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***“Spirit That Knows Itself in the Shape of Spirit”:  
On Hegel’s Idea of Absolute Knowing***

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## *Introduction*

To judge a thing that has substance and solid worth is quite easy, to comprehend it is much harder, and to blend judgment and comprehension in a definitive description is the hardest thing of all<sup>1</sup>.

The object of the present study is Hegel's conception of absolute knowing, the concluding moment of consciousness's path, as it is described in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This topic is of central significance for a number of reasons, that I will illustrate in the course of this introduction and that will become even clearer throughout the whole work.

The literature on the *Phenomenology*, as we know, is very rich, as well as the specific literature on absolute knowing. The major interpreters of Hegel's thought have addressed it in their studies, and nonetheless this text keeps causing a considerable embarrassment, even after more than two hundred years from its publication.

Even though, in fact, there are certainly many illuminating texts on this topic<sup>2</sup>, it is equally true that very often only a few concluding pages in the

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<sup>1</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 9. hg. von W. Bonsiepen u. R. Heede, Meiner, Hamburg 1980, p. 11; *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, transl. by A. V. Miller, with analysis of the text and foreword by J. N. Findlay, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1977, § 3. The following references to the *Phenomenology* will be given with the abbreviation *PhG*, followed by the page number of the German edition and, in parentheses, the section number of the English translation. Some translations will be modified: where Miller translates "Vorstellung" as "picture thinking", I will prefer "representation", and where he translates "Begriff" as "notion" I will prefer "concept" (with the small letter).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, G. Baptist, *Das absolute Wissen. Zeit, Geschichte, Wissenschaft*, in D. Köhler u. O. Pöggeler (hg.), *G.W.F. Hegel. Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 2006, pp. 245-61; A. De Laurentiis, *Absolute Knowing*, in K. R. Westphal (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, Wiley Blackwell, Malden (Mass.) 2009, pp. 246-64; L. De Vos, *Absolute Knowing in the Phenomenology*, in A. Wylleman (ed.), *Hegel on the Ethical Life, Religion and Philosophy (1793-1807)*, Leuven University Press and Kluwer Academic Publishers, Leuven/Dordrecht 1989, pp. 231-270; J. Flay, *Absolute Knowing and Absolute Other*, «The Owl of Minerva» 30 (1998), n.1, pp. 69-82 (this whole issue of the «Owl of Minerva» is devoted to

monographs on the *Phenomenology* are devoted to absolute knowing, that is described in terms of a “concluding summary”<sup>3</sup>, identified by some distinctive features (the most “popular” of them are usually the gathering together of the preceding moments, indeed, the annulment of time and the transition to the system proper).

It cannot certainly be denied that the chapter on absolute knowing is an extremely complicated and short text: and it is disproportionately so if one considers the extension of the preceding chapters of the *Phenomenology* and even more if one considers that it is its achievement and an essential moment of transition to what will come afterwards, thus the logic on the one hand, and the system with the *Realphilosophie* (that is, the philosophies of nature and of spirit) on the other hand. It is therefore an extremely dense text, that on the one side encloses the entire path that preceded it, and on the other side proceeds to the definition of the nature and conceptual structure of absolute knowing, or the standpoint of science. The difficulty of dealing with it in an adequate manner, therefore, is fully understandable. Given the richness of the themes addressed in it, besides, it enables multiple reading levels that are likely to create a considerable dispersion in the analysis of its structure and to jeopardize a full understanding of its meaning.

Despite the chapter's difficulty, however, it is necessary to fully recognize its significance and role as regards the subsequent development of the system and

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absolute knowing); H. Fr. Fulda, *Das erscheinende absolute Wissen*, in K. Vieweg, W. Welsch (hg.), *Hegels Phänomenologie des Geistes. Ein kooperativer Kommentar zu einem Schlüsselwerk der Moderne*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 2008, pp. 601-24; *Nach dem absoluten Wissen. Welche Erfahrungen des nachhegelschen Bewußtseins muß die Philosophie begreifen, bevor sie wieder absolutes Wissen einfordern kann?*, in K. Vieweg, W. Welsch (hg.), *Hegels Phänomenologie des Geistes. Ein kooperativer Kommentar zu einem Schlüsselwerk der Moderne*, op. cit., pp. 627-654; S. Houlgate, *Absolute Knowing Revisited*, «The Owl of Minerva» 30 (1998), n.1, pp. 51-68; W. Jaeschke, *Das absolute Wissen*, in A. Arndt u. E. Müller (hg. von), *Hegels Phänomenologie des Geistes heute*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 2004, pp. pp. 194-214; S. Lumsden, *Absolute Knowing*, «The Owl of Minerva» 30 (1998), n.1, pp. 3-32; M. H. Miller, *The Attainment of the Absolute Standpoint in Hegel's Phenomenology*, in J. Stewart (ed.), *The Phenomenology of Spirit Reader. Critical and Interpretive Essays*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1998, pp. 427-43; R. B. Pippin, *The “Logic of Experience” as “Absolute Knowledge” in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, in D. Moyar u. M. Quante (eds.), *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit. A Critical Guide*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2008, pp. 210-27; R. Williams, *Towards a Non-Foundational Absolute Knowing*, «The Owl of Minerva» 30 (1998), n.1, pp. 83-101.

<sup>3</sup> This is the expression used by Hans Friedrich Fulda to designate the core of these interpretations. See *Das erscheinende absolute Wissen*, cit.

Hegel's overall conception of philosophy as science, and this awareness requires a careful analysis and reconstruction of the fundamental moments that, in the same work, have led to the attainment of this form of knowing, and the deepening and contextualization of several thematic nodes that are connected, as it were, to the conceptual core of absolute knowing and determine its meaning and significance in detail. It is therefore necessary, in my view, to provide an integrated interpretation of these different levels, handling the chapter on absolute knowing as a hypertext whose fundamental components can be elaborated in order to understand the complex structure and richness in references and themes that constitute it.

One of the aspects most frequently emphasized by the scholarship about the concluding chapter of the *Phenomenology* is its substantial inadequacy as a text, that is referred to the well-known conditions under which Hegel himself said to have completed the book<sup>4</sup>: it is said to be a hasty text, in which Hegel tries to complete the work rapidly, but is not able to offer a clear, detailed and consistent account of what should constitute the standpoint of science and its conceptual structure. It is my persuasion, on the contrary, that the one on absolute knowing – although it cannot clearly be defined as a reader-friendly text (it is Hegel, after all, and furthermore in one of his best performances in this respect) – constitutes a unitary and consistent text, which answers in a very precise way to the work's intent, and offers a clear theory of the way in which spirit, at the end of its path, achieves a comprehension of that same path by superseding the opposition of consciousness and self-consciousness, and an account of the kind of experiences that, in particular, allow this supersession, of the specific features defining the scientific standpoint, and of its relation with actuality and the history of spirit whose comprehension it constitutes.

The method according to which this study will develop will thus be the following one: I will analyze the concluding chapter of the *Phenomenology* in its

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<sup>4</sup> See the letter to Schelling (May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1807) in *Briefe von und an Hegel*, hg. von J. Hoffmeister, Meiner, Hamburg 1952, pp. 161 and ff. (*Hegel: The Letters*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1984). For an exhaustive account of the composition history of the *Phenomenology* and the relevant debate, see O. Pöggeler, *Die Komposition der Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in H. F. Fulda, D. Henrich (hg.), *Materialien zu Hegels "Phänomenologie des Geistes"*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1973, pp. 329-90.

unfolding and I will deepen, one by one, the major themes that will emerge in the course of the chapter. This way of proceeding will be carried out by referring to some fundamental questions to which this study will try to answer. The first question concerns, in a pretty simple way, the nature of absolute knowing (what *is* absolute knowing? What kind of *knowing* is it?) and its role in the context of the work and the system, that is, the way in which the path leading to it and its conceptual structure relate to each other, or the kind of “look” that philosophy is able to cast on actuality when it becomes system. The second question, then, concerns the absoluteness of absolute knowing: that is, what makes absolute knowing *absolute*? What does it mean for it to be absolute? How does it differ from the simple gathering and result of the preceding moments?

As I mentioned above, the literature on the *Phenomenology* and absolute knowing is extremely rich, and all major commentators have dealt with this issue. The aim of my work, however, is not to provide an account of everything that has been written in the last two hundred years on this text, since this task has been carried out by several excellent interpreters of Hegel's thought<sup>5</sup>. My aim, rather, is to go through Hegel's text in depth in order to understand its dynamics and to loosen some complex nodes. The existing literature, given this aim, will constitute a precious support both to the formation of the background that is necessary in addressing such an issue, and to the building of my interpretation and reading of this central moment in Hegel's thought.

