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The Margins of Contradiction: On Todd McGowan's *Emancipation after Hegel*

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Todd McGowan's book on Hegel comes with an unsurpassable merit in comparison to the majority of contemporary philosophy books, namely to be unmistakably clear. Clarity is, of course, an aim of every true philosophical book, and maybe there is no philosophical book that would not at least claim to have sought for the maximum of clarity in relation to its topic.

But often, a sort of clarity is obtained by following a rather poor strategy: namely by avoiding specific problems that appear within the discussed thoughts. When faced with such a conundrum, a certain degree of clarity can be achieved by circumventing the unpleasant and even sleazy questions philosophy brings along. Let us call this approach for a moment a 'method', a method which renders one, for example, able to read a controversial thinker in such a manner that the objects of contention disappear. One picks a line of inquiry to follow, and everything that appears as an obstacle on your way, is declared to be rather less emphasized or important. Mysteriously, in the end everything seems suddenly clear, only that the reader is left with the vague idea that something went wrong.

This method of clarification usually does not fully ignore problems, but rather belittles them, pushes them to the side and reclassifies them as minor problems.

Inevitably, what is being dealt with are the true major problems, and in following the discussion of the true major problems, the reader gains a certain specific clarity, because the line of major problems mysteriously forms a suture of sense, going through the entire oeuvre. Finally, the reader is consoled that within the works of some controversial and ambivalent thinker, there are true questions, true answers, a guiding thread, and that no argument is wasted. A pleasant, even smug, relief ensues.

But then again, before we enjoy too much the mocking about the method to destroy every method of thought for the sake of clarity, which has become highly popular nowadays again, isn't it true that there are major and minor problems populating the path of every thought? Doesn't every philosophical argument necessarily have to distinguish between major and minor problems? And even further, isn't every philosophical argument also the result of the avoidance of particular problems, because every philosophical argument does not only take something into its view, but does also shift something out of its view?

Seen in this light, the conundrum is not whether a philosophical argument excludes some problems and addresses only a specific choice of problems. Rather, it is a condition of a philosophical argument to not only single out a set of particular problems of thought, but also to dismiss other problems as irrelevant or as pure semblance of a problem.

The question of clarity needs to be related to a different site of the argument: It is about the handling of internal problems that occur within the argument itself. It is here, that often a semblance of clarity is produced, by simply ignoring or belittling problems that impose themselves within the employed concepts. The question of philosophical clarity is rather linked to the method of treating problems *within* a thought, and the question of philosophical ignorance is related to problems that arise *within* a thought and not to those problems that are being put aside. The major problem with many, and especially with many contemporary philosophical readings is not that they circumvent specific controversial areas of thought, but rather that they present thought in a non-controversial manner.

A non-controversial thought is the semblance of clarity, once we understand thought itself to be the real production of something new in the world, and not as depiction of some imaginary given. It then follows that an apparently clear argument is not clear at all, if it gains its semblance of clarity from its non-controversial presentation. Logically, if a thought intervenes in the world, it cannot be non-controversial.

This problem, which we might address as the distinction between an ideological and a dialectical approach to thought, is not only limited to readings of controversial philosophers, it is also a problem of philosophical writing as such. Moreover, it is a question of the method in which philosophical writing applies to itself.

Here the question beckons, wherein then does true clarity reside, if it does differ from the semblance of clarity, gained by the ignorance towards the inner difference of the concept itself?

It is interesting to read McGowan's book against this backdrop, for we find all the ingredients of the problem of philosophical clarity: McGowan does scale problems in Hegel, by accepting some of them and dismissing others as minor difficulties, and he does so quite forcefully. But what is more decisive, he has absolutely no interest in simply avoiding those specific moments within Hegel that define Hegel as a controversial thinker. Instead, these difficulties are accepted as precisely difficulties to be taken up, sometimes even sought for, and the controversial part is even acclaimed rather than rejected. Along these lines, the entire book is unfolded with an unsurpassable clarity, and this clarity consists in addressing all the problems that appear within the Hegelian thought.

A good example here is how McGowan treats the question of the state. While conservative and liberal interpretations either affirmatively read Hegel as a conservative defender of the Prussian state or try to conjure away Hegel's estimation for the state, that is, to take it as a deviation of the true Hegelian program of liberal freedom, McGowan seeks to defend Hegel as a true emancipatory thinker all the while defending the state as a necessary function of emancipatory freedom. Likewise, he argues in favor of the infamous Hegelian monarch.

The entire book is conceived as a defense of Hegel as the thinker of contradiction. Contradiction is here explained as Hegel's true motive, as a destruction of classical metaphysics, as a barrier against false claims of substantiality, and also as the motor of emancipatory thought. McGowan's book is in every line abundantly clear in unfolding this program of contradictions as Hegel's project, and in presenting reconciliation with failure not necessarily as the overcoming of failure, but as the acceptance of its necessity.

