

The Metaphilosophical Implications of Hegel's Conception of Absolute Idealism as the True Philosophy

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Hegel's constructivist approach to philosophy: The history of philosophy and the philosophy of spirit

In the remark to the final paragraph of the chapter on 'Existence' (*Dasein*) in the *Logic* of the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1830), Hegel states that the 'ideality of the finite is the chief proposition of philosophy' and that 'every true philosophy is for that reason idealism' (EL,¹ §95 R; ENZ, §95 Anm.). At the end of the chapter on 'Existence' in the *Science of Logic* (1832) Hegel claims, further, that 'every philosophy is essentially idealism or at least has idealism for its principle, and the question then is only how far this principle is carried out' (SL, 124; WdL, GW21, 142). Along this line, Hegel conceives of absolute idealism not only as the result of the entire history of philosophy but also as the philosophical system that reveals, by developing it and formulating it adequately, what the precedent philosophies, mostly unknowingly, tried to develop and formulate, namely a general theory about reality based on the principle of the unity of being and thought. According to Hegel, every particular philosophy throughout history expounded in a successive, partial and complementary way the process of identification of being and thought; inasmuch as the system of absolute idealism assumes the latently idealist theses present in former philosophies, it makes those theses explicit and expounds as its own internal development the process of the identification of being and thought. Thus, absolute idealism is, for Hegel, the philosophy that shows what philosophy is actually about.

It is not by chance that Hegel explicitly mentions idealism in the context of his exposition of the category of 'existence' (or 'being-determinate'). If the most basic ontological category is 'something' (*Etwas*) – as it was arguably the case, for example, in Kant's philosophy² – existence has still to be added to that *possible* something so that it actually exists. In this framework, existence is as such the other of the determinate content that the knowing subject knows, that is, the other of *determinacy* (*Bestimmtheit*). Hegel, on the contrary, claims that being becomes *itself*

being-determinate and, further, the existing determinate thing (*Daseiendes*) (EL §90; ENZ §90; SL, 88–90; WdL, GW21, 102–103; see also WdL, GW11, 65–66). But, for Hegel, the unity between being and determinacy entails the unity between *thought* and the existing things in general. Thought conceives of itself as different from *each* particular existing thing; thus, it tends to conceive the identity of thought with itself, that is, the thinking I, as an existing ‘thing’ amongst others. But there is no difference between thought when it conceives of itself as pure thought, without any determinate content, and being considered as pure being, without consideration of any determinate being. In such a case, thought and being are identical with each other. Although, according to Hegel, pure being is also the *same* as pure nothing, being as such and non-being as such purport to be the *opposite* of each other. This internal contrariness of each of them – each is itself *and* its opposite – leads to the sublation of their alleged complete difference: being turns into being with non-being *in itself*, that is to say, it turns into being-determinate. At the beginning of the chapter on ‘Existence’ in the *Greater Logic*, Hegel states that ‘determinateness has *yet* to detach itself from being; nor will it *ever* detach itself from it, *since* the now underlying truth is the *unity* of non-being with being; *all* further determinations will transpire on this basis’ (SL, 85; WdL, GW21, 98; my emphasis). Since pure being is identical with pure thought, when being turns into being-determinate and then into ‘all further determinations’, thought does so *too*. The unity between being and thought, between being and what there is, and therefore, between thought and what there is, existed from the outset of Hegel’s *Logic*.³ Absolute idealism is the philosophical system that makes explicit and develops that unity.

Now, the unity between *being*, what there *is* and *thought* is the main claim of *constructivism*, namely that since the generation of things out of being is in point of fact their generation out of thinking, things are in truth what human thought produces by its activity. To delimit the epistemic specificity of philosophy with respect to the epistemic specificity of the other sciences it is not unusual to appeal to the alleged holistic character of philosophy (Moore 1953: 1–27; Sellars 1991: 1–5; Rescher 2017: 32–43). However, the aspiration to totality is also shared by the natural sciences; indeed, natural sciences as a whole also aim to give an answer to highly universal questions such as, for example, the origin of the universe, the constitution of matter or the formation of consciousness. For Hegel, however, the specific characteristic of philosophy is much less its holism than its constructivism (Westphal 1989: 140–148, 180; 2003: 53; Beiser 2002: 581–582; 2005: 80–109; Brandom 2019: 180–192, 216–231, 422–432, 487–499, 610–620, 707–712). Since the theory of being and the theory of knowledge are sub-disciplines of philosophy, it is philosophy that is the only type of knowledge that is capable through its own activity of both grounding and making explicit the intrinsic unity between what there is and how we know it. In this framework, holism is only a corollary of constructivism. With the exception of philosophy, all disciplines assume their starting points. What defines each science as such and such a particular science is to analyse a specific domain of objects, not to reflect on the relation between the nature of those objects and the way our mind knows them. Since the theories of being and of knowing in general, that is, ontology and epistemology, have been traditionally considered as sub-disciplines of philosophy, only philosophy

examines how being and knowing relate to each other. Although the field of objects analysed by other sciences can eventually be very extensive, it never includes the relation between the constitution of their objects and the knowledge of those objects by the subject. This is what, according to Hegel, characterizes philosophical thought. Within philosophy, Hegel criticizes realistic monism – whose most sophisticated version in Hegel's time was Spinoza's philosophy – precisely because he considers that realism is not capable to give a plausible account of the relation and unity between being and knowing, that is to say, in Spinoza's own words, between extension and thought (VGP III, 250).