I will immediately give an example of my approach: in this introduction, indeed, I deem especially appropriate to refer to a very provocative interpretive stance that has been expressed by William Maker, in order to show – albeit negatively – what is my stance and my approach to absolute knowing. Maker starts from the identification of the project of the *Phenomenology*, which “as Hegel's declared introduction to science, is meant to indicate how consciousness can overcome its merely perspectival and imbedded character and how, thereby, a standpoint of autonomous objective reason – the standpoint of science – can be

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<sup>5</sup> The work of Henry S. Harris, in this respect, is exemplary and certainly not reducible to a simple account of the existing literature on the matter. In his *Hegel's Ladder*, Harris analyzes in great depth the path and the thematic nodes of the *Phenomenology*, providing an extremely useful and accurate examination of the literature on the work as a whole and the single topics discussed in it.



attained”<sup>6</sup>. Maker assumes the *Science of Logic*, and especially Hegel’s statements at the beginning of the *Logic* on its relation to the *Phenomenology* as introduction to science, as a reference point for the evaluation of the concept and role of absolute knowing. Regardless of the (questionable) appropriateness of the evaluation of one text on the ground of another text, and the specific question regarding the relationship between the two works, what matters to me are Maker’s conclusions with respect to absolute knowing. He claims, in fact, that for the most part the interpreters did not properly understand the project of the *Phenomenology* as introduction to science: according to what he calls the “received view”, absolute knowing is for Hegel an “absolutely true, actual and scientific knowing and as such constitutes for him the concept of science”<sup>7</sup>. According to Maker this interpretation is wrong, for if one considers Hegel’s statements at the beginning of the *Logic*, the *Phenomenology* and absolute knowing as the deduced concept of science can only be interpreted in a negative sense: absolute knowing, indeed, “does constitute the beginning point of science” but is “not a true or actual knowing and not a determinate structure or methodological principle for the constitution of science”<sup>8</sup>. Maker’s argument is that, if logic is not to begin with any presuppositions, then it cannot begin with any knowing or form of knowing, and according to him Hegel is unequivocal on this point. “Not only does the absolute or pure knowing which the *Phenomenology* results in cease in and of itself to be a knowing. Further, this self-cessation, what that absolute knowing was as a determinate describable structure – the structure of consciousness – also ceases to be, is eliminated or *aufgehoben*”<sup>9</sup>. My aim with the present study is to refute every such interpretation, and to show that Hegel’s text and theory on absolute knowing are consistently structured and give rise to a positively determined knowing, which does not imply any elimination of consciousness and of the relation to a content, but constitutes, through the superseding of consciousness’s opposition, the necessary foundation of science on the ground of the identity between being and thought.

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<sup>6</sup> W. Maker, *Hegel’s Phenomenology as Introduction to Science*, «Clio» 10 (1984), n. 4, pp. 381-97, here p. 381.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 384.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 385.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 387.

The dissertation is articulated in two parts, the first of which is devoted to the phenomenological premises of absolute knowing, that is, to the moments that immediately precede such knowing, and the role they play for the constitution of the scientific standpoint. More specifically, Hegel defines absolute knowing as the reconciliation of consciousness and self-consciousness, and in the first pages of the chapter he claims that such reconciliation has already been attained in two different ways, that is, in moral consciousness and religion, respectively designated as the reconciliation “in the form of being *in itself*” and the reconciliation “in the form of being *for self*”<sup>10</sup>. Absolute knowing constitutes the unification of these two forms. The first chapter, therefore, is devoted to moral consciousness and the conceptual structure it exemplifies, in an examination that, on the ground of the relevant indications given in the chapter on absolute knowing, will resume the discussion of moral consciousness and especially of the beautiful soul in Chapter VI of the *Phenomenology*. More specifically, I will first analyze the postulates of the moral worldview and the contradictions deriving from it in the shape of the *Verstellung* (distortion), in which it will be possible to observe the consequences of the universal’s separation from the realm of *Dasein* (being there, existence). I will then focus on the shape of the beautiful soul, that in the chapter on absolute knowing is pointed at as the one providing the form of the concept, since it is able to remain in its concept. On the other hand, this shape is also representative of the individual consciousness’s tendency to isolate itself, to remain closed within itself: it lacks, indeed, the capacity to concretize its essence in the existence, and therefore the capacity not only to remain by itself in its other, but also to find itself in it. And this is precisely the aspect which, albeit negatively, the beautiful soul alludes to, that is, the side of the unification of which it is the bearer with respect to absolute knowing. As I will try to highlight, therefore, the beautiful soul provides the side of the concept’s *form*, that still lacks, however, the concrete fulfillment, the *content*. The latter is provided by religion, whose role in the definition of absolute knowing’s essence is the object of the second chapter. In this section of my study, which will proceed in a way similar to the first chapter, I will entwine the references to this shape in the last

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<sup>10</sup> *PhG*, p. 425 (§ 794).

chapter of the *Phenomenology* with the analysis of the chapter specifically devoted to it, in order to identify the aspects of this modality of reconciliation, the sublation and development of which contribute to the attainment of the absolute knowing's perspective. I will thus proceed to an examination of the nature of religion, as it is discussed in the relevant chapter, and I will outline the different forms in which it develops; I will then essentially focus on the discussion of the revealed religion, which constitutes the ultimate basis for comparison with respect to absolute knowing. The conceptual nuclei upon which the chapter is structured are the concepts of representation and revelation. As regards the first one, I will try to show that it constitutes an epiphenomenon of what actually is the essential structure of religion, that is, the persistence of an opposition between consciousness and its object. Such opposition is determined by the fact that the reconciliation of consciousness and object, that in fact takes place in it, is not accomplished by the self, but is reached and represented in something *other* than consciousness, that is, god<sup>11</sup>. Representation, as I will try to show, is therefore important not as much as a metaphoric or narrative element in which religion expresses its content and is understood by the subject, but insofar as its mode of shaping the content reflects a deeper inadequacy, which is situated at the level of the relation between consciousness and its content. On the other hand, however, revelation – that is, the second conceptual nucleus upon which the discussion of religion is grounded – constitutes an essential aspect as regards the necessity for the concept to determine itself and to give itself a concrete configuration, to measure itself against actuality: that is, precisely what moral consciousness lacked. This aspect is particularly meaningful as concerns absolute knowing: I will show, in fact, that the revelation taking place in revealed religion is still inadequate for a number of reasons, among which the major ones are the fact that it takes place in a single self-consciousness (the divine's incarnation in the shape of Jesus) and the fact that such self-consciousness has the form of an other, thereby showing once again the oppositional dynamic of consciousness. Whereas, therefore, moral consciousness displayed an unbalance on the side of the content,

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<sup>11</sup> In the course of the present study I will not use the capital letter for god, because I will consider it as a name for a form of spirit's self-understanding, and therefore only in a phenomenological perspective.

here the situation is characterized in the opposite sense: the shape, indeed, lacks the form of the concept, namely the self. The subject (consciousness) must become the author and bearer of the reconciliation that in religion is projected onto an other; in other words, it must understand – as I will try to show in my second chapter – that the view expressed in the representation of the divine is nothing but its own view about itself, the projection of its self-understanding.

The second part of the work is devoted to the specific discussion of absolute knowing's nature: whereas in the first two chapters I will indeed focus on the shapes constituting the phenomenological and conceptual premise of absolute knowing, in the third and fourth chapter I will proceed to a detailed examination of such knowing, as it emerges precisely from the convergence of the two perspectives of moral consciousness and religion, and of its specific features: first from the point of view of its nature, and then from the point of view of its concrete existence. In the third chapter, therefore, I will start from a terminological and historic-philosophical analysis of the concepts of *Form* (form) and *Gestalt* (shape), which structure in an essential way the discussion of absolute knowing. It is indeed possible to show – both on the ground of the purely textual analysis, and on the ground of the conceptual elaboration proper – how these concepts and their dialectical interaction constitute the unitary framework upon which the concluding chapter of the *Phenomenology* is built. The concept of form, as I will show, refers to the conceptual structure of something, whereas the shape refers to the singularized, i.e. concrete determination, that the conceptual structure assumes in the context of *Dasein*, that is, of existence, actuality. In particular, the aspect that I will try to clarify is Hegel's definition of absolute knowing as *Geistsgestalt* (shape of spirit), that is connected to the topic of expression, the manifestation of a conceptual content in the context of concrete experience. This movement, which plays a crucial role in the determination of absolute knowing, brings the movement of revelation to completion, thereby showing what its proper nature is and in which way it completes itself in its perfection when the standpoint of science is reached. As specifically regards the nature of absolute knowing as a shape of spirit, I will deal in particular with three questions, the first of which concerns its status as a shape: in other words, my aim is to understand if absolute

knowing can still be defined as a shape, as all preceding manifestations of consciousness, given that it constitutes the overcoming of the preceding inadequacy and the transition to the subsequent development in the system as scientific standpoint. For the same reason I will address the question concerning the subject of absolute knowing: can it still be consciousness, if consciousness is defined as oppositional relation to an object, or the attainment of the absolute perspective forces us to think of a different subject, which is able to overcome the inadequacy of consciousness's perspective and to gain the access to a higher dimension? The third fundamental question I will deal with will be the one concerning the existence of absolute knowing, that is, its actualization in concrete reality. In this sense, I will focus on Hegel's language, which is rich in expressions relating to the manifestation, existence, concrete actuality, and on Hegel's frequent use of the term *Gestalt* (shape), in order to understand what kind of relation absolute knowing establishes with reality. The topic of absolute knowing's existence will lead, in a quite natural way, to the conclusive part of Hegel's chapter, that will be the object of the fourth chapter of the present work and constitutes, in my view, one of its most complex parts.

