

Metaphysics and the Critique of Metaphysics

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Our question can be simply stated. What does "metaphysics" name in any discourse that declares a crisis of metaphysics (in the best of cases), or the end or even the profound non-sense of metaphysics (in the worst)? What type of thought does this word, "metaphysics", refer to, for all those who claim to critique or reform its effects?

Let us recall that the theme either of an obsolescence or of a necessary and radical transformation of that which is sustained by the name "metaphysics" runs, uninterrupted, from Kant to the present. It is certainly useful to submit these verdicts to revision. We should keep a sample of the modern anti-metaphysical spirit in mind, if for no other reason than to be baffled by how such a negative certainty is answered by the interminable and uncertain history of the perpetual reconstitution of metaphysics.

Almost three centuries have gone by in which the opera of the end of metaphysics has never been absent from the repertoire, albeit in extremely varied productions: it is truly of considerable interest to know the different fates that have befallen this libretto.

We shall group them under four main headings:

1. That of the interruption and adjudicative limitation of metaphysical ambitions. Let us call this the critical trial of any dogmatic metaphysics. The canonical reference here is Kant.

2. That of the exhaustion, not only intellectual, but also political and historical, of the supposed virtues of metaphysics, to be finally replaced by a rational positivity which takes the empirical sciences as its paradigm. Let us call this the positivist trial of any metaphysical imaginary. One can here follow Auguste Comte, but also the early Wittgenstein or Carnap.

3. That for which metaphysics is nothing but a mutilation of a complete form of thought, which assumes the living, concrete becoming

of contradictions over against the unilateral entities and fixed categories through which metaphysics allows something like a submission to death to prosper. Let us call this the dialectical trial of any metaphysical immobilism or 'eternitism'. In this trial Hegel is a key witness for the prosecution, but also Marx and Nietzsche, as well as Freud and Lacan.

4. Finally, that which discerns under the name of metaphysics the nihilistic disposition of the entire history of the West. 'Metaphysics' stands here for a prescription of the history of being such that to desire its reversal one must engage in an interminable hermeneutic wait. Let us call this the historical trial of metaphysics, which in the end can only oppose to metaphysics' rampant technical reign the reserve of the poet or the announcement of a return of the dead gods.

Anti-metaphysics is thus to be found in four guises: critique, positivism, dialectics, and hermeneutics. If, against the vacuity of the metaphysical concept, it functions through a discipline of limitation, it is the essence of critique; through a discipline of mathematized experimentation, it is positivism; through the overcoming of the principle of identity that grounds metaphysics, it is dialectics; finally, if it functions through a deciphering of the history of being that culminates in an epochal diagnosis, it is hermeneutics.

In all four cases, to say that the violence of these claims is symptomatic is to state the case mildly. One might even see these claims as extorted from philosophy in the mode of the cry, of the insult, or of venomous mockery. Let us listen to them, one last time:

Let us begin with Critique. Who would expect from that eminently reasonable philosopher, Kant, peremptory and contemptuous statements such as those which, for example, point out the metaphysician's irresponsibility? Thus we come across the assertion in the *Prolegomena* [§52b] according to which, I quote: "One can tinker around with metaphysics in sundry ways without even suspecting that one might be venturing into untruth".¹ The metaphor, as we can see, is not far from an indictment of the common metaphysician as a swindling craftsman. For Kant the metaphysician is and remains a swindler if he imagines he can actually propose something truly new. With regard to the concept of substance for example, that is, with regard to the very heart of classical metaphysics, Kant does not hesitate to declare, in the very last section of the same prolegomena: "through all this analysis nothing is achieved, nothing created and advanced, and, after so much bustle and clatter, this

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, Ed. and Trans. Gary Hatfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 94. [All footnotes are by the translator. Thanks to Miguel de Beistegui and Stephen Houlgate for help with locating the Heidegger and Hegel references.]

science is still where it was in Aristotle's time".² We can ask ourselves if Kant does not in fact, with his rather laboured, emphatic style, add to this very bustle and noise even though, with a self-assurance which should also elicit commentary, he nonetheless does claim to be putting a stop, once and for all, to the bustle in question. In any case this is the injunction which opens the *Prolegomena*, which should be quoted in full, for so much pride is a rare thing indeed: "My intention is to convince all of those who find it worthwhile to occupy themselves with metaphysics that it is unavoidably necessary to suspend their work for the present, to consider all that has happened until now as if it had not happened, and before all else to ask the question: 'whether such a thing as metaphysics is even possible at all'".³

As we can see, the introduction to a critical metaphysics, which is an exposition of the transcendental as such, is undertaken according to an anti-dogmatic line of violence whose very necessity should be put into question.

