

CHAPTER SIX

Hegel and the Right of Evil

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The aim of this chapter is to propose a reading of the dynamic of inclusion and exclusion through an interpretation of Hegel's figure of the evil conscience. The main point of the chapter is to reveal the dialectic underlying the opposition of the good and the evil, according to which the so-called universal good itself turns out to be evil, and therefore needs to be redetermined.

Although the contribution will focus on the dialectical movement between the good in itself and the evil conscience in the philosophy of spirit, it is worth starting with a reconstruction of its logical form in order to understand Hegel's account of evil as thought-determination. Accordingly, the chapter firstly proposes an excursus through some occurrences of the term "evil" in Hegel's *Science of Logic*, in order to make explicit which logical structure underlies the figure of the evil conscience. Secondly, it deals with this figure in the realm of the spirit. By pushing Hegel's argument further, it tries to draw some consequences concerning the dialectic of good and evil as a dialectic of exclusion and inclusion.

The Logical Form of Evil

In Hegel's philosophy, the category of "evil" not only has a practical, moral connotation, but it is characterized by a logical form. It is precisely by

comprehending some of the analogies that Hegel suggests between the determination of evil and particular logical structures, which can be read as defining the pure conceptual form of evil, that we can come to a reinterpretation of the role of the evil conscience (*das böse Gewissen*) in Hegel's *Element of the Philosophy of Rights*.

References to the category of evil occur in the *Science of Logic* where the thinking activity is objectified in a thought-determination, which is characterized by the two following features. Firstly, its self-identity is not an immediate identity, but it results from a reference to itself mediated through the negation of its otherness (it is the negation of its own negative). Secondly, the self-identity and self-subsistence is affirmed abstractly, i.e. insofar as it posits its otherness as something in itself null and lacking self-subsistence, and abstracts from it. This is despite the fact that its self-reference is only possible through the mediation of this otherness.

Firstly, in the Doctrine of Being – the sphere of being as determinate being – the thought determination which is associated with evil is the being-for-itself that affirm its unity by means of exclusion of the other being-for-itself. The being-for-itself is “absolutely *determinate being*”, i.e. not the finite being as simple negation – the determinate being that defines its own determinacy only at the limit with its opposite, thus at the limit with its negation.¹ Rather it is the unity that results from the negation of its own being-other, that is, of its own finitude. The being-for-itself would therefore be absolute insofar as it is detached from any reference to something external, because its identity with itself is already constituted by mediation (the negation of its own negative). The being-for-itself is therefore infinity, as resulting from the self-negation of the finitude.² And yet, since it is posited as one and absolute precisely by virtue of the exclusion of the other being-for-itself, its independence is an abstract one, because it actually relies on a relationship, namely that of exclusion.

1 GW 21, 144/Hegel 2010, 126. Cf.: “We say that something is for itself inasmuch as it sublates otherness, sublates its connection and community with other, has rejected them by abstracting from them. The other is in it only *as* something sublated, as its *moment*” (GW 21,145/Hegel 2010, 126-127).

2 In this regard, Cf. Becker, 2021. Becker argues that the logical form corresponding to the category of evil in the *Elements of Philosophy of Right* can be found in the Doctrine of Being, because this is the sphere of finite thought as well as the objective spirit in the philosophy of right, in which evil appears. However, in the thought determination of the being-for-itself, thinking activity already sublates its finitude; indeed, the being-for-itself is the first infinite determinate being. Moreover, Becker does not take into account the analogy established by Hegel between evil and the contradiction of positive and negative in the Doctrine of Essence.

Driven to the extreme of the one as being-for-itself, self-subsistence is an abstract, formal self-subsistence that destroys itself. It is the ultimate, most stubborn error, one which takes itself as the ultimate truth, whether it assumes the more concrete form of abstract freedom, of pure “I”, and further still of evil. (GW 21, 160/Hegel 2010, 140)

Evil in the sphere of being is therefore the thought determination that is not the immediate determinate and finite being (simple negation), but rather the affirmation of infinity as self-reference resulting from the self-negation of the finitude (negation of negation). Because of this, it claims to be self-subsistent and absolute unity. In fact, however, it abstracts from the fact that this unity is possible only by means of exclusion of other unities, thus by means of reference to otherness.

