Hegel on what cannot be said

An interpretation of the ineffable in the Phenomenology's 'Sense-certainty'

Thesis for obtaining a "Master of arts" degree in philosophy

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09-09-2019

I hereby declare and assure that I, Ariën Voogt, have drafted this thesis independently, that no other sources and/or means other than those mentioned have been used and that the passages of which the text content or meaning originates in other works - including electronic media - have been identified and the sources clearly stated.

Place: Utrecht, date: 09-09-2019

Abstract It is often claimed that Hegel's philosophy of absolute knowledge cannot accept that something would remain beyond what language can express, and that his thought therefore systematically represses the possibility that something cannot be said. By analyzing Hegel's account of the ineffable in the chapter 'Sense-certainty' of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, this article argues that Hegel does not repress, but firmly confront the problem of what cannot be said. With the help of Giorgio Agamben's analysis of the ineffable in the context of 'Sense-certainty', it is shown that Hegel's conception of the ineffable must be understood from the perspective of his understanding of language. The ineffable in Hegel's thought is linguistically constituted, and cannot be said to remain external to and independent from the dialectic of language and Spirit.

Key words Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, Ineffable, Sense-certainty, Meinung, Language, Agamben, Language and Death

Introduction

Hegel's system of absolute idealism aspires to complete transparency. What appears obscure, alien and unknown at first, is to be conquered by consciousness and rendered comprehensible for conceptual reason. And because language is for Hegel "the *existence* of Spirit,"[1] and the transparent medium for conceptual thought, one should be able to express in words whatever is understood in thought. It follows that insofar as for Hegel everything is mediated and grasped through the concept, language should be equally capable of expressing the totality of being.[2] It appears therefore as if Hegelian thought hinges on the presupposition that nothing escapes language. Something like an 'ineffable', that which cannot be said, would accordingly have no place within Hegel's thought. But is it true that Hegel is unable to account for what would remain beyond language?

The program of complete transparency, which Hegel supposedly establishes in order to eradicate all that remains beyond thought and language, puts him at odds

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[1] G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 359/405. See also ibid., 351/395. Henceforward I cite from the English translation, to which the second page number corresponds. The first page number refers to the German version: *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Gesammelte Werke, vol. 9 (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1980).

[2] Although I cannot address the issue in detail, I should say something about the relation between language and thought in Hegel's philosophy. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit,* Hegel asserts that the Spirit exists and preserves itself in the objective reality of language. Hegel, *PhS*, 351/395. As Charles Taylor states, thought and language are for Hegel fully intertwined, and the concept cannot be separated from its medium. *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 82. Karin de Boer similarly asserts that for Hegel thought can exists in the transparent medium of language without contamination by the arbitrariness of signs. See chapter 7 in *On Hegel: the Sway of the Negative* (Basingstoke, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). Jim Vernon shows that there are many different readings of the relation of thought to language in Hegel's thought, see the introduction to *Hegel's Philosophy of Language* (London: Continuum, 2007). Especially the problem of the necessity of universal thought in relation to the contingency of natural language is heavily contested in the literature. Yet, for our current purposes I can simply assume that for Hegel, that which can be *grasped* by conceptual thought can be *said* in language. There is hence no essential difference for Hegel between what escapes language and what escapes the dialectic – between what is ineffable and what is unintelligible.

with a great number of other philosophers and theologians. Many of Hegel's contemporaries disagreed with his claim that the absolute can be conceptually grasped and expressed in language. And in twentieth-century thought the opposition to Hegel's ideal of total sayability only intensified. Following Heidegger's emphasis on finitude, postmodern thought[3] has similarly raised awareness of the limitations of discourse, by elaborating on phenomena that are similarly ineffable or absent from discursive language – yet also inescapably present and unavoidable.[4] The question of the ineffable proves to be one of the most important and urgent issues of fundamental philosophy now. As much of twentieth century thought thus seems diametrically opposed to the all-encompassing, systematical enterprise of Hegelian thought, his thought appears like a small island of confidence in a sea of distrust vis-à-vis the possibility of language to grasp and express the totality of existence. In their thought on the ineffable, many contemporary philosophers indeed perceive Hegel as the primary opponent, who needs to be grappled with foremost. But regarding these contemporary debates with Hegel, we should always ask whether Hegel's thought is faithfully represented, or whether it figures more as a stereotype that is erected in order to be directly taken down. One can all too readily claim that Hegel's idea of absolute knowledge implies that everything can be said

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[3] 'Postmodern thought' is an almost meaninglessly broad category, but is commonly associated with post-structural and deconstructionist thinkers as Bataille, Lacan, Derrida and Lyotard among many others.

[4] Examples in contemporary thought are the gift, God, the Other or death. For interpretations of these themes in contemporary thought in regard to the idea of the ineffable, see for example the following literature: William Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014). William Franke, *On What Cannot Be Said: Modern and Contemporary Transformations* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007). Thomas A. Carlson, *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Arthur Bradley, *Negative Theology and Modern French Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2004).

and thought, and that the ineffable is therefore rendered impossible, but can a detailed reading of Hegel warrant that claim? We thus come to recognize the urgency of giving a good and unbiased account of Hegel's stance vis-à-vis the ineffable.

Several scholars have recently commented on this issue. In this regard, most have asserted that Hegel opposes any affirmation of an element of ineffability. According to Cyril O'Regan, Hegel's thought can even be characterized by a *repression* of ineffability. An example he gives is Hegel's appropriation of the mystical tradition: while Hegel is highly appreciative of certain mystics (Meister Eckhart, Jakob Böhme), he only appropriates the aspects in their thought that involve a 'positive' experience of divine presence, and that Hegel neglects the 'negative' aspects which emphasize the absence, transcendence and ineffability of God. O'Regan suggests that Hegel's repression of the apophatic elements in mystical texts mirrors a repression of the ineffable in his own thought – an operation that O'Regan calls an 'apophatic erasure'.[5] Hegel's apophatic erasure "systematically represses" suggestions of the limits of language and the reality of what cannot be said, "leaving only a positive nonmysterious content to be appropriated."[6] We can call this take on Hegel's relation to the ineffable the *repression hypothesis.* This hypothesis would entail that Hegel's dialectic simply cannot deal with what escapes language, and ends up

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[5] "Reflective of an operation that he seems to perform on his own discourse, Hegel exercises on the discourse of the mystics what might be called *apophatic erasure.*" Cyril O'Regan, *The Heterodox Hegel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 43.

[6] Ibid., 43n41.

flatly denying the latter's reality. If indeed, as William Franke says, for Hegel "the rational is coextensive with language and all it can express, this means that what is not expressible in language simply has no reality."[7] Franke's interpretation is thus in agreement with O'Regan's in claiming that Hegel's thought leaves no room to account for anything like an ineffable.

I would like to make a different case. In this article I argue that Hegel does account for ineffability, and that his thought does not repress but firmly confronts the problem that is posed by what appears to be unsayable. I build on the analysis of Giorgio Agamben, who asserts that the ineffable is not repressed within Hegel's thought, but taken up by the dialectic in a productive way.[8] I substantiate my view of the ineffable in Hegel's thought on the basis of Hegel's analysis of the unutterable particular of sense-certainty. The text in which Hegel develops this analysis, the first chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (*PhS*), is in my opinion crucial to an understanding of how Hegel's thought approaches the ineffable, since here Hegel *explicitly* speaks of the unutterable. This chapter considers how a pure particular insofar as it immediately appears to us presents itself as an immediate certainty, a certainty however that we cannot express in language. The immediate particular seems to escape from the universality of the concepts that language uses, and can

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[7] Franke, *Philosophy of the Unsayable*, 27.

