

Thinking as Syncopated Figuration: Jean-Luc Nancy's Hegelian Correction of Kant

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Abstract

This paper brings out the centrality of Hegel's understanding of immanent negativity and becoming in Jean-Luc Nancy's anti-foundationalist attempts to think: What does it entail to think or philosophise in our post-truth world? What is the status of thought in our contemporary world when the edifice of epistemology and metaphysics stands questioned? Analysing one of the most prominent attempts in the history of philosophy to discern foundations for philosophy, i.e., Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Nancy turns Kant upside down and suggests that thought self-presents insofar as its self-identity is interrupted, i.e., as a syncopated figuration. My suggestion is that Nancy's reversal of Kant's system relies on a Hegelian correction of Kant, specifically Hegel's temporalization of the Kantian limits of pure reason. The paper will highlight the proximity of Nancy's thought to Hegel's philosophy by explicating their uptake of Kant's transcendental philosophy. This paper argues that the reactualization of Hegel's temporalization of Kantian limits and exposition of becoming in Nancy's contemporary, post-metaphysical works opens up the possibility of thinking differently and infinitely from within our finitude. The paper's wager is to explicate Hegel's exposition of immanent negativity in thought and being at work in Nancy's thinking, specifically, his work on community and show how the Hegel-inspired position delivers us from the seemingly contradictory impasse of our time: either retreating to the substantial metaphysical ideas of God, substance, etc. or being reduced to our finite and disparate existence and succumbing to the impossibility of thought.

Keywords

Jean-Luc Nancy; syncopation; negativity; Kantian Limits; Hegel.

1. Introduction

In contemporary French philosophy, Jean-Luc Nancy is responsible for shaping an understanding of singularity in relation to collectivities following the fall of the Cartesian subject and the critique of metaphysics. One of the important questions he tries to address is how the substantial ways of organizing ourselves in relation to the world, such as totalitarian forms of governance, capitalism, and religious fundamentalism, repeatedly haunt our post-metaphysical and post-truth world. Accordingly, insofar as the imperative to iterate and analyze the absence of foundations goes, Nancy's work undoubtedly shares some similarities with deconstructionism and post-structuralism. However, Nancy differs in the way he thinks through this problem from his contemporaries, such as Derrida, who project the messianic possibility of a democracy to come that would absolve us from our current crises in thought and politics. In a typical deconstructionist vein, Nancy reads

thinkers like Descartes and Kant to upturn their emphasis on foundations for, respectively, subjectivity and thought. In this paper, I will focus on how Nancy's deconstructionist reading of these thinkers is influenced by Hegel's understanding of negativity and becoming, which I suggest remains a crucial aspect of Nancy's thinking that sets him apart from his post-modern contemporaries. Notably, Hegel enters the scene of French philosophy through Alexander Kojève's famous lectures on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, attended by thinkers including Georges Bataille, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Jacques Lacan, among others, who significantly influence the terrain of modern French thought. However, we will see how Nancy's Hegel differs from Kojève's Hegel and comes closer to recent attempts at reactualizing Hegel by thinkers including Slavoj Žižek, Alenka Zupančič, Frank Ruda, Rebecca Comay, and Andrew Cole.

Kant's first *Critique*, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is read in an epistemological and foundational as well as anti-foundationalist manner. For instance, interpretations of Kant by thinkers like P. F. Strawson¹, who read the *Critique* for its foundational and epistemological significance, dismiss the antinomies of pure reason as inconsequential and, at best, treat the connection between the two divisions of the *Critique* with considerable skepticism. In contrast, contemporary thinkers like Žižek² emphasize the significance of Kant's indefinite judgment in thinking through Kant's antinomies of pure reason. For most contemporary anti-foundationalist readings of the first *Critique* that aim to question the authority of a transhistorical and substantial idea, like those of Heidegger and Nancy, the way the «Transcendental Aesthetic» and «Transcendental Logic» fit together to form the edifice of critical philosophy is of crucial interest³. In this paper, by analyzing Nancy's anti-foundationalist reading of Kant's first *Critique*, I suggest that Nancy's account is mediated and made possible only through a Hegelian re-reading of Kant. In this manner, the paper emphasizes the relevance of Hegelian thinking in the contemporary, in the way it speaks to Nancy's desire to think with and beyond thinkers such as Heidegger, Derrida, and Bataille.

The paper begins by contextualizing Nancy's reading of Kant's First *Critique* in his text *The Discourse of the Syncope: Logodaedalus*⁴, wherein Nancy builds upon Heidegger's reading of Kant to further an idea of thought as a figural presentation rather than a conceptual representation. While for Heidegger, the obtrusiveness of certain sections of the *Critique* reveals that the text that aims to ground philosophical discourse also, at once, un-grounds it. Nancy takes the instance of un-grounding in the *Critique* to its limits to suggest that the instance of un-grounding is not merely a contingent or accidental feature of Kant's *Critique* but a necessary aspect of thought itself in the sense that it is the unthought or limits of thought that make any thinking possible. In Section 2, I refer to Nancy's *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*⁵ to develop how thought operates figuratively in response to the immanent and shared negativity of our thought as well as the world. Insofar as the negativity also traverses the object, it becomes a constitutive aspect of thought and not merely an impediment to our capacity to know, i.e., thinking must repeatedly tarry with this negativity. This section concludes the paper by pointing at the Hegelian temporalization of Kantian limits at play in Nancy's idea of community, which he contrasts with society. So, the paper opens a possibility to engage and detail the merits of Hegelian influence on how Nancy conceives of and works through the problematic of community without communion and politics.

¹ Strawson (2006).

² Žižek (1993).

³ James (2006, 30).

⁴ Nancy (2008).

⁵ Nancy (2002).

