

FREUD, HEGEL AND PHILOSOPHY AFTER THE COPERNICAN  
AND FRENCH REVOLUTIONS: THOUGHTS ON REBECCA  
COMAY'S *MOURNING SICKNESS: HEGEL AND THE FRENCH  
REVOLUTION*

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In *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution*, Rebecca Comay brings together the figures of Hegel and Freud. As a student at Tübingen, having watched from a distance the unfolding of the French Revolution, Hegel came up with an account of its central place in the development of the modern world that purported to be based on an idealist logic underlying all things. For the generation that came after Hegel, his attitude to the question of a revolution in his own country exemplified what this idealism entailed. The idealist could think of Germany as having *already had* its "revolution" in "spirit"; it had then no need for one in material, practical reality. Critics like Marx and Engels would explode the pretensions of this attitude as an "ideology" rather than a "scientific" disclosure of reality, one to be diagnosed in Comay's words as "a thinly disguised blend of anxiety, envy, and *Schadenfreude* ... typical of the "German misery." (Comay, 1)

One might expect, then, a parallel to be drawn between the attitude of Freud and the diagnostic stances of Marxist critics of Hegel. Marx and Freud are commonly paired as practitioners of a "hermeneutics of suspicion", with Marx reducing ideologies such as religions or the religion-like metaphysics of Absolute idealism to effects of forces working below the level of consciousness. That is, one might expect Freud to be used in a diagnosis of absolute idealism as a symptom of whatever "trauma" underlies that condition of a peoples that was captured by Marx's idea of the "German misery" that Hegel exemplified. But Comay's book takes an unexpected turn here. The "German misery" is taken as the model of trauma *qua* "modal, temporal and ... historical category" to be explored, and explored with "Hegel, of all people, its most lucid theorist." (Comay, 4) Hegel thus becomes the partner of Freud in the exploration of the human condition, not the object of diagnosis in a Marx-Freud alliance.

But neither does Comay present a psychoanalytic "reading" of Hegel's account of the French Revolution and the Enlightenment more generally in the sense of a reductionist reading of Hegel. Her account is philosophical rather than historical or psychological. Perhaps it could be better said that Comay finds in Hegel's interpretation of the Revolution an approach that strikingly anticipates the theoretical language that Freud later brought to his

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psychological histories of individuals. Thus the “mourning” of the title of the book alludes to the “mourning” of Freud’s article “Mourning and Melancholia”, and Hegel’s reading of the revolution is organized around the idea of a type of entrapment within a pathological “melancholic” response to loss that Freud contrasts with an otherwise “healthy” process of mourning. As Comay points out, for Hegel those melancholic aspects of the revolution with its terroristic consequences were tied to the failure of France to have lived through the earlier revolution in religious thought that had been carried through in the German parts of Europe. Modernity, for Hegel, involved the necessary disruption of forms of religion like Medieval Catholicism based on the “immediate” relations found in the pre-modern family. This melancholic holding on to immediate forms of culture that had lost their grounds is a tendency to be found throughout the modern world, interfering with its *necessary* work of “mourning”. Such losses *are* to be mourned, but in its refusal to acknowledge the passing of this culture, the French nation had adopted a melancholic distortion of this.

On Comay’s interpretation, Hegel’s promotion of the French Revolution to the status of exemplary modern event, as well as the problems raised by the idea of a revolution able to be viewed and identified with from a distance, crystallize what she describes as “the untimeliness of historical existence”. In communities subject to the movements of history unevenly distributed over space, subjects can feel as not firmly planted in their present, a condition itself experienced as displacement and loss. It becomes “the task of philosophy ... to explicate this untimeliness”, and this is where Hegel’s philosophy, complete with its notion of “absolute knowing” is relevant. (Comay, 4-5) This is, she acknowledges, “of course not the standard reading. Absolute knowing is usually either discarded as metaphysical flotsam (the “deflationary”, usually liberal, approach) or reviled as an exercise in legitimization.” (Comay 5) While not accepting this dismissal of absolute knowing, neither, of course, does she accept its traditional *affirmative* reading, characteristic of religious “right” Hegelianism. Hegel had spoken, in a way reminiscent of Hölderlin or the early Schelling, of cognition as involving a “wound” brought about by a type of primordial incision separating a self off from a world within which it was initially immersed, allowing that world to become available for it as an object of conscious cognition.<sup>1</sup> Absolute knowing, especially in the hands of the religious right-Hegelians, was meant to signal the healing of this wound by the alienated subject’s becoming reunited with the “ground” of its being, “God”. For Comay, however: “Absolute knowing is just the subject’s identification with the woundedness that it is. Antidote is in this sense indistinguishable from injury, health from illness, and poison from cure”. (Comay, 130)