Hegel claims that all philosophies are actually variants of idealism and that their difference lies therefore in the extent to which idealism has been made explicit in each of them. Absolute idealism is the philosophy in which idealism becomes completely manifest. Since in absolute idealism philosophy itself finally becomes aware of its own nature, absolute idealism is the consummation of philosophy. The intuitively more plausible way to understand what absolute idealism is *qua* consummation of philosophy seems to be by reconstructing its genesis through the *history* of philosophy. Although to understand Hegel's conception of absolute idealism it is indispensable to examine his own interpretation of the history of philosophy,⁴ the successive philosophical systems are *already* realizations of the 'concept' (i.e. the specific nature) of philosophy. Thus, the genesis or, in other words, the deduction of that concept does *not* take place in the history of philosophy, but it is presupposed by that history. Why and how human beings come to philosophize and, on that basis, what philosophy in general is amongst the other human activities – and, ultimately, along these same lines, what is it exactly that human beings are attempting to reach by developing philosophical systems – cannot be, therefore, reconstructed only by means of an analysis of Hegel's reflection on philosophy as the end form of absolute spirit, but rather through an examination of – at least – his entire philosophy of spirit. The philosophy of subjective spirit, of objective spirit and of the forms of absolute spirit previous to philosophy itself are, in fact, the *nervus probandi* of the deduction of the 'concept' of philosophy.

In Hegel's system, the philosophy of spirit provides the argumentation that philosophy is the final form of the process of self-knowledge of the human mind in the sense that philosophy reveals the essence of the mind – and of what the mind knows – in a more precise and explicit way than any other activity.⁵ In the beginning of the *Philosophy of Spirit* Hegel presents the concept of spirit in its most simple and abstract form (EPM,⁶ §§381–384; ENZ §§381–384; VSG, 9–18 [§§299–303], 149–206, 555–575); it is along the philosophy of *subjective* spirit where Hegel unfolds the determinations of that concept. Indeed, subjective spirit is spirit in its concept or, what amounts to the same, it is the *concrete* concept of spirit (EL §385; ENZ §385; VSG, 18–19 [§304], 22–24 [§307], 207–210, 578–592). Thus, subjective spirit as the concrete concept of spirit contains a programme about the nature and development of *philosophy*. To elucidate: philosophy is, for Hegel, the most accomplished achievement of the human mind; the concept of mind is expounded throughout the philosophy of subjective spirit; thus, to understand what philosophy means for Hegel it is crucial to understand first what, according to him, constitutes the human mind as such.

The last form of subjective spirit, that is, spirit proper or spirit as such, expounds in detail what defines the mind. Since spirit proper is theoretical as well as practical, free spirit as the end form of spirit proper is the *unity* of theoretical and practical spirit. Precisely because it is the unity of intelligence and will, Hegel characterizes free spirit as the 'concept of *absolute spirit*' (EPM, §482; ENZ, §482). Free spirit is the human mind when it finally understands itself according to its own nature and, for that reason, becomes *from then on* able to *act* accordingly to that nature. Along this line, in the final paragraph on free spirit in the *Encyclopaedia* of 1830 Hegel inserts a remark in which he states that objective spirit and absolute spirit are the 'objectivity' (*Gegenständlichkeit*) and the 'actuality' (*Wirklichkeit*) of free spirit (EPM, §482 R; ENZ §482 Anm.). This means, in other words, that objective spirit and absolute spirit are the realization of the full-blown concept or essence of the human mind. Hegel's conception of spirit in its successive forms – theoretical, practical and free spirit – is, therefore, the condition of possibility for understanding the structure and meaning of the rest of his philosophy of spirit and, in this context, to understand what defines, according to him, philosophy as the most accomplished realization and manifestation of the human mind (Nuzzo 2016: 21, 24).

The alleged paradoxical structure of Hegel's philosophy of spirit

In the order of exposition of the philosophy of spirit as such, that is, in the section 'Psychology', intelligence precedes will; will arises at the end of the process of intelligence. On the other hand, however, Hegel presents objective spirit as the continuation of the process of subjective *will* (in fact, until the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia* Hegel places in the beginning of the philosophy of *objective* spirit the passages that in the third edition become free spirit as the final form of subjective spirit), while he explicitly organizes the different forms of absolute spirit – art, religion and philosophy – according to the formal structure of *theoretical* spirit – intuition, representation and thought. For the same reason that in the stage of subjective spirit theoretical spirit precedes practical spirit, it seems in the stage of the realization of free spirit that absolute spirit should precede objective spirit. It is a fact, however, that Hegel considers art, religion and philosophy as subsequent and superior with respect to the forms of objective spirit. More clearly, in the realm of subjective spirit intelligence precedes will, which derives from the culmination of intelligence; it seems that same hierarchy between intelligence and will should repeat symmetrically in the following general stage of the realization of free spirit. But Hegel follows in the latter case an (apparently) opposite logic: the forms of absolute spirit as realizations of free spirit as cognition come *after* the forms of objective spirit as realizations of free spirit as action. This 'inversion' has been noted by Hegel scholars such as, for example, Adriaan Peperzak and Edith Düsing. Peperzak and Düsing speak in this respect of a 'primacy' of the intelligence over the will in Hegel's philosophy of spirit (Peperzak 1987: 38–57; Düsing 1991: 119–133). But to characterize placing absolute spirit after objective spirit as an alleged 'primacy' of the intelligence over the will does not provide any explanation of that particular disposition in terms of Hegel's own system.

