doi:10.1017/hgl.2019.7
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Hegel Bulletin, 40/3, 484–499

Dialectics and Difference: Negative Dialectics as a Logic of Action

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Abstract

This paper argues that the different ways of facing Hegel's system, as an impossible attempt to harmonize tradition and openness to novelty, respond to an underlying malaise: that provoked by the disturbing question of "the actuality of philosophy" after Hegel. That question insistently arises with respect to different paradigms of contemporary philosophy, and is found in critical theory, in analytical philosophy of action, in Žižek's materialism, and in Derrida's deconstructive reading. Adorno's interpretation introduces the tension between universal concepts and laws, transmitted by the cultural tradition, and particular elements that the subject of the action must always take into account. As a consequence, the subject must include what is not reducible to a concept, which enables the construction of a language of experience that transcends the identifying thinking of the concept and makes negative dialectics possible as a theory of action.

Hegel's system has generally been regarded as a culmination of the history of philosophy in encyclopaedic terms, to such an extent that Gadamer expressed his doubts about the validity of criticisms of the system, since they were foreseen in advance by Hegel, and could be answered without having to abandon it. Hegel viewed his own work as converting past philosophies—by means of articulating their differences dialectically—into stages of the development of a science that was already achieved. And it has often been affirmed that philosophy could only survive if it turned into a kind of discourse completely different from that which we find used between Plato's time and that of Hegel. All these stances respond to an underlying malaise, provoked by the disturbing question of 'the actuality of philosophy' after Hegel.

To help focus on the small part of this huge question that I want to address in this paper, I start by transforming it into a question concerning the possible present-day relevance of Hegel's thought. This latter question arises insistently with respect to different paradigms of contemporary philosophy, and is to be found in literature as diverse as critical theory, analytic philosophy of action,

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Derrida's deconstructive reading of Hegel, and Žižek's proposal for a new dialectical materialism.

I briefly pause here to make some remarks that are relevant to the problem of the dialectical theory of action, which I will address next. Derrida summarizes the general feeling about Hegel's omnipresence with these words:

> Nothing in the world can be determined … that does not entertain some sort of relation with the living tradition embodied by Hegel. It is simply not enough to recall the names of Marx and Heidegger, and the motifs of the 'end of history', of 'absolute knowledge', of the 'dialectic', of the *ends* of this and the *ends* of that, the 'death of God', the 'death of Man', etc. These terms and themes are Hegel's terms, we always finish by finding Hegel at the very origin of all these thematized or schematized *ends*. (Derrida 2005: xviii)

That presence of Hegel in specific topics co-exists, however, with the conviction that we are unable to adopt his system because it is the coherent—but also the historical—organization of that which has been thought and lived up to a certain moment in time. The fact that it is not possible either to accept or to dispense with the entirety of Hegel's thought marks the question of its present-day relevance.

Žižek places at the centre of a current appropriation of Hegel the situation of a *parallax gap*, 'the confrontation of two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible' (Žižek 2006: 4). In Žižek's reading of Hegel—in which he curiously rejects Adorno's option of a negative dialectics (for reasons beyond my understanding)—he proposes a current use of dialectics in which the struggle between opposites is not seen as a moment prior to their synthesis. To avoid this, Žižek proposes 'to replace this topic of the polarity of opposites with the concept of inherent "tension", gap, noncoincidence, of the One itself'. 'This book'—he adds—'is based on a strategic politico-philosophical decision to designate this gap which separates the One from itself with the term *parallax*' (Žižek 2006: 7). It is precisely this insurmountable tension between 'particular' and 'universal' that I hope to deal with in the dialogue that I am about to establish between Hegel and Adorno.

According to Derrida, the present-day relevance of Hegel depends on that non-synthesizable duality: to synthesize tradition, on the one hand, and to be open to the 'event' and to novelty, on the other hand. Derrida takes as the starting point of his analysis Catherine Malabou's text on the future of Hegel, and the decision of that author to understand that this possible future of Hegel's thought (beyond the alleged end of history or the *topos* of the absolute Spirit) depends on the assumptions involved by the French word that translates 'future': *avenir*, that which is *to come*. In the plasticity of the French expression *voir venir*, to see

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(what is) coming, two opposing senses co-exist in tension: 'to see what is coming' can be understood as to anticipate, to foresee what is coming our way, but it also means 'to let oneself be surprised by the unexpected, by the sudden appearance of what is un-awaited' (Derrida 2005: ix).

