

The “Unhappy Consciousness”. A Paradigm of Reason’s Speculative Power



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Abstract: One way to address the question concerning the nature of reason consists in inquiring rational anxieties such as the tension between changeable and unchangeable. The yearning of the particular towards the universal, the iterative, interminable quest of the thinking is namely something which seems to be proper of many systems of classical German philosophy (but not only). In this paper I want to consider this problematic focusing on the figure of the unhappy consciousness which is perhaps the clearest expression of this tension and use it to approach Hegel’s account on speculative reason. After recalling – in the first section – the figures which precede the unhappy consciousness, I will address the question concerning the historicity and universality of the development of the consciousness, asking if it is the case that the unhappy consciousness belongs only to a particular historical age (and needs specific historical preconditions) or if it expresses a general feature of reason or of human experience. In the second and the third sections, namely, I will try to defend this second interpretation by showing that the unhappy consciousness not only is central in Hegel’s system and is re-echoed in several figures of the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* but it is also central in other philosophical systems. For instance, as I will show in the fourth section, Kant’s ethical thinking could be read under the light of the unhappy consciousness, whose unsatisfied yearning towards the universal is the expression and source of the speculative or metaphysical thinking.

Keywords: Unhappy consciousness; moral Law; speculative reason; religion; Hegel; Kant.

I. From Lordship and Bondage to Scepticism

To better understand the unhappy consciousness, I will recall the stages that precede it within the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*.¹

The dialectic of lordship and bondage ends with the introduction of the freedom of the self-consciousness, which is then developed in the figures of stoicism, scepticism and finally the unhappy consciousness. More specifically, stoicism is the step in which

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Citations to Kant will be made on the basis of the Akademie-Textausgabe (abbr. AA) by volume and page (for instance, AA I, 1–2; 3–4). English quotations will be edited according to the Cambridge edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, except for the *Critique of Pure Reason* where citations will use the standard A/B edition pagination (for instance, CPR, A 709/B 737).

the consciousness finds shelter in the realm of the thinking, where it does not matter if the subject is on the throne or in fetters (Hegel 2018, 118; orig. 117). This freedom, however, is not actual: it is not experienced in the praxis but is rather only a thought: the external world, namely, remains indifferent to the subject, who is withdrawn into itself. This indifference to the world must then be overcome by a new attitude towards reality – scepticism – in which the consciousness is not detached from the world, but engaged with it. The subject, then, experiences freedom by negating all kinds of determinations; but in this movement of continuous dispersion, the self-consciousness, solely, persists. This persistence, however, does not mean rest: scepticism, namely, comes to be identified by absolute inquietude and restlessness (Hegel 2018, 125; orig. 123), caused by the inner rupture between the empirical world – of which the subject is still part of – and the inner abstract identity of the consciousness with itself (Hegel 2018, 125–126; orig. 124–125). This absolute laceration constitutes the unhappy consciousness.

Now, describing stoicism, we can find expressions suggesting a defence of the interpretation of the *Phenomenology* in a rigid historical sense, such as:

However, stoicism is the freedom which always immediately leaves servitude and returns back into the pure universality of thought. As a universal form of the world-spirit, it can only come on the scene during a time of universal fear and servitude but which is also a time of universal cultural formation that has raised culturally formative activity all the way up to the heights of thinking (Hegel 2018, 118–119; orig. 118).

Nevertheless, other passages support a different, a-historical interpretation. For instance, in the dialectic of lordship and bondage, Hegel writes in one of the comments: “This subjugation of the slave’s egotism forms the beginning of true human freedom. This quaking of the single, isolated will, the feeling of the worthlessness of egotism, the habit of obedience, is a necessary moment in the education of all men” (Hegel 1971, 342). Besides, further in the text, there are hints supporting the thesis that subjugation is always a possibility, no matter which is the stage of development of the consciousness. For instance, discussing religion, Hegel states that it: “includes within it the form which we found in the case of immediate self-consciousness, the form of lord and master, in regard to the self-consciousness of spirit which retreats from its object” (Hegel 1971, 699). This dialectical relation of lordship and bondage expresses namely a religious attitude, which, in Hegel’s interpretation, characterises oriental religions (Hebraism and Islam). As it is stressed in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*: “Now finitude of the will characterizes the Orientals, because with them the will has not yet grasped itself as universal, for thought is not yet free for itself. Hence there can but be the relation of lord and slave, and in this despotic sphere fear constitutes the ruling category” (Hegel 1997, 299). It seems, therefore, that there are textual reasons to support a historical interpretation of the development of the spirit, as well as to regard at least some figures (such as *Lordship and Bondage*) as being possible development of the consciousness at any time.