The positivists are no less acrimonious, even when, like Auguste Comte, they hold metaphysics to be a temporarily useful but already obsolete state of thought. Whilst Kant is enamoured of the image of metaphysics as an interminable and fruitless battle, as a conceptual struggle over so much wind, Auguste Comte introduces the image of metaphysics as mental illness. Thus in the *Discours sur l'Esprit Positif*, he declares that "ultimately, one can view the metaphysical state as a sort of chronic illness which naturally inheres in our mental evolution, both individual and collective".⁴ This propensity to pathologise metaphysics and to prescribe a brutal therapy to deal with its most acute cases has been hugely popular, to the present day. One can no longer count the physicians crowding the bedside of the man either sick with metaphysics, or sick from the sickness of metaphysics itself.

It's true that for Comte (but is it so different for Kant? And will it be so different for Wittgenstein, or Heidegger?) the metaphysical state is not simply a mental disposition. It is also that which an entire intellectual group lays claim to, a group whose social power is not to be underestimated. Indeed, if the critique of metaphysics can so quickly turn violent, it is because political determinations are always at stake. For Comte there exists a metaphysical party, which he has all the reasons to fear, as he clearly expresses in that astonishing text which is the 'Personal

² Ibid., p.122.

³ Ibid., p.5.

⁴ Auguste Comte, *Discours sur l'Esprit Positif in Traité Philosophique d'Astronomie Populaire* (Paris: Fayard, 1985), p. 22.

Preface' to the *Cours de Philosophie Positive*. There he writes, comparing the dangers he faces from the clerical party to those he faces at the hands of the metaphysicians: "Towards the metaphysical party, whether governing or aspiring to, my necessary position, albeit relative to a less pronounced collision, is, at base, even more dangerous for me."⁵ And he gives his reason, which in my opinion has lost none of its relevance: "More enlightened and more supple, this equivocal party [...] is just as interested as the purely theological pretenders in preventing, by any means necessary, the social installation of the true modern philosophy."⁶

Here we are. One of the common meanings of the term "metaphysics" designates, beyond the discursive apparatuses of the reigning philosophy, a fearsome force, whose area of influence is much vaster than the University, a conservative force that blocks a strategic passage: the passage between philosophy and social order. A force that, as Comte argues, attempts to hinder, by any means necessary, the "social installation" of anti-metaphysical philosophy, whether this philosophy be critical, positive, dialectical, or hermeneutic.

Somewhat blurring the outline of this essay, allow me to remark that it is just such a force that in a very different (one might even say opposite) register Heidegger diagnoses under the name of metaphysics. Whether it is a question of the unrelenting and sterile irresponsibility, indicated by Kant, or of the equivocal and devastating pathological force, named by Comte, Heidegger is more prone to raising the stakes than to any form of restraint. It is only at this price, after all, that he can include Nietzsche himself, and ultimately Nietzsche above all, within metaphysics. For Nietzsche is indeed the philosopher who has given the prevalence of a metaphysical disposition with regard to being the name it ultimately deserves: the will to power. Against this Heidegger shows himself to be no less violent in his words than his predecessors. In the fourth book of his *Nietzsche*, Heidegger does not hesitate to call "machination" the hegemony of Being under the sway of the metaphysical structure. And he adds: "When meaninglessness comes to power by dint of machination, the suppression of meaning and thus of all inquiry into the truth of Being must be replaced by machination's erection of "goals" (values)."⁷

⁵ Auguste Comte, *Préface Personelle in Physique Sociale. Cours de Philosophie Positive, Leçons 46 à 60* (Paris: Hermann, 1975), p.472.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche. Zweiter Band [Gesamtausgabe Band 6.2]* (Frankfurt Am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1997), p.14. English Translation from Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche. Volume III: The Will to Power as Knowledge and Metaphysics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), p.175.

To the conspiracy of the metaphysical party, denounced by Comte, corresponds the ontological machination, which founds the criminal reign of the meaningless.

Of course for Comte the conspiracy of the metaphysical party went only as far as his exclusion from the Ecole Polytechnique, whilst for Heidegger metaphysics, unbridled as machination, as technical nihilism's power of enframing, signals nothing less than the devastation of the Earth. On the one hand, a civil servant failing to attain his professorship, on the other, the planetary reign of technology, with a little of what I'd like to call ontological ecology. It is, as it were, a Franco-German difference. This difference should not stop us from noticing that with a century between them, and in opposed conceptual contexts, the same project is pursued: the identification, under the name of "metaphysics", of a corrosive power obsessed with maintaining its domination over a history that is both deep and diverted; obsessed with hindering, by any means necessary, that which is to come and save us, whether this coming be, for the German, predictably, a refashioning of the Greek gods, or, for the Frenchman, and predictably as well, the arrival of a professor of physics in the great schools, doubling as the founder of a subversive political faction.

