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Holocaust Memory and Hegel

The finite has always to be maintained and made into an absolute.

—Hegel

Hegel and His Critics

To invoke the name Hegel in the context of the Holocaust—and what it means to remember it—will surely be for some to strike a discordant note. As cardinal spokesman for German Idealism and its version of an absolute subjectivity, Hegel is usually more frequently aligned with clearing a conceptual space amenable to the commission of an event like the Holocaust than with ensuring against any future recurrence of it. Given this affiliation, to make the case for a return to Hegel in the service of an ethics of historical memory—a case this book aims to make—is to invite from a variety of quarters a series of immediate objections. Few may be as explicit as Karl Popper—for whom Hegel is the decisive link in the emergence of modern totalitarianism¹—but the lion’s share of contemporary critical-theoretical positions (especially those informed by poststructuralism) still depend fundamentally on a rejection of Hegel on political and ethical grounds. What virtually all of these rejections have in common is an overabiding suspicion of the putatively “universal” or “absolute” dimension of Spirit that Hegel advocates so unequivocally. Indeed for many, Hegel’s systematic dialectic of History—in which every immediacy, every experience, every particular is already and automatically swallowed up by the Whole—points up the violent flip side of an Enlightenment master-narrative concerning the universality of Reason at its worst. In its deployment of such a notion of universality, Hegel’s master-narrative of Spirit would seem to entrap and subsume so many different *material* or *historically specific* markers of identity (bodily, ethnic, gender, socioeconomic status, etc.)—markers which for Hegel gain their apparently singular bearing solely

by means of what is universal and absolute (i.e., speculative logic and the activity of thinking). The critique to be waged here against Hegel's idealism would seem to be self-evident: in its drive for sameness, Hegel's Spirit lets nothing go free. Even Kojève (though for him, this is not a reproach) notes this feature of Hegel's thought, pointing out that "one cannot bring up any discourse in opposition to [Hegel's] own discourse, which would not be reproduced in a paragraph of the System as a constituent element (*Moment*) of the whole."² In Hegel's system, nothing is permitted to resist the grip of the sovereign concept of reason and its meaning-making abilities. In this regard, one need only recall Hegel's paean to the sacrificial logic of the "cunning of reason" in his introduction to the *Philosophy of History*, in which Hegel claims quite explicitly that "the particular is for the most part of too trifling value as compared with the general." There, Hegel unreservedly asserts that when it comes to *phenomenal being*, "part is of no value, part is positive and real."³

It is perhaps safe to say that the Hegel who champions the cunning of reason in *The Philosophy of History*, the Hegel who accompanies this championing with a more or less cavalier avowal of just what reason's cunning entails for that which has been deemed valueless ("individuals are sacrificed and abandoned"), is the Western metaphysician par excellence *against* whom so much contemporary discourse concerning ethics defines itself. Indeed, from the liberalism of Rawls and Rorty to the poststructuralism of Deleuze and Derrida, this is precisely the Hegel we are told we must avoid. Within Holocaust and Jewish cultural studies especially, this devaluation of the particular sounds an especially keen series of alarming ethical questions. Does not Hegel's idealism simply take to its very extreme a longing for the univocal and the universal initiated by the Greeks and made the foundation of anti-Judaism (via the discourse of Paul) in Christian Europe?⁴ Does not Judaism, in Hegel's teleological understanding of religion, represent merely an "adolescent" stage in the progressive life of Spirit coming-to-itself—a stage soon eclipsed by and incorporated into a universally and absolutely true Christianity?⁵ Was not the anti-Semitism and dictatorial power that fueled the Holocaust itself a product, at least in part, of the sort of universalist or absolutist thinking whose clearest philosophical underpinning rests with Hegel? And must we not, in our attempt to bear witness to what happened, avoid reproducing a certain Hegelian gesture whereby even this ultimate of catastrophes is "overcome" or redeemed—that is to say, made to serve the advance of a meaningful, universal Idea?⁶

In his essays on Judaism, Emmanuel Levinas perhaps sounds this theme most forcefully, indicting Hegel's notion of Spirit for presiding over a philosophic operation by which (and this phrase cannot help but give us pause) Jews are made to vanish. In Levinas's reading of Hegel,

The particularity of a people is identical to its finitude. It is Hegelian logic that presides over this announcement of disappearance. The particularity of a thing has significance in fact only in relation to a whole; and from that point on, in the name of Hegelian logic, the necessary disappearance of a people is announced, for everything that is finished must finish.⁷

From the standpoint of Hegelian logic, Levinas notes, any claim by Jews to some independence from history, some existence apart from the universal (read: “Christian”) History that Hegel advocates, is simply illusory. The Jewish claim to be an “eternal people,” for example, cannot survive what Levinas sees as a less than just litmus-test for legitimation—

The exaltation of the judgement of history, as the ultimate jurisdiction of every being, and the affirmation that history is the measure of all things. The judgement passed by a conscience on events that succeed, that have an efficacy, an objective visibility, would, you know, according to the exaltation of history, be merely a subjective illusion that vanishes like smoke in the face of the judgement of history. For this conception, there is no eternal people liable to live free in the face of history. Every people is part of history, bears within it its determined essence, and contributes in its way to the universal work that incorporates and surpasses it—into which, consequently, it is finally absorbed and disappears. What would be eternal is the universal history itself which inherits the heritage of dead peoples. (200)