II. The Unhappy Consciousness

The unhappy consciousness is not a topic exclusive of the *Phenomenology* for Hegel. Already in his early theological writings, Hegel was occupied in characterising the Greek ancient world as the happy one and the Hebraic and Christian as unhappy. While the former, namely, lived in harmony with nature, the latter developed a reflection out of nature, thus breaking the unity. Abraham is the champion of this movement: he is uprooted as a stranger on earth, who abandoned the parents' shelter, being unable to love again (Hegel 1907, 371). To love, namely, means to be in a state of unity, in which the infinite is immanent in the finite. When we love, we experience the unity with our beloved, with nature, with our work, thus being in a relationship with an infiniteness that touches our finitude (Hyppolite 2005, 232–235). But the power of reflection breaks with this unity: god, to Abraham, is conceived as beyond the finitude, as the infinite and sublime², which is and must remain out of reach. In contrast to stoicism, in Hebraism, the thought of the consciousness is the thought of its finitude in front of god – the negation of the finitude –, while in stoicism the consciousness discovers itself as divine, as free within itself.

The first figure of the unhappy consciousness, opposed to stoicism, is namely the *wandelbar* consciousness in front of the immutable [*das Unwandelbare*]; the second concerns early Christianity, i.e., the stage in which the unchangeable becomes individual via the incarnation; the third one, finally, is historically exemplified by medieval and modern Christianity, where a new kind of religious consciousness, which is committed with the world, emerges:

However, in this movement consciousness experiences this very emergence of singular individuality in the unchangeable and the emergence of the unchangeable in singular individuality. (...) However, to itself, this unity becomes at first itself the sort of unity in which the difference of both is still dominant. As a result, what is present for consciousness is the threefold way in which singular individuality is bound up with the unchangeable. At one time, it comes forth again, to itself, as opposed to the unchangeable essence, and it is thrown back to the beginning of the struggle, which remains the element of the whole relationship. However, at another time, for consciousness the unchangeable itself has in itself singular individuality such that singular individuality is a shape of the unchangeable into which the entire way of existing moves over. At a third time, consciousness finds itself to be this singular individuality within the unchangeable (Hegel 2018, 125; orig. 123).

As already stated, the figure of the unchangeable exemplifies Hebraism, in which the essence of the consciousness is unreachable, absolutely beyond itself. This break, this unhappiness, leads the consciousness to strive to reach the unreachable, which makes itself existent in a paradoxical way, by entering into the singularity. In the image of Christ, the unchangeable is no longer transcendent, but embodied in a figure [*Gestalt*], in which eternity and history are immediately united. The problem, however, is that this is only an immediate unity: the unchangeable, once figured in a singularity, becomes sensible i.e., it

² In a similar sense, Kant regards Judaism (and Islam) as a religion of the sublime (AA V, 275).

must die. The transcendent, namely, must remain as such and the hope to be at one with it, this absolute hope, must remain unsatisfied so that it can preserve its essence:

It is through the unchangeable taking shape that the moment of the other-worldly beyond has not only lasted but has become even more securely fixed, for if, on the one hand, the other-worldly beyond seems to be brought closer to the singular individual by this shape of singular actuality, then it is, on the other hand, henceforth opposed to it as an opaque sensuous One possessing all the aloofness of something actual. The hope of coming to be at one with it must remain a hope, which is to say, it must remain without fulfilment, without ever being present. Between the hope and the fulfilment stands the absolute contingency or immovable indifference which lies in the shape itself, or in the very basis of the hope. Through the nature of this existing One, or through the actuality it has taken on, it necessarily happens that in time it has disappeared, and, having once existed, it remains spatially utterly distant (Hegel 2018, 126; orig. 124).