One simple consequence that follows from the construction of this argument is that *Emancipation after Hegel* really calls for a discussion of the controversial points in and about Hegel, and this is what makes the book a wonderful, refreshing and productive book. The book is unafraid, it does not only declare contradiction to

be the Hegel's project, but it also seeks out contradiction. For one, because the book is contradictory in itself: The method of contradiction within Hegel is unfolded in a quite non-contradictory manner. This is also the point at which the book loses some of its clarity, for it remains in the end enigmatic how a thought of contradiction can be given such a systematic structure. But the book also seeks controversial debate as some of its claims take very distinct positions that are in themselves not uncontroversial.

Although McGowan's book deals with almost the entirety of Hegel's oeuvre and develops its line of thought through a variety of different steps, one might focus on one point and discuss this point in the light of achieving dialectical clarity. This is a point that concerns Hegel's aftermath, however, a tarrying with this also reveals difficulties within Hegel as well – the idea of an aftermath of a thought, distinct from the actual thought, is merely only a vague and unconvincing construction. To push this along a bit further, maybe this one point consists out of two moments in thinking: one is the relation between Hegel and Marx, and the other the relation between Hegel and Freud.

Let us begin with Freud. In a chapter devoted to the reading of Hegel after Freud, McGowan writes: "Nonetheless, my argument is that Freud's formulation of the basic psychoanalytic project provides a theoretical supplement for Hegel, giving us a language that makes Hegel's otherwise misleading philosophy accessible." (p. 41) This is to be understood as a step in both directions as McGowan goes on to explain: "Freud clarifies Hegel, but when it comes to the power of reason, Hegel takes a step beyond Freud and psychoanalysis through a reevaluation of reason that grasps its impasses as the positive thinking of contradiction." (p. 56). We can understand that Hegel does think contradiction, while Freud gives us means to understand what Hegel actually thinks. This is well balanced and implies a certain tension between the line of thought and the line of time, if the point is taken in the fundamental sense.

But here we can ask, what about timely relations in the history of philosophy? The famous 'end of history' comes to mind, and maybe the Hegelian-Freudian connection is to be understood in some relation to this problem. Instead of taking the 'end of history' as a constraint for the subject, leading to its passivity, McGowan argues rather the contrary: "...The proclamation of the end of history...assures us that we are condemned to freedom, that we cannot turn back to the assurances of a consistent authority." (p. 137) History, the one History, disintegrates under the

(logical) imperative of contradiction, and it is actually the time of real politics that begins.

Can we draw anything from this for the relation between Freud and Hegel? Maybe we have to move a step further and consider the other prominent figure in relation to Hegel. This, of course is Marx. And while Freud is greeted as a companion by McGowan, Marx is rejected, and, what is more, Marx is rejected on his own grounds: In the end, it is not Marx, but Hegel who proves to be the real emancipatory thinker for McGowan. Let's directly go to the heart of what McGowan says in a longer quotation:

Marx believes that political emancipation does not consist in the collective recognition that we will never achieve a harmonious society but in its successful attainment. Marx's name for emancipation, communism, is the label for success, not for reconciliation with the necessity of failure. Since Marx's political victory over Hegel, the project of emancipation has given up its proper territory – that of intractable contradiction – for the fantasy of harmonious social relations that Marxism promulgates. The problem is not that communism fails to do what Marx claims and is unable to solve the riddle of history but that it actually does so. (p. 215)

Taken in its isolation, this passage may sound as if it was taken from some conservative critic of Marx. But as already has become evident, McGowan's argument is that it is Marx who is the conservative reader of Hegel and who substantializes Hegelian dialectic in the form of a "rightist deviation" (p. 212). Nevertheless, it is also very clear that this claim might be hard to swallow and is, to say the least, debatable. But instead of diverging into a discussion about the true kernel of Marx's work (which one might take to be rather the contrary of McGowan's view) we should focus on a specific consequence of this argument. This rejection of Marx, which is understood as a rejection in the name of emancipation, leads to us back to a difficulty within McGowan's reading of Hegel.

Marx's critical reservation against Hegel stems from the question of praxis: Politics, for Marx, is a practical contradiction, which unleashes class struggle as a fundamental imbalance of the capitalist society. For Marx, Hegel is incapable to address the relation between capital as the automatic machine of inequality and the proletariat as the eventually arising force of the revolution. One might read this as a "materialist turn" in which "basic human needs rather than the realization of abstract

ideals like freedom” (p. 212) are taken into view. But maybe there is more. Marx seeks to establish, against all teleological tendencies that might be figured out in his oeuvre, a need for the possibility of a revolution of the capitalist society, a revolution that would also have to be a revolution of thought. This inevitably brings him to the edge of philosophy, and fuels his critique against Hegel, for Hegel comes along with a system of thought. This point – the interruption of a system of thought – can also be understood with Hegelian means, but it does nevertheless bring Hegel to the edge of *Hegel*. This edge of Hegel is an edge of which it is not sure whether it is to be found within Hegel.

