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Being Rational: Hegel on the Human Way of Being

Abstract: In the second paragraph of the last edition of the *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel writes: “it is through thinking that human beings distinguish themselves from the animals”. Therefore, according to Hegel, all that is human is “a result of thinking”. In the background of this old prejudice and apparent triviality lies a specific conception of the human subject. Thought is indeed a dimension to which human beings belong and is not at the disposal of human arbitrariness. It is human beings that belong to thought, and not thought that belongs to human beings. The aim of my paper is therefore to analyse the specific Hegelian conception of the “nature” of human subjects, following the idea that the specific way of being of humans is realized only in self-transcendence.

1 Introduction

The second section of Hegel’s 1830 edition of the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, and its related and very important Remark, represent a key moment in Hegel’s philosophical system – one in which he anticipates some of the most fundamental and complex nodes of his philosophy. Indeed, it is within this particularly dense paragraph that one finds the following famous proposition, which I would like to take as the starting point for this essay:

If, however, it is correct (as it probably is) that it is through thinking that human beings distinguish themselves from the *animals*, then everything human is human as a result of and only as a result of thinking [*dadurch und allein dadurch menschlich, dass es durch das Denken bewirkt wird*].¹

This article is a reworking of a talk given at the 31st Conference of the international Hegel-Gesellschaft (*Erkenne Dich Selbst. Anthropologische Perspektiven*) held in Bochum from 17 to 20 May 2016.

1 Hegel 2010b, § 2. Henceforth cited as Enc. and the paragraph number. The letter R. after the paragraph number indicates that the quoted text belongs to the Remark. The acronym Ad. indicates that the citation origination from the Addition. In the latter case, the page number is also shown.

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The human, for Hegel, is thus presented as that which is crossed through by thought. My purpose here is to try to understand concretely what it means to say that thought is what makes the human a human – and to try to clarify what such a thing implies about the human’s way of being. In other words, what does it mean, according to Hegel, for the human being to be itself?

Perhaps the most immediate and simple reading of the above proposition takes Hegel to be saying that the human is an animal with an additional property with respect to other animals: thought. That the human is constituted by precisely this specific difference. Yet in reality such a reading expresses very little of what Hegel intended to say. In fact, if not properly understood, this proposition risks being read as something that Hegel does not mean at all. For thought for Hegel – and this is the point that needs to be understood – is not an attribute that simply adds on to a given animal nature, offering the body that possesses it greater possibilities than those without it. Rather, thought, as we will see, profoundly redefines the animal being of the human: it reconfigures and transforms it. As I intend to show here, for Hegel the fact that thought constitutes the proper, irreducible attribute of the human means that thought acts on the entire cognitive apparatus of this particular type of animal. Thought thus emerges as an element that in some way establishes its way of being.

This obviously calls into question the traditional Western definition of the human as a *rational animal*. What is interesting is that, while on the one hand Hegel seems to consider this time-honored definition of the human obvious – “It is an old prejudice, indeed a triviality, that human beings set themselves apart from animals through thinking [...] it may seem trivial to remind ourselves of such a longstanding belief, it must definitely seem strange that there should be a need for such a reminder”² – on the other, he systematically submits it to a radical revision, giving it a meaning that is not at all obvious or banal.

2 Rational Animals

Hegel could in some ways – but only in some ways – be read as taking up the critique of this traditional definition that was proposed by Heidegger, for example in his famous *Letter on “Humanism”*. As has been noted, within a discussion of the concept of *humanismus*, Heidegger asks what exactly the *humanitas* of *homo humanus* is, and in asking this question tries to bring to light the assumptions that the concept of *humanitas* implies: the metaphysical foundation on

2 Enc. §2, R.

which the classical interpretation of *humanitas* rests. According to Heidegger, this underpinning emerges from the presupposition that there is a universal human “essence,” which then gets expressed as consideration of human being as a *rational animal*. What Heidegger finds distinctive about this definition is that it already accounts for the human with reference to *animalitas* – that is, the human is already understood as a living being among others that is distinguished from those others (plants, animals, and also from God) by the faculty of rationality, by the possession of a property that distinguishes it from other living beings. In this way, Heidegger says, “metaphysics thinks of the human being on the basis of *animalitas* and does not think in the direction of his *humanitas*”³.

This conception of the human way of being, according to Heidegger, is quite misleading with regard to what the human actually is: it is a radical misunderstanding of the original ontological structure of what Heidegger calls ek-sistence (*Ek-sistenz*) and considers constitutive of the specific mode of being of the human. According to Heidegger, we cannot think of the specificity of the human starting from *animalitas*. If anything, we can understand the specific animality of the human being only by starting from its specific way of being, or rather from what he calls “the essence of ek-sistence”⁴.

This has absolutely radical consequences for Heidegger: it means the human is not simply an animal that, unlike other animals, has characteristics deriving from its being an *Ek-sistence* rather than a being among others. The human is not a particular type of animal that, unlike other animals, lives in the Lighting of Being [*Lichtung des Seins*], blocked from other animals that do not “have” “language”.