That such “dead peoples” whose own judgments are made to vanish like smoke (again, phrases that warrant pause) might insist on a kind of vitality is, according to Levinas, from the standpoint of Hegelian logic chalked up to a mere “subjective belief [whose] purely subjective significance is denounced at the very moment at which the real curve of events is drawn” (200). Under the pressure of Hegel’s “synoptic gaze,” history is turned into teleology, its “progress” thereby granted an almost sacred warrant. Levinas’s concern rests with the ways this warrant gets sustained. That is to say, the prestige Hegel accords history depends fundamentally on the fact that no one locate him- or herself in opposition to its meaning and forward direction. For this prestige to be thus maintained, Judaism (or any other particular ethnic or cultural tradition for that matter) faces two choices—integration into Christianity or a judgment of insignificance:

Philosophy, as it is summed up and crowned by Hegel, would precisely end up by integrating the individual and collective wills to the

extent that they are real—that is to say, effective—into a reasonably structured totality, in which these living totalities are represented by their works, but in which these works derive their true—that is to say visible—significance not from the subjective intentions of their authors but from the totality, the only one to have a real meaning [*sens*] and to be able to confer it. The intentions of the authors and, consequently, everything that—to return to Judaism—the Jews think themselves, the whole of our *Aggadab* and *Halakbab*, would be just an old wives' tale, a theme for a sociology or psychoanalysis of Judaism. Judaism would not be true in what it wished, but in the place where the universal history would have left it. (200)

As Levinas suggests here, grand narratives of history are ultimately inimical to the particular exercise and manifestation of unique beliefs and practices. In short, the very desires of Judaism—the will and wishes of Jews themselves—are seriously threatened by universalizing or totalizing narratives of whatever stripe (e.g., Hegelian, sociological, psychoanalytic) that claim to possess the *real* meaning of these desires. Levinas may not go as far as *Anti-Oedipus* in hailing the schizophrenic dimension of this desire, but his basic argument is similar: these grand narratives, functioning as reasonably structured totalities, might claim to operate in an ostensibly neutral fashion, but in their claim to comprehensiveness, their interests are far from merely objective or neutral. This is the case because their versions of history do not allow for alternate narratives, laws, and desires to have a kind of autonomous significance in the face of the grand narrative's definitive social determinations in the act of its coming-to-fruitation—that is, the story of Hegel's self-realizing Absolute, Marx's proletarian class, or Freud's Oedipal narrative. According to Levinas then, the Jew today is not one who merely believes in Moses and the prophets; on the contrary, to be a Jew is to insist on and be granted a kind of *prior* philosophical ground that permits and enables that belief. To quote Levinas again,

To wish to be a Jew today is therefore, before believing in Moses and the prophets, to have the right to think that the significance of a work is truer in terms of the will that wished it into being than the totality in which it is inserted; and, even more brutally, that will in one's personal and subjective life is not a dream whose death will allow us to draw an inventory of the work and the truth, but that the living willing of will is indispensable to the truth and understanding of the work. (200)

In Levinas's key qualifier ("even more brutally"), it is clear that the terrain of philosophy is one with ramifications of violence for real, live Jews—the prevention of which would seem to be predicated on a clear rejection of Hegel.

Levinas's essays on Judaism render even more urgent his political concern voiced initially in *Totality and Infinity* having to do with the sacrifice of interiority and desire on the altar of history so as to comprehend being. In his elaboration of this political concern, Levinas is—as my cursory reference to *Anti-Oedipus* begins to make clear—part of the wider dismissal of Hegel and Hegelian dialectics in poststructuralist French thought.⁸ Decisive in the history of philosophy, it is this comprehension of being that deprives the past and the present of its radical alterity, of that which (to take the title of another of Levinas's books) is "otherwise than being." This sacrifice of interiority betrays the categorical ethical imperative that underwrites Levinas's defense of transcendence and metaphysics. To sacrifice interiority is already to sacrifice the plane on which the subject is most radically called into question: it is to synthesize the irreducible orders of totality and infinity, by taking both to belong to the same sociosymbolic, minimally consistent, life-world. The pitfalls of this synthesis ultimately apply to Hegel, who by "including the real" in a universal narrative of history—that surplus exterior to totality and nonencompassable within it—has determined the real in its "historical objectivity" without regard for what Levinas refers to as "interior intentions." These intentions institute an order of time that cannot be completely synchronized with historical time, and this, for Levinas, is their particular virtue (and the virtue of particularity more generally). Interior intentions determine the real from a "secrecy that interrupts the continuity of historical time"—a secrecy that makes possible the pluralism of society.⁹

The problem with treating Judaism as merely historical, then, is that it overlooks the extent to which Jewish (or any other religious) subjects occupy a position before an infinite other—a part of whom remains incapable of being integrated into a meaningful totality. Though we are, as particular subjects, not "exterior to history," Levinas claims nonetheless that we do "find in the Other a point that is absolute with regard to history—not by amalgamating with the Other, but in speaking with him. History is worked over by the ruptures of history, in which a judgment is born on it. When a man truly approaches the Other he is uprooted from history."¹⁰ For Levinas, *this*—and not a quantity of knowledge to be had at the putative "end of history"—is what is Absolute: an experience of the Other in a *conversation* that does not commit historiography's "totalizing" crime of reducing the Other to the same. This is how Levinas

thinks his ethics would ward off future genocides: in the recognition that human discourse or conversation is *already* the result of the subject's receipt of a prior summons to it by that which is absolutely Other, Levinas situates intersubjective relations on the ground of nonknowledge, on the face to face encounter that cannot be historicized.¹¹ Constituting an irremediable breach of totality, this summons is for Levinas the inaugural event of ethics, since it dispossesses me of a world hitherto mine and gets me paradoxically to offer the world to the Other. This version of the advent of subjectivity informs Levinas's dictum that "Transcendence is not a vision of the Other but a primordial donation."¹² What triggers this advent is a primordial Signifier carrying out its expressive function, its breathless performance of an act of "signification without context" that maintains the alterity of the Signifier despite its own subsequent thematization. In discourse, we experience something absolutely foreign, something Infinite that is not integrated for having been spoken. According to Levinas, language may institute a relation between a human being and the Infinite—between the metaphysician and the metaphysical—but both parties "*absolve* themselves from the relation, remain absolute within the relation."¹³ This is what is absolute about language for Levinas—the extent to which we are, in conversation, indebted to a nonhistorical instance of the Other's saying that exceeds what is merely said. When Levinas says that to be Jew today is to be granted a ground prior to belief in Moses and the prophets, this is what he means: that Judaism *begins* with a nonhistorical encounter with the Other/God in and after which both parties maintain an *absolute* particularity.

