
The Act of Negation: Logical and Ontological

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1.

Are there historical events? Is there historical change? The answer to the question seems obvious: obviously, things are changing. They change constantly, sometimes faster, sometimes more profoundly, but always somehow. But the question is how they change, and whether there are changes of a specifically historical nature.

The concept of history, which is at issue here, gains its meaning through its distinction from nature. Nature and history are accordingly categorically different. At the latest since Darwin (but indeed already since Wolff's theory of the epigenesis and Goethe's doctrine of the metamorphosis of the plants) it is clear that nature and history do not differ in the way that there is change in history and only repetition of the same in nature. Also, in nature everything—the exemplars (according to Goethe) and the species (according to Darwin)—changes constantly and fundamentally. Nevertheless, Hegel (who knew Goethe's experiments on plant metamorphosis well) briefly and simply writes in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: »However, organic nature has no history.«¹ Only the »spirit« has a history. Both nature and spirit are changing; also, (organic, living) nature is essentially »movement, becoming, process« (Alexandre Kojève)—like the spirit. They differ, however, in the way they change. According to Hegel, nature »engender[s] coming-to-be merely as a contingent movement, within which each is active in its parts and the whole is preserved, but within which this vitality is restricted for itself merely to where it reaches its pinnacle.«² Kojève explains this by saying that change in nature is »not creative.« And it is not »because it is not negative [or not »negating«].«³ This is the

¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: *Phenomenology of Spirit*, transl. by Terry Pinkard, Cambridge 2018, p.295. On Hegel's acquaintance with Goethe's investigations on plant metamorphosis see the »historical excursus« in Eckart Förster: *Die 25 Jahre der Philosophie. Eine systematische Rekonstruktion*, Frankfurt am Main 2012, pp.286–289.

² Ibid.

³ »En quoi la Vie diffère-t-elle du Geist? L'être vivant est essentiellement mouvement, devenir, processus. Or Hegel dit la même chose du Geist. Mais le processus vital n'est pas créateur (parce qu'il n'est pas négateur); il aboutit là où il a commencé (de l'œuf à l'œuf).« Alexandre Kojève: *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, Paris 1979, p. 83.

decisive determination. The modern distinction between nature and history is not the distinction between immutability and change, but between one change and the other. And the peculiarity of historical change is that it takes place through negation—while change in nature is »contingent.« This is why history is not the same as »evolution.« Evolution is rather the category of non-distinction between nature and history. To speak of evolution means to say that there is no history (and hence no spirit)—that there is no transformative act of negation.

These are the questions that I will start to discuss in the following pages: What does negation mean here? How must negation be thought if it is to be the principle, or rather the power, of historical change? My thesis will be that this can only be understood if we conceive of negation not just as a logical (a semantic or discursive) operation but rather as an ontological one. As a logical operation, negation refers to determinations that are given in the form of a proposition: One proposition negates another, one determination is the negation of the other. As an ontological operation, on the other hand, negation does not refer to the content, but to the mode of being of a determination (or to the form of the proposition). The logical operation negates *what* a determination says; the ontological operation negates *how* it says it, indeed, how it *is*.

I will discuss this distinction with reference to a question in the field of politics. (This does not carry any conceptual weight; one could discuss the problem with reference to any field.) In the field of politics, the question of historical change refers to the possibility of transformative action. Or it refers to the possibility of revolution; for in politics the counter-concept to evolution—to the idea that change in nature and in history is of the same kind and logic—is revolution. If there is no specifically historical logic and dynamics of change, if the distinction between nature and history is but a modern illusion, then also no revolution is possible; there never actually *has been* a revolution (as liberals from Tocqueville to Furet and sociologists also from Tocqueville to Luhmann alike have claimed). We can thus study the problems of maintaining the difference between natural and historical change by investigating the contemporary crisis of (the concept of) revolution or of radical transformative action. For this crisis does not merely have political reasons, and thus does not merely affect the contemporary state of politics. It rather is the »crisis of negation.«⁴

⁴ The Crisis of Negation. An Interview with Alain Badiou by John Van Houdt, in: *Continent* 1.4 (2011), pp. 234–238. For a helpful reconstruction see Frank Ruda: *For Badiou. Idealism Without Idealism*, Evanston 2015, chapter 3.

2.