Comay’s account of Hegel’s metaphysics, his “absolute knowing”, is thus contrasted explicitly with two existing philosophical critiques—the liberal “deflationary” attitude to metaphysics in general, and the left-Hegelian-to-Marxist critique of it as ideology, and implicitly with the traditional right-Hegelian affirmative approach. However, I want to linger on this question of how to locate her reading in the array of existing understandings of Hegel, and in particular with respect to the debate between the so-called post-Kantian or “non-metaphysical” readings of Hegel, and what may be called “revised metaphysical” readings. Up to a few decades ago the standard “scholarly” interpretations of Hegel generally accepted a view of Hegel as putting forward a very substantialist and theocentric metaphysical picture, the sort affirmed by the traditional right-Hegelians. In the closing decades of the last century, however, his account came to be contested from various directions. One alternative emerged in the late 1980s with the writings of Robert Pippin and Terry Pinkard. In short, Pippin and Pinkard flatly denied that Hegel represented a return to pre-Kantian metaphysics. Hegel should be read not only as a philosopher who had taken on board Kant’s critique of traditional metaphysics, but also as having applied the spirit of Kant’s critique to residual “metaphysical” dimensions of Kant’s own transcendental idealism. In reaction, the “revised metaphysical” readers such as Robert Stern and Stephen Houlgate have criticised Pippin and Pinkard for their excessive *Kantianization* of Hegel, eliminating the possibility of an Hegelian metaphysics. And so while seeing Hegel as having learned important lessons from Kant, they also see him as reinstating some more modest version of substantive metaphysics, often emphasising its Aristotelian or Spinozistic dimensions.

On my understanding of Comay’s book, her Hegel, I think, has more features in common with Pippin’s and Pinkard’s Hegel than either the traditional or revised metaphysical views.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, I think her pairing of

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Hegel with Freud sheds important light on how we might think of a “post-Kantian” Hegel. In particular, it gives us a way of understanding better what Hegel accepts of Kant’s “Copernican revolution”, and what he rejects—a question that in many ways parallels the political one of his attitude to the French Revolution. To try to do this I’ll approach these issues in terms of Comay’s diagnosis of the “melancholia” diagnosable in both revolutions. My crude rendering of this will be that Kant is the modern philosopher who most explicitly acknowledges the loss of a desired object—specifically the object of traditional metaphysical desire, a knowable “world in itself”. However, in his case, mourning became entangled in melancholia, and it is in relation to Kant as analyst and that Hegel plays the role of Freud the analyst. The last thing Hegel *qua* Freud *should be doing*, I suggest, is telling Kant (and us) that there is *no reason* to mourn, and that what we have actually lost is of no great loss—a loss that is more than compensated for by a *gain*. This purported gain is absolute knowing in which a *genuine* metaphysical object has been regained—one showing what had been wrong with the conception of the object *initially* sought and what was wrong with how it went about seeking it. Such an attitude would seem to share in the *worst* aspects of the romantic idealizations of lost objects—Novalis’s finding joy in the Sophie who “lives on” in his heart and writings after his fiancée’s actual death. On this reading of idealism, the “real” Sophie *is* the ideal Sophie. This is the attitude of denial, the rejection of the reality principle, and is most obvious in the right-Hegelian readings of Hegel’s metaphysics. On such an account, the metaphysical Hegel is telling us that our beloved epistemic object is *really* alive, living on “in spirit”, which is the *rightful* realm in which all objects live.

