

Chapter 1

Freedom and the Absolute

Hegel inherits his concept of freedom from that philosophy of the modern age which, by conferring absolute centrality on the subject, ended up giving the individual dominance over nature, overturning the relation of dependence that had characterized ancient philosophy. Despite the distinction—also this typically modern—between an external natural sphere, marked by mechanistic relations of cause and effect, and an inner spiritual sphere, characterized by freedom, the individual, in relation to nature, had attained an essential supremacy, asserting his mastery over being and over things.

Hegel's enterprise can be seen as an effort to give radical consistency to this conception, in virtue of which freedom is no longer considered only a property of human inwardness and the sign of its superiority to nature but has become the ultimate logic of the real, the essence of totality. If freedom is the fundamental characteristic of the absolute and the absolute coincides with totality, it follows that freedom becomes the ground of all reality. Freedom is the profound truth of things, their hidden sense. Only insofar as the real is understood as essentially free is it apprehended in its truth. Nature itself is, in itself, *free*, since its truth is spirit, just as, inversely, conscious freedom is nothing other than nature that has come to be "with itself."* This results in an idea of the real that has been completely transformed with respect to the modern mechanistic conception. In this regard, Herbert Marcuse wrote: "But freedom is for Hegel an ontological category: it means being not a mere object, but the subject of one's existence;

*"Presso di sé"—in German "bei sich"—is translated throughout this book as "with itself."

not succumbing to external conditions, but transforming factuality into realization. This transformation is, according to Hegel, the energy of nature and history, the inner structure of all being!¹ Objects are not in truth only objects, but subjects. If they are assumed in their factual condition of objects, things, pure substrates, they are not understood correctly—that is, they are not assumed in their true dimension. Nature is not true *as* nature. It is, in truth, freedom: it is the subject and not the object of existence.

But such an emphatic conception of freedom has need of a foundation. Hegel is well aware of this and by no means shrinks from the task. The terrain is that of the *Science of Logic*, and in particular the last pages of “The Doctrine of Essence,” in which he prepares the transition to the “Subjective Logic.”

1.1. Freedom and Ontology

The question posed throughout “Book Two” of the *Logic* is the question of *essence*, of ultimate nature, of the deep layer of reality, after the investigation in “Book One” of *being*, understood as immediacy, as presence, as what-is. From the very first pages of Book Two, Hegel referred to the investigation of essence as an *Erinnerung*—that is, as both a *remembering* and an *inwardizing*.² Such a movement implies a “backward-step” with respect to the investigation of being (but from the first pages of the *Logic* Hegel served notice that every true advance is a “retreat into the ground, to what is *primary* and *true*”³) and, at the same time, a step into a greater depth. It is a sort of journey in the *timeless past* of being—a past that is present in the etymon of the German word for essence [*Wesen*].

But this journey does not lead to any esoteric or hidden dimension of being. Indeed, the title of the last section of Book Two—presumably Hegel’s last word on the subject—is *Die Wirklichkeit*. The Italian translation of the word as “reality” [*realtà*: the English translation is “actuality”] poorly expresses Hegel’s meaning. *Wirklichkeit* is “reality” [actuality] insofar as it has developed all its potentialities—that is, has attained its completion, manifesting itself completely. In short: the deep and ultimate essence of the whole [*das Ganze*] is nothing other than its full and radiant manifestation. We are very close, then, to what Aristotle meant by the concept of *energeia*. This manifestation, however, must not be understood as something static (this would take us back to the very immediacy of being that essence supersedes) but, rather, as a continual self-manifestation, as the very process of showing. It is not fortuitous that the title of the last chapter of this

section is “The Absolute Relation.” Reality in act is nothing other than a relation—a movement.

It is here that Hegel broaches the question of freedom. In these last pages of the Doctrine of Essence he yields the floor to Spinoza—which means to the philosophical position that understood essence as substance and necessity. If Spinoza were right, then the truth of nature would be not spirit but substance, just as the essence of the whole would not be freedom—the free self-recognizing of thought—but blind necessity. The foundation of freedom—equivalent to a full and proper foundation of idealism itself—therefore presents itself as a *refutation of Spinozism*.

Hegel, then, takes Spinoza at his word⁴ and assumes substance in its absoluteness, as *causa sui*. Substance is absolute precisely insofar as it does not depend on other than itself—that is, has no need of any other than itself to exist. It is, therefore, self-position. This conclusion entails the necessary speculative transition from substance to cause—the resolution of the relation of substantiality in that of causality.⁵

But this distinction between a (positing) cause-substance and a (posited) effect-substance, which corresponds to the celebrated Spinozian distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, is in fact a purely nominal and abstract distinction, because the two realities are in truth only one. Consequently, substance can no longer be understood as substance alone or cause alone, but rather as relation between cause and effect, a relation in which the cause is immediately the effect and the effect is immediately the cause. Substance, then, is resolved in the reciprocal relation—namely, that *absolute relation*, which is the title of the entire chapter.

