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## The Divine "Synthesis" of the Progressivists: Proudhon, Merleau-Ponty and Lévinas Make An Anti-Hegelian Movie

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The progressivists have (had) the misfortune of laicizing their categories in a radical manner. The gods ejected with such a to-do have often returned by the back door. The construction of a space of knowledge disencumbered of the revealed truths of the various religions has itself been contaminated by soft forms of religiosity. Two important concepts in the intellectual structuring of progressivist thought, the linked categories of "totality" and "synthesis", continue to have a theological aftertaste. The high priest of German philosophy of history, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), played an important role in the promotion of these categories and in their association with that of "Progress." However, thinkers as different as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) and Emmanuel Lévinas (1906-1995) have provided us with resources for us to dissociate ourselves from them. In so doing, they stumble across certain intuitions of the language of contemporary cinematography. Taken together, they help open the way to a problematic of relative transcendences and Filtered Enlightenment.<sup>1</sup>

### The Hegelian "synthesis"

In his voluminous and rather useful panorama of the peregrinations of the category of "totality" and its critiques in the history of philosophy, Christian Godin<sup>2</sup> suggests that "the Whole has been the object of philosophy *par excellence*."<sup>3</sup> According to him, Hegel thus pushed "this idea of philosophy to its ultimate consequences."<sup>4</sup>

For Hegel, Spirit refers, at the same time, to a property of reality, to the movement of history, and to an attribute of knowing subjects. The whole would thus be all at once a quality of reality – a fundamental coherence in spite of the appearance of dispersion, the world and the movements of the history comprising a system – and a means [*dispositif*] of knowing this real history, of attempting to encompass it by means of concepts which contain it. In Hegel, this totality (on the side of real as well as that of knowledge) is not complete; it is in motion, in a process of totalization. But the completion of this movement is promised: "the process of Universal History [...] is the exhibition of the divine, absolute development of Spirit in its highest forms, – that gradation by which it attains its truth and

consciousness of itself. [...] [I]t begins to discover salient principles, and at last it arrives at full consciousness.”<sup>5</sup> The ultimate form of this contradictory movement is Progress.

Progress proceeds by successive syntheses of contradictions in history, until the final synthesis: the end of History. Thesis (affirmation) – antithesis (negation) – synthesis (negation of the negation): the contradictory in intellectual history as in general history is inscribed, each time, within a unifying logic. The synthesis recovers the terms of the contradiction, includes them, and supersedes them, while carrying them higher and farther. In the Hegelian dialectic, the successive resultant of the process is incarnated in “a new concept[,] but one higher and richer than the preceding – richer because it negates or opposes the preceding and therefore contains it, and it contains even more than that, for it is the unity of itself and its opposite.”<sup>6</sup> In the dynamic of movement, the syntheses come to progressively encompass everything: the chance, the heterogeneous, the discontinuous, the different, the new already have their designated place as details within the whole.

Isn't it something like a god who has endowed the twofold movement of thought and history with such coherence, in spite of the *apparent* chaos? And doesn't this final synthesis, transparent to itself, definitively harmonious, have some resemblance to a divine Paradise? As to the totalizing gaze which encompasses reality conceptually, doesn't it borrow its posture from an all-seeing, overarching god? It really seems that if the Hegelian absolutes have been laicized, they have not yet broken all of the ropes mooring them to divine absolutes.

This extremely diagrammatic sketch of Hegel does not do justice to the many threads running through his work. I have instead painted the portrait of what Merleau-Ponty calls “the textbook Hegel,” that of “the final synthesis heralded and guaranteed.”<sup>7</sup> However, it is this simplified Hegel who seems to have most marked progressivist thought, particularly, though not exclusively, through a number of Hegelianized Marxisms.

### **Proudhon's “balancing of contraries”**

The Hegelian triad (thesis-antithesis-synthesis) posed problems for Proudhon, who initially had adopted it. He made the beginnings of a critique of it, but this critique has, until now, enjoyed little posterity.

“The Hegelian formula is only a triad by the good pleasure or the error of the master, who counts three terms where there truly exists only two, and who has not seen that the antinomy does not resolve itself, but that it indicates an oscillation or antagonism susceptible only to equilibrium,” asserts Proudhon in *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église* (1858).<sup>8</sup> Proudhon substitutes a thought of balancing contradictions for that of the necessary movement of their synthetic totalization. In *Théorie de la propriété* (1866), Proudhon specifies: “I recognized that whereas the antinomy is a law of nature and of the intelligence, a phenomenon of the understanding, like all the concepts that it touches, it is not resolved; it remains eternally what it is, first cause of all movement, principle of all life and evolution, by the contradiction of its terms; it can only be balanced,

whether by the balancing of contraries or by its opposition to other antinomies.”<sup>9</sup> Totalization (or synthesis) would not be the primary category, but the antinomy. The antinomy can take on different aspects, but the antinomy, in an unstable balance, would remain the motive force, not the synthesis.