I make this slight digression toward Levinas's own ethics not for the purpose of dismissing his alternate account of what is Absolute, but rather to telegraph briefly how much Levinas's critique of ontology and his insistence on a diachrony that survives synchronization in fact relies on Hegelian insights. Indeed, as I shall show shortly, Hegel, too, sees the ultimate alterity of the Other—the absolute particularity of sense particulars—as likewise "absolved" from the relation that our symbolization of it institutes. Language may appropriate the Other or object, but for Hegel, too, this appropriation is not entirely successful. The absoluteness of the subject instituting the relation lies for Hegel, however, in the direction of *universality* and *infinitude* as well, since the symbolic order of meaningful language is precisely that which has already eclipsed the finite, particular raw matter that words are. Against the Levinasian insistence on an exalted infinitude of the Other, the Hegelian point to make here is that this very designation is only intelligible if conceived as the result of a finite subject's self-negation. This is what Hegel means when he says that finite beings raised into the infinite are in no sense acted on by an alien force: "the

finite is not sublated by the infinite as by a power existing outside it; on the contrary, its infinity consists in sublating its own self.”¹⁴ For Hegel, then, language is, as it is for Levinas, that which institutes a common world, while at the same time preserving something absolutely uncommon, but this commonality—contra Levinas—means that we have already reached a domain of universality. In addition, like Levinas, Hegel sees our encounter with the Other’s alterity as incommensurable with the order of ordinary historical experience, as involving an encounter with trauma in which we (in Levinas’s words) are uprooted from history. But this encounter may be more terrifying than the pure experience or pure knowledge of the transcendent which Levinas deems a “traumatism of astonishment.”¹⁵ My own reading of the Hegelian subject below will aim to establish that Hegel does not eliminate metaphysics in the act of realizing it terrestrially, that the totalization of history does not bring to a halt all relationship with alterity and infinity. Whereas Levinas (and the group of French postwar thinkers of whom he is a part) believes that a totalization of history must be avoided in order to bring about a more genuine relationship with alterity, my own reading uncovers the extent to which Hegel reveals the achievement of very same relationship as the *product* of a totalizing gesture—and achieved only by way of such a totalizing gesture. For Hegel, such a gesture can and ought to be repeated. The Hegelian endorsement of totalization, on this view, does not announce just the “end” of history—as if Hegel was the first and only individual in human history ever to have fathomed it. On the contrary, the “end” that Hegel claims to have grasped ends up executing a kind of replay of history’s beginning¹⁶—and all of history’s epistemic “crises” in which bodies of knowledge and universes of meaning face traumatic material that cannot be accounted for.

Even devotees of Hegel who concern themselves directly with ethics and the Holocaust and the formations of cultural identity, even those who clearly see themselves as working in the tradition of Hegel, likewise cannot escape the idea that there is something about the Hegelian claim to a universalist or comprehensive speculative position that associates his metaphysics with atrocity.¹⁷ The case of Adorno is here no doubt paradigmatic, since despite his clear praise of Hegel,¹⁸ there is for Adorno nonetheless something in the philosophy of the latter that, in the last instance, is complicit with the mentality of fascism and anti-Semitism. In Adorno’s work, this idea receives any number of articulations—from the explicit linking of totality and anti-Semitism in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; to the claim in *Minima Moralia* that “the whole is the false,” which rewrites Hegel’s famous equation in the *Phenomenology* that “the whole is the true”; to the decidedly counter-Hegelian assertion in *Negative Dialectics* that

“No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one leading from the slingshot to the megaton bomb. It ends in the total menace which organized mankind poses to organized men, in the epitome of discontinuity. It is the horror that verifies Hegel and stands him on his head.”¹⁹ To grasp the whole of history is, for Adorno, a worthy task for theoretical understanding, but that whole would have to be defined not as the positivistic realization of a redemptive reconciliation between some universal Idea and all phenomenal occurrences but rather as “permanent catastrophe” or “historic suffering.” As Adorno sees it, “There is hardly another way to interpret history philosophically without enchanting it into an idea” (320). To counter Hegel’s “enchanting” of history under the spell of a self-realizing idea or identity, Adorno thus puts forth the notion of a “negative dialectics”: against the Hegelian claim to have achieved some final identity between universal and particular, Adorno grounds a kind of ethical disposition on “the consistent sense of nonidentity,” on a “negative dialectics” that is always faithful to the “remainder” that eludes our ways of knowing. Adorno defines dialectic as precisely the recognition that all most assuredly cannot be reduced to Spirit, that philosophy cannot presume to bring all phenomena into the orbit of meaningful, conceptual knowledge. Hegel, for Adorno, “cut short” dialectics in his positing of some final position of reconciliation (an “all-subjugating identity principle”), and this is likened specifically to the attitude of the Nazis in Adorno’s remarkable claim that “if thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims” (365).