The plasticity between the two opposite meanings makes what is unsaid appear in what is said, and becomes the conceptual scheme (in continuity with the Kantian notion of *Schema*) of being; as such, it is the scheme that allows 'the unification of the concept with empirical existence' (Derrida 2005: xv). Being the scheme of the unit that it creates, it makes plasticity a phenomenon that shapes such central notions as 'concept', 'subject' and, as I already mentioned, 'experience' (Derrida 2005: xi), which converts the 'seeing it coming' in a gap between the two senses indicated, and gives space for the future in dialectics. In the words of Derrida, 'there would, without the future, be no more history, and there would be no more future, no event to come, without the very possibility of an absolute surprise' (Derrida 2005: xiii). The historical teleology, and the possibility of absolute novelty that the event represents, co-exist in the very notion of 'future', and in dialectics itself, if we interpret it in this way.

Regardless of the fact that Derrida's deconstruction—as practiced in Malabou's text—might be more or less convincing, the important point is that it places the current validity of Hegel's dialectics, what we might call its 'actuality' or present-day relevance, in that role of unifying the universal concept with the experience of the particular, which are rethought in order to make it possible that thinking about history might be open to the unexpected event. The present virtuality of Hegel's dialectics depends on such an opening of philosophy—conceived as the owl of Minerva—to an unforeseeable future. Its capacity to think the present seems to depend, both in Derrida's and Žižek's interpretations (notwithstanding the differences between their respective ways of practising philosophical reflection) on a plasticity between opposites. This parallax that combines mutually exclusive perspectives is a way of thinking the articulation between the particular—non-conceptual and, therefore, contingent—elements of experience and the universality of the concept.

Adorno agrees with the conception of that *topos* as a space of that which cannot be unified in a thinking of identity. *Negative Dialectics* (1973) assumes, in its central part, the philosophical decision to think both with and against Hegel, in order to bring him to a diagnosis of the present time. Needless to say, for Adorno, philosophy as the theory of reason does not exhaust its object when it theorizes about the propositions of science or the standards of morality. Nor can it renounce thinking about the 'objective spirit', dealing thematically with the family, the *polis*, alienation, wealth or power. In other words, it cannot renounce considering social actions and institutions as examples of a realized rationality. The conversion of chapter six of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* into a threshold below which

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philosophy, as a theory of reason, cannot fall, is a consequence of what Adorno considers to be of current validity in philosophy.

But Adorno's fidelity to Hegel does not mean adherence to the way in which the Hegelian system proceeds. Rather, that procedure entails the sacrifice of experience to the identifying logic of the concept. The operation of bringing Hegel into thinking the present involves being rigorously faithful to the expression of experience, which must include what is not reducible to a concept; the commitment to a current Hegelianism, with the organization of its object as 'constellations', provides the construction of a language of experience that transcends the identifying thinking of the concept. In Adorno's own words, 'it is up to philosophy to think the things which differ from the thought and yet make it a thought, exclusively, while their demon seeks to persuade the thought that it ought not to be' (Adorno 1973: 192).

Thought as an intentional activity refers to what is not thought itself, to an experience of something containing the individuality (*haecceitas*) and the difference with which logical thinking, as an activity of appropriation of the generic, must dispense. The absolutization with which the thinking of logic proceeds is the perspective with which Adorno, in his stance *against* Hegel, invites us to break. Let us now see to what extent this attitude helps us to think through the theory of rational action in the present time.

I shall provisionally retain the invitation from the 'demon' of philosophy to establish it as a knowledge of the whole, as the only activity in which we find the whole. It is well known that in Adorno's negative dialectics he rejects Hegel's version of the overcoming of contradictions by means of synthesis, arguing that Hegel imposes the attitude of a final conservative assent to the Leibnizian logic of identity, and consequently downplays the greatest contribution of dialectics: the possibility of thinking the negative and difference.

Apart from those options of taking distance from Hegel, the contribution of Adorno's debate to the current acceptance of Hegel focuses, in my opinion, on rethinking dialectics as a logic of experience without any cuts affecting the particular and the conflict, that is, the negativity that distinguishes dialectics from the thinking of understanding. It is true that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* discovers dialectics as the logic of the movement of conceptualization of experience that begins with perception. But its approach to experience, as a movement of consciousness which leads to science, places the phenomenologist, who performs the description, in a reconstructive position. That is, it places experience as a concluded activity, located in a past time that is now closed. It is only because of the historical distance at which it is situated that the 'science of the experience of consciousness' becomes possible. In my opinion, this argument complements Adorno's contribution.

