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Psyche as Inner Contradiction

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Our Divided Nature Within

The psyche is split. Breaching with inner divisions, we may say that the subject – we – are comprised of multiple self-states in opposition or competition with each other vying for expression, if not domination, but willing to settle for a compromise. This is largely due to the plethora of rival unconscious desires or schemata that populate mental life,¹ but it is a universal feature of thought itself. The logic of inner division produces gaps, lacunae – holes in being that expose incongruities, but it also highlights the polarizing nature of the psyche based on an economy of splitting. Hegel shows how this binary logic is at play in the schism of thinking itself, what psychoanalysis refers to as “projective identification,” namely, the negation and projection of our internal contents onto otherness, only then to come to identify with our split-off nature, and re-incorporate it back into our internal constitutions.² This is the antediluvian pattern of the rotary motion of the dialectic as split-off or dissociated self-states and the manifold of object representations that transpire within unconscious process due to the vicissitudes of desire and drive, which further fuel counter-identifications that intensify in quality constellated as tensions of difference. Intensities of splitting underlie the essence of psyche.

The schematic structure of mind through splitting is first initiated as a violent cleavage via negation. For Freud, it is death working silently in the unconscious in circuitous manners.³ For Hegel, it is pure negativity itself.⁴ Contradiction is merely one moment in relation to other psychic events – desire, wish, drive, defense, affect, fantasy – that are split-off and sequestered as independent entities with semi-

autonomous organizational properties, energies, and propensities clamoring for breath and release, the multiplicities of soul. This ensures that even with the most highly cultivated and sophisticated shapes of mind – Spirit (*Geist*), there will always be contraries and psychic conflict that not only elude, but resist, reconciliation.

On the Non-Contradiction of Contradiction

In his lectures on metaphysics, Heidegger tells us “the principle of contradiction has ‘ontological’ significance because it is a basic law of the logos, a ‘logical proposition.’ Accordingly, the suspension of the principle of contradiction in Hegel’s dialectic is not an end to the domination of the logos but only its extreme intensification. Hegel should have given the name ‘logic’ to what is actually metaphysics.”⁵ For Derrida, “Hegelianism represents the fulfillment of metaphysics, its end and accomplishment.”⁶ And for Žižek, Hegel’s logic is “simply a systematic deployment of all the ways available to us of making claims about what there is, and the inherent inconsistencies of these ways.”⁷ Among good company, Todd McGowan has recently offered his own interpretation of the mercurial philosopher’s ontology of contradiction.

Since the contemporary renaissance in Hegelian studies, there is no dearth of commentators and expositors offering their own interpretation of Hegel’s philosophy. A profound and prolific writer, Hegel offers a majestic metaphysical system based on the logic of the dialectic. One has to metabolize Hegel over years to distill the essence of his project. For McGowan, this distillation lies in the pithy crack of contradiction. There is no escape from contradiction, no pristine flight into the Absolute as a foreclosure of contradiction, and no freedom from it, as it is an ontological necessity that gives us a radical freedom, the emancipation of reason.

Hegel’s Logic is not the kind that schoolmasters teach, not the formal predicate or deductive logic of mathematical equations, syllogistic forms, and conditional proofs with established rubrics of inference, quantifiers, and identity rules that obey the laws of non-contradiction. Instead, for Hegel there is no self-identity, no pure unification of opposites, no supersession of thought into a grand synthesis of everything, at least not according to McGowan. Rather, contradiction may never be eliminated nor reasoned away, as it is the ground of Being and thinking itself.

McGowan’s reading and compelling analysis of Hegel’s key texts is original and perspicacious, if not controversial for reducing Hegel’s entire oeuvre into a single category. From a psychological perspective, this is self-evident: no human being thinks, feels, or acts in perfectly non-contradictory ways. From a psychoanalytic point

of view in particular, this is impossible, for the psyche is divided and consists of a cacophony of innumerable competing wishes, conflicts, and compromises as a way to cope with the multiplicity of desire and defense besieged by anxiety and its external social conditions, and hence McGowan seizes on the *principle of the non-contradiction of contradiction* that lies dormant in every philosophy whether one likes it or not. Name me a subject, let alone a life, that is not contradictory! There is none, because we constantly contradict ourselves in desire, emotion, thought, and deed. This is the internal ontic condition of every human being, our relation to a fleeting interior in the process of becoming Other to itself, another that is not self-identical or stable. This flux or instability in being is the defining characteristic of subjectivity. As McGowan puts it, "The point is not just accepting contradiction but seeing how it drives our thinking and our actions. We don't retreat from contradiction but seek it out."⁶ Why would we seek out conflict? Because we are internally divided and allow different self-states to express themselves uninhibitedly even to our own detriment. We want because we lack. When we satisfy a particular desire we are not fully sated, so we want something else beyond satisfaction. The fantasy of satisfaction beyond the present is what drives us, but it never delivers a full meal. Objects are pursued, used, and disposed of, yet we continue to want. The illusion of satisfaction drives us, but unconsciously we know it is neither sustainable nor permanent. This is also the processual thrust behind the Hegelian dialectic: desire has no bounds, no limitations, no endings. It simply gobbles up and regurgitates, in ascendance and decay.

