

Part II. Hegel's Interdisciplinary Concept of the Will

1. Introduction. Spirit and Dualism

Kant accepted what a century of philosophy had proven: all knowledge begins from experience, and experience cannot give direct access to the world in itself. All we learn from experience is how things *appear* to us, nothing about what the world is *in itself*. But on the other hand, science is not an illusion. Somehow, we *do* have an adequate knowledge of the world despite having access only to its appearances.

Kant, it is said, taught Philosophy to speak German. His objective was to clear up the conceptual confusion that had led to the stand-off between scepticism and dogmatism. This was the task of German Idealism.

All attempts to “get around” Descartes' ontological dualism had failed. Kant accepted this dualism and did not attempt to subvert it, but simply to show how Science was possible despite the fact that the world could only be known by its appearances, not in itself, not directly. The rigour which Kant's critique introduced into philosophy certainly made the issues at hand clearer. However, it did not result in an elimination of unproductive dualisms. In fact, every distinction Kant introduced to clarify the problem only generated more dualisms. What followed was an intense period of philosophical debate *criticising* Kant's own Critical Philosophy, struggling to overcome the dualisms in Kant's philosophy. This philosophical movement culminated in Hegelianism.

The problem of the starting point

An ontological dichotomy (“There are two kinds of thing in the world, so ...”) becomes a dualism if it appears as the *starting point* of an enquiry. Self-evidently, philosophy is all about making clear and careful distinctions. But if a beginning is made with *two* (or more) substances (such as mind and matter), a dualism necessarily arises which cannot be resolved within the terms of the theory. The two fundamental substances cannot be “joined together” later on, without recourse to some other mediating substance. One must *begin* with a single substance, and then make distinctions within that one substance subsequently. So the problem of making a beginning in philosophy requires that a concept is determined in which both mind and matter are already implicit. The relation between each side of the distinction is then already given by the nature of the substance itself, and there is no dualism. The distinctions remain, but they are now *mediated*.

The starting point is always difficult. Descartes said that philosophy had to start from something certain, and famously, he determined that the only thing he could be absolutely certain of was that he existed. Equally famously, this led to the dreaded mind/matter dualism.

The mistake was to begin an epistemological enquiry with an ontological dualism.

So we have to begin any science from *one* concept (“Everything is ...”). The whole science then is an examination of this one concept and the elaboration of all the relations implicit within it. The nature of the one concept will determine the kind of science you build. Hegel began his Logic from Being, not a proposition like “Being is ...” this or that, a completely empty concept which would therefore import nothing extraneous into the logic. Being is just the noun

from the verb “to be.” Logic differs from any other science in that it contains *no definite content*, whereas all other sciences *do* contain a specific content. That is why *Logic* had to begin from an empty concept.

Contrary to Spinoza, Hegel believed that he could solve the problems generated by the critique of Kant not by proposing a novel ontology, but via *logic*, and his *Logic* would begin from a critique of the concept of Being rather than some axiom. That is, Hegel reduced ontology to logic. Also, he observed that ancient Greek philosophy had begun when, instead of speculating about the nature of the world outside of thought (the three elements, etc.), the Eleatics declared “All is Being.” So it was an historical fact that Philosophy properly so-called had begun from that single concept.

The *Logic* is the method. I will come back to the *Logic* later.

Hegel’s *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* takes as its subject matter *Spirit (Geist)*, and Hegel developed in outline the complete range of sciences from mechanics to biology to psychology and sociology, all of which were concerned with various “forms of Spirit.” *Each* of the various sciences he dealt with in the *Encyclopaedia* also started with the critical examination of *one* simple concept of Spirit.

It is not possible to give a definition of “Spirit” because Spirit is the sole substance of Science as Hegel sees it. It is not “Spirit and ...” something else, just Spirit. If I were to give a definition of Spirit, I would then have to make a beginning from the terms of that definition, not Spirit. So given that Spirit is just Spirit and not spirit and something else with which it can be contrasted, there can be no definition of “Spirit.” The reader will already be familiar with the word and will understand it in some general sense depending on their own life experience. And as they read their way through the *Encyclopaedia* the concept will take on an increasingly concrete meaning. It is not defined in advance, but is clarified by the philosophy itself, which is elaborated according to the *Logic*.

This may seem shocking, but consider for example the philosophical concept of “matter.” Matter is only “everything that exists outside my consciousness” and nothing more definite than that, and yet that concept has proved quite adequate to construct all the natural sciences, and would avoid some of the confusion which arose in Quantum Physics in the early years of the twentieth century. But by the beginning of the nineteenth century, Science had arrived at a point where a dichotomy between mind and matter had tied science into knots and was no longer tenable. So Spirit, or *Geist*.

How a present-day reader interprets Hegel’s philosophy hinges very much on how they interpret the word “Spirit.” If you think that “*Geist*” means something like “ghost” or “mind,” or “consciousness,” then it is likely that you will dismiss Hegel as an early nineteenth century German philosopher who has nothing to say to us about Science. This would be a big mistake.

Think of *Zeitgeist* – the spirit of the times. I read Hegel on the basis that *Geist* is *human practice in general*. And the *Logic* is the logic of human practice in general. I’ve read the whole of Hegel’s *Encyclopaedia* and I’ve never had a problem interpreting what I read in this light. Like Hegel, I don’t intend to offer a definition of “human practice in general.” I presume that you’re familiar with this expression.

Immediate and mediated knowledge

There is nothing, nothing in heaven, or in nature or in mind or anywhere else which does not equally contain both immediacy and mediation, so that these two determinations reveal themselves to be *unseparated* and inseparable and the opposition between them to be a nullity.

Hegel, 1812, “With What must Science Begin?”

In the Introduction to the *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel exhibits the only instance which I have found in his work of the trope: “Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis.” Hegel gives us a short history of Philosophy since the Reformation which uses this trope as its theme.

The problem posed by the Copernican Revolution was this: is the relation between the mind and the Absolute (i.e., God, or the world in itself) mediated or immediate?

Some philosophers had proposed that we do have immediate knowledge of the world. Descartes had claimed that Reason gives us access to the Absolute by quiet reflection. In Hegel’s own times, Jacobi had claimed that we can know God through Faith, without the mediation of the Church.

On the other hand, Francis Bacon claimed that knowledge of the Absolute was possible by observing His works, that is to say, access to the Absolute was mediated by Experiment, not immediate. And with his Critical Philosophy, Kant agreed – only knowledge of appearances was possible; that is, direct knowledge was possible only of the mediating element, be that sensation or feelings.

Both lines of reasoning had failed. Hegel responded: access to the Absolute was *both* mediated *and* immediate!

In his critique of Jacobi, Hegel explained it this way:

When we regard this opposition more closely all knowledge may be termed immediate, but all immediate knowledge is likewise mediated in itself. This we know within our consciousness, and we may see it in the most general phenomena. I know, for example, of America immediately, and yet this knowledge is very much mediated. If I stand in America and see its soil, I must first of all have journeyed to it, Columbus must first have discovered it, ships must have been built, &c.; all these discoveries and inventions pertain to it. That which we now know immediately is consequently a result of infinitely many mediations.

Hegel, 1805–06, §3.A

So, this is the logical key with which Hegel untangled the knot into which European Philosophy had tied itself. All knowledge is *both* immediate *and* mediated.

So, how does this maxim overcome the roadblock which had stymied Philosophy ever since the Reformation? To say that experience can give us knowledge “only” of appearances is a fallacy. One finite or several experiences do not give us the thing-in-itself, that is true. But the sum total of *all* possible appearances tells us *everything* about external reality. The “in-itself” which remains is Nothing, an empty abstraction.

This definition of Idealism which Hegel gives in the *Science of Logic* (1812) makes this point forcefully:

The proposition that the finite is ideal constitutes Idealism. The idealism of philosophy consists in nothing else than in recognising that the finite has no veritable being. Every philosophy is essentially an idealism or at least has idealism for its principle, and the question then is only how far this principle is actually carried out. ... A philosophy which ascribed veritable, ultimate, absolute being to finite existence as such, would not deserve the name of philosophy; the principles of ancient or modern philosophies, water, or matter, or atoms are thoughts, universals, ideal entities, not things as they immediately present themselves to us, ... in fact what is, is only the one concrete whole from which the moments are inseparable.

Hegel, 1812, §316

A human being cannot grasp *the whole*, concretely. It's a journey. But there's no "thing-in-itself" hidden behind appearances which is inaccessible. The "thing-in-itself" is nothing.

It remains now to elaborate the *Logic* which bases itself on the unity of mediation and the immediate. Then we must examine experience. As Kant has said: "all our knowledge begins with experience" (Kant 1787) – using the *Logic* as our method.

The structure of the *Logic*

The *Logic* has three Books, Being, Essence and Concept. The structure of each Book is slightly different. However, what unites the *Logic* into a whole is that it begins from the critique of a concept and the critique generates new logical concepts and each new concept is subject in turn to critique drawing only on the concepts which have been already derived, and so on to the end. Nothing is presumed, other than the concept of Being with which the logic begins which is equally both empty and universal.

Every concept in the *Logic* and in the whole *Encyclopaedia* is unique. There is no *formula* for how to critique a concept. Critique just means to critically examine a concept, push it to its *limits* and see where that leads you. However, each of the three Books does have a distinct character which it is useful to know.

The first Book, the Logic of Being, is a critique of the concept of Being. Its form of "movement" is that the first concept is "demolished" and gives way to a new concept, and this happens "serially," that is, it's just one damn thing after another. For example, once it is shown that Being means Nothing, the concept of Being is exhausted having been shown to be nothing. The Logic of Being generates a series of concepts which are the concepts which arise in immediate perception, prior to any reflection or synthesis. All the concepts in the Logic of Being arise from this kind of movement.

The second Book, called the Essence Logic, begins with the critique of Reflection, that is, its subject matter is reflection on the data of perception and "going behind" things, to build theories about the nature of what is given in perception. Whereas the Logic of Being has the character of "one-ness" (one thing after another), the Essence Logic has the character of "two-ness" – identity and difference, positive and negative, etc – everything is relative.

The third Book, called the Concept Logic, begins with a simple, abstract concept which is the result of the unity of Being and Essence, a simple concept which captures the subject "in a nutshell," so to speak. For Hegel, a universal

definition does not constitute a concrete concept. The Concept has three moments, the Universal, the Individual (the concrete entities which fall under the Universal) and the Particular (the characteristics by which an Individual is subsumed under the Universal). So, the Concept Logic has this “three-ness.”

The *Logic* on the Will

Although the *Logic* begins with concepts like Being, Measure, Identity, Causality and so on, as the reader gets to the later parts of the *Logic* we find concepts like Chemism, Subject, Life, Living Individual, Cognition, the Good,... which sound like they don't belong in logic, but in the natural sciences or sociology. But they are indeed logical concepts, just not *propositional* logic.

The “Subject,” which occupies a central place in the *Logic*, refers to the *active* subject within a “Concept.” These terms can be interpreted in the traditional way, but Hegel develops them in such a way that logic becomes something useful for understanding human experience, which propositional logic is not. The *Logic* will stand on its own terms, but for the modern reader it makes a lot more sense if the *Logic* is taken as the logic of human practice. In its developed form then, a “concept” is a science, a science interpreted as a form of practice – developing theories, gathering evidence, engaging in scientific discourse, etc. Religion would be a *different* concept, a different form of practice. This is the way of reading the *Logic* which I defended in *Hegel for Social Movements*.

The Subject is not necessarily a social movement, however. It is *any* active entity, any living being. It could be a biological cell, an animal, a person, a state, a corporation, a social movement or any active entity. Human practices are the most highly developed forms of Spirit, so all the moments of Spirit can be exhibited in the history of human practice. Thus, when Hegel gets to the most developed concepts of the *Logic* he draws on words already present in the language to express the logical content of the concept.

In his logical examination of the Concept, Hegel gets to the Idea of the True (the Theoretical Idea), and this makes sense. But the Idea of the Good also arises from a logical examination of a concept. It is a mistake to think that a concept is somehow free of purpose and intent. Concepts arise *only* as the solution of some problem, some situation. Implicit in every concept is the Good which motivates it. Consequently, the Will arises from the last section of the *Logic* as the unity of the True and the Good. The Will is not itself a logical concept, but a subject is bound to strive to make actual what it holds to be both true and good in its own terms.

When we turn to the Will, no definition of the Will (“The Will is ...”) will be satisfactory. Such a definition could only make a beginning of the enquiry, but it lacks concreteness. A critical examination of such a definition should lead to successively more and more concrete concepts of the Will. But in itself, the *Logic* can give us no more than such a beginning. The *Logic* defines the Will as the unity of the theoretical Idea and the practical Idea. Admittedly, this is not very helpful if you are not already an aficionado of Hegel.

To make Hegel's idea of the Will a little clearer, I will refer to remarks he later made in the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*.

Freedom of Will is best explained by reference to physical nature.
Freedom is a fundamental phase of Will, as weight is of bodies. ...
that which is free is the Will. Will without Freedom is an empty
word, and Freedom becomes actual only as Will ... The distinction

between thought and Will is only that between a theoretical and a practical relation. They are not two separate faculties. The Will is a special way of thinking; it is thought translating itself into reality; it is the impulse of thought to give itself reality.

Hegel, 1821, §4 Addition

Returning to the *Logic*, for a complete outline of Hegel's *Logic*, see my book, *Hegel for Social Movements* (2019). Our subject matter here is the Will, and the only other passage of the *Logic* which is material to the topic of the Will is "The Syllogism of Action." This passage is found in the penultimate section of the *Logic*, following the unity of the Idea of the True and the Idea of the Good, and before the Absolute Idea. Given that the Absolute Idea is nothing more than a synopsis of the *Logic*, the Syllogism of Action is in a strong sense the outcome of the *Logic*, the final word in the logic of human practice.

The Syllogism of Action

In the context of the *Logic*, "subject" could refer to any living organism, individual or collective. If a subject has determined the truth of its situation and the subject knows the good they aim for, all that remains is to take action. In Hegel's always arcane way of putting things, taking action means:

In the syllogism of action, one premise is the *immediate relation of the good end to actuality* which it seizes on, and in the second premise directs it as an external *means* against the external actuality.

Hegel, 1816, §1773

Francis Bacon would heartily agree. "Nature cannot be vanquished until she is obeyed" (1620, Book 1, Aphorism 3).

For "the external actuality" read the world as you find it immediately before you. The *situation* is the relation between what is willed and this actuality. In order to conquer the situation, one must seize upon some element of this external actuality as means and use it against the problematic element of this same immediate actuality. Not something else, some aspect of the situation itself. This does imply that "the situation" has to be taken very inclusively, taking everything into account, as indicated in Hegel's definition of Idealism given above.

Thus, the action only realises what was already implicit in the social situation itself, not necessarily what was intended. The outcome of the action is what Hegel called the Realised End, that is, the whole situation which is brought about by the subject's action. This is not necessarily what the subject may have had in mind. The Realised End is now the Subject's new external actuality.

External actuality is the sum of all the Realised Ends of the various enterprises at work in the world. Any subject realises or fails to realise its Will only by means of using the very same external world as the means by which it aims to change the external world.

As Hegel put it:

Purposive action, with its Means, is still directed outwards, because the End is also not identical with the object, and must consequently first be mediated with it. The Means in its capacity of object stands, in this second premise, in direct relation to the other extreme of the syllogism, namely, the material or objectivity which is presupposed. This relation is the sphere of Chemism and Mechanism, which have

now become the servants of the Final Cause, where lies their truth and free notion. Thus the Subjective End, which is the power ruling these processes, in which the objective things wear themselves out on one another, contrives to keep itself free from them, and to preserve itself in them. Doing so, it appears as the Cunning of Reason.

Hegel, 1831, §209

A few words of clarification of this very dense paragraph are in order.

“The sphere of Chemism and Mechanism” refers to all those processes at work in the situation *other than* the subject. In particular, “Mechanism” refers to those processes which are at work independently of each other, solely according to their own nature, while “Chemism” refers to processes which produce outcomes resulting from the synergy between them, rather than from each on its own.

“The Final Cause” refers to the reality as a whole as it unfolds as an outcome of all the enterprises and causes at work, seemingly according to some plan of its own. “The Subjective End” is what the Subject himself (such as an individual person or organism, or some project engaging many individuals together).

Hegel says specifically that the Subjective End, the “power ruling these processes,” continues after each effort as part of each new cycle of activity. On the other hand, “the objective things” which are used as means (such as the materials and tools used, but also including people who are used by the subject) “wear themselves out.”

Over and above this nice observation about the condition of all living things, Hegel also defines here the distinction between the actor, which “preserves itself,” and the means, which “wear themselves out.” Hegel’s conclusion is that things unfold not as the subject may have intended but rather according to a destiny which was already present in the objective situation which the Subject aimed to use for its own ends. It is as if the situation was unfolding according to some greater, unseen power. This is what Hegel calls the “Cunning of Reason.”

Marx cites this passage in the context of the situation of a worker employed in the labour process:

An instrument of labour is a thing, or a complex of things, which the labourer interposes between himself and the subject of his labour (*Arbeitsgegenstand*), and which serves as the conductor of his activity. He makes use of the mechanical, physical, and chemical properties of some substances in order to make other substances subservient to his aims.

Marx, 1867, Chapter 6

and in a footnote cites Hegel:

Reason is just as cunning as she is powerful. Her cunning consists principally in her mediating activity, which, by causing objects to act and re-act on each other in accordance with their own nature, in this way, without any direct interference in the process, carries out reason’s intentions.

Hegel, 1831, §209, Note

Marx is making the point that it is the nature of the means of production (used up in the labour process) which determines how things work out, not the intentions of the workers or their employers.

The subject and object are each mutually independent totalities, but the means, *that is, the object being used*, is, according to Hegel, more powerful in the long run:

That the end relates itself immediately to an object and makes it a means, as also that through this means it determines another object, may be regarded as *violence* in so far as the end appears to be of quite another nature than the object, and the two objects similarly are mutually independent totalities. ... the *means* is superior to the finite ends of *external* purposiveness: the plough is more honourable than are immediately the enjoyments procured by it and which are ends. ...

Hegel, 1816, §1614

A person does as they please, but the ends a person pursues are generally not chosen. So *in this sense*, Hegel agrees with Luther and Spinoza: we are slaves to our own ends:

The *tool* lasts, while the immediate enjoyments pass away and are forgotten. In his tools man possesses power over external nature, even though in respect of his ends he is, on the contrary, subject to it.

Hegel, 1816, §1615

Enquiry into the ends which people pursue is not the business of the *Logic*, however. For that, we must first enquire into the human being as a natural being, and then into the forms of society which human beings have constructed for themselves.

References

Hegel, G.W.F. (1805-06/1995). *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. University of Nebraska Press.

Hegel, G.W.F. (1831/1956). *The Philosophy of History*, ed. E. Gans, ed., 1837, tr, J. Sibree. New York, NY: Dover Publications.