Reciprocity displays itself as a reciprocal causality of *presupposed, self-conditioning substances*; each is alike active and passive *substance* in relation to the other. Since the two, then, are both passive and active, any distinction between them has already been superseded; the difference is only a completely transparent semblance; they are substances only inasmuch as they are the identity of the active and the passive. (WL11 407/SL 569)

In this case too, Hegel’s “journey” consists in resolving ontological substantiality in a pure logical movement. But for this pure relatedness to show itself as the acquisition of the dimension of thought a last step is necessary: it is necessary that the absolute relation reveal itself as a relation of self-reflection, in which the relation is *transparent* and *self-aware*. This is a necessary step. If the reciprocity in which substance consists is to be truly

absolute, the relation must be known by the substance itself—which is to say that the relation must be posited, not undergone, by the substance. Only if the process of self-causation is *thought* as a process of self-reflection—as a process that is transparent to the substance itself—will it be capable of positing its own absoluteness. But in this way substance reveals itself to be *concept* [Begriff]; that is, *subject*.

The mutual opacity of the substances standing in the causal relationship has vanished and become a self-transparent *clarity*, for the originality of their self-subsistence has passed into a positedness; the *original* substance is original in that it is only *the cause of itself*, and this is *substance raised to the freedom of the concept*. (WL12 16/SL 582)

This is the true Hegelian foundation of idealism: the demonstration that the truth of ontological substantiality is nothing other than thinking—thinking reflected on itself. This act of self-reflection is the only true condition of absoluteness. The question of the ultimate essence of things has thus been answered: it is not ontological essence but logical concept.⁶ Being *is* not in virtue of itself but in virtue of the reflectivity of thinking. The *Science of Logic* is, fundamentally, a journey from *being* to the *absolute Idea* as its condition: the last category is the ground of the first, its true *raison d'être*.

But this enterprise has also produced a *second important result*. In grounding substantiality in the concept, Hegel has at the same time grounded the blind and necessary self-causation of substance in the free and transparent self-reflection of the concept as its condition: “Accordingly the concept is the *truth* of substance; and since substance has *necessity* for its specific mode of relationship, freedom reveals itself as the *truth of necessity*” (WL12 12/SL 577–78). The transition from essence to the concept is therefore at the same time the transition from necessity to freedom. The movement immanent in Spinozian substantiality has refuted necessity and, at the same time, brought it to its consummation, to its truth.

This infinite reflection-into-self, namely, that being is in and for itself only insofar as it is posited, is the *consummation of substance*. But this consummation is no longer *substance* itself but something higher, the *concept*, the *subject*. The transition of the relation of substantiality takes place through its own immanent necessity and is nothing more than the manifestation of itself,

that the concept is its truth, and that freedom is the truth of necessity. (WL12 14/SL 580)

Freedom, then, manifests itself as the truth of the whole: “In the *concept* the realm of *freedom* has thus been opened. The concept is free, since the *identity in and for itself*, which constitutes the necessity of substance, is at the same time superseded” (WL12 15/SL 582). The meaning of the *Logic* has been radically transformed: it is not simply the necessary journey made by the logical determinations but, since its ground is the freedom that reflects on itself, *the Logic manifests itself as the categorical system of freedom*. If it is “the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature and a finite spirit” (WL21 34/SL 50), God has revealed himself to be identical to freedom itself, and the processuality that characterizes him is nothing other than the cadenced journey of freedom. In fact, freedom does not consist in a single act, that is, in the self-position of thought (as it still did in Fichte), but in the totality of the categorical process. The absolute is freedom because it has superseded the totality of the finite categorical determinations that negate its self-positing. In conclusion: freedom (like thinking) is not an indistinct unity but is a process, a multiplicity, a journey, whose final destination maintains in itself the totality of the categories through which it has passed.

But let us understand Hegel’s thesis correctly: in thinking the essence of the whole as freedom he does not intend to affirm the existence of an absolute that *in itself* is free, be it in the guise of a transcendent *supreme being* or in the guise of a spiritualistic *pantheism*. As he expressed it in the passage quoted above, “the identity in and for itself, which constitutes the necessity of substance, is at the same time superseded” (WL12 15/SL 582), which is to say: since the meaning of the whole is freedom, it *proves to be impossible to fix it in an essence*.

It is in this context that Hegel’s claim, in the *Encyclopaedia*, that spirit is the ground of nature is to be understood: “For us spirit has for its *pre-supposition* nature, of which it is the truth, and for that reason its *absolute prius*” (ENC § 381). If “for us” (that is, for the reader of the *Encyclopaedia* or—more in general—for the self-consciousness that “knows itself” after having experienced the otherness of nature) nature comes before spirit, *in itself*—that is, in truth—spirit comes first: it is the ground, the *raison d’être* of nature. In other words, nature thought in its essence is nothing other than spirit: its truth is not in itself but in an other. Nature does not depend on itself but on an other—namely, on that spirit which is *the absolute prius*. This leads Hegel to conclude—perfectly in line with the fundamental thesis of

idealism: “In this truth nature has vanished.” Thought in its essence, nature has lost any trace of naturalness—of externality—and only spirit appears.

