted in opposition to the notion of positivity, conferring to the latter a constellation of meanings and properties which, translated into the metaphysical and catholic frameworks, can only refer to God, while the former is that which is distant from God and its attributes: as such, negativity has been reduced for many centuries to an attribute of evil, mainly due to the so-called naturalistic fallacy. The main reason for this lack of interest and investigation into the themes of nothingness and negativity throughout the history of western philosophy must be found in the nature of metaphysics. Metaphysics deals with the investigation and the study of *what exists*, while that which cannot exist – such as nothingness, defined as the privation of what exists – was not taken into account. Likewise, negativity was reduced to a matter of logic discussed only with reference to what is not negative: in other words, only to what exists.

It is only in modern philosophy¹ that nothingness receives a proper philosophical consideration and revaluation through the contribution of many pivotal authors in the philosophical scenario. In their reflections on nothingness and negativity, Leibniz, Schelling, and Hegel, for example, call into question many important principles that ground western logic, such as the principle of non-contradiction and the principle of identity, and

¹ On this topic see Gerhard Gamm: *Flucht aus der Kategorie: Die Positivierung des Unbestimmten als Ausgang der Moderne*, Berlin 1994; Ludger Lütkehaus: *Nichts*, Zürich 1999; Andreas Hetzel (ed.): *Negativität und Unbestimmtheit. Beiträge zu einer Philosophie des Nichtwissens*, Bielefeld 2005.

they show their versatility through their possible use. It was in the last three centuries that the notions of nothingness and negativity were investigated from different standpoints, both from the perspectives of so-called continental and analytic philosophy. Philosophy had to deal with the notion of nothingness, which was, for a long time, underestimated by speculative thinking. From the perspective of speculative thinking, the issue of nothingness appeared to hold many provocative challenges, among which we can recall the relationship with negativity, with subjectivity and with alterity. This is a fundamental point: more often than not, perhaps also due to the use and abuse of philosophical words in ordinary language, we tend to confuse and overlap the notion of nothingness with the notion of negativity. Negativity is an issue of logic which can also be inscribed into the metaphysical discourse on nothingness. The results of these investigations serve as landmarks that highlight the important transition from the *logic of negation* to the *semantic of nothingness*.² With these expressions, I mean the transition from the logical realm to the ontological one, in which negativity is considered not only as a logical connective, but also as a subject of ontological investigation. In other words, it is treated as ‘something’, and as such, it exists.³

II The Algebra of Negativity: Logic, Metaphysics and Ontology

What do we mean when we use the word negativity? This question can be addressed from three different standpoints and framed into three fields of knowledge: logic, metaphysics and ontology.

Logic is the science that determines the criteria required for the validity of arguments. The first definition of logic was provided by Aristotle,⁴ who

² On this topic I refer the reader to Klaus von Heusinger/Claudia Maienborn/Paul Portner (eds.): *Semantics: An International Handbook of Natural Language Meaning*, Berlin 2011.

³ On this aspect, see Bertrand Russell: *On Denoting*, in: *Mind. New Series* 14 (1905), pp. 479–493; Willard Van Orman Quine: *On What There Is*, in: *Review of Metaphysics* 2:5 (1948), pp. 21–38.

⁴ See Aristotle: *Prior Analytics*, ed. by Gisela Striker (translated with a commentary), Oxford 1997. For a clarification of Aristotelian logic in connection with modern logic see Jan Łukasiewicz: *Aristotle's Syllogistic from the Standpoint of Modern Formal Logic*, Oxford 1957. On the relationship between

defined it as a method to be used in building and dismantling deductions, whose most important results appear in his theory of inference, traditionally called the syllogism. However, throughout the centuries, logic was developed into a more complex and vivid system. Kant⁵ conceives logic as the science of our understanding, and he divides logic into two spheres: *formal logic*, which investigates pure forms and the structure of understanding and thinking; and *transcendental logic*, which focuses on the basic kinds of representational contents that our understanding makes use of in these acts. Nonetheless, it was Hegel's merit to elevate logic to the fundamental ground of philosophy.⁶ His famous definition of logic is well-known: logic must be understood as "the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature and a finite mind."⁷

