

# *In seinem Anderen bei sich selbst zu sein:* Toward a Recuperation of Hegel's Metaphysics of Agency

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay argues for a distinctly post-Kantian understanding of Hegel's definition of freedom as "being at home with oneself in one's other." I first briefly isolate the inadequacies of some dominant interpretations of Hegelian freedom and proceed to develop a more adequate theoretical frame by turning to Theodor Adorno. Then I interpret Hegel's notion of the freedom of the will in the *Philosophy of Right* in terms of his speculative metaphysics. Finally, I briefly examine Hegel's treatment of agency in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in order to establish important continuities between the early and late Hegel.

The specter of the divided Kantian subject—more, perhaps, than that of the Cartesian subject, as Slavoj Žižek would have it—haunts Western academia.<sup>1</sup> It would be no exaggeration to assert that the radical split established so forcefully by Kant between the noumenal self precariously dwelling in the ethical realm of freedom and the phenomenal self hopelessly trapped in the causal realm of necessity, provides the basic coordinates for discourse on agency to this day. The early twentieth-century spectrum of thought on agency simply transposed this Kantian dichotomy into the extremes of Sartrean existentialism's absolute freedom of choice and vulgar Marxism's reduction of the subject's so-called "freedom of choice" to a superstructural reflex.<sup>2</sup> The spectrum requires little updating, it seems, to make it relevant to contemporary discourse. One need only replace vulgar Marxism with certain strains of poststructuralism, which reduce the robust subject to a mere "subject-effect" of

the discursive-ideological field.<sup>3</sup> And as for the defunct Sartrean subject's existential freedom, it now appears in the guise of the liberal bourgeois subject's pretense to "freedom of choice" under late capitalism.<sup>4</sup>

It is something of an irony, then, that Hegel has been so eagerly assimilated to either extreme of the spectrum—as if he had not been the most powerful champion of the need to overcome the very terms of the antithesis in the first place.<sup>5</sup> It seems easy enough to rehearse Hegel's decisive response to Kant. If the Kantian autonomous subject remains continually haunted by its heteronomous Other, the Hegelian subject earns genuine autonomy only by incorporating or, in proper Hegelese, *sublating* the Other within it. As Hegel puts it in a well-known formulation from the *Encyclopaedia Logic*, freedom consists in "being at home with oneself in one's other, depending upon oneself, and being one's own determinant" (*in seinem Anderen bei sich selbst zu sein, von sich abzuhängen, das Bestimmende seiner selbst zu sein*).<sup>6</sup> However, as the formidable scholarship on Hegel attests, it is all too easy to be glib about the Hegelian subject's "sublation of otherness" and much more difficult to articulate what such sublation concretely involves. This essay is a modest attempt at such an articulation.

Proceeding from the conviction that Hegel's major works can mutually illuminate one another, I test the possibility that the metaphysics of the will which Hegel develops in the Introduction to his last published work, *Philosophy of Right* (1821), can help us to appreciate Hegel's conception of agency in the much earlier *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). Of course, I fully realize that conceiving his corpus as a more or less unified body of thought flies in the face of most scholarship on Hegelian agency, which insists on a fairly radical discontinuity between the "early" and "late" Hegel. Hegel commentators in the Anglo-American analytic tradition are especially insistent on this discontinuity, almost exclusively focusing on the late *Philosophy of Right*, which supposedly contains his "mature" views on agency. So although it might seem anachronistic to read the *Phenomenology* in light of the *Philosophy of Right*, I risk such a synthetic account of Hegelian agency on the conviction that we can appreciate what is uniquely valuable in the *Phenomenology's* complex account of agency by reading it against the later Hegel's speculative metaphysics of the will (and vice-versa).

All this by way of anticipation. However, before turning to a close examination of the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Right* and the *Phenomenology*, I need to develop an adequate theoretical frame within which to examine Hegelian agency. To this end, I proceed contrastively; that is, the inadequacies of some common approaches to Hegelian

agency will help cumulatively to motivate a viable theoretical frame. I begin by considering some exemplary Anglo-American “liberal” accounts of Hegelian agency which either ignore or severely downplay Hegel’s speculative metaphysics. I then turn to Žižek’s interpretation of Hegelian agency in order to expose the basic failings of the Anglo-American approach. Žižek, I hope to show, is brilliant in registering the inadequacies of liberal “freedom of choice” readings of Hegelian agency. However, Žižek’s Lacanian reading of Hegelian agency comes perilously close to the poststructuralist stance which Žižek explicitly rejects: in the end, he seems to deprive the Hegelian subject of all substantiality. So I turn to the work of Theodor Adorno which, I argue, honors Hegel’s speculative metaphysics without eviscerating the Hegelian subject. With this Adornian frame in place, we can turn to Hegel’s metaphysics of the will, elaborated in the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*, and finally, to the *Phenomenology*.

### I. HEGEL AS RAWLSIAN LIBERAL?

Allen Wood opens his book, *Hegel's Ethical Thought*, with a polemical attack on those commentators who attempt to link Hegel’s speculative metaphysics to his political philosophy: “If you are not so sensible, you will humbug yourself into thinking that there is some esoteric truth in Hegelian dialectical logic which provides a hidden key to his social thought.”<sup>7</sup> Instead, Wood claims to provide a sober account of Hegelian ethics based on the *Philosophy of Right*, explicitly reading Hegel “against his own self-understanding”—that is, ignoring Hegel’s own repeated protestations that his political philosophy can only be understood in light of his speculative metaphysics. Let us see how Wood handles Hegel’s key notion of freedom:

“Being with oneself in an other” is a paradox. It speaks of something that is different from or other than myself and yet at the same time not different or other at all, because I am “with myself” in it. The central paradoxes in Hegel’s philosophy need not scandalize us once their point is properly understood (and we do not need a new system of “dialectical logic” in order to understand them). . . . Freedom for Hegel is a relational property. It involves a self, an object . . . and a rational project of the self. Any object, simply as object, is an “other” to the self whose object it is. But because a self is actual by identifying itself with a set of rational projects involving objects, the otherness of an object can be overcome when the object is integrated into the self’s rational projects. A self is with itself or free in an object with

respect to a rational project if that object belongs to that project, becoming a part of that self.<sup>8</sup>

Wood's purportedly non-metaphysical reading of the "paradoxical" Hegelian formulation, "being with oneself in an other," turns out to involve something resembling the Rawlsian deontological subject freely choosing its determinations. But the avowedly *non*-metaphysical status of Wood's interpretation should give us pause. After all, if Michael Sandel powerfully demonstrates how something like a Kantian transcendental subject underlies Rawls's political theory, it is hard to see how Wood's account of the self's overcoming of otherness through its incorporation into a "rational project" can escape this charge of a tacit—and deeply problematic—metaphysics.<sup>9</sup> But we do not need Sandel to prove this; in my later reading of the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*, I argue that Hegel himself radically critiques the underlying metaphysics of a liberal bourgeois conception of "freedom of choice" based on "rational projects."<sup>10</sup> The paradox of "being with oneself in an other" is easy enough to handle, Wood demonstrates, so long as the complexities of Hegel's own argument are actively suppressed.