At a more immediately philosophical level, the determination of the essence of metaphysics as power or as party, always refers, as is attested both by Comte and Heidegger, to the fact that metaphysics leaves undetermined the true nature of what is. This is a crucial point in all critical acceptations of the word "metaphysics": what is to be feared in it is precisely the apparent weakness of its content. For it is indeed in the vague or undecided character of metaphysical determinations that its usage and deployment as a force is to be located.

What makes metaphysics fearsome is that it ignores the discipline of the true questions in favour of an indeterminacy that any signifier of mastery whatsoever can come to inhabit. What is to be feared in metaphysics is, under the mask of a search for truth, a cold and argued indifference to the very question of truth. This is stated with particular clarity by Heidegger himself in the notes entitled *Towards the history of being as metaphysics*: "All the events of the history of Being, which is metaphysics, have their beginning and their ground in this, that metaphysics leaves and must necessarily leave undecided the essence of Being, insofar as an appraisal of what is question-worthy, that is, of what is problematic, aimed at safeguarding its essence, is from the beginning) a

matter of indifference to metaphysics, and this in the indifference of non-knowledge."⁸

Kant had already recognised this indifference in his observation regarding the sterile combat and conceptual immobility which afflicted metaphysics after Aristotle. He had recognised that speculative dialectics constantly feeds off of its own inability to attain knowledge. He had spotted what Heidegger calls "the indifference of non-knowledge". Nevertheless, he had undoubtedly not recognised that far from being a decisive objection, the acknowledgement of metaphysics' indifference is also the acknowledgement of the origins of its power. "Metaphysics" means: the reign of the essentially undetermined. It is in the interests of metaphysics, insofar as it is the history of thought as power, that the essence of Being remain undecided. But this is what Comte had already made out, when he emphasised, as one of the indispensable characteristics of metaphysical entities, what he called their "vagueness", or their "equivocity". And when he wrote, again in his *Discours*, that the "historical efficacy of these entities is a direct result of their equivocal character",⁹ he linked, like Heidegger, the theme of a historical or destinal power of metaphysics to the abstract indifferencing of its problems. For Heidegger, metaphysics conceals the question of Being under that of the supreme being, and proceeds to forget this forgetful configuration itself to welcome, under the name of overman, the technical absoluteness of nihilist man. In this sense metaphysics is a simplified and abstract religion, concerned with undecided entities. But Comte had already forged in his own language what would become the thesis of an onto-theological unity of metaphysics: "Metaphysics" - he writes - "is in fact nothing but a form of theology gradually enervated by dissolving simplifications".¹⁰

Indifferencing, simplification, abstraction, separation, dissolution: such are the operations through which, under the accepted name of metaphysics, the power of a neutral thought, or of the object-less argument, establishes itself. The power of the undecided and the undetermined as such.

⁸ These notes can be found appended to the second volume of Heidegger's *Nietzsche* in the Gesamtausgabe edition. Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche. Zweiter Band [Gesamtausgabe Band 6.2]* (Frankfurt Am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1997), p.418. This passage is not to be found in Krell's translation and runs as follows in the original: "Alle Ereignisse in der Geschichte des Seins, die Metaphysik ist, haben ihren Beginn und Grund darin, daß die Metaphysik das Wesen des Seins unentschieden läßt und lassen muß, sofern ihr eine Würdigung des Fragwürdigen zugunsten der Bräutigam ihres eigenen Wesens von Beginn an gleichgültig bleibt, und zwar in der Gleichgültigkeit des Übermenschen."

⁹ See Comte, *Discours sur l'Esprit Positif*, p. 20.

¹⁰ See Comte, *Discours sur l'Esprit Positif*, p. 21.

It is after all in full agreement with this portrait of metaphysics that contemporary positivists, the partisans of linguistic empiricism, declare that what gives metaphysics its power is the very thing that obliges us to rid ourselves of it, that is, its lack of sense. One must here follow Wittgenstein's sinuous trajectory in the *Tractatus* from aphorism 6.40 to 6.50. Metaphysics is identified here, just as in Carnap, to statements devoid of sense. Aphorism 6.53 specifies that "one must say nothing except what can be said, i.e., the propositions of science". And he adds: "whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, [...] demonstrate to him that he had failed to give meaning to certain signs in his propositions."¹¹

Once again, metaphysics means: undetermined, devoid of any assignable signification. For Wittgenstein, metaphysics denotes the void in signification, just like for Heidegger it denotes the void in the problematic or the question, and for Comte the void in scientific denotation. For all that, Comte is quite close to the beginning of the *Tractatus* when he declares that he considers it "a fundamental law, that any proposition that is not strictly reducible to the simple statement of a fact, whether particular or general, cannot exhibit any real or intelligible sense."