Experience as past action, already complete and reconstructed by knowledge, loses its openness, viz. its ability to present the new and unexpected, to act upon

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the subject that performs it, altering its own structure. The experience of Antigone, for instance, is subsumed in the Hegelian conceptualization of objective Spirit, but such phenomenological theorizing is of no avail in helping Antigone to make a decision. The relationship between a theoretical concept and the action of the subject of the experience loses, under the image of philosophy as the Owl of Minerva, all possible reciprocity. The concept completes the journey begun by perception, but fails to illuminate the subject of the action. The requirement for a new relationship between concept and action is, for Adorno, a criterion of what can be currently valuable in dialectics.

Let us consider the approach to these issues in *Negative Dialectics*. Re-establishing the intentional nature of thought is the first move that Adorno makes in order to consider experience *not only* as a moment in the life of the concept, but also as the non-conceptual space of action that marks the task and the validity of the concept, as well as its limits: 'without "something" there is no thinkable formal logic, and there is no way to cleanse this logic of its metalogical rudiment' (Adorno 1973: 135). Or, as he wrote in a note *contra* Hegel: 'Hegel, in the first Note to the first Trias of his *Logic*, refuses to begin with Something instead of with Being' (Adorno 1973: 135).

Two observations seem to me necessary to the proper positioning of the relative separation of experience and concept. First, that it is not to be understood as supporting some form of realism, given that the 'something' as a point of departure is not an exteriority that provides a reference to the concept (the *haecceitas* cannot be conceptualized), but rather the minimal condition of possibility by which experience can be a sphere differentiated from the concept. The second observation is tangential to my interpretation but not, I believe, without importance. In his development of a present-time 'post-Hegelian' dialectics, Adorno tries to distance himself from Heidegger, as is already evidenced in the first sentence of the text: 'There is no Being without entities' (Adorno 1973: 135). This is not to deny the place that corresponds to the concept of being, but only to point out its conceptual character in opposition to the *haecceitas* of the particular entity.

This is not, however, the issue on which I wish to focus. Instead, I wish to raise a question about the elements of dialectics that we find in experience, if we consider it not as a reconstructive logic of that which has been experienced but, rather, as a logic of action and the movement of constitution of the subject. In this article, I seek to articulate this critical perspective on what lacks present validity in Hegel's writings with some reformulations that are central to Adorno's work.

The question concerns the extent to which dialectics decides its pathway when opting between the notions of 'being' and 'something' as points of departure. Let us first examine Hegel's arguments in *The Science of Logic*, the critique of which serves as Adorno's basic reappraisal. After making a reiteration to answer the question 'what is the starting point of science?', the answer, already given in the

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Phenomenology to characterize Spirit, is: the complementarity existing between ancient realist thought, which prioritizes the ontic content of the categories, and modern idealist thought, which, after the 'Copernican turn', opts for positioning it in 'the subjective activity … grasped as an essential moment of objective truth' (*WL*: 46/66).[1]

Hegel stresses the 'need to unite the method with the content, the *form* with the *principle*' (*WL*: 46/66), in short, the identity of the object and the subject. He argues that this identification presupposes the phenomenological itinerary, whose beginning

> is made from empirical, *sensuous* consciousness, and it is this consciousness which is *immediate* knowledge … Immediate consciousness is also that which in the science comes first and immediately and is therefore a presupposition. (*WL* : 47/67)

The end of that itinerary is '*pure science*, that is, pure knowledge in the full compass of its development' (*WL*: 47/67). In the *Science of Logic*, what is presupposed is the concept, *thinking as such*:

> The beginning must then be *absolute* or, what means the same here, must be an abstract beginning; and so … must not be mediated by anything or have a ground, ought to be rather itself the ground of the entire science. (*WL*: 48/68–69)

The characterization of the logical point of view as pure knowledge—absolute beginning and ground—that is, the option of absolute idealism, removes the tension between 'this something' as the starting point of experience and the process of conceptual elaboration that is its purpose. If we cannot accept this complete equivalence in Hegel's thought between reality and concept, an equivalence that forces us to follow the principle of sufficient reason and converts the logic of experience into the logic of necessity, then experience cannot be cancelled in the concept of scientific knowledge. The option for system reduces the particular dimensions of experience and condemns negativity to the status of something provisional. Upon negating the necessary character of a ground and the construction of a system, the abandonment of an absolute point of view enables us to accept 'experience' as a field of tensions between the activity of conceiving and the 'something' that starts it. The beginning of Adorno's proposal in *Negative Dialectics* is reliant upon this change in perspective.

