The GCAS Review

The GCAS Review Journal
Vol. II, Issue 1/2025
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Available online at: https://www.gcasreview.com/philosophy-and-social-commitment

Crisis as Determinate Negation
A Hegelian Response to Planetary Catastrophe

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Abstract: This paper applies Hegel's framework to contemporary global crises, by viewing crises as failures to recognize their respective determinate negations, which expose fundamental untruths in our belief systems. What if it is not the thing-it-itself that produces crisis, but its interaction with our meta-cognitive understanding of its appearance? Treating crises as appearances of negation, we observe three failed positions Hegel identified for confronting crisis. First, the skeptic who claims nothing can be done, accepting his fate. Second, the activist who seeks solutions through the application of existing frameworks, refusing to acknowledge that these very ideologies have produced our current catastrophes. Third, the sophisticated skeptic who criticizes all parties while passively waiting for solutions to reveal themselves (perhaps in a dream). Each approach dismisses crises as results of a pure evil Other, ignoring the unpleasant truths crises reveal about our own systems. I propose the dialectical approach that neither denies nor attempts to solve crises, but examines what they negate, understanding crises as chaotic systems that can neither be solved nor predicted but perhaps transformed to novel, less hazardous crises through shifts in the collective consciousness and perception of their appearances. Hegel's dialectical method offers a formally complete framework requiring neither perfect knowledge nor final solutions. By identifying determinate negations, namely, what specific assumptions and structures each crisis reveals as untenable, philosophers can contribute without claiming to resolve the irresolvable. The crucial question becomes: what core assumptions contributing to these crises are we refusing to abandon? This reframes philosophy's social commitment: not as external application of solutions, but as the

discipline helping consciousness recognize and move through its own contradictions, distinguishing never-ending repetitive crises (marking our refusal to learn) from progressive ones, thus opening the possibility for a new future history.

Keywords: *determinate negation, crisis, dialectics, post-rationality, leap-of-faith, defense mechanisms, plasticity.*

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1. Introduction: Crises as Appearances of Negation

Global crisis is what we face every day: wars, climate change, social tensions, discrimination, populism, authoritarianism. The images from Gaza say it all: children covered in dust, medical workers performing surgery using a smartphone flashlight, families dividing their last bread without knowing when the next humanitarian truck will arrive. But let us zoom out just slightly. All this happens while humanitarian trucks idle at checkpoints, their contents meticulously calculated, with sufficient calories to prevent mass starvation, yet insufficient to maintain health. The humanitarian machine functions more effectively than ever, and I argue, it is through this increasingly effective functioning that the catastrophe it claims to address is enabled and any possibility of a long-term solution is prevented.

We tell ourselves that the Gaza conflict is a failure of international law, international relations, or of humanitarian principles, and then demand better coordination, more aid, stronger diplomatic pressure. Yet, we should acknowledge that each response operates within the same framework that produces the crisis; the overarching structure of things remains unchanged. What if every documented war crime that goes unpunished does not strengthen international law but in fact reveals its actual function, its inherent impotence, its Hegelian determinate negation (Hegel, 1977) that we refuse to acknowledge: not preventing violence but archiving it, not constraining power but legitimizing it through procedural acknowledgment. The problem is clear: we supposedly know the crisis, yet all our efforts to solve them fail miserably; if anything, the crisis tends to respond like a Hydra to our attempts.

Going one step further beyond the solutions to crisis, what if the crisis itself is not the thing-in-itself, the bombing, the famines, the displacements, but a symptom, a signifier of our meta-cognitive refusal to see what it negates? What if Gaza does not represent the failure of humanitarianism but its success, showing us exactly what humanitarianism is designed to do: manage suffering within acceptable parameters rather than address its causes? What if our inability to "solve" Gaza stems not from insufficient effort but from the impossibility of the framework within which we develop our solutions? As Jean-Luc Nancy (2015) observed regarding Fukushima, catastrophe is no longer an external event but a systemic “equivalence” where technological rationality exceeds its own capacity for meaning. The goal of this Essay is not to provide you with a content-based solution to any crisis, but much rather to offer you a complete method to deal with crisis, which, as a consequence, should also serve as an attitude adjustment toward our perspective on crisis.

This method is in essence an application of Hegel's dialectical approach. Hegel argued

that each failed attempt to grasp truth contains, within its specific failure, hints toward better recognition. Each negation has unique identity, bound to the particular misrepresentation it negates, hence 'determinate negation.' Most people dismiss negations as irrelevant or interchangeable, missing their specificity. This dismissal blocks consciousness from progressing toward truth.

For us, this means that crises are not problems to solve but determinate negations revealing fundamental untruths in our belief systems. Each crisis carries within itself the specific revelation of what is wrong about our current frameworks. While Gaza negates the humanitarian paradigm, Ukraine negates the liberal international order and climate change negates sustainable growth. These negations are obvious and are present even in more specific fields, even in empirical science, where we have a massive replication crisis: And of course, the replication crisis in empirical science negates empirical method. As a default, we either refuse to acknowledge these negations, treating crises (and those who point them out) as external evils and simply require an even better application of the very frameworks they reveal as impossible, or we cease to engage with these crises altogether, retreating into fatalism.