In our era,⁸ logic has been explored by many authors (i.e., Frege, Russell, Gödel, Quine just to name a few of them) and most of them convey the idea that logic is supposed to be *ontologically neutral*. It ought to have nothing to do with questions concerning what there is, or whether there is anything at all. In other words, logic should be free from any metaphysical presuppositions. This conception of logic may be illustrated with the help of the "locked room" metaphor:⁹ logicians must pretend to be locked in a dark, windowless room, and to know nothing about the world outside. When confronted with a statement, they must try to evaluate it exclusively based on their linguistic competence. If they can establish that it is true, then the statement is logically true. If they can establish that the statement is true on the assumption that certain other statements are true, then the corresponding argument is logically valid. Logical truth and validity are

logic and nothingness in Aristotle see Michael V. Wedin: *Negation and Quantification in Aristotle*, in: *History and Philosophy of Logic* 11:2 (1990), pp. 131–150.

⁵ See Immanuel Kant: *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood, Cambridge 1998.

⁶ See Hans Georg Gadamer: *Hegel's Dialectic: Five Hermeneutical Studies*, New Haven 1982.

⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: *Science of Logic*, Cambridge 2015, p. 29.

⁸ See Francesco Berto: *There's Something About Gödel*, Oxford 2009.

⁹ Ermanno Bencivenga: *What Is Logic About?*, in: *The Nature of Logic. European Review of Philosophy*, vol. 4, ed. by Achille C. Varzi, Stanford 1999, pp. 5–19.

based on how our language works, and on our ability to keep track of the fixed meaning of certain syncategorematic expressions such as connectives and quantifiers.¹⁰

From the point of view of classical logic, negativity is a logical connective, the use of which can only be a ‘one-way path’: the meaning of negation is to invert the truth value of a proposition to which it (the negation) is related. In other words, logical negativity does not imply the existence of nothingness and is also devoid of any relation with the problem of being. However, logical negativity can also be expressed using words that do not refer properly to the logical connective (that is, negativity): I can negate something without resorting to words such as *no*, *not*, *neither*. In the realm of logic, negativity does not have any metaphysical meaning.

What happens in metaphysics? In the realm of metaphysics, negativity assumes other meanings, and its validity relates to the need *to know something* about the world. In this field, Hegel has provided a significant contribution in thinking about the notion of negativity, showing its fundamental role both in the process of knowledge and in the clarification of the structure of thinking as a fluid, relational and evolving movement. In Hegel’s metaphysics, which is presented in the first years of his writings, negativity is the prominent theme that runs through his whole philosophy as an Ariadne’s thread: negativity is “the energy” of unconditional thought.¹¹ In his early writings, by negativity Hegel means the separation and laceration which characterised modern subjectivity from the anthropological point of view as well as from the religious, the political and social ones, etc. From the Jena years till the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, we find that negativity assumes the guise of the *determinate negation* (*bestimmte Negation*), whose power is to make explicit and overcome the limits and insufficiencies of all the finite forms of knowledge. Negativity is the source of the dialectical development of thought because through determination and opposition it allows the movement of thought. However, it is with the *Science of Logic* that Hegel broadens his concept of negativity. The aim of that work is to conceive every pure concept as the unity of its contrary determination and, in doing so, Hegel considers the opposition

¹⁰ I refer the reader to Achille C. Varzi: *Logic, Ontological Neutrality, and the Law of Non-Contradiction*, in: *Contradictions. Logic, History, Actuality*, ed. by Elena Ficara, Berlin 2014, pp. 53–80.

¹¹ Martin Heidegger: *Hegel*, ed. by Ingrid Schüßler, Frankfurt a.M. 1993, p. 14.

in each concept only when they are used to determine reality. He conceives the opposition between concepts as a necessary moment of the movement in which these concepts establish the unity of their contrary determinations. The opposite determinations are not fixed moments, rather they are part of a process, of a relation whose main feature is the development of their unity. As a movement, the fluidity of the relational process, as well as the emergence of the unity, let the opposites be part of the unique and same becoming. In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel claims that “pure being and pure nothing are, therefore, the same.”¹² The relation between being and nothingness expressed in this sentence, which sounds pretty complicated, can be explained by a comparison with the relation between a cause and its effect: cause and effect are distinct moments of the same process, but each implicates and requires its counterpart in order to be what it is and to allow the process of becoming to move ahead in the domain of reality. To put this in Hegelian jargon, the passage towards ‘becoming’ is the passing of pure being into nothingness:

The concept of the unity of being and non-being – or, in a more reflected form, the unity of difference and non-difference [...] could be regarded as the first, purest, that is most abstract definition of the absolute – as it would in fact be the case if we were at all concerned with the form of definitions and with the name of the absolute. In this sense, that abstract concept would be the first definition of this absolute and all further determinations and developments only more specific and richer definitions of it.¹³

What does negativity mean from the perspective of ontology? Ontology addresses the study of the whole of reality and its origin can be traced back to Aristotle, who in book IV of his *Metaphysics* introduced the idea of a “science of being qua being”, or of being as such. However, “Aristotle did not use the word ‘ontology’ to name such a science. The word is a more recent seventeenth-century coinage”¹⁴ and according to some authors, this branch of knowledge deals with a list of *all there is*. In the realm of ontology, negativity *is* something and it has a mutual relationship with the no-

¹² Hegel: *Science of Logic*, op. cit., vol. 1, p. 74.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Francesco Berto/Matteo Plebani: *Ontology and Metaontology. A Contemporary Guide*, London 2015, p. 1.

tion of being, the oldest question of western philosophy. Negativity and nothingness have been scrutinised by western ontology only with reference to the notion of being, and their determination and meanings have been derived by opposition to what being is. Welcoming the legacy of Leibniz's question, exemplified by the fundamental question "Why is there something rather than nothing?", Heidegger tried to address this question from the perspective of nothingness, which he defined as the most radical question of all philosophy, rather than from the perspective of being. In doing so, he needed to confront all the history of western metaphysics conceived as a form of ontology in which the issue of being was completely misinterpreted. It is in the prologue entitled *What is Metaphysics?* (1929) that Heidegger initially addresses the notion of nothingness and puts it in connection with the theme of negativity (from the logical perspective) and with the issue of mortality (from the perspective of life). For the first point, his confrontation with Hegel is central. Let's see why.

III Heidegger Reader of Hegel

Heidegger devoted almost 40 years to questioning Hegel's meditation, according to Gadamer.¹⁵ In 1938–1939 Heidegger lectured to a group reading Hegel's *Science of Logic*. These observations, published into volume 68 of Heidegger's *Gesamtausgabe* entitled *Hegel*, aimed to discuss the conception of negativity at work in Hegel's text, with a specific focus on the conception of nothingness, as the opening pages of the volume show. In these remarks, through consideration of this core principle of Hegel's thinking, Heidegger challenges Hegel on the theme of negativity, claiming that "there is a way of thinking of nothing that is overlooked but presupposed by Hegel and is the origin of the most basic senses of negativity."¹⁶

Heidegger acknowledges the importance of negativity for Hegel, and he identifies at least four kinds of negativity at work in Hegel's thinking. The first of these abstracts from any entity or representation of an entity, thereby yielding the thought of being that is not any entity (*das Nicht des*

¹⁵ See Hans Georg Gadamer: *Heidegger's Ways*, New York 1994. On this theme, see also Francesca Brencio: *La negatività in Heidegger e Hegel*, Rome 2010.

¹⁶ Daniel O. Dahlstrom: *Thinking of Nothing: Heidegger's Criticism of Hegel's Conception of Negativity*, in: *A Companion to Hegel*, ed. by Stephen Houlgate and Michael Baur, Hoboken 2011, pp. 519–536, here p. 519.

Seienden), and he refers to this conception of being as Hegel's narrow sense of being. The second type of negativity is the negation of the foregoing sense of being (*das Nicht des Seins*). He designates this sense as a "completely abstract" negation, expressed by "not-being" (*Nichtsein*) at the beginning of the *Logic*. The third sense of negativity is a conditioned, abstract negativity, consisting of a first negation and the second one, presumably, the negation of the first. The fourth sense of negativity is the negativity that is "concrete" and "unconditioned", and it refers to the sense of negativity expressed in Hegel's conclusion regarding the positive and the negative, namely, that each is in itself "the self-referring negation of being-merely-positing, of the negative, and thus is itself the absolute negation", which Hegel calls "absolute negativity" and "the negativity for itself".

