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Das Fortleben der Klassischen Deutschen Philosophie in der Kritischen Theorie

Adorno's Misinterpretation of Absolute Idealism

1 Adorno's hyperconceptualist account of idealism

According to Adorno, idealism is based on the assertion that the unity between subject and object is also a subject, namely a transcendental or absolute subject. In idealism, the subject is therefore one part and at the same time the whole. From a different perspective: idealism understands the object as constituted by the human subject, but at the same time this product must be opposed to the same subject as something that the subject discovers. This contradiction, Adorno says, is »nonsense« and a »scandal«.¹ Although Hegel criticized Kant's transcendental subject, for Adorno, Hegel did not really overcome its constitutive formality:² what spirit is for Hegel is for Kant the transcendental subject, insofar as Hegel attempts to expand it beyond the boundaries of the thing-in-itself.³ In absolute idealism thus looms the primacy of the subject.⁴ Hegel's allegedly »absolute« idealism is for Adorno nothing more than »transcendental subjectivism«.⁵ Fichte begins the

1 Theodor W. Adorno: »Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie«, in: Rolf Tiedemann (Ed.), *Theodor W. Adorno, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5, Frankfurt a. M. 1986, p. 7–245, here p. 178, 271. See also Theodor W. Adorno: *Negative Dialektik*, Rolf Tiedemann (Ed.), *Theodor W. Adorno, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, p. 7–412, here p. 17, 198–199, 312; Theodor W. Adorno: »Stichworte«, in: Rolf Tiedemann (Ed.), *Theodor W. Adorno, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 10, p. 595–798, here p. 745. See also Theodor W. Adorno: »Drei Studien zu Hegel«, in: Rolf Tiedemann (Ed.), *Theodor W. Adorno, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5, p. 247–381, here p. 261.

2 See Adorno: »Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie«, p. 38, 151; Adorno: »Drei Studien zu Hegel«, p. 323; Adorno: *Negative Dialektik*, p. 49.

3 See Adorno: »Drei Studien zu Hegel«, p. 254, 262–263, 265; Adorno: *Negative Dialektik*, p. 173.

4 See Adorno: »Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie«, p. 12; Adorno: »Drei Studien zu Hegel«, p. 259–261, 264; Adorno: *Negative Dialektik*, p. 48, 125, 139 [Footnote 1], 180–181, 343.

5 Adorno: »Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie«, p. 29.

Science of Knowledge with the pure identity of the I with itself; thus, Adorno also distinguishes Hegel's approach from Fichte's. Indeed, at the beginning of the *Science of Logic* Hegel rejects – as Adorno openly recognizes – indeterminate identity as the first principle of his system and replaces it with determinate being, which develops all determinations out of itself. Although Adorno does not overlook this decisive difference between Hegel and Fichte, he nonetheless claims that Hegel's absolute idealism ultimately results from a deeper radicalization of transcendental idealism through the further extension of its main principle. Adorno describes, therefore, Hegel's relation to transcendental idealism as contradictory: despite opposing Kant and Fichte, Hegel does not give up their general project of deriving determinate contents from subjectivity of the I with itself; thus, he does not abandon the fundamental claim of the pre-eminence of the subject.⁶

Along these lines, Adorno also rejects Hegel's thesis that the result of the negation of negation is affirmation. For Adorno, a further negation cannot reduce the non-identical to the first identical moment that that non-identical negates. If restoration of identity were possible, it would mean that the first negation had not been negative enough.⁷ The non-identical cannot be subsumed under the identical as a moment of its renewed identity. If the non-identical could be reduced to the identical, it would no longer be non-identical, in the same way the identical would cease, in turn, to be identical to itself. For Adorno, this impossibility is the index of the irreducibility of the identical and the non-identical.⁸ The 'scandal' of absolute idealism consists precisely in the fact that what the subject is supposed to have produced must at the same time persist as something else that stands against it. For Adorno, the pretension of spirit to be the unity of the subject and the object is based on Hegel's hypostatization of the subject;⁹ when the subject is hypostatized in its abstract difference to the concrete object, the illusion arises that it is no longer opposed to it, since only the concrete subject differs from the object that it knows.

According to Adorno, Hegel understands the given as a completely indefinite content; this is a sign that the given is the result of a radical abstraction. But such interpretation of the given is a *petitio principii* for Adorno: the given as purely indeterminate is only a function of the self-understanding of the subject as primarily active and productive, because, deprived of determinacy, the given requires a subject to determine it.¹⁰ When the real world is reduced to mere material by a

6 See Adorno: »Drei Studien zu Hegel«, p. 260.

7 See Adorno: *Negative Dialektik*, p. 161–162.

8 See *ibid.*, p. 17, 33.

9 See Adorno: »Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie«, p. 37–38; Adorno: »Drei Studien zu Hegel«, p. 263; Adorno: *Negative Dialektik*, p. 44–45, 198–199; Adorno: »Stichworte«, p. 754, 756. See also Theodor W. Adorno: »Theorien und Theoretiker«, in: Rolf Tiedemann (Ed.), *Theodor W. Adorno, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 20, p. 11–263, here p. 103–104; Theodor W. Adorno: »Der Begriff des Unbewußten in der transzendentalen Seelenlehre«, in: Rolf Tiedemann (Ed.), *Theodor W. Adorno, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, p. 79–322, here p. 98.

10 See Adorno: »Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie«, p. 143–146.

subject that is viewed as exceedingly productive, subjectivity becomes unlimited, absolute.¹¹ For Adorno, however, the concrete world of determinate things always remains behind the given conceived of as the last remnant of an expanding abstraction. Absolute idealism is thus an infinite regress of reduction of the given: if the given were completely reduced to a moment of the subject, the process of its assimilation as a non-identical element would cease; thus, the non-identical in relation to the spirit is as such a necessary, irreducible moment of the activity of knowledge. The human spirit tries to reduce it to its own self-identity, but the non-identical given has to remain in its non-identity in relation to the spirit.¹² The non-identical given therefore implies an inner tension in the concept of spirit, a contradiction that cannot be solved and undone. Adorno claims that absolute idealism aims to reduce the non-identity of an empirical given to the knowing subject. But he considers that such reduction is nothing but a logical juggling act: Hegel understands the non-identical as an instantiation of the universal concept of non-identity; by means of this consideration, the non-identical is supposed to be successfully assimilated by the subject.¹³ For Adorno, however, in order for the activity of knowledge to take place at all, the non-identical must be respected as such, and it must persist in its own irreducible non-identity against the subject that knows it. Kant construes the object as a synthesis of empirical material and categorical form. Absolute idealism assumes the same conception of the object, but tries to reduce the object entirely to the categories with which the subject understands its structure. The subject as a formative power and the object as entirely deprived of determinacy are correlative theses: if one gives up the claim to primacy of the subject, one must give up the conception of the object as mere material for the same reason. That the subject provides the object with determinacy is only a plausible claim if it is capable to completely subjugate the object. The object that is thought of as what remains after the subject has extracted its subjective components from it is for Adorno, however, a delusion of the metaphysics of the human mind proposed by idealism. The object is more than mere facticity. There is nothing in the world, says Adorno, that it is composed of facticity and concept.¹⁴ Hence, the alleged power of the conceptual activity of the human mind must be demystified in order to prevent its limitless expansion over the object. Thought should not become absolute.¹⁵

According to Adorno, concepts refer to something that is as such non-conceptual; this non-conceptual element in concepts provides them with their meaning and, by doing so, it transcends them. In this context, Adorno refers to Kant's assertion that concepts as such are »empty».¹⁶ By correlating Hegel's concept with Kant's empty concept, Adorno understands conceptual activity as intrinsically formal

11 See Adorno: »Drei Studien zu Hegel«, p. 264.

12 Adorno: »Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie«, p. 36; Adorno: »Drei Studien zu Hegel«, p. 264, 375; Adorno: *Negative Dialektik*, p. 17–18, 23, 126–127.

13 See *ibid.*, p. 126, 175, 322.

14 See *ibid.*, p. 188–189.

15 See *ibid.*, p. 24.

16 See *ibid.*, p. 23, 179–180.

and equates the other of the concept, i.e. the non-identical, with the *empirical* content.¹⁷ Adorno thus endorses Kant's conception of the passive constitution of intuition as the legitimate source of knowledge and also defends the thesis of the irreconstructibility (*Inkonstruierbarkeit*) of empirical determinacy.¹⁸ Concepts – Adorno continues in another passage¹⁹ – indicate a deictic moment. Insofar as the content of concepts is conceived of as abstractly universal, it needs something external, namely the empirical content, in order to become singular and be able to relate to the world. In equating *de facto* ›non-identical‹ with ›empirical‹, Adorno equates Hegel's ›spirit‹ with abstract universal activity. In this context, empirical contents are in turn construed as different from the empty spirit and, therefore, as containing in themselves a direct connection to the external world.

Since, for Adorno, absolute subjectivity results from the hypostatization of thought, which he regards as formal, subjectivity lacks the constraint that is necessary to explain the phenomenon of knowledge of the non-mental world. If thought is only the abstract identity with itself, it must spin untethered in the void. In this frame, perception must convey thought with its connection to the real world; thought must receive the fixed point from perception, which provides it with the consistency that it does not have itself.²⁰ Since the truth depends on the relation of thought to the real world, idealism, according to Adorno, makes the concept of truth impossible.²¹ In other words: objectivity is impossible unless thinking is tied to something that is not itself thought.²²

The *Science of Logic* begins with the notion of pure ›being‹ (*Sein*) instead of the notion of ›something‹ (*Etwas*). For Adorno, this starting point decides in advance on the development of Hegel's logic in an idealist direction, which aims to legitimize the primacy of the subject. By beginning with the notion of pure being, Hegel can dissolve singular beings in the universality of the concept of being: each being (*Seiendes*) dissolves into mere being as that which is.²³ Hegel's logic therefore lacks content and, despite its material pretension, remains a purely formal theory;²⁴ instead it should begin with the category of ›something‹, not with the category of the abstractly indeterminate ›being‹ which is identical with its negative, that is to say, with ›nothingness‹ (*Nichts*). Adorno claims that if Hegel's logic – as, for example, Kant's logic did – had started with the category of ›something‹ instead of the category of ›being‹, the determinate something would have remained as a fundament that could not be sublated by the later conceptual process.²⁵ There is

17 See Adorno: »Der Begriff des Unbewußten in der transzendentalen Seelenlehre«, p. 98; Adorno: »Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie«, p. 161; Adorno: »Drei Studien zu Hegel«, p. 264.

18 See Adorno: *Negative Dialektik*, p. 48, 311; Adorno: »Stichworte«, p. 600–601.

19 See Adorno: *Negative Dialektik*, p. 24.

20 See *ibid.*, p. 44–45, 48.

21 See Adorno: »Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie«, p. 178; Adorno: »Drei Studien zu Hegel«, p. 262.

22 See Adorno: *Negative Dialektik*, p. 186; Adorno: »Stichworte«, p. 601.

23 See Adorno: *Negative Dialektik*, p. 125–126.

24 See *ibid.*, p. 48–49.

25 See *ibid.*, p. 44, 139 [Footnote 1], 160.

no pure being without something that is, states Adorno.²⁶ Conceptual activity can never sublate the *individuum ineffabile*; individuals always persist beyond the conceptual activity of the knowing subject, as its negation.²⁷ For Adorno, something is a non-conceptual content that cannot be reduced to a concept and sublated into an identity with it. The non-conceptual content is certainly determined by, but cannot be properly identified with universal concepts. This is the main premise of a dialectic – a 'negative' dialectic – which Adorno presents as specifically different from Hegel's 'positive' dialectic.

For Adorno, the concept of *labor* (*Arbeit*) is hidden behind Hegel's spirit, as the young Marx made clear in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*.²⁸ The condition of possibility of combining Hegel's concept of spirit with labor is the consideration of the content of thought as entirely deprived of own determinacy and thus as an amorphous material that thought must shape and appropriate through its activity. When Hegel speaks of the 'labor of the concept' (*Arbeit des Begriffs*) in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he does not mean it, Adorno claims, metaphorically.²⁹ Adorno associates Hegel's notion of thought more specifically with non-physical, intellectual work (*geistige Arbeit*) and relates his conception of spirit to the privilege that bourgeois society assigns to non-physical work over manual labor.³⁰ Non-physical work relates to nature as a material that is dominated by human activity.³¹ For Adorno, the conception of spirit as essentially active, as pure activity that overcomes and abolishes the resistance offered by the empirical given, implies the cult of the activity of producing. The ideology that portrays human beings as masters who rule nature is the final consequence of bourgeois subjectivism, which regards the world as the result of human labor and consequently a kind of *commodity* (*Ware*).³² According to Adorno, the conception of spirit as absolute is based on the exaltation of non-physical work; but to idolize non-physical work implies, in turn, absolutizing and justifying class relationships, because if human beings did not have to work, there would be no relationships of domination between them.³³

Adorno also connects the absolute character which absolute idealism grants human thought with the concept of the *system*.³⁴ Systematization is a theoretical extrapolation of the human claim to power and order over matter. In a barely veiled allusion to Nietzsche's famous dictum that »the spirit is in fact most like

26 See *ibid.*, p. 139, 175.

27 See *ibid.*, p. 148.

28 See Adorno: »Drei Studien zu Hegel«, p. 265–266, 271; Adorno: *Negative Dialektik*, p. 199.

29 See Adorno: »Drei Studien zu Hegel«, p. 269.

30 See *ibid.*, p. 270–272; Adorno: *Negative Dialektik*, p. 179.

31 See Adorno: »Drei Studien zu Hegel«, p. 268; Adorno: *Negative Dialektik*, p. 23, 30, 181.

32 See Adorno: »Drei Studien zu Hegel«, p. 274, 289–290.

33 See *ibid.*, p. 270–272.

34 See Adorno: »Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie«, p. 37; Adorno: »Drei Studien zu Hegel«, p. 324; Adorno: *Negative Dialektik*, p. 31–33.

a stomach« (*wirklich gleicht der Geist am meisten noch einem Magen*),³⁵ Adorno states that »the system is the belly that has become spirit« (*das System ist der Geist gewordene Bauch*).³⁶ For Adorno, the idea of the system has its prehistory in the animal life of the species: predators jump on their preys, subdue them with power and violence and assimilate them to themselves. In absolute idealism this pattern of behavior is sublimated into epistemology.³⁷

For Adorno, Kant's transcendental subject, Fichte's absolute I, and Hegel's spirit are all the result of the abstraction from empirical subjectivity.³⁸ Although Hegel allegedly tried to conceal its origin, the concept of absolute subjectivity can only be obtained from individual subjects. Hegel's model for understanding the relation between human spirit and the given is nothing more than the model of the *social* process of labor. The human spirit seeks to impersonate the absolute subject, but, being in reality the result of the abstraction of the empirical I, it contains within itself society as the context of functions of the singular subject. In Hegel's philosophy, Adorno claims, society should be part of what was constituted by the spirit; however, society cannot legitimately be characterized as a constituted component of spirit; rather, it is a transcendental one, since it is integrated into the spirit as it is derived from the concrete living subject by abstraction.³⁹ According to Adorno, Hegel tries to remove the trace of individual consciousness from the foundations of his concept of spirit, even though individual consciousness is the only thing capable of real experiences. Since only individuals can be unhappy, Hegel tries to suppress the critical potential contained in the concrete, living subject.⁴⁰ So Adorno portrays Hegel as an arch-bourgeois (*urbürgerlicher*) thinker.⁴¹

2 Hegel's absolute idealism: The intrinsic unity of mind and world

Absolute idealism, Adorno claims, would have overcome itself from within if it had realized that the identity of the subject and the object cannot be a subject again and therefore that the object cannot be reduced to a mere moment of the subject. Now, Hegel also characterized such a »scandal« as a »contradiction« (*Widerspruch*); it is in fact this contradiction – the contradiction implied by »consciousness« (*Bewusstsein*) – that led Hegel to develop the concept of »spirit« (*Geist*) as the *unity*

35 Friedrich Nietzsche: *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, in: Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Eds.), *Friedrich Nietzsche, Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 5, 2. rev. ed., München, Berlin et al. 1988, p. 168 [§ 230].

36 See Adorno: *Negative Dialektik*, p. 34.

37 See *ibid.*, p. 33. See also *ibid.*, p. 198–199.

38 See Adorno: »Drei Studien zu Hegel«, p. 263–264, 288–289; Adorno: *Negative Dialektik*, p. 139; Adorno: »Stichworte«, p. 744, 756; Adorno: »Theorien und Theoretiker«, p. 104.

39 See Adorno: »Drei Studien zu Hegel«, p. 265–266.

40 See Adorno: *Negative Dialektik*, p. 55. In this sense see also Adorno: »Drei Studien zu Hegel«, p. 322–323; Adorno: *Negative Dialektik*, p. 300–303.

41 See Adorno: »Drei Studien zu Hegel«, p. 323.

of subject and object.⁴² Indeed, Hegel would not have disagreed with Adorno's claim that subject and object are defined only by the fact that they differ from one another. Rather, what Hegel seeks to explain is that, although object and subject are certainly different from one another, they are *at the same time* identical with one another in the act of (true) knowing. The theoretical model that Hegel tries to develop aims to explain the curious fact that object and subject are different but become identical with each other in the act by which the object is known by the subject. Such a model must at the same time be able to explain the phenomenon of self-consciousness, since in self-consciousness the object of which the subject is aware is explicitly the subject itself: a subject that, without ceasing to be a subject, recognizes itself as an object. Inspired by Fichte, Hegel realizes that a new paradigm is required to understand the nature of consciousness and self-consciousness. Hegel's »spirit« is not unlimitedly expanded »consciousness«, but a subject that cannot be understood in its own specificity so long as it is viewed as radically different from the object it knows. Thus, the scandalous contradiction Adorno sees in idealism does not necessarily lead to rejecting the possibility of absolute idealism; properly understood, it leads to questioning the reflective model on knowledge and self-consciousness of transcendental idealism.⁴³

In Hegel's philosophy, spirit cannot be considered a further expansion of the subject, abstractly opposed to the object: the result of such an expansion would just be a more abstract version of that *same* subject, that is to say, it would still be »consciousness«. Compared to the idealism of Kant and Fichte (or rather, the early Fichte), Hegel argues that absolute idealism introduces a theoretical revolution: the dividing line is not between idealism and realism, but between realism and subjective, transcendental idealism on the one hand and absolute idealism on the other.⁴⁴ Hegel's answer to the apparent contradiction of unifying subject and object in the subject is that the subject is never only a subject, but is rather, from the very beginning, unified with the object. The subject's self-conception as opposed to that of the object is flawed. The subject is at every moment unified with the object. The difference between subject and object becomes an exclusive relation when – and only so long as – the subject understands itself as formal and empty. That is, the subject initially knows itself as an immediate, undifferentiated unit with a determinate content; then, it asserts the difference between the definite content as

42 See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse* (1830), in: Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Eds.), *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Werke in 20 Bänden*, vols. 8–10, Frankfurt a. M. 1970, § 414, § 421, § 425, § 426, § 430. The abbreviation *Enz* is used in the following references. See also Georg W. F. Hegel: *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie des subjektiven Geistes*, in: Christoph J. Bauer (Ed.), *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 25.1, Hamburg 2008, p. 112 [§ 352], 420, 430, 446–447, 455–456, 459, 463–464; vol. 25.2: p. 748, 752–754, 772–776, 779–780.

43 See in this respect Dieter Henrich: *Fichtes ursprüngliche Einsicht*, Frankfurt a. M. 1967.

44 See Héctor Ferreiro: »El idealismo absoluto como superación de la dicotomía realismo-idealismo«, in: Natalia Lerussi and María Jimena Solé (Eds.), *En busca del idealismo. Las transformaciones de un concepto*, Buenos Aires 2016, p. 193–216, here p. 195–196.

it is in itself and as it appears to the subject – at this stage the subject understands itself as formal and therefore excludes the determinate content with which it is nevertheless connected, since it knows the content as an object even if it sees itself as empty; when the subject realizes that it has never ceased and can never cease to be united with the object, it ›recovers‹ its unity with it. For Hegel, spirit does not arise from an abstraction from the empirical singular subject but from the awareness that the activity of knowing differs from the object and contains it in itself. The solution to this contradiction lies in recognizing that thought is determined *in itself* with the determination that it knows. Hegel certainly characterizes the unity between subject and object as subject – namely as absolute subjectivity or spirit; this is grounded in the perspectival approach to knowledge that is inherent in idealism: it is the subject that actively puts *itself* in relation with the world, to a world that only becomes an object in the true sense of the word through that activity. It is precisely in this sense that the unity of subject and object can legitimately be characterized as ›subjective‹.

In absolute idealism, as Adorno imagines it, the object is the mere material on which thinking exercises its categorial activity. But unlike in transcendental idealism, in absolute idealism the subject is supposed to completely subjugate that material. However, since being is for Hegel indivisibly linked with thought, the activity of thinking does not ›apply‹ itself to the object as material, but it is *as such* objective, contentful thinking, *world-thinking*. On the basis of Adorno's (mis)interpretation of absolute idealism, it is possible to recognize the identification of thinking with conceptual activity as different from perceptual knowledge. Indeed, Adorno interprets absolute idealism as a radicalized conceptual project, that is, as a project in which perception is reduced to concepts and sensibility to intelligibility. It is crucial to remember in this context that Hegel distinguishes *three* types of cognitive activity, namely intuition, representation and thought, and that he understands thought as the *unity* of intuition and representation as the respective realms of empirical and conceptual contents.⁴⁵ Representation can legitimately be characterized as the subsumption of perceptual contents under abstract universal contents;⁴⁶ comprehension, however, should not be confused with an expanded version of representation – Adorno seems to have missed this point. For Hegel, comprehension unifies the concrete perceptual contents of intuition and the abstract universal contents of representation into the theory of the object. Comprehension achieves an adequate theory of the object not through abstractions and subsumptions, but through a system of *inferences (im Schlusse)*.⁴⁷ In the inference, which is specific to comprehension, perceptual contents are not obliterated; comprehension does not take place by reducing perceptual contents completely to abstract concepts. Adorno is right when he thinks such an endeavor is impossible. Hegel, in fact, would have shared his opinion. Comprehension does not suppress the fundamentally irreducible duality of empirical and conceptual content, but integrates both types of content as different aspects of the *same* comprehended object.

45 See Hegel: *Enz* §§ 446–468.

46 See Hegel: *Enz* § 451.

47 Hegel: *Enz* § 467.

Contrary to Adorno's assertion, the knowing subject is for Hegel not unlimited because it exhausts the totality of the object's determinacy through its conceptual activity; it is unlimited and infinite because the determinate contents which the subject finds as given are already *itself*.⁴⁸ Adorno attributes a radically conceptualist idea of perceptual knowledge to Hegel; strictly speaking, however, Hegel's position is independent of the problem of whether perception implies conceptual activity or not. In fact, Hegel reserves a specific role for perceptual content. Human subjectivity is not infinite because its conceptual activity supposedly has the capacity to reduce perceptual contents completely to universal categories but because perceptual contents are not external to the activity of thinking. Thought must therefore be conceived as broader than a purely conceptual activity. Adorno mistakenly considers the alleged reduction of sensitivity to intelligibility to be the main tenet of absolute idealism; the key claim of absolute idealism, however, is the reduction of being to determinacy and, on this basis, the reduction of determinacy to self-determined thinking. Hegel's absolute idealism does not result, as Adorno claims, from the elimination of the difference between empirical and conceptual contents, but from the sublation of the abstract difference between being and thought, between world and mind. According to Hegel, even if the subject abstracts from every possible determination it cannot conceive of itself but as already determined. More clearly: even if thought negates all possible and real entities and thereby grasps itself as completely without content, it cannot conceive of itself but as already united with being, that is, in other words, as *existing* thought.⁴⁹ From this perspective it becomes possible to understand Hegel's advocacy of the ontological argument as well as his positive reappropriation of Descartes' *cogito*.⁵⁰

According to Hegel, the perceived content is not something to which the subject externally applies its activity of thinking. Since perception is another instance of thinking, its content is immanent to thinking. The illusion that the content of perception originates from a realm completely different from the subject is based on the assumption that thought as such is abstract universal activity, so that, since perception differs from such thinking, its content can only come from an external world. Thought, however, contains perception as one of its own instances. The perceived content is therefore nothing other than the determinateness of the act of perception, it is the activity of perceiving as determinate. Comprehension should not be understood as an expansion of the practices of subsumption typical for representational thought; it actually sublates any dualism between intuition and representation, between singular empirical contents and abstractly universal contents.

48 See Hegel: *Enz* §§ 440, 442–443, 446.

49 See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie III*, in: Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Eds.), *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Werke in 20 Bänden*, vol. 20, Frankfurt a. M. 1970, p. 131; Hegel: *Enz* § 64 Zus., *Enz* § 76.

50 See Hegel: *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie III*, p. 137, 145, 156–157, 360, 362. See also Georg W. F. Hegel: *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion II*, in: Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Eds.), *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Werke in 20 Bänden*, vol. 17, Frankfurt a. M. 1986, p. 212.

For Hegel, then, universality is not primarily abstractness, but that which remains identical with itself in what appears as its other. True universality is nothing but self-determination.

Hegel's dialectics does not aim to negate the difference between object and subject by dissolving empirical contents under abstract universal categorial patterns; it results rather from the process of confrontation of the object with its successive conceptions by the subject trying to comprehend it. The condition of possibility of Hegel's 'positive' dialectics is only the thesis of the unity of being and thought. At the beginning of the greater *Logic*, Hegel criticizes the conception of being that arises from an abstraction that mistakenly regards itself as unlimited. Hegel does not radicalize the role assigned to conceptual activity; on the contrary, he repeatedly criticizes the scope of validity of abstract concepts.⁵¹ He further claims that what is and ever was are only things that are determinate. Determinate things are not radically different from human thought, instead they are instances of thought itself, since thought can only think which is determinate.

In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel seeks to show that the process that explains the determinacy of the object is the process of *thinking* of this very process; both processes, that is, the development of the determinacy of the object and the mental explanation of this determinacy, are in fact one and the same; in this frame there is no empty concept of a purely extrinsic facticity, that is, there is no place for the non-identical 'something' of Adorno's 'negative' dialectics. On the contrary: the notion of a positive mere facticity is demolished by Hegel through the figure of 'pure being' as the contradictory and untenable result of an entirely universalized abstraction. The chapter on quality in Hegel's logic offers the major premise of his argument against a radical distinction between facticity, determinacy and thought. Hegel's logic begins with the category of 'being' – as scholastic metaphysics did – for the simple reason that if this were not the case, the *Etwas* or *Daseiendes* would remain insufficiently explained in its own minimal determinacy. By beginning his logic with the analysis of pure being, Hegel seeks to check if there might be anything that transcends the universe of determinate objects. If at the end of its activity of abstraction, human thought reached a content incommensurably different from thought, such content would actually refer to something *beyond* the world as we know it; just as, for example, classical metaphysics asserted was the case with being, and Kant claimed was the case with the thing-in-itself. Hegel, on the contrary, assumes that both the notion of being as the pure positivity of what there is, and the notion of nothingness as the complete absence of whatever is, are illegitimate precisely because they reveal in themselves the determinate something from which both have been obtained by the activity of thought. For Hegel, 'the empty figments of thought' (*die leeren Gedankendinge*) of pure being and pure not-

51 See Hegel: *Enz* § 456 Zus.: »Abstrakte Vorstellungen nennt man, beiläufig gesagt, häufig Begriffe. Die Friesische Philosophie besteht wesentlich aus solchen Vorstellungen. Wenn behauptet wird, daß man durch dergleichen zur Erkenntnis der Wahrheit komme, so muß gesagt werden, daß gerade das Gegenteil stattfindet und daß daher der sinnige Mensch, an dem Konkreten der Bilder festhaltend, mit Recht solch leere Schulweisheit verwirft.«

being refer to the determinate beings from which the subject has built them.⁵² When the subject resolves and dissolves them into the determinate something that lies at their origin, there is no longer a place where one can imagine a realm of reality radically different from thought, and there is no longer a place where one can imagine thought as in itself merely formal. It is not that which simply is – as Adorno claims – but what is (mistakenly) considered to be irreducibly different to thought – as theologizing metaphysics and transcendental idealism claimed – that transcends human knowledge.

Thinking is not a ›pure‹ activity because it is applied to the object that it knows and constitutes its entire determinacy, but rather because, insofar as thought is determined in itself, it can only affect itself. The effect of the spirit's activity is spirit itself; spirit is *causa sui*.⁵³ The relation between intelligible and empirical contents differs specifically from the relation between (merely) mental and real objects; if one equates both relations, thought as such becomes empty and empirical contents become real things. However, since thought is structurally connected to the real world, the singularization and objectivation of a particular content inside the totality of contents of knowledge takes place through an internal binding of that content by means of a system of inferences that makes it necessary. Truth, which is understood as a correspondence, that is, in Hegel's vocabulary, as ›correctedness‹ (*Richtigkeit*), occurs only in the context of representational thinking, where merely mental, abstract representations meet the abstractly external objects of intuition.⁵⁴ Against Adorno's assertion that thinking in absolute idealism has to spin frictionless in the void, Hegel argues for a *coherence* theory of truth, according to which the ›fixation‹ of thought does not result from the reception of a real thing from an outer realm, but instead from the *self-singularization* and *self-objectivation* of the mind's world-thinking.

Hegel does not seem to have clumsily overlooked the fact that the notion of absolute subjectivity is formed taking the individual living subject as the starting point. In Hegel's system, however, spirit cannot be reduced to the result of an abstraction of empirical subjectivity. The notion of subjectivity obtained through mere abstraction is the notion of a still finite subjectivity, that is, it is still ›consciousness‹ – Hegel regards Kant's transcendental subject together with Fichte's absolute I as being such an idea. In fact, Hegel never severs the connection to the concrete, living individual. Hegel's philosophy of spirit begins with the embodied mind, which lives in a particular place on earth and has natural characteristics that distinguish it as one or the other individual. It is the internal dialectic of the self-conception of the human spirit as being merely natural that rectifies this initial self-conception. But in spirit as such, soul and consciousness are sublated, not erased. Even Hegel's ›absolute spirit‹ is the *same* concrete, living individual from

52 Georg W. F. Hegel: *Wissenschaft der Logik. Die Lehre vom Sein* (1832), in: Hans-Jürgen Gawoll (Ed.), *Georg W. F. Hegel, Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 21, Hamburg 2008, p. 72.

53 See Hegel: *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie III*, p. 168; Hegel: *Enz* § 153.

54 See Georg W. F. Hegel: *Wissenschaft der Logik. Die subjektive Logik* (1816), in: Hans-Jürgen Gawoll and Friedrich Hogemann (Eds.), *Georg W. F. Hegel, Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 12, Hamburg 2003, p. 65. See also Hegel: *Enz* § 172 Zus., § 213 Zus.

the beginning; only the way it understands itself changes through the process. Indeed, for Hegel, absolute spirit results from the universalization of the singular spirit through its interaction with other singular spirits in social life. Spirit, as Hegel understands it, is always a singular subject; what it overcomes through the development of its self-knowledge are only the enduring forms of immediacy, the multiple forms of the *status quo*.

3 Finals remarks

Adorno's critique of absolute idealism is beset with considerable hermeneutical errors. Adorno does not fail to notice, however, that Hegel addressed many of the open questions of transcendental idealism and tried to solve them. For example, Adorno recognizes that Hegel criticized Kant and Fichte precisely because they both ultimately advocated a formal conception of subjectivity; Hegel unceasingly stressed instead the importance of the intrinsic unity of subject and object. Furthermore, Adorno acknowledges that Hegel rejected the pure identity of the I as the starting point of the system and claimed that the different conceptions of reality developed by the human mind are based on the successive contradictions of the objects with their own concepts – for Adorno this is the reason why Hegel was able to expound his philosophy on the basis of the thoughts of the subject in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and from the determinations of the object in the *Science of Logic*.⁵⁵ Adorno explicitly recognizes that the attempt to develop dialectics from both sides, that is, from the subject and the object, was an advance of Hegel over earlier idealists.⁵⁶ Adorno, finally, accepts that, although Hegel characterizes subjectivity as absolute, objectivity plays a decisive role in his philosophy.⁵⁷ With Hegel, according to Adorno, idealism reaches its maximum strength and its highest elevation.⁵⁸ Now, despite recognizing the advantages of Hegel's approach Adorno nonetheless maintains that absolute idealism ultimately rests on the radicalization of transcendental idealism, as a further expansion of its basic principle.⁵⁹ Hegel disagreed with transcendental idealism, but he did not abandon its main project of deriving all determinacy from subjective thought; he therefore did not contest the priority of the subject. Although Adorno recognizes the value of many of the solutions that Hegel offers to solve the theoretical tensions within transcendental idealism, he thinks that those solutions do not actually resolve these tensions – in Adorno's eyes they simply cannot be solved within the idealistic paradigm. It is not unfair to say that Adorno misunderstands Hegel's absolute idealism as an attempt to further develop Fichte's philosophical program in a divergent way (especially as it is presented in the *Foundation of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*).⁶⁰ Adorno's suppos-

55 See Adorno: »Drei Studien zu Hegel«, p. 260; Adorno: *Negative Dialektik*, p. 176.

56 See *ibid.*, p. 176.

57 See Adorno: »Drei Studien zu Hegel«, p. 255–256.

58 See *ibid.*, p. 260.

59 See *ibid.*, p. 255, 258, 261, 265; Adorno: *Negative Dialektik*, p. 343.

60 See Adorno: »Der Begriff des Unbewußten in der transzendentalen Seelenlehre«, p. 96–98; Adorno: »Drei Studien zu Hegel«, p. 252, 259–264; Adorno: *Negative Dialektik*,

edly ›immanent‹ critique of absolute idealism⁶¹ is based on a highly controversial interpretation of Hegel's approach, which is in fact to resolve those problematic claims of Kant's and Fichte's variants of idealism that Adorno himself considers untenable.

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p. 49. See in this respect Simon Jarvis: »The ›Unhappy Consciousness‹ and Conscious Unhappiness: On Adorno's Critique of Hegel and the Idea of an Hegelian Critique of Adorno«, in: *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit: A Reappraisal*, Gary K. Browning (Ed.), Dordrecht 1997, 58–61; Michael Theunissen: »Negativität bei Adorno«, in: *Adorno-Konferenz 1983*, Ludwig von Friedeburg and Jürgen Habermas (Eds.), Frankfurt a. M. 1983, p. 41–65, here p. 57–58; see also Michael Theunissen: *Hegels Lehre vom absoluten Geist als theologisch-politischer Traktat*, Berlin 1970, p. 24–37; Michael Rosen: *Hegel's Dialectic and Its Criticism*, Cambridge 1982, p. 153–178.

⁶¹ See Adorno: »Drei Studien zu Hegel«, p. 262, 266; Adorno: *Negative Dialektik*, p. 40, 322.

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