

## The Twofold Purposiveness of Philosophical Activity: Hegel on Kant's Idea of Philosophy

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From the time that Hegel began to explore the systematic nature of philosophy as science, that is, from the *Difference* essay to the last editions of the *Encyclopaedia*, he presents the philosophical activity according to two different models of purposiveness. To explain the very doing and the form of development of philosophy, Hegel refers to both the purposiveness of living organism and a kind of poietic production. While the organic purposiveness expresses the internal model of development belonging to natural growth, philosophy as *poiesis* represents an activity with two different poles that generates a distinct product. These two models seem to represent the stem of a contradiction involving Hegel's account of philosophy. In this chapter I will address the tension within the purposiveness of philosophical activity, without eliminating it. I want, then, to show that the vitality of this tension is particularly poignant when considered in relation to some passages in which Hegel refers to Kant's idea of philosophy.

To answer the question about the features of Hegel's idea of philosophy, first of all one has to tackle the problem of a relative shortage of the materials in which Hegel presents his account of philosophy and of how philosophy works. When Hegel gives us some information about philosophy he does so in a programmatic way, often in the introductions and prefaces to his writings. This is the case of the *Difference* essay, the essay on *Philosophical Criticism*, the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and the introductions to different editions of the *Encyclopaedia* and to the *Science of Logic*.<sup>1</sup>

In a sense, the fact that we cannot find in Hegel's writings a specific section dedicated to a proper metaphilosophical analysis reflects the peculiar character of systematicity of philosophy as science that he wants to pursue. More generally, it involves the idea that for Hegel – just like there is no way to learn to swim but to dive into the water<sup>2</sup> – philosophy needs no introduction and philosophical self-reflection is a result of the development of philosophical activity understood in full as reason's self-knowledge.

Although the twofold purposiveness of philosophical activity is not strictly thematized by Hegel and it is never the topic of a specific reflection, it is, however, active throughout Hegel's philosophical conception. Recently, amongst Hegelian scholars, there has been a growing interest in the form of purposiveness at stake in

the system, and several contributions have showed the crucial relevance for Hegel of the biological notion of organism and metaphors from life sciences, which belong to a widespread language within the philosophical culture of his time.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter I want to highlight the other side of the way through which Hegel expresses the purposiveness of philosophy, that is, the poetic production as *labour* in philosophical activity.

### Philosophy as productive activity

The idea of the internal purposiveness of an organism is fundamental for the systematic nature of Hegel's philosophy and represents one of the most relevant issues for understanding the relationship between Hegel and Kantian philosophy. Yet, the internal purposiveness of philosophy is presented by Hegel through the language of endeavour, of labour. I would like to move from Kant's reflection on the systematic form of philosophy to providing some thoughts on Hegel's connection between labour and life on this point.

In the *Architectonic of Pure Reason*,<sup>4</sup> Kant presents the characteristics of systematic unity, at the basis of all sciences, insofar as it allows reason to promote its own ends. Therefore, the object of investigation is the essential link between the account of systematicity belonging to a science and reason as capable of having ends. If for Kant systematic unity is central to the project of raising 'ordinary knowledge to the rank of science' (KrV, A 832 / B 860), the specific manner of development that belongs to organisms constitutes the analogy that sketches the correspondence between an idea (the ground upon which a science in general is to be established) and the resulting system. Still, this is true for any science:<sup>5</sup> the idea expresses not only a mode of being together of a manifold of knowledge but also it reflects the end that is prior to that same manifold, making it a coherent and harmonic whole. The idea represents the origin that is at once the scope and the form of the whole.

The philosophical system of transcendental idealism, as Kant claims in the *B Deduction*, is in general the 'system of the *epigenesis* of pure reason' (KrV, B 167). In the *Architectonic of Pure Reason*, the generative mode of the 'self-development of reason' (KrV, A 835 / B 863) is embedded in a discussion aimed at indicating not only the ideal basis of a systematic unity but also the kind of idea that is here at stake.

As if it were an organic germ, the idea hidden in reason is an undifferentiated and undeveloped nucleus that gradually leads to the complete self-development of reason as a system: 'this idea lies hidden in reason, like a germ in which the parts are still undeveloped and barely recognisable even under microscopic observation' (KrV, A 834 / B 862).

According to an epigenetic embryological theory of generation (which Kant has in mind for the construction of the analogy in these passages),<sup>6</sup> what is generated, the whole, is not a mere mirror image of the origin; it is not the idea as realized or as simply determined, a copy of it; rather, it is the result of a process of individuation and differentiation. Generally, this model is in opposition to a preformative theory that considers a germ as a ready-made individuum, in which all qualities are already disclosed in their reciprocal functional relations. In fact, according to an epigenetic

framework, the idea sustains the whole as a form, which is, however, the possibility of the difference as a development process. Therefore, the law binding the whole is neither blind nor completely transparent; rather, the idea has a reflective manner of exposition, it expresses an underlying directional force: a goal. On the one hand, there is no immediate correspondence between system and idea, and indeed the realization of the idea is configured as an exposition (schema) of rules and a logical nexus; on the other hand, for the system the idea is like a mediate inner. The interconnected whole of parts, distinguished according to functional criteria, is the result of a movement originating in the undifferentiated unity of the idea, which bestows the whole with a unitary purpose. Each part has value as a member of that organized body that is reason, as its internal articulation; hence, the determination of each member has a teleological sense, and the established relationship runs in two correlative directions: between members, and between members and the whole. The idea is at the same time first and what gives the name of the whole, acting as its inner end.