Why contradiction? We seek out diversity and novelty, hence strangeness, which can complicate relations with others rather than merely complementing one another. But McGowan can be accused of missing the Hegelian big picture: he stays focused on contradiction and misses the inherent holistic propulsion of the dialectic. In fact, he is fixating on only one *function* of the dialectic, the negative moment, when the negative is also progressive in the greater process of trying to seek resolution. I say *trying*, because every logical mediation passes into another movement as a constant pining for unification; but there is no guarantee, because there is no preestablished endpoint. Contradiction is one moment of mediation even when contradictions do not resolve, although they can become more complex and robust through dialectical evolution. Although I agree with McGowan that contradiction is central to psyche because we are all at odds with ourselves, I wonder why he generalizes this one element to signify and epitomize the totality of the dialectic when in Hegel's system this is merely a continuation of gradual,

sequential, ongoing sublated movements in the process of *Geist* coming to express and understand itself as a self-articulated complex whole – the coming into being of pure self-consciousness, despite remaining incomplete as an indeterminate openness. As Hegel says, the logical unfolding of Spirit is a “*circle* returning upon itself” through mediation and self-reflection, “*a circle of circles*,” the return of archaic ontology – of origins, “ensouled by the method reflected into itself.”⁹

Indeterminacy is a state of undifferentiated immediacy (or the simple unity of being or presence). It is only when thought ingresses into this state that it becomes differentiated mediacy. Every mediation forms a new immediate and then must be differentiated into further contents, forms, patterns, etc., and this is what constitutes a dialectical progression. The minute something is identified or given an identity, it is already mediated as standing in opposition to what it is not, hence difference, but this opposition is inherent to identity, so you cannot have a sense of self without difference that stands in relation to opposition, even if you identify yourself as a certain thing or belonging to a class of social objects (despite being a subject).

Indeterminacy could be whatever you fail to identify as designating a particular being, thing, or process. This indeterminate spacing symbolizes the unconscious, what we don't know or experience directly. It could be an intermediary state, a meso-domain, an ambiguous classification, a non-determined entity, an open possibility, a paradox, aporia, or anything that lacks a determinate signifier that linguistically or socially determines its identity, significance, and meaning. It simply lacks designation, and by this accord, it lacks. Anything that is not determined or determinate ontologically lacks, hence contradiction becomes the absence of presence that presently lacks being. And because lack is pure negativity, it is not identified or reified. Given that contradiction implies non-determination, it is ultimately about freedom and the heterogeneity of desire.

On the Dialectic

McGowan's thesis is that Hegel's entire philosophy is based on a structure and logic of contradiction. We may rightly anticipate his critics' response: he has overstated his case. What about the generative, progressive, and complex organization of the dialectic in general, not merely the reiterative clash of contradiction? McGowan's Hegel is reduced to impasse rather than outlining a procreant, overdetermined dynamic self-articulation of mind that progresses toward increased complexification, which emerges in higher shapes of consciousness and social collectives through the laws of sublation (*Aufhebung*). Rather than opposition

remaining fixed in a stalemate or mutually repetitive fight, he appears to downplay the teleological sequence of Hegel's system as determinate freedom.

McGowan tells us: "At each step of the dialectic, the image of the possible end to contradiction seems to drive the dialectic forward toward another articulation."¹⁰ This conclusion assumes a predetermined fixed teleology oriented toward its destined path and terminus, like Aristotle's acorn, rather than a fully open non-determined teleology that forges its own destiny and route toward its own freely realized self-completion, but one that is never fully complete, only more stout, and open to unannounced contexts, contingencies, and future possibilities, not causally predetermined outcomes. After all, Spirit only comes to understand itself by looking back at the process of its own becoming.