This was the reading abhorred by the original left-Hegelians and those who saw in Hegel a willingness to renounce any *concrete* revolution for the Germans because they had already carried it out in “spirit”. The recent “revised metaphysical” readers of Hegel are just as critical of the traditionally understood picture of “idealism” as had been the left Hegelians, but this is because they think the *content* of this metaphysical reading is incorrect. They are in general happy to forego the objects of “*metaphysica specialis*” (God and the soul), and in place attribute to Hegel a “*metaphysica generalis*” that, contra Kant, provides us with genuine knowledge of general categorical features of objective “being”. In this sense they are as anxious as the right-Hegelians to heal the wound of cognition that persists in Kant’s account, and to restore the object that, on Kant’s philosophy, had been lost. To this degree, they too show a melancholic unwillingness to go through the mourning initiated by Kant.

Let’s turn to Freud here and look at a description of melancholia *qua* pathological and regressive analogue of mourning, in which he focuses on the ambivalence of self-esteem that is found in melancholics.

As with paranoia, so also with melancholia ..., it has been possible to obtain a glimpse into the inner structure of the disorder. We have perceived that the self-reproaches with which these sufferers torment themselves so mercilessly actually relate to another person, to the sexual object they have lost or whom they have ceased to value on account of some fault. From this we concluded that the melancholic has indeed withdrawn his libido from the object, but that by a process which we must call ‘narcissistic identification’ he has set up the object within the ego itself, projected it on to the ego. ... The ego itself is then treated as though it were the abandoned object; it suffers all the revengeful and aggressive treatment which is designed for the object. The suicidal impulses of melancholics also become more intelligible on the supposition that the bitterness felt by the diseased mind concerns the ego itself at the same time as, and equally with, the loved and hated objects. In melancholia ... a feature of the emotion life which, after Bleuler, we are accustomed to call *ambivalence* comes markedly to the fore; by this we mean a directing of antithetical feelings (affectionate and hostile) towards the same person.<sup>3</sup>

On the post-Kantian reading of Hegel, Hegel starts from the reality principle and, with Kant, acknowledges the loss of the desired object—but on this reading Hegel finds Kant in the grip of a melancholic *internalization* of that very object. This results in Kant’s paradoxical combination of under- and over-estimation of our cognitive powers. *Theoretically* Kant is self-castigating. We are essentially total failures from the epistemic point of

view. We know nothing and *can* know nothing of the real world beyond ourselves. There is an unbridgeable gap between an *infinite* cognition to which the world would be presented whole and direct and our own: all we can know are our own miserable representations. But in this *reduced* realm, our knowledge is sovereign—here the mind can in fact achieve perfect knowledge because it is simply knowledge *of itself*. Moreover, this reversal from an under-estimation of our cognitive powers to their *over*-estimation becomes most obvious in *practical* reason. We all have an unimpeachable *certainty* of the “objective” moral law, and so with respect to the practical realm effectively achieve the infallibility of God.

It is not surprising that in his *New Introductory Lectures* Freud follows his account of the abusive super-ego of melancholia with a short discussion of Kant’s account of “conscience”, a juxtaposition that essentially parallels that found in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* in the confession and forgiveness scenario that concludes Hegel’s account of the “beautiful soul” and that Comay discusses with such illumination the last chapter of *Mourning Sickness*. But rather than follow her down that path, here I want to pursue the idea of an Hegelian diagnosis of this simultaneous under- and over-estimation of our cognitive powers within the domain of *theoretical* philosophy, and do so in what I understand to be the spirit of Comay’s reading. Here is where I take Comay to be opposed to those who want a Hegel who reverses Kant’s metaphysical skepticism and takes us to some modified version of traditional metaphysics. Like Comay, I take Hegel as insisting that there is “no-going-back” to anything like the original metaphysical project. I want to briefly look to the role played by Leibniz in Hegel’s *Science of Logic*.