The idea hidden in reason, which grounds the system of pure reason, is for Kant the idea of philosophy: 'philosophy is a mere idea of a possible science, which nowhere exists *in concreto*, but to which, by many different paths, we endeavour to approximate' (KrV, A 838 / B 866); more precisely, it is the idea of philosophy according to its *conceptus cosmicus* (cosmic concept, or *Weltbegriff*): 'On this view, philosophy is the science of the relation of all knowledge to the essential ends of human reason (*teleologia rationis humanae*), and the philosopher is not an artificer in the field of reason, but himself the lawgiver of human reason' (KrV, A 839 / B 867).

From the Kantian point of view, the systematic completeness of metaphysics, as it consists in relating rational knowledge to human reason, is given in an eminently processual form. Moreover, the systematic whole based on the Kantian organic model constitutes a negative process of development: a self-differentiation. I think that this kind of processual form is essential for Hegel's own idea of philosophical activity and generates the insuppressible tension between systematic completeness and incompleteness that permeates it.

In the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel writes: 'the subject matter is not exhausted in its *aims*; rather, it is exhaustively treated when it is *worked out*. Nor is the *result* which is reached the *actual* whole itself; rather, the whole is the result together with the way the result comes to be' (PS, 5; PhG, GW9, 10).<sup>8</sup>

For Hegel, the activity of the development of philosophy has to keep in itself the *effort* of its own self-production and the mediation proceeding it as a generative core and driving force of the philosophical system. Moreover, from his early Jena years, Hegel kept alive the interest that fuelled his non-philosophical studies on the 'more subordinate needs of man' (LE, 64) by bestowing on philosophy *qua* science and system the general task of philosophy of unifying the cleavage of the epoch, by disclosing its presuppositions.<sup>9</sup>

In the *Difference*, Hegel writes:

the sole interest of reason is to suspend such rigid antithesis. But this does not mean that reason is altogether opposed to opposition and limitation. For the necessary cleavage is one factor in life. Life eternally forms itself by setting up

oppositions, and totality at the highest pitch of living energy [*Lebendigkeit*] is only possible through its own re-establishment out of the deepest fission [*Trennung*].

(DIFF, 91; DIFF, GW4, 13)

Life is then linked to the cleavage: it is the form through which cleavage is given together with the need of its overcoming through philosophy, it expresses the unity of the principle that generates the oppositions and the philosophical comprehension.<sup>10</sup>

The model of the organic production in its connection with the model of labour never refers to a vague substantialism or to a spontaneous vitality, but rather to the capacity of the moments of an organic unity to *bear* an inner struggle. Although the model of labour shares with the model of organism the necessity of a moment of opposition within the philosophical development, Hegel uses it to emphasize the characteristics of separation, alterity and determinacy in philosophical activity.

It is within the semantic horizon of labour, as an effort for its own realization, that philosophy is considered in opposition to its characterization as 'love of knowledge', as a pure *contemplative* activity, a sort of passive mirror of truth. In his rejection of a contemplative conception of philosophical knowledge (identified in particular, since the *Difference* essay, in Reinhold's philosophy) is at stake the denial of a philosophy understood as mere technique without any autonomous capacity to produce its own content. The critique of the Reinholdian idea of philosophy (which Hegel eloquently defines as 'comfortable') can in my opinion be read in its entirety in the light of Hegelian opposition to a philosophy committed simply to grasping the truth – already given and not produced by reason – in knowledge:

We can see that [Reinhold's] absolute in the form of truth is not the work of reason [*ein Werk der Vernunft*], because it is *already in and for itself* something true and certain, that is, something cognized and known. Reason cannot assume an active relation to the absolute. On the contrary, if reason were active in any way, if the absolute were to receive any form through it, the activity would have to be viewed as an alteration of the absolute ... the Absolute itself readies itself for being something true and known, and surrenders itself for total enjoyment to the passivity of a thinking which only needs a mouth agape. Strenuous creative construction, in assertoric and categorical statements, is banished from this utopia. A problematic and hypothetical shaking of the tree of knowledge, which grows in a sandy grounding, brings the fruit tumbling down, already chewed and self-digested.

(DIFF, 184–185; DIFF, GW4, 85–86)

In this sense, for Hegel, the problem of philosophy is neither to find the way in which a finite subject can grasp universal truth – allegedly considered as already given, even though not yet in its full transparency – nor to trace back the different and determinate manifestations to a substantial basis as their inner truth. It is not a matter of *unveiling* the truth and it does not concern *men of genius*. Hegel's alternative to such an account is represented by the idea that in the cognitive process, philosophy produces the object of its knowledge, so that the possession

of knowledge is not the destination somehow finally reached, but the activity of its production. For Hegel, as well as for Kant, the task of philosophy is not to 'unlock substance's secret', that is, 'to take what thought has torn asunder and then to stir it all together into a smooth *mélange*, to suppress the concept that makes those distinctions [*den unterscheidenden Begriff unterdrücken*], and then to fabricate the feeling [*Gefühl*] of the essence' (PS, 7; PhG, GW9, 13). By adopting an approach that is completely opposite to the approach that considers philosophy as science, 'edifying philosophy' holds the concept to be only a reflection on the finiteness; then it gives away understanding and establishes a non-conceptual knowledge of the substance as divine essence or supreme being. Hegel invokes the scientific form of philosophy against the 'prophetic prattle' (PS, 8; PhG, GW9, 14) of those forms of philosophy that aim at feeling or intuiting the absolute instead of conceptually grasping it: 'true shape of truth lies only in its scientific rigor, or (which is the same) in asserting that truth has the element of its existence solely in the concept [*an dem Begriffe allein*]' (PS, 6; PhG, GW9, 12). Moreover, Hegel refers to the *Arbeit* as the characterization of philosophical scientific and systematic activity: 'true thoughts and scientific insight can only be won by the labour of the concept [*in der Arbeit des Begriffes*]' (PS, 44; PhG, GW9, 48).<sup>11</sup>

Hegel writes: 'this prophetic prattle imagines that it resides at the centre of things, indeed that it is profundity itself, and viewing determinateness (the *horos*) with contempt, it intentionally stands aloof from both the concept and from necessity, which it holds to be a type of reflection at home in mere finitude' (PS, 8; PhG, GW9, 14).