According to Heidegger, Hegel "fails to put negativity itself in question, since he does not take it seriously, and as a result, what goes by the name of 'negativity' in Hegel's thinking has already sacrificed everything negative or everything with the character of 'not' (*Nichthafte*) and 'swallowed' it up in positivity from the outset."¹⁷ This happens, following Heidegger's critique to Hegel, because for him (Hegel), thinking is the process of determining beings by way of our consciousness of them or our way of presenting or representing them to ourselves in general. Thinking provides the perspective within which being is determined. Thus, Heidegger concludes that Hegel's assumption that thinking must always have determined content makes negativity unquestionable. Heidegger argues that the forgetfulness of being and the "renunciation" of considering the "original difference" is an essential presupposition of the possible absoluteness of unconditional thinking.¹⁸ This happens because Hegel is inscribed into the history of the modern metaphysical tradition, inaugurated by Descartes for whom the beingness of beings (*Seiendheit des Seienden*) is the *presence* (*Anwesenheit*), the objectual. Things, as well as the I, can be presented and re-presented as something by the subject, the *ego cogito*, which can represent all the world and its beings. In the frame of this theoretical necessity, nothingness is unquestionable, and, in order to overcome this assumption, and thereby make nothingness questionable, Heidegger turns to his notion of the "ontological difference": being as such is not a

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 525.

¹⁸ Heidegger: *Hegel*, op. cit., p. 14.

being, and is therefore nothing. In a sense, the ontological difference is already found at the beginning of the *Logic*, where pure being and nothingness are undifferentiated. But it is ultimately sublimated into the affirmation of determinate 'being'. By equating nothing with being at the outset of the *Science of Logic*, Hegel has, in effect, construed nothing as the privation of the absolute actuality (being in the broader sense). But Heidegger contends that nothing is in no way a privation of being, something that takes away or diminishes being, but is precisely what being needs "as the ground of a possible diminishing":

According to Heidegger, Hegel forsakes (*ab-sagt*) and ultimately forgets the ontological difference, not merely in the sense that the difference between being and beings is not thematized but more importantly in the sense that it cannot be thematized, that is, there is no content to thematize, given the narrow sense of being or, what is the same, its sameness with nothing at the outset of the *Science of Logic*.¹⁹

In this oblique manner, Heidegger gives some indication of what he understands as genuine negativity, namely, the negativity of a sense of nothing that is operative in being but is necessarily not derivative from or dependent upon being. As he underlines in *Mindfulness* (1938–39):

As ab-ground, being "is" specifically the nothing and the ground. Nothing is what is different from being, a difference that holds onto the ab-ground: nothing is the nihilating of all ground (of all prop, all protections, all measures, all goals) and it is thus en-ownment unto the open of the refusal and, therefore, is of the sway of being, but it is never "the same" as being because it is never the foundational fullness. Nothing is, above all, not the fullness because it is thus no ground.²⁰

Heidegger's identification of Hegel's negativity as the "conscience's difference" is conditioned not only by the oblivion of the sense of being, but also by Hegel's doctrine of being. It is from this point that Heidegger goes to the *truth* of being as that which can disclose the closeness between being

¹⁹ Dahlstrom: *Thinking of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 529.

²⁰ Martin Heidegger: *Mindfulness*, London 2006, p. 83.

and nothingness.²¹ In *What is Metaphysics?* (1929), *Mindfulness* and *The Principle of Reason* (1955–1956), Heidegger questions nothingness starting from Leibniz’s question (“why are there beings at all, and not rather nothingness?”) referring to the ontological difference, forgotten by Western philosophy. The obliviousness to the ontological difference is crucial for Heidegger’s general argument: according to him, the primordial sense of being (*Sein*) coincides with a primordial sense of nothing, and it is what he calls “sameness”. If we look at Heidegger’s path from *Being and Time* to the seven later historical treatises,²² we find that what it means to be, entailing the ontological difference, is a historical event, and its unfolding is the primordial sense of being (*Sein*). *Sein* is the groundless (abyssal) origin of the difference between beings and being, and nothingness (in the primordial sense) is not only distinct from anything merely not present-at-hand, but must be said to “nihilate” from the abyss.²³ This sameness of being and nothingness reminds us of the Japanese tradition and in particular the Kyoto school, whose representatives were in dialogue with Heidegger (and also with Hegel).