The crisis of negation relates to the model of negation which Hegel has called »determinate negation.«⁵ Determinate negation is defined by its difference from »abstract« negation. These two conceptions of negation can be explained by showing their different ways of understanding the principle that all determination means negation.

In abstract negation, this principle states: By determining something in a particular way (i.e. by saying: A is *p*), I negate any other determination. I say: A is »this and nothing else.«⁶ Since by determining something in this way I deny *any* other determination, there is obviously no (specific, substantial) connection between the determination which I claim and the determinations (namely any other) which I deny. The connection between determination and negation is itself indeterminate: it is abstract. That is why according to the model of abstract negation I can also—the other way around—negate any given determination without thereby claiming another one myself. I can assert something without negating something specific; I can negate something, indeed anything, without asserting something specific.

The counter-model of determinate negation claims that the model of abstract negation is in fact an abstract model of negation: The practice of negation, the negation in practice, does not work this way.⁷ If we actually perform an act of negation—viz. in the context of a debate, in a process of investigation, as a tool for education and training—we do not just deny one determination. We state or at least hint at an alternative, true one, and we do this precisely by exposing the proposed determination as being wrong: as the misrepresentation, i.e. the distorted representation of the truth. According to this argument, the negation of a given determination always leads to another determination: »A is not *p*, but rather *q*.« The act of negation mediates between two determinations; it leads from an existing, old one to a new one. As determinate, negation is processual. Determinate negation means innovation: the production of a »new form.«⁸ The determinate negation has a »result.«⁹ And this is so because already the act of negation itself is

⁵ The definition of determinate negation which I give in the following is highly schematic and simplified. I do not claim to represent Hegel's account adequately (and much less Adorno's critical appropriation of it). The aim is to indicate the understanding of negation which is constitutive for the standard account of revolutionary historical transformation.

⁶ Niklas Luhmann: Über die Funktion der Negation in sinnkonstituierenden Systemen, in: Harald Weinrich (ed.): Positionen der Negativität (Poetik und Hermeneutik, vol. VI), München 1975, pp. 201–218: 203 (my translation, C.M.).

⁷ Cf. Josef Simon: Philosophie des Zeichens, Berlin/New York 1989, p. 85.

⁸ Hegel: Phenomenology of Spirit (as note 1), p. 79.

⁹ Ibid.

a result: In determinate negation, »nothingness is only the determinate shape of the nothingness from which it itself has resulted.«¹⁰ The negation is »immanent« to the determination against which it is directed.

The (old) determination *p* which is negated, and the (new) determination *q* which is produced, thus turn out to stand in a more complex relation than the one just being the other of the other. The new determination *q* is produced by the negation of the old determination *p* because *q*—and hence the negation of *p* by *q*—was already implied in *p*. *q* and *p* are asymmetrically related, for *q* is the truth about (or in) *p*, the true form or version of the old determination *p*. In short, the act of determinate negation is an act of transformation. Determinate negation means to turn a determination against itself by means of itself. Determinate negation means self-transformation, a determination becoming its own other. Or it means to detect and unfold the contradiction in a determination. Determinate negation is dialectical.¹¹

3.

The dialectical conception of determinate negation defines the structure of the political idea of revolution. Lenin's conception in *State and Revolution* is a fitting example. According to Lenin, the revolution is the abolishment of the bourgeois state, which is the political form of capitalism, i.e. the rule of the bourgeois class in political form. The revolution is the negation of, the break with, the bourgeois state. At the same time, the revolution is grounded in capacities that the capitalist order (which is expressed and maintained by the bourgeois state) itself has developed: »The development of capitalism, in turn, itself creates the prerequisites that enable indeed all to take part in the administration of the state.«¹² Capitalism only functions through »the ›training and disciplining‹ of millions of workers«¹³; capitalism is a disciplinary regime, and the point of discipline, as Lenin (like Marx and Weber) knows, is not repression, but enablement, competence, and qualification.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ In Hegel's sense of the term: not the resolution (or »reconciliation«) of a contradiction but rather its detection and unfolding.

¹² Vladimir Ilyich Lenin: *The State and Revolution* in Henry M. Christman (ed. and trans.): *Essential Works of Lenin. "What is to be Done?" and Other Writings*, translated by Henry M. Christman, New York, NY 1987, pp. 271–364, p. 347. I am sketching here an argument that is much more complex in order to display the logic of negation that defines the concept of revolution. For details and further references see Christoph Menke: *The Possibility of Revolution*, transl. by Frank Ruda, in: *Crisis & Critique*, vol. 4 (2017), no. 2, pp. 313–321.

