

Chapter I

Substrate and Subject (Hegel in the Aftermath of Aristotle)

1. Aristotle: A Certain Underlying Nature and the Individual "Thing"

One does not need be a *militant* Heideggerian to recognize that "metaphysics," from its very beginning, has posed a problem that is by no means easy to resolve, and, what is more, that metaphysics has thereby posed itself as a problem too. Metaphysics is precisely *this* problem: that of providing an investigation (*skepsis*) into the relation between permanence and change, between being and becoming. Naturally we cannot resolve this question by eliminating one of the two contrasted terms, at least not without falling either into a hyper-Parmenidean position like that defended by Zeno of Elea or into the kind of corrosive relativism espoused by Gorgias or Cratylus. That the relation would have to bestow preeminence on that which is (*to on*) over against "things which come to be" (*ta gignomena*) has been inscribed in the very terminology of the philosophical tradition ever since the verb *keimai* ("to lie") was specifically chosen to express the primacy of *constant presence*, of that which continues to be the same as itself, that which endures and thereby merits confidence in its reliability. And this is the source of the two compound expressions, the *hypokeimenon* and the *antikeimenon*—namely "that which lies beneath as ground or foundation," on the one hand, and "that which lies before or over against us," on the other (in the masculine

gender *ho antikeimenos* means the “adversary” or “opponent,” and thus in the religious context also the Devil).

And the task that falls to metaphysics is to transform this opposition of something considered in terms of stability (as *hypos-tasis*) and something else that resists or hinders it (as *antistasis*) into a relation of subordination on the part of the latter (that which is “opposed”) with regard to the former (that which “underlies”), or to put this in another way: into the *dominion* of the former over the latter. Moreover, and quite independently of the *vexata quaestio* of whether the ancient Greeks did or did not accord a certain primacy to the reality of “things” with respect to the one who contemplates or beholds this reality (namely to the human being), the various uses of the expression *hypokeimenos* make it possible for us (namely *we ourselves* as human beings of late modernity) to understand very clearly what or rather *who* it is that truly stands at the ground or foundation, who it is that acts from “below,” transforming obstacles and hindrances into so many stimuli and opportunities for its own activity. Thus *ho hypokeimenos chronos*, for example, is “the actual present time, the time that lies within our hands.” And *ta hypokeimena* are “the things which lie within our power.” And, finally, *to hypokeimenon* also signifies, according to a classic French lexicon of the Greek language, “le sujet proposé, le texte.”¹ It is of course well known that in various European languages the words *le sujet*, *the subject*, *il soggetto*, (a film script, for example), still possess the meaning of the “thing” or “matter” in question (in the sense of the Latin *causa* or the German *Sache*: the theme or subject matter at issue). But it is particularly instructive, as I see it, to recognize above all that this *sujet*, this *soggetto*, is effectually something that is *proposé*: proposed or nominated—namely something “put forward” or “placed before.” We are talking therefore of a proposition, a veritable *pro-posal* for what is properly to be regarded as “being,” namely that which enjoys stability, as if we would thereby assert and propose our own permanence—and assert and propose ourselves in terms of this permanence—as if we took time “into our hands” precisely because we would then be laboriously reducing *ta antikeimena* (the circumstances that oppose and resist us) to *hypokeimena*, namely to “things which lie within our power.”

This is, of course, a modern reading (where we should point out that we have expressly linked the notions of “hands” and “power,” and thus of submitting things to the acting subject). It is a somewhat “violent” reading that accentuates a certain understanding of the *sujet* or *theme* in question here (which is to explore the nature of “the subject” in Hegel), by exploiting those *subjective* hints or traces that are already manifest in the everyday use of certain notable Greek terms and expressions.

Nonetheless, it is worth recognizing that Aristotle, from the beginning, already realized the difficulty of a *substrate* that could propose something for itself, let alone stand as a ground or foundation for mastering whatever opposes it, thus conquering the adversary, so to speak. But in any case it seems that the Stagirite makes this critique of the substrate rather too easy for himself—thus initiating a long philosophical tradition in opposition to materialism—when he identifies *hypokeimenon* and *hylē* , “substrate” and “matter,” thereby demoting “that which underlies” to mere *materia bruta* or “material for further development” (and thus, implicitly, fomenting the tendency to convert *ta antikeimena* into *ta hypokeimena* , that is, into things lying at hand or within our reach, things that are *vorhanden* or “present at hand,” as Heidegger would say). In this way Aristotle can criticize “the earliest philosophers” who believed that “the principles which underlie all things are only to be found in the realm of matter” (*Metaphysics* I.2, 983b, 6–8), without recognizing something that is indeed obvious to Aristotle (obvious, that is, once the meaning of *hypokeimenon* has been submitted, or “subjected,” to that of *hylē*), namely that “is surely not the substrate itself which causes itself to change” (*Metaphysics* 984a, 21–22). Changes transpire in and derive from the substrate, but the latter cannot change in and of itself, for to do so would require the activity of *reflection* —to put this in a specifically modern fashion—or would require us to recognize that the substrate is *destined to be that which it always already was* ; would require us to recognize that it *does not go out of itself* in the process of change. On the contrary, it is there where it knows or recognizes itself, where it *uncovers or discloses things in and of itself* .²