The ambit of experience where this tension takes place—a tension between forces which cannot be neutralized by the mere assimilation of some forces by others—is presented as a central theme by Hegel himself in the *Phenomenology*, in which he names the self-alienated spirit 'culture'. The principle with which he describes this alienation highlights the nature of the internal conflict with

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experience when he postulates that culture is the medium through which the individual has validity and reality here. The mere equalization of the planes of 'reality' and 'validity' presupposes a preference for unifying them through the subordination of one to the other. The question that the phenomenologist has to address is that of an already formed individuality, in other words, a 'this' configured in accordance with an essentiality. In as much as 'this' has no further content other than its natural state, Hegel compels it to provide—as we shall see immediately—the 'magnitude' and quantity of the 'energy of the will'. Essentiality—which consists of the defining notes of the genre that give it 'form'—cannot come from a merely quantitative particular. Indeed, when describing its formation, Hegel does not cast aside the tensions that may even lead to the death of a figure of the spirit when an individual chooses as the goal of his action his own personal pleasure, thereby ceasing to offer his strength and talent for the realization of the universal proposed to him by institutions. In this situation where conflict seems to be at odds with spirit, he makes use of the equivalence between 'reality' and 'validity'. He then abandons the descriptive point of view characteristic of phenomenology, and articulates the solution from a normative perspective, intrinsic to the life of the spirit, in subsuming nature in culture, or likewise in subsuming the particular in the universal, as a means of understanding the wholly-formed human being. In this way, Hegel unifies the duality of matter and form which was characteristic of Kant, who considered that it was a task of future historical action to achieve the articulation, once and for all, of the conflict between the first and second nature of humanity, thereby recognizing the conflictual character of both. In addressing this recognition, Hegel finds himself bound to establish a logic of 'cancellation' (*Aufhebung*), where a relation of subsumption becomes one of identity. The dialectical movement guarantees its own continuity not only when it resolves the logical contradiction in an identity, but also in an initial and, it can be said, originary mode. We must not forget that in the moment of beautiful ethical life, in the time of the Greek *polis*, there was not enough complexity to permit talk of dialectical contradiction.

In contrast with Kant's posing of this problem to the political and emancipatory task of the Enlightened movement, Hegel, without negating the effectiveness of the conflict, harshly twists the description. He does so to such an extent as to make unworthy of any philosophical operation the attribution of any form of relevance to the action of an individual that does not submit to the universal. Particular action is characterized, when Hegel is describing the 'dissolution of ethical substance', as the contempt of 'the earnest wisdom of mature age which, indifferent to purely private pleasures and enjoyments, as well as to playing an active part, only thinks of and cares for the universal' (*PhG*: 288/353). The action of the individual who rejects submission to the configuration and objectives imposed by the universals of his cultural time, of his figure of spirit, nonetheless pursues 'pleasure

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and enjoyment', which will relegate the individual to irrelevance from the perspective of the realization of spirit. Yet, as Hegel recognizes, such an individual, in contrast to the wholly-formed person who shows us 'the wisdom of mature age', is alive and has vigour for 'playing an active part', because he has the necessary strength for it.

It is not a question of not carrying out any action, but rather of an action that falls outside the scope of the logic of the life of the spirit. The paradox is only apparent if we consider that Hegel discovers dialectics in describing the 'life of the spirit', but not in the 'vegetative life of the spirit', which nevertheless deserves to be considered from the perspective of a logic of action in which individuals do not produce new universals. Although this life is noted by the phenomenologist, its logic is cast aside and may be conceived as the logic of the agent who participates by performing universals already transmitted by the cultural tradition.

Before developing this suggestion further, I wish to recall the precise terms used by Hegel when he refers to the subsumption of the specific nature in spirit through 'alienation': 'the originally *specific* nature is reduced to the *unessential* difference of quantity, to a greater or lesser energy of will. But the purpose and content of the will belong solely to the universal substance itself and can only be a universal' (*PhG*: 298/364). The experience that alienation is to solve is that of a conflict or plurality of conflicts which cannot be treated as dialectical (there is no dialectical opposition except in the case of contradictory things). Their dissolution, however, is the presupposition of a systematic and affirmative dialectics.