This essay defends a Hegelian response to planetary catastrophe that diverges from the two dominant contemporary readings of determinate negations. Against Catherine Malabou's influential claim that destructive plasticity has replaced determinate negation as the new form of the Absolute (Malabou 2005; 2010; 2012), and against Slavoj Žižek's diagnosis of an undead dialectic we are condemned to inhabit without exit (Žižek 2019; Comay & Ruda 2023), I argue that contemporary crises reveal not the end of negation but the determinate negation of a historically specific, impotent plasticity: a regime that compensates for Real incapacity with ever-greater Imaginary potency (more models, more aid, more discourse). The task of philosophy is therefore neither to celebrate explosive form nor to enjoy the symptom, but to force the integration of the loss that this impotence disavows, a task that requires treating collective consciousness clinically rather than merely diagnostically. This position also differs from Ray Brassier's extinctionist reading of reason's self-abolition and from Karen Ng's robust defence of Hegelian life-processes, insofar as it insists that the current impasse is not ontological but historically specific to a regime of impotent plasticity.

In what follows I develop a Hegelian-psychoanalytic account of crisis along three claims. First, crises are not external problems awaiting solutions but appearances of determinate negation: they reveal specific impossibilities in the frameworks that structure our collective life. Second, contemporary responses to crisis largely remain at the level of A→A* optimisation, complicating existing paradigms, rather than making A→B

transformations in which consciousness and object change together. Third, the persistent refusal to recognise these determinate negations is best understood through Freudian and Lacanian defence mechanisms operating at the level of collective consciousness. On this basis, I argue that philosophy's task is not to provide solutions to planetary catastrophe, but to function as a kind of meta-analysis, helping consciousness register and work through the negations that crises signify.

2. Three Failed Positions

Treating crises as appearances of determinate negation, we can observe the exact three failed positions Hegel identified for confronting crisis. So what are the three failed positions according to Hegel?

Hegel explicated three stances one can hold towards truth: the paralyzed skeptic who sees negation everywhere, the activist who sees the negations but denies them, intensifies failing solutions (resembling Freudian reaction formation), and the sophisticated critic who analyzes without engaging.

Firstly, we have the doubter who claims nothing can be done, seeing errors everywhere. Paralyzed by this conclusion, he is accepting catastrophe as his fate. Everyone knows at least one self-proclaimed nihilist predicting inevitable collapse, just to give an example. Consider also the sophisticated critical theorists demonstrating Gaza's roots in structures too deep for intervention. This position presents itself as rational, boasting with the acceptance of negation, while actually defending against recognition of what crisis negates: not that nothing can be done but that what we are doing currently maintains what we claim to oppose. Hegel nicely dismantled the universal doubter's position by constructing a contradiction: the doubter doubts everything except the doubt itself, thus holding an impossible position. By this reductio ad absurdum Hegel can elegantly dismiss universal pseudo-rational doubt as logically incoherent.

Secondly, Hegel presents the option of seeing but denying the negation. This position is also futile, as this position already admitted its wrongfulness, but simply denies it. This is analogous to the activist who seeks solutions through the intensified application of existing frameworks after they have failed already, refusing to acknowledge that these very ideologies have produced our current catastrophes. He always argues that the frameworks have not been applied well enough. He is the obsessive-compulsive perfectionist, thinking he needs to do more of what cannot work, just more efficiently, more effectively. He may seek more humanitarian aid for Gaza, more weapons for Ukraine, more renewable energy for climate,

more rigorous methods for science. The vast majority of our politicians are proposing such solutions, despite a long history of their failures. The most dangerous part of this position is, that it appears engaged and constructive (thus receives recognition and funding) while refusing to acknowledge that these frameworks have produced the catastrophes they claim to address. It confuses water with gasoline to erase the fire. The activist knows but won't accept that humanitarianism requires humanitarian crisis, or that sustainable development is an oxymoron. This optimistic denial functions in the short term, but every now and then parts of the real will creep in and cause distress.

Third, the most subtle one, a sophisticated critical contributor, a sceptic who criticizes all parties while remaining carefully uninvolved, passively waiting for solutions to reveal themselves (perhaps in a dream). This position is the most problematic, because it looks like thoughtful contribution, but is in fact solving nothing. If anything, it discourages others to engage with the problem. Their maxim is that nothing is good enough and everything is erroneous. In essence it is just a very sophisticated procrastination. These might be the academics who have stopped publishing because they see the futility, or the powerful critics who only tear down without building. As a result, we get more of the first position: the intellectuals who have withdrawn entirely or the inventors who never finish a product. It is the most overlooked stance, as it hides under noble values. Being deeply intellectual and just-trying-to-help, this position is very easy to defend but through the Hegelian framework has nothing meaningful to offer. Moreover, it is logically inconsistent: comprehensive scepticism about all solutions implies a criterion for judgment that itself escapes scepticism. The sophisticated critic who dismisses every approach as inadequate must possess some standard of adequacy, but where does this standard come from if not from positive knowledge? They claim to know what won't work without explaining how they could know this without knowing what would work. Like claiming all maps are wrong while somehow knowing you're not at the destination. Here the judgment itself requires the very knowledge being denied.