Taken from this perspective, Marx is perhaps rather a moment within the controversial structure of Hegel himself, not his precise opponent. But even at this juncture we can take this point further: The rejection of Marx can then also be read as the rejection of something within Hegel. Although McGowan argues for Hegel as a defender of the revolution, there might arise a slight doubt how relevant this affirmation of revolution is for McGowan’s contemporary Hegel. Let us consider two positions. On the one hand, McGowan seems to argue that contradiction needs to be recognized to unfold its emancipatory power. In relation to capital, he says:

This failure to recognize that capital also is what it is not—substance—is the lifeblood of the functioning of the socioeconomic system. Once subjects recognize capital as contradictory, capitalism can no longer function (p. 80).

It is a deeply Marxian point to show that subjects may very well recognize that capital is contradictory, but nevertheless hold on to it. Later, in a discussion of the concept of contingency, McGowan argues:

A solution to the planetary dominance of self-destructive capitalism might present itself, or we could even find a way to eliminate human death. Hegel accepts that the impossible is always possible, but he insists that there is no possible solution to contradiction itself. [...] Contingency misleads us because it suggests that anything could happen, even the final elimination of contradiction [...] (p. 123).

If we link this passage to the rejection of communism as Marx’s idea of such a solution to capitalism, it becomes clear that there is an argument directed against the possibility of having an alternative idea to capitalism. This problem has the name

of communism, and communism is rejected as the phantasy of being a solution. But at this point, there is a slight difference that is ignored implicit within this rejection: Namely, that there is a difference between a name as a placeholder for a different idea and a name as the indication for something considered as a 'solution'. It seems that with the rejection of 'communism' as a proper name of a 'solution', 'communism' as a placeholder for a different idea is also rejected. The problem is that this placeholder fulfills an important function. It signals that there can be something different from capitalism. As such, the placeholder inscribes a fundamental difference within the development of contradiction, even if (or, especially if) everything possible reveals to be contradictory, there still exists a difference between capitalism and an alternative idea of social organization. Thus, it seems as if the rejection of the name 'communism' as a placeholder hides the more fundamental rejection of radical change. If this is the case, then the reading of the 'end of history' as the beginning of a true political time turns against itself, for it seems that the impetus of politics, that is emancipatory change, is rather weakened.

The question then becomes: Can politics be thought without the inscription of such a placeholder, which marks the beginning of a new beginning?

This question might point to a different position of Marx within Hegel, and such an inscription might send us back to Freud and the relation of psychoanalysis to Hegel. After the end of the history of philosophy, philosophy begins. This is how McGowan's relation of Freud to Hegel can be read. But the problem with Marx reappears in a different form. For if there is no historical development of thought, how can then thinkers like Freud and Hegel be relatable if thought does not follow lines of continuous development? Doesn't Freud also inscribe something into Hegel that can only be understood as Hegelian with Freud? If there is an inscription of something Freudian into Hegel, then Hegel after Freud cannot be the same Hegel anymore, and we may ask whether this problem can be accounted for in the terms of contradiction. For, who is Hegel if the name of Freud as well as the name of Marx, once inscribed into Hegel, might point to something non-Hegelian in Hegel?

The relations between Hegel and Freud and Marx are fundamental problems, and McGowan's book has the advantage to take clear positions on these problems. It seems that the precise problem is that it might be the case that Marx needs to be rejected from a Hegelian standpoint. And it might also be that Hegel needs to be retained as the more fundamental thinker than Freud. Even more so, is it might be that it is necessary to take a stance on these issues within Hegel. Reading Hegel

thus proves to be a philosophical endeavor, making it necessary to distinguish major from minor problems, and to accept problems with the burden of their ambiguity.

However, it is also precisely here, in the center of philosophical clarity, at the margins of Hegel's oeuvre, that is when confronting the relations to its aftermath, that we get to the margins of this clarity, that clarity itself becomes somewhat ambivalent by bringing about its own contradiction, especially in the moment in which it provokes the idea that Freud and Marx might present something different in Hegel, outside the frame of contradiction. Something takes place on the margins of contradiction, challenging philosophical clarity. It is as if a clear program of contradiction becomes, at the margins, contradictory itself, only that this contradiction cannot be part of the program anymore.