I have described Kant’s mourning as a refusal that we can have the sort of object loved by traditional metaphysics. This is an object which ultimately manifests itself to us if we, as it were, learn to train the mind’s eye on it and discard the misleading givens of the sensory world which are no more than shadows on the wall of a cave. Sometimes, this process is presented as happening via a process of cognitive self-purification in which immediate givens come to be reflected on and mediated in a web of rationally connected thought. This is traditionally how Hegel’s path to absolute knowledge is presented, with Hegel channelling Diotima from Plato’s *Symposium*. As it is often pointed out, the imagery in these pictures is visual, and this type of immediate quasi-visual apprehension can be seen to characterize even the thinking subject’s grasp of the relation of inference in Aristotle’s account of logic. Thus Aristotle had appealed to this quasi-visual imagery by talking of terms as “contained” or “inhering” others. For example, “Socrates is mortal” is pictured in such a way that the predicate term “mortality” is grasped as contained in the subject term “Socrates” in the way that Socrates’ predisposition to eventually die is *in* him. This containment relation is transitive and its transitivity can be pictured in a visual way by the use of diagrams, for example. Indeed, Aristotle is said to have himself utilized diagrams to get his idea of inference across.

If in a diagram I can see that, say, a circle C is contained in another, B, and that B is contained in further circle, A, then I can simply *see* that C is itself contained in A. Such diagrams are able to model those syllogisms that manifest this type of perspicuous relation, the so-called first figure syllogism “Barbara”, for example: “all As are B; and all Bs are C; therefore As are C”. Aristotle characterized such syllogisms as “perfect”. But not *all* syllogisms (which, by definition, are *valid*) are “perfect” in this way, and so Aristotle attempted to reduce all *non*-perspicuous syllogisms (syllogisms in the second and third “figures”) to those in the first by relying on various “conversion rules” and indirect proofs that are *themselves* not understood in the immediately visualizable ways that accompany the notion of conceptual “inherence”.

In his account of “the Syllogism” in the *Science of Logic*, Hegel in essence sketches the evolution of logic in terms of the dialectical undoing of Aristotle’s way of thinking of inference, tracing the syllogism through its three figures and coming, finally, to the post-Aristotelian “fourth-figure” holding among singular judgments. This last figure poses a serious problem for Aristotle’s conception of the validity of syllogisms, as the constitutive judgments of the fourth figure have *entirely lost* those relations on which the earlier proofs relied—relations of “inherence” as underlying perfect syllogisms, and even those of “subsumption” that had developed in the task of explaining the “reduction” employed in the proofs of imperfect ones.

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Hegel also calls the fourth figure syllogism the “mathematical syllogism” and discusses it in terms of Leibniz’s attempts to reduce logic to a generalized algebra or “calculus”. This aspect of Leibniz’s logic is now thought of as the revolutionary and forward-looking, anticipating, in general ways, approaches that did not develop until the end of the nineteenth century. Although brief, Hegel’s discussion of Leibniz’s mathematical logic and its development by Gottfried Ploucquet, whose logic he learnt at Tübingen, is perspicuous and advanced. Hegel is lacerating in his criticism of the attempted reduction of thought to an algebraic calculus—an extreme product of what he describes as the abstract “understanding”. But there is no sense in which Hegel thinks there can be some return to Aristotle: the ultimate collapse of the Aristotelian syllogism was an inevitable outcome of the very project from its inception, and resulted from a contradiction between the *model* of inference Aristotle took as the norm and the devices he had to employ to give a general account of *all* inferences in terms of that model.

