

PHILOSOPHY AS IDEALISM: DEFINITION AND TRANSCENDENCE IN HEGEL'S THEORY OF FREEDOM

TUSHAR IRANI
Colgate University

*I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over:
May no fate willfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:
I don't know where it's likely to go better.*

-- Robert Frost, "Birches," II. 49-54

AS A DISCIPLINE, philosophy is often charged with existing in a realm of ideas far removed from our practical world and indifferent to earthly affairs—in a tenuous realm of ‘theory.’ Throughout his works, G.W.F. Hegel will wrestle with this contention—that theory and practice should be mutually exclusive—before coming to the firm conclusion in his *Philosophy of Right* that “the theoretical is essentially contained within the practical” (HR p. 329).¹ By this, we should not take Hegel to mean that the practical subsumes theory as a whole, but that it has in essence a *theoretical aspect*. In this sense philosophy may not be torn, he asserts, between our thought and our will; between form and content; between theory and practice. Although we have a tendency to view such ‘oppositions’ as mutually exclusive, it is just these dichotomies that Hegel wishes to review: all such oppositions, he suggests, are inseparable and yet distinct. And this is indeed a curious paradox—at one and the same time, our thought exists *apart from* and as a *part of* our will—“the idea that the two are separate must be rejected,” Hegel maintains, “for one cannot have a will without intelligence” (HR p. 329). It is the way in which Hegel reconciles and at the same time distinguishes such oppositions that this paper focuses on: the way in which he can advocate an ultimate ‘reality’ in a realm of infinite spirit that depends upon a less ultimate, though no less important, ‘ideality’ in a realm of finite nature. This dynamic relationship remains key to Hegel’s notion of the finite transcending itself but also figures prominently in his definition of true “self-consciousness” in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Section I of this paper, accordingly, analyses both the distinction and the relationship Hegel draws between the infinite and the finite

which, by analogy, is the same relationship he perceives between ‘reality’ and ‘ideality’ in the *Science of Logic*. Embedded in this analysis, we discover a crucial intimacy between spirit and nature in the *Philosophy of Right*, and a way in which freedom may be actualised through such intimacy. Section II extends this argument to Hegel’s discussion of self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. There we find his case for mutual recognition between human beings: an argument that looks to verify one’s seemingly subjective existence in a world of other subjective beings and which at the same time explicates a method whereby we may ‘define’ the world around us (in the manner of Kant’s Transcendental Idealism) and still sidestep the dangers of solipsism. Ultimately, the way in which we think about *definition* will be vital here—whether our efforts to define things results in an imprisonment or an expression of real meaning. This paper concludes by considering how Hegel responds to the problem Kant leaves us with in his first *Critique*, in the sharp contrast Kant draws between the noumenal and the phenomenal, and how Hegel’s own philosophy, as an ‘idealism,’ can grant us transcendence.

I. Infinity, Reality, Spirit

Hegel looks to arrive at an authentic notion of infinity in the *Science of Logic*. There, he discusses the difference between “true” infinity and a “spurious” notion of the infinite: whereas the latter defines itself *against* the finite (removed and remote in the great beyond) a true notion of the infinite, he asserts, defines itself *with* the finite:

. . . the main point is to distinguish the genuine Notion of infinity from spurious infinity; the infinite of reason from the infinite of the understanding; yet the latter is the *finitized* infinite, and it will be found that in the very act of keeping the infinite pure and aloof from the finite, the infinite is only made finite. (HR p. 205)

In keeping the infinite aloof and detached from the finite, Hegel states, one has only succeeded in *limiting* infinity; one draws a line of demarcation between the two, and this line effectively serves to quarantine infinity ‘out there.’ This is our commonsensical understanding of the infinite: infinity is supposed to eliminate the finite, “so that there are *two* determinatenesses; *there are* two worlds, one infinite and one finite” (HR p. 205). Hegel faults this two-world theory since it relies on a principle of mutual exclusion—if we define these worlds against one another, we have simply *finitised* the infinite—we arrive at a spurious notion of infinity that eliminates the other (the

finite) as its limit. But this is only “a determinate infinite, an *infinite which is itself finite*.” In this manner, infinity fails to affirm itself and can in no way be self-reliant; it “resuscitates” the finite again and again through an “alternating determination” (SL pp. 138-139).²