Here is our heuristic path: and what if certain antinomies of the human condition, human action, and human history are not necessarily resolved in all-inclusive, harmonious syntheses? Admittedly active contradictions in human societies, because they do not follow from any fixed “human nature”, move, take on different forms and contents, die and are born, but the postulate according to which they would be ineluctably drawn to be superseded within a higher entity appears too dangerous. For do the partial coherences we may observe in reality necessarily constitute a philosophical lesson in the diversity of contradictions? On the side of the knowing subject, does this aspiration to a synoptic tableau in any way change the partial, provisional and relative character of our knowledge? And what if the real progress of thought has also been festooned with regressions, blind spots, irrecuperable losses? It appears, then, to be emphatically grandiose but futile to try to fit the boots of a god, to crudely disguise oneself as a magician of the Concept.

Politically, Proudhon translates the logic of balancing opposites into “the principle of federation.”<sup>10</sup> Federation is opposed to the “unitary system.” The federation is presented as the a public space established for the expression of human plurality and its contradictions. Daniel Colson recently made an anarcho-Deleuzean reading of Proudhon, insisting on “the form of autonomous and contradictory or antithetical forces, struggling only to recognize and join forces with one another, and not to resolve the difference which opposes them.”<sup>11</sup> Proudhon the libertarian is thus wary of dreams of harmonious societies and the politics of synthesis. The imposition of uniformity on human plurality and the authoritarian absorption of contradictions constitute potentialities which are indeed historically actualized, after Proudhon, in various forms of modern statism, even totalitarianism. But Proudhon does not therefore abandon the twofold perspective of a coordination of dissimilar beings and the constitution of a space common to them.

### **The Merleau-Pontian adventures of the dialectic**

In Hegelian and “Marxist” dialectics, it is not the historical dynamic of contradictions which make Merleau-Ponty frown in *Adventures of the Dialectic* (1955),<sup>12</sup> in which he breaks from Sartre and “Marxism”, but the double assumption of a direction to this historical process and of a completion of the play of contradictions and conflicts.

First of all, Merleau-Ponty notes that “history does not have a direction [*un sens*], like a river, but has a meaning [*du sens*].”<sup>13</sup> This direction/meaning includes ambiguities within history itself: “Equivocalness is in things.”<sup>14</sup> And that has consequences for knowledge, which merely constitutes a reasoned evaluation of the probable and improbable in a given situation, thus clashing with the element of uncertainty produced by historical contingency. This probabilistic, partial and provisional knowledge then nourishes wagers in action, wagers made with more or less reason, but which can never be justified by

definitive guarantees. It is then ludicrous to demonize as “treason” different wagers made on the basis of probabilistic knowledges (sometimes scarcely different...). For Merleau-Ponty, totalization begins to depart the movement of history as well as its knowledge.

Absolute totality is abandoned, too, because there is no longer an endpoint in Merleau-Ponty, only an infinite play of contradictions. “What then is obsolete is not the dialectic but the pretension of terminating it in an end of history,” he asserts.<sup>15</sup> Merleau-Ponty thus rejects “[t]his idea of an absolute purification of history, of an inertialess regime without chance or risk.”<sup>16</sup> No trace of god’s hand in the logic of history, no philosopher-god in his knowledge, no paradisaical station at which to arrive!

The core of a democratic politics, which would make no concession to capitalism, would then be to activate contradictions and conflicts. For this reason we must be on guard against totalists who could infect the categories of the necessary social critique: “the defects of capitalism remain defects; but the critique which denounces them must be freed from any compromise with an absolute of the negation which, in the long run, is germinating new oppressions.”<sup>17</sup> Here, Merleau-Ponty is undoubtedly too idealistic: it is not primarily intellectual categories which comprise history, but on the other hand, they can help to paralyze our understanding of authoritarian logics.

### **Lévinas: the face of the other as a fissure in totality**

At the crossroads of the Jewish tradition and 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenology, Lévinas has a different way of upsetting the totalizing pretensions of Western philosophy.