¹³ Lenin: *The State and Revolution* (as note 12), p. 347.

In doing this, however, capitalism produces its own other. The revolution is the act by which this becomes manifest. The revolutionary negation *of* capitalism only realizes its as-yet-implicit *self*-negation. It shows that the capitalist discipline which indeed aims at the exploitation of the workers results in enabling them to undertake themselves the organization of labor. This is why the revolution is an act of determinate negation: it turns these capacities and skills against the capitalist discipline that has produced them. The revolutionary negation only unfolds and realizes the self-negation of capitalism.

Ever since Rosa Luxemburg's criticism of Lenin, the problem of this revolutionary model of determinate negation has been described time and again. The criticism states that a revolution that is the determinate negation of the existing order of domination will inevitably only lead to the establishment of a new version of the same domination. In order to ensure the »proximity, easiness, [and] practicability«¹⁴ of the revolution, Lenin identifies the revolutionary subject with the one that has already been produced by capitalist discipline: The revolutionary subject *is* (identical with) the disciplined subject. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that the state that is established by this revolution is engaged in nothing other than the reproduction of its disciplinary basis, the disciplinary subjectivity that grounds it. Just as the revolutionary subject is the disciplined subject, the revolutionary state is the state of discipline. (All of Lenin's texts immediately after the revolution turn around one problem: that of labor-discipline.) Tying the revolution to the dialectical logic of determinate negation grounds it so well in the existing order of domination that the revolution cannot be but its repetition and indeed its intensification.

4.

The conceptually relevant point about the political failure of the classical, Leninist conception of revolution concerns the concept of determinate negation. For determinate negation does not only result in a new determination, it also results from an old determination which it presupposes as much as it dissolves it. The act of determinate negation discovers the new determination as already given in the old determination. In fact, the new determination is produced by (the self-negation of) the old one. The determinate negation depends on what it negates. It is hence not free: it can only transform what already exists or has already been produced (by others and by other means). I will briefly indicate how this dependence of the determinate negation on a presupposed determination manifests it-

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 322.

self in the political case of the revolution. I will then come back to the concept of negation itself.

What must the revolution presuppose (and thus perpetuate instead of changing) in order to be able to carry out its work of negation? According to Lenin's classical model, the revolution opposes capitalism in such a way that it discovers and unfolds its internal contradiction. Further following Lenin, this is the contradiction between the appropriation of organizational power by the bourgeoisie on the one hand and the already existing capacity of the proletariat for the self-organization of its labor, developed by capitalism itself, on the other. The determination which is presupposed in the negation of the bourgeois state is thus the capacity of the proletariat, that is to say, the proletarian subject. According to Lenin, this subject is formed by disciplinary processes. Lenin also says that it is formed by habituation; subject formation is habit formation (or, abilities are habits). This is the presupposition that the revolutionary negation of the bourgeois order makes. It presupposes the formation of the subject by capitalist conditions, or more generally: it presupposes habit—first and foremost, the habits of labor. The revolution relies on the fact that there are subjects who work, who can and want to work, and who have the habit of working. For it is this habit which the revolution invokes—negatively—against the prevailing capitalist conditions.

The presupposition of habit is the fundamental problem of the revolution, the problem on which it fails.¹⁵ It is the fundamental problem of the revolution, because the habit that it must presuppose is at the same time opposed to it. As we have seen, Lenin says this himself: The revolution wants liberation, but the habit on which it is based is the effect of discipline. We can generalize this point. Not only this specific habit on which Lenin wants to base the revolution, but habit as such is disciplinary and unfree. Habit *means* servitude.

This connection holds true from both sides—servitude and habit. Firstly, habit is the way in which servitude, i.e. domination, reproduces itself. Surely, in its beginning, servitude is externally imposed. Servitude is produced in acts of subjection or coercion, by a lord or master. But servitude is reproduced, or rather, servitude reproduces itself, by *being* a servant: by thinking, willing, desiring, and acting like or as a servant, by servitude becoming habitual. But servitude can only become a habit because, secondly, habit itself is internally linked with domination; because habituation *is* domination. The habit of servitude is founded on—it is made possible and reproduced by—the servitude of habit. For a habit is nothing but an externally pre-given social form which the individual has learned to reproduce.