Objective spirit and absolute spirit are not, respectively, the realization of practical and theoretical spirit, but *both* are realizations of *free spirit*, which is, as Hegel explicitly states, the *unity* of theoretical and practical spirit. Thus, since free spirit is neither mere intelligence nor mere will, objective spirit and absolute spirit are not the realization of practical spirit, on the one hand, and the realization of theoretical spirit, on the other. The conception of objective and absolute spirit as ‘inverse’ forms of manifestation of the nature of the human spirit relies on a mistaken interpretation of Hegel’s philosophy of spirit. This erroneous interpretation consists, more precisely, in considering that for Hegel intelligence ‘internalizes’ the objects of the external world, while the will ‘externalizes’ the internal goals of the knowing subject (Fetscher 1970: 142–143, 189; Peperzak 1987: 43–44; 1990: 287, 302–305; 1991a: 366; 1991b: 22–23, 63, 104; deVries 1988: 199; Düsing 1991: 126; Murray 1991: 54–55; Stederoth 2001: 383–384; Rometsch 2007: 229–232). However, there are at least three sound arguments that prove that in the case of Hegel’s system this way of conceiving the difference between intelligence and will is fundamentally wrong.

The first objection against conceiving the activity of the will as the externalization of internal goals is that in the exposition of the philosophy of subjective practical spirit Hegel does *not* develop the activity of the will in that way, but as the *universalizing* of the spontaneous self-determinations of the mind, that is to say, as the sublation of the immediacy of the feelings, drives and inclinations of the spirit and as the sublation of the particularity of the abstractly formal capacity to choose them (Höslé 1988: 394; Ferreira 2019: 81–88).

The second objection is that such a conception equates ‘spirit’ (*Geist*) with ‘consciousness’ (*Bewusstsein*). Internalizing and externalizing contents are activities of the human subject that has not *yet* become aware that objects are not things of an external world, but its *own* determinations. Through the phenomenological process of consciousness the knowing subject sublates the abstract difference between itself as a merely inner realm and the contents of knowledge as the realm of merely external things. Precisely this sublation turns consciousness into spirit as such. Hegel can thus claim that, unlike consciousness, spirit as such faces the determinate contents of the so-called external world with the certainty that they are ‘flesh of his flesh’ (VSG, 118, 798, 1084 [§440]). The process of theoretical spirit consists in showing that object and subject do not oppose each other in an abstract way. In the first theoretical form of spirit as such, that is, in feeling and intuition, the mind is still sunk in objectivity, while in the general form of representation it opposes an inner content to the external content of intuition – the process of representation consists precisely in sublating that opposition (EPM, §451; ENZ §451; VSG, 822–825). The last form of theoretical spirit, that is to say, thought or comprehending, reveals the deficiency of the abstract differentiation and opposition between the intuited external thing and the internally represented content. When the mind comprehends objects, it operates at a level that is neither merely objective nor merely subjective, but a unity of both, since object and subject no longer relate only to themselves, but have become ‘forms’ of determinacy as such, that is to say, purely formal aspects or moments of the determinate content that is in each case known. Thus, what is overcome in the transition from consciousness to spirit is not the – as such irreducible – difference between the knowing subject and

the things external to her/his body. Hegel does not deny that there is a world different from the subject that knows it. What is sublated in that transition is, strictly speaking, the conception that knowing is an 'internal' realm, outside which there are the things that are known, things that are accordingly conceived as 'external'. However, things are external to each other, but they are not external to knowing, because knowing is not itself a thing. For knowing things are not 'things' either, but determinate contents or objects of knowledge, that is, determinations of the activity itself of knowing. Once the spatializing approach to knowing and what knowing knows has been superseded, an abstract differentiation between 'outer' things and 'inner' contents becomes meaningless; accordingly, the interpretation of theoretical activity as the internalizing of alleged external objects and of practical activity as the externalization of alleged inner goals becomes meaningless too.

The third objection against construing theoretical activity as the process of internalizing the real things that the intelligence knows and practical activity as the complementary process of externalizing the contents of the subject, is that Hegel conceives of *art* as a form of *absolute* spirit. Buildings, monuments, sculptures, paintings, musical compositions and theatre representations are certainly 'things' of the real world. It is therefore evident that externality is not the criterion with which Hegel distinguishes objective spirit from absolute spirit. The externality of things made by human beings with respect to their own bodies does not imply as such that those things should be, for that reason, considered as the result of the activity of the will by contrast to the supposedly merely inner objects of intelligence; otherwise, Hegel would not consider artworks – as he in fact does – as instances of absolute spirit, but as instances of *objective* spirit. On the other side, private property or contracts, which are for Hegel figures of objective spirit, are not external things either, although what someone owns as property can eventually be a spatial thing and a contract can be written on paper. This shows that for Hegel the 'objectivity' of objective spirit does not bear any relation to an alleged externalization of internal contents nor the 'subjectivity' of subjective spirit bear any relation to an alleged internalization of external things. Besides, since Hegel correlates the different forms of absolute spirit with the cognitive forms of intuition, representation and thought, its 'absoluteness' becomes in this particular approach highly problematic. Indeed, there is in this framework nothing left but to suppose – as Peperzak and Düsing did – a mysterious 'primacy' of the intelligence over the will in Hegel's philosophy of spirit.

The objectivity of objective spirit

As stated above, it is essential to understand the meaning of Hegel's theory of spirit as the last form of subjective spirit to understand the difference between objective and absolute spirit as realizations of free spirit and, further, to understand Hegel's conception of philosophy as the end form of absolute spirit. Let us begin with Hegel's theory of subjective theoretical spirit: knowing spontaneously conceives of itself as an entirely formal or empty activity, as a 'tabula rasa' or a 'white paper', thus, as an activity that is not a true *activity*, but rather a mere mirroring of objects that consequently

present themselves as the only actually existing things. Since knowing conceives of itself as indeterminate, that is, as 'ideal', the thing that knowing knows is, since it is determinate *in itself* and for that very reason 'real', what *actively* determines knowing. As indeterminate, knowing is not as such *something* (*Etwas*) that can reflect other somethings, but pure reflecting itself.⁷ However, by its own process knowing becomes gradually aware that the object is not something given from outside – as if object and knowing were two different 'things', one outside the other – but the result of the activity of knowing and comprehending the object. The allegedly merely real thing becomes by that process an explicit determination *of* knowing and, reciprocally, knowing becomes *itself* real. By assuming in itself as its own self-determination the content that was until then unilaterally real, knowing, which was until then entirely formal and therefore unilaterally ideal, ceases to conceive of itself as a pure mirroring and reveals itself as the *real* activity of knowing, that is, as *action* (*Handeln*) (SL, 729; WdL, GW12, 230; see also EPM, §§468–469; ENZ, §§468–469; VSG, 886–887). Practical activity – or 'will' – is for Hegel the very activity of knowing as far as it is now itself something that is determinate *in itself*. That is why will is, for Hegel, the result of the transition of intelligence *into its own existence*.⁸ 'Practical spirit – says Hegel – not only *has* Ideas but *is* the living Idea itself' (NS, 57; my emphasis).

As the unity of knowing and the world that it knows, knowing becomes itself an *actual singular something* (*Wirkliches*) [SL, 729; WdL, GW12, 231; EPM, §469; ENZ §469; VSG, 531, 886; GW26, §6, 244]; *Einzelnes* [SL, 729–730; WdL, GW12, 231–232; PR, §13 R; GPR, GW14.1, 37 (§13 Anm.); EPM, §469, §471; ENZ, §469, §471; VSG, 138 (§389), 532, 883–884]. In Hegel's system, practical spirit is, indeed, 'the *actual* spirit' (*der wirkliche Geist*) (VSG, 886; EPM, §482 R; ENZ, §482 Anm.). Precisely because knowing has made explicit to itself that it is an actual subject that acts, the presupposition of the *other* (*Anderes*)⁹ reappears, but it reappears in a way that is specifically different from the way things are other to each other and *seemed* to be other with respect to knowing. When purely theoretical knowing conceives of itself as indeterminate, it conceives of itself as entirely passive with respect to the 'real' things; accordingly, it conceives of the 'real' things as acting *on* knowing and determining it. When, on the contrary, knowing becomes aware that it is itself a being in itself, that is to say, that it is something actual that is at the same time, unlike things that are merely determinate in themselves, *for* itself (*für sich*), it has as practical activity *power* (*Macht*) over its own determinations as well as (potentially) over the determinations of all things, therefore, over the determinate *as such* (GW23.1, 305; GW23.2, 639, 794; VSG, §382, 935). In other words, since knowing is necessarily always knowing a determinate content, the determinate in general is the other with respect to knowing as determinate in itself, that is, as actual knowing or will. However, unlike the other with respect to indeterminate, merely theoretical knowing, the determinate is now something other than can be *actively* negated *by* actual knowing. Thus, Hegel states that actual singular knowing conceives of itself not simply as one singular thing – namely as a self-conscious, singular living mind – amongst the many other singular things of the world; its own actuality entails the *non-actuality* (*Unwirklichkeit, Nichtsein*) and *worthlessness* (*Nichtigkeit*) of the entire determinate world, that is, more clearly, of the *own* determinations of the knowing subject (that is why the singular subject can

eventually negate itself by committing suicide) as well as of the determinations of the *other* determinate things (SL, 729–732; WdL, GW12, 231–233; EL, §233; ENZ, §233; GW23.1, 307, 406; GW23.2, 794, 804; GW23.3, §234, 958).

Along these lines, the development of subjective practical spirit consists, for Hegel, in the process of action *on itself* or, what is the same, in the process of *thinking* itself the self-determinate – therefore actual, singular – thinking. The singular mind that at the end of the process of subjective practical spirit has thought itself and, by doing so, has sublated its own immediacy, that is to say, its own immediate self-determinacy is, therefore, the unity of theoretical and practical spirit: *actually* free will (*wirklich freier Wille*) (EPM, §481; ENZ, §481; see also EL §236; ENZ, §236). To elucidate, for Hegel, thinking becomes free spirit when, despite being a concrete and determinate mind, it is a universal form (free will of choice) with respect to its own determinations (its feelings, drives and inclinations); thus, free spirit is nothing other than the living concrete subject that being always determined to be a particular singular subject can nevertheless choose to be or not to be that particular subject. Being embodied minds that are determinate and at the same time free with respect to their own determinacy – and for that same reason with respect to determinacy *in general* – is what defines, according to Hegel, the very nature of human beings.

Merely theoretical knowing is, as stated above, knowing that conceives of itself as entirely indeterminate and, therefore, as determined by the determinate object. On the contrary, the activity of knowing that is determinate in itself, but at the same time free with respect to its own determinateness and, therefore, free with respect to the determinate in general, relates to the other of itself as something that can be (re)determined by the actual, singular activity of knowing. As actually free will, the singular activity of knowing – namely, the living human mind – has power over the determinate; it is something according to which the determinate can be modified, since the determinate is as such only in itself, not, like the living mind, something that is determinate in *and* for itself. From now on, the subject relates with the object as the object related before with the subject. It is in this precise sense that Hegel characterizes the actual activity of knowing as 'objective' (SL, 729–733; WdL, GW12, 231–234). Indeed, in Hegel's system objective spirit is not the 'external' world as far as it has been modified by the subject – artworks and religious ceremonies, which are for Hegel forms of absolute spirit, modify the world too – but the very activity of knowing as far as it gives now the determinate in general its intrinsic value (*gilt*) just as before the determinate in general gave knowing its intrinsic value and determinateness (SL, 732; WdL, GW12, 233).

However, as long as the actually free activity of knowing differs from its other as two entities that are each determinate in itself *as* singular, their relation cannot be reduced to a differentiated identity. With regard to each singular mind, the other minds and the world are always, to a lesser or greater degree, as the case may be, the irreducibly other. The determination of the other by each living free mind is, thus, an endless search and a mere ought. The 'objectivation' of spirit in such logical-ontological framework remains always a *postulate* (*Postulat*) (SL, 731; WdL, GW12, 233; GW23.2, 804) that gives rise to a *progress to infinity*, since, even though the human spirit tries and tries again, at the level of singularity as such the active determination of the other is an unattainable goal

(SL, 732–734; WdL, GW12, 234–235; EL §234; ENZ §234; GW23.2, 639, 645, 804). The development of objective spirit does not rely, thus, on the fact itself that the singular subject seeks once and again to determine the other of itself according to its own goals of free singular subject, but strictly speaking, in sublating *its own singularity*. Indeed, for Hegel, the successive figures of objective spirit are but forms of achieving increasing *universality* in the relations amongst free singular spirits or ‘persons’.

By falling into a progress to infinity, the free singular subject becomes aware that the universalization of the relations between the multiple free singular subjects as singular is not as such sufficient to redetermine the other of each of them – therefore, the other in general of the free singular subject in general. The free singular subject thereby *realizes* that the self-conception of knowing as a singular activity that is determined in itself and for itself is still a deficient way to conceive itself and, accordingly, to conceive the determinate contents that singular knowing knows. According to Hegel, in this act of reflection the activity of knowing overcomes the general realm of its own being-*in-itself* by *positing* its own being-*for-itself*, that is to say, by positing as such knowing or cognition. To elucidate, spirit overcomes the realm of objective spirit by focusing *on knowing itself* and not anymore on the fact that that activity is actual, namely, that it is a real action. That is why Hegel can describe that further act of reflection and deeper self-awareness of the activity of knowing as a restoration of knowing *as such* and, along this line, he can correlate in a general way the following acts of the singular activity of knowing, that is, the acts of absolute spirit, with the acts of the *theoretical* spirit (SL, 731–732; WdL, GW12, 233). By doing so, the singular subject in general, that is, the still *externally* universal spirit (*äußerlich allgemeinen*), that is, the *world-spirit* (*Weltgeist*), ceases to be unilaterally ‘objective’ with respect to the other of itself and becomes explicitly *absolute* spirit (EPM, §549; ENZ, §549).

Absolute spirit as the self-awareness of world-making

Even though at the end of the process of subjective theoretical spirit the activity of knowing entirely determines the object by means of concepts, judgements and inferences, that thoroughgoing determination takes place only on the part of the subject; on the part of the object, determinacy remains, in the last analysis, as something *given* to the knowing subject because the subject conceives of it as belonging to the object as it is *in itself*. Only when the activity of knowing begins to explicitly conceive determinacy as its own *product*, does it enter the final stage of thoroughgoing determination of determinacy in general. That is why Hegel holds the self-manifest production of determinate contents that occurs in art – the person who produces a piece of art knows *that* he/she is producing it – to be a form of *knowing*. Hegel’s philosophy of absolute spirit expounds the progressive operations by means of which the mind actively shapes determinacy in general. The first type of active determination of determinacy in general reduces a content to be the ‘expression’ (*Ausdruck*) (VSG, §457, 1108; EPM, §556, §558; ENZ, §556, §558) of another content, which becomes in turn the ‘soul’ (*Seele*) of the former content, that is to say, its ‘meaning’ (*Bedeutung*) (EPM, §458, R; ENZ, §458, Anm.; VSG, 132–134, 512–517, 523–524; VSG, 837–840,

1107–1108 [§§456–457]). But a content that only expresses other content always keeps its own determinacy. This deficient strategy for determining content is specific to art and, to a lesser extent, to religion. The successive forms of absolute spirit radicalize the process of content determination by performing the different cognitive acts implied in the form of free spirit. A key milestone in the radicalization of the process of content determination is the moment in which the mind stops using perceptual things to express other contents and begins to use for that same purpose *language*. Language is the specific element of comprehending. The transition to language takes place for Hegel still on the stage of art through poetry and, more in general, through literature. In architecture, sculpture, painting and music spirit resorts – in decreasing degree – to external things to express contents that are different from those things. Although sculpture often uses the same kind of materials as architecture – stone, marble, metal, etc. – it negates their determinacy to a greater extent, so that the content that functions as the meaning prevails more than it does in the products of architecture. In painting and music, the used material is colour and sound, which are as such more malleable than tri-dimensional things and can thus be reduced more easily to express other contents. Finally, in poetry and literature the mind operates *at the immanent level of meaning*. Since in the meanings of linguistic signs the correlation between things and sensible intuition and between mental contents and representation is sublated, language is, so to speak, the ‘platonic’ medium of determinacy *as such*: language can speak about things without any need for the things to be present to our senses; in turn, the meaning of a word is not, strictly speaking, a merely subjective content, precisely because it can refer to objects of the real world. What in language is reduced to material for expression of other content is *meaning itself*, not the thing to which meaning refers; thus, for example, painting uses white colour to symbolize purity, while poetry and literature simply use the meaning of the strokes or of the sequence of sounds of the word ‘white’. From this stage on, the active determination of determinacy takes place at the level of meaning through the progressive purification of figurative thinking in the diverse genres of poetry, literature and religious thought. But the result of these types of active sense production is still symbolic and metaphorical. Thus, for example, religious thought seeks to explain the unity between being and thought resorting to the image of the artisan that produces her works from ideas that she previously had in her mind.

Although in the contents produced by figurative thinking one determinacy is subordinated to another, each determinacy remains further partially related to itself. Symbols, metaphors and allegories contain different layers of determinacy that cannot be completely mediated with each other. The mind gradually moves away from figurative thinking by developing ever more abstract ways of systematizing the multiple determinations that it knows. By resorting less and less to symbols, metaphors and allegories and by interrelating determinations in terms of concepts, judgements and inferences, the activity of knowing begins to actively determine determinacy entirely by itself. Exhaustive content determination by knowing – therefore, *self-conscious* content determination – is for Hegel specific only to philosophy. However, even self-conscious content determination shows in the beginning aspects of immediacy; the self-awareness of thoroughgoing content determination by the activity of knowing is a gradual process. The system of objects that philosophy develops has still to become

able to reflect *in its own constitution* that it is a set of contents produced by the activity of knowing. In other words, the objects that constitute the world have still to reveal *as their own determinacy* that they are a *result* of the activity of comprehending them. The remaining difference between the activity of knowing and the determinate contents is finally sublated when the subject determines their determinacy according to the model of their unity with the knowing subject, that is to say, when the world itself contains as its own determinacy its unity with the subject that knows it. Thus, a decisive milestone in the process of self-awareness of the identity between the knowing subject and the world it knows is, for Hegel, *idealism*. Within idealism, *absolute* idealism is, as the self-aware activity of ‘world-making’, the philosophical system that finally becomes able to develop the full-blown unity of being and thought.

In the chapter on ‘Being’ and ‘Existence’ in both the *Greater Logic* and the *Lesser Logic* Hegel relates philosophy to idealism: his main claim about absolute idealism – and ultimately about philosophy in general – is, indeed, that it is the theory that manages to make explicit and justify that the determinations of human thought are likewise the determinations of the real world. Merely theoretical comprehending – namely, comprehending as an activity of *subjective* spirit – is for Hegel the activity of knowing when it develops a general theory about what there is, but does not understand yet what the nature of comprehending implies *for the theory itself* and, therefore, does not rework the theory and its contents on the model of *self-comprehending*. The activity of comprehending that now develops a world theory that reflects in its own structure and contents that same activity of developing the theory – comprehending as an activity of *absolute* spirit – is precisely what to Hegel’s eyes defines absolute idealism as the true philosophy. Since in absolute idealism the activity of knowing finally and fully understands the identity between knowing and being, absolute idealism is the philosophical system that is able to comprehend what human beings actually do when they do philosophy and, along this line, what philosophy has been trying to do from its very beginning.