2.1 The Syncopation of Pure Reason

Heidegger's reading of Kant's first *Critique* suggests that the treatise is at once a text that founds and unfounds philosophical discourse⁶. In the preface to the *Critique*, Kant claims: «Any philosophical treatise may find itself under pressure in particular passages (for it cannot be as fully armored as a mathematical treatise), while the whole structure of the system, considered as a unity, proceeds without the least danger»⁷. Here, Kant suggests that the clarity and precision of the treatise as a whole are not compromised by the difficult presentation of its parts. Heidegger contests this prefatory note to say that the obscurity of certain parts, while specifically referring to the part concerning «schema», defeats the purpose of Kant's radical project at a very crucial moment in the text and, in turn, makes him settle for a rather traditional, Aristotelian solution to the problem of schematism. To clarify, schematism, for Kant, is the process through which understanding relates to sensible perception. Through this process, we create a sense of a unified experience. But Kant, especially in the first edition of the *Critique*, vaguely alludes to imagination or the inner depths of the soul to perform this unifying job. And this is where, for Heidegger, an abyss at the heart of the Critique opens⁸. Heidegger writes:

Will not the Critique of Pure Reason have deprived itself of its own theme if the pure reason reverts to the transcendental power of imagination? Does not this ground laying lead us to an abyss? In the radicalism of his question Kant brought the “possibility” of metaphysics to this abyss. He saw the unknown. He had to shrink back. It was not just that the transcendental power of imagination frightened him, but that in between [the two editions] pure reason as reason drew him increasingly under its spell⁹.

Heidegger's reading of Kant's prefatory note highlights how Kant's attempt to discern systematic foundations to philosophy also comprises a partial resignation to the murky terrain of imagination, and thereby a failure of thought at a crucial moment in the treatise. Thus, we can suggest that one upshot of Heidegger's reading is to highlight the finitude and fragility of thought even as it tries to secure and work out its own foundations. Nancy builds upon Heidegger's interpretation to suggest that this limit of thought that appears as strange and detrimental to thought's self-presentation is a necessary condition of thought's movement and in no way a negative condition for thought to stop thinking about or beyond the limits of pure reason.

Reason, as finite and restricted to the realm of phenomena, is the Neo-Kantian interpretation of Kant's First *Critique* and a prominent interpretation of Kant's system. Hegel, in “Faith and Knowledge,” discusses how reason critiques faith and prevents philosophy from merely being a handmaiden of faith, as was philosophy's received understanding before the Enlightenment project. However, Hegel also points out that the other side of the Enlightenment project is to draw limits on the critical force of reason and thus posit faith as substantial and positive beyond reason. When reason is reduced to intellect alone, it succumbs to finitude and is separated from any access or critical take on the absolute and the infinite that strictly lie on the side of the substantial beyond of faith. Hegel writes:

Enlightened Reason won a glorious victory over what it believed, in its limited conception of religion, to be faith as opposed to Reason. Yet seen in a clear light, the victory comes to

⁶ James (2006, 29)

⁷ Kant (1998, 123).

⁸ James (2006, 35-36)

⁹ Heidegger (1997, 117-118).

no more than this: the positive element with which Reason busied itself to do battle is no longer religion, and victorious Reason is no longer Reason. The newborn peace that hovers triumphantly over the corpse of Reason and faith, uniting them as the child of both, has as little of Reason in it as it has of authentic faith. [...] Reason, having in this way become mere intellect, acknowledges its own nothingness by placing that which is better than it in a *faith outside and above* itself, as a *beyond* [to be believed in]¹⁰.

Hegel draws attention to the Kantian limit to reason, as it both names and defies the cause of critical philosophy. One of the prominent aspects of Kant's philosophy is to emphasize the limits of reason to constitute some other domain as infinite, beyond, and transcendent. This happens, for instance, when limits are imposed on scientific knowledge so that it doesn't pose a threat to existing structures of faith and belief. Gillian Rose¹¹ develops this line of argument when she suggests that the neo-Kantian uptake of Kant's critical philosophy either presupposes "validity" arising from empirical reality or "value" rooted in transcendent social structures. This presupposition of either value or validity to derive the one from the other, for instance, presupposing a certain belief to stabilize norms, undercuts the force of Kant's critical philosophy that aims to question the presuppositions governing our empirical reality. The neo-Kantian positions exclude any enquiry into our empirical reality and thus reduce transcendental philosophy to epistemology. In this backdrop, Rose suggests that Hegel's speculative philosophy remains a philosophy without any presuppositions and thus realizes the desire of Kant's critical philosophy. Hegel's philosophy prompts us to grasp the unthought of thought, which relates reason to faith and thus restores the possibility of questioning both faith as well as reason from the point of their inherent impossibility to be complete and perfect. In the absence of such an immanent gap, both reason and faith tend to slip into dogmatism. Rose writes:

In the name of a neutral method which seeks solely to justify knowledge, transcendental philosophy justifies infinite ignorance not finite knowledge. It subjects the objects of both theoretical and practical knowledge to the domination of the discursive concept. We can only turn from our limited knowledge of the finite to an insatiable yearning for the unknowable and inaccessible infinite. However, this irrational relationship to the infinite renders a rational relationship to the social and political conditions of our lives impossible. The limitation of justified knowledge of the finite prevents us from recognizing, criticizing, and hence from changing the social and political relations which determine us. If the infinite is unknowable, we are powerless. For our concept of the infinite is our concept of ourselves and our possibilities¹².

Thus, the task of any thinking after Kant must be to analyse the limits to reason as the very precondition for our access to the infinite, and thinkers like Rose, Adrian Johnston, and Alenka Zupančič bring out how Hegelian philosophy is the desired meta-critique of Kant's critical project. In this paper, I attempt to situate Nancy's reading alongside such attempts insofar as Nancy insists on explicating the critical force of reason, and for this, he insists upon the limits of reason as a necessary condition of its infinite capacity to create.