Hegel recognizes full 'reality' in only one of the terms of the conflict, the universal of culture:

> If, therefore, individuality is erroneously supposed to be rooted in the *particularity* of nature and character, then in the actual world there are no individualities and no characters, but everyone is like everyone else; but this presumed individuality really only exists in someone's mind, an *imaginary* existence which has no abiding place in this world, where only that which externalizes itself, and, therefore, only the universal, obtains an actual existence. (*PhG*: 298/364)

To the degree that absolute idealism involves the perspective of a reconstructive observer as a point of view for finding dialectics in experience, we must ask ourselves about its relevance in illuminating the agent—the approach that guides the *praxical* character of the critique that Marx would come to make—and (to make our reading more precise) about the status that Hegel attributes to his preference for the conceptualized universal in the consideration of action.

The texts in the sixth chapter of Hegel's *Phenomenology* pose a problem that, in the second half of the twentieth century, generated criticism or self-criticism with

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regard to the whole project of the Enlightenment. I will not delve further into this criticism now, but its origins are to be found in the character that the processes of rationalization in complex societies adopt: often normalizing and repressive of difference. Hegel points out these tensions between rationality and what it must suppress at a given and opposite moment in history. The moment of 'beautiful ethical life' is dissolved because individuals, far from exercising reason, abandon the universals of their community and follow the logic of the particular. As he puts it, 'the community, however, can only maintain itself by suppressing this spirit of individualism, and, because it is an essential moment, all the same creates it and, moreover, creates it by its repressive attitude towards it as a hostile principle' (*PhG*: 288/353). Yet the currents of tension which Hegel describes become deactivated from a theoretical perspective upon declaring the nullity of force, to the extent that it resists absorption by the universal. The notion of a cancelling synthesis eliminates duality to the advantage of identity, as it eliminates the struggle and tension in favour of a harmonious whole. At its initial, even pre-dialectical stage, the option for the notion of 'being' instead of 'something' already amounts to choosing a harmony that overrides tensions and establishes the *telos* of a dialectics of the reconciliation of conflicting elements of the whole in the concept.

The restoration of the notion of experience as a field of tensions that are objective, and endured as such by the subject, compels us to revise dialectics as a systematic construct by recognizing in it an effective function, not reducible to the concept, of the character of 'this something' that the agent has as an individual. Taking that guiding thread, I will lay out Adorno's revision of Hegel, which is aimed at upholding the present-day relevance of dialectics as a logic of difference.

The general principle that is the starting point for the answer to the question about the present relevance of dialectics is thus set forth in *Negative Dialectics*:

> Once dialectics has become inescapable, … it cannot stick to its principle like ontology and transcendental philosophy. It cannot be maintained as a structure that will stay basic no matter how it is modified. (Adorno 1973: 136)

The ontology inherent in Hegel's reading is obviously the one that we find in *The Science of Logic*; it is consequently assimilated to that one since it establishes that the concept is the *telos* and the true reality of all experience that is fully self-aware. Even though the concept supposedly brings to the consciousness of the subject pursuing science the real movement of experience, it is nonetheless true that in this movement 'willpower', 'talent', and 'this'—in other words, the dimensions that the concept cannot collect—are excluded from the already achieved science of experience, and, to a greater extent, from *The Science of Logic*.

In this sense, we can affirm that the dialectics that Hegel, in a phenomenological attitude, finds in experience—and in his reflection on the historical figures

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of the Greek *polis*, the Roman Empire or alienated modernity—goes beyond its self-assigned descriptive status to include a tacit normative assumption, as happens in transcendental philosophy. This normativity operates through the 'supporting structure' that Adorno denounces, and which Hegel sees as intrinsic to the systematic procedures of science. I reiterate that this suppresses the dimensions and elements of experience which, while not being essential (nor, therefore, capable of being conceptualized), prevent the philosophical reflection of rationality from becoming a factor that might illustrate the action of the participating agent. The agent has to consider the specific elements of the situation in which he has to act. It is not only for chronological reasons that Antigone could not drink from the fountain of Hegel's *Phenomenology* in making her decision. It also happens that Hegel's reading of the character in Sophocles's tragedy, by way of its own status, does not give any help to the rationality of a particular decision, even though it analyses the historical consequences of the action. Hegel's analysis is morally normative only in a very general sense: when, in this as in other cases, he recommends opting for the realization of the universal. The exclusion of the tension established by the particular elements which the subject of the action must always take into account paves the way for a reconstructivist theory of the reason that is already realized. But it does not facilitate a theory that accommodates the action's own logic.