Absolute idealism and metaphilosophy

How the human mind holds the world to be – which kind of objects there are in the world – and what the mind thinks it is doing when it conceives of the world as it does – how the mind conceives of its own activity of conceiving – are for Hegel intrinsically interrelated and depend one on the other. Philosophy is for Hegel the only discipline that develops a general theory that conceives of the world in such a way that its position as the object of theory is essential for its own constitution, that of the theory which examines it and, ultimately, for the mind that develops the theory. For Hegel, that is the specific difference of philosophy with regard to all other sciences as well as it is the specific difference of the objects with which philosophy deals with regard to the objects with which other sciences deal. As it has been stated above, with the exception of philosophy all sciences assume their starting points, that is, they assume their objects as already real. On the contrary, the objects that philosophy has been trying to understand from the beginning of its history – being, essence, substance, etc. – are

for Hegel precisely those in which the human mind can recognize itself as constituent. Unlike any other kind of objects, the objects of philosophical knowledge explicitly reveal in themselves that they are not independent from the knowing mind, but already in their being-in-themselves the relation with the mind that knows them (that is why for Hegel even 'being' is a *logical* category). To put it in another way, the objects with which philosophy deals entail in their own constitution that they are known by the mind and, for the same reason, that knowing is not a pure mirroring – or 'aboutness' – and that the mind is not an empty container that receives its determinations from other beings. For Hegel, philosophy has been from its very beginning the knowledge of those objects that are at the same time real entities of the world and categories of the knowing mind. Since the objects of philosophy are the unity with the mind that knows them and the mind only knows what it can know, in philosophy the mind becomes aware that it actually constitutes *all* objects of the knowable world. The objects of philosophy are, thus, the most universal ontological categories of reality. However, philosophy only gradually becomes aware of the true nature of its contents and of its own true nature. The ultimate reason for this gradualness is, according to Hegel, that the different objects with which philosophy deals are themselves only partly – but always increasingly – manifest forms of the unity between being and thought, between the world and the mind that knows it.

One could be misled to think that in Hegel's system the reflection of philosophy on itself as discipline, that is to say, (the philosophy of) the history of philosophy, is where Hegel expounds his metaphilosophical meditations. Indeed, the history of philosophy contains most of Hegel's key ideas on what philosophy is. Yet, philosophy is ultimately only one of the many events that happen in the world – other events are, for example, causation, animal life, social relations, art and religious beliefs. Philosophy or, more clearly, philosophizing, presupposes the genesis of its own concept because the fact that human beings philosophize does not explain why and how they come to philosophize. The objects and events that philosophy deals with are for Hegel precisely what by themselves – that is, by their own internal dynamics – have led the human mind to make philosophy. As an event that happens in the world, making philosophy further leads philosophizing itself to become aware of what philosophizing is and, thus, what philosophy as content actually is. To elucidate, for Hegel it is not an external *theoretical* reflection of philosophy on itself and its history what makes philosophy become aware of its nature, but it is through the real process of understanding better its contents that philosophy gets to understand its own nature. That is why philosophy is for Hegel the conclusion of the systematic process of contents that philosophy seeks to understand. Philosophy is, thus, part and whole of itself; indeed, for Hegel, philosophy is itself the last *content* of the system of *philosophical sciences*. Amongst other possible contents, philosophy also reflects on its own history. Thus, philosophy always contains, as long as the history of philosophy is itself a philosophical discipline, metaphilosophical reflections. But not only when philosophy analyses its successive systems as developing in time, but already when it analyses their different contents it is already reflecting on itself, since philosophy thereby reflects on how it arises amongst all other activities and on what it does differently from them. Thus, in Hegel's thought philosophy is *as such* metaphilosophy. However, for Hegel it is only in absolute idealism when philosophy

is finally able to retrospectively reconstruct its entire genesis and become, by doing so, fully aware of why the human mind does philosophy and what it is actually doing when it philosophizes.