Leibniz’s mathematical syllogism could only work because Leibniz had come up with a new way of thinking of the structure of categorical judgments, bypassing any idea of properties “inhering” in substances and predicates “inhering” in subjects. Within the mathematical syllogism, the very difference between a subject and predicate is annihilated, as two conceptual determinations are deemed abstractly equal, with the copula replaced by an “=” sign. The judgment can be treated algebraically in this way because both the two concepts are taken as predicable of a *third* that “has absolutely no determination whatever as against its extremes”. *Ibid.*, p. 679 (6:371).<sup>4</sup> This reconfiguration of the categorical judgment can be thought to reflect the loss of the desired epistemic object because *that object* had been thought of as represented by the traditional *subject* of categorical judgment. What the “object” of the judgment is, is now just some indeterminate “*whatever*” that satisfies both predicates and makes the judgment “true”. Moreover, “truth” now becomes reduced to one of *two* values, as in the modern truth-values “T” and “F”—values that, as Leibniz realized, can be replaced by a binary number system (1 and 0) allowing the sentence–equations to be subjected to computation via a calculus.

Hegel is explicit, this fourth figure “mathematical” syllogism brings reason to the point of its death in that it reduces thought to a mechanical computational process that requires no consciousness on the part of any “computer”. Hegel refers to the “ossified” products of this analysis, recalling his treatment of “Phrenology” in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in which an existing self-conscious being gets reduced to “a bone”.<sup>5</sup> In relation to the mathematical syllogism, Hegel quotes Ploucquet: “I can teach the whole logic mechanically even to the uneducated, just as children are taught arithmetic, so that, if there is no error of calculation, it would be possible not to be tormented by the fear of erring in reasoning or of being deceived by falsities”.<sup>6</sup> Ploucquet and Hegel were aware, of course, that arithmetical calculation could be “performed” by machines. Pascal had designed a machine capable of addition and subtraction, and Leibniz himself had designed one capable of carrying out multiplication and division. If logic could be successfully reduced to a calculus, it could be taught “mechanically” because it would, like addition and multiplication, be capable of being “performed” by machines, machines that would, we might say, eliminate the thinking “head” of the human “computer”.<sup>7</sup> Comay points to Hegel’s attitude towards another well-known machine that in the period of revolutionary terror was used to remove the heads of thinking humans.

In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel had spoken of the revolutionary use of the guillotine in logical, rather than moral, terms. Where there is no “syllogistic” mediation between “the singular” (an individual) and “the universal” (universal freedom, “*volunte generale*”) what results is the simple “negation of the individual as an *existent* within the universal”. Thus the “sole work and deed” of the universal will was reduced to that of administering “the coldest and meanest of all deaths, with no more significance than cutting off a head of cabbage or swallowing a mouthful of water”.<sup>8</sup> The project of human freedom is, paradoxically, reduced to the destruction of actual individuals whose freedom is purportedly being sought under the heading of freedom for *all*.

The machine required to remove thinking heads in the realm of logic, being considerably more complicated than the invention of Dr. Guillotine, had to await the twentieth century to be built, but the principles involved were clear to Hegel as they had been to Leibniz. For Hegel, the fourth-figure syllogism was the route to a

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machine which eliminated the living head, “tormented by the fear of erring in reasoning or of being deceived by falsities”. A successful invention of the type of calculus with which Leibniz and Ploucquet experimented would be the invention of a type of language within which this machine would “think”. To Hegel (and many others) this is as paradoxical as that found in the murder of individuals in the name of universal freedom. As in the reduction of spirit to a bone, we have lost the normative dimensions of knowledge and reason that we are supposedly explaining. But that this is paradoxical is, for Hegel, not the grounds for dismissing it. The paradox of this situation is to be acknowledged and dealt with.