²¹ See also Walter Biemel: *Heidegger im Gespräch mit Hegel*, in: *Metaphysisches Fragen*, ed. by Paulus Engelhardt and Claudius Strube, Cologne 2008, pp. 167–200.

²² The seven major treatises on the history of Being are *Beiträge zur Philosophie. Vom Ereignis* (1936–1938), *Besinnung* (1938–1939), *Metaphysik und Nihilismus* (1938–1939), *Die Geschichte des Seyns* (1938–1940), *Über den Anfang* (1941), *Das Ereignis* (1941–1942), *Die Stege des Anfangs* (1944). They highlight the passage from the ontological-existential analysis of Dasein, inaugurated with *Being and Time*, to the being-historical thinking (*seinsgeschichtliches Denken*). On this topic I refer the reader to Heidegger: *Mindfulness*, op. cit., pp. 419–428; Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann: *Contributions to Philosophy and Enowning-Historical Thinking*, in *Companion to Heidegger’s Contributions to Philosophy*, ed. by Charles E. Scott et al., Bloomington 2008, p. 105.

²³ Dahlstrom: *Thinking of Nothing*, op. cit., p. 530. On this topic, see also Ryan Johnson: *Thinking the Abyss of History: Heidegger’s Critique of Hegelian Metaphysics*, in: *Gatherings: The Heidegger Circle Annual* 6 (2016), pp. 51–68; Otto Pöggeler: *Hegel und Heidegger über Negativität*, in: *Hegel-Studien* 30 (1995), pp. 145–166; Lin Ma: *Going under Toward the Abyssal Question: Heidegger’s Confrontation with Hegel on Negativity*, in: *The Journal of British Society for Phenomenology* 50 (2019), pp. 358–377.

IV Subjectivity from the Point of View of Negativity

At this point, we can ask: which views do Hegel and Heidegger share with regards to negativity? They share a rich and complex consideration of negativity and nothingness as a philosophical premise for a reconfiguration of subjectivity. In particular, they question the ontological principle that says *ex nihilo, nihil fit* suggesting that perhaps there is another part of the story in which nothingness and being have the same origin. If we accept this philosophical suggestion and its arguments, the history of Western philosophy and its implications in the fields of anthropology, religion, arts, etc., need to be questioned and re-addressed from a new perspective, in which the subject manifests itself as a giant with feet of clay.

Considering the previous historical background, the focus on Heidegger as a reader of Hegel and the legacy of their meditation in contemporary philosophy, perhaps we can ask what the relationship is between different meanings of negativity and the notion of subjectivity. To address this question, we need to go back once again to Heidegger and Hegel. They intended to dismantle the primacy of a solid foundation of subjectivity in favour of a different conception of it. In fact, the notion of the subject was crucial in modernity: in the 17th century, Descartes asserted that self-consciousness is the starting point of philosophy. He expressed this by claiming “I think, therefore I am.” The subject was put in a position to be able to cognise the world. Towards the end of the 18th century, Immanuel Kant performed a “Copernican revolution” by putting the subject at the centre of knowledge, describing the structures of our consciousness as the “condition of possibility” of objective knowledge. For Kant, the objectivity of knowledge is only possible within ourselves, not in something outside ourselves. In this sense, in the course of the long and robust tradition from Descartes to Kant, subjectivity becomes the key to knowledge.

Another direction in the understanding of subjectivity was taken by Hegel, through his meditation of subjectivity in relation to the notion of negativity and specifically in his conception of the logical idea of life.²⁴

²⁴ On this subject, I refer the reader to Michela Bordignon: *Vida e contradição no pensamento hegeliano*, in: *Filosofia da natureza: vida, ordem, razão*, ed. by Federico Ferraguto, Caxias do Sul 2020, pp. 177–220; Eadem: *A lógica especulativa como lógica da vida*, in: *Los aportes del itinerario intelectual de Kant a Hegel. Comunicaciones del I Congreso Germano-Latinoamericano so-*