In step with this transformation of *to hypokeimenon* into something *inert* , something without any life or movement of its own,

Aristotle separates—first in theoretical terms, and then in terms of the “thing itself”—this second principle (the “material cause”) from the first and fundamental principle: the ideal agent, the *promoter* of change (the “formal cause” as it was later called). What he goes on to claim is this: “we call one cause the substance [*tēn ousian*] or the ‘what it is to be,’ or strictly the ‘what it was to be’ [*to ti ēn einai*], of the thing (since the ‘reason why’ of a thing is ultimately reducible to its formula [*ton logon*] and the ultimate ‘reason why’ is a cause and principle)” (*Metaphysics* I.2, 983a, 27–29). We should note the *reflexive* circularity that is expressed here: to say what something *in the last instance* really is, its ultimate *logos*, amounts to affirming all the affections, properties, and determinations of that thing. In other words: everything that constitutes its *being*, what it was in its origin, or what was *inscribed* in it, so to speak, as the “name” that belongs to it in an absolute sense. For what is ultimate, the “ultimate thing” that it is possible to say of something would be its “name”: the *name that is proper* to it (“what it was to be,” or its *essence*). Thus, in truth, this name would say nothing other, nothing “more,” than what *is mentioned or intended by it* (that would be to take it once again as substrate or matter), so that the thing itself would be uttered or expressed, or would utter or express *itself* (in German we could say *Es sagt* rather than *Man sagt*: “It speaks,” rather than “one speaks about it”—and this specific qualification is important), would mention or refer to itself, would *itself* name what it was in the beginning and *in principle*, namely *ousia*, or in accordance with the traditional rendering: *substance*. The Greek word *ousia* is a participle of the verb *eimi* and is thus equivalent to *to ti ēn einai* (“the what it was to be”). It is by no means unusual therefore for Aristotle to identify *logos* and thing, that which is ultimate and that which is primary *with regard to something*.

And this is certainly not so strange. Yet it remains too easy, for to justify this identification or equivalence we should have to admit, in the first place, the presence of “something” as a *tertium quid*, as a basis common to the name properly speaking and the thing properly speaking, that is, to the *logos* or essence and the *ousia* or substance; namely something *in which* the beginning (the thing) and the end (its name) could recognize one another. And in the

second place we should have to demonstrate in this entire *trajectory*—which moves from the beginning to the end: what it will be and what will be said of it, namely its specific determinations—that the thing is thereby effectively realizing its initial *pro-grammē* (in the literal sense of a “prior inscription”), accomplishing that which it already was beforehand. With regard to the first point Aristotle has a response, unsatisfactory though it may be: a response that will sharpen rather than resolve the problem. With regard to the second point, by contrast, “the Philosopher” prefers to dissolve the problem in and at its root rather than attempting to resolve it. Let us start by considering the first point.

How is it possible for word and being, for *logos* and *ousia*, to come together in something, or to be the same thing and be said of the same thing? Aristotle’s response to this question, as we have just suggested, sharpens and even *redoubles* the problem rather than resolving it. For he says in effect that *ousia*, or “a substance—that which is called a substance most strictly [*kyriōtata*: ‘in the most powerful or pre-eminent degree’—as I would translate it], primarily and most of all—is that which is neither said of a subject [*mete kath’hypokeimenou tinos legetai*] nor exists in a subject [*mete en hypokeimenoi tini estin*]” (*Categories* V, 2a, 11–12). This rather enigmatic and negative definition (in terms of the realm of language and of being alike) is followed by another definition concerning a *secondary* and derived sense of *ousia*: namely the *eidōs* (what we see something as and what can therefore be said of it), traditionally rendered as *species* (as well as the *genos* that encompasses a plurality of species). Aristotle says that these species “govern from the beginning,” so that we could say that they *underlie* (*hyparchousin*) the primary substances (cf. *Categories* 2a, 14–16). It is clear therefore that without knowing what these substances are we could not understand them nor could anything even be *said* of them; in other words, it could not be said that there are also secondary substances (i.e., that which is “said” of the primary substances, that which gives them *name and standing* as it were). “The Philosopher” can neither furnish a definition of the *tode ti* (for then he would say something about it) nor demonstrate that it exists (for then they would not be *primary* substances). Thus he must introduce them more obliquely, as examples, employing for