Secondly, in the Doctrine of Essence the thinking activity already has a self-referential form. Indeed, essence is reflection. It posits itself insofar as it posits its immediacy as semblance (*Schein*), i.e. it negates the self-subsistence of its immediate being, which is itself posited as simple negation, and returns to identity with itself. The essence, therefore, affirms itself only by positing itself as immediate being and then negating that this immediate being – which, as immediate, does not show the mediation out of which it comes from and seems to be self-sufficient – is an independent determinate being. By doing so, however, the essence negates that its reference to its (self as) otherness is constitutive for its identity with itself. This dynamic manifests itself as an explicit contradiction in the thought-determinations of the positive and the negative. These are not only opposed to each other and so exclude one another, but at the same time each one is in itself opposite to itself and so identical with the other one. The positive is positive because it posits its self-identity by negating the negative, the otherness. Therefore, however, it is in itself the negative, i.e. that which is what it is only by negation. The negative, in its turn, posits itself through the negation of the positive, that is of the opposite, but by doing so it is identical with itself, thus a positive. Both are the contradiction: each of them is opposed to and identical with its own negative, which is thus constitutive to it and which however is excluded. As an example of this logical structure, Hegel writes in a note that, by analogy: “[e]vil consists in maintaining one’s own ground as against the good; it is positive negativity” (GW 11, 284/Hegel 2010, 379).

Finally, in the Doctrine of the Concept, evil is the particular moment that opposes the actualization of the objective, universal good by the subjective will. It is the actuality insofar as “it still has the determination of *immediate existence*”,

and thus appears as “an insuperable restriction” (GW 12, 234/Hegel 2010, 732). However, here in the sphere of the concept this restriction has already been sublated and posited as the mediation of the thinking activity with itself (as its own objectivity). It confronts the realization of the good only as long as it appears as immediate being, but it is no longer a being in and for itself. Therefore, it is more properly defined as “evil or indifferent” (GW 12, 234/Hegel 2010, 732).

From this brief *excursus* on the occurrences of evil in the *Science of Logic*, it follows that the logical form of evil is the one of a thought-determination which, being the self-reference that has negated the independence of the otherness, posits itself as self-subsistent and claims to be absolute. But in doing so excludes the very otherness which is the condition of its own self-subsistence. This form of thought articulates a quality that made itself independent but abstract (in the logic of being) as the contradictory opposite of the good (in the logic of essence), and as the immediate, particular being of actuality which, in its immediacy, appears as a restriction to the actualization of the good (in the logic of the concept).

Evil as the Reversal of Morality

Having analysed the logical structure of evil, I now turn to dialectics it undergoes as a concrete determination of the spirit, that is, as an evil conscience.

In the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, the evil conscience appears in the section “The Good and the Conscience”, where Hegel deals with the determination of the good itself, insofar as this latter is “actualized by the particular will” (TWA 7, § 130, 244/Hegel 1991, 157). It is therefore the matter of determining what, on the one hand counts “as universal welfare and essentially as *universal in itself*”, i.e. acknowledged and shared ethic values within a society, while on the other hand it has to express the freedom of the consciousness, its right of self-realization through its own subjective will, and must therefore be posited by the conscience (the moral consciousness) itself (TWA 7, § 130, 243/Hegel 1991, 157). The good ought to be the substantial character of the conscience – it expresses what counts as true value, so that the conscience ought “to make the good its end and fulfil it” – and this action of the conscience is the only means by which the good is actualized (TWA 7, § 131, 244/Hegel 1991, 158). Consequently, the subjective will has its obligation towards this determination of the universal good, which provides the criterion

for the evaluation of an action “as right or wrong, good or evil” (TWA 7, § 132, 245/Hegel 1991, 158).

This means that, on the one hand, the conscience must determine this universal and posit *what* is duty, expressing in this determination its inner certainty, that is, what it knows as its own essence. On the other hand, this subjective essence must at the same time be the universal essence – the substance as such, the shared value within the society.