Rather than an end to all contradiction, mind contemplates and elaborates on contraries as an organic, self-reflective cognizing emersion into its interiority. Following the logic of a developmental monistic ontology, world or universal spirit seeks greater forms of awareness through acquired complexity, and not simply a reiteration of contradictions. It is about mediating oppositions in a more sophisticated evolving pattern of self-instantiation, the reinstatement of archaic ground coming to know itself and its operations as world collectivity, the coextensive and mutually implicative interrelationship of subjectivity, objectivity, and intersubjectivity.

When McGowan makes statements such as contradiction is "the driving force of all movement of being,"¹¹ "the animating principle of the entire system,"¹² and "the driving force of the concept,"¹³ he is displacing the dialectic and giving contradiction *agency* rather than seeing how this agency is the vitality of psyche itself. While it is true that contradiction sustains the subject as a desiring entity, which cannot be eradicated, just as the Absolute is the *fantasy* of pure reason itself – like this could ever be attained, this does not mean there is no progression to sublation. McGowan denies this: the movement of "thought is not . . . a progressive one."¹⁴ Although McGowan provides a compelling argument that thought never eliminates contradiction, but can merely only reconcile it (if it is lucky), he does askew the traditional reading of Hegel's texts where Hegel specifically refers to the sublation of spirit as an historical, progressive unfolding process, or in other words, a negating-subsuming-transcending matrix in its quest for truth, ethical enlightenment, and the unity of knowledge actualized through its objective social achievements.

Spirit or the self is pure activity, unrest, and flux.¹⁵ Mind is in a constant state of psychic turbulence as pure process, a purposeful activity of becoming. The unrest of *Aufhebung* is a progressive unfolding of cancelling, preserving, transmuting, and

elevating opposition within its internal structure. Here opposition is raised to a higher unity. As I have argued elsewhere,¹⁶ sublation has a threefold meaning: (1) to suspend or cancel, (2) to surpass or transcend, and (3) to preserve. In the *Encyclopaedia Logic*, Hegel makes this clear: "On the one hand, we understand it to mean 'clear away' or 'cancel,' and in that sense we say that a law or regulation is canceled (*aufgehoben*). But the word also means 'to preserve.'"¹⁷ This is prepared in Hegel's *Science of Logic*.

"*To sublata*" has a twofold meaning in the language: on the one hand it means to preserve, to maintain, and equally it also means to cause to cease, to put an end to. Even "to preserve" includes a negative element, namely, that something is removed from its immediacy and so from an existence which is open to external influences, in order to preserve it. Thus what is sublated is at the same time preserved; it has only lost its immediacy but is not on that account annihilated.¹⁸

Hegel's designation builds on this "twofold meaning" and introduces a threefold activity by which mental operations at once cancel or annul opposition, preserve or retain it, and surpass or elevate its previous shape to a higher structure. This process of the dialectic underlies all operations of mind and is seen as the thrust behind world history and culture. The dialectic is the *essence* of psychic life, for if it were to be removed, consciousness and unconscious processes would disappear.

Aufhebung is itself a contradiction; the word contradicts itself. Thought as a contradiction is constituted in and through bifurcation, a rigid opposition as antithesis. Thus, as a process, reason cancels the rigid opposition, surpasses the opposition by transcending or moving beyond it in a higher unity, and simultaneously preserving the opposition in the higher unification rather than simply dissolving it. The preservation is a validating function under which opposition is subsumed within a new shape of consciousness. Reason does not merely set up over and against these antitheses; it does not only set up a higher unison but also reasons a union precisely through these opposites. Thus, the dialectic has a negative and a positive pole. McGowan's Hegel appears to omit the exalted character of Spirit, its tendency to elevate itself as it passes through its various robust shapes on its ascent toward the Absolute. Although contradiction is never eliminated, as everything is incorporated, retained, and superseded, Hegel's dialectic also allows for regression and withdrawal back to earlier developmental phases emanating from the feeling

soul, what we may equate with basic desires, affects, sentiments, and internal conflicts, not to mention the neurotic and pathological manifestations of mind. McGowan's reading of Hegel could lead to an infinite repetition of contradictions and conflict that meet with no resolve. The positive significance to the negative is underplayed as he does not concentrate on the whole dialectical process, just on the moment-to-moment vacillation between oppositions as absolute difference mired in parallax rather than on their complementarities that are mutually implicative and ontologically interdependent.

Contradiction as Repetition Compulsion

The locus of contradiction is merely the repetition of difference and opposition within temporally mediated events through the return of the archaic rotary motion of the dialectic. Contradiction is only one moment of dialectical process in the movement of engaging in exceedingly more complicated mediations of oppositions in the coming into being of collective agency. McGowan perseverates on this one element as the essence of Hegel's system when it is not necessary to overplay this uncontested point that contradiction underlies psychic process. He could have stayed attentive to this one facet of internality and social repetition without detracting from his thesis rather than insist it is the fulcrum of Hegel's overall philosophical project.