¹⁵ For a first version of the discussion of the negation of habit see Christoph Menke: *The Standstill of Habit: The Beginning of Liberation*, in: Reinhold Goerling, Barbara Gronau and Ludger Schwarte (eds.): *Aesthetics of Standstill*, Berlin/New York (forthcoming).

Aristotle, the theoretician of habit, describes this learning process, the process of habituation and hence of acquiring capacities, in the following way. All learning starts with a paradox: the paradox that we only acquire capacities by already enacting them. Thus, in order to become able to act, we act before we are able to act: »the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g. men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre.«¹⁶ Thus, we learn by doing something that we do not yet know how to do; learning comes about through an activity, without us already having the required abilities. Therefore, in the process of habituation acting has the character of externality. Those who have just begun to learn a language speak »in accordance with the laws of grammar«, but lack »grammatical knowledge in [themselves]« (II.4); they speak something »grammatical« but not »grammatically.« To learn is to repeat externally, mechanically what the other prescribes—like »actors on the stage« (VII.3). Knowledge, i.e. capacity, is neither the ground nor condition of acting, but is the effect of an acting which itself is and functions without knowledge and is hence externally determined and controlled. Habit is the effect of a mechanism. And habit *stays* the effect of a mechanism: it will never entirely overcome (or sublate) its emergence from externality and domination.

This is the dialectic of habit as »spiritual mechanism«: »although, on the one hand, by habit a man becomes free, yet, on the other hand, habit makes him its *slave*.«¹⁷ Habit is liberating (from the power of nature) *and* enslaving (by the powers of the social). And this is not a relation of contradiction—if we understand this according to the dialectical model of determinate negation. The operation of determinate negation consists in opposing a given condition in the name of its own inner other; thereby, the given condition is overcome and transformed into a »new form.« Precisely this is impossible with habit. Habit cannot be negated dialectically; habit is the end of dialectics, the zone where dialectics ends or perishes. For habit cannot be transformed; habit always stays, in an endless, unproductive, uncreative ambiguity, liberating and enslaving at the same time and in the same respect. Habit is beyond (or rather prior to) history. There is, to be sure, an evolution of habit—habit is *the* site of evolution—but there is no revolution of habit possible (that is, as long as we think of revolution in its classical form: as determinate negation. If there is to be a revolution of habit, it has to take an entirely different form; see below, sect. 6.).

¹⁶ Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics*, transl. by David Ross, New York 2009, II.i.

¹⁷ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind*, trans. W. Wallace and A. V. Miller, Oxford 2007, p. 134. Cf. Christoph Menke: *Hegel's Theory of Second Nature: The ›Lapse‹ of Spirit*, in: *Symposium*, Vol. 17 (2013), No. 1, pp. 31–49.

5.

The problem of (the dialectical concept) of revolution is its inability to think historical change. Hegel's thesis was that historical change, in contradistinction from natural change, is negative. I have taken this to mean that it is based on an act of determinate—immanent and productive—negation. Lenin's concept of revolution provides a paradigm for this. But precisely this paradigm case shows that historical change by determinate negation presupposes the un- or pre-historical: the revolution is based on a habit that it does not change, but rather changes on its own (or by itself, like nature). The revolution which performs an act of determinate negation is only an epiphenomenon of evolution as a self-perpetuating, quasi-natural change. History is based on nature (as second nature).

Is this the end of the attempt to think historical change? Or can the historical negation, i.e. the negation that makes history, be understood differently? This means: Can the act of negation be understood in such a way that the negation of habit becomes possible? Can the change of habit itself be changed—from a quasi-natural evolution to its self-conscious, negating historical transformation?

So far, I have distinguished two understandings of negation: abstract and determinate negation. The abstract negation says »no« to a determination and leaves open what other determination it posits; the abstract negation thus opens up the space of other determinations. The determinate negation posits a new determination by unfolding the immanent contradiction in a given, old one. Both models of negation fail at habit. There can neither be an abstract nor a determinate negation of habit. Since habit is as much without alternatives as it is closed, without inner difference which could be turned against it, *in* habit there is neither the possibility of an abstract nor of a determinate negation. You cannot say no to a habit—more precisely: you cannot say no to a habit while in the midst of that habit.