Robert Pippin's treatment of agency in Hegel improves on Wood's account by insisting on the importance of situating Hegel's ethics within his larger philosophical architectonic. Pippin argues that Hegel's account of how Spirit emerges from nature is essential to understanding Hegel's notion of freedom: "Spirit . . . is . . . not the emergence of a non-natural substance, but reflects only the growing capacity of still naturally situated beings in achieving more and more successfully a form of normative and genuinely autonomous like-mindedness."<sup>11</sup> But it quickly becomes apparent that Pippin locates Hegel's advancement over Kant in Hegel's *pragmatization* of Kant's metaphysics of agency—in his insistence on the "original, indispensable role of the ethical community": "in Hegel as in Kant, I am subject only to laws that I in some sense author and subject myself to. But the legislation of such a law does not consist in some paradoxical single moment of election, whereby a noumenal individual elects as a supreme governing principle, either obedience to the moral law as a life policy, or the priority of self-love and its satisfactions. The formation of and self-subjection to such normative constraints is gradual, collective, and actually historical."<sup>12</sup> Pippin here sets up an either-or between Kant's untenable metaphysics of agency and Hegel's non-metaphysical, historico-pragmatic conception of agency. So Pippin attempts to free Hegelian agency from the kind of problematic metaphysics that Allan Wood seems to bind himself to, by relativizing

the justification for a given individual's "rational project" to his or her community's ethical norms.<sup>13</sup>

But it is hard to tell Pippin's account of Hegelian agency apart from a straightforwardly pragmatic conception. In a telling footnote, Pippin acknowledges the obvious affinities between his treatment of Hegelian agency and neo-pragmatism: "The interpretive direction suggested here, 'left Hegelian' as it is, might look like a familiar, and ever more popular, one in Anglophone interpretations—a pragmatism, perhaps a radical pragmatism. . . . There is, however, something non-negotiable, let's say, in Hegel's account that makes such interpretations incomplete. Said summarily, the status of freedom in Hegel is 'absolute'; its historical character is only a matter of its 'realization'" ("Hegel's Practical Philosophy," p. 198). Pippin's feeble attempt here to distance himself from pragmatism rests on an insistence on the "absolute" nature of freedom in Hegel; the word "absolute" has to be scare-quoted, though, since it makes little sense to conceive this absoluteness outside the realm of Hegel's speculative metaphysics. The possibility Pippin summarily forecloses—one which I will explore in this paper—is that of recuperating a distinctly *post-Kantian* metaphysics of agency from Hegel's work.

## II. THE TAUTOLOGICAL GESTURE: ŽIŽEK'S READING OF HEGEL

Žižek's reading of Hegelian agency is the crucial first step in such a recuperation. In a number of provocative works, Žižek insists on the necessity of construing Hegelian agency via his speculative metaphysics.<sup>14</sup> In my later discussion of the *Philosophy of Right*, I will examine the details of Žižek's interpretation of Hegelian agency in terms of the doctrine of essence elaborated in the *Science of Logic*. For present purposes, suffice it for Žižek to illuminate the fundamental problem in wanting a Hegel shorn of his metaphysics. The attempt to conceive Hegel's formulation of freedom as "being at home in one's other" in the non-metaphysical terms of incorporating an agent's ends into his or her "rational project," Žižek argues, is exactly wrong. According to the "philosophical common sense" of a Wood or a Pippin, Žižek writes, "we have the possibility of choice, we can realize our freely conceived projects, but only within the framework of tradition, of the inherited circumstances which delineate our field of choices. . . . However, it is precisely such a 'dialectical synthesis' that Hegel declines. The whole point of his argument is that we have no way of drawing a line between the two aspects."<sup>15</sup> We will examine in detail below how what Žižek calls the "vulgar liberal notion of freedom

of choice”<sup>16</sup> is reduced to a sublated moment in the development of robust agency in Hegel’s work.

Problems arise, however, when Žižek tries to extract a positive account of agency from Hegel. On Žižek’s Lacanian reading, the Hegelian subject seems to be rarefied virtually out of existence. If poststructuralism’s claim is that there is nothing left over from the process of subjectivation, Žižek’s claim seems to be that there is precisely *nothing* left over from subjectivation—and this “nothing” *is* the Hegelian subject. The movement from a poststructuralist conception of agency to a Lacanian-Hegelian one consists in the subtle “conversion of this lack of the signifier into the signifier of the lack.”<sup>17</sup>

But what then becomes of the Hegelian subject’s “free will”? For Žižek, the subject’s only genuinely “free” act consists in a “purely symbolic, tautological gesture,”<sup>18</sup> which he aligns with Lacan’s “*point de capiton*”: “one has to renounce thoroughly the standard notion of ‘freedom as comprehended necessity.’ . . . Hegel’s point is, on the contrary, that *it is only the subject’s (free) act of ‘dotting the i’ which retroactively installs necessity*, so that the very act by means of which the subject recognizes (and thus constitutes) necessity is the supreme act of freedom and as such the self-suppression of necessity.”<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, Žižek never gets any clearer on what this “free,” albeit radically tautological, act concretely consists in. Worse, he is unable to find a correlate for Lacan’s *point de capiton* anywhere in Hegel’s texts themselves. So if it took a Lacanian perspective on Hegelian agency to discern the need to honor Hegel’s speculative metaphysics, the trouble with Žižek’s account is that he so Lacanianizes Hegel that nothing is left of Hegel himself.

### III. HARNESSING THE STRENGTH OF THE SUBJECT: ADORNO ON HEGELIAN AGENCY

Adorno proves to be so helpful because he, like Žižek, emphasizes Hegel’s speculative metaphysics but, unlike Žižek, does not liquidate the subject to a vanishing point (*de capiton*). Against Wood and Pippin, Adorno insists, “Hegel’s substantive insights . . . cannot be separated from speculation—the vulgar notion of which has nothing to do with the Hegelian notion—as though it were some kind of troublesome ornamentation. On the contrary, those insights are produced by speculation, and they lose their substance as soon as they are conceived as merely empirical.”<sup>20</sup> Shortly thereafter, Adorno shrewdly anticipates and passes his grim verdict on the Anglo-American analytic approach to Hegel that ignores his speculative metaphysics: “If one tried to rescue the material

substance of Hegelian philosophy from its allegedly outmoded and arbitrary speculation by eradicating its idealism, one would have nothing but positivism on the one hand and superficial intellectual history on the other."<sup>21</sup> In fact, it is in these speculative concepts summarily dismissed by Wood as far-fetched that Adorno locates Hegel's most concrete insights into agency:

[I]t is precisely the construction of the absolute subject in Hegel that does justice to an objectivity indissoluble in subjectivity. Paradoxically, historically, only absolute idealism gives free rein to the method that the introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* calls "simply looking on" [*reines Zusehen*]. Hegel is able to think from the thing itself out, to surrender passively, as it were, to its authentic substance, only because by virtue of the system the matter at hand is referred to its identity with absolute subject. Things themselves speak in a philosophy that focuses its energies on proving that it is itself one with them.<sup>22</sup>

From an Adornian perspective, it is precisely because Wood and Pipin neglect Hegel's metaphysics that they end up reducing Hegel's conception of agency to a liberal or pragmatic framework. So instead of dismissing Hegel's metaphysics as willfully obscure, we might begin to appreciate its complexity as a necessary means of allowing the object to develop immanently. It is no wonder that we find Hegel's metaphysics—in which "things themselves speak"—so profoundly disorienting: our disorientation is an index of the extent to which his language refuses the assimilation of the object to preconceived frameworks.

For Adorno, Hegel's conception of the subject carefully negotiates between the inadequate extremes of liberal "freedom of choice" ideology and poststructuralist-Lacanian eviscerations of the subject. As Adorno observes in *Negative Dialectics*, a work published shortly after his book on Hegel, "[t]he individual's independence, inappropriately stressed by liberal ideology, does not prevail."<sup>23</sup> In fact, Adorno locates a trenchant critique of liberalism in Hegel himself: "Hegel disdains the illusion of freedom, the individual who, in the midst of universal unfreedom, behaves as though he were already free and universal."<sup>24</sup>

However, Adorno's critique of liberal ideology does not lead him simply to dismiss the category of the subject altogether. In the Preface to *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno famously announces the book's task: "To use the strength of the subject to break through the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity."<sup>25</sup> Later in the book, Adorno elaborates this notion: "The subject is the lie, because for the sake of its own absolute rule it will deny its own objective definitions. Only he who would refrain from such

lies—who would have used his own strength, which he owes to identity, to cast off the façade of identity—would truly be a subject.”<sup>26</sup> Here we see Adorno struggling to capture the paradox of Hegel’s formulation of freedom as “being at home with oneself in one’s other.” The subject, in order to earn genuine subjectivity, must acknowledge “its own objective definitions.” “Freedom,” for Adorno, in this age of nearly thoroughgoing ideological interpellation, “is never more than an instant of spontaneity.”<sup>27</sup> Notice that Adorno, unlike Žižek, does not dismiss the possibility of robust freedom altogether; an individual’s freedom is never *entirely* coopted by ideology.