This subject, which constitutes the first determination of the last section of the subjective logic, is scrutinised by Hegel starting from the consideration of how a living being, an organism observed from the point of view of the philosophy of nature, can experience negativity. His explanation of natural organisms (with a particular focus on the animal) is the first step into the *Realphilosophie*, where the word subject makes its appearance. According to Hegel, it happens on two occasions: in facing death and in relation to the external environment experiencing the “need of something”. The experience of being in need of something allows every living being to deal with two kinds of negativity: on the one hand, the negativity that comes from the relationship with the other, which I would call *a negativity coming from alterity*, and, on the other hand, the negativity that comes from the relationship with oneself, *a negativity coming from the Self*. Hegel claims that these kinds of negativity come from the “unity of need”. According to Hegel, to be in need of something is not a defective condition, a passive status, but an active condition. This kind of ‘lack’, which characterises every living being, plays an active role in its struggles and needs to be satisfied. The recognition of this need and the request of the satisfaction is addressed by Hegel in a positive frame: *die Tätigkeit des Mangels*, the activity of lacking, is precisely what enhances the movement of becoming and, as such, it requires negativity as a fundamental moment for (a) the satisfaction of a biological need, (b) becoming in the movement of life and (c) the development of a different form from the original Self. Biological life is grounded on this internal teleology, which is possible only through the recognition of the essential role played by negativity.²⁵ In other words, one of the main contributions of Hegel’s meditation into the notion of negativity has been to let it enter into the domain of subjectivity with a foundational role and not merely as a passive attribute.

In the 20th century, Heidegger reinforced the need to recognise the foundational role of negativity and nothingness and challenged the Western notion of subjectivity, of *what I am* in relation to *what I can know*. He rejected the Cartesian approach that relied on a division between the subject and the object of knowledge, as well as the Kantian approach that

bre la Filosofia de Hegel, ed. by Héctor Ferreiro, Thomas Sören Hoffmann, and Agemir Bavaresco, Porto Alegre 2014, pp. 247–273.

²⁵ See Francesca Brencio: *Life and Negativity. The Inner Teleology in Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature*, in: *Revista Opinião Filosófica* 5:1 (2014), pp. 54–68.

made knowledge a prerogative of the subject. Instead, he turned to that which is most certain of any human being, that is finitude and mortality, unpacking the way we think about the subject. In doing so, he starts from a critical reading of subjectivity. The entire Western metaphysics, in his view, has interpreted subjectivity as starting from the certainty of the subject with the aim of understanding other beings (the world, the others, myself). What “I am” makes me sure that everything is interpreted through this certainty, that “I am”. In the centre of knowledge, there is the certainty that the human being is the subject. The human being grounds itself (what “I am”) as the principal criterion for all comprehension of the world, of others, and of beings. It is as if everything should be understood from the perspective of the “I”, the only measure through which the human being can be defined. According to Heidegger, this idea of subjectivity is reminiscent of Protagoras’s statement: “Man is the measure of all things”. This idea of subjectivity was broadened by Descartes, who transformed the embodied self into a disembodied thinking substance, a *res cogitans*. As Heidegger writes in his work *Nietzsche* (1962), in modern metaphysics the certainty of all the reality and its truth is based upon the self-consciousness of the “I”: “*ego cogito ergo sum*”. It is starting from this point (the relationship between the “I” and reality, on the basis of the thoughts that I think, therefore I exist) that Western metaphysics thinks of subjectivity as the fundamental certainty of what “I am”. According to Heidegger, this is also what turns Western philosophy into anthropology. In the centre, there is always what I am: Descartes’ *cogito*, Kant’s “I think”, the will of Schelling and not-will of Schopenhauer, and the will to power of Nietzsche. Consequently, philosophy becomes an expression of the ‘subjectification’ of being, in which everything is regarded in terms of its relation to our consciousness.