Nancy finds Kant's remarks on the two prefaces of the first *Critique* on the clarity of the text and its presentation defence against the unclear passages in the treatise (James 2006, 37). He draws attention to Kant's desire for clarity in philosophical thought and its presentation, similar to that of the sciences and mathematics. Interestingly, he upholds that unclear presentations necessarily exist within a text like the first *Critique*, which attempts to think through the movement of thought itself and discern its foundations.

¹⁰ Hegel (1977b, 55-56).

¹¹ Rose (1995, 1-13).

¹² Ivi, 44-45.

Thus, I suggest that for Nancy, the inconsistency within the *Critique* is not incidental to the text but necessary to the structure of thought.

Crucially, for Nancy, the encounter with the limit of thought results in a «syncope» but not in an abyssal recognition of thought's own finitude. In the Translator's Introduction to Nancy's *Logodaedalus*, Saul Anton elaborates on different senses of syncope in French. Most colloquially, it means a momentary stoppage of the heart, akin to a heart attack, or a sneeze; a sudden, brief event. Syncope also connotes the interruption of a musical line, especially in the context of jazz. Notably, the heart and the musical note do not stop but are restored differently after the syncope. Anton writes:

In this manner, the syncope points to the corporeality (a heart attack!) of consciousness in its linguistic expression, the dimension and moment (transcendental? empirical? empirico-transcendental?) wherein consciousness senses or feels itself "in the flesh" and does so precisely because it is there that it blacks out, perhaps in the face of a sudden shock, a powerful emotion, or an experience of sublime grandeur – or just from trying to read Kant. It names the waking unconsciousness we call "incomprehension" that forces one to read a text over and over, especially when it operates, as does Nancy's, in multiple registers¹³.

The syncope is the interruption but not the destruction of the stream of consciousness with the corporeality of the real. The interruption remains a point of incomprehension that can restore thought differently. The interruption is a point of thought's engagement with itself.

In his analysis, Nancy highlights the exigency of thought's syncopation by pointing to the impossibility of complete and pure presentation (*Darstellung*) in philosophy. The manner of presentation is also a crucial question to be addressed by Kant because he aspires for the certitude of mathematics, but «philosophical argumentation can in fact never fully match the discursive rigour or exactitude of mathematics»¹⁴. Philosophical exposition is contingent upon historical discourse and, therefore, temporally specific and vulnerable to change. However, it is neither completely dependent on its other, i.e., history, nor is it completely independent; but crucially, any philosophical exposition must bear the consequences of its fragile and vulnerable presentation. Taking responsibility for its inherent contingency partly entails working through the relation thought has with its other, not just other discourses, but crucially, its own inconsistency that allows it to relate to history. Nancy considers the relation of thought to history and contingency as immanent and necessary, rather than a contingency that strikes thought from the outside and can be analysed coherently once the stable foundations of philosophy have been definitively and abstractly discerned. Insofar as thought is internally lacerated, the limitations imposed by other contingent discourses, such as history and politics, on thought's contingency are only apparent. It is thought's immanent inconsistency that *forms* thought insofar as it becomes the hallmark of thought that tarries with the real and does not presuppose itself and thereby the world, but creates the world from a (syncopated) moment of its impossibility, the point of its limit. Thus, thought's limit to be complete and uninterrupted, which appears counterintuitive to thought's necessity and certainty, is the inherent condition of thought's self-presentation.

For Nancy, unlike Descartes and Kant, there is no pure abstraction of thought or an idea of a first beginning possible. We can only begin to think from where we are. Nancy begins to reconfigure the relationship between philosophy, wherein philosophical concepts are typically taken to be a representation of the world as it *is*, and discern the first principles of the world as they are, etc., with its other, such as history and literature, which are discourses marked by contingency and creative presentations. Nancy subverts this

¹³ Nancy (2008, xvii)

¹⁴ James (2006, 39)

commonplace understanding of philosophy, explicating how it is impossible for philosophical presentation to be purely representational, and it is necessarily a figuration of a reality in relation to an unfigurable real of nature. Based on this, Nancy refutes Kant's prefatory claim that the fragility of philosophical exposition does not affect the structural unity of the system as a whole¹⁵. For Nancy, a mathematical presentation is adequate to presentation proper, but a philosophical presentation is different, and it is in this gap between mathematics and philosophical presentation that Nancy re-founds the presentation specific to philosophy. He writes: «the partition of mathematics and philosophy opens the divide in *Darstellung* itself, the crisis, which *stricto sensu* separates *Darstellung* from another mode of 'presentation,' the philosophical one, which Kant specifically chose to call Exposition»¹⁶.

Darstellung, which has been translated as "presentation", means literally, "placing-there", "placing-in-front", "showing", or "exposition"¹⁷. The emphasis of *Darstellung*, therefore, lies specifically on the act of bringing into presence or into view the determinations and deductions of pure reason. Typically, *Darstellung* is distinguished from the term *Dichtung* in German, which implies a more general concept of invention or creation, such as that of novels, poetry, and other literary expositions. Nancy's interruption of the philosophical presentation also blurs the distinction between philosophy and literature. Philosophy shares with literature the exposition in response to syncopation at the limits of a discourse.