Absolute knowing's relation to temporality, indeed, is a thematic node of fundamental significance for the overall clarification of its nature. In the chapter I will devote to it I will try to provide a unitary interpretive framework for the different and controversial statements Hegel makes about spirit's relation to time. Whereas, on the one hand, he claims that time is the dimension in which science can manifest itself once spirit has led to completion the path of its experience, by virtue of which it finally reaches the identification of consciousness and self-consciousness, on the other hand time is defined as the dimension in which spirit manifests itself insofar as it has not yet grasped its concept, and that must be annulled in order for spirit to reach the completeness of its development. The issue of time's annulment is one of the hurdles of the chapter on absolute knowing, on which most of the commentators have focused. It certainly represents a central aspect in the definition of absolute knowing and its relation to spirit's experience, and therefore – since Hegel's conception of temporality, as it is expressed in the concluding chapter of the *Phenomenology*, is extremely rich and

complex – it is necessary to integrate the different levels of such conception in a unitary and consistent theory of temporality, and relate it to the question regarding the role of history, which is essential in the last pages of the chapter. I will thus proceed to a detailed analysis of these different determinations, and I will show that time represents, in one sense, the dimension in which spirit manifests itself, in its incompleteness, as a plurality of shapes isolated from one another, but when it comes to understand that those shapes constitute a unitary experience, it grasps them as conceptual determinations that keep being valid regardless of time and beyond it. In another sense, I will show that time for Hegel is the necessary dimension in which something must manifest itself in order to be part of spirit's experience, and therefore object of knowledge. The historical process, therefore, is both the movement by virtue of which consciousness becomes spirit – gradually acquiring the awareness of its identity in the course of its shapes' development – and the reality in which science, that is, the standpoint of consciousness that has become spirit aware of itself, necessarily manifests itself, insofar as the capacity to exteriorize itself and to remain by itself in this exteriorization constitutes the definition of spirit's power and freedom. The chapter will thus develop the theme of the necessity of science's manifestation in time and, at the same time, the opposite movement by virtue of which spirit must return into itself from its exteriorization and acquires the meaning of the single shapes as a set of specific concepts, thereby allowing the transition to the logic. Such outcome, as I will show through the discussion of the role of *Erinnerung* (recollection, inwardization), is possible precisely on the ground of a specific relation to time, that is, on the ground of an adequate relation of spirit to its experience, and of a comprehension of such experience.

The analysis I will develop in the course of this study aims to show how, despite the “formal weaknesses”<sup>12</sup> from which evidently it suffers, despite the hurry under which it has been written and despite the lack of organization in the text, Hegel's chapter of absolute knowing adequately responds to the project of the *Phenomenology* with a unitary and consistent theory of the path leading to

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<sup>12</sup> A. De Laurentiis, *Absolute Knowing*, in K.R. Westphal (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, op. cit., p. 246.

absolute knowing and the theoretical structure that sustains the standpoint of science. Absolute knowing is certainly no propositional knowing, whose contribution is to be found in the specific content of which it is the bearer; it is rather the indication of the *form* that knowing must have, and of the necessity of a concrete relation to its content, namely spirit's experience. This way the conclusion of the *Phenomenology*, against Maker's argument, not only attains to a true and real knowing, but also to a *positive* account of such knowing, with the explicit statement of both the conceptual structure of such knowing and the modalities in which it must be concretely realized.





## Chapter One

### *The Role of Moral Self-Consciousness in the Attainment of the Absolute Standpoint.*

#### *Introduction*

The introduction of a discussion on absolute knowing is a critical task, since Hegel's terminology, in this as well as in a number of other cases, runs the risk of leading to significant misunderstandings or to predispose the reader in a negative way. The expression "absolute knowing", indeed, is not immediately clear, and since the whole text makes a large use of high-sounding terms, it might lead to think of a sort of supernatural science, fallen from heaven and delivered to human beings by an unknown and mysterious god. Alternatively, Hegel's idea of absolute knowing as a non-temporal and all-encompassing science might induce to formulate the common charges of a "philosophical totalitarianism" towards him, who has been often chastised and blamed for the conception of a system in which the living richness of the real is sacrificed to the powerful abstractness of the logical idea<sup>1</sup>. It is precisely this kind of misunderstanding that an accurate reading and interpretation of his words, especially in the complicated but pivotal chapter on absolute knowing, can help avoid (or confute) by showing that his idea of absolute knowing is far from an abstraction from, and reduction of, the realm of existence.

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<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek has a stimulating perspective on the usual criticism against Hegel and his panlogism: "The establishing of absolute knowing, of the ultimate reconciliation, plays the role of 'Hegelian Thing', a frightening and at the same time ridiculous monstrosity, that we are suggested to keep at bay. [...]. For us, the image of a panlogic Hegel, who devours and mortifies the living substance of the particular, is the Real of his critics. We use 'Real' in the Lacanian meaning of the term, which designates the building of a point that actually does not exist (a Hegelian monster with no relationship with Hegel), but that it is necessary to presuppose in order to legitimate one's position in virtue of the negative reference to the Other in the effort to dissociate oneself from it"; see S. Žižek, *L'isterico sublime. Psicanalisi e filosofia*, Mimesis, Milano 2003, pp. 7-8. It seems, in other words, that the popular, sharp criticisms against Hegel are only an easy means to legitimate one's position, where, in fact, no clue to such criticisms is to be found in Hegel's texts, unless one seriously misunderstands (or fails in understanding) his words, which are undeniably likely to make such misunderstandings easier.

One of the issues that, in my view, make the understanding of the absolute standpoint difficult by exposing it to what can be called the “abstractness charge”, is the one pertaining to its subject and the role that its activity plays in the constitution of such standpoint. The first step of the clarification process, therefore, can be accomplished through the examination of Hegel’s critique of moral consciousness and the *Gewissen*’s (conscience’s) role in the attainment of the absolute standpoint. In other words, the examination of the role of *Gewissen* in absolute knowing can contribute in a decisive way to the elucidation of its nature, dissolving some of the prejudices I have mentioned above and bringing into light the way in which absolute knowing is essentially characterized by the concrete contribution of subjectivity through action and, consequently, by a subjectivity that is fully inscribed in the historical and (at the same time) spiritual process.

In the present chapter, therefore, I will deal with the sections of the Absolute Knowing chapter that recall the Morality section of the *Phenomenology*, in which Hegel focuses on the role of moral self-consciousness, the shape that, through its development, provides the form of the concept and the reconciliation proper. The form of the concept, indeed, is already attained before absolute knowing, and more precisely in the shape of the beautiful soul: starting from the revival of the latter in the last chapter, therefore, I will go back to Hegel’s discussion of the moral worldview and the *Verstellung* (distortion) in the Spirit chapter, in order to highlight the limits and problems emerging from the isolation of the individual consciousness from the concreteness of action, and finally get to the section on the beautiful soul in order to resume its conceptual structure and show how its features will constitute some of the essential components of absolute knowing.

### *1. Absolute Knowing and Morality*

In order to introduce our discussion, it will be useful to outline Hegel’s first determinations of absolute knowing: such outline will provide us with a “starting notion” of its nature and conceptual structure, that can constitute the ground for

the examination of the role of moral consciousness – which is also a part of that conceptual structure – in the achievement of the absolute standpoint. As it is well known, Hegel opens the concluding chapter of the *Phenomenology* with a reference to the immediately preceding moment, namely revealed religion, and its inadequacy, that in these first lines is identified with the fact that religion has not yet overcome its consciousness. In other words, Hegel is referring to the inability of consciousness, as *religious* consciousness, to supersede the oppositional relationship with its object. More specifically, this means that in religion spirit projects its self-understanding onto an objectivity that is other than, and external to, itself, in which it is not capable of fully recognizing itself and its identity with it<sup>2</sup>.

The ultimate goal of the phenomenological path, indeed, is precisely the identification of spirit with the path itself, that is, spirit's recognition of the identity between itself and the different forms of self-understanding and knowledge that have characterized the course of its experience. This recognition is what eventually situates spirit in the perspective peculiar to absolute knowing. But what are the features defining this perspective? The first determination emerging from the opening lines of the chapter on absolute knowing is a negative one. Hegel insists, indeed, on the inadequacy of revealed religion's inadequacy:

Its actual self-consciousness is not the object of its consciousness<sup>3</sup>.

This feature of religion is exactly what spirit needs to supersede in order to get to absolute knowing: in other words, spirit must make its self-consciousness – that is, the understanding of itself (thought) – the object of its consciousness – that is, the understanding of the object (being) – or the object of the knowing relationship. Focusing on the structure of this self-consciousness, and more specifically of the moral self-consciousness, is consequently necessary in order to clarify the role of one of the most fundamental structures upon which the movement of absolute knowing is founded.

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<sup>2</sup> The reconciliation attained by religious consciousness and the inadequacy from which it still suffers will be thematized in the next chapter of the present study.

<sup>3</sup> *PhG*, p. 422 (§ 788).

The significance of moral consciousness's role is emphasized by Hegel from the very beginning of the chapter on absolute knowing. Absolute knowing, as we will soon see, constitutes the unification between the perspective of moral self-consciousness and the perspective of religious consciousness: more specifically, it is the unification of the two reconciliations that have been produced in these shapes. Moral self-consciousness, in particular, plays an essential role, for it provides the side of subjectivity and of the activity pertaining to it, through which a fundamental structure characterizing absolute knowing is realized:

[Self-consciousness] has [...] superseded this externalization and objectivity too, and taken it back into itself so that it is in communion with itself in *its* otherness as such<sup>4</sup>.

Moral self-consciousness, according to Hegel, provides the structure of spirit's capacity to remain by itself ("in communion with itself") even in its otherness. Hegel describes a movement through which spirit becomes able to externalize itself, that is, to actualize itself in the objectivity, and to take such objectivity back into itself, thereby not losing itself in it. We can already recognize, in this movement, the typical dialectical structure of the concept, moving from the abstraction of the being in itself, to the externalization in the being for itself, and returning into itself – at the same time preserving the externalization and attaining the being in and for itself. Spirit, according to this structure, has actualization as its essential moment, and as the dimension in which it must be able not only to give concrete realization to the content of its being "in itself", but to find itself in, and preserve its relationship with, what is other than itself. As I will show throughout my reading of Hegel's text, this capacity of spirit is precisely the fundamental structure underlying all the distinctive features of absolute knowing.

This capacity, however, is the outcome of a complex process undergone by self-consciousness, which is described by Hegel in the Spirit chapter and

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

especially in section 6C, devoted to the examination of “Spirit that is certain of itself”.