Another consequence of Adorno's change of perspective has an enormous impact on one central notion of Hegel's thought, namely, the totality to which the concept of truth must refer. Adorno states, 'Since the basic character of every general concept dissolves in the face of [a] distinct entity, a total philosophy is no longer to be hoped for' (Adorno 1973: 136). This entails the falling back on the commitment to acceding to the truth of the system by the conceptualization of totality; it is the only way of avoiding philosophy's conversion into an acritical ideological acceptance of the status of the given which would not take serious account of the social reality of the negative. If dialectics is to do justice to the difference and is to accomplish its critical task, it must be a negative dialectics. To succeed in this endeavour, it needs to tackle the negative, as the active subject must also do. The critical value of dialectics is rooted in the clear differentiation between Hegel's perspective as a phenomenologist who raises negativity to the level of a knowledge that comes forth from a form of life such as *Sittlichkeit*, and the way Antigone has to confront it as a subject or proto-subject that acts.

In Adorno's text, *what is thought* forms part of philosophical activity as critique of ideology: 'Without specific thoughts, thinking would contravene its very concept' (Adorno 1973: 136). Dialectics thereby becomes the only way of thinking, that which he calls 'the self-critique of the concept', which prevents any access to synthesis as a moment of final reconciliation. Upon considering negation as a merely provisional tool of historical advancement, dialectics becomes an apology for what exists, as much in societies of alienation as in those which justify

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themselves through a Marxist overcoming of that alienation. The reconstructivist logic of affirmative dialectics—whether idealist or materialist—ends up operating as a false consciousness that justifies the *de facto* deployment of political and economic power.

That priority—if not exclusivity—granted to the theoretical-reconstructive perspective prevents us from considering the specific elements of a theory of the agent as an individual subject who attends to his own condition as a particular, and to the condition of the singular elements that form part of the objective situation upon which his action will operate.

Hegel's theoretical approach translates the priority that the *Phenomenology* confers upon the *logic of spirit* upon the *spirit of the people* when theorizing history. In doing this, he misses the particular dimensions and singular action of the individual. Theoreticism's reconstructivist nature excludes the question of the practical interest of reason, and the excluding option taken in favour of the realized universal depends on this. Hegel makes that option explicit in *Die Vernunft in der Geschichte*: 'it is from this very conflict and destruction of particular things that the universal emerges, and it remains unscathed itself' (*VPG*: 89/105). As Adorno points out, Hegel is conferring a theoretical status on the almost exclusive weight of the systemic structures of contemporary society against the actions carried out by the decisions of the individual. The option favourable to the universal is not only logical, but also a position with consequences in the conception of society and politics. But even when *haecceitas*, which cannot be conceptualized, seems to relinquish the whole stage of action to the universal, the latter resorts to the strength and talent of the particular to become present in society and be effective. As in the case of the genius, the individual's ability to have an impact on history depends on their degree of penetration into the universal that is not yet realized, and this capacity is rooted in the particular. In Adorno's words, 'of a particular, nothing can be predicated without definition and thus without universality, and yet this does not submerge the moment of something particular, something opaque, which that predication refers to and is based upon' (Adorno 1973: 328; revised translation). Adorno therefore insists that, although the particular cannot be conceptualized, this does not mean that it becomes non-existent or unreal.

All this has direct consequences for the perspective from which Hegel thought out the theory of action and, above all, for the perspective of the singular agent, which is eluded. In general, Adorno affirms that '[Hegel's] philosophy has no interest in there being individuality at all' (Adorno 1973: 342). The conception of the individual in *Negative Dialectics* is substantially different from that proposed in a liberal theory of society—it differs precisely on the more 'Hegelian' role that critical theory confers on the social processes of rationalization in the task of forming individual rationality. Nonetheless the individual, in terms of what Adorno retains of the particular, and in the relevance that he grants to decision and freedom,

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preserves a critical potential with regard to systemic action. Adorno does not renounce this potential at all, nor could he renounce it for a present-day theory of action.

Hegel's option for the universal has, as I have mentioned, a series of consequences for the conception of society and politics that are very much present in his notion of history and of the human being. As Adorno states, 'what Hegel hypertrophically assigned to the popular spirits as collective individualities is withdrawn from individuality, from the individual human being' (Adorno 1973: 340). Under this perspective, the individual becomes assimilated to the function of 'agent of the absolute', thereby removing all singularity from an action that starts from a decision and which considers the specific particularities of its situation. Under this conception, there appears to be no difference between the evolving logic of society and the action of the individual, which prevents the individual from being taken seriously as a particular and as attentive to the particular. The logic of the historical process—which includes the *telos* that marks the universal—excludes those moments in history and those societies where the vegetative life of the spirit prevails. When the universal does not introduce a new configuration of collective life we cannot expect that anything worthwhile will be added to the theory of the activity of reason. However, the same does not occur if we consider the action of the individual subject.

The need to pursue the debate with Hegel, aimed at bringing him into the present world, generates reflection on the existing differences between the reconstructive logic of collective action that has been carried out, and the logic—and the elements not reducible to it—of individual action. The inclusion of this difference means, as we have seen, that a dialectics of the action that is underway cannot be concluded through a synthesis, as the synthesis cannot avoid the lasting character of conflict and negativity in social formations; nor can it exclude the effectiveness of the particular, which escapes the concept's capacity for subsumption.

When confronting an action in an experience that constitutes an open process that does not interrupt itself to a point to which we could confer the condition of *telos* of that process, we find that there are major upsets in the philosophical discourse of the subject. This also occurs in our conception of history and of the human being, focused as we are on action theory. We will now turn to these remaining two themes, which become related when, far from adopting liberal conceptions, we consider the individual as a product of society whose configuration as a subject is not timeless but, rather, is as historically changing as society itself.

The recognition of the historically mutable character of the configuration of the individual subject is part of the position of those thinking 'with Hegel'. In fact, at times it has been confused with the anti-liberal stance of the political philosophy that considers social action as the realization of the universal, which ultimately adopts the form of the State. *Negative Dialectics* shows that both positions can be

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separated; in other words, at the same time that we think rationality, 'with Hegel', as a historical production, we can also think 'against Hegel', namely, against a position that justifies the conservation of what exists by means of a dialectics that excludes self-criticism of the concept, negativity and, in short, the different and the new. The novelty of the present time includes the phenomenon of the ongoing reduction of the space that society offers to the action of the individual: 'Compared with Hegel and his epoch, the individual has become irrelevant to a degree which no one could anticipate' (Adorno 1973: 343).

This same historical movement, a perhaps unforeseen consequence of the increasing systematic rationalization of society, has given signs that the action of reason does not always lead to emancipation. This is highlighted in two examples referring to the constitution of the individual: the idea of autonomy, and passion, 'the motor of individuality for Hegel as it was for Balzac. To the powerless, who find more and more narrowly prescribed what they can and cannot attain, passion becomes an anachronism' (Adorno 1973: 343).

Adorno does not specify—probably because he regards it as obvious—the vanishing character in our society of autonomy, the emblematic ideal of moral and political modernity. It is true, however, that the Hegelian thesis of the subject as the appropriation of the universal of his society had already led to the paradox that freedom consists in obeying the law. By contrast, it is clear that an understanding of experience as a minefield of tensions, in which the particular and the universal converge, may offer the possibility of recognizing that the function of the individual is not reducible to the universal, or universalizable, law of reason. It is true that this approach does not offer a criterion for the identification of what the autonomous subject *consists in*. It invites us, however, to re-think that notion in terms that do not exclude all that we do not have in common—each and every one of us.

The analysis of passion, a *pathos* that in Kant is contrary to autonomous action, had regained prestige in its new role as a force in the service of reason in Hegel's thought. Hegel breaks away from the exclusive opposition between 'action from reason' (autonomous) and 'action from passions' (heteronomous), made possible in Kantian analysis by the transcendental character of the subject. Instead Hegel's declaration in the *Encyclopaedia* that 'Nothing great has been, nor can it be accomplished without passion' (*PS*: §474) appears as an evaluation that derives from his extension of the concept of experience far beyond all that can be grasped in the twelve-category system. Hegel does not modify, however, his option for the relevance of the universal when he clarifies that:

> Impulse and passion constitute nothing other than the liveliness of the subject however, in accordance with which it is itself involved in its purpose and in the carrying out of the same.

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> What is ethical concerns the content, which as such is the universal, an inactive factor deriving its motivation from the subject. (*PS*: §475)

It is important to note that although it is excluded from the content which gives rise to it (namely the universal), passion is the vitality of the subject and that which activates it in the realization of this content. We cannot, then, ignore its particular contribution to the action of the spirit. The heterogeneous elements that make up the field of forces which I have referred to in this paper are set forth in the above text with greater clarity than in others. As Hegel points out here, passion 'involves the whole of active subjectivity' (*PS*: §475).