He opposes the category of the Infinite, as a “surplus always exterior to the totality,”<sup>18</sup> to that of Totality itself. There is something in the singularity of the face of the other which always escapes my totalizing grasp, and from which ethics arise. I can never comprehend (in the double sense of catching and knowing) the other completely. But I am “caught,” corporeally and not intellectually, by the distress in the other’s call, accosting me as I take my usual way, disorienting me, sending me down the singular paths of the incommensurable. This intuition, for Lévinas, comes to splinter one of the central axes of the Western philosophical tradition: “In Sartre, the phenomenon of the other was still considered, as in all Western ontology, to be a modality of unity and fusion, that is, a reduction of the other to the categories of the same.”<sup>19</sup> There is, however, something which resists totality and totalization. Lévinas does not reject the philosophical work of reason, and in particular, the effort to create the intellectually commensurable – quite the contrary – but he refuses its pretensions to a quasi-divine absolute power. Admittedly Lévinas, who remains attached to a theology, associates these infinite leakages in the philosophical bathtubs of totality with “the traces of God’s passage.”<sup>20</sup> However, one can laicize his analyses by not retaining this opening onto a divine transcendence. His critique of totality would then become a resource for distancing one of the figures of the persistence of the divine in progressivist thought. The enigmas of others would not be formulated then as a divine mystery, but would be presented as one of the dimensions of human fragility, merely human.

Lévinas, before having worked out this ethics of the face, began to approach the failures of totality in his first work on phenomenology. For example, he questioned the totalizing aims in a phenomenology of escape.<sup>21</sup> There, the totalizing pretension takes on the socio-historical shape of the “bourgeois”: “He demands guarantees in the present against the future, which introduces unknowns into those solved problems from which he lives. What he possesses becomes capital, carrying interest or insurance against risks, and his future, thus tamed, is integrated in this way with his past.”<sup>22</sup> Bourgeois totality is the spirit of the tightwad, conservative, resting on the reproduction of privileges. Here, exploration of the new is prohibited, the future being locked up in the formulas of the past, like a fortune which is tirelessly mined for profit on the same tracks. Conversely, escapist literature invites us to an exit, a way out of oneself, out of totalities, towards the unknown.

Lévinas also sketches out a phenomenology of the caress.<sup>23</sup> In this case, the critique aims at the totalizing arrogance of the dominant masculine eroticism of “possessing.” The more feminine erotic of the caress, however, thwarts the traps of a sexuality haunted by figures of power and fusion: Can this relationship with the other through Eros be characterized as a failure? Once again, the answer is yes, if one adopts the terminology of current descriptions, if one wants to characterize the erotic by “grasping,” “possessing,” or “knowing.” But there is nothing of all this, or the failure of all this, in eros. If one could possess, grasp, and know the other, it would not be other.”<sup>24</sup> The caress points to another way: “The seeking of the caress constitutes its essence by the fact that the caress does not know what it seeks. This ‘not knowing,’ this fundamental disorder, is the essential. It is like a game with something slipping away, a game absolutely without project or plan, not with what can become ours or us, but with something other, always other, always inaccessible, and always still to come [*à venir*].”<sup>25</sup>

Totality appears to be full of little holes, in knowledge as in the object of knowledge. Movement opens onto a new which is not totalizable, which retains something imperceptible. The utopian opening prevents totality from closing up again. But a utopia which itself defies a utopian retotalization: “A difficult utopia which can resist any globalizing synthesis from the perspective of a third party which, hovering over the social scene, would aspire to create the harmony or completeness of social groups,” comments Miguel Abensour.<sup>26</sup>

### **The ethical insomnia of Al Pacino**

The contemporary cinema may inherit from the philosophers the task of weakening traditional, divine, or laically-divine totalities. Such is the case of Christopher Nolan’s American film, *Insomnia* (2002).<sup>27</sup> Al Pacino is one of two cops from Los Angeles who go to Alaska for an investigation during a season when the sun never sets. Pacino, a seasoned police officer, is under an internal investigation following his tampering with evidence in a prior case. During a thick fog, he kills his partner (Martin Donovan). The ambiguity reaches its peak when he himself really does not know if this was a mistake or if there was in him the beginnings of a murderous intention, since his colleague was going to testify against him. He then covers up this death and is subjected to blackmail by a killer (Robin Williams) who witnessed the scene. Little by little, the Alaskan climate and

the ethical complications of his situation draw him into an increasingly dire state of insomnia. Pacino gets hold of himself again at the end, killing Robin Williams and saving a young cop (Hilary Swank). At the moment of death, while Hilary Swank wants to destroy evidence of his lie, Pacino refuses, telling her: "Don't lose your way!"