this purpose—in somewhat circular fashion—the aforementioned secondary substances or species: “For example, man is said of a subject (*kath’hypokeimenou*), of this individual man (*tinou anthropou*)” (*Categories* 2a, 21–22). Thus *ousia*, in its proper and most authentic sense, is precisely *to hypokeimenon*. In truth, it would not seem necessary to offer an example here (*ontically*, as we might say). It would suffice to resolve (in *logical* terms) the preceding double contradiction into a simple *tautology*: if there is something that is neither said of a subject nor exists in a subject, this is obviously because it is itself the subject, as Aristotle himself concedes (once again obliquely and as something that seems self-evident): “All the other things are either said of the primary substances as subjects or in them as subjects” (2a, 34–35). In short, the real and true *ousia* is this individual concrete thing, and at the same the ultimate subject (*to hypokeimenon eschaton*) of predication in a judgment. Yet we would know nothing about this thing without that “other” *ousia*, the *essence*, or that which is *fully predicated* and *realized*, and which, though it may be separated from the thing in thought, continues to be its *morphē* and *eidōs* and governs (*hyparchei*: “falls to” or “belongs to”) the *tode tis* in advance.

Here too we can recognize the inseparability of the ontic and the logical dimension. If it is appropriate to deploy the word *ousia*—albeit in a derivative sense—both for the species that expresses “what this individual was from the beginning” and for that which governs it—here too as in the case of the *sub*-stantia which stands *hypo* or “underneath”—this springs from the ambiguity of the Greek word *logos*, which can designate both the enunciation (the judgment in which something is said, *kata tinou*) and the thing that is enunciated. Nonetheless, it is clear that, as the subject of judgment, what is mentioned with this thing (the *tode tis*, “this concrete something”) is a mere limit or extreme of the enunciation, a *horismos*, and not the thing in its full range and extent. Regarded from the side of essential predication the subject continues to be submitted or subjected, continues to belong to that determination which “governs it from the beginning.” Thus the *hypokeimenon* is contrasted—as if it were the *antikeimenon*—with the *eidōs*, which in its predominant action or even assault (*hyparchein*) transforms what is primary or first-born,

so to speak, into what is secondary or subordinate, into something or someone that is literally *commanded* (*hyparchos*, according to the French lexicon we have already cited, also signifies: “sujet, soumis à, dependent de”—that which is subject to, submitted to, or dependent on something). In this way, therefore, something that exists *as* the subject *of* an attribute is in turn subject *to* that attribute (that which is primary substance is subject to the *dictio* [enunciation]—and the *ditio* or *dicio* [dominion or authority]—of secondary substance)—if, that is, it would really be something true instead of nothing, or better put, instead of mere *hylē*, instead of that bare *hypokeimenon* of which nothing can be said—precisely because there is nothing to say here.

And this is the source of that double meaning—surviving even today—that attaches to the word “subject”: a subject is the one who commands, but also the one who is commanded, a subject of the crown, for example. (In the German of Kant’s time the *Untertanen* were still known as *Subjekte*, or subjects of the monarch. The old word *Untertan* expresses the notion of a “subordinate,” and, in the most derogatory sense, an “underling.”) But to make the problem even more complicated, the agent that “rules” or “commands” cannot be a subject, a *hypokeimenon*, because then this would have to be “matter”—which would be incapable of giving any account of itself or generating its own determinations from out of itself. That which “commands” in the subject—that which tells the subject what it already was—is, as we have seen, the *eidos*, the *species* (or, if we take the word *logos* in its full meaning, the essence: *to ti ēn einai*). Yet secondary substance does not exist of itself, unless it is given with primary substance. We are evidently confronted with a certain inversion here, with an irresolvable chiasmus: that which is first in the order of being is second in the order of logical discourse, and vice versa. As a result, therefore, and strictly speaking, we cannot speak of “ontology” here. It is no accident that one of the first to employ the Latin term *ontologia* (clearly fabricated as a neologism) was a pupil of Descartes, namely Johannes Clauberg.

Until the end of the modern period, “logic” and “metaphysics,” technically speaking, will proceed more or less independently. But in truth they are mutually entwined in that uncertain arena or

battlefield that the subject has effectively become, as indeed they were in the times of ancient philosophy, when it was already difficult to bring all of these terms and expressions into a fully harmonious or coherent relationship with one another—*hypokeimenon* (substrate or matter in general), *tode ti* (an individual), *protē ousia* (that which in the last instance has to do solely with itself)—in the context of antithetical notions (*to kyriōtaton*, “that which prevails in the greatest degree,” on the one hand, and *to hyparchon*, “that which is submitted or subject to its own denominated origin”—its certificate of quality and authenticity, as it were—on the other).