All three positions fail to understand that only through interaction with the crisis, through trial-and-determinate-error, truth can be achieved. Hegel has convincingly proven that each of these three positions is either logically impossible or is not really helpful at all. The objective that all share, including Hegel's, is gaining access to pure truth, absolute knowledge. What all three have in common is error-aversion. They instantly put all errors in the trash, dismissing them as something without value or unique identity. Here, Hegel introduces the term of a determinate negation. He notes that we should not treat all negations as equal but instead should try to see the hints toward the absolute, that each negation holds. Every negation

is different and is always tied to its object. Within this negation, Hegel argues, we can find a key bit of truth, that allows ourselves to evolve consciously. By evolving consciously, the original object of interest changes. Hegel says, we should not stop there but look for the next determinate negation and find the next bit of truth in it. If we find it, we evolve again. One could mistakenly assume that this implies an absolute state, an endpoint of consciousness to be reached. This is an incorrect reading of Hegel, however. Hegel's absolute endpoint was actually the process itself, as continuous and everlasting interaction between consciousness, object and its determinate negation. This is the essence of Hegelian dialectics: find a concept of truth first, then find an inconsistency and revise the concept relative to this inconsistency and repeat the process indefinitely. Each step gets us one step further, without having a necessary defined endpoint. The method, the journey itself is the destiny. Dialectics do not prescribe knowledge about the thing-in-itself but give us a formally complete method of getting ahead without specifying a destination. In Hegel, consciousness and object develop together through mutual determination, and this development is the absolute itself. The solution to planetary crisis is in the evolution of it and with it. Applied to planetary crises, this means abandoning the impossible goal of 'solving' them. Crises are not problems awaiting solutions but moments in consciousness's development.

This needed to be clarified as one could prematurely assume that the absolute is an endpoint to be reached. However, the absolute is not the endpoint but the entire process, including all the "errors" and temporary truths along the way. There is no object-in-itself at perfection that consciousness gradually discovers. To translate it back to our planetary crises, we should not dismiss crises as mere failures and finally stop ignoring the unpleasant truths crises reveal about our own systems but recognize them. Through this recognition, the crisis will not go away, but its appearance will be different. This difference and transformation are guaranteed, as consciousness and the object are tied together, as consciousness changes, so does the object.

The Hegelian solution to planetary crisis is not to try to solve it, because it is per definition impossible. Instead, the solution lies in the transformation of these crises into novel ones. The chance we get is that while crises can neither be solved nor predicted they perhaps can be transformed to novel, less hazardous crises, through shifts in the collective consciousness and perception of their appearances. As the crises are the results of our consciousness, both are tied together and will change accordingly once the consciousness changes. Each crisis transforms into a new crisis at a higher level of recognition, not because we have failed but because that is what dialectical movement is.

3. The Sigmoid Staircase Model

Progress as a function of effort versus reward does not follow a linear trajectory but sigmoid staircase. The activist approach, which is intensifying existing solutions, moves solely within a single S-curve: from A to A* to A** with each "*" representing another point within that S-curve, with each step more complex and resource-intensive than the last. Initially, this shows exponential improvement, validating the approach. Inevitably, diminishing returns will set in, as the trajectory turns asymptotic, approaching a mathematical limit that no amount of additional effort can transcend.

Each S-curve represents optimization within a paradigm where consciousness and object remain fundamentally unchanged, only their quantitative relationship intensifies. The stairs between curves, from A to B, occur when consciousness recognizes the determinate negation of its current framework. In this recognition, consciousness and object transform together, co-evolving into a qualitatively different unity. This isn't just adopting new methods but consciousness itself developing through crisis, with the object simultaneously revealing itself differently to this transformed consciousness.

The activist's error lies in treating consciousness and object as separate, believing better application of unchanged consciousness to unchanged problems will yield different results. They cannot see that the exhausted S-curve signals the need for dialectical transformation where both consciousness and its object must evolve together. This pattern reveals why increased effort produces decreased results. Without dialectical transformation, reaching the next sigmoid step "B", without consciousness evolving through recognizing what crisis negates, we remain trapped on plateaus, exhausting resources for marginal gains while the stairs to new curves remain invisible.

Žižek (2012, 2013) does not read the crisis as a disturbing but ultimately integrable "trauma" or as a benign Other we can gently reconcile with. For him, every genuine crisis is the sudden revelation of the "night of the world": the day of the existing symbolic order is already over; constituted reality has collapsed into the psychotic void of absolute negativity. What we still experience as "daylight" is only the afterglow, and all our political programs, reforms, and humanitarian flashlights are just desperate attempts to keep pretending the sun is still up.