This distance is what characterises the consciousness as unhappy, inessential [*unwesentliches Bewußtsein*]: a never-ending fight to achieve unity with itself, with its essence, which, however, remains out of the reach. Then, once that God is dead – “It is the loss of substance as well as of the self, the pain that expresses itself in the harsh phrase that God is dead” (Hegel 2018, 431; orig. 401) – the consciousness, in the form of the inner heart, lives the pure feeling of the unity and this is not merely an abstract unity concerning concepts, but rather an experience. Guided by the strength of this *Sehnsucht* and *Andacht* (a devotion deprived of the thought – *denken* – of its object), the disciples become crusades, whose quest, however, lead them to nothing more than a void sepulchre. The consciousness cannot find the immutable it was longing to, because this is not in the world any more.

After facing the “grave of its life,” the consciousness learns then that the search must go on in another direction, not outside, but within itself:

while consciousness has learned from experience that the grave of its actual unchangeable essence has no actuality, that the vanished singular individuality as vanished is not true individuality, it will give up searching for the unchangeable singular individuality as actual, or it will cease trying to hold on to it as something that has vanished. Only then is it for the first time capable of finding singular individuality as genuine, or as universal (Hegel 2018, 128; orig. 126).

The consciousness, then, finds itself as a desiring [*Begierde*] and labouring one. After the incarnation and Christ’s sacrifice, the world became a trace, a figure of God. Wine and bread are no more only wine and bread because the sensible world is now a sacred one: all empirical reality becomes the symbol of the unchangeable, or, in other words, a gift to mankind from God.

As a consequence, the consciousness believes to act spontaneously, but its actions, powers, attitudes actually derive from grace solely: all strength and capacities are given from a power out of the reach of the consciousness. Here, the motive of the dialectic of lordship and bondage appears again but the difference is that the consciousness recognises its dependence on God, i.e., the communion with the divine (Hyppolite 2005,

257). The believer recognises that his humiliation is at the same time the highest point of his self-consciousness and this awareness leads to the practice of ascetism. Knowing his nullity, the ascetic, in opposition to the stoic, will not conduce his inner life in a state of abstract freedom and proud thought, but rather in the misery of the condition caused by the awareness of enmity which inhabits each soul. The consciousness continually sees itself as polluted, and: “What we see here is only a personality limited to itself and its own petty acts; we see a brooding personality, as unhappy as it is impoverished” (Hegel 2018, 132; orig. 129). But then, at the very moment of its deepest misery, the negative relationship with the unchangeable assumes a positive meaning:

However, in both the feeling of its unhappiness and in the poverty of its acts, consciousness just as much binds itself to its unity with the unchangeable. For the attempted immediate annihilation of its actual being is mediated through the thought of the unchangeable, and it takes place within this relation. The mediated relation constitutes the essence of the negative movement in which this consciousness directs itself against its singular individuality, but which as a relation, is likewise positive in itself and will engender its unity for this consciousness itself (Hegel 2018, 132; orig. 129).

The individual has at his disposal a mediating access to God: the Church. In this way, the consciousness annihilates itself and commits sacrifices for the universality: in the sacraments, the acceptance of dogmas and practice of worship, the consciousness leaves apart its own will and rejects to choose by itself, losing its independence. By doing what it does not understand, it purges its unhappiness, because it loses its individuality: it does not act by itself anymore, but rather it is the universal that acts in it (Hegel 2018, 133–134; orig. 130–131). But this, as already stated, does not happen through the consciousness itself but through a third, a mediator: “Hence, for consciousness, its will becomes universal will, a will existing in itself, although, to itself, it itself is not this will in-itself” (Hegel 2018, 134; orig. 131). Consequently, the consciousness remains parted [*gebrochene Gewißheit*, *ibid.*] within in itself the doing of an individual subject becomes its inverse, namely an absolute doing; but for the consciousness itself its actual doing remains impoverished and the sublation [*das Aufgehobensein*] of its sorrows is postponed to the afterlife:

Its enjoyment in consumption remains sorrowful, and the sublation of these in any positive sense continues to be postponed to an otherworldly beyond. However, within this object, its doing and its being as this singularly individual consciousness is, to itself, being and doing in itself. Thus, within this object, the representational thought of reason has, to itself, come to be. This is the representational thought of the certainty for this consciousness that it is absolutely in itself within its singular individuality, or it is its certainty of being all reality (Hegel 2018, 134–135; orig. 131).

The mediation between the individual and the unchangeable takes place thanks to a middle term, that putting the two into relation is the consciousness of their unity, i.e., reason, even if only at the immediate stage of the idealism.