[8] According to Agamben, "[t]he originality of the Hegelian system is that, through the power of the negative, this unspeakable point no longer produces any solution of continuity or any leap into the ineffable. At every point the Notion is at work, at every point in speech blows the negative breath of Geist, in every word is spoken the unspeakability of Meinung, manifested in its negativity." Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: the Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen E. Pinkus and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 14. In section two I will elaborate on what Agamben means here.

therefore properly be called ineffable. This article aims to elucidate how Hegel interprets this ineffability of the particular of sense-certainty.

Yet Hegel's account of the ineffable particular, I suggest, is but one manifestation of the general dialectical approach that Hegel takes in order to account for what appears to be beyond language. There are obviously many other forms of ineffability. For example, we can think of the ineffable being of God. The idea of the transcendence of the divine with respect to human language and conceptual thought is a perennial idea that is related to the tradition of negative theology.[9] The ineffable character of God and of the pure particular initially seem to be very different, and on first sight it is not clear how Hegel's understanding of the ineffable particular would be similar to his understanding of the ineffability of God.[10] But interestingly, Hegel's analysis of the incarnation and death of God in the section 'Revealed religion' in the *PhS* explicitly recalls his analysis of the ineffable particular in the first chapter.[11] I believe that we must understand Hegel's account of the ineffable being of God to unfold in the same way as his account of the unutterable particular of sense-

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[9] The tradition of negative or apophatic theology, that runs through all of Western thought since Plato and especially the Neo-Platonists, revolves around the idea that God (or the One, the Absolute) cannot be known through conceptual reason and cannot be spoken. This tradition therefore often involves a renunciation of language, in order to better approach God through mystical silence.

[10] While a pure particular cannot be understood and expressed as such, insofar as one can only understand and speak a universality, the ineffable nature of God precisely seems to relate to his abstract universality, i.e. the fact that God is the most high and universal being, who transcends all conceptual distinctions that we inevitably make in language. This issue is too complex to address here, but a preliminary solution can be found in Hegel's emphasis on the Christian idea of incarnation. In Hegel's thought, God does not remain an abstract universality, but comes down into the world of sensible particulars.

[11] Note for example Hegel's literal comparison of the incarnated God with the particular of sense-certainty: "This individual man, then, which absolute Being has revealed itself to be, accomplishes in himself as an individual the movement of sensuous Being. He is the *immediately* present God; consequently, his '*being*' passes over into '*having been*'." Hegel, *PhS*, 407/462.

certainty.[12] Because of this article's focus on the ineffable in the chapter 'Sense-certainty', I cannot elaborate on the connections with other parts of Hegel's philosophy. It is clear however that Hegel's analysis of the unutterable in the context of 'Sense-certainty' does not stand on its own, but relates to other forms of what cannot be said. In my view, an understanding of Hegel's thought regarding the immediate particular already reveals the dialectical structure that I believe informs and underlies Hegel's general position vis-à-vis the ineffable.

In the following, I will start by considering the 'Sense-certainty' chapter of the *PhS*, which confronts us with the problem of the ineffable particular. We *mean* the particular of which we are immediately aware, but we fail to *say* what we mean. In this context Hegel explicitly speaks of the 'unutterable', and I aim to explicate what he means by this. Does Hegel here admit that language has its limits, or does he ultimately resort to repress and erase this supposedly dangerous possibility from his thought? Neither of these options is convincing, and I suggest another way to conceive of Hegel's interpretation of the particular's ineffability. In the subsequent section, I assess the analysis of Giorgio Agamben's *Language and Death*, in which the ineffable in Hegel's 'Sense-certainty' is interpreted from the perspective of the

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[12] I agree with Thomas Carlson who suggests that God's ineffability within Hegel's thought can be understood in the same way as the ineffability of the particular of sense-certainty. Carlson, *Indiscretion*, 110-11. I would like to note that because of the *PhS*'s study of *experience* and *consciousness*, the ineffability of God in 'Revealed religion' is considered from the perspective of the experience of the incarnation and death of God in Christ. A different issue would be Hegel's position on the ineffability of God in a purely conceptual, logical sense – i.e. not related to the incarnation of God, but to the idea of God according to pure reason. This would amount to an analysis of Hegel's relation to the tradition of negative or apophatic theology, and would need to focus on the *Science of Logic* and the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. I cannot undertake this analysis here, but I point out that presumably even here the same dialectical structure of the ineffable would apply.

negativity and temporality that inheres in the being of language. According to Agamben's interpretation, immediate sense-certainty, while being ineffable, is not therefore external to language. Rather, the dialectic between *langue* and *parole* determines what we call immediate sense-certainty. What cannot be said is thus intimately related to the nature of language itself. In the next section, I argue that with the help of Agamben's interpretation, we can understand how Hegel's account of the ineffable particular is closely related to his understanding of language. I conclude with a general account of what I think it means in Hegel's thought that something is ineffable, and that Hegel cannot be said to repress the ineffable in his thought. Hegel's dialectic shows, in my view, that it is able to account for what is beyond language.

The ineffable in 'Sense-certainty'

The first chapter of the *PhS* ('Sense-certainty: or the 'this' and 'meaning'') constitutes the key Hegelian text on the ineffable, because here Hegel explicitly refers to the 'unutterable'. This chapter offers an analysis of the experience of sense-certainty, in which one tries to account for what immediately appears to the senses, but then necessarily fails to actually express this in language. To refer to what immediately appears as a pure particular phenomenon, is in fact to engage in a process of mediation.[13] Consequently, when one *means* an immediate particular, a This, one

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[13] According to Hegel, reference to the particular does not exclusively denote the use of words, but includes *pointing* at the particular – which however is in fact not an extra-linguistic process, as we will see below.

actually expresses a mediated universal. One says the opposite of what one means to say and one cannot say what one means. The pure particular indeed seems to reside beyond the domain of language, and would accordingly be ineffable. Yet despite all evidence offered by Hegel's text that something indeed escapes here from what language can say, Hegel concludes the chapter with a famous yet controversial assertion:

> Consequently, what is called the unutterable [Unaussprechliche] is nothing else than the untrue [Unwahre], the irrational [Unvernünftige], what is merely meant [bloß Gemeinte].[14]

Before we proceed to analyze this statement in the context of the chapter, we could briefly take it at face value. If we consider Hegel's conclusion on the status of the ineffable on its own, we might be led to believe that Hegel simply rejects the possibility of ineffability as an 'untrue', even 'irrational' position, as some mere 'opinion' (*Meinung*) that we can easily shove aside. That something is beyond the realm of what language can express is simply nonsense. But one should then consider that Hegel, a few lines earlier, admitted of the immediate particular that "if they wanted to *say* it, then this is impossible, because the sensuous This that is meant *cannot be reached* by language [der Sprache *unerreichbar* ist]."[15] It seems that by this statement Hegel affirms that which he rejects a moment later, i.e. the reality of the unutterable, that which cannot be said. Reading these subsequent passages, one could claim that Hegel shuts his eyes to the ineffable the moment it poses a real

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[14] Hegel, *PhS*, 70/66.
[15] Ibid.