Levinas is right that ethics first appears as an infinite responsibility summoned by the face of the Other, but Žižek insists this responsibility cannot consist in patching up the neighbor (A → A*), in restoring the old daylight by humanitarian or redistributive means. That would

merely paper over the fact that the previous world is already dead. The truly ethical act is instead to traverse the night, to accept the radical negation that has already occurred, and to refuse the false consolation of "fixing" what is irreparable. Only by staring into the Hegelian night, into the death drive, into the inhuman core of the human, do we clear the ground for a genuine A → B, a new symbolic order that is not a renovated version of the old.

This traversal is not a one-time apocalyptic event we should dread; the night of the world is not an external catastrophe that might befall us tomorrow. It is the permanent, constitutive background of every symbolic order, the Lacanian Real of the insurmountable gap between signifier and signified, the lack that prevents any system from ever achieving full closure. Because this gap is structural and eternal, every "day" already carries its own night within it. The ethical obligation is therefore not to postpone the night but to actively assume it, to push the contradictions of the existing order to the point where they implode and open the space for something truly new.

The next night is not a threat, but an opportunity for dialectical progression. Every symbolic order is a brief dawn that is already, from its first second, a long twilight.

The ethical-political task is not to keep the old dawn artificially alive with ever-weaker bulbs, but to plunge courageously into the night so that a genuinely new day, one we cannot yet even imagine, becomes possible again.

The Challenge of Traumatic Plasticity and Extinction

The most serious contemporary challenge to the Hegelian framework defended here comes from theories that view crisis not as a dialectical contradiction, but as an ontological absolute, either as biological destruction or cosmic extinction.

This challenge is most vividly articulated by Catherine Malabou's concept of (destructive) plasticity. Neurological destruction, stroke, and Alzheimer's are taken by Malabou to illustrate that form can now only explode or scar over without necessary sublation, rendering classical determinate negation obsolete (Malabou, 2012). Similarly, Ray Brassier (2007) pushes the "trauma" of reason to its limit, arguing that the ultimate horizon of thought is not historical progress but solar extinction, a "truth of extinction" that renders human meaning-making retroactive and ultimately void. On the other end of the spectrum, Karen Ng (2020) attempts to ground the dialectic in "life-processes," defending a continuity between organic life and self-consciousness.

My position diverges from all three by insisting that the current crisis is neither biological accident (Malabou), nor cosmological inevitability (Brassier), nor organic continuity

(Ng). It is a historically specific crisis of the Symbolic.

Against Brassier, I argue that while extinction is the ultimate reality of the physical universe (the Real), it cannot serve as a political category. To treat political crisis as synonymous with cosmic extinction is to capitulate to the very "skeptic's paralysis" Hegel warned against. Against Ng, I argue that we cannot look to "Life" for salvation because the current system has rendered Life itself "undead", our crisis is precisely that capital functions as a zombie-life that consumes the organic.

Finally, Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda (2018) offer a more nuanced reading, describing the "dash", the space of hesitation or standstill, as a necessary moment in the dialectic. While compelling, the danger of lingering in the "dash" is that it mirrors the "sophisticated skeptic" who analyzes the gap without traversing it. The crisis of necromancy requires not a standstill, but a cut.

Yet, Malabou's (2012) challenge remains the most potent because it relies on the "unsymbolizable" nature of trauma. She argues that the Alzheimer's patient or the stroke victim has no "history" to dialecticize. Yet this interpretation commits a decisive category error: I do agree, that all determinate negations are indeed losses, but not every loss is a determinate negation. Alzheimer's is an encounter with the Real, chaos that resists symbolisation, but the determinate negation lies elsewhere: forty years and billions spent on the amyloid paradigm have produced ever-more refined explanatory models for a disease that only worsens (Bateman et al. 2023, Cummings et al., 2016). What happens, in Lacanian terms, is that the scientific community has retreated into an inflationary Imaginary potency that masks absolute Real impotence. Malabou therefore mistakes the occasion of the Real (the lesion) for the negation itself; the negation is the refusal to recognise what the Real has revealed about our paradigms.

This misunderstanding extends beyond neurology into the philosophy of history. Critics like Achille Mbembe (2019) or proponents of Afropessimism (Wilderson, 2020) often argue that specific traumas, the Holocaust, the Middle Passage, or colonial extraction, are absolutes that defy dialectical integration. They argue that these events are instances of pure destruction, a 'Real' that invalidates the logic of negation.

However, this view commits a category error regarding where the dialectic takes place. The Hegelian dialectic is not an operation on the Real, precisely because the Real is indeed absolute, indifferent, and needs no negation. The dialectic is the movement of the Symbolic as it attempts to register the shock of the Real. To say that 'Auschwitz refutes Hegel' is to confuse the map with the territory. The horror of the Real does not stop the dialectic; it is the engine of it.

While the activist (A→A*) retreats into the Imaginary to paper over the trauma with 'solutions,' the dialectical approach (A→B) allows the Symbolic to be shattered by the Real, forcing a reconstruction of our entire meaning-making apparatus. The claim that a trauma is 'too big' for dialectics is simply a refusal to let the Symbolic order die.

We must distinguish between the Traumatic Destruction (the Real) and the Determinate Negation (the Symbolic). The former is the tissue loss, the human piles of bodies; it is ontological, tragic, and absolute. The latter is the System Loss; it is the realization that the Symbolic system which allowed this destruction to happen, and causally led to it, has been negated.