This division in presentation proper begets a kind of creation that is linked to or a result of the gaps in the presentation itself. These literary creative eruptions affect the architectonic of the *Critique* whereby gaps in the presentation cannot be dismissed as contingencies that do not bear upon the structure as a whole. The gaps are, instead, constitutive of the text and also of thought *as such*. So, reason's syncope or an imperfect self-presentation manifests as a symptom of limiting reason to representation alone. Reason syncopates insofar as there is no pre-given world to approximate but a world to create. Perhaps, Hegel's "concept" proposes a treatment of this symptom whereby it unites *Dichtung* and *Darstellung* to retain a sense of presentation proper to the concept. As Hegel famously writes in the *Phenomenology*:

Reason, essentially the concept, is directly sundered into itself and its opposite, an antithesis which for that very reason is equally immediately resolved. But when Reason is presented as its own self and its opposite, and is held fast in the entirely separate moment of this asunderness, it is apprehended irrationally; and the purer the moments of this asunderness, the cruder is the appearance of this content which is either only for consciousness, or only ingenuously expressed by it. The depth which Spirit brings forth from within – but only as far as its picture-thinking consciousness where it lets it remain – and the ignorance of this consciousness about what it really is saying, are the same conjunction of the high and the low which, in the living being, Nature naively expresses when it combines the organ of its highest fulfilment, the organ of generation, with the organ of urination. The infinite judgement, qua infinite, would be the fulfilment of life that comprehends itself; the consciousness of the infinite judgement that remains at the level of picture-thinking behaves as urination¹⁸.

I want to emphasize how Nancy seems to conceive of reason essentially as critical, as opposed to something finite, to the extent that thought syncopates when it tries to self-

¹⁵ James (2006, 39).

¹⁶ Nancy (2008, 32-33).

¹⁷ James (2006, 40).

¹⁸ Hegel (1977a, 210), translation modified, substituting "concept" for "notion".

present. For Nancy, Kant becomes the key to interrogate and expose the syncope of thought, despite his attempts to cover over the moments of syncope.

Philosophical discourse is pronounced over a syncope or by a syncope. It is held up by an undecidable moment of syncope. This moment, this mode of production, and this regime of inscription are Kant's, which means: they are Kant's still today. The Kantian function in philosophy is what exhibits – or should one say incises? – the syncope, in spite of everything, in spite of all the will in discourse. Philosophy has always comprised this function, even if it is constitutionally incapable of understanding it (and why, at the critical moment, the syncope happens to it)¹⁹.

The point is this: any attempt to ground philosophy's foundations, like Kant's *Critique*, attempts to model philosophy's certitude on the existing model of mathematics syncopates and points at the impossibility of thought's finished presentation. It is from this point of impossibility of a pre-given and complete presentation that we can begin to conceive or write the discourse differently. In each repetition to ground philosophy's certainty and make it akin to mathematics, an enigmatic excess or undecidability implodes the possibility of any philosophical certainty. Nancy suggests: «Kantian philosophy stems from this undecidability and keeps to this syncope. It announces and notes it, and in doing so, it identifies itself in what is most proper to it and dooms its transcendental identity, its own system, to impossibility»²⁰. The undecidable creeps in the Same, in the moment of repetition, to secure the identity of the Same. The underlying point is that we cannot repeat anything in the same way; repetition introduces a minimal difference. The undecidable alters each repetition and disrupts the identity. Here, Nancy seems to affirm the introduction of difference and uncanniness within the possibility of philosophy's self-presentation of its grounds. This implies that philosophy is not limited by its other, such as politics or history, but the fact that philosophical presentation is made possible by a limit, introduces an immanent difference within philosophical presentation and makes it necessary for philosophy to present itself as always already syncopated and estranged from any retreat into a transcendental safe-house.

To clarify, Nancy's most prominent work is on community without communion that exists as a limit to society and politics here and now, which he develops in *The Inoperative Community*. Nancy argues that such a community that is different from communion is ontologically necessary and cannot be erased even in the face of concrete attempts to annihilate a collective social existence. Crucially, Nancy's demarcation of community from politics leads interpreters like Fraser, Claude Lefort, and Simon Critchley to suggest that Nancy's distinction between the community and politics, here and now, is a Heideggerian re-instantiation of the ontic-ontological distinction that forbids us to act in a politically decisive manner and insisting on this distinction also defeats Nancy's desire to think beyond a metaphysics of presence that constantly encumbers our political realities. For instance, Nancy Fraser comments on this demarcation between community and politics that Nancy develops alongside Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe at the École normale supérieure in Paris, at the *Center for Philosophical Research on the Political* (1980-84), and is later detailed by Nancy in *The Inoperative Community*. Fraser suggests that such a demarcation constitutes a retreat into a transcendental safe house, avoids a step into politics, and justifies political inaction²¹.

This paper's emphasis on a Hegelian influence in Nancy's contemporary political philosophy crucially saves his position from being reduced to a conservative position that

¹⁹ Nancy (2008, 15).

²⁰ Ivi, 11.

²¹ Fraser (1984).

calls for an uncritical retreat to the transcendental. I will discuss the significance of a Hegelian reading of Nancy's idea of community in the final parts of the paper.

The above discussion of Kant's critical philosophy and Nancy's concept of syncope points to the fact that the limit (here, the limits of philosophy's self-presentation of its grounds with certainty, and the limits of pure reason), needs not necessarily result in the following responses: (i) the defence of the intelligibility of the whole (edifice of critical philosophy) by safeguarding the limit to thought as something external to thought's presentation. This is the case with Kant's spatial fixation of limits. (ii) The limits to philosophy destroy any idea of revival of critical philosophy and function as a recognition of human finitude and also the limits of philosophical thinking itself. This appears to be the case with Heidegger, where philosophy can only perform the task of throwing over the system of onto-theology, but to think anew, poetical thinking must take over. Nancy's idea of syncope at the limits of a discourse points to the possibility of a poetical thinking as always already interrupting and forming the exposition of philosophy. Syncopation does not destroy thought but forms it by taking into account its other. i.e., disequilibrium and contingency.