Conscience expresses the absolute entitlement of the subjective self-consciousness to know *in itself* and *from itself* what right and duty are, and to recognize only what thus knows as the good; it also consists in the assertion that what it thus knows and wills is *truly* right and duty. As this unity of subjective knowledge and that which has being in and for itself, conscience is a sanctuary which it would be *sacrilege* to violate. (TWA 7, § 137, 255/Hegel 1991, 164)

The determination of the good rests therefore on an ambiguity: “the identity of the subjective knowledge and volition”, i.e. what defines the inner individuality of the conscience has to count at the same time as a universally valid principle (TWA 7, § 137, 255/Hegel 1991, 165). Precisely in this ambiguity lies the possibility for the conscience to be evil. This occurs when it elevates to a universal principle a determination of its subjective will that is only its own *arbitrium*. As Hegel states, the self-consciousness “is capable of being evil”, that is “of making into its principle [...] the *arbitrariness* of its *own particularity*, giving the latter precedence over the universal and realizing it through its action” (TWA 7, § 139, 260–261/Hegel 1991, 167).

However, conscience is *always* at the point of turning into evil (Cf. Menegoni 2004, 307): whatever the determination the conscience may posit as the good, its action is unavoidably valued as evil. Indeed, since the good, in order to be concrete and actual, cannot remain the inner certainty of the conscience but has to become objective, posited as existing by means of an action, it is the particular determining ground of a particular will, which thus excludes some other determination of it. Consequently, the actualization of the universal good, concretized as the action of a singular conscience, appears to the other self-consciousness as one-sided, partial and arbitrary, and as excluding them from the participation in the determination.

This dynamic is articulated in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, namely in the section “c. Conscience, The “beautiful soul”, evil and its forgiveness” – the last subsection of “Morality”. Here the conscience considers itself as “the pure,

immediate truth” in its inner certainty, and “as a moral *essentiality* or as *duty*”, loosened from any external universality imposed on it:

[C]onscience is free from any content whatever; it absolves itself from any specific duty which is supposed to have the validity of the law. In the strength of its own self-assurance it possesses the majesty of absolute autarky, to bind and to loose. (GW 9, 347, 349/Hegel 1977a, 391, 393)

Such a self-consciousness is caught within the contradiction that, for it, the determination of its self-certainty – the identity with itself – is at the same time the truth, objective and universal. And yet, being posited as objective by means of an action, the determination of the universal good unavoidably turns evil. Indeed, in order for it to be acknowledged by other consciences as the objective, universal good has to be exteriorized. However, since truth is given only as the adequacy to the inner self-certainty of the conscience – independently of what is the content of this self-certainty– the other consciences cannot judge on the basis of the external determination that they see realized in the action. They cannot know whether the acting self-consciousness is good or evil, and they have rather to regard it as evil, because, being themselves consciences, each of them cannot accept as good something that has not been determined by its own inwardness and that is instead externally given. That determination

is something expressing only the self of another, not their own self: not only do they know themselves to be free from it, but they must dispose of it in their own consciousness, nullify it by judging and explaining it in order to preserve their own self. (GW 9, 350/Hegel 1977a 395)

In its exteriorization the good becomes particular, and this particular can no longer be justified on the basis of self-certainty of the self-consciousness, which is something inner. Therefore, the authenticity of the determination of the good cannot be valued from outside, that is from the other self-consciousness. On the basis of this gap between the truth of the inner self-certainty and the lack of external recognition, evil conscience can develop hypocrisy and irony, thus showing the absoluteness of its arbitrium against any given value.

The hypocritical character consists in the fact that the conscience, though knowing the good in itself, consciously determines its own particular will against the good, so that for the conscience itself it is true that its own will is determined as evil, and still it states that its determination is good (Cf. TWA 7, § 140, 266-267/Hegel 1991, 170-172).

At the first level, hypocrisy is “the formal determination of untruthfulness, whereby *evil* is in the first place represented *for others* as *good*”, but it reaches its peak when the conscience deceits itself by means of this untruthfulness (TWA 7, § 140, 268/Hegel 1991, 172). Indeed, in this case the hypocritical conscience undergoes a process of perversion in which it is for itself (and not for others) that the subject provides a justification of the evil, as it could be turned into good by means of a good pretence (Cf. Chiereghin 1980, 365). By lying to itself, the self-consciousness undermines its being for itself (and not for the others), the determining ground of its will according to its self-certainty.

The absoluteness of the subjectivity against the universal is accomplished as irony. This is the possibility to subvert any determination of the good. The conscience is aware that it can vanish any pre-existing established value that it is in its power to dissolve any binding to a given content (Cf. Morani 2019; Rebentisch 2013).

