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Stop Making Sense: Hegel's Critique of Common Understanding

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Stop Making Sense: Hegel's Critique of Common Understanding

A Thesis Presented

by

DANIEL A. BURNFIN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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German and Scandinavian Studies

Stop Making Sense:
Hegel's Critique of Common Understanding

A Thesis Presented
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DEDICATION

To my family, to J  ssica and to closet philosophers everywhere.

Speculare aude!

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ABSTRACT

STOP MAKING SENSE: HEGEL'S CRITIQUE OF COMMON UNDERSTANDING

MAY 2015

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This thesis presents Hegel's account of abstract 'understanding' (*Verstand*) and asserts that his thought is to be read as primarily presenting a critique of abstract understanding. *Verstand* involves the methodological supposition of a self-subsistent fundament of what it speaks of, and hence the critique of understanding is the critique of the supposition of self-subsistent fundaments. Grasping his account and reading him in its critical light yields a very different image of Hegel than the *caricature* of 'totalizing systems'. The dimension of the *Verstandeskritik* has been relatively neglected in Hegel-reception and misunderstandings result from trying to 'understand' Hegel, by overlooking the topic of 'understanding' in his work as *critique*. Many caricatures result from understanding Hegel as a proponent of what he actually critiques ('absolute knowing' is often understood as a mega-understanding). The thesis then addresses the historically influential criticisms raised by his contemporary, F.J.W. Schelling, to give a voice to a Hegel that has been hitherto drowned out by caricatures that began with Schelling.

*... the eternal return is indeed the Similar, repetition in the eternal return is indeed the Identical – but precisely the resemblance and the identity do not pre-exist the return of that which returns. They do not in the first instance qualify what returns, [rather] they are indistinguishable from its return. It is not the same which returns, it is not the similar which returns; rather, the Same is the returning of that which returns...*¹

When I was a child
I lived unknowing
In order now to own
This memory of then,

Today I sense
What then I was.
Now my life goes on,
Made of my pretenses.

But in this prison,
My only book, I read
The smile of someone else,
Of who I was then.²

Der Beweis liegt in wenigen Worten.³

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (London: Continuum, 2004), 300-1. Italics mine.

² Fernando Pessoa, *The Surprise of Being* (London: Angel Books, 1986), 49.

³ Friedrich Hölderlin, *Über Religion*, in *Werke* (Tübingen: Rainer Wunderlich Verlag), 1263.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This essay concerns Hegel's critical account of 'understanding' (*Verstand*) and the problematic way in which his work has (ironically) been 'understood' since its initial critical-reception, which transmitted the meaning of 'Hegel' to the present. It attempts to disentangle Hegel's message and importance at present from the angle of its problematic historical reception and to suggest a thread for future research by bringing his criticisms of understanding to the foreground of interpretation. It does this by examining Hegel's text in detail and by highlighting passages that are central to a heterodox reading. It will not primarily attempt to make Hegel 'plausible' or 'intelligible' for common understanding, to provide 'answers' to questions or 'solve' problems, but rather to reveal his engagement with understanding as the *crucial problem or question* that Hegel is usually responding to. Clarifying what Hegel critiques as the "*Abstraktionen des trennenden Verstandes*" ('*abstractions of the separative understanding*'),⁴ and making this critique central to interpreting what Hegel is all about, clarifies his work as a critical philosophy. Reading Hegel as a critique of understanding, rather than as simply advancing his own understanding of things, evacuates the obscurity, mysticism and scale of claims that often emerge in his texts – or in short, the caricatures of 'Hegel' – and there are indications everywhere that he is to be read in this manner. Because of his peculiar use of the word 'understanding', which perhaps never takes a negative connotation in ordinary use, his text can be baffling and impenetrable to an unfamiliar reader. This problem can nonetheless pose its own solution, if the critique of understanding is made the consistent and text-immanent guide for approaching Hegel, rather than a barrier standing between the reader and Hegel. This angle has not yet been sufficiently made a central topic in Hegel-research or interpretation, which is due surely in part to the fact that understanding remains as invisible to itself as its critique remains

⁴ G.W.F. Hegel. *Encyclopedia Logic*, in *Werke in zwanzig Bänden* (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main: 1969), vol. 8, 140, § 55. Hereafter: EL. In what follows, Hegel's works will be cited from the Suhrkamp Theorie Werkausgabe, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, with their title followed by 'W', immediately followed by the volume number, page number and finally paragraph number where appropriate. (E.g. EL, in W8: 140, § 55.) All English translations of German texts by are mine unless otherwise noted.

‘unintelligible’ to ordinary understanding when the term is taken in its ordinary signification. The present thesis hopes to make a contribution in this respect.

When his earliest critics tried to ‘understand’ him, they too did not make the exegetical step that this thesis claims is crucial. Many have overlooked the centrality of his detailed account of *understanding* as such, and took its meaning for granted as self-evident in trying to ‘understand’ and critique him, rather than using his work as an occasion for self-criticism; the extent to which he actually presents an alternative to understanding was thereby obscured for posterity. Unsurprisingly, attempts to ‘make sense’ of Hegel, which give an exposition of his thought with the method he rejected (*verstehen*) and overlook the one he advanced (*begreifen*), therefore mistake his thought for something it is not and transform its message into something that it does not assert. This application of *understanding* to Hegel is what made him into ‘Hegel’, the ‘totalizing system builder’, or the obscure philosopher of ‘unintelligible nonsense’. In particular, the popular means by which Hegel’s thought was characterized and transmitted to a broader audience in the 19th century and up to the present was imprinted by the interpretation advanced by F.J.W. Schelling, whose version of ‘Hegel’ is formulated within the very parameters of ‘understanding’ that Hegel critiqued. (Perhaps the first post-Hegelian to claim, “one must once again return to Kant”, the late Schelling was arguably the first *neo-Kantian* in his employment of Kantian understanding against Hegel’s speculative thought.⁵) A focused engagement with Schelling is necessary here because Schelling’s critical-interpretation from the standpoint of understanding has quietly dominated the discourse on Hegel and to the extent that he is at times regarded as a sort of alternative ending, as it were, to ‘German idealism’.⁶ His criticism was the first major trend-setting criticism in the history of Hegel-reception, and examining it will illustrate the common problem that emerges when one tries to ‘understand Hegel’. Thus addressing Schelling

⁵ F.W.J. Schelling, *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, trans. Bruce Matthews (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 110. Hereafter: GPP. Schelling’s attack on Hegel may be called the first ‘Neo-Kantianism’, because it antedates the banner raised early on by Otto Liebmann – *Zurück zu Kant!* – by more than 20 years.

⁶ For a classic representative of this view, see: Walter Schutz, *Die Vollendung des deutschen Idealismus in der Spätphilosophie Schellings* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1975); Manfred Frank’s *Der unendliche Mangel an Sein: Schellings Hegelkritik und die Anfänge der Marxschen Dialektik* (Frankfurt Am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1975), is also a point of reference here. Contemporary philosophers such as Markus Gabriel have expressed similar views more recently.

also exemplifies the relation of understanding to a proper grasp of speculative thought. While understanding functions with over-arching taxonomies and system-views, the concept, grasps differences and is deflationary. This is why his conceptual account did not yield the intended critical-deflationary result, but the dogmatic-metaphysical caricature, when it was read with *understanding*. Thus if an accurate awareness of what Hegel is in fact up to in his text is what is at stake, and Hegel is *criticizing understanding*, then Hegel's speculative thought must not be 'understood' at all, but 'grasped' in the conceptual manner he advances. The accusations of his 'unintelligibility' (*Unverständlichkeit*) therefore also melt away or at least change meanings in this light. The outcome is a Hegel who is a critical 'philosopher of difference', and who often has more in common with many of his critics than 'himself' (i.e. his caricatures).

In the first part of this thesis, the topic of understanding will be introduced and critically assessed from the perspective of comments from Hegel's text. This will clarify the thesis that what Hegel is consistently critiquing is *the understanding* of whatever subject matter is in question, and this is why one must not (mis)understand him. In the second part of this essay, some examples of 'conceptual comprehending' (*begreifen*) as the alternative to 'understanding' (*verstehen*) will be addressed. Then in the third part, the later Schelling's theoretical critique of Hegel after the latter's death will be addressed, before a speculative response to Schelling will be given on the basis of Hegel's texts.

1.1 'Unintelligible' (*unverständlich*) Comprehension (*begreifen*) of Understanding

If one gathers and reads all of Hegel's introductions and prefaces for a general orientation of his project and how he uses terms, it becomes quite clear that he is offering a *Kritik des gemeinen Verstandes* – not altogether unlike Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*.⁷ A critical remark regarding the abstract way that 'understanding' behaves

⁷ There are, of course, immense differences that make up much of the contemporary debate, and these are handled to some degree in what follows. Regarding his 'introductions', though he always warns that his prefaces and introductions are mere claims and assurances of what can only be proven in the labor of the text itself, these texts are a good place to start. Reading all of Hegel's generally orienting prefaces and introductions next to one another gives this consistent impression. These texts are invaluable, despite Hegel's warnings, for focusing his thought and univocal in establishing his theoretical practice as a critique of the method 'understanding'; see e.g. G.W.F. Hegel, *Reading Hegel: The Introductions* (Seddon, Victoria: re.press, 2008).

towards what it would understand occurs on almost every other page of his published and posthumous writings. So if one judges by the sheer frequency of critical comments regarding understanding in Hegel's texts, the critique of 'understanding' certainly ranks as *the* central aspect of Hegel's thought, simply because it is everywhere. In fact, it is *unintelligible* why Hegel would mention 'understanding' so often, unless he were principally engaging with *Verstand* in a critical way. It also clearly informs his criticisms of the history of philosophy: of *Verstandesmetaphysik* (e.g. Wolff) and *Verstandesphilosophie* (e.g. Kant).⁸ For purposes of properly interpreting the text, it therefore appears to be a safe assumption that it is crucial to get Hegel's account of understanding right. The further claim that it is reading Hegel through the lens of the understanding that makes him into the caricature 'philosopher of system' will be defended in the following sections of this thesis.

In everyday life it is not customary to distinguish different ways of thinking – for instance, between 'thought', 'understanding' and 'comprehending' etc. There is often simply no reason for doing so. One just 'gets it' and 'moves on', and that suffices in all but critical situations or crises. The term 'understanding' (*Verstand*) or 'to understand' (*verstehen*) is customarily understood in everyday situations as signaling that further explanation is not required (e.g. 'I understand already'), that the matter is seen as self-evident (*selbstverständlich*) or 'makes sense' – regardless of whether or not the interlocutors actually have the 'same meaning' in mind or not. Whether interlocutors 'really' understand one another may simply come down to practical situations' solutions, and so everyday, 'self-evident sense-making' is a good characterization of the business of understanding. According to this rather undifferentiated picture of thought, it might seem 'obvious' that if understanding were subtracted, then no other mental stance would remain. But this general picture prematurely suggests that the only alternative to 'intelligibility' (*Verständlichkeit*) is '*un*-intelligible'. The appearance that there are no alternatives to understanding, its own 'intelligibility' and 'self-evidence', result from using the overgeneralizations that understanding employs in understanding things (such as itself) as 'obvious'. Hegel offers an opportunity for revising this common picture of

⁸ See especially his discussion of Wolff and the Kantian and 'critical' philosophies in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, in W20 256ff. & 329ff.

thought. He observes that what one usually has in mind with the term ‘thought’ (*Denken*) generally is in fact what is more precisely accounted for as ‘understanding’ (*Verstand*),⁹ and that such generalities are the abstractions or calcified ‘determinations’ or specifications of the understanding (*Verstandesbestimmungen*), which it uses to understand actuality in the understanding’s characteristically static way. And what common understanding often similarly understands ‘concept’ to be, according to Hegel, is what is more correctly called a ‘(re)presentation’, ‘picture’ (*Vorstellung*) or ‘snapshot’ of something, not a conceptual grasp (*Begriff*) in the robust sense Hegel advances.¹⁰ His related account of ‘representational thought’ or ‘picture thinking’ (*vorstellendes Denken*; *Vorstellung*) critiques views that argue on the basis of the static images of ‘what things are’ that one may have, rather than justifications.¹¹ When understanding makes arguments with recourse to the ‘image of thought’ it has of itself, its own generalities and their ‘obviousness’ are what make getting a firm grasp of just what understanding actually is so hard.¹² This ‘obviousness’ of understanding makes many of Hegel’s comments on understanding seem to be merely ‘reporting the obvious’. Grasping understanding is obscured by the fact that understanding is at work in its attempt to understand itself, and the result is that understanding itself may remain *unthought*. Accurately defining understanding in light of what it does is therefore a good starting point for finding (conceptual) alternatives, and finding alternatives is a good way of defining understanding specifically. Hegel’s criticism brings understanding into visibility, sheds light on what *it is quite specifically* ‘to understand’ (*verstehen*) something or for something to be ‘intelligible’ (*verständlich*), by offering a *conceptually grasping* (*begreifend*) alternative to ordinary understanding. Grasping understanding is already the shift to the concept (*Begriff*). What is often being handled in the discussions in his text is not some allegedly external referent (as would be the case with *understanding*). Hegel rarely makes naïvely direct assertions about ‘the way things really are’, but rather is

⁹ G.W.F. Hegel, EL, in W8: 169, § 80, addition.

¹⁰ See *ibid.*, 311-15, §§ 163-4.

¹¹ See the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in W3: 57-8ff. Hereafter: PS.

¹² Gilles Deleuze makes relevant remarks to the effect that the ‘image of thought’ (*l’image de la pensée*) one has dictates how one thinks about what it is. Unfortunately, his uncharitable reading of Hegel shares the problematic ‘understanding’ of Hegel critiqued in this essay, which prevents a fruitful interaction. See “The Image of Thought”, in *Difference and Repetition*, 165-208.

content to show the implications of others' views, which he examines, simply shedding light on the conceptual or cognitive procedures that are usually taken for granted in understanding things in that manner, or rendering explicit what is going on in those intelligible stances. Thus his account shows that the way of thinking that seems obvious to itself, understanding, is actually a very specific stance of thought.

Because one customarily does not make this distinction of ways of thought, the demand that one take the various terms regarding thought as entirely specific and technical names for different way of approaching actuality in thought presents a strange and formidable task for Hegel's reader. His use of language makes reading him at times a *strange* experience when seen from the standpoint of the everyday use of terms; everyday use no longer calls for reflection to the extent that it has become second nature. This can be ameliorated with increased attention to detail, and making 'abstract understanding' a unifying thread can cut the task of the text down to size. *Verstand* ('understanding'), as well as its adjectival form, *verständlich* ('intelligible' or 'understandable'), and the verb form, *verstehen* ('to understand'), are almost always used as technical terms with a specific meaning peculiar to his account. Hence 'understand', 'understanding' and 'intelligible' will be used in the strict sense that he critiques throughout the rest of this thesis. The reason for this adherence is that, for Hegel, the meaning of a notion is what it does, and so he presents and comments on terms neither by accepting them in the 'obvious' or everyday designation, nor by holding them still before the mind and designating them through arbitrary definition (which 'understanding' does), but rather by and through using them, or getting a 'handle' (*Begriff*) on them. This is what his text offers to his reader, if the reader is willing to play along, as it were, making reading him as easy as 'learning to swim by swimming' (but also as difficult). The repetition of the term 'understanding' that will follow is accompanied by the hope that estranging, or de-familiarizing it, will re-sensitize against the obviousness of 'understanding' that happens through habituation.¹³

¹³ As he puts it in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: "Das Bekannte überhaupt ist darum, weil es *bekannt* ist, nicht *erkannt*. Es ist die gewöhnlichste Selbsttäuschung wie Täuschung anderer, beim Erkennen etwas als bekannt vorauszusetzen..." (G.W.F. Hegel, PS, in W3: 35). ("The familiar generally is not recognized, precisely because it is familiar". It is the most ordinary self-deception, as deception of others, to presuppose something as familiar in cognizing".)

1.2. Which Hegel and Why Schelling?

In order to clarify precisely which reading of Hegel is being advanced here, some preliminary remarks about the historical context relevant to ‘understanding’ and how Hegel has been ‘understood’ must be addressed. While they are inevitably superficial in significant respects, a historical orientation is crucial for grasping how critical-reception has framed ‘Hegel’ by understanding him – hence also for what is at stake presently.

‘Understanding’ appears at present to be a primarily historical (or at least dated) topic that is no longer handled at length in the methodological discourse of the arts and sciences. Yet rather than viewing the disappearance of explicit discussions about it as its disappearance, silence on the topic may be regarded as its all-pervasiveness, as a result of the total normalization and success of ‘understanding’ as method:¹⁴ “... if a rule has absolutely no exceptions”, the American linguist Whorf writes, “it is not recognized as a rule or as anything else; it is then part of the background of experience of which we tend to remain unconscious”.¹⁵ In such a case, the rule is treated as a fact, which in fact illustrates what understanding does quite nicely. The logic of contemporary discourse may be regarded as a monolog (or mono-logos) of understanding to such an extent that it is not even readily intelligible what alternatives to or critiques of ‘understanding’ could even mean besides sheer ‘unintelligible nonsense’. Even before the 20th century methodological debate about *Verstehen*, ‘understanding’ had monopolized discourse by becoming the norm in theory, following Kant’s ‘critique of metaphysics’, which was waged from the standpoint of ‘human understanding’. The rationalist discourse of ‘pure reason’ (*Vernunft*) in theoretical philosophy thereby became something ‘historical’. But by the time it itself vanished in the 20th century, it had also already played a key role in

¹⁴ Schleiermacher, Droysen, Dilthey and Weber were all important moments of this trend. In this connection, see Herbert Schnädelbach’s *Philosophy in Germany 1831-1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). And in her book, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (London: Athlone, 1981), Gillian Rose convincingly argues that in the wake of German idealism, the successive waves of Neo-Kantian thought eventually completely monopolized the discourses of the arts and sciences; she uncovers the inheritance of their Platonized reading of Kant stemming from Hermann Lotze as the fact-value distinction, the notion of ‘application’ and the theory of ‘validity’ (*Geltung* and *Gültigkeit*). What is to be added to Rose’s claim is that it was effectively the ‘philosophy of the understanding’ that Hegel critiqued, which overtook and silenced his objections. (See esp. chapter 1.)

¹⁵ Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Truth and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1956), 209.

the 19th century by defining the method of the natural sciences too ('explanation', *Erklären*), albeit as a point of contrast,¹⁶ which ought to guarantee its lasting significance. This state of affairs gives plenty of opportunities for a critical Hegelian contribution to methodological discourse – but it also makes it difficult to uncover his critical account in the first place, because understanding is the method that is 'ready to hand' when one begins the exegesis of his work. The eclipse of *Verstand* as an explicit topic in 'arts and sciences' discourse generally and a lack of alternatives to it contributes to metaphysical-interpretations of Hegel's work that preclude his critique. The result is a strange catch-22: precisely because it offers such a novel alternative, it remains obscured, due to, rather than in spite of, its capacities for critique. Hegel's 'Logic of Essence' (*Wesenslogik*), for instance, deals with the modes of thought and categories of the *understanding* or *reflective thought* that the arts and sciences in particular employ.¹⁷ Yet this crucial middle-section of Hegel's *Logic* remains in the shadows (e.g. of 'being-nothing-becoming'), as Schelling's criticisms illustrate in particular.¹⁸

Several examples of how Hegel has been understood will illustrate his curious invisibility as a critic of understanding and the comedy of errors that follows from trying to 'understand' him. The interpretive frame 'Hegel' is itself a *product* of 19th century interpretations, and the once popular though now forgotten interpreter of German philosophy, Heinrich Moritz Chalybäus, is one case in point. The common notion that Hegel's thought consists of the formula 'thesis-antithesis-synthesis' (taken up, for instance, by the young Marx) can be traced back to Chalybäus: he interprets the opening of Hegel's logic on *being*, *nothing* and *becoming* with the tripartite formula as a "schema for all that follows".¹⁹ What is problematic about this reading, which has become

¹⁶ 'Explanation' (*Erklären*), however, arguably does not escape *Verstand* in Hegel's sense of the term, merely by being distinguished from it in ordinary usage. This important historical distinction was drawn significantly by J. Gustav Droysen in his *Grundriss der Historik* (Leipzig: Verlag von Veit & Comp., 1882, 11, §14). It was later taken up and further developed in important ways by Wilhelm Dilthey and Max Weber.

¹⁷ See G.W.F. Hegel, EL, in W8: 235-6.

¹⁸ In his lectures published in English as *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy (Philosophie der Offenbarung)*, and his comments on Hegel from his lectures *On the History of Modern Philosophy*, Schelling makes comments on the beginning and end of the *Logic* ('being' and 'concept'), but largely ignores the portion of Hegel's work that pertains to his own philosophical method the most. See parts 3-4.

¹⁹ In this connection, see Gustav E. Mueller's article, "The Hegel Legend of 'Thesis-Anti-Thesis-Synthesis'" in Jon Stewart, *The Hegel Myths and Legends* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1996), 304. Chalybäus' text, *Historische Entwicklungen der spekulativen Philosophie von Kant bis Hegel, Zu näherer*

common (though mistaken) knowledge, is that it occurs nowhere in Hegel's work and its *generalization* is a kind of intelligible formalism ("schematism") that Hegel explicitly opposes. (In fact, Hegel considers the 'first' proper thought of the *Logic* to be 'becoming', not 'being', because it is the first thought concretely grasped as the disjunctive synthesis of the other moments.²⁰) Yet the schema 'makes sense of Hegel' in ways that 'one can at least easily understand', which at once explains its success and Hegel's misfortune. Commentators who claim that either Hegel has been on the winning side of the history of philosophy or unjustly over-shadowed his contemporaries, because his name is still recognized, are therefore deeply mistaken:²¹ though 'Hegel' is remembered, the name has, to a large extent, been defined through his reception by 'philosophers of the understanding' who are no longer remembered and hence whose interpretations enjoy an unparalleled immunity due to their obscurity.

Hegel is also often similarly read as advancing a theory of 'the absolute' or 'absolute knowing', and defusing this myth broaches the complex topic of the Schelling-connection. Understanding 'the absolute' (and similar terms) as Hegel's own concoction, or his statements about it as his own understanding of things, or as assertions about 'the way things are', for instance, overlooks what his account actually does. Understanding him that way approaches his text with the interpretive expectation of what 'Hegel' means and the assumption that 'he reports about things that he holds to be real', which would be a manner of proceeding he in fact criticizes as *understanding*.²² The topic of 'the absolute' comes, rather, from F.J.W. Schelling's early appropriation of the previous critical philosophy;²³ and Hegel's treatment is in fact a *criticism* of Schellingianism, though this is obscured by the fact that he does not use contemporary conventions of

Verständigung des wissenschaftlichen Publikums mit der neuesten Schule (Dresden: Arnoldi Buchhandlung, 1848), which was commissioned by Kantians, was (directly or indirectly) extremely influential from the 19th century to the present, and was available in English early on.

²⁰ See G.W.F. Hegel, W8: 192, § 88, addition.

²¹ Examples of such views are Frederick C. Beiser's *Late German Idealism: Trendelenburg and Lotze* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) or John Laughland's *Schelling versus Hegel: From German Idealism to Christian Metaphysics* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Pub., 2007), 125.

²² For instance, Frederick Beiser adopts such a non-Hegelian formulation in his understanding of Hegel: "Why does he *postulate the existence* of the absolute?" (Frederick C. Beiser, *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 3. Italics mine.).

²³ Two points of immediate reference to the discussion of Hegel in this thesis are: F.W.J. Schelling, "Presentation of My System of Philosophy (1801)" (Michael Vater, transl., *The Philosophical Forum* 32.4 (2001): 339-71), and "Further Presentations from the System of Philosophy (1803)" (ibid., 373-397).

academic-writing (quotations, references, footnotes etc.), which makes it hard to tell what is commentary and what is his own position (especially in translation and in poor editions). A good example of this phenomenon and a clear knowledge that it is the case is gained by comparing his comments in the preface of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* with his *Wastebook* from approximately the same time in Jena. In the former, he speaks of a “formalism” of the philosophies of the “absolute”, which involve an abstraction that problematically overlooks real differences, just as “the night in which all cows are black”.²⁴ In the *Wastebook* one finds this comment directly linked to the Schellingian philosophy of nature and ‘the absolute’, via the same phrase. He writes:

Naturphilosophie. Es wird noch geraume Zeit vergehen, ehe es ganz ohne Flunkern darin abgeht. – Geständnis hiervon oder dreistes Behaupten und Beharren dagegen. – Das Absolute: in der Nacht sind alle Kühe schwarz. — Das absolute Erkennen [ist] der große Besen, der alles wegfegt, *fait la maison nette*.²⁵

Hegel is thus clearly critical of the very notion of the ‘absolute’ as a concept that simply makes theoretical messes disappear (‘a broom that cleans house’). Later it becomes clear that it is a position held by abstract philosophies of the *understanding* that he criticizes, such as Schelling’s ‘philosophy of identity’. Yet because his contemporary reader often does not have these connections ready to hand, and overlooks the dimension of the critique of understanding by trying to ‘understand’ or ‘make sense of him’, his point is often lost and he becomes ‘unintelligible’ to the extent that what he is doing is not understanding, but a conceptual critique of the ‘understanding’ of his time. Positions are then attributed to him that are not his own. Elsewhere in the same text Hegel relates the question of the historical reception of new philosophies by those who would ‘understand’ them, or in this case rob them of their speculative capacity. He relates Schelling’s own early reception to its being *understood* in a way that is strangely reminiscent of what happened to his own thought historically: the way a philosophy is received and understood effectively shapes what it appears to be. Hegel writes:

Was *Schellingsche* Philosophie in ihrem Wesen ist, wird kurze Zeit offenbaren.
Das Gericht über sie steht gleichsam vor der Tür, denn viele verstehen sie schon.

²⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, PS, in W3: 22.

²⁵ Ibid., “Aphorisms from Hegel’s *Wastebook*”, in W2: 651. (“*Philosophy of nature*. Some time will have passed before it tallies entirely without some fibbing there. – Here an admission of it or there a brash assertion and insistence against it. – The absolute: in the night, all cows are black. – Absolute cognition [is] the big broom that sweeps everything away, tidies up the house”.)

Doch erlagen diese Philosophien weniger dem Beweise als der empirischen Erfahrung, wie weit mit ihnen zu kommen ist. Blind bilden sie die Anhänger aus, aber das Gewebe wird immer dünner, und endlich finden sie sich von der Spinnwebendurchsichtigkeit überrascht. Es ist ihnen wie Eis geschmolzen und wie Quecksilber durch die Finger gelaufen, ohne daß sie wüßten, wie ihnen geschah. Sie habens eben nicht mehr, und wer ihnen in die Hand sieht, mit der sie ihre Weisheit ausboten, sieht nichts als die leere Hand und geht mit Gespött weiter. Während jene, die Kälte fühlend, sie noch für etwas ausrufen, vermeinen diese die Sache ergründet zu haben, da sie doch nur das Nichts derselben, nicht, was sie war, erblicken. Der eine Teil ist getäuscht wie der andere. Das Wahre ist indes, daß dies Verschwundene selbst sie hierher gebracht hat. Es wird das Wort der Schrift erfüllt: wenn wir schweigen, schreien die Steine. Das Wahre ist indes, daß dies Verschwundene selbst sie hierher gebracht hat. Es wird das Wort der Schrift erfüllt: wenn wir schweigen, schreien die Steine.²⁶

Here Hegel departs from both sides of the historical dispute in a way that may inform how his own philosophy was received after his death. But it was ironically *Schelling* who survived Hegel and advanced the formulation in which Hegel's thought was perhaps most importantly characterized, dismissed and transmitted in that version to a broader audience in the 19th century and onwards, formulated within the very parameters of 'understanding' that Hegel critiqued (see part 3). The ultimate historical significance of recalling Schelling's reading of 'Hegel' for debunking present problems in Hegel-interpretation stems from the fact that Schelling's interpretation was disseminated to leading minds of the next generation of German intellectuals in his 1841 Berlin lectures on *Positive Philosophy* (*Philosophie der Offenbarung*), many of which influenced the further reception of Hegel in one way or another – either passing on views about it, or proceeding critically or even dismissively on that basis. These included Friedrich Engels and Søren Kierkegaard (who both kept lecture notes readily available

²⁶ Ibid., in W2: 548-9. ("What *Schellingian* philosophy is in its innermost being will be revealed in a short time. The court presiding over it stands before the door, as it were, for many already understand it. But these philosophies [that are condemned] succumb less to a proof than to the empirical experience of how far is to be come with them. They blindly form adherents, but the fabric grows ever thinner, and finally they find themselves surprised by the transparent [thinness] of the spider's web. To them it is as though ice had melted and run through their fingers like quicksilver without their knowing how [it] happened to them. They do not even have it any more, and whoever looks into their [outstretched] hand, with which they offer their wisdom, sees nothing but the empty hand and passes on and ridicules [them]. While those who feel this cold-ness still claim their wisdom is still [good] for something, these [critics] suppose themselves to have proven the matter, because they only catch sight of the Nothing of it, not what it was. The one party is as deceived as the other. What is true is, however, that this disappeared [thing – allegedly wisdom] is what has brought even them to this point. The word of scripture is fulfilled: if we fall silent, the stones shall scream".)

today), Mikhail Bakunin, Friedrich Carl von Savigny, Alexander von Humboldt, Jacob Burkhardt, Leopold von Ranke and Friedrich Adolf Trendelenburg, the eminent 19th century ‘refuter’ of Hegel’s *Logic*. There are therefore as many different versions of ‘Hegel’ as there are understandings of him held by Hegel-critics – at once one and many. This is to say that many interpretations of Hegel may be historically contextualized and oftentimes traced back to the early *understanding* in his reception. The result of Schelling’s reading is the sense in which ‘the concept’ was subsequently understood in continuing accordance with common understanding of it (as it also appears in Kant), and hence the way ‘the concept’ was misread in Hegel’s work: for Schelling, ‘concept’ is an abstraction from the given which can never overtake the given; for Hegel, such a notion of ‘abstract’ and ‘concept’ is itself an abstract picture (*Vorstellung*), and the genuine conceptual aspect in that formulation is the frame by which ‘concept and given things abstracted from’ are partitioned and related (a disjunctive synthesis). When the Hegelian view is read by the Schellingian one, it appears to be a ‘panlogist system’ that ‘devours the world’, which is Schelling’s critique and where the caricature arguably begins.

There is also a larger and more hilarious history of missed connections and critics misunderstanding Hegel to the precise degree that they would ‘understand’ his work. It is worth taking the term in its most stringent literalness to appreciate the irony of his reception and the equivocal value of statements about him. From Heinrich Heine, who attended his lectures in the 1820s, it is known that “he [Hegel] did not want to be understood at all, hence his qualified method of presentation and also perhaps his preference for people whom he knew did not understand him”.²⁷ One can easily imagine the comical side of this story, if one both supposes that Hegel had a sense of humor and reads this statement in light of his critique of understanding in its specific sense. This would clarify a lot of the obscurity and controversy that ensued. Another curious example is the early Hegel-critic, Trendelenburg, who also attended Hegel’s lectures. He effectively serves to illustrate that understanding Hegel has led to unnecessary disagreements about his work. “Regarding his [Hegel’s] views”, Trendelenburg writes in an August 4th 1824 letter to his father, “as far as I understand them, I am a decided

²⁷ Heinrich Heine, “From Confessions”, in *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany and Other Writings*, ed. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 205.

opponent...”²⁸ It perhaps never occurred to Trendelenburg that he could do something other than ‘understand’ Hegel without giving up thought altogether, and that there is potential agreement, if one opens a broader conceptual-methodological discussion about what ‘understanding’ is or does. Hegel would agree with Trendelenburg’s rejection of ‘Hegel’s logic’ understood as an enormous deductive-chain of syllogisms abstracted from the empirical world.²⁹ Yet similar formulations of the meaning of ‘Hegel’, resulting from a casual use of ‘understanding’, also occur with thinkers otherwise more amicably disposed towards Hegel, such as Goethe. In his (last) letter to Zelter of March 11th 1832, on scientific studies, Goethe writes:

Glücklicherweise ist Dein Talentcharakter auf den Ton, das heißt auf den Augenblick angewiesen. Da nun eine Folge von konsequenten Augenblicken immer eine Art von Ewigkeit selbst ist, so war Dir gegeben, im Vorübergehenden stets beständig zu sein und also mir sowohl als Hegels Geist, *insofern ich ihn verstehe*, völlig genug zu tun.³⁰

In formulating his relation to Hegel, ‘transitory moments’ in empirical observation are opposed to an ‘eternal’ dimension in dichotomous fashion. While this supposedly refers to Hegel’s philosophy, it frames the latter in a way that implicitly *understands* Hegel with Platonist overtones. Rather than a matter of individual faults, this inherent formalism is endemic to *understanding*, which Hegel therefore critiqued.

In more recent reception too, Adorno’s sympathetic remark about the frustrated reader of Hegel who gives up on the details and flees into generalities, takes on a completely new meaning when read literally – the reader “kapituliert, weil Hegel strikt gar nicht zu verstehen sei”.³¹ This statement may be truer than he knew if Hegel’s critique of understanding informs the sense of the term. Adorno’s correct insight in his

²⁸ Quoted in Frederick Beiser, *Late German Idealism: Trendelenburg and Lotze*, 19.

²⁹ Trendelenburg’s critique of Hegel played a major role in the history of Hegel-reception in Germany and the United States, and is advanced principally in his *Logische Untersuchungen*, from 1830 (Hildesheim, G. Olms: 1964.), and *Die logische Frage in Hegels System*, from 1843, which appeared in translation in the 19th century English publication *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*. Among other invaluable documents of early Hegel reception, this latter and shorter essay can be found in partial form in Robert Stern, *G.W.F. Hegel: Critical Assessments* (London: Routledge, 1993), volume I.

³⁰ Cited in Karl Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1969), 19-20. Italics mine. (“Luckily, your talented character is drawn to sound, that is, to the moment. Now because a sequence of consecutive moments is itself always a kind of eternity, it was given to you to always to remain constant in the transitory and thus to satisfy my mind, as well as Hegel’s, *to the extent that I understand him*”).

³¹ Theodor Adorno, “Skoteinos, oder Wie zu Lesen sei”, in *Drei Studien zu Hegel* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), 331. (“... capitulates, because Hegel is not to be understood at all”).

Three Studies on Hegel, that Hegel poses difficulties to understanding (him) to the extent that he rejects ordinary foundationalist suppositions, is crucial to reading Hegel by his own lights ('speculatively'); yet this must be pushed to a full-blown critique of *understanding* as such. There is a strange ironic ring to in his less sympathetic remarks and objections to what he understands to be the identical form of the concept in *Negative Dialektik*: "Denken heißt identifizieren".³² Adorno takes the concept to overlook real differences, and hence he objects that the primacy of the object (as resistant to thought) and difference (*das Nichtidentische*) is effaced by the abstract thought of idealism. Yet, if Hegel too is read primarily as a critic of abstract identity, and if abstract identity is what *understanding* employs, then Hegel is actually on Adorno's side, and the latter ought to amend his own abstract proposition, to '*verstehen* heißt identifizieren'. Yet *Verstand* has also been overlooked as a factor in the depiction of Hegel in very recent reception too, albeit at the opposite end of the spectrum. Because of Hegel's claim that his conceptual project is not a 'love of wisdom' (*philo-sophia*) that lacks the latter, but a kind of actual knowing (*scientia*), it has been asserted by one commentator "that we *must* understand Hegel as a Hermetic thinker, if we are to understand him at all".³³ But whether 'we must *understand* Hegel' in the first place remains unquestioned. Hegel himself states that 'mystical' is simply how his conceptual-speculative approach appears from the viewpoint of abstract understanding,³⁴ suggesting the very opposite reading.

Despite the valuable breakthroughs in the recent Anglo-American Hegel-renaissance of the last several decades, English literature on Hegel also has not made the critique of understanding in its full specificity a sufficiently central aspect of clarifying his thought. The 'non-metaphysical' readings of Hegel (rightly) hold that there is no going back to a pre-Kantian picture of philosophy and that Hegel is a post-Kantian 'critical philosopher'. Yet they thereby remain in many ways indebted to a version of Kantian philosophy, through which they read Hegel, in order to legitimate him against less sympathetic critics. Thus they do not emphasize the dimension in which Hegel breaks with Kant's critique of reason from the standpoint of understanding: his critique of understanding. Unsurprisingly, the same issue of reproducing understanding in

³² Ibid., *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966), 15. ("... thinking means identifying".)

³³ Glenn Alexander Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 1-2.

³⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, EL, in W8: 178, § 82.

interpretations of ‘Hegel’ that *understand* him with interpretive guidelines external to the sense of his terms also crops up here. In broad (perhaps unjustly superficial) strokes, suggestions for an investigation of this topic may be shown in several exemplary moments of the literature on Hegel that advance the post-metaphysical view. For instance, the following statement by Robert Pippin illustrates not only how much of a Kantian he takes Hegel to be, but how Kantian his Hegel is. He writes:

I believe that these official statements of Hegel’s basic position [about possible stances in philosophy; see W6: 486] preserve, even while greatly transforming, a Kantian project; that a Notional ‘foundation’ (*Grundlage*) of actuality refers to the conceptual conditions required for there to be possible determinate objects of cognition in the first place, prior to empirical specification, and that the key element in such an investigation will continue to be a focus on the self-reflexive character of any possible judgment and what *that* condition requires.³⁵

Pippin admittedly holds that the difference between Kant and Hegel is that the latter does not hold intuition and concept apart in rigid dualistic fashion;³⁶ and he rightly notes that Hegel’s speculative stance cannot efface the difference between subject and object without becoming *abstract*.³⁷ Yet the view manifest above remains predominantly Kantian in prioritizing fundamentals and possibility in a way that is uncharacteristic of Hegel’s own statements prioritizing actuality;³⁸ and by retaining a tone that suggests the empiricist dichotomy of conceptuality and objectivity (or ‘mind and world’) uncharacteristic of Hegel’s radically deflationary statements about the concept.³⁹ He refers to the *Logic*; yet the guide for the sense of the terms used appears to be taken from philosophies other than Hegel’s, which arguably criticizes ‘possibility’ and ‘fundamentals’ as characteristic of abstract understanding. Pippin’s statement elsewhere that “the notion of an independent, an-*sich* substance is unthinkable”⁴⁰ also similarly exhibits that this reading understands the matter with understanding, as it were, or with an external criteria for what can count as ‘thinkable’, such as to then withhold that status from it. This is susceptible and foreign to Hegel’s critique of *Verstand*, prioritizing ‘possibility’ as the

³⁵ Robert Pippin, *Hegel’s Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), 176.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

³⁷ See *ibid.*, “Concept and Intuition: On Distinguishability and Separability”, in *Hegel-Studien* Band 39/40 (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag: 2004/2005), 29.

³⁸ See e.g. G.F.W. Hegel, *EL*, W8: 284-7, § 145.

³⁹ See e.g. *ibid.*, 309-10, § 164.

⁴⁰ Robert Pippin, “Hegel’s Metaphysics and the Problem of Contradiction”, in *The Hegel Myths and Legends*, 247.

angle from which things are to be judged. It may not sync up with Hegel's own claims that one must use internal criteria,⁴¹ and that what 'the thing in itself truly is' can perfectly well be thought – a mere abstraction (*Gedankending*) – which is illustrated by the fact that the 'impossible thought' is already thought in negating it.⁴² Expectations must be lowered here, in order to grasp precisely how much more deflationary Hegel is than Kant. Thus an important respect in which Hegel differs from Kant without reverting to dogmatic metaphysics remains underemphasized. Focusing on this difference would redirect philosophical concern away from 'our relation to things'.

From a somewhat different angle, Sally Sedgwick similarly raises Hegelian objections against Kant in her interpretation, which also remains very Kantian. Though they are somewhat problematic from the standpoint of the critique of understanding, they point in a helpful direction. The problem with the Kantian *Critique* is, she claims, that

It presupposes that, in thinking, we can overleap or transcend our time: we can access a vantage point that is absolutely independent from "common reality." As we have seen, *Hegel doubts that human reason is capable of this degree of detachment*. In his view, it is not possible for us to abstract to a meta-level form of inquiry that in no way reflects our debt to the ordinary as well as scientific practices of our day.⁴³

Sedgwick's reading makes use of a stance that is basically Kantian here, now turned against Kant, that the human mind is 'finite' and hence 'too limited for total withdrawal via abstraction'. Thus her reading similarly reproduces an understanding-structure in Hegel, which claims that the abstraction Kant's understanding attributes to the 'finite human intellect' is 'not possible'. Admittedly, Sedgwick rightly identifies this 'second order' problem (which must be diagnosed as understanding) as *the* problem, though it remains somewhat unclear. Indeed Hegel does hold that the attempt to view things externally and abstractly is problematic, and that it is futile to try to transcend one's situation or time. Yet this is not because the abstraction 'cannot be done' – if such abstractions were 'not possible' (or in other words, were *never* actual), then there would be no reason for speculative criticism, because the abstraction would not be happening. Such abstraction is precisely taking place in the problematic views he criticizes (as well as in calling abstraction 'impossible'), which do not problematically fall short of

⁴¹ See G.W.F. Hegel, PS, in W3: 76-8, and the *Science of Logic*, in W6: 241 and 249-50. Hereafter: SL.

⁴² See e.g. *ibid.*, EL, in W8: 120-1. § 44.

⁴³ Sally Sedgwick, *Hegel's Critique of Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 196. Italics mine.

abstraction, but abstract problematically. Moreover, in recognizing the limited nature of our cognition we have *already* surpassed that alleged limit. As with Pippin's stance above, the 'impossible thought' is nevertheless actual in Sedgwick's assertion that 'it is not possible'. What is at stake here is his critique of what understanding does *whenever* it understands. It is not that 'we cannot abstract to a meta-level'. We do precisely this whenever we render actuality abstractly (for instance as diced into 'subjects and objects'). The problem is that thought *is* capable of detachment from concrete actuality such that it remains *totally abstract* or inadequate. In actually acting *as though one could* examine everything externally (viz. understanding), one actually just has a merely external view of the matter; important details are thereby left out, and hence the problem. What is required from a speculative perspective is not a deflation of the separation of 'subject and object', but an account of the actual separation of subject and object, which relates them in the first instance.

The absence of a univocal diagnosis of understanding as the problem, which indeed views things as 'second order', contributes to the problem of 'understanding Hegel', or of trying to interpret his texts with the understanding that he critiqued (e.g. with interpretive frames). This contributes to a *particular* 'Hegel' that is nonetheless presented as simply being Hegel as such, while obscuring the critique of understanding. Some exemplary statements in Dieter Henrich's influential Harvard lectures, regarding 'making sense' of Hegel from the perspective of possibility and a 'second order' discourse, are reminiscent of understanding. Take, for instance, his claim that the logic of negation is the "second-order discourse that could interpret what he [Hegel] was doing. I [Henrich] believe that without the 'key' to Hegel's *Logic*, the system remains ultimately *unintelligible*".⁴⁴ Henrich does not ask whether Hegel might not be up to understanding at all. This basic interpretive 'key' involves a reduction to a common, 'intelligible' element. "Hegel believes", Henrich writes,

that this semantic structure of self-referring, autonomous negation underlies all possible rational discourse. No matter where we start, we will arrive at a structure of the type Hegel describes. In order to prove that the *Logic* is not a deliberate operation, but, instead, the nature of all possible rational discourses, we have to start from the most elementary thought we can think. Then we have to show that "negation," in the

⁴⁴ Dieter Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 317. Italics mine.

sense in which we have described it, follows from the attempt to make this most simple thought consistent.⁴⁵

Here the interpretive frame clearly employs the methodological supposition of subject-and-predicates, which is the hallmark of understanding. And characterizing Hegel's account as one of 'all possible accounts', 'consistent' etc. resembles the taxonomic and exhaustive character of understanding, the classic shape of which is the Wolffian 'ontology' of general forms of possible objects, which Hegel critiqued. This is precisely what Schelling mis-understands Hegel to be doing in his criticism and mistakenly reproaches him for. An alternative to 'lowest common denominators', that may still be a 'key to every topic', may be simply the conceptual grasp (*Begriff*).

The sort of stance that makes Hegel's account into a sort of meta- or second-order view is relatively ubiquitous in Hegel-criticism. For instance, it is the ironic result of the attempt by Robert Hanna to distinguish what he takes to be Hegel's 'ontological logic' from 'ordinary logic', which unfortunately does not distinguish *understanding* from the *concept*, and thereby remains problematically intelligible. He similarly writes:

Hegel's philosophical use of common logic is a higher-order activity than the common-logical activity, and does not therefore by any means *compete* with the common logic at its own level. Hegel's higher-order comments about the common logic are *ontological* remarks or recommendations, not *common-logical* remarks or recommendations ... [this] *helps make it understandable*... viewed from a higher viewpoint, namely that of ontology, the common logic can be seen to rest on certain enabling presuppositions which are also at the same time crippling limitations from an ontological point of view.⁴⁶

The way Hanna implicitly presents Hegel as an 'ontological logician' is all the more unfortunate, considering that his reading comes very close to showing that Hegel indeed is doing something *radically different in kind* from ordinary understanding altogether. Nonetheless the formulation makes Hegel into a philosopher of understanding: because the alternative to 'common logic' is construed as a 'second order' thought, it reproduces precisely features of common *Verstand*, not *Begriff* (or *Vernunft*). That the discourse of 'ontology' beginning with Wolff was in fact a principal instance of

⁴⁵ Ibid., 320.

⁴⁶ Robert Hanna, "From an Ontological Point of View: Hegel's Critique of the Common Logic", in *The Hegel Myths and Legends*, 255. Italics mine.

Verstand and the target of Hegel's critique of *Verstandesmetaphysik* goes overlooked, because this reading does not make understanding as such into *the* problem.

Finally, a similar yet more instructive move has been repeated in A.W. Moore's recent book. Moore distinguishes between ordinary 'making sense of things' or 'sense-making', on the one hand, and "making sense of sense-making" on the other,⁴⁷ which Moore takes to be the second-order business of metaphysics in his very general definition, and which Hegel as alleged 'metaphysician' is presumably up to. Thus this reading also assumes that Hegel's approach is a second-order viewing of a first-order thing (common understanding), which in turn would be the second-order viewing of first-order things (objects). This tier-system, however, does not problematize the entire structure of its assumption of intelligibility. While Moore is right to claim that Hegel advances a "genuine heterodoxy" that challenges the common understanding,⁴⁸ especially in relation to Hegel's views on contradiction, he overlooks the distinction of understanding (*verstehen*) and conceptual comprehension (*begreifen*) in his account of 'sense making' in Hegel (though he does address the relation of understanding (*Verstand*) and reason (*Vernunft*) in some detail).⁴⁹ The fact that the framework invoked in this characterization is what Hegel characterized as *understanding* itself is overlooked: the very attempt to 'get above' its object rather than dive into it for an immanent view. It also overlooks that this rubric it fits Hegel into is antithetical to Hegel's speculative alternative (or *critique* of understanding), thereby obscuring the singularity of Hegel's stance. 'Making sense of sense-making' is 'understanding understanding', or more of the same, not something else. Because understanding finds itself in a vicious circle, as it were, it can only be sorted out through an *immanent* investigation of the specific concepts used in understanding. Yet if 'making sense' or 'sense-making' characterizes *understanding as such*, this would actually illustrate precisely what Hegel is *not* doing if he is not doing 'understanding'.

One must therefore 'stop making sense' of Hegel, in the words of David Byrne, or stop trying to 'understand' him, because this would employ assumptions and conceptual

⁴⁷ A.W. Moore, *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 170.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 182ff.

functions that Hegel critiqued, which therefore obscures his critical thought. The alternative is to read his critique on its own terms, rather than with an external interpretive frame (such as ‘metaphysics’). For, ‘understanding Hegel’ rules out the possibility that Hegel may be doing something much more radical than understanding, or the rather harmless pictures of his work that Hegel-advocates have delivered thus far. Perhaps the only reading of Hegel that addresses the understanding-topic head on in a radically speculative way is that of Slavoj Žižek, who parts with these views by giving a totally *immanent* (not meta- or second-order) account of understanding. This resonates with Hegel’s own comments on what ‘conceptual grasping’ means. In what follows, this essay will pursue Hegel’s critique of the understanding in light of Žižek’s reading, referring to his statements where they are relevant, yet first and foremost attempting to clarify and argue for this reading in a more text-exegetical and systematic way.

1.3. What is a Critique of Understanding and Which Textual Justifications?

This thesis claims that Hegel is to be read as a critical philosopher, yet one who primarily presents an immanent critique of common understanding, which according to Hegel proceeds abstractly. Understanding according to this account is the methodological supposition of a self-subsistent fundament ‘behind’ or read-made identity ‘throughout’ what is being spoken of in its various guises (e.g. a ‘lowest common denominator’ or *tertium quid*). In the various sorts of accounts the understanding gives, this may take on a more ontological-metaphysical character or an epistemological one; yet both would regard things from an allegedly external (viz. abstract) perspective.⁵⁰ Hence the critique of understanding is the critique of the very supposition of such externally observed and self-subsistent fundaments. Precise characterization of both Hegel’s critique and understanding as such clarifies that it is not a ‘bad’ or a ‘poorly applied understanding’ that is problematic, in contrast to another ‘good’ or ‘rightly applied version’ of understanding. For making such a supposition would itself employ suppositions of understanding, rather than directly examining it: regarding the type ‘understanding’ as distributed in different tokens-instances that may be ‘good or bad’ is the basic move of

⁵⁰ See ‘Äußere Reflexion’ (‘external reflection’) in G.W.F. Hegel, SL, in W6: 28ff.

understanding itself, and so doing so would overlook the application of *types*, *kinds*, or *rules* as that which is problematic in itself. Thus the critique does not consist in moving to another ‘kind of understanding’, but in simply regarding the immanent blind-spots of understanding, noting where it transgresses the rules or limits it establishes for itself (its ‘anomalies’ or ‘antinomies’), which transitions to the conceptual approach. The result of this critique inverts Hegel’s appearance. While his critique of the supposition of a fundamental object ‘out there in the world’ may appear to be the apogee of idealist excess, the point of the critique is that the opposite is the case. If there is no given ‘out there’, then neither is there a subjective ‘in here’ that the former would be collapsed into. The critique ironically shows that accounts that make the supposition of an ‘external’ fundament of the understanding are in fact the tacit idealists, because they mistake for a given reality what is in fact a component of their cognitive edifice: a generality or abstraction (e.g. ‘*the object*’, which is never *an* actual object, but any or all of them).

Whether Hegel may be said to be a ‘critical philosopher’ in the lineage of the Kantian critical project depends on what one takes ‘critique’ to be, and how much of Kant’s project belongs to its most important features – above all in relation to ‘understanding’ (*Verstand*). For Kant, understanding is “our *power of rules*”,⁵¹ and he bases his critique of reason on the conformity, which those rules demand from reason. His view of what counts as “science” as a “system” ordered according to such basic rules also bears out this intelligible understanding of what science and understanding are.⁵² Yet the characteristics of understanding appear even where the subject matter seems to be something other than understanding, such as the concept; for instance in the section of the *Critique* on the idea, Kant writes, “a concept refers to the object indirectly, by means of a characteristic that may be common to several things”.⁵³ The general rule – like applicability – is the hallmark of understanding and permeates Kant’s understanding of the concept. It is crucial for a correct perception of what Hegel takes issue with as inadequate in understanding: the picture of thought as general rules applied externally to different, particular things. There is plenty of textual evidence that Hegel is opposed to a

⁵¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1996), 172, A126. Hereafter: CPR.

⁵² Ibid. *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, in *Philosophy of Material Nature* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1985), 3. 467.

⁵³ Ibid., CPR 366, A320 / B377.

certain common interpretation of Kantian critique. For instance, in several places he fairly characterizes the Kantian conception of critique as the notion that one must first get acquainted with our cognitive faculties before we use them;⁵⁴ and he criticizes Kant's conception as a 'demand that one know how to swim before setting foot in the water'.⁵⁵ Elsewhere he also opposes to this view his view that one never investigates thought except already by thinking, and that it is therefore not feasible to investigate thought before using it – and that this would only be a problem for Kant: the 'circularity' of self-consciousness is not a problem, but a luxury a rock does not have.⁵⁶ Other basic assumptions that Kant makes, which prevent Hegel from taking part in the 'critical philosophy' are: 1) the adoption of the empiricist dichotomy of thoughts-and-things and the claim that access to things is obviously the only source of knowledge,⁵⁷ 2) that critique is to proceed by interrogating 'conditions of possibility',⁵⁸ and 3) that possibility precedes and is presupposed by actuality, and that critique would mean regressively reading the possible from the actual in reflection.⁵⁹ Hegel does not hold these views, or the Kantian view that reason and our relation to actuality in the broadest sense are to be restricted to the limits of what is 'possible' for a 'finite human intellect', because for him the recognition of such limits already involves surmounting them in some sense.⁶⁰ Hegel even names Kant's philosophy (after Wolff's) *the quintessential Verstandesphilosophie*

⁵⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, EL, in W8: 53, § 10.

⁵⁵ See *ibid.*, 54. § 10 & 114. § 41 addition, as well as the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, in W20: 334 & 430.

⁵⁶ See *ibid.*, SL, in W6: 487.

⁵⁷ The basis of this is his empiricist assumption that the distinction between mentality and things is self-evident. In the introduction of the second edition of the first *Critique*, Kant lays all of his cards on the table as it were. He reveals the extent to which he is ultimately untroubled by laying unquestioned conceptual dichotomies at the foundation of his entire project at the very beginning of the *Critique*. He writes: "Daß alle unsere Erkenntnis mit der Erfahrung anfangt, daran ist gar kein Zweifel". ("That all of our cognition begins with experience, there is no doubt".) His justification for placing the empiricist dichotomy of idea-and-fact at the heart of his endeavor and his unquestioning acceptance of *modality* disappointingly runs as follows: "denn wodurch sollte das Erkenntnisvermögen sonst zur Ausübung erweckt werden, geschähe es nicht durch Gegenstände, die unsere Sinne rühren..." (Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1956, 38, B1.) ("for by what other means should the *capacity* of cognition otherwise be awakened, if not through objects that touch upon our senses..." *Italics mine.*) It is treated as obvious and given.

⁵⁸ E.g. see *ibid.*, CPR, 13, A xxi.

⁵⁹ For example, Kant asks: "How is pure mathematics possible? How is pure natural science possible? Since these sciences are actually given, it is surely proper for us to ask how they are possible; for that they must be possible is proved by their being actual. As regards metaphysics, however, there are grounds on which everyone must doubt its possibility: its progress thus far has been poor" (*ibid.*, CPR. 60-1, B20-1).

⁶⁰ See G.W.F. Hegel, EL, in W8: 142, § 60.

in his lectures on the history of philosophy.⁶¹ To be fair to Kant, though, the following account of understanding is less a critique of his own critical philosophy than of the common and abstract methodological assumptions built into the understanding that his critique employs and provides such a clear example of. The most pernicious instances of understanding are precisely those that do not appear in this or that philosophical position, but rather ubiquitously as obvious or innocent ‘givens’.

If the remnants of empiricism, rationalist modality and anthropocentric subjectivism may be viewed as uncritical *remnants* in the edifice of Kantian critique, and something else remains, then Hegel may be regarded as taking up this *new* remainder in Kant, without the other remnants.⁶² Hegel does raise criticisms homologous to those of Kant, indicating that he does take up the ‘critical’ project in spirit if not in the letter: 1) he too makes objections regarding the necessity of first interrogating one’s categories and assumptions before accepting what appears by way of them as self-evident in itself (see below); 2) he similarly objects to “dogmatism” as the assumption that truth is simply analytical relation of thoughts to their definitions regarded as self-evident;⁶³ 3) he names the ‘synthetic judgment *a priori*’ the great speculative (viz. conceptual) contribution by Kant, as an original synthesis structurally akin to his theory of the concept;⁶⁴ and 4) he

⁶¹ See *ibid.*, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, in W20: 258 & 325.

⁶² Sally Sedgwick convincingly makes this point in *Hegel’s Critique of Kant*.

⁶³ Hegel’s statement from *the Phenomenology of Spirit* is worth comparing with Kant’s definition of ‘dogmatism’. Hegel writes: “Der *Dogmatismus* der Denkungsart im Wissen und im Studium der Philosophie ist nichts anderes als die Meinung, daß das Wahre in einem Satze, der ein festes Resultat ist oder auch der unmittelbar gewußt wird, bestehe. Auf solche Fragen: wann Cäsar geboren worden, wie viele Toisen ein Stadium betrug usf., soll eine *nette* Antwort gegeben werden, ebenso wie es bestimmt wahr ist, daß das Quadrat der Hypotenuse gleich der Summe der Quadrate der beiden übrigen Seiten des rechtwinkligen Dreiecks ist. Aber die Natur einer solchen sogenannten Wahrheit ist verschieden von der Natur philosophischer Wahrheiten” (G.W.F. Hegel, PS, in W3: 41). (‘Dogmatism of the way of thinking in knowing and studying of philosophy is nothing other than the opinion that the true consists in a proposition that is a fixed result or that is immediately known. To such questions as ‘when was Caesar born’, ‘how many seats are in a stadium’ etc., a *nice* answer should be able to be given, just as it is certainly true that the square of the hypotenuse is the same as the sum of the square of both remaining sides of a right-triangle. But the nature of any such so-called truth is different from the nature of philosophical truths’.) Similarly, Kant writes: “Dogmatism is the pretension that we can make progress by means of no more than a pure cognition from concepts (i.e., philosophical cognition) in accordance with principles – such concepts and principles as reason has been using for a long time – without inquiring into the manner and the right by which reason has arrived at them” (Immanuel Kant, CPR 34, B xxxv). If the empiricism and the view of ‘concepts’ as *mere concepts* are subdued here, the two may be said to be doing something very similar. Nonetheless Kant continues with problematic assumptions about the priority of ‘possibilities’: “Hence dogmatism is the dogmatic procedure followed by reason without prior critique of its own *ability*” (*ibid.* *Italics mine*). ‘*Actuality*’ would have to be substituted here.

⁶⁴ See G.W.F. Hegel, “On the Concept in General”, in SL, in W6: 245-272, and especially 260.

shares Kant's scorn for abstractions. In the introduction to his *Critique*, where Kant discusses the necessity of drawing limits and warns against flight into pure abstractions of the understanding, he gives an image that, if reinterpreted, comes very close to the reading of Hegel advanced here: "When the light dove parts the air in free flight and feels the air's resistance", Kant writes, "it might come to think that it would do much better still in space devoid of air".⁶⁵ The obvious observation is that its very flight into resistance-less space would, ironically, make its flight itself impossible; limitation (e.g. negation) is a necessarily built-in feature of the actual determinacy that the dove *is*, and the supposition that its subtraction would help rather than erase the dove is based on an abstract understanding of the matter. Hegel too may be read as agreeing about this 'necessity of limitation', though for him this is a descriptive, not prescriptive claim (viz. we need not voluntarily limit ourselves to understanding if we are already inherently limited). Hegel leaves behind the empiricist tone Kant gives the lesson of the dove, but he never tires of showing that the abstractions of the pure understanding can only overlook their impure ('mediated') constitution with abstractions, but not escape them.

Several important claims regarding categories in the second preface to Hegel's *Science of Logic* corroborate and orient reading him as a critic of understanding. Hegel extends the critique of categories taken for granted by scientific judgments beyond Kant's purview⁶⁶ to include even the categories and assumptions or presuppositions of the judgments in ordinary everyday thought, which forms the background of sense-making for philosophy and theory. He calls this "natural thought" (*natürliches Denken*)⁶⁷ or "natural logic" (*natürliche Logik*), which contains an "unconscious" (*bewußtlos*) use of categories.⁶⁸ Hegel draws the banal fact of language, the relation of language to thought and the limits of the denotative 'sentence' or 'propositional form' for expressing and grasping truth into the field of critique. The "most common categories" (*gewöhnlichsten Kategorien*),⁶⁹ or unthought "determinations of thought" (*Denkbestimmungen*), are inherent and transmitted in our ordinary language,⁷⁰ as though they were 'synthetic a

⁶⁵ Immanuel Kant, CPR, 50, A5 / B9.

⁶⁶ On the '12 categories', see Immanuel Kant, CPR, 129ff., A75 / B102ff.

⁶⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, SL, in W5: 22.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 24.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 21.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 20.

priori’ categories in their own right; yet they often escape critical scrutiny *because* they shape our views. Because one brings one’s assumptions along everywhere one goes, an unthinking-thought crosses as far into theory as one thinks. This is Hegel’s primary concern regarding *understanding* in philosophy and the sciences: “der *reflektierende* Verstand bemächtigte sich der Philosophie” (‘*reflecting* understanding took over philosophy’).⁷¹ Thus a principal ‘dogmatism’ Hegel grapples with is the range of assumptions that blindly order common judgments *in philosophy*, exemplifying the critical concern regarding what judgments presuppose.

The accusation of ‘unthinking reflection’ needs clarification. It may initially sound as though ‘understanding’ that is already ‘reflective’ could not have ‘unthought’ assumptions; but, for Hegel ‘reflection’ is not synonymous with ‘thought’, and ‘reflective’ and ‘unconscious thought’ are in fact similar phenomena. The ‘unthinking’ dimension of ‘reflective thought’ is due to the fact that categories comprising one’s unexamined assumptions are *employed* (or ‘thought with’, ‘about’ something else) in a privileged manner vis-à-vis what they are applied to, rather than being *scrutinized* (or ‘thought about’) in themselves. The problematic, ‘unconscious’ or ‘unreflecting’ component of ‘reflective thought’ is therefore the portion of reflective thought that remains unthought by being employed as a measure *applied to* what is measured. So the more thought becomes reflective, the less it grasps the parameters it understands things with in its reflections on those things, which may be effectively illustrated by the criticism Kant raises against ‘reason’ (*Vernunft*) as he understands it. The claim that one must limit reason to ‘conditions of possible knowledge’ from the parameters of ‘finite understanding’ (*Verstand*) does not sufficiently factor in the concepts or categories implicitly employed (‘presupposed’) in formulating this critical edifice in this manner or its own intelligible standpoint (e.g. the notion of ‘limit’, ‘possible’ or even ‘understanding’). Kant rightly demands that one bear in mind what the understanding necessarily presupposes in judgments related to experience (against empiricist-skeptics), yet from which standpoint is the difference of reason and understanding theorized? Restricting thought to understanding acts as though it were something other than the named understanding giving the account of itself, and yet this takes for granted the very

⁷¹ Ibid., 38.

conceptual vantage point of the understanding in question, in opposition to reason, without critically accounting for it. Reason understood in this way results in construing the ‘objects of reason’ as a ‘beyond’ (for instance, the self, world or ‘thing in itself’), because they can never be immediately presented in empirical experience. Yet the limits on reason that Kantianism establishes are already transgressed through reference to something that understanding allegedly does not have access to.⁷² When understanding defines or establishes the limits of itself vis-à-vis something else or other, it omits its own role therein and cannot but transgress the limits it establishes for itself. The great American reader of German idealism, Josiah Royce, diagnoses the problems of common understanding in this manner. He writes:

... common sense is, as a fact, dialectical and self-refuting, since it asserts the existence of a world of fact independently of its own thoughts, while common sense is still unable to define or to describe this external world except in terms of the categories of its own thought.⁷³

This undesired side effect undermines yet also accompanies *critique* in its classical shape, because understanding approaches its object as though it naturally conformed to intelligible assumptions about it (e.g. that its is external, its actuality presupposes possibility, thoughts are thoughts of given things etc.), which is dogmatic in Hegel’s sense. Yet Hegel’s approach turns understanding’s transgression into a virtue.

Particularly instructive for reading Hegel as a practitioner of the critique of categories and the ‘unthought of reflective thought’ occurs in the context of his response to one of his critics. It aptly indicates what Hegel considers ‘critical’ and ‘uncritical’ and what he takes the issue to be. He states:

Im Gegenteil haben sich mir zu häufig und zu heftig solche Gegner gezeigt, welche nicht die einfache Reflexion machen mochten, daß [1] ihre Einfälle und Einwürfe Kategorien enthalten, welche Voraussetzungen sind und selbst erst der Kritik bedürfen, ehe sie gebraucht werden. Die Bewußtlosigkeit hierüber geht

⁷² Regarding Kant, Hegel writes: “Die Kritik der Formen des Verstandes hat das angeführte Resultat gehabt, daß diese Formen keine Anwendung auf die Dinge an sich haben” (ibid., 40). (“The critique of the forms of the understanding has had the mentioned result, that these forms have no application to the things in themselves”). In the process of (im)posing these limits on reason by saying ‘things in themselves’ beyond the understanding are off limits, the understanding effectively employs a category of ‘that which is beyond our limits’ for those things that it thereby describes, surpassing those alleged limits illegitimately. ‘A thing in itself beyond our knowledge’ is nothing but a general category of the understanding. A ‘real’ limit here would not be something one is conscious of at all (c.f. ibid. EL, in W8: 142ff. § 60).

⁷³ Josiah Royce, *Lectures on Modern Idealism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1919), 216.

unglaublich weit; sie macht das Grundmißverständnis, das üble, d. h. ungebildete Benehmen, [2] bei einer Kategorie, die betrachtet wird, *etwas Anderes* zu denken und nicht diese Kategorie selbst. Diese Bewußtlosigkeit ist um so weniger zu rechtfertigen, als [3] solches *Anderes* andere Denkbestimmungen und Begriffe sind, in einem Systeme der Logik aber eben diese anderen Kategorien gleichfalls ihre Stelle müssen gefunden haben und daselbst für sich der Betrachtung werden unterworfen sein.⁷⁴

It is not simply ‘reflection’, but reflection stopping short of what he calls the ‘simple reflection’ (*einfache Reflexion*) on what thought actually *does* when it thinks ‘about’ things, which is the issue. (This ‘about-ness’ is the mark of an external understanding.) Reflective thought’s critique is not radical enough if it takes its premises for granted in criticizing its object; critique must make premises themselves into its ‘object’, as the crucial points Hegel names indicate: 1) objections contain categories that are not self-evident, but rather are presuppositions in need of critical examination in their own right, before they are used as grounds for denying validity to other positions (or else such objections are groundless assertions); 2) what Hegel calls a ‘thoughtless’ or ‘uneducated’ is the practice of treating a category as something other than the category it is (e.g. treating it as a given or immediate truth-maker), or what it *does* in its argument; and 3) whatever else that category may be regarded as is itself just another unexamined categorical function being employed in the overall argument. The difference between classical critique and Hegel’s critique may therefore be construed as a shift from examination of ‘conditions of possibility’ to ‘determinations of actuality’, as Béatrice Longuenesse writes:

... Hegel offers a critique of metaphysics in the way that Marx will later offer a “critique of political economy.” Or rather, Marx offers a critique of political economy like Hegel, *and not like Kant*, offered a critique of metaphysics. Marx does not ask: under what conditions is a political economy possible? Rather, he asks: what is going on, that is, what is thought, *in fact*, in political economy? What are the referent and reciprocal relations of its concepts? This way of proceeding is precisely the same as the one Hegel adopts in his *Science of Logic*.

⁷⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, SL, in W5: 31-2. (“On the contrary, such opponents have often and adamantly appeared to me, which did not want to make the simple reflection that [1] the thoughts that occurred to them and their objections contain categories that are presuppositions and that are first in need of critique before they are used. The thoughtlessness about this goes unbelievably far; it commits the basic misunderstanding, the bad, i.e. uneducated behavior, of, in the case of a category that is being considered, [2] thinking *something other* [than it] and not this category itself. This thoughtlessness is all the less to be justified, as [3] such [an] *other* [thing] is [just] an other determinations of thought and concepts in a system of logic, but just these other categories too must have found their place and must be subjected to consideration”).)

It does not consist in asking under what conditions metaphysics is possible. Rather, it consists in investigating what metaphysics is about, and how the project of metaphysics need to be redefined if one it to come to any satisfactory accomplishment of its self-set goal.⁷⁵

Such hyper-scrutiny of prejudice or presupposition sounds immediately appealing to anyone with enlightenment-values. Yet the extent to which Hegel pushes it may cause even most critical *Aufklärer* to lose their nerve. The presuppositions and prejudices Hegel targets are not just easily discarded, obvious and superficial preferences or biases, but more universally held assumptions about the ‘nature of things’, which orthodox sense-making is deeply committed to (usually pertaining to empiricism, contradiction, possibility and identity). In a passage where he names such ‘assumptions’, he writes:

Solche Voraussetzungen, daß die Unendlichkeit verschieden von der Endlichkeit, der Inhalt etwas anderes als die Form, das Innere ein anderes als das Äußere, die Vermittlung ebenso nicht die Unmittelbarkeit sei, als ob einer dergleichen nicht wüßte, werden zugleich belehrungsweise vorgebracht und nicht sowohl bewiesen als erzählt und versichert. In solchem Belehren als Benehmen liegt – man kann es nicht anders nennen – eine Albernheit...⁷⁶

This list exemplifies the understanding’s assumptions, all of which are based on the principle of abstract identity or *exclusive* opposition (rather than ‘disjunctive *synthesis*’), and he aptly names the abstract “*Either-Or*” the mark of “metaphysical understanding”.⁷⁷ This passage also suggests, by contrast, that for him the finite and infinite, form and content, inner and outer and the mediated and immediate *do* actually coincide in their opposition or ‘contradiction’ (depending on what is under consideration). So, the depth of the problem with reflective thought is due to fact that its ‘bad part’ – the insistent ‘assumption’ – is not an accidental feature of understanding, but rather that which understanding understands with. It derives conclusions with the character of ‘obviousness’ by appeal to its privileged supposition of a measure of what ‘makes sense’, and so in the final analysis its principles or axioms are simply asserted,

⁷⁵ Béatrice Longuenesse, *Hegel’s Critique of Metaphysics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5.

⁷⁶ Ibid., SL, in W5: 33. (“Such presuppositions that infinity is different from finitude, content is something other than form, the inner is an other than the outer, mediation too is not immediacy (as though one did not know this) are brought forward in a pedantic way and are not proved as much as told and insisted upon. In such behavior, as a behavior, there is - one cannot put it any other way – an absurdity...”)

⁷⁷ Ibid., W8: 155, § 65.

rather than argued for. This leaves no possibility of further justification, or reasons why its views should be compelling to an interlocutor. If things only ‘make sense’ to ‘understanding’ on the basis of shared assumptions, then the horizon of thought is *doxa*, and subtracting the ‘bad part’ would apparently subtract intelligibility and understanding itself. For example, in the case above, abstract understanding usually claims that such coincidences of opposites are ‘impossible’, because they do not abide by a rule of abstract self-identity. But for the speculative view it is not clear why one should assume that a ‘contradictory phenomenon’ is to be dismissed rather than an obtuse understanding of it that insists it cannot be happening. Hegel elsewhere claims that such an exclusive disjunction of elements – that is not at the same time a synthesis – is not to be found anywhere in the world of actually existing concrete things.⁷⁸ If the counter-intuitiveness of this claim makes it difficult to picture (*vorstellen*) or understand (*verstehen*), the speculative response is that this is due to abstract understanding: we already often do think otherwise than abstract understanding, as there is already more going on in abstract understanding than what it recognizes. The alternative to such understanding, for which the understanding is necessary but not sufficient, would be an *immanent* critique of its position. This critique consists not in identifying it as ‘deficient’ (*mangelhaft*) by contrast to some external principle,⁷⁹ but in identifying assumptions as problematic to the extent that they are *assumptions*; the critique then proceeds to simply abstain from those assumptions, thereby unmasking them.⁸⁰ The *Logic* is therefore not ‘presuppositionless’ in the sense that nothing comes before it or of pure beginnings, but by making theoretical

⁷⁸ Elsewhere in the same text Hegel similarly critiques this notion: “Es gibt in der Tat nirgends, weder im Himmel noch auf Erden, weder in der geistigen noch in der natürlichen Welt, ein so abstraktes Entweder-Oder, wie der Verstand solches behauptet. Alles, was irgend ist, das ist ein Konkretes, somit in sich selbst Unterschiedenes und Entgegengesetztes. Die Endlichkeit der Dinge besteht dann darin, daß ihr unmittelbares Dasein dem nicht entspricht, was sie an sich sind” (ibid., W8: 246-7 § 119. addition 2). (There is in fact nowhere, neither in heaven nor on earth, neither in the mental nor in the natural world, such an abstract either-or as the understanding asserts. Everything that is at all, is a concrete [something], and thereby is something itself differentiated and opposed. The finitude of things consists in the fact that their immediate existence [or being-there] does not correspond to what they are in themselves”.)

⁷⁹ See Hegel’s discussion of the ‘thorough refutation’ in PS, in W3: 27ff.

⁸⁰ Later in the *Logic* Hegel states: “Ferner muß die Widerlegung nicht von außen kommen, d. h. nicht von Annahmen ausgehen, welche außer jenem Systeme liegen, denen es nicht entspricht. Es braucht jene Annahmen nur nicht anzuerkennen; der Mangel ist nur für den ein Mangel, welcher von den auf sie gegründeten Bedürfnissen und Forderungen ausgeht” (ibid., SL, in W6: 250). (“Further, the refutation must not come from without, i.e. not start from assumptions, which lie outside of that system, which it does not correspond to. It must only not acknowledge [i.e. recognize or honor] those assumptions; the *deficiency* is only a deficiency for the one that departs from the needs and requirements based upon it”.)

presuppositions as such into the subject matter of its discourse, instead of making any further suppositions about what ‘presuppositions’ are than what they do in theories.⁸¹

Where Hegel has been recognized as a critic of abstract understanding, his critique has occasionally been read as a critique of abstract or limited understanding from a more all-encompassing standpoint of reason (*Vernunft*), rather than that of understanding itself. This accepts the Kantian dichotomy, simply inverting the standpoint and object of critique. It therefore risks reproducing ‘understanding’ in ‘reason’, by understanding the later as a ‘meta’ or ‘second-order’ understanding. Hegel’s early works that engage with the ‘philosophers of understanding’ (Kant, Fichte, Jacobi and Schelling) dating from the time of his collaboration in the ‘Critical Journal’ indeed do make more use of this dichotomy.⁸² Hegel and the young Schelling also agree at least in some capacity about the need of surpassing the “standpoint of reflection”,⁸³ but about also about the young Schelling’s assertion that reason is not a ‘beyond’.⁸⁴ For the Hegel of the *Logic*, however, the distinction between understanding and reason is less significant than that of abstract understanding (*Verstand*) and grasping concretely or conceptually (*Begriff*), and it is the shift from *Verstand* (v. *Vernunft*) to (*Verstand* v.) *Begriff* that is the crucial speculative step. Slavoj Žižek aptly addresses the relation of understanding and reason and illustrates the way for avoiding relapses into understanding by naming its problematic features explicitly, or by taking the immanent perspective from which each of the terms is construed vis-à-vis the other. That is, he factors the conceptual means that are used in giving an account of the subject matter into the account in their own right, as

⁸¹ The issue of his *Logic* as a ‘presuppositionless science’ is a contentious matter for which he was criticized. But his critics arguably understood him to mean something more substantial than the logic of internal suppositions emphasized here. This will become an issue below with Schelling.

⁸² See *ibid.*, in W2. These works include *Belief and Knowledge* and the essay *The Difference of the Fichtean and Schellingian Systems of Philosophy*.

⁸³ F.W.J. Schelling, *Presentation of My System of Philosophy*, 345. Schelling writes that the “System of Identity” is “wholly removed from the standpoint of reflection... the system of reflection that is its antithesis, since reflection works only from oppositions and rests on oppositions” (*ibid.*, 348). He does not seem to recognize that he arrives at this formulation ‘beyond opposition’ only in opposition (‘antithesis’) to the standpoint that it is not (*viz.* reflection). This indicates a serious shortcoming.

⁸⁴ For the early Schelling, reason is the *indifference point* or immanent relation between the subject and object, and to a certain ambiguous extent this resembles Hegel’s speculative view of the concept – see below. Schelling writes: “I call *reason* absolute reason, or reason insofar as it is conceived as the total indifference of the subjective and objective” (*ibid.*, 349, §1). That one nonetheless arrives at this standpoint via reflection, according to Schelling, does not seem to awaken his suspicion that he may not have indeed gone beyond reflection (*Verstand*).

discussed above. In his first book, he makes a crucial observation for changing perspective on understanding and reason, moving from *Verstand* to *Begriff*. Namely, moving ‘beyond’ understanding in a substantive sense in fact means not going ‘beyond’ it at all, because ‘beyond’ is how other stances look *from the perspective of understanding*; truly going beyond it, as it were, is simply exorcising philosophical method of the assumption that there is any ‘beyond’ in the first place. He writes:

Reason is not something “in addition” to Understanding, a movement, a living process that escapes from the dead skeleton of the categories of the understanding. Reason is Understanding itself in the sense that nothing is lacking from Understanding, in the sense that there is nothing beyond it. It is the absolute form outside of which no content persists. We remain at the level of Understanding so long as we think there is something “beyond” it, a force that eludes Understanding, an unknown inaccessible to the “rigid schematics” of the categories of the understanding – *and so long as we call this beyond “Reason”!* By making the step toward Reason, we are not adding anything to Understanding; rather, we are *subtracting* something from it (the phantom of the object that persists beyond the form), which is to say we reduce it to its formal process. We “go beyond” Understanding when we recognize that Understanding is already in itself the living movement of self-mediation that we are searching for outside of it.⁸⁵

The genuine move from *Verstand* to *Vernunft* (or better, *Begriff*) is nothing but an immediate return to *Verstand*, albeit with an altered, immanent perspective on what understanding does and therefore is: the negative distinction of moments or features as ‘fundaments’, which at the same time connects them (‘negatively’). The allegedly transcendent thing it refers to is a symptom of the immanent process of differentiations or mediations. Read in this way, again, Hegel does not dismiss the project of critique, but rather, passes from the subject to the object genitive of the ‘of’ in ‘critique of understanding’: he advances critique by turning the understanding’s critique (of reason, in Kant) into the critique of understanding itself. Žižek is therefore correct to problematize the understanding-reason distinction as part of abstract understanding’s own perspective, rather than regarding ‘reason’ as an alternative to it, because a *rigid* distinction between understanding and reason is formulated in the understanding’s view of ‘either-or’. In a manner strangely reminiscent of Kant’s dictum about the inter-

⁸⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The Most Sublime Hysteric. Hegel with Lacan* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2014), 10. Translation altered. See: Slavoj Žižek, *Les Plus Sublimes des Hystériques. Hegel avec Lacan* (Paris: Presses Universitaires De France, 2011), 25.

dependence of ‘understanding and the senses’, Hegel writes: “Die Vernunft ohne Verstand ist nichts, der Verstand doch etwas ohne Vernunft”.⁸⁶ Reason as the immanent and differential (‘contradictory’) functioning of understanding is not a second order understanding (‘meta-understanding’) or a free-standing factor. Žižek captures Hegel’s view by decapitating the ‘beyond’ feature, as it were, or by showing it to be an excess intrinsic to understanding that the latter does not always register as its own. His related statements on the elements from Kant that Hegel radicalizes resonate with his sketch of a speculative ontology (see 1.3.6) in connection to ‘contradiction’ or ‘antinomy’.

1.3.1. What Does Understanding Do When it Understands?

An adequate account of understanding cannot be rendered solely from etymology or the metaphors that understanding presents its thought in – the trope of space – yet a close examination of the term is valuable. Because *ver-* in English is often translated with *-ify*, and *stehen* is rendered *to stand*, a literal English translation of ‘to *ver-stehen*’ something would be ‘to standify’, to bring to a ‘stand still’, or to ‘arrest movement’. *Verstand* (intellect or understanding), *verstehen* (to understand) and *verständlich* (intelligible) all suggest a presupposed ‘place’ whether something ‘stands’ or is ‘stood’, and hence also the violent abstraction (ab-strahere: ‘drawing away’) or taking hold of different aspects of a thing and ‘placing’ or ‘standing them’ in this way or that. *Verstand* (OHG: *farstān*) historically suggests an even stronger link to the ‘representational thought’ that Hegel critiques: a rendering immediately present ‘before’ oneself or others, or a representing (c.f. *vorstellen* and *vertreten*, e.g. in court).⁸⁷ The English term ‘understand’ (OE: *under-standan*) is also telling, consisting of ‘under’ in the sense common with German of ‘among’ and ‘stand’. Yet it also suggests ‘stand beneath’ (c.f. ‘sub-tend’, ‘sub-ject’), which manifests the understanding’s fundament-oriented stance. Under-standing something may be called the search for a ‘lowest common denominator’ among what is presented, as it were, the invariant, ‘sub-tending’ or ‘sub-stantial’ element,

⁸⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, *Aphorisms from the Wastebook*, in W2: 551. (“Reason without understanding is nothing, yet understanding is something without reason”.) The difference from Kant is clear, and the implication here that ‘understanding’ can be deeply ‘irrational’ or ‘without reason’ must be taken quite literally.

⁸⁷ See Friedrich Kluge, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (23. Auflage. De Gruyter, Berlin 1999).

or the ‘point’ that ‘stands among’ all of the different members that in turn ‘stand for’ as its appearances or ‘re-present’ it. These observations are also reflected in Hegel’s account. And just as the term suggests, for Hegel the *supposition* or *hypostatization* of fundamentals (“*subjectum*”, “*hypokeimenon*”) are what is *understood*,⁸⁸ as is suggested by the name. Hegel takes ‘understanding’ and ‘abstracting’ together, where the latter is usually the flaw of the former.⁸⁹ The subject matter may be variously understood by regarding it as an ‘appearance’ of something else that is more substantial. “Das unmittelbare Sein der Dinge wird hier gleichsam als eine Rinde oder als ein Vorhang vorgestellt, hinter welchem das Wesen verborgen ist”.⁹⁰ Or the understanding may regard it by peering ‘behind’ appearance into the “background”,⁹¹ when the subject matter is understood as ‘beyond appearance’. This diagnoses the essentialism and substance metaphysics of ‘*res*’ or thing-ontologies that have been a standard feature of western philosophy, but which are implicit also in intelligible ‘methodology’ since the critique of metaphysics. The claim that Hegel’s account is a critique of this understanding, however, requires a text-exegetical justification. So in the following two sections, some characterizations of abstract understanding will be addressed in detail.⁹²

What has already been suggested about understanding is perhaps most clearly illustrated in Hegel’s more popular statements on abstract understanding, in the more everyday context he discusses in his essay *Wer denkt abstrakt?* (*Who Thinks Abstractly?*). The example of ‘the murderer’ clearly illustrates abstract understanding. Hegel writes:

⁸⁸ G.W.F. Hegel, SL, in W6: 303-4.

⁸⁹ E.g. EL, in W8: 169. § 80. See also his *Philosophical Propaedeutic*, in W4: 12, § 12.

⁹⁰ Ibid., EL, in W8: 232. Addition. (“The immediate being of things is here (re)presented as though a rind, peel or curtain behind which the being [or essence] is hidden”) Hegel continues: “Wenn dann ferner gesagt wird: alle Dinge haben ein Wesen, so wird damit ausgesprochen, daß sie wahrhaft nicht das sind, als was sie sich unmittelbar erweisen” (“If further then it is said that all things have an essence, then it is also stated thereby that they truly are not that which they immediately prove themselves to be”).

⁹¹ And further on in the *Phenomenology* too, he similarly characterizes the understanding in the following manner: “Erhoben über die Wahrnehmung stellt sich das Bewußtsein mit dem übersinnlichen durch die Mitte der Erscheinung zusammengeschlossen dar, durch welche es in diesen Hintergrund schaut...” (ibid., PS, in W3: 135). (“Elevated above perception, consciousness presents itself together with the super-sensible through the means of appearance, through which it peers into this background”).

⁹² An invaluable resource for research in the connection of abstraction and understanding are the entries ‘*Abstraktes*’, ‘*Abstraktion*’ and ‘*Verstand*’ in *Registerband* of Hegel’s *Theorie Werkausgabe*, which present far more connections and instances for consideration than the number that can be considered here. See Helmut Reinicke’s *Register to G.W.F. Hegel Werke in zwanzig Bänden* (Frankfurt Am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), 21ff., 22ff. & 701ff.

Dies heißt abstrakt gedacht, in dem Mörder nichts als dies Abstrakte, daß er ein Mörder ist, zu sehen und durch diese einfache Qualität alles übrige menschliche Wesen an ihm [zu] vertilgen.⁹³

Abstract thinking is an elevation of one sameness or common aspect, which is the opposite side of the same coin that reduces or effaces differences in an essentialist way.⁹⁴ (An example of this abstract understanding may be found in the distinction between ‘tokens and types’ or ‘instances and kinds’; in using these dichotomies, the assumption is made that the kind-model is the basic key to what these tokens-instances are, and that nothing important is lost in what the kind-model overlooks in the different, individual tokens-instances.) In a passage from another popular source, his *Philosophical Propaedeutic*, he specifies what he means by ‘abstraction’, naming the difference between ‘abstraction’ and mere ‘subtraction’. He writes:

Wenn ich alle Bestimmungen von einem Gegenstand weglasse, so bleibt nichts übrig. Wenn ich dagegen eine Bestimmung weglasse und eine andere heraushebe, so ist dies abstrakt. Das Ich z.B. ist eine abstrakte Bestimmung.⁹⁵

The abstraction separates out and privileges one aspect or determination of the being as a remainder rendered as a fundament; or, abstraction is a partial subtraction of the being, while subtraction removes the entire being or is total abstraction without remainder. One must note how radically non-foundationalist Hegel’s view is here: if one subtracts all of the determinations of the thing, then no-thing remains that they have been taken from. And conversely, the ‘lowest common denominator’, which for common sense is what is ‘substantial’ (such as the ‘I think’ that ‘accompanies all of my thoughts’), is an empty abstraction (viz. *everyone* says ‘I’). To substantiate the claims that ‘abstraction’ and ‘understanding’ are connected, the following passage from Hegel’s *Lectures on the*

⁹³ G.W.F Hegel, *Who Thinks Abstractly?*, in W2: 578. (“This is abstractly thought: to see nothing in the murderer but the abstraction, that he is a murderer, and through this simple quality, to eradicate all of his remaining human essential-being”.)

⁹⁴ The critical capacity speculative thought offers here for cultural-political discussions is immense. See e.g. the account of ‘diversity’ as ‘indifference to differences’. Much as superficial-liberal ‘tolerance of the other’ only actually tolerates a similar or de-natured ‘other’: “In der Verschiedenheit als der Gleichgültigkeit des Unterschieds ist sich überhaupt die *Reflexion äußerlich* geworden” (ibid., SL, in W6: 48). (“In diversity, as the indifference of difference, *reflection* as such has become *external* [or superficial]”.)

⁹⁵ Ibid., *Philosophical Propaedeutic*, in W4: 163, §3. (“If leave all of the determinations of an object aside, then nothing remains left over. If, by contrast, I leave one determination aside and emphasize another, then this is abstract. For example the ‘I’ is an abstract determination”.)

History of Philosophy is worth consideration. He proposes the example of ‘a bouquet of flowers’ as the ‘being’ that is at once ‘one’ *and* also ‘many’ in itself. He writes: “Obgleich die Blume vielfache Qualitäten hat, als Geruch, Geschmack, Gestalt, Farbe usf., so ist sie doch *eine*... Nur der Verstand, das verständige Denken findet Anderes als unverträglich nebeneinander”.⁹⁶ And in *Wer denkt Abstrakt?* Hegel illustrates this same intolerance of the many. Abstract thought selects one of the various features (*Bestimmungen*) of which the thing also consists and installs it – usually the most obtrusive or conspicuously common one – as the basis of the thing; one “denkt abstract und subsumiert... alles... durch und durch mit diesen [Aspekte] gefärbt”.⁹⁷ Abstraction as rigidly clinging to one predicate is best illustrated by Hegel’s description of the Prussian officer and the Prussian soldier, which shows how abstraction can be eminently practical: “Among the Prussians”, Hegel writes, “kann der Soldat geprügelt werden, er ist also eine Kanaille; denn was geprügelt zu werden das passive Recht hat, ist eine Kanaille. So gilt der gemeine Soldat dem Offizier für dies Abstraktum eines prügelbaren Subjekts”.⁹⁸ The justification, ‘for’ (“denn”), effectively shows the circularity of abstract thought. As in the case of the murderer, the officer thinks abstractly to the extent that he understands persons as single invariant qualities or descriptions (understood as bearers of the other qualities), which exact a certain behavior from him.

From this vantage point one must recall the initial passage from *Wer denkt Abstrakt?* cited above. A first impression may be that the mistake of abstract thought consists in abstracting away from or cutting down on the variety or richness of the subject (‘*Wesen*’) in question. But this impression, formulated in this way, would be incorrect, because it would already understand the problem abstractly. Namely, it would take a dichotomy of ‘properties-predicates and subject’ for granted and assume that there is a

⁹⁶ Ibid., *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. 1, in W18: 44. (“Although the flower has various qualities, as smell, taste, figure, color etc., nevertheless it is but one... only the understanding, the intelligible thought finds what is other incompatible side by side”.)

⁹⁷ Ibid., *Who Thinks Abstractly?*, in W2: 580-1. One “thinks abstractly and subsumes... everything... colored through and through with these [aspects]”. Hegel similarly discusses the ‘fundamental’ and essentialist assumptions of *phrenology* in a similar manner. The assumption that character can be divined from examination of facial and skull-features, rather than being actual in the actions of individuals is homologous to the kind of understanding here (see *ibid.*, PS, in W3: 242).

⁹⁸ Ibid., *Who Thinks Abstractly?*, in W2: 580. Hegel writes “*beim preußischen*”, not “Austrians” as in the standard English text, which comes from a dubious version of the German text. (“... a soldier can be beaten, thus he is canaille [viz. a dog]; for whatever has the passive right to be beaten is canaille. Thus the common soldier counts as this abstractum of a beatable subject for the officer”.)

one-dimensional subject to efface in the first place. It assumes that the subject can be articulated as a single basis that undergirds the other properties-predicates and is neatly amenable to the propositional form of a judgment ('s=p'), which actually effaces the various other properties-predicates by stating an identity. It is telling that Hegel uses *Wesen*, which can be complex, and not *Essenz*. '*Being*' is a better translation of '*Wesen*' in the context of Hegel's use and meaning of the term than 'essence' (c.f. '*Lebewesen*' a 'living being', or '*Postwesen*' the 'postal system'), as it is often translated, due to the latter's inherently abstract connotations; Hegel is precisely not making a point about an 'essence', but rather objecting to the essentialism of ordinary understanding. The 'soldier' or 'murderer' may perfectly well be a genuinely 'kind parent, loyal friend, handsome and hapless' *and* be 'a guilty murderer' or 'canaille', which enrages abstract understanding's demand for one-dimensional fundamentals. Abstract understanding takes the opposition between an individual's properties (such as between determining factors in an individual's history *and* individual freedom), to be irreconcilable, except through reduction to one single abstract basis. It cannot admit that there are differing properties of the 'same' individual, all of which are equally basic, because it assumes the subject must be one-dimensional.⁹⁹ The examples of people in his essay whom he appears to regard more favorably are accordingly those who regard others as basically *multiple or composite*. One instructive (if not somewhat ironic) example Hegel gives of the treatment of "servants" clarifies this. The "common [*gemeiner*] man", Hegel writes,

denkt wieder abstrakter, er tut vornehm gegen den Bedienten und verhält sich zu diesem nur als zu einem Bedienten; an diesem einen Prädikate hält er fest... Der vornehme Mann weiß, daß der Bediente nicht nur Bedienter ist, sondern auch die Stadtneuigkeiten weiß, die Mädchen kennt, gute Anschläge im Kopfe hat...¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ This attitude is illustrated by the assumption that 'explanation is excusal'. In this connection Hegel aptly describes the abstract thinker: "Ein Menschenkenner sucht den Gang auf, den die Bildung des Verbrechers genommen, findet in seiner Geschichte schlechte Erziehung, schlechte Familienverhältnisse des Vaters und der Mutter, irgendeine ungeheuerere Härte bei einem leichteren Vergehen dieses Menschen, die ihn gegen die bürgerliche Ordnung erbitterte, eine erste Rückwirkung dagegen, die ihn daraus vertrieb und es ihm jetzt nur durch Verbrechen sich noch zu erhalten möglich machte. – Es kann wohl Leute geben, die, wenn sie solches hören, sagen werden: der will diesen Mörder entschuldigen!" (ibid., 578.). ("A person who knows people traces the path that the development of the criminal took, [he or she] finds bad upbringing in his history, bad familial relations to the father and mother, some immense cruelty incurred because of some insignificant action of this person that embittered him against the social order, a first reaction against it that drove him out and to his now only being able to survive by crime. There may certainly be people out there who upon hearing this will say: he wants to excuse this murderer!")

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 580.

Perhaps Hegel's point here would have been clearer if he had put "a servant" in quotation marks refer to *the sense*, and to indicate that *a predicate* is what the "common man" abstractly relates to, rather than the multi-faceted human-beings that both in fact are. If thinking abstractly is therefore a 'clinging to one predicate' ("servant"), then the qualification 'not merely a... but also...' is crucial to Hegel's conception of grasping something concretely. This is telling, because in his theoretical works Hegel also states that the concrete is a unity of basically diverse determinations.¹⁰¹ Unlike understanding's fundament, he characterizes the "*konkret*" as "in sich unterschieden" ('differentiated or distinguished in itself'),¹⁰² as the example of the *bouquet* suggests. So concrete consideration of the "servant" does not render any aspect a single, substantial 'core', but dissolves or distributes the one-dimensionality of the substantivized predicate (the 'subject') into a disjunctive synthesis, permitting the being to be basically multiple.

The text 'On Scientific Cognition', which was added to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as its 'preface' after completion, similarly identifies the problems of abstract understanding in a theoretical register. It can also be regarded as a précis of the text's considerations and as critical manifesto against abstract theoretical understanding. Hegel characterizes understanding as "tabellarisch" (*tabular*) and its variety of 'knowledge' as that of a taxonomic 'table of contents' ("*Inhaltsanzeige*"), because it merely subsumes what it assumes to be given under pre-established rubrics or criteria in its "schematizing" activity.¹⁰³ For instance, understanding encodes the features of its subject matter according to the parameters of its own assumptions in regarding its object as 'essential', 'fixed', 'apparent', 'given' etc. It also assumes that the 'empty form' of 'thought' is inherently separate from the 'given content' of a 'ready-made world' confronting it,¹⁰⁴ or

¹⁰¹ See e.g., EL, in W8: 176ff. § 82. Also: 128ff. § 48, addition. ("... thinks more abstractly again, he acts noble to the servant and relates himself to him only as to a servant; he holds fast to this one predicate... [but] the noble man knows that the servant is not only a servant, but rather also knows what is new in the city, knows the girls, has good recommendations in mind...")

¹⁰² G.W.F. Hegel, Lectures on the History of Philosophy, vol. I, in W18: 43.

¹⁰³ Ibid., PS, in W3: 51-2.

¹⁰⁴ An example of this view is Kant's conception of a "general logic" as being empty, "merely formal, abstracts from all content of cognition (pure or empirical) and deals merely with the form of thought (i.e., of discursive cognition) as such" (Immanuel Kant, CPR, A131 / B170). In the *Logic* Hegel explicitly criticizes such assumptions: "Der bisherige Begriff der Logik beruht auf der im gewöhnlichen Bewußtsein ein für allemal vorausgesetzten Trennung des *Inhalts* der Erkenntnis und der *Form* derselben, oder der *Wahrheit* und der *Gewißheit*. Es wird *erstens* vorausgesetzt, daß der Stoff des Erkennens als eine fertige

that what is real is something ‘over there’, separated from it by a gap, ‘over here’.¹⁰⁵ Hence this procedure overlooks how the matter being examined by understanding is always already at least minimally concept-laden to such an extent that the supposition of an invariant and basic fundament is really a feature of understanding, or the understanding’s abstraction. This is indicated here in ‘how’ (*als*) this ‘representational thought’ (*vorstellendes Denken*) assumes or accepts (*annimmt*) its object as the subject-bearer of accidental-properties. Hegel writes:

Das Subjekt ist als fester Punkt angenommen, an den als ihren Halt die Prädikate geheftet sind, durch eine Bewegung, die dem von ihm Wissenden angehört und die auch nicht dafür angesehen wird, dem Punkte selbst anzugehören; durch sie aber wäre allein der Inhalt als Subjekt darzustellen.¹⁰⁶

What is under-stood is presented ‘as’ (‘als’) a ‘fixed point’, rather than for instance a movement of elements fixed in this way in reciprocally mediating relations. This identitarian way of thinking overlooks essential differences that also go into the thing’s being what it is – but also the way in which there is interdependence of mediation and what is mediated. For example, typically one understands ‘money’ as what ‘mediates between people in market economies’. Yet this understanding obscures the equally important obverse side of the situation that it does not take note of. In the example of taking ‘persons’ as basic fundaments between monetary mediations regarded as accidental, one thereby overlooks that ‘people’ are also dependent on the basic movements of monetary systems, the regularity of which is – for better or for worse – mediated by people. This mutually mediating character of all things concrete is crucial

Welt außerhalb des Denkens an und für sich vorhanden, daß das Denken für sich leer sei, als eine Form äußerlich zu jener Materie hinzutrete, sich damit erfülle, erst daran einen Inhalt gewinne und dadurch ein reales Erkennen werde” (G.W.F. Hegel, SL, in W5: 36-7). (“The earlier concept of logic is based on the separation, which is perpetually presupposed by common consciousness, of the *content* of cognition and the *form* of the same [*viz. of cognition*]. It is presupposed, *first*, that the content of cognition is present in and for itself as a ready-made world outside of thought, that thought is with respect to itself [‘for itself’] empty, as a form that is externally attached, [or] fills itself with the former, [and] then gets a content and thereby becomes a real cognition”).)

¹⁰⁵ In introduction to the *Phenomenology* Hegel writes that it assumes “daß das Absolute *auf einer Seite* stehe und *das Erkennen auf der anderen Seite* für sich und getrennt von dem Absoluten doch etwas Reelles [sei]...” (ibid., in W3: 69-70); “that the absolute stands *on one side* and *cognition* [stands] *on the other side* for itself and separate from the absolute yet [as nonetheless] something real...”.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 27. (“The subject is assumed as a fixed point, on which predicates are heaped as onto a stable footing through a movement that belongs to the one knowing and that also is not regarded [by the understanding] as belonging to the point; but the content were only to be presented through it [the movement]”).)

for Hegel's speculative view, yet effaced through the abstract supposition of a subject by understanding.

1.3.2. What Does Actuality Look Like in the Understanding's Shadow?

The understanding's assumptions cast a long shadow, which appears inescapable. It sees only its own estranged figure ('obviousness') dimly reflected in the definition of everything it regards, because it has no alternative approach or perspective at its disposal. The best place to begin unpacking Hegel's account of what the understanding takes to be 'what is' – the ontology of common sense understanding – is the succinct account he gives at the beginning of the *Encyclopedia Logic*. In the first of what are perhaps the three most important (yet overlooked) paragraphs in Hegel's work (§§ 80-83), he states:

Das Denken als *Verstand* bleibt bei der festen Bestimmtheit und der Unterschiedenheit derselben gegen andere stehen; ein solches beschränktes Abstraktes gilt ihm als für sich bestehend und seiend.¹⁰⁷

The attitude of understanding towards actuality is one of thought being directed towards discrete *things* or *entities* that simply are so. What 'there is' according to understanding are 'ready-made', self-subsistent and self-identical objects, subjects or sub-stances; their differences fall below its visibility, and hence these 'things' populate the various types of accounts it offers: analyses of 'givens',¹⁰⁸ or the familiar '*res*' ontology that western thought has shared.¹⁰⁹ Understanding makes a distinction in a manifold being such as the bouquet or soldier, holds its various features apart or abstracts them from one another, stands these distinguished features in opposition to one another and then treats them as though they were just naturally distinguished in themselves, as autonomous or free-standing furniture of reality. The general critical point suggested by this passage, however, is that it is not as simple as understanding supposes, that there are

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., EL, in W8: 169, § 80. ("Thought as *understanding* remains standing with the fixed determinacy and their distinctions from others; such a limited abstract [thing] counts, for the understanding, as subsistent and being for itself".)

¹⁰⁸ A fruitful connection between Hegel's criticism of the understanding and the Anglo-American engagement with his ideas occurs in the discussion of Wilfrid Sellars's account of the 'myth of the given' (see John McDowell, "Hegel and the Myth of the Given", in *Das Interesse des Denkens: Hegel aux Heutiger Sicht*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2003, 75-88).

¹⁰⁹ In the *Logic* Hegel states that classical metaphysics ('ontology') is what is critically dealt with in the first part, the 'objective logic' (see *ibid.*, W5: 61ff.).

simply no such naturally pre-given, self-identical or ready-made entities, and that these stem from the one-sided view that abstract thinking regards actuality with.

Reflective thought takes the thing to be given in a prior instant, which thought must merely re-flect upon in a subsequent instant. This static and finite outlook of understanding generates its own *aporias*, because of the way it poses the matter. It not only overlooks the entire *flux* or *processual* dimension that fills and falls outside of its rigid models, and which Hegel calls the ‘dialectical’ or ‘negatively rational’ (§81); it also excludes or overlooks the specific results of this very negativity, which Hegel calls the positively rational or ‘speculative’ side (§82). For example, an *actual* ‘apple’ viewed concretely is not just ‘that delicious thing there on my desk at noon’; it is also ‘not itself’ to the extent that its ‘sitting on the desk before me at lunchtime’ in an isolated moment is just one aspect, torn from a flux of its movement from soil to waste (or, from not-apple to not-apple by way of being ‘that apple there’) (§81). Thus for Hegel, it is immediately given particulars such as ‘this apple before me’, such as the understanding points or picks out, which are actually the abstractions. What abstract understanding regards as ‘external’ here is nevertheless essential, because if the rest of this series does not hold, then ‘it’ is not actually ‘an apple’. Its negation is not just a *general* negation that effaces differences, but a *specific* or ‘positive’ result – the specifically different ‘waste’ it will have been (e.g. depending on whether it is mass-produced, consumed and junked or whether it rots on the branch and is eaten by insects) (§ 82). What is ‘speculative’ here is the realization that the ‘negation’ or ‘limit’ that goes into things being defined or definite always has a specific ‘positive’ result, because there is no thing or negation in general (and hence no general negation); ‘in general’ is a mere abstraction. Coming to grips with the context of this process and mediation or differentiation, which makes things actual particulars (rather than generalities), makes an account a concrete one.

Yet negativity is not a stranger to understanding, which typically defines or determines ‘what’ things are along the lines of the dictum ‘*omnis determinatio negatio est*’. For example, understanding determines what the thing is by contrasting it with what it is *not* or with some *other* thing. This is why understanding needs identity and difference equally, why it seeks a ‘third’ that unifies the distinguished determinations (e.g. ‘substance’, its own shadow), and why its imposition of the abstract ‘third’ that it

subsumes things under actually subdues their particular differences. Understanding also often negatively distinguishes ‘what’ things are (‘determination’) from their existence (‘that’ they are) and hence the sum of determinations from the existent things considered as ‘positively’ given (as Schelling illustrates – see part 3). The consequence of this is that ‘determination’ or ‘what’ something is (its *Wesen*), is no longer understood as intrinsic to its existence as a being (*Wesen*) but as an ‘abstraction’. Understanding opens the host of its own problems by positing whatever subject matter it considers along the lines of exclusive dichotomies (e.g. ‘thoughts and things’ as ‘abstract and the concrete’). For instance, it tries to understand ‘particulars’ with ‘generalities’ or actuality as diced into ‘subjects and objects’ (e.g. the “thesis of heterogeneity” between ‘intellect and the senses’¹¹⁰). But whatever it supposes, it stops short of a full awareness of the immense implications of its own negativity: its negative distinction connects its distinct entities.

1.3.3. Speculative Critique of Understanding as Immanent Critique

The real problem with the understanding’s viewpoint is this external, dichotomous way in which it determines things, whereas Hegel’s conceptual viewpoint involves an *immanent* determination, taking note of how problems are generated by the manner in which they are posed conceptually: through the trope of spatiality (and perception). Understanding remains in what Hegel calls “external reflection” (*äußere Reflexion*).¹¹¹ Hence his conceptual critique is an *immanent* critique of understanding and its objects. It reveals the ‘presupposition’ that understanding’s standpoint is external and that what appears necessary in its subject matter is due to its conceptual *suppositions*. From a conceptual view, the understanding’s pre-supposition is a supposition supposed as ‘prior’ or understood as ‘given’: it supposes “that the presupposed is not [also equally] supposed by thought”.¹¹² The speculative alternative here is not a different *kind* of understanding, but registers what understanding does. In the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel humorously characterizes the way the understanding’s own *view* itself is precisely what *blinds* it to the thing, because the view is supposed as

¹¹⁰ See Sally Sedgwick, *Hegel’s Critique of Kant*, 124.

¹¹¹ G.W.F. Hegel, SL, in W6: 50.

¹¹² See e.g. Hegel’s discussion of Descartes, in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, in W20: 129.

external. “Statt in den immanenten Inhalt der Sache einzugehen”, he writes, “übersieht er immer das Ganze und steht über dem einzelnen Dasein, von dem er spricht, d.h. er sieht es gar nicht”.¹¹³ Understanding ‘overlooks’ the thing altogether by trying to get an ‘overview’ (an ‘impartial’, ‘second order’ or ‘birds eye’ view) of the phenomenon. This is why it would be misleading to understand speculative thought as a kind of a ‘meta-critique’ or a ‘meta-philosophy’. Abstract understanding is incapable of grasping particulars because *it* compares them with its external criteria in such a ‘meta-perspective’ (e.g. its opposition of generalities to particularities that are subsumed), resulting in an abstract residuum of generality. For example, understanding supposes that ‘concrete’ means ‘immediate given’, and hence when it tries to distinguish between two immediately given particulars it hopes to grasp them with the demonstrative-indexical ‘this’, which is employed externally. Yet the immediate ‘this’ of the supposition does not have a sufficient sensitivity for grasping differences. Hegel states, “man *meint*, durch ‘Dieses’ etwas vollkommen Bestimmtes auszudrücken”, yet, “der Ausdruck *Dieses* enthält keinen Unterschied”.¹¹⁴ ‘This’ can be equally said of everything *indifferently*, and hence names nothing concrete in particular. Understanding misfires or short-circuits, as it were, between particularity and generality, because of how it poses its problem with ‘this’, which is at once general *and* indicates particulars. That is, the understanding uses the *same term* to grasp *different things*, and hence its residuum of abstractness that lets particularity slip past it.¹¹⁵ To be clear, the speculative point here is not that we are fooled by immediate particulars in everyday life – we obviously know the difference between things that are ‘meant’ in immediate contexts of action (e.g. ‘which sandwich do you want, this one or that one?’). The point is, rather, precisely because we nonetheless *do* know what is meant, despite the fact that the designator does not grasp the specificity of the things in question, this shows that a more complex conceptual procedure is already

¹¹³ Ibid., PS, in W3: 52. (“Instead of going into the immanent content of the matter, it [the understanding] looks over [overlooks] the whole and stands over the individual existence of which it speaks, i.e. he does not see it at all”.)

¹¹⁴ Ibid., SL, in W5: 126. (Although “one *means* by ‘this’ to express something completely determinate”, “the expression *this* contains no difference”). See also the first chapter of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ‘On Sense Certainty’ for a similar discussion.

¹¹⁵ Moreover, ‘this’ only admits of distinction in being distinguished from ‘that’. Understanding can only define ‘this’ as being ‘this not that’; but the external reference point (‘that’) used can also only be determined by understanding as ‘this not that’ as well, hence the residual abstractness or generality.

going on in that communicative-knowing situation than the understanding is capable of registering. The understanding cannot account for the conceptual means it is already making use of: though ‘this’ is good enough for everyday life, it only becomes a problem when understanding monopolizes scientific method and discourse (e.g. Schelling makes the immediate ‘this’ a cornerstone of his theoretical critique of Hegel’s ‘concept’).

Hegel’s critique of supposed fundamentals goes into further detail without relying on the wordplay or equivocation of the understanding’s spatial metaphor. In a passage from the same preface, he claims that the understanding runs up against a limit it cannot surpass, which he calls a ‘counter-thrust’ or ‘recoil’ (*Gegenstoß*). Yet his claim is not that its deficiency is due to an *external* barrier that it cannot surmount, which would locate his critique itself in terms of a merely imposed, external and intelligible (*verständlich*) dichotomy. Rather, the understanding’s collision with its limit is due to the fact that it only recognizes its own suppositions in things (its ‘shadow’); what it collides with is simply itself, or its supposition of subject as its own concept and its incapacity to account for its own relation to its allegedly separate object. His critique pertains to the ordinary propositional form (‘s=p’) in particular and the abstract way understanding understands with it, by assuming a subject in subsuming many features under it. Hegel writes:

Das vorstellende Denken, da seine Natur ist, an den Akzidenzen oder Prädikaten fortzulaufen, und mit Recht, weil sie nicht mehr als Prädikate und Akzidenzen sind, über sie hinauszugehen, wird, indem das, was im Satze die Form eines Prädikats hat, die Substanz selbst ist, in seinem Fortlaufen gehemmt. Es erleidet, [um] es so vorzustellen, einen Gegenstoß. Vom Subjekte anfangend, als ob dieses zum Grunde liegen bliebe, findet es, indem das Prädikat vielmehr die Substanz ist, das Subjekt zum Prädikat *übergegangen* und hiermit aufgehoben; und indem so das, was Prädikat zu sein scheint, zur ganzen und selbständigen Masse geworden, kann das Denken nicht frei herumirren, sondern ist durch diese Schwere aufgehalten.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Ibid., PS, in W3: 58. Italics mine. (“As it is its nature to run through the accidents and predicates, and rightly so [because they are just that], and to go above and beyond them, representational thought is checked in its progress, because that which has the form of a predicate in its proposition is the substance itself. It suffers a counter thrust – to put it in in figural terms. Beginning from the subject, as though this remained lying at the ground, it finds – as the predicate is more so the substance – that the subject has *passed over* to the predicate and is thereby surpassed; and as that which appeared to be the predicate has become a whole independent mass, though it can no longer bumble around freely, but rather is held up by this weight”).

This passage highlights the crucial moment of Hegel's alternative to the ordinary abstract proposition – the “speculative proposition”.¹¹⁷ Whereas the subject of the ordinary proposition of abstract understanding simply ‘goes missing’ if the understanding wants to pin it down precisely, the speculative proposition (or *account*) grasps the alleged subject precisely *as* its mediated ensemble of differentiated predicates-properties. Two crucial points can be raised here regarding the ‘transition’ (*Übergang*) from subject to predicate stated in the quotation above, which makes up the ‘counter thrust’. Hegel is sometimes read as either primarily epistemological (‘post-metaphysical’ or Kantian) or ontological (dogmatic system-metaphysics), though both readings miss something. *On the one hand*, Hegel's claim that ‘subject passes into predicate’ may be read *epistemologically* as stating that what the understanding takes to be the substantial basis of predicates is *itself* what is in fact predicated to various features understood as ‘predicates’ of it. On this reading, ‘substance’ itself is what the understanding predicates to things and hence substance itself ironically turns out to be the predicate, or the abstraction of understanding. This is another way of saying the ‘subject’ is a methodological supposition of understanding's own functioning – not some genuinely external third thing. It strings them together through its own activity, hence understanding itself is the ‘lowest common denominator’; it does not easily find its ‘tertium quid’ because it is itself the latter.¹¹⁸ This could explain understanding being ‘held up’ or arrested ‘by its own weight’ because it is only holding up *itself* in the ‘subject’, and this seems a perfectly legitimate reading of the passage. *But on the other hand*, Hegel's claim about the transition of ‘subject into predicate’ may also be read *ontologically*, which would mean that the alleged subject of an articulation (as Hegel states elsewhere in his comments on subjects in the preface) *is* only determinate or only *exists at all* in its actual

¹¹⁷ See *ibid.*, 59-62.

¹¹⁸ “Indem beide *für dasselbe* sind, ist es selbst ihre Vergleichung...” (*ibid.*, 78-9). (“By both being for the same one, it is itself their comparison [or equation]...”) Many common examples of this paradoxical irony can be given. For instance a person may claim how *strange* it is that they should have such a wide variety of friends who apparently have absolutely nothing in common; thus they seek a ‘lowest common denominator’ that all of the friends might have in common, such as to explain how this person could have some connection to each and every one of their friends. This person effectively functions as the understanding here. The ‘search’ is perfectly superfluous from the outset, because what connects the different friends is simply the person. The conceptual move would simply be to change to an immanent perspective and state that this person need not seek a ‘third thing’ that connects all of the others such that there can be a connection – this person in themselves is the third thing that connects all of the different other persons and hence also enables their ‘being so different’.

articulation or in its accidents-predicates. The understanding intelligibly (*verständlich*) assumes the subject ‘is something independently before its properties are named or articulated’, or that ‘existence’ and ‘determination’ are distinct, yet it does not materialize *until something definite is articulated*.¹¹⁹ In a more practical context this would mean a subject is only actual, or only actually is, to the extent that it has actually proven itself to be what it is by having acted. And Hegel makes statements to this effect in the *Phenomenology* and elsewhere that fit with his criticism of understanding the murderer ‘abstractly’. “Das wahre Sein des Menschen ist vielmehr *seine Tat*; in ihr ist die Individualität *wirklich*”.¹²⁰ And in the *Philosophy of Right* he similar states: “Was das Subjekt *ist*, ist die *Reihe seiner Handlungen*”.¹²¹ These readings may both be right, and support for taking them together may be found in Hegel’s ‘Logic of Essence’, where ‘counterthrust’ also appears. There, Hegel also gives a critical account of reflective thought, but the term he uses is “*absoluter Gegenstoß*” (‘absolute counterthrust’ or ‘recoil’). The discussion handles ‘presupposition’ as itself a supposition (e.g. ‘thing’ or ‘grammatical subject’ that seems to antedate its actions). He states: “[das] Vorgefundene *wird nur darin, daß es verlassen wird*”.¹²² What may be drawn from that discussion for the purposes of this thesis is that the allegedly pre-supposed subject is never present in time (‘werden’), thus never ‘before’ its actions, but is always already past (*ge-wesen*; *geworden*). It does not ‘come first in time’, but only ensues from the action that will have been ‘its own’. Less cryptically stated, presupposition is what is logically supposed as ‘prior’ in the hindsight perspective of reflective thought, and hence the subject regarded as a self-subsistent given is itself the understanding’s reflection or abstraction. The corollary is that the actual subject is only the result of articulation or *is only retroactively*.

This also resonates with the actual sense of Hegel’s famous yet often terribly translated statement that in his view “das Wahre [ist] nicht als *Substanz*, sondern ebensosehr als *Subjekt* aufzufassen und auszudrücken”.¹²³ The statement does not say that

¹¹⁹ This also raises a powerful critique of the understanding’s “thesis of heterogeneity” of the assumed subject, from the perspective of *actuality* (*Wirklichkeit*), which remains a central concern throughout Hegel’s texts.

¹²⁰ Ibid., W3: 242. (“The true essence of the man is much rather *his deed*; he is actual/he actually is in it”.)

¹²¹ Ibid., *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, in W7: 233, § 124. (“What the subject is, is the series of its actions”.)

¹²² Ibid., SL, W6: 27.

¹²³ Ibid., PS, W3: 22.

one must ‘grasp and express the true *not only* as substance, but *also just as much* as subject’, as it is usually translated. It says: ‘everything depends on grasping and expressing the true *not* as substance, but rather *just as much*’ – which is to say *not at all* – ‘as subject’: unless, that is, the reader’s sense-making-interpretation of Hegel *supplements* the text grammatically, which thereby actually performs the point he is making about there being no self-subsistent and continuous grammatical-subject that antedates its utterance. This speculative view illuminates the blind-spot of the understanding (viz. its action), yet has largely been obscured in translations, ironically making Hegel into a consistent and objectionable philosopher of the understanding (e.g. ‘the true as substance and subject’). It also informs the sense of *Vernunft* (‘reason’), which is clarified as ‘distinct’ from *Verstand* only in the addition of a *vernehmen* (hearing, registering) to what *verstehen* already does: the speculative, or “plastischer Vortrag erfordert dann auch einen plastischen Sinn des Aufnehmens *und* Verstehens”,¹²⁴.

1.3.4. The Kernel of the Speculative Critique of Understanding – The Concept

Hegel’s critique of abstract understanding is already somewhat clear from his account of what understanding is. But the kernel of the critique, which is the concept, goes farther. Understanding at once distinguishes at least two things through its own negativity, and it thereby also relates or connects them qua ‘things’. It abstractly overlooks this obverse and positive side of its own distinction of the two identities, which is the relation or connection, and it then treats them as though they were naturally so, apart from its separating.¹²⁵ This overlooked dimension is the immersion in the thing. Hegel’s specific criticism is that understanding simply “fails to bring these two thoughts”, which it already performs, “together”, or to simply become aware of the

¹²⁴ Ibid., SL, W5: 31. Italics mine. (“... [a] plastic exposition then also requires a plastic sense of registering [viz. ‘taking up’] *and* understanding”).

¹²⁵ Hegel’s criticism of classical metaphysics is that it remained within “abstrakte Verstandesbestimmungen”, rather than giving an account of the way that its own thought framed what it took to be necessary, or rather than factoring its own account-giving into the account that it gives. Metaphysical understanding ‘held fast’ to these abstractions: “als ob jede der beiden Bestimmungen eines Gegensatzes für sich ein Bestehen hätte und in ihrer Isolierung als ein Substantielles und Wahrhaftes zu betrachten wäre. Dies war jedoch der Standpunkt der alten Metaphysik” (ibid., EL, in W8: 101, § 35, addition). (“... as though each of both of these determinations of an opposition had some self-subsistence for itself [or on its own] and [as though each] were to be considered [something] substantial and truthful”).

double action that is already occurring.¹²⁶ In other words, the ‘either-or’ that the understanding always asserts is always already an ‘and... and’ (‘disjunctive synthesis’), although the understanding cannot recognize this because it is obligated to make assumptions that exclude their coincidence. Namely, it only sees *identities*, and refuses to admit that identity and differentiation coincide. Connection in difference (and *vice versa*) is elided in the “*abbreviation*” or abstraction that ordinary understanding performs;¹²⁷ what is abstracted from is the ensemble of differentiated elements, privileging certain aspects over others in ‘holding them fast’ (*ver-stehen*).¹²⁸ The conceptually comprehending grasp simply registers (*vernimmt*) this. Hegel writes:

Die schon namhaft gemachte Reflexion ist dies, über das konkrete Unmittelbare *hinauszugehen* und dasselbe zu *bestimmen* und zu *trennen*. Aber sie muß *ebenso sehr* über diese ihre *trennenden* Bestimmungen *hinausgehen* und sie zunächst *beziehen*. Auf dem Standpunkte dieses Beziehens tritt der Widerstreit derselben hervor. Dieses Beziehen der Reflexion gehört an sich der Vernunft an...¹²⁹

The sense of the ‘must’ in Hegel’s claim that ‘reflection must go beyond its separating determinations and first relate them’ must be taken in a descriptive, rather than normative sense. In other words, this is what the understanding already necessarily does by default, as it were, when it distinguishes; whether it *fully* reflects on what it does in its reflections, though, is a matter of contingency. This regard in which one acknowledges

¹²⁶ This is in part his conceptual criticism: the “Mangel besteht in der einfachen Unvermögenheit, zwei Gedanken – und es sind der Form nach nur *zwei* vorhanden – zusammenzubringen” (ibid., 143, § 60). (Its “deficiency consists of the incapacity of bringing [the] two thoughts together – and according to the form there are only two [of them] present”.) See also SL, in W6: 548 and the EL. W8: 246 & 243.

¹²⁷ Hegel calls this “geläufige Vorstellung geworden *Abbreviaturen*” (ibid., SL, in W5: 24). (“... *abbreviations* become ordinary presentations [or ‘notions’].”)

¹²⁸ Shortly after a remark on how difference and identity must always be taken together, Hegel writes: “Die Naturbetrachtung bringt durch die Realität, in welcher ihre Gegenstände sich festhalten, dieses Zwingende mit sich, die Kategorien, die in ihr nicht länger ignoriert werden können, wenn auch mit der größten Inkonsistenz gegen andere, die *auch* geltend gelassen werden, zu fixieren und es nicht zu gestatten, daß, wie im Geistigen leichter geschieht, zu Abstraktionen von dem Gegensatze und zu Allgemeinheiten übergegangen wird” (ibid., 21). (“Observation of nature brings through reality (in which its objects hold fast), this compelling [issue along] with itself, to fix the categories that can no longer be ignored in it, even if with the greatest inconsistency vis-à-vis others that are *also* permitted to remain as valid, and not to permit a transition into abstractions from the opposition and [or] generalities, as easily happens in all matters of thought [*Geist*].”)

¹²⁹ Ibid., 39. (“The reflection that has already been made well-known is namely this: to go *above and beyond* the concrete immediate [subject matter] and to *determine* [or specify] and *separate* it. But it must *just as much* go *above and beyond* this, its *separating* determinations, and firstly *relate them* [to one another]. From the standpoint of this relating, the antagonism of them steps into the foreground. This relating of reflection belongs to reason it itself...”)

that what is distinguished or separated is related or connected already in the precise degree to which it is distinguished or separated, is what Hegel calls the “speculative” or conceptual perspective.¹³⁰ If Hegel’s conceptual account is not read as *an account of the understanding*, or with the understanding’s emphasis on exclusive-abstract identities for an interpretive frame, then the ‘coincidence of opposites’ is *neither* an esoteric ‘yin-yang’ conception *nor* a reduction of difference to sameness, as in the *caricature* of ‘*Aufhebung*’. From this observation, that one pole of the understanding’s distinctions (e.g. ‘difference’) already immediately coincides with the other (e.g. ‘identity’ or ‘connection’), or is mediated in itself, follows the positivity of the negative itself; negativity as an always-specific negation yields positive results, and hence this positive emerges from or amidst negativity (or differences), para-doxical as this may appear to understanding; it is not just a separate, general vacuity, because it is always a concrete, particular being that is negated.¹³¹ While ordinary understanding supposes that something negated is simply null and void and that ‘nothing can come from nothing’, for Hegel a concrete result of negation always follows (‘*ex nihilo*’), which is the truth and bearer of that from which it came. This speculative co-originality of difference and connection is also why ‘things’ are inherently relational and why the standard abstract propositional-form cannot adequately grasp actual things. (The latter may be “correct” without being

¹³⁰ Hegel writes: “In diesem Dialektischen, wie es hier genommen wird, und damit in dem Fassen des Entgegengesetzten in seiner Einheit oder des Positiven im Negativen besteht *das Spekulative*” (ibid., 52). (“*The speculative* consists in this dialectical [aspect], as it is taken [up] here, and hence in the grasping of the opposed in its unity or the positive in the negative”.) And later more precisely: “Nach dem zugrunde liegenden Elemente aber der Einheit des Begriffs in sich selbst und damit der Untrennbarkeit seiner Bestimmungen müssen diese ferner auch, insofern sie *unterschieden*, der Begriff in ihrem *Unterschiede* gesetzt wird, wenigstens in *Beziehung* aufeinander stehen” (ibid., 58). (“But according to the basic elements of the unity of the concept in itself and thereby the inseparability of its determinations, these [elements] must further also stand in *relation* to each other [viz. not just be absolutely different], to the extent that they are *distinguished*, [and] the concept is posited in their differences [to one another]”.)

¹³¹ What is crucial for the speculative view, for Hegel, is “die Erkenntnis des logischen Satzes, daß das Negative ebensosehr positiv ist oder daß das sich Widersprechende sich nicht in Null, in das abstrakte Nichts auflöst, sondern wesentlich nur in die Negation seines *besonderen* Inhalts, oder daß eine solche Negation nicht alle Negation, sondern *die Negation der bestimmten Sache*, die sich auflöst, somit bestimmte Negation ist; daß also im Resultate wesentlich das enthalten ist, woraus es resultiert...” (ibid., SL, in W5: 49). (“The cognition of the logical proposition that the negative is just as much positive, or that the self-contradictory does not dissolve itself into a null-void or the abstract nothing, but rather essentially only is in the negation of its *specific* content, or that some such negation [is] not all negation, but rather *the [specific] negation of a specific* content, which dissolves itself, and hence is a determinate [viz. specific] negation; thus that that which is contained in the result is that from which it results [viz. not some other fundament]”.)

“true”.¹³²) The thing is a composite or ensemble of different and opposed determinations, which the proposition can only name with identity (‘S is P’), omitting half of what is involved. It is the concept rather than the proposition that is the cohesive unit of differentiation in theoretical accounts and can grasp things in their concreteness – if one can accept contradiction, and sideline the residual abstractness of understanding and the host of problems that its propositional form opens.¹³³

For reasons that result from his own criticisms of understanding, critique is not merely negative or sheer rejection of it. “Refutation” in Hegel’s sense is not an out and out dismissal, which would only be an abstract-external critique. Refutation simply means exhibiting that sublime point where a philosophical element transcends the limits, which it claims it is restricted to, thereby showing its truth in the concept.¹³⁴ The problematic negativity of the understanding’s distinctions and its abstractions thus remain an integral feature of the concept itself for the speculative view,¹³⁵ though the difference

¹³² Ibid., EL, in W8: 323, § 172.

¹³³ “In der Tat läßt sich eine spekulative Bestimmung nicht in Form eines solchen Satzes richtig ausdrücken; es soll die Einheit *in* der zugleich *vorhandenen* und *gesetzten* Verschiedenheit gefaßt werden” (ibid., 191. § 88). (“In fact, a speculative determination does not admit of being correctly expressed in the form of a [mere] sentence [or proposition]; the unity *in* the simultaneously *present* and *posited* distinction should be apprehended”). “Dieser Satz, statt ein wahres Denkgesetz zu sein, ist nichts als das Gesetz des *abstrakten Verstandes*. Die *Form des Satzes* widerspricht ihm schon selbst, da ein Satz auch einen Unterschied zwischen Subjekt und Prädikat verspricht, dieser aber das nicht leistet, was seine Form fordert” (ibid., 237. § 115). (“This proposition, rather than being a true law of thought, is nothing other than the law of the *abstract understanding*. The *form of the proposition* [or sentence] already contradicts it [by] itself, because a proposition also promises an difference between subject and predicate, but does not achieve this, which its form requires [viz. because it utters identities instead of the indicated differences]”). “Der Satz *des ausgeschlossenen Dritten* ist der Satz des bestimmten Verstandes, der den Widerspruch von sich abhalten will und, indem er dies tut, denselben begeht. A soll entweder + A oder — A sein; damit ist schon das Dritte, das A ausgesprochen, welches *weder + noch —* ist, und das *ebensowohl auch* als + A und als — A gesetzt ist. Wenn + W 6 Meilen Richtung nach Westen, — W aber 6 Meilen Richtung nach Osten bedeutet und + und — sich aufheben, so bleiben die 6 Meilen Wegs oder Raums, was sie ohne und mit dem Gegensatz waren” (ibid., 244. § 119). (“The proposition of the *excluded middle* is the proposition of the determinate understanding, that would like to hold contradiction away from itself and, by doing this, commits this same [contradiction]. A is suppose to either be + A or — A; the third, the A, is thereby already uttered, which is *neither + nor —*, and that is *just as much* posited *also* + A as — A. If + W means 6 miles to the west, — W to the east and + and — cancel one another, then the 6 miles of the way or space remain, which they were with and without the opposition”).

¹³⁴ In the EL Hegel states: “Das Widerlegen einer Philosophie hat also nur den Sinn, daß deren Schranke überschritten und daß das bestimmte Prinzip derselben zu einem ideellen Moment herabgesetzt wird” (ibid., EL, in W8: 185. § 86, addition 2). (“The refutation of a philosophy thus only has the meaning that its boundaries are surpassed and that the determinate principles of it is displaced to [being] an ideal moment”).

¹³⁵ Hegel states as much openly: “In der spekulativen Philosophie ist der [endliche] Verstand zwar ein Moment, aber ein Moment, bei welchem nicht stehengeblieben wird” (ibid., 106. § 37). “The understanding is admittedly a moment in speculative philosophy, yet a moment at which one does not remain standing”).

of dichotomy is only half of the matter. The speculative view can accommodate understanding's negativity, but understanding cannot tolerate the speculative implications of distinction as identical or its negative derivation of positivity. Hegel calls understanding an "*absolute Macht*" ('absolute might'),¹³⁶ yet this does not mean that he concedes the last word to it. Rather, this means that it is the sole difference-making (and therefore connecting) activity 'in itself' or 'immanently'. It is 'absolute' in the sense that its distinction is an 'immanent' one. Viewing understanding in this way as an *immanent* action that holds relata apart and thereby relates them already means seeing it in a speculative manner that is not visible from the understanding's vantage point regarding itself. The understanding cannot see that the difference, distinction or negation that it makes in its dichotomies *is* the connection or relation of identity stringing the distinguished things together, because of its insistence on abstract identity of its terms; it *insists* that identity and difference are inherently different by themselves or without being related, and that difference cannot at the same time distinguish and connect or identify identities. Indeed they are distinct. But this insistence overlooks that in an *actual* concrete identity and difference, they are not simply different 'in themselves' in the sense of a sheer exclusion of their correlate. Hegel states: 1) "*daß die Identität ein Verschiedenes ist... daß die Identität nicht äußerlich, sondern an ihr selbst, in ihrer Natur dies sei, verschieden zu sein*";¹³⁷ or, "*die Identität ist die Reflexion in sich selbst*";¹³⁸ and 2) that: "*Die Momente des Unterschiedes sind die Identität und der Unterschied selbst*".¹³⁹ Identity is different from difference, and difference is always a specific difference between identities that depend on it; in the articulation of the self-identity of the one, the other is present. Thus they are also different 'in and of' or 'for themselves'. Abstract understanding may insist that '*identity is just identity and difference is just difference! And that is that!*', or that this conceptual dimension and how it relates to actuality is a trivial or uninformative exercise. But if one simply dismisses Hegel's speculative

("In speculative philosophy, the [finite] understanding is admittedly a moment, but [only] a moment at which one does not [just] remain standing [there].")

¹³⁶ Ibid., PS, in W3: 36.

¹³⁷ Ibid., SL, in W6: 41. ("... that the identity is something different [or distinguished]... that identity is not externally [or superficially], but rather in itself, [or] according to its nature, this: to be different".)

¹³⁸ Ibid., 40. ("Identity is reflection in itself".)

¹³⁹ Ibid., 48. ("The moments of difference are themselves identity and difference".)

exorcism of the understanding, then all that remains of accounts are the understanding's allegedly self-evident assertions (viz. no other justification than tautologies). A critical and concrete account of identity and difference begins by specifically determining the conceptual parameters used when one identifies and distinguishes identities and differences in actuality, before simply setting to work. This liquidates the problems that emerge due to intelligible assumptions. And it is also a clear illustration of the concept,¹⁴⁰ which is not a second order view spanning differences, but the specific difference, the 'hold' on the thing in its singularity, a first-order 'distinction that connects' in itself. Thus Hegel's claims are in fact minimal, though demanding; and as trivial as they may appear, if they were not to hold, then neither would the abstract claims understanding makes about 'particular things' presented to it as 'differentiated identities' or 'discrete entities'.

1.3.5. Speculative Consequences: Critical Redefinition of 'Abstract v. Concrete'

Ordinary understanding usually supposes that 'thoughts' or 'concepts' are 'what is abstract', 'things' or 'objects' are 'what is concrete', and abstractions come into being by being abstracted from things. This is why it is so hard for any understanding to come to grips with the 'speculative' view, which defines terms by what they do in their theories. His perhaps 'counterintuitive' view is that thought can be concrete and what is abstract is actually the immediately given or present thing (*Vorstellung*). Hence what abstract theories 'abstract from' are not self-subsistent 'given things', which are already the abstractions or generalities used in common-sense theories, but rather the concepts they use, which are ensembles of differentiations. Such is Hegel's heterodoxy.

¹⁴⁰ For instance, Hegel gives the following concrete-conceptual breakdown of equality and inequality, identity and difference, in the EL: "Die Gleichheit ist eine Identität nur solcher, die *nicht dieselben*, nicht identisch miteinander sind, - und die Ungleichheit ist *Beziehung* der Ungleichen. Beide fallen also nicht in verschiedene Seiten oder Rücksichten gleichgültig auseinander, sondern eine ist ein Scheinen in die andere. Die Verschiedenheit ist daher Unterschied der Reflexion oder *Unterschied an sich selbst, bestimmter Unterschied*" (ibid., EL, in W8: 242, § 118). ("Equality [or sameness] is an identity only of such entities, which are *not the same*, [or] are not identical with one another, - and inequality [or not-sameness] is [the] *relation* of those which are unequal [or not-the-same]. Thus both therefore do not fall apart indifferently into different sides, aspects or viewpoints [of some third thing], but rather [each] one is [but] an appearing in the other. Hence the diversity [between them] is [a] difference of reflection or *difference in itself, specific* [or determinate] difference".)

What is abstract for Hegel is the not one side of a dualism (viz. ‘abstract v. concrete’), but the merely exclusive dualism or disjunction of ‘abstract and concrete’ itself. This point is central for the difference between *Verstand* and *Begriff*. What Hegel means by ‘concept’ is never one abstracted pole of a dualism in opposition with ‘the concrete given’, but rather the specific ‘opposition that connects’ at work in such distinctions. It is only when his account is read with meanings of terms foreign to his account that it becomes an obscene conceptual takeover of what is other to the concept in some ‘all-encompassing system’. (The concept is already the ‘other of itself’.) Hegel specifically characterizes and critiques the ordinary view that concepts are empty ‘generalities’,¹⁴¹ ‘pictures’ or ‘abstractions’ 1) in his *Logic*,¹⁴² but also obliquely 2) in the preface to the *Phenomenology*. His conceptual critique of understanding and the alternative to abstraction he poses do not arbitrarily give another stipulative definition of these things or simply make other assertions about them. Rather, his account simply shows how abstraction works conceptually in accounts that speak of abstraction, or the conceptual aspects at work yet undisclosed in the ordinary understanding of abstraction, which uses the very abstractions it would explain. His view on the ‘conceptual’ procedures in such formulations is that of a ‘grasp’ (*Begriff*) of a matter consisting of various counter-posed elements, which ‘holds’ (*hält*) the elements under consideration

¹⁴¹ For instance, in the section of the *Critique* on the idea, Kant writes, “a concept refers to the object indirectly, by means of a characteristic that may be common to several things” (Immanuel Kant, CPR, 366, A320 / B377). This approach to the concept caused a heated debate in post-Kantian philosophy, for instance in the relation of Hegel’s and Schelling’s critiques of one another.

¹⁴² That he precisely has this picture of what abstraction is in mind is indicated by the following passage, which he follows with a critical remark (see below). He States: “*Es ist nur ein Begriff*”, pflegt man zu sagen, indem man nicht nur die Idee, sondern das sinnliche, räumliche und zeitliche handgreifliche Dasein als etwas gegenüberstellt, das vortrefflicher sei als der Begriff. Das *Abstrakte* hält man dann darum für geringer als das Konkrete, weil aus jenem so viel dergleichen Stoff weggelassen worden sei. Das Abstrahieren hat in dieser Meinung die Bedeutung, daß aus dem Konkreten nur *zu unserem subjektiven Behuf ein* oder *das andere Merkmal* so herausgenommen werden, daß mit dem weglassen so vieler anderer *Eigenschaften* und *Beschaffenheiten* des Gegenstandes denselben an ihren *Werte* und ihre *Würde* nichts benommen sein solle, sondern sie als das *Reelle*, nur auf den anderen Seiten drüben, noch immer als völlig Geltendes gelassen werden, so daß es nur das *Unvermögen* des Verstandes sei, solchen Reichtum nicht aufzunehmen und sich mit der dürftigen Abstraktion begnügen zu müssen...” (G.W.F. Hegel, SL, in W6: 258). (“*It is only a concept*”, one might say, by not only opposing the idea, but also the sensible, spatial and temporal manually graspable existence as something more admirable than the concept. One holds that which is *abstract* more lowly than the concrete, because so much of the same material has been left out of it. Abstracting has, in this opinion, the significance that *one or the other feature is taken out for our subjective purposes*, that nothing of their value and dignity should be messed up by leaving out so many other *properties* and *qualities* of the object, but rather as the *real* they are only left out on the side over there, still just as valid as ever, such that it is only an because of *incapacity* of the understanding that it does not take up such riches and has to be satisfied with such impoverished abstractions”).

still in their oppositions such that ‘common’ features come into abstract relief; yet understanding (*ver-stehen*) only registers the results of this hold, not what goes into it.

1) In the *Logic* Hegel opposes the common image of abstraction, which would have it that abstraction is held to one side of a distinction, while the sensible, the spatial and temporal existence is held in opposition to it on the other. This is an abstract picture of abstraction because it itself already uses the abstractions it should account for in the dichotomies it uses (‘identity and difference’, ‘abstract and concrete’, ‘subjective and objective’ etc.) in its own account of abstraction. It begs the question rather than explicating its terms *in light of what they do in the procedure*. Hegel writes:

Das abstrahierende Denken ist daher nicht als bloßes Auf-die-Seite-Stellen des sinnlichen Stoffes zu betrachten, welcher dadurch in seiner Realität keinen Eintrag leide...¹⁴³

In accordance with his comments on the concept cited above, he continues:

... sondern es ist vielmehr das Aufheben *und* die Reduktion desselben als bloßer *Erscheinung* auf das *Wesentliche*, welches nur im *Begriff* sich manifestiert.¹⁴⁴

‘Abstraction’ concretely grasped is the arrangement of the field of elements such that they count *as* ‘features’ of whatever thing is in question (e.g. a ‘subject/substance’). It is a conceptual *procedure* or *process* that distinguishes them negatively *and* thereby at the same time places them into positive relation to one another; it takes up elements *and* reduces them to what they ‘count as’ (e.g. ‘the apparent and the essential’). The concept is not one side of this dualism, but rather the Janus-head arrangement of these different sides. What outruns or eludes the understanding’s perspective, as one side seen from the perspective of the other, is simply this internal organization of the field of elements. The concrete-speculative grasp of abstraction is thus not an esoteric-mystic insight, but simply accounts for the relation of the different elements to one another in their coincidence or actuality, in which they consequently are what they count as or appear to be.

2) Hegel makes the same instructive criticism in his discussion of the mathematical mode of cognition, in the aforementioned preface.¹⁴⁵ There the

¹⁴³ Ibid., 258. (“Abstracting-thinking is thus not to be considered as a mere leaving-to-the-side of sensible stuff, which would thereby suffer no entry in its reality...”)

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. Italics mine. (“... rather it is much more so to the surpassing and the reduction of the same as mere *appearance* to the *essential*, which only manifests itself in the concept”.)

homogeneous formal identity that is employed as the quantitative ‘stuff’ of the mathematical formula or equation only leaves room for difference of *degree* (‘magnitude’). It is indifferent towards qualitative differences, which it excludes yet presupposes – hence its ‘abstractness’. For instance, the area of a room in meters as ‘25’, and ‘25 grapefruits there’, are ‘the same magnitude’, though they clearly entail actual differences. Again, the concept is not a generality, and what is abstracted *from* it by this ‘magnitude’ is not the given particularity of the things that ‘abstraction’ itself is usually compared to or contrasted with. What is abstracted from or indifferently left out of the account in ‘magnitude’ is that the various moments are posed together in such a way *by* being distinguished, or the concept that holds these distinctions together. He writes:

es ist die Größe, der unwesentliche Unterschied, den die Mathematik allein betrachtet. Daß es der Begriff ist, der den Raum in seine Dimension entzweit *und* die Verbindungen derselben und in denselben bestimmt, *davon* abstrahiert sie; sie betrachtet z.B. nicht das Verhältnis der Linie zur Fläche; und wo sie den Durchmesser des Kreises mit der Peripherie vergleicht, stößt sie auf die Inkommensurabilität derselben, d.h. ein Verhältnis des Begriffs, ein Unendliches, das ihrer Bestimmungen entflieht.¹⁴⁶

So what is overlooked in the formal-quantitative abstractions of understanding is the very operation that puts the various elements into ‘mathematical’ relation in the first place, such that quantitative difference is the only ‘kind’ of difference that ‘counts’ as ‘valid’ for its variety of cognition, resulting in a ‘figure’. What connects line and surface, diameter and circumference (‘area’) is their very negative distinction itself. This is the concept (*Begriff*), neither as distinct from the ‘concrete’, nor as engulfing or smothering the concrete, but as what is inherently distinct or distinguishing-differentiating in itself and therefore the concrete in itself. (Hopefully even the most ardent ‘philosopher of difference’ or ‘the concrete’ could be at peace with this.) The positivity of the ‘substantial’ figure generated is therefore not ‘given’ as the understanding would have it,

¹⁴⁵ Of course for Hegel abstraction is not really a problem in mathematics itself. It only becomes problematic when the mathematical mode of cognition (or geometrical identity) is used in substance-metaphysical accounts *outside* of mathematics, or as a substitute for conceptual method in philosophy.

¹⁴⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, PS, in W3: 45. Italics mine. (“It is magnitude alone, the inessential difference, that mathematics considers. That it is the concept that divides space into its dimensions *and* determines the connections of the same in them – *this* is what it [mathematics] abstracts from; e.g. it does not consider the relation of line to surface; and where it compares the diameter of the circle with the periphery, it bumps into the incommensurability of them, i.e. a relation of the concept, an *infinite* that escapes its determinations”).

but only emerges through negative distinction itself. In holding the elements together in the equation, however, *understanding* does not see this, because its insistence on abstract self-identity disqualifies ‘difference’ from visibility as the identity-conferring connection of different things. For understanding, there remains an infinitesimal blind-spot or gap (*‘parallax’*) in the equation where difference apparently lies, ‘behind’ the identity that understanding would think it with, and which appears to it as a liminal point seen from its calculation (π , ‘squaring the circle’ etc.). In standard philosophies of understanding this blind-spot generated at the interstices of the understanding’s own conceptual parameters is projected into infinite distance (*‘transcendence’*) as a ‘beyond’ – for instance in the way abstract understanding represents ‘the real’ as ‘infinitely distant’ (e.g. in the manner of a Kantian ‘regulative ideal’, ‘thing in itself’ etc.) or knowledge of it as an ‘infinite task’. Yet what the subject matter is at bottom, as it were, is simply the negative unity or ensemble of distinguished determinations (viz. the concept), not some ‘exterior positivity’ or fundament of under-standing. Hegel’s heterodoxy must be borne in mind when reading some of his more jarring claims about the concept. He claims: “Dasselbe, was ihm [the understanding] in sinnlicher Hülle Gegenstand ist, ist es uns in seiner wesentlichen Gestalt, als reiner Begriff”;¹⁴⁷ and: “Indem wir so beide Momente [of the thing] in ihrer unmittelbaren Einheit erhalten... [it is] *der Begriff*, welcher die unterschiedenen Momente als unterschiedene trägt...”¹⁴⁸ It must be recalled that Hegel is getting at the theoretical component already active in the stances he addresses, which are not his own. He is not proposing any self-subsistent or self-identical thing in place of the understanding’s ‘substances’, ‘subjects’, ‘objects’ etc., but dismantling suppositions of them. Nothing is reduced to the concept. Rather, the conceptual frame at work in ordinary understanding is simply revealed, as well as its implicit metaphysical dimension.

1.3.5.1. Speculative Alternatives: Concept – Thing – Contradiction

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 134. (“That which for the understanding is an object in a sensible cover is for us, in its essential form, as a pure concept”.)

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 110. (“By getting both moments in this manner in their immediate oneness... [it is] *the concept*, which bears the distinguished moments as distinguished”.)

There are nonetheless ontological consequences that follow from the epistemological critiques Hegel raises. This will bring the post-metaphysical or deflationary readings of Hegel that try to make him into a Kantian into contrast with a Hegel that is deflationary in another, more radical sense: Hegel's critique of understanding arguably deflates the autonomy or self-subsistence of 'subjects and objects' that understanding supposes. Even though Hegel admittedly never wrote a text entitled 'my refutation of understanding and substitute-ontology', a radically deflationary ontology can be neatly derived from his comments on understanding and its fascination with abstract self-identity (' $a = a$ '). Describing what Hegel calls the "Hartnäckigkeit" ('obstinacy') of the understanding, he states that it tries to hold onto the thing "*als ein mit sich Identisches, sich in sich nicht Widersprechendes*".¹⁴⁹ It can be safely inferred from the tone of this characterization – and is no surprise by now – that the thing is therefore *not simply* self-identical, for Hegel, but that the opposite is also in some sense the case; as he emphasizes throughout his texts, a 'concrete' being is 'differentiated in itself'. So in some sense or respect the thing must also be *non-identical* with itself (' $a \neq a$ '), or *be* a 'contradiction'. His following remarks on the character of concrete things as *antinomies* (a term taken from Kant) are helpful for dispelling the impression of 'panlogism' and demonstrating his ontological heterodoxy.

Hegel's comments on what he takes to have been the profound insight of the Kantian ('cosmological') 'antinomies of pure reason' yields the speculative alternative to thing- or res-ontologies of the understanding. In Kant, the treatment of antinomy injects what appear to be contradictions in the world (when reason goes beyond 'possible experience' or the 'finite human intellect') with a subjective perspectivism that Hegel finds problematic. The third antinomy of 'freedom versus natural determinism',¹⁵⁰ for instance, deals with the conflict between the fact that human subjects appear to be causally determined as physical bodies in nature (*Phenomena*), although we also experience ourselves as free inwardly as 'moral beings' (*Noumena*). The apparent contradiction is resolved by imposing the dichotomy of '*phenomena* and *noumena*' that

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., EL, in W8: 235, § 113. (The problematic blindness and "obstinacy" of the understanding consists in its attempt to grab hold of the thing "as a [thing] identical with itself, not contradicting itself in itself".)

¹⁵⁰ See Immanuel Kant, CPR, 442ff., A 406 / B 433ff.

Kant's transcendental idealism offers.¹⁵¹ He would have it both ways, by using an *epistemological* distinction: as phenomena in nature, humans may appear as caused, and yet apart from the phenomenal manner in which classical physics regards bodies (as *res extensa*), humans may also be thought of as *noumena*, which may not be caused ('free') beyond appearance. The consequence of Kant's treatment is a partitioning of the opposed dimensions of the contradiction as two different perspectives on the "same thing", as he would have it, which can be taken in "different relations" (either as 'thing in itself' or as appearance 'for us').¹⁵² It can be 'seen from two different sides', as it were, and so the thing comes out of this juggling process of contradictions unscathed and internally consistent.¹⁵³ What is important for the Kantian problematic is that these 'opposites' can be thought "without contradiction",¹⁵⁴ when the supposition is made that there is an identical, external, third, 'same thing' that they are both sides of. And keeping the self-identical 'same thing' as presented differently in its sides means forgoing the possibility of *real* contradictions, or means admitting only of contradictions in thought or in terms rather than in things (*contradictio de re* or *eo ipso*). What this 'same thing' would be, over and above what it is 'in itself' and 'for us' (if not simply an intelligible methodological supposition), remains a telling mystery.

¹⁵¹ Of course this presents a terribly simplified view of the Kantian problematic here, as elsewhere. Yet within this thesis, the matter unfortunately can be gone into in no greater detail.

¹⁵² Kant writes: "...Natur also und Freiheit eben demselben Dinge, aber in verschiedener Beziehung, einmal als Erscheinung, das andre mal als einem Dinge an sich selbst ohne Widerspruch beigelegt werden können" (ibid., 108-9, 344). ("... thus nature and freedom can be imputed to the same thing without contradiction, but in different relations, once as appearance and the other time as things in themselves".)

¹⁵³ Kant writes: "So kann die Handlung in Ansehung der Kausalität der Vernunft als ein erster Anfang, in Ansehung der Reihe der Erscheinungen aber doch zugleich als ein bloß subordinierter Anfang angesehen, und ohne Widerspruch in jenem Betracht als frei, in diesem (da sie bloß Erscheinung ist) als der Naturnotwendigkeit unterworfen, angesehen werden" (ibid., *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik*, 111, 346-7). ("In this way the action can be seen with respect to causality of reason as a first beginning, but with respect to the series of appearances at the same time as a merely subordinated beginning, and without contradiction in that consideration as free, in this (as it is mere appearance) as subjected to natural necessity".)

¹⁵⁴ Kant writes: "alle Handlungen vernünftiger Wesen, so fern sie Erscheinungen sind (in irgend einer Erfahrung angetroffen werden), stehen unter der Naturnotwendigkeit; eben dieselbe Handlungen aber, bloß respective auf das vernünftige Subjekt, und dessen Vermögen, nach bloßer Vernunft zu handeln, sind frei" (ibid., 109-110, 345). ("... all actions of rational being, to the extent they are appearances (encountered in any experience), are subject to natural necessity; but just in this action, merely respectively to the rational subject and its capacity are free to act according to mere reason".)

Hegel calls this shifting of the burden of contradiction onto mind or spirit through epistemology Kant's "Zärtlichkeit für die weltlichen Dinge".¹⁵⁵ Hegel also wants to 'have it both ways', albeit without the epistemological baggage of a supposed 'same thing' behind the different sides, and this means admitting contradictions not just in thoughts, but also in things. He inverts the assumption that because one can have different perspectives of a thing that is viewed as the same, the thing is the same in itself and only the perspectives of it are different. Seen speculatively, the actual ('same') thing can also be different 'in itself' or be the *difference* between the sides. What he indicates regarding the importance of the Kantian antinomy is telling, because these comments show that his critique of understanding does more than understanding and epistemology. He writes:

Die wahre und positive Bedeutung der Antinomien [Kants] besteht überhaupt nun darin, daß alles Wirkliche entgegengesetzte Bestimmungen in sich enthält und daß somit das Erkennen und näher das Begreifen eines Gegenstandes eben nur soviel heißt, sich dessen als einer konkreten Einheit entgegengesetzter Bestimmungen bewußt zu werden.¹⁵⁶

Hegel is obviously extending 'Kant's insight' for his own purposes, but it is nonetheless significant for clarifying his view: *everything actual*, or everything that actually is, contains antinomies; this fits with his critical statements about what is concrete as being internally differentiated, and that 'becoming conscious of this' is what it means to grasp the thing concretely. Hegel elsewhere takes this further and poses the fact that op-position occurs as a condition of a concrete thing's existence, contrasted to the sheer self-identical abstractions of understanding. He similarly states:

...es ist überall gar nichts, worin nicht der Widerspruch, d.i. entgegengesetzte Bestimmungen aufgezeigt werden können und müssen; das Abstrahieren des Verstandes ist das gewaltsame Festhalten an einer Bestimmtheit, eine Anstrengung, das Bewußtsein der anderen [Bestimmtheit], die darin liegt, zu verdunkeln und zu entfernen.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, EL, in W8: 126, § 48. ("... tenderness for the things of the world".)

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 128, § 48. ("The true and positive significance of the Antinomies [of Kant] consists as such in the fact that everything actual contains opposed determinations in itself and that the cognition [of it] and better conceptually grasping an object really just means as much as becoming conscious of it as of a concrete unity of opposed determinations".)

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 194, § 89.

Alles, was uns umgibt, kann als ein Beispiel des Dialektischen betrachtet werden.¹⁵⁸

These statements about the contradictory character of existent things shed light on why, according to Hegel, the understanding's self-identical generalities cannot suffice for accounting for things concretely. A concrete or determinate subject matter consists of multiple, different features; hence it cannot be subsumed under the understanding's one-dimensional generalities (e.g. 'subject' or 'object'), without this subsumption (which is indifferent to its differences) effacing the particular differences that make it what it specifically is.¹⁵⁹ While it needs to grasp these differences, identical generalities are all that understanding has at its disposal, and this is why it is blind to the actual particular thing in its singularity. The slippage of generality and elusiveness of the particular is evident even from the understanding's use of 'the particular', which becomes a generality in its hands: it is thereby made into a category that names *every* particular as equally 'a particular', though grasping particularity clearly should not have this result. It should *involve* the precise extent to which the particular does not entirely dissolve into or slip through the cracks of generality's indifference, without effacing it, while still falling under the generality in *some sense* such as to be comprehended; thus its singularity is a point of resistance in the generality (e.g. what Schelling calls a "nie Aufgehender Rest"¹⁶⁰ or Adorno calls "das Nichtidentische"¹⁶¹). *Contradiction* is required for grasping concrete singularity because of the problems inherent to the understanding's abstract way of thinking about things. Seen from the perspective of the understanding's generalities, the singularity resistant to generality would have to be the *non-identical* in the particular identity, or the point within the generality it falls under in which the general 'contradicts itself' or deviates from its identical character in and of itself. While this clearly marks a deviation from Kant, admitting contradiction into the account of concretely grasped

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 174, § 81, addition. ("Everything around us can be regarded as an example of that which is dialectical")

¹⁵⁹ For instance, the differences between several particular cats are effaced in the indifference of the generality 'cat' when they are all equally considered tokens of the type 'cat'; what makes each cat the particular concrete cat that it is, is that it has not-cat features that 'contradict' the generality 'cat', as it were, such as 'diabetic', 'naughty' or 'my aunt's'. These particulars that evade generality must be factored in without being effaced, which the understanding cannot do.

¹⁶⁰ F.W.J. Schelling, *Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1997), 32.

¹⁶¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 15.

things does cut the purity of the abstraction, as it were, that Kant rightly warns his metaphorical dove about. A concrete grasp means triangulating the moments involved in the thing: the *Allgemeine* (universal), *Besondere* (particular) and *Einzelne* (singularized in relation to universals and particulars),¹⁶² where the third is simply the negative unity or inherent tension of the first and the second: the thing itself.¹⁶³ Grasping the thing as *being* an ‘antinomy’ means that ‘negativity and positivity’ of ‘determination and existence’ do not just fall apart as two ‘sides’ or ‘views’ of the ‘same thing’ (e.g. Kant’s view and Schelling’s ontology – see 3.2.), but rather are each collapsed or mediated into each other: the negative resides in the resultant positive content of the thing as differentiated.¹⁶⁴ This is in fact the account Hegel gives of “the thing” as being the difference between its properties, between ‘itself and itself’ or as intrinsically multiple (see part 4).¹⁶⁵ The characteristic feature of ‘real things’ as resisting immediate human desires or individual wills therefore is not, on the speculative view, due to their being a transcendent ‘x’ totally apart from subjects (‘things in themselves’) or pressing back against them (ob-jecting). Rather, what resists understanding is simply the immanent difference between perspectives on the ‘same object’ or the differences inherent to the thing: its deviant or anarchic, singularizing particularity. Characterizing the thing as contradiction also helps think it as having intrinsically ‘become’ what it is in itself (‘*eingewordenes*’), by deflating the ‘subject’, which supposedly stands behind every phenomenon or before every action, into a mere ‘topic’ of discourse (or ‘import’).¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² See G.W.F. Hegel, SL, in W6: 273ff.

¹⁶³ E.g. *Goethe’s deathbed* might illustrate this: it involves the universal type ‘bed’, the particular, immediately presentable, bed that has a significant history connected to ‘Goethe’ and is named by those universals, and the tension between the two which makes it the *only* bed of its kind.

¹⁶⁴ For speculative thought, unlike in the understanding with its formalist distinctions of form and content, Hegel writes: “gehört im begreifenden Denken das Negative dem Inhalte selbst an und ist sowohl als seine *immanente* Bewegung und Bestimmung wie als *Ganzes* derselben das *Positive*. Als Resultat aufgefaßt, ist es das aus dieser Bewegung herkommende, das *bestimmte* Negative und hiermit ebenso ein positiver Inhalt” (ibid., PS, in W3: 57) (“The negative belongs to the content itself, in conceptually grasping thought, and it is also positive as its *immanent* movement and determination as a *whole* of the same. Comprehended as a result, it is the determinate negative coming forth from this movement and hereby just as well a positive content”).

¹⁶⁵ See the EL, in W8: § 130.

¹⁶⁶ Hegel writes: “Indem der Begriff das eigene Selbst des Gegenstandes ist, das sich als *sein Werden* darstellt, ist es nicht ein ruhendes Subjekt, das unbewegt die Akzidenzen trägt, sondern der sich bewegende und seine Bestimmungen in sich zurücknehmende Begriff. In dieser Bewegung geht jenes ruhende Subjekt selbst zugrunde... Der feste Boden, den das Rasonieren an dem ruhenden Subjekte hat, schwankt also, und nur diese Bewegung selbst wird der Gegenstand... Der Inhalt ist somit in der Tat nicht mehr Prädikat des

1.3.5.2. Speculative Alternatives: Parallax

Slavoj Žižek's reading of Hegel departs from the aforementioned critique of understanding and its consequences regarding the concrete thing as a contradictory bundle of determinations ('antinomy'). He does this with his speculative appropriation of the concept of 'parallax' as inherent 'ontological tension' or 'incompleteness' and thereby offers a tidy yet radically deflationary Alter-Hegel. Hegel already goes to great lengths to collapse the understanding's generalities. Yet Žižek's concept of parallax is perhaps an even more effective term for naming a deflationary ontological unit than 'contradiction', because of the connotation the term carries with (a displacement) and because it is not such a pejoratively loaded term. The concept appears in *The Parallax View*, yet seems to result from earlier considerations about the understanding. In *The Indivisible Remainder*, Žižek makes the following similar statement about the relation of understanding to reason, which connects the critique of understanding to antinomies and ontology in the way he later designates as 'parallax'. Again, leaving understanding 'behind' is not a move 'beyond' it. He writes:

Hegel does *not* supplement Kant's logic of abstract Understanding, which gets struck on the threshold of the Unknowable, with *another* logic or Reason capable of penetrating Things-in-themselves; what Hegel effectively accomplishes is merely a kind of reflective inversion by means of which the very feature (mis)perceived by Kant as an epistemological obstacle [viz. the gap between 'us' and 'things in themselves'] turns into a positive ontological determination. The 'unknowableness' of the subject *qua* Thing is simply the way Understanding (mis)perceives the fact that the subject 'is' a non-substantial void – when Kant asserts that the transcendental subject is an unknowable, empty X, all one has to do is confer an ontological status on this epistemological determination: the subject *is* the empty Nothingness of pure self-relating...¹⁶⁷

Subjekts, sondern ist die Substanz, ist das Wesen und der Begriff dessen, wovon die Rede ist" (ibid., 57-8). ("By being the own self of the object, that presents itself as its own *becoming*, the concept is not a resting subject that bears accidents in an unmoved manner, but rather the self-moving concept retrieving its determinations in itself. Every resting subject perishes in this movement... The stable ground, that such reckoning [*understanding*] has in the resting subject, hence staggers and only this movement itself is the object... The content is thus in fact no longer the predicate of the subject, but rather the substance, it is the essence and the concept of that which is being discussed [*i.e. the 'subject matter' or 'topic'*]").

¹⁶⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*, (London: Verso, 1996), 124.

Žižek clearly takes at least as much liberty with Kant's thought here as Hegel does above, but his sense is clear. The standard Kantian position assumes that what is real apart from any relation to 'our access conditions to it' is something 'beyond' them, which can be thought but not known (*noumenon*), while what can be presented 'here' and hence known by human intellects is just a bundle of different appearances (*phenomena*) of that *noumenal* 'X': different views on the 'same thing'. 'For us', the abstract or empty-formal 'X' (concept of the 'transcendental object') that unites the appearances of the thing for an equally empty 'I' is allegedly a merely epistemological affair;¹⁶⁸ the *noumenal* may be taken negatively as a limit-concept for unifying phenomena.¹⁶⁹ This implicitly entails withholding the status 'real' from the gap between 'us and the real', by assuming 'the real is beyond its appearance for us', or on the other side of the gap. Žižek's view restores the status of the gap and thus inverts the Kantian epistemological question, 'how must human subjectivity be oriented such that the experiences we are having of things are possible for us', into an ontological one: "How should reality be structured so that (something like) subjectivity can emerge in it?"¹⁷⁰ He collapses the epistemological gap by acknowledging it. Appearances of the thing are not 'incomplete' by comparison to something beyond; the thing *is* definitively incomplete taken 'in itself'. Like Hegel, Žižek turns to Kant's antinomies to deflate the thing and its ontological status.¹⁷¹

Žižek's concept of *parallax* also develops the re-interpretation of 'understanding and reason'. The ordinary concept of *parallax* bears an inherent perspectivism reminiscent of the understanding (e.g. 'the same thing can be viewed from two sides'). The OED definition of parallax is: "the effect whereby the position or direction of an object appears to differ when viewed from different positions, e.g., through the viewfinder and the lens of a camera". Žižek writes: "The standard definition of parallax

¹⁶⁸ See Immanuel Kant, CPR, 160, A109.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 317, B7.

¹⁷⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil: Towards A New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2014), 19.

¹⁷¹ Žižek writes: "Kant's notion of freedom implies a discontinuity in the texture of natural causes, that is, a free act which is ultimately grounded in itself and, as such, cannot be accounted for as an effect of the preceding causal network—in this sense, a free act *does imply* a kind of hole in the texture of phenomenal reality". Žižek adheres strictly to Hegel's speculative view laid out in the preceding section that what is actual in the thing is the gap between its appearance and its 'in itself' (i.e. the 'thing' itself is the gap between the appearances of itself); "phenomenal reality is thus incomplete, non-All, a fact confirmed by the antinomies of pure reason which arise the moment our reason tries to comprehend phenomenal reality in its totality" (ibid., 20.)

is: the *apparent* displacement of an object (the shift of its position against a background), caused by a change in observational position that provides a new line of sight”.¹⁷² This understanding of the term supposes that there is a ‘same subtending basis’ of the different appearances-view, though it is only ever given in different appearances-views; it stops short at an intelligible perspectivism. The resistance of the thing to different views is supposedly because there is some substantial, self-identical or free-standing something ‘out there’ behind the appearances; thus this view abstractly reduces the ‘different perspectives/sides’ to the ‘same thing’. Examples of parallax, which Žižek names, may be taken from scientific discourse, for instance, “the wave-particle duality” of light in physics.¹⁷³ Seen from one methodological perspective, or by measuring light in one way, it shows all the signs of being a particle, yet by measuring it in another way and with another method it shows all the characteristics of a wave; both are equally ‘light’, yet ‘the same thing’ is neither immediately given in either case, nor is it positively given as both; it only appears either as one or the other. This ‘gap in perspective on the same phenomenon’ tellingly appears at the interstices of methodological suppositions,¹⁷⁴ as the ‘same thing’ (‘X’) behind the differences is only ever suggested by and through the differences themselves. Žižek’s version of the term makes a move analogous to Hegel’s treatment of the ‘Either-Or’ and Kant’s antinomy above. It side-steps the abstract supposition of the ‘same thing’ with exclusive appearances, by radicalizing the differential ‘gap of perspective’ into a ‘gap in the thing’. There only comes to be a substantial ‘something’ that lies ‘beyond’ appearance to the extent that there is a

¹⁷² Ibid., *Italics mine*.

¹⁷³ Slavoj Žižek, *Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2009), 7.

¹⁷⁴ A good example of the supposition that it is ‘the same thing’ perceived, standing behind the ‘gap’ of (methodological) viewpoints, is the ‘atom’ regarded by the different the views of ‘the chemist’ and the ‘physicist’. (The alternative to this view is jettisoning the supposition, and taking the actual or concrete thing to be the gap or disjunctive synthesis of the different viewpoints.) For instance, Thomas Kuhn writes: “An investigator who hoped to learn something about what scientists took the atomic theory to be asked a distinguished physicist and an eminent chemist whether a single atom of helium was or was not a molecule. Both answered without hesitation, but their answers were not the same. For the chemist the atom of helium was a molecule because it behaved like one with respect to the kinetic theory of gases. For the physicist, on the other hand the helium atom was not a molecule because it displayed no molecular spectrum. Presumably both men were talking of the same particle but they were viewing it through their own research training and practice. Their experience in problem-solving told them what a molecule must be. Undoubtedly their experiences had had much in common, but they did not, in this case, tell the two specialists the same thing” (Kuhn, Thomas. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996, 50-1).

divergence or disparity between the viewpoints witnessing it. This is not to say that ‘the thing’ is simply a fiction or illusion, which would be an abstract negation. Rather, it a homologous treatment to that of identity and difference in the speculative concept, accepting that the thing *actually* appears only through different appearances or that only the different appearances appear rather than the thing that is therefore intrinsically mediated; it then makes a different ontological claim about what this means for the ‘same thing’ in its character as ‘real’. The usual roles understanding assigns to differences between appearances and the identity of the regarded ‘X’ are inverted, making the very *division* of the different appearances into the genuinely indivisible-real core that is viewed differently from its different (mediated) sides, rather than some identity beyond differences: the individual thing is indivisible only because it is already divided; the difference between the views is itself the invariant element uniting the different views of it; the point of resistance that actually makes up the real is difference. Thus Žižek’s version saves the ‘differences’ and by denying that it is an exclusively self-identical and simply positive ‘X’ without difference, such as abstract understanding supposes.

‘Parallax’ reflects the thing’s inherent difference or mediation, rather than glossing over it. If one abstractly isolates and closely examines the object in search of its inner thingly core, the identical center-point at which the thing puts up its resistance as ob-ject cannot be found physically. If one searches for objectivity as such (‘the real’) in the heap of particular objects that make up empirically given reality, then it appears to be a mere fiction. Yet “the parallax of the *Real*” avoids this relativism without reverting to metaphysical suppositions of the understanding. The ‘real’, Žižek writes, “has no positive-substantial consistency, it is just the gap between the multitude of perspectives on it”, or the interstices of relations and mediations. In the case of the search for the subject, person or ‘mind in the brain’ too, the similar “parallax of *neurobiology*” appears: “the realization that, when we look behind the face into the skull, we find nothing; ‘there’s no one at home’ there, just piles of gray matter”.¹⁷⁵ The ‘subject’ is not a ‘thing’ that can be ‘found’ or immediately given in a way that excludes the social relations and

¹⁷⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Parallax View*, 7.

mediations in which it emerges.¹⁷⁶ This version of ‘parallax’ deflates the understanding’s duality of ‘subject and object’, to the extent that it inverts the assumption regarding the identity of the ‘same thing’ in relation to its different modes. Žižek writes:

The philosophical twist to be added [to the standard understanding of parallax], of course, is that the observed difference is not simply “subjective,” due to the fact that the same object which exists “out there” is seen from two different stances, or points of view. It is rather that, as Hegel would have put it, subject and object are inherently “mediated,” so that an “epistemological” shift in the subject’s point of view always reflects an “ontological” shift in the object itself... the subject’s gaze is always-already inscribed into the perceived object itself, in the guise of its “blind spot,” that which is “in the object more than the object itself,” the point from which the object itself returns the gaze. “Sure, the picture is in my eye, but I, I am [as a structural position] also in the picture”... the reality I see is never “whole”—not because a large part of it eludes me, but because it contains a stain, a blind spot, which indicates my inclusion in it.¹⁷⁷

Just as Hegel’s speculative view of ‘*Wesen*’ neither reduces appearance to essence nor essence to appearance, so too does ‘parallax’ avoid a one-sided reduction of ‘subject and object’. Both sides are reduced to the other, are inherently relational or are only self-identically separate in abstraction from their concrete disjunction. All that is lost in the shift from understanding to *parallax* (or *Begriff*) is the inert concept of ‘reality’ as a ‘res’, which in the final analysis is a mere generality. This liquidates the intelligible semblance that both poles of the opposition are free-standing or are ‘sides’ of some separate ‘third thing’: the two poles are only two sides of the difference between them. Making *parallax* into the basic ontological unit exposes the expectation of finding objectivity in the given or the subject in the skull as a *category error*, because actuality or personhood is not of

¹⁷⁶ The perspective of social context (production, circulation, exchange and consumption) perhaps more effectively illustrates the parallax-nature of the thing emerging at interstices of perspectives or relations. The example Žižek gives is of an object of exchange that traverses different social classes as an object of exchange, ‘pork’/‘pig’. He writes: “Is not a nice linguistic example of the parallax between production and consumption that of the different use of “pork” and “pig” in modern English? “Pig” refers to animals with whom farmers deal, while “pork” is the meat we consume—and the class dimension is clear here: “pig” is the old Saxon word, since the Saxons were the underprivileged farmers, while “pork” comes from French “porque,” used by the privileged Norman conquerors who mostly consumed the pigs raised by farmers” (ibid., *Parallax View*, 393.). Ordinary common sense would have it that the sense of these two terms designate the same single referent that is ontologically sound in itself, though it is designated differently from different perspectives of language (dialect), class etc. The ‘same thing’ (‘X’) is always another, third designation, not the pork-pig thing itself. With the explicit question of what the ‘in itself’ of the referent *is*, the understanding has nothing to fall back on but generalities – unless the pork-pig *is* just the empty ‘X’, gap or parallax. Difference – or in this case, social antagonism – is the ‘thing itself’ that liquidates the common-sense ontological understanding or supposition of ‘what is’.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

the variety of being of a thing. A similar consequence follows regarding the standard understanding of ‘form and content’, which supposes that the form of thought is empty and that its content must be given. The “consequence of the move from Kant to Hegel”, Žižek writes (or the shift from *Verstand* to *Begriff*), is that “the very gap between content and form is reflected back into the content itself, as an indication that the content is not all...”¹⁷⁸ Form and content coincide in a reciprocal reduction to the content as inherently differentiated or mediated: *parallax* casts the subject matter in “inherent tension” or “non-coincidence” of the thing with itself (“non-All”), which makes it ‘thing’ in the first place. It is thus the name to “designate this gap which separates the One from itself”, not a ‘one’ that antedates its division.¹⁷⁹ The ramifications of *parallax* are therefore at once radically ‘anti-metaphysical’, if one understands ‘metaphysics’ to mean the discourse of the ‘real nature of things beyond their appearances’, yet yields an ontological account.

In *Less than Nothing* too, Žižek makes a similar point that is relevant for the speculative critique of understanding: the distinction of ‘existence’ opposed to ‘thought’, which central to intelligible objections to Hegel’s speculative outlook (such as Schelling’s below). The following passage contains an important critical observation on what is apparently Hölderlin’s view regarding the relation of reflective thought and (pre-reflective) being, which would have it that being as *pre-reflective* cannot be grasped conceptually, but rather is always presupposed by reflection and therefore can only be alluded to poetically. Žižek writes:

...what he [Hegel] adds to Hölderlin is a purely formal shift of transposing the tragic gap that separates the reflecting subject from pre-reflexive being into this being itself. Once we do this, the problem becomes its own solution: it is our very division from absolute being which unites us with it, since this division is immanent to Being... Being as the inaccessible pre-reflexive Ground disappears; more precisely, it reveals itself as the ultimate reflexive category, as the result of the self-relating division [i.e. what is the figment of reflection here is a ‘Being’ beyond our grasp]: Being emerges when division divides itself from itself. Or, to put it in Hölderlin’s terms, the narrative is not merely the subject coping with its division from Being, it is Simultaneously the story Being is telling itself about itself.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing* (London: Verso, 2012), 306.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, *Parallax View*, 17.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., *Less Than Nothing*, 15.

Again, ‘being and thought’, like ‘subject and object’, are inherently mediated through one another; the gap does not just separate the subject from the actual object, but rather to the extent that it is actual, the understanding’s distinction also already connects them, is ‘cancelled’ or ‘surpassed’ (*Aufgehoben*). Žižek’s reading, like Hegel’s critique of understanding, thereby shows how the usual allegedly anti-metaphysical position is in fact implicitly metaphysical, and thus the former pose a radically deflationary alternative. What would in fact be “metaphysical” here would be “clinging to the notion of a pre-reflexive Ground” against thought in the first place: “what is properly-metaphysical is the very presupposition of a substantial Being beyond the process of (self-)differentiation”;¹⁸¹ hence claiming that ‘metaphysics is impossible’ is not to exorcise thought of it. The notion of ‘parallax’ enables Hegel’s reader to name this phenomenon, to gain an immanent grasp of the problem and to critique such allegedly realist positions as in fact covertly metaphysical positions. Admittedly, the danger that ‘antinomy’, ‘contradiction’ or *parallax* could be *understood* as a fundament does threaten the speculative alternative, and Hegel has been understood this way.¹⁸² This remains a constant threat to speculative thought, and to a certain extent these considerations do remain theoretical-conceptual observations for the sake of the critique of understanding. ‘Beyond’ understanding and its critique, there is no *general* account of singularity. Actual cases from history, politics, etc. would have to be discussed for a ‘more concrete’ account.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 16

¹⁸² This fatefully occurs in Adolf Trendelenburg’s critique of Hegel in his *Logische Untersuchungen*, where Trendelenburg turns ‘the dialectic’ in a ‘lowest common denominator’ or a basic ‘sub-stance’ of the text, reading it as a giant series-argument of moments that follow one another towards an end. It is no surprise that Hegel ‘fails’ in the hands of such an interpretation, and it is an irony of tragic proportions that Hegel would be read as a giant philosophy of the understanding – that he himself criticized – and was criticized then for the ‘illegitimate’ reference of his abstractions to ‘the empirical’. What is worse is that this very formulation is often that which is tacitly taken up by ‘Hegelians’ themselves in trying to defend against such criticisms.

CHAPTER 2

COMPREHENSION AS ‘UNINTELLIGIBLE’ ALTERNATIVE TO UNDERSTANDING

2.1. Prelude: The Speculative Pre-History of the Retroactivity of the ‘Subject’

Before directly addressing Schelling’s critique of Hegel, several instructive moments from the history of German idealism are worth addressing because they clarify what comprehension as an alternative to understanding or intellect would be. They also shed light on the difference between Hegel and Schelling’s views. These are 1) Kant’s account of ‘organic unity’ in the third *Critique* and 2) Fichte’s account of self-positing of the subject in the *Second Introduction to the Wissenschaftslehre*.

1) Fortunately, Kant did not follow his own injunctions to limit speculation to the understanding, and in his account of ‘organic unity’ in §§ 64 and 65 of the third *Critique* he suggests the beginnings of a speculative view of the subject as a ‘self-generating’ (‘*causa sui*’). ‘Self cause’ admittedly cannot be thought with the normal serial notion of time used in the first *Critique* (*Nebeneinander* and *Nacheinander*, simultaneity and succession). On the assumption of linear-temporality, a thing cannot be a free ‘*causa sui*’ without ‘contradiction’ (which the ‘third antinomy’ was meant to circumvent) or ‘infinite

regress', because the act of *causing* presupposes the 'self' enacting the cause that it set out to explain as pre-existent; the efficient cause of natural science must *precede* its effect in the temporal series of *phenomena*. Hence the concept remains paradoxical for the understanding. But "organic unity" poses an alternative that side-steps these constraints. He states that "ein Ding existiert als Naturzweck, *wenn es von sich selbst ... Ursache und Wirkung ist*".¹⁸³ Though it sounds contradictory, the way in which the single organism can at once be both a cause and effect 'of itself' is clarified by the example that Kant names: the life of a tree as a reciprocal inter-dependence and co-production of the parts by one another and hence the whole they constitute. Kant writes:

... erzeugt ein Teil dieses Geschöpfs auch sich selbst so: daß die Erhaltung des einen von der Erhaltung der andern wechselseitig abhängt... [dann] Zugleich sind die Blätter zwar Produkte des Baums, erhalten aber diesen doch auch gegenseitig; denn die wiederholte Entblätterung würde ihn töten, und sein Wachstum hängt von ihrer Wirkung auf den Stamm ab.¹⁸⁴

Every part is what it is, or has its existence *de facto* on the condition that it contributes reciprocally to every other part. The organism's complexity consists in the fact that, on the one hand the parts cannot live outside of the context of the 'whole' organism, and on the other hand neither does the whole have any totally independent existence vis-à-vis them taken together – defoliation kills the 'whole' tree. The whole 'exists' through the mediation of the parts and the parts only through the whole (reciprocally). The speculative consequence of this complex phenomenon with respect to 'causation' or 'temporality' is that the 'self' of the 'whole organism' does not temporally antedate itself in its 'self-production', but rather follows 'of itself' or automatically will have been generated if there is inter-action. The self is itself the product of its 'self-production'. This can be clarified by distinguishing the logical prior-ness of 'pre-supposition' that the understanding makes (e.g. that every action has a grammatical subject-agent) and the chronological prior-ness of serial-temporality. Though any process

¹⁸³ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, in *Schriften zur Ästhetik und Naturphilosophie, Werke III*. (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1996), 733, § 64. ("... a thing exists as a natural-end *if it is cause and effect of itself* (although in a two-fold sense)".)

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 734, § 64. ("...a part of this creature produces also itself thus: that the maintenance of the one reciprocally depends on the maintenance of the other... At the same time, although the leaves are products of the tree, these contain, however, each other reciprocally; for the repeated defoliation would kill it, and its growth depends on their effect on the trunk".)

logically presupposes a subject, viewed from the standpoint of its results, the subject is not a temporal antecedent, but a consequent. For instance, a beating heart is a ‘presupposition’ of being a *living* human being; but this does not mean that having a heart comes first in relation to other organs temporally, because organs are inter-dependent. This difference of the logical and temporal senses of ‘prior’ or ‘first’ is what is obscured by abstract conceptions of ‘presupposition’ or ‘reflection’. If one distinguishes these and is thus not restricted by the assumption that the subject, which is logically presupposed, must come first in time, then a ‘self-cause’ is thinkable as a causality that did not originate in a prior moment in the serial order of time, but which followed ‘of itself’ or ‘*automatically*’ afterwards (“ein Ganzes aus eigener Kausalität”;¹⁸⁵ “*organisiertes und sich selbst organisierendes Wesen*”¹⁸⁶). Paul Guyer nicely summarizes the difficulties that emerge when one tries to *understand* this speculative situation abstractly. He writes:

Kant argues that organisms require us to see the parts as the cause of the whole but also the whole as the cause of its parts. The latter requirement violates the unidirectional nature of our conception of mechanical causation – we cannot conceive how a whole that comes into being only gradually from its parts can nevertheless be the cause of the properties of the parts.¹⁸⁷

It would be more apt to distinguish conceptual thought and understanding here and to say that ‘we cannot *understand*’ this phenomenon, emphasizing the limits of understanding rather than the capacity of cognition altogether. That the problem is articulated is itself evidence that we *can* indeed comprehend it, even if the requirements of ‘understanding’ would reject it as ‘unintelligible’. The advantage of a conceptual distinction between being ‘temporally prior’ and being logically ‘presupposed’ is that *both* can ‘come first’ in different senses. Logical ‘presupposition’ of a subject henceforth can in fact be posited *ex post facto* by events as they occur, and thus a kind of free ‘creation ex nihilo’ or emergence of a subject *through* but not *in* time thereby becomes conceivable (though ‘unintelligible’) as *retroactivity* (*Nachträglichkeit*).

This is also arguably Hegel’s conception of the ‘subject’ as ‘self-mediated’. As in Kant’s account of the whole organism, Hegel too claims that the ‘whole’ is itself just a

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 736, § 65. (“... a whole from its own causality”)

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 737, § 65. (“... as an organized and *self organizing being*”.)

¹⁸⁷ Paul Guyer, *The Cambridge Companion to Kant* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1992), 22.

result in and of itself.¹⁸⁸ He also indicates that temporal and logical priority are not to be regarded as the same in speculative philosophy.¹⁸⁹ The supposition of a presupposed subject in retrospect is a methodological supposition for thinking the truth of what happened, not necessarily the postulation that there was such a free-standing subject in the same form from the beginning. The subject only ‘will have been’ or ‘was’ what it is, as seen from the end. Much as Deleuze would have it, only the “sich *wiederherstellende* Gleichheit oder die Reflexion im Anderssein in sich selbst – nicht eine *ursprüngliche* Einheit als solcher oder *unmittelbare* als solche – ist das Wahre”.¹⁹⁰

2) In his *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte articulates a theory of the ‘self positing of the I’, which in certain respects is very similar to the logic of ‘organic unity’. Fichte’s account bears the same distinction of temporal and logical priority, yet he moves it into the register of individual consciousness and cognition. For Fichte there will have been a first self on the condition that the self has posited its *self* in action. While this may sound like a von Munchausen myth or mere tautology, Fichte is actually side stepping linear temporality, making a more unique statement about the ‘self’, and breaking with ‘representational thought’ of the subject as a grammatical subject. In § 4 of the *Second Introduction to the Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte clearly articulates his position regarding the ‘I’ as a ‘self recursive activity in itself’ (“eine in sich zurückgehende Tätigkeit”). Typically one assumes, along the lines of temporal succession pictured by the reflective understanding, that first one must exist as subject, then act (or manifest oneself), in order to then subsequently be able to ‘look back’ and ‘see what one did or was previously’ upon reflection. But anticipating the critique of reflection Hegel wages in his ‘Logic of Essence’, Fichte changes the basic logic of ‘reflection’: reflection is no longer just an act of a subject, or suspended between the present reflecting self and past self reflected upon;

¹⁸⁸ He writes: “Das Wahre ist das Ganze. Das Ganze aber ist nur das durch seine Entwicklung sich vollendende Wesen. Es ist von dem Absoluten zu sagen, daß es wesentlich *Resultat*, daß es erst am *Ende* das ist, was es in Wahrheit ist; und hierin eben besteht seine Natur, Wirkliches, Subjekt oder Sichselbstwerden zu sein” (G.W.F. Hegel, PS, W3: 24). (“The true is the whole. But the whole is only the being completing itself through its development. It is to be said of the absolute that it is essentially result, that it is first at the end that which it in truth is; and just in this consists its nature, to be actual, subject or becoming itself”.)

¹⁸⁹ For instance in § 124 of the *Philosophy of Right*, in W7.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. W3: 23. (“...only this self *reproducing* sameness or the reflection in being-other in itself – not an *original* one-ness as such or *immediate* [something] as such – is the true”). Compare the epigraph at the opening of this thesis taken from *Difference and Repetition*.

rather, the subject 'is' basically the 'reflecting' act in between, and the two pole-moments become abstractions-accidents. 'Recursion' in itself or the substance-less 'between' movement of reflecting is the central moment that the self is, rather than being what the understanding typically takes to be a fundament. Fichte writes:

Das Ich geht zurück *in sich selbst*, – wird behauptet. Ist es denn also nicht schon vor diesem Zurückgehen, und unabhängig von demselben da für sich; muss es nicht für sich schon da seyn, um sich zum Ziele eines Handelns machen zu können; und, wenn es so ist, setzt denn nicht eure Philosophie schon voraus, was sie erklären sollte?

Ich antworte: keineswegs. Erst durch diesen Act, und lediglich durch ihn, durch ein Handeln auf ein Handeln selbst, welchem bestimmten Handeln kein Handeln überhaupt vorhergeht, wird das Ich *ursprünglich* für sich selbst. Nur *für den Philosophen* ist es vorher da als Factum...¹⁹¹

The subject is not a 'starting point' in the linear-series of temporal moments as represented in reflection, though it will have come first as the fact of that series afterwards. Nor is it a self-subsistent given that is 'gone into' by reflection. 'In itself', the 'I' is not a positive metaphysical substance that is subsequently 'reflected upon', but the "Zurückkehren in sich". It is only actual in its recursion or is itself its own self-recursive-ness. It is not merely identified 'retrospectively', but rather only itself comes into being 'retroactively', in the gap between logical presupposition and temporal priority, which these accounts make visible.¹⁹² Because it is primarily a 'return', it emerges not from an

¹⁹¹ Immanuel Hermann Fichte, *Fichtes Werke I* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1971), 458-459, § 4. ("The I goes back *in itself* – is asserted. Thus is it then not already there for itself and independently of it before this going-back; must it not already be there for itself, in order to be able to make itself into the goal of its activity; and, if that is so, does not your [i.e. Fichte's] philosophy already presuppose what it should have explained?

I answer: in no way. First through this act and solely through it, through an acting directed at an acting itself, the specific activity preceded by no other, is *originally* for itself. It is only *previously there as a factum for the philosopher...*")

¹⁹² This can be illustrated further in the following speculatively read example of the metabolism of the common housefly. In order to digest whatever it is capable of finding as food, the fly does not digest the food in its own 'stomach' as a human does after first placing it in its mouth, chewing it and so on. Rather, a fly actually externalizes its own digestive system onto the matter that it will digest by vomiting, letting the fluids liquefy and dissolve the contents, before 'reabsorbing them'. Thus the temporal sequence here would be: fly lands, vomits stomach acids, lets them dissolve the content and then reabsorbs them. But now, if one observes this as a material process in the course of which flies emerge as subject, rather than as a temporal sequence of images that presupposes a given fly as the agent, then one roughly has the speculative logic at work in Fichte here and the temporal sequence becomes an illusory distraction rather than explanatory key: there are metabolic movements and movements of the stuff that will be the flies food, and the fly only first becomes the 'self of its act' in the digestive fluids 'returning' to 'him' with the nutrients necessary for life. There 'will have been a fly' from this movement that 'will have been' first, only after the fact, if it succeeds. And similarly in the case of humans: digestion does not just begin in the stomach of a pre-given

antecedent, but rather as though ‘ex nihilo’. Thus Žižek describes Fichte’s account as speculative: “Far from being an inconsistency, this is the crucial, properly speculative, moment in Fichte: the presupposition itself is (retroactively) posited only by the process it generates”.¹⁹³ And the same (though significantly modified) approach towards the positing of ‘the self’ arguably appears in Hegel’s account of the ‘self-mediation’ as in Fichte. This is suggested by the appearance of very similar language in Hegel as in Fichte. Hegel’s account of immanent negativity of ‘self positing’, a “*Zurückgehen in sich*”,¹⁹⁴ must be read along the lines of Fichte’s “*Zurückkehren in sich*”. Hence, Fichte offers another way of reading Hegel’s statements on the concept, precisely not as an ‘original subject’ in the sense of temporally first origin or classical teleology.

2.2. Illustrations: Comprehension & Retroactivity

The reading of Hegel advanced so far has consisted in a deflation of the understanding’s subject matter. And the preceding observations indicate a speculative view of the subject as retroactive, which is different from the grammatical subject usually supposed by common understanding. Žižek’s ‘retroactive’ reading of Hegel, which is clearly influenced by Gilles Deleuze’s view of identity as retroactively effected through differentiation, offers a speculative alternative to the understanding’s supposed subject, which fits well with ‘antinomy’, ‘contradiction’ and *parallax*. Understanding assumes that if something becomes, there must be a subject that antedates its own becoming. This is

subject, but already in saliva and chewing, and it has already begun in our inorganic bodies through the culinary process itself.

¹⁹³ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 171.

¹⁹⁴ “For example”, Hegel writes: “Die Wissenschaft darf sich nur durch das eigene Leben des Begriffs organisieren; in ihr ist die Bestimmtheit, welche aus dem Schema äußerlich dem Dasein aufgeklebt wird, die sich selbst bewegende Seele des erfüllten Inhalts. Die Bewegung des Seienden ist, sich einesteils ein Anderes und so zu seinem immanenten Inhalte zu werden; andernteils nimmt es diese Entfaltung oder dieses Dasein in sich zurück, d.h. macht sich selbst zu einem *Momente* und vereinfacht sich zur Bestimmtheit. In jener Bewegung ist die *Negativität* das Unterscheiden und das Setzen des *Daseins*; in diesem Zurückgehen in sich ist sie das Werden der *bestimmten Einfachheit*” (G.W.F. Hegel, PS, in W3: 51-2). (“Science may only organize itself through its own life of the concept; in it is the determinacy, which from the schema is stuck externally onto existence, that self-moving soul of the fulfilled content. The movement of the being is in part to become an other and so to become its immanent content; in [the other] part it takes this unfolding or this, its existence back in itself, i.e. it makes itself into a *Moment* and simplifies itself into determinacy. In that movement, *negativity* is the distinguishing and positing of existence; in this recursion in itself, it is the becoming of determinate simplicity”).

also the supposition of the understanding that, when applied to Hegel, yields the teleological-determinist-system caricature of a historical becoming of ‘absolute spirit’ etc. But Žižek’s reading draws out the full implications of the critique of understanding. It shows how the innermost self of the subject matter is ‘mediated with itself’ or ‘in itself’, without assuming that the subject ‘presupposed at the end’ was necessarily pre-established from the beginning, and how this is the deflation of the understanding’s subject. In the example of ‘necessity’, his reading defuses necessity itself by undermining the subject of a necessary development. Žižek writes:

On a first approach, there is massive evidence that Hegel is *the* philosopher of potentiality: is not the whole point of the dialectical process as the development from In-itself to For-itself that, in the process of becoming, things merely “become what they already are” (or were from all eternity)? Is not the dialectical process the temporal deployment of an eternal set of potentialities, which is why the Hegelian System is a self enclosed set of necessary passages? This mirage of overwhelming evidence dissipates, however, the moment we fully take into account the radical *retroactivity* of the dialectical process: the process of becoming is not in itself necessary, but is the *becoming* (the gradual contingent emergence) *of necessity itself*. This is also (among other things) what “to conceive substance as subject” means: the subject as the Void, the Nothingness of self-relating negativity, is the very *nihil* out of which every new figure emerges; in other words, every dialectical passage or reversal is a passage in which the new figure emerges *ex nihilo* and retroactively posits or creates its necessity.¹⁹⁵

The fundament or subject, which reflective or abstract understanding usually supposes to be given prior to its features, is one with its process or action here, and hence itself is actually the *result* of the process or action. This undermines any pre-established teleological or taxonomical ‘system’. What will have come first from the perspective of the end (the grammatical or presupposed subject) is actually a result, and so the subject of necessity was not pre-given. It is not a necessary development of the subject ‘necessity’ or second-order necessity.

This ‘Hegel’ is not just Žižek’s invention. In the context of a discussion of organic relations (‘observing reason’), Hegel makes comments on ‘necessity’ that corroborate the retroactivity reading. Just as with ‘organic unity’, the ‘self’ or ‘cause’ of ‘self-productive’ action paradoxically *follows* its effect in time initially, though it ‘will have been first’ (logically) at the end. Starting by stating what could be agreed upon by

¹⁹⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 231.

‘retrospective’ accounts (*reflective understanding*), “die Notwendigkeit ist an dem, was geschieht, verborgen und zeigt sich erst *am Ende...*” (“necessity is hidden in that which happens and shows itself first *at the end...*”), he goes on to complicate the temporality and tenses ‘beyond’ reflection. He continues:

... aber so, daß eben dies Ende zeigt, daß sie auch das Erste gewesen ist. Das Ende aber zeigt diese Priorität seiner selbst dadurch, daß durch die Veränderung, welche das Tun vorgenommen hat, nichts anderes herauskommt, als was schon war. Oder wenn wir vom Ersten anfangen, so geht dieses an seinem Ende oder in dem Resultate seines Tuns nur zu sich selbst zurück; und eben hierdurch erweist es sich, ein solches zu sein, welches *sich selbst* zu seinem Ende hat, also als Erstes schon zu sich zurückgekommen oder *an und für sich selbst* ist. Was es also durch die Bewegung seines Tuns erreicht, ist *es selbst...*¹⁹⁶

Though the convolutions of language may give the impression of a ‘first self’ of necessity, this must be read along lines of Fichte’s § 4 (or Deleuze’s comments on ‘same’ of the ‘eternal return’ as *the* returning: the ‘self’ is itself the ‘return’ to the extent that it returns). What it ‘itself’ is in the end is what it continually re-arrives at or proves to have been. Rather than ‘coming back’ to a self that ‘was already there’, it wins a self that ‘was already there’ only after its action. What it gets out of the process is its ‘self’. In the temporally first immediate instance it is not even itself.

The point is arguably found in a passage from Hegel’s *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, where he writes:

Um noch über das *Belehren*, wie die Welt sein soll, ein Wort zu sagen, so kommt dazu ohnehin die Philosophie immer zu spät. Als der *Gedanke* der Welt erscheint sie erst in der Zeit, nachdem die Wirklichkeit ihren Bildungsprozeß vollendet und sich fertig gemacht hat. Dies, was der Begriff lehrt, zeigt notwendig ebenso die Geschichte, daß erst in der Reife der Wirklichkeit das Ideale dem Realen gegenüber erscheint und jenes sich dieselbe Welt, in ihrer Substanz erfaßt, in Gestalt eines intellektuellen Reichs erbaut. Wenn die Philosophie ihr Grau in Grau malt, dann ist eine Gestalt des Lebens alt geworden, und mit Grau in Grau läßt sie sich nicht verjüngen, sondern nur erkennen; die Eule der Minerva beginnt erst mit der einbrechenden Dämmerung ihren Flug.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, PS, in W3: 199. (“...but in such a way that exactly this end shows that it [necessity] was also the first. But the end shows this priority of itself thereby that nothing else emerges through the change, which the deed undertook, than what already was. Or if we begin from the first, then this goes in its end or in the result of its deed only back to its self; and precisely hereby it proves itself to be some such thing that has *itself* for an end, hence as first already returned to itself or is *in and for itself*. What it thus reaches though this movement of its deed, is *itself...*”)

¹⁹⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, in W7: 27-8.

One can distinguish a merely reflective or ‘retrospective’ understanding of this passage from the properly speculative ‘retroactive’ reading that Žižek’s passage above advances. The reflective understanding of the passage interprets it as saying that thought is a merely secondary ‘re-flex’ to what happens in fact (roughly along the lines of the treatment of Hölderlin above). For this understanding, *thought* is always too late because life must be lived first to be understood later; knowledge of what *is*, is knowledge of what *was*. This would place ‘reflection’ on one side of an opposition vis-à-vis the world understood as what is real. Yet Hegel *does not* make this claim that ‘philosophy is always too late because it is the mere re-flection on a world’; doing so would conflate the temporal prior-ness with logical presupposition of the grammatical ‘subject’ of the development that he distinguishes. His claim is more radical. Reflective-thought is not temporally ‘after being’, but abstractly opposed to the latter. In the passage, what develops historically (the ‘result’ of history), does not ripen ‘in’ a chronological order, but appears first in its temporal-serial order after it is already completed and finished, whereby it can then be understood in narrative fashion in light of what actually happened (This is why history (*Geschichte*) is always already ‘past’ (*Geschehen*) by definition.) The retroactive reading stays closer to the text, which states that it is actually the very *opposition* of ‘the real *and* the ideal’, not one but both sides of the entire dichotomy, which is itself the belated *reflection*: only ‘first in the ripeness of actuality’ (or only first in the ripeness which actuality is) ‘does the real stand opposed to the ideal’. Because the opposition ‘thought after being’ is the reflection, to ‘escape’ reflective thought is simply to realize that the ‘real’ which appears to be the ‘beyond reflection’ is itself an effect of (the opposition with) reflection, or is a reflection (or abstraction) in itself. Not only must a fact’s development first be concluded before thought can then in turn appropriate it and recount it definitively. Rather, the thing must also first *be concluded* in itself, in order to be able to *be* what it definitively ‘is’ and is known as having been, hence its retroactivity. Two further topics from Hegel’s text may be taken as examples of what concretely grasping a subject matter would look like, rather than understanding it: 1) individual action, illustrated by ‘Caesar’, and 2) the subject of ‘world history’. Rather than subsuming things under a ‘system’, the retroactive reading would have it that the conceptual grasp emerges from the thing itself, unlike the understanding’s subsumptions.

First, in his consideration of the order of individual action, Hegel effectively presents the antinomial movement of determination of what a thing is ‘in itself’ as a free process of becoming that which ‘will have been’ after the fact of its actualization. He writes:

Was es *an sich* ist, weiß es also aus seiner Wirklichkeit. Das Individuum kann daher nicht wissen, was *es ist*, ehe es sich durch das Tun zur Wirklichkeit gebracht hat. – Es scheint aber hiermit den *Zweck* seines Tuns nicht bestimmen zu können, ehe es getan hat; aber zugleich muß es, indem es Bewußtsein ist, die Handlung vorher als die *ganz seinige*, d.h. als *Zweck* vor sich haben. Das ans Handeln gehende Individuum scheint sich also in einem Kreise zu befinden, worin jedes Moment das andere schon voraussetzt, und hiermit keinen Anfang finden zu können, weil es sein ursprüngliches Wesen, das sein Zweck sein muß, *erst aus der Tat* kennenlernt, aber, um zu tun, *vorher den Zweck* haben muß. Ebendarum aber hat es *unmittelbar* anzufangen und, unter welchen Umständen es sei, ohne weiteres Bedenken um *Anfang, Mittel* und *Ende* zur Tätigkeit zu schreiten; denn sein Wesen und *ansichseiende* Natur ist alles in einem, Anfang, Mittel und Ende.¹⁹⁸

From the understanding’s perspective, the individual must first know what he or she is doing in order to carry it out, though he or she must also first act to be actual and thereby discover the actuality through reflection. This is a contradiction of reflection, and understanding would wait here if it were not forced onward. Yet the individual’s concrete actuality is determined precisely as this contradiction in itself of ‘before and after’ of the act. Both must be first, and this contradiction of *both* having to be first is resolved by retroaction (the *future anterior*) in light of something’s *having actually been* (*Gewesenheit*).¹⁹⁹ What is essential, or what essentially is (*wesentlich ist*) is simply what

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., PS, in W3: 296. (“What it is in itself, it thus knows from its actuality. Hence the individual cannot know what *it is* before it has brought itself into actuality through the deed. – But it appears hereby unable to determine the *end* of its deed, before it has done it; but at the same time it must, by being consciousness, have the action already as *fully his*, i.e. before itself as *end*. The individual going into action thus appears to find itself in a circle in which every moment already presupposes the other, and hereby [is] not able to find a beginning, because it learns of its original essential-being that must be its end *first from the deed*, but in order to act, [it] must *previously* have the end. And just this is why it has to begin *immediately* without any other considerations of *beginning, middle and end*, under whatever circumstances it may be, and proceed to action; for its essential being and *being-in-itself* that is its nature is everything in one, beginning, middle and end”).

¹⁹⁹ This conflict or collision of equally total demands and their ironic ‘reconciliation’ in any outcome constitutes the tragic dimension of Hegel’s outlook on the actualization of the subject.

has been (present perfect – *gewesen ist*). Essence can neither be reduced to appearance, nor does it exist apart from having appeared.²⁰⁰

The best example that Hegel gives of the retroactivity of individual beings is his account of ‘essence’ (*Wesen*) as ‘past being’ in the action of *Caesar* as *having been in Gaul*. Hegel describes the relation of essence to past immediacy or past being as follows:

Dieser Irregularität des Sprachgebrauchs [in German] liegt insofern eine richtige Anschauung vom Verhältnis des Sein zum Wesen zugrunde, als wir das Wesen allerdings als das vergangene Sein [i.e. the past participle: *gewesen*] betrachten können, wobei dann nur noch zu bemerken ist, daß dasjenige, was vergangen ist, deshalb nicht abstrakt negiert, sondern nur aufgehoben und somit zugleich konserviert ist.²⁰¹

It is worth recalling Hegel’s observations on the ‘taking up’ and ‘reduction’ of the concept discussed in part 1. The concept as both negative and the positive of the negative is already involved in whatever ‘subject matter’ the concept any understanding of ‘Caesar’ as a historical result already involves; the negativity is not extraneous to the subject matter’s determinate being, but belongs to it. He continues:

Sagen wir z. B.: Cäsar ist in Gallien *gewesen*, so ist damit nur die Unmittelbarkeit dessen, was hier vom Cäsar ausgesagt wird, nicht aber sein Aufenthalt in Gallien überhaupt negiert, denn dieser ist es ja eben, der den Inhalt dieser Aussage bildet, welcher Inhalt aber hier als aufgehoben vorgestellt wird.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Compare the following statement in an addition to the *Wesenslogik*: “Man pflegt so namentlich zu sagen, es komme bei den Menschen nur auf ihr Wesen an und nicht auf ihr Tun und ihr Betragen. Darin liegt nun zwar das Richtige, daß dasjenige, was ein Mensch tut, nicht in seiner Unmittelbarkeit, sondern nur als vermittelt durch sein Inneres und als Manifestation seines Innern zu betrachten ist. Nur darf dabei nicht übersehen werden, daß das Wesen und dann weiter das Innere sich eben nur dadurch als solche bewähren, daß sie in die Erscheinung heraustreten; wohingegen jener Berufung der Menschen auf ihr von dem Inhalt ihres Tuns unterschiedenes Wesen nur die Absicht zugrunde zu liegen pflegt, ihre bloße Subjektivität geltend zu machen und sich dem, was an und für sich gültig ist, zu entziehen” (ibid., in W8: 234, §113). (“One may say that with people it depends on their essence and not on their deeds and behavior. In that there is [something] right, [namely] that what a person does is to be considered not in its immediacy, but rather only as mediated through his interiority and as manifestation of his interiority. Only it may not thereby be overlooked that the essence [or being] and interiority only even prove themselves as such by stepping out into appearance; whereas the basis of that appeal of people to their essence distinguished from the content of their deeds tends to just have the intention of making their mere subjectivity count and to hold back from what counts in and for itself”.)

²⁰¹ Ibid., EL, in W8: 232. (“A correct intuition of the correct relation of being to essence belies the irregularity of the use of language here to the extent that we [in German] can consider essence at any rate as past being, whereby then it is only still to be noted that that which is gone is not abstractly negated, but rather surpassed and with that at the same time conserved”.)

²⁰² ibid. (“If we say, for instance: Caesar *has been* in Gaul, then thus only the immediacy of that, which is being said of Caesar here, is being negated, but not his stay in Gaul in general because it is precisely that, which forms the content of this expression, whose content has, however, been sublated”.)

This result indeed emerged with the passing of time, but its structure is not necessarily equal to the linear temporality of the understanding (simultaneity and succession). Caesar's immediate 'being in Gaul' is not negated on the assumption that his 'appearance' there is irrelevant to his 'essence'; rather, he was (or is) essentially 'Caesar' precisely in the way he crossed into Gaul ('was in Gaul') and left again ('was not in Gaul'). In leaving Gaul, Caesar became what he, 'Caesar', 'was from the beginning'; this negativity belongs to Caesar's being or being-Caesar. But this is also to say that, though it is necessary that 'Caesar was in Gaul', it was not 'necessarily necessary' that Caesar went to Gaul in the first instance, though had he not done this, he would not have been the singular 'Caesar' known today, but someone else. Abstract understanding does not make this distinction at any rate and assumes the same subject stands at beginning as at the end, because it imputes 'subject' abstractly. Doing so conflates the past as it 'was' when it was an immediate and contingent present with the past as it 'was', regarded from a present view of results held now, which is mediated, in the present that actually followed from it. That the same term ('was') is used to describe these two different moments abstracts or glosses over the differences. Thus when Hegel writes in the *Wesenslogik* that "das Wesen ist das vergangene, aber zeitlos vergangene Sein",²⁰³ this nonetheless does not mean that 'timeless' or 'eternal' is an unendingly long time or absolutely outside of time altogether (viz. abstractly). The subject is 'never present in time' as an immediacy excluding mediation only because its immediate presence *is itself mediated*. *Wesen* is what is 'eternally present' to the extent that it continually has 'returned' through mediations.²⁰⁴ The retroactive dimension here shows how accusations of *a priori* 'teleology' in Hegel are unjust and result from understanding his discussion abstractly; genuine teleology would require that logical presupposition and temporal priority are isomorphic, and they are not so according the retroactive or speculative account. As Hegel puts it – employing Fichtean language of a "*Rückkehr in sich*" of

²⁰³ Ibid., SL, in W6: 13. ("Essence is past, yet timelessly past being".)

²⁰⁴ Hence philosophy, he writes: "als sich mit dem Wahren beschäftigt, hat es mit ewig Gegenwärtigem zu tun. Alles ist ihr in der Vergangenheit unverloren, denn die Idee ist präsent, der Geist unsterblich, d.h. er ist nicht vorbei und ist noch nicht, sondern ist wesentlich jetzt" (ibid., *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, in W12: 105). ("... as occupying itself with the true, it has to do with the eternally present. Everything is not lost in the last, for the idea is present, spirit immortal, i.e. it is not past and is not yet, but rather is essentially now".) Hegel again recalls Deleuze in this respect.

reflection or “absolute recoil” (*absoluter Gegenstoß*) – “Dies vorgefundene *wird* nur darin, daß es *verlassen* wird”.²⁰⁵ The ‘pre-supposed’ is a supposition after the fact, or what under-standing belatedly supposes to be prior.

Second, what is perhaps the most hilariously ironic *dénouement* of the reflective understanding occurs where Hegel is allegedly most serious, teleological and formulaic – in his account of ‘world history’. He reproduces the same gesture there again, though understanding may overlook the subtle speculative shift of his point. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* he writes:

Aber auch indem wir die Geschichte als diese Schlachtbank betrachten, auf welcher das Glück der Völker, die Weisheit der Staaten und die Tugend der Individuen zum Opfer gebracht worden, so entsteht dem Gedanken notwendig auch die Frage, wem, welchem Endzwecke diese ungeheuersten Opfer gebracht worden sind. Von hier aus geht gewöhnlich die Frage nach dem, was wir zum allgemeinen Anfange unsrer Betrachtung gemacht; von demselben aus haben wir die Begebenheiten, die uns jenes Gemälde für die trübe Empfindung und für die darüber sinnende Reflexion darbieten, sogleich als das Feld bestimmt, in welchem wir nur die Mittel sehen wollen für das, was wir behaupten, daß es die substantielle Bestimmung, der absolute Endzweck, oder was dasselbe ist, daß es das wahrhafte Resultat der Weltgeschichte sei.²⁰⁶

One might feel as though left hanging in suspense at the end, waiting for an answer as to what ‘the result of world history’ is. But this is because understanding raises different expectations than what Hegel is doing. The point is to grasp historicity while *deflating* ‘History’. A deflationary joke here plays on the ambiguity of the genitive case (‘of’, ‘der’). Hegel does not understand history as a ‘red thread’ running through historical differences from the beginning to the end or as something that ‘generates results’, but rather deflates such metaphysical assumptions. Thus, the ‘result’ in ‘result of world history’ is not something other than ‘world history’ itself (viz. ‘world history’s result’); rather, the ‘result’ *is* ‘world history’, which is the result. World history itself is a

²⁰⁵ Ibid., SL, in W6: 27. (“... this thing found before us [c.f. ‘the given’] only *comes to be* by being *left*”).

²⁰⁶ Ibid., *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, in W12: 35. (“But also by considering history as this slaughter bench, on which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states and the virtues of individuals have been sacrificed, the question necessarily comes to thought for whom, for which end-goal this immense sacrifice has been made. From here the question usually goes after what we made the beginning of our consideration; from the same, we have the occurrences that offer that depiction and dark sensation to our thoughtful reflection, at the same time determines the field in which we only want to see the means for that which we assert, that it is the substantial determination, the absolute end-goal, or what is the same, that it is the result of world history”).

historical result ‘in and of itself’, because there has not always been ‘world history’. What historical actions and peoples unwittingly contributed to was simply the present in which one discusses them and ‘world history’. Hence ‘teleology’ only leads up to ‘the present’ in fact, not due to an order pre-determined in some first instance, but because the present is where ‘the past’ actually ended up. Here, as with Caesar, ‘world history’ cannot be what it concretely is without having existed – yet Schelling will try to separate precisely *what* something is from its *existence*.

CHAPTER 3

THE MATURE SCHELLING’S INTELLIGIBLE CRITICISM

3.1. Schelling on ‘Positive and Negative’ Philosophy

Unlike the examples of comprehension above, Schelling proceeds to understand things in the manner presented in part 1. The mature Schelling’s criticism of Hegel is based on his understanding of philosophy – of thought and being (*Sein*) – which he presents in his lectures on the ‘philosophy of revelation’ (*Philosophie der Offenbarung*),²⁰⁷ published in English translation as *The Grounding of Positive Philosophy*, and in his Munich lectures, *On the History of Modern Philosophy*.²⁰⁸ It is presently relevant because of its influence in the history of Hegel reception. But it is also significant as a first articulation of ‘positivism’ leveled against speculative thought, which at the same time bears a striking similarity to 20th century phenomenological or

²⁰⁷ See F.W.J. Schelling, *Schellings Werke* 6, supplementary volume (1-174), especially the fifth lecture (81-93). In what follows, however, the English translations of Schelling’s texts will be cited, rather than the German. Schelling’s German text has not been presented here in equal detail to Hegel’s. This is because his prose is not only more straightforward and readily intelligible than Hegel’s; but this is also because it is Hegel’s thought that is being reinterpreted in a perhaps controversial way in this thesis, rather than Schelling’s through, around which there is little interpretive controversy.

²⁰⁸ F.W.J. Schelling, *On the History of Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994). Hereafter: HMP. See also *ibid.*, *Schellings Werke*, volume 5, 71-270, especially 196-234.

‘fundamental ontology’.²⁰⁹ His general understanding of the parameters of philosophy and existence must be clarified before addressing the criticism itself, because it provides the basis and meaning of his critique. It entails a vortex of dichotomies, which are:

I.		II.
‘What’ (<i>Was</i>)	v.	‘That’ (<i>Daß</i>)
Essence	v.	Existence
Logical/Rational	v.	Real/Being
Conceptual	v.	Given
Negative	v.	Positive
Potential	v.	Actual
General	v.	Particular
Mediated	v.	Immediate
Necessary	v.	Contingent
Immanent	v.	Transcendent
<i>A Priori</i>	v.	<i>A Posteriori</i>

What is curious about Schelling’s attempts to articulate his account of philosophy in its relation to actuality, in any number of the many dense passages where he advances it, is that many of the determinations involved in the distinctions above appear. The terms are not individually defined in a certain order, but rather have their meaning taken together in the distinctions as they are employed. This makes it as difficult to enter the circle of Schelling’s own system-view at any particular point as it makes it easy to enter it at every other point. Beginning with the following statement about ‘rational’ philosophy, which contains a succinct formulation of the distinction forming the cornerstone of his objections to Hegel, is therefore as good a place to start as any. It is the distinction of ‘what’ something is and ‘that’ it is at all, reminiscent of classical metaphysical orientation of Leibniz.²¹⁰ Schelling lays down the ‘rule’ of his outlook as follows:

Rationalism can only be negative philosophy, and both concepts are completely synonymous. According to its subject matter, that *pure* rationalism was already contained within Kant’s critique... the rule that the *concept* of a thing contains

²⁰⁹ Despite their differences, Schelling’s distinction between *Was* and *Daß* points at a dimension of Heidegger’s claim of ‘ontological difference’: that the “Being of entities ‘is’ not itself an entity” (Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, New York: Harper Perennial/Modern Thought, 2008, 26 / 6).

²¹⁰ By taking up this angle and orientation that he continuously advances, Schelling shows his indebtedness to the methodological outlook of the pre-Kantian metaphysics Hegel criticizes as ‘metaphysics of the understanding’ (*Verstandesmetaphysik*). Compare Leibniz’s question: “Why is there something rather than nothing?” (G.W. Leibniz, “Principles of Nature and Grace Based on Reason”, in *Philosophical Essays* Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1989, 210). ‘That’ there is something rather than nothing forms the core of Schelling’s stance.

only the pure *what-ness* [Was] of the concept, but nothing of its *thatness* [Daß], of its existence. Kant shows in general how futile it is for reason to attempt through inferences to reach beyond itself to existence.²¹¹

The view exhibited in this passage is revealing in its likeness to Kant's on a methodological level regarding *Verstand* (and his picture of logic as formal and empty of content) as the limit of reason and possible knowledge. What is basically asserted along with Schelling's dichotomies is the "thesis of heterogeneity" of understanding and experience also found in Kant.²¹² Comparison is instructive here. Kant writes: "Through receptivity an object is *given* to us; through spontaneity an object is *thought* in relation to that [given] presentation".²¹³ And perhaps more famously, he writes: "Thoughts without [sensible] content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind".²¹⁴ This distinction, as one *held apart*, excludes a basic connectedness of the relata,²¹⁵ and serves as the basis for his interpretation and critique of Hegel. Both Kant and Schelling's accounts employ an empiricist distinction between '*ideas*' and '*facts*' (or beings).²¹⁶ Though Schelling addresses what he saw as the *problem* of empiricism in philosophy and even calls his own position a kind of higher "metaphysical empiricism", he is confident that his account does not suffer due to this.²¹⁷ The difference between Kant's and Schelling's use of this distinction is admittedly that for the former the given ('experience') is the more literally empiricist sensibilia of the five senses (ordered in the forms of space and time and subject to the understanding's categories), while for the latter it is ontological, concerning the being or existing of the beings that are given (the 'positive'). Schelling nevertheless takes over an ontologized version of the Kantian framework or thesis, as it were, which would

²¹¹ F.W.J. Schelling, GPP, 147.

²¹² Sally Sedgwick, *Hegel's Critique of Kant*, 110.

²¹³ Immanuel Kant, CPR, 106, A50 / B74.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 107, A51 / B75.

²¹⁵ Schelling reformulates Kant's dictum almost verbatim: "while there can be a concept without a real cognition, it is not possible for there to be a cognition without a concept" (F.W.J. Schelling, GPP, 129).

²¹⁶ David Hume's hard and fast distinction is worth comparing here: "All the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, *Relations of Ideas*, and *Matters of Fact*... Propositions of this [the first] kind are discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is any where existent in the universe" (David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 18).

²¹⁷ Schelling writes: Germany had little "effect in arresting the ubiquitous and incessant spread of empiricism" (Schelling, F.W.J. GPP. 117); "German philosophy has incorporated Empiricism... without thereby becoming Empiricism (*ibid.*, 131). He calls his philosophy an "*a priori* empiricism" or even "metaphysical empiricism" (*ibid.*, 167).

still limit the extent of reason through opposition to the positively given now understood as ‘being’ (*Sein*) instead of the ‘sensible’. *On the one hand*, the totality of what Schelling understands as ‘reason’ plays a homologous role to the intellect or understanding and categories in Kant’s thesis. It is the all-encompassing subsumption-matrix or taxonomy of *kinds* or *types* of ‘what’ things ‘can be’. Hence Schelling claims that this domain is restricted to ‘potencies’ (or possibility). And *on the other hand*, keeping with the distinction, there are the positively given ‘beings’ that simply are, for Schelling, and that are actual to the extent that they are present and ‘fill in’ reason’s taxonomy of kinds or types as *tokens* of the same. This either-or frames Schelling’s critique.

Schelling accordingly distinguishes the rational or negative philosophy, as “a science that grasps the essence of things and the content of all being” from positive philosophy, as “a science that explains the actual existence of things”.²¹⁸ (His peculiar use of ‘content’ as ‘mental’ rather than ‘existent’ is worth noting.) Whereas the negative philosophy is one “*immanent*” to pure thought, the positive philosophy is a “*transcendent*” one;²¹⁹ “positive philosophy starts out from that which is external to all thought... *absolutely* external to thought”.²²⁰ Negative philosophy is “an entirely self-enclosed science that has arrived at an unchanging conclusion, and is, thus, in *this* sense a *system*”; yet according to Schelling’s understanding of ‘system’, this is not the case for his positive philosophy, which would remain *open* to ‘the given’ in some sense.²²¹ Though he does not usually examine this manner of posing the problem, he elsewhere qualifies this dualism, when he makes the further assertion that the two are somehow mutually entailing, albeit without accounting for the difference;²²² “every cognition corresponds to a being”,²²³ Schelling writes, keeping with the Kantian understanding of ‘understanding and experience’. He also elsewhere articulates his ‘what and that’ distinction in Kantian terminology, indicating that he shares a similar assumption that

²¹⁸ Ibid., 155.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 138.

²²⁰ Ibid., 179.

²²¹ Ibid., 182.

²²² Ibid., 155. He writes: “in its truth, that is, to the extent it is *philosophy*, the negative is itself positive since it posits the latter outside itself, and, thus, there is *no longer* a duality” (ibid., 197); he further equates the negative with critique as preparatory for positive philosophy, much as Kant conceived of the relation of critique to philosophy. But he adds the ontological dimension: “the negative is only grounded through the positive” (ibid., 198).

²²³ Ibid., 132.

‘actuality’ is that which is given within the parameters of the possible, that it presupposes possibility, and that the discovery of these formal possibilities is the task of thought.²²⁴

He writes:

... insofar as the question is of the *whatness* of a thing, this question directs itself to *reason*, whereas—*that* something is, even if it is something realized by reason from itself, *that* this is—that is, *that* it exists—can only be taught by experience. To prove *that* something exists cannot be an issue for reason, due to the simple fact that, by far, the most of what reason takes cognizance of from itself [*von sich aus*] *occurs in experience and what is a matter of experience requires no proof that it exists precisely because it is already determined as something that actually exists*. Thus, at least regarding everything that occurs in experience, it cannot be an issue for a science of reason to prove *that* it exists; to do so would be superfluous. *What* exists ... is the task of the science of reason, which allows itself to be realized a priori. But *that* it exists does not follow from this, for there could very well be nothing at all that exists. That something exists at all, and, particularly, that this determinate thing exists in the world, can never be realized a priori and claimed by reason without experience.²²⁵

The key claim in this understanding is that the actuality of the given is treated as self-evident (possibility is read from it). In further explicating his ontological picture, Schelling re-articulates his distinction of ‘what and that’ in way that recalls the Kantian formulation of antinomies of pure reason, as the ordinary perceptual parallax discussed above, for which the ‘same thing’ may be viewed under ‘different aspects’. He writes:

Here we should note that in everything that is real there are two things to be known: it is two entirely different things to know what a being is, *quid sit*, and that it is, *quod sit*. The former—the answer to the question *what* it is—accords me insight into the *essence* of the thing, or it provides that I understand the thing, that I have an understanding or a concept of it, or have it *itself* within the concept. The other insight however, *that* it is, does not accord me just the concept, but rather something that goes beyond just the concept, which is existence [*Existenz*]. This is *a cognition* [*ein Erkennen*] whereby it is readily clear that while there can be a concept without a real cognition, it is not possible for there to be a cognition without a concept. For in cognition what I take cognizance of as existing is precisely the *whatness* [*das Was*], the *quid*, that is, the concept of the thing. Most cognition is, properly speaking, a recognition—for example, if I take cognizance

²²⁴ For Kant, something’s possibility needs no proof if it is already regarded as actual (‘given’), because the assumption is made as being self-evident that ‘what is actual must have been possible first’. For instance: “How is pure mathematics possible? How is pure natural science possible? Since these sciences are actually given [as existent], it is surely proper for us to ask how they are possible; for that they must be possible is proved by their being actual. As regards metaphysics, however, there are grounds on which everyone must doubt its possibility” (Kant, Immanuel, CPR, 60, B20).

²²⁵ F.W.J. Schelling, GPP, 129. Italics mine.

of a plant and know what type it is, then I again take cognizance of the concept that I previously had of it, that is, in what exists.²²⁶

The pressing question that asserts itself here is what adding ‘existence’, ‘beyond the concept’, would really add to the concept if in the concept one grasps the content and thing ‘itself’. A key to grasping Schelling’s manner of understanding things is a grasp of Schelling’s conception of rational thought as a *reflection* on or “recognition” of what goes on in ordinary thought of things – a second-order ‘thought about thought’, which is ordinarily understood as a ‘thought about (first-order) beings’. Reflective thought or ‘reason’s’ comparing things with its measures for ‘recognition’ make up Schelling’s image of thought. He writes:

Reason, as soon as it directs itself to itself [i.e. in reflection], becomes an object to itself, [and it] finds within itself the *prius* [i.e. the ‘principle’ for measuring the given, the supposition of a sub-ject] or the subject of *all* being [*Seyns*]*—*which is the same thing*—*and in this it also possesses the means, or rather the principle, of an a priori knowledge of everything that is [*alles Seyenden*]*...*²²⁷

The finite intellect has categories or ‘principles’ (*prius*), which delimit or define the definite things presented before ‘us’ (*Vorstellungen*) from the vantage point of ‘reflection’ vis-à-vis ‘what is reflected upon’. In ‘negative philosophy’, thought would reflect on itself in a second-order and find the formal principles it has for thinking particular positively given things, as subsuming particular-given instances under kinds.

‘Reason’, ‘the concept’ and the ‘what’ (*Was*) is ‘negative’ for Schelling to the extent that it is firstly not the ‘positive’ (*Daß*), but also because determining ‘what something is’ happens vis-à-vis other things’ determinations, which it *is not* or which are distinguished from it. For instance a ‘cat’ as ‘what’ is ‘not a dog’ (or a not-dog) as well as ‘not every other mammal, living being, inorganic nature, or imaginary entity’ etc. For Schelling, the thesis *omnis determinatio negatio est* holds only in a restricted intelligible or conceptual realm of the ‘what’, which is opposed to the *what’s* existence (its ‘whether’ or ‘that’). Schelling rejects the statement that “*determinato est negatio*” as an ontological thesis,²²⁸ because he does not recognize negativity in the composite heart of the thing, or remains with the understanding’s assumption that ‘something’ is a given positivity that is

²²⁶ Ibid., 128-9.

²²⁷ Ibid., 128.

²²⁸ F.W.J. Schelling, *Über das Wesen der Menschlichen Freiheit*, 56.

not inherently composite. For him, being ‘a not-dog’ excludes also positively being ‘a cat’. The ‘cat’ (*Was*) defined as ‘not-everything-else’ cannot reach ‘that it is’ (*Daß*); ‘not-not-everything else’ cannot turn into its positivity for Schelling, hence his understanding postulates or supposes the entity’s existence as a positivity beyond itself that is not only not the negative, but also a surplus over it. For Schelling, the negative philosophy also gets its negative character by consisting in an *abstraction-from*, or an abbreviation of givens through abstraction, such that general concepts can be held over particulars that may be subsumed under them. (Schelling’s orthodox view of abstraction holds, for instance, that “abstractions cannot be there, be taken for realities, before that from which they are abstracted”.²²⁹) Elsewhere he continues to describe this negative, abstractive procedure:

With this is then also provided the concept of a negative science, whose duty is precisely this: to produce in this manner the *concept* of what being itself is through the successive elimination of everything that is not being and that lies *implicit* or *potentia* in the general and indeterminate concept of being. This science can lead no further than to the aforementioned negative concept; thus, in general, only to the *concept* of being itself.²³⁰

Yet this ‘concept of being’, qua concept, always only remains a ‘mere concept’ (*possible*), for Schelling. The concept of being, for Schelling, *is firstly not being*. The negativity of thought distinguished from positivity is pushed even to the conclusion that thought’s negativity results in being totally *empty*, subtracted (or abstracted) from being or beings altogether. The logical, therefore ‘is’ not, or cannot be said to be, but rather is a pale shadow (a ‘potency’) of the being of what is. In his lectures on the *History of Modern Philosophy*, he states that “what is logical also presents itself as the merely negative aspect of existence”.²³¹ And in his lectures on *Positive Philosophy*, he states:

... reason has none other than a *negative* concept of that which being itself is. Even if the final goal and objective of reason is solely the being that *Is*, it can nonetheless determine nothing else: it has no concept for the being that *Is* other than that of what is not nonbeing, of that which does not pass over into otherness, that is, a negative concept.²³²

²²⁹ Ibid., GPP, 145.

²³⁰ Ibid., 137.

²³¹ Ibid., HMP, 147.

²³² Ibid., GPP, 137.

Elsewhere Schelling makes similar statements, yet which appear to indicate he was aware that the two distinct *relata* – thought and being – must still be somehow *related*,²³³ though he gives little detail. This would be the crucial detail for the speculative view of his account. A picture of the relation of thought to being that Schelling gives is basically divided as an *Ek-stase* or *Außer-sich-Sein*, as it were, such as the two sides of a stocking that may be worn indifferently either ‘inside out’ or inversely.²³⁴ Regarding the negative relation of thought-being, he sums up the two as follows:

That which just is [*das bloß Seyende*] is being [*das Seyn*] from which, properly speaking, every idea, that is, every potency, is excluded. We will, thus, only be able to call it the inverted idea [*Umgekehrte Idee*], the idea in which reason is set *outside* itself.²³⁵

Yet despite this connection that he admits, for Schelling the heterogeneity of thought and being – of the *Was* and *Daß* – always takes priority, and the obliquely acknowledged (parallax) dimension of their connection does not get the same amount of attention as the *distinction*. (This is the source of tension with Hegel’s conceptual account, for which distinction *is* the connection, unity is a negative unity, or ‘*Daß*’ is the parallax of the various ‘*Was*’.)

To these coupled distinctions of what-that, thought-being and negative-positive, Schelling’s account adds accompanying and overlapping dimensions of distinctions: *possible-actual*, *necessary-contingent* (‘modality’), *general-particular* (‘abstract and concrete’) etc. What these intelligible poles add sharpens the disagreement with the Hegelian position articulated in part 1, because they configure the abstract space beside being, as it were where beings are under-stood. The negative philosophy or lexicon of general types of beings that have *a priori* necessity, for Schelling, always remains inherently ‘possible’ (‘potencies’), opposed to actual being, understood as positively

²³³ He states, for instance: “in the negative philosophy everything is knowable only to the extent that it has a *prius*, yet this final object does not have a *prius* in the sense of everything else, since here the matter is turned on its head: that which in the purely rational philosophy was the *prius* here becomes the *posterius*. In its culmination, the negative philosophy itself contains the demand for the positive, and the philosophy that is aware of itself, and understands itself completely, certainly *has* the need to posit the positive outside itself” (ibid., GPP, 153).

²³⁴ This view results in a remarkable parallel with the *ek-zentrischer Bahn* that Hölderlin pursued, for which, it is claimed, that there is no immediate access to that which comes before the original separation/partition (*Ur-Teilung*). (See Žižek’s remarks above on Hölderlin’s *Sein und Urteil*.)

²³⁵ Ibid., HMP, 203.

given, hence the qualification ‘mere’. He sees the side of ‘*what*’, ‘thought’ and ‘negative’ as abstractions that ‘can be’ more or less filled by the given understood as what is actual.

Or, he writes:

... it [negative philosophy] only knows a priori what is or what can be, if something is, and determines a priori the concepts of every being. Reason arrives at what can be or will be when the potency is thought of as self-moving only in concepts, and, thus, again, only as a *possibility* in contrast to real being.²³⁶

This ‘real being’, or the positively given particular thing opposed to thought, is construed by Schelling as an *immediacy*, such as the relation of the demonstrative indexical ‘this’, which may be pointed at whatever one finds present. An immediate consequence of this is the conclusion Schelling draws about concepts therefore being unable to adequately grasp the given. The example Schelling recurrently gives in different places is meant to clarify his view: a particular immediately given natural object, a ‘plant’. In the following passage, Schelling indicates precisely how he understands the problematic relation between philosophy or thought and being, and the *limited task* of the philosophical concept. He writes:

Of itself, reason cannot realize or prove any actual, real being even in the sensible world; it cannot realize or prove any *present* existence, for example, the existence of *this* plant or this stone. If reason wants a real being, if it wants as something real any type of object discovered within itself in a concept and, thus, as something merely possible, then it must submit to the authority of the senses.²³⁷

So quite literally, for Schelling, on the one hand there are ‘abstract generalities’ which do not count as ‘existent’ and on the other there are ‘concrete particulars’ that do not count as ‘thought’, and the former has no ‘power’ of crossing over into the latter without ceasing to be thought in becoming actual. Reason’s power, limited to ‘potencies’, has no actual ‘might’ (*Macht*), and must await being contingently presented with a fact for it to apply its concepts. (And conversely, ‘necessity’ becomes a matter of mere concepts, tautologies etc.) Arguing from his definition, there is “no *actus* from the side of reason”. And his justification here is: “Were it otherwise, reason would cease to be the

²³⁶ F.W.J. Schelling, GPP, 134.

²³⁷ Ibid., 210.

pure potency of cognition”.²³⁸ The “science of reason”, for Schelling, “moves forward in” what he casts as “mere thought”.²³⁹

Along the lines of formal understanding, Schelling claims that generalities grasp nothing in particular and hence are nothing concrete;²⁴⁰ according to this ontological picture, only particulars ‘exist’. There can be no ‘proof’ of actual things beyond immediate designation, because he takes ‘proof’ to refer to an immediate presence in the domain held apart from ‘beings’, or does not require it for what is understood as ‘given’. Holding this dichotomy apart results in the irreducible gap, slippage or indeterminacy between generality and a given existent instance of the general kind. Schelling writes:

That a plant in general exists is nothing contingent if anything in general exists: it is not contingent that there are plants in general, but there are no plants that exist in general, since there exists only this determinate plant at this point in space and in this moment of time. If I then also realize—and perhaps it is to be realized a priori—that in the cycle of existence in general plants must occur, with this insight I have still not moved beyond the concept of the plant. This plant is still not the real plant, but rather just the concept of the plant. Further—and I certainly do not want to assume that somebody thinks he can prove a priori or through reason that this determinate plant exists here or now—someone will, however much he may accomplish, still have only proved that there are, in general, plants.²⁴¹

Apart from the first sentence of this passage, perhaps everything here is readily intelligible to ordinary understanding. The dualism asserts that conceptual thought can never grasp ‘this plant’ – *this* – that is understood as the concrete. (From a Hegelian view, this will be because of its inherently abstract understanding: ‘this plant’ is already a generality applicable to every plant.) Yet the further he goes, the stranger this familiar common sense often turns out to be. The bizarre result of Schelling standing potentiality (which functions as the register for the negative differences between ‘whats’) apart from actuality is that individuation or singular, individuated beings (*a* plant) strangely become disqualified from ‘being’. That the negative philosophy, he states, is “only concerned with the *quid*, not with the *quod*”, means:

A being or something is just as good a concept as *being* or potency is a concept

²³⁸ Ibid., 132.

²³⁹ Ibid., 133.

²⁴⁰ Schelling writes: “A being in general, however, cannot now, nor ever, be provided through sensation: this is obviously a [48] concept and can only be thought in the understanding” (ibid., GPP, 122).

²⁴¹ Ibid., 130.

[i.e. it is not one by definition]. A being [*ein Seyendes*] is no longer being [*das Seyendes*]²⁴²—it is something other than this, but only *essentially*, that is, according to its concept, but not *actu*, something different. The plant is not being, but is rather already a being.

Though it may appear to be *anti-Platonist* in its claim that ‘real’ existence is external to the idea, or may be reconciled with common sense, the *implicit* Platonist tendencies present in formalist understanding are revealed in Schelling’s stringent adherence to his distinction. He continues: “*But it [the plant] is a being even [66] if it never really existed*”. This abstract outlook must be kept in mind when he makes the following accusation against ‘reason’:

It is, therefore, only a logical world in which we move in a science of reason; to imagine that a real chain of events is intended here, or to claim that this chain of events took place during the original generation of things would not only be contrary to our meaning, but also would be an absurdity in itself.²⁴³

That it is ‘only a logical world’ in which this account is given does not trouble Schelling. His objection to the view that a ‘conceptual’ chain can be ‘real’ is his objection to Hegel as he understands him. Schelling’s text effectively reaches a point where the circle of this thought closes and he repeats his distinctions and argument from definitions in different variations, forming a dualistic axis for his critique of Hegel’s alleged panlogism. In the final analysis, for Schelling (like Kant), not stepping into philosophical error means knowing one’s place in the breakdown of thoughts and things or the negative and the positive he presents and not transgressing the limits established between them. Methodologically, this means not questioning his limiting account with respect to how it is formulated conceptually. What Hegel does is precisely to question such formulations, which Schelling (mis)understands as the promulgation of theses.

3.2. Schelling’s Intelligible Hegel-Critique

Schelling’s criticism of Hegel is ‘intelligible’ in the sense that it applies orthodox understanding to Hegel’s heterodox conceptual account, or tries to *understand* Hegel in the frame of ordinary intelligible distinctions presented above; hence Schelling tries to

²⁴² Ibid., 134. Italics mine.

²⁴³ Ibid. Italics mine.

‘make sense’ of Hegel as a normal ‘intelligible’ account of things, although it should be clear from Hegel’s critique of understanding that he clearly does not share the version of dualism that Schelling’s account is based on. This very attempt to place Hegel in the understanding is what renders the un-intelligible interpretation of him. Schelling’s criticism of Hegel, simply put, is that Hegel effectively fools himself and others when he asserts that (his) ‘merely negative’, ‘merely logical’ or ‘merely conceptual’ philosophy of ‘reason’ or ‘the concept’ can cross over into the ‘positive’ and completely grasp ‘existence’ in its singular specificity and without remainder. Or, Schelling thinks that Hegel thinks that the first column of distinguished terms (above) can overtake the second column, extending the ideal pole in Schelling’s opposition beyond its limit over the real pole. The “fundamental error” of Hegel’s thought, for Schelling, “consists precisely in that it wants to be positive... The philosophy that Hegel presented is the negative driven beyond its limits: it does not exclude the positive, but thinks it has subdued it within itself”.²⁴⁴ Hegel’s “Idea... eats up being”.²⁴⁵ The speculative objection to the thesis of heterogeneity involves what Schelling takes to be “a wrongly *understood* identity of thought and being”,²⁴⁶ or a “philosophy which leaves absolutely nothing outside itself”,²⁴⁷ which for him was a “monstrous”, mere “episode”.²⁴⁸ Here one ought to recall Hegel’s own similar concern about formalism that understands ‘the absolute’ as a ‘night in which all cows are black’, or subsumes particulars in a void of generality. It is not immediately clear how the idea or concept could be grasped as *devouring* being. Thus in the rest of this section, the following points will be addressed: 1) what Schelling identifies in Hegel and how he locates it within his own picture of ‘negative and positive philosophy’, and 2), how Schelling’s understanding of Hegel is based on reading Hegel’s philosophy with his lens of understanding. This imputes views to Hegel which are not his own by assuming that Hegel’s account makes ‘the concept’ or ‘thought’ into a basic *fundament*. Then statements by Schelling that corroborate the claim that he does not perceive the gist of the critique of understanding will be addressed.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 145.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 153.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 129. Italics mine.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 135.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 136.

1) In his lectures on *Positive Philosophy*, Schelling tellingly identifies what he takes to be the core of Hegel's thought. He writes that the "*true* thought of a philosopher is precisely his fundamental thought from which he proceeds. The fundamental thought of Hegel is that reason relates to the in itself, the essence of things..." Yet Schelling equates 'in itself' with 'essence', understood in the common sense of the term, rather than that of Hegel's *Wesen* and 'Logic of Essence'. It becomes evident that Schelling is less concerned with discovering what Hegel has in mind (e.g. critique) to the extent that it may be radically different than he is interested in interpreting Hegel with his own dichotomies and expectations or interpretive frames. He continues: "...from which immediately follows that philosophy, to the extent that it is a science of reason, occupies itself only with the whatness [*Was*], or the essence, of things".²⁴⁹ Hegel's claim that the 'in itself' is the 'subject matter' of philosophy is understood as a kind of affirmative stance about 'substance', rather than a *critique* of the notion that there is some self-subsistent 'in itself' at all. Schelling thus takes Hegel's terms in his own sense, by placing 'concept' on one side of his dichotomy opposed to 'being'. He writes:

One need not read very far into Hegel's *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* to find repeatedly in the first pages the dictum that reason concerns itself with the 'in itself' [*An sich*] of things. Now you may well ask what the in itself of these things is. Is it, perhaps, the fact that they exist; is it their being [*Seyn*]? Not at all, for the in itself, the essence [*Wesen*], the concept—for example, the nature of man—remains the same even if there were no people at all on the earth, just as the in itself of a geometrical figure remains the same whether or not it exists.²⁵⁰

Of course, Hegel would object to this formulation (and its inherent Platonism), yet ironically this is precisely Schelling's objection to Hegel. Because Schelling takes these terms his own senses, what appears to be Schelling's concession to what he takes to be Hegel's main claim (that *what* is thought is not entirely alien or radically transcendent to thought) must be taken with a grain salt. In agreement with what he takes to be Hegel's account, he states that "it is true that what is real does not stand in opposition to our thinking as something foreign, inaccessible, and unreachable, but that the concept and the being are one: that the being does not have the concept outside itself, but rather has it within itself". But that he says '*the* being' is crucial here; he recasts *being* as such as a

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 130.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 129-30.

new ontologized transcendence or ‘beyond’ of the concept. Schelling immediately relates this reading of Hegel’s considerations of the ‘in itself’ to his own series of dichotomies discussed above. “Nonetheless”, he continues,

in all this the discussion was only about the *content* of what is real, but regarding this content, the fact *that* it exists is something purely contingent: the circumstance of whether it exists or not does not change my concept of the content in the least.²⁵¹

His interjection of the peculiar term, “content” may be read as an attempt to salvage a dichotomy of thought and being or content, in what would otherwise be their *collapse* in Hegel. He continues:

... in all this one sees that the discussion is only about the *content* of what exists: *if* there are things that exist, then they will be of this kind, and will come to be in this sequence and no other—this is the meaning. But that they exist I do not know in this way and must convince myself of this from somewhere else, namely, from experience.²⁵²

Schelling adds the further dimension of ‘actuality’ (*Wirklichkeit*) to the discussion of ‘content’ (i.e. ‘form’), understood in *his own* sense as an immediately given particular opposed to thought, which is markedly non-speculative. He writes:

Reason provides the content for everything that occurs in experience; it comprehends what is *real* [*Wirkliche*], but not, therefore, *reality* [*Wirklichkeit*]. This is an important difference. The science of reason does not provide what really exists in nature and its *particular* forms. To this extent, experience, through which we know what really exists, is a source of knowing independent of reason and, thus, travels right alongside it. And *here* is precisely the point where the relationship of the science of reason to experience allows itself to be positively determined: the science of reason, contrary to excluding experience, requires it... only experience, and not reason, can say that *that* which has been construed really exists.²⁵³

This injection of dichotomy would understand a ‘reality’ (*actuality*) as separate from the actuality of the thing. The result of this understanding is that it casts Hegel as a return to the dogmatic-rationalist metaphysics of the Wolffian school because of its use of these dichotomies as its interpretive rubric for Hegel. What follows from this is the most ironic and damning accusation Schelling makes – that Hegel marks a regression to

²⁵¹ Ibid., 130.

²⁵² Ibid., 131.

²⁵³ Ibid., 131.

the *Verstandesmetaphysik* of Wolff – because Wolff is the paradigm-case for Hegel’s critique of the understanding, which Schelling does not acknowledge. In his lectures on the *History of Philosophy* he fits Hegel into the picture of his dichotomies as follows:

The old metaphysics, which was built up out of various sciences, had as its universal basis a science which also had concepts only as concepts as its content: ontology. In his *Logic* Hegel had nothing in mind but this ontology, which *he* wanted to elevate above the bad form which it had had in the Wolffian philosophy for example where the various categories were set up and dealt with in a more or less just coincidental, more or less indifferent, juxtaposition and succession... But going back to this ontology at all was a retrograde step.²⁵⁴

Hegel claims that his *Logic* takes over the content of what was historically called ‘metaphysics’, and Schelling reads this as a continuation of the dogmatic metaphysics, rather than of its critique;²⁵⁵ he understands the assertion that *Logic* examines the assumptions of the particular sciences to mean that it is a ‘first philosophy’.²⁵⁶ In his lectures on *Positive Philosophy*, Schelling sets up what he finds his view of ‘negative and positive philosophy’ and his understanding of Hegel to have in common. He writes:

... the former metaphysics was based on the assumption that it is capable, through the application of general concepts and fundamental principles to what was provided in experience, of inferring that which is beyond all experience. One has disparagingly called this metaphysics in recent times a metaphysics of the understanding [*Verstandesmetaphysik*]. It would be nice indeed to wish that one could say the same of every philosophy, namely, that it incorporates understanding at all.²⁵⁷

Thus the critique of understanding appears to be lost on Schelling. On the one hand the Wolffian philosophy consisted of the general-formal discourse of ‘ontology’, which dictated which objects of knowledge can be, on a purely logical basis (e.g. if they are not self-contradictory). “Philosophy is the science of the possibles insofar as they can be”, Wolff writes, contrasted with actual objects. And on the other hand this formal-general ontology was applied to the opposed three objects of human knowledge: soul, world and God.²⁵⁸ This is the textbook case of formalism that Hegel critiques as

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 133-4.

²⁵⁵ See G.W.F. Hegel, SL, in W5: 61.

²⁵⁶ See *ibid.*, EL, in W8: 41ff. § 1.

²⁵⁷ F.W.J. Schelling, GPP, 116

²⁵⁸ Wolff writes: “The beings which we know are God, human souls, and bodies or natural material things” (Christian Wolff, *Preliminary Discourse on Philosophy in General*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), 33.

Verstand, as well as actually being in a closer fit with Schelling's *Was-Daß* account. It is therefore ironic that Schelling would consider Hegel a Wolff in new clothing, as it were, considering the fact that this is the formalism, imputed to Hegel in his reading, inherent to his own account.

2) Once Schelling has placed Hegel in his system of dichotomies, he can then interpret Hegel's rejection of the supposition of a fundament exterior to thought – *which is actually Hegel's critique of Verstand* – as a conceptual *Machtanspruch* against 'existence'. His understanding of Hegel transforms what is actually Hegel's anti-fundamental conceptual account into a kind of conceptual fundamentalism in the precise degree that he tries to understand Hegel's conceptual position as common understanding characterized above in part 1. Schelling takes Hegel's concept as a *hypo-stasis* or precisely a metaphysical *under-standing*, or as making the concept (or 'the idea') into a basic sub-ject in the manner of pre-critical substance metaphysics. For instance, Hegel's claim that the concept is the element of *all* thought is understood as a claim that Hegel advances a container-totality-style account in which "the concept was *everything* and left nothing outside itself".²⁵⁹ Departing from his appropriation of a Kantian framework, Hegel's conceptual criticism of understanding appears to him as a "logical dogmatism that Hegel later wanted to ground solely in the abstract concept", which Schelling calls "most repugnant".²⁶⁰ In the lectures on *Positive Philosophy* he writes:

...he [Hegel] hypostatized the concept with the intent of providing the logical movement—which, however independent one takes it to be of everything subjective, can nonetheless always exist only in *thought*—with the significance of an objective movement, nay, what is more, of a *process*.²⁶¹

In the lectures on the *History of Modern Philosophy* he also indicates that he under-stands Hegel as a conceptual metaphysician or theologian. He writes:

... one admittedly cannot reproach Hegel with holding the opinion that God is just a concept; his opinion is rather: the *true* creator is the concept; with the concept one has the creator and needs no other outside this creator... for him the concept had the meaning that it *was* God. His opinion is: God is nothing but the concept which step by step becomes the self-conscious Idea (*Idee*), as self-conscious Idea releases itself into nature, and, returning from nature into itself, becomes absolute

²⁵⁹ F.W.J. Schelling, HMP, 134.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., GPP, 146.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 151.

spirit.²⁶²

Yet these claims are based on examples and metaphorical uses of language by Hegel, for illustrating points that occur throughout his work, but taken literally. Schelling himself indicates that it is *his* under-standing (of Hegel and otherwise), which consists of a demand for a grammatical *sub-ject*. For him, thought, as anything, must have a subject that thinks it, and every action or predicate-attribute must have a sub-ject/sub-stance that it is predicated to (remaining perfectly in line with the understanding Hegel actually critiques). Schelling retorts:

Concepts as such do in fact exist nowhere but in consciousness [or: “for the *philosopher*”²⁶³]... abstractions cannot be there [or exist, da-sein], be taken for realities, before that from which they are abstracted; becoming cannot be there before *something* becomes, existence not before *something* exists.²⁶⁴

The insistence on this view shows how Schelling cannot see Hegel’s point due to his own obligations. It is questionable whether Schelling is intersecting with Hegel’s account at all here; for Hegel, the something that becomes (the ‘subject’) is not just something other than its becoming.

3.3. Schelling’s Intelligible Misapprehensions

What makes Schelling’s critique of Hegel so fascinating is that it is a completely ‘understandable’ one, in a double sense: one can see how Schelling got the impression of Hegel that marks his understanding, *and* his reading is clearly shaped by the understanding, which is blind to the critique of understanding, and hence distorts Hegel as a critic of the latter. Thus the experience of reading his critique has the character of watching a gratuitous struggle. The cluster of confusion gravitates around Schelling’s understanding, for instance, of what ‘system’ (or ‘concept’) must mean for Hegel, and this bears on what he takes to hold true for Hegel too. He similarly indicates a priority that Hegel shares: thinking the thing in its singularity, and he thinks he wins room for doing so by determining ‘the positive’ as in some sense left ‘open’ and opposed to

²⁶² Ibid., HMP, 135.

²⁶³ Ibid., 154.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 145. Italics mine.

thought. Thus he thereby assumes that system and the singular thing are self-evidently opposed in an exclusive manner, and so he thinks that Hegel prefers ‘system’ over the ‘thing’. In his lectures on *Positive Philosophy*, he writes:

... this unconditional demand for a system expresses the heights to which the philosophical science has been elevated in our time; one is convinced that nothing more can be known in its singularity, but rather only in its context and as part of a great, all-encompassing totality.²⁶⁵

And yet, what if the thing can only be known in its singularity precisely *in* a systematic view? Reading ‘totality’ in this way as ‘encompassing all details’, rather than the individual one, is the conception of totality one gets by thinking it from the standpoint of *understanding*’s ‘second-order’ thoughts ‘about’ things and problematic abstractions. This also falls back on common-sense understanding for the meaning and justification of its terms. So it is in fact Schelling’s understanding of what ‘system’ and ‘whole’ mean that prevents him from seeing what Hegel is up to. In the same discussion he continues:

Hegel, who in the details is so sharp, was abandoned by this artistic sensibility by nothing so badly as when he moved on into the whole [*das Ganze*], for otherwise he would have detected the interruption of movement that takes place for him between the *Logic* and the *Philosophy of Nature*... The philosopher who really wants a completed system must see far out into the distance, not just stare myopically at details and what lies nearby.²⁶⁶

Schelling repeats the same assumption here. There is, however, arguably *no whole system* in Hegel *apart from the details*. The caricature-image of the ‘Hegelian system’ as a deductive chain-argument, stretching from logic to nature to culture, of a series of conclusions from self deduced premises (‘sublations’),²⁶⁷ arguably begins here with Schelling’s reading. There is indeed a gap between the themes; they indeed do not run together in the way Schelling expects them to. Yet if he finds the fit of the pieces of the ‘system’ a poor one, this is arguably because they are in fact not the expected enormous chain of deductions. So, Schelling is right to take issue with Hegel’s *Logic* in the way he understands it, which requires revision. His argument for his problematic understanding of the text is: “how else can one understand it?”²⁶⁸ Hence confusion results from his own

²⁶⁵ Ibid., GPP, 150.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 150.

²⁶⁷ See *ibid*, HMP, 138-42 & 147 (on the accusation of teleology).

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 138.

interpretive sense-making requirements for the text and the text as a *challenge* to his own understanding; it results in his assumption and accusation that Hegel's logic contains a "teleology" that is implicitly just leading up to what is given (c.f. Hegel's 'quietism').²⁶⁹

Schelling even makes speculative points in his objections to Hegel; he objects to the discussion of 'being' (*Sein*) at the beginning of Hegel's logic: "it is an impossibility to think *being in general*, because there is no being *in general*...". Thus Schelling elides Hegel's point. (At any rate 'becoming' is the 'first concrete' thought in Hegel's *Logic*, because it is the first instance of a 'conceptual grasp' of opposites.) Hegel and Schelling would be in agreement here, if the latter did not then veer off into suppositions of abstract understanding: "...there is no being without a subject, being is rather necessarily and at all times something determinate...".²⁷⁰ Hegel would agree that being is always determinate, which is the reason for his rejection of abstractly supposed 'subjects'. Thus Schelling shows that he is incapable of reading this sense in Hegel's statement because of the way that he approaches the text, and because his expectations about what the text must be doing frame it in advance: "*whatever* meaning he might give to this proposition" about being, Schelling writes "it cannot on any account be his intention to declare pure being to be an un-thought (*Ungedanken*), after he had just declared it to be the absolutely first thought".²⁷¹ This is arguably Hegel's point if read otherwise than by understanding. The further objections Schelling raises also indicate the specific, misguided sense in which he understands them. Schelling also takes Hegel to "boast of not presupposing anything".²⁷² This claim can be identified in Trendelenburg's later confused critical formulation of Hegel as implicitly relying on, yet denying, reference to an external, empirical experience,²⁷³ which would allegedly delegitimize it. Yet 'presuppositionless' arguably just means making presuppositions (*assumptions*) the object of critique, not a

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 139-40.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 139.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 139-40.

²⁷² Ibid., 148.

²⁷³ Schelling writes: "Hegel must, by setting up the Logic in that sublime sense as the first philosophical science, use the common logical forms to do so, without having justified them, i.e. he must presuppose them, when he says, e.g.: 'Pure being *is* nothing', without in the least having proved anything about the meaning of this *is*. However, it is obviously not just the logical forms, but virtually *all* concepts which we use in everyday life without further reflection and without considering it necessary for us to justify ourselves because of them, it is virtually all concepts of this kind which Hegel uses at the very beginning, which he therefore *presupposes*..." (ibid., 148).

kind of immaculate intellectual conception (insisting the contrary in fact would be simply making the *presupposition* that there must always necessarily be *presuppositions*). Schelling similarly mentions “the pretension to complete systematisation, i.e. the claim that all concepts have been included and that outside the circle of those that have been included no other concept is possible”.²⁷⁴ This view has outlived Schelling up to present readings of Hegel. Here, ‘complete systematization’ would have to be understood in a *Platonist* sense imputed to Hegel; though Hegel’s critique of *Verstand*, by contrast, would entail a critique of this container-notion of totality and the inscription of what is in the index of modality (‘possibility’).

In the following statement from the lectures on the *History of Philosophy* Schelling effectively shows how what he takes Hegel to be saying is determined by his expectations or assumptions of what it must be that Hegel is doing. This is apparent in his expectations or assumptions regarding necessity and contingency, and the disappointment that follows from these. He writes:

It cannot be our intention to go further into the detail of the Hegelian Logic. What really gives rise to our interest is the system as a *whole*. In relation to the system which is its basis, Hegel’s *Logic* is something completely contingent... I myself believe that one could easily produce this so-called real logic in ten different ways. Yet I do not for this reason underestimate the value of many uncommonly clever, particularly methodological remarks which are to be found in Hegel’s *Logic*. But Hegel threw himself into the methodological discussion in such a way that he thereby completely forgot the questions which lay outside it.²⁷⁵

This firstly assumes that there is a ‘whole’ apart from details that one can skip to, though in fact Hegel devotes a chapter of the ‘Logic of Essence’, which Schelling does not mention, to the discussion of reciprocal dependence of parts and wholes.²⁷⁶ He also shows that he assumes that it would be a problem if the logic were written in a different order, or that it must correspond to the ordinary conception of ‘necessity’ – though Hegel himself admits it could have been written different ways and precisely critiques *a priori* necessity (i.e. actual necessity is always retroactively necessary, or immediately contingent). Schelling seems to take the attitude of a natural scientist here; for Hegel there is perhaps no philosophical concern except for methodology. If nothing else, the

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 144.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 146-7.

²⁷⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, SL, in W6: 164ff. & 166ff.

lesson to be taken from the introduction to the *Logic* is that the very object of philosophy, as Hegel sees it, is the method of thought (or which thought is) itself.

Schelling makes several other claims about understanding and Hegel, which show that he actually does not have a grasp of what the critique of understanding amounts to: a critique of the methodological supposition of self-subsistent fundamentals. They illustrate how he misreads Hegel as a philosopher of the understanding because he does not make the issue an explicit topic when interpreting Hegel. In an earlier manuscript from his time in Erlangen, Schelling writes:

... whoever wants to raise himself above all natural concepts with the excuse that they are merely finite determinations of the understanding even deprives himself thereby of all organs of comprehensibility [*Verständlichkeit* – intelligibility], for only in these forms can everything become comprehensible to us.²⁷⁷

Schelling does not honor the distinction between intelligibility and conceptual comprehensibility. This quote is presumably directed at Hegel's criticism of the understanding, yet it can only indicate that it (mis)understands the latter. It is also a prime example of the endemic problems of philosophical translation and reception as obscuring Hegel's thought: *verständlich* is translated here as 'comprehensible', which is vague enough to suggest the wrong connotation and make the relation to Hegel and Hegel's actual criticism perfectly illegible. 'Intelligible' or 'understandable' would be more accurate. It also shows the way in which Schelling holds the explicit view (except of course, when he does at times think speculatively, when he is not contrasting himself to Hegel) that one cannot do something other than understanding in theory without being reduced to unintelligible nonsense, or that understanding *exhausts* thought. On the one hand, Schelling's description of Hegel's thought as the "purest prose and a sobriety totally devoid of intuition" similarly indicates that he does not see the performative or poetic dimension in the speculative-conceptual project and its self-reflexive mode of exposition;²⁷⁸ the concept does not prosaically refer to an external referent, as an abstract proposition would, but rather only to itself, which is in fact half of Schelling's objection. Though on the other hand, elsewhere, he states that he regards Hegel's writing as simply word-play: "Hegel loves this inexact way of expressing himself; but that way the most

²⁷⁷ F. 162. See *Schellings Werke*. vol. 5. 323.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., GPP. 176.

trivial things can be given the appearance of something extraordinary”.²⁷⁹ His ambivalence here indicates that he misses what Hegel is doing. Schelling does not criticize the concept *as Hegel presents it*, because he overlooks the extent to which Hegel’s project is different. Schelling does not critically recognize understanding and metaphysics as partners or as one particular option for thinking contrasted with others. Rather, he claims that the “true understanding of the world is provided by precisely the *right* metaphysics”.²⁸⁰ Thus Schelling’s project (at least at the point in time at which he was critiquing Hegel) is incapable or unwilling to yield any kind of critique of the status quo of ordinary thought, because he accepts it as a given and reliable norm: “I believe that even the philosopher must direct his employment of language according to general usage”,²⁸¹ he writes. Though it may sound strange to cast Schelling as a positivist or ordinary language philosopher, he states: “... one should remain convinced that anything that allows itself to be articulated only in a garbled and eccentric manner cannot, for that very reason, be what is true and right”.²⁸²

Schelling drives the view that that there is no alternative to (his own) understanding even further, effectively blaming ‘unintelligibility’ (*Unverständlichkeit*) of stances on some intrinsic feature of the subject matter itself. This ironically exhibits an understanding-like (essentialist) way of framing the entire matter in his very objection. What appear to be charitable remarks towards Hegel become incrimination for the reader familiar with Hegel’s speculative critique of understanding and the obvious reasons why it would seem ‘unintelligible’ to understanding. In his lectures on the history of philosophy he writes:

People complain about the incomprehensibility [*Unverständlichkeit* – unintelligibility] of this philosophy and seem to seek the reason for this in a failing on the part of the individual, whereby one is, for example, being unfair to Hegel, who, when he comes out of his confinement or speaks of matters which are closer to life, certainly knows how to express himself very decisively, very comprehensibly, indeed very wittily. The incomprehensibility lies in the thing itself (*in der Sache selbst*); what is above all understanding can never become comprehensible [*verständlich*]; if it were supposed to become comprehensible it

²⁷⁹ Ibid., HMP. 141.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., GPP. 107. Italics mine.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 210.

²⁸² Ibid., 101-2.

would first have to change its nature.²⁸³

And in his lectures on *Positive Philosophy* he similarly writes:

There is nothing more common regarding philosophy lectures than to hear complaints about their unintelligibility. When this occurs, a certain injustice is done to some teachers to the extent that the blame is placed on his individual inability to express himself distinctly, or that he lacks the gift of clear analysis, whereas the blame properly lies in the subject itself. For where the subject is *in itself* unintelligible and muddled, the highest art of oratory would still be incapable of making it intelligible.²⁸⁴

In both of these cases, Schelling postures himself as though he were being generous to Hegel. Yet this extremely reified way of regarding actuality as having ‘natures’ – in this case the ‘unintelligible problem’ being ‘intrinsically’ so – is ironically the very problematic way of reading Hegel itself, which is responsible for making him ‘unintelligible’. Schelling does not recognize or honor the concept or the distinction of understanding and comprehending required for Hegel’s text to be *meaningful*.

The most damning thing Schelling says for his own grasp of what Hegel is actually doing occurs in what he presents as a criticism of Hegel. He indicates that he *expects* understanding from Hegel, when he objects that one cannot ascribe *either* ‘true’ or ‘false’ truth-values to Hegel’s statements. Though, of course, this would not meet Hegel’s account, because Hegel is first and foremost critiquing that very abstract propositional form, dualisms etc. Expecting ordinary intelligible propositions about invariant states of affairs from *Hegel* is confused in the first place. He writes:

One cannot really contradict these propositions, or declare them to be false; for they are, rather, propositions that give one nothing. It is as if one wanted to carry water in cupped hands, which also gives one nothing. The work of just holding onto something which cannot be held onto because it is not anything here replaces philosophising. One can say the same thing about all of Hegel’s philosophy. One ought really not to talk about it at all, because *it is characteristic of it that in many cases it consists of just such incomplete thoughts which cannot even be held onto for long enough for a judgement about them to be possible.*²⁸⁵

If Schelling would put aside his positivism for just a moment, he would see that the “nothing” manifest in the immanent contradiction of propositional form, which he

²⁸³ Ibid., HMP, 162.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., GPP, 101.

²⁸⁵ HMP. 141. Italics mine.

points out here, is Hegel's speculative *point*, rather than a mere disqualification or shortcoming. If Hegel's point is actually a demonstration or exhibition of the collapse of abstract understanding by presenting *its aporias*, rather advancing a series of dogmatic metaphysical assertions that must be free of contradiction in order to be honored, then Schelling would actually be turning *Hegel's point* into an accusation against him to the extent that he overlooks it. What is more shocking is that the intelligible objections Schelling raises have largely stuck to Hegel long after Schelling himself vanished.

CHAPTER 4

SPECULATIVE REJOINDERS

Schelling's account of philosophy, his characterization of Hegel's thought and his criticism of the latter rest on the same 'intelligible' (*verständlich*) edifice of dualisms that Hegel criticizes. It is evident to the reader acquainted both with Hegel and Schelling that Schelling is less interested in grasping what Hegel is doing than his own understanding of the latter's terms. This makes it difficult to accurately grasp what is at stake before criticism begins. By claiming that Hegel's 'negative' philosophy only thinks merely conceptual determinations (or that Hegel therefore illegitimately extends the concept beyond its possible bounds), Schelling's critique takes the dichotomy that opposes 'concepts' ('what' determinations of things) to actuality ('that' something is) for granted as self-evident. It is in fact entirely premised on the assumption, rather than proof, that existence is excluded from a determinate thing (the distinction of *Was* and *Daß*), and so his critique stands or falls with the status of this distinction. Schelling's account motivates the obvious question regarding the status of this entire distinction itself: *is this distinction of concept and being itself not a conceptual distinction through and through?* If this should be the case, then Hegel and Schelling have far more in common than the latter understands; yet Schelling would then have to forego 'existence' as separate, because it would itself therefore turn out to be an abstract *category* (e.g. it names any number of instances that things exist) won through the concept. For Hegel this distinction between 'determination and being' (*Was* and *Daß*) cannot be honored in the first place without making an enormous concession to conceptuality as more than 'merely' conceptual. He does not assert that the negative 'can become positive', but rather he discovers that negativity already has positive results in particular cases, and he does not repress this comprehensible observation for sake of 'intelligibility'.

In what follows, detailed speculative replies to Schelling's critique will be given: 1) pertaining to the problems surrounding the concept, and 2) pertaining to Hegel's treatments of the same distinctions Schelling employs against Hegel, although Schelling never addresses them, and the specific details of Schelling's account from a speculative perspective. This will show that Schelling's employment of these distinctions against speculative thought distorts the latter, which he is ultimately responsible for. Hegel can actually be read as an anti-system or 'philosophy of difference', if his conceptual critique of understanding is not read through the understanding's lens of taxonomies, subsumptions and schematizations. In light of the critique of understanding, it is Schelling who turns out to be the 'all knowing totalizer': his two master-categories (*Was* and *Daß*) categorize everything that can be in principle.

4.1 Problems Surrounding the Concept

Schelling objects to the criticism of reflection Hegel makes from a conceptual perspective. For instance, Schelling tries to point out what he takes to be a gratuitous assumption on Hegel's part. He writes:

Hegel often refers to the fact that people have always thought that philosophy primarily entails thinking or reflection.²⁸⁶ This is true, but it does not follow from it that the object of this thinking is again only thinking itself or the concept.²⁸⁷

The actual the problem lies in the assumption Schelling is imputing to Hegel. Hegel's claim is not that philosophy is simply locked into itself or the concept because it is reflective; the self (and hence its mental inventory) does not antedate its act of reflection in the first place. Rather, philosophy is at its most self-deceptive when it thinks it can simply refer to what it speaks of as though they were given facts of natural science, and in this sense 'philosophy is always actually about the concept'. The actual stakes consist in the fact that it is when one tries to distinguish the 'real' from 'the theoretical reflection', as Schelling seems to advocate here, that reflection (viz. abstraction) occurs at its purest – as what philosophers designate as 'real'. The suppositions of things distinct from thought or the concept are not so radically non-conceptual ('given') that they do not

²⁸⁶ See G.W.F. Hegel, EL, in W8: 93. § 26 (on 'metaphysics').

²⁸⁷ F.W.J. Schelling, HMP, 146.

appear in the theory, precisely because they populate ‘realist’ *theories*. Here Schelling’s claims that ‘positive philosophy’ begins with what is “absolutely external to thought” is extremely vulnerable, as are his claims that *being* understood as immediate cannot be grasped, because he has thereby already given an account of it involving conceptuality.

In the body of § 164 of the *Encyclopedia Logic*, Hegel clearly indicates that what he means by ‘concept’ is not the ordinary understanding of it as ‘abstraction from givens’, which Schelling holds. Hence Hegel does not extend the ordinary understanding of the ‘concept’ beyond its limits, but basically redefines it to factor in what the understanding already does conceptually when it understands ‘things’ yet overlooks. In the lecture-additions to Hegel’s texts after his death (and which do not appear to have had a significant impact in advance of Schelling’s interpretation), Hegel makes this crystal clear. He actually holds the opinion that the concept is something “*differentiating*” or “*specifying*”, and not an abstract identity resulting from generalization or omission of differences, which Schelling understands the concept to be. There, Hegel describes the ‘usual’ way the concept is understood as a mere generalization or abstraction *from* differences in a way that is *identical* to Schelling’s abstract understanding of concept addressed above, or ‘the way the understanding takes the concept’, which Schelling then wrongly imputes to Hegel.²⁸⁸

The concept is not an over-arching abstraction, common feature or container of

²⁸⁸ Hegel’s account in fact targets this picture of ‘concepts’ as held by Kant and Schelling; in the first addition it is stated: “Wenn vom Begriff gesprochen wird, so ist es gewöhnlich nur die abstrakte Allgemeinheit, welche man dabei vor Augen hat, und der Begriff pflegt dann auch wohl [als] eine allgemeine Vorstellung definiert zu werden. Man spricht demgemäß vom Begriff der Farbe, der Pflanze, des Tieres usw., und diese Begriffe sollen dadurch entstehen, daß bei Hinweglassung des Besonderen, wodurch sich die verschiedenen Farben, Pflanzen, Tiere usw. voneinander unterscheiden, das denselben Gemeinschaftliche festgehalten werde. Dies ist die Weise, wie der Verstand den Begriff auffaßt, und das Gefühl hat recht, wenn es solche Begriffe für hohl und leer, für bloße Schemen und Schatten erklärt. Nun aber ist das Allgemeine des Begriffs nicht bloß ein Gemeinschaftliches, welchem gegenüber das Besondere seinen Bestand für sich hat, sondern vielmehr das sich selbst Besondernde (Spezifizierende) und in seinem Anderen in ungetrübter Klarheit bei sich selbst Bleibende” (G.W.F. Hegel, EL in W8: 311-2, § 163, addition 1). (“When the concept is spoken of, it is customarily only abstract generality that one usually has in mind, and then the concept may be defined as a general representation or picture. One accordingly speaks of the concept of color, of plants, of the animal etc., and these concepts are supposed to emerge by the same common [features] are held fast, while the particular, by which the different colors, plants, animals etc. are distinguished, are left aside. This is the manner in which the understanding apprehends the concept, and feeling is in the right when it explains such concepts to be hollow and empty, for mere schemas and shadows. But now, the general [or universal] of the concept is not merely [some] common [feature], which has some subsistence for itself [or by itself] vis-à-vis the particular, but rather [it is] in fact the self-determining (specifying) [moment] and what remains in unclouded clarity in its other”).

differences, but rather *what differentiates* and thereby establishes connections through its own activity, or establishes itself. And in the second addition Hegel addresses the inverted error (*verkehrt*) of what he calls the “*Verstandeslogik*”. Again he diagnoses the very interpretation of the concept Schelling gives as *Verstand*. It is stated:

Es ist verkehrt, anzunehmen, erst seien die Gegenstände, welche den Inhalt unserer Vorstellungen bilden, und dann hinterdrein komme unsere subjektive Tätigkeit, welche durch die vorher erwähnte Operation des Abstrahierens und des Zusammenfassens des den Gegenständen Gemeinschaftlichen die Begriffe derselben bilde. Der Begriff ist vielmehr das wahrhaft Erste, und die Dinge sind das, was sie sind, durch die Tätigkeit des ihnen innewohnenden und in ihnen sich offenbarenden Begriffs.²⁸⁹

The concept is ‘first’ in the sense of the consideration of the ‘truth’ (*warhaft Erste*) of the thing, as the result of a process or its having become what it is. This ‘first’, however, is a *logical* and not *chronological* prior-ness (or is only retroactively first). It pertains to the subject that the understanding will belatedly ‘pre-suppose’, or that is freely supposed by the understanding’s implicit conceptual activity. It is *not* a free-standing subject that antedated its own becoming temporally, which would be a naïve supposition of the understanding. Hence it is Schelling’s claim, that there must be something that becomes ‘before’ it can become, which is actually a logical confusion the *Logic* sets out to clarify. This means Hegel does not mix up a ‘conceptual process’ with a ‘real process’ (pace Schelling), because he rejects this dualism, isomorphism of concepts and things, and because he complicates the notion of temporality (‘retroactivity’).

Hegel noted the dualistic tendency of Schelling’s thought in his own lifetime (which he nonetheless held to be of “deep” speculative merit in other regards that cannot be addressed here²⁹⁰) in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. Yet while he noted this early on, it was still impossible to have addressed Schelling’s critique or responded to it. The precise problematic of the inadequacies of abstract understanding, or its incapacity to become aware of its own immanent procedures and actuality, emerges in his

²⁸⁹ Ibid., EL, in W8: § 313, addition 2. (“It is mistaken to assume that first there are the objects, which constitute the content of our presentations, and then thereafter enters our subjective activity, which constitute the concept through the previously mentioned operation of abstraction and composition of the common [features] of the objects. The concept is in fact the truly first [or first in truth], and the things are that which they are through the activity of the inhering concept that reveals itself in them”).

²⁹⁰ See *ibid.*, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, in W20: 453 (viz. regarding Schelling’s Essay on Human Freedom).

discussion of early Schelling as well, and can arguably carry over to the later Schelling too. In the following statement from his lectures, the crucial connection for formulating a response to Schelling is made, which also resonates with what has been said about what ‘the concept’ means for Schelling and for Hegel. It is stated:

Es ist der Standpunkt des Verstandes, die Gedanken zu unterscheiden, zu bestimmen gegeneinander; und die Forderung des Philosophierens ist, diese unterschiedenen Gedanken zusammenzubringen. Das natürliche Bewußtsein hat allerdings das Konkrete zum Gegenstand, aber der Verstand entzweit, unterscheidet, hält an den endlichen Gedankenbestimmungen fest; und die Schwierigkeit ist, die Einheit [*that is already there*] zu fassen und festzuhalten. Unendlich und endlich, Ursache und Wirkung, positiv und negativ hält man immer auseinander; das Denken fängt damit an. Es ist das Gebiet des reflektierenden Bewußtseins, dies hat denn das alte metaphysizierende Bewußtsein mitmachen können; aber das Spekulative ist, diesen Gegensatz vor sich zu haben und ihn aufzulösen.²⁹¹

Hence Schelling, for Hegel, does not meet the speculative-critical requirement of ‘bringing together’ the understandings own thoughts in important ways. This resolution (*Auflösung*) that marks the passage from understanding to speculation is neither some ‘absolute knowing’ that lies on the horizon nor an ‘overcoming’ of difference with another, third identity that traverses it. (The latter would only efface differences in the manner of abstract understanding.) The ‘coincidence of opposites’ does not happen in a third identity, because the third is the *difference*. The resolution is simply the irreversible depth of the cut of opposition itself borne fully in mind: the ‘difference that connects’. Grasping this difference immanently in its full depth is the concrete concept (*Begriff*), which Schelling fails to grasp in his criticism of Hegel’s concept and in his own account of positive and negative philosophy because he regards *Begriff* as an identical-general-abstract *Vorstellung*. Speculative ‘resolution’ is not the removal of the contradiction, but a grasp of the thing as being contradictory in fact, rather than merely in thought. Describing the concept and the thing in this manner, Hegel states:

²⁹¹ Ibid., W20: 429. (“It is the standpoint of the understanding to distinguish thoughts, to determine [or specify] them vis-à-vis one another; [yet] the requirement of philosophy is to bring these distinguishes thoughts together. Natural consciousness admittedly has the concrete for its object, but the understanding divides, distinguishes, holds fast to the finite determinations of thought; and the difficulty is grasping and holding fast to the unity [that is already there]. One always holds infinite and finite, cause and effect, positive and negative apart from one another; thought begins with that. It is the domain of reflecting consciousness, [and] so the old metaphysicizing consciousness could participate in this; but the speculative is have this opposition before one[’s view] and to resolve [or thereby solve] it”).

jede Bestimmung, jedes Konkrete, *jeder Begriff* ist wesentlich eine Einheit unterschiedener und unterscheidbarer Momente, die durch den *bestimmten, wesentlichen Unterschied* in widersprechende übergehen. Dieses Widersprechende löst sich allerdings in nichts auf, es geht in seine negative Einheit zurück. Das Ding, das Subjekt, *der Begriff* ist nun eben diese negative Einheit selbst; es ist ein an sich selbst Widersprechendes, aber ebensosehr der *außgelöste Widerspruch*; es ist der *Grund*, der seine Bestimmungen enthält und trägt.²⁹²

Thus the concept is no ‘hypo-stasis’ at all, which would actually be the business of understanding. Rather, it is the disjunctive synthesis of differences and the different moments involved, homologous to the actually existent thing that is also the bundle of differences. Schelling gets into troubles of his own here. Placing negative concepts on the side of possibility and positive being on the side of actuality is in fact the hypostasis of understanding; the bizarre implication that follows is that this distinction itself, as conceptual, would not be an actual distinction. He claims that there is no positive concept of being, though he perfectly well contrasts *Was* with *Daß* and thereby wins reference to the latter. The lesson of Hegel’s critique of reflection is that if Schelling’s assertion about the concept as a mere abstraction from existence is true, then the ‘real being’ that Schelling abstractly contrasts with conceptual determination is also rendered an abstraction by being compared in the concept in his theory. Schelling relies on the prosaic assumption that language in propositions refers to ontologically separate things, and his own abstract comparison would suggest that it is already not ‘real being’ that is contrasted with the concept, but a negative-general category (‘the positive’), which he believes he can designate ‘positive things’ with. Positivity (*Daß*) is an intelligible redoubling or conceptual re-articulation of what the thing is ‘beyond’ itself.

4.2 Hegel’s Treatment of the Key Distinctions

²⁹² Ibid., SL, in W6: 78. (“... every determination, every concrete, *every concept* is essentially a unity of distinguished and distinguishable moments that through the *determinate, essential distinction* transition into the contradictory. This contradictory [fact] does not dissolve into nothing though, [rather] it goes back [or reverts, recurs] in its negative unity. Now the thing, the subject, *the concept*, is just this negative unity itself; it is a self-contradicting [thing], but just as much the *released contradiction*; it is the *ground* [or reason], that contains and bears its determinations”).

Hegel's *'Logic of Essence'* in particular contains the determinations commonly used in metaphysics and the sciences and includes the determinations of reflective understanding Schelling uses to criticize him. Hence it is an obvious resource for grasping the (mis)understanding. These determinations are what he calls 'determinations of reflection' (*Reflexionsbestimmungen*), and there Hegel collapses the dualisms at work in discussions that employ them, such as Schelling's. Though Schelling quotes the beginning and end of Hegel's *Logic*, he does not mention the *Wesenslogik* in any detail in either of his texts, and this indicates that either Schelling was not actually acquainted with the text or that he did not see what Hegel does there – in either case this shows Schelling's 'Hegel' to be a misreading. Abstract, reflective understanding treats things as though they were given and reflected on or thought about externally; and in the manner in which Schelling too understands his own distinctions, they are treated as distinct, self-subsistent givens. Yet determinations of reflection, Hegel writes, "sind nicht von qualitativer Art". They are not determinacies of fixed things that one merely reflects on, or which are qualitatively different in kind. Hegel continues:

Sie sind sich auf sich beziehende und damit der Bestimmtheit gegen Anderes zugleich entnommene Bestimmungen. Ferner, indem es Bestimmtheiten sind, *welche Beziehungen an sich selbst sind*, so enthalten sie insofern die Form des Satzes schon in sich.²⁹³

The proposition and fact are not simply mutually exclusive. Relations are not just named or drawn between given things. Rather, the determinations spoken of, which are related, *are* relations of relations. This is another way of saying their difference *also connects* or *relates* the different relata, such that they are what they are, rendering them *intrinsically relational*. It is Marx who perhaps best illustrates the determinations of reflection:

Determinations of reflection [*Reflexionsbestimmungen*] of this kind [viz. commodities having their *own* value expressed in *other* commodities exchanged with them] are altogether very curious. For instance, one man is king only because other men stand in the relation of subjects to him. They, on the other

²⁹³ Ibid., 37. Italics mine. (Determinations of reflection "are not of a qualitative kind... They are self- to self-relating [determinations] and thereby at the same time determinations taken from the determinacy vis-à-vis others. Further, by being determinacy's *that are relations in themselves*, to this extent they contain the form of the proposition already in themselves".)

hand, imagine that they are subjects because he is king.²⁹⁴

... the coat cannot represent value towards the linen unless value, for the latter, simultaneously assumes the form of a coat. An individual, A, for instance, cannot be 'your majesty' to another individual, B, unless majesty in B's eyes assumes the physical shape of A, and, moreover, changes facial features, hair and many other things, with every new 'father of his people'.²⁹⁵

'Essence', 'Appearance', 'Existence', 'Identity', 'Difference', 'Thing', 'Ground', 'Positive', 'Negative' and so on, are all examples of these sorts of conceptual determinations for Hegel. This conception of the content of reflective philosophy as being *thought* (viz. abstractions) has direct consequences for any philosophy that invokes these concepts in the assumption that it is speaking of them as self-subsistent givens (e.g. Schelling's 'positivity'). So using these determinations to critique the *Logic* without further ado is a bold move. Schelling's accusation that Hegel hypostatizes the concept is a mistake because it reads Hegel's theory of the concept not in its own light, but in the light of the understanding. Hegel, too, is primarily critiquing all *hypo-stases* or suppositions of the understanding, hence this cannot be what Hegel is doing; Hegel actually goes farther than Schelling in jettisoning 'fundaments', because the latter still insists on one. What is to be drawn from this vis-à-vis Schelling's criticism is that these determinations, which he uses must not be thought of as given and fixed in themselves. They cannot be used as *foundations* against Hegel's conceptual account without ignoring the latter. The relation between method or concepts and subject matter is more complicated than simple application of 'concepts' to 'things' because these 'things' are already reflected determinations ('conceptual'). The following conceptual-determinations that Schelling uses, and which exhibit *wesenslogische* characteristics in Hegel's treatment of them will be critiqued and *diagnosed* as Schelling's *understanding* in the rest of this section: a) determinate particulars (*Etwas* and *Anderes*), b) the existent 'thing' with properties (*Ding*), c) 'essence' (*Wesen*) and d) 'positive and negative'.

a) Schelling's picture of determination of 'what' a thing is as separate from its 'existence' is a textbook case of understanding as presented in part 1. Determining what the thing is, for abstract understanding, means *distinguishing it from* something else,

²⁹⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. I (London: Penguin in Association with New Left Review, 1990), 149.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 143.

which is in part accurate, were it not abstractly understood. And in Schelling's second-order understanding of how the 'what' relates to 'that', the negativity of the understanding is employed again in opposing the former to the latter ('the negative is not the positive'). Schelling should have considered Hegel's discussion of 'something and other' ('determinate existence') because it directly relates to his problematic and resolves it concretely. In the ordinary understanding, the claim that one 'something' is determined by negative distinction from another 'something else' (or an 'other') also requires that this second frame of reference used to define the first thing must itself in turn be defined. Yet when understanding does this, it must also define the 'something else' or 'other' (the frame of reference it used in the first case), and when it tries to do this in the same manner as the first case (distinguishing it from something else), an infinite regress is opened. "Etwas wird ein Anderes", Hegel writes, "aber das Andere ist selbst ein Etwas, also wird es gleichfalls ein Anderes, und so fort ins *Unendliche*",²⁹⁶ which Hegel calls the "bad infinity", limit-less-ness or abstract negation of the finite, or repetition of the same opposition.²⁹⁷ Because each new determination understood in this way requires more determination from some extraneous thing, one would have to have already defined every individual thing just in order to exhaustively understand one particular-determinate something. This infinite regress of abstract-negative determination sustains the dualistic illusion of the understanding, according to which conceptual determinations of 'what' things are remain forever separate from the beings 'that' they are, posed one alongside one another like parallel lines. The two indeed never meet as long as they are viewed abstractly in this way; understanding pictures the allegedly *given* ('real') thing itself as 'infinitely distant' from conceptual determinations, and 'knowing it' becomes an 'infinite task'. But this entire problematic situation follows from the abstract understanding of it, which opens the dualism of residual generality opposed to 'particulars' in the first place.

²⁹⁶ G.W.F. Hegel, EL, in W8: 198. §93. ("Something becomes an other, but the other is itself a something, thus it equally becomes an other and so forth into the *infinite* [or un-ending].")

²⁹⁷ Hegel writes: "Diese *Unendlichkeit* ist die *schlechte* oder *negative* Unendlichkeit, indem sie nichts ist als die Negation des Endlichen, welches aber ebenso wieder entsteht, somit ebenso sehr nicht aufgehoben ist, - oder diese Unendlichkeit drückt nur das *Sollen* des Aufhebens des Endlichen aus" (ibid., 199. § 94). ("This *infinity* is the *bad* [or poor] or *negative* infinity, by being nothing other than the negation of the finite, which nevertheless just as much re-emerges again and thereby is not surpassed, - or, this infinity expresses only the *ought* [should or thou shalt] of supersession of the finite".)

Hegel does not claim to be able to jump to the end of an unendingly long series in a miraculous act of ‘absolute knowing’ here, or a higher, second-order understanding; rather, he simply changes the terms of the discussion to account for the immanent negativity that is already going on within them conceptually in order to clarify the problem. *Understanding* the matter gets itself into trouble in the first place by defining the particular ‘something’ or ‘existent’ in relation to an *external* point of reference that it understands as *fixed*, inherently other or abstract – this assumption of fixity opens the problem when the frame of reference itself has to be defined, because ‘thing’ and ‘frame of reference’ coincide in actuality. Hegel’s exemplary speculative-conceptual ‘solution’ is just an account that treats each pole of the relation reciprocally vis-à-vis the other, or makes each something the point of reference for determining the other, instead of appealing to an external point of reference *ad infinitum*. The problem can be solved immanently if one simply does not assume that one must have an absolutely external referent, that the identity of ‘something’ excludes its also being ‘other’ to vis-à-vis its own ‘other’ (frame of reference) or that it can be different in itself; being ‘something’ does not preclude that something’s also being ‘other’. Though this appears contradictory or paradoxical to abstract understanding, it is in fact trivial to claim that things exist in reciprocal-contextual determination. He writes:

Etwas ist im Verhältnis zu einem Anderen selbst schon ein Anderes gegen dasselbe; somit das, in welches es übergeht, ganz dasselbe ist, was das, welches übergeht – beide haben keine weitere als eine und dieselbe Bestimmung, ein *Anderes* zu sein – so geht hiermit Etwas in seinem Übergehen in Anderes nur *mit sich selbst* zusammen, und diese Beziehung im Übergehen und im Anderen auf sich selbst ist die *wahrhafte Unendlichkeit*.²⁹⁸

The speculative-conceptual resolution dissolves the rigid fundamentals of the understanding into a mutual indifference. That is, something is not de-fined merely in opposition to an absolute other, which would result in mere abstraction, because the other is itself in turn a particular-concrete other; the other is also a ‘something’ determined in relation to the *other*, which the first something *is in itself*. This means the actual being is

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 200-1. § 95. (“Something is, in relation to an other, itself already an other vis-à-vis the same; thereby, that in which it transitions is wholly the same [as] what transitions (both have no further determination than one and the same [one, viz. that] of being an *other*), thus something hereby goes together only *with itself* in its transitioning in its other, and this relation in transition and in the other to itself is the *true infinity*”).)

its determinacies or has its negative limits in itself. Hegel's speculative view collapses the infinite regress and abstraction that understanding opens by showing that a concrete something's actual determinateness consists in being internally different. He states:

Das von der Bestimmtheit als unterschieden festgehaltene Sein, das *Ansichsein*, wäre nur die leere Abstraktion des Seins. Im Dasein ist die Bestimmtheit eins mit dem Sein, welche zugleich als Negation gesetzt, *Grenze, Schranke* ist.²⁹⁹

Thus it is the *contrary* assumption, which Schelling makes, that something's *being* would be something other than *what* it specifically is, that risks making 'being' into an abstraction and therefore losing any grasp of actual singular beings. The isolated category 'being' turns out to be just another 'lowest common denominator': namely, 'that' they all exist. This is rather ironic, because Schelling takes his understanding to save concrete existence. Though this discussion of 'something and other' occurs in the *Seinslogik*, the basic relations of the *Wesenslogik* are already implicitly at work: each related term is what it is only through its relation to *its* specific other, which is to say it is intrinsically relational or reflected in itself.

b) Hegel gives a speculative account of the being of the existent 'thing' with properties (*das Ding*) that is also relevant to Schelling's criticisms, and which is closely related to the foregoing consideration of 'something'. Typically *understanding* regards an existent 'thing' as a fundament or bearer of properties (*Eigenschaften*), or in Schelling's account, of the 'what' determinations attached to it as its features or accidents. Thus understanding supposes the consistent 'thing' as their fundament or a 'thing in itself' without asking about its own consistency or the extent to which it is anything at all on its own or without its properties; but 'the thing' is basically a determination of reflection.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 197. § 92. ("The being held fast from determination as different, the *being-in-itself*, would only be the empty abstraction of being. In existence [or being-there, determinate being], determinacy is one with being, which is at the same time posited as negation, *limit, boundary* [i.e. is a limit surpassed]").)

³⁰⁰ Hegel writes: "Das Wesentliche der Unzulänglichkeit des Standpunkts, auf dem jene Philosophie stehenbleibt, besteht nun darin, daß sie an dem *abstrakten Ding-an-sich* als einer *letzten* Bestimmung festhält und die Reflexion oder die Bestimmtheit und Mannigfaltigkeit der Eigenschaften dem Ding-an-sich gegenüberstellt, indem in der Tat das Ding-an-sich wesentlich jene äußerliche Reflexion an ihm selbst hat und sich zu einem mit *eigenen* Bestimmungen, mit Eigenschaften begabten bestimmt, wodurch sich die Abstraktion des Dinges, reines Ding-an-sich zu sein, als eine unwahre Bestimmung erweist" (ibid., SL, in W6: 136). ("Now the essential deficiency of the standpoint that that philosophy [of the understanding] remains standing at consists in the fact that it holds fast to the *abstract thing-in-itself* as a *final* determination and opposes reflection or determinacy and manifoldness of properties [or features of things] to the thing-in-itself, [and it is manifest that this is deficient] by the thing-in-itself in fact [or in the act] already essentially having that external reflection in itself, and [it] proves itself to be an untrue

Upon closer investigation, it would seem that one has either a free-standing thing and mere accidents, or the thing is nothing without the accidents that constitute it. Yet Hegel's deflationary account of the thing as basically a contradiction or compositum can have it both ways by reducing each to the other in a way that drops the understanding's suppositions of self-subsistent things. The thing can be regarded speculatively as the 'negative unity' of the properties without thereby being totally negated as a mere nothing. The actual thing itself is not only distinguished from other things by its properties (which may also be regarded as distinct things), but it also consists of them in itself.³⁰¹ Or, the thing positively consists of the differences between its properties vis-à-vis one another and the difference between its properties and the properties of other things: it is a host of differences, the differential set of relations of the properties, or 'the difference between itself and itself' (viz. a *parallax* or contradiction).³⁰² In his discussion in the greater *Logic*, he writes: "Das Ding ist daher die sich widersprechende Vermittlung des selbständigen Bestehens mit sich durch sein Gegenteil, nämlich durch seine Negation".³⁰³ The thing as 'negative unity' exists only through its contradictory 'properties' as its enabling mediation. Thus the language of *Aufhebung*, *Versöhnung* etc. in Hegel must be taken with an extremely deflationary grain of salt (if not ironic humor). The difference is not 'overcome' in the sense of being removed or 'bridged' – rather the difference is the thing. "Das existierende Ding ist in seiner Auflösung dieser Gegensatz geworden", Hegel writes: "das *Positive* seiner Auflösung ist jene Identität des Erscheinenden".³⁰⁴ The thing is its break-down, and hence it is not 'incomplete' vis-à-vis an ideal of completeness as the understanding would picture it, but definitively 'incomplete' (or 'differential',

determination by [its] *own* determinations, determined with endowed properties that [show] the abstraction of the thing, [the] pure thing-in-itself".)

³⁰¹ Hegel writes: "Das Ding-an-sich *existiert* wesentlich; die äußerliche Unmittelbarkeit und die Bestimmtheit gehört zu seinem Ansichsein oder zu seiner Reflexion-in-sich. Das Ding-an-sich ist dadurch ein Ding, das Eigenschaften hat, und es sind dadurch mehrere Dinge, die nicht durch eine ihnen fremde Rücksicht, sondern sich durch sich selbst voneinander unterscheiden" (ibid., 137). ("The thing-in-itself essentially *exists*; external immediacy and determinacy belong to its being-in-itself or to its pure reflection-in-itself [which are the same]. The thing-in-itself is thereby a thing that has properties, and is thereby more things that are distinguished not by some regard that is foreign to them, but rather [are] themselves distinguished from one another through themselves".)

³⁰² Ibid., EL, in W8: §130.

³⁰³ Ibid., SL, in W6: 143. ("The thing is thus the self-contradicting mediation, of the independent subsistence, with itself through its opposite, namely through its negation".)

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 152. ("The existing thing has, in its resolution, become [better: *is*] this opposition... the *positive* of its dissolution is that identity of what is appearing".)

‘mediated’) in itself. This avoids the understanding’s attempt to string the different moments of the thing into the ‘lowest common denominator’ of a ‘sameness’, which results in an externally imputed sameness and abstraction that effaces differences rather than actually grasping the singular thing.³⁰⁵ This abstractness is also why the understanding may claim that ‘contradiction cannot be thought’, while for Hegel it is just a fact.³⁰⁶ To be an actual concrete thing is to be different ‘in and of itself’ or inherently ‘distinct’, and hence the thing is not merely what thought reflects on, but ‘the thing’ as an alleged self-identical and self-subsistent given is what is actually the reflection, or a supposition of abstract understanding; the “*Ding* aber ist die Reflexion-in-sich”.³⁰⁷

c) Hegel’s account of essence (*Wesen*; being), which is ordinarily distinguished with ‘existence’ or ‘appearance’, also makes a similar deflationary move in the direction of concrete, differentiated beings. It collapses the ordinary distinction. It is important to recall what has been said about Hegel’s thoughts on ‘*Wesen*’ as multiple-being above. For Hegel, actual ‘essence’ cannot be rigidly separated from either ‘appearance’ or ‘existence’ without reducing it to a mere abstraction; and the latter cannot be regarded as mere accidental features of it; an ‘essence’ that never ‘appeared’ or ‘existed’ would not actually be any essence at all, just as appearances of mere ‘nothing’ would not be genuine ‘appearances’. As in the example of Caesar, essence (*Wesen*) as what ‘has been’ (*‘was gewesen ist’*) essentially involves being or existence; and hence Caesar as ‘the one who was in Gaul’ cannot ‘never have been’ (in Gaul) and still be Caesar, pace Schelling, even though he had to leave Gaul to become precisely ‘Caesar’. In both the *Encyclopedia* and greater *Logic*, therefore, Hegel states that “das *Wesen* muß *erscheinen*”.³⁰⁸ This ‘must’ or ‘necessity’ is not an *apriori* or predetermined (‘teleological’) necessity in the ordinary sense, but rather the contingent, retroactive or conditional necessity discussed above: if it does not appear, then it is not (or better: ‘will not have been’) essence, therefore it ‘must’ appear to be essence. The claim that essence involves existence is not only theological and does not necessarily involve any *a priori* ‘teleology’. Any *Wesen* implies existence

³⁰⁵ “Das *Diese* macht also die vollkommene Bestimmtheit des Dinges aus, daß sie zugleich eine äußerliche ist” (ibid. W6: 141). (“The *this* thus constitutes the complete determinateness of the thing, that it at the same time is an external [determinateness]”).

³⁰⁶ Ibid., EL, in W8: § 119.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 256. § 125.

³⁰⁸ See ibid., 261. § 131 & SL, in W6: 124.

because it is first and foremost already ‘a being’, but also because it must have *already* become what it is for reflection, or have been mediated up to the reflection that understands it. The examples Hegel gives, which illustrate this, are of ‘beings’ (*Wesen*) that do not simply ‘appear’ immediately, but rather come to be through their dynamic and mediating parts, such as the ‘postal system’ (*Postwesen*) or ‘tax system’ (*Steuerwesen*).³⁰⁹ ‘Essence’ (or ‘the being’) therefore *is*, or exists, and it is something that is a “complex”, subsisting not in opposition to, but only by passing through and recuperating itself via its appearances-existences. These are consequences of Hegel’s prioritization of *actuality* over abstract possibility. Hegel repeatedly makes claims that show that for him actualization comes first: “Möglichkeit und Zufälligkeit sind die Momente der Wirklichkeit...”³¹⁰ he writes: “In der Tat ist die Möglichkeit die leere Abstraktion der Reflexion-in-sich”.³¹¹ And elsewhere, for instance: “in der Wirkung ist erst die Ursache wirklich und Ursache”, he writes. “Die Ursache ist daher an und für sich *causa sui*”.³¹² This ‘self’ (*sui*) is not the pre-established subject of the understanding, but rather is ‘of itself’ the result, because the cause is a cause only to the extent that it has (had) an effect. There is no subject beyond or behind the actualization, because the subject is or coincides with its actualization or expression: “Die Äußerung des Wirklichen ist das Wirkliche selbst, so daß es in ihr ebenso Wesentliches bleibt und nur insofern Wesentliches ist, als es in unmittelbarer äußerlicher Existenz ist”.³¹³ This is actually Hegel’s deflation of the metaphysical subject of these propositions at every corner. Schelling’s abstract stance on essence as opposed to existence, by contrast, is due to fact that he uses a dualism and rigid subjects in trying to acknowledge concrete being, which is actually a self-defeating endeavor. He claims that “it is an impossibility to think *being in general*, because there is no being *in general*...” Hegel would certainly agree that ‘there is no being in general’, as this would be an abstraction, generality or no being in particular. But he would disagree that it is ‘unthinkable’, because it is indeed thought in the very negation or abstractions

³⁰⁹ See *ibid.*, EL, in W8: 233. § 112, addition.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 284 § 145. (“... possibility and contingency are moments of actuality...”)

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 280-1 § 143. (“In fact, possibility is the empty abstraction of reflection-in-itself”.)

³¹² *Ibid.*, 298. § 153. (“... the cause is first actual and [hence] cause in the effect... the cause is hence in and for itself *causa sui*”.)

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 279. § 142. (The utterance of the actual is the actual itself, such that it just as much remains essential in [the utterance] and only is essential to the extent that it is in immediately external existence”.)

that Schelling opposes; thus he would also deny that *Was* does not include *Daß*. The more Schelling's understanding tries to remain concrete, the more it constantly veers into suppositions of abstract understanding because of his theory-immanent constraints; he continues: "...there is no being without a subject, being is rather necessarily and at all times something determinate...".³¹⁴ Hegel agrees that being is always determinate, but would not accept that this is necessarily equivalent to supposing a fundament of understanding. Thus, one cannot be misled where Schelling's claims appear to be forerunners of the 'philosophy of existence', because there is an abstract Platonist streak behind his views on existence, which Hegel notes,³¹⁵ and which always leaves differences out of the being in question:³¹⁶ for instance, his claim that a leaf would be a leaf 'even if it had never existed'.

Schelling claims to agree with Hegel that in understanding the 'what' or the essence, one understands 'the thing itself'; but then he claims that this 'in itself' is only the 'thing itself' *in the concept*, not *in existence*; it is "the *content* of what is real, but regarding this content, the fact *that* it exists is something purely contingent".³¹⁷ While the distinction between the concept of a thing and its 'presence before me' is admittedly an *understandable* difference, in Schelling's dualistic formulation, little remains of the existence of the thing, if the 'thing itself' is had in the concept; adding existence to the concept adds very little. But 'concept' as '*Begriff*' is more than a mere mental representation. What Schelling calls 'content', which is fully 'in mind' yet either 'may or may not be' and hence falls 'outside of' mind, is a thin notion of content. It is the result of excessive formalism that regards content as accidental (e.g. 'types' of which there are various 'tokens').³¹⁸ What he calls 'content' is already very formal, considering that it does not even have to exist. This move by Schelling actually shifts what Hegel means by the 'in itself' into a position very different from Hegel's to try to resurrect dualism in Hegel's destruction of it. Schelling clearly uses different meanings for these terms than Hegel, which obscures his grasp of Hegel. For Hegel, an actual cognition, concept and thing-cognized constitute a unity (albeit a differentiated one).

³¹⁴ F.W.J. Schelling, HMP, 139.

³¹⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, Lectures on the History of Philosophy, in W20: 439.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 434.

³¹⁷ F.W.J. Schelling, GPP, 130.

³¹⁸ See G.W.F. Hegel, EL in W8: 264ff., §133.

d) The dichotomy ‘negative and positive’ is the master-distinction, as it were, that Schelling critiques Hegel with, and it also receives a similar and crucial treatment in the *Wesenslogik*. It is therefore curious that Schelling does not address it in his lectures. The negative and positive subsist separately alongside one another, as it were, in Schelling’s theoretical edifice. As though Hegel had read Schelling’s *verständliche* critique, he summarizes such a view (and eventually the consequences of its abstract understanding) in the following way: “Das Positive und das Negative sind so die selbständig gewordenen Seiten des Gegensatzes. Jedes ist es selbst und sein Anderes, dadurch hat jedes *seine Bestimmtheit* nicht an einem Anderen, sondern *an ihm selbst*”.³¹⁹ Allegedly, Schelling’s negative *is not*, and yet what ‘positive’ is, *is* allegedly over and above being *not-negative*, as an absolute positivity of its own. Yet it is unclear what that may mean: Schelling seems to assume that he can think these determinations in isolation without reducing them to tautological definitions or abstract generalities, and this leaves no other argumentative justification for coming over to his side of the matter than sharing his assumptions or simply taking his word for it. Schelling’s external view of negation holds that ‘plant’ is not positively in any sense ‘not-cat’, hence one can therefore not say what its positivity is except under the category ‘positive’, and so existence becomes ineffable. While this may appear to acknowledge existence from the standpoint of abstract understanding, viewed conceptually it is failure. The force behind Hegel’s claim that negative and positive must be accounted for in their concrete relation *to* each other, rather than only in opposition, has to do with the necessities of actually giving an account of the terms asserted in particular rather than as abstract or any two categories in general. (Doing so is also valuable for Schelling.) If one is content with the way understanding presents the two categories, then both remain indefinite generalities, which name any number of negative and positive phenomena and hence none in particular, because understanding simply ignores their determinate relations. Hegel’s conceptual account proceeds to break down ‘negative and positive’ into their concrete shapes by showing how the theoretical method of their distinction is not accidental to their presentation as the self-subsistent ‘negative and positive’ given poles of the dichotomy that they appear

³¹⁹ Ibid., SL, in W6: 56. (“The positive and the negative are in this way the sides of an opposition that have become independent in themselves. Each is it itself and its other, [and] thereby each has *its determinacy* not in another, but rather *in itself*”).

to be for Schelling. This tests the conceptual formulation of Schelling's asserted dualism. Each side of the opposition is at once an *identity* and *different* from the other. In the *Logic* Hegel writes:

Jedes [viz. *positive and negative*] ist an ihm selbst positiv und negativ; das Positive und Negative ist die Reflexionsbestimmung an und für sich; erst in dieser Reflexion des Entgegengesetzten in sich ist es positiv und negativ.³²⁰

Both positive and negative are positively themselves and negatively not the others. Yet whence this 'positively themselves'? Each is what it specifically is, not only in opposition to an 'other' in general ('mere negativity'), but in opposition to its specific other. Even if it belongs to the negative to not be positive and the positive to not be negative (though the positive would remain something more), then they nonetheless are not *simply* independent, but relational, albeit asymmetrically so. Hegel describes this kind of 'essential difference' in 'opposition' in the *Encyclopedia Logic*, Hegel writes:

Der Unterschied des Wesens ist daher die *Entgegensetzung*, nach welcher das Unterschiedene nicht ein *Anderes überhaupt*, sondern *sein* Anderes sich gegenüber hat; d. h. jedes hat seine eigene Bestimmung nur in seiner Beziehung auf das Andere, ist nur in sich reflektiert, als es in das Andere reflektiert ist, und ebenso das Andere; jedes ist so des Anderen *sein* Anderes.³²¹

Each is specified or defined vis-à-vis its specific other, though allegedly it remains itself 'in itself', for Schelling. The final step of deflating these determinations of reflection is the removal of the 'in itself' of their self-subsistence, which the understanding supposes is exclusive and had in isolation from one another. (This supposition arguably adds nothing to them but confusion.) The 'in itself' supposed by understanding and the allegedly 'clearer' definition actually abstracts 'everything else' from the matter, rather than approaching the thing more closely. The upshot of abstractly regarding the matter as an 'in itself' is that one actually gets a subject matter that is a mere abstraction *in itself*. The speculative view thus removes nothing but the assumption that things are only self-subsistent in isolation, that 'in itself' excludes relations to others

³²⁰ Ibid., 58. ("Each [viz. positive and negative] is in itself positive and negative; the positive and negative is the determination of reflection in and for itself; first in this reflection of the opposed in itself is it positive and negative".)

³²¹ Ibid., EL, in W8: 243, § 119. ("The distinction of essence is hence *opposition*, according to which the distinguished is not *an other as such*, but rather has *its* other vis-à-vis itself; i.e. each has its own determination only in its relation to the other, is only reflected in itself as it is reflected in the other, and just as much the other; each is in this way, of the other, *its* other".)

or that the understanding's either-or is not in fact an and-and. That is, in the end the understanding simply gets its way, as it were, though the results are not what it intended.

Hegel writes:

An sich sind sie es, insofern von ihrer ausschließenden Beziehung auf Anderes abstrahiert und sie nur nach ihrer Bestimmung genommen werden. *An sich* ist etwas positiv oder negativ, indem es nicht bloß *gegen Anderes* so bestimmt sein soll... *An sich* positiv oder negativ sind sie also nicht außer der Beziehung auf Anderes, sondern [so,] daß *diese Beziehung*, und zwar als ausschließende, die Bestimmung oder das Ansichsein derselben ausmacht; hierin sind sie es also zugleich an und für sich.³²²

Each is what it is not in spite of, but precisely by its being abstracted from the other, or each is the abstraction that it is vis-à-vis the other it is abstracted from. The two are connected by their difference as a negative unity (in the concept), which at once holds them apart and nonetheless relates them. Hence a 'concrete view' actually just shows 'the positive as such' and 'the negative as such' to be the abstractions that they are in themselves. Concretely, each is not merely reflected in the other or reflected on by something other, but is in itself reflected or itself is a reflection, not a parameter that may be dealt with by understanding as though it simply hovered before the mind of its own power. The 'speculative moment' here is dropping the abstract understanding's insistence on self-identity that Schelling subscribes to, which is what insists that no positivity can follow from the negative, and no negativity is involved in the positive. Schelling himself hints at his awareness of having thought himself into such an impasse in the following, admittedly "embarrassing situation". He writes:

Existence, which appears as accidental in everything else, is here the essence [in positive philosophy]. The *quod* is here in the position of the *quid*. It is, thus, a pure idea, and nonetheless it is not an idea in the sense this word is understood [!] in the negative philosophy. That which just is [*das bloß Seyende*] is being [*das Seyn*] from which, properly speaking, every idea, that is, every potency, is excluded. We will, thus, only be able to call it the inverted idea [*Umgekehrte Idee*], the idea in which reason is set *outside* itself.³²³

³²² Ibid., SL, in W6: 59. ("In themselves they are it to the extent [they are] abstracted from their exclusive relation to an other and are taken only in their determination. In itself something is positive or negative, as it should not merely be determined by contrast to what is other... They are thus in themselves positive or negative not outside of the relation to another, but rather in such a way that this relation, and moreover as exclusive, constitutes the determination or the being-in-itself of the same; in this way they are thus at the same time in and for themselves".)

³²³ F.W.J. Schelling, GPP, 203.

The speculative revision Schelling makes of ‘the idea in the sense this word is understood in negative philosophy’ is arguably what Hegel’s account actually consists of. Schelling’s failure to master the conceptual dimension of his theory – or to recognize the fact that the manner in which problems are posed conceptually may in fact pre-determine the theoretical results one gets at the end – cannot be overlooked here: ‘positivity’ understood as a ‘pure idea’ that is nonetheless ‘not an idea’ does not say enough to be a foundation against other philosophies such as Hegel’s, and this renders his entire effort vis-à-vis Hegel redundant. His *ec-static Idea* would just as well be described as Hegel’s account of existence as essential being that must appear.³²⁴

Hegel’s objection to abstract understanding is that it overlooks its own conceptual involvements and excesses. Schelling overlooks the speculative concept in his own account by overlooking that his theory of the difference between ‘what and that’, which also connects them, *is* already implicitly what Hegel means by ‘concept’; the disjunctive synthesis of ‘concept and thing’ (two differentiated identities) is effectively *Schelling’s actual concept* that he advances in his theory yet disavows. Schelling’s ontologized version of the empiricist thesis of heterogeneity implicitly takes for granted that the dichotomy it asserts is somehow bridged, or it stands over the two things and renders their difference sufficiently commensurably to speak of both allegedly separate terms. In uttering his proposition that the concept is only one half of a free-standing dualism, Schelling falls into performative contradiction, because the thing distinguished from the concept is only won for his account through such differences. For a speculative view, ‘what and that’ are in fact elements of his intelligible theory, are both conceptual determinations or opposed poles abstracted from the contradiction that any actual ‘thing’ is (viz. the gap between them). Thus, viewed speculatively, different ‘whats’ are not different ‘views’ of the thing’s ‘being’; rather, ‘being’, or ‘that’ (*Daß*) something is, is just the *parallax* or blind-spot of different perspectives of beings, or ‘whats’ (*Was*), which suggest some other ‘being’ (*Daß*) apart from them in the first instance, the later

³²⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, EL, in W8: 262-3, § 131.

being a generalization over their differences.³²⁵ The ‘same thing’ is the difference of the thing from itself.³²⁶

Schelling assumes that conceptuality writ large falls under one of two dualistic categories called ‘what’, and thus for him ‘overcoming’ or ‘bridging’ the difference between them would mean applying another third identity and therefore effacing the difference. He reproaches Hegel for this, although it is not the case for Hegel, because what ‘bridges the gap’ is not an identity that threatens erasure of difference but the ‘gap’ itself (viz. ‘difference’ is an identity that does not exclude difference). Thus it is actually Schelling’s understanding that implicitly abrogates the difference it asserts between ‘what and that’, though it represses this. This oversight explains why the latter does not perceive that Hegel is not advancing an understanding-type account and this is why Schelling imputes a *Meta-Verstand* to Hegel as the latter’s theory of the concept. In his claim that ‘Hegel’s concept eats up the world’, the dualism concept-world has already been assumed as self-evidently being the right interpretation. Yet, if Schelling’s intelligible assumption is not accepted, then the ‘eating of the world by the concept’ can never take place. This obscene speculative spectacle is actually figment of abstract understanding. Reading Hegel this way would ironically overlook that the ‘erasure of difference’ is Hegel’s own concern and objection to abstract understanding. It is a sad irony that Schelling took Hegel and his ‘system’ to be a mere madness and imitation, rather than as responding to the same problem in a radically different way.³²⁷ Because of

³²⁵ Žižek explicitly connects the topic of ‘ontological difference’ in Heidegger, *Was* and *Daß* and his concept of parallax to this effect (see Slavoj Žižek, *Parallax View*, 7 & 23). The result of his Hegelian conception of parallax for ‘fundamental ontology’ is far reaching. If ‘beings’ *are not* modalities of the same ‘being’ (as classical substance metaphysics would have had it), then it makes little sense to think their ‘being’ through one single category as though they were reducible to the same; or, the method that distinguishes ‘being’ and ‘beings’ (‘ontological difference’) is a problematic *understanding* (which explains how metaphysics haunts phenomenology), which must be revised.

³²⁶ Žižek calls this a ‘minimal difference’; “pure difference—not the difference between the element and other elements, but the difference of the element from itself” (ibid., 29). He continues to describe his view of the plane of differences on which ‘things’ appear: “there is no ‘neutral’ reality within which gaps occur, within which frames isolate domains of appearances. Every field of ‘reality’ (every ‘world’) is always-already enframed, seen through an invisible frame. The parallax is not symmetrical, composed of two incompatible perspectives on the same X: there is an irreducible asymmetry between the two perspectives, a minimal reflexive twist. We do not have two perspectives, we have a perspective and what eludes it, and the other perspective fills in this void of what we could not see from the first perspective” (ibid.).

³²⁷ In a letter written after Hegel’s death, Schelling writes: “Ich begreife nicht, was Ihnen in den Worten ‚die mein Brot essen‘ unverständlich sein konnte. Zunächst ist natürlich Hegel gemeint, der in allen diesen Leuten eigentlich spricht. Nun können Sie vielleicht gar nicht so bestimmt wie ich, der ihn von Jugend auf

this, Schelling compromises many of his own genuinely valuable critical-theoretical insights, the possibility of advancing beyond dichotomy and obscures Hegel's actual account.

gekannt, wissen, was dieser für sich und ohne mich fähig gewesen wäre, obwohl seine Logik hinlänglich zeigen kann, wohin er, sich selbst überlassen, geraten wäre. Ich kann also wohl von ihm und seinen Nachfolgern sagen, daß sie mein Brot essen; das Mit-Füßen-treten ist ohnedies klar. Ohne mich gab es gewiß keinen Hegel und keine Hegelianer, wie sie sind. Dies ist nicht hochmütige Einbildung, wovon ich weit entfernt bin, es ist Wahrheit" (Schelling, F.W.J. *Letter to Dorfmueller* (September 10, 1841) in *Hegel in Berichten seiner Zeitgenossen*. p. 523). ("I cannot comprehend what could be unintelligible to you in the words 'who are eating my bread'. Firstly, of course Hegel is meant [by that], who actually speaks in all of these people. Now perhaps you cannot know at all as certainly as I, who knew him in his youth, know this [person] would have been capable of for himself and without me, although his *Logic* can sufficiently show where he would have ended up if he had been left to himself. Thus I can say of him and his followers that they are eating my bread; the trampling under foot is clear anyways. Without me there would have been no Hegel and no Hegelians as they are. This is not proud imagination, which I am far removed from, it is truth".)

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

This thesis has tried to clarify ‘understanding’ as a central moment in the thought of Hegel and its bearing on the misleading interpretation his principal critic offers. ‘Understanding’ is therefore important for interpreting Hegel’s work in a double sense: for grasping what understanding is according to Hegel and recognizing that it is a central problem for his thought and for adjudicating between readings of Hegel that came after him and inform contemporary opinions about him. This has necessitated the attempt to formulate and advance a novel reading of Hegel by developing a textual guide along the lines of his criticisms of understanding (*Verstand*) with the justification that doing so removes many of the more disagreeable aspects of his philosophy for contemporary readers. This meant addressing the problems that arise in reading Hegel when one does not read his conceptual approach in its own light, and argued that one therefore must do so in order to accurately assess his position. Namely, Hegel is not responsible for the interpretations of his work that result from ‘understanding’, or misreading his text. If Hegel is read as a critic of understanding, then he is philosopher of method with a powerful capacity for critique, rather than a proponent of dogmatic metaphysics. Due to the contentious nature of the basic assertion of this thesis, it has gone into considerable detail to show that the claims are textually justified and the positions ascribed are accurate and fair. Further desiderata in this connection would be a genealogical history of *Verstand* before Hegel’s critique and a pursuit of it as a topic and implicit or explicit method after Hegel’s death, through the chain of reception-influences triggered by

Schelling's interpretation up to the present; an examination of the unclear relationship between the early Schelling and Hegel during their collaboration would also be useful. From this standpoint it would be possible to make speculative-critical interventions in problems of contemporary theoretical understanding. Though this essay has restricted its purview to a narrow section of intellectual history and German philosophy before 1850, it was nonetheless carried out with the belief that Hegel's speculative view is still – perhaps now more than ever – of extreme relevance for contemporary discourse. While the dimension of the contemporary has almost completely been omitted in the letter of this thesis, the spirit of the problems addressed in Schelling's positive-ontological criticism and *Verstand* is still with us and poses pressing questions for the present, to which the speculative view of the concept may be carried over.

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