The above discussion suggests that the notion of a limit to pure reason is read in various ways, for instance, as a substantial limit to human knowledge and a testament to human finitude. As Zupančič²² points out, the Kantian limit can be understood to posit a noumena as a positive realm of things in themselves beyond the grasp of our consciousness, thus closing off any thinking of a beyond and reducing us to finite and particular human experience²³. However, in line with the arguments developed in this Section, a reassessment of Kantian limits to pure reason suggests syncopated exposition as reason's desire to transcend these two limiting possibilities: either an overemphasis on human finitude or positing a substantial beyond that is inaccessible to human reason. This is also how Zupančič interprets the Kantian limits when she asks:

Does a limit imply containment, even self-containment? Or does it imply a split, a gap? Another question: Does limitation necessarily imply something "smaller"? Does it necessarily imply that something is "left out" or that something "remains" beyond? Is the Kantian universe actually smaller than the pre-critical universe, as Meillassoux suggests? Might it not be possible that limitation actually produces a world that is, in some sense, "bigger" than a world without limitation?²⁴

To contextualize, Meillassoux (2008) critiques Kant's critical philosophy for limiting our knowledge of the world to mere correlation between human consciousness and what it can reasonably grasp, thereby closing off any thinking about the "great outdoors" or a beyond. Zupančič's response to this critique is that there existed no great outdoors that could ever be lost to us. She argues that the Kantian limit *creates* a beyond or noumena for the first time, instead of closing it off to us. The notion of a "great outdoors" or the noumena is itself a figuration insofar as we cannot retrieve or isolate any knowledge about our origin or the world before our time that is not always already syncopated and in need of creative impulses to present itself. Thought syncopates when it thinks beyond the concepts of understanding. A figural presentation works through the limit by internalizing and overcoming the limit of understanding, and this limit, which is not merely outside reason but immanent to it, invents or creates a sense of beyond precisely by moving away from

²² Zupančič (2024).

²³ This line of argument makes Kant's Copernican turn susceptible to the criticism by Quentin Meillassoux (2008) whereby critical philosophy closes off our access to any objective, trans-historical knowledge outside of its relation to finite subjective historical experience.

²⁴ Zupančič (2024, 176).

the idea that the world is always already given to us and all that remains is to grasp and represent it perfectly (or imperfectly) through concepts of understanding. This idea of limits is an injunction to create a world in response to the lack of any pre-given world. So, the noumena are not lost to us but are created for the first time as a syncopated figuration in the moment of thought thinking itself. This implies that it is with Kant's critical philosophy that we have a notion of limit that functions with respect to human reason and is not externally imposed by a God, a prime mover, etc. This is the import of Kant and Kantian philosophy at work in Nancy's reading when he affirms in the above quotation that the discourse on the syncope is singularly a product of Kant's system, which at once syncopates and covers over this necessity of syncope by defending it as the contingency that strikes thought at certain instances without affecting the architectonic of the whole treatise.

Therefore, for Nancy, pure reason can only self-present itself in syncopation. Again, syncopation is not simply a negation of something but a disruption in its self-identity. As James remarks, «The exposure to the groundlessness of thought is constitutive of philosophical discourse per se, it exists or is held by this groundlessness in its very enunciation *as* discourse»²⁵. The upshot of a syncopated exposition of thought is that whenever philosophy tries to secure its foundations in an unmediated manner, here by alluding to the function of pure reason alone, its self-identity is disrupted to show the self-groundlessness of thought and presents itself in the absence of pure presentation and in an undecidable relation to presentation and creation. When philosophy is thought of as a figural exposition, the relation or distinction between philosophy and literature becomes undecidable. However, I will not pursue this discussion in this paper. The point to emphasise here is that both literature and philosophy operate figurally, not foundationally, in relation to an unfigurable real²⁶.

The real, or the thing in itself, escapes signification or presentation, but this lack of pure presentation gives rise to a surplus of sense over signification because clearly, the possibility of signifying truth (i.e., metaphysics) stands questioned. And philosophical discourse can only be a figural praxis whereby thought pays fidelity to its own lack, its groundlessness, and does not stop writing this excess of sense in significations.

2.2 Hegelian Negativity, and Kantian Limits

In this section, I discuss Hegelian negativity in relation to Kantian limits to draw a red thread between Nancy's interruption of Kant's attempt to seek transcendental foundations of pure reason as discussed in the previous section and Hegel's temporalization of Kantian limits, which will be elaborated in the following paragraphs. As discussed, for Nancy, all thought is a syncopated movement, and in *Hegel: The Restlessness of the Negative*, he suggests that «Hegelian thought does not begin with the assurance of a principle»²⁷. He maintains that all thought is marked by a restless movement because of the negativity of thought, and this is becoming. Unlike foundational approaches to philosophy, such as those of Descartes and Kant, for Nancy, it is not possible to delineate the first instance of our original fall into the world to discern the first principles of the world. Instead, we begin in the middle, i.e., in the thick of life. Nancy writes:

The restlessness of thought first means that everything has already begun: that there will therefore be no foundation, that the course of the world will not be stopped in order to be

²⁵ James (2006, 47).

²⁶ Ivi, 64.

²⁷ Nancy (2002, 8).

recommenced. It means that one is no longer in Descartes's element, nor in Kant's, and that, if the thread of history is broken, this happens of itself, because its very continuity is only division and distension²⁸.

This implies that history does not pause at the will of a philosopher; if it does, it does so because of its immanent contradictions, and these are the moments when history calls upon philosophy to relate to it, figure it in a syncopated instance. Thus, Nancy's reading of (Hegelian) becoming insists upon the absence of foundation in thought or history, and thereby, for him, Hegel is the "opposite of a 'totalitarian' thinker"²⁹. Insofar as Nancy insists on thought's movement that does not presuppose a world but relates to the world and exposes it at the point of contradictions and impasses of the world, Nancy's uptake of Hegel's thought resonates with thinkers like Rose, Johnston, and Zupančič who emphasize the critical potential of Hegelian metaphysics.