If Levinas’s and Adorno’s critiques are at all representative, as I think they are, of the disfavor under which Hegelian thought labors today, the fundamental source of this disfavor lies clearly, as we can see, with the implicit violence toward difference believed to lie at the core of Hegel’s idealism and the “transcendental subject” who takes it up. The now-standard critique of this subject, from the quarters of both liberalism and deconstruction, has as its target precisely this subject’s radical exercise of power in order to make idea and actuality correspond—that is, a cognitive gesture said to erase the divide between spirit and matter, between soul and body, and thereby realize a (fictive) unity or final identity between the two. In one sense, this identity-relation has always been problematic for the insult and injury it poses to one of the two terms. If in Hegel’s day, advocacy of such an identity constituted an ethical breach against the very qualities of Spirit, since it was to beg the charge of having executed a “pantheistic” degradation of Spirit to claim that Spirit *is* the infinite multiplicity of individual things, today of course, the ethical breach

lies in the other direction. To be sure, few critiques of Hegel take issue with the pantheistic diminishment he imparts to Spirit by asserting its identity with each and every particular thing, but many, however, recoil from the unfreedom to which Hegel condemns each and every particular thing by locking them in an identity-relation with Spirit. If one of the commonly understood lessons of the Holocaust concerns precisely the resolute need for a tolerance for, and indeed fostering of, multiplicity and the free expression of different identities, the identity-relation Hegel asserts between the multiplicity of things and Spirit would seem to fail to anticipate or be adequate to this lesson. One need only, as Karl Popper does, read Spirit as State or Race or Nation, and Hegel appears to be quite obviously an enemy of democracy and the “open society.”

One of the difficulties here has to do with Hegel’s insistence that particular, finite entities only gain minimal integrity by way of their link to Spirit, to what can give them meaning. In this basic idealist gesture of dialectical negation, Hegel denies an autonomy to the very *existence* of particular things with respect to the generation of their meaning—an autonomy that he nonetheless grants to Spirit. Because the autonomy given to Spirit then appears to have something transcendent about it, Hegel here runs squarely up against the historicist or anti-imperialist methodological imperative that today enjoys virtual hegemony when it comes to conceptualizing an ethics of bearing witness to history and an understanding of the formation of cultural identities. Hegel runs afoul of such an imperative in this way: in his insistence on an ultimate identity between particular entities and universal Spirit, Hegel’s phenomenology “historicizes” the particular—insisting, indeed, that every particular phenomenon is the product of *mediation* by Spirit—but exempts Spirit itself from the same operation. In this way, Hegel refuses to see Spirit *itself* as something particular, as something that is *not* universal or transcendent but rather historical, finite, conditioned, “ethnocentric.”

Hegel, Psychoanalysis, and Their Kantian Antecedents

Here, we might recognize a connection (evoked already by Levinas, if only negatively) between Hegel’s thought and psychoanalysis—a connection the vitality of which I believe is critical in helping us to develop a responsible ethics of Holocaust memory. Indeed, I think the claim can be made that psychoanalysis clarifies the ethical stakes of Hegelian epistemology and the need to think and act a way out of history. This bears directly on the urgent question—taken up most notably by Dominick LaCapra—in Holocaust studies concerning a working through of the

past. I shall develop in more detail the way a psychoanalytically charged Hegel can help us to address this question, but suffice it to point out here the fundamental similarity between the exemption, as it were, that Hegel gives to Spirit qua unhistoricizable (i.e., not conditioned by some external, mediating force) and the exemption given by psychoanalysis to the creation and existence of the unconscious as the repository of traumatic material that we can never fully or completely “remember.” Noteworthy in this context is the fact that in the case both of Spirit and the unconscious, we are in the presence of a universal frame or horizon whose universality is insisted on—that is, whose particular manifestations can be historicized/analyzed—but which is itself claimed to have a nonhistorical status. Indeed, according to Hegel, the very order of history ensues only with Spirit’s own self-division—an act of primordial negation in which, as Hegel would put it, Spirit “thinks itself” and thus navigates the path from being (*Sein*) to existence (*Da-sein*). And psychoanalysis, too, suggests that the very condition of historicity depends likewise on an act of primordial repression, a “shock without affect,” in which the unconscious becomes “for itself” at the same time that it becomes for the ego and thus available for the contents of “normal” repression. Here we can see why so much of the historicist suspicion evinced toward Hegel is likewise evinced toward psychoanalysis: the Oedipal narrative, the Law of the Father, and the notion of unconscious desire would appear to function in much the same way as Hegel’s Suprasensible Idea—as a kind of absolute and un-touchable anchoring point or Law from which to make meaning out of phenomena.²⁰ For critics of both German Idealism and psychoanalysis, this universal anchoring point seems nothing but a weapon of epistemic (and sometimes actual) discipline and punishment, since in the tradition of logocentrism, it appears to harness the freedom and spontaneity of the particular under the heavy yoke of the universal.²¹ According to this view, both Hegel and psychoanalysis are guilty of positing that something definitely *does* exist that *is* the ultimate, universal ground of meaning (e.g., Reason, the Paternal Law)—something that cannot be regarded as one more particular phenomenon to be grouped among a host of other particular phenomena.

For those who would memorialize the Holocaust, the questions to pose at this point are these: What precisely is to be understood by the apparently self-evident contradiction of a universal “something” that is yet nonhistorical? How close are we here to participating in the fascist fantasy of a Universal Reich—or of a “pure” Aryan Identity purged of its perceived (historical) contaminants? Can this constitute a working through of the past? The answer to these questions necessitates a bit of a detour back to the figure who first opened up the path down which Hegel and