If anything – even if reasoning in such terms risks upholding the polarities inherent to the metaphysics from which Heidegger claimed to take leave – the opposite is true. *Ek-sistence*, a negation of the way of being of an entity with a given essence⁵, acts on its own body structure, on what could still be understand as its own animality, transforming it, molding it, producing a configuration of being that cannot be thought in terms of the simple *animalitas* of the animal. Heidegger says in the *Letter* that:

The human body is something essentially other than an animal organism (...) The fact that physiology and physiological chemistry can scientifically investigate the human being as

³ Heidegger 1998, p. 246.

⁴ Heidegger 1998, p. 247.

⁵ “The ecstatic essence of the human being consists in ek-sistence, which is different from the metaphysically conceived *existential*” (M. Heidegger 1998, p. 248).

an organism is no proof that in this ‘organic’ thing, that is, in the body scientifically explained, the essence of the human being consists⁶.

According to Heidegger, it is precisely for this reason that we cannot interpret language, understood as that which is proper to the human or as the dimension in which openness to being occurs for the human, to start from the organic nature of the human: “In its essence,” Heidegger writes, “language is not the utterance of an organism: nor is it the expression of a living thing”⁷.

These pages in many ways constitute the manifesto of Heidegger’s anti-naturalism and, to use categories that Heidegger would surely consider inadequate to his thought, the manifesto of what might be called his anti-naturalistic anthropology.⁸

In what sense, then, could Hegel in some ways – but again only in some ways – be read as embracing the Heideggerian critique of the traditional definition of the human as a *rational animal*? As a preliminary answer, we could say that for Hegel, as for Heidegger, calling the human being a *rational animal* does not simply mean it is an animal that also has the property of being *rational*. According to Hegel, if it is true that thought produces all that is human in the human character, it cannot merely be understood as an additional property, an extra tool added to the other instruments with which, as an animal, it would already be endowed. To say that thought is proper to the human being, that everything that is properly human begins with and is thought, for Hegel means positioning thought as the origin point from which the human is configured. It means that only starting from thought can we adequately consider the multiple different faculties with which the human being is endowed. In other words: if thought is what belongs to the human, if it is what makes any act performed by a human a human act, then thought is that from which the entire human way of being must be thought. It is therefore also starting from thought that the animality of the human can be thought – which is not the same thing as conceiving an animality enhanced by thought.

⁶ Heidegger 1998, p. 247.

⁷ Heidegger 1998, pp. 248–249.

⁸ For a critical discussion of Heidegger’s antinaturalism, cf. Rouse 2005.

3 The Humanity of the Human

What, in concrete terms, does it mean to say that thought is what makes the human as such? Obviously, this does not mean that thought and reflective activity in the human substitute that which in the animal is instead governed by sensation, feeling, or instinct. Having thought does not mean that the human lacks sensations, feelings, and instincts. Instead, according to Hegel, a feeling, intuition, desire or any other content of consciousness is human only if it is crossed by thought. A feeling is never a feeling for the human in the same way it would be for an animal. It is always something else, with its own peculiar structure: a feeling accompanied by thought, impregnated with thought.

For Hegel, the human does not experience pure, unintelligent sentiment, devoid of any relationship to thought. Or, even if it does, certainly this is not what makes the human as such. In this sense, Hegel maintains, against any form of romanticism, that it is ridiculous to think of the human in terms of some original uncontaminated naturalness or pre-reflective purity. On the contrary, those who found human activity on the possibility of returning to this kind of pre-noetic state inevitably place human activity within a generic animal sphere, thus disregarding precisely what is specific about the human character.

Yet saying that feelings, intuitions, and representations are human because they are crossed through by thought does not mean that these forms exhaust all possible types of thought. Thought in the human can of course also appear in the pure form of the concept. But what Hegel is interested in emphasizing in the introductory paragraphs of the *Encyclopedia* is the fact that thought is mostly present in the human in forms other than the concept.

Outlining § 2 of the *Encyclopedia* and its corresponding Remark, Hegel's argument can be summarized in these 4 points:

- 1) Every human activity is properly human (i. e., specific to the human) insofar as it is characterized by thought. This means that the specifically human nature of what is human is determined by thought. It also means that an act the human shares with another animal is specifically human only insofar as it is "accompanied" or traversed by thought. Or rather, only inasmuch as the act is not in fact identical in the human and the animal.
- 2) The type of thought that makes an activity human, however, does not for the most part appear in the pure form of the concept. Thought, in the ordinary activity of man, is mostly given as a mixture of feeling, intuition, and representation.
- 3) These forms of thought (feeling, intuition, representation), which characterize the human's openness to the world, are not other to thought or ways of

accessing reality that are alternative to thought. To the extent that they are traversed and permeated by thought, they in fact constitute something that is properly human.

- 4) However, although they are not other to thought, feelings, intuitions, and representations should not be understood as thought as such. They should therefore be distinguished from thought as form⁹.

According to Hegel, when feelings, intuitions, and representations are considered privileged forms of thought guaranteeing the human authentic access to the world and are therefore nominated as good candidates for revealing an original, pre-noetic form of openness to the world, we find ourselves embracing an inadequate conception of the faculties of the human and the role played by thought. For Hegel, this is a distorted and distorting vision of what the human is.