At the end of the first recapitulation of the stages preceding the attainment of absolute knowing, Hegel summarizes the contribution of moral self-consciousness before proceeding to the full examination of its role with respect to absolute knowing:

[The thing] must be known not only from the standpoint of the immediacy and determinateness, but also as *essence* or *inner being*, as self. This occurs in *moral self-consciousness*. This is aware that its knowledge is a knowledge of what is *absolutely essential*, it knows that being is simply and solely pure willing and knowing; it is nothing else than this willing and knowing; anything else has only unessential being, i.e. not *intrinsic* being, only its empty husk. In the same measure that moral self-consciousness lets *determinate being* go free from the self, so too, in its conception of the world it takes it back again into itself. Finally, as conscience, it is no longer this continual alternation of existence being placed in the self, and *vice versa*; it knows that its existence as such is this pure certainty of itself. The objective element into which it puts itself forth, when it acts, is nothing other than the self's pure knowledge of itself<sup>5</sup>.

Hegel's argument, here, refers to the process of the object's knowledge, which can be inferred from the concrete context, i.e. the context of morality and its relation to action, in which moral self-consciousness unfolds. In order to actually know an object, he claims, one cannot stop at the stage of its immediacy, that is, at the stage in which it is simply *given* to consciousness as something other than itself. The knowledge of the object, rather, must include the knowledge of the essence, of its inner nature, which constitutes the element of universality. This side of the object is provided by moral self-consciousness, that focuses its activity on what it considers as “absolutely essential”: more specifically, this shape of consciousness focuses *exclusively* on what it regards as “absolutely essential”, identifying being (that is, the dimension in which the object of its knowledge is placed) with an absolutely pure willing and knowing and thereby opposing to such perfect essence everything that is different from this perfection, which is obviously deprived of every value and dignity if compared to the absolute essence. Moral self-consciousness, therefore, tends to be isolated from the concreteness of being: in its moral worldview, indeed, the side of existence is

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 424 (§ 793).

freed from the self, in the sense that self-consciousness keeps itself in a firm separation from the actual acting and therefore from the actualization of the absolute essence. This will give rise to a continual following one another of the contrasts between essence and actual existence, and eventually to their reconciliation in conscience (and, especially, in the shape of the beautiful soul), which will understand the identity between its existence and its certainty of itself: such identity, though, is conceived by conscience as realized within itself. What moral self-consciousness still lacks is therefore the side of the concrete content of reconciliation, that will be provided by religion; the role of action, in this perspective, is essential to the attainment of the absolute standpoint, for it contributes to the actualization of the being in itself in the being for itself that has been described as the dialectical movement of the concept<sup>6</sup>. From the abstract affirmation of universality, therefore, self-consciousness will achieve the realization of its own essence in the concreteness of existence, of *Dasein*.

This short summary, however, presents us with a really thick determination of moral consciousness's role, that needs to be fully unpacked in order to clarify the meaning of this first form of reconciliation achieved by spirit. I will now proceed to a detailed examination of the relevant text in the *Phenomenology*, and finally combine the result of this analysis with Hegel's resuming of moral self-consciousness in this part of the Absolute Knowing chapter.

## *2. The Development of Moral Self-Consciousness*

### *2.1 The Moral Worldview*

The section devoted to moral self-consciousness is placed, as it is well known, at the end of the Spirit chapter<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> This point has been emphasized by J. Burbidge in his interesting article on the role of action in absolute knowing ("a key word, often overlooked, in the *Phenomenology*'s chapter on absolute knowing"). According to him, knowing and acting cannot be conceived as two separate realms (as in Kant's philosophy) but as sides of a single, complex process. See *Absolute Acting*, «The Owl of Minerva» 30 (1998), n.1, pp. 103-18.

<sup>7</sup> Hegel's conception and critique of morality has interested many commentators. The following titles simply constitute a selection that can be useful to clarify the interpretive framework in which my reading develops: B. Bitsch, *Sollensbegriff und Moralitätskritik bei Hegel*, Bouvier, Bonn

In the section “Spirit that is certain of itself”, Hegel discusses the nature of self-consciousness as it operates in the sphere of morality. Here, self-consciousness identifies itself with the essence, the source of every knowing. It understands itself, therefore, as that which is essential and, in turn, it regards essence as the actual self (*wirkliches Selbst*):

Self-consciousness, [...], in the form of morality, grasps itself as the essentiality and essence as the actual self; it no longer places its *world* and its *ground* outside of itself, but lets everything fade into itself<sup>8</sup>.

Self-consciousness, as it becomes clear in this passage, reaches a significant moment in its development, which is also decisive for the perspective of absolute knowing: the opposition between subject and object, between spirit and its world, is superseded in moral self-consciousness, because it *absorbs* within itself both the objectivity that was previously regarded as external and opposed to itself, and its ground, its foundation. The latter can be now found in self-consciousness itself, and not – as in the preceding stages of spirit’s development in this chapter – in something other than itself.

This feature of self-consciousness can be easily recognized as an identifying feature of absolute knowing, insofar as it overcomes the oppositional structure that characterized the relationship between consciousness and its object in the course of the phenomenological path. This reconciliation, however, will need to be somehow completed with respect to the side of objectivity: as I will show in what follows, indeed, the side of objectivity in morality has absolute preponderance. Spirit that is certain of itself attains the identity between its knowing and truth, but this certainty, we might say, has its place inside consciousness itself. The first stages of moral self-consciousness, in particular, are

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1977; H. Krumpel, *Zur Moralphilosophie Hegels*, Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, Berlin 1972; F. Menegoni, *Moralità e morale in Hegel*, Liviana Editrice, Padova 1982; M. Moneti Codignola, *Moralità e soggetto in Hegel*, ETS, Pisa 1996; T. Pinkard, *Hegel’s Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994; J. Schmidt, “Geist”, “Religion” und “absolutes Wissen”, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart/Berlin/Köln 1997; L. Siep, *Anerkennung als Prinzip der praktischen Philosophie. Untersuchungen zu Hegels Jenaer Philosophie des Geistes*, Alber, Freiburg-München 1979, P. Vinci, «Coscienza infelice» e «anima bella». *Commentario alla Fenomenologia dello spirito di Hegel*, Guerini, Milano 1999.

<sup>8</sup> PhG, p. 240 (§ 442).

characterized by an immediate identification between self-consciousness and substance, which in turn is conceived as identical with everything actual:

Absolute essential being is, therefore, [...] all *reality* [*Wirklichkeit*], and this reality is only as knowledge. What consciousness did not know would have no significance for consciousness and can have no power over it. Into its conscious will all objectivity, the whole world, has withdrawn<sup>9</sup>.

The absolute essence, then, is not only the *essence* of thought, but rather the essence of all reality, of everything that exists, that is only insofar as it is the object of self-consciousness's knowing. What, therefore, does not find a place in this self-consciousness loses its very subsistence, for the objectivity, as I have observed above, is completely swallowed by the knowing will of this consciousness. The opposition of subject and object, therefore, is only superseded insofar as the object is absorbed by and within the subject, and is therefore annulled in its autonomous standing.

The one just described constitutes the basic determination upon which Hegel's account of the "Moral Worldview" is grounded.

For moral consciousness, *duty* is identified with the absolute essence, that is, everything that has significance for consciousness and everything consciousness feels to be bound to. Duty, as a consequence of what we have seen above, does not have the form of something other for consciousness, but has validity and is structured starting from consciousness itself, which confers it its subsistence. In this way, and under such conditions, an actual object cannot be properly given, Hegel argues, for it is completely pervaded and constituted by the subject itself, and moral consciousness, in turn, cannot be properly considered a consciousness, because it is merely in a relation to itself, and it cannot be said to have an object.

As a consequence, consciousness does not establish an actual relationship with its other, that is, with actuality, because it relates to it as a reality void of any significance, and therefore in a manner that is completely free and indifferent. Consciousness, in fact, recognizes that *there is* an other, but at the same time it is not able to recognize its subsistence and dignity, for everything that counts is what consciousness itself constitutes and knows. What exists outside self-

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 324 (§ 598).



consciousness and its process of constitution of objectivity, therefore, is regarded as an independent reality: Hegel distinguishes, in this respect, two worlds, that are entirely distinct and separated from one another, governed by different orders of laws and without any possibility to communicate with one another, that is, the natural world and the spiritual, or rational world. This constitutes a clear critique to the philosophies of Kant and Fichte:

The object has thus become a complete world within itself with an individuality of its own, a self-subsistent whole of laws peculiar to itself, as well as an independent operation of those laws, and a free realization of them – in general, a *nature* whose laws like its actions belong to itself as a being which is indifferent to moral self-consciousness, just as the latter is indifferent to it<sup>10</sup>.

The moral worldview, therefore, is configured as the relationship between “the absoluteness (*An- und Fürsichsein*, in and for itself) of morality and the absoluteness (*An- und Fürsichsein*, in and for itself) of nature”<sup>11</sup>, where “in and for itself”, for Hegel, means that these different worlds are complete within themselves, thereby highlighting once more the reciprocal independence and non-communication between them.

The relationship between the two worlds, that is, the relationship between the moral self-consciousness and the natural world, is therefore grounded upon two essential components: on the one hand the mutual independence and indifference of the two worlds, on the other hand – from the perspective of self-consciousness – the conception of duty as something absolute, as the only essentiality, and the consequent conception of nature as dependent and indifferent. Hegel develops the discussion of the moral worldview, in its constituting moments, according to the dialectical unfolding of the relationship between these two components. The driving force of the moral worldview’s development is constituted, in fact, by the interaction between moral self-consciousness and actuality, i.e., the world understood as other than itself and entirely separated from itself.

In the first stage of this interaction, moral consciousness – understood as *wirklich* (actual) and *tätig* (active) – experiences the independence of nature, and

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 325 (§ 599).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem* (§ 600).

therefore realizes that the accomplishment of its goal, that is, the realization of pure duty, is not granted. Consciousness, however, cannot renounce to the realization of duty, because it coincides with its happiness: the goal of moral self-consciousness, indeed, includes the necessity of containing the individual consciousness, because it is in this consciousness that the universal goal (duty's fulfillment) and particular existence are unified.

