Fig. 11: Veronika Pausova, *Midnight Jacuzzi*, 2017, oil on Canvas, 15" x 18" (45.7x38.1 cm.) © Veronika Pausova / Subal Gallery, New York.

Goran Vranešević

An Atom of Touch: Scepticism from Hegel to Lacan

There is a myriad of topics that can illustrate the peculiar nature of scepticism, all worthy of a thorough commentary. However, it is by no means clear whether a sceptical endeavour is even suited to perform a delicate gesture needed to grasp a firm essence, considering that the sole positive assurance preserving such an endeavour is constant doubt. In the context of psychopathology, such a drive would undoubtedly be assessed as an addiction to doubt (*Zweifelsüchtigkeit*). This text will instead propose a different route: a Hegelian one, a questioning of the use of language when appropriating elements of knowledge. This might be a worthy aim, as the role of language is often disregarded when striving for certitude. Contrary to common usage, language should not be considered as a medium of adequation, precipitating a bond between things and words, but as a placeholder of contradiction (*Widerspruch*); speaking against itself through the medium of the nonsensical sound of words. Or, to put it more plainly, the task of language is not to offer the right words for the right things, but to arrange appropriate junctures between words themselves. Accordingly, the object of analysis must primarily be knowledge itself, while it is only on its heels that it is possible to discern the contours of language. Knowledge is not an explication of fundamental truths, as Aristotle argued, or an adequate articulation of a thing that one ponders about, not even the notion of wise ignorance, but a product of working on oneself and grasping such an errand. Hegel acknowledged this when he claimed, “What is familiar and well known (*Das Bekannte*) as such is not really known for the very reason that it is *familiar and well known*”;¹ that is, there is a nuanced argument to be made regarding knowledge that usually favours the idea according to which knowledge ensures the path to truth, or at least certitude. However, it is *skepsis*, a retraction of truth, that enables knowledge to establish its footing through its otherness, through its negative facet, through its difference in itself. Meeting the other of oneself in oneself, however, is more appropriately expressed as a proposition that meets itself in separation from itself. And this rather speculative portrait of *skepsis*—an interjection of negativity/failure that causes a separation within statements and produces positive knowledge—is exemplarily presented through a simple gesture of touch induced by homophony: a pair of words that sound the same, but have a different spelling. Procuring a common bond for “Kant,” “count,” and even “cunt” might seem unfathomable were it not for a chance coincidence in their enunciation. By capturing different morphemes in a single sound, homophones literally enable disparate words to touch each

1 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. and trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 20.

other while maintaining a definite separation between them. While the idea of touch is usually limited to the haptic interplay of bodily surfaces and sense reception, this article will argue, in contrast, that homophonic utterances do not only produce knowledge, but all the more so that they exhibit the essential form of touch, which comes about when the other of oneself is present in oneself. Although it was Jean-Claude Milner who recognised and explicated this specific characteristic in Lacan's later works and may have had explicated the significance of Lacan's linguistic turn towards homophones, he nevertheless omitted an essential ingredient: the presence of the right touch. However, before we put the whole weight of our tongue behind this argument, let us first unfold the sceptical framework that preconditions it.

On Knowledge

It is easy to portray an inquiry relating to the meaning of knowledge as banal, since it seems self-evident what we are talking about when we use such a notion. Even when pressed to further elaborate on the meaning of knowledge, the ideas are mostly reduced to the ability to remember certain facts and, with their aid, create definite truths. From the viewpoint of perception, every assurance stems from the comparison of ideas, but consequently, every judgement hangs on only a thin thread of certainty. Against common sense, Hegel structures knowledge by way of self-othering (*Sichanderswerden*) of the concept, not by finding a general logic, but by formally evacuating the content of knowledge. Any fixed sense becomes useless.² One must realise that a fact can be apprehended only when there is a forced shift of focus from the idea of a totalisation of self-identity to a propositional logic that anticipates certainty. If something can be defined only through its relation to the otherness, it fulfils its purpose by returning the concept to itself from a place of otherness. This "rigorous exertion of the concept upon oneself"³ is a contradictory movement filled with coincidences (joyful wordplay), deficiencies (slips of the tongue), and disjunctions (jokes).

To alleviate the weight of the initial conceptual wager, let us take a more mundane, but fundamental conceptual approach to the subject at hand. While (positivistic) sciences approach the world with their eyes half shut, omitting the dynamic nature of knowledge, *Wissenschaft*, the German equivalent, is able to encompass its structural capacity to change. Let us be clear. Any phenomena can be knowable

² Although Marx had another form of discourse in mind, he incidentally also articulated an indicative quality of knowledge: "All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify": Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore, introduction and notes by Gareth Stedman Jones (London: Penguin, 2002), 223.

³ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 36.

when it is given as an object of experience, which comes into being by way of arousing sensation. However, reducing knowledge to sense perception is only enough to explicate a bare positivity; even if this idea of knowledge enables one to become acquainted with the world of phenomena, it only poses a ready-at-hand entity to be appropriated. Knowledge (*Wissen*) is not merely handed down; it is additionally supplemented with the work of creation (*schaft* or *schöpfen*), a differentiation of oneself (*Selbstunderscheidung*) in order to establish the composition of science (*Wissenschaft*). Both variants of science build upon their precursor, the ancient *epistēmē*, which is characterised by eternal necessities and the idea of objects that cannot be different from what they are, but only *Wissenschaft* encompasses the negative aspect of knowledge via scepticism. It is a well-worn assumption that scepticism is unable to keep an opinion firmly in its hands, “only pure nothing”;⁴ however, Hegel came closest to establishing a convergence between these sceptical interventions and (eternal) truths. He paired the question “What can I know?” with the labour of conceptual unveiling and thereby grasped knowledge as the process of self-comprehension (*Selbsterfassen*), or, more directly expressed, the task of touching (*Fassen*) oneself (*Selbst*).