Ethics thus appears without a stop, overflowing the limits of historical circumstances and human ambivalences. These overflows disturb the very possibility of a definitive, decisive narrative of what has happened: did Pacino kill his partner accidentally or intentionally?

A veil of uncertainty will remain. Ethics thus cannot have the absolute character of divine commands or of the precepts of totalizing lay moralities. And yet, in spite of all this, it participates in the manufacture of our identitarian coordinates, and it continues to serve us as a compass. Not to tell us exactly what we must do, but to help us to orient ourselves.

Is this a matter of a radical immanence against any transcendence? Such would be the conclusion of Daniel Colson's anarchism, with its Nietzschean and Deleuzian inspiration: "Anarchism refuses any distinction between good and evil, these two prescriptive categories inevitably referring to a transcendent authority [...] In place of good and evil, anarchism opposes what is good or bad for a given being in a given situation. [...] The good and the bad are thus entirely immanent to the experience of these beings."<sup>28</sup> I do not believe that this is really the path of questioning upon which Nolan's film sets us. Our values are quite immanent, born merely of our human world, but they function as benchmarks, a little above our heads, as if they were transcendent; the "as if" indicating their human fragility. We deal in relative transcendences, radiating the Filtered Enlightenment of a reason which has broken away from the banks of omniscience.

### **Agnostic melancholy**

Militant atheism holds the attraction of conquest and reconquest vis-à-vis the periodic returns of the religious and their repeated encroachments on our unstable public spaces. It has the disadvantage, however, of continuing to inscribe itself within the registers of final certainty and belief, through the negation of the existence of gods and the fight for unbelief. The agnostic, more carefully, recognizes a degree of undecidability and tries to bracket the register of belief. Protagoras (ca. 492-422 BCE), a democrat quite wrongfully accused of the crime of "sophism" by Plato and Aristotle, gives agnosticism one of its first formulations: "Concerning the gods, I have no means of knowing whether they exist or not or of what sort they may be. Many things prevent knowledge including the obscurity of the subject and the brevity of human life."<sup>29</sup> Protagoras thus withdraws from the arena in which believers and unbelievers fight, while avoiding infesting our debates with divine entities. For in this world, which is the only world which concerns him, "man is the measure of all things."

This agnosticism may then present a melancholy aspect in its consciousness of human fragility and that which escapes it. The bomb-strapped chests of divine and laically-divine totalisms give way to the gentle balancing of a teenage slow dance, under the modest illumination of a Filtered Enlightenment...

## Notes

1. On the problematic of relative transcendences and Filtered Enlightenment, see my books *La société de verre – Pour une éthique de la fragilité* (Armand Colin, 2002) and *Les grands penseurs de la politique* (Armand Colin, 2005).
2. In *La Totalité*, volume 3: *La philosophie*, Champ Valon, 2000, 1002 pages.
3. Ibid, 17.
4. Ibid, 8.
5. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans J. Sibree (Kitchener, Ontario, Canada: Batoche Books, 2001) 70.
6. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, ed. and trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 33.
7. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-sense* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964) 81.
8. *De la Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église* (Paris: Fayard, 1998) 1.35.
9. *Théorie de la propriété* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997) 206.
10. Proudhon, *The Principle of Federation*, trans. Richard Vernon (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979).
11. Daniel Colson, *Petit lexique philosophique de l'anarchisme de Proudhon à Deleuze* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 2001) 27.
12. Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, trans. Joseph Bien (London: Heinemann, 1974).
13. Ibid., 20.
14. Ibid., 104.
15. Ibid., 206.
16. Ibid., 5.
17. Ibid., 231.
18. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: M. Nijhoff Publishers, 1979) 22.
19. Lévinas, *De la phénoménologie de l'éthique, entretien avec R. Kearney* (1981), *Espirit* 234 (July 1997): 125.
20. Ibid., 139.
21. *On Escape (De l'évasion)*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2003).
22. Ibid., 50.
23. In *Time and the Other and Additional Essays*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1987).
24. *Time and the Other* 90.
25. Ibid., 82.
26. In *Penser l'utopie autrement*, in Cahier de l'Herne, *Emmanuel Lévinas* (1st ed.: 1991), (LGF Livre de Poche, 1993), 578-579.
27. Remake of Norwegian film of the same title by Erik Skjoldbjærg (1997).
28. Op. cit., 50-51.
29. In *Les écoles présocratiques*, ed. Jean-Paul Dumont (Paris: Gallimard, coll. Folio-essais, 1991) 680.



30. Ibid., 678.