Hegel is often portrayed as simply critical of such developments characteristic of modernity and that are working to undermine the ancient “speculative” conception of reason. Didn’t Hegel relentlessly criticise the reduction of “reason” to “the understanding” in this way? While the answer is “yes”, this is commonly understood in a way that crudely opposes “reason” and “the understanding”. Antinomies are generated by the actions of “the understanding” as had been recognized by Kant. Wanting to save thought from such antinomies, Kant had reacted by restricting the scope of the understanding to “appearances”, and by disallowing questions about the world “in itself”. For Hegel, the antinomy generating features of human thought could not be quarantined in this way, but neither could “reason” be separated from the “determining” activity of the understanding. The understanding was not something that could be avoided or restricted in its operations. Rather *restricting* the operations of the understanding in this *Kantian* way was what robbed its determinations of the propensity to generate contradiction—they dynamic motor of reason. Reason is not to be isolated from the understanding, it must, as it were, give the understanding its head. The paradoxical fourth-figure syllogism was simply the purest expression of the understanding, as was the application of the guillotine in the revolutionary terror; the logical processes of thought reflecting on itself working its way through human culture had been led to these events inevitably, and was not to be sidetracked. Thus logic for Hegel cannot avoid such consequences, but must somehow *acknowledge* them, and think *through* them, and in doing so it must acknowledge the reality its potentially deadly contradictions. In order to live, thought must incorporate the reality of its deadly reduction to the “ossified” forms of thought found as in formal logic, and that of the treatment of citizen’s heads as cabbages.

Critics of the “post-Kantian” interpretation advocate a picture in which Hegel is taking thought *back* to the lost objects of metaphysics. It is true that for Hegel logical thought is reborn after the formal syllogism, resurrected from its death at the hands of the understanding—a resurrection paralleling the one central to the religion with which Hegel identified. But Leibniz’s evisceration of the logical schemata of Aristotelian thought must amount to the abandonment of the *very concept* of the sorts of objects purported to be reasoned with that logic—the classical objects of metaphysics, objects with necessary rather than contingent existence, with essential natures, and so on. Any backtracking would just restart that dialectic that brings this idea of reason to lifeless mechanism. Kant had accepted the loss of these objects, but in urging us to settle for substitutes we could know—“appearances” in the theoretical realm, and the moral law in the practical realm—he, from the Freudian point of view, blocked the work of mourning by inserting the phantasms of melancholia. Whatever the *details* of Hegel’s solution, neither the restitution of pre-Kantian metaphysics, nor the traps of melancholic internalization can point the way. This means that the cognitive life restored must be understood as having non-life—death, mechanism, inertness—as an essential ingredient.

On my reading of Comay, this is the message born by her account of “absolute knowing”. This is a type of knowledge that is built on the assumption that the “wound” of cognition *constitutes* us as the beings we are, there can be no immediate belonging to the world or to our own historical moment, a belonging which is free from the effects of this internal wound within life that makes us human. “Absolute knowing is just the subject’s identification with the woundedness that it is”.<sup>9</sup>

NOTES

1. Hölderlin, Schelling, Hegel
2. It might be the case that Comay includes these readings within the scope of “liberal”, “deflationist” approaches to philosophy. But the misleadingly called “anti-metaphysical” reading of Hegel should not be simply identified with the “deflationist” attitudes of contemporary analytic philosophy.
3. Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, trans. Joan Riviera. New York: Pocket Books, revised edition 1952, 26<sup>th</sup> lecture, 434–5.
4. The idea that the subject and predicate of a categorical judgment could be understood as *predicates* both predicated of some “*tertium commune*” was a revolutionary move not equalled until the rediscovery of mathematical logic in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
5. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, § 331.
6. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*. Trans. and Ed. George di Giovanni. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 608. Hegel’s quote is in Latin, di Giovanni’s translation is given in endnote 92 on 624.
7. It is easy to think of arithmetic as a mechanical procedure, with the child being taught to follow a series of instructions. Consider, for examples, two rows of signs (“numerals”) written on a sheet of paper accompanied by the sign “X”. The child learns to look to the left-most sign on the lower line, then to the sign above it. Say that are “3” and “6”, respectively. Consulting a provided table produces a sequence of two further signs, a “1” followed by an “8”. A further rule tells the child to write the second of these signs immediately below the first one looked at, and to “carry” the first. The same procedure is repeated for the next two left-most signs, but the composite sign that results from the table has to be put through a further process to accommodate the sign “carried”, and so on. Through this, the child does not yet have to know what numbers “are” or what purpose this activity is meant to serve. The child can be replaced by a machine.
8. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §590, quoted in Comay, *Mourning Sickness*, 73.
9. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 130.