Notwithstanding this, when we move into the sphere of objective spirit, subjectivity as a historical product is variable in its configuration. Adorno indicates that it is a feature of current society that 'the integrating social organization sees to the removal of the patent obstacles that used to kindle passion and makes up for them by placing the controls into the individual, in the form of his adjustment at any price' (Adorno 1973: 343). If this is in fact the new distribution of functions between the rationality of the economic and political subsystems—on the one hand by institutions and, on the other, by the individual who has the almost exclusive task of adjusting his self-control at any price—then the role of passion, which for Hegel could still '[involve] the whole of active subjectivity', is found to have been reduced to its minimal expression. It would be necessary to revise dialectics to ascertain the kind of relationship that 'universal' and 'particular' sustain in the new configuration of experience. Reflection is required to establish Adorno's terrible verification that 'the individual survives himself. But in his residue which history has condemned lies nothing but what will not sacrifice to false identity' (Adorno 1973: 343).

From a perspective that is far removed from the critique of ideology and focused on categorial analysis, Arto Laitinen and Constantine Sandis present various relevant positions in the analytic tradition, in relation to the problem of the active subject, in their paper 'Hegel and the Contemporary Philosophy of Action' (2010: 1–21). The conflict between the two perspectives that I have tried to elaborate above presents itself as what Pippin would term an 'Inner-Outer' problem. Opposing the individualist theoretical position, intended to capture the sense of an action from the agent's intention, Pippin claims that we cannot separate actions from other events without referring to 'the position of a subject about what is happening and why'. The reference to the subject, in Hegel, does not allude to intention as an individual instance, for its interiority 'cannot be understood regardless of social relationships; my relationship with myself is mediated by my relationship with others' (Laitinen and Sandis 2010: 8). This is what differentiates actions from (other) events. A careful reading of Hegel's text,

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as Pippin emphasizes, reveals that it is sociality that gives rise to a *retrospective* conscience of intentions: 'only as long as it is manifested or expressed, then it is possible (even for the subject itself) to retrospectively determine what the intention must have been' (Laitinen and Sandis 2010: 8).

In terms of the distinction that I have proposed between the agent's perspective and the perspective of the theoretician, we say that the former has interiorized a social comprehension of reality without which he himself would be incomprehensible. Antigone's problem would not be comprehensible unless we accept that she completely identifies herself with the 'divine law' institutionalized in the family. However, Hegel's perspective as a theoretician of action does not merely confirm the social origins of sociability. It also includes the idea that in a complete theory of the logic of action, the fundamental element also includes the effect of this action on the part of the social structure upon which it impacts. The subject is not a mere interiority, given that she has been configured by the social character of her own experience prior to the decision to act. Furthermore, the subject's action affects the community to which she belongs. Keeping the other community members in mind forms part of the sense of that action, something that is only possible retrospectively, and can only be done when there is a historical distance between the action and the person theorizing it. The theoretician of the action is not fulfilling her task if she is merely concerned with grasping the agent's intention; this results in interpreting it as something individually produced to cause her behaviour, yet she does not know the short- or long-term consequences of the action. Hence she cannot comprehend the action in its totality. In the theory of action, the perspective offered by the agent's intention, according to Hegel's interpretation, is as limited as the ethics of intentions proves to be in the moral of the beautiful soul.

The price of this perspective is having to accept that the retrospective character of the comprehension of the action prevents the theory from illuminating the agent. In turn, the cost of the perspective of negative dialectics is having to renounce the knowledge of the totality which reconstructs the evolution of the human species, which entails the advance of the abstract over the concrete—that is to say, to renounce a certain philosophy of historical evolution.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/hgl.2019.7 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Note

[1] Abbreviations used:

PhG = Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977)/*Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973).
PS = Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Spirit*, vol. 3, ed. M. J. Petry (Dordrecht & Boston: D. Reidel, 1978)/*Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse, 1830. Dritter Teil*, ed. E. Moldenhauer & K. M. Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986).
VPG = Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History. Introduction: Reason in History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975)/*Die Vernunft in der Geschichte* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1955).
WL = Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. G. di Giovanni (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010)/*Wissenschaft der Logik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969).

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https://doi.org/10.1017/hgl.2019.7 Published online by Cambridge University Press