There is a strict causal asymmetry here. When the Real erupts, a part of the Symbolic is inevitably destroyed as a necessary consequence. However, the reverse does not hold: if by determinate negation the Symbolic is abolished, the Real remains physically unchanged. Yet, something crucial happens: the transmuted Symbolic (B) is now one step closer to the Real. It has shed the illusion (A) that obscured the danger. The dialectic does not repair the Real; it aligns the Symbolic with the truth of the Real.

The Hegelian act, therefore, is not to mourn the tissue, that belongs to memory and grief, but to mourn the validity of the Concept. In the Holocaust, the determinate negation is not the victims, but the concept of Western Enlightenment Rationality itself (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002); the camps revealed that "Rationality," when pushed to its absolute limit without ethical sublation, becomes industrialized murder. In Alzheimer's, the disease negates not the memory, but the concept of the "Autonomous Subject" independent of its biological substrate. In Gaza, the starving child negates not humanitarianism, but the "Rules-Based Order" that uses Law to legitimize siege.

If the "loss" were merely the tissue, the logical response would be restoration and reparations (A→A*). But because the loss is the System itself, the system as the causal logic that produced the horror, the only valid response is abandonment (A→B). The "loss" is the death of the Concept, as each concept is only useful until it runs to the next contradiction.

Since every Symbolic order is finite, attempting to optimize a dead concept (A*) does not revive it; it merely animates it. Going to A* renders the system undead. The dialectic is the refusal of this necromancy.

The AI/LLM crisis

This pattern of necromancy is visible in contemporary AI, particularly large language models (LLMs). After an initial wave of optimism, it has become clear that simply scaling existing

architectures does not in itself resolve any of our major crises. The negation of A is already visible: current systems reach performance plateaus and exhibit well-known limitations, such as persistent hallucinations and shallow reasoning despite massive compute. Yet our response has largely been to demand larger models, more data, and vastly greater computational resources, precisely an A→A* movement. The core paradigm remains unchanged; only its quantitative parameters are intensified, as seen in proposals for nuclear reactors to power AI training amid escalating energy demands.

The asymptotic flattening of every sigmoid curve is civilizational impotence: the system can no longer achieve generative potency in the Real and compensates with an endless proliferation of Imaginary substitutes.

From a Hegelian perspective, this is not a failure of implementation but a refusal of determinate negation. The recognition that current architectures may have reached their internal limits would require transforming the object itself (A→B), rather than escalating the same paradigm.

The logic is familiar in other domains: we respond to plateaus in drug development, economic growth, or humanitarian interventions by injecting more resources into exhausted frameworks, exhausting energy, capital, and attention that could instead support a qualitative shift. Not only does our approach fail, it seems to accelerate the issue, as moving further down towards A*n increases the complexity. To truly improve the handling of crises, we have to start finding A → B solutions.

Cognitive Bottleneck

There is another much bigger problem of the naïve A→A* approach: It presupposes unlimited time and infinite resources. Yet our cognition is severely constrained. We can indefinitely intensify technological and institutional complexity, even contemplating mining other planets for resources, regardless, our cognitive apparatus remains comparatively fixed. As complexity and resource demands escalate together, we begin to exhaust not only planetary resources but also our own capacity to process what we produce.

A landmark paper in AI has accumulated over 100,000 citations in roughly a decade (LeCun et al., 2015). At first glance this appears as a spectacular marker of progress. But if its author wished to read all citing papers at a pace of three per day, it would require almost a century to read them all, even if no further citations would be added. Similar dynamics obtain across disciplines: scientific output expands faster than any individual or community can meaningfully comprehend, let alone integrate, while indicators of disruptive advance decline

(Park et al., 2023), and large-scale replication efforts reveal systematic fragility in empirical results (Baker, 2016). These are not isolated failures but symptoms of a paradigm that has reached its limits.

The deeper problem here is a scientistic and techno-solutionist conviction that more data, more computation, and more refined methods will eventually resolve crises, while our cognitive capacity required to evaluate this expanding complexity remains the same. We simply cannot read, retain, and critically assess the volume of information now generated. Under such conditions, it is unsurprising that research faces replication crises and that political and planetary crises intensify deeply despite unprecedented analytical capacity.

The post-rational society

Overwhelmed by this absolute excess of information, we inevitably have to perform increasingly larger Kierkegaardian leaps of faith (Kierkegaard, 1992) to remain capable of acting. The insurmountable gap between systemic complexity and cognitive capacity is resolved by faith-dominant thinking, acting and decision-making. This denotes the present post-rational state of society in which the frameworks demand more of cognition than cognition can deliver. This is especially evident if one follows recent cultural developments, of the never-ending fake-news, half-truths, and radicalisation.

Because we refuse to see the determinate negations, we are stuck optimizing within exhausted paradigms (faster computers, bigger models, more papers) approaching mathematical limits, rather than making qualitative leaps to new paradigms. Recognizing this trap is only half the problem. The solution is not so simple: what if it is not that we cannot get to B, but that we do not want to?