The only possible culmination [...] of that subjectivity which regards itself as the ultimate instance is reached when it *knows* itself as that power of resolution and decision on [matters of] truth, right, and duty which is already in itself (*an sich*) present within the preceding forms. Thus, it does indeed consist in knowledge of the objective side of ethics, but without that self-forgetfulness and self-renunciation which seriously immerses itself in this objectivity and makes it the basis of its action. Although it has a relation (*Beziehung*) to this objectivity, it is at the same time distances from it and knows *itself* as that which *wills* and resolves in a particular way but may *equally well* will and resolve otherwise. – “You in fact honestly accept a law as existing in and for itself” [it says to others]; “I do so, too, but I go further than you, for I am also beyond this law and can do *this or that* as I please. It is not the thing (*Sache*) which is excellent, it is I who am excellent and master of both law and thing; I *merely play* with them as with my own caprice, and in this ironic consciousness in which I let the highest of things perish, I *merely enjoy myself*”. (TWA 7, § 140, 278-279/Hegel 1991, 180-182; translation revised by author)³

3 Hegel’s conception of irony keeps together the pre-Socratic and the rhetorical meaning of the word “irony”. As Christoph Menke (1996, 144-146) notices, according to the first one, the ironic consciousnesses are either deceivers, who for the sake of their own interests give themselves for the ones who have a knowledge, thereby expressing their contempt towards established values and misrecognizing what counts as knowledge. In this sense, irony is the destruction of ethics and virtue. According to its second meaning, moreover, irony is subversion (*Verkehrung*) and dissimulation (*Verstellung*): the ironic consciousness says the opposite of what it really means. Thereby, the subject shows its freedom from the content of its consciousness.

If we take these arguments to their logical conclusion, then the definition of the good as the self-certainty of conscience results in evil, both in terms of content and form. On the one hand, the conscience that affirms its own determination of the good, that its own *arbitrium* against what is acknowledged as the shared, universal good, is evil.⁴ On the other hand, the good as self-certainty claiming for universality (whatever its determination may be) is itself *structurally* the evil, because it turns out to be only allegedly the universal, insofar as it excludes the other self-consciousnesses from its determination, and therefore cannot be acknowledged by them. The first aspect of evil actually implies the background of an ethical order of society as already given – the context of a *Sittlichkeit* – as a criterion for deciding on the moral determination of the conscience as good or evil. Conversely, this same order is a determination of the good that at a certain moment of the history of the spirit has been posited as universal, as the substance of the ethical life. As such, however, it is limited and one-sided.

Evil as the Dissolution of the Ethical Form of Life

The relationship between the evil conscience and the given context of the *Sittlichkeit* must therefore be further developed. What is at stake is the role of what appears as evil conscience in determining the acknowledged universal good within an ethical form of life. Since the conscience is evil because it opposes its own determination of the good, on the basis of its identity with itself, to the shared values of a society, it opens up a split (*Entzweiung*) within that same society. It makes the split emerge that lies in that determinate form of life.

The universal good is the substance of an ethical form of life insofar as, at a given moment in the history of the spirit, it is the truth for the spirit, i.e. it is the way in which the spirit knows itself and makes itself objective, in “laws and institutions” that are therefore fixed as the necessary and universal ethical content valid in and for itself (TWA 7, § 144, 293–294/Hegel 1991, 189). As a consequence, the action of the evil conscience – opposing its own determination of the good to the shared one – is the negation, the misrecognition, and contestation of the universality of the good. As such, the evil consists of the emergence of a dichotomy within the life of the spirit, that is of a crisis.

4 Bojana Jovičević draws exactly the opposite conclusion in this volume when she claims that: “evil is explained by the same principle that explains good, it cannot be nothing else than a mere form of its logical privation, its ‘badness’, i.e., nothing but the principle of good itself” (2024, 146).