threat to his own system. After admitting the possibility that something cannot be said, Hegel immediately responds by denouncing this position as 'untrue' and 'irrational'. The vehement rejections within this passage seem to testify to Hegel's stiff denial to look the possibility of the ineffable in the face. This perspective on Hegel's thought amounts to what I in the introduction called the *repression hypothesis*. According to this hypothesis, when confronted with something that cannot be said, Hegel supposedly reverts to a repression of the encountered ineffability. But does Hegel in this chapter indeed repress the ineffable? And is it true that Hegel's dialectic disavows that which cannot be said? A closer look at the 'Sense-certainty' chapter of the *PhS* provides a more nuanced understanding of Hegel's dealing with the ineffable. The ineffability of the particular is not simply excluded from Hegel's account, but functions as a center piece to the dialectic of language. To understand this, we first have to analyze Hegel's chapter 'Sense-certainty' in more detail. Before I propose my interpretation of how this chapter of the *PhS* deals with the ineffable, I briefly summarize the main line of Hegel's dialectic of sense-certainty.[16]

In this chapter, Hegel initially tells us that the reality of an immediate particular, a 'This', seems to be the most undeniable and robust truth. The one thing it seems I cannot seriously doubt is what appears to me here and now, the being of

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[16] My aim in this paper is not, of course, to provide a comprehensive analysis of the whole chapter on 'Sense-certainty'. I will only consider Hegel's general analysis insofar as it provides the context for his reasoning on the ineffable. For more information and commentary on the 'Sense-certainty' chapter, I refer the reader to the following literature: Charles Taylor, "The Opening Arguments of the Phenomenology," in *Hegel: a Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Alasdair MacIntyre (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976); Matthias Kettner, *Hegel's 'Sinnliche Gewißheit': diskursanalytischer Kommentar* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1990); H.S. Harris, *Hegel's Ladder: the Pilgrimage of Reason* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

the immediate This without further qualification. But for Hegel such an assertion is deeply flawed: "To make such an assertion is not to know what one is saying, to be unaware that one is saying the opposite of what one wants to say."[17] A direct sense-certainty of a particular given, a This that is here and now as seen from the spatio-temporal perspective of the I, cannot be an absolute truth. In fact, the moment one accounts for the alleged truth of immediate sense-certainty, the This that was here and the temporal moment of the Now have turned into a different This and a different Now, together with a different I. What immediately appears to me changes from one moment to the next. An immediate phenomenon vanishes as soon as I point to it. The certainty that I had of what appeared to my senses has instantly been repudiated. Obviously, I cannot be certain of the being of an immediate This or Now, if it directly vanishes. The consciousness of a truly particular and immediately given is actually and in truth only the consciousness of something that has always already disappeared.

> 'Now'; it has already ceased to be in the act of pointing to it. The Now that *is*, is another Now than the one pointed to, and we see that the Now is just this: to be no more just when it is. The Now, as it is pointed out to us, is Now that *has been*, and this is its truth; it has not the truth of *being*. Yet this much is true, that it has been. But what essentially *has been* [*gewesen ist*] is, in fact, not an essence that *is* [*kein Wesen*]; *it is not*, and it was with *being* that we were concerned.[18]

[17] Hegel, *PhS*, 69/65.
[18] Ibid., 67/63.

The being of a This that is Now is already no more in the moment that it is. Its presence, upon closer look, is just as much absence. [19] Its being is, in fact, a nothingness. Hegel's analysis thus forces us to abandon the evanescent This as a basis for our certainty, but the same holds for the subjective awareness of the I, which can neither be said to be stable and similarly disappears in the moment that it is. So Hegel's account then turns to consider the *combination* of these two sides: the I that is aware of the This forms immediate sense-certainty as a *whole*.[20] We could now attempt to arrest this immediate certainty before it disappears from view by *speaking* it. I'm completely certain that I now see this tree, and by giving a voice to it, I can try to preserve my particular temporal certainty as a truth in language. Yet, the statement 'I now see this tree' loses its initial truth when this moment and this I have passed away. It is *now* no longer true that I see it. The immediate certainty that gave rise to these words has been lost. The only truth that remains in these words is the *universality* of spatio-temporal being and consciousness – of the 'thisness', 'nowness' and 'I-ness' that remains when every particular This, Now and I have disappeared. I can never retrieve the particular sense-certainty that spoke the words, but I can recognize *that* it was an instance of the most abstract universality. That some I was conscious of some This (this tree) reveals the universal concepts of being and

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[19] The concepts of 'presence' or 'absence' [*An/Abwesenheit*] are strictly speaking not the terms that Hegel uses in the context of 'Sense-certainty'. Yet, I believe it can help to explain the dialectic of *Meinung* and the ineffable in this chapter.

[20] "Thus we reach the stage where we have to posit the *whole* of sense-certainty itself as its *essence*, and no longer only one of its moments, as happened in the two cases where first the object confronting the 'I', and then the 'I', were supposed to be its reality. Thus it is only sense-certainty as a *whole* which stands firm within itself as *immediacy* and by so doing excludes from itself all the opposition which has hitherto obtained." Hegel, *PhS*, 67/62.

consciousness.[21] The immediate particular that was *meant* to be expressed in language, has been transformed by language into the expression of a mediated universal. As a consequence, language does not permit one to say what one *means* to say, to express one's '*Meinung*' (translated as 'meaning'), i.e. the immediate This.[22]

> If they actually wanted to *say* 'this' bit of paper which they mean, if they wanted to *say* it, then this is impossible, because the sensuous This that is meant [das gemeint wird] *cannot be reached* by language, which belongs to consciousness, i.e. to that which is inherently universal. [23]

We now understand why sense-certainty is related to the ineffable.[24] The sensuous This that one *means* cannot be *said.* That what is *meant* to be expressed, the particular, is destroyed by its own expression. It "crumbles away" in the "actual attempt to say it," and eventually one must admit of "speaking about something which *is not*."[25] The particular and immediate fall outside of what language can express, insofar as discourse and consciousness are under the sway of mediation and the universal. What one *means* to say, the pure particular, is negated in order to reveal the truth of

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[21] "[..] [T]his very *certainty* proves itself to be the most abstract and poorest *truth.* All that it says about what it knows is just that it *is*; and its truth contains nothing but the sheer *being* of the thing. Consciousness, for its part, is in this certainty only as a pure 'I'." Ibid., 63/58. Hegel's analysis brings to mind Duns Scotus's *haecceitas,* the 'thisness' that constitutes the being of a particular being. According to H.S. Harris, it does not seem likely that Hegel knew much about the Scotist theory of individuation, but that Hegel rather refers to neo-Platonic ideas. *Hegel's Ladder*, 217.

[22] We might presume that the failure of language to express the particular can be offset by *pointing* to what we mean, but according to Hegel this does not help us at all: "But if I want to help out language [..] by *pointing out* [daß ich *aufzeige*] this bit of paper, experience teaches me what the truth of sense-certainty in fact is: I point it out as a 'Here', which is a Here of other Heres, or is in its own self a 'simple togetherness of many Heres'; i.e. it is a universal." Hegel, *PhS*, 70/66. This insight of Hegel adumbrates Wittgenstein's that pointing is itself *linguistic*; in order for an arrow to signify it must enact the same movement as language. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations: the German Text, with a Revised English Translation*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3 ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), §454, 112e.

[23] Hegel, *PhS*, 70/66.

[24] Harris notes that in this chapter Hegel builds upon Aristotle's claim that singular things *qua* singular are ineffable (*Metaphysics* 1039b, 27-30; 1054b, 24-32, quoted in *Hegel's Ladder*, 217). Yet I hope to show that Hegel is not simply repeating Aristotle, but reflects on the reasons and consequences of the particular's ineffability.