For Hegel, such emphasis on the role of sentiment and intuition, as opposed to and alternative to thought, is based in reality on a narrow, restricted, and one-sided conception of thought. He saw this emphasis widely embraced in his time, embodied, for example, by the so-called sentiment theologies maintaining that God cannot be thought, only felt, and by the forms of venerating immediacy that claimed to isolate extranoetic intuition as a way of accessing the divine. Such conceptions identified thought solely with reflective activity, or rather, with the abstract procedure of the intellect. When thought is identified with reflective thought that which is extraneous and not reducible to such activity immediately becomes other to thought. Thus, operating within this dichotomy between thought and that which is other to it, these perspectives come to argue that what is not graspable by reflective thought, what is therefore impervious to the reflection of the intellect, can instead be grasped by extranoetic modes of access to the world, such as feeling or intuition. Precisely because they are extranoetic, these activities are understood to exceed the constraints and limitations typical of abstract intellectual thought.

However, according to Hegel, founding religion, art, morality, or any other human and spiritual activity on something foreign to thought is like saying that these activities are not specifically and properly human:

In this kind of separating it is forgotten that only human beings are capable of religion and that animals no more have religion than they have law and morality¹⁰.

⁹ Cf. Soresi 2007; Illetterati 2016.

¹⁰ Enc., §2, R.

What Hegel aims to disavow, evidently, is the possibility of an extra-rational foundation for the spiritual activity of the human, and in particular for knowledge of what is not immediately objectifiable by reflective thought.

This disavowal finds its condition of possibility in the conviction – made explicit at the beginning of Hegel’s philosophical system – that thought cannot be reduced to reflective activity and that such a reduction is in fact instrumental to establishing an extra-rational foundation for knowledge. In other words, for Hegel, emphasis on the elements that thought positions as ‘other’ and identification of thought with the reflective activity of the intellect are two sides of the same coin, mutually constitutive of each other and supported by the same ground. And this is a point worth emphasizing because it has metaphilosophical implications beyond the horizon of meaning to which Hegel referred, for all those theories expressing what has been called the philosophical discourse of otherness.¹¹

Hegel thus displaces this idea by making the point that sentiment (or intuition, fantasy, etc.) is not other to thought and that thinking is not reducible to the form of reflective thought. In saying this, Hegel does not intend to eliminate the human specificity of sentiment or to consider it irrelevant, nor does he disregard the force of reflective thought, which he maintains constitutes a decisive and inescapable general mode of knowing. Rather, he intends to show the one-sidedness and self-contradiction of a position that, absolutizing the reflective procedure of the intellect, opens the door to forms of sentimentality and intuitionism that risk evading any rational control.

4 Hegel’s Philosophy of Mind

On the basis of what has been said, we can begin to grasp, though still in elementary terms, the basic structure of what might be called the Hegelian philosophy of mind. For Hegel, mental contents, the contents of our consciousness, can take the form of feeling, intuition, image, or even thought and concept. Feeling, intuition, image and concept are all forms of thought. They are mostly given in mixed forms. When thought is given in pure form one has the form of the concept.

Describing the function of our mental activities – and therefore also their dysfunction and malfunction – in what we could call phenomenological terms, Hegel notes that even if the content of a mental act is “one and the

¹¹ Cf. Labarriere, 1983.

same” [*ein und derselbe*] but it appears in different forms, that same content corresponds in the different forms to different intentioned objects. This is because “the determinacies of these forms [and therefore the specific ways of being of sensation, of intuition, and of the concept] convert themselves into part of the content”: the way of being of the forms through which a content is grasped gets reflected in the content itself, thus producing a particular appearance. So, Hegel concludes, “what is in itself the same, can take on the look of a different content”¹².

Put differently, depending on whether an object is felt, intuited, or thought, it will appear as a different object. But what are different are the forms within which that object is caught, not the object as such. In this sense, for example, we can let ourselves be carried away by the feeling that an object of art induces in us, or we can treat the art object in a detached way, as a simple object perceived by the senses: measuring its dimensions, weight, chemical composition, etc. Or we can reflect upon the meaning the art object expresses, upon the thought content that it incorporates. And it is in this sense that we can say that the object intended in these three different activities can be thought of as three different objects (a bit like the evening star and the morning star referred to by Frege).

At the same time, however, all these approaches refer to the same reality and – to the extent that the different approaches through which we can address the same reality express our way of being, allow us to relate to the world – they are all in some way traversed by what characterizes the human as such, that is, by thought. Indeed, thought is what prevents each individual approach, each particular point of view, from giving itself as the autonomous and self-subsisting reality, or at least guarantees the possibility of going beyond the partiality and perspective offered by each of the different ways of accessing the real.

Although each has its own ordering structure and characterizing element that distinguishes it from the others, the organizing structures of experience (i.e., intuition, feeling, representation) are not watertight compartments or, to use a metaphor dominant in discussions on relativism, are not incomparable and incommensurable points of view, precisely because they are also thought. In this sense, thought is what prevents unilateral points of view from becoming fixed as absolute visions of the world and is what is able to put in communication and connect different experiences and approaches of reality¹³.

¹² Enc., §3.