This spurious conception of infinity is not at all what Hegel terms the “infinite of reason.” On the one hand, he wants to conceive of the infinite as a part of the finite; on the other, we should still be able to distinguish the two somehow. Therefore, superseding Kant’s two-world dichotomy, Hegel constructively criticises both our notions of the infinite and the finite so that their opposition can be overcome—or at least thought of in a new way. He describes the infinite and the finite as *dependent on one another*, and here we have the makings of a marriage. For if we start to think of the infinite and the finite as fundamentally *related*, we can imagine “true” infinity as *in the finite*. The infinite thus emerges from within the finite, Hegel suggests, as its “self-transcending”:

One only needs to *be aware of what one is saying* in order to find the determination of the finite in the infinite. . . . the infinite and the finite [are] viewed as *connected* with each other—the connection being only external to them but also essential to them, without which neither is what it is—each contains its own other in its own determination, just as much as each, taken *on its own account*, considered *in its own self*, has its other present within it as its own moment. . . . finitude is only as a transcending of itself; it therefore contains infinity, the other of itself. Similarly, infinity is only as a transcending of the finite; it therefore contains its other and is, consequently, in its own self the other of itself. (SL pp. 143-146, emphasis added)

Just as Hegel will describe freedom as a transcendence of self, and just as spirit fulfills something that nature contains in potentiality, an infinite realm of spirit *consummates* a finite realm of nature. This is “true” infinity in Hegel’s sense of the term since it can be defined *affirmatively* rather than negatively. In contrast, a spurious notion of infinity cannot affirm itself but only hopes to consume the finite and negate it—insofar as it “resuscitates” the finite through an alternating determination, however, its appetite remains insatiable.

For Hegel, accordingly, the infinite is the *consummation*, not the consumption, of the finite—they are dependent on one another and inextricably connected—they are *apart from* and *a part of* one another. Extrapolating this relationship, we can analyse the way in which Hegel defines ‘reality’ and ‘ideality’ in his writings, particularly in the

Science of Logic. When he affirms that “the proposition that the finite is ideal constitutes idealism” (SL†p.154), we should interpret this proposition to mean that the finite contains something latent, in *potentiality*. And when he states further that “every philosophy is essentially an idealism or at least has idealism for its principle,” we†should take Hegel to mean that potentiality is *key*: a philosopher remains as bound to a realm of practical experience as he or she is to theoretical thought, since the practical essentially *includes* theory. This is exactly the same way in which the finite includes the infinite. The infinite, as the most ultimate realm of freedom and reason, is ‘reality’ for Hegel just as correspondingly the finite, as less ultimate and not fully free, is ‘ideality.’

Thus, “the most real, most ‘ultimate’ realm, the infinite [spirit] *depends upon* the less real, less ultimate realm [nature], at the same time that it transcends it.”³ This dynamic, yet paradoxical, relationship is crucial for Hegel. To grasp his theory better, we might apply the following analogy:


 Finite : Infinite :: Ideality : Reality :: Nature : Spirit

SELF-TRANSCENDENCE

In these terms, we can begin to appreciate Hegel’s assertion that “the spirit is the *idealist* proper” (SL p. 155). Nature tends towards ‘reality’ by virtue of its being transcended by spirit; however, insofar as nature must realise (i.e., actualise) its ownmost potentiality, *spirit idealises nature*. To say that “what is actual is rational” (HR†p. 325), therefore, is not to conceive of our physical nature as actual. It is rather the *self-transcending* of the physical, in metaphysical reason, that is actual. This metaphysical realm consummates the physical realm, yet depends on it.

Thus the spirit is ‘idealistic,’ in Hegel’s sense of the word, as long as nature looks to ‘realise’ itself: spirit *is* reality but tends toward ideality; nature *is* ideality but tends toward reality. As contained in one another, the two effectively define one another—not through negation, but through affirmation. This line of reasoning now leads us to thoughts on definition. In the following section, therefore, we will focus on Hegel’s theory of self-consciousness and mutual recognition in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

II. Definition, Expression, Transcendence

To begin with, let us look at a commonsensical way in which we often ‘define’ things. All definition, we might†say, turns on dichotomy—the mutual exclusivity of terms such as ‘black’ and

‘white’—a relational world in which subject may be separated from object so that we may ascribe life with meaning. We derive such meaning from our words, names, and categories because they do not ‘mean’ anything else.† Here, accordingly, our principal mode of definition is negation, but throughout his works Hegel seems to develop a more affirmative sort of definition. We have†learned, for†instance, how he avoids defining infinity through negation in his *Logic*. In the *Phenomenology*, we see him build a similar case for mutual recognition,†effectively spelling out two different ways of defining.

‘Define’ stems from the Latin *definire*, from *de-* + *finire*: to limit, end. Etymologically, then, we can think of all definition (and even language) as a process that looks to categorise objects by pigeonholing them, by†driving things apart and†drawing sharp†limits between them—indeed, by making them finite. Thus, our categories enable us to devise neat, yet limiting, constructs in terms of qualities: if we are confronted with something entirely unknown we work to comprehend it in our *own* terms, to ‘fit the mould.’ If this is the case, however, our definitions also serve to limit the world around *us*—in effect, they imprison us. Hegel looks to break this mould. Language†may be imagined as imprisoning meaning but it should also serve as an *expression* of meaning.

Hegel conveys this idea implicitly in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in his examination of self-consciousness. Ultimately, he maintains, we can learn far more about our selfhood, and even our freedom, through relationships. For basic self-consciousness is lacking (in much the same way that the finite is lacking) without an object. Introducing this object in §166, Hegel states that “self-consciousness is Desire” (HR p. 88, p. 91). In German this desire reads *begierde*—an avaricious appetite—which must arise out of something ‘other’ than self-consciousness, i.e., in an†independent object. I†look to *consume* this other, to incorporate it into me, and†thus, I†wish to destroy it through negation.⁴ Through this process, I hope to acquire self-certainty, “a certainty which has become explicit for self-consciousness itself *in an objective manner*” (HR p. 91, §174).

But thinking of self-consciousness solely in these terms is, to use Hegelian vernacular, spurious to say the least. I cannot satisfy this desire, for if my awareness of self can only be thought of as a negation of objects, I have merely succeeded in drawing a limit between others and myself through mutual exclusion. This is definition as imprisonment with no ultimate satisfaction in sight. The object of my desire will be endlessly reproduced through my insatiable need to consume it, through my very relationship with it:

Thus self-consciousness, by its negative relation to the object,

is unable to supersede it; it is really because of that relation that it produces the object again, and the desire as well. (HR p. 91, B175)

We can associate this unending production of the object with the way in which the finite is “resuscitated” in Hegel’s *Logic* through a spurious notion of infinity: “the infinite resuscitates the *being* of its negation, of the finite again which at first seemed to have vanished in the infinite” (SL pp. 138-139). Through its very relationship with the infinite, the finite is never eliminated; through its very relationship with the subject, the object is never destroyed. Thus, Hegel seeks in the *Logic* to arrive at an *affirmative* notion of infinity, and his goal in the *Phenomenology* is very similar: self-consciousness must be defined in affirmative terms. He affirms,†accordingly,†that self-definition should†in effect be an expression of self *with* the other (a consummation) through acceptance, not an imprisonment of self *against* the other (a consumption) through cupiditous desire (*begierde*).

Hegel offers us here an expression of freedom and autonomy†as a function of self-transcendence, an emergence “into the†spiritual daylight of the present,” with the infinite really *in* the *finite* and vice versa: in the “‘I’ that is ‘We’ and the ‘We’ that is ‘I’” (HR p. 92, B177). Here too, there will be a marriage of sorts and a movement from self-imprisonment and mutual exclusion towards self-affirmation and mutual recognition: *an expression of freedom*. Hegel formulates this beautifully: “*Self-consciousness achieves satisfaction only in another self-consciousness*” (HR†p. 91, B175). I define myself with another, not against another, and in so doing arrive at a far more profound sense of definition as expression:

Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness; it has come *out of itself*. This has a twofold significance: first, it has lost itself, for it finds itself as an *other* being; secondly, in doing so it has superseded the other, for it does not see the other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self. (HR p. 92, B179)

Following this process of mutual recognition, Hegel illustrates how a self-consciousness “receives back its own self” and ultimately “lets the other again go free” (HR pp. 92-93, §§180-181). In the final analysis I can actualise my freedom individually, through a process of self-transcendence, and in a shared realm of infinite spirit.

Conclusion: Parting Words

Hegel’s account of the “contradictory” aspect of the finite has aroused great suspicion in many of his commentators, such as Guyer

and Taylor.⁵ Hegel's suggestion here, his critics maintain, boils down to an argument that nature is somewhat 'lacking'—devaluing our world of becoming by relying on metaphysics and 'otherworldly' constructs. We may now respond to this suspicion, however, by appealing to Hegel's model of nature as 'ideal'—in the sense that it contains something latent, in potentiality. In these terms, his central intention in the *Logic* is to identify "determinate being" *by virtue of itself*, through affirmation, and not through negation or by virtue of nature's relation to other qualities. His method seeks fundamentally to incorporate a true notion of freedom into our world, to justify our underlying belief in human rights, equality, fairness, and reason. Nature's ability to transcend itself is crucial here in that it *connects* freedom with being—a realm of theory with a realm of practice. By no means a devaluation of nature, therefore, Hegel's system results in a recognition of its sublime character; he locates a metaphysical realm of spirit *in* our physical nature, as our "second nature," and not at all as something 'otherworldly.'

"[A]ll human beings," Kant states in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, "actually have always had in them, and always will have in them, some metaphysics" (B21).† For Kant, therefore, the locus of the noumenal realm is the 'I': in no way otherworldly and beyond the self but, on the contrary, the essence of self. In this vein his Transcendental Idealism accounts for our human ability to bestow the world with meaning. At the same time, however, Hegel faults this idealism as tearing apart what should be sewn together. Kant errs, he believes, in failing to elucidate how a noumenal world of freedom may relate to our phenomenal world of experience. Thus, although the transcending of one's inclinations through reason contains a kernel of truth for Hegel, in anticipating a notion of self-transcendence, Kant maintains that a noumenal realm does not and cannot reveal itself in phenomenal experience. Hegel, however, seeks to unveil the intimate *relationship* between freedom and being, through which the infinite emerges from within the finite, as spirit from within nature—as a part of and apart from the other—as I find myself in another through self-transcendence. In this way we learn to find freedom in the here and now; to relate theory with practice; to relate the infinite with the finite so that philosophy, even if a little 'idealistic,' might grant us transcendence. We form meaningful relationships. We realise our potential.

NOTES

¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Hegel Reader* (HR), ed. Stephen Houlgate (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999).

² G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Science of Logic* (SL), trans. A.V. Miller (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1989).

³ Robert Wallace's "What is Hegel's 'Idealism'?" handout.

⁴ Hegel's notion of *begierde* connects well here with his "spurious" notion of the infinite in the *Logic*. A self-consciousness looks to destroy its object through negation just as a spurious infinity looks to eliminate the finite.

⁵ Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) and Paul Guyer, "Hegel, Leibniz and the Contradiction of the Finite," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 40 (1979): 75-98 are two contemporary philosophers who take issue with Hegel's notion of finitude, largely through their reading of Hegel's theory in relation to Spinoza's "single substance" doctrine. For a robust assessment of these interpretations and an analysis of Hegel that sees his theory not in opposition to Kant's, but rather as reformulating Kant's key ideas on autonomy and individualism see Robert Wallace, *Hegel's Theory of Freedom, in his Logic and his System* (manuscript), Preface (pp. 6-8) and Ch. 3 (pp. 35n.2, 37nn.5-6, 40n.11, 48n.18).

REFERENCES

Guyer, Paul. "Hegel, Leibniz and the Contradiction of the Finite." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 40 (1979): 75-98.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *The Hegel Reader*. Edited by Stephen Houlgate. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999.

-----, *Hegel's Science of Logic*. Translated by A.V. Miller. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1989.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Werner Pluhar. Introduction by Patricia Kitcher. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996. Cited by second edition (B) page numbers.

Taylor, Charles. *Hegel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.

Wallace, Robert. *Hegel's Theory of Freedom, in his Logic and his System* (manuscript).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper owes a great deal to the guidance of Professor Robert Wallace of Colgate University, on whose work I draw. I am grateful for his unending support, encouragement, and advice.