The fulfillment of duty produces enjoyment. The latter, however, is not included in the concept of morality as it is understood by the spirit that is certain of itself, because it concerns the actualization of a moral action and not the *disposition* to action, we might say the intention, which is considered as purely rational and independent from the particular purposes of the acting subject. Hegel emphasizes the contradiction pertaining to the relationship between disposition and action, pure duty and its fulfillment. The disposition, indeed, must necessarily become a concrete action, that is, actualize itself, and this necessarily ends up producing enjoyment. The moral worldview, as I will show in what follows, always finds itself caught in a controversial relation to the concrete content of pure duty. Its purpose *is* to fulfill the duty, that is, to identify the pure moral content and the actualized individuality. Nature, in order to reach this goal, must be in harmony with it. Nature represents, in this respect, the dimension of singularity *against* the abstract purpose. This harmony between morality and nature, or in other words, between morality and happiness (i.e., the fulfillment of the pure duty) is the object of the postulate characterizing the first stage of the moral worldview.

Hegel explains the meaning of this postulate in these terms:

The harmony of morality and happiness is *thought of* as something that necessarily *is*, i.e., it is *postulated*. For to say that something is *demanded*, means that something is thought of in the form of *being* that is not yet actual – a necessity not of the *concept qua* concept, but of *being*<sup>12</sup>.

The content of this first postulate, therefore, is the unity between the pure moral consciousness and the individual self-consciousness.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 326 (§ 602).

Nature, in the second stage of the moral worldview, is no longer (or not only) conceived as an independent and external world in which the moral self-consciousness must realize its purpose. Consciousness itself, now, is understood as accidental and natural, since it is considered from the point of view of its sensibility, its natural element; as such, it is characterized by particular ends and sets itself in contrast to pure will (that is, the will of pure duty) and the pure end.

A substantial contrast, therefore, arises between pure consciousness and the individual, actual consciousness: the former, in fact, postulates the absolute unity of itself and sensibility, their perfect reconciliation, whereas the latter experiences the conflict between reason and sensibility. A possible resolution of this conflict can occur through mediation, i.e. through the awareness of the opposition, that can eventually produce a dialectical unity between its components, thereby giving rise to *actual* morality. Since in the moral worldview the natural world – as we have seen above - is regarded as entirely independent, however, sensibility as its manifestation is regarded by the pure moral consciousness as something entirely other than itself, and other than duty, which is identified with pure essence. The outcome of the relationship, at this stage, can merely be the simple obliteration of sensibility or, given that it would be impossible to eliminate the natural component of subjectivity, the *conformity* of sensibility with morality, the adaptation and adjustment of the former to the latter.

The unity of sensibility and morality, however, is not actually *given* in the realm of being, but it is only the object of a postulate: what is actually given, instead, is consciousness in its typical oppositional structure, that now puts into contrast reason and sensibility. In a quite different way from the first postulate, according to which the harmony between duty and consciousness was placed outside moral consciousness itself, the second postulate of the moral worldview places such harmony *in* moral consciousness, so that it pertains to the acting subject, that has the task to realize it.

The task of realizing harmony between reason and sensibility, however, is projected into infinity: as a matter of fact, moral consciousness itself would be eliminated if the task were accomplished, because consciousness itself is identified with that conflict of faculties. Moral consciousness and harmony, in the

concrete context of actuality, exclude one another. Harmony, precisely as duty is in the first stage and in the moral worldview as such, is conceived as an absolute task, which is only and constantly thought as something which ought to be done, and therefore reduces to a mere demand of reason. In this perspective, according to Hegel, a specific representation of the goal of moral consciousness must be avoided, and in any case it shall not be sought, because it produces nothing but contradictions: that is, the contradiction inheriting to a task which *must* remain abstract and unaccomplished, and the contradiction of morality which cannot be consciousness anymore, which cannot become actual, otherwise it would end up “harming the very essence of morality”<sup>13</sup>.

The first postulate, Hegel argues, was the harmony between pure duty and consciousness in the form of being in itself, whereas the second postulate was the same harmony in the form of being for itself. The third moment will thus be constituted by the “movement of *actual* conduct itself”<sup>14</sup>. In the concrete context of existence consciousness is placed in connection with actuality, and therefore with a multiplicity of cases; its moral acting, accordingly, is various and manifold. Considering the point of view of the content, this implies that there is a plurality of moral laws referring to the multiplicity that characterizes actuality. Moral consciousness, as knowing and willing only the pure duty as the absolute essence, puts itself in contrast with such multiplicity, for the latter gives rise to determined, concrete moral duties that consciousness refuses to regard as holy insofar as their concreteness is opposed to the pureness of abstract, pure duty. Such determined duties must be considered as “being in and for itself”, but at the same time it is necessary for them to be placed in a moral self-consciousness.

As an outcome of this contrast, and a solution to it, the particular duties are placed in another consciousness: the object of the third postulate, indeed, is the existence of such other consciousness by virtue of which this set of duties is sanctioned and sanctified. In this way, moral self-consciousness is able to remain in the pureness of the abstract duty, and in the opposition to every determined duty, thereby “preserving” the contrast between the form and the content of duty

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 328 (§ 603).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem* (§ 604).

itself. This relationship between form and content, as I will show in chapter Three, is a decisive element in the constitution of absolute knowing: insofar as the form of the concept is not reconciled with its content, consciousness will remain stuck in the opposition that prevents it from the actual knowing of itself and, therefore, of its object. In order to gain the absolute standpoint it is necessary for spirit to mediate between the understanding of the absolute principle, that is, the achievement of the universal standpoint, and the content of its experience, which cannot be excluded from what Hegel considers as an actual knowledge. This of course applies also to the context of morality: moral consciousness, in order to complete its development, must establish a relation to a concrete and determined content, and therefore actualize itself in *action*. This side, in the third postulate, is delegated to the “other” consciousness whose existence is demanded in order to guarantee the subsistence of the particular duties. For this other consciousness, in fact, duties are determined duties, and both the form and the content of duty play an essential role: particular and universal, for such consciousness, constitute a unity.

This is then [...] a master and ruler of the world, who brings about the harmony of morality and happiness, and at the same time sanctifies duties in their multiplicity. This last means this much, that for the consciousness of *pure duty*, the determinate or specific duty cannot straightway be sacred; but because a specific duty, on account of the actual “doing” which is a specific *action*, is likewise *necessary*, its necessity falls outside of that consciousness into another consciousness, which thus mediates or brings together the specific and the pure duty and is the reason why the former also has validity<sup>15</sup>.

This other consciousness, therefore, is God, that is, the consciousness mediating between pure duty and determined duty thereby relating the moral self-consciousness to the concreteness of actuality. The process operating here displays the same structure we will see in the Religion chapter of the *Phenomenology*, where consciousness projects its knowing onto another subject. Moral self-consciousness, in fact, is not able to become the active subject of moral duty and of its fulfillment in action; rather, it is stuck in its contradictions and therefore needs to project the concrete actualization of duty onto another being,

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329 (§ 606).

the only one that is regarded as capable of bringing something absolute into being by preserving, at the same time, its absoluteness.

In this perspective, the acting consciousness does not consider duty as *belonging to itself*: rather, it constitutes the content of another (god's) consciousness, compared to which the existing moral consciousness can only consider itself as faulty, because its knowledge is incomplete and accidental, and its will is conditioned by ends that are affected by its sensibility: the consequence of this standpoint is that moral consciousness does not consider happiness as necessarily following from its convictions and actions, but as entirely accidental, as *grace*: that is, as an external, divine gift and not, rather, as the outcome and expected consequence of its just actions.

The essential contrast characterizing the moral worldview emerges with considerable clarity already at this stage of Hegel's discussion of morality: it is, indeed, the contrast between the abstraction of universality and the concreteness of its actualization in action, i.e., its realization in the individual subject, which – as I will show in what follows – will acquire an even greater relevance in relation to absolute knowing and the path leading to its attainment. The pure knowing and the pure will that characterize consciousness at this stage, in fact, regard pure duty as the absolute essence:

In the concept, therefore, so far as the concept is contrasted with reality, or in thought, [duty] is perfect. But the absolute being is just this being that is *thought*, a being that is postulated *beyond* reality<sup>16</sup>.

The absolute essence, therefore, is a postulated entity that is thought as existing outside of actuality, it is merely *thought*, in which the imperfect knowledge and will of the individual moral self-consciousness are regarded as perfect.

In the last stage of the moral worldview, thus, duty undergoes a twofold destiny: on the one hand, it is something that reduces to the object of a representation (that is, duty is represented in the perfect consciousness postulated by the actual, individual self-consciousness); on the other hand, it is not granted

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 330 (§ 609).

any validity unless it is recognized and sanctified by the perfect consciousness. What consciousness lacks in the moral worldview is the concrete development of its concept, its actualization, and therefore the turning of the concept into an object for itself.

Moral self-consciousness, however, is not aware of the opposition between form and content, and it is unable to “behave like the concept”. This means to let its moments develop by simultaneously conciliating and keeping them together in the whole of the moral relationship. The formal side, as it has become clear, rather prevails in a substantial manner: consciousness understands duty only as coinciding with the knowledge it has of it in the pureness and abstractness of its concept. In regard to this point we might observe that this kind of pureness constitutes, as it were, the abstract side of absoluteness, which in this sense is still lacking with respect to the completion of spirit’s path. To understand a content only according to its concept, without including its comprehended actuality, constitutes a necessary but not sufficient condition for a complete and fully developed knowledge. According to the goal declared by Hegel in the *Preface*, substance and subject are somehow unified, but their unity is entirely overbalanced on the side of the subject, whereas, as we will see in the next chapter, in religion the same unity is overbalanced on the side of the substance.