In comparison to the common idea that scepticism should be equated with doubt, Hegel recognised a more accurate motive behind its activity: “to dissolve all certainty, to show it in its nothingness.”⁵ Such is also the elementary sceptical demand that permeates Hegel’s thought. In this respect, the dissolution of determinate content is not merely an idea for itself as it is intertwined with an elementary thesis regarding knowledge, according to which we cannot know whether our opinions are true. If scepticism were to retain only this negative aspect, then the only attainable certainty would be embedded in individual self-consciousness. Hegel was clearly aware of this when he compared the outcome of such sceptical affairs to a total paralysis of the limbs.⁶ Although this was a legitimate standpoint, he clearly did not envision a paralysis of being, but rather an Elvis-like dance move. Even though this may appear to be a debilitating motion, an ordinary dance pose which suddenly turns into its opposite, this is the closest image of the idea of dialectics to have been presented in popular culture. While scepticism is merely a negative determination of a finite will that can grasp subjective knowledge, Hegel’s positive speculative gesture

4 Hegel, 53.

5 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy 1825–6. Volume 2: Greek Philosophy*, ed. Robert F. Brown, trans. Robert F. Brown and J.M. Stuart with the assistance of H.S. Harris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 302.

6 There is a tendency to simply yield to the radicalism of the sceptical negative stance; however, the respect thus gained is more often than not a solitary affair: “In fact, if one utterly desires to be a sceptic, one cannot be affected, or be brought to a positive philosophy—any more than one who is paralyzed in all his limbs can be made to stand. Such paralysis is indeed scepticism.” A sceptic is content to “merely stand still in the negative, and in individual self-consciousness” (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie II. Werke, Band 19*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986], 359).

encompasses this negation in itself, but as an affirmative moment of truth. Thereby, knowledge is not sustained through the consciousness of objects, but is rather a result of a return to oneself from the place of otherness.

This otherness does not have to be defined, since it is not the content of the otherness that defines such a movement, but the act of intervention into something itself which enables this something to stand on its own volition. Otherness shifts from an external reference point to inhabiting the mantle of the identity of this something. However, this is not an invitation to consider the something and its other as one and the same entity; on the contrary, some form of difference needs to be preserved. A case can be made that a pupil must take on the practices that his teacher has prescribed to him as his own, while maintaining a distance from these practices and acting as if their presence is redundant, adopting the teacher's behaviour without simply imitating it and distinguishing himself by his effective adoption. There is no need for enchantment or passion, but merely a mechanical repetition of the subject presented for study. The otherness of the syllabus has to become the defining feature of the pupil. In a sense, there is nothing else to education.

The other elementary characteristic of scepticism is the act of declaring or *asserting*: to assert that things are changeable. The contemporary form of scepticism, which differs from the classical in that it fills the "negative movement" with certainty of thinking itself, referred to by Hegel as "the Calvary of the absolute spirit,"⁷ would have a legitimate reason to express the latter as a doctrine of doubt. However, doubt is only capable of producing uncertainty and restlessness that bring forth a general negativity; it is not able to guarantee a criterion of validity. It is also possible to deduce that the above-mentioned assertion merely clarifies that things are established in their being as well as in their non-being. For example, when at a certain moment, we reasonably claim, "now is day-time" and a few moments later, "the now is the night,"⁸ we are justified in speaking of the same thing—namely, this now—in its contradictory meaning, maintaining itself vis-à-vis its opposite. In this manner, it is possible to assign the moniker of a sceptic even to Homer, who breathes into Odysseus the spirit of contradiction. Captured in the Cyclops's cave, Odysseus gets the latter drunk and tells him his name: "Nobody (*Outis*)—that's my name."⁹ During that same night, Odysseus and his companions blinds the Cyclops, which rouses his Cyclopean neighbours to cry out to him: "Is somebody (*mē tis*) trying to kill you now by fraud or force?" The Cyclops's spontaneous reaction is to reply: "Nobody friends, is killing me now, by fraud and not by force!"¹⁰ The truth of the scene is

7 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 467 (translation modified).

8 Hegel, 65–66.

9 Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles, introduction and notes by Bernard Knox (New York: Penguin, 1996), 9.410 (223).

10 Homer, 9.454–55 (224).

structured as untruth. This cunning linguistic trick¹¹ chases the Cyclopes away, revealing the orientation of a sceptic—a one-sided negative determination against the positive. But this sceptical insight should, first and foremost, act as a confirmation that a negation determines all determinations. Since the main determination is not truth, but the certainty of untruth, the conclusion can be drawn that in the stubborn certitude of doubt, there is no inclination to reach any truth. Furthermore, probably even more importantly, the same should hold true for any word.

It would be convenient if Hegel could offer a well-rounded exposé of the sceptical assumption regarding the inscription of knowledge into the world. However, the extent of his understanding was still a reflection of the age in which he addressed this topic. After the ancient Greek period, when reasoning was moulded by aesthetics, and then the domination of the religious discourse that was prevalent in the greater part of the 19th century, the last matrix of reasoning was framed by science (*Wissenschaft*). While this may not be the consensus, it is nevertheless reasonable to argue that Hegel propagated the most consistent form of the scientific approach (*Wissenschaftliche Verfahrensweise*), identifying knowledge in the experience of its failure from the position of knowledge itself. The failure is not reflected in the inability to meet an intended objective, but is contained in the return to oneself from the place of otherness that retrospectively expresses the truth as the road to the truth. Such a successful lack of success represents a general feature of the modern world in which the ever-continuous pursuit of knowledge, where consciousness “can find no rest,”¹² is sacrificed in the name of knowledge as such. This knowledge does not derive from a scepticism that is solely directed towards the outside, but is a product of self-reflexive kind, a “self-consummating skepticism” (*sich vollbringende Skeptizismus*).¹³

The knowledge that Hegel brought to the forefront was knowledge attached to the logic of signification. It does not produce meaning, understanding, or comprehension, but overcomes the separation of subject and object, not by abolishing

11 “*Ou/mē tis*, not somebody, anything but somebody, nobody”: Barbara Cassin, “Ab-sense, or Lacan from A to D,” in Alain Badiou and Barbara Cassin, *There’s No Such Thing as a Sexual Relationship: Two Lessons on Lacan*, trans. Susan Spitzer and Kenneth Reinhard, introduction by Kenneth Reinhard (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 33.