psychoanalysis travel. I am referring here to Kant and the space he clears for freedom in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, of course, Kant had ruled out Reason's speculative knowledge of its ultimate, transcendent basis, claiming that there is no way to validate or document the truth of pure Reason's assertions by referring to something that is *already* the product of Reason's cognition. Seeming to promise us nothing less than an expansion of our knowledge beyond all bounds of experience, "pure" reason for Kant ends up containing "nothing but regulative principles." This is what constitutes the decisive "negative benefit" of critique: rather than discovering truth, it prevents errors.²² By being referred back to the a priori conditions for its cognition, Reason finds itself checked by a discipline that cures it of its extravagance and self-conceit, and that diminishes the tendency toward aggressive attempts to secure its assertions and claims.²³ The entirety of Kant's efforts rests on the phenomenological fact that Reason's claim to have authoritative knowledge of transcendental ideas by way of historical experience always leaves unanswered a prior question concerning the conditions (e.g., space and time) that make experience and knowledge possible. Logically speaking, these conditions cannot themselves be historical without simply eliciting the same question pertaining to the conditions of *their* possibility. It is this logical necessity that ends up disciplining Reason in its tendency toward dogmatism. Refusing the conflation of transcendental idealism and transcendental realism, Kant protects the original import of the word *idea* by maintaining that an idea is a notion that surpasses the possibility of intelligible experience. Kant's ultimate result in the first *Critique* is thus essentially one that informs the prevailing attitude toward metaphysics and epistemology that sees no way to bring about a genuine encounter with something transcendent (and in the case of pragmatism, no reason even to try): as knowing subjects, we are confined to the theatre of history and finitude; we cannot know the transcendent realm, since ours is only a world of appearances; even our very selfhood is but the way we appear to ourselves.

As it turns out, however, this is not Kant's last word on matters historical. Indeed, as the second *Critique* makes abundantly clear, there is one transcendent speculative idea that we can know a priori and this is freedom. Mindful of his claims regarding direct cognition of Reason's ultimate ground in the first *Critique*, Kant says that we know this a priori without having any insight into it. That is to say, freedom does not extend cognition to the supersensible realm; on the contrary, it manifests itself practically in our capacity to act in conformity with a Law without concern for our interest and inclination—in short, to act morally. As Kant sees it, freedom is not beyond causality: it is the inexplicable locus of

causality that is self-caused—in Kant’s words, “the power to begin a state *on one’s own*.”²⁴ Only this transcendental idea allows us to take literally the notion of working *through* the past: to act freely, which is to say ethically, we do not take our cues from nature or from intelligible history or from objects or ideas we imagine as the bearers of plenary meaning. Indeed, for Kant, the traumatic object/idea outside the world of appearances has nothing natural or intelligible or meaningful about it: it is not even an object of knowledge. But it can have a determinative effect on the world of appearances. Here, then, is the ethical dimension to our encounter with transcendent, which is to say traumatic, material: it allows us to think and act in such a way that arrests the violent and vicious circle of history. Only the transcendental idea of freedom allows us to think a history that is radically incomplete, a history that is not synonymous with nature—in short, a history already structurally conditioned by trauma. If we as historical agents are not mechanical entities, if every cause is not to be regarded as beholden to natural laws, if it makes any sense at all to speak of human responsibility, then we must, following Kant, exempt something from history. Each of us, insofar as we are free, are not *only* historical agents caught in the nets of ordinary space and time. On the contrary, we are the bearers of a causality that is not subject to another cause. Kant implies that this is an aspect of the subject radically cut off from ordinary consciousness—the real (or noumenal) part of ourselves capable of beginning “its effects in the world of sense *on its own* without the action’s beginning *in the subject* itself.”²⁵ In his working out of the nature of a genuine moral act, Kant can be credited, by extension, with having theorized a way to *free* the act of memorialization—a way of conceiving a memorial act that avoids its being put to ideological or otherwise affirmative uses. Kant thus addresses the dilemma that I referred to in my introduction involving the effects of postmodernism on Holocaust memory. This problem is not that far from Kant’s: how to conceive ethics apart from pathological motives. Kant’s response is to show that the most ethical instance of bearing witness is the freest.²⁶ And the freest instance is the one that does not neatly resign itself to a historicizing gesture. On the contrary, the freest act would be the one that takes up Reason’s own traumatic, nonhistorical ground.

Though Kant may have wavered at times on the feasibility of a free act carried out terrestrially by human agents, Hegel and psychoanalysis do not. Both insist that we try to take up for the purpose of encountering a universal, metaphysical, nonhistorical anchoring point of subjectivity. What we achieve by doing so is not the pure object of the fascist fantasy, but rather the traumatic hole in history—a hole occupied not by a missing source of plenitude but by material incapable of being historicized.

The Lacanian name for this material is the traumatic kernel of the real—that *irreducible presence* voiced by someone or something that both sets in motion and forever eludes all of our attempts to comprehend or symbolize it. According to Lacan, the aim of analysis—of attempting to get the unconscious to speak—is to isolate for the purpose of recognizing that there is something of substance internal to every identity that cannot be made to mean, and that we are forever cut off from this substance even as it is lodged within us. The position of the subject, then, involves attempting to bear witness by a kind of proxy—in the stead of that which might bear witness directly on its own if it only had a language to do so. As Lacan puts it in *Seminar XI*, the aim of analytic interpretation “when it is a question of the unconscious of the subject” is to “bring out” those irreducible signifiers to which we as subjects are subjected.²⁷ Lacan is most deeply Hegelian on precisely this score, since the aim of analysis is to bring about the recognition that one *is* this thing of substance, even as one cannot master it. Both Spirit and the unconscious betoken the existence of this substantial, traumatic kernel, because their cause *refuses ordinary historicization*, because their cause is *internal to* that which comes into existence by way of it. One implication of this insight is simply that there is no way to speak meaningfully or empirically about a chain of causes that creates Spirit or the Unconscious other than to posit the definitional, if not tautological, necessity, of their own self-formation. Hegel never tires of claiming that Spirit *is* its own finitizing of itself, its own becoming an object for itself, and that the Understanding only distorts things when it believes it can separate Spirit from its ground, for the purposes of representing the latter for consciousness.²⁸ And Freud, replacing an early hypothesis concerning seduction with a metapsychological one, likewise provides a picture of the formation of the unconscious rooted in the notion of death drive and in a quantity of excessive excitation that remains unrepresentable.