For Hegel, the main problem with an edifying philosophy is less about the wish to elevate the human soul, to leave this sensible present (*Gegenwart*) in order to direct 'people's eyes to the stars' (PS, 7; PhG, GW9, 17) or to the divine essence, and much more about the disdain that this kind of philosophy has for determinacy.

In other words, the movement of elevation (*Erhebung*) from the simple and immediate *Gegenwart* belongs to philosophy and to philosophy's *raison d'être*; this is something that philosophy shares with religion. Nevertheless, regarding its form, the movement of elevation appears quite generic and incapable of expressing the activity that is proper to philosophy, that is, the activity of a non-edifying philosophy.

## Philosophy as struggle between worlds

In the 'time of birth' and 'transition to a new period' (PS, 8; PhG, GW9, 14) during which Hegel was living and that he wished to comprehend philosophically, the task of philosophy was not to announce the new epoch or prescribe how the old world should adjust accordingly. On the contrary, philosophy was the most radical experience of life's cleavage, of its splinters, of its multiple and partial manifestation, dealing with the break between the *forms of existence* and the *forms of thinking* of the old world, which the ongoing development of spiritual activity keeps generating.<sup>12</sup> Hegel presents 'the labour at reshaping itself [*Arbeit seiner Umgestaltung*]' (PS, 9; PhG, GW9, 14; translation modified) of the spirit as sneaky and underground; its process coincides

with the dissolution process (*allmähliche Zerbröckeln*) of the old order: the coming to life of the new is the dying of the old, its crumble. And it ends suddenly, with a qualitative leap: the full realization of a new shape.

The cleavage – which is always historically determined and embodied – is structured on the formal level of *Wissen* as the cleavage between forms of existence and forms of thinking, being and thought, reality and concept. Philosophy deals with the cleavage on this formal level, although it is itself a form of knowledge, and therefore it must take on the antithesis made up by philosophy itself, in its different versions.<sup>13</sup> The legitimacy of philosophical knowledge – Hegel chooses to use terminology from the juridical field when it comes to the duel between the ‘right’ of the old world and the ‘right’ of the new one, and between the ‘right’ of common sense and the ‘right’ of science – is an immanent critique of the forms of knowledge and of the framework of the world they establish.

If the process of dissolution of the established order coincides with the process of birth of the new one, then it could seem that, after a first negative-critical activity of philosophy, the real beginning of the new life can finally take place, and the speculative activity of philosophy can work for the realization of that new life. This second beginning would then be the starting point of the process of development of science according to reason's lead. Does the new world need to cut off all relations with the old world to accomplish its realization?

Hegel addresses this matter in a quite controversial way. There is, in Hegel's words, an echo of the organic and planning metaphors (the project of a building and the germ of an organic evolution)<sup>14</sup> that Kant employs to express philosophical development based on a critique of pure reason:

Yet this newness is no more completely actual than is the newborn child, and it is essential to bear this in mind. Its immediacy, or its concept, is the first to come on the scene. However, just as little of a building is finished when its foundation has been laid, so too reaching the concept of the whole is equally as little as the whole itself. When we wish to see an oak with its powerful trunk, its spreading branches, and its mass of foliage, we are not satisfied if instead we are shown an acorn. In the same way, science, the crowning glory of a spiritual world, is not completed in its initial stages.

(PS, 9; PhG, GW9, 15)

To understand this passage, I think it is important to also refer to the following passage: ‘The beginning of a new spirit is the outcome [*das Product*] of a widespread revolution [*weitläufigen Umwälzung*] in the diversity of forms of cultural formation; it is both the prize at the end of a winding path [*verschlungenen Weges*] just as it is the prize won through much struggle [*Anstrengung*] and effort [*Bemühung*].’ (PS, 9; PhG, GW9, 15).

Hegel conceives the emergence of the new world in the form of an *immediacy*, as a simple/universal concept (*einfach Begriff*); because of its partiality and unilaterality, the *einfach Begriff* is more similar to the *unterscheidend Begriff* than to the *Begriff* understood as life of the truth. The simple/universal concept is the concept of the

whole that is not the whole itself: it is the form of a cleavage between form and content, it is the simple concept insofar as it is not reality. The task of philosophy in regard to the simple concept is to bridge this cleavage. But how can this cleavage be bridged? What does philosophy know about the simple concept in its immediacy? At its first appearance (*Erscheinung*), this concept is nothing but 'the whole enshrouded in its simplicity' (PS, 9; PhG, GW9, 15); it is in a certain sense empty, a sort of container. Yet, about this immediacy philosophy could not say a word if it were not full of the (dying) forms structuring the old world. The dying forms, conscious and known, that constitute the already obsolete spiritual life are in fact, according to Hegel, the 'wealth' of the concept of the new world. The simplicity and the immediacy of the new concept already and inevitably express a cleavage. Yet it is due to this cleavage that the concept finds a conscious and known form: it can be expressed by philosophy. At its first appearance, the concept is unconscious, although it is already living in an immediate way as substance of the new world. To yield the conscious and known form is something that the concept can do only through the labour of philosophy.