But what have we gained from all this? What is this essence of spirit that represents the truth of nature? Hegel’s answer is crystal clear: “The *essence* of spirit is therefore, formally, *freedom*, the absolute negativity in the concept as identity with itself” (ENC § 382). Hegel’s answer to the old ontological question, “What is the essence of spirit?” is that *spirit has no essence*. Precisely because it is freedom, spirit posits itself as the antithesis of everything that has a nature and a stable essence. Nature has now “vanished,” and spirit shows itself to be “absolute negativity.” It is so free that it can distance itself even from its own nature: “According to this formal determination, spirit *can* abstract from everything external, and even from its own externality, from its existence [*Dasein*]” (ENC § 382). Its freedom is the freedom to negate everything, all determinacy—even its own determinacy. Spirit cannot be an existing thing. But then, if spirit is the truth of nature and if the essence of spirit is freedom, then the truth of nature is that there is no substrate and that the only truth is the negation of every substrate. The essence of spirit is that of being the negation of all essence.

Nevertheless, this negativity stops short of negating this, its own negative activity: “it can endure infinite *pain*, the negation of its individual immediacy; that is, it can keep itself affirmative in this negativity and be identical for itself” (ENC § 382). Spirit can negate its external manifestations but not its free activity. In the same paragraph, a few lines earlier, Hegel wrote that spirit’s “absolute negativity” was at the same time “identity with itself”; that is, the negativity was not directed against itself but maintained itself as negative, and this constituted its identity. This same concept is now expressed by the image of pain and its endurance. If the negative activity produces pain (precisely because it is also turned against its own manifestations, against its very positing itself as *existent*), this pain can be endured—it does not destroy the activity of negation. Spirit’s self-negation can be endured.

Hegel focused on this relationship between freedom and pain in the famous “Conclusion” of his Jena essay *Faith and Knowledge*. His claim was that absolute subjectivity (“the pure concept”) in its limitless freedom inevitably produced “infinite pain,”⁷ and that “absolute freedom” led to “the absolute Passion, the speculative Good Friday in place of the historic Good Friday” (GuW 414/FK 191). Philosophy’s task was that of comprehending this absolute freedom “in the whole truth and harshness of its Godforsakenness [*Gottlosigkeit*]” (GuW 414/FK 191).

But what is the relation between freedom and this “absence of God”? For Hegel this is all an inevitable consequence of the nihilistic nature of

freedom and therefore of God himself. Indeed, God is freedom—which means that his relation with every determination is negative. His infinity is an “abyss of nothingness” (GuW 413/FK 190), and therefore entails the end of his own determinacy. The absolute that negates is, in its turn, negated by its own activity. Obviously this negating activity does not negate freedom itself, but is directed toward every *Dasein*, every existence, every immediate and empirical reality. It is at this point that Hegel writes the most famous lines of this early work: this infinite pain, before it was speculatively understood, “only existed historically in the formative process of culture. It existed as the feeling that ‘God Himself is dead,’ upon which the religion of more recent times rests” (GuW 413–414/FK 190).

The *death of God*—the passion and death of Jesus—is the religious representation of a speculative truth: the necessity that the absolute negate its own finite existence—that it pass through pain and death—precisely in order to assert its freedom. But the God that is put to death is the sensuous God—freedom as concrete and determinate existence: this reality cannot resist the process of negation. Jesus must be put to death. This story of “the death of God” represents historically the conceptual truth of the negative nature of freedom.

But this same story narrates the nondefinitive character of death. The negation is not absolute. Freedom, like Jesus on the cross, is able to endure the pain and maintain its identity at the moment of extreme forsakenness. The death of God is “a mere moment of the absolute Idea, but also nothing more than a moment” (GuW 413/FK 190), so that “the highest totality can and must achieve its resurrection solely from this harsh consciousness of loss, encompassing everything, and ascending in all its earnestness and out of its deepest ground to the most serene freedom of its shape” (GuW 414/FK 191). From death on the cross God rises again, no longer as sensuous existence but as spirit. For the spirit of freedom is capable of enduring negation, keeping itself “affirmative in this negativity” and thus showing itself to be “identical with itself” (ENC § 382).

1.2. Freedom and Self-transparency

Spirit’s capacity to maintain its identity in spite of its eminently negative constitution is rooted precisely in Hegel’s analysis of the nature of “*Begriff*” in the *Science of Logic*. As we have seen, in the “concept,” the absolute independence of substance and the absolute self-transparency of the concept coincide. Indeed, the former—autonomy of the substance—is made possible

precisely by the latter, that is, by the concept's transparency to, and full awareness of, itself. We are confronted here with one of the most distinctive features of Hegelian philosophy, in which freedom is always put into relation with self-reflectivity. Self-reflectivity is the special relationship that thought has with itself, thanks to which, referring to itself, it determines itself and makes itself independent of everything that does not coincide with it. This is the *first characteristic of freedom*, which Hegel expresses with the celebrated locution of *being-with-self* [*Bei-sich-selbst-sein*].