4. Why and how Determinate Negation is resisted

The question is not why we fail to solve crises but why we refuse to recognize what they negate. Hegel documented this resistance but never fully explained its mechanism. He observed that consciousness clings to failing paradigms, that we choose the doubt over despair, which is the terror of abandoning fundamental assumptions. You can always take your doubt back, but you cannot move backwards in the dialectic. Once a determinate negation is recognized, consciousness is transformed forever. You can always lie to yourself and disavow the realisation, but according to Hegel these attempts of self-gaslighting are futile in the long run. Or as common wisdom dictates: once you see it, you cannot unsee it. This irreversibility makes

dialectical movement a path of despair rather than doubt, precisely because doubt can be taken back, but dialectical recognition cannot. The dialectical path of despair is a traumatic reality where one no longer has an absolute, comforting truth to hold on to, as the eternal task is to acknowledge the limitations of each temporary absolute.

Thus, there is something deeply traumatic about Hegelian dialectics. The answer lies not in individual psychology but in the collective consciousness itself, and Freud (1966) gave us some answers for this matter. And here is where Hegel stops, but Freud continues. This refusal in itself is significant, as it resembles Freudian defence mechanisms.

Defense mechanisms are unconscious psychological operations that protect consciousness from recognizing unbearable truths. Freud identified these as automatic processes - repression, denial, projection, displacement - that prevent traumatic recognitions from entering awareness. Their primary function is maintaining psychic equilibrium by keeping contradictions unconscious. When applied to collective consciousness, these mechanisms don't just protect individual egos but entire civilizational structures from recognizing their own impossibility.

Symbolic versus Imaginary Progression – An epistemology of determinate negation

To understand how these mechanisms operate collectively, we need Lacan's (2006) three registers: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. The Imaginary is the realm of images, identifications, and quantitative modifications. This is where A→A* progressions occur. They change the image of the object, without affecting the symbolic order. Exemplarily, you can use AI to write faster, compute more, analyse deeper, but it will not change the overall direction of your work. These changes transform what you can do and think but do not disrupt the fundamental coordinates of meaning, the symbolic order that structures reality itself.

The Symbolic comprises all signifying structures, latent or manifest, which are organizing society, be it through the law, language, or morals. The Real is what resists symbolization entirely, it is the traumatic kernel that cannot be integrated into either imaginary identifications or symbolic structures. Crises are eruptions of the Real, moments when the impossible breaks through our meaning-making systems. The Real breaking through is precisely what Hegel called determinate negation - the specific impossibility each crisis reveals. Defense mechanisms now have a new function, as they no longer just protect individual psyches but maintain the symbolic order itself by preventing recognition of its gaps and contradictions. The Real is precisely what our defense mechanisms work to keep at bay, what makes dialectical movement so terrifying, as it forces encounter with what cannot be

symbolized within current frameworks. This very encounter, with a close Hegelian reading, will require the abandonment of the current symbolic order. When crisis reveals the symbolic's failure (humanitarian aid enabling siege, growth destroying our planet earth), defense mechanisms transform these recognitions into problems within the system rather than problems of the system. They convert encounters with the Real into imaginary solutions (A→A*), protecting the symbolic coordinates from dissolution.

The symbolic order comprises the foundational truths organizing society, not just explicit beliefs but the unconscious assumptions making experience coherent. Exemplarily we all believe that growth is good, that problems have solutions, that knowledge accumulates toward truth and that humanitarian intervention alleviates suffering. These aren't mere opinions but structural necessities for our current form of life. If someone told us otherwise, even if he held impeccable evidence, we would not believe him. These are what Kripke (1982) called "grammatical sentences", statements we refuse to abandon, whose negation would require rebuilding language itself.

But Kripke missed something crucial: why certain knowledge can be overwritten while other knowledge faces violent resistance. The answer resides in the Imaginary vs Symbolic distinction. Imaginary change (A→A*) does not threaten the symbolic order and is thus accepted quickly. Computers calculating faster will not challenge fundamental assumed truths about progress, rationality, or human nature. You can infinitely optimize within the imaginary without disrupting the symbolic coordinates that give these activities meaning.

Symbolic change is different as it is a A→B transformation. It demands recognizing that the symbolic order itself contains impossibilities, that our foundational truths are precisely what crisis negates. This is not just changing what we think but changing what makes thinking possible. It is not improving humanitarian aid but recognizing humanitarianism as structurally complicit with violence.

When we encounter crises that negate our fundamental assumptions, we defend and double down on them. Consciously we say we change, adapt, improve, but in fact we usually generate increasingly sophisticated versions of failing solutions, create more complex theoretical frameworks to explain simple impossibilities, or produce mountains of analysis that prevent rather than enable recognition of the problem.

The problem is not that we do not understand our crises but that we understand them too well within existing paradigms. This boundedness to the paradigm and the unwillingness to move on makes a true recognition of the thing-in-itself impossible. We do not abandon these paradigms but find more sophisticated elaborations of the theoretical and institutional

frameworks we know have failed. The root cause is thus not cognitive (due to ignorance) but emotional and traumatic: by the unbearable anxiety of recognizing the negation of fundamental assumptions.