12 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 54.

13 Hegel, 52. Different thinkers have expounded the gist of the impact of scepticism on Hegel’s works. However, the sceptical imposition as such does not usually play a central role in the unfolding of his thought. For instance, Dieter Henrich argues that Hegel’s speculative logic “seamlessly incorporates a theory of the construction (*Aufbau*) of all historical forms of metaphysics” (Henrich, 1991, 90), which also entails dogmatism, scepticism, etc. On the other hand, Markus Gabriel highlights the other aspect of scepticism; namely, how Hegel sought in it “a basic feature of metaphysical thinking” (Gabriel, 2011, 32) which would disclose the path to absolute knowledge. Both, in their own way, implicitly or outright, object to scepticism’s failure to form a metaphysical basis for going beyond itself, while Hegel himself was adamant that such a beyond is merely an expression of the impossibility embedded in a phenomenal world.

their independence, but by understanding that the subject's other is nothing more than the subject in its opposite determination. Despite this incremental insight into knowledge, Hegel did not account for an aspect of modernity that seems fundamentally anti-sceptical: the ability to encompass any contingency and transfer it further untouched in its minimal form.

This is especially evident in modern science, where the natural phenomena become comprehensible only when they are "*translittérable*, transcribable into letters," as this makes knowledge universally available. The suitability of the letter form for asserting the self-identity and universality of knowledge follows from the circumstance that it embodies the smallest element of meaning, acting as an index of itself. This insight prompted Galileo to consider the great Book of Nature as an alphabet of nature and thus written using mathematical letters. Such an integral transference is the most basic form of understanding, an "atom of knowledge,"¹⁴ knowledge that is indivisible, self-referring, and universal. Modern science, born with Galileo, brought about a (fundamental) modification of the scientific framework, an effective way of providing accuracy and transferability of this self-referential structure. The transfer of knowledge is entrusted to the written word, or more precisely, to the letter. Inspired by Koyre's reading of modern science as the practice of mathematisation and empiricism, Milner clarified that both of these functions can be reduced to a single letter, since "mathematics in science can letter everything empirical"¹⁵ and since the letter "captures the difference in what is constantly different"¹⁶ and should therefore not be viewed as a mere transcription of empirical facts. A precise description of this science would be "literalised science," having the capacity to incorporate contingent propositions by sewing together the unchangeable and the fleeting or the negative.

Although an essential account of this shift can already be discerned in the logic of Hegel's *Wissenschaft*,¹⁷ it was more thoroughly outlined by Lacan, who leaned on signifying logic to delineate scientific theory, a stance that enables us to grasp how things differ from one another. That is, a signifier does not represent things or elicit meaning, as its function is, similar to Hegel's use of otherness, simply to refer to an-

14 Jean-Claude Milner, *Jasno delo: Lacan, znanost, filozofija*, trans. Peter Klepec and Ana Žerjav, introduction and notes by Jelica Šumič-Riha (Ljubljana: ZRC SAZU, Založba SAZU, 2005), 126.

15 Milner, 59.

16 Milner, 60.

17 When elaborating on the relationship between language and alphabetical writing system, Hegel, almost in passing, highlighted the vital function of lettering; namely, that it is in the alphabet that we can find the word, "the most dignified way of expressing the ideas specific to intelligence, brought to consciousness, made to the object of reflection" (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse, 1830, Dritter Teil, Werke, Band 10* [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986], 275). Moreover, only on the basis of these constituent few lettering elements, which act as a sort of "primal gestures of articulating," is it possible to bring forth "the sensuousness of speech to universality, which at the same time attains complete positivity and purity in this elementary mode" (Hegel, 275).

other signifier and thereby to allow us to comprehend things. The original character of any thought is not only to differentiate itself from some other thought, but also to mark how its object is different from all other objects. As Milner argues, “the theory of the signifier is the theory of thought as such.”¹⁸ Furthermore, in the framework of signification, knowledge offers insight into the mechanism of copulation, revealing the way in which the link between matter and form, male and female, or active and passive is structured and persists. In this context, the structure of two elements relies on a dependency of one on the other. However, a Lacanian reflection pushes this opposition even further. How can we grasp this minimal form of two? Regarding the relation of these pairs, there is only “the sole sense, one-sense, is un-sense”:¹⁹ there is no such thing as a relationship, only a contingency that is held together as a written formalisation. Confronting such irreconcilable pairs also formalises them. Lacan recognised the inability of the signifier to encompass a specific, contingent structure and therefore committed his attention to the theory of the letter, which enables the transferability of knowledge of contingency.