[Spirit] does not find its content outside itself, but makes itself its own object and its own content. Knowledge is its form and function, but its content is the spiritual itself. Thus the spirit is by nature *with itself* [*bei sich*] or *free*. (PhWgI 54/PH1 47)

Spirit's relation to itself is the ground and the guarantee of its freedom. This is the principal difference between the freedom of spirit and the necessity of nature. While matter has its center outside itself (Hegel refers explicitly to the force of gravity that impels matter "to move towards a central point"), spirit has its center in itself.

Spirit, on the other hand, is such that its center is within itself; it too strives towards its center, but it has its center within itself. Its unity is not something external; it always finds it within itself, and exists in itself and with itself [*bei sich*]. Matter has its substance outside itself; spirit, on the other hand, is being-with-self [*Beisichselbstsein*], which is the same thing as freedom. (PhWgI 55/PH1 48)

Joachim Ritter, in his comparative studies on Aristotle and Hegel, showed that this conception of freedom is rooted in the Aristotelian concept of "free human being": "Aristotle defined freedom by expressly differentiating it from the unfreedom of the slave: for him, 'that man [*anthropos*] is free whose end is in himself and not in another' (*Met.* 982b 25–28). Hegel draws first of all on this concept: freedom is the *Bei-sich-selbst-sein* of the individual."⁸ Accordingly, Hegel's being-with-self is the idealist translation of Aristotle's having one's end in oneself. And this translation is possible because it is mediated by the Kantian theory of autonomy, according to which a human being is free when he is independent of every motive that is external to pure practical reason—that is, independent of any natural influence, be it internal or external, and of any coercion by another's will.

This first characteristic of freedom is fully consistent with the “modern” conception of freedom’s essentially *self-referential* nature, grounded in the absence of relation with anything external (be it object or subject), since this would keep it from full autonomy, rendering it heteronomous. This is confirmed by a passage in the *Philosophy of Right*:

Only in this freedom is the will completely *with itself, because it has reference to nothing but itself*, so that every relationship of *dependence* on something *other* than itself is thereby eliminated.
(PR § 23)

Being-with-self is expressed here in terms of absence of relation with other (seen only as a relation of dependence and a source of unfreedom). Freedom, then, in this first formulation, appears to be monological, solipsistic, and self-referential—elements we shall find again in Hegel’s second formulation of freedom.

1.3. Freedom and Negativity

The negative nature of freedom, emphasized in *Faith and Knowledge* and in the *Encyclopaedia*, is reaffirmed in the *Philosophy of Right*—in particular in the first of the three paragraphs that state programmatically the fundamental characteristics of freedom.

The will contains the element of *pure indeterminacy* or of the ‘I’’s pure reflection into itself, in which every limitation, every content, whether present immediately through nature, through needs, desires and drives, or given and determined in some other way, is dissolved; this is the limitless infinity of *absolute abstraction* or *universality*, the pure *thinking* of oneself.
(PR § 5)

The tendentially limitless nature of freedom is converted, for Hegel, into absolute abstraction—that is, into the impossibility of having determinate contents. Indeed, any determination would appear as a limitation of its universality and an external conditioning. Hegel refers to freedom in this sense as “*negative* freedom or freedom of the understanding” (§ 5 R): it manifests itself not only in the negation of all externality and of any object but also in the abstraction from all determinacy. Here, the dominion

of the universal over the particular is radical, in the sense that it entails the negation of all particularity.

But the expression “freedom of the understanding” brings an element of caution to this presumed limitlessness. In Hegel the understanding [*Verstand*] is always a sign of finitude and limitation. And here limitedness is in some way the product of abstraction itself. Positing itself as limitless, freedom ends up by instituting, contrary to its own intentions, a new limitation and opposition—namely, between this indeterminate abstractness and the entire sphere of the determinate and the finite that it leaves outside itself. Hegel calls it “the freedom of the void,” and he gives a couple of examples.

The first is the example of the “Hindu fanaticism of pure contemplation”; the second, of the French Revolution, “the fanaticism of destruction, demolishing the whole existing social order” (PR § 5). Hegel returns here to his celebrated analyses of the phenomenon of revolution, already prominent in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*; that is, to his claims that precisely the pursuit of universal freedom—universal equality—inevitably turns into the negation of any concretization whatsoever.

It [freedom] may well believe that it wills some positive condition, for instance the condition of universal equality or of universal religious life, but it does not in fact will the positive actuality of this condition, for this at once gives rise to some kind of order, a particularization both of institutions and of individuals; but it is precisely through the annihilation of particularity and of objective determination that the self-consciousness of this negative freedom arises. Thus, whatever such freedom believes [*meint*] that it wills can in itself [*für sich*] be no more than an abstract representation [*Vorstellung*] and its actualization can only be the fury of destruction. (§ 5 R)

1.4. Freedom and Finitude

But freedom cannot be only this destructive limitedness of itself and of others. It feels free when it determines itself, when it creates and institutes something that depends on it alone. Freedom, as self-determination, thus has a *positive side*. It was Kant, in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, who proposed a categorical distinction between *negative freedom* and *positive freedom*. The former characterizes the will when it can act “independently of *determination* by alien causes,” thereby asserting its capacity to abstract from any sensuous and empirical influence. By contrast, positive freedom

expresses its own law positively and by itself, and is thus “autonomy—the property that will has of being a law to itself.”¹⁰

Hegel’s comments in section 6, where he presents this second side of freedom, are to be read in this context. He remarks that freedom, if it posits itself as positive, necessarily determines itself in particular contents that it will end up seeing as its limitations, even if they come from itself. If, then, negative freedom asserted its absoluteness and its infinite nature at the price of its insubstantiality, positive freedom asserts its concreteness, but thereby ends up finding itself limited and finite.