We need Adorno, I think, to appreciate fully Hegel’s fundamental refusal to be assimilated to the extremes of liberal or poststructuralist-Lacanian conceptions of agency, which give a straightforward “Yes” or “No” to the question of freedom. In the readings of the *Philosophy of Right* and the *Phenomenology* that follow, we would do well to heed Adorno’s strictures for theory to engage in a dialectic of the individual and its circumstances:

The question of freedom does not call for a Yes or No; it calls for theory to rise above the individuality that exists as well as above the society that exists. Instead of sanctioning the internalized and hardened authority of the super-ego, theory should carry out the dialectics of individual and species. . . . The subject would be liberated only as an I reconciled with the not-I.<sup>28</sup>

#### IV. HEGEL’S METAPHYSICS OF THE WILL IN THE *PHILOSOPHY OF RIGHT*

There is admittedly a certain irony in adopting an Adornian frame in our reading of the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*. Adorno, after all, repeatedly condemns the *Philosophy of Right* as, by and large, a piece of non-dialectical and non-speculative “pedantry.”<sup>29</sup> I suggest, however, that the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Right* is often *reduced* to non-speculative “pedantry” at the hands of a Wood or Pippin, so we ought at least to make the effort—as Hegel wished—to read it in a genuinely speculative manner.

Hegel announces in the beginning of the Introduction that his account of the will involves a kind of conceptual unfolding: “The shapes which the concept assumes in the course of its actualization are indispensable for the knowledge of the concept itself.”<sup>30</sup> And in language that recalls the role of the phenomenological observer in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel urges us to “look on at the proper immanent development of the



thing itself" (*der eigenen immanenten Entwicklung der Sache selbst zuzusehen*).<sup>31</sup> So the Introduction does not offer a *logical* "proof" that the will is free: "The truth is that in philosophical knowledge the necessity of a concept is the principal thing; and the process of its production as a result is its proof and deduction."<sup>32</sup> Several pages later, Hegel reiterates, "Logical deduction . . . this deductive method of the Understanding has nothing whatever to do with the satisfaction of the demands of reason or with philosophical science."<sup>33</sup>

These disclaimers prove to be necessary because moments later, Hegel startlingly asserts, without offering any justification: "The will is free."<sup>34</sup> A page later, he informs us that the "proof that the will is free" is based on premises established in his *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*.<sup>35</sup> But Hegel provocatively adds that even his most "speculative" formulations are rigorously grounded in concrete *experience*: "The moments in the concept of the will . . . result from the premisses to which I have just referred, but in addition anyone may find help towards forming an idea of them by calling on his own self-consciousness."<sup>36</sup>

He begins his account of the will by asserting, "The will contains . . . the element of *pure indeterminacy* [*reinen Unbestimmtheit*] or that pure reflection of the ego into itself which involves the dissipation of every restriction [*Beschränkung*] and every content either immediately presented by nature, by needs, desires, and impulses, [*die Bedürfnisse, Begierden und Triebe*] or given and determined by any means whatever. This is the unrestricted infinity of *absolute abstraction* or *universality*, the pure *thought* of oneself."<sup>37</sup> This capacity of the will to abstract from every determination, Hegel is quick to insist, "is only one side of the will," but when this one side is taken for the whole, we have "negative freedom, or freedom as the Understanding conceives it."<sup>38</sup> In vivid language, he writes that such a capacity of the will "takes shape in religion as the Hindu fanaticism of pure contemplation [*der Fanatismus der indischen reinen Beschauung*]."<sup>39</sup>

This "unrestricted infinity of absolute abstraction" gives way to what Hegel dramatically calls the "absolute moment": "At the same time, the ego is also the transition from undifferentiated indeterminacy to the differentiation, determination, and positing of a determinacy as a content and object. Now further, this content may either be given by nature or engendered by the concept of mind [*Geist*]. Through this positing of itself as something determinate, the ego steps in principle into determinate existence. This is the absolute moment, the finitude or particularization of the ego."<sup>40</sup> This second moment—what he concisely calls "determination"—"cancels the abstract negativity of the first" (*es*

*ist nämlich das Aufheben der ersten abstrakten Negativität*).<sup>41</sup> The translator Knox misleadingly renders *Aufheben* as cancellation; it is essential, however, that *Aufheben* (the usual rendering in English is “sublation”) contain the meanings of both cancellation *and* preservation, as Hegel himself repeatedly insists. The movement from the first to the second moment, in fact, seems to be the precise one of determinate negation (a concept elaborated in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology*).<sup>42</sup> Hence, Hegel adds: “this second moment is already contained in the first and is simply an explicit positing of what the first already was implicitly [*was das erste schon an sich ist*].”<sup>43</sup>

Of course, with Hegel, we can never rest complacent in a second moment’s negation of the first; what is ultimately required is the *negation* of the negation. Accordingly, in the next paragraph, Hegel declares that “freedom of the will” consists in the *unity* of the first and second moments just discussed:

The will is the unity [*die Einheit*] of both these moments. It is particularity reflected into itself and so brought back to universality, i.e. it is individuality. It is the *self-determination* of the ego, which means that at one and the same time the ego posits itself as its own negative, i.e. as restricted and determinate, and yet remains by itself, i.e. in its self-identity and universality. It determines itself and yet at the same time binds itself together with itself. The ego determines itself in so far as it is the relating of negativity to itself [*insofern es die Beziehung der Negativität auf sich selbst ist*]. As this self-relation, it is indifferent to this determinacy; it knows it as something which is its own, something which is only ideal, a mere possibility by which it is not constrained and in which it is confined only because it has put itself in it.—This is the *freedom* of the will and it constitutes the concept or substantiality of the will, its weight, so to speak, just as weight constitutes the substantiality of a body.<sup>44</sup>

The trouble with most readings of this crucial formulation is their failure to conceive this third moment’s “unity” as a negation of the second moment’s negation. For instance, Paul Franco, an analytically oriented commentator, essentially aligns Hegel’s notion of the will as “the self-determination of the ego” with Kantian autonomy.<sup>45</sup> But this misses the crucial difference between Hegelian and Kantian agency: namely, that for Hegel, the ego “remains by itself” even as it “posits itself as its own negative.” So long as we remain trapped in a Kantian paradigm, Hegel’s complex formulation of the will all too easily collapses into the liberal ideology of freedom of choice.

In fact, Hegel seems to have anticipated later liberal appropriations of his conception of the will in his trenchant critique of what he calls the "arbitrary will." In the arbitrary will, "the ego . . . is the possibility of determining myself to this or to something else, of *choosing* between these specific determinations, which at this point I regard as external to me."<sup>46</sup> The will is "arbitrary" in this case since the "determinations" among which the ego chooses are themselves merely *given* to the ego, not willed by it. Thus, the arbitrary will involves "dependence on a content and material given either from within or from without."<sup>47</sup> Put concretely, the "choices" that the arbitrary will is faced with are themselves prescribed by some combination of society ("from without") and the ego's inner impulses and inclinations ("from within"). So, from Hegel's perspective, the prized "freedom of choice" of liberal doctrine proves to be an empty freedom.

Hegel insists that the "unity" of the first two moments of the will has to be understood in a rigorously "speculative" manner:

The first two moments . . . are readily admitted and grasped because, taken independently, they are false and moments of the Understanding [*Verstand*]. But the third moment, which is true and speculative (and everything true must be thought speculatively if it is to be comprehended) is the one into which the Understanding declines to advance, for it is precisely the concept which it persists in calling the inconceivable. It is the task of logic as purely speculative philosophy to prove and explain further this innermost secret of speculation, of infinity as negativity relating itself to itself, this ultimate spring of all activity, life, and consciousness.<sup>48</sup>

Though Hegel insists that the Understanding is unable to grasp the third moment, the irony of Hegel commentary is that this third moment has been grasped *exclusively* by the Understanding; that is, its speculative content has been actively suppressed by such commentators as Wood and Pippin. But honoring its "speculative" content proves much more difficult than it might seem since language itself has a tendency to reduce the speculative to the merely discursive: "if you say 'the will is universal, the will determines itself', the words you use to describe the will presuppose it to be a subject or substratum from the start. But the will is not something complete and universal prior to its determining itself and prior to its superseding and idealizing this determination."<sup>49</sup> We have to remain attentive to the ways in which the very subject-predicate form of philosophical propositions might spuriously substantialize the will. As Adorno puts it, "language and the process of reification are interlocked." "The very form of the copula, the 'is,'" he continues,

“pursues the aim of pinpointing its object, an aim to which philosophy ought to provide a corrective; in this sense all philosophical language is a language in opposition to language, marked with the stigma of its own impossibility.”<sup>50</sup>

Considering the rigors of speculative reading, it is perhaps unsurprising that Hegel’s formulation of the free will as “the unity of the two moments” has been regularly evacuated of its speculative content and reduced to the liberal doctrine of freedom of choice. No commentator I have encountered simply takes Hegel at his word and interprets his *Philosophy of Right* conception of the free will in terms of his speculative logic. I make an attempt here at such an interpretation. Fortunately, Žižek offers a very useful head start. Žižek brilliantly relates Hegel’s doctrine of essence (Book II of the *Science of Logic*) to agency by focusing on the three forms of “reflection” Hegel articulates in that section: positing, external, and determining reflection. Taking Žižek’s lead, I test the possibility that there is a rigorous homology between the three moments of the will, elaborated in the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*, and the three forms of reflection in the *Science of Logic*.<sup>51</sup>

The first book of the *Science of Logic* concerns “being” (*Sein*), what Hegel calls the “immediate.”<sup>52</sup> The movement into the subject of Book II, “essence” (*Wesen*), is motivated by the logical need to overcome such immediacy: “Being is the immediate. Since knowing has for its goal knowledge of the true, knowledge of what being is *in and for itself*, it does not stop at the immediate and its determinations, but penetrates it on the supposition that at the back of this being there is something else, something other than being itself, that this background constitutes the truth of being.”<sup>53</sup> So in Book II, Being is reduced to “illusory Being” (*Schein*) since it becomes “the *unessential*” relative to its underlying essence: “Essence that issues from being seems to confront it as an opposite; this immediate being is, in the first instance, the *unessential*.”<sup>54</sup> But the relation between essence and its illusory manifestation in being is not a contingent or arbitrary one. As Hegel puts it, “this illusory being is not something external to or other than essence; on the contrary, it is essence’s own illusory being. The showing of its illusory being within essence itself is *reflection*.”<sup>55</sup> “Reflection” is precisely the process of essence’s sublation of illusory being within itself: “Essence contains the illusory being within itself as the infinite immanent movement that determines its immediacy as negativity and its negativity as immediacy, and is thus the reflection of itself within itself. Essence in this its self-movement is *reflection*.”<sup>56</sup>

In the highly complex section that follows, Hegel argues that there are three stages within reflection itself. Carefully following the intricacies of his doctrine of reflection will prove to be necessary, I think, in order to read Hegel's metaphysics of the will in a speculative manner. In the first form of reflection, positing reflection, the immediacy of illusory being is taken for the essence. It *posits* its own immediacy: "It is a *positing* in so far as it is immediacy as a returning movement; for there is no other on hand, either an other *from* which or *into* which immediacy returns."<sup>57</sup> But it immediately *sublates* its positing; in other words, it *presupposes*, or takes for granted, its very capacity to posit robustly: "Reflection in its positing, immediately sublates its positing and thus has an *immediate presupposition*. . . . But the fact that what is thus presupposed is a negative or is posited does not concern it; this determinateness belongs only to the positing reflection, but in the presupposing the positedness is present only as sublated."<sup>58</sup> The crucial point here is that positing reflection *posits* its very capacity to posit—but since it fails to acknowledge its positing of this capacity to posit, such positing is merely *presupposed* by it.

This is highly abstract, but thankfully, intelligent commentators have offered useful paraphrases of positing reflection. Pippin conceives positing reflection as the "impossibility of a purely *self*-determined reflective condition."<sup>59</sup> I hope we can begin to notice a connection between positing reflection and the first moment of the will in the *Philosophy of Right*. In this first moment of the will, the "unrestricted infinity of absolute abstraction," the will assumes the capacity to abstract from every determination—in terms of the *Science of Logic*, it *presupposes* its capacity to posit robustly. What it fails to see is that its very capacity to posit is *itself* posited; in other words, it fails to acknowledge that its assumption of radical agential autonomy is precisely an *illusion*.

Perhaps the underlying mechanism of positing reflection will become clearer once it is contrasted with external reflection. External reflection, Hegel claims, *renders transparent* the positedness of the presupposition of positing reflection. External reflection directly negates positing reflection and thus "presupposes itself as sublated, as the negative of itself."<sup>60</sup> Hegel elaborates that external reflection "is reflection that is negatively self-related; it is related to itself as to its non-being."<sup>61</sup> Hegel very usefully associates external reflection with Kant's notion of reflective judgment. For Kant (according to Hegel), judgment is merely reflective, "if only the particular is given *for which the universal is to be found*."<sup>62</sup> Hegel then observes: "That reflection to which Kant ascribes the search for the universal of a given particular is clearly also only *external* reflection, which is related to the immediate as to something given."<sup>63</sup> For external

reflection, then, the immediate is seen as a mere epiphenomenon of its underlying essence: it is wholly “subsumed” under the universal. Thus, Hegel writes: “the universal, the principle or rule and law to which it advances in its determining, counts as the essence of that immediate which forms the starting point; *and this immediate therefore counts as a nullity*, and it is only the return from it.”<sup>64</sup> So the supposed superiority of external reflection over positing reflection is shown to be illusory. In fact, external reflection “presupposes the immediate”: it *posits* the immediate as “something given.” Although it seems as if external reflection constitutes an advance over positing reflection insofar as it “goes beyond an immediate to the universal,” external reflection spuriously posits the immediate as *given*, over against the universal. Pippin helpfully defines external reflection as “reflection simply *being* determined by the . . . empirically given.”<sup>65</sup> So if positing reflection simply presupposed its capacity to posit robustly, external reflection is “external” insofar as it presupposes radical determination of the immediate by external forces (what Pippin calls the “empirically given”).

But here Hegel makes a crucial observation: “The fact is . . . that external reflection is not external, but is no less the immanent reflection of immediacy itself.”<sup>66</sup> And now we can link external reflection to the second moment of the will in the *Philosophy of Right*—the “absolute moment” of determination. What should not be missed is how the second moment of the will is *generated out of* the first moment: what was merely *in itself* for positing reflection becomes *for itself* in external reflection. It is in this precise sense that Hegel argues (as cited earlier) that the second moment of the will is simply a radicalization of the first moment: “this second moment is already contained in the first and is simply an explicit positing of what the first already was implicitly [*was das erste schon an sich ist*].”<sup>67</sup> Žižek helpfully elucidates the basic difference between positing and external reflection as follows: “to put it in Spinozeian terms: ‘positing reflection’ observes things as they are in their eternal essence, *sub specie aeternitatis*, whereas ‘external reflection’ observes them *sub specie durationis*, in their dependence on a series of contingent external circumstances.”<sup>68</sup> In the terms of my introduction to this paper, we might say that positing reflection finds its analogue in Sartrean absolute “freedom of choice,” and external reflection in the thoroughgoing socio-economic determinism of vulgar Marxism.

Hegel resolves this deadlock between positing and external reflection by introducing “determining reflection.” But this is where it will prove necessary to take issue with both Žižek and Pippin. The trouble with Žižek is that he sees determining reflection as a radically ideological

gesture: he discerns “an elementary ideological operation” in the forms of determining reflection.<sup>69</sup> In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, he elaborates on this notion: “What is the ‘empty gesture’ by means of which the brute, senseless reality is *assumed*, accepted as our own work, if not the most elementary ideological operation, the symbolization of the Real, its transformation into a meaningful totality, its inscription into the big Other?”<sup>70</sup> But this impels Žižek to locate genuine freedom outside of the circuit of reflection altogether: he locates “radical change” in “the final stage of the psychoanalytic process: ‘subjective destitution.’”<sup>71</sup> Here Žižek’s overeagerness to assimilate Hegel to a Lacanian framework becomes overtly problematic. For Hegel clearly sees determining reflection as a genuine dialectical *resolution* of the deadlock between positing and external reflection. Instead of taking the immediate simply as given as external reflection does, determining reflection posits the immediate “in accordance with its true being.”<sup>72</sup> The transition from external to determining reflection thus consists in the crucial transposition of external reflection *into* the very workings of immediacy itself: “what reflection does to the immediate, and the determinations which issue from reflection, are not anything *external* to the immediate but are its own proper being.”<sup>73</sup>

Hegel captures this transposition in a dramatic metaphor near the end of the section: determining reflection “is *positedness*, negation, which however bends back into itself the relation to other, and negation which is equal to itself, the unity of itself and its other, and only through this is an *essentiality*.”<sup>74</sup> Pippin views Hegel’s resort to metaphor here as an index of his failure to articulate the concept of determining reflection.<sup>75</sup> Pippin concludes, therefore, that “the ‘resolution’ suggested by determining reflection is not really a resolution at all.”<sup>76</sup> Žižek acutely recognizes Pippin’s failure: “Pippin fails at the crucial place, in his treatment of the logic of reflection. The final result of his analysis is that we are ultimately condemned to the antinomy of positing and external reflection: he repudiates ‘determining reflection’ as an empty metaphoric formula, a failed attempt to break out of this antinomy.”<sup>77</sup> By contrast, as we have seen, Žižek does *not* dismiss determining reflection as an empty resolution but sees it rather as the “elementary ideological operation” of the subject’s decisive inscription into the “big Other.”

But this is where I must depart from Žižek. The fundamental problem with Žižek’s account becomes apparent when we attempt to correlate determining reflection with the third moment of the will in the *Philosophy of Right*, the moment when the will becomes genuinely free. Just as free will is “the unity” of the first two moments of the will, determining

reflection is the “unity of itself and its other”—of positing and external reflection. As Hegel puts it: “In so far . . . as it is the positedness that is at the same time reflection-into-self, the determinateness of reflection is *the relation to its otherness within itself*.”<sup>78</sup> In a concise formulation of the same point, he writes: “The determination of reflection . . . has taken its otherness back into itself.”<sup>79</sup> It is in this precise sense that we can understand Hegel’s account of the third moment of the will as “particularity reflected into itself and so brought back to universality.”<sup>80</sup> So the third moment’s “unity,” in order to be understood in a genuinely speculative manner, must be understood in terms of the “unity” of determining reflection. Conceiving the “unity” of determining reflection in terms of the Understanding would be a radical falsification: “It is not an affirmative, quiescent determinateness, which would be related to an other in such a way that the related term and its relation are distinct from each other.”<sup>81</sup> But now we can see the problem with analytic philosophical appropriations of Hegelian free will to a liberal framework: on the “rational project” view, the subject *chooses* from a host of options which are strictly *external* to it. Such a liberal reading misses the fundamental point of determining reflection’s “taking its otherness back into itself”—namely, that the otherness is no longer other.

So the basic problem with Žižek’s account is that this third moment of the will—in which the will achieves genuine freedom—is radically ideological, is not really “free” at all. This is an unacceptable consequence since it is clear from Hegel’s work that true freedom consists precisely in “being at home with oneself in one’s other.” For Hegel, the subject’s “free” sublation of otherness into itself is the decisively *non-ideological* gesture. Žižek systematically (and no doubt willfully) confuses the Hegelian subject’s sublation of its other with the subject’s *ideological inscription* into the “big Other.”

Several years after the publication of the *Science of Logic*, Hegel composed the *Encyclopaedia Logic*—intended as a supplement to his lecture courses—which covers much of the same ground as the earlier work in a more accessible fashion.<sup>82</sup> The second subdivision of the *Encyclopaedia Logic* revisits the doctrine of essence elaborated in the *Science of Logic* but mercifully offers concrete examples for his abstract assertions and even discusses freedom of the will within that context. Turning briefly to the *Encyclopaedia Logic* might allow us more fully to grasp the subtle ways in which Hegel’s theory of reflection informs his metaphysics of the will.

Although the *Encyclopaedia Logic* does not employ the language of “reflection” of the *Science of Logic*, much of the second subdivision



can be seen as an attempt to articulate the fundamental mechanism of determining reflection in a different terminological register.<sup>83</sup> Hegel argues, "What is outer is, *first of all, the same content* as what is inner . . . appearance does not show anything that is not within essence, and there is nothing in essence that is not manifested."<sup>84</sup> He then immediately relates this fundamental insight of determining reflection to agency. Hegel observes that only "the abstract understanding with its 'either-or'" insists on an absolute distinction between the individual and his "circumstances": "[W]e can gather what our attitude should be when someone appeals to his quite different inner self, and his allegedly excellent intentions and sentiments, in the face of his inadequate performances and even of his discreditable acts. There may, of course, be single instances where, through the adversity of external circumstances, well-meant intentions come to nothing and the execution of well-thought out plans is frustrated. But here, too, the essential unity of inward and outward generally holds good; and hence it must be said that a person *is* what he *does*."<sup>85</sup> So what seem to be external *impediments* to an individual's free will actually prove to be *constitutive* of free will itself. Hegel offers a concrete example of how the subject's sublation of otherness takes place:

Thus a child, for instance, [considered] as human in a general sense, is of course a rational essence; but the child's reason as such is present at first only as something inward, i.e., as a disposition or vocation, and this, which is merely internal, has for it equally the form of what is merely external, namely, the will of its parents, the learning of its teachers, and in general the rational world that surrounds it. The education and formation of the child consists therefore in the process by which it becomes *for-itself* also what it is initially only *in-itself* and hence for others (the adults). Reason, which is at first present in the child only as an inner possibility, is made actual by education, and conversely, the child becomes in like manner conscious that the ethics, religion, and science which it regarded initially as external authority are things that belong to its own and inner nature.<sup>86</sup>

Notice that the child's rational essence only emerges through the transposition, or sublation, of what seemed strictly *external* to its essence *into* itself, thus following precisely the logic of determining reflection, according to which the pressure of external reflection is displaced into the workings of immediacy itself.

Soon enough, Hegel explicitly links this process of the sublation of otherness to genuine freedom of the will: "The will that is genuinely free, and contains freedom of choice sublated within itself, is conscious

of its content as something steadfast in and for itself; and at the same time it knows the content to be utterly its own.”<sup>87</sup> In genuine freedom of the will, then, the choice of content is not arbitrary at all—it is utterly “steadfast”; yet, that very same content is known to be “utterly its own.” What liberal readings of Hegel’s notion of the free will miss is precisely this “steadfastness” of the content. Moments later, Hegel offers his most trenchant critique of the liberal doctrine of freedom of choice:

[T]he will that does not go beyond the level of freedom of choice, even when it decides in favour of what is, as regards its content, true and right, remains infected with the conceit that, had it so pleased, it could also have decided in favour of something else. For the rest, when we look at it more closely, freedom of choice proves to be a contradiction, because the form and content are here still opposed to one another. The content of freedom of choice is something given, and known to be grounded, not within the will itself, but in external circumstances. For this reason, freedom in relation to such content consists only in the form of choosing; and this formal freedom must be regarded as a freedom that is only supposed to be such because it will be found, in the final analysis, that the same external sort of circumstances in which the content given to the will is grounded must also be invoked to explain the fact that the will decides in favour of just this and not that.<sup>88</sup>

Hegel anticipates here the most advanced forms of ideology critique available to us today. He begins by pointing out that the liberal notion of freedom of choice proves to be an empty freedom since the array of choices that the agent is faced with is itself merely *given*—it is grounded in “external circumstances.” But his brilliant next move is to note that even the liberal agent’s “freedom” to *choose* is itself radically *unfree* since its choice is dictated by the very same “external circumstances”: “the same external sort of circumstances . . . must also be invoked to explain the fact that the will decides in favour of just this and not that.” We are now equipped to isolate the deepest problem with the Wood-Pippin interpretation of Hegelian agency as the subject making certain external ends its own by incorporating them into its “rational project.” Hegel’s point is that the so-called “rational project” *itself* is arbitrary, and therefore profoundly *irrational*, to the extent that the subject’s very choice of a certain “rational project” is radically determined by its culture’s prevailing ideologies.<sup>89</sup>

By contrast, true freedom is only secured through the recognition of absolute necessity: “we can also gather how absurd it is to regard freedom and necessity as mutually exclusive. To be sure, necessity as such is not

yet freedom; but freedom presupposes necessity and contains it sublated within itself. The ethical person is conscious of the content of his action as something necessary . . . it is only through this consciousness that his abstract freedom becomes a freedom that is actual and rich in content, as distinct from freedom of choice."<sup>90</sup> But this is not a necessity imposed from without, but rather one realized from within—a necessity, to use the language of the *Science of Logic*, that the subject *freely* “bends back into” itself.

## V. THE PROBLEM OF AGENCY IN THE *PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT*

Hegel's scattered remarks on agency in his early work, the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, seem almost to invite misinterpretation. Applying the metaphysics of the will just elaborated to the *Phenomenology* might allow us both to resist reductive readings of his account of agency and to discern important continuities between the early and late Hegel. In the Observing Reason section of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel argues that the fundamental problem with observational psychology is that it clings to an absolute distinction between the individual and its circumstances: “the individuality itself” is pitted against “the given circumstances, situation, habits, customs, religion, and so on.”<sup>91</sup> Consider observational psychology in terms of external reflection. As discussed earlier, external reflection, in subsuming the particular under the universal, ends up reducing the particular to an epiphenomenal “nullity.” The basic problem with external reflection is that it presupposes the immediate as merely “given.” Notice that observational psychology is guilty of the same mistake in rigidly contrasting the “individual” to the “given” circumstances. Because observational psychology implicitly relies on the inadequate metaphysics of external reflection, it simply cannot honor the complexities of the individual's relation to its circumstances:

Now, the law of this relation of the two sides [according to observational psychology] would have to state the kind of effect and influence exerted on the individuality by these specific circumstances. But this individuality consists precisely both in being the *universal*, and hence directly and unresistingly coalescing with the *given* universal, the customs, habits, etc., and becoming conformed to them; and in setting itself in opposition to them and in fact transforming them; and again, in behaving towards them in its individuality with complete indifference, neither letting them exert an influence on it, nor being active against them. Therefore, *what* is to have an influence on the

individuality, and what *kind* of influence it is to have—which really mean the same thing—depend solely on the individuality itself [Was auf die Individualität Einfluss und welchen Einfluss es haben soll—was eigentlich gleichbedeutend ist—, hängt darum nur von der Individualität selbst ab]; to say that by such and such an influence this individuality has become *this specific individuality* means nothing else than that it has been this all along.<sup>92</sup>

So much seems to depend on what Hegel means when he says “depend solely on” (*abhängen von*) in this passage.<sup>93</sup> On a superficial reading, it seems to suggest that the individual possesses the *second-order* capacity to choose its *first-order* determinations: it freely *chooses* how its “circumstances” will affect it. But this is precisely the arch-bourgeois conception of freedom of choice that Hegel subjects (as we have amply seen) to radical critique. So long as we remain within this liberalist framework, we cannot escape the vicious circle of the individual and its circumstances that Hegel so brilliantly exposes in his later work: the supposedly “free” second-order choice ends up being radically *determined* by the very circumstances that it claims to stand above.

Instead, let us explore the possibility that Hegel here critiques the “external reflection” metaphysics of observational psychology from the precise standpoint of *determining* reflection. Later in the paragraph, Hegel vividly captures the deadlock between positing and external reflection (or the first and second moments of the will in the *Philosophy of Right*) in the striking image of a “double gallery of pictures”:

If the constitution which the external world has spontaneously given itself is that which is manifest in the individuality, the latter would be comprehended from the former. We should have a double gallery of pictures, one of which would be the reflection of the other: the one, the gallery of external circumstances which completely determine and circumscribe the individual, the other, the same gallery translated into the form in which those circumstances are present in the conscious individual: the former the spherical surface, the latter the centre which represents that surface within it.<sup>94</sup>

[Wir hätten eine gedoppelte Gallerie von Bildern, deren eine der Widerschein der andern wäre; die eine die Galerie der völligen Bestimmtheit und Umgrenzung äusserer Umstände, die andere dieselbe übersetzt in die Weise, wie sie in dem bewussten Wesen sind; jene die Kugelfläche, dieses der Mittelpunkt, welcher sie in sich vorstellt.]<sup>95</sup>

On the “external reflection” side of the double gallery, the individual is a mere “nullity” subsumed under “external circumstances,” while on the

“positing reflection” side, these circumstances are present only in the individual himself. But notice how the double gallery metaphor yields to a startlingly different metaphor in the passage's last clause: “the former the spherical surface, the latter the centre which represents that surface within it.” The linear, non-hierarchized double gallery *literally* bends back into itself to form a sphere, suddenly transposing the “external reflection” gallery onto its surface and swallowing the “positing reflection” gallery into its center. But recall that this is *precisely* how determining reflection resolves the deadlock between positing and external reflection: determining reflection “bends back into itself the relation to other.”<sup>96</sup>

The next passage reveals the work to which this “spherical” metaphor is put:

But the spherical surface, the world of the individual [*die Welt des Individuums*], has at once an ambiguous meaning: it is the actual state of the world as it is in and for itself, and it is the world of the individual; it is the latter either in so far as the individual has merely coalesced with that world, has let it, just as it is, enter into him, behaving towards it as a merely formal consciousness; or, on the other hand, it is the world of the individual, in the sense that the actual world as given has been *transformed* by the individual [*Welt des Individuums so zu sein, wie das Vorhandene von ihm verkehrt worden ist*]. Since, on account of this freedom [*Da um dieser Freiheit*], the actual world is capable of having this twofold meaning, the world of the individual is to be comprehended only from the individual himself; and the *influence* on the individual of the actual world, conceived as *existing* in and for itself, receives through the individual the absolutely opposite significance, viz. that the individual either *allows* free play to the stream of the actual world flowing in upon it, or else breaks it off and transforms it [*dass es entweder dem Strom der einfließenden Wirklichkeit an ihm gewähren lässt oder dass es ihn abbricht und verkehrt*].<sup>97</sup>

The ambiguity in the phrase, “the world of the individual,” lies in the genitive “of,” which can be interpreted in opposed ways: on the one hand, the “world” can be seen as standing over *against* the individual, and on the other, the “world” can be seen as manifesting itself *in* the individual itself. At this point, Hegel crucially introduces the notion of freedom (*Freiheit*)—at the exact moment that the individual *bends back into itself* its “external” determining circumstances: “Since, on account of this freedom, the actual world is capable of having this twofold meaning, *the world of the individual is to be comprehended only from the individual himself.*” So Hegel's displacement of the “positing reflection”

gallery into the center of the sphere can be seen as a crucial assertion of the primacy of the subject's free will: freedom lies in the individual's sublation of the world into itself. But as we have seen, this is precisely the logic of determining reflection: "what reflection does to the immediate, and the determinations which issue from reflection, are not anything external to the immediate but are its own proper being."<sup>98</sup> It is in this sense, then, that Hegel defines free will in the *Philosophy of Right* as "the *self-determination* of the ego, which means that at one and the same time the ego posits itself as its own negative, i.e. as restricted and determinate, and yet remains by itself."<sup>99</sup>

It is only from the perspective of determining reflection, I think, that we can make sense of the section's last paragraph:

Thus there is no question of a *being* which would be *in and for itself* and was supposed to constitute one aspect, and the universal aspect at that, of a law. Individuality is what *its* world is, the world that is its *own*. Individuality is itself the cycle of its action in which it has exhibited itself as an actual world, and as simply and solely the unity of the world as *given* and the world it has *made*; a unity whose sides do not fall apart, as in the conception of psychological law, into a world that *in itself* is already given, and an individuality existing *on its own account*.<sup>100</sup>

We can now clearly see the fundamental problem shared by both positing and external reflection: namely, that they presuppose that the individual and the world are "given" independently of each other. Determining reflection, by contrast, *posits an equal sign* between the "individual" and the "world": it is, as we recall, "the unity of itself and its other."<sup>101</sup> Here, accordingly, Hegel defines "individuality" as "simply and solely the unity of the world as *given* and the world it has *made*." The "sides" of this unity "do not fall apart" because the individual resides in the spherical *center*, sublating the "world as *given*" within it.

Later, in the "spiritual animal kingdom" subsection of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel elaborates on the assertion just cited that "individuality is itself the cycle of its action." Action *as such* is shown to be the process by which the individual sublates the world as *given* into the world it has *made*:

[A]ction is simply the coming-to-be of Spirit as *consciousness*. What the latter is *in itself*, it knows therefore from what it *actually* is. Accordingly, an individual cannot know what he [really] is until he has made himself a reality through action. However, this seems to imply that he cannot determine the *End* of his action until he has carried it out; but at the same time, since he is a *conscious* individual, he must

have the action in front of him beforehand as *entirely his own*, i.e. as an *End*. The individual who is going to act seems, therefore, to find himself in a circle in which each moment already presupposes the other, and thus he seems unable to find a beginning, because he only gets to know his original nature, which must be his *End*, *from the deed*, while, in order to act, he must have that *End* beforehand. But for that very reason he has to start immediately, and, whatever the circumstances, without further scruples about beginning, means, or *End*, proceed to action; for his essence and *intrinsic* nature is beginning, means, and *End*, all in one.<sup>102</sup>

Here Hegel provocatively suggests that the vicious circle between the individual and its circumstances (discussed earlier) can be resolved through action itself—since action is precisely the “coming-to-be of Spirit as *consciousness*.” He elaborates on the ontological status of action later in the paragraph: “What we have, therefore, is a set of given *circumstances* which are *in themselves* the individual's own original nature; next, the interest which treats them as *its own* or as its *End*; and finally, the union [of these] and the abolition of the antithesis in the *means* [*endlich die Verknüpfung und Aufhebung dieses Gegensatzes im Mittel*].”<sup>103</sup> Action as such unites—by sublating (not by “abolishing,” as Miller renders *Aufhebung*)—the antithesis of the individual and its circumstances.

In the Morality section of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel complicates this metaphysics of action by importing the structure of the “double gallery of pictures” discussed earlier:

Since, in the action as such, the doer attains to a vision of *himself* in objectivity . . . the inner aspect is judged to be an urge to secure his own happiness. . . . No action can escape such judgement, for duty for duty's sake, this pure purpose, is an unreality; it becomes a reality in the deed of an individuality, and the action is thereby charged with the aspect of particularity. No man is a hero to his valet; not, however, because the man is not a hero, but because the valet—is a valet, whose dealings are with the man, not as a hero, but as one who eats, drinks, and wears clothes, in general, with his individual wants and fancies. Thus, for the judging consciousness, there is no action in which it could not oppose to the universal aspect of the action, the personal aspect of the individuality, and play the part of the *moral* valet towards the agent.<sup>104</sup>

Here, the earlier dialectic between the individual and its circumstances—captured perfectly in the double gallery metaphor—is transposed into the *moral* dialectic between action motivated purely by duty (“autono-

mous” action in the Kantian sense) and action motivated by impulses or inclinations (“heteronomous” action in the Kantian sense). Hegel’s point is that *no* action can escape this “moral” double gallery, in which it can be seen as autonomous and heteronomous at one and the same time. But for Hegel, unlike Kant, this is far from being a problem: in fact, he claims that the Kantian ideal of “duty for duty’s sake . . . is an unreality.” Hegel simply rejects Kant’s alignment of genuine agential autonomy with action based on absolute duty. Instead, as we have seen, Hegel locates robust autonomy in the individual’s *sublation* of heteronomy within itself.

In a fascinating passage from the much later *Encyclopaedia Logic*, Hegel polemically attacks “pragmatic historiographers,” who play the “moral valet” to the “heroes” of history:

In our modern era, what we call ‘pragmatic historiography’ has often sinned quite notably with regard to great historical characters through this false separation between inward and outward. . . . Instead of contenting themselves with simply narrating the great deeds that have been accomplished by heroes of world-historical stature, and recognising that their inner selves correspond to the content of these deeds, the pragmatic historians have considered it a right and duty to scent out allegedly secret motives behind what lies open to the light of day; and their opinion has been that historical inquiry is all the deeper the more it succeeds in removing the halo of the hero who has hitherto been celebrated and praised, and degrading him, with regard to his origin and his “real” significance, to the level of common mediocrity.<sup>105</sup>

But notice that in this passage, his concern is with the actions of “heroes of world-historical stature,” whereas in the *Phenomenology* passage, “hero” seems to be deployed as a metaphor, applying to the action of all people. So what seems to be a metaphysics of action *tout court* in the *Phenomenology* is restricted in the *Encyclopaedia Logic* to the action of such world-historical heroes. Action *as such*, in fact, generally operates at “the level of common mediocrity”—which is to say, pragmatic historiographers would probably not be wrong to remove the “haloes” from those run-of-the-mill types who believe they are acting out of noble motives. But this passage from the *Encyclopaedia Logic* ends with a fundamental ambiguity: “[S]ince inward and outward have in truth the same content, it must be expressly asserted, against all such schoolmasterly cleverness, that if the historical heroes had been only concerned with subjective and formal interests, they would not have accomplished what they did; and with reference to the unity of inward



and outward, it must be recognised that the great men willed what they did and did what they willed.”<sup>106</sup> The ambiguity lies in the fact that the sentence opens with a *general* metaphysical thesis about the identity of “inward and outward,” but then proceeds to assert that such a “unity of inward and outward” only really applies to “the great men.” The Hegel of the *Encyclopaedia Logic* would seem to have to revise the statement in the *Phenomenology* by asserting: *No man is a hero to his valet, and most men are not heroes, period.*<sup>107</sup>

The ambiguities and questions, in fact, multiply as we continue to ponder Hegel's conception of agency. As we have seen, there seems to be a deep tension, both in the *Phenomenology* itself and in Hegel's work as a whole, between his hypervaluation of action *qua* action as inherently autonomous and his repeated suggestions that only “great men” are able to act in a genuinely autonomous manner. What, then, is the status of Hegel's bold assertion in the *Philosophy of Right* that “the will is free”? If only world-historical “heroes” are able to *actualize* their free will, Hegel's conception of agency threatens to collapse into the straightforwardly Kantian conception. In other words, the “bite” of his *Phenomenology* polemic against Kantian ethics is in his insistence that Kant rarefies the genuinely “autonomous” act out of existence. But it remains far from clear what an “autonomous” act, on Hegel's own conception, concretely involves.<sup>108</sup>

I began this essay with the intention of comprehending speculatively Hegel's notion of freedom as “being at home with oneself in one's other.” However, it has turned out that much of the paper has been devoted to the seemingly preliminary task of showing up the inadequacies of some dominant interpretations of Hegelian agency. Perhaps that is as it should be. After all, it was Hegel who insisted that negation, so long as it is “determinate,” is *already positive*, insofar as it necessarily motivates—and even in some sense *already constitutes*—the emergence of a “new form.”<sup>109</sup> This modest exercise in tarrying with the negative will have succeeded if, in future attempts to extract a positive account of agency from Hegel's work, we honor the complexities of Hegel's formulations and resist the reductive assimilation of his account to preconceived frameworks. Only a careful understanding of the subtle logic of determining reflection—merely gestured toward in this piece—can begin to capture the intricate dynamics of freedom by which the Hegelian subject “bends back into itself” its relation to its Other.

## NOTES

1. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* (London: Verso, 1999; hereafter TS), 1–5.
2. For a very useful discussion of the Sartrean extreme, see Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. A. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973; hereafter ND), 49–51. Originally published in German in 1966. Adorno observes there, “The notion of absolute freedom of choice is as illusionary as that of the absolute I as the world’s source has ever been” (ND, 50).
3. Žižek offers a useful discussion of this reductive tendency in some prominent poststructuralist conceptions of agency (often inflected by Foucault) in his *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989; hereafter SO), 174–5. Judith Butler’s work is a notable exception in its sustained attempt to honor poststructuralism’s rejection of subject essentialism without foreclosing the possibility of agency. In *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997; hereafter PLP), Butler insists that the “subject” cannot simply “be *reduced* to the power by which it is occasioned” (16). Instead, she argues: “If the subject is *neither* fully determined by power *nor* fully determining of power (but significantly and partially both), the subject exceeds the logic of noncontradiction, is an excrescence of logic, as it were” (PLP, 17). She asks, “Is there a way to affirm complicity as the basis of political agency, yet insist that political agency may do more than reiterate the conditions of subordination?” (PLP, 30). The trouble, for me, is that this pressing question ultimately remains, in her work, a question without an adequate answer. Her attempt in an earlier work, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990; hereafter GT), to theorize a positive account of agency in terms of “subversive repetition” inevitably fails because it only secures subversion by smuggling in the very category of the subject that she claims to reject (see especially 145–9). She resorts to metaphor in an effort to capture the nature of the genuinely subversive act: “There is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very ‘taking up’ is enabled by the tool lying there” (GT, 145). The deep problem with this metaphor, of course, is that it depends on an agent who *does* the “taking up”—even if this agent is occluded by the grammar of the sentence (“There is only a taking up of the tools”). My essay can be seen as an attempt to provide a theoretical frame that might enable a very different way out of the impasse so brilliantly articulated by Butler.
4. Simon Glynn’s recent essay, “The freedom of the deconstructed postmodern subject,” reflects the fundamental deadlock characterizing much of the contemporary discourse on agency. See *Continental Philosophy Review* 35 (2002): 61–76. He acutely argues that the poststructuralist “deconstruction” of the subject seems to foreclose the possibility of freedom, but his positive account of freedom turns out to be a disguised version of the liberal bourgeois ideology of “freedom of choice”: “While constraining the range of alternative acts by which one can (semantically) meaningfully constitute

- oneself as a subject, and thus the range of subject positions open within a culture, the symbolic order or culture is then the condition of possibility of our 'articulating' ourselves at all, not to mention of our becoming self-conscious, or fully human subjects. As with our physical embodiment and economic situatedness, we each remain free within the pertinent range of constrained or circumscribed possibilities to articulate ourselves in any manner whatsoever" (70). Moreover, Glynn unfairly accuses poststructuralism *tout court* of "reducing" subjects "to the cultural systems which are the condition of their possibility" (61).
5. Jean-Luc Nancy's brilliant *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, trans. Jason Smith and Steven Miller (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), stands as an important exception. However, Nancy runs into difficulties in attempting to articulate a positive account of Hegelian freedom (probably due to his deep allegiances to poststructuralism). Freedom, for Nancy, consists in the self's very *freedom* from determination: "freedom is the name for the necessity to be in itself and for itself detached from all fixity, all determination, from every given, and every property" (67). As will be shown in my discussion of Hegel's doctrine of the will in the *Philosophy of Right*, Nancy's conception of Hegelian freedom falls short because it turns out to be merely a sublated *moment* in the development of robust agency. What Nancy is unable to allow—and what is essential, I think, in understanding Hegelian freedom—is Hegel's notion of "determining reflection" from the *Science of Logic*. This is discussed later in the article.
  6. G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991; hereafter EL), 58. For the original German, see G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), 84.
  7. Allen Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), xiii.
  8. *Ibid.*, 46–7.
  9. See Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
  10. Paul Franco usefully links Hegel's notion of the "arbitrary will" to a Rawlsian metaphysics: "What Hegel describes here under the rubric of the reflective will looks very much like the deontological self prior to its ends which Michael Sandel has ascribed to John Rawls." See *Hegel's Philosophy of Freedom* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), 164.
  11. Robert Pippin, "Hegel's Practical Philosophy," in *Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, ed. K. Ameriks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 190.
  12. *Ibid.*, 194.
  13. It is curious that Pippin, the author of *Hegel's Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989; hereafter HI)—a brilliant defense of Hegel

- as a post-Kantian metaphysician—is so resolutely *anti*-metaphysical in his interpretation of Hegelian agency.
14. See, for instance, Žižek's treatments of Hegelian agency in chapter four of *Tarrying with the Negative* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993; hereafter TN), 125–64; chapter six of *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 201–32; and TS, chap. 2, pp. 70–124.
  15. TN, 141.
  16. TS, 18.
  17. *Ibid.*, 209.
  18. TN, 148.
  19. *Ibid.*, 150.
  20. Theodor Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993; hereafter HTS), 2–3. Originally published in German in 1963.
  21. *Ibid.*, 3.
  22. *Ibid.*, 6.
  23. ND, 219.
  24. HTS, 46.
  25. ND, xx.
  26. *Ibid.*, 277.
  27. *Ibid.*, 219.
  28. *Ibid.*, 283.
  29. HTS, 94.
  30. PR: G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox (London: Oxford, 1971), 14.
  31. PR, 14. For the original German, see G.W.F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1981; hereafter GPR), 30.
  32. PR, 15.
  33. *Ibid.*, 20.
  34. *Ibid.*
  35. *Ibid.*, 21.
  36. *Ibid.*
  37. *Ibid.*, 22; GPR, 44. For whatever reason, Knox's translation rarely reflects Hegel's frequent use of italics in the *Philosophy of Right*. In this passage, I have added italics to reflect the original.
  38. PR, 22.
  39. *Ibid.*, 21; GPR, 42.
  40. *Ibid.*, 22; GPR, 44.
  41. *Ibid.*, 22; GPR, 44.
  42. See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971; hereafter PS), 51.

43. PR, 22; GPR, 44.
44. Ibid., 23; GPR, 45.
45. Franco, *Hegel's Philosophy of Freedom*, 178–87.
46. PR, 27.
47. Ibid., 27.
48. Ibid., 24.
49. Ibid., 24.
50. HTS, 100.
51. That Hegel himself implicitly encouraged linking his doctrine of reflection to his metaphysics of the will is suggested by his placement of his discussion of the free will in the section of the *Encyclopaedia Logic* that corresponds precisely to the “doctrine of essence” section of the *Science of Logic*.
52. G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (New York: Humanity Books, 1969; hereafter SL), 389.
53. Ibid., 389.
54. Ibid., 394.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid., 399.
57. Ibid., 401.
58. Ibid., 403.
59. HI, 212.
60. SL, 403.
61. Ibid., 403.
62. Ibid., 404.
63. Ibid., 404–5.
64. Ibid., 405, italics mine.
65. HI, 213.
66. SL, 404.
67. PR, 22; GPR, 44.
68. TN, 142–3.
69. Ibid., 130.
70. SO, 230.
71. Ibid., 230.
72. SL, 405.
73. Ibid., 405, italics mine.
74. Ibid., 408.
75. HI, 217.
76. Ibid., 218.
77. TN, 266.
78. SL, 408.
79. Ibid.

80. PR, 23.
81. SL, 408.
82. See the Translator's Preface to EL, vii for detailed discussion of EL's place in Hegel's corpus.
83. See HI, 213 for a useful overview of the various ways scholars have construed EL's relation to SL.
84. EL, 209.
85. *Ibid.*, 211.
86. *Ibid.*
87. *Ibid.*, 218.
88. *Ibid.*, 218–9.
89. Michel Foucault makes the same point over a century later: while “the subject constitutes himself in an active fashion, by the practices of the self, these practices are nevertheless not something that the individual invents by himself. They are patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group.” See Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 12 (1987), 122.
90. EL, 233.
91. PS, 183.
92. *Ibid.*, 184. For the original German, see G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1970; hereafter PG), 231.
93. Quentin Lauer offers a unique interpretation of this passage: “The influences are too general to have particular effects; it is the individual who particularizes their generality.” See Lauer, *A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1993), 169. Hegel's point, however, as I hope to show, is much more radical than this—the individual does not merely “particularize” the generality of external circumstances, but radically identifies itself with those very circumstances.
94. PS, 184.
95. PG, 231.
96. SL, 408.
97. PS, 184; PG, 232.
98. SL, 405.
99. PR, 23.
100. PS, 185.
101. SL, 408.
102. PS, 240.
103. *Ibid.*, 240; PG, 298.
104. PS, 404.
105. EL, 212.
106. EL, 213.

107. In this context, we can see how Hegel might provide an important corrective to Judith Butler's attempt to theorize agency (discussed in an earlier footnote). While Butler's project depends on resisting the ontologization of subjects into reified identity-categories, she ironically smuggles in something very much like a universal subject constituted by culture in rigid, law-like fashion. That is, her Foucauldian theory of the "cultural constitution" of the subject founders on its inability to admit any *variability* in the way individual subjects are constituted. Hegel's crucial point is that not all subjects are "constituted" by culture in the same way.
108. Put another way, Hegel's anti-Kantianism proves to be in tension with his avowed Spinozism. Spinoza's *Ethics* ends by insisting on the sheer difficulty and rarity of attaining genuine freedom (which, for Spinoza, consists in liberation from bondage to the affects): "If the way which I have pointed out as leading to this result seems exceedingly hard, it may nevertheless be discovered. Needs must it be hard, since it is so seldom found. How would it be possible, if salvation were ready to our hand, and could without great labour be found, that it should be by almost all men neglected? But all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare." See Spinoza, *On the Improvement of the Understanding; The Ethics; Correspondence*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1977), 270–1. Nancy is very good on Hegel's debt to Spinozean freedom: "If Hegel refers to Spinoza on the subject of freedom, it is because he recognizes in Spinoza the thought of the only true freedom in the absolute, as distinct from the illusory freedom of men who believe themselves masters of their acts because they are unaware of the real determinations of these acts. Free will is only a moment and a figure of freedom: for in it there subsists, and even prevails, the given fixity of the subject as master of its choices" (67).
109. PS, 51.