In both cases, then, the universality of Spirit and the Unconscious entails a substantial content that cannot present itself in sensible form that enables Spirit and the Unconscious to appear *to themselves*. Thus, Spirit and the unconscious qua universal frames of reference both exist as the lifeblood of what we can know but can never be fully or meaningfully known themselves. That the presence signified by this traumatic kernel of the real is not in itself meaningful does not mean that we can make it can mean anything we want it to, nor does it mean that we cannot *encounter* it. Indeed, that we *can* encounter it is precisely what links Hegelian phenomenology and psychoanalysis—the idea that an absolute or universal position places one not in a comfortable position whereby all is reduced to univocal meaning, but rather in a position to *bear witness to trauma*, to

that unsymbolizable nugget of nonmeaning to which we are subjected. What must become clear here is the extent to which psychoanalysis elucidates the trajectory toward trauma in Hegelian phenomenology. When Hegel—inheriting from Kant the notion of an act that breaks from the ordinary temporal sequence of intelligible causes—claims that we have *already* performed such an act and must in the name of ethics do so again, he is in fact urging us toward a traumatic encounter. If memorializing the Holocaust is to work in the service of ensuring that it is never again repeated, if we are to take up Adorno’s categorical imperative to “arrange thought and action so that Auschwitz never repeats itself,” then we will have to find a way to bear witness to its trauma in its ultimate form and place. My claim here is simply that the *path* of the Hegelian dialectic—substance, negation, negation of the negation—corresponds to moments within a psychoanalytic mode of inquiry aimed at producing an encounter with trauma. Indeed, an understanding of this path is crucial to the locating of those points at which a given theoretical or artistic response to the Holocaust gets “stuck” on it. As I hope to show below, the diagnostic categories of psychoanalysis (e.g., obsession, hysteria, paranoia) might best be regarded as moments at which a given theoretical or aesthetic response to the Holocaust fails to go all the way through the Hegelian dialectic and thus works to redeem or disavow the existence of trauma. Understood in this way, then, the return of Spirit to itself that Hegel likens to its recognition of its own absolute or universal nature is akin to an encounter with the unconscious—an ultimate encounter with Reason’s freedom, with the place of traumatic knowledge that cannot itself be known. This is what various aesthetic representations of the Holocaust confront and cope with by way of symptoms ripe for psychoanalytic investigation.

When Hegel, however, is understood to deliver up the wholeness and closure that only the cozy confines of an abstract Idea can deliver, this is where the problems begin. For rather than bringing about the recognition that we are irreducibly split off *from within* from that which would make us whole, Hegel—in this reading—only ties up what is contingent and irrational into the neat bow of rationality and necessity.²⁹ Ignoring a kind of antifascist ethical imperative—to recognize that any universal interest is only and always a particular one—Hegel prepares the ground, inadvertently or not, for an exercise of power predicated on the pursuit of an absolute identity between Spirit and what stands over against it. For Levinas, this is tantamount to announcing the disappearance of a people, and for Adorno, this amounts to the ideological sanction of violence par excellence. For these reasons, Hegel’s insistence on the universal or absolute nature of Spirit is, more often than not, seen to be inseparable

from the workings of totalitarianism and from the fundamental fantasy of fascism. It is this fantasy that virtually every single theoretical articulation or artistic rendering having to do with the Holocaust and an ethics of bearing witness to it seeks to contest—that subjects and societies *are* organic, singular and yet universal totalities which *are* implicitly and absolutely whole, that the Holocaust is somehow compatible with the foreordained telos of Reason's development toward perfection. With the Holocaust and fascism precisely as a reference point, ways for how to combat this fantasy have usually come from one of two quarters—liberalism or deconstruction. I shall discuss in more detail below—apropos *Schindler's List* and *The White Hotel*—the manner in which assumptions emanating from these quarters underwrite aesthetic approaches to Holocaust, but my turn now is to these assumptions themselves, and their ways of coping with the fundamental fantasy of fascism. Here, my aim is to understand the liberal-democratic and deconstructionist positions vis-à-vis memorialization by way of the questions they would pose to Hegel and his notion of an Absolute or Universal Spirit. What I hope to enact here is a kind of dialectical progression toward the encounter with trauma in its most genuine form—an encounter that necessitates our *going through* the liberal and deconstructionist positions for the purpose of arriving at a moment best suited to the undoing of the fascist fantasy of mastery. This final moment, of course, is the *absolute* or *Hegelian* one. My claim regarding this final moment is simply this: that Hegel allows us to structure a relation to the fact that all of our forms of knowing and exercising power are rooted in the fact that we are creatures of trauma, subject to that which we cannot master *in the very act of mastery*. Rather than aiming to repair the trauma or to postpone infinitely the encounter with it, Hegel brings us to the recognition that we are in fact encountering it all the time.