¹³ On this point, it could be interesting to extend this discussion by situating the Hegelian perspective in relation to the Davidsonian one. Davidson, as has been noted, shows within his fa-

The separation of feeling and thought, as faculties meant as extra-noetic and noetic, for Hegel reflects a totally inadequate anthropological model, according to which the human emerges as a composition and combination of a series of faculties that remain independent of, and separate from, one another. To understand better why this compositional model does not work for Hegel, and in what sense he rejects conceiving thought as a property to be simply added to those already possessed by animals, it may be useful to compare Hegel's comments on forms of animal openness to the world in *Philosophy of Nature* with his account of the same forms of openness to the world in the human in *Philosophy of the Subjective Spirit*.

5 The Animal's Openness to the World

The concept that profoundly characterizes the sphere of *animalitas*, according to Hegel, is the concept of subjectivity – a notion that finds its first real thematization in his system within a naturalistic context. What does Hegel mean by stating that the animal's way of being is that of a subjectivity? The animal is a subject for Hegel because it contains within itself the fulcrum of its movement. Or rather, its movement does not tend towards some external power that directs and dominates it and upon which it depends, but instead tends toward the direction of itself. In other words, its end is in itself. Even when the animal organism's activity is turned outwards – when, moving from need, and therefore from a lack that it feels in itself – it moves beyond its own singularity and toward what is other to itself, it always tends to realize itself.

Precisely because the center around which its activity revolves is in itself and not in another, animal subjectivity is, in Hegel's language, a concrete unity: this is distinct from a merely formal unity, like that of the plant, whose parts are all autonomous with respect to the whole, in that they are able to survive separation from the whole and give rise, as parts, to new organic totalities. The unity of the animal is a concrete unity, in that it is realized in difference and articulation: the parts are members of a whole, such that, if separated and divided from the whole, they are no longer what they are and lose

mous essay how this “dominant metaphor” in the ambit of conceptual relativism conceals within itself a paradox that is difficult to circumvent: “Different points of view make sense, but only if there is a common coordinate system on which to plot them; yet the existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability” (Davidson 1973/1974, p. 6). The function that Davidson here attributes to the “common system” is the function that Hegel attributes to the universalizing power of thought and its systematic articulation.

their specific organic meaning. This concrete unity makes the animal an individual in the proper and concrete sense of the term. Or rather, makes it a way of being that cannot be divided without canceling out its own ontological structure – a structure that, in articulating itself (i.e., in its internal self-direction and in its becoming something other than itself), nonetheless remains in unity with itself¹⁴.

As a subject, or rather, having within itself and not outside itself the fulcrum of its unification, the animal is capable of self-movement – it is capable of withdrawing, even if only partially, from external control – and of self-determination on the basis of needs and motives found within itself. It is thus no coincidence that in *Philosophy of Nature*, in the last section on organic physics, the concept of freedom makes its appearance in Hegel’s discussion of animal subjectivity.

The concepts of subject and freedom are intimately connected in Hegel; the two words often appear as explanations of each other. In fact, Hegel explains the animal’s ability to change dwelling by making reference to the unique relationship, with respect to the rest of the natural world, that the most complete organismal forms have with time. Unlike the plant, which is subjected to the external power of light, above all for its movement, and is likewise dependent on the cyclical time of nature for its growth, nutrition, and reproduction, the animal, as a subjectivity, has a way of being that Hegel significantly calls “liberated time [*freie Zeit*]”¹⁵. This expression implies some form of independence with respect to the external and to purely natural time. It therefore suggests, for the first time, a capacity for autonomy and self-determination in the realm of nature.

If this “liberated time” manifests itself in the animal’s self-movement, this capacity for self-movement should not only be understood as the possibility for spontaneously changing place, but also, to the extent that one can speak of an “ideal form” of self-movement, as the condition capable of accounting for and giving rise to all the characteristics that specifically mark the way of being of this form of natural subjectivity. Self-movement thus constitutes all the particular phenomena which will be further and more specifically articulated at the level of the spirit: the vocal faculty [*Stimme*], animal heat [*animalische*

¹⁴ The animal organism, according to Hegel, is the concrete realization of life in nature, insofar as “it is the unit which holds the free parts bound within it; it sunders itself into these parts, communicates its universal life to them, and holds them within itself as their power or negative principle” (Hegel 1970, § 342, Ad., p. 41).

¹⁵ Hegel 1970, § 351.

Wärme], interrupted intussusception [*unterbrochene Intussuzeption*], and, above all, feeling [*Gefühl*].

In fact, the voice, according to Hegel, is the organism's expression of "a free vibration *within itself* [ein freies Erzittern *in sich selbst*]"¹⁶ and is in this sense an expression of its subjectivity. Of course, the *Stimme* characterizing animal subjectivity is not yet crossed through with the symbolic production that leads to the spiritual level of spoken language [*Sprache*]. Yet, as a manifestation of animal subjectivity's capacity for expressing itself – exteriorizing its inner self and giving a form of external existence to its intimate conditions of pain, satisfaction, or need – *Stimme* can be read as one natural precondition, necessary, even if not sufficient, of the symbolic capacity of language, which will find its articulation only at the level of the spirit.