The evil conscience is the manifestation, *in individuo*, of the fact that a given shape of the spirit has turned into a dead form, i.e. the fact that there is a dichotomy between the laws and institutions in which the spirit has objectified its knowledge of itself, and the way the spirit now experiences itself, so that that objectified knowledge is no more real (*wirklich*), it no longer responds to the need of the spirit. Evil is in this sense the expression of the dissatisfaction of the spirit with regard to the established form of life. It demonstrates that the given determination of good is no longer capable of accounting for the way the spirit knows itself, and thus for the identity of the spirit with itself. The identification between what is considered to be good in itself and the inner self-certainty of the conscience fails. Therefore, the conscience reflects on that determination of the universal good, which now, taken as the object of the consciousness, reveals its limitedness. It comes to reveal that its claimed universality is only an alleged one. As such, the so-called universal good is shown to be arbitrary, without justification, and is called into question. Being excluded from the otherwise shared horizon of values, the subjective will thus discovers itself as determining ground of what counts as good and makes itself into absolute criterium of good and evil. This vindication of the subjective will in its right to decide on good and evil brings to light that the ethical unity is torn apart, which leads to the dissolution of this form of life.

Indeed, when the limitedness of this determination of the good becomes an obstacle for the self-recognition of the spirit in its objectivity, consciences feel the need to oppose it, that is to act evilly. Self-consciousness therefore has a reason,

To renounce duties and laws that otherwise it would immediately fulfil. Now it is the general tendency to require grounding, to require that an acknowledged [practice] be connected firmly to some wholly universal principle. If such grounds, i.e. something wholly universal, are not discovered as the basis, the representation of virtue becomes precarious. Then duty as such becomes something that is not valid absolutely, but only insofar as the ground of its validity are known. Connected with this is the separation of individuals from each other and from the whole; for consciousness is subjectivity, and it has the need to isolate itself, to grasp itself as a particular subjectivity in the form of a *this*. This subjective inwardness, grasping itself in the form of singularity, is what produces vanity, self-seeking, etc. – qualities that are contrary to faith. Thus self-interests and passions are unleashed as destructive qualities, and the destruction of a people runs rampant. (Hegel 2012, 162-163)⁵

5 “Dem Selbstbewußtsein werden so gründe eingegeben, sich von dem Pflichten, den Gesetzen loszusagen, die es sonst unmittelbar erfüllte. Jetzt ist überhaupt die Tendenz, die Begründung

Hegel makes reference to the figure of Socrates as the beginning of the determination of the good according to the subjective self-certainty (TWA 7, § 140, 277/Hegel 1991, 180).

In the shapes which it more commonly assumes in history (as in the case of Socrates, the Stoics, etc), the tendency to look inwards into the self and to know and determine from within the self what is right and good appears in epochs when what is recognized as right and good in actually custom is unable to satisfy the better will. When the existing world of freedom has become unfaithful to the better will, this will no longer finds itself in the duties recognized in this world and must seek to recover in ideal inwardness alone that harmony which it has lost in actuality.⁶

Hegel's reference to Socrates is telling, because it is this figure who brings together both the practice of philosophy and the practice of irony. On the one hand, Socrates is the philosopher who, challenging the presuppositions underlying the Greek ethical form of life and its shared common sense, was considered as an opponent of the good and the gods of Ancient Greece, and therefore dangerous to the established order, i.e. evil.

In this sense, philosophy itself – as the practice of free thinking that undermines presuppositions – plays the role of evil, as long as it blows out the ethical order and causes the crisis to explode. It is no coincidence that the example of Socrates is also used in the “Introduction” to the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, where Hegel states that philosophy rises in the moment of unsatisfaction with the shared values, in the times of decadence and corruption of a form of ethical life.

zu fordern, daß ein Anerkanntes im Zusammenhang mit einem ganz Allgemeinen gefaßt wurde. Indem solche Gründe, d.h. etwas ganz Allgemeines, als Basis nicht gefunden wird, so wird die Vorstellung von der Tugend schwankend. So wird die Pflicht als solche nicht als absolute geltend, sondern nur insofern die Gründe, weshalb sie gelten soll, gewußt werden. Damit hängt zusammen, daß die Individuen sich voneinander und vom Ganzen absondern; denn das Bewußtsein ist Subjektivität, und diese hat das Bedürfnis, sich zu vereinzeln, sich als besondere Subjektivität in der Form eines *Diesen* zu fassen. Dieses subjektive Innere, in der Form der Einzelheit sich fassend, ist das, woraus Eitelkeit, Selbstsucht, etc. hervorbricht, Bestimmungen, die dem Glauben, dem Unmittelbare zuwider sind. So treten die eigenen Interessen, Leidenschaften losgebunden als Verderbens hervor. So bricht das Verderben eines Volkes aus” (V 12, 50-51).

6 TWA 7, § 138, 259/Hegel 1991, 166. Cf. TW 18, 458; cf. Rebenisch (2013), who argues against Hegel that while he recognized the beginning of modern morality in Socrates, he then considered the Socratic practice of irony to be merely subjective and not directed against the thing itself.

When the inner inadequacy occurs between that which the spirit wants and that in which it can find its satisfaction, so philosophy emerges. Thus, the flourishing of philosophy shows every time the fall of a previously satisfactory situation.⁷

Against this loss of values, the consciousness retires, flees into its interiority and determines its truth only on the basis of the identity with itself and in the inner dimension of thought.⁸

On the other hand, Socrates practises philosophy precisely by using irony. Along with philosophy, indeed, irony itself plays a role in the erosion of the assumptions underlying a given determination of the universal good. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Right* held in 1822/23, Hegel establishes an explicit parallelism between the corruption of democracy in ancient Athens and the figure of Socrates on the one side, and the loss of faith in objective shared values and the ironic consciousness at Hegel's own time on the other.⁹

The ironic consciousness is the consciousness of its own subjective freedom as the power to be for itself the determining ground of good and evil, and brings to light the dissolution of the ethical form of life.

7 The translation of the author; cf: »Wenn die innere Unangemessenheit zwischen dem, was der Geist will, und dem, worin er sich befriedigen kann, stattfindet, dann tritt die Philosophie hervor. So beweist jedesmal das Aufblühen der Philosophie den Untergang eines Zustands, der früher befriedigte« (V 6, 296). This passage clearly recalls what Hegel has been affirming since his first published philosophical essay "*The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*": "Dichotomy is the source of *the need of philosophy*" (GW 4, 12/Hegel 1977b, 89).

8 Cf. »Es sind die Zeiten des beginnenden Untergangs, des Verderbens der Völker; da hat sich der Geist in die Räume des Gedankens geflüchtet, die Philosophie sich ausgebildet« (V 6, 296).

9 The 1822/23 lectures on the philosophy of right are transmitted to us as the *Nachschrift* by Heinrich Gustav Hotho, who writes: "Dieß ist auf einer Seite auch eine Krankheit unserer Zeit, daß die Ehrfurcht vor den Gesetzen nicht mehr da ist, sondern daß der Mensch in seiner Reflexion sich zurückhält [...] Insofern das Objective nicht in der Einheit mehr [ist] des inneren Freiheitsbegriffs ist, belibt dem Menschen nur diese abstracte sich sich beziehende Subjectivität. Deser Standpunkt ist also überhaupt der, daß das Subject in sich sich zurückzieht, und sich weiß als Begriff der Freiheit. Der Mangel ist die Abstraction dieses Standpunkts. Es ist die Spitze wo das Böse möglich ist, und aufgeht" (VRPh, 436).

Similarly, in Eduard Gans' addictions to the *Elements of the Philosophy of Rights*, we can read: "Only in ages when the actual world is a hollow, spiritless, and unsettled existence (*Existence*) may the individual be permitted to flee from actuality and retreat into his inner life. Socrates made his appearance at the time when Athenian democracy had fallen into ruin. He evaporated the existing world and retreated into himself in search of the right and the good. Even in our times it happens that reverence for the existing order is in varying degrees absent, and people seek to equate accepted values with their own will, with what they have recognized" (TWA 7, §138, Zu., 260/Hegel 1991, 166-167). Cf. also Siep, 1982.

Evil as the Dialectical Element in the Redetermination of the Universal

Therefore, despite their apparently only negative connotation, the evil conscience – and the ironic conscience as its highest form – being indivisibly entangled with subjective freedom and the dissolution of *Sittlichkeit*, do play a dialectical role in the actualization of the good and of freedom, since the actualization of good requires subjective freedom as its condition, as seen above.¹⁰ In this regard it is worth examining the way in which the one-sidedness and limitedness of a given determination of the good is revealed precisely in the radical affirmation of subjectivity of the ironic conscience.

Irony is not simply an exercise in subjective arbitrariness. Instead, it requires that a conscience refer to what is recognized as determining the universal good in the contemporary given historical form of the spirit, and then dissociate itself from this determination and subverts it.¹¹

Thus the logical form of evil becomes evident not only in the realm of being – a quality that has become for itself autonomous self-determination – but also in the realm of essence: evil is defined as the negation of the good, which it opposes and then excludes, claiming its absoluteness precisely insofar as it can abstract from the good. Still, in this movement the evil posits the good itself as something abstract and self-contradictory, since the good excludes evil and thus is no more universal as it claims to be. It is precisely by positing itself as evil – that is, as the contradiction that abstracts from the universal good and yet claims to be absolute – that conscience reveals the universal good itself to be the same contradiction that evil is. Good and evil are both evil, and it is only because the former is assumed as a normative value within a community that the conscience opposing it is defined as evil. Since this conscience questions the good and reveals it to be non-absolute,

10 Cf. Menke 1996, 143. Cf. also Rebutisch (2013), who argues that irony plays a constitutive role in the ethical form of life, and affirms, against Hegel, that it is necessary to the safeguard of the freedom that Hegel himself recognizes as indispensable in modern age. Cf. Wahsner (1999), who suggests that irony has a role as resistance against the becoming positive of the shapes of spirit, that is their becoming fixed, and thus turning into a presupposition in which the spirit does no longer recognize itself.

11 As Christoph Menke points out, However, the ironic conscience implies not only the detachment of the individual from the common good, but also their constitutive relation to it; what irony actually means, it can only say through the opposite (Menke 1996, 199).

its action cannot be accepted within a community that still finds its truth in the established system.¹²

Good and evil, the objective universal and the subjective will of the conscience, are therefore contradictorily correlated: the good as the positive, the evil as the negative. Both are in themselves a contradiction, but the former only in itself, the latter as a posited contradiction. The evil conscience, the negative, is “to be *identical with itself over against identity*, and consequently, because of this excluding reflection, to exclude itself from itself” (GW 11, 280/Hegel 2010, 375-376). The good, the positive, is contradiction “in that, as the positing of self-identity by the *excluding* of the negative, it makes itself into a *negative*, hence into the other which it excludes from itself” (GW 11, 280/Hegel 2010, 375). Both are self-subsistent totalities which exclude one another and still are necessarily implying one another.

Consequently, when the subjective will claims its absoluteness, it posits not only itself as abstract and one-sided, but indivisibly the universal as well. The evil conscience brings to light the only alleged universality of the determination the good within a given shape of the spirit, its limitedness.

Particularly as ironic consciousness, by subverting any value – and thus detaching itself from the good and putting the absoluteness of this good into question – it shows the good as a fixed presupposition. In this sense, the ironic consciousness also plays a role in the becoming conscious of the historical and changeable dimension of the determination of the good.¹³

Therefore, the re-determination of the universal good by means of its conflict with the evil conscience shows the emancipatory potential of the evil, insofar as it unleashes a dialectical movement by means of which the good frees itself from the one-sidedness and limitedness unavoidably implied in its particularizing for a determinate form of life of the spirit. The evil – conceived of as the

12 Cf. Geiger, 2027. Cf. also Yonover 2021 on the right of revolutionary action despite the impossibility of accounting for it *within* the given ethical form of life the revolution would subvert.

13 “This supremely subjective point of view can arise only in a highly cultivated age in which faith has lost its seriousness, which now exists essentially only in the vanity of all things” (TWA 7, § 140 Zu., 286/Hegel 1991, 184). Cf. “die Haltung der Ironie [ist] die Zerstörung der Sittlichkeit”; “die „Vernichtungskunst“ der Ironie besteht in einer radikalen Umkehrung des transparenten Ausdrucksverhältnisses zwischen Substanz und Handeln, Sittlichkeit und Subjekt, Gehalt und Gestalt”; “Die Ironie des Individuums gegenüber dem Gemeinwesen [...] richtet sich nicht gegen den Anspruch auf (praktische) Geltung überhaupt, sondern gegen den Vorranganspruch des Gemeinwesens und seiner sittlich substantiellen Werte gegenüber den Individuen” (Menke, 1996, 146-147, 149). Cf. Rebentisch, 2013, 123.

thought determination characterized in the *Science of Logic* – would thus have its dialectical role acknowledged in the process of the realization of freedom. That is, evil would have its right.¹⁴

If then the evil conscience makes the one-sidedness of the good explicit, so it plays a constitutive role in the process of the realization of the good itself, because it is the drive to the redetermination, from time to time, of what is called universal, which must be rethought so that it can also take into account for the hitherto excluded subjectivity. However, it is not a question of quantitative inclusion, i.e. allowing the hitherto marginalized group to participate in the good and to have access to practices and institutions from which they have been excluded. Rather, what was considered to be good needs to be radically rethought, shared values and the practices and institutions that give them objectivity need to be reshaped. In other words, it is not that the established ethical system needs to be enlarged to welcome more subjects, but the determination on which the system rest has to change by confronting with the claims of these excluded subjects.

An Example: The Rabble

An example of the dynamic exposed above is the case of the rabble, notoriously treated at the §§ 241-245 of the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, which however remains unresolved within the Hegelian system.¹⁵ The rabble is the social layer which does not find a place in the system of the States (*Stände*), that is the system that organizes the civil society. Consequently, it is not integrated in the latter, it is the element that remains excluded, outside.

A human being with no estate is merely a private person and does not possess actual universality. (TWA 7, § 207, Zu., 360/Hegel 1991, 239, translation revised by author)

Therefore, the rabble tends to oppose resistance to the alleged universality (of the civil society and of the State above it) which does not include it.

[R]abble is created only by the disposition associated with poverty, by inward indignation (*innere Empörung*) against the rich, against society, the government, etc. (TWA 7, § 244, Zu., 389/Hegel 1991, 266)

14 It is right, “the *existence* of the *free will*”, or the freedom as Idea, that is the concept of freedom as realized, made concrete in the world (TWA 7, § 29, 80/Hegel 1991, 58).

15 For this reading of the role of the rabble I take reference to Ruda, 2011. A similarly convincing argument was made by Zdravko Kobe: Hegel was perfectly aware of the mechanism of necessary impoverishment in (unrestricted) civil society, and that in his view the poor were actually justified in developing a rabble mentality (2019, 27).

It is not Hegel himself who directly suggests such an interpretation of the dynamic between the subjectivity of the rabble and the universality of the State. However, it is telling that he repeatedly associates the rabble with the semantic sphere of the evil. He says that poverty is not itself the constitutive character of the rabble, and yet it the condition for the rabble, because “the poor” have “the disposition of [...] viciousness” (*Bösartigkeit*) (TWA 7, § 241, 388/Hegel 1991, 265). Indeed, this “gives rise to the evil”, but the evil is “that the rabble do not have sufficient honour to gain their livelihood through their own work, yet claim that they have a right to receive their livelihood” (TWA 7, § 244, Zu., 389/ Hegel 1991, 266).

Conclusion

Drawing conclusions from the arguments presented here, what emerges is a conception of the evil as an element that, as a form of being-for-itself, i.e. the power to make itself an autonomous part in opposition to the good and to claim its own independence, brings to light the oppositional structure between the two, each of which posits itself only through the other, which is then excluded. But while the evil is the negative and immediately shows to have its self-identity only insofar as it opposes and negates the good – and precisely for that it is called “evil” – the good does not show its dependence on evil and only seems to exclude it. It is thus by means of the action of the evil conscience that the deficiency of the good is revealed.

The evil conscience, particularly in the form of irony, is the one that announces the crisis and dissolution of the ethical form, but it is also what allows that shape of spirit to redetermine itself and to overcome its limitations. Here I have tried to argue that the rabble can be an example of such a dynamic.

The resulting framework, in conclusion, is that evil is a factor that corroborates the process of the realization of the universal good and thus of freedom (being the good realized only through the action of subjective free will). The unity of the subjective will and the good in itself, therefore, is to be understood not as a state of affairs that is attained once for all, but rather as a constant redetermination of the universality of the good in its dialectical dynamic with the subjective will, which at each time pushes it to redetermine itself in order to sublimate its one-sidedness.¹⁶

16 “Thanks to the critical potential of morality, the concrete universal of the community can then also be seen as a normative principle and a task, which aims for its fulfilment even beyond Hegel’s own elaborated solutions (as formulated for example in his theory of the state)” (Hofmann, 2014, 352). Cf. also Menke, 2018, 19-50.

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