Liberalism as an Antidote to Fascism

The liberal-democratic critique of Hegel and the fascist fantasy of legitimacy might be boiled down to the following questions: How can Hegel's dialectic of Spirit avoid enacting a self-sanctioned, tyrannical monism antithetical to certain values that must be *constructed* via persuasion and not force—for example, moral recognition, justice, consensus, and solidarity? Can Spirit itself ever be subject to the norms of reasonable debate? Can Spirit safeguard the basic liberties seen to be essential to a well-ordered society? If totalitarianism is predicated on the belief that human subjects, human society, or both *are* implicitly and absolutely whole,

the liberal response is usually to insist that wholeness is not something given in any organic or exclusive or foundationalist way. Indeed, the liberal-democratic suspicion of a nonhuman idea of the whole usually centers on the sense that when conceived of as *immanent* in society, its realization can only be achieved by means of violent force. In his *Conscience and Memory: Meditations in a Museum of the Holocaust*, for example, Harold Kaplan suggests an inevitable ethical trespass constituted by the attempt to realize in actuality some organic *idea* of wholeness. According to Kaplan, “Those lumbering abstractions of the German philosophic tradition—Fichtean, Hegelian, Marxist, then Fascist—sought immanence and became deadly, perhaps because immanence could be found only in violent form. History mounted a stage and demanded sacrifice.”³⁰ Here, the liberal democratic heritage would seem to claim that subjects and societies are *not* whole, but that liberal values—for example, rule of law, universal rights of property and contract, the methods of the social sciences, democratic reform, community-based norms for reasonable communication and behavior, and so on—can *fill in* what is missing. If the fascist fantasy disavows the existence of antagonism from its very conception of society—as Juliet Flower MacCannell has succinctly put it, fascism copes with its own fantasy by short-circuiting it³¹—the liberal response admits the existence of social antagonism but seeks to rid us of its source, believing that reasonable people’s fantasizing can reveal a ground of agreement prior to conflict and capable of warding off its outbreak.

This notion is perhaps most clear in the well-known Rawlsian wager that the creation of a just society comprised of free and equal citizens, a society conceived as a fair system of cooperation over time between generations, depends fundamentally on the securing of some point of view from which to determine the transparent rationality of its just structure. The securing of this point of view is achieved by way of what Rawls notoriously refers to as “the original position.”³² This point of view is, for Rawls, to be regarded as the essence of a “thought experiment” (i.e., a fantasy): the original position is a “device of representation”—part expository tool and part intuitive notion—that functions to convey a kind of reasoning likely to reach agreement about the necessary governing principles for a just and fair society. Freely confessing that the “parties” of the original position are not actual persons in society (and insisting that no general assembly has occupied this position immanently and en masse at some particular instant of history), Rawls claims that it is our responsibility to imagine these “artificial” persons to be as pure as possible. The strategic value of these fantasmatic idealizations for Rawlsian liberalism cannot be underestimated: the more we can eliminate self-interest and other pathological factors from the ideal figures with whom we are imaginatively to identify, the more likely we will be—when we

role-play from the original position—to make fair and reasonable decisions about the basic structure of society. As Rawls puts it, “Remember, it is up to us, you and me, who are setting up justice as fairness, to describe the parties (as artificial persons in our device of representation) as best suits our aims in developing a political conception of justice.”³³ This elimination of self-interested or pathological factors informs the critical Rawlsian notion that the parties that model the kind of reasoning that is the signature of the original position are situated behind a “veil of ignorance.” Behind the veil of ignorance—the warrant for which Rawls has said is implicit in Kantian ethics—the parties of the original position reason not from the standpoint of the particular facts that characterize their own social position or historical epoch, but rather from a position of detachment. As a result, they are able to take a “clear and uncluttered view of what justice requires when society is conceived as a scheme of cooperation between free and equal citizens from one generation to the next.”³⁴ Their envisaging of a just and fair society is thus such that they do not know if the principles they adopt will be to their particular advantage or not: they are obliged, as Rawls puts it, to evaluate principles solely on the basis of general considerations. In this way, the veil of ignorance nullifies the accidents of natural endowment and the contingencies of social circumstances that are often exploited in directions that do not take fairness as the *sine qua non* of justice. Rawls has referred to the veil of ignorance as a way to remove differences in bargaining advantages, of “correcting” the arbitrariness of the world, and this effort depends on the exclusion of knowledge: in my emulation of the kind of rational reasoning modeled behind the veil in the original position, I am thus emulating parties who are supremely ignorant of the social positions, race, sex, able-bodiedness or comprehensive doctrines they represent. I am even immune to what Rawls refers to as “special psychologies” (e.g., envy, aversion to risk, desire for mastery, etc.). In this way, Rawls secures a subject whose reasoning about the basic structure of society takes place in the purest, most disinterested way. No subject in the original position, in other words, would risk willing a world in which he or she might be disadvantaged. Pure, disinterested reasoning means only one thing: the exercise of our moral nature. And the exercise of our moral nature can only lead to one result: a consensual recognition that justice qua fairness ought to determine social and political policy.

In one sense, Rawls’s debt to German idealism is clear, since he is performing the characteristic idealist gesture of situating the subject prior to so-called objective knowledge, of repudiating the notion of a one-to-one correspondence between Nature and a given religiopolitical order. In short, it is possible to see Rawls as merely following through on the “Copernican” gesture Kant calls for in the first *Critique* and that Hegel

radicalizes in his positing of an Absolute Spirit who is the basis of all historical reality: rather than see our cognition as determined by an objective or Natural religiopolitical order, we should instead see the way the latter is in fact the product of a gesture that gets *it* to conform to our cognition. When we perceive a world whose hierarchical relations are said to be the immanent realization of a divine chain of being, we are not, in other words, perceiving this world *as it really is*, but rather only *as it appears to us*. When liberalism sets out after the questions that every political order seeks an answer to—what justifies political power? what unites a *polis*?—it thus discovers not a mind-independent, suprahistorical object (e.g., a religious doctrine, national myth, or economic theory), but a process or a method carried out by autonomous, reasoning subjects. The commitment to this process or method is what ensures that even if one dislikes the policies that are the outcomes of this process, one affirms them nonetheless. Because the process protects the inviolable freedom of the subject, it is ultimately more important than any end it produces. In his putting the subject first, Rawls wants clearly to contest both the monarchical or aristocratic idea of a “natural” ordering of society and the “naturalness” of the utilitarian apology for how goods and liberties are distributed in a given society. But in another sense, what gets discovered beneath the aristocratic or utilitarian idea of the natural is a liberal version that lays claim to the same title. Why does a Rawlsian subject, role-playing the original position behind a veil of ignorance, discover principles of justice therein? Because the capacity to discern justice and to remain faithful to it is a *natural* attribute. This is an attribute that “no race or recognized group of human beings” is without: only “scattered individuals are without this capacity, or its realization to the minimum degree, and the failure to realize it is the consequence of unjust and impoverished social circumstances, or fortuitous contingencies.”³⁵ The exercise of this natural attribute enables a critique-free consensus to emerge regarding the natural principles on which to structure a well-ordered society. As Roberto Alejandro has noted, the monopoly Rawls grants to justice over the deepest recesses of our identity—as “the virtue that best expresses our nature”—places the principles of that justice beyond revision and reevaluation.³⁶ These principles include first a commitment to the notion of citizens as free and equal persons, since all persons possess moral powers and the power of reason; second, a commitment to basic liberties, equal opportunity, and the idea that insofar as social and economic inequality must exist, such inequality should benefit the least advantaged members of society; and third, a commitment to measuring one’s comparative position in society by way of units Rawls designates as “primary goods”—not units of wealth, utility, or desire. Primary goods are things persons

need as free and equal citizens trying to develop their moral powers and to pursue their determinate conceptions of the good.

What is crucial here to Rawls's thought-experiment, and the thought-experiment of liberalism more generally, is that it allows for the free expression of a *plurality* of individual identities and communities. Like the Kantian critique of pure reason, Rawls' thought-experiment functions as a kind of tribunal that puts law in the place of war. In this regard, Rawls never tires of insisting that his brand of liberalism aims not at truth (i.e., Reason's direct cognition of objects) but at reasonableness, and that he makes no claim to comprehensiveness because he "takes to heart" conflict and wants only a charter for the well-ordered society that will be acceptable to all parties. What Rawls calls the "fact of reasonable pluralism" means that citizens can never agree on an authoritative doctrine that applies to all subjects and covers all values. But what they *can* agree on is a political conception of justice. Thus, while Rawls does argue for a certain procedure that enables us to "enter the original position" at any time for guidance, he also subjects the description of the original position to revision in the hopes of one day achieving a kind of final identity between the dictates of the original position and our own judgments bereft of the veil of ignorance. Even here, however, Rawls points out that this identity is provisional.³⁷ One point that becomes clear here is that if the fascist fantasy is predicated on a univocity of identity and community that is somehow pre-given—and that forces the creation of the anti-Semitic caricature of the Jew in order to cement this univocity—the liberal response is to insist on the polyvocality by means of which individuals and societies organize themselves. As David Johnston in his summary of Rawls's political liberalism puts it, "Rawls assumes that different people pursue different projects and hold different values, and that these diverse projects and values—or comprehensive conceptions of the good—are equally reasonable. That is, for him, the defining assumption of political liberalism. The principles of justice are intended to guide adjudication of people's *conflicting* claims, so that each person's capacity to pursue her own conception of the good will be protected, as long as that conception is consistent with justice."³⁸

Liberal-democratic values, then, operate quite clearly as a kind of reference point about which there can be "overlapping consensus"—even and precisely among those who hold different views. Even liberals who might quarrel with the ahistorical position Rawls assigns to those conducting the thought-experiment—Richard Rorty and others, for instance, have remarked on the extent to which those behind Rawls's veil of ignorance "look remarkably like twentieth-century American liberals"—do not quarrel with the vital importance of Rawls's assumptions

for the integrity of democratic society, that being the value of consensus among and between members of a community, and not simply fidelity to some objective, transcendent, nonhuman idea (e.g., the self-realization of Spirit). That Rawls's liberalism does not aim for synchronicity with some "nonhuman idea"—this is here perhaps an implicit reference to an absolutist version of the figure of Hegel—is inseparable from its claim to an ethical mandate. Preferring politics to philosophy, its scope is decidedly more narrow: we might say that its morality is inseparable from its modesty. This move toward modesty informs what has been called Rawls's shift to the political from *A Theory of Justice* (1971) to the more recent *Political Liberalism* (1992). In the latter, Rawls aims to be even more forthright about the fact that his liberalism is "not comprehensive liberalism," that it seeks neither to replace comprehensive doctrines (religious or nonreligious) nor to provide their "true" foundation, and that its articulation of principles and values which all can endorse must be taken as having to do only with politics and not metaphysics. Much of this has to do with the now well-known communitarian critique of Rawls and the extent to which *A Theory of Justice* is said to rely on a comprehensive Kantian philosophical theory of what has been called an "unencumbered and antecedently individuated subject."³⁹ According to the communitarians, Rawls does in fact rely on a comprehensive metaphysical doctrine about the subject—one that risks fixating on the reasoning subject's pure process of self-reflection and thus ignoring altogether the way a subject's attachment to various ends, values, conceptions of the good, and communities might in fact be a constitutive part of the "pure" subject on whom Rawls depends. In his reply to these charges, Rawls is quick to distance himself from any reliance on metaphysics: the veil of ignorance, he says

has no specific metaphysical implications concerning the nature of the self; it does not imply that the self is ontologically prior to the facts about persons that the parties are excluded from knowing. We can, as it were, enter this position at any time simply by reasoning for principles of justice in accordance with the enumerated restrictions on information. When, in this way, we simulate being in the original position, our reasoning no more commits us to a particular metaphysical doctrine about the nature of the self than our acting a part in a play, say of Macbeth or Lady Macbeth, commits us to thinking that we are really a king or a queen engaged in a desperate struggle for political power. Much the same holds for role playing generally.⁴⁰