Moral consciousness, moreover, behaves as *denkend* (thinking) and not as *begreifend* (comprehending, i.e. thinking according to the concept), and therefore it is not able to grasp its unity with the object of its actual and individualized moral self-consciousness. In other words, it is unable to grasp what is other than itself, i.e., its opposite, in a dialectical unity with itself. As a matter of fact, moral self-consciousness is not even able to conceive of an other than itself in the proper sense, because everything that it can conceive of is the abstract affirmation of a universal content, of its *self*. Starting from an abstract and absolutizing conception of its own duty, as a consequence, it necessarily collides with actuality, and its only way to overcome such opposition is that of annulling actuality itself, by depriving it of any value and significance.

A breaking point, however, is necessarily encountered when moral self-consciousness is forced to establish a relationship to actuality:

This self-consciousness which, *qua* self-consciousness, is *other* than the object, is thus left with the lack of harmony between the consciousness of duty and reality, and that, too, its own reality.<sup>17</sup>

## 2.2 *The Verstellung* (“Dissemblance or Duplicity”)

In the discussion of the second shape in the morality section, Hegel explodes all the contradictions following from the establishing of an abstract duty that is conceived as absolute, and the reality of moral action. Action, as we will see in the remainder of the present chapter, plays a crucial role: it is precisely this direct confrontation with reality that enables the emerging of the deep contradictions implied by the moral worldview and the subsequent development of the moral self-consciousness, which will eventually lead to achieve the form of the concept.

In the shape of *Verstellung* (that can also be translated as distortion), self-consciousness acts, and incurs in a problematic and contradictory movement: it establishes a moment, and starting from that it passes immediately into the following one, thereby negating the former; as soon as it establishes the second moment, it negates and distorts it again and makes of its opposite, rather, the essence. The section develops the contradictions and distortions following from the three postulates that have been examined in the preceding section. Hegel, therefore, first considers the postulate of the harmony between morality and nature. Such harmony, precisely insofar as it is postulated, must remain “in itself”, that is, it cannot be concretely realized. In other words, the unity of morality and nature does not become the object of self-consciousness, or the object of its experience, but rather remains as only *thought*. Presence (*Gegenwart*) would be nothing but the contradiction between morality and nature, which are conceived as two mutually distinct and independent orders of reality. Nature is regarded as what simply exists, against morality, thought in such a way that it cannot be in harmony with itself. Moral consciousness is an acting (*handelndes*)

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 331 (§ 613). Ludwig Siep, in his article *Hegel über Moralität und Wirklichkeit*, discusses Hegel’s conception of the relationship between morality and reality in connection with the contemporary debate on metaethics. See *Hegel über Moralität und Wirklichkeit*, «Hegel-Studien» 42 (2007), pp. 11-30.



consciousness, and it is precisely this qualification that constitutes the side of *reality* pertaining to morality. In action, however, the very fact that reality is thought in disharmony with morality is *verstellt* (distorted): insofar as consciousness proceeds to action, it contradicts its own conviction, its own presupposition, because action necessarily implies some sort of realization.

The action is nothing other than the actualization of the inner moral purpose, nothing other than the production of an *actuality* determined by the purpose, or of the harmony of the moral purpose and actuality itself<sup>18</sup>.

To carry out an action, therefore, contradicts the claim of disharmony, because it produces precisely some sort of unity (that of course will succeed in different degrees) between reality and the declared purpose of the action itself:

Action, therefore, in fact directly fulfills what was asserted could not take place, what was supposed to be merely a postulate, merely a beyond. Consciousness thus proclaims through its deed that it is not in earnest in making its postulate, because the meaning of the action is really this, to make into a present reality what was not supposed to exist in the present<sup>19</sup>.

That consciousness is not *serious* and cannot be serious when it establishes the postulates and regularly negates them will constitute, as we will see, a constantly returning element in the course of this section. The fulfillment of action, in fact, shows that consciousness does not seriously believe, that is, *actually* believe, in the non-conformity between its goal and reality. On the contrary, consciousness *does* believe in action as such, because *it acts*. But its proclaimed conviction is the opposite one, and “because the universal *best* ought to be carried out, nothing good is done”<sup>20</sup>. However, although a new standpoint – that is, the nullity of real action and the reality of the absolute end – has been established, a new turnaround is carried out: since pure duty is the only absolute end, action as the realization of such end – even within its limit – *is* the fulfillment of the absolute end. Moreover, if one considers the fact that reality, regarded as an independent nature, is opposed to pure duty, then pure duty cannot realize its own

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<sup>18</sup> *PhG.*, p. 333 (§ 618).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 334 (§ 619).

law in such reality. As a consequence, since duty is the essence, we are not dealing with the fulfillment of pure duty, which represents the ultimate end, but with the fulfillment of reality. Consciousness *must* act, and express, exteriorize, concretize duty in nature: "Moral law [ought] to become natural law"<sup>21</sup>. But in the fluctuating working of distortion this position also, in turn, gives rise to a contradiction: if nature and morality are no more conceived as different and non-communicating orders of reality, if they are not governed by different systems of rules and laws anymore, then there is harmony between them, and moral action loses legitimacy and value, since its acting could only violate this harmony.

The conclusion of this first part of *Verstellung*, which revolves around the contradictions implied by the first postulate, is that consciousness is not earnest about moral action. The contradictions described by Hegel as following from the second postulate, however, are immediately bound to the subversion of this conclusion. The second postulate, as it has been observed in the previous section of the present chapter, asserts the harmony between moral consciousness and sensibility: moral consciousness is the pure knowing of the pure duty, which is independent from inclinations and natural impulses, and as such it eliminates all ends connected to sensibility. As soon as this position is established consciousness carries out a new *Verstellung*: it acts, once more, but it is precisely sensibility, which was supposed to be eliminated, that constitutes the *medium* of action, what enables communication between the two dimensions of pure consciousness and reality.

The element of sense [...] is the instrument or organ of the former [pure consciousness] for its realization, and what is called impulse, inclination. Moral self-consciousness is not, therefore, in earnest with the elimination of inclinations and impulses, for it is just these that are the *self-realizing self-consciousness*<sup>22</sup>.

Precisely because action is the realization of moral consciousness, it immediately constitutes the realization, in the dimension of actuality, of the harmony between morality and the naturalness of impulses, which however, by virtue of a new *Verstellung* (distortion), is merely postulated. As the being in itself

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 335 (§ 622).

of this harmony consciousness renounces to its role, for harmony and therefore moral perfection is constituted by a *conformity* of sensibility to morality, whose modality of realization is not accounted for, but simply demanded insofar as moral consciousness, which considers nature, impulses and inclinations as independent, does not think to determine them in any way. The consequence of this position is that moral consciousness abdicates from its role, since any conflict between itself and sensibility has ceased: “it would be rather morality that was given up in that perfection”<sup>23</sup>.

Moral consciousness, in this sense, shows that it is not serious in pursuing moral perfection, since it projects such perfection onto the infinite, arguing that its fulfillment cannot take place in any way, and therefore ends up rather conferring value to its opposite or, as it were, a *status* considered as a process that is supposed to lead to perfection in an undetermined moment. At the same time, such process would lead to the end of morality itself, to its exhaustion, for – as we have seen – the harmony between morality and reality would determine the vanishing of moral self-consciousness insofar as it is conceived as the relationship between the pure purpose and its concrete realization. But if moral self-consciousness is regarded as this state of necessary imperfection, then happiness, that is, the object of the firsts postulate, cannot constitute its goal as a reward for its action, but rather only as a *gratia* (grace), as something that is arbitrarily distributed by God.

The stance described above is the starting point of the *Verstellungen* (distortions) following from the third postulate. Since it has been established that morality is not perfect, the consequence is that it is conceived as immorality: morality itself, therefore, cannot be found in the context of *actual* moral self-consciousness, but only in a perfect essence, i.e., “a holy moral lawgiver”<sup>24</sup>. As I have mentioned in the discussion of the second stage of the moral worldview, when actual moral self-consciousness deals with the concreteness of action, it finds itself in a relationship with what is other than itself, with the *difference* characterizing reality: from this relationship derives a plurality of moral duties.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 336 (§ 622).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 337 (§ 626).

Compared to the notion of pure duty of which moral self-consciousness is the bearer, the determined duties appear as inessential, void of any significance and value in themselves: such significance and value can only be guaranteed by another essence that makes them holy. This new stance, however, implies a new *Verstellung*: moral self-consciousness still considers duty only *as pure duty*, and anything differing from that is simply seen as *other* than duty. Through a further distortion, therefore, the essence that has been previously entrusted with the sanctification of the various determined duties is now regarded as holy only insofar as it sanctifies pure duty. The latter, in fact, cannot have real value in moral self-consciousness, since moral self-consciousness is also a natural consciousness, and as such it is affected by sensibility. The holy essence is therefore identified with the perfection of morality, because morality, in it, is not invalidated by the relationship with nature.

The problem relating to the reality of duty and to its concrete actualization in the realm of existence, however, remains unsolved:

But a pure morality that was completely separated from reality [...] would be an unconscious, unreal abstraction in which the concept of morality, which involves thinking of pure duty, willing, doing it, would be done away with. Such a purely moral being is therefore again a dissemblance of the facts, and has to be given up<sup>25</sup>.