To recapitulate the argumentation so far: if we regard scepticism as the royal road to knowledge, we also have to take into account that the usual exposition of scepticism, premised on continuous doubting, does not offer a sufficient framework. The sceptic is preoccupied with an ever-present undecidability that paralyses him. Hegel clearly understood this and made appropriate adjustments. In his hands, scepticism as general form of uncertainty is left without the only remaining certitude; namely, that of uncertainty itself. To complete the final gesture of sceptical philosophy therefore means to insist on thinking the nothingness of certainty to the very end until every particularity is dissolved. An individual who performs such an act of self-renunciation is thereby returning to himself as nothing and ensuring identity with himself. The truth of the matter is that the universality of knowledge is maintained precisely in this self-othering. Lacan embraced this radical nature of nothingness and deduced the consequences in the field of language. He borrowed the conceptual apparatus from modern science, especially the principle of its necessity and empirical exactness, but most importantly, he posited formal entities as the exclusive material of reasoning. In this manner, he redefined the question of knowledge. Knowledge is not a task of acquiring facts and certainty, but rather something that we exercise and express.

¹⁸ Jean-Claude Milner, “Lacan and Modern Science,” *European Journal of Psychoanalysis* 3–4 (1996–97): 126, accessed 07/06/2019, <http://www.psychomedia.it/jep/number3-4/milner.htm>.

¹⁹ Cassin, “Ab-sense, or Lacan from A to D,” 9.

On Scepticism

What is the smallest measure of knowledge? Any assessment of knowledge has to pass through a certain criterion. It is necessary to understand what the criterion that justifies knowledge is. In Ancient Greek thought, *epistēmē* of an object discloses the characteristics that make it necessary and eternal, while modern empiricist science constantly revises knowledge according to new understandings. In this respect, scepticism practised by individual thinkers during the period of German idealism, especially Hegel, bypassed such a filter. They instead adapted to the aporia of the endless relegation of accountability, whereby every representation, or more precisely concept, is supported by another: whether it has a moral (Kant), linguistic (Herder), ethical (Fichte), or even historical structure (Schelling), it consistently forms a transcendental background, which affirms understanding. In order to nonetheless preserve a sort of coherence of this idealistic movement, such a system has to be structured around a fixing point, a letter, and not exclusively through the inter-subjective sphere of the spirit. While the final form of Spirit is expressed in the instant when the world comes to know itself in pure particularity (Napoleon as the World-Spirit on horseback), a letter constitutes a positivity that can be demonstrated (sensual support, referent, etc.). Milner argues that “letters include the difference in that which is constantly different.”²⁰ The minimal inscription of the letter guarantees that contingent propositions are as they are, without there being a reason for it. At the same time, letters have no reason to be different from how they are and are thereby identical with themselves through their contingently gained qualities. This holds even truer for our contemporary times; just take into consideration the fact that modern biology is preconditioned on three simple letters: DNA.²¹

Since a sceptical outlook proves only what it presupposes, comprehending what is included in thought (mathematics or semantics), but never being able to depend on their application to the empirical sphere. There may be no absolute truths, but a sceptic nevertheless strives to establish some traces of truth, or rather certainty.²²

²⁰ Milner, *Jasno delo*, 60.

²¹ While Milner was perceptive enough to recognise this fundamental structure (Milner, *Jasno delo*, 96), there is an even more essential structure that is shaping our world. This was Marx’s deduction of the self-valorising value of capital with only three letters, M–C–M, the formula that perpetuates the activity between money, commodity, and surplus-money that not only changed economic theory and logic, but restructured reality.

²² It is certainly impossible to determine a definitive description of scepticism as such, since there is an unbridgeable gap between the ancient notion of *skepsis* and the modern logic of scepticism. While Aenesidemus refuses any notion of truth, be it sensible, intelligible, or in another form, Descartes maintains his doubt about our capacity to know alterity or otherness. There were many other thinkers who could be or were identified as sceptics; however, the modern idea of a sceptic is best embodied by Schulze. Against Kant’s insistence on disclosing the conditions of possibility of knowledge, Schulze rejected the possibility of a consistent conception of knowledge: “If what the Critique claims to know of the foundations of experience is real knowledge, the affirmation of the same Critique, ac-

Scepticism's most notable modern representative, Gottlob E. Schulze, argued that all attempts to find a general and permanent endorsement of a science as the "unconditioned causes of everything that is conditioned," ultimately fail. Schulze clarified that the reason for this failure was that the "bread of reason" had been viewed as unconditioned stone under our feet. Instead of this, he refurbishes the formalistic idea inherent to Kant—that is, the distinction between the object and subject—into a conditioned system in which certainty is based on the facts of consciousness alone. This led to Hegel's justified criticism of Kant's "spiritless letter of a spiritless spirit."²³

While this criticism seems fatal to the sceptical method, it simultaneously constituted the principle according to which Hegel himself argued that consciousness negates its own position and thereby elevates itself to another, higher state of consciousness. One after another, the series of appearances fail, leaving behind only a memento of their contingency in the form of a letter, a written remainder.²⁴ It is in this movement that natural consciousness passes the test of reality and affirms the necessity that constitutes the law of knowledge, in which anybody is able to search for a univocal sense. As Hegel remarked, "the positive aspect of scepticism resides in that [...] it does not go beyond consciousness [...] and indeed, has the existence of that which is given in the periphery of our consciousness as undeniable

cording to which all true knowledge of our mind is exclusively limited to objects of experience, is absolutely false. If, on the contrary, this latter affirmation must be true, all knowledge of the sources of experience must be taken as a whole to be an empty appearance" (Gottlob Ernst Schulze, *Kritik der theoretischen Philosophie*, Vol. 2. [Reprint edition. Brussels: Culture et civilisation, 1973], 2:578 [17]).

23 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "Verhältnis des Skeptizismus zur Philosophie. Darstellung seiner verschiedenen Modifikationen und Vergleichung des neuesten mit dem alten," in *Jenaer Schriften, 1801–1807. Werke, Band 2*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Meiner Verlag, 1970), 269.