As we can now see, Aristotle does not resolve this problem, but rather accentuates it in the most extreme and desperate manner. We should realize that what is so desperate here is neither logic nor metaphysics as such, but the astonishing circumstance that at one and the same time they are neither separable from one another nor compatible with one another. In effect, Aristotle cannot be satisfied with a *hyparchein* that is merely logical in character to “construct” the world in a rational manner, for it is evident that secondary substance does not exist *in and of itself*: “Man in general would be the principle of man as a universal [*anthropou katholou*], but there is no such man.” On the contrary, “the source [*archē*] of individuals is an individual [*to kath’hekaston*]” (*Metaphysics* XII, 1071, a20). In order that the world may exist, therefore, we need an individual source or Principle, and a single one at that, given what Aristotle famously claims by appeal to Homer: “things have no wish to be misgoverned. ‘It is not good that many should command: let one alone be the Ruler’” (*Metaphysics* XII, 1076a, 4; cf. Homer, *Iliad*, Bk. II, v. 204). Yet this Monarch for its part cannot be a subject of predication—one can say nothing at all about it—for in that case it would possess features and determinations in common with other subordinate beings (and then it could not itself avoid being “commanded,” as we see with the kind of modern Monarch who is therefore regarded—with a greater or lesser degree of cynicism—as “the first servant of the state” in the words ascribed to Frederick the Great). Even less can it be an ultimate subject, for in that case it would be or would involve matter, and would be subject to change. In a word, while it must be an individual, it cannot be a subject. It would therefore have to be *ousia* even though it can never be *ousia*.

Aristotle's name for this contradictory being is "God," which he describes as first or "primary *ousia*," as something that is "simple" in nature, as something that is engaged "in activity" (*kat'energeian*) (*Metaphysics* XII, 1072a, 31–32). But since—let us remember—the *prōte ousia* was defined as *hypokeimenon*, it seems clear that the only way—precarious though it is—of escaping contradiction is to admit another use, an *analogical* one, of the term *prōte*. In his treatise on *The Categories* the word "first" or "primary" signifies that which is "basic," that which "underlies," as in effect befits the ultimate subject of predication (ultimate with respect to discourse, but primary with respect to being: given that there can be nothing below or beneath the *hypokeimenon*—except for the *hypokeimenon* in general: "matter," and not indeed "subject"). In the *Metaphysics* Aristotle's description of divine *ousia* as "primary" possesses a high-ranking axiological status since in effect it governs the series of contraries in the sense that it allows no contradiction within itself (it is absolutely simple). Thus the only conceivable simple principle (although this involves difficulties of its own) would be the individual which is so perfect that it possessed absolutely no need to move or be moved in order to exist, which would then coincide completely and precisely with itself, and only with itself (its definition, its *logos* or essence, would be utterly absorbed in its existing individuality). It would not even be permissible to describe it as a subject or substrate of itself, for that would imply some internal division between its being and its essence). But then what can be said of it at all, even if only by way of analogy? All that can be said is this: *archē gar hē noēsis*—"the principle, in effect, is intellection" (*Metaphysics* XII, 1072a, 30).

For us human beings, *noēsis* (which could also be translated, and with good reason, as "intellectual intuition") is that supreme activity in which the act of thinking and that which is thought instantaneously come together as one. We may speak of "fusion" here, as if we were talking about two separate things that were *then* subsequently united, for as living beings possessed of *logos* (and thus of judgment, of the process that separates subject and predicate, that separates primary and secondary substance) we are thereby *submitted* and *subjected* to time. For all this, it is true—so Aristotle believes—that we too, the philosophers, are capable at least on some occasions of "immortalizing" ourselves in the sense that in

an instant “outside of time” *hypokeimenon* and *antikeimenon*, subject and object, can be identified with one another—to return to our earlier terminology—in a simple undivided *actus*. We can thus attribute to God an eternal state of perfection, which, by contrast, “we only rarely enjoy” (*Metaphysics* XII, 1072b, 25). This state of eternal enjoyment, which is at the same time the supreme form of activity (*noēsis noēseōs*), is also described by Aristotle as *zōē* or “life.” And indeed, this perfect life, for here the individual coincides absolutely with its species and its genus.

All things considered, the only thing we can definitely say about this supreme life—this Principle, this Individual on which “the sensible universe and the world of nature (*phusis*) depend” (*Metaphysics* XII, 1072b 14), on which the intelligibility and even the existence of the world depend, subject as it is to this single One—is that it negates and destroys, so to speak, in its own excessive character all the forms and schemes of being and of thought that have been so patiently analyzed up until this point.

In effect, for us, God is not intelligible. In and of Himself, or perhaps better: in and of Itself (if we are permitted to intrude on such an intensely focused and concentrated divine existence), the supreme One does not act as an intelligible Individual on anything other than itself (yet what kind of intellection would it have to accomplish if it is indeed already a pure unity of intellection and its intelligible object insofar as the latter is submitted to or is “subject” to the intellect?). Although all things tend toward the supreme One, the latter knows nothing of this, and need know nothing. It is “from without,” if we may put it this way, that the supreme One is the ultimate “end” for all things. And yet, in and of itself, the supreme One cannot even be regarded as the end in terms of itself since it has never been separated or divided from itself in the first place. How could that which has always already been the origin or principle possibly be an end? And how can that which never *directly* furnishes the origin or principle for anything turn out to be the ultimate origin and principle, given that other beings move toward it only *hōs erōmenon*, only insofar as it is an object of love? (*Metaphysics* XII, 1072b, 4).