In order to understand the reason for the failure of both abstract and determinate negation at habit, one first needs a better understanding of what negation actually does in both these cases. So far I have only described negation as a logical operation. Logically understood, acts of negation refer to determinations that can be understood as the content of a proposition. Logic, in its classical form, has to do with the relations between propositions. The logical operation of negation is, however, always at the same time an ontological operation: negating is a change in the (way or mode of) being of determinations.

Niklas Luhmann has described this for the abstract model of negation as its »effect of generalization [*Generalisierungsleistung*].« According to its abstract model, negation means saying »A is not this but something else.« Or the other way round (this is Luhmann's formulation): A is »this and nothing else.« »This and nothing else« means: Every determination (every »this«) is taken as the reverse side of the

negation of every other determination and is thus placed—precisely by negating them—in relation to all other determinations. By its negation, all other determinations are not made absent but rather held present »in the semi-darkness of the border [*im Halbdunkel des Randes*].«¹⁸ Or the other way round: By saying »Not this, but something else«, the determination is set by its negation in relation to the unlimited variety of other determinations. Abstract negation changes how we understand determinations (or properties, facts, etc.). In the light of abstract negation, each determination becomes one of many, indeed, of all.

The fact that the logical negation of a determination implies its ontological transformation also holds for determinate negation. The basic idea of the model says: The »nothing« of the negation is always directed against a determination; therefore, it is »itself determinate and has a content.«¹⁹ The explanation for this is that the negation directed against a determination is at the same time »immanent« to this determination. The negation is a »result« (namely of the determination which it negates) and it *has* a result: »the negative belongs to the content itself and is the positive.«²⁰ But this also means, conversely, that the positive is the negative. The positive, i.e. the newly won determination, is the »result« of a negation; not simply given, but produced. The determination is new precisely because it has a (pre-)history. (This is the historical category of the new: Only what has a past can be new.) In the »movement« or »transition«²¹, which the determinate negation performs, not only the content changes, but also the concept or form of determination. Determination now means something else: it means to have been set, made, produced by an act of negation.²²

Luhmann defines the ontological effect of negation as generalization: This specific determination is set in relation to all others. Hegel goes one step further: If the determination is understood as being »mediated« by a negation, then it is no longer understood as given, but as made or produced. Thus, each determination is a new determination. Or each determination is historical (while the given is the natural). The determinate negation has a radically ontological effect: the given is re-modeled as posited, or put more precisely, as posited by itself, that is

¹⁸ Luhmann: *Über die Funktion der Negation* (as note 6), p. 203 (Luhmann quotes here J. M. Baldwin; my translation, C. M.).

¹⁹ Hegel: *Phenomenology of Spirit* (as note 1), p. 79. For the claim that negation in Hegel (especially in the figure of the negation of negation) cannot be reduced to its logical sense see Dieter Henrich: *Formen der Negation in Hegels Logik*, in: Rolf-Peter Horstmann (ed.): *Seminar: Dialektik in der Philosophie Hegels*, Frankfurt am Main 1978, pp. 213–229.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59 and p. 79.

²² More precisely: the result of a negation of negation. Because the negation of the determination *p* is immanent to *p*, the negation of *p* by positing *q* is just as much: (1) the realization of *p* as it is (2) the negation of the (self-)negation of *p*.

as the subject. Determinations, as far as they result from negation, are acts of self-determination. They are acts of freedom.

With this we can say why there can be no negation of habit, that is, neither according to the model of abstract nor to that of determinate negation. This is because habit resists the ontological operation, which is carried out via the logical negation of a determination. For the habituated self cannot relativize its habit in relation to all other determinations (as Luhmann describes the generalizing power of abstract negation); there is no exit from habit.²³ Nor can it transform its habit into the product of its own act of self-determination (as Hegel describes the liberating power of determinate negation); there is no free appropriation of habit. Habit is an inwardly operating external mechanism, which the self in each of its acts, even those of negation, merely repeats and enacts.

6.