Certainly. But in human experience there are not only thinkable facts, even for Comte, who will one day be obliged, before the markedly singular fact that is his desire for Clotilde de Vaux, to pronounce what he called "the characteristic verdict": "One cannot always think, but one can always love". Even here something of metaphysics' power to support the undetermined is made apparent. And even for Wittgenstein, there isn't just what can be said, there are also, *Tractatus* 6.522: "things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical."¹² But what then is to distinguish the mystically unsayable from the metaphysically undetermined? Already in Comte, what is to distinguish the social religion which seals the alliance of the Woman and the Proletarian from the vague and equivocal entities of metaphysics? In the gap between the mystical element and metaphysical non-sense; in the gap between the positivist sciences and the positivist religion, the entire problem of metaphysics as power interjects itself, as the capacity to invest with the supra-sensible the entire territory of the unsayable, to over-determine the undetermined. Even in Heidegger's case - though, as he says in his testamentary declaration, only a God can save us - the question

¹¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge, 1974), p.74.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 73.

of knowing what this "God" is, and in what sense it is not, at the very peak of nihilist distress, the last recourse to the metaphysically undetermined, poses itself with a certain intensity.

Basically, for critique as for hermeneutics and positivism, metaphysics is identified with the dogmatic assumption of the undetermined, as a false knowledge of the essence, and it is precisely here that its power is thought to lie. But to ward it off, one must have recourse to a higher indeterminacy, or more accurately: one must affirm that the undetermined remains undetermined, the unknowable unknowable, where metaphysics in its cunning rationality inserts the undetermined into the discursive rationality of a determination.

We shall therefore hold that critique, positivism, and hermeneutics, even if we were to grant that they diagnose metaphysics correctly, merely replace it with what we shall call an *archi-metaphysics*, that is, with the suspension of sense to an undetermined that is purely and simply left to the historical indeterminacy of its coming. *Archi-metaphysics* is the replacement of a necessary undetermined with a contingent one, or: the established power of an unknown master is opposed by the poetics or prophetics of the to-come. This is the case with the mystical element in Wittgenstein, as with the metaphorical God in Heidegger or the positivist church in Comte.

This is above all what must originally be perceived in Kant's replacement of knowledge with faith. God as regulative idea, God as postulated by practical reason, the God of religion within the limits of reason alone, much more essentially undetermined and unknowable than the God proved by Descartes or Leibniz, is in this sense more metaphysical than either Descartes' or Leibniz's God. The fact that it grounds its own indeterminacy is only an apparent progress. For where Reason draws its limit, common morality at once brings its unformed God, whether it be called Man, or the indistinct something which is to warn us against malevolence.

Archi-metaphysics, in its positivist, critical or hermeneutic guises, always resolves itself into an indistinct promise, the ethical converse of the order that it claims to overcome. Philosophy of the day in different outfits, *archi-metaphysics* ineluctably activates all of the possible decompositions of the concept.

One is thus obliged to recognise, with Hegel, the native superiority of dogmatic metaphysics over critical *archi-metaphysics*. This superiority is based on the postulates of rationality which in rational metaphysics blunt indeterminacy and expose transcendence to a rational control more rigorous than could ever be exerted by positivism's Humanity, Kant's

moral subject, or the poet of hermeneutics. Dogmatic metaphysics defends the rights of indeterminacy only within the bounds of a preliminary thesis which affirms that thought and the thinkable are homogenous to each other. As Hegel writes in the introduction to the *Science of Logic*: "Ancient metaphysics had in this respect a higher conception of thinking than is current today. [...] This metaphysics believed that thinking (and its determinations) is not anything alien to the object, but rather is its essential nature, [...] and that thinking in its immanent determinations and the true nature of things form one and the same content."¹³

Therefore we could say that ancient metaphysics accepted the place of the undetermined in the Parmenidean maxim, the maxim that declares the identity of being and thought. This is why it authorises us to proceed, with regard to the concept of metaphysics itself, in a dogmatic rather than critical fashion.

A being, philosophically accessible as a name, can be said to be essentially undetermined if amongst the predicates that permit its definition is the claim that this being exceeds, in its very essence, any predicative determination available to an understanding such as ours.