Now, the unhappy consciousness has gone through a threefold movement, that can

be described as follows: first, the subject finds itself in opposition to the unchangeable (the kingdom of the father, where God is the only lord and judge); second, the unchangeable makes itself existent (the kingdom of the son); and, finally, there is the conciliation of the singularity and the universality (the kingdom of the spirit) (see Hyppolite 2005, 244). Again, here one could regard this movement as resembling a particular historical time (in this case, Medieval Christianity). However, recent interpreters read it as being more or not only, a historical stage of the development of the Spirit in Hegel's *Phenomenology*: it describes a problematic that inhabits all the stages of the phenomenology or, more generally, it refers to a universal human experience. Baille, translating the text into English, was aware of this ambiguity: "The background of historical material [for the unhappy consciousness] is found in the religious life of the Middle Ages and the mental attitude assumed under the dominion of the Roman Catholic Church and the Feudal Hierarchy" even though: "these are merely instances of an experience found in all mankind" (Hegel 1971, 241).

Here, again, it is Hegel himself who comes to define a figure of the *Phenomenology* as something which is not necessarily related to a historical moment. One thing, namely, is to assert that there are historical events which are most exemplar or well defined by referring to a figure of the development of the consciousness; one other is to state that such a figure can be found and is possible in these and only these historical orders. To provide more arguments on the thesis according to which the unhappy consciousness is paradigmatic and not bound to a precise historical period, I will focus on its occurrences within the *Phenomenology*.

III. Echoes of the Unhappy Consciousness within the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*

The first figure which resembles the universal yearning characteristic of the unhappy consciousness is the *Begierde*, which, as abovementioned, is included in one figure of the unhappy consciousness, too.

As Hyppolite stresses, *Begierde* can be translated only with great difficulties because appetite, on the one hand, is too much related to sensibility and makes it difficult to understand the further spiritual development of it; desire, on the other hand, is too related to the experience of the loss of an object that once existed and is no longer here. In contrast to this, *Begierde* is much closer to Stendhal's connotation of a progressive construction or crystallization to which the object cannot pre-exist (Hyppolite 2005, 192). It is a kind of primordial conatus or *Begehrungsvermögen* which determines the first stage of the movement of the self-consciousness, namely life. The impulse to, of, and for life is movement: there is life, where there is movement. More specifically, this is the movement of the needy subject. It is not a mere experience of absence, but a need that is one and the same with the activity generated by a lack. And this lack is already a relation

to what is lacking:

lack is not the simple emptiness (...) it is the activity of a lack. The subject of this activity is thus divided in himself by himself: he subsists as needy precisely because he has in himself the negative imprint of what he lacks. In fact, nothing could positively entertain a relationship with anything other than himself if he did not already possess in himself the possibility of this relationship itself (Chiereghin 2008, 86; trans. L.S.).

But not every kind of object is susceptible to this relation: in the world of nature, for instance, there are necessary rules according to which only some objects can satisfy the appetite. In the realm of spirit, differently, the self-consciousness will forge through freedom its objects. Still, there is one common feature that characterises all these movements: the fact that this striving is never-ended. Even if once satisfied, the appetite will come again. Even if a consciousness has been recognised once, it will long for this recognition again and again. The relationship between the needy subject and the object, namely, cannot be satisfied once for all and this is the core and meaning of life, both in its natural and spiritual dimensions.

Furthermore, there are at least two more occurrences of the unhappiness of the consciousness in the *Phenomenology*, which deserves attention. The first concerns the beautiful soul, which, at first, embodies Schiller’s description of a happy soul in which nature and freedom, moral law and instinct find a conciliation (e.g., Schiller 1793; Goethe 1795–1796). The consciousness is here contemplative, rather than active: it finds within itself an aesthetic and divine voice, i.t. the universal. But this consciousness, insofar as it does not engage in the world, it does not act, escapes its destiny and becomes a prisoner of its own intact inner pureness, vanishing and losing its actuality:

Nor does it have existence, for what is objective does not arrive at being a negative of the actual self, just as this self does not arrive at actuality. It lacks the force to relinquish itself, lacks the force to make itself into a thing and to sustain being. It lives with the anxiety that it will stain the splendor of its innerness through action and existence. Thus, to preserve the purity of its heart, it flees from contact with actuality (...) The hollow object which it generates to itself it thus now fills only with the consciousness of emptiness. It is a yearning which only loses itself as it becomes an essenceless object, and as it goes beyond this loss and then falls back on itself, it only finds itself as lost. – In this transparent purity of its moments it becomes an unhappy, so-called beautiful soul, and its burning embers gradually die out, and, as they do, the beautiful soul vanishes like a shapeless vapor dissolving into thin air (Hegel 2018, 354–355; trans. 380–381).

The second occurrence concerns that part of the *Phenomenology* which is devoted to religion. Here Hegel states that the unhappy consciousness is the condition of the revelation:

These forms³, and, on the other side of the coin, the world of the person and legal right, the devastating savagery of the content’s elements cast out into free-standing status, as well as both the person of stoicism as it has been thought

³ Hegel refers here to the cycle of the productions of art which embraces the absolute substance’s forms of self-relinquishing.

and the untenable disquiet of scepticism, all constitute the periphery of those shapes, which, expectantly and with urgency, stand around the birthplace of spirit becoming self-consciousness, and they have as their focal point the all-permeating pain and yearning of the unhappy self-consciousness and the communal birth pangs of its emergence, – the simplicity of the pure concept, which contains those shapes as its moments (Hegel 2018, 480; orig. 403).

The entire loss of the self, the pain expressed in the “harsh phrase that God is dead” (Hegel 2018, 478; orig. 401) is presupposed in revelation because the individual, in order to comprehend the absolute, must have a capacity to recognise and welcome it. This comprehension occurs in the form of the yearning and pain which constitutes the unhappiness of the consciousness.

Hegel seems to assume that in human nature there is a necessity, *Bedürfnis*, to know the divine: “earth has a religious need” stated Wahl interpreting these passages (Wahl 1951, 22). If the object to be known is absolute, then there must be a universal capacity to recognise it as such (Burbidge 1970, 75) and this is a phenomenon that characterises religious experiences such as Hebraism, Islam, Buddhism as well as the general sense of void, caused by the disappointment and acknowledgement that the political and spiritual convincement that the world is progressing has failed. The “age of anxiety” (Dodds 1965), which characterises the period between Marcus Aurelius and Constantine, defined by material and spiritual insecurity, is still here. Perhaps this is always been the case. At least, for sure, when historical events come to contribute to feeding this feeling of loss and lack of security, human vulnerability appears in its strength. Perhaps we found ourselves in a moment in history in which we should no more be ashamed to show this vulnerability, this unhappiness because this is at the same time our best resource to stand up and re-create human bonds. This dynamic can be seen already in Kant, who wrote in the *Conjectural Beginning of Human History*:

Refusal was the first artifice for leading from the merely sensed stimulus over to ideal ones, from merely animal desire gradually over to love, and with the latter from the feeling of the merely agreeable over to the taste for beauty, in the beginning only in human beings but then, however, also in nature (Kant, AA VIII, 113).

It is because of our fragility and the uncertainty in representing and expecting the future that we can mature and establish a solid bond with each other. It is easily seen, for instance, that one starts to trust the other, to feel nearness to him, once that he reveals his limits and frailty. Paradoxically, if one follows Hegel’s perspective, vulnerability can be regarded as the other side or a necessary premise of greatness: once acknowledged that we are given the eyes and the heart to perceive this all-permeating yearning to the infinite, we find ourselves in the position to *be* this unchangeable absolute. I do not mean here this in an idealistic-solipsistic sense, but in a critical, Fichtean one: negations, losses, defeats challenge us to go beyond boundaries we considered fixed.

IV. Kant’s Ethical Struggle as Unhappy Consciousness

Hegel was not the first to recognise the division within the subjectivity which causes its unhappiness as a universal condition. Before him, Kant makes a similar claim concerning his analysis of moral consciousness. The first part of the *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* opens with a pessimistic vision, which anchors itself to the experience of human inadequacy in front of the law. There is a radical tendency, a propensity to evil, which corrupts the grounds of our maxims. More specifically, Kant defines the propensity (*propensio*) as a subjective ground for the contingent possibility of a habitual desire (*inclinatio*):

He is evil by nature« simply means that being evil applies to him considered in his species; not that this quality may be inferred from the concept of his species ([i.e.] from the concept of a human being in general, for then the quality would be necessary), but rather that, according to the cognition we have of the human being through experience, he cannot be judged otherwise, in other words, we may presuppose evil as subjectively necessary in every human being, even the best. Now, since this propensity must itself be considered morally evil, hence not a natural predisposition but something that a human being can be held accountable for, consequently must consist in maxims of the power of choice contrary to the law and yet, because of freedom, such maxims must be viewed as accidental, a circumstance that would not square with the universality of the evil at issue unless their supreme subjective ground were not in all cases somehow entwined with humanity itself and, as it were, rooted in it: so we can call this ground a natural propensity to evil, and, since it must nevertheless always come about through one’s own fault, we can further even call it a radical innate evil in human nature (not any the less brought upon us by ourselves) (Kant, AA VI, 32).

As Kant puts it, the propensity to evil belongs even to the best human being as “a subjective determining ground of the power of choice that precedes every deed, and hence is itself not yet a deed” (Kant, AA VI, 31). How can this necessity be understood?

To Kant one must distinguish: first, the propensity to evil as “original deed” [*peccatum originarium*] insofar as it concerns a use of freedom through which the supreme maxim against the law is or can be adopted – it is the formal ground of every deed contrary to the law –; second, as vice [*peccatum derivativum*], i.e., as a deed that resists the law empirically. The former is intelligible (cognizable through reason alone), the latter sensible [*factum phaenomenon*], the former cannot be eradicated, the latter may be avoided. It is true that Kant states that the propensity to evil is a universal feature of our species (Kant, AA VI, 25; 30–33) and it cannot be eradicated (AA VI, 31). However, this natural propensity is not defined as a strict or objectively necessary one, rather as subjectively necessary (AA VI, 32), i.e., it is not being inferred from the concept of a human being in general (AA VI, 32). In this sense, we could argue that the propensity to evil is not implied in the concept of a human being analytical, i.e., as if it were a necessary property of the concept without which it would not be the same, but rather more as a postulated condition. There is, namely, a distinction between propensity [*Hang*] which affects the *Willkür* but not the *Wille*, i.e., practical reason wanting the moral Law in toto)

and *Gesinnung* to evil, i.e., a moral disposition wanting necessarily and sufficiently only the evil and which is not bounded to the moral Law: Kant does not argue that human beings are necessarily morally evil. For if that were so, then the possibility of a change of heart would be lost and it would make no sense to question the morality of our maxims.

Then the propensity to evil logically and causally precedes each moral disposition [*Gesinnung*], even though they do seem to converge once we choose the propensity as a general rule within our *Gesinnung*. But this convergence is produced through an act of will whereby a proper practical principle (the moral Law) is installed within our will. From this perspective, then, radical evil (AA VI, 57) could be interpreted as a condition of possibility of the moral life, “virtue is a struggle” (Weil 1970, 148; trans. L.S.). Without inclinations, there would be no struggle to determine our will in accordance with the moral Law and consequently no moral life:

The human being must make or have made himself into whatever he is or should become in a moral sense, good or evil. These two [characters] must be an effect of his free power of choice, for otherwise they could not be imputed to him and, consequently, he could be neither morally good nor evil. If it is said, the human being is created good, this can only mean nothing more than: He has been created for the good and the original predisposition in him is good; the human being is not thereby good as such, but he brings it about that he becomes either good or evil, according as he either incorporates or does not incorporate into his maxims the incentives contained in that predisposition (and this must be left entirely to his free choice) (Kant, AA VI, 44).

In other words, assuming the *factum* of the moral Law in its imperative form, we have at the same time to assume that there is something that leads us to different directions from the Law. It is because of this necessity of our thinking, that we must assume the doctrine of radical evil. In a similar way, in which reason has the natural and unavoidable tendency to go beyond the limits of experience, thus causing fallacies and cognitive errors, so the will has a natural propensity to evil, but both can and should be corrected and for this, they can never be total, absolute:

(...) the Law is always binding the subject and somehow implied in the maxims. The ground of this evil can also not be placed (2) in a corruption of the morally legislative reason, as if reason could extirpate within itself the dignity of the law itself, for this is absolutely impossible (Kant, AA VI, 35).

As a result, a situation of moral struggle rises in which it is left to the subject to choose to reverse the moral order or to strive for adequate the maxims to the categorical imperative.

This Kantian formulation of the unhappy consciousness has a philosophical positive aspect, in a similar way as in Hegel’s perspective: if there is a struggle and the law must be always legislative, the individual is always already also at least in relation to the universal. If he must, he can. The will, namely, is always bounded to reason and even when it prefers other motives to it, it cannot be absolutely (necessarily and sufficiently) determined by them. This determines the duty to respect every human because and the predisposition

to the good. As Kant puts it in the *Metaphysik der Sitten* [The Metaphysics of Morals], we have

a duty to respect a human being even in the logical use of his reason, a duty not to censure his errors by calling them absurdities, poor judgment and so forth, but rather to suppose that his judgment must yet contain some truth and to seek this out, uncovering, at the same time, the deceptive illusion (...) The same thing applies to the censure of vice, which must never break out into complete contempt and denial of any moral worth to a vicious human being; for on this supposition he could never be improved, and this not consistent with the idea of a human being, who as such (as a moral being) can never lose entirely his predisposition to the good (AA VI, 463–464).

By distinguishing between the original predisposition to good in human nature and the propensity to evil, Kant rejects a deterministic account of good and evil. Even if we are subjected to inclinations, these are not in themselves evil and are never sufficient to determine our decisions:

by “the nature of a human being” we only understand here the subjective ground wherever it may lie – of the exercise of the human being’s freedom in general (under objective moral laws) antecedent to every deed that falls within the scope of the senses. But this subjective ground must, in turn, itself always be a deed of freedom (for otherwise the use or abuse of the human being’s power of choice with respect to the moral law could not be imputed to him, nor could the good or evil in him be called “moral”). Hence the ground of evil cannot lie in any object determining the power of choice through inclination, not in any natural impulses, but only in a rule that the power of choice itself produces for the exercise of its freedom, i.e., in a maxim (Kant, AA VI, 21).

When we describe human nature as being good or evil, then, we actually characterise not human nature in itself, rather the grounds which determine our maxims. Kant, namely, assumes a so-called rigoristic position: although human beings determine and adopt a variety of maxims at different times and situations, each of these maxims must have one supreme ground according to which the dispositions involved are hierarchal organised (subsumed). Contrary to this is syncretism, i.e., the assumption of different grounds – not hierarchical organised – for the maxims. Then, according to Kant’s rigorism, even if the supreme ground of the determination of the will in the maxims is hardly graspable with clarity, such a supreme ground must be presupposed:

The disposition, i.e. the first subjective ground of the adoption of the maxims, can only be a single one, and it applies to the entire use of freedom universally. This disposition too, however, must be adopted through the free power of choice, for otherwise it could not be imputed. But there cannot be any further cognition of the subjective ground or the cause of this adoption (although we cannot avoid asking about it), for otherwise we would have to adduce still another maxim into which the disposition would have to be incorporated, and this maxim must in turn have its ground. Hence, since we cannot derive this disposition, or rather its highest ground, from a first act of the power of choice in time, we call it a characteristic of the power of choice that pertains to it by nature (even though the disposition is in fact grounded in freedom). However, that by the “human being” of whom we say that he is good or evil by nature we are entitled to understand not individuals (for otherwise one human being could be assumed to be good, and another evil, by nature) but the whole species (Kant, AA VI, 35).

Some interpreters (Wahl 1951; Salvetti 2014) have seen the Kantian moral consciousness as a figure of the Hegelian unhappy consciousness even if there are some significant differences: the moral Law, firstly, is not a transcendent divine but rather could be identified with reason itself and secondly, in Kant there is never a moment of sublation [*Aufhebung*] and the adequacy of real and ideal remains a telos, a state that has to be given (Wahl 1951, 54–70; Salvetti 2014, 75). The law, a perfect moral consciousness, adequate to the Law, remains ideal: here is no perfect adequacy between the maxims and the categorical imperative. Therefore, Kant's ethics is similar to Judaism⁴: even if the origin of the law is different (reason in one case, God in the other one), the kind of relation established between the individual consciousness and the law is the same.⁵

This leads us to highlight a tension in interpreting Kant's position towards Judaism. On the one hand, namely, he states that the only moral religion is Christianity, but on the other hand, his conception of the moral Law and its purity resembles the Judaic tradition. Schopenhauer saw this analogy and pointed out:

Kant, be it observed, ridiculed all empirical stimuli of the will, and began by removing everything, whether subjective or objective, on which a law determining the will's action could be empirically based. The consequence is, that he has nothing left for the substance of his law but simply its Form. Now this can only be the abstract conception of lawfulness. But the conception of lawfulness is built up out of what is valid for all persons equally. Therefore, the substance of the law consists of the conception of what is universally valid, and its contents are of course nothing else than its universal validity. Hence the formula will read as follows: "Act only in accordance with that precept which you can also wish should be a general law for all rational beings." This, then, is the real foundation – for the most part so greatly misunderstood – which Kant constructed for his principle of Morals, and therefore for his whole ethical system (Schopenhauer 1903, 60–61 [Schopenhauer, SW IV, 141]).

Concluding Remarks

Through this article I do not want to provide a conclusive demonstration in favour of the universalistic interpretation of all figures from Hegel's dialectic but rather to focus on the unhappy consciousness, interpreting it as being exemplar to understand Hegel's conception of what reason might be, in its relation between history and spirit, contingent and universal dimensions.

Both Hegel and Kant are confronted with a separation in reason within itself but have two different ways to approach this problematic. Kant, namely, who was tormented by the antinomic reasonings, admits:

⁴ More specifically, this analogy regards Islam, too. Both Judaism and Islam (and Christianity after the death of Christ), regard the relation between individuals and God as an absolute difference. This interpretation can be found not only in Hegel's texts (e.g., Hegel 1925–1929, XIII 91), but also in Kant's works (for instance, Kant, AA V, 274–375).

⁵ Besides, Hegel interprets Fichte's system in a similar way as he regards Judaism and Kant's ethics: it is, namely, condemned to remain a state of need, governed by abstraction and separation (Wahl 1951, 69).

It was not the investigation of die existence of God, immortality, and so on, but rather the antinomy of pure reason – “The world has a beginning; it has no beginning, and so on, right up to the 4th [sic]: There is freedom in man, vs. there is no freedom, only die necessity of nature” – that is what first aroused me from my dogmatic slumber and drove me to the critique of reason itself, in order to resolve the scandal of ostensible contradiction of reason with itself (Kant, AA XII, 258).

Kant’s solution to this struggle of reason within itself is the following: on the one hand, there is a capacity to reveal the illusion which leads reason to those metaphysical statements and then be freed from those conflicts; on the other hand, metaphysics remains an unavoidable need for reason, which is characterised by features that are the very sources of the metaphysical tendency.⁶

Hegel, by introducing his speculative account on reason, regards this antinomic character as being constitutive of both the movements of the thinking and the being (cf. Scaravelli 1976). This dialectical movement of reason and reality has an origin which is not logical in an abstract sense, but rather affective, intuitive: “At the origin of this doctrine which presents itself as a concatenation of concepts, there is a sort of mystical intuition and affective warmth” (Wahl 1951, 6; trans. L.S.). In Hegel’s system, reason is not treated as the subject and object of an analysis aiming at answering fundamental questions such as: “1. What can I know? 2. What should I do? 3. What may I hope?” (Kant, CPR, A805/B833). Hegel’s perspective, his method and conception of reason have changed radically from Kant’s approach: even if, one could say, the starting point is still experience, the profound aim has changed. It consists no more in the determination of the possibility of objective experience in a theoretical, critical sense, but rather in speculative thinking, namely an inquiry on reason in its being theory and history. Within this perspective, the unhappy consciousness provides an exemplar interpretative standpoint of such a notion of speculative reason. As Wahl puts it:

This presence of the immutable in the individual and of the individual in the immutable has been characterised by Hegel by using the term *Erfahrung*: the way in which the immutable reveals itself is, in fact, an *Erfahrung* of the consciousness, an experience which is tested by the divided consciousness in the course of its misfortune. The revelation of the immutable is born out of this very misfortune and the entire phenomenology is the story of this experience (Wahl 1951, 133; trans. L.S.).

Besides these differences, as shown by the reference to Kant’s moral consciousness, the figure of the unhappy consciousness can open a path to identify a recurrent characteristic of reason, which belongs to different philosophical paradigms, and can be defined by a yearning, a tension between individual and universal dimensions that

⁶ As Willaschek puts it: “On the one hand, the structure of rational thinking is discursive and iterative (...) On the other hand, as rational inquirers we want our questions to come to a satisfactory conclusion, which they can find only in ultimate answers, that is, in answers that do not raise further questions of the same kind. (...) Kant gives us good reason to think that discursivity, iteration and striving for completeness are fundamental features of rational thinking and that, taken together, they give rise to a specific kind of metaphysical speculation” (Willaschek 2018, 1).

provides an impulse to the process of the philosophical thinking.

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