The abstract negation as well as the determinate negation are ontological operations. They re-define the determination as the effect of an act of negation. The model of abstract negation understands this effect as an external relativization: in its negative relation to any other determination, each particular determination is seen as one among all the others. The model of determinate negation understands its ontologically transformative effect on determination as its internal processualization: each determination is seen as the result of a movement of transition from a self-contradictory old determination to a new one. Both forms of ontological transformation fail at habit. Habits can be observed and compared by an observer from outside, or habit can change by itself, i.e. evolve, as nature does. But since habit *defines* the subject (the subject is constituted by its habits), that subject itself can neither relativize it externally nor processualize (or historicize) it internally. If negation is either abstract or determinate, no negation—and, hence, no historical transformation—of habit is possible. But there is still a third possibility to conceive the negation of habit. Here, its negation is the mobilization of a counter-force which is presupposed by, but not contained in, habit.

We can see the conceptual place of such a counter-force to habit in habit already in Aristotle's description of its formation. Because habits, i.e. capacities, are acquired, they—genetically as well as logically—presuppose a prior, initial state of incapacity or inability; the second nature of habit emerges from a state of first

²³ For an understanding of liberation (or exodus) as »exit« see Paolo Virno: *Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus*, in: Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (eds.): *Radical Thought in Italy. A Potential Politics*, Minneapolis 1996, pp. 189–210.

nature. From the perspective of acquired capacities, i.e. in retrospect, the relation between first and second nature appears as harmony or agreement. Retrospectively, first nature is conceived of as the capacity to acquire capacities; first nature appears as the »disposition« (Aristotle) to form a second, cultural and social nature. But in this self-interpretation (or self-congratulation) of successful education it will become incomprehensible to itself. For if the socially and culturally acquired capacities had already been there in nature in the form of dispositions, we lose the sense of their becoming—by a leap out of nature. Second nature is then not understood anymore as the *other* nature (but rather as *other nature*: as nature once again).

The only way to think together, (i) that second nature has *become from* first nature, and (ii) that second nature is the *other of* first nature, is to think (iii) first nature itself as (its own) otherness. There can only be second nature, i.e. there can only be culturally acquired capacities and habits, if the first nature of the individual (that eventually will become a subject) itself is or entails the possibility of otherness from nature. (First) Nature must be thought as its own other in order for second nature, the acquiring of habit, to be possible. If nature is the order of necessity—the relation, interaction, and mutation of objects under a law—then the other of nature in nature, which only makes possible and hence comprehensible the emergence of a second nature, is contingency: the interruption of the necessity of nature by a power or force that operates in it, but at the same time exceeds it. There is negativity in nature.²⁴

The assumption of such negativity of force or contingency in nature explains the habituation of capacities in a twofold sense. It does explain firstly, as indicated, why a natural being, a being that has a first nature, can form any social or cultural capacities, i.e. a second nature, at all: only the negativity of force in nature from nature makes processes of the acquisition of habits possible. This also explains secondly, why all culturally produced capacities are defined by an indissoluble element of externality (or why habit, according to Hegel, is but a »spiritual *mechanism*«). If the natural state of the individual is not its »disposition« for culture, but the force of indeterminacy, the individual can never fully appropriate the socially pre-given forms of behavior. They necessarily remain external to the individual. But this, in turn, also means that the individual remains necessarily external towards its habits—i.e. its own social form as a »subject.« The individual is never entirely cultural, a mere inhabitant of its habits. It is (and always remains) retarded to its own social form.

²⁴ See Giorgio Agamben: *Bartleby, or On Contingency* (1993), in: *Potentialities. Collected Essays in Philosophy*, transl. by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford 1999. The tradition of modern aesthetics has called such negativity the aesthetic »force« in nature (or the force of »aesthetic nature« [Herder]); see Christoph Menke: *Force. A Fundamental Concept of Aesthetic Anthropology*, New York 2012.

With this we can see how the negation of habit is possible. It is possible by »return[ing] it to its potential not to be«, by »consign[ing] it once again to potentiality, to the indifferent truth of the tautology [namely, that it is and therefore also could not be]»; i.e. by returning to contingency (or to the play of force) as »the dark and eternal background of intelligible beings«, which means of every social form.²⁵ The counter-force that the act of negation mobilizes against habit is not to be found in it but rather before, prior to it; it is the ground which makes habit possible (and can precisely thereby never be an element of, or part in, habit; the counter-force is thus no *contradiction* in habit). The negation of habit is the return to its beginning or ground in the »dark potential not to be« (Agamben). The negation of habit is thus nothing but its repetition. For in repeating the process of habituation, habit changes its form, its mode of being. Habit becomes an effect. Indeed, it becomes a paradoxical effect: it becomes the effect of the force of its non-existence. In consequence, the negation of habit allows for a new way of acting: it allows the individual to play (and play with) habit.

7.

The third model (or mode) of negation differs from the other two by breaking with the principle that negation means determination (which is the flipside of the principle that all determination is negation). According to this principle, to negate something always means to assert something else. This is obvious in the model of determinate negation. It is its programmatic point: Each negation, by being a negation of a particular determination, generates as its result a new determination; the act of negation *is* the assertion of a new determination. But the tie between negation and determination also holds for the counter-model of abstract negation. This model rejects the claim of the concept of determinate negation that negation is necessarily a relation between one (old) and another (new) determination. Luhmann (whom I have read as defending abstract negation against Hegel's critique) therefore says that negation, by its »effect of generalization«, produces indeterminacy: »The negation allows something indeterminate to enter the functional place of the determinate and thus enables the continuation of operations without the actual execution of all determinations. [...] I determine my yes and leave the necessary negations undetermined.«²⁶ In saying »this, and nothing else«—Luhmann's formula for (abstract) negation—negation does not refer (as Hegel claims) to this specific determination but to anything else. However, anything else is not any-

²⁵ Agamben: *Bartleby, or On Contingency* (as note 24), p. 267 and p. 252.

²⁶ Luhmann: *Über die Funktion der Negation* (as note 6), p. 205; my translation, C.M.

thing: following Luhmann's understanding, I negate anything *else* but I do not—I cannot—negate anything. Also in the model of abstract negation I can only negate if at the same time I assert something: if I posit *another* determination. Determination remains the condition of the possibility of negation.

This is the condition with which the third mode of negation breaks. It is neither merely the negation of *this specific* determination nor even of *all other* determinations. Rather, by »return[ing] it [i.e. a determination] to its potential not to be« (Agamben), it negates determination *as such*. This is why it can be called »infinite negation.« For it is the act of negation which is performed in the form of »infinite judgment.«²⁷ Following Kant's elucidation of the term, »infinite« judgment is to be distinguished from »negative« judgment. This distinction at first refers to *what* is negated: »In negative judgment the negation always affects the copula; in infinite judgment not the copula but the predicate is affected by it.« Thus the »the soul is not mortal« is a negative judgment, while »the soul is non-mortal« is an infinite judgment. However, the decisive point of this distinction is that they practice an entirely different *kind* of negation. In a negative judgment, the subject »is placed without the sphere« of a specific predicate: by saying »the soul is not mortal« I deny that the soul pertains to the sphere of mortality and I thereby leave undetermined in which other sphere it has to be placed. The infinite judgment »the soul is non-mortal«, however, »shews not only that the subject is not contained under the sphere of a predicate, but that it lies without its sphere somewhere in the infinite sphere.« The negative judgment claims that a specific predicate does not apply to the subject because the subject does not pertain in this sphere. The infinite judgment claims that the subject lies without or outside the sphere [*außer der Sphäre*]; that the non-predicate does not apply states that its sphere is »limited« [*beschränkt*]. The act of negation in the infinite judgment infinitizes the subject. It claims its transcendence towards the sphere of predicates, of determination as such; it claims its radical indeterminacy or its »infinite determinability.«²⁸

In infinite judgment we thus encounter a mode of negation which differs radically from its standard logical form.²⁹ As Frege explains, by the logical operation of

²⁷ For a brief definition see Immanuel Kant: *Logik*, Part I, sect. 2, § 22, in: *Werke*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel, Darmstadt 1956, vol. III, pp. 534–5; English translation by John Richardson: *Emmanuel Kant, Logic*, London 1819, p. 145–6. The following quotes are from here. (The translation is revised: Richardson translates Kant's *unendlich* as »indefinite« while I render it as »infinite«.)—I follow here the succinct analysis in Jan Völker: *Ästhetik der Lebendigkeit. Kants dritte Kritik*, München 2011, pp. 100–111. Cf. also the use of the term with reference to Bartleby in Slavoj Žižek: *The Parallax View*, Cambridge/Massachusetts 2006, p. 381–2.

²⁸ Völker: *Ästhetik der Lebendigkeit* (as note 27), p. 102; my translation, C. M.

²⁹ According to Kant, therefore »the distinction of the infinite from the negative judgments

negation we form from the expression of one thought (which is either true or false) the contradictory thought (which is hence either false or true).³⁰ The act of negation thus remains in the sphere of »thought«, i.e. of determination or proposition. It refers to a specific content but not to the form of thought. In logic, the negation of a thought does not mean »the dissolution or destruction of the thought«.³¹ From which Frege concludes: »No non-thought is turned into a thought by negation, just as no thought is turned into a non-thought.«³² There is no act of negation that turns thought into non-thought. All negation only turns one thought into another thought.

Both the model of abstract and of determinate negation share this logical assumption. For Luhmann, the »preservation [of meaning] is and remains a condition of the negating operation.«³³ For Hegel, the ontological transformation by negation consists in changing the meaning of determination (from a given to a »result«). Infinite negation, however, does precisely what Frege claims *cannot* be done by an act of negation: it destroys a thought; it dissolves »the interconnexion of its parts.«³⁴ In Kant's analysis of infinite judgment: it establishes an infinite difference between the two elements of a thought, its subject and its predicate. This is why infinite negation falls outside of the realm of logic. While determinate and abstract negation are logical operations with ontological effects, infinite negation is a *purely* ontological operation.



does not pertain to this science,« i.e. the science of logic (Kant, *Logic*, p. 146; translation revised, C. M.).

³⁰ »Thus for every thought there is a contradictory thought; we acknowledge the falsity of a thought by admitting the truth of its contradictory. The sentence that expresses the contradictory thought is formed from the expression of the original thought by means of a negative word.« Gottlob Frege: *Negation*, transl. by Peter Geach, in: Peter Geach and Max Black (eds.): *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, Oxford ²1960, pp. 117–136: 131.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 124. (»Kein Ungedanke wird durch Verneinen zum Gedanken, wie kein Gedanke durch Verneinen zum Ungedanken wird.«)

³³ »It is worth asking whether and how meaning can be negated at all. If one first tries to negate certain meaningful contents [Sinngelhalte]—for example the statement that Bad Homburg is a city—then the meaning is by no means lost through the negation, but is only transformed. Its preservation is and remains a condition of the negating operation—condition of its own meaning. If you go farther and try to destroy the meaningfulness itself, then you have to produce nonsense—Bad Homburg ploughs headaches—which in turn is too absurd for explicit negation. Negation has no differentiating effect in the field of nonsense. Nonsense can only be produced, not negated.« Luhmann: *Über die Funktion der Negation* (as note 6), p. 35; my translation, C. M.

³⁴ Frege: *Negation* (as note 30), p. 123.

Frege justifies his claim that, for logical reasons, the negation of a thought cannot be its dissolution with the distinction between two forms of operation which have to be kept clearly separate from each other:

»How, indeed, could a thought be dissolved? How could the interconnexion of its parts be split up? The world of thoughts has a model in the world of sentences, expressions, words, signs. To the structure of the thought there corresponds the compounding of words into a sentence; and here the order is in general not indifferent. To the dissolution or destruction of the thought there must accordingly correspond a tearing apart of the words, such as happens, e.g., if a sentence written on paper is cut up with scissors, so that on each scrap of paper there stands the expression for part of a thought. These scraps can then be shuffled at will or carried away by the wind; the connexion is dissolved, the original order can no longer be recognized. Is this what happens when we negate a thought? No! The thought would undoubtedly survive even this execution of it in effigy. What we do is to insert the word »not«, and, apart from this, leave the word-order unaltered. The original wording can still be recognized; the order may not be altered at will. Is this dissolution, separation? Quite the reverse! It results in a firmly built structure.«³⁵

While a thought cannot be dissolved, there can be the dissolution of a sentence, for a sentence has a material existence which the thought does not have. The claim of infinite negation—the claim that it has the power to dissolve the very structure, the »interconnexion« (Frege) which defines thought—depends on undermining this separation between a thought and its material existence. That infinite negation is a purely ontological operation means that it cannot be stated but only performed. This performance of infinite negation is a material operation: an operation on the material existence of thought—viz. an operation on the materiality of language like the one Frege describes (and the artists of his time began to execute). In infinite negation the ontological operation is material and the material operation is ontological.

³⁵ Ibid.