Nevertheless, as strange as this formula may sound, the simple concept, in its immediacy, is the result of a production that works unconsciously. The beginning is both immediacy and product, but *simultaneously* so. It is the concept of the whole in its immediate form, only because it is a product. Nevertheless, the distinction between these two sides makes sense only for philosophy *qua* conscious and known form of the whole. Moreover, there is an additional ambiguity of the concept of the whole highlighted by Hegel, which I consider to be of the greatest importance. The *einfach Begriff* at the beginning of science is the product of a *radical upheaval* in two senses: as the result both of a 'winding path' and of *Anstrengung* and 'effort'.

These two paths, which generate the knowledge of the new form, do not immediately coincide, although they participate in the same productive activity. While the 'winding path' refers to a contorted, unclear way that goes on covered and almost hidden, the way of the *Anstrengung* is instead what philosophy can take. The winding path is a complex process of producing the changes that fuel the spiritual sphere; it comprehends the world of human activity – not simply the field of philosophical reflection – whose finality, considering the set of these activities as a whole, transcends the singular aims of each of them. From a general point of view, it is an unconscious production: it shows itself as substance.

Thus, from a general point of view, it can be said that philosophy works on the side of consciousness. Philosophy follows that winding path and puts in place the fundamental activity of *Ausbildung der Form*, a formal 'refinement'. The process of science consists in this: in the determination of the differences composing the content of the new form and their mutual relations. In this way, philosophy gives a proper form to the form in its immediate and simple guise. Philosophy is the forming process of the form: it bestows on it systematic shape.

The intelligibility of philosophy depends on this prize won through the *Anstrengung* of the refinement of the form of the *einfach Begriff*. Hegel claims that 'without this refinement (*Ausbildung*),<sup>15</sup> science has no general intelligibility' (PS, 10; PhG, GW9, 15). In the form of an immediate manifestation of the whole – as *einfach Begriff* holding an inner *Entzweiung* between form and content – philosophy appears for Hegel as an

*esoteric* activity, capable of finding interest in dealing with dead content to elevate it to the life of the new form: without the refinement of the form, science 'seems to be the esoteric possession of only a few individuals – an esoteric possession, because at first science is only available in its concept, or in what is internal to it, and it is the possession of a few individuals, since its appearance in this not-yet fully unfurled form makes its existence into something wholly singular' (PS, 10; PhG, GW9, 15).

There is nothing very interesting in the beginning of philosophy but the contradictions it keeps inside.

Philosophy devotes its attention to the dead content of the new form, not hoping for its resurrection, but by posing itself as the definitive seed of its destruction. It is a seed that radically changes both content and form. To this dead content, philosophy is therefore an 'inverted world' (*verkehrte Welt*) (PC, 283; PK, GW4, 125)<sup>16</sup> a craziness for common sense (*gesunden Menschenverstande*), and even *esoteric*. Indeed, it is in this way that in 1802, in the Introduction of the *Kritische Journal (On the Essence of Philosophical Criticism)*, that Hegel defines philosophy: 'Philosophy is, by its very nature, something esoteric, neither made for the vulgar as it stands, nor capable of being got up to suit the vulgar taste' (PC, 283; PK, GW4, 125). A similar tone is kept in his pamphlet *Who Thinks Abstractly?* (1808). Insofar as philosophy is the opposite of common sense (its inversion), it is esoteric. Similarly, Hegel writes to van Ghert in 1812: 'To the uninitiated, speculative philosophy must in any case present itself as the inverted world [*verkehrte Welt*], contradicting all their accustomed concepts and whatever else appeared valid to them according to so-called sound common sense [*gesunden Menschenverstande*]' (LE, 591; translation modified).

Nevertheless, in the preface to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel strongly affirms the *exoteric* and intelligible character of philosophy as science, as the developed form of the *Begriff*: 'Only what is completely determinate is at the same time exoteric, comprehensible, and capable of being learned and possessed by everybody. The intelligible form of science is the path offered to everyone and equally available for all' (PS, 10; PhG, GW9, 15).

Even though philosophy does appear as an inverted world to common sense, and the task of philosophy is indeed to tip what is natural, familiar and well known (*bekannt*) upside down, the development of science is not a blind violence against it. The conceptual knowledge of philosophy consists in this labour: to make something known cognitively (*erkannt*) out of what is well known (*bekannt*), to achieve rational knowledge through understanding.

### A matter of eating and digestion

What emerges from these considerations is the radical idea of a transformative or even subversive account of philosophical labour, in opposition to a neutral one. Philosophy works according to an internal touchstone of truth: it does not aim at reflecting what is true in itself. Since philosophy is in general a thinking activity, it changes the meaning of what it considers;<sup>17</sup> however, philosophy does not stop at reproducing the object in the fixed subjective form, as understanding does. Hegel writes: 'Through the process of thinking something over, its content is altered from the way it is in sensation, intuition,

or representation initially. Thus, it is only by means of an alteration that the true nature of the object emerges in consciousness' (EL, §22, 56; ENZ, GW20, §22, 62).

Insofar as what is true is the change, the transformative activity of thinking, philosophy (as *Nachdenken*) shares something fundamental with the reflective thinking of understanding. To describe the Kantian transcendental position and its focus on the subjective conditions of the possibility of knowledge, Hegel uses the image of *eating* and of its conditions. Like the constitutive means of the act of eating, the conditions of time and space of the Transcendental Aesthetic are considered by Hegel the mouth and the teeth of the subject eating an object that, on the contrary, has no mouth and teeth. In the Kantian section of the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, we read:

There are things in themselves outside, but devoid of time and space; consciousness now comes, and it has time and space beforehand present in it as the possibility of experience, just as, in order to eat, it has a mouth, teeth, etc. as conditions necessary for eating. The things which are eaten have not the mouth and teeth, and what eating does to things, so space and time do to them.

(LHP1 III, 435; VGP III, 341; translation modified)<sup>18</sup>

According to this image, thinking is a unidirectional process; it violently crushes an unarmed *non-organic* nature. Both the things that are about to be eaten and the eater are like independent entities, abstract starting points of the eating process, which are activated within the process itself. The process of eating goes *from* the subject *to* the object: by chewing the object, the subject radically changes the form of non-organic nature, which can then be swallowed, and fulfil its aim by becoming nourishment. There is a sort of finality that the subject bestows on the non-organic nature, when she chooses to eat it. The non-organic nature is there *for* the subject in order to be eaten; therefore, it has no intrinsic value. Similarly, the act of thinking is a process of idealization, a limitless power over externality through which a 'thing' becomes something 'thought'. The subject transforms the givenness and elevates it with the higher meaning of the *ideal*: givenness becomes something subjective, which belongs to us. It is a property of the subject.

Although, for Hegel, the image of eating describes a one-sided process, it expresses at the same time something true; thus, I do not think it is merely another of Hegel's criticisms against Kant's subjectivism. Hegel chooses to use the same image also to indicate a 'wisdom' known since the old Eleusinian secrets of 'the eating of bread and the drinking of wine' (PS, 66; PhG, GW9, 69). This kind of *wisdom* belongs also to animals and, in general, to any kind of animated being, insofar as they 'do not stand still in the face of sensuous things, as if those things existed in themselves. Despairing of the reality of those things and in the total certainty of the nullity of those things, they without any further ado simply help themselves to them and devour them' (PS, 67; PhG, GW9, 69). First of all, to eat the object means negating its presupposed autonomy, its independent subsistence, the fact that it could have true reality in itself; second, it means to make the object like the subject, to mould the object into something subjective. In other words, the knowing subject *assimilates* (*sich assimilieren*) the

nature by negating it. The negative activity of the process of assimilation underlines a movement that Hegel describes as 'unconscious' and 'immediate', linked to the subject's structure (teeth, mouth or the internal organs and the gastric juices in digestion) and the peculiar meaning that *receptivity* assumes for the subject (assimilation). Indeed, the receptivity of the otherness for the subject has indeed a specific kind of activity, a type of unification of subject and object. On this point, Hegel refers to Aristotle's *De Anima*, according to which the process of assimilation is structured as an *activity-within-passivity*; the mediation between subject and object is carried on by a subject that is constitutively predisposed to do that.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, for Hegel, the comparison between assimilation and the thinking process does not result in an error due to a subjective way of conceiving of thought; instead it shows an essential aspect of the process of thinking and its negativity, as well as of the same structure of the subjectivity in a wide sense. In general, such a comparison highlights what Hegel considers the 'natura', 'instinctive' or 'impulsive' character of thinking activity.

Thinking, as the movement of idealization led by the subject, is this 'swallowing up' of the object; it imposes a sceptical position against the truth of the object and the negation of the *for-itself* of externality: in one word, thinking is *idealism*. As immediate negation of the autonomy and independence of the object, the I posits itself as the substance and the *in-itself* of the object, as the substrate or universal genre (*Gattung*) that unifies the otherness under the form of what is 'mine'. As power of the otherness, the I sublates it: the I does not destroy the otherness from an external position, and the otherness does not simply flake apart in the mediation; in reaching its *ideal* meaning, the otherness realizes its internal finality.

Generally, far from the passivity of philosophy (such as Reinholdian philosophy) understood as simply a 'mouth agape', I think that the image of eating, employed – according to Hegel – by Kantian philosophy to understand the activity of subjectivity, has to be understood in connection with Hegel's physiological studies. To grasp what Hegel concretely means by comparing thinking activity to the process of assimilation and by using this image regarding Kant's philosophy in its most subjective aspects is important for the comprehension of Hegel's account of thinking, cognition and subjectivity. At the same time, this is crucial for understanding the nature of philosophical activity as a specific and peculiar kind of thinking, and philosophical criticism in terms of philosophy's inner critique.

In the Jena period, Hegel engages with the study of physiology and in particular with the process of digestion. Such an interest is kept alive also in his later writings up to the last edition of the *Encyclopaedia*, where we find an exposition of the meaning of the process of assimilation (*Assimilation*) in the Philosophy of Nature (EPN, §§357–366 A, 380–410; ENZ, GW20, §§357–366; ENZ, W9, §§357–366 Z, 464–498)<sup>20</sup> and the comparison of the process of assimilation with thinking and with the general activity of spirit in regard to nature (EPM, §381 A, 14; ENZ, W10, §381 Z, 23).<sup>21</sup>

From modern physiology, Hegel learned that the organism, as universal power, *immediately* absorbs food as particularity; the organism negates the non-organic nature of food and posits that as identical to itself.<sup>22</sup> Organic life incorporates in its own flesh and blood non-organic nature; in this activity, the non-organic

becomes the particular of the universal that is the organism. For Hegel, digestion is a metamorphosis incomprehensible from a purely mechanical or chemical point of view; it is a *teleological* metamorphosis, dominated by the power of organic life. Hegel writes: 'The chief moment in digestion is the immediate action of life as the power over its non-organic object which it presupposes as its stimulus only in so far as it is in itself identical with it, but is, at the same time, its ideality and being-for-self' (EPN, §365 R, 395; ENZ, W9, §365 A, 481).

Only in this assimilation does non-organic nature find its truth. For Hegel, such a power of animated beings expresses the *substantial relation*, in so much as the non-organic nature is immediately engulfed by the subject:

The ground of every reciprocal relation between these two [the organic and the non-organic] is just this absolute unity of the substance through which the non-organic is thoroughly transparent, ideal and non-objective for the organic. The alimentary process is merely this transformation of the non-organic nature into a corporeality belonging to the subject ... The power of animality is the substantial relation, the main thing in digestion.

(EPN, §365 A, 397; ENZ, W9, §365 Z, 483)

Hegel underlines several times the immediate and unconscious character of the mediation process of assimilation; within such a context, he expresses that kind of immediate mediation that is assimilation by using the paradoxical utterance '*das bewusstlose Begreifen*' (EPN, §365 A, 399; ENZ, W9, §365 Z, 485); Hegel claims that assimilation is an *unconscious comprehending* of the non-organic. This comparison opens a series of interpretative difficulties involving different matters, particularly Hegel's account of thinking and the 'natural' and 'instinctive' aspect of the thinking process. What does it mean in general that assimilation is an immediate process of mediation? In which way does this immediacy apply to thinking activity? Moreover, how is the unconsciousness implicated in comprehending?

As already mentioned, in the alimentary process, the organic is the author of a one-sided action over the non-organic; in this way, the organic brings the non-organic to identity-with-itself. According to Hegel, digestion describes the movement of mediation of itself with otherness as a logical development of its abstract identity. The process of mediation and the immediate character of such a process does not seem to be in mutual conflict. Immediately the *structure* of the organism is oriented to take possession of the non-organic. It is an activity carried on by the organism spontaneously and unconsciously. Nevertheless, the organism digests the non-organic in a processual way, through different moments and organs;<sup>23</sup> Hegel stresses the autonomy of the organism, showing the movement of mediation as completely dominated and oriented by the organism itself: the mediation is '*for its own sake* in order to be movement and consequently actuality' (EPN, §365 A, 399; ENZ, W9, §365 Z, 485). The process of digestion, through its different moments, is an internal modification of a substance that is actual only insofar as it is not a permanent substratum, but a reflective movement through otherness. In other words, the life of the organism, in all its autonomy and self-reference, is so only as an activity that makes itself passive.<sup>24</sup>

Its receptivity is a mode of its activity, and it is thus constitutively open to otherness: it is necessarily and immediately defective, split, needy and hungry.

According to such an analogy between the process of assimilation and thinking activity in general, it is possible to grasp a sort of *naturality* of thought; we think as we digest: unconsciously. Of course, it is not to say that we are not aware of what we think; instead, we are unaware of the complexity of that dynamic.

On the natural aspect of thinking, in the Preface to the first edition of the *Science of Logic*, Hegel says that we don't learn how to think through logic, 'just as if one were to learn how to digest or to move first from the study of anatomy and physiology' (SL, 8; WdL, GW21, 6). Hegel presents it almost as a joke; however, besides sarcasm, it indicates a sort of independence of the process of 'natural' thinking from the process of its 'being known'. The first kind of thinking can and does work without the second, while the second is a reflection on the first.

For the thinking subject, *consciousness* constitutes the form of such natural and *unconscious* thinking: consciousness is the immediate form of our thinking activity. We think and, for us, thinking is a one-sided action, we speak the language of the subject, we are in an immediate way the focal point, the agent of our activity: an absolute beginning. Thinking is doing: our action constitutes a break from an amorphous continuity. Breaking is the way in which we possess otherness and through otherness we reflect on ourselves: 'the most rational thing that children can do with their toys is to break them' (EPM, §396 A, 57; ENZ, W10, §396 Z, 80). In such action, children apprehend their I-hood as a return from externality. The separation between the subject and that on which the subject acts is given *immediately* only through activity on otherness, which in this sense, is similar to what I said for the organism: the passivity is already an active mode of thinking.

I think the natural character of thought has to be understood within the dynamic of the process of assimilation of externality, that is, within the epistemological perspective that defines and permeates every human activity: it is like an instinct for human beings. The naturality of thought is the instinct to make otherness something mine – the instinct to recognize ourselves in that on which we act. Thus, for Hegel, the epistemological perspective that belongs in a wide sense to every human activity does not refer to a pure theoretical approach to objectivity; rather it shapes a process of alteration that objectifies objects and at the same time objectifies the subject: it is the synthesis of object and self.

In the *Philosophy of Spirit*, Hegel says:

Whereas the animal is silent or expresses its pain only by groaning, the child expresses the feeling of its needs by screaming. By this ideal activity the child shows that it is straightaway imbued with the certainty that it has the right to demand from the external world the satisfaction of its needs, – that the independence [*Selbständigkeit*] of the external world in face of man is void.

(EPM, §396 A, 56; ENZ, W10, §396 Z, 79)

At a closer look, then, it seems that the instinctive negative relationship between the human being and the external world (as early and unconscious expression of

thinking activity) is already different from the one involving animals: it is immediately a 'right' of thinking subjectivity. Philosophy works exactly on the untold assumptions that the dynamic of assimilation bears: on thinking as an instinct. On thinking as natural, philosophy can see the layering of the present, of the new shape of spirit. The immediate mediation of thinking activity involves a 'produced' naturalness that ignores its own becoming. Philosophy reflects on the layers that build the frame in which we move.

To borrow Bodei's words, philosophy brings to light the '*Denkbestimmungen* that are already unconsciously present in individuals and in the epoch; in this respect philosophy has only an eminently *maieutic* function' (Bodei 2014: 136; my translation and emphasis). In its natural aspect, thinking is for us a language, a universality that structures our horizon of meaning and through which we say things; however, we do not put language into question, since it is for us a natural acquisition, a habit. In the Preface to the second edition of the *Science of Logic*, Hegel expresses this natural character of thought as a 'natural logic': 'In everything that the human being has interiorized, in everything that in some way or other has become for him a representation, in whatever he has made his own, there has language penetrated, and everything that he transforms into language and expresses in it contains a category, whether concealed, mixed, or well defined' (SL, 12; WdL, GW21, 10). He then asks: 'I have said elsewhere, what is familiar is for that reason not known, and it can even be a source of irritation to have to occupy oneself with the familiar – and what could be more familiar than just those determinations of thought which we employ everywhere, and are on our lips in every sentence that we utter?' (SL, 13; WdL, GW21, 12).

First of all, philosophy is subversion of the familiar order and there is nothing more familiar, unconscious and substantial than thought.

### Philosophical labour as activity on the instinct

According to Hegel, philosophy is one of the modes of thinking. Insofar as it is thinking in general, like every thinking activity, philosophy is a process of mediation and movement of alternation of its object. However, philosophy is not immediate, natural and unconscious assimilation, but more specifically a labour (*Arbeit*). In his essay 'Labor and Interaction', Habermas focuses his attention exactly on this point and traces differences and similarities between the dialectic of labour that mediates subject and object and the mediating dialectic of representation. Habermas writes: 'Just as language breaks the dictates of immediate perception and orders the chaos of the manifold impressions into identifiable things, so labour breaks the dictates of immediate desires and, as it were, arrests the process of drive satisfaction' (Habermas 1973: 153–154). Here, Habermas addresses something fundamental. The break that subjectivity posits with the universalization of the particular in the process of labour is doubled and posited within subjectivity itself.

Within the process of eating as a metaphor for the thinking process, an apple that I decide to eat has value only as a particularized desire: I immediately assimilate

nature. Thinking posits and unifies the separation in the ideal form that makes the object something thought, a synthesis. Within the process of labour not only does the product not immediately correspond to the desire but also the worker suspends her/his immediate desire: the product of her/his labour constitutes a translated desire. Moreover, the force that the worker transfers in the product is not a blind force: unlike the teeth that destroy an inanimate and unarmed nature, in the process of labour the worker forges the object according to laws imposed by nature. In this sense, Hegel describes the process of labour in contrast with an instinctive activity: 'Labour is not an instinct, but a rational act' (JS I, GW6, 319; my translation).<sup>25</sup>

In regard to philosophy, I claimed that the *einfach Begriff* of science has to be understood both as a product and path. The process of labour exemplifies the activity that philosophy has to do as self-development of the *einfach Begriff*, in light of another point that I find crucial. The in-itself of the *einfach Begriff*, the beginning of science, is an already mediated immediacy. Similarly, the raw material of the process of labour is not in fact a pure naturality, a givenness. According to Hegel, the content of a simple concept has then the form of something thought, something consumed, an 'abbreviation'. Thus, it is not something original, rather it is a being-negated, the simple negation of being.

If thinking in general is the activity of abstraction of subjectivity, the instinct (or also the right) to make of the world something mine, philosophy is always a *second-order* thinking activity, the elaboration of a material that has the shape of an *already-thought*, an *abstraction*. In this sense, the world in the form of something mine is the *raw material* of philosophy, since being is always already the result of a thinking activity of abstraction. Philosophy does not work above the internal discrepancy of the products of thinking, but is the rational comprehension of the abstraction itself, of the nature of thinking insofar as thinking becomes, through its alteration, truth of reality.

Philosophy aims at changing the immediate form of the oppositions and separations of the understanding and at giving them the systematic form of rational knowledge. Nonetheless, the acknowledgement of the separation between thought and reality throughout Kant's philosophy does not simply determine its suppression. On the contrary, for Hegel, what is achieved is a philosophical form of the separation: what brings to light the transformative character of thought towards reality.

## Notes

- 1 Sandkaulen considers the opening of *Difference* essay is a prototypical text for Hegel's thematization of philosophy, proposed by Hegel again in the later formulations; see Sandkaulen (2017: 3–27).
- 2 In the *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel writes: 'But the examination of knowing cannot take place other than *by way of knowing*. With this so-called instrument, examining it means nothing other than acquiring knowledge of it. But to want to know *before* one knows is as incoherent as the Scholastic's wise resolution to learn to *swim, before he ventured into the water*' (EL, §10, 38; ENZ, GW20, §10, 51). The *Encyclopaedia Logic*

- is quoted according to Brinkmann and Dahlstrom's translation. References include the section (§) number and page number of the German and English edition.
- 3 See Stanguennec (1997), Illetterati and Michelini (2008), Sell (2013, 2021), Illetterati (2016) and Achella (2019). Amongst Hegel's scholars, there is also an interest in the notion of autonomy and its analogy with the inner teleology of life that aims at understanding the form of freedom and its realization; see Jaeggi (2014), Khurana (2017) and Ng (2020).
  - 4 Quotations of passages from *Critique of Pure Reason* are taken from the Norman Kemp Smith translation (London: Macmillan and Co., 1929); all citations from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* will henceforth follow standard citation practice in referring to the A edition of 1781 and the B edition of 1787 when providing *Akademie Ausgabe* page numbers.
  - 5 Kant writes: 'no one attempts to establish a science unless he has an idea upon which to base it' (KrV, A 834 / B 862).
  - 6 On the notion of 'epigenesis of reason' (KrV, B 167), see Mensch (2013: 80–82, 110–145) and Goy (2014). See also O'Neill (1989: 3–80), Kleingeld (1998) and Barale (2008).
  - 7 Cosmic concept 'has always formed the real basis of the term "philosophy"' (KrV, A 838 / B 866).
  - 8 Quotations of passages from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* are taken from Pinkard and Baur's translation (2018).
  - 9 On the decisive turn in Hegel's studies from political, socioeconomic, historical and theological readings to philosophy and on Hegel's interest in the tangible aspect of human existence, see Pöggeler (1973: 110–169).
  - 10 On Hegel's teleological form of philosophical comprehension in relation to Kant's philosophy, see Chiereghin (1990), Lugarini (1992) and Nuzzo (2012).
  - 11 In his recent translation of the *Phenomenology*, Pinkard often prefers the plural 'concepts', even when in the original text Hegel uses the singular 'concept'. I do not share Pinkard's decision, and I therefore modified his translation.
  - 12 On this point, see Macherey (2017).
  - 13 To the notion of *philosophical criticism* and to its justification on the spiritual level, Hegel devotes a major part of his endeavour during the Jena period and as editor (with Schelling) of the *Kritisches Journal der Philosophie* (the task of this journal was indeed to carry on an immanent critique of philosophy). The matter of philosophical criticism comes back in the preface to *Phenomenology*, as well as in the *Encyclopaedia*, as constituting a crucial aspect of philosophical labour. 'Genuine philosophy' cannot be exempt from an engagement with the 'reflective culture' (PC, 282; PK, GW4, 124) of the new epoch (composed of the philosophies of reflection – mainly Kant, Fichte, Reinhold, Jacobi, Schulze – and *Populärphilosophie*). On this matter, see de Boer (2012: 86–89).
  - 14 On the two teleological models involving Kantian reason, see Ferrarin (2015: 25–104).
  - 15 Pinkard translates 'Ausbildung' and 'Ausbildung der Form' with 'development' and 'development of the form'. I disagree with his choice, for 'development' is more generic and it can refer to a natural and spontaneous process of change. Therefore, I think that 'refinement' and 'refinement of the form' is more adequate to indicate a laborious and conscious activity like the *Ausbildung*, which is carried on by philosophy.
  - 16 On the image of the *verkehrte Welt*, see Verene (1985: 39–58) and Gadamer (1966).

- 17 On this point, Nuzzo says: 'Hegel argues that thought necessarily transforms whatever it thinks. And since in philosophy thinking or reason takes rationality in its actual shapes as its content the philosophical problem of thinking change is ultimately the problem of a form of rationality capable of immanent self-transformation'; see Nuzzo (2007: 291–307). Moreover, Nuzzo raises the question if philosophy can think the reality of the change without losing the internal dynamic. On rational dialectic as logic of historical transformation and, therefore as tool for thinking the transformative processes, see also Nuzzo (2018).
- 18 The *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* are quoted according to Haldane and Simson's translation (1896).
- 19 The structure of this *activity-within-passivity* and Hegel's reference to *De Anima II* regarding this matter are showed by Ferrarin; see Ferrarin (2004: 221–222).
- 20 Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature* is quoted according to Miller's translation (2004). References include section (§) number and page number of the German and English edition.
- 21 The *Philosophy of Mind* is quoted according to Wallace and Miller's translation (2007). References include section (§) number and page number of the German and English edition. Bodei shows the meaning of the equivalence between assimilation and the thinking dynamic, by dealing with Hegel's bibliographic sources during the Jena period, when Hegel attended Professor Jakob Fidelis Ackermann's lectures on physiology. As Hegel also reports in the *Philosophy of Nature*, Lazzaro Spallanzani (*Opuscoli di fisica animale e vegetale, I: Della digestione*), is his main source of information on the digestion process; see Bodei (2014: 99–108).
- 22 See Bodei (2014: 102).
- 23 Hegel argues: 'If the organism does bring the non-organic into an identity with itself gradually through separate stages (*Momente*), this complex arrangement of digestion through the intermediation of several organs is *for the non-organic*, indeed superfluous: but it is not so for the organism which progresses through these moments within itself *for its own sake* in order to be movement and consequently actuality' (EPN, §365 A, 399; ENZ, W 9, §365 Z, 485).
- 24 On the structure of the organism as 'impulse' (*Trieb*) and 'activity of lacking' (*Thätigkeit des Mangels*), see Illetterati (2014: 155–165).
- 25 See Bodei (2014: 180). In Hegel's considerations in Jena, we found that the dynamic of labour becomes coextensive to the dynamic of objectification of spirit. On this point, see Fornaro (1978), Adorno (1993: 1–52), O'Connor (1999), Arndt (2003) and Cesarale (2009).

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