While it is true that every assertion contains its negation as opposition, through opposition mutation and developmental maturations ensue. Everything is process: nothing remains a static thing or entity. Difference, opposition, and negation ensure a perennial deflection of contradictions. Difference and opposition are ontic constructs that stand in relation to previous moments or movements of the dialectic or to entities in the world. All objects are mediated categories through human subjectivity. They may or may not directly contradict, which is determined by their values, as everything is valuational to consciousness. The ontology of contradiction underscores our divided nature, namely, the upheaval of subjectivity within society, which is in fact based in a philosophy of trauma. The traumatic act of opposition, difference, contradiction – is the ontological presence of negativity saturating every aspect of our being in the world.

The ubiquity of contradictions signals the multiplicity of particularity, the negating universality of an endless sea of instances, that is, of experiences and their heterogeneity, or perhaps, to appropriate Deleuze's term, "heterogenesis,"¹⁹ the diffraction of pure thought spreading out like a rhizome.

Hegel's logic of the dialectic can be viewed in psychoanalytical terms as a repetition compulsion of defense, as a return of the archaic expressed through antipodal contents and relations due to their multifarious instantiations. Oscillating between contradictions is an unconscious operation of the compulsion to repeat, what spurs compromise or symptom formations – voices from the unconscious tendency to self-destruct, the eclipse of reason for the irrationality of infantile wish. Mind seeks higher transcendental plains but it also succumbs to regression, masochistic withdrawal, and devolvement into its more primitive (original) conditions. This is clear from Hegel's corpus.²⁰ He does not offer a Pollyannaish philosophy of completion through the dissolution of opposition. Every assertion contains its negation as opposition and through opposition. Defense is a compromise formation, the attempt to quell the decent of opposition in the subjective mind and in social realities. This necessarily means that contradictions have their own internal dramas within all facets of subjectivity that must tarry with the negativity inherent in all opposing differences that are mutually implicated in all human relations. This is what we may call the tension of opposites.

On the Tension of Opposites

We are ontologically dependent upon the Other, the State, the Law. Emancipation from contradiction is impossible, but it does not mean that unitive processes are not at work. Shifting theoretical contexts, the psychology of C.G. Jung on the question, being, and truth of opposites bears a comparison to Hegel's philosophy and McGowan's thesis in particular.

The term "transcendence" has a convoluted semiotic history, particularly in philosophy and religion. Jung applies the notion in a psychological sense rather than a logical or metaphysical one. His 1916 paper "The Transcendent Function," written after his break with Freud and during his so-called "confrontation" period, laid dormant for decades, buried in his files until students discovered the manuscript and distributed it for publication in 1957. In his 1958 revision and Prefatory Note published in the *Collected Works*, Jung believes it was the foundational precursor to his method of active imagination whose trajectory is oriented toward an integration of the personality as a whole. This is a seminal early work that is closely related to the question and process of individuation and the psychological quest of holism, which focuses on the dialectical tension of opposites, one-sidedness, compensation, and balance within his conceptualization of the self as a developmental pursuit of the numinous within a trajectory toward achieving a unifying, totalizing, or refined

personality, namely, the synthesis of soul. We may immediately question whether this form of unification and holism is possible, but the notion of a psychic “function” that leads to the experiential lived reality of a phenomenal felt transcendence within the subject harbors qualitative psychological-spiritual value. For Jung, the transcendent function was posited as arising from the “union of conscious and unconscious contents,”²¹ and as an attempt to wrestle with the abyss of contradictions that lie within the psyche, specifically the “autonomous” nature of the unconscious that fuels and sustains these contradictions.

This early essay highlights Jung’s insights that “the unconscious behaves in a compensatory or complementary manner towards the conscious”²² and vice-versa. What consciousness experiences is reflexively encountered in the unconscious where competing forces and fantasies are at play, and when denials, defenses, and restrictions are imposed by thought, including practical or moral reason, this intensifies contradictory elements in both domains that seek a natural discharge. If a balance cannot be achieved, then this can lead to “one-sidedness,” which is an over-compensation, but one that Jung says is “an unavoidable and necessary characteristic of the directed process”²³ mediating contradictions. Jung believed that a synthetic method could be applied in thought (whether in self-analysis or clinical treatment), which facilitates the unconscious becoming more conscious of its internal contraries and overdetermined dynamics, and hence brings about a new inner “attitude.” Because Jung saw the psyche as a “self-regulating system,”²⁴ mutual compensatory functions serve to balance the complementarity and collaboration between conscious and unconscious factors. This tendency toward compensation acts as a regulating principle of the two psychic domains directed toward each other. By bringing together opposites and their mutual contradictions, this leads to a *third* function that may be comparable to a rudimentary dialectic: unification leads to a higher movement in thought, understanding, and judgment.