And this is why I claimed earlier that in the last analysis Aristotle dissolved the second problem regarding the relation between

the *logos* and the *tode ti* (and *ousia* consisted in just this relation) since the former—we must remember—is an expression of essence if and only if the ultimate definition coincides without remainder with the primary subject, with the *hypokeimenon*. But for that reason, with regard to the whole trajectory, namely the complete path that leads ontically from the origin and principle to the end—the inherence of determinations in the subject—and from which we logically return—with the subsumption of the subject to the predicate—it would be necessary to demonstrate that the journey and the return coincide entirely with one another. It would be necessary to demonstrate, as it were, that the thing in question succeeds in effectively and precisely accomplishing its initial program as we have already described it (in the literal sense of a “prior inscription”), and demonstrate at the same time that the execution of this program succeeds in giving reality, shape, and body to what was previously nothing but substrate, nothing but subject in general: an *x*. Yet, as we have tried to show, Aristotle makes things a little too easy for himself in this regard, for *ab initio* his supreme principle has no need to go or to return from anywhere. There is no course or trajectory here. Rather, everything that is not God, indeed everything else there is (which is to say: everything that we can think and express and experience) traces its own path inasmuch as it attempts (consciously or not) to conform its life to its definition. And it is precisely because it cannot accomplish this completely that everything here can be called “things” (determinations or properties) that belong to things (*qua* subjects or individuals). It is precisely for this reason that logical discourse and ontic becoming are given together. Moreover, and also for this very reason, everything—save for God—exists in time, and is thereby destined for death. Only the supreme One lives eternally—as we have had occasion to show—because uniquely God harbors and maintains its essence entire.

Let us briefly recapitulate the argument. We began by showing how the initial problem of metaphysics lay in “counterposing” two modes of “being” or existence: that of the *hypokeimenon* or *subjectum*, and that of the *antikeimenon* or *objectum*. The common use of these ancient terms led us to suspect that the subordination of the second term with regard to the first allowed us to glimpse a primacy, though still latent, of the “subject” here which was sustained

and encouraged by this subordinate relation. Our examination of the relevant Aristotelian concepts in this regard, however, yielded a highly ambiguous result, and one that creates more problems than the philosophical tradition has been able to resolve. In the philosophy of the Stagirite the *hypokeimenon* plays, in effect, a double and indeed antithetical role: on the one hand the notion is identified with that of matter or general substrate, while on the other it is identified with individual substance or the subject of attribution. Yet after having laid this basis, the Stagirite sees himself forced to reduce its function and significance to an extreme minimum.

In the first case, matter or the substrate is restricted exclusively to the physical world of becoming (where the notion of the *hypokeimenon* properly served to ensure a certain element of permanence at the heart of change). Above and beyond the realm of matter there lies the purest principle that “erotically” attracts all other beings, without knowing that it does so, and that for its part can somehow, though only obscurely, be conceived as an extremely strange kind of pure and self-activating *morphē*, as something like a secondary substance that would have *subsumed* primary substance entirely without remainder within its own *all-embracing determination*. Yet we would then be talking about an *Eidos* that is alien to the *logos*, one where the *adspēctum*—the way in which “it gives itself to be seen”—would be absolutely one with the very act of seeing: the *noēsis*, not of some specific meaning or *noēma*, but solely of itself (*noēsis noēseōs*).

In the second case, this same principle sees itself as a perfect inherence of the predicate within the subject: once again we are presented with something that cannot logically be enunciated in terms of any judgment, presented, rather, with what, as something that is simple and true, can only “be apprehended and seen in its (self) manifestation” (*to men higein kai pthanai alēthes*)—as Aristotle says, wrestling with the limits of language—since, as he adds in hermetic parenthesis here, “(for affirmation [*kataphasis*: letting something appear from top to bottom, letting something appear in its place] is not the same as being shown in a flash [*phasis*])” *Metaphysics* IX, 10, 1051b, 24). Moreover, with regard to such a stupendous form of being (though Aristotle still speaks of *ta hapla* in the plural, he

soon reveals that there is only one being—God—that is simple and in continual activity (*energeia*), with regard to the supreme One he claims that it is impossible to be deceived. He says that we either “behold and understand” (*noein*) this form of being or we do not (*ibid.*, 1051b, 32), thereby alluding to those rare moments that philosophers are capable of enjoying (the sort of instant in which, as Spinoza would say, *sentimus experimurque nos aeternos esse*).³ Such is the “immortalization”—rather than immortality—that is available to human beings: an ephemeral *noetic* participation in the divine life, in the *noēsis noēseōs*.