This explains why consciousness adopts the three failed positions from the previous chapters: the skeptic's paralysis, the activist's intensification, and the critic's distance are all defense mechanisms preventing encounter with the Real. Each creates the appearance of engagement while avoiding the irreversible recognition that would dissolve the symbolic order.

The victims of mass defence mechanisms

These mechanisms operate most visibly when paradigm-threatening discoveries emerge. Semmelweis's 1847 discovery that handwashing prevented childbed fever did not simply introduce a new medical technique; it revealed that doctors themselves were killing their patients. His subsequent dismissal, exclusion from practice, institutionalisation, and early death exemplify a reaction that was not scientific scepticism but a violent refusal to acknowledge what the discovery negated in the hospital's symbolic order.

Modern academia refines these defences through institutionalised procedures that appear to pursue truth while limiting paradigm recognition: peer review tends to keep work within accepted frameworks, citation metrics reward elaboration over transformation, and tenure structures can penalise more radical challenges. Contemporary practices often labelled "cancel culture" extend this logic, not merely by silencing particular views but by foreclosing the possibility that opposing positions might both be inadequate, and that their conflict exposes shared assumptions requiring abandonment. In all these cases, maintaining symbolic coherence proves more important than recognising the determinate negations that crises and discoveries articulate.

The pattern repeats countless times throughout history. Each time, the resistance was tied to recognizing the negation of existing paradigms. Philosophy's necessary task becomes clear: not to overcome society's defences directly but to create conditions where recognition becomes possible despite them.

5. Philosophers as Analysts

Philosophy's task in regard to crises isn't solving them or providing solutions but helping consciousness and society recognize the signifiers of the determinate negations it systematically refuses to see. Like the analyst who notices not what the patient says but what

they consistently avoid saying, philosophy must attend to the structured absences around which our discourse organizes. The real "solution" to crisis resides in the determinateness of the negation. What obvious crises exist which we are refusing to see, and how can philosophers signify them?

Dealing with defence mechanisms

Collective reactions to crisis are not random; they are defence mechanisms. Breaking through requires recognizing these defence mechanisms as defence mechanisms, and not as random, arbitrary responses. Clinically, patients often come to analysis wanting to "get rid" of trauma, as if the goal were to return to a pre-traumatic state. Yet the cure consists not in erasing trauma but in integrating it: weaving the trauma into a new symbolic reality in which it is acknowledged, displaced, and worked through rather than denied.

The same holds at the collective level. Civilization's "neurosis" organizes around what its symbolic order cannot afford to avow: those determinate negations that show the impossibility of its self-understanding. As Fink (1997) argues, the analyst does not complain about the patient's resistance; resistance is assumed as the very material of the work. What matters is the analyst's desire, the consistent orientation that allows the analysand to risk confronting what has been defended against. Philosophy, as a kind of meta-analysis, bears a similar responsibility: not to blame society for being defensive, but to persist in clarifying what those defences protect.

Philosophy is structurally equipped for this task because it inhabits a meta-level relative to other discourses. It produces durable symbolic forms, concepts, arguments, books, that can outlive and slip past institutional mechanisms of suppression. You can burn books, censor curricula, purge departments, but once a determinate negation has been conceptually articulated, it tends to return like the repressed, haunting the symbolic order until it is finally recognized.

This aligns with Žižek's "enjoy your symptom.", which is not the determinate negation itself but its first, necessary acknowledgement: it is the moment when consciousness finally ceases the exhausting labour of defence and lets the contradiction appear in its raw, obscene form. However, enjoyment shouldn't be treated as a kind of critical end-point. The symptom is the determinate negation knocking at the door; enjoyment is opening the door and genuinely welcoming it. The true dialectical movement begins only when consciousness moves through enjoyment toward integration: relinquishing what the symptom has revealed as untenable and constructing a new configuration that includes the loss. Flashbacks, individual and collective,

perform exactly this function: they are the repeated presentation of the determinate negation until it is worked through. They cease only when the new self- or world-view is established.

The Dialectical Wager

This sets up a wager structurally analogous to Pascal's, but inverted. Pascal (1995) proposed betting on God's existence because an infinite gain outweighed finite loss. Today, we confront the reverse: we must wager on the impossibility of our prevailing paradigms because the cost of maintaining them tends toward infinity, while the loss we risk is "only" the anxiety of uncertainty.

The A→A* logic of crisis management, the attempt to intensify, optimize, or cosmetically reform the very paradigm that produced the crisis, demands exponentially increasing resources for diminishing returns. We see this across domains: billions poured into drug development within failing biomedical paradigms; escalating energy consumption to feed AI models that inch along an asymptotic performance curve; humanitarian and military cycles that "manage" conflicts without transforming the coordinates that generate them. The sigmoid curve flattens while sunk costs explode.