24 There is an argument to be made that letters are interchangeable with signifiers. Even Lacan's paradigmatic text on this topic, "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason since Freud," was ambiguous regarding their relationship. However, if we interpret it as a simple synonymy between these expressions, it would be necessary to establish a common definition. That was practically impossible until his late seminars, especially *Encore*, where the main differentiating elements became evident. Their function was precisely delimited. While the signifier resonates only within a relationship, "where it represents for and is what it represents" (Milner, *Jasno delo*, 131), a letter has a distinctively affirmative essence. Being a pure form of differentiating relation signifiers are the embodiment of negativity, existing only in relation to the other. Not having a reason to be as they are for themselves, someone else must speak for them. The opposite is true for the letter, which is attributed with positive features that enable it to be transferred, famously constituting the framework of the four fundamental types of discourse, and to have a self-referential relationship. Both qualities result from the compulsion to be declared: "What is written [...] it only subsists if I use it to present the language (*langue*) I use" (Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 20: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink [New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999], 119). This is also the defining characteristic that makes it a perfect vessel for knowledge.

certainty.”²⁵ However, these appearances, which could have been completely different up to the point of their sublation, become unchangeable.

The usual way to understand letters is to consider them as an indication of a particular meaning;²⁶ however, here, they stand as formal entities, which are open to interpretation. The chain of refutations of natural consciousness is not merely relational, as it also produces these entities. By facilitating a positive existence, letters cause restlessness. Thus, instead of determining a precise field pertaining to knowledge, it is paramount to firstly identify with the letter. This is understandably a curious thesis, but it is not groundless. Before knowing language and before acquiring knowledge itself, there is the mark (the letter) of the impasse of formalisation. To put it differently, the letter enables a contingent characteristic to receive “an imaginary trait of that which cannot be different than it is,” which is more commonly referred to as “the necessity of the laws of science.”²⁷ Understanding scepticism as an affair of doubt is consequently even more difficult to defend:

However, it does not have the meaning of scepticism, which has no other goal than doubting itself that one should stand still in this indecision of the spirit, which has its freedom therein. It has rather the sense that one must renounce any prejudice.²⁸

Since Hegel, it has been practically self-explanatory that natural consciousness has a sceptical character. While this is an essential position of modern thought, it also illustrates a re-evaluated perspective on scepticism itself. Although the classical tradition of scepticism originates from a presupposed understanding that any aspiration for real knowledge has to be renounced, scepticism of the modern age is not opposed to “final” knowledge, but claims that philosophy has not provided a sufficient justification of knowledge. However, it is thereby not striving to undermine philosophy, but providing unconditional aid, working as an accomplice to philosophy, or a voice that martyrs for truth:

As soon as true and universally conclusive principles are found and instituted in philosophy, by which it will be possible to determine what we can know and what not [...] scepticism will immediately reach its end.²⁹

25 Hegel, “Verhältnis des Skeptizismus zur Philosophie,” 227.

26 The most obvious example is the Greek alphabet, since the word “alphabet” consists of the first two letters, alpha (α) and beta (β). Furthermore, the Greek alphabet borrowed its structure from the Phoenicians, who used *aleph*, which also meant “ox,” and *bet*, which also meant “house.”

27 Milner, *Jasno delo*, 72.

28 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie III. Werke, Band 20*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 72.

29 Gottlob Ernst Schulze, *Aenesidemus oder über die Fundamente der von Herrn Professor Reinhold in Jena gelieferten Elementar-Philosophie*, ed. Manfred Frank (Frankfurt am Main: Meiner Verlag, 1996).

In the same vein as foxhunters who understand themselves to be conservators of rural culture, sceptical thinkers act against philosophy in the name of philosophy. Despite scepticism's tendency towards self-termination, it is also based on the premise that human reason is directed towards perfection. It is a constant re-evaluation of this same position. The unappeasable drive of doubt, or rather *skepsis*, is hindered only by its own reliance on consciousness; namely, doubt itself persists only through the facts of consciousness, a stance that is problematic in its simplicity. Any fleeting experience, be it an exchange of glances on public transport, the depth of sunlit spring trails, or the rhyme of a midnight poem, is permeated with an inevitable volatility, a discrepancy between expectations and their manifestation, which can be reconciled, according to the sceptic, only by a rational principle. While certain a priori traces of truths are undeniable even for a sceptic—for instance, the notion that all bodies are heavy—the realm of hyperphysical phenomena is, without exception, suspect to such sceptical concerns. The sceptical eye thus perceives the objective world in discord. The sceptic must therefore always look over his own shoulder to catch a glimpse of an impending conceptual treason committed against the kingdom of objective reality. It is not ill-fitting to define such a demeanour as paranoid, going so far as to put into question every relation that entails the identity of thinking and being. Every single object with theoretical value becomes unjustified in the eyes of a sceptic. Insofar as reason is made out of conceptual building blocks, a sceptical critique is aimed at this fundament itself, an a priori that can be reconciled only under conditions set forth by the sceptic.

Even though the sceptical principle of functioning is generally based on non-identity (of thinking and being, object and subject), it also establishes the conditions under which such an identity is possible. When scepticism is consistent with its own determination, it inevitably exposes the contradictions inherent in rational categories and thereby transforms its own inner order into identity. However, a sceptical identity cannot achieve more than to mechanically unify the discrepancy embedded into the world. It repeatedly introduces external rational terms in order to sew up the tear in the world, which produces, at best, a patched-together conception of reality. It is, on the contrary, only possible to install a world that recognises the same identity, in its entirety and in its parts, by rejecting the choice of either/or.