Often, though not without fail, the understanding which functions as a criterion will be defined as finite, whilst the essential excess of the being in question with regard to any determination whatsoever will be called its infinity.

The name of "metaphysics" will then be given to that discursive disposition which claims that an undetermined being, as we have just defined it, that is, a being whose determination exceeds our cognitive power, is required in order to complete the edifice of rational knowledge. This undetermined being is classically given the name of God, but metaphysics lasts well beyond this name. It is enough, for metaphysics to retain its power, that it be able to place, within a discursive framework available to all - an argumentative and not a revealed framework, in other words a *rational* framework - a point of indeterminacy that may, from that moment on, harbour any signifier of mastery whatsoever.

It will be noted that this definition of metaphysics is compatible with the one usually attributed to Aristotle, who regards the science of being *qua* being, whose existence as a science is acknowledged in Book Gamma of the *Metaphysics*, as immediately introducing indeterminacy, or what August Comte would have called the equivocal. For being is said in many ways. But the science of being *qua* being also introduces the

¹³ G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (New York: Humanity Books, 1999), p.45.

determinate framework of this indeterminacy. For being is said "προς εἶναι", towards the One. This is the subtle balancing act of metaphysics, which must determine in terms of the One what it otherwise undetermines, what it sets out as the overcoming of determination itself.

For metaphysics is, and this is its shortest definition, that which makes a predicate of the impredicable.

In this regard one must go further back than Aristotle, to Plato, and specifically to the Book 6 of the *Republic*, when Socrates simultaneously formulates the demand for the Good conceived of as radical transcendence together with its absolute conceptual indeterminacy. What is a determination for Plato? A form, an Idea, an intelligible section of being. And what is the Good? That which is not an idea, that which, as Socrates says, surpasses any idea by far both in power and prestige.

In other words, the existence of the Good is necessary, but its complete determination is impossible. That one may prove an existence without thereby determining what exists is the core of metaphysics as power.

Metaphysics is classical, or dogmatic, when it grants the undetermined point of its apparatus the rationality of its existence.

This point is crucial. What classical metaphysics after Plato borrows from mathematics is the demonstration of existence purely on the basis of the concept. Metaphysics is at base the recognition of a pure existence. Meaning that this existence, which cannot be empirically attested, and the being of whose content is beyond the measure of our cognition, can nonetheless be rationally demonstrated.

The power of classical metaphysics is mathematical, in the sense that it originates from the demonstration of the existence of an existent without it being the case that 'what exists' is commensurable to its determination. This is the case, for example, when we demonstrate a non-denumerable infinity of transcendental numbers, whilst it is quite difficult to exhibit any of them, or when we affirm that there exists an infinite family of non-principal ultra-filters, when in this case it is impossible to construct even one of them.

It is therefore true, as Kant had already noted, that the proofs of the existence of God form the hard core of classical metaphysics, just as they has already served to complete both the Physics and the Metaphysics of Aristotle. Much noise is made every time that a refutation, or dialectisation, of these proofs is able to eradicate that which is in question, that is, the affirmed existence of an essential undetermined being. In truth, subtracting this existent from the regime of proof serves

only to make us pass from classical metaphysics to modern archi-metaphysics. For the function of proof is not to prove. Rather, its function is to analogically assure the mathematicity of existence, and therefore to assure the rational compatibility of the undetermined with the proposed regime of determination. By giving a proof of the existence of the undetermined, or of the infinite; or more precisely, by acknowledging within the discourse itself that the existence of the essential undetermined being is a matter of proof, you show, regardless of whether this proof is universally convincing or not, that in any case you hold that existence is rationally shared between the undetermined and the determined, the infinite and the finite.

Descartes adds the finishing touches to this stance when he declares that the will, or freedom, that is to say, pure and bare existence, is neither distinguishable nor hierarchisable between man and God.

Classical metaphysics owes its greatness to this transit from the finite to the infinite by way of existence. This is what I call the mathematized regime of existence, the one to which Spinoza entrusts the entire architecture of his thought.

In the end, nothing is more corrosive for philosophy than to separate itself from this regime, which creates, beyond that which can be empirically attested, the real of a simple possibility, and destines thought to the only thing that matters, its absolute identity with the being that it thinks.

This is to say that critique, in Kant's sense, misses what is essential to dogmatic metaphysics, the mode of subsumption of the existential by the rational for which mathematics serves as the paradigm. This was recognised by Plato, and later Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz. And it is to this that Hegel returns, even if he believes he can organise the passage from the real to the rational through the sole artifices of speculative dialectics, and engages in a pernicious depreciation of mathematics. To this extent, let us risk saying it, these thinkers were and remain of a calibre which Kant could never lay claim to.

Let us state our thesis otherwise. What dogmatic metaphysics proposes is a rational treatment of the existence of the infinite. In this sense, it counterbalances both empirical finitude and the evidence of death by a radical excess which finds in existential proofs its effective discourse. On the contrary critique, but positivism and hermeneutics as well, brings us back to finitude, a dimension in which dogmatic metaphysics had placed us only in order - at the horizon of rationality, and at the school of mathematics - to let the exception shine.

Let us then say that anti-metaphysics, insofar as it separates the infinite from our rational faculties, and renounces the paradigm of a demonstrable infinite existence, does nothing but restore an empirical finitude that Plato would not have failed to consider, purely and simply, as anterior to any philosophy whatsoever.

For philosophy does not dedicate itself to the care of the limits, but to the care of the unlimited.

Here one must nonetheless do Kant justice. For he did more than perceive the fact that the true question for metaphysics is less that of its results than that of its existence. How else could we explain that the repetitive vacuity of the results of metaphysics has yet to stop anyone from returning to it? Metaphysics resembles the condition of life as viewed by Rimbaud, expressed in two aphorisms: "one never leaves" [*"on ne part pas"*], and "I'm there, I'm always there" [*"j'y suis, j'y suis toujours"*].

With regard to this point, Kant outlines a doctrine which is in tune with the perception of metaphysics as power. When he writes, for example, that metaphysics is "reason's dear child", and that its "procreation cannot be attributed to a fortuitous accident, but rather to an originary germ which finds itself wisely organised towards great ends", it is clear that the biological and finalist metaphor views metaphysics from the standpoint of what one could call a natural or determined being of cognition, not from within the subjective categories of this same cognition, which would leave nature and its ends beyond our scope. Likewise, when he considers as "a problem worthy of inquiry to discover the ends of a nature that can have as a goal this faculty of reason for transcendent concepts", it seems that Kant is very close in the end to collapsing his critique of dogmatic metaphysics into an equally dogmatic metaphysics of the nature of thought and of the ultimate ends of the contradiction between the transcendental organisation of the understanding and reason's urge-to-transcendence.

Nevertheless, considering, as he puts it, that this is a delicate enquiry and that he can only present us here with conjectures, Kant dedicates his rational efforts to the consolidation of critique and the exposition of the transcendental.

In doing this, however, he augments rather than decreases the part played by the undetermined, and consequently the recurrent possibility of a veritable metaphysical obscurantism.

This is of course why, after Hegel, dialecticians have thought that the critique of metaphysics simply prepares its archi-metaphysical repetition unless a real determination of the undetermined that endows metaphysics

with its power is undertaken. That is, if one does not answer the question whose dogmatic response constitutes the anti-obscurantist force of metaphysics, and which can be stated as follows: what has the power to infinitise the finite?

We could say that dialectics, whether Hegelian, Marxist, or Freudian, as varied as its doctrines may be, attempts to wrench itself from the transcendent indeterminacy in which metaphysics thrives without thereby falling into the promises and moralisms of archi-metaphysical finitude, particularly in its transcendental, positivist, or hermeneutic forms.

After all it would be a good negative definition of a properly dialectical metaphysics to say that it covers in philosophy all that which is neither Kantian, nor empirico-positivist, nor phenomenologico-hermeneutic.

Let us acknowledge in passing that one of Lenin's great intuitions lay in having discerned the main philosophical enemy under the nominal mask of empirio-criticism, killing two anti-metaphysical birds with one stone, as it were.

Likewise, we are indebted to Lacan, after Freud, for having recovered, against all philosophies of consciousness, the dialectical genius of the great Empedocles, or the Hegelian theory of a negativity which conserves, that is, transforms into cunning power, that which it negates, thereby bringing the appearance of the undetermined to the implacable and repetitive determination of the symptom.

We shall refer, for this dialectical metaphysics of the unconscious, to Freud's fundamental text on negation, written in 1925, and to the commentaries of this text - linked as if by a Moebius strip - made on February 10, 1954 by Jacques Lacan and that great Hegelian, Jean Hyppolite. This memorable session is reprinted in Lacan's *Ecrits*. It is quite remarkable, given the way in which I've proposed to define metaphysics, that Jean Hyppolite's commentary is wholly concerned with the real origin of the judgement of existence. Moreover, that in his own response, speaking of the symbolic guarantee required by reality as such, perceptual reality included, Lacan proposes this formula: "Nothing exists but insofar as it does not exist" ["*Rien n'existe qu'en tant qu'il n'existe pas*"].

Which immediately brings us back to Hegel.

Not that Hegel's anti-metaphysical remarks are any kinder, initially, than Kant's. He does not hesitate in writing (in the Preface to the *Science of Logic*) that: "That which, prior to this period [the critical period], was

called metaphysics has been, so to speak, extirpated root and branch and has vanished from the ranks of the sciences."¹⁴

Ultimately, Hegel recognises, in Kant's footsteps, that the "forms of pure thought",¹⁵ which are the very material of metaphysics, have in the past been uncritically applied to particular substrates, such as the soul, the world, or God. This means - now quoting Hegel from the introduction to the *Science of Logic* - that classical metaphysics: "employed these forms *uncritically* without a preliminary investigation as to whether and how they were capable of being determinations of the thing-in-itself, to use the Kantian expression - or rather of the Reasonable."¹⁶

In other words, for Hegel, how can one verify that such and such a form of pure thought is indeed a determination, not of the understanding, but of the thing itself? Simply by following the deployment, the effective becoming, of the life of the object.

Dialectical critique is solely concerned with showing that the categories that metaphysics applies from the outside to a supposed undetermined being, the categories that it uses to arrange and demonstrate this essential indeterminacy, are in fact names for the becoming of the determination of this presumed indeterminacy. Each and every category, whether it be being, nothingness, becoming, quality, quantity, causality, and so on, ultimately consists of a definite time of determination, if only one has the patience to follow the true movement of transformation whereby each category takes place as the exteriorization and dialectical truth of the preceding ones.

This is what Hegel calls the replacement of dialectics by logic, of which he has the courtesy to remark that it was first sketched by Kant. As he writes: "Critical philosophy had already turned metaphysics into logic".¹⁷ "Logic" means: a regulated process of determination, whereby the undetermined absolute (for example being, being as such) lets integral singularity take place as the ultimate immanent specification of itself. Logic is here the logic of determination, which leaves no indeterminacy behind, and which, in this sense, abolishes metaphysics.

However, we are here dealing more specifically with the abolition of a critical archi-metaphysics.

Against a certain image of classical metaphysics, Kant was certainly right to hold that we must not begin from a philosophy of special objects, such as the soul, the world, or God, but that instead we must begin with

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 63.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 64.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 51.

the exposition of the categories. Otherwise these objects would remain arbitrarily indeterminate. But Kant pushed what Hegel called "the fear of the object"¹⁸ so far that he deemed it necessary to give the categories an essentially subjective signification. In doing so, he created an even more radical indeterminacy than the one he denounced in classical metaphysics. Categorical determinations, as Hegel writes with his customary equanimity and precision: "remained burdened with the object they had avoided and were left with the residue of a thing-in-itself, an infinite obstacle, as a beyond."¹⁹ It is this operation that creates the radically unknowable. It allows the placing of all signifiers of conformism and of moralising oppression in the beyond of the supra-sensible. I have called this operation, which, as Hegel claims, embodies a "timid and incomplete standpoint",²⁰ *archi-metaphysics*.

In passing we will remark that confronting the power of metaphysics demands the courage of thought, a courage that Plato originally conceived as philosophy's cross, and with which, in Hegel's eyes, Kant was insufficiently endowed. It is this lack in Kant that explains why prudent *archi-metaphysics* ends up increasing the space of indeterminacy on the basis of which dogmatic metaphysics organised the submission of wisdoms.

Dialectical argument, as a courageous argument in the sense outlined above, attempts to put an end at the same time both to the objectivity of the undetermined in classical metaphysics and to the subjective finitude which, in critical *archi-metaphysics*, stands alone before the undetermined absolute. Essentially, dialectical argument poses that a category of thought is only such on condition that it exhausts without remainder that which is thought in thought through this category. Or, to quote Hegel, if the category remains a form of absolute thought, there cannot also be the surplus of "a *thing-in-itself*", something alien and external to thought."²¹ When all is said and done, argument, to quote Hegel again: "demands that the forms of pure thought be considered not with any such limitation and reference but as they are in their own proper character, as logic, as pure reason."²²

In brief, we can say that the thesis of dialectical metaphysics claims:

1. Against classical metaphysics, that every undetermined comes to determination. Or, in other terms, that any initial gap between the finite

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 51.

and the infinite is to be considered as the place from which thought proceeds, or as the distance it crosses, and not as an obstacle to thought. This is what "the real is the rational" amounts to. Which means two things. Firstly, that to the extent that the thinkable is thought, it is thought *absolutely*. On this point Hegel carries on the legacy of Plato, Descartes, Spinoza, or Leibniz. Secondly, that everything is thinkable, admitting if necessary that it takes time, or what the sorely missed Gérard Lebrun called, with Hegel, the patience of the Concept.

2. Against critical *archi-metaphysics*, dialectics claims that categorical determinations are not unilaterally subjective. This is not to say, which would indeed entail a return to classical metaphysics, that they are objective, or connected to particular objects, such as God or the world. It means that, deploying the content of a thought to which they are adequate, categorical determinations are simultaneously subjective and objective, which, in a language that is henceforth permitted, means that these determinations are *conceptual*, that is to say absolute. This is what is meant in this case by "the whole of the rational is real". Which again means two things. Firstly, that there is no thinkable category that is not appropriated to a determinate content. On this point Hegel continues the work of Kant and the thesis of an insoluble link between concepts and experience. Secondly, that the becoming of concepts exhausts the real. Or, as was said with great simplicity by Mao Tsetung, a thinker whom I invoke here with some caution, "we shall come to know everything which we previously did not know".

Not only, and contrary to what Hamlet declares, is there nothing in the world which exceeds our philosophical capacity, but there is nothing in our philosophical capacity which could not come to be in the reality of the world.

It is this coextensivity *in actu* of conceptual invention and of a reality-effect that is called the absolute, and it is this that is the sole stake of philosophy.

Ultimately, it is a question of opposing the absoluteness of the concept to the transcendental subjectivity of the categories. The recent linguistic transformation of the transcendental changes matters little. Rather, we are dealing here with a reinforcement, by means of a synthesis between criticism and positivism, and soon, via cognitivism, with a hermeneutics of intentionality, of all that which for the past two centuries has taken place in the way of *archi-metaphysics*.

The starting-point for an attack on this position, as it should be clear by now, has always been in dialectics, in the singular conjunction,

articulated by Plato in the *Sophist*, between the absoluteness of the concept and the creative freedom of negation.

Nevertheless, can we be content with this starting-point today? A discussion of this issue would take us beyond the bounds of this essay. It would force us in any case to re-examine the axioms of classical metaphysics, to unearth the secret, which Hegel himself underestimates, of the link between finitude, infinity, and existence within a mathematical paradigm. Doubtless we would learn that, as Descartes once glimpsed, it is possible, in light of contemporary mathematics, and namely of the Cantorian treatment of the infinite, to begin purely and simply with the infinite.

Let us say that a contemporary metaphysics would deserve the name of metaphysics to the degree that it both rejected archi-metaphysical critique and upheld, in the Hegelian style, the absoluteness of the concept. On the contrary, it would not deserve this name if, elucidating from the beginning the infinity of being as mathematisable multiplicity, it would lack any reason whatsoever to postulate the undetermined.

Doubtless this would no longer properly speaking be a dialectical metaphysics, if it is indeed the case that it would no longer need to have recourse to the theme of a historical auto-determination of the undetermined. Rather, it would affirm, in a Platonic style (and therefore metaphysically) albeit in a style bereft of any hyperbolic transcendence of the Good (and therefore outside of metaphysics) that for everything which is exposed to the thinkable there is an idea, and that to link this idea to thought it suffices to decide upon the appropriate axioms.

This is why one could propose that such an enterprise should present itself under the paradoxical name of a metaphysics without metaphysics. Its task would be, in line with Mallarmé's request, with which I conclude, to address a "demand to the world that it adjust its dread to rich and numbered postulates" [*"une sommation au monde qu'il égale sa hantise à de riches postulats chiffrés"*].

Translated by Alberto Toscano

Of Life as a Name of Being, or, Deleuze's Vitalist Ontology*

ALAIN BADIOU

Deleuze's thought is always placed transversally with regard to its own distinctions. Like every great philosopher, Deleuze constructs the apparatus of categorial opposition simply in order to determine the point that abstracts itself from it, the line of flight that absorbs within itself the apparent extremities of this apparatus. This is the profound meaning of the methodological maxim that Deleuze ceaselessly reaffirms: take things by the middle; do not first try to find one extremity and then move towards the other. No. The middle must be grasped so that the sense of the trajectory of thought is not fixed by a principle of order or of succession; but so that it is instead fixed by the moving metamorphosis that actualises one of the extremities into its most detached counterpart. This procedure could bear the name of the anti-Cartesian method. There is a non-Cartesian philosophy in Deleuze just as there is a non-Aristotelian theater in Brecht.

Where Descartes negatively and reflexively fixes the first certainty within a chain of reasons, Deleuze affirmatively and impersonally grasps a line of flight by the middle.

Where Descartes leaps to the external guarantee of his references by means of the big Other, Deleuze intuits, at infinite speed, the continuity of metamorphosis, the micro-economic exchange of the small same and its other, or the macro-economic exchange of the small other and the big Same.

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