

To cite text:

Nakhwa, Rutwij. 2024. "An Absolute Hegelianism for Postmodern Times: Hegel with Lacan after Bataille and Derrida". *Philosophy and Society* 36 (1): 257–276.

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AN ABSOLUTE HEGELIANISM FOR POSTMODERN TIMES: HEGEL WITH LACAN AFTER BATAILLE AND DERRIDA¹

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the Hegelian dialectical procedure of determinate negation in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* through the lens of "failure" in light of its critique by post-Hegelian thinkers, primarily Georges Bataille and Jacques Derrida. Further, this paper shows how the notion of failure remains important in the thinking of both Hegel and Bataille and discusses the Hegelian "labor of negative" as a Beckettian "failing better" in its resonance with Lacanian psychoanalytic praxis. In so doing, this paper highlights how the post-Hegelian praxis of psychoanalysis and even the "anti-Hegelian" thinking of Derrida and Bataille share certain conceptual operations with Hegel's philosophy. The paper goes on to trace the limitations of Bataille's and Derrida's critiques of Hegel, especially through Bataille's notion of "sovereignty" that he opposes to "lordship," which he views as the central concept of Hegelianism. The paper argues that most critics of Hegel (including Bataille and Derrida) misread his notion of "absolute knowing" due to a misunderstanding of the radical difference between the transitions within the *Phenomenology* and the culmination of this series of transitions in absolute knowing. Through dispelling this misunderstanding, the paper argues that absolute knowing remains a crucial conceptual operator to cut through the impasses of postmodern thinking.

KEYWORDS

Hegel, absolute knowing, failing better, Bataille, sovereignty, Derrida, Lacan, psychoanalysis, capitalism

¹ I presented parts of this paper (on Hegel and Lacan) at the 4th Australian Hegel Society Conference, Sydney and Online, November 30-December 1, 2023. I thank Siby K George, Rohit Goel, Lachlan Kermode, and Arundhati Dubey for their comments on previous versions of this paper. I also thank all three anonymous reviewers for their encouraging and critically constructive comments, which helped me rethink, substantiate, and hone various aspects of this paper.



Introduction

In his inaugural address to the Collège de France, Michel Foucault remarked:

truly escaping Hegel would require appreciating exactly what it would cost to detach ourselves from him. This would require knowing just how far Hegel, perhaps insidiously, has moved in our direction. This would require knowing what remains Hegelian about that which allows us to argue against Hegel, and to measure the extent to which our recourses against him are perhaps a lure that he has set for us, at the end of which we will find him waiting, immobile and elsewhere. (1981: 74-75)

I adduce this remark to highlight the commonplace that post-Hegelian objections to Hegel's philosophy are often (more or less explicitly) anticipated by Hegel himself or, more precisely, and this is Foucault's point, that ostensibly anti-Hegelian positions actually turn out to be remarkably Hegelian – this is the lure that Hegel's philosophical system always already sets up for us. However, the argument of this paper is not simply that anti-Hegelian positions, which are technically “post-modern” insofar as Hegel is considered the culmination of modern philosophy (Förster 2012) — are actually Hegelian. Such an argument implies that postmodern philosophy should merely *recognize* its proper debt to Hegel. Rather, I argue that the problem with anti-Hegelian postmodern philosophy is *not* that it is actually Hegelian but that this philosophy *is not Hegelian enough*.

To this end, I engage the French writer Georges Bataille as my primary interlocutor not only because he's widely considered a “precursor of poststructuralism” whose literary works are now included as “modern classics” (Noys 2000: 1) in the Western canon but also because, as Jacques Derrida (2005) took great pains to point out, he remains one of the most perspicuous readers of Hegel in the twentieth century. This paper takes “failure” in its relation to the Hegelian conceptions of negation and the negative as a privileged entry point into both Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Bataille's “parody” (Ko 2024) of the Hegelian dialectic. The first section considers how failure remains a central driving force for both Hegel's and Bataille's thought and articulates Bataille's and Derrida's criticism of the Hegelian dialectic alongside a certain long-standing Marxist critique of Hegel's dialectical logic as mirroring the logic of capital. The second section persists with the motif of failure, considering how the Hegelian dialectic takes the form of (Beckettian) “failing better,” which logically resonates with the praxis of Lacanian psychoanalysis. I engage the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in this context both because his reading of Hegel (like that of Bataille's) remains thoroughly mediated by the influence of Alexander Kojève but, more crucially, because Lacan remains a symptomatic internal-exception in the horizon of postmodern thinking. The third section focuses on Bataille's opposition to Hegelian determinate negation through the former's articulation of “sovereignty” and goes on to trace the limitations of the Bataillan sovereign operation. The fourth and final section argues that the

Hegelian notion of absolute knowing is typically misread because of a negligence of the difference between transitions within Hegel's *Phenomenology* as a process of sublation (*Aufhebung*: supersession and preservation) and absolute knowing as the sublation of this (process of) sublation. In so doing, I contend that absolute knowing remains a crucial conceptual operator to *cut* through the impasses of contemporary postmodern thinking.