Zupančič, in her discussion on Kantian limits, argues that the distinction between Kant and Hegel lies in Kant's spatially fixated and positivized dimension of the boundary of pure reason and Hegel's temporal reversal of the boundary³⁰. Hegel's specific understanding of boundaries plays a crucial role in exposing his idea of becoming. The crux of my argument here lies in demonstrating the proximity of Nancy's explication of the necessity of figural exposition in thought's self-presentation with the Hegelian temporalization of boundaries, in contrast to the understanding of boundaries as merely a spatial distinction. To be sure, figuration creates an excess of signification based on an unfigurable real, i.e., an empty or gaping space, and such an exposition of the world points to the fact that thought does not merely represent the world but forms it in syncopated instances of relating to its impasses and contradictions. To reiterate, Kant's *Critique* presents to us the limits of pure reason, beyond which reason runs into an inevitable contradiction with itself. Figural exposition in response to syncope presents one distinct way, among others, to engage with the limits of reason's discourse. Zupančič suggests that a limit always only indefinitely approximates that which it limits. In that sense, a limit is a simple negation or void. In contrast, a boundary is a space of negativity that leaves a (positive) trace³¹. The boundary touches what it divides, whereas the object only ever approximates its limit. The touch, in case of the boundary, does not merely limit externally but forms or constitutes what is touched insofar as it internally splits the object. If the boundary were merely a substantive and positive boundary, it would not be a boundary but the thing itself. The boundary is a void but also more than a void insofar as it opens an infinity for the thing to figure itself, to form itself precisely by limiting it. The boundary, insofar as it is not substantive, is not an external imposition but one that can only co-appear with the figuration of the thing. The boundary is immanent to the syncopated exposition of the being of the thing. So, with a boundary, we always begin with a two, but the two here does not refer to two different objects, «but rather to an object and a void, that is to say, an object and its inherent impossibility that constitutes its ground, so to speak»³².

Notably, it is not always the case that our access to the world demands a figuration or an excess of signification; sometimes, and this is true for mundane everyday functions, we simply function in a correlational or habitual mode of knowledge and understanding. However, questions of subjectivity, ethics, and politics constantly push reason beyond these usual modes of understanding and making sense of the world. This is where Kant's

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ Zupančič (2024, 188)

³¹ Ivi, 181.

³² Ivi, 185.

distinction between limits and boundaries becomes significant, and Zupančič explicates how limits transform into boundaries in the event reason oversteps or transgresses the negativity of the limit. This is where I situate Nancy's discussion of thought as a syncopated exposition, i.e., in a flux that transforms an external, inaccessible limit to an immanent one by creating sense from the limit. Zupančič writes:

Kant talks about the difference between a limit and a boundary, but we could also talk about the moment (and movement) in which a limit becomes a boundary through reason's "overstepping" or "overtaking" negativity (the space that always separates us from the limit point), which is now included in the "here" as its "beyond." Negativity is no longer ahead of reason but is within reason [...] indicating its split³³.

Thus, when reason overcomes or transgresses its own limits, it need not necessarily run into a contradiction with itself. Figural exposition is a way in which reason can work through its immanent negativity to open an infinity of sense without falling upon "dogmatic" or "skeptical" responses to problems of pure reason. The exemplar for this is Kant's introduction of the indefinite judgment in addition to and distinction from the negative judgment. Žižek³⁴ brings out the importance of the indefinite judgment through the exemplification of un-deadness in relation to the dead, and its negative, i.e., not-dead (which is simply to be alive). The undead is not a simple negation of the predicate dead; instead, it introduces a third possibility in the dichotomy of the two polarities (life and death) and thus introduces an excess within the finite options. The third liminal possibility emerges at/ beyond the limits of the two finite positions introduced by the two contradictory positions.

Hegel's radicalization of Kant entails showing how the limit simultaneously forms that which it limits. Here, we begin to see resonances with Nancy's idea of a syncopated presentation of philosophy – one that is both disrupted and formed by its other. Hegel³⁵ elucidates that it is not merely the point that serves as the boundary of a line and the line that serves as the boundary of a plane, but, in a temporal reversal, the point is also an element of the line, and the line is also an element of a plane. Implying that the boundary is not merely a positive and third liminal space, but the boundary here, a line (which is a boundary of a plane), is itself split from within insofar as it has an element of not-line (i.e., the point) that *forms* a line while maintaining itself as an other to the line. Zupančič writes: «Hegel goes on to speak about the unrest of the something in its Grenze [boundary], of the contradiction that propels it beyond itself. We thus get a specific temporality of the dialectical movement, that of becoming»³⁶. Hegel's emphasis on the restlessness of the boundary allows us to think beyond the finitude of the two contradictory positions, which distinguishes his understanding of the boundary from Kant's, which remains spatially fixated.

Typically, Hegel's correction of Kant is understood to entail a historical contextualizing of Kant's alleged empty formalism. Against this usual understanding of Hegel's correction of Kant, Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda argue that Hegel radicalises Kant's formalism insofar as, for Hegel, Kant's formalism is not formalist enough³⁷! Hegel maintains that Kant's "fear of the object"³⁸ leads him to fill in the categories of pure reason with content as soon as he forms them. This hypostatizes being or posits a noumenal

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ Žižek (1993, 112–114).

³⁵ Hegel (2010, 100).

³⁶ Zupančič (2024, 187).

³⁷ Comay, Ruda (2018, 20).