[25] Hegel, *PhS*, 70/66.

universality. Only the dialectical negation of the immediate brings consciousness to truth. Why would a negation of the This be necessary for truth? A closer look at Hegel's use of words might shed more light on what he has in mind here.

> The Now, as it is pointed out to us, is Now that *has been* [ist ein *gewesenes*], and this is its truth; it has not the truth of *being*. Yet this much is true, that it has been [*gewesen ist*]. But what essentially *has been* [*gewesen ist*] is, in fact, not an essence that *is* [*kein Wesen*].[26]

In the *Encyclopedia Logic,* Hegel notes that the German '*Wesen*' (here translated as 'essence') is also used in the expression for the past tense of '*sein*', viz. '*gewesen*'. This grammatical irregularity in the verb 'to be', according to Hegel, correctly denotes the relation between being and essence: "Essence we may certainly regard as past Being, remembering however meanwhile that the past is not utterly denied, but only laid aside [*aufgehoben*] and thus at the same time preserved [*konserviert*]."[27] Hence, insofar as the past of *sein* is *gewesen-sein,* so the negation of being is essence. The *Aufhebung* or sublation of being does not result in pure non-being, but in the preservation of the *truth* of being. Yet the truth of being is not being itself, but its having-been, its *Wesen,* i.e. the universality of essence. The temporal negation of present into past is exactly the same movement as the linguistic transformation of the immediate particular that is *meant* into the universal that is *expressed.* The negativity that resides within the

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[26] Ibid., 67/63.

[27] G. W. F. Hegel, *Logic*, Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences, vol. 1, trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), §112Z, 232/163. The German version used is *Enzyklopädie der philosphischen Wissenschaften I*, Werke, vol. 8, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970).

particular's being is thus revealed both by the movement of time and by its expression in language.[28]

Unutterable as the This of *Meinung* might be, Hegel has shown that what *Meinung* tries to say, the presumed certainty of the immediate This, turns out not to be so 'certain', it is actually *untrue*. Hence, we arrive at Hegel's conclusion which has given rise to so many commentaries: that the "unutterable is nothing else than the untrue, the irrational, what is merely meant." [29] But understood in its context, we see that Hegel does not simply discard the possibility of something ineffable by denouncing any such position as 'irrational'. We recognize Hegel's argument that lies behind his description of the unutterable as the 'untrue' and 'irrational': the fleeting sense-certainty of *Meinung* cannot claim to be absolute truth, and one necessarily experiences the untruth of the certainty that one means, when one tries and fails to express it in language. Hence what appears as the unutterable is simply the untrue (or irrational). The unutterable is not excluded from Hegel's account, let alone repressed, as if it does not belong to the realm of philosophy. Hence, the repression hypothesis does not hold in this case. Rather, the first chapter of the *PhS* is in fact concerned (in part) with understanding the unutterable character of the

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[28] For Hegel, the correspondence between the two movements of time and language is not by chance, but arises out of the inner dialectic of the concept. Temporal movement is, according to Hegel's philosophy of nature, the external form of the movement of the Concept. "Time is the same principle as the I = I of pure self-consciousness, but this principle, or the simple Notion, still in its uttermost externality and abstraction —as intuited mere *Becoming*, pure being-within-self as sheer coming-out-of-self." G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences, vol. 2, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), §258, 49/35. The German version used is G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosphischen Wissenschaften II*, Werke, vol. 9, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970). The relation between time and the Concept, and Hegel's interpretation of the concept of time in general, are too complex to be further elaborated in this article.
[29] Hegel, *PhS*, 70/66.

immediate particular. Instead of repressing the ineffable as such, Hegel rejects any desperate attempt to cling to the unproductive 'certainty' that consciousness finds in the ineffable experience of the particular, and breaks any resistance against language's productive transformation of the '*gewesen-sein*' of the particular into the '*Wesen*' of the universal. To mean the immediate particular without involving oneself with the universal is to deny oneself truth. The will to 'take the This' fails to 'take the truth'.[30]

> Immediate certainty does not take over the truth [nimmt sich nicht das Wahre], for its truth is the universal, whereas certainty wants to apprehend the This [das Diese nehmen].[31]

Still, Hegel's recognition of the inability of language to speak the immediate particular seems to allow for a way of opposing his dialectic. The position of the ineffable and immediate certainty of *Meinung*, unproductive and untrue as it might be from a Hegelian perspective, can still be affirmed. Indeed, the fact that we *mean* to say something that ultimately cannot be expressed proves that there is indeed something that escapes the grasp of language. Otherwise, we would not be able to

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[30] To take the This without ending up in the realm of the universal is not only to deny oneself truth, but also to deny oneself language. The persistent will to hold fast to immediate certainty must, in the last instance, refrain from speaking at all. This indeed reminds of mystical thought, or negative theology, where the ineffable being of God can only be approached through the renunciation of language and profound silence. This mystical affirmation of the ineffable through a complete negation of language would be an example of what Hegel elsewhere calls an "abstract negation'"(ibid., 112/114.) or the "pure nothingness" of a particular type of skepticism. "The scepticism that ends up with the bare abstraction of nothingness or emptiness cannot get any further from there" and ends up with an "empty abyss". It does not lead to some defined philosophical position, let alone truth. In a dialectical or *determinate* negation, in contrast, "a new form has thereby immediately arisen" and it always is a *productive* negation. Ibid., 57/51. Another way to interpret the will to take the This in silence is, following H.S. Harris, to attribute this will to a solipsistic Protagoras, who alone, as individual I, is 'the measure of all things'. He has no need to speak, because in his individual certainty he has no need for a community (which is made possible by *logos*) or for truth. Harris, *Hegel's Ladder*, 219. We will see below that even this mystical or Protagorean silence is rendered untenable by Hegel.

[31] Hegel, *PhS*, 71/67.

mean it at all. In speech, we cannot seem to account for the particular *qua* particular.[32]

While the immediate certainty of the particular that we mean to say might inevitably get lost in all expression and mediation, it is undeniably the case that this certainty *is there*, and crucially so, because it constitutes the *source* of all subsequent expression in language and conceptual mediation. According to the 'Sense-certainty' chapter, we would never arrive at the truth of language, if it were not for the experience of sense-certainty and the urge to put this certainty into words. It seems therefore that we must acknowledge the reality of immediate sense-certainty, even if we cannot capture it in language.[33] And because the ineffable This cannot be expressed in language, immediate sense-certainty cannot be incorporated by Hegel's conceptual dialectic – or so it appears. Even if immediate sense-certainty is *aufgehoben*, or negated and preserved, in the subsequent stage of 'taking-the-truth' (*Wahrnehmung*, viz. perception), does this sublation not leave a *remainder* of the original sense-certainty, a remainder which as such cannot be taken up in Hegel's dialectic? Do we indeed encounter something *transcendent* to Hegel's thought, namely the ineffable This?

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[32] Charles Taylor, notwithstanding his intention to defend Hegel, actually reinforces this objection by positing the "unavailability of the bare particular" as an "epistemological truth". The particular in its particularity remains beyond the realm of language, because "the particular is the subject of potentially endless description; for at any point, descriptions in general terms will not have captured its particularity, and yet there is nothing further to be done in order to express this particularity other than mere description in general terms." Taylor, "Opening Arguments," 166.