The kernel of this thought form is present in Hegel's figure of knowledge as "the identity of identity and non-identity"³⁰ that was actually intended to be an elucidation of Schelling's idea of "identity of identity" or "duplicated identity."³¹ Both of them were in agreement that identity and non-identity have the markings of the same whole, but differed in the elaboration of the said whole. Whereas Schelling does not recognise a method by which a difference between one and the other

³⁰ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, trans. H.S. Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1977), 46.

³¹ Wilhelm Friedrich Schelling, *Sämtliche Werke: Band 6* (Munich: Beck, 1979), 117, 165.

can be determined and comprehended from the standpoint of the all-encompassing identity, Hegel sees it the other way around. One has to go with the flow of the object, surrender to the differences that it expresses. In this manner, it becomes clear that objects are not held together by identical provisions, but by differences. It is only when we see differences in things that we can assign a specific identity to them. If we follow the use of German idealistic vocabulary, identity is authentic when it is an identity of identity and non-identity, since the identity between the latter is realised through the fact that they are different.

In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel signifies such a stance as the already mentioned “self-consummating skepticism.”³² Stone has to become bread and not the other way around. Such a move should decisively bury the last corpses of ancient scepticism, but, even more damningly, should also deal an openhanded slap to Schulze’s self-assurance. The position of self-consuming scepticism necessarily encompasses a sign of chance; something that is present in a certain form, but could also exist otherwise. This tension never reaches a satisfactory resolution or understanding. But as long as this condition is met, asserting uncertainty that concurrently discloses the contingency of certitude, the modern sceptic is working in a manner as if knowledge can be produced. The notion of identity that comes from Hegel’s mouth is very precise in these matters.

This difference is constructed through identity,³³ or, as known in linguistics and constituting the purest form, through homophones, which are not merely identical-sounding words, but the formal conditions under which touch is enacted, and with it the need for interpretation. Homophones can touch you because they touch their other in themselves. Once heard, they cannot be left unattended. The indistinguishable sound between *sense* and *scents* calls for an intervention. Or take, for example, the famous witticism illustrated in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*:

SAMPSON: Gregory, on my word, we’ll not carry coals.

GREGORY: No, for then we should be *colliers*.

SAMPSON: I mean, and we be in *choler*, we’ll draw.

GREGORY: Ay, while you live, draw your neck out of *collar*.³⁴

It may seem that *collier* (“coal miner”) coincidentally corresponds to *choler* (“irritability”), or even by chance; however, the third element in the chain, *collar* (“neck apparel”), makes it clear that there is more at play. This parallelism of lexeme pronunciation is an expression of the way that an individual community “addresses its own

³² Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 52.

³³ Hegel points out that “difference in itself is the difference that refers itself to itself; thus it is the negativity of itself, the difference not from another but of itself from itself; it is not itself but its other. What is different from difference, however, is identity.” Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, ed. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 361.

³⁴ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, updated ed. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.1.1–4 (emphases added).

unconscious experience.”³⁵ There is an immanent positive quality to language. A similar structural principle is present in Marx’s class antagonism, which does not simply distinguish a simple difference between incompatible social positions, but provides a fundament according to which it is possible to discern interests in the first place.

On Homophony

To comprehend such an incremental dimension³⁶ of knowledge, we need to discern more specifically the homophonic feature of language. Lacan’s insights will guide us in clarifying this peculiar facet. What principle in language enables different words to be pronounced in the same manner while simultaneously conditioning the dehiscence in their meaning? The usual suspect is *homonymy*. One word, one sound, different meanings. However, the play of words that characterises *homophony* is expressed through a single pronunciation.³⁷ Even if homophony is usually regarded as a substratum³⁸ of homonymy, it has an undermining role. Their relationship has a rather fortunate similarity to the abovementioned difference that delimits signification from literalisation. The first introduces a logic where every signification always

35 Jacques Lacan, “La troisième,” *La cause freudienne* 79 (2011): 11–33.

36 As is usual with Lacan, the use of words is a simple neutral endeavour, and in this case, the word “dimension” is not a stylistic choice, but refers to the homophonic dimension that is proper to knowledge. By writing “*dit-mension*,” Lacan invokes two French words: firstly, *dit* (“what is said,” but also “word”) and secondly *mension*, which is related to *mensonge* (“lie”): “*Dit-mension* is *mension* of the said. This way of writing has an advantage, which is to allow *mension* to be extended into *mensonge*, which indicates that what is said is not at all necessarily true” (Jacques Lacan, *The Sinthome: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XXII*, trans. A.R. Price (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 124–25.

37 If there is a Lacanian point to make here, it has to be expanded on: “Si le style, c’est l’*homme* [ɔm], le tracé du stylet c’est l’(a)t*ome* [(a.t)ɔm]” (Cassin, “Ab-sense, or Lacan from A to D,” 90). Atoms are not merely a representation of the smallest thing, but a materialisation of language, which is why Democritus *reads* atoms as letters. They are written down on a roll of paper or papyrus (*tomos*, [ˈtɔ.mo:s]) and in this sense are an expression of a (wo)man’s style. While the weight of the atoms is held upright by the physicality of letters, their actualisation is inscribed in the sound [ɔm].