What we cannot do is positively describe "B," the order beyond A. By definition, B lies beyond the current symbolic frame. But we can recognize when A has become structurally impossible: when further investment no longer produces transformation, only more elaborate repetition. The rational wager is not on a particular image of the future but on the necessity of abandoning the demand that A must be made to work. Recognizing A's impossibility is the condition of possibility for B, whatever B will turn out to be.

This requires a harsh epistemic humility: treating even our most fundamental assumptions as already wrong, but not therefore useless. Their truth-value now lies in their negations: in what they exclude, misname, or systematically fail to register. By attending to those determinate negations, we do not "design" a new order in advance; we cease preventing one from emerging.

From Other to Self

Crisis discourse typically remains at the level of the Other. A→A* talk is saturated with familiar villains: climate deniers, authoritarian leaders, predatory corporations, corrupt institutions. While not false, but they are one-sided: they allow us to preserve the very symbolic coordinates we share with those we condemn.

The shift philosophy enables is from "What is wrong with them?" to "What determinate

negation does my own position refuse to see?" When we accuse others of clinging to a losing paradigm, we often reveal our own attachment to the same order, differing only on who should occupy which place within it. Both sides of a culture war typically defend the same basic structure while fighting over its content. The Other becomes the screen upon which our own disavowed complicity is projected.

If we really cannot but criticise others, the question becomes: what does my critique reveal about my own disavowal? We are all in it, no one is exempt, just as every analyst is forever also an analysand.

Recognition begins when we see our own participation in what we criticise, as we inherently are a part of the symbolic order we claim to oppose. Philosophy's task is about helping consciousness work through and past its own inherent refusal to see its determinate negations.

Chaos as Dialectical Necessity

As mentioned before, the symbolic order maintains itself through peer review, metrics, hierarchies, funding procedures, ethical boards, bureaucratic routines and other stabilizing paradigms. They secure continuity, filter noise, and coordinate labour; they also filter out determinate negations that would force a reconfiguration of the field. The more efficiently these mechanisms operate, the better they can exclude what threatens the order, not necessarily because the excluded is false, but because acknowledging it would be too costly affectively, institutionally, or cognitively.

Perfect order means perfect repetition of existing patterns approaching infinity without transformation, while inevitably exhausting resources toward crisis. If transformation is to occur, some degree of disorder is structurally necessary. Time and energy currently spent shoring up impossible systems would have to be released into a transitional phase whose content we cannot yet script. This is what makes the wager so difficult: chaos is not merely a risk but a requirement of dialectical change.

Thus, the choice is not simply between order and chaos but between ordered repetition unto certain death versus chaotic transition toward mere possibility. Philosophy's final task is helping consciousness recognize this choice, offering methods to tolerate the anxiety of paradigm abandonment, and to stop the compulsive restoration of unviable orders.

Concluding Remarks

Crises mark our refusal to recognize determinate negations, eventually leading unto planetary exhaustion. The answer to crisis lies not in their resolution (A → A*) but in their transformation (A → B). This path emerges once consciousness recognizes what crises determinately negate.

Planetary crises do not announce the end of determinate negation but the determinate negation of a historically specific, impotent plasticity, one that inflates the Imaginary (more models, more aid, more data, more discourse) to compensate for its incapacity to transform the Real. Recent attempts to pronounce the death of dialectics, whether through destructive plasticity (Malabou, 2023), the dialectics at a standstill (Comay & Ruda, 2018), or the enjoyment of the undead symptom (Žižek, 2019), underestimate that plasticity itself has reached its determinate limit. The philosophical task is therefore neither to track explosive form nor to inhabit the impasse, but to force the integration of the loss that this impotence disavows. Only when collective consciousness recognises that its current coordinates are untenable will the repetitive crises cease and a new, less hazardous configuration become possible. The absolute is not endless plasticity but the forced recognition that even plasticity has its determinate negation.

This reframes philosophy's social commitment: not as external application of solutions, but as the discipline helping consciousness recognize and move through its own contradictions, distinguishing never-ending repetitive crises (marking our refusal to learn) from progressive ones, thus opening the possibility for a new future history.

Consequently, this Hegelian response is far more than a mere contemplative shift; it requires a praxis of active subtraction. If the activist’s error is the infinite injection of resources into dying paradigms (A→A*), the dialectical act is the strategic withdrawal of that investment. It means defunding the 'better' model to force the invention of the new; it means refusing the comfort of the 'good enough' humanitarian compromise to expose the intolerable reality of the political structure. This is not passive resignation, but a violent, active decoupling from the symbolic order. It is the refusal to prop up the corpse of the old world. By stopping the frantic maintenance of the status quo, we do not merely suggest a new method; we physically clear the space in reality for the emergence of the determinate negation.

Recognition without sacrifice remains mere enjoyment of the symptom; only the relinquishment of what the determinate negation reveals as untenable, career, identity, institutional investment. creates the conditions for a new, less hazardous configuration.

Comfort can be found upon the recognition, that the absolute is not a location that can

be reached, but rather a process in constant, never-ending oscillation between perception and determinate negation, what Jean-Luc Nancy (2002) identifies as the "restlessness of the negative". Each determinate negation transforms consciousness and object together, creating new unities with new contradictions. The journey itself is the absolute.

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