In the same way, ‘I’ is the transition from undifferentiated indeterminacy to *differentiation*, *determination*, and the *positing* of a determinacy as a content and object. [. . .] [This is] the absolute moment of the *finitude* or *particularization* of the ‘I.’ (PR § 6)

In the Addition to the paragraph Hegel explains that the “I” cannot express its freedom merely by willing, but only by willing something; that is, by determining itself in relation to concrete contents. But in so doing it finds its limitation and negation.

I do not merely will—I will *something*. A will that, as described in the previous paragraph, wills only the abstract universal, wills *nothing* and is therefore not a will at all. The particular [thing] that the will wills is a limitation, since the will, in order to be a will, must in some way limit itself. The fact that the will wills *something* is the limit or negation. Thus particularization is what as a rule is called finitude. (RZ 54/PR § 6 A)

It seems that freedom, in the end, is unable to extricate itself from this aporia that makes it oscillate between two sides that are equally one-sided:¹¹ if it wants to be free in an absolute sense it cannot give itself concrete contents, and so its freedom becomes a freedom of nothing; but, on the other hand, if it wants to be freedom of something it loses its absoluteness and finds itself to be finite and unfree.

1.5. Freedom and Relation

Hegel gives his solution to this aporia in section 7, where freedom acquires a dimension that until that point had been hidden. His presentation of the solution is only formal at first, as “the unity of both these moments,” in

keeping with his distinctive manner of dialectical argument. It is “*particularity* [i.e., the second moment] reflected *into itself* and thereby restored to *universality* [the first moment]. It is *individuality* [*Enizelheit*]” (PR § 7). Hegel’s idea (expressed here in a still only formal and indeterminate manner) is that freedom as “individuality” manages to be universal in its particularity, and therefore, finitizing itself, does not lose its universality, as hitherto had appeared to be inevitable. In short, the “I,” even as it determines itself, manages to maintain its self-identity, without losing itself in the multiplicity of its contents. In other words, individuality—the “I”—“as *determinate and limited*, at the same time remains with itself, that is, in its *identity with itself* and universality” (§ 7).¹²

How can all this come about? How can two apparently irreconcilable dimensions of freedom be reconciled? Hegel answers this question in the Addition to section 7, leaving the formalism and vagueness of his initial formulation behind: “The third moment is that ‘I’ is *with itself* in its limitation, *in this other*; as it determines itself, it nevertheless still remains *with itself* and does not cease to hold fast to the *universal*” (RZ 57/PR § 7 A, my italics). That other in which freedom determines itself is no longer seen here as a limit for freedom but as identical to this freedom itself.

At this point Hegel broaches an illuminating example precisely of how an otherness can constitute not a limit to freedom but, rather, represent its fullest actualization: “But we already possess this freedom in the form of feeling [*Empfindung*], for example in *friendship* and *love*. Here, we are *not* one-sidedly within ourselves, *but* willingly limit ourselves with reference to an other, even while knowing ourselves in this limitation as ourselves.” In affective relationships the other is *not* a limit to the individual’s freedom, but is the condition of his or her development. In other words: while the individual is with the other he is at the same time with himself. As Hegel writes, “he regards the other as other” and, simultaneously, “attains a sense of himself [*Selbstgefühl*] for the first time”: that is, *he is with himself precisely insofar as he determines himself in an other*. “*This, then, is the concrete concept of freedom*”: in acquiring determinacy and contents freedom in no way loses its own universality and identity with itself, but gains concreteness without losing absoluteness. “Thus, freedom lies neither in determinacy nor in indeterminacy, but is both at once” (RZ 57/PR § 7 A).

In this passage Hegel is moving toward a concept of freedom that *corrects* the initial monological and self-referential paradigm he had introduced with the notion of “with itself,” which was then essentially confirmed both by the negative and by the positive character of freedom. Freedom continues to be characterized as being-with-self, but this being is now understood as a

being-with-self-in-being-other-than-self. In other words, freedom is now seen as *relational freedom*.

Hegel's reason for elaborating this more complex model of freedom lies in the limits a concept of freedom understood exclusively as being-with-self inevitably comes up against. As we have seen, a freedom that excludes otherness from itself and closes itself up within its relation with itself will always keep the other outside and see it as an insuperable limit. It will therefore be able to assert itself only in an infinite conflict with otherness from which it can never escape, and therefore will never attain its actualization. Only by including the other in its own project can freedom overcome this structural limitation.

It must, quite frankly, be said that this relational nature of freedom does not seem to be fully in line with Hegel's method in the *Science of Logic*, where the category of the Idea (and thus the essence of freedom) is fundamentally characterized by its self-reflective relation with itself (which is what accounts for its superiority to the category of substance). Nevertheless, despite the predominance of the monological model of freedom based on the exclusive and totalizing "for itself" [*für sich*], we do find some traces of this alternative (relational) model in the *Science of Logic*. In particular, in "The Doctrine of the Concept," after having at first described the "pure concept" as "the absolutely infinite, unconditioned and free" (WL12 33/SL 601), Hegel goes on to say that, as "free power," this universal concept "encroaches on its other" (WL12 35/SL 603). But the impression that, here too, Hegel is endorsing a monological and exclusive concept of freedom is immediately corrected: the concept, in this encroachment, does not "*do violence*" to its other; on the contrary, in its other it is "calm and *with itself* [*ruhig und bei sich selbst*]." The concept's other is thus not seen as something alien to be defended against or to encroach on with violence, but rather as something in which the subject can find self-confirmation: in its other—outside itself—the concept is *bei sich*.

We have called it free power, but it could also be called *free love* and *boundless blessedness*, for it relates itself to what is *different* just as it relates *to itself*; in what is different it has returned to itself. (WL12 35/SL 603)

The concept is presented here in the first place not as reference to itself but as *reference to another*; that is, as a "love" in which the concept does not lose its identity and freedom but, rather, finds them at a higher level. As we saw in the Addition to section 7 of the *Philosophy of Right*,

Hegel sees love not as dependence on another but, rather, as actualization of the self thanks precisely to its relation with the other.¹³

These conclusions, in “The Doctrine of the Concept,” are fully consistent with Hegel’s analysis in “The Doctrine of Essence,” where he made it clear that absolute self-independence can be attained and posited only in the dependence on another.¹⁴

But Hegel had already discussed the relation of being-with-self with being-other in the last section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, titled “Absolute Knowing.” Here, the superseding of the object’s externality in relation to consciousness is not expressed simply with the usual formula of being-for-itself and of being-with-itself, but—rather—through the inclusion of being-other within being-with-itself as its moment: “self-consciousness has equally superseded this externalization and objectivity, and taken it back into itself so that it is with itself in its otherness [*Anderssein*] as such” (PhG 428/ PS 479). Analogously, the conceptual comprehension of its own content on the part of consciousness comes about when the “I” is with itself in its otherness: “it is only when the ‘I’ is with itself in its otherness that the content is *conceptually comprehended* [*begriffen*]” (PhG 428/PS 486). In the Preface, the notion of absolute knowing is presented as self-recognition in otherness: “*Pure* self-recognition in absolute otherness, this aether *as such*, is the ground and soil of science, or *knowing in its universality*” (PhG 22/PS 14). In other words: the immediacy of the unity with itself that characterizes the absolute (that which Hegel describes here as “pure self-recognition,” and elsewhere as “reference to itself”) is obtained not by *eliminating* otherness but only by *gaining* it—that is, by becoming-other and being-other-than-itself.

In conclusion, with this complex theoretical elaboration Hegel releases the concept of freedom from individual subjectivity and makes it a property of communicative relations. Freedom is something that is not originally within us, but that dwells first of all in the objectivity that surrounds us, from which we can then acquire it. This is the distinguishing feature of Hegelian doctrine.

1.6. Freedom and Objectivity

Hegel’s elaboration of the Kantian concept of freedom can be understood as a progressive *desubjectivization of freedom*. As he writes in the *Philosophy of History*, freedom in the individual does not consist in following arbitrary will but in adapting to *true* freedom—that which he calls “freedom of the will” (PhWg IV 920/PH2 cf. 442 ff.). By this he does not mean “the particular

will, as it is possessed by a determinate individual” but rather freedom “as it is in and for itself”—that is, “the freedom of God in himself, the freedom of spirit, not of this particular spirit, but of universal spirit according to its essence” (PhWg IV 920). Consequently, “if we would know what is truly right, we must abstract from inclinations, drives, desires, as particulars; we must know what the will is in itself” (PhWg IV 920/PH2 442).

If we do not allow ourselves be deceived by Hegel’s theological tone (properly understood, “God” here is equivalent to truth in and for itself; that is, to the objective and universal essence of freedom), we may note that the notion of “the will in itself” does not seem to be very far from Kant. The release of freedom from the individual’s arbitrary will—from sensuous inclinations and desires—had been a key element of Kant’s philosophical enterprise. By the same token, in Kant, freedom—like duty—had become objective and independent of the empirical subject.

Hegel, then, does no more than draw the extreme conclusions of these Kantian theses: if true freedom is the objective freedom of duty then it cannot be understood as a property of the individual subject. In support of this conclusion he adduces the link between freedom and thought.

True freedom, in the shape of ethical life, consists in the will’s finding its purpose in a universal content, not in subjective or selfish interests. But such content is only in thought and through thought. (ENC § 469 R)

Just as thought in and for itself is the universal par excellence—is independent of particular subjects—the same is true of freedom. For Hegel, Rousseau had come to this conclusion even before Kant.

It was the achievement of Rousseau to put forward the *will* as the principle of the state, a principle that has *thought* not only as its form (as with the social instinct, for example, or divine authority) but also as its content, and that is in fact *thinking* itself. (PR § 258 R)

As Hegel makes clear in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Rousseau’s principle of the general will means that “the concept of freedom must not be taken in the sense of the arbitrary caprice of an individual, but in the sense of the rational will, of the will in and for itself” (GPh2 XV 477/HP III 402). He goes on to say: “Freedom is just thought itself; he who casts thought aside and speaks of freedom knows not what he is talking of.

The unity of thought with itself is freedom, the free will.” Thought is thus the condition for going beyond particular subjectivity: “It is only as having the power of thinking that the will is free” (GPh2 XV 478/HP III 402).

Hegel makes similar remarks in the *Philosophy of History*, where he endorses the principle “put forward by Kantian philosophy”: namely, that “the will is free only when it does not will anything alien, extrinsic, foreign to itself (for as long as it does so, it is dependent), but wills itself alone—wills the will.” (PhWg IV 921/ PH2 442). A concept emerges here that is central not only for Kant but also for Hegel, and which constitutes the true corrective with respect to the particular will: the concept of *the will that wills itself*.

As he writes in the *Philosophy of Right*, “the will that *has being in and for itself* has as its object the will itself as such, and hence itself as its pure universality” (PR § 21 R). And: “the absolute determination or, if one prefers, the absolute drive, of the free spirit is to make its freedom into its object” and, accordingly, “the abstract concept of the Idea of the will is in general *the free will that wills the free will*” (PR § 27).

Nonetheless, we know that Hegel does not think of this corrective to the particularistic will in the Kantian terms of pure universality. As we have seen, pure universality, precisely because it is capable of elevating itself above particularity and finitude, is incapable of determinations and dissolves into the void. Kant’s proposal to overcome the particular wills can certainly be endorsed, “But the next question is: *How does the will determine itself?* For in willing itself, it is nothing but a relation of identity with itself” (PhWg IV 922/PH2 443).

Mere abstract universality is not the way to overcome the particularistic will. This is what emerges from Hegel’s critique of arbitrariness, whose corrective resides in a concept of duty that is not merely universalist.

A binding duty can appear as a *limitation* only in relation to indeterminate subjectivity or abstract freedom, and to the drives of the natural will or of the moral will that arbitrarily determines its own indeterminate good. The individual, however, finds his *liberation* in duty. On the one hand, he is liberated from his dependence on mere natural drives, and from the burden he labors under as a particular subject in his moral reflections on obligation [*Sollen*] and desire [*Mögen*]; and on the other hand, he is liberated from that indeterminate subjectivity which does not attain existence or the objective determinacy of action, but remains *within itself* and has no actuality. (PR § 149)

But in reasserting the Kantian critique of arbitrariness, pitting the true freedom of duty against that false freedom, Hegel characterizes this true freedom in a way that is very different from Kant's. The freedom of duty liberates the individual not only from "mere natural drives" but also from "indeterminate subjectivity that does not attain existence," and makes him fall into "depression" due to his "moral reflections on obligation." Duty is therefore something essentially different from a universalist imperative—a question that Hegel takes up in detail in his discussion of ethical life in the *Philosophy of Right*.

Analogously, arbitrariness is not simply dependence on natural drives but stems from the unfortunate combination of two elements: the indeterminate will on the one hand, and the will determined by natural drives on the other. Hegel writes: "The freedom of the will, according to this determination, is *arbitrariness*, in which the following two factors are contained: free reflection, which abstracts from everything, and dependence on an inwardly or externally given content and material" (PR § 15). Thus, when the universally free will comes up against empirical material it produces an arbitrary volition, as Hegel explains in the Addition to the same paragraph:

The choice that I have lies in the universality of the will, whereby I can make this or that [thing] mine. This [thing] that is mine is a particular content and is therefore incompatible with me. [. . .] Because of this content, the will is consequently not free, although it has in itself the aspect of infinity in a formal sense. None of these contents is in keeping with it, and it does not truly have itself in any of them. (RZ 67/ PR § 15 A)

The content—that which is *other* than the will—makes the will unfree, and this gives rise to arbitrariness. Unlike the case of the "concrete will"—the will that stems from relation—here *the other*, instead of leading to greater freedom, makes the will dependent on it: "It is inherent in arbitrariness that the content is not determined as mine by the nature of my will, but by *contingency*; thus I am also dependent on this content, and this is the contradiction that underlies arbitrariness" (RZ 67/ PR § 15 A). The relation to the other is here an unfree relation, governed by the logic not of freedom but of enslavement.

Arbitrariness, then, is "the will as *contradiction*" (PR § 15 R): it intends to be free, but in following its merely subjective inclinations it ends up by becoming unfree and dependent. It is therefore necessary to overcome both of the elements that determine it: the heteronomous nature of the content

and the abstract character of the will. But to do so it is necessary to overcome the intellectualistic viewpoint that keeps them alive.

The understanding stops at mere *being-in-itself* and therefore calls freedom in accordance with this being-in-itself a *faculty* [. . .] [In this way it] takes the relationship of freedom to what it wills, or in general to its reality, merely as its *application* to a given material, an application that does not belong to the essence of freedom itself. (PR § 10 R)

The error of the understanding lies in its instituting a relation between indeterminate freedom, on the one hand, and unfree contents on the other. The unfree relation instituted in this way in its turn generates an unfree—arbitrary—will. Hegel's enterprise consists in *thinking* freedom in a completely different way: not as the deliberation of a (free) subject with respect to an (unfree) object but as an *already existing network of free relations between subjects*. Here, what needs to be discovered is the *objective dimension of freedom* that makes it possible to realize a *relation between the free will and an other*—an other that becomes a moment of its freedom. Whether or not this other is part of freedom obviously does not depend on the will's subjective disposition, is not in its power, but depends on this network of objective relations.

Freedom of the will (or the freedom that wills itself) is to be understood not as mere abstract universality but as a *network of practices and objective relations* regulated by freedom and in which freedom is already embodied. This makes it possible to apprehend the nature of that *other* on which the freedom of subjects depends. This other is to be taken less—and not only—in the sense of another subject than in the sense of an *objective sphere* that becomes a guarantee of individual freedom. As we shall see, for Hegel this is the sphere of *ethical life*.

1.7. Freedom and Self-consciousness

While Hegel corrects the modern philosophers and Kant by denying that freedom is a property or a faculty of the subject, positing it as an objective and relational reality, at the same time he also reaffirms and radicalizes its subjective aspect. This aspect is implicit in the self-reflectivity and self-transparency that Hegel attributes to freedom. The condition for freedom to become real (and not a mere ideal outside of history) is that it be recognized,

and that historical individuals become aware of it as their nature. “Freedom in itself carries with it the infinite necessity of attaining consciousness—since freedom, according to its concept, is self-knowledge—and hence of realizing itself” (PhWg I 63–64/PH1 55). The awareness of freedom is its realization. Freedom is activity, and hence is real only in the act of producing itself.

[Spirit] is *its own product*, and is therefore its own beginning and its own end. The business of spirit is to produce itself, to make itself its own object, and to gain knowledge of itself; in this way, it exists for itself. Natural objects do not exist for themselves; for this reason, they are not free. The spirit produces and realizes itself in the light of the knowledge of itself; it acts in such a way that all its knowledge of itself is also realized. (PhWg I 55–56/PH1 48)

The consciousness freedom has of itself therefore coincides with its manifesting and realizing itself. Freedom cannot remain an ideal object of contemplation: if it remained an idea—that is, if it remained confined to the *Logic*—it would not be true freedom. It would lack the moment of its self-recognition, since the contemplating consciousness would remain outside it, thus infringing its *logical* nature. For it to be real it must be identical with the self-consciousness that recognizes it.

If the spirit knows that it is free, it is altogether different from what it would be without this knowledge. For if it does not know that it is free, it is in the position of a slave who is content with his slavery and does not know that his condition is an improper one. It is the sensation of freedom alone that makes the spirit free, although it is in fact always free in and for itself. (PhWg I 56/PH1 48)

Freedom of the spirit is full only in its historical realization. Elevating itself above historical conditioning by no means guarantees its absoluteness; on the contrary, it can subsist only within history. Here, ontology forms a circle with history: its truth depends on the historical eventuality. God abandoned himself to the world and awaits his confirmation from the world. But the age of the complete self-recognition of the spirit is *the modern age*. Only here does freedom’s being-in-itself come to coincide with its for-itself.

By contrast, the premodern ages are typically characterized by an absence of the consciousness of freedom. Spirit is always free, but its

unawareness of its freedom entails its de facto unfreedom: “The *Oriental*s do now know that the spirit or man as such are free in themselves. And because they do not know this, they are not themselves free. They only know that *one* is free” (PhWg I 62/PH1 54), namely, the despot. All the others are his subjects.

The consciousness of freedom first awoke among the *Greeks*, but with a decisive limitation. “Like the Romans, they only knew that *some*, and not all men as such, are free” (PhWg I 62/PH1 54). Their awareness went only to the point in which “it is only by birth (as, for example an Athenian or Spartan citizen), or by strength of character, education, or philosophy (—the sage is free even as a slave and in chains), that the human being is actually free.” In short, “the Greeks and Romans, Plato and Aristotle, even the Stoics” never had the full and proper idea of freedom (ENC § 482 R).

True spirit manifests itself only with the advent of the *modern age*, in which it is realized “that man as man [*der Mensch als Mensch*] is free, and that freedom of the spirit is his very nature” (PhWg I 62/PH1 54). So, while for the Orientals *only one* is free and for the Greeks and Romans *some* are free, for the moderns *all* are free. This is the *greatness* of modernity: its having brought the journey of freedom to its final destination, thanks to the concept of self-conscious subjectivity.