38 “Homonym” is derived from the Greek *homōnymos*, “bearing the same name, and using the same denomination,” which is a combination of *homos*, “same” (from which we get homo-) and *onoma*, “name.” The effectiveness of homonyms relies on the accidental coincidence of words; that is, a homonymy is present whenever one word has several meanings. Aristotle had already distinguished the peculiar nature of homonyms. He insisted on a non-contradictory link between the order of being and the order of discourse, hence the role of the univocality of words and sentences: “For not to have one meaning is to have no meaning” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 4.4, 1006b7–8, in *Complete Works*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols., 6th ed. [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995], 2:1589). Because homonyms violate the principle of non-contradiction, they were considered undesirable by Aristotle, who went so far as to call them a deep-rooted linguistic disease in that there are more things than there are words and we therefore have to use the same words for several things (*Sophistical Refutations* 1.164a4–19).

refers to another signification and thereby establishes an interconnected system where even a missing object has its proper place. Similarly, homonyms need to be attached to a particular context in order to produce an appropriate meaning. Take, for example, a *fair* lady, a lady who can be beautiful and equitable, but not necessarily both at once. Meanwhile, literalisation sidesteps the question of meaning by despiritualising the examined phenomena, making formal entities out of them. In this sense, they function as a localised event that has universal properties, just like homophones, which have their own unrelated existence and only encounter each other by mere chance. For instance, in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice herself is seduced by the mouse's long and sad *tale*, as she has been imagining all this time that he was referring to his *tail*.

Ever since the dawn of modern linguistics, inaugurated by Saussure, a sign has become detached from the corresponding thing. Take Saussure's famous example of a tree (*arbre*). It is improbable that an idea of a tree would simply connect with a word or sound designating a tree. Saussure drew the radical conclusion that "a linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern,"³⁹ or, respectively, between a signifier and a signified:

ARBRE

Moving further in the evolution of structural linguistics, such an explanation was still unsatisfactory in Lacan's eyes. He addressed it by constructing a simplified version of the sign, which "shows how the signifier actually enters the signified":⁴⁰ an image of two doors, both unmistakably leading a person to the expression of their natural needs, the only difference between them being a signifying inscription above them:

³⁹ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 76.

⁴⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink in collaboration with Hlose Fink and Russell Grigg (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 417.

HOMMES DAMES

There is no dialogue, no well-established meaning or copulation that distinguishes them. All of these are possible retroactively, since the “signifier alone guarantees the theoretical coherence of the whole as a whole.”⁴¹ In order to form a coherent essence, a signifier necessarily attaches itself to another signifier, forming a chain that is, in the last instance, the only graspable object. It is possible to discern such a mechanism in the children’s game Red Rover, where the goal is to break one of the two chains of hands or arms linked together by one of the teams. If successful, the team acquires additional player-signifiers, thereby making it impossible to persist as a lone player. Even the final futile act of the game is to try to secure a new chain one last time. The chain itself has a negative existence, since each team is only able to endure by linking arms with another. Such an embodiment of negativity that relies on the absence of certainty can be viewed as the closest linguistic analogy to a sceptical work. We have already pointed out that in its purest form, scepticism opens and maintains a minimal gap, a negativity between a subject and an object. But because of its empty nature, it is unable to encompass the specificity of a given structure.

What the signifier is not able to achieve individually, a letter is. We have already pointed out that it is identical with itself and always ready at hand. In this view, a letter does not represent a quality or an attribute; it is instead a formal entity that lends itself to interpretation. Furthermore, the status of an entity enables it to be grasped, transformed, appropriated, and brought into contact or connection with another letter. Take, for instance, a line segment, which is bound by two distinct endpoints marked with a letter. The line is made visible, thinkable, and coherent when it is lettered and forms a rule. Conversely, take away a letter from DNA and the molecular double helix simply collapses. While a signifier can be missing, a letter has its own assured place and is thus present at hand and integrally transmissible, making it not just a suitable means of expressing knowledge, but also giving access to its purest form.

The structure of lettering is consequently supposed to offer an ideal form of knowledge accumulation and its further consumption. What holds this idea of knowledge together is supposed to be a twofold homonymic arrangement: univocity, giving it clear unified sense, and literalisation, which gives it coherence and repeat-

⁴¹ Lacan, 345.

ability. The product of word-for-word harmonic union is therefore clearly transferable elements of knowledge that are of practical use in language. The paradigmatic example of “the persistent sameness of a name is [...] *Aufhebung*,”⁴² which simultaneously means to transcend, to preserve, and to cease. *Aufhebung* exhibits self-identity, while being caught in its own differentiation. Although Aristotle was aware that things can get tangled up in the same name, but not the same definition of being,⁴³ Alice in Wonderland was clearly not:

[Alice:] “You see the earth takes twenty-four hours to turn round on its axis—”
 “Talking of axes,” said the Duchess, “chop off her head!”⁴⁴

Who would encourage the idea to sever a head? Well, Alice. This reading of a letter, usually attributed to a homonymous copula, establishes a continuity of thought, an unconscious weaving of an idea. Alice is warned that “if everybody minded their own business,” leaving the field of enunciation as it is, then “the world would go round a deal faster than it does.”⁴⁵ Regardless, Alice intervenes with an elemental knowledge that should be self-evident. Letters are not just a medium of sameness, since they also need to “include difference in what is constantly other.”⁴⁶ The possibility of being other is the measure of contingency. Whilst homonyms have a fundamental characteristic of knowledge in that they encompass identity in difference, they lack the ability to encompass contingency. Moreover, the distinguishing function of writing makes it possible to differentiate between meanings and thereby ignore any instance of homonymy. Homonyms may be subject to this objection, but it does not bind homophones.

The letter simultaneously functions as an inscription of an impasse of formalisation and as the instability of language itself. Linguistic principles are unable to interpret the antagonism embedded in the homophonic structure. Usually, homonymy is simply mapped onto homophony as one of its variants. Both are usually understood as something similar, but of a different nature. However, it is not without significance if we give primacy to speech or script. It is precisely here that homophones enter the frame. The hard kernel of homonyms is written in an identical form. To illustrate the nature of homonyms, we may turn to Oscar Wilde’s play *The Importance of Being Earnest*. The main character is introduced as neither earnest nor Ernest, but by the end of the play, he is both. Homophones, in contrast, are produced through an identical sound. The remarkable homophonic overlapping of oration and *ratio* allows us to hear the quality of *logos* in speech. The emphasis is on enunciation. There is an in-

⁴² Mladen Dolar, *Heglova fenomenologija duha* (Ljubljana: Analecta, 2017), 408.