Following the legacy of Hegel’s and Heidegger’s meditations, my idea is to consider the issue of *subjectivity under the light of negativity*, which means to take the notion of displacement as a central theme in the understanding of a subject and its relationships. Paraphrasing Freud’s famous dictum, we can say that through the lens of negativity the ego is not even master in its own house. The *displacement* of subjectivity from the solid ground of being to the uncertain field of possibility entails the displacement from inside to outside the metaphysical arena.²⁶ The subject is no

²⁶ Reiner Schürmann: *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anar-*

longer the main character of the metaphysical discourse. Rather, it is replaced in the peripheral regions of the world. It was Heidegger himself who hinted at this when in his essay on the origin of the work of art, he claims that the ontological nature of the artwork is to re-situate and displace us: “To submit to this displacement means: to transform all familiar relations to world and to earth, and henceforth to restrain all usual doing and prizing, knowing and looking, in order to dwell within the truth that is happening in the work.”²⁷ The displacement of the subject from a metaphysical central position to a peripheral one involves the reassessment of what we define as identity (but also difference) and its relationships with every different form of identity. If we trace this theme back to Heidegger’s essay entitled *Identity and Difference*, we can understand how his meditation jeopardises the western understanding of the subject. What is required in order to compel metaphysics to dismantle the primacy of pure presence in favour of the revealing of the being is a *shift* of the classical ontological paradigm, that is *from a substantial ontology to a modal one* in which the condition of possibilities of entities can lead to the right interrogation of the question of being. In other words, scrutinising subjectivity under the light of negativity means to call into question identity, both as a metaphysical category and as an individual and social one.

A precious indication for this shift is provided by the Japanese concept of *aïda*²⁸ which can be translated into English with the word “betweenness”. *Aïda* means the interpersonal and intersubjective nature of subjectivity, and it conveys a sense of openness and an original bond with others. The concept of *aïda* guides us in the direction of overcoming a dualistic approach to the issue of subjectivity, in which on the one hand we find the being and on the other hand the nothingness. In the Japanese sensibility, we do not start as monads, but rather as members of a community, and one develops oneself as an individual self out of an initial state of unity with others.²⁹ In other words, we can say that in welcoming this notion of *aïda*, the nature of subjectivity is always intersubjective, and as such, it is only

chy, Bloomington 1987, p. 212.

²⁷ Martin Heidegger: *The Origin of the Work of Art*, in: *Off the Beaten Track*, Cambridge 2002, p. 40.

²⁸ See Bin Kimura: *L'Entre*, Grenoble 2000.

²⁹ See James Phillips: *Kimura Bin*, in: *The Oxford Handbook of Phenomenological Psychopathology*, ed. by Giovanni Stanghellini et al., Oxford 2019, pp. 148–156, here p. 152.

through this interpersonal and intersubjective dimension that the self can be what it chooses to be. Put in metaphysical jargon, it means that identity has to recognise and include difference and negativity as a fundamental part of identity as such.

If we try to “translate” this complex language of metaphysics into our ordinary way of living and conceiving life, we can see that this displacement means a different relation of the self with every form of alterity and a more critical and inclusive way of conceiving identity and accepting differences. Displaced into these areas of relations and meanings, human beings are no longer able to conceptually (but also physically and technologically) appropriate the world and, conversely, we know ourselves to be co-determined by the world. Therefore, we must renounce and lose our attitude of wanting to control and use every form of alterity, an umbrella term under which we can count every living being in its individuality, the environment, and more generally, what we call the “world”. This attitude – or better said: this way of being and embodying life – can substantially impact the well-being of each community and, seen from a macro perspective, it may affect the safeguarding of the environment by impacting both political choices and community rules. The displacement of subjectivity may also be a strong basis for a critique of all political and ideological views built on the exacerbation of differences, bigotry and nationalism. From a political and cultural perspective, the displacement of subjectivity means a critical deconstruction of ideologies, which can be exemplified by the motto “we are...they are...”. At the core of every form of nationalism, there is the issue of identity and, as we have already seen, the definition of what identity and difference means. Thinking identity (as a form of subjectivity) through the lens of negativity enables the dismantling of every form of ideology (and possibly political practices), which compromises a more inclusive way of acting, living and thinking.

I find it appropriate to stress that the possibility to conceive subjectivity in the light of negativity, in terms of displacement and a more complex and inclusive notion of identity, can contribute to the quest of solidarity and empathy, significant experiences that allow for the appreciation of difference, contributing to the struggle against every form of stigma and to questioning the nature of our own identity and values. In this way, negativity can be seen as a precious epistemological tool to enlarge the notion of “humanity” and to investigate *who we are*. It allows for the emergence of a space in which more ethical relationships between humans can de-

velop, and can involve non-humans and the environment in their mutual belonging.