This all rings very well, and sounds indeed “divine” (not unlike the celestial music we have heard for centuries in the course of a less than *holy* union between Scholastic thought and the Christian religion). But it should be clear that rather than resolving the problem of the two senses of *subject* (the subject-thing of *inherence*, and the subject-concept *subsumed* under the predicate), Aristotle has undertaken a flight to the front, as it were, offering as a solution that is nothing more than the forced combination of two approaches in one unique *individual*. And he has done so by suppressing the relation in question. We might therefore be tempted to reject Heidegger’s famous judgment on metaphysics as *ontotheology* and argue instead that Aristotle, with his conception of *theos*, actually made it rather difficult to comprehend the connection between the ontical and the logical dimension, or between primary substance as *tode ti—hypokeimenon*—and secondary substance as *eidōs—to ti ēn einai*.

2. Not Substance, But Just as Much Subject

It would of course be extremely misleading to claim that Hegel thinks about the problem of the subject in precisely the same terms that were bequeathed by Aristotle. A long and significant number of famous names, of *intermediary* figures, would clearly document that in this case too we are talking about a certain trajectory in the course of which the problematic we have been discussing is sometimes deepened and enhanced and sometimes obscured. But the very idea of a “closure” with respect to an entire movement of

thought—namely “metaphysics”—that has shaped our history (the history of the West), that has thus proved literally epoch-making, would naturally suggest that the thinker who arguably represents the culmination of the metaphysical tradition (and therefore also its decline) must have expended considerable effort on acknowledging and appropriating, in the most thorough and coherent (that is to say: *systematic*) manner, the rich and problematic heritage that began with the thinker who stands at the beginning of that tradition. Nonetheless, going beyond (or rather going back *before*) what he expressly defended as a philosophical *program* with regard to the “demands of the time” and its relationship to the entire earlier development of thought, it is quite clear that Hegel deliberately and repeatedly turns back to ancient philosophy in general, and to Aristotle in particular, precisely to counter the most *recent* aspect of the most *recent* time, namely of Modernity—that is to say: the agnosticism characteristic of the followers of Kant, the egoistic subjectivism of Jacobi, and the unbridled subjectivity of the early romantics, preoccupied as they seemed to be with a hypertrophied and in truth somewhat poignant exhibition of *ego*. And the general significance of what Hegel believed he found in Aristotle, and that he appropriates in his own way, can effectively be described with the single word *relationality*.

For in effect Hegel always thinks in *holistic* terms, in terms of structure, rather than actually attempting to deduce a philosophical system on the basis of a single principle or proposition, as he claimed that Descartes, Reinhold, and Fichte had undertaken to do. Indeed in 1801 Hegel memorably describes the idea that “something merely posited for reflection must necessarily stand at the summit of a system as the highest or absolute or basic proposition” as nothing but a “delusion” (*Wahn*). And shortly after this, in his critical remarks on Spinoza for having begun the presentation of his *Ethics* “with a definition,” Hegel claims that the Spinozan philosophy can only properly be reevaluated once “reason has purified itself of the *subjectivity* of reflection.” All this clearly reveals his hostility to what he calls the “philosophy of reflection” and the kind of philosophy that typically appeals to “the facts of consciousness,” as exemplified by Fichte and his conception of the absolute “ego.”⁴

Nevertheless, it is evident that we must recognize a factor that also separates Hegel from Aristotle, and this is the formidable emergence in the Modern Age of a notion of *subject*—one that soon came to dominate the philosophical panorama—which was concerned not only with the human subject qua individual but above all with the “I” conceived as *consciousness*, and, at the same time, as the free subject that is responsible for its own actions. In this regard, it is necessary to mention, at least in passing, the Cartesian “I” that is certain of itself as *fundamentum inconcussum veritatis*, as the unshakable ground of truth (even if, not altogether coherently, this ground or foundation has to appeal in turn to God). In this respect, we might say, Hegel regards himself as “absolutely modern,” so that his criticisms of modern subjectivism should rather be seen as an attack on the uncontrolled desire of the romantics to reduce everything to a fixed point, to a *subject* that is as immovable as it is vain. And for all his reservations in this regard, Hegel will always insist on the importance of the discovery of the infinite value and significance of *interiority* as an essential factor in the experience of freedom.

Thus, if Hegel is prepared to praise Descartes, we must not forget that this is because it was the latter who began to establish “once again” the autonomy of philosophy. For Hegel sees him not so much as an innovator as one who has continued—after the long medieval interruption—what was inaugurated in the great tradition of Greek thought. To take up an image deployed by Hegel himself, it is quite true that the land now glimpsed by the sailor cannot be regarded by him as the same land that he left behind so long before. But what has changed so significantly is not so much the land and the home that it provides (for the fertile soil here is still that of Greece) as the gaze or perspective of the sailor himself, or in other words: the method. Descartes begins in effect by seeking a fixed or stable point, a “concrete this” (*tode ti*) that will serve as a refuge against the mutability of things, and at the same time as a criterion for measuring and comparing the regularity of their changes and movements. And like Aristotle in this, Descartes demands that this point should constitute a *fundamentum*: an ultimate and irreducible subject of predication that cannot be said or predicated of any other *hypokeimenon* and cannot exist in any other *hypokeimenon*, and

which in contrast remains and persists within itself. However, we should remember that Aristotle had encountered an obstacle in this regard, that is, the difficulty of having to attribute two antithetical characteristics to the same notion (or at least to the same term, namely the *hypokeimenon*): on the one hand the ground or foundation would have to be regarded as a point (the *prōtē ousia* or individual substance); on the other hand it would have to be regarded as a limitless and amorphous domain (the *hylē* or matter), which would lie at the basis of those same individual substances as *one* of their components (the other being the “form,” as we already know).

There is, then, a nest of difficulties and contradictions here that Descartes believed he could resolve by invoking the single word “I.” The I, in effect, is a point without extension that moves through time without being modified by any temporal circumstances (and how could it be so modified if it was simple or not made up of parts?). Yet it is certainly *hypokeimenon*, or *fundamentum inconcussum*. But this is not because it could receive determinations within itself (such as secondary substances) that would also belong to other similar individuals, but rather because (and this is the *Cartesian* version of the *transcendental leap*) it constitutes the logical *matter* of all determination (i.e., of the *realitas objectiva* of entities). In this way, the “I” also configures the unlimited *field* of consciousness, something that Aristotle had already suspected when he claimed in *De anima* that “the soul is in some way all things.”⁵ As far as these “things” are concerned, the “way” this transpires is explained by pointing out that what the soul identifies with is not of course the concrete thing, the *tode ti*, but the *phantasmata* and *noēmata* of things (*De anima*, 431b, 7). And as far as the soul is concerned, what identifies with these “images” and “thoughts” is not the soul as a whole, but rather its active and eternal principle: the *nous* (*De anima*, 431b, 16–17).

In this regard it would not be an exaggeration to say that Hegel does not take a significant step beyond the problems initially addressed by Aristotle and so laboriously pursued and elaborated in the modern age. But what Hegel undertakes to do is nothing less than to gather all these *membra disjecta* of the tradition and transform them into a comprehensive structure, or better, into a

“living” organism of thought, converting the ultimate substrate of reality and human life into the purest and complete movement of *self-referentiality*, a movement in which the Subject (if we wish to continue describing it as this) exists for itself and knows itself and nothing but itself—though only to empty or relinquish itself without remainder in and as the Other of itself.⁶ For this reason, and in relation those “analytically” minded predecessors incapable of grasping a concrete or organic Whole, Hegel could have adopted as his own the words that Mephistopheles addresses to the student in Goethe’s *Faust*:

Wer will das Lebendige erkennen und beschreiben,
Sucht erst den Geist herauszutreiben,
Dann hat er die Teile in seiner Hand,
Fehlt, leider!, nur das geistige Band.⁷

Hegel will dedicate all his intellectual effort to the task of restoring just this kind of *subjection* between the parts, restoring this kind of *spiritual bond* (rather than restoring the “subject”). And we know of course what he explicitly proposes as his task, according the famous dictum of 1806 from the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: “According to my view of things, which can be justified through the exposition of the system itself, everything depends on apprehending and expressing the true not as [*nicht als*] substance, but just as much [*eben so sehr*] as subject.”⁸

There is a *vexata quaestio* as to whether something is missing in the first half of the phrase, such as the word *sowohl* (so that it would then read: “not so much as [. . .]”), or a qualifying *nur* (*nicht nur als*: “not only as”). The adverbial *eben so sehr* in the second half of the phrase would seem to demand this latter reading. This would result in a certain leveling of the initial contrast: the true must be apprehended and expressed in the *same* way both as substance *and* subject, and moreover in precisely the same sense. But there are times when philosophy has its reasons of which grammar knows not. And I would therefore argue, however difficult this reading may seem *ad pedem litterae*, that we should accept the phrase just as Hegel framed it. Here there is neither a word too few nor a word too many.

The philosopher begins by assuring us that he has a certain view (*Ansicht*) on things that might initially strike the reader as a particular and *subjective* opinion of his own, for while an individual may honestly be sure and *certain* that the way things are is the way he tells us that *he* sees them, it is always possible to invoke the opinion of some other individual against him. In the end, therefore, it would be necessary to look for some firm and unwavering *fundamentum* or substrate to appeal to. The root of the problem must therefore be sought in the reasons that could be said to arise immanently from *the thing or the matter itself* (*die Sache selbst*), in other words, the reasons to which individual subjects, *velis nolis*, would have to subject themselves and their opinions. But to reach this perspective of a “pure looking on” (*reines Zusehen*), where we only have to “look upon” the thing itself, it is necessary that we relinquish our own particular individuality for the sake of some shared and necessary rule or principle, namely for the sake of a certain *law*.

In this sense, the entire Hegelian philosophy begins with a decidedly *antisubjectivist* gesture. Thus Hegel defines “opinion” as “the way in which an individual thinks and represents things to himself in a merely subjective and arbitrary [*subjektive, beliebige*] manner.”⁹ And in effect, even if this is far from certain etymologically speaking, it looks as if the word for “opinion” itself—as expressed in German of course: *die Meinung*—would seem to emphasize the purely individual “I” (*eine Meinung ist mein*—an opinion is mine after all or what I “mean” is “mine”—as they say), and in this sense cannot therefore aspire to any general or universal validity. And that is why Hegel demands that the individual be prepared to *sacrifice* his own particularities in order to allow the Thing itself, or the Matter which is in question here (i.e., *le sujet*), to reveal or manifest itself: to unfold *in and of itself* without any external interference whatsoever. But the Thing or Matter is not in turn something that is merely *objective*, if by “objective” we understand something that is alien or external to the human subject—for then, on the contrary, all of our attempts to know or act with regard to it would prove vain and fruitless (as in effect is the case with the Kantian *thing in itself* according to Hegel). Rather, it necessary for us to recognize and include in some way the capacities (practical and cognitive) of

these very subjects which are also specifically required to abstain from intervening externally. Hegel's name for that which integrates "reflection" and "unfolding" (or immanent development) is "concept" (*Begriff*)—a word that in this case is perhaps actually more appropriate in Spanish (*concepto*) than it seems in German, given that it refers essentially to an all-encompassing *conception* or *comprehension* of something.¹⁰ Hegel tells us that "philosophical thinking reveals itself as the activity of the concept itself." And he continues, emphasizing the abnegation of the individual subject that specifically interests him in this connection, as follows: "For this expressly demands the effort to free ourselves of our own whims and particular opinions which constantly threaten to reappear."¹¹

For the sake of argument, let us provisionally accept that Hegel really does wish to say what he seems to be telling us here: that we must regard our single and particular "I" as a *quantité négligeable*, as something entirely evanescent, and thus allow consciousness (something that we all possess, although it would not in any way be peculiarly "our own," as also seems the case with Kant's "transcendental subject") to establish solely through itself the agreement or "adequation" of reality (the represented object) with the concept (the power of representation itself, as we might say).

We ourselves—as mere cognitive points of reference—would have to look on or contemplate (to apprehend) the whole process "from without," and in the best case would thereby be allowed to express the latter in its own terms. In short, it is necessary to be objective and to say things as they are. Is this not just what Hegel wants to tell us with all of these admonitions to *mortify* the individual? But if it were so, how are we to capture and express the truth, if for Hegel "the true is the whole"? Would there not then be *two things* in play?—on the one hand we ourselves, those who merely "look on" or contemplate (who, even reduced to points of view—surely the perfect phrase here—would have to enjoy an existence of some kind) and that which is contemplated "in truth" (namely that *reflection* on itself that consciousness undertakes to identify itself with the object in its role as the criterion of truth: as concept?)

Following Fichte, and internally assuming what for Fichte constituted the starting point of all activity (the *I* or *absolute subject*),

Hegel concedes of course that the beginning of philosophy has to be found in a negative activity, one that is *purified* of everything merely finite, but one that as such must be absolutely *abstract* and *empty* since it negates all that it itself is not—and that means Everything, starting with one’s own individual “subjective I” and everything that transpires within it. In this way this *abnegation*, this self-negation of the individual finite subject, is already the *self-positing* of the universally concrete infinite subject. Let us remember that in the famous formulation in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel specifically demands that we *express* the true as Subject. But not indeed because there are somehow three “things” here: the finite subjects, the Subject, and the expression of the latter by the former. The finite subjects *already are themselves* that expression. And the infinite Subject (if we still wish to describe it in these terms, in accordance with the terminology deployed in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*) exists and recognizes itself precisely in and through that expression, and not outside of it.

Thus, the truly significant thing here, Hegel’s decisive contribution to the problem of the subject, lies in the way he does not propose a new solution in this regard, as if the two extremes of the Aristotelian alternative (the *eidōs* and the *hypokeimēnon*) needed to be replaced. To put this succinctly in traditional terminology: on the one hand we have *form*, that which is determining and bestows determinacy, and on the other we have *matter*, that which can be determined and rendered determinate). If this is how things stand it is easy to recognize that the mistake would lie in exclusively emphasizing one of these sides, in reducing the other one to itself, either to declare that it is unknowable, something that exists solely *in itself*, or to regard matter as being *ultimately identical with form* (logically speaking all judgments would then be reduced—at least for the Divine Mind—to a single *identical judgment*: *Noēsis noēseōs*, “A = A,” “I think therefore I am,” “I = I”—so many empty formulas for the same thing.).

To escape this sterile alternative Hegel simply notes that the “relation to objects,” this activity without which the subject could never have come to recognize itself as pure *relation-to-self* (there can be no *self-consciousness* without consciousness of something, without