[33] Feuerbach is a prime example of this position: he affirms sense-certainty to the detriment of language. For him, not the unutterable particular, but *language* should be called unreal, if it cannot put sense-certainty into words. "Dem sinnlichen Bewusstsein ist eben die Sprache das Unreale, das Nichtige. Wie soll also das sinnliche Bewusstsein dadurch, dass das einzelne Sein sich nicht sagen lässt, sich widerlegt finden oder widerlegt sein? Das sinnliche Bewusstsein findet eben gerade darin eine Widerlegung der Sprache, aber nicht eine Widerlegung der sinnlichen Gewissheit." Ludwig Feuerbach, "Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Philosophie," in *Kritiken und Abhandlungen 2*, ed. Erich Thies, Werke in sechs Bänden (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), 34.

Hegel cannot simply disavow this ineffable phenomenon, but neither does he appear to be able to incorporate the phenomenon in his system of absolute knowledge. Hence, philosophical opposition to Hegel's dialectical thought can try to attain a foundation in the ineffable, that which resists mediation and expression. In this way, the alleged comprehensiveness of the Hegelian system might collapse, because of its inability to grasp the ineffable particular.[34] But is the ineffable indeed beyond what Hegel's thought can incorporate?

Agamben on the negativity of language

In response to these claims, I turn to Giorgio Agamben's analysis of Hegel's 'Sense-certainty'. In his book *Language and Death: the Place of Negativity*, Agamben rejects that Hegel's dialectic can be opposed from the standpoint that affirms the ineffable. According to him, the ineffable can never constitute a position transcendent to the dialectic of language. Even if one fully affirms the ineffability of sense-certainty, and opts for a rejection of language *in toto*, one is still not outside Hegel's dialectical mechanism. "Any thought that wishes to think beyond Hegelianism cannot truly find a foundation, against the negative dialectic and its discourse, in the experience

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[34] One could contend that Hegel's philosophical system is only concerned with understanding the *essence* of things through the *universality* of the Concept. Accordingly, the particular is by definition not included in the dialectic of the Concept, and the comprehensive character of Hegel's thought would not be bothered by an ineffable and inaccessible particular. But I believe this to be mistaken. The totality of reality, all being, thought and experience is for Hegel permeated by the Concept, and hence no particular part of this totality ought to be conceptually impenetrable in principle. If we have access to something as immediate sense-certainty, this form of consciousness ought to be included and understood in Hegel's thought. And to *understand in thought* is for Hegel the same as to *express in language*. See footnote 1.

(mystical and, if coherent, necessarily mute) of disengaged negativity."[35] In this section I will summarize Agamben's analysis, in order afterwards to determine to what extent his approach is helpful for understanding Hegel's thought on the ineffable.[36]

Agamben bases his interpretation of the 'Sense-certainty' chapter on an account of the indexical. The meaning of indexical terms, such as 'this', 'now' and 'I', depends on the context of their expression in discourse. Detached from any discursive context, they do not refer to any signified. Without being spoken by someone, they basically remain empty signifiers. By being spoken, they establish a relation to the context of their expression and hence they become meaningful. In Agamben's words, indexicals therefore "permit the passage from *langue* to *parole*."[37] This passage implies that language is not merely a system of signifiers/signifieds in ideality (*langue*), but *must take place* as *parole*. Before indexicals can denote any particular object (such as 'this tree'), or even the speaker or person addressed ('I' and 'you'), these words, according to Agamben, must first of all have established a relation to the actual *voice* that uttered them. Or in other words, to the 'happening' of their linguistic expression itself. These terms thus always point to the taking-place of

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[35] Agamben, *Language and Death*, 53. With 'disengaged negativity', Agamben refers to '*négativité sans emploi*', a phrase of Bataille, whose thought according to Agamben exemplifies the attempt to oppose Hegelian dialectics through the affirmation of what is ineffable and purely negative, and the resistance to make it productive.

[36] It is legitimate to question whether Agamben, an important and difficult philosopher on its own, can be considered a 'mere' commentator of Hegel. I admit that *Language and Death* is not in first instance an exegesis of Hegel's *Phenomenology,* as Agamben develops his own project in investigating the negativity inherent to language within the history of philosophy. However, in my opinion Agamben's reading of Hegel remains faithful to the original text, and I believe his interpretation to be valuable for an increased understanding of the status of the unutterable in Hegel's thought.

[37] Agamben, *Language and Death*, 24.

discourse – what Agamben, following the linguist Benveniste, calls the 'utterance'. Indexicals establish a relation to the pure instance *of* discourse, rather than to what is said *in* discourse. In discourse, we refer to the very taking-place of that discourse through indexicals, even if the disclosure of that taking-place always remains implicit.[38]

The structure of indexicals implies that the ability of language to refer to any particular (This, I) or event (Now) is as such based upon and conditioned by the reference of language to its own utterance. Hence, it is only through language and the structure of its self-reference that we can experience the particular event as such. It is only the possibility to *speak* words like 'this', 'now' and 'I', to refer to language's taking-place, that enables to grasp what is a pure particular, a spatio-temporally located event.[39] This insight is significant for an understanding of the function of language in 'Sense-certainty'. Agamben points at Hegel's dialectic of the This and explains how the particular can never be experienced without involving the structure of indication that language enables. Sense-certainty, immediate and pure as it might appear, is always already mediated through language and its dialectic of *langue* and

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[38] According to Agamben, the utterance is in some sense *transcendent* with respect to what is uttered, but the use of indexicals allows us to understand this sphere. The transcendence of the utterance even constitutes an originary structure of transcendence that mirrors the transcendence of Being with respect to beings. "[T]he shifters [i.e. indexicals], which indicate the pure *instance* of discourse, constitute [..] the originary linguistic structure of transcendence." Ibid., 26. And later on: "Being is in the voice [..] as an unveiling and demonstration of the taking place of language, as *Spirit*." Ibid., 35. Yet, these transcendent dimensions are not beyond comprehension. "Only because language permits a reference to its own instance through *shifters,* something like being and the world are open to speculation." Ibid., 25-6.

[39] Agamben approvingly cites Benveniste to make this point: "[Temporality] is produced in and through the utterance. [..] It is that presence in the world that only the speech act makes possible, since (if we reflect on this), man has no other way of living 'now' at his disposition besides the possibility to realize it through the insertion of discourse in the world." Benveniste, *Problèmes de Linguistique Générale,* vol. 2, 83, cited in Agamben, *Language and Death,* 36.

parole.[40] Agamben here alludes to Hegel's claim that neither the 'Now' nor the 'pointing out of the Now' is "something immediate and simple, but a movement which contains various moments."[41] To indicate the Now or This, even when we try to do it without speaking by pointing, is according to Agamben always "a process of mediation, or more properly, a true and proper dialectic that, as such, always contains within itself a negation."[42]

And this process of mediation is enabled by language. The indication of pure particulars is thus only possible *linguistically;* it is structured by the passage of *langue* into *parole* that language permits, and by language's ability to refer, through indexicals, to its own taking-place.[43] Without these indexicals, we would not be able to experience particulars or events as such. Hence, according to Agamben, the particular This and I, insofar as they are grasped as a particular This and I at all, are *linguistically* constituted. As such, these phenomena cannot be deemed *external* to language.

But if according to Agamben language is always implicated in the particular, how does he account for Hegel's assertion that "the sensuous This that is meant

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[40] Josef Simon similarly notes that sense-certainty is for Hegel not at all outside language, but is already determined by language: "Ist ihr nun die sprachliche Weise des Verhaltens entgegengesetzt, so werden dadurch nachträglich die schon vorhandenen Bestimmtheiten der 'sinnliche Gewissheit' als Bestimmtheiten der Sprachlichkeit gedeutet." Josef Simon, *Das Problem der Sprache bei Hegel* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1966), 26. Or in general, all forms of consciousness are bound to language: "Das Bewusstsein verhält sich zur Wirklichkeit, wie es sich in seinem Sprechen verhält. [..] Das Bewusstsein ist auch in seinem empirischen Weltverhalten sprachliches Bewusstsein." ibid., 29.

[41] Hegel, *PhS*, 68/63-4.

[42] Agamben, *Language and Death*, 11.

[43] That not only indexical words, but all forms of indication are essentially *linguistic,* is what we have already seen above (see footnote 22).

cannot be reached by language"?[44] Is the This in- or excluded from language? The solution to this paradox, according to Agamben, lies in the temporal and negative structure of indication and language. The mediation process that forms the experience of the This indeed "always contains within itself a negation."[45] We have already seen how Hegel reveals the negativity that resides in the particular This or Now. "[W]e see that the Now is just this: to be no more just when it is. The Now, as it is pointed out to us, is Now that *has been.*"[46] The particular *qua* particular cannot be preserved as a presence in consciousness; it *is* only as *negated* presence. But Agamben's interpretation emphasizes that it would be wrong to think that this absence of the particular in consciousness is an inability on the part of language to express the being of the particular. The emptiness of the This, which becomes clear as soon as it is expressed, is not a result of some deficiency of language compared to the fullness of immediate sense-certainty. It is rather because language can precisely reach the *truth* of the particular's being that this being can only be expressed as a nothingness.[47] Language, in destroying the particular This through *saying* it, does not deceit us about the particular. Instead, to *speak* the particular This is to present and enact the movement of disappearance that constitutes the being of the particular

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[44] Hegel, *PhS*, 70/66.

[45] Agamben, *Language and Death*, 11.

[46] Hegel, *PhS*, 67/63.

[47] This is why Agamben underlines the significance of the reference in 'Sense-certainty' to the Eleusinian Mysteries. In the Mysteries, particular, sensuous beings are revealed as nothingness. Not just because one can destroy them, but because they destroy themselves. "For he who is initiated into these Mysteries not only comes to doubt the being of sensuous things, but to despair of it; in part he brings about the nothingness of such things himself in his dealings with them, and in part he sees them reduce themselves to nothingness." Even the animal "celebrates these open Mysteries which teach the truth about sensuous things" – namely, their nothingness. Ibid., 69/65.

This. In a sense, the particular excludes *itself* from being said. But how is it possible that spoken language, according to Agamben, can enact the being of a pure particular? We recall Hegel's remark that language is that "which belongs to consciousness, i.e. to that which is inherently universal."[48] So how can Agamben presume that the *universal* being of language is able to enact the *particular* being of a This of sense-certainty?

This question boils down to the objection with which we ended the last section. It is the claim that the universality of language cannot account for the *original* presence of the particular. It might not be so strange after all that the negativity of 'having-been' is the only possible mode for the *particular* This in the properly *universal* dimension of language. Even if the truth of the This is indeed its revelation as not-This, we are still forced to recognize the original This that preceded its negation. And this original This cannot be reached by language. To phrase it differently, the encounter with the This in sense-certainty is a pure *event*. And as event it can never be fully expressed in language – its expression would always leave a remainder unexpressed, i.e. precisely its event-character. In order to convincingly answer this objection, we have to return to Agamben's analysis of the indexical once more.

Agamben's analysis indicates that the being of language is *not just* universal. He reminds us that there is a difference between *langue* and *parole.* And the

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[48] Ibid., 70/66.

conversion of *langue* into *parole* is precisely the introduction of the *event-character* into language. Language, before it can signify, *must take place.* The being of language, encompassing both *langue* and *parole,* is both universal and particular.[49] As event, the taking-place of discourse contains the same temporal structure as of every Now, This or I. Yet, from Hegel's dialectic we know that this temporal structure implies a negativity. Language must not only take place, but must negate this taking-place. Language's signifying-dimension, or the possibility of it being *understood,* is conditioned by the negation of its taking-place. Just as, according to Hegel, the *universal* truth of the This presupposes its manifestation as *not*-This, so the *universal* understanding of what is said in language presupposes the transformation of language's taking-place into *not*-taking-place.[50] The speech-event *is* only, and can be referred to only, as a *having-been,* a non-being. The utterance, as soon as it is referred to by the indexical, is no longer present, has already disappeared. Indexicals thus only ever denote the absence of the taking-place of their own expression. Language brings with it the dialectical negation of its own taking-place. According to

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[49] Josef Simon briefly touches on this issue in Hegel's thought: "Hegel schreibt nicht, die Sprache sei von nur abstrakter Relevanz und habe es überhaupt nur mit dem Allgemeinen zu tun, sondern sie 'verkehre' das Einzelne in das Allgemeine, so dass das Allgemeine offenbar ein ebenso 'Verkehrtes' wie das Einzelne (das Gemeinte der 'sinnliche Gewissheit') ist." Simon, *Das Problem der Sprache bei Hegel*, 28. Yet Simon in this regard fails to notice that language itself must enact the same reversal *in its own being* of particular into universal and vice-versa.

[50] In this regard Agamben speaks of the negation of pure sound or the materiality of the sign in order for it to appear as signifier. The voice that speaks initially appears in an immediate way as pure sound, but it must disappear as such in order to become language. This dimension of *becoming language* – no longer being sound but not yet having a determinate meaning – is what Agamben identifies as the taking-place of discourse, and what he calls the 'Voice'. Agamben suggests that all linguistic signification is ontologically dependent on the negativity of the 'Voice', i.e. the taking-place of language: "But inasmuch as this Voice (which we now capitalize to distinguish it from the voice as mere sound) enjoys the status of a *no-longer* (voice) and of a *not-yet* (meaning), it necessarily constitutes a negative dimension." Agamben, *Language and Death*, 35.

Agamben, the pure utterance, from the perspective of signification and meaning[51], thus constitutes a negative dimension. But it necessarily underlies every positive meaning; all signification presupposes the utterance. Even though the instance of speech is ontologically prior to whatever is said in speech, it must have been negated in order for meaning and truth to appear. And only as negated can the instance of speech be referred to *within* speech, by way of the indexical.[52]

This negative dimension of the utterance is what allows language to capture the being of the particular, the event of encountering the This, in its truth. Speaking the This in language reveals the dialectical negation that pertains both to the particular's temporal being and to discourse's temporal taking-place. Just as language's being consists in the negation of its taking-place, so the particular's being consists in the negation of its presence. On the one hand, we need the foundational presence both of the speech-event and the This. But on the other hand, this presence must have disappeared for it to function as foundation. And only as absence can the This and the utterance be referred to, be experienced. The immediate ground, whether it is immediate sense experience or the taking-place of language, necessarily negates itself in so far as it brings into existence what it grounds.[53]

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[51] In this case not a translation of '*Meinung*'.

[52] Because the utterance can only be referred to as an absence, just like the particular of sense-certainty, the utterance is itself unutterable. That means that the particularity of the instance of speech, the intention-to-signify of a voice, cannot itself be signified or made manifest within discourse.

[53] In elaborating the negative dimension of speech, Agamben implicitly refers to Hegel's account of the concept of ground in the *Science of Logic*. "It is *ground*, but in the sense that it goes *to the ground* and disappears in order for being and language to take place." Agamben, *Language and Death*, 35. Hegel's understanding of 'ground' would be relevant here to help understand the negativity in language and the particular This. In general, a treatment of

In short, the initial presence of both the particular This and the taking-place of language can only be approached when a negation has already taken place, i.e. when this presence has already been transformed into absence. This negation is not an external attribution by language to something that is in itself purely positive. Rather, insofar as it is revealed as a positive something at all, something is in itself already marked by a movement of negation. What we would initially call 'immediate' presence, whether of the speech-event or of the This, can only appear *in retrospect* as the foundation of subsequent linguistic signification. In retrospect, i.e. as already passed, as having disappeared, as mediated and sublated presence.[54] Any 'original presence', such as the This, can only be revealed insofar as it originates, from the perspective of what it has originated. Hence, the This can only be revealed insofar as it is no longer present but has negated itself.

Hegel on language and the ineffable This

What can Agamben's inquiry into the structure of the indexical and the taking-place of language add to our understanding of Hegel's account of the ineffable in 'Sense-certainty'? And can we even use Agamben's analysis, as elucidated above, for a faithful interpretation of Hegel? It might seem that Agamben's emphasis on the particularity and event-character of discourse is in direct contradiction with Hegel's statement that language "belongs to consciousness, i.e. to that which is inherently

Hegel's *Science of Logic* would help to clear up how Hegel's thought deals with the ineffable. But unfortunately, we cannot go into the *Science of Logic* here.
[54] The retrospective nature of the experience of sense-certainty is in agreement with the central role of recollection (*Erinnerung*) in the *PhS*.

universal."[55] Yet first of all, although we do not explicitly encounter all of Agamben's ideas in Hegel's 'Sense-certainty', I think that Agamben's analysis can reveal certain *implicit* ideas in Hegel's text about the ineffable and its relation to language. Secondly, even if Agamben uses different terminology, e.g. utterance, taking-place of language, one can actually recognize the same elements in Hegel's dialectic of consciousness and language. The distinction that Agamben makes between *langue* and *parole*, and his understanding of the negativity that inheres in the being of language, are in agreement with Hegel's understanding of language, on which he is clear in other parts of the *PhS*. As expression and real existence of the 'I', Hegel writes, language is both *particular* and vanishes as particular, in order to make manifest and to signify, as *universal*:

> Language, however, contains it in its purity, it alone expresses the 'I', the 'I' itself. This *real* existence of the 'I' is, *qua* real existence, an objectivity which has in it the true nature of the 'I'. The 'I' is this particular 'I'—but equally the *universal* 'I'; its manifesting is also at once the externalization and vanishing of *this* particular 'I', and as a result the 'I' remains in its universality. The 'I' that utters itself is *heard* or *perceived*; it is an infection in which it has immediately passed into unity with those for whom it is a real existence, and is a universal self-consciousness. That it is *perceived* or *heard* means that its *real existence dies away*; this its otherness has been taken back into itself; and its real existence is just this: that as a self-conscious Now, as a real existence, it is *not* a real existence, and through this vanishing it is a real existence.[56]

[55] Hegel, *PhS*, 70/66.
[56] Ibid., 276/308-9. This passage from 'Spirit', even if it is only one example out of many, clearly shows that Agamben's emphasis on the instance of speech is in agreement with Hegel's thought. Even if Hegel in 'Sense-certainty' is not yet quite clear about the being of language, we already perceive the same structures in that chapter. For example, Hegel notes that the particular and immediate 'I' disappears in order to give rise to the 'I'

Hegel's assertion that language and consciousness are inherently universal evidently does not exclude their event-character, but implies that signification is always the mediated result of language's transformation of particularity into universality. Similar to what we saw in Agamben, language for Hegel must pass through the moment of being expressed, of being a particular This and Now in the event of its taking-place. Yet the nature of language consists in the negation of its happening as particular event and the transformation into universal signification. Language in its very being conforms within Hegel's thought to the same dialectical movement that characterizes the This. Hence, Agamben's *Language and Death* is not in disagreement with Hegel's *PhS*, but explicates the fundamental dialectical structure of language that is present within Hegelian thought. But now that we have seen how language and the particular This are intimately connected, what does that entail for Hegel's understanding of the ineffable in 'Sense-certainty'?

Language and linguistic indication, according to Agamben, structures our experience of temporality and particularity. Sense-certainty and the particular This as such are therefore in the first place not possible without language and its transformation into *parole*. That the pure particular, insofar as it is meant, cannot be said, does not entail that the sense-certainty of a particular is 'extralinguistic', i.e.

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as a universal. The movement as a whole constitutes the true being of the I. Ibid., 66/61-2. Similar to what Agamben reveals about language, Hegel remarks of the 'pointing-out' of the Now that it "is thus itself the movement which expresses what the Now is in truth, viz. a result", and the pointing-out must therefore, as this movement, be understood as the negation of its taking-place as an event and its transformation into a universal. Ibid., 68/64.

would stand outside language.[57] Yet, sense-certainty suffers from the same negativity that inheres in the nature of language. The dialectic that enacts the negation of the event of language's taking place also enacts the negation of the immediate This. This is the reason why the This that one means cannot be said. The ineffability of the *meant* particular is due, not to the transcendence of the being of the particular with respect to language, but merely to *Meinung*'s inability to conform to the true being of the particular –as always already having disappeared. One experiences the untruth of *Meinung* when one fails to express it in language. And the ineffability of the particular This that results from this failure, far from hinting at some profound reality beyond language, thus only expresses and preserves the particular's own negativity, the fact that it has already negated itself.[58] A pure particular being is according to its own movement rather a pure *ist-gewesen*, and in this manner a sublation into universal *Wesen*. The This of *Meinung* has thus transformed *itself* into an ineffable absence, in order to ground the universality of its essence. The ineffable can only be understood as the *result* of the dialectic, as it only *becomes* ineffable through the self-negation of immediate sense-certainty. The pure particular This is not externally excluded from the realm of language, but excludes itself from being

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[57] Here I firmly disagree with H.S. Harris, who claims that for Hegel "[t]he 'thisness' [..] is extralinguistic." *Hegel's Ladder*, 227. It is not extralinguistic, because language itself involves a 'thisness' and 'thisness' itself is made possible by the linguistic structure of consciousness. But it is true that within the dimension of signification that language opens up we cannot positively express a This. Hence 'thisness' is not extralinguistic, but it is of course ineffable.

[58] Charles Taylor states that "the unsayability of the particular is simply the expression of its ontological status, as that which cannot remain, that which must pass." Taylor, "Opening Arguments," 166. As Agamben notes, recognition of this unsayability does therefore not require total renunciation of language in order to arrive at some profound mystical silence, but is spoken and kept by language itself. "[N]ow language has captured in itself the power of silence, and that which appeared earlier as unspeakable 'profundity' can be guarded (in its negative capacity) in the very heart of the word." Agamben, *Language and Death*, 14.

said precisely because its being must negate itself according to its own dialectic. It is therefore always already included in the dialectic, and cannot be thought outside of it.

Language is able to conform to the movement of the This, because it is not just *langue* or universal signification, but is also *parole,* i.e. it includes the event of language's taking-place. Language as *parole* passes through the moment of its taking-place as event, and also through the negation of this event that opens up the dimension of signification. The implicit reference of an indexical to the event of speech requires the negativity of this event, and equally imposes this negativity on the indexical's signified – i.e. the This or Now can only be signified as a negativity. Signification, manifestation and expression are thus movements that bear a fundamental negativity. Seen in this light, the failure of *Meinung* is to take sense-certainty as the manifestation of a pure, immediate and positive given, without recognizing the negativity that inheres in this and every manifestation. Precisely the dialectical negativity that forms the nature of language makes possible the appearance of the particular, even though it can only be referred to as negative and absent. This generates its ineffability, while also, at the same time, it enables the manifestation of its truth. Hence, any position that tries to oppose the dialectic by clinging to the supposedly extra-linguistic reality of the ineffable misunderstands the nature of ineffability. It mistakenly sees behind the ineffable something positive that resides beyond the limits of language. It mistakenly believes that it hides a presence, and that only its entry into language attaches to it a negativity that is not proper to its

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original being. But Hegel reveals the negativity that properly belongs to it. Language's truthfulness entails that what can only be referred to in retrospect as already negated, cannot simply be evoked as pure presence. That *Meinung* means to recall the presence of what in truth is absent, is only to say that it *means* to say something that is not *true.* And language stops the attempt of meaning in its tracks.

> Language [..] has the divine nature [die göttliche Natur] of directly reversing the meaning of what is said [die Meinung unmittelbar zu verkehren], of making it into something else, and thus not letting what is meant *get into words* at all.[59]

The moment one tries to say what one means, language defuses this attempt of mere *Meinung,* leaving it as that which cannot be said.[60] Not because the universality of language represses or cannot account for the particular, but because language enacts the negative movement that is constitutive for the being of the particular. Hence, "what is called the unutterable is nothing else than the untrue, the irrational, what is merely meant."[61] That which one means but cannot say is not an illusion or unreal, but it is untrue and irrational, in the sense of the impossibility of sense-certainty to be truthfully 'presented' in language as it is in fact always already absent, and in the sense of failing to express the truth that is revealed precisely by the dialectical negation of the particular that was meant.

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[59] Hegel, *PhS*, 70/66.
[60] It is important to notice that '*Meinung*' is both 'opinion', or that which has not attained the level of truth, and '*Mein*-ung', or that which only belongs to *me* and is not shared by others. The transformation performed by language of *Meinung* into truth implies therefore not only the negation of the particular This into universal essence, but also the negation of what merely belongs to me as particular opinion into what can be universally shared as truth.
[61] Hegel, *PhS*, 70/66.

I would briefly like to point out one more element in the passage of 'Sense-certainty' above.[62] Hegel speaks of the 'divine nature' of language. With this phrase Hegel already foreshadows his interpretation of God in the section on 'Revealed religion'. To draw the connection with Hegel's conception of God might shed extra light on what we have analyzed in this article. Hegel understands God as *Logos*, as 'Revealed religion' makes clear.[63] But if Hegel follows the Gospel of John in understanding God as *Logos,* then we should be aware of the corollary, i.e. that the *Logos* must have become flesh. God becomes *particular* in the form of Christ, but must suffer the death and negation of this particular in order to be resurrected in the Spirit, i.e. to reveal himself as universal.[64] The incarnation of the Word signifies precisely what Agamben calls the passage from *langue* to *parole*, i.e. the necessity of language *taking place.* For Hegel the moments of incarnation, death and resurrection belong not just to the divine life, but also to language. The incarnation, death and resurrection of language would correspond with its taking-place, the negation of its taking-place and the understanding of its signification and meaning. Signification is hence only

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[62] As this article has focused on 'Sense-certainty', I cannot elaborate on but only briefly point towards the connections with 'Revealed religion'. Another study would need to take up a detailed analysis of Hegel's understanding of God in relation to the dialectic of language and the ineffable as we have examined it here.

[63] See for example the following passage on the being of God as the Word: "It is the word which, when uttered, leaves behind, externalized and emptied, him who uttered it, but which is as immediately heard, and only this hearing of its own self is the existence of the Word. Thus the distinctions made are immediately resolved as soon as they are made, and are made as soon as they are resolved, and what is true and actual is precisely this immanent circular movement. This immanent movement proclaims the absolute Being as *Spirit.*" Hegel, *PhS*, 410/465.

[64] Note how Hegel's analysis of divine incarnation and death in 'Revealed religion' explicitly recalls the terminology and dialectic of 'Sense-certainty': "Consciousness, for which God is thus sensuously present, ceases to see and to hear Him; it *has* seen and heard Him; and it is because it only *has* seen and heard Him that it first becomes itself spiritual consciousness. Or, in other words, just as formerly He rose up for consciousness as a *sensuous existence*, now He has arisen *in the Spirit*." Ibid., 407-8/462.

possible when language is uttered, i.e. it takes place as event, and as event it vanishes as soon as it is heard and *must* vanish for the dimension of signification to open up. Just like God, in order to reveal himself in and as the Spirit, must pass through a moment of death, negativity and absence, so language, in order to reveal the truth of sense-certainty, must first render it ineffable. But paradoxically, the ineffability of the particular This is precisely what enables its truth to be said.

Conclusion

Now that we have analyzed Hegel's dialectic of the ineffable in the context of 'Sense-certainty', we can generalize our results. A general formulation of the dialectical structure that we perceived in this specific case contributes to a broader understanding of ineffability in Hegel's thought. The first element that we recognize is the conformity between the movement that language enacts and the reality of the phenomenon itself. What appears ineffable is, according to Hegel, not ineffable because language fails to convey real, immediate and positive presence. Negativity is not an external attribution by language to something that is in itself purely positive. Instead, language merely enacts, recollects and preserves the movement of negation that inheres in the thing itself, and ineffability thus corresponds to an inherent negativity and absence that results from its own dialectic.

The second element in Hegel's account of the ineffable is a fundamental negativity that inheres in revelation, signification and truth. The truth of the particular This can only be revealed through the negation of its immediate presence,

which then becomes ineffable as a moment that has already been negated. Hence, the ineffability of the particular This is a manifestation of a deeper structure of negativity – the negativity of language that constitutes its 'divine character'. Hegel tells us that the word, in order to become universal signification, must be expressed, and that this expression carries a fundamental negativity. As much as language requires its transformation into *parole,* i.e. the existence of discourse as event, it equally requires the negation of this very existence in order to open up the dimension of signification and truth. Truth and revelation, bound to language as they are, thus presuppose a negative moment. This negative moment can accordingly appear as such only in a negative way, as ineffable. In other words, it can only appear *in retrospect* from the perspective of disclosure in language. In retrospect, i.e. as mediated, sublated and disappeared presence. But the negativity of the ineffable is not at all prior to or independent from Hegel's dialectic of language. The ineffable is neither extra-linguistic nor extra-dialectical. The ineffable is a result of a dialectical self-negation, and in its negativity it is expressed by language itself.

Hegel's system does not repress the ineffable, does not disavow what cannot be said. The dialectic gives a truthful account of the negativity of what remains beyond speech. But it cannot allow for the *independence* of the ineffable outside of the dialectic. Hegel puts the negativity of the ineffable *to work.* The ineffable is whatever is incorporated as a moment of the dialectic *in* and *by* its self-exclusion and self-negation. The ineffable is not a positive reality that remains out of reach, but a mediated non-reality that can only be ineffable as a result of the dialectical negation.

[35]

To claim that something cannot be said is only to tell the truth about its being a *having-been*, its self-enacted absence and emptiness. In effect, any position that bases itself on the affirmation of that which cannot be said, only positions itself *within* Hegel's dialectic and not *outside* of it. Ineffability and negativity can neither presume independence nor opposition vis-à-vis the concept, language and dialectic. Rather, what is ineffable must always be understood as being *constituted* by the movement of Spirit. What remains of the immediate sense-certainty of the particular This after we have destroyed it in speech, are indeed the dead and ineffable remains. But one should not ponder the ineffable in silent despair, Hegel's gospel teaches us —"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!"[65]

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[65] Luke 24:5-6, NIV

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