⁴³ cf. Aristotle, Categories 1a1–2, in *Complete Works*, Vol.1, ed. Jonathan Barnes [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995], 1:3.

⁴⁴ Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 51 (emphases added).

⁴⁵ Carroll, 50.

⁴⁶ Milner, *Jasno delo*, 60.

coherence present in homophones, which can be seen as anti-linguistic, in the sense that something is resisting complete integration into the letter. Hearing a coinciding sound conveys that nothing can be deduced but their mere (singular) existence. As Milner puts it, the homophone has an “integrally positive and affirmative,” yet “punctual”⁴⁷ quality. It is thus impossible to integrate a homophone into a linguistic structure as a whole. If homonymic structure is based on regularities that are unable to encompass contingency, homophones are themselves contingent solitary phenomena that produce a surplus. Indeed, homonyms wave *through* each other and homophones wave *to* each other. It is therefore essential to follow Saussure to the logical end that is in a way present in his analysis of anagrams.⁴⁸

A tree can harbour both a concept and sound, doors fixated to a minimal signifying pair, but an enunciation's encounter with itself offers a different perspective. For “know” and “no” to inhabit the same space, we must reject any affinity to transcendental postulates, but also to linguistics, and instead rely on singular craftsmanship whereby even words become something other than what they are. Homophones seem to induce uncertainty by circumventing any pretension to knowledge; however, we have seen that knowledge is premised on the identity of identity and non-identity. According to the law of identity, $A = A$, the pure identity inevitably undermines its own identity by presenting a difference that is in no way external to identity. Therefore, homophones are not an instance where two words coincide, but a singularity,⁴⁹ a minimum of an object, which is purged of all qualities, but stops shortly before abolishing the object itself and making it unknowable. At the same time, it is also

⁴⁷ Jean-Claude Milner, “Back and Forth from Letter to Homophony,” *Problemi International* 1, no. 1 (2017): 88.

⁴⁸ Saussure's work in *Cahiers d'anagrammes* revolved around the widespread use of anagrams concealed in Latin poetry, specifically his preoccupation with Saturnian verse, but remained unresolved and unpublished. This research predated his famous *Cours de linguistique générale*. See Jean Starobinski, *Words upon Words: The Anagrams of Ferdinand de Saussure*, trans. Olivia Emmet (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979).

⁴⁹ Alenka Zupančič interprets the figure of the double in an identical fashion: “The double is exactly not the figure of the two, it does not imply any duality, but is the privileged figure of singularity—we could say, it is singularity *par excellence* [...] a one, which is singularised until it is unrecognisable.” Alenka Zupančič, *Seksualno in ontologija* (Ljubljana: Analecta, 2011), 157.

not one, not even a simple negation, but a reoccurring parasite attached to enunciation that inhibits a symbolic space, an irreducible core of sameness that exists as an independent essence and haunts both words. Through repetition, the homophonic words introduce a contingency into knowledge, something that enables a particular word to be completely different, an impasse, which does not represent an exception, but the point of a specific articulation, a folding of knowledge onto itself.⁵⁰ An emancipation of words from the lexical foundation, but also semantic dependency.

If scepticism is capable of producing knowledge, it is in the form of such speculative homophonic enunciations, whereby the (guaranteed) position of knowledge is sacrificed at the behest of knowledge itself while withholding the answer of what this knowledge is. If the principal conundrum was how knowledge is conceived, it has been rearticulated as the problem of scepticism and further, the dilemma of establishing a relationship of two. In the end, it is the work of finding the minimal fundament of their cohabitation. And since there is no sexual relationship predicated on the two, in the sense of a successful copulation or joining together, it is only possible to know them as singular instances, a minimal object or, perhaps most appropriately, an atom. Contrary to common sense, atoms are not atoms because they are the smallest bodies, but because they are indivisible. While *tomos* is the cut, *atomos* is the uncuttable. Therefore, an atom can only be the undividable fundament. Naturally, Hegel takes a speculative step further and conceptualises the atom as a cut between the one and the emptiness that inhabits the same value. The logic is simple; everything can be cut except the cut itself. The fundament is thus split in itself, or is a split (*Unterbrechung*). If we make the final step, all these characteristics converge in a single gesture: a touch, not simply a touch of the hands, but a touch embodied in homophony. Hence, touch is not present in the interaction of two distinct entities, nor in the contact of sameness, but in the identity with otherness, an identity that meets the other of oneself in oneself. And after all, isn't "knowing the unity in the opposite and the opposition in unity"⁵¹ one of the definitions of absolute knowledge?

50 In her work on repetition, Bara Kolenc developed the concept of constructive difference, driving on the idea of an exception being inscribed into the persistence of sameness: "As a function, constructive difference is defined through a certain ambiguity between integration and differentiation of the two terms between which it arises: at once, it both differentiates and connects the two terms of repetition. It is a cut that yet establishes the relation between the two. It launches the two terms of repetition as absolutely identical and radically different at once. This means that somehow paradoxically the difference between the two terms of repetition is established exactly by the fact that there is no difference between them. It is the very indiscernibility between the two terms of repetition that is the condition of possibility of their difference." Bara Kolenc. "The Category of the (Un)Touchable in Haptolinguistics: Touch, Repetition and Language," in *The Language of Touch: Philosophical Examinations in Linguistics and Haptic Studies*, ed. Mirt Komel (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 96–97.

51 Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie III*, 460.

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