Notes

- 1 The *Encyclopaedia Logic* is quoted according to Brinkmann and Dahlstrom's translation.
- 2 AA 09, 95.17–20: 'Der abstracteste Begriff ist der, welcher mit keinem von ihm verschiedenen etwas gemein hat. Dieses ist der Begriff von Etwas; denn das von ihm Verschiedene ist Nichts, und hat also mit dem Etwas nichts gemein.'
- 3 See SL, 47; WdL, GW21, 55: '*Das reine Wissen*, als in diese Einheit zusammengegangen, *hat alle Beziehung auf ein Anderes und auf Vermittlung aufgehoben; es ist das Unterschiedlose*; dieses Unterschiedlose hört somit selbst auf, Wissen zu seyn; es ist nur einfache Unmittelbarkeit vorhanden. Die einfache Unmittelbarkeit ist selbst ein Reflexionsausdruck und bezieht sich auf den Unterschied von dem Vermittelten. *In ihrem wahren Ausdrücke ist daher diese einfache Unmittelbarkeit das reine Seyn.*' SL, 59; WdL, GW21, 69: 'Es [das reine Seyn, H. F.] ist die reine Unbestimmtheit und Leere. – Es ist nichts in ihm anzuschauen, wenn von Anschauen hier gesprochen werden kann; oder es ist nur diß reine, leere Anschauen selbst. Es ist ebensowenig etwas in ihm zu denken, oder es ist ebenso *nur diß leere Denken* [...] Nichts Anschauen oder Denken hat also eine Bedeutung; beyde werden unterschieden, so ist (existirt) Nichts in unserem Anschauen oder Denken; oder vielmehr *ist es das leere Anschauen und Denken selbst und dasselbe leere Anschauen oder Denken als das reine Seyn.*' SL, 73; WdL, GW21, 84: 'Bey dieser ganz abstracten Reinheit der Continuität, d. i. Unbestimmtheit und Leerheit des Vorstellens ist es gleichgültig, diese Abstraction Raum zu nennen, oder reines Anschauen, *reines Denken* [...] Dieses dumpfe, *leere Bewußtseyn ist, als Bewußtseyn aufgefaßt, – das Seyn.*' – EL, §86; ENZ, §86: '*Das reine Seyn* macht den Anfang, *weil es sowohl reiner Gedanke*, als das unbestimmte einfache Unmittelbare ist, der erste Anfang aber nichts vermitteltes und weiter bestimmtes seyn kann.' GW23.3, §86 Z1, 860: 'Wir haben, wenn angefangen wird zu denken, *nichts als den Gedanken in seiner reinen Bestimmungslosigkeit*, denn zur Bestimmung gehört schon Eines und ein Anderes; im Anfang aber haben wir noch kein Anderes. Das Bestimmungslose, wie wir es hier haben, ist das Unmittelbare, nicht die vermittelte Bestimmungslosigkeit, nicht die Aufhebung aller Bestimmtheit, sondern die Unmittelbarkeit der Bestimmungslosigkeit, die Bestimmungslosigkeit vor aller Bestimmtheit, das Bestimmungslose als Allererstes. *Dieß aber nennen wir das Seyn.*' GW23.3, §88, 863: 'Man hört sehr häufig behaupten, das Denken sey dem Seyn entgegengesetzt. Bei solcher Behauptung wäre indeß zunächst zu fragen, was unter dem Seyn verstanden werde? Nehmen wir das Seyn auf, wie solches die Reflexion bestimmt, so können wir von demselben nur aussagen, es sey dasselbe das schlechthin Identische und Affirmative. Betrachten wir nunmehr das Denken, so kann es uns nicht entgehen, daß dasselbe wenigstens *gleichfalls* das schlechthin mit sich Identische ist. *Beiden, dem Seyn und dem Denken, kommt somit dieselbe Bestimmung zu. Diese Identität des Seyns und des Denkens* ist nun aber nicht konkret zu nehmen und somit nicht zu sagen, der Stein sey als seyender dasselbe, was der denkende Mensch ist.' (In all cases

- my emphasis, H.F.) For a closer examination of Hegel's claim of the unity of being and thought at the beginning of the *Logic*, see Ferreiro (2017: 97–122).
- 4 For a closer analysis of the relation between the history of philosophy and the self-understanding of philosophy in Hegel, see Ware (1996: 253–279; 1999: 145–146, 156–159, 204–205).
- 5 The argument that proves that philosophy is the highest form of self-knowledge is, strictly speaking, the entire system of philosophy itself. For the coextensivity of philosophy and metaphilosophy in Hegel, see Miolli (2017: 119–121) and Miolli's contribution, Chapter 26, in this volume.
- 6 The *Philosophy of Mind (Part Three of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences (1830))* is quoted according to Wallace and Miller's translation (2007).
- 7 For Hegel's account of the relation between the categories of 'something' (*Etwas*) and 'other' (*Anderes*) in the *Logic*, see SL, 89–95; WdL, GW21, 104–110; EL, §§91–93; ENZ §§91–93.
- 8 VSG, GW25.2, 886–887: 'Der praktische Geist ist eigentlich erst der wirkliche Geist in so fern er damit als unmittelbare Weise; hier tritt für ihn die Endlichkeit ein. Die Intelligenz ist darin frei; gegen diese Freiheit ist die bestimmung der Unmittelbarkeit und so tritt sie in die Endlichkeit ein.' PR, §13 R; GPR, GW14.1, §13 Anm., 37: 'Im Willen beginnt daher die eigene Endlichkeit der Intelligenz.' VSG, GW25.2, 883: 'Der praktische Geist ist das concrete Denken; er ist dies: zur bestimmung des Unmittelbaren überzugehen und mit einem Zweck. Diese Unmittelbarkeit von der das Denken frei geworden, ist doch das, in das es zurückkehrt[.] Die Welt, ihr Gefühl hat die Intelligenz verdaut, und hat sie als das Ihrige und hat sich mit sich zusammengeschlossen, ist frei; dieses Resultat: sich mit sich zusammengeschlossen zu haben ist eben das Zurückgekehrtsein zur einfachen Einheit mit sich selbst, und hat sich so als unmittelbar (zur Einzelheit) bestimmt.' EPM, §469; ENZ, §469: 'Der Geist als Wille weiß sich als sich in sich beschließend und sich aus sich erfüllend. Dies erfüllte Fürsichsein oder Einzelheit macht die Seite der Existenz oder Realität von der Idee des Geistes aus.'
- 9 SL, 729–730; WdL, GW12, 231–232: 'In der praktischen Idee aber steht er als Wirkliches, dem Wirklichen gegenüber ... Die Willens-Idee hat als das selbstbestimmende für sich den Inhalt in sich selbst. Dieser ist nun zwar bestimmter Inhalt, und insofern ein endliches und beschränktes; die Selbstbestimmung ist wesentlich Besonderung, da die Reflexion des Willens in sich als negative Einheit überhaupt auch Einzelheit im Sinne des Ausschliessens und des Voraussetzens eines Andern ist.'

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