The voice is not simply the consequence of some mechanism internal to the organism. It is a form of the animal's self-movement: its self-production, a phenomenon through which the animal succeeds in giving objective form to its own subjectivity, to its own *feeling*, to its own *Gefühl*.¹⁷ The *Gefühl* [feeling] and the *fühlen* [feel] are perhaps the most original expressions of animal subjectivity. Indeed, only in so far as it feels is the animal able to express, through and in the voice, what could be called, without attributing any consciousness to it, its self.

This subjective structure of the animal is further explained by Hegel in relation to how the animal's relationship with exteriority, or the world around it, is articulated – a relationship constituted by the *Assimilation-process*, the process, born with *feeling*, that the animal maintains with the world. Here feeling is always meant to be understood as subjective, in that it is connected to the animal and above to all a feeling of lack that *affects* it. Starting from feeling, animal subjectivity is consequently explained as action emerging in relation to this perception of lack and "the *drive* to overcome it"¹⁸.

The assimilative process is thus born from a need and structural deficiency within the organism itself, but, even before, at a more basic level, it is born from the capacity – unique to the living animal being and which determines its intimately subjective structure – to feel this need and this lack.¹⁹ Therefore, as a subjectivity, the animal organism is not simply 'the lacking being' but 'the being that

¹⁶ Hegel 1970, § 351.

¹⁷ Hegel 1970, § 351.

¹⁸ Hegel 1970, § 359.

¹⁹ "Only a living existence is aware of deficiency" (Hegel 1970, § 359 R.). Petry's English translation risks leading us to believe that Hegel attributes consciousness to living beings as such. The German text says: "Nur ein Lebendiges fühlt *Mangel*." A more fitting translation might be "Only a living (being) feels deprivation."

is capable of feeling and of living lack within itself'. And it is precisely because of this capacity to live and feel its own state of destitution, and consequently its own contradiction and wound, as determining elements of its ontological constitution, that it is indeed a subject:

The *subject* is a term such as this, which is able to contain and *support* its own contradiction; it is this which constitutes its *infinite*²⁰.

The infinity that Hegel here attributes to the subject's mode of being should not be understood as possibility on the part of the animal subject to move beyond the concrete forms of lack and need that are constitutive of it, or to extend itself beyond its nature. The infinity instead consists in the animal subject's ability to feel its being finite, to experience its own negativity, to live its limit as a lack and as a drive to overcome that lack.

In this sense, the infinity of the subject reveals itself as the finite subject's ability to transcend itself in the very act in which it first perceives itself as finite. Precisely because it is a subject in this sense, the animal is able to extend itself toward what is presented to it as something else in the form of an assimilative relationship. The first way the animal enters into relationship with its environment, indeed, the very condition that allows the animal to have an environment, to transform what surrounds it into *its* environment, is what Hegel calls 'the theoretical process' [*theoretischer Prozess*]: the form of assimilation of the surrounding world effected by the multiplicity of the senses.

This assimilation of the external world does not imply, as in the case of real assimilation, the nullification and dismemberment of perceived objects, but it is nonetheless an assimilative type of process and, as such, implies a form of transformation. The animal, leading itself into that which is other to itself, externalizing itself, at the same time brings that alterity into itself – and through this assimilative movement thus strips itself [*aufheben*, sublate] of its otherness.

How do the senses transform reality? This theoretical assimilation of the senses, Hegel says in Remark 358 of the *Encyclopedia*, is a "reduction of the separated moments of inorganic nature to the infinite unity of subjectivity." However, the unification produced by the senses is only partial – and this is a point of particular relevance for the argumentative line of this essay – since the animal "is still a natural subjectivity". The moments in which the animal articulates itself, and the plurality of senses through which it is placed in relation to and internalizes the world, "still exist separately": they are separate and divided from

²⁰ Hegel 1970, § 359 R.

each other, or rather, they give rise to what can be thought of as a fractional totality.

This suggests that what we mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Hegel's points in § 2 of the *Encyclopedia*, could also hold true for the animal: different ways of considering the same object could produce the impression that what is being considered is not a single object, but different objects. In fact, for the animal, it seems that experience of the object – even if it is not possible, properly speaking, for the animal to speak of experience as such or of the object – is fractioned into the different senses by which the animal stands in relation to the world. The different senses, despite corresponding to a subjective unity, are nonetheless separate from one another.

6 The Human's Openness to the World

On the other hand, the function of unifying different sensible experiences, tracing them back to the unity of the object, takes place in the human through thought. Not because thought unites a content that the senses produce as differentiated, unifying the multifaceted material supplied by the senses, but because the senses in the human are already crossed through by thought. They are already, that is, part of an experience that cannot be isolated into separate sections.

Experience, in the human, is always given as distinct forms – reality can be experienced through a desire, a feeling, a volition, or an intellectual consideration – but is also unitary, in the sense that these forms are never separate from one another but are from the beginning connected to one another. Hegel says in the 1827–28 *Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit*, that:

Experience means more than mere sensible grasping or mere perception; it already includes a universality within itself. If something is supposed to count as experience, there must be a law, something universal, and not merely a particular perception. This something must be raised by thinking to universality.²¹

This process of being “raised” does not imply passage from sense considerations to a higher plane where the intellect works (i. e., understanding), as the dialectic of *sinnliche Gewissheit* [sense certainty] in the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* shows. Rather, this raising already takes place in sense consideration: it is already active within it. Or in other words, it already takes place in sense consid-

²¹ Hegel 2007, p. 62.

eration viewed from the perspective of the concreteness of the spirit, the concrete way of being of the human, whose faculties are not simply juxtaposed to one another but are a connected totality of distinct forms. This is why, according to Hegel, only the human really has experiences: “In order to experience, one must be capable of thought and reason”²².

The spirit is a concrete unity in a sense more radical than for the animal organism. Indeed, dismemberment of the human into a plurality of autonomous functions connected only externally by some higher function would contradict the concreteness, or truth, of the spirit. For Hegel it is only from an abstract standpoint that we could understand human sensations, feelings, volitions, and desires to be separate modules subsequently put together by some organizing function. Hegel locates in the *I* the dissolution and overcoming of precisely this type of separation. Indeed, the *I* is this concrete unity, and this concrete unity is the human; or rather, the *I* is the spirit. “The human being is spirit,” Hegel says in the 1827–1828 *Lectures*, immediately afterwards asking, “What is the innermost, concentrated nature, the root of spirit?” His response is clear: “Freedom, I, thinking” (Hegel 2007, 105, 8).

Here it is evident that freedom, I, and thought for Hegel are different ways of saying the same thing: the ability of the subjective spirit to be with itself. Its ability to cut itself off from any form of dependence on the outside, of denying everything. In this sense, saying that the human being is a *rational animal* for Hegel does not mean saying that the human being is an *animal* to which we add, alongside the properties already proper to the *animal* in general, the further ability of also being *rational*. The link posed by the *also* is that typical of abstraction, of the enumerative procedure of an intellect which, after dismembering a unit into its component parts, reassembles it by simply putting things side by side, each in its place. “The connecting ‘also’ always allows the independence of every activity and their mutual indifference”, so that “the soul appears as an external connection of all these diverse types of powers and activities”²³.

The *also* is the typical form of conjunction used by the intellect: once concrete complexity has been decomposed, the intellect recomposes it by adding the parts back to each other, as if concreteness were a set of separable and distinguishable parts.²⁴ Hegel expresses it in this way:

²² Hegel 1970, p. 63.

²³ Hegel 1970, p. 63.

²⁴ On this perspective, see Corti 2015. Corti’s text contains a pointed analysis of the secondary literature on this question. See also Corti 2016. I owe some of the ideas presented here to discussions with Luca Corti and Sergio Soresi, whom I thank.

For the understanding, the difficulty consists in ridding itself of the arbitrary distinction between the faculties of the soul, feeling, and thinking spirit, which it has already fabricated for itself, and in realizing that in the feeling, volition and thought of man there is only one reason.²⁵

Thinking of the spirit as a totality of faculties, forces, or functions that can be considered separately and independent of the concrete unity in which they act means considering the spirit in naturalistic terms, so to speak. In fact, it is in nature – dominated by exteriority – that different determinations are separate and exterior to each other. Instead, the spirit is *spirit* precisely inasmuch as it is a process of progressively eliminating this exteriority. Thinking of spirit as an accumulation of faculties would mean reducing it to something else – thinking it in a non-spiritual way.

Hegel thus introduces the notion of philosophy of the subjective spirit in § 380 of the *Encyclopedia* in this way:

The concrete nature of spirit is peculiarly difficult, in that the particular stages and determinations in the development of its Notion do not remain behind together as particular existences [...] In the case of external nature they do however [...]. The determinations and stages of spirit occur in the higher stages of its development essentially only as moments, conditions, determinations.

By saying that the human is essentially thought, Hegel deconstructs the idea of subjectivity understood as a set of separable faculties. Since this separateness is not given in the concreteness of the spirit, a description of the human that begins from this compositional model is revealed to be not only intellectual artifice but also, and above all, a reduction of spiritual complexity to natural ontology.

7 The Nature of Thought

This idea that thought is not an additional faculty but a fluidifying and transformative element is confirmed by the Preliminary Conception of the Science of Logic in the *Encyclopedia*, where Hegel, wanting to introduce an idea of a science of pure thought, moves from ordinary considerations of thought to considering thought scientifically. Here Hegel emphasizes not only the idea of thought as a unifying element of subjectivity but also the radical consequences inherent to recognizing the human as essentially thought.

²⁵ Hegel 1987, § 471, R.

According to Hegel, thought is ordinarily meant as

- 1) one of the spiritual faculties or activities that belongs to the subject “*alongside others*” such as sensing [*Sinnlichkeit*], intuiting [*Anschauung*], imagining [*Phantasie*], desiring [*Begehren*], or will [*Wollen*]²⁶;
- 2) the *product* [*Produkt*] of a faculty [*Vermögen*];
- 3) the *I*.

Hegel does not intend to make sense of these conceptions, but rather to show that they are all rooted in a conception of thought that serves as their condition of possibility and which they also transcend.

To this list of ordinary considerations of thought Hegel adds that of thought as a faculty. Without denying that thought can also be thought of as a faculty, he maintains that it is not simply one faculty among others. Rather, thought is a structure that redefines all the other faculties, putting them in connection with each other and that also passes through them, so they are no longer isolated and fragmented.

Moreover, thought for Hegel is an activity [*Tätigkeit*], a productive activity – whose product is nothing other than thought itself. One therefore cannot distinguish thought as faculty from thought as product. It is both activity and product. Thought, in this sense, produces itself; it is a form of self-movement and is therefore essentially subjectivity. This means that thought is never simply a given, it is not something that exists independently of its exercise. Thought is thus always essentially an activity. To say that thought is a subject and essentially activity means for Hegel that thought is thinking: “the simple expression for a concretely existing [*existierenden*] subject that thinks is *I*”.²⁷

Yet the *I* is not simply the seat of thought, a place or entity characterized by possession of the faculty of thought. Kant had already deconstructed the assumptions upon which such a representation rests, and Hegel did not intend to revive them. Rather than the substratum of its different properties, for Hegel the *I* is thought and is constituted in thought. It is constituted in the relation to itself, as consciousness of itself, as an activity that self-determines itself.

This does not, however, relegate the *I* to the realm of the purely subjective. On the contrary, thought is universal precisely inasmuch as it overcomes subjective particularity – the condition of possibility for the liberation of the finite subject from the constraints in which every particular subjectivity is inevitably immersed. The thinking subject is, despite the paradoxicality of the expression,

²⁶ Cf. Enc., § 20.

²⁷ Enc., § 20.

the process through which the finite subject frees itself of its own particular subjectivity.

The product of this activity is the universal, which Hegel says – in a not unproblematic expression – contains “the value of the basic matter [den Wert der Sache], the essential, the inner, the true”.²⁸

Since it is active, since it captures and produces the universal, thought transforms empirical content; “it is only by means of [vermittels] an alteration that the *true* nature of the *object* emerges in consciousness”.²⁹ This true nature, however, is not a product of the subject, at least certainly not in the sense that the subject, as a unilaterally “idealistic” reading would suggest, somehow “creates” the object. If anything, such a reading is typical of what Hegel calls “the sickness of our time”;³⁰ the trait of an era that has reached the despairing point of recognizing only the subjective as true and, in turn, of viewing the subjective as the ultimate term beyond which no subject is able to go. According to Hegel, within such despair there also lies a criticism, namely that the nature of the object is true only because the subject transcendently gives it the characteristics of truth.

The task of philosophy, according to Hegel, is precisely that of taking back this subjectivist presupposition and showing that the true nature of the object, which the subject reaches through reflection, is true not because the subject makes it true, but because the subject, through thought, is able to go beyond the subjectivist limits of its own experience – because the subject, in thought and through thought, transcends the subjectivist limits of its experience of the thing to grasp the thing’s essence. It is within this complexity that we should understand Hegel when he says that, because reflection gives us the true nature of things and reflection is an activity of the subject, “true nature is equally the *product of my spirit* insofar as the latter is a thinking subject (...), i. e., as an I that is entirely *with itself* – it is the product of my *freedom*”.³¹

This does not simply support, as a naive idealist might believe, the dissolution of the objectivity of things in their being represented. Precisely because thought, through reflection, grasps not a simulacrum of the thing but the essential, it allows us to go beyond both the position that poses objectivity as a dimension separate from thought (as if the essence of the thing were completely independent of the reflective process by which it emerges and therefore impermeable to the thought that thinks it) and the position that dissolves ob-

28 Enc., § 21.

29 Enc., § 22.

30 Enc., § 22, Addition, p. 56

31 Enc., § 23

jectivity in conscious representation (as if essence were a product of the subject without any real anchorage in the thing itself)³².

It is precisely through this twofold overcoming of both independent objectivity and the conscious reduction of objectivity that “thoughts may be called *objective* thoughts”.³³ With the expression “*objective* thought [*objektives Denken*],” Hegel seems to want to indicate that thought is not reducible to the expression of a subjective point of view or to the general ability to forge and make one’s own reality a reality still constitutively different from the way in which it is conceived. Rather, for Hegel, the expression “objective thought” indicates the universal *logos* that runs through all reality: the rational plot within which are located both the subject – who actively thinks and, in this act, brings things to meaning – and the object, which is thought and yet is not a production of the subject. This universal *logos* should not be understood as tantamount to the idea that the world is in the mind of God, especially if understood as something simply to be uncovered or that the subject must only somehow find. Universal *logos* is constituted through the comparisons that subjects conduct amongst themselves and with the world; it becomes objective in the rational practices which alone enable us to talk about the subject and the world.

To the extent that “objective” in the language of ordinary representation usually characterizes all that is *mind independent*, applying the term to thought removes the implication of representation, also taken in the ordinary sense in which thought is understood to take on meaning only in relation to a mind from which it originated. The expression “objective thought” seems to be used by Hegel to show the need to move beyond precisely this subjectivist perspective of representation, according to which “objective thought” inevitably sounds like an oxymoron. What is objective is, from the subjectivist point of view, “other” to thought, that which is outside the dimension of thought – just as, vice versa, thought is considered an internal and subjective dimension determined by its opposition to the sphere of objectivity.

³² On this point allow me to refer to Illetterati 2014 and Illetterati 2018.

³³ Enc., § 24. In this sense, §§ 20–24 tend to show how, starting from the notion of thought understood as *activity of the subject*, one arrives, by analyzing the production of this thought as a reflection aiming to capture the universal and therefore the essence of things, at the notion of thought as *objective thought* – and, consequently, at the identification of logic, as a science of thought, with metaphysics.

“Objective thought” is therefore an expression that Hegel simultaneously wants to mean

1. that the dimension of thought is not closed within the subjectivist perspective, and
2. that the sphere of objectivity is not extraneous to thought in itself.

“Objective thought” for Hegel consequently means there is no fracture between thought and the world that needs to be remedied through some sort of mutual adaptation to each other. Although not simply the product of the thinking activity of a finite subjectivity, and therefore not independent of the subject (*mind independent*), the world is nonetheless conceivable by the subject: it has within itself the conditions of its own thinkability, which are how the subject can indeed think of it. Both the subject and the world thus belong to a common *logos* that transcends the perspective of any particular subjectivity, emerging instead from the transcendence that subjectivity achieves with respect to its own particularity.

If, on the one hand, the human subject is *as it is thought*, on the other, thought, according to Hegel, does not belong to the subject as his property. The subject is not the “master” of thought. In fact, not only is thought not reducible to a production of the subject, thought so little belongs to the human as its possession – or as sort of instrument it has for grasping the world – that, if anything, “it is they [the determinations of thought] who have us in their possession.”³⁴ Concepts of things and determinations of thought are not intellectual instruments or prostheses through which to subjugate the world, understood as the sphere of the other and of that which is separated from thought. Determinations of thought and concepts of things rather constitute the horizon within which our thinking moves, such that “our thought must accord with them, and our choice or freedom ought not to want to fit them to its purposes.”³⁵

This “realism” of thought is what makes Hegel’s idealism “anti-idealistic”, so to speak. But it is an “anti-realistic” realism, because it recognizes in thought (which is never subjectivistically or idealistically understood) the element from which it is possible to begin thinking of the subject’s access to the world. In other words, Hegel’s realism, in response to constructivist delusions about modernity, does not simply contrast subjectivism with reality posed as a sort of impregnable and impenetrable fortress for subjectivity. Instead, it goes beyond such a subjectivist and instrumentalist conception of thought, in

³⁴ Hegel 2010a, p. 15.

³⁵ Hegel 2010a, p. 16. G. di Giovanni’s translation is perhaps less strong than the original German. Hegel in fact says here that our thought is limited [*beschränkt*] by the determinations of thought in which it moves.

which the reality about which the subject speaks and to which it relates is always and only one of its constructions – the simulacrum of something whose truth remains inaccessible – as well as beyond a conception of reality as that which is other to, foreign, and opposed to thought.

8 Conclusions

The human is a being *in itself* rational, Hegel says. But in saying this, he also says that the human being is not *immediately* rational – that being rational is an activity, a process and not a given. Rationality is not a substance *out there* in the world the subject somehow has to make its own, nor is it something the subject has always already simply possessed. Rationality is a process realized in and with thought, in and with reality. Rationality, in general terms, is that which human beings must realize in order to be themselves.

The idea of the human being as a *rational animal* is taken up again in an important way in the *Science of Logic*, in the part on objective logic that is dedicated to quality. This is where Hegel discusses the notions of determination, constitution, and limit [*Bestimmung, Beschaffenheit und Grenze*]. As an example of determination, and to clarify the difference between determination and determinateness [*Bestimmtheit*], Hegel takes up the Fichtian theme of the *Bestimmung des Menschen*, the vocation or destination of the human being. “The *determination of the human being*, its vocation,” Hegel says, “is rational thought [*denkende Vernunft*]”³⁶. If thinking [*Denken*] is the determinateness [*Bestimmtheit*] of the human, that which distinguishes it from pure natural being, being rationally thinking is more radically its determination [*Bestimmung*]: not just a property that affects the human being and differentiates it from what is other to it, but that which it must be to be itself. To say that rational thinking is the determination of the human being for Hegel means that this is the human’s destination, its vocation; the human is itself when it acts in the direction of the *denkende Vernunft* [thinking Reason] that constitutes it as a human being.

In the *Anthropology*, Kant calls the human being *animal rationale*, i.e. “an animal endowed with the capacity of reason”, and he explains such an expression by saying that the human being is an animal that “can make out of himself a rational animal [*der aus sich selbst ein vernünftiges Thier [animal rationale] machen kann*]”³⁷.

³⁶ Hegel 2010b, p. 96.

³⁷ Kant 2006, p. 226.

Making a *rational animal* out of itself, according to Hegel, means realizing oneself as a thought. And this realization implies self-liberation from one's own subjective nature – transcending oneself, knowing that there is no given human nature but that human nature is precisely this transcending action, this taking oneself away from oneself.

Such transcendence is not contingent upon something external, something other to subjectivity. Subjectivity transcends one's being simply a finite subject in the very act of realizing one as a subjectivity. Rational nature is therefore not a given towards which the human must strive to reach or match. It is what is realized in precisely the movement of transcendence that subjectivity performs upon itself.

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