³⁸ Hegel (2010, 30).

world beyond the grasp of thought. Hypostatization means to posit and fixate a concept as a substance, and Kant appears to hypostatize the transcendental and liminal spatiality he ingeniously discovers while navigating the apparent contradiction that reason encounters when it attempts to extend its imagination beyond what is given and readily accepted. Kant's anxiety with the restlessness of reason's limits is also apparent in Heidegger's reading of Kant, wherein he suggests that Kant fears the radicality of his questioning of limits to pure reason. Despite opening the possibility of the indefinite judgment that allows us to conceive of an excess within finite human experience, such a Kantian liminality succumbs to abstract formalism. This is because the limit is spatially fixated on the side of thought alone and being or objects themselves remain untouched by any conception of limit whatsoever. So, for Kant, the boundary exists between thought and being, wherein thought is finite and limited, whereas being is conceived as infinite and unlimited. This makes it difficult to conceive any relation of thought (finite) to being (infinite) as such. In contrast, Hegel's temporalization of the boundary introduces a split within being itself. Consider, in the case of the point and line example, the boundary (here, the point) is in a state of unrest and contradiction. The point is at once not a line but also something that forms the line. This contradiction inherent in the point propels it beyond itself. So, Zupančič suggests that while for Kant the boundary is an internal limit, for Hegel, it is transformed into an «internal infinite movement that breaks down its own finitude»³⁹. Hegel's exposition of this movement, as a result of the immanent negativity of any substance, allows us to conceive of being (and not just thought) as lacking. The point can relate to the line insofar as it has an element of not-point, or a lack inherent in it. The lack, however, makes the point partake of infinity rather than succumb to immanentism or finitude, insofar as the lack of the point to be wholly, completely, and self-sufficiently a point makes it (an element of) the line. This is how Hegel not only understands thought and the substance as internally lacerated by negativity, but also de-substantializes their relation⁴⁰, insofar as thinking relates to the substance based on their inherently shared negativity. Crucially, subjectivity emerges as the placeholder of this double lack, wherein the lack in thought coincides with the lack in the being. Explicating the thought's movement as presentation and not merely a representation of the world out there, Nancy writes:

In the final analysis, this [Hegelian] enterprise can be a matter of nothing other than dissolving these categories of "thought" and "being," or of making and letting them dissolve themselves. But this dissolution is itself nothing other than the operation of each one toward the other. Each deposes the other of its own consistency and subsistence. But it is in positing the other that it deposes it – and that it deposes itself in this deposition. The operation of sense thus gives itself as pure negativity – but this negativity is nothing other than the upsurge of the real in its absolute concreteness, nothing other than the point of the subject. No respite, no repose outside the inscription of this point; there you have Hegel's restlessness – but still: this point is nothing other than restlessness itself ... it is, at the same time, the unsettling, and the unsettled⁴¹.

Evidently, we have over here once again, the presentation of how the limit in and of thought and being, i.e., their negativity, forms and deposes them. The subject is constellated as that which traces this temporalization of sense as a result of a restlessness of the negativity that inheres, and divides thought and being. Hegel challenges the unilateral relation between subject and object, where the subject coherently forms the

³⁹ Zupančič (2024, 189).

⁴⁰ Comay, Ruda (2018).

⁴¹ Nancy (2002, 11).

world and, in turn, itself through the rules of sensible cognition. The introduction of negativity within the object and the de-substantializing of the subject-object relation make any foundationalist readings of Kant (such as those of Habermasians, neo-Kantians, and neo-pragmatists) highly suspect, as the very operation of sensible cognition and rationality as an uninterrupted and self-legislating principle stands questioned. Thought incessantly tarries with its radical otherness, the unthought, i.e., negativity, and forms itself because of this limitation. Therefore, Hegel opens an infinite becoming within the finitude of being.

Nancy's exposition of thought as syncopated figuration echoes with Hegelian radicalisation of Kantian limits. Briefly put, the radicalisation entails the temporal movement and self-presentation of thought by virtue of the interruption of its self-identity by negativity. To recapitulate, Nancy reads the inconsistency in Kant's *Critique* as the limitation of thinking to self-present itself with consistency without considering its immanent negativity (i.e., otherness). But Nancy's reading of Hegel suggests that the negativity for Nancy is not merely on the side of thought alone, but traverses the objective reality as well. This inherent lack in objective reality, which saves it from being pre-given and predetermined, becomes most manifest in Nancy's discussion of the narrative about the loss of community in modernity, which I will instantiate shortly. It is because of the lack of a pre-given narrative of objective reality that he introduces the notion of figuration as opposed to the representation of reality in thought, whereby the syncopated thought can only present itself by tarrying with the negativity of reality. The negativity of reality entails the fact that we have no unmediated access to nature or reality (as an unfigurable real) that exists as a whole outside of our figuration of it.

Nancy's reading of Hegel as a thinker who thinks through every possible presupposition of thought and world, makes him suggest that Hegel's philosophy is «witness of the world's entry into history»⁴². Here, history is not meant as a mere succession of events, but rather as an understanding of transformation and culture within the labyrinth of nature, i.e., how it becomes possible to speak and affect the course of that which is completely foreign to us, i.e., nature. Nancy suggests that the notion of transformation remains incomprehensible without Hegel's explanation of negativity. He emphasizes that Hegel shows thought in movement and considers that thought *is* only insofar as it is restless and in motion, whereas stagnation is a quality of the myth⁴³. Remarking on the Hegelian notion of becoming, Nancy writes:

Now, there is no thing – neither being nor thought – that is not determined. Everything is in the absolute restlessness of becoming. Becoming is not a process that leads to another thing, because it is the condition of every thing. Its absolute restlessness is itself the determination of the absolute. Becoming is quite exactly absolution: the detachment of each thing from its determination, as well as the detachment from the Whole in its determination⁴⁴.

Thus, neither being nor thought, neither nature nor culture exist out there as givens, absolutes, or as finished products, but are a result of constant determination and an absolute restlessness of the becoming. And the restlessness of becoming that forms things is because of the inherent non-identity, or lack of determination of the thing itself. Becoming has no *telos* insofar as it is a work of inherent negativity. Thought does not act upon things to represent them, but it presents the restlessness of things in and of themselves. Thought marks the limit or separation of things from themselves, so thought

⁴² Ivi, 7.

⁴³ Ivi, 8.

⁴⁴ Ivi, 12.

“is the separation of things and the ordeal of this separation”⁴⁵. This understanding of thought as the separation and presentation of this separation within things is a Hegelian re-working of the Kantian limits that conceive of reason’s boundary as plastic insofar as it allows us to introduce an infinity (through a figural image) within the finitude of reason’s determination.

The figuration is at once a lack and a surplus – it should not be confused with a mystical and imaginary expression that is removed from reality because thought operates figurally only in relation to the determinate negativity of the reality it tries to grasp, and not any abstract negativity. Just like the idea of self-identical substance, uninterrupted by negativity, is imaginary, the idea of an uninterrupted abstract negativity is also unreal. In figuration, the unfigurable real of reality beyond our grasp is actualized through a determinate negation of the reality at hand. Therefore, thought operating figurally simultaneously creates its own measure of signification insofar as the self-presentation of thought depends upon not foreclosing its syncopated exposition, in thought’s self-presentation with its necessary dislocations, instead of covering over or defending these as accidental or contingent lapses that keep thought’s rigour, as a whole, intact. Nancy’s notion of figuration transforms the moment of disruption in thought as the very measure of its soundness. To be sure, thought’s disruption is traced by Nancy as an ontological and primordial cut or limit not merely of human reason but a cut of being itself. This is the Hegelian influence that is at work in Nancy’s deconstruction of Kant’s systemic philosophy: the objective reality is split from within between its positive significations and a void or negativity. For instance, consider Nancy’s response to the typical understanding of the coming into being of a society:

Society was not built on the ruins of a *community*. It emerged from the disappearance or the conservation of something – tribes or empires – perhaps just as unrelated to what we call “community” as what we call “society.” So that community, far from being what society has crushed or lost, is *what happens to us* – question, waiting, event, imperative – in *the wake of society* ... Nothing, therefore, has been lost, and for this reason nothing is lost. We alone are lost, we upon whom the “social bond” (relations, communication), our own invention, now descends heavily like the net of an economic, technical, political, and cultural snare. Entangled in its meshes, we have wrung for ourselves the phantasms of the lost community⁴⁶.

To be sure, in *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy distinguishes the understanding of community based on a shared identity or essence as forms of communion from community without communion. The latter is an ontological sharing out of being-with the other that necessarily forms singularity despite socially or individually envisaged attempts to form a social commune based on shared substantial identities. The above quotation is indicative of the fact that, for Nancy, there is something beyond the historical passage from pre-modern feudal communes to modern civil society that explains our present narrative about the loss of communion. Nancy suggests that such a pre-modern commune was never really there; even if it were there, the historical ruptures, for instance, like the Industrial Revolution, do not completely explain our present social existence, which is at once governed by laws and social bonds, but also a testimony of the excess that the community without communion is. It is primarily because of the community’s (empirical) non-existence at any given point in time that any social bond is created as opposed to being historically determined. It is another thing that our social bonds are encumbered by totalizing and assimilatory ideologies that conceal the limits and

⁴⁵ Ivi, 13.

⁴⁶ Nancy (1991, 10-11).

contradictions inherent to society, which in turn conceals society's moment of creation and makes it appear as unchanging. However, the inherent limit of any society makes any historically specific disruption or change in calendrical time conceivable. Phenomenological disruptions like movement from one historical epoch to another are possible because of the transhistorical cut of our being: we can imagine and figure a different organization of being in the world, because of the trans-historical necessity of something like Nancy's community, i.e., the inherent lack of our society to accomplish a completely operative communion. Community conceived as such an immanent limit makes the figuration of a different society conceivable.

I will conclude by emphasizing the merit of reading Nancy through a Hegelian framework in the context of Nancy's idea of community – a framework that Nancy, on other occasions, himself defends and develops. The Hegelian notion temporalisation of limit presents Nancy's idea of community in a different light as compared to the usual analysis of the distinction between community and politics through the Heideggerian ontological difference (ontological-ontic). Prioritising the Hegelian inherent negativity or uncanniness within the Same, also responds to the problem of resorting to a transcendental safe-house and political inaction by thinking about a community different from politics here and now. By virtue of the inherent limits of politics as a discourse, it always already presupposes its other, i.e., community. Community is the internally necessitated limit of politics that forms/syncopates politics. In instances that disavow such a community, politics is limited to a series of nows; it is confined to historical and calendrical time, devoid of any notion of enduring structural transformation. To materialise a community without communion as a resistance to the closure of politics onto itself, we must act in a way that safeguards the instance of syncope within politics. Because the community without communion does not empirically exist, except only as a liminal realm, and manifests as symptoms in instances of political fissures. So, it is not the case that we have a community first and then a certain kind of politics comes into being. In fact, we cannot really touch this community or approximate it in any way, as it does not exist (empirically). Political interventions are all we have, but we can act in a way that inscribes eternity in our otherwise fleeting and momentarily fragmented political existence. Community as the limit and other of politics, which is not in any way a precondition of politics but co-appears with it, pushes us to act in a way that makes political actions generate any real difference and not fizzle out into political inaction by reproducing more of the same differences. The Hegelian correction of Kant's spatial fixation of limits becomes crucial to advance this critical reading of Nancy's oeuvre, which, as I try to bring out in the paper, is implicit in Nancy's writing on Kant and Hegel.

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