All the contradictions and transpositions that we have seen following from the one-sided statement of duty in its pure universality can be related to an originary contradiction, that is, the one between the abstractness of morality's universal principle and the concreteness of reality. From these lines, and from the preceding discussion of such contradictions, Hegel's essential demand for knowing emerges in a clear manner, and will display all its significance in the concept of absolute knowing: in order to reach the complete knowledge of itself, indeed, spirit must reconcile the abstract and pure universal principles with the concreteness of the content, that is, its experience in the dimension of *Wirklichkeit* (actuality). As we will see, in fact, this demand holds not only for the context of morality, but also for the epistemic context proper.

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 338 (§ 628).

The crucial result of the movement of *Verstellung* (distortion) is that consciousness eventually admits that it does not take the distinction and opposition between the being in itself and the being for itself seriously, and takes the content, that it first considered as simply other, and external to itself, back into itself. If moral self-consciousness persevered in its *Verstellungen*, regardless of such awareness, it would fall into *hypocrisy*: since it is *pure* moral consciousness, however, it withdraws into itself and refuses this opposition “between the way it thinks and its own essential nature”<sup>26</sup>, between its concept and its realization.

### 2.3 *Gewissen* (conscience)

The third section of Hegel’s discussion of morality is the most interesting for our purposes, that is, for the constitution of the conceptual structure and standpoint of absolute knowing. The process carried out by the moral self-consciousness will eventually lead to the unification of universality and singularity, of the concept and its realization, that will find its complete fulfillment in the concluding shape of the phenomenological path.

Because, however, what appear as contradictory propositions, which the moral consciousness makes clumsy efforts first to separate and then to reconcile, are intrinsically the same, since pure duty, viz. as *pure knowing*, is nothing else than the *self* of consciousness is *being* and actuality: and similarly, because what is supposed to lie beyond *actual* consciousness is nothing else than pure thought, and thus is, in fact, the self – because this is so, self-consciousness, *for us* or *in itself*, retreats into itself, and is aware that that being is its own self, in which what is actual is at the same time pure knowing and pure duty. It is itself in its contingency completely valid in its own sight, and knows its immediate individuality to be pure knowing and doing, to be the true reality and harmony<sup>27</sup>.

In this passage, with a typical move, Hegel condenses the essential determinations of moral self-consciousness in an extremely dense formulation: we need to unpack it in order to let all relevant implications emerge in a clear manner. Hegel started his discussion from the moral worldview, and more specifically from the assertion of pure duty by consciousness, which completely identified

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340 (§ 631).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 341 (§ 632).

itself with such duty and constituted the source of any validity. Moral self-consciousness, however, conceived the world of morality (i.e., the world of spirit) as completely opposed to, and independent from, the natural world, in turn regarded as characterized by its own, distinct normativity, indifferent to the spiritual normativity that ruled morality. When presented with the necessity to realize duty, consciousness crashed into reality, thereby giving rise to the distortions we have discussed in the previous section. In *Gewissen* (conscience), which constitutes the concluding shape of this troubled path, moral self-consciousness eventually realizes that reality and pure duty, that initially appeared as opposing one another, and that caught it in a tragicomic coming and going between continually established and then subverted stances, actually constitute a unity: pure duty, in fact, is understood as the *self* of consciousness, and this self of consciousness, in turn, is understood as coinciding with being, with actuality<sup>28</sup>. The self, at this point, conceives itself as the very source of that pure duty, as consciousness believed to be also in the first stages of the moral worldview. Now, however, this awareness is accompanied by the awareness that the attainment of that pure knowing and will does not exclude action: on the contrary, it is precisely what legitimates and confers fullness to action, that is, to the actualization of that very knowing and willing.

Harmony, which was at first postulated – and moreover, it was postulate in an other than itself, is now, again, the outcome of a concrete subjectivity's action. And it is concrete subjectivity in the sense that it is also *historically* determined:

This self of conscience, spirit that is directly aware of itself as absolute truth and being, is the *third* self. We have reached it as the outcome of the third world of spirit<sup>29</sup>.

Whereas the third self is the subject as conceived in Hegel's epoch, the first self in this sequence was constituted by the person in the classic, ethical world as analyzed in the first section of the Spirit chapter, and the second self was

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<sup>28</sup> For a detailed analysis of the role of *Gewissen* see D. Köhler, *Hegels Gewissensdialektik*, «Hegel-Studien» 28 (1993), pp. 127-41, and F. Schick, *Der Übergang von der Moral zur Religion im Gewissen*, «Hegel-Studien», Beiheft 50 (2009), pp. 287-307.

<sup>29</sup> *PhG*, p. 341 (§ 633) – also for the following quotes, until further reference.

constituted by the subject in the world of culture, as discussed in the third section, devoted to the alienated spirit<sup>30</sup>.

As regards the person in the ethical world, its substance coincides with its “being recognized by others”, and therefore its self is not characterized by an autonomous substance, since the single individual and its knowing does not have any role in the constitution of the substance itself, of universality, with which the self is rather conceived as in an immediate unity. The self “is not separated off from its universality, and therefore the two are not actively related to one another; the universal is in it without any distinction, and is neither the content of the self, nor is the self filled by itself”. The second self, instead, is the one pertaining to the world of *Bildung* (culture), in which the immediate unity between singularity and universality of the preceding world falls apart: universality is the object of the self, but in such a way that it does not have “the form of an existence free from the self”, that is, it does not have any autonomous subsistence, in which it does not receive any actual content. Moral self-consciousness, eventually, allows universality to subsist autonomously, and at the same time it keeps it within itself as a superseded moment. As we have seen, however, this self-consciousness falls in the whirl of *Verstellung*.

Only the third self, that is, *Gewissen*, reaches the reconciliation between universality and singularity by conferring duty a concrete content to duty – which is therefore not regarded as pure and abstract anymore – and to its will. This allows the self to acquire existence (*Dasein*), to realize itself in actuality:

[Moral self-consciousness], when thus returned into itself, [is] concrete moral spirit which, in the consciousness of pure duty, does not give itself an empty criterion to be used against actual self-consciousness; on the contrary, pure duty, as also the nature opposed to it, are superseded moments. Spirit is, in an immediate unity, a *self-actualizing* being, and the action is immediately something *concretely* moral<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> See P. Vinci, *Sapere assoluto e riconoscimento: dalla comunità allo spirito agente*, «Verifiche» 2008, pp. 11-32, esp. pp. 16-17 “What seems crucial to me is that the discussion of self-consciousness has a first conceptual formulation in the chapter explicitly devoted to it, and then a resumption which puts itself knowingly in a historical dimension, in which – after the French revolution – spirit that is certain of itself presents us with the ‘third self’, i.e. a form of self-consciousness corresponding to the modern individual”.

<sup>31</sup> *PhG*, p. 342 (§ 634).

Conscience, therefore, is the shape of morality which, after having experienced the opposition between the being in itself (the universal, abstract duty) and the self (the subject of moral action, that is, real consciousness as such affected and conditioned by the relationship with sensibility), returns into itself thereby reaching the unity between universality and singularity, and therefore determining itself as *concrete moral spirit*: it is a concrete spirit because knowing of the pure duty, which it still has, does not give rise to an empty criterion that it opposes to real consciousness. In this unity both pure duty and the independent nature that was previously opposed to it, only subsist as superseded moments, which are now raised to a higher form, as is the form of concreteness, of the individual conceived as the actualization of universality in the particular of experience. Action, in this sense, constitutes precisely the medium of that unity, the means through which the latter takes shape in the concreteness of existence: action is indeed defined by Hegel as something *concretely* moral, and consequently – we might say – as the only thing that can be said to be *properly* moral, for as we have seen in the two previous moments of morality the one-sided assertion of the two sides against one another can only generate the falling apart of morality as such:

Action *qua* actualization is thus the pure form of will – the simple conversion of a reality that merely *is* into a reality that results from action (*getane Wirklichkeit*), the conversion of the bare mode of *objective* knowing into one of knowing *reality* as something produced by consciousness<sup>32</sup>.

This passage provides us with an essential suggestion about the crucial role of action: such role, indeed, does not reduce to a concretization of the initially abstract moral principle. Action, insofar as it is this concretization, *turns* reality as it is immediately given to the subject in a reality that is essentially constituted by the subject's moral conduct. This has two fundamental implications: the first one concerns action as such, which this way acquires even greater significance, because it is bestowed with the power to shape reality. The second one, that is connected to the first, is of a theoretical nature: action changes knowing itself, for what previously was *simply* knowing of an object (and thus characterized by the

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem* (§ 635).



oppositional structure of consciousness) now becomes knowing of a whole *reality*, a *Wirklichkeit* (actuality) that is produced by self-consciousness, by subjectivity. Both implications, therefore, concern the role of subjectivity, which in moral self-consciousness finally plays a leading role in the movement towards absolute knowing. The content of consciousness's knowing, in other words, is its own experience. Reality is not something distinct from itself, but is composed precisely by the concrete actualization of consciousness through action, and the gradual development of an awareness with respect to it. Through action, therefore, *subjectivity expresses a creative capacity concerning actuality*. Productivity, creativity and originality will constitute, in the course of the path leading to absolute knowing, increasingly fundamental aspects of the relationship between spirit and the object of its experience and knowledge.

Looking at this certainty from the point of view of the opposition of consciousness, the content of the moral action is the doer's own immediate *individuality*; and the *form* of that content is just this form as this self as a pure movement, viz. as [the individual's] knowing or his *own conviction*. [...]. [Moral consciousness] regards itself as the *in itself* or the *essence*; but as conscience, it apprehends its *being for self* or its self<sup>33</sup>.