Contradictions in the psyche lead to dialectical tensions that can potentially be brought into dialogue with one another through self-conscious reflection or therapy, which can “modify the conflicting standpoints” through comparison, exchange, and “to distinguish them clearly from one another.”²⁵ The point for Jung is that no one can deny contradictions in the psyche, in the stratified levels and parallel processes of both conscious and unconscious life, nor deny the Other within us the right to exist. Sometimes opposites are simply held in tension with each other, or in suspension or abeyance, hence allowed a co-existence, or they are transformed through confrontation with each other that allows for a creative movement out of their

suspension that leads to a new inner process or situation where opposites are conjoined and integrated, what Jung equates with “wholeness and freedom.”²⁶ Here we may observe a *simpatico* with Hegel.

This early essay foretells Jung's more mature work on the conundrum and resolution of opposition exemplified in his preoccupation with the coincidence of opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*) and their complexity (*complexio oppositorum*), hence giving rise to complementarity, tensions, conflicts, compensation, and their conjunction (*coniunctio oppositorum*), therefore leading toward their union as balancing activities of the psyche teleologically oriented toward achieving a cultivated and integrated personality. Although we may question the possibility of a synthesis of internal opposition that leads to a greater principle of unity through the sublation of soul, Jung always maintained that the individuation process was a singular journey that was oriented toward greater self-awareness and actualization peculiar to each person, an idiosyncratic process of inner liberation and meaning, never a preordained destination. The only thing that is unavoidable, fated, or inescapable is our encounter with contradiction.

Coda

That which it is *not* establishes what it *is*. Being in the mode of being what I am not is the circular return of the rotary institution of contradiction. The conclusion is unequivocal: we are never complete. Desire has no bounds, no restraints, no final realization. Desire is life; it animates existence. Our divided nature within, our contradictory dispositions (in thought, feeling, pulsions, and action) is inevitable due to the teeming instantiations of desire that can never be psychologically unified in a concrete holism, but perhaps only as a conceptual (abstract) scheme Hegelianism affords. This reflects our being in relation to lack that not only can never be quenched, its fulfillment would represent and signal its end: the death of desire would mean the terminus of the dialectic, its demise. If this were the case, Psyche, Spirit, Mind – *We* would no longer exist. The main point is that we have a multitude – if not infinity – of contradictory realities that populate our psychic lives. These copious realities constitute the heterogeneity of psyche. Being able to tolerate ambiguities and mediate, sustain, and incorporate tensions between antipodes in the mind (and in society) is a cardinal goal of individuation, one's own self-defining process of becoming as the courage to be oneself.

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Notes

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- ¹ See Mills (2010) for a thorough discussion.
- ² Mills (2000), "Hegel on Projective Identification: Implications for Klein, Bion, and Beyond".
- ³ Freud (1925), "An Autobiographical Study". *SE*, Vol. 20: 57.
- ⁴ See Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 32; *Science of Logic*. 55, 443, 449, 479.
- ⁵ Heidegger (1959), "The Limitation of Being": 187-188.
- ⁶ Derrida (1968), "The Pit and the Pyramid": 73.
- ⁷ Žižek, (2006), *The Parallax View*. 28.
- ⁸ McGowan (2019): 7.
- ⁹ *Science of Logic*. 842.
- ¹⁰ McGowan (2019): 54.
- ¹¹ Ibid: 14.
- ¹² Ibid: 32.
- ¹³ Ibid: 40.

¹⁴ Ibid: 17.

¹⁵ *Phenomenology*, § 22.

¹⁶ See Mills (2002):11-13, 194-196.

¹⁷ *EL* § 96, *Zusatz*.

¹⁸ *SL*: 107.

¹⁹ Deleuze (2007):365.

²⁰ See Mills (2002) for a detailed review of Hegel's philosophical psychology.

²¹ Jung, *The Transcendent Function*. *CW*, Vol. 8:69

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid: 71.

²⁴ Ibid: 79.

²⁵ Ibid: 89.

²⁶ Ibid: 90.