Hegel the Capitalist?, or, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as the Work of Death

In the "Introduction" of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel writes of the book's method with surprising clarity. The object of the inquiry is "phenomenal knowledge" (Hegel 1977: 53). And to know any object, consciousness implicitly follows its own *internal* criterion for what an object of knowledge, in general, is for consciousness. As Hegel puts it: "Thus in what consciousness affirms from within itself as being-in-itself or the True [i.e., an object in the world, R.N.], we have the standard which consciousness itself sets up by which to measure what it knows" (ibid.: 53). Thus, Hegel's phenomenological method makes explicit the internal criterion or standard consciousness implicitly but necessarily follows to know its object. However, what drives the *Phenomenology's* movement is precisely the *failure* of consciousness's *own* internal criterion of (objective) knowledge vis-à-vis its object. The first shape of consciousness, "sense-certainty," has as its object the immediacy of the "this," of the immediate "here" and "now." The *Phenomenology* shows that what sense-certainty believes to be the most immediate and direct knowledge is, in fact, the most abstract and depends on universal (proto-)concepts of "here" and "now." Thus, the failure of sense-certainty, which is also its "truth," leads to the next shape of consciousness or form of knowing: perception (ibid.: 66).

Hegel makes the following crucial point about the *Phenomenology's* method or labor unequivocally:

Since consciousness thus finds that its knowledge does not correspond to its object, the object itself does not stand the test; in other words, the criterion for testing is altered when that for which it was to have been the criterion fails to pass the test; and the testing is not only a testing of what we know, but also a testing of the criterion of what knowing is. (ibid.: 54-55)

Because what fails is not simply consciousness's knowledge but the very criterion of knowledge, consciousness is forced to alter its criterion, and thereby, the object of knowing itself changes. In Hegel's words, "Inasmuch as the new true object issues from it, this dialectical movement which consciousness exercises on itself and which affects both its knowledge and its object, is precisely what is called experience [*Erfahrung*]" (ibid.: 55). Thus, Hegel describes the *Phenomenology* as the "science of the experience of consciousness" (ibid.: 56). This apparently abstruse point has far-reaching consequences. For

instance, isn't this the basic lesson of Marxian ideology critique? That ideology is not simply false knowledge but the very frame that constitutes what counts as knowledge. And thus, the solution lies not in correcting knowledge but in a different frame.

Hegel himself recognizes that he is proposing something radical against the usual notion of experience wherein change transpires not because we labor to create a different standard or criterion for our experience but due to a chance encounter with something external (ibid.: 55). Thus, *pace* Bataille for whom the "absolute dismemberment" of the negative, the temporary "rupture" of discourse is only "an accident in the ascent" (Bataille 1990: 27) of meaning, for Hegel, because the failure is immanent to consciousness's criterion of knowledge, it has a necessity, albeit a retroactive one: "the entire series" of the shapes of consciousness has a "necessary sequence" (Hegel 1977: 56; cf. Pip-pin 1993: 54). Indeed, Catherine Malabou has characterized Hegel's dialectic as a dialectic of necessity and contingency, or, of essence and accident: the becoming essential of the accident *and* of essence becoming accidental (2005: 163). Thus, while the temporary rupture of the negative as a failure in and of discourse might appear as something accidental and contingent, this failure takes on a retroactive necessity as consciousness transitions to a new shape that appears as the necessary result of the contingency, which, therefore, also becomes necessary. In other words, the contingency that results in necessity retroactively itself becomes necessary. However, the necessity, in turn, becomes accidental through its failure, and this process continues until (at least) the "conclusive" point of absolute knowing.

To be sure, Bataille admires Hegel because the latter takes failure seriously, in particular, the absolute failure that is death and the notion of sacrifice, which Bataille infamously tried to literalize in his secret society *Acéphale* (Headless) (Noys 2000: 9). Bataille was introduced to Hegel's philosophy through Kojève's lectures (1934-1939) on the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in France, which were attended by many-a-French thinker, including Bataille's friend, Lacan, whom I engage below. Much like Lacan, Bataille's reading of Hegel does not escape Kojève's mediating influence. In his essay on "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice," Bataille (1990) repeatedly, almost obsessively, returns to the following passage from the *Phenomenology's* preface:

But the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. It is this power, not as something positive, which closes its eyes to the negative, as when we say of something that it is nothing or is false, and then, having done with it, turn away and pass on to something else; on the contrary, Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being. (Hegel 1977: 19)

On Bataille's account, Hegel takes death, the negative, seriously, but, perhaps, too seriously and, therefore, not seriously enough. As Derrida argues:

The immense revolution [of Kant's and Hegel's philosophy, R.N.] consisted—it is almost tempting to say consisted *simply*—in taking the negative *seriously*. In giving meaning to its labor. Now, Bataille does not take the negative seriously. But he must mark his discourse to show that he is not, to that extent, returning to the positive and pre-Kantian metaphysics of full presence. In his discourse he must mark the point of no return of destruction, the instance of an expenditure without reserve which no longer leaves us the resources with which to think of this expenditure as negativity. For negativity is a *resource*. (2005: 327-328; original emphases)

Thus, for Bataille (and for Derrida), in Hegel's philosophy, death, negativity, and failure are ultimately subsumed or sublated (*Aufhebung*: superseded and preserved) into a higher sphere of meaning, into the infamous Hegelian totality. As Hegel himself puts it in the above-quoted passage, spirit's "tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being." In Derrida's terms, negativity is a resource from which one gains the "profit of meaning" (2005: 322). Bataille calls Hegel's philosophy the "work of death" (Bataille 1990: 14) insofar as this philosophy sublates the negativity of death, makes it subservient to the work of philosophy, and, in Kojève's "anthropological" reading, also the deadening labor of the worker in capitalism who is "pinned to his work" (Bataille 1990: 17). Thus, on this account, the Hegelian dialectic constantly and necessarily mourns away, sublates, all of its losses, accidents, ruptures and turns them into the ideality of meaning (Gómez 2022). As per Derrida's *Glas*, "The *Aufhebung* is the dying away, the amortization, of death. That is the concept of economy in general in speculative dialectics" (Derrida 1986: 133 A; cited in Gómez 2022: 480). Further in the text, Derrida suggests that the economy of the Hegelian dialectic, its "onto-logic," is coextensive with "political economy" (1986: 133 A).

This criticism of Hegel's philosophy does not remain restricted to the profit of meaning alone but extends to the literal profit of capital in a continuing line of argument in the Marxist tradition (notably, in Theodor Adorno and Moishe Postone) and going back to Marx himself, which contends that the logic of Hegel's idea, spirit, etc., mirrors capital's logic of profit for the sake of profit (Dolar 2022: 123-132). While I will not enter the details of this debate, suffice it to say that contemporary capitalism, or so-called neoliberalism, thrives off of failure, negativity, crises of all sorts, and even death. As many historians (Mirowski 2013) and political analysts (Klein 2007) have demonstrated, capitalism turns its *own* failures into its greatest resource and never lets a serious crisis or disaster go to waste.

To put it briefly, no crisis or catastrophe, whether COVID-19, climate change, or international warfare, is capable of limiting capital; the capitalist machine swallows everything and marches on in its work of death. Marx's image of capital in his *Grundrisse* is aptly described by Gérard Lebrun as "a monstrous mixture of the good infinity and the bad infinity, the good infinity which creates its presuppositions and the conditions of its growth, the bad infinity which never ceases to surmount its crises, and which finds its limit in its own nature" (Lebrun 2004: 311; cited in Žižek 2022: 20).

In this view, at its worst, Hegel's philosophy not only succumbs, as Bataille and Derrida claim, to the profit of meaning but also, more devastatingly, to the profit of profit or the logic of capital. Through reading Derrida and Bataille together, one could make the case that both Hegel's philosophy and political economy constitute "restricted economies" that prohibit true freedom or "sovereignty," which Bataille sought (Derrida 2005: 342-350). Curious then that Lacanian psychoanalytic theory as an avowedly anti-capitalist praxis, at least in a certain interpretation, seems to follow this above-elaborated Hegelian logic of profiting from failure, which I turn to next.

Anti-Capitalist Psychoanalysis, or, Failing Better as the Work of Truth

I now consider the extent to which the work of Hegel's *Phenomenology* logically resonates with psychoanalysis, to which Freud (2001) gives the imperative of "working through" and which Jacques Lacan calls "the work of truth" (2007: 78).

At the outset, what brings together Hegel's *Phenomenology* and psychoanalysis is that they both refuse to rely on an external standard and not just of "good" mental health, which psychoanalysis does not seek but, ultimately, of truth. In his text, "The Freudian Thing," Lacan rails against ego psychologists for imposing on the patient their standard of what a healthy ego is (ultimately their own ego) with the promise to (re)integrate her in capitalist social reality (2006: 353). In contrast, the work of psychoanalysis is not about getting the analysand to match up to an external standard (even and especially that of the analyst) but to force them to make explicit (the failure of) their own standard and thereby create a different self-measure. Similarly, the dialectical process does not require the philosopher to actively intervene with her own ideas but only renders explicit what is always already there implicitly (i.e., "in itself" [*an sich*]) in the concept. Hegel's methodological principle would equally apply to the Lacanian analyst. In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel asserts: "we do not need to import criteria, or to make use of our own bright ideas and thoughts during the course of the inquiry; it is precisely when we leave these aside that we succeed in contemplating the matter in hand as it is in and for itself" (1977: 54).

The immanently critical approach of the explication of the implicit or the "in itself" avoids the obvious problem of infinite regress: an external standard would always require another standard that justifies why the former is the proper standard. However, apart from this pragmatic consideration of avoiding infinite regress, there is a more crucial (philosophical) reason for the immanently critical procedure of both Lacanian psychoanalysis and Hegelian dialectical philosophy. Infinite regress becomes a problem because there is, strictly speaking, *nothing* to regress to. And not coming to terms with this nothingness or negativity *is* what results in a spurious or bad infinity of regress. On the one hand, there is no substantial human nature to which we have recourse. On the other hand, as Lacan insisted, there is no metalanguage that could provide an external (philosophical-linguistic) criterion to our procedures of (self-)knowledge.

Hegel makes the absence of a first nature abundantly clear in his *Philosophy of Spirit* (2007), in general, and particularly in his philosophy of objective spirit, including the *Philosophy of Right* (2008). In the absence of a “first nature,” human beings give themselves their own second nature through a dialectic of habit and (self-)alienation (See Malabou 2005; Novakovic 2017). Put differently, the first nature of human beings is to be determined as naturally undetermined or a “weak nature” (Johnston 2015: 217-261). As it were, the lack in and of human nature, which thwarts any automatic human instinct, persists as the lack in and of language, prohibiting any complete and completely self-transparent (meta) language. This redoubling of lack, which, at the same time, produces an excess (*jouissance*, enjoyment), makes necessary the hypothesis of the Freudian-Lacanian unconscious (See Zupančič 2017). In other words, human nature is the failure to have a substantial human nature (ibid.: 84-93), and human speech is the result of not being able to “say it all” (Lacan 1990: xix).

Because there are no a priori, pre-given external standards or criteria of success, success can only emerge as a retroactive result of failure, which takes a determining role in the discursive-conceptual production of psychoanalysis as well as Hegelian dialectics. At the get-go of the *Phenomenology*, language itself reveals the failure of consciousness in revealing the truth beyond our intended speech. Hegel writes:

we do not strictly say what in this sense-certainty we mean to say. But language, as we see, is the more truthful; in it, we ourselves directly refute what we mean to say, and since the universal is the true [content] of sense-certainty and language expresses this true [content] alone, it is just not possible for us ever to say, or express in words, a sensuous being that we mean. (1977: 60; translator’s parentheses)

In other words, because we are speaking beings, consciousness’s relationship to the world is constitutively and necessarily mediated through language, which always fails to capture completely the objects of our knowledge. Thus, for us, experience can only take the form of the failure of (totalized, complete, whole) experience. As Mladen Dolar puts it:

Language comes too late to capture the experience, but *it is this very inadequacy that ultimately constitutes the experience*—the full presence of experience turns out retrospectively to have been a mirage. This inadequacy will haunt the (natural) consciousness all throughout the *Phenomenology*, to the very last page, for it will always be doomed to saying something else than intended. (2020: 40; original emphasis)

In the *Phenomenology*’s final pages, it’s precisely this mirage or fantasy of the full presence of experience that absolute knowing breaks or traverses rather than, as is typically believed, fulfills. Like the *Phenomenology*, psychoanalysis works towards traversing the fantasy of complete experience, which is, at once, the fantasy of the subject’s full self-presence as a unified, sovereign, self-sufficient whole.

To repeat, in the *Phenomenology*, due to the constitutive lack in human nature and language, there is no external standard of success but only an implicit, internal one, which becomes explicit and fails — and this failure drives the whole process. And because failure is all we have, “an untrue mode of knowledge,” i.e., failure, “must not be allowed to run away into an empty nothing, but must necessarily be grasped as the nothing *of that from which it results*—a result which contains what was true in the preceding knowledge” (Hegel 1977: 56, original emphasis). Thus, the *Phenomenology*’s imperative takes the form of a sort of Beckettian failing better; its motto: “Try again. Fail again. Fail better” (Beckett: 1983). And the better implies that we must not simply insist on and repeat the failure of sense-certainty but fail *better*, which makes possible movement and transition from sense-certainty to perception and all the way to absolute knowing. Failure for the sake of failure or negation for the sake of negation is identical to skepticism, or “abstract negation,” to which Hegel contrasts his procedure of determinate negation, which grasps that in the result of failure, “a new form has thereby immediately arisen, and in the negation the transition is made through which the progress through the complete series of forms comes about of itself” (Hegel 1977: 79).

I am building upon Samo Tomšič’s argument that psychoanalysis pursues the work of failing better. He also makes the connection to Hegel, but only in a single footnote. Tomšič argues that Beckett addresses to the subject the imperative of failing better and

conceives the process of transformation through the combination of repetition, failure and displacement. The lines indicate a possible link between failure and production [...]. The predicate “better” sufficiently indicates that Beckett does not speak of failure for the sake of failure. In a structure or situation that makes the opposition between success and failure inoperative, invalid or insufficient, a subject can either fail or fail better, but he or she must engage in a repetition, which also means a process of work, in order to bring about a gradual change. (2019b: 85)

To be sure, since modernity at least, the situation wherein the opposition between failure and success is inoperative is not an exceptional situation that one encounters in Hegel’s philosophy or the psychoanalytic clinic, but it is the situation of the modern subject as such. In the absence of an external standard coercively or consensually imposed by God or a divinely ordained king, the subject can only choose to fail or fail better — this is the true meaning of self-determination. Slavoj Žižek has proposed the following as a possible formal definition of the subject: “a subject tries to articulate (express) itself in a signifying chain, this articulation fails, and by means and through this failure, the subject emerges; the subject is the failure of its signifying representation—this is why Lacan writes the subject of the signifier as \$, as ‘barred’” (2011: 311).

In other words, for modern subjects, success cannot simply be a pre-given or predetermined telos to be achieved but necessarily has to be a practical result. As Hegel puts it in the *Phenomenology*’s “Preface,” truth is not a thing or

an object that can be pocketed like a freshly minted coin (1977: 27). Similarly, Hegel remarks that the true and false cannot be treated like oil and water and the false cannot be separated from the true like “dross from pure metal” (ibid.: 23). The *Encyclopedia* echoes this thought: “Otherness or error, as something sublated, is itself a necessary moment of the truth, the truth which only is by making itself its own result” (Hegel 2010a: 282). Thus, any measure of success can only be a retroactive result of the process or labor of failing better, which, I suggest, is a possible way of interpreting Hegel’s labor of the negative, at least in the *Phenomenology*.

Failure retroactively makes explicit the standard with respect to which the failure has failed. In other words, the object or criterion emerges through determinate negation, i.e., through an immanent failure and necessity rather than an external one. Derrida’s and Bataille’s main issue with Hegel is precisely his preference for determinate negation over abstract negativity, which, for Hegel, runs away “into an empty nothing.” Below, I consider the reasons for the Derridian-Bataillan opposition and their proposed alternative.

Sovereignty, or, Failure, Pure Failure – Without Further Sublation

In his text on Bataille’s reading of Hegel, Derrida quips that Bataille would respond to Hegel’s dialectic of determinate negation with a “burst of laughter”:

Laughter alone exceeds dialectics and the dialectician: it bursts out only on the basis of an absolute renunciation of meaning, an absolute risking of death, what Hegel calls abstract negativity. A negativity that never takes place, that never *presents* itself, because in doing so it would start to work again. A laughter that literally never *appears*, because it exceeds phenomenality in general, the absolute possibility of meaning. And the word “laughter” itself must be read in a burst, as its nucleus of meaning bursts in the direction of the *system* of the sovereign operation [...]. (Derrida 2005: 323)

In Derrida’s account, laughter is beyond meaning, meaningless, a risk of death that cannot be given any meaning, which he equates with Hegel’s abstract negativity. Further, laughter never presents itself phenomenally, does not appear, yet it somehow — exists. Laughter is the meaningless, baseless base, groundless ground of meaning, which makes all meaning possible and is the constitutive exception of the Hegelian system, without which the dialectic cannot get going but at the same time, due to which the dialectical synthesis necessarily falls apart, fails. Laughter makes dialectics at once possible and impossible. Therefore, the Hegelian system necessarily has to repress it to exist (Gómez 2022: 477). For Derrida, laughter marks the imperceptible difference between the Hegelian concept of lordship (*Herrschaft*) and the Bataillan “operation” of sovereignty.

Following Kojève’s idiosyncratic interpretation of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* through the lordship-bondsman (or “master-slave”) dialectic (Kojève 1980: 50; McGowan 2017: 139-141), Bataille takes the concept of lordship as the key to

Hegel's entire philosophical system. Again, lordship represents the sublation, the overcoming of death. As per Derrida, "The lord is the man who has had the strength to endure the anguish of death and to maintain the work of death. Such, according to Bataille, is the center of Hegelianism" (Derrida 2005: 321). And, through the moment of laughter, Bataille subjects the Hegelian concept of lordship to "the rigorous effect of trembling" (ibid.: 320) to get to the point of "sovereignty," which, as Bataille famously claimed, "is NOTHING" (Bataille 2017: 256). In Derrida's words, "Simultaneously more and less a lordship than lordship, sovereignty is totally other. Bataille pulls it out of dialectics" (2005: 323). As Derrida clarifies further, sovereignty is not simply an interruption, a caesura of dialectics that would still retain a relationship to the Hegelian dialectic as its reverse side – as the negative of Hegel's philosophy (ibid.: 327-328). Thus, sovereignty is not even the negation of the infamous Hegelian "negation of the negation," which would constitute some sort of "affirmationism" (Noys 2010: xi) but a much more radical *setting aside* of Hegel's philosophy, which "keeps itself beyond the opposition of the positive and the negative" (Derrida 2005: 344). In other words, the sovereign operation "is convulsively to tear apart the negative side, that which makes it the reassuring *other* surface of the positive; and it is to exhibit within the negative, in an instant, that which can no longer be called negative" (ibid.: 328). Through the operation of sovereignty, Bataille wants to push Hegel's "closed" system to its extreme, to its limit, to rupture out of it, and, thus, move beyond it.

In his text "Method of Mediation," Bataille describes sovereignty as an excess, an "excessive energy," as a "senseless loss":

The *general economy*, in the first place, makes apparent that excesses of energy are produced, and that by definition, these excesses cannot be utilized. The excessive energy can only be lost without the slightest aim, consequently without any meaning. It is this useless, senseless loss that *is* sovereignty. (Bataille 1943: 233; cited in Derrida 2005: 342)

At this point, it is instructive to quote Lacan's incisive description of capitalism from his *Seminar XVII*:

Something changed in the master's discourse at a certain point in history. We are not going to break our backs finding out if it was because of Luther, or Calvin, or some unknown traffic of ships around Genoa, or in the Mediterranean Sea, or anywhere else, for the important point is that on a certain day surplus *jouissance* became calculable, could be counted, totalized. This is where what is called the accumulation of capital begins. (2007: 177)

For Lacan, surplus *jouissance*, "enjoyment," has the status of an excess – of a surplus pleasure, or more precisely, a pleasure-in-pain. But, crucially, vis-à-vis Bataille's description of sovereignty as an excess energy and a senseless loss, for Lacan, too, surplus *jouissance* is a senseless loss, a waste, which, however, is not simply an absence or a lack, but an *insisting* absent presence (Zupančič 2006: 157). In the seminar, Lacan compares his notion of surplus *jouissance*

both to the Marxian notion of surplus value as well as to entropy. Ultimately, for Lacan, (surplus) *jouissance* is waste as opposed to simply a lack; the distinction between the two is that in waste, “something is there, yet it serves no purpose” (Zupančič 2006: 158). I will not belabor further the proximity between Bataille’s and Lacan’s notions of excess.² The crucial point is that while Bataille claims that this excess cannot be “utilized” by the economy and thereby constitutes the resistance that is sovereignty, for Lacan, the entire transition from feudalism (i.e., the master’s discourse) to capitalism is premised on capital’s utilizing, counting, and putting into circulation this excess. Capitalism puts to use senseless waste, the excessive energy that was hitherto lost.

So, finally, does Bataille’s excess, the burst of laughter, sovereignty escape capital’s utilization? Yes and no. As Tung-Wei Ko (2024) argues apropos of Bataille’s entire oeuvre:

If sovereignty in an elementary sense is equivalent to supreme power, it is a power that is naked of force, of action, and of the ability to transcend. A sovereign act suggests a forward movement, a defiant spirit that might have precipitated the whole movement to its destruction had the need for restraint not asserted itself in time. Bataille, unable to write sovereignly, nevertheless succeeds in making a display of his failure, which in this limited context can be taken as a partial achievement. For this very failure homes in on the reality of the sovereign proper: that it will always remain in a state of suspension.

Sovereignty impossibly aims at something like *pure failure* that is beyond the dialectics of the positive and the negative, master and slave, a death that is not, cannot be, sublated. Thus, sovereignty aims at death to “simulate” (Ko 2024) an impossible moment: “at all costs, man must live at the moment that he really dies, or he must live with the impression of really dying” (Bataille 1990: 20). In a sense, all of Bataille’s life and writing could be thought of as so many impossible attempts to simulate the impossibility that is sovereignty – to try to return again and again to the “state of suspension” just before death. Eric Santner writes:

Bataille’s later reflections on sovereignty could be grasped as a set of reflections not on the “discourse of the master” but rather on what Lacan referred to as the “discourse of the analyst,” a discourse distinguished by the paradoxical attempt to occupy the place of an excremental remainder that induces, in turn, the other’s evacuation or emptying out, his separation precisely from the master or sovereign signifiers that heretofore dominated his libidinal life, subordinated his enjoyment to the servility and service of goods. (Santner 2011: 104)

Bataille, of course, would protest against such a putting to use of sovereignty. While Lacan saw the psychoanalytic cure as a point of “subjective destitution” (Verhaeghe 1998: 15-19) or “symbolic death” (Žižek 2012: 511-515) from

2 On Lacan’s unacknowledged appropriation of Bataille’s work in Lacan’s development of his concept of *jouissance*, see Noys (2000: 3, 31-33).

which would follow a radical reconfiguration of the subject's being-in-the-world, Bataille seems fixated on biological death — the ultimate limit of life but also of Bataille's work.

Benjamin Noys tells us of Bataille's "traumatic initiation" to Hegel (through Kojève's lectures), which made Bataille feel "suffocated, crushed, shattered, killed ten times over" (Noys 2000: 7). In a letter to Kojève, Bataille wrote: "I imagine that my life – or, better yet, its aborting, the open wound that is my life – constitutes all by itself the refutation of Hegel's closed system" (Bataille 1937/1997: 296). As per Noys, after Bataille's encounter with Hegel, all of the former's writings "can be read as a sustained and violent dialogue with the overwhelming force of Hegel" (Noys 2000: 7). From my limited engagement with Bataille's oeuvre, a fateful limitation of Bataille's encounter with Hegel and of his alternative, i.e., sovereignty (Bataille's paradoxical concept without concept) is that Bataille repeatedly creates the conditions from which sovereignty might emerge as a temporary suspension, a suspension that cannot be sustained.³ The impossibility of achieving pure failure, i.e., the nothingness of death or failure without any further sublation, nevertheless, seems to force Bataille to engage in a process of failing better, not unlike the one elaborated above. Or, more precisely, Bataille engages in a repeated failure to fail, which persists in a kind of Hegelian bad infinity.⁴ In contrast, and this is the argument of this paper's next and final section, through absolute knowing, Hegel too, like Bataille, aims at the excess, but Hegel moves from the bad infinity of excess to the true or good infinity of creation from this excess, from the point of absolute knowing.

Before moving on, I must note that, from Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) to Noys, all serious readers of Bataille lament "a profound *failure* to read Bataille" (Noys 2000: 1) in his assimilation and appropriation by Bataille's so-called followers. For one, Derrida (2005) points out that one cannot begin to read Bataille without reading Hegel, a precondition that, as per him, almost no Bataillians meet. An obvious issue in engaging with Bataille seems to be his insistence on the momentary state of suspension he calls sovereignty, which his followers seem to be anxious to either dispatch or, which is the same, somehow sustain. Noys remarks: "The impossibility of deriving a theory from Bataille may be the reason that he is so little read, but when he draws out the impossibility of theory itself he becomes impossible to ignore" (2000: 17).⁵

3 This resonates with Lacan's pessimistic view of the unsustainability of the love encounter, which is elaborated by Zupančič (2017: 134–135).

4 Derrida recognizes this limitation of Bataille but, expectedly, attributes it to Bataille's yet unresolved Hegelianism; see Derrida (2005: 346–350).

5 This anxiety about the impossibility of theory certainly seems to be at play in Bataille's appropriation by contemporary art-critical discourse, which Santner subjects to devastating critique, in particular, the Bataille-inspired art criticism of Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois in which Santner detects a celebration of the "infantile," of regression to "not-yet-human animality" (Santner 2011: 112) as an attempt to deal with the excess.

Absolute Knowing, or, The Failure of Failing Better

The argument of this paper elaborated in this section is that there is a radical difference between the transitions that take place *within* the *Phenomenology*, i.e., the dialectical progression of *Aufhebung* (sublation) as determinate negation — and the culminating point of absolute knowing that brings this process to a close in a sublation of sublation, which Malabou terms as “*speculative abrogation or letting-go*” (2005: 156).⁶ The ignorance of this difference marked by the moment of letting go, release (*Entlassen*) is, arguably, the shared blind spot of typical postmodern critiques of Hegel, including but not restricted to those of Derrida and Bataille.

The final paragraph of the *Phenomenology*'s introduction declares:

In pressing forward to its true existence, consciousness will arrive at a point at which it gets rid of its semblance of being burdened with something alien, with what is only for it, and some sort of “other,” at a point where appearance becomes identical with essence, so that its exposition will coincide *at just this point* with the authentic Science of Spirit. And finally, when consciousness itself grasps this its own essence, it will signify the nature of absolute knowledge itself. (Hegel 1977: 56-57; my emphasis)

At the outset, Hegel apparently sets up a clear measure of success for the *Phenomenology*'s inquiry: a stable, homeostatic correspondence between the subject and object of knowledge. Hereby, all the usual critiques of Hegel appear vindicated. Absolute knowing as the systemic closure ultimately sacrifices the process of failing better simply to success. However, since this anticipation of success is in the text's introduction and not in the philosophical work itself, perhaps it is not yet genuine philosophy but “mere talk” about philosophy, which nevertheless has its proper function “to serve the aims of preparation, initiation” (Yovel 1996: 27). Hegel seems to set up this “organizing fantasy” of success and completion only for absolute knowing to traverse or implode it. As Rebecca Comay argues, absolute knowing “reveals our stubborn attachment to the magical power of narrative closure and our unquenchable desire for a Master—a subject-supposed-to-know—who controls the story and possesses the key to its interpretation [...]. The ending of the *Phenomenology* explodes this fantasy” (2021: 75). Thus, rather than what Hegel says in the introduction, perhaps we should focus our attention on what absolute knowing *shows*. Frank Ruda explains:

What all the stages of the *Phenomenology* strangely have in common is that they in one way or the other try to generate a stable knowledge of something, of the subject, even in the last instance of knowledge itself. Yet, and this is precisely what the *Phenomenology* depicts, it demonstrates how the very idea of any stability is irrefutably unsustainable. (2014: 124)

⁶ I set aside for now the controversial question of the transition from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* to Hegel's *Science of Logic* and thereby the question of the relation between the only two “books” Hegel published, which has been the subject of longstanding debate in Hegel scholarship; see Collins (2012), Comay and Ruda (2018), Pippin (1993).

If the *Phenomenology's* work retroactively appears as a series of better failures, then absolute knowing shows that there is a radical difference between failing better as making implicit, *existing* standards (i.e., the unconscious habits of consciousness) explicit and creating a truly new standard, a new habit — through a radical abrogation, kenosis, sacrifice.

Implicitly or explicitly following Hegel, one of the basic achievements of psychoanalysis was to destabilize the rigid boundary between the internal and external, between subject and object. In the psychoanalytic clinic, Tomšič argues that “every demand for the cure always already contains a demand for a change in the social structure” (2019a: 187). Lacan’s definition of the psychoanalytic cure was “to raise impotence to impossibility” (Tomšič 2019a), which Tomšič interprets as the displacement of the subject from being the “impotent sufferer” who compulsively repeats her symptoms to the “impossible laborer” who works on the structure that causes her symptoms. But given the mutual internal externality (or extimacy, as per Lacan’s neologism) of subject and structure, isn’t the danger that every resistance against the structure is the very mode in which the structure appears as such and, therefore, (re)produces itself? Thus, Foucault might be correct to claim that “resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (1978: 95). But perhaps true resistance has to be created not *against* the structural frame but in (in)difference (Ruda 2024) to the frame: creation not only from the limit or failure of the enframed content, i.e., failing better, but creation from the limit of the very procedure of framing, i.e., from the limit or failure of failing better. In other words, the point is not to resist interminably the against the structural frame of capitalism with the hope of a final success but a radical setting aside of this interminable labor grounded in the impossible fantasy of cure. Absolute knowing knows its own process of knowledge — failing better — as a failure and, therefore, makes possible, creates, the actuality of freedom.

In absolute knowing, Hegel tells us, spirit in its self-knowledge “knows not only itself but also the negative of itself, or its limit: to know one’s limit is to know how to sacrifice oneself” (1977: 492). Till the point of absolute knowing, the transitions were happening “behind the back of consciousness” (ibid.: 56), which only Hegel’s observing consciousness (or the psychoanalyst in the clinic) could formalize by merely looking on. However, in absolute knowing, consciousness does not become self-transparent but knows itself in its self-negativity, its limit. And this constitutes sacrifice because spirit does not merely recognize this negativity but becomes the negativity.⁷ Thereby, spirit can set aside the existing frame of experience or *Phenomenology* through the creation of the frame of the *Science of Logic*. Spirit at once remembers and forgets everything that came before and knows itself as the immediacy of the pure concept that the *Logic* will both acknowledge and set aside, remember and forget, or remember to forget, which is the only way it can get to (its own) creation.

7 Zupancič (2017) has developed this point vis-à-vis psychoanalysis.

Ultimately, Derrida misses the point that absolute knowing always already points to its beyond when he claims:

In sacrificing meaning, sovereignty submerges the possibility of discourse: not simply by means of an interruption, a caesura, or an interior wounding of discourse (an abstract negativity), but, through such an opening, by means of an irruption suddenly uncovering the limit of discourse and the beyond of absolute knowledge. (2005: 330)

As the previous section showed, sovereignty remains an impossible rupture, a pure failure that the sovereign operation keeps circulating around in a repeated interminable failure of pure failure. In his crucial *Seminar XI*, Lacan (1981) directly links the impossible (as the “real”) to his conception of the drive (*Trieb*). Drive is what always finds its goal of satisfaction (*jouissance*) even through the failure to achieve its aim. For instance, the drive satisfies itself through the “normal” consumption of food (if there is such a normal) just as equally as through the extremes of gluttony and anorexia (cf. Miller 1995: 13). It is the drive that enjoys even at the expense of the subject who suffers. Thus, one can again link Bataille’s operation of sovereignty with the capitalist drive (M-C-M’) — capital’s interminable drive for more capital (Johnston 2024) — that finds satisfaction even through the very dissatisfaction of laborers’ and consumers’ desires and the devastation of their actual lives (disaster capitalism).

To be sure, the Hegelian-Lacanian cure is not the championing of desire over drive. For Lacan, while drive is what always finds satisfaction, desire can only sustain itself as unsatisfied (Zupančič 2000: 242). Desire is that which remains unfulfilled in the consumption of every object and, therefore, that which no object can fulfill. Desire is the constitutive “this is not it.” To put it in an abbreviated manner, if drive is the necessity of satisfaction, the necessary enjoyment bound to the failure of pure failure (i.e., sovereignty), the waste that capital puts to work and to (ac)count, desire is what marks the contingency of every necessity. In other words, desire marks the failure inherent to any structure, its immanent impossibility. Desire exposes the structure’s repression of laughter and, therefore, opens up the possibility of the structure being otherwise, of displacing the structure through the labor of failing better. However, the process of failing better can itself become interminable. As I suggested earlier through a Foucauldian cautioning of failing better as resistance against structure, the very procedure of exposing the contingency of necessity itself can retroactively shore up the necessity of the structure. Behind every “this is not it,” the “it” of capital reproduces itself and satisfies itself at the expense of the “impossible laborer.”

Despite his repeated rejection of the Hegelian “monstrosity” (Dolar 2006: 152) of absolute knowing, Lacan conceived the terminus of the interminable failing better of psychoanalysis in a manner strikingly close to absolute knowing (ibid.: 149-152). The end of analysis is not simply a matter of success whereby the subject becomes one with herself but a radical separation from her subjective coordinates that hitherto guided the process of cure. Hegel’s absolute

knowing marks a similar moment of “radical destitution” (Comay and Ruda 2018: 4) wherein the fantasy of a successful union of subject and object collapses, spirit sacrifices itself and this “sacrifice is the externalization in which Spirit displays the process of its becoming Spirit in the form of *free contingent happening*” (Hegel 1977: 492) Thus, while Bataille’s desire for sovereignty turns into a drive that repeats around the impossibility of biological death in different symbolic iterations — better failures that hold the subject hostage to “its” enjoyment, in Hegel and Lacan the moment of impossibility results in the symbolic death of subject.

The psychoanalytic cure coincides with the transition from the position of the patient to the position of the analyst. Lacan concludes *Seminar XI* by declaring that the “analyst’s desire is not a pure desire” (1981: 276) because the traversal of the (fundamental) fantasy (of cure and closure) opens up the analyst to the “experience of the drive” (ibid.: 273-274). In other words, freedom is the short circuit of desire and drive. While the operation of sovereignty recycles its energy in constantly approaching the point of impossibility, retreating, and making a different approach, absolute knowing sublates the process of sublation itself. It terminates the interminable failing better. As opposed to a pure failure, it reaches the impossibility through and as the failure of failing better. The cure is that there is no cure, and this allows spirit to move on. As Dolar tells us, psychoanalysis shows that “the disease that the subject suffers from is incurable—yet analysis also shows that this incurable disease is another name for the subject, that this disease founds the very possibility of human experience” (1993: 92). Having digested, reduced, abstracted, sublated all the experiences of spirit, Absolute knowing sublates this experience in a “liberation of energy” (Malabou 2005: 165-166; cf. Marder 2021). As a result, for Malabou, “Force, previously contained within the strict limits imposed by a transcendental perspective, which the gap between subject and object particularly sustains, now breaks away from these bonds and becomes free for other combinations and other syntheses” (ibid.: 165) With this release of energy, absolute knowing makes possible real creation or creation in the real: an impossible new beginning, which allows Hegel, in the *Science of Logic*, to unfold the thoughts God had before his creation (Hegel 2010b: 29). When Lacan conceives of psychoanalysis as the overcoming of the discourse of the master and as an exit from the capitalist discourse, he remarks that “perhaps it’s from the analyst’s discourse that there can emerge another style of master signifier” (2007: 176).⁸ We can only move beyond the existing standard of the master and capital by creating a new measure, another style.

8 To be sure, Lacan ultimately abandoned as a failure his notion of the pass (*la passe*) from the position of the analysand to the analyst. On this, see Frosh (2009: 108-111). This is why we still need Hegel’s notion of absolute knowing *after* Lacan. I thank Gene Flenady for pushing me to clarify this point, which needs to be developed further. For a contemporary re-actualization of the Lacanian notion of *la passe*, see Gabriel Tupinambá (2021).

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Rutvij Nakhva

Apsolutno hegelijanstvo za postmoderno vreme: Hegel sa Lakanom posle Bataja i Deride

Apstrakt

Ovaj rad ispituje hegelijansku dijalektičku proceduru određene negacije u *Fenomenologiji duha* kroz prizmu „neuspeha“ u svetlu njene kritike posthegelovskih mislilaca, pre svega Žorža Bataja i Žaka Deride. Dalje, ovaj rad pokazuje kako pojam neuspeha ostaje važan u razmišljanju Hegela i Bataja, te razmatra hegelijanski „rad negativnog“ kao beketovski „bolji neuspeh“ u njegovoj rezonanciji sa lakanovskom psihoanalitičkom praksom. Na taj način, ovaj rad naglašava kako posthegelijanska praksa psihoanalize, pa čak i „antihgelijansko“ razmišljanje Deride i Bataja dele određene konceptualne operacije sa Hegelovom filozofijom. U radu se dalje prate ograničenja Batajove i Deridine kritike Hegela, posebno kroz Batajov pojam „suvereniteta“ koji on suprotstavlja „gospodstvu“, a koji smatra glavnim konceptom hegelijanstva. Autor tvrdi da je većina kritičara Hegela (uključujući Bataja i Deridu) pogrešno protumačila njegov pojam „apsolutnog znanja“ zbog nerazumevanja radikalne razlike između prelaza unutar *Fenomenologije* i kulminacije ove serije prelaza u apsolutnom znanju. Uklanjanjem ovog nesporazuma, ovaj rad pokazuje da apsolutno znanje ostaje ključni konceptualni operater za prevazilaženje čorsokaka u postmodernom mišljenju.

Ključne reči: Hegel, apsolutno saznanje, bolji promašaj, Bataj, suverenitet, Derida, Lakan, psihoanaliza, kapitalizam.