Hegel draws, first of all, a distinction between content and form<sup>34</sup>, where the content is spirit's immediate singularity, its concrete moral experience, and the form is the self, regarded as pure knowing of that duty (and therefore as conviction, in relation to the acting subject). *Gewissen* (conscience) displays an essential development with respect to moral self-consciousness: whereas the latter understood itself only as a being in itself, as the essence, now conscience also acquires the awareness of its being for itself, that is, of the self. That self and being for itself are identified in Hegel's text, constitutes in my view an illuminating aspect for these dense pages: being for itself, indeed, is for Hegel the movement of the form itself, of the concept exteriorizing itself in order to "fill" the abstractness of the in itself. This aspect will require a deeper examination in

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 343-44 (§ 637-638).

<sup>34</sup> Such distinction, actually, can only be drawn from the perspective of consciousness's opposition, since in *Gewissen* form and content are unified.

the next chapters of the present study, but it is appropriate, at this stage, at least to mention it, for it plays a central role in the whole discussion of absolute knowing.

But this *in itself* is abstract universality, in which the nature of the divine life *to be for itself*, and so too the self-movement of the form, are altogether left out of account. If the form is declared to be the same as the essence, then it is *ipso facto* a mistake to suppose that cognition can be satisfied with the in itself of the essence, but can get along without the form – that the absolute principle or absolute intuition makes the working-out of the former, or the development of the latter, superfluous. Just because the form is as essential as the essence is to itself, the divine essence is not to be conceived and expressed merely as essence, i.e. as immediate substance or pure self-contemplation of the divine, but likewise as *form*, and in the whole wealth of the developed form. Only then is it conceived and expressed as an actuality<sup>35</sup>.

Hegel places these lines, that are essential to what we are discussing, just before one of the most famous passages of the whole book, and this is not by chance. The passage I have quoted makes it clear that it is the “in itself” that constitutes an abstraction with respect to the “for itself”, and not, conversely, that the “for itself” constitutes the concretization or actualization of the “in itself”. From an ontological perspective, indeed, the “for itself” is therefore prior to the “in itself”, that consequently gains only a logical priority. The moment in which – in moral consciousness, as well as in religion and absolute knowing – essence is actualized in the concreteness of existence, thus the moment in which the self (that Hegel identifies with the movement of the “for itself”) completes the “in itself” with the whole wealth of details originating from the concrete experience of consciousness, does not really represent a completion, but a simple returning to the fullness of the concrete after the abstraction, thereby treasuring that experience. The self, as a consequence, emerges as the fulcrum of the whole movement.

In the following passage, Hegel adds the famous formulation I mentioned above:

The true is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development. Of the absolute it must be said that it is essentially a *result*, that only in the *end* is it what it truly is<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19 (§ 19).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19 (§ 19).

If we read this passage by referring to what I have observed above, it is clear that its meaning is crucial to the issue we are dealing with: Hegel is certainly discussing the circularity characterizing his philosophical system, which subsists as a whole in which each part is justified precisely in its relation to the whole, as much as the beginning is justified in relation to the outcome, to the end. But it is also true that the whole is what can only be contemplated if the essence is considered together with its concrete development, and above all it is true that the absolute itself is a result, and precisely the result of a path that – in this perspective – might be described as the taking back of the *for itself* after the abstraction of the *in itself*. Such taking back will be, once again, the self's task. Somehow anticipating some of the questions that will be the object of the discussion I will present in the next chapters, it might be said that the absolute cannot be conceived as detached from the concrete reality, of which it would be regarded as an abstraction; neither it can be conceived as the metaphysical principle of such reality, but rather, it will be necessary to think of it as the dimension that spirit attains when the path described above in terms of taking back and comprehending is completed. Absolute knowing might be understood, in these terms, as the standpoint reached by spirit once that the latter completes a path that coincides with the *becoming conscious* of the whole of its experience, and with the understanding that the whole of that experience is *its own work*. Precisely this aspect of spirit's identification with is "history", and the identification of itself as the author of such history<sup>37</sup>, is what moral consciousness, in the course of its development and by virtue of the self's role, is able to provide.

Let us return to the analysis of that development: I will try to describe it in detail and eventually to show the way in which it is included in the perspective of absolute knowing.

As we have seen, action is the modality in which conscience realizes the unity between pure duty and reality. Such dimension, however, is not confined in the private context of the self, but it is also "being for another", and therefore implies an essential relationship with other selves, which it asks for recognition.

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<sup>37</sup> For a narrative approach to Hegel's philosophy see E. Bencivenga, *Hegel's Dialectical Logic*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, esp. Chapter three.

The *existent reality* of conscience, however, is one which is a self, an existence which is conscious of itself, the spiritual element of being recognized and acknowledged. The action is thus only the translation of its *individual* content into the *objective* element, in which it is universal and recognized, and it is just the fact that it is recognized that makes the deed a reality. The deed is recognized and made real because the existent reality is directly linked with conviction or knowledge; or, in other words, knowing one's purpose is directly the element of existence, is universal recognition<sup>38</sup>.

Two connected elements result as essential in order for the action of *Gewissen* (conscience) to have reality: the first one is the recognition (*Anerkennung*) of such action, the second one is conviction (*Überzeugung*) with which action is carried out, that is, the awareness of the end of the action itself<sup>39</sup>.

The issue relating the multiplicity of the concrete cases that consciousness is presented with in action, however, and the multiplicity of duties deriving from that, still subsists. Conscience is aware that it cannot know all the concrete cases in which it acts, and that it cannot *choose* among the different duties, since – compared with pure duty – none of them is absolute. Conscience, therefore, must act on the sole ground of its conviction, which precisely as pure duty is an empty and immediate conviction, and seems to give rise to a new *Verstellung* (distortion):

This, as a determination and content, is the *natural* consciousness, i.e. impulses and inclinations. Conscience does not recognize the absoluteness of any content, for it is the absolute negativity of everything determinate. It determines from *its own self*<sup>40</sup>.

This emptiness characterizing conviction and the following *turn* of conscience, through action, into natural consciousness, determines a situation in

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 345 (§ 640).

<sup>39</sup> The role of recognition in Hegel's system has polarized the attention of many commentators, who also regard it as an appealing topic for contemporary moral issues. See for example the classic work by Ludwig Siep, *Anerkennung als Prinzip der praktischen Philosophie. Untersuchungen zu Hegels Jenaer Philosophie des Geistes*, Alber, Freiburg/München 1979. For a specific focus on self-consciousness and recognition in the *Phenomenology*, see Ch. Iber, *Selbstbewußtsein und Anerkennung in Hegels «Phänomenologie des Geistes»*, in A. Arndt – E. Müller (eds.), *Hegels «Phänomenologie des Geistes» heute*, op. cit., pp. 98-117. For a detailed analysis of the relationship between these two essential elements see F. Menegoni, *Action Between Conviction and Recognition in Hegel's Critique of the Moral Worldviews*, in A. Laitinen, C. Sandis (ed.), *Hegel on Action*, Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke/New York 2010, pp. 244-59.

<sup>40</sup> *PhG*, p. 346-47 (643).

which the certainty characterizing conscience simply becomes the discretion and accidentality connected to the acting of the single individual. It seems that we are back to consciousness's assertion of the mere pure duty as the side of the in itself. If the determined content of duty is again inessential, and if moral self-consciousness cannot be identified with its actions, then the other selves, in turn, are in the same position. Conscience, indeed, reduces to the simple enunciation of what it regards as a duty, and the action's recognition becomes impossible, for each moral consciousness fights to assert its singularity as universality. Language, which becomes the medium of conscience expressing the value of its actions, plays the role of the only thing that can legitimate action:

The content of the language of conscience is the *self that knows itself as essential being*. This alone is what it declares, and this declaration is the true actuality of the act, and the validating of the action. Consciousness declares its conviction; it is in this conviction alone that the action is a duty; also it is valid as duty solely through the conviction being *declared*<sup>41</sup>.

The authentic content of the duty, and the truth value of conscience's declaration that it acts according to duty, however, are entirely unessential and meaningless for conscience.

Therefore, whoever says he acts in such and such a way from conscience, speaks the truth, for his conscience is the self that knows and wills<sup>42</sup>.

### *3. Towards Absolute Knowing*

#### *3.1 The Beautiful Soul and the Final Reconciliation*

The outcome of the dynamics discussed in the final stage of the *Gewissen* (conscience) is condensed in the shape of the beautiful soul (*die schöne Seele*), which – as I will try to show in the remainder of the present chapter – will

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 351 (§ 653).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 352 (§ 654).

constitute a decisive moment for the understanding of the absolute knowing's structure and the "effort" that spirit will have to make in order to achieve it<sup>43</sup>.

As we have seen, conscience places every content in its knowing and its will: "it is the moral genius which knows the inner voice of what it immediately knows to be a divine voice"<sup>44</sup>. The divine's presence in the shape of the beautiful soul, differently from what happens in religion, is not given from the outside, as an object, but it is immediate, *concealed* in the self, which opposes to it everything that is outside itself and recoils from its realization in objectivity:

[This self] lacks the power to externalize itself, the power to make itself into a thing, and endure [mere] being. It lives in dread of besmirching the splendor of its inner being by action and an existence; and, in order to preserve the purity of its heart, it flees from contact with the actual world, and persists in its self-willed impotence to renounce its self which is reduced to the extreme of ultimate abstraction, and to give itself a substantial existence, or to transform its thought into being and puts its trust in the absolute difference<sup>45</sup>.

The beautiful soul, withdrawn into the isolation of its conviction, is not able and does not have the courage to objectify itself, to act and therefore to test its knowing through the relation to the *Dasein* (being there, existence). This nature makes it vacuous, and to use Hegel's image, it makes the beautiful soul vanish as the shapeless fog. Its concretization is necessary and unavoidable, because actuality end up imposing its power. And it is precisely its isolation that forces the beautiful soul to enter in a relationship with the other selves, because each self asserts its conviction in the same way and such dynamics determines an opposition between the different selves and towards universality itself. The beautiful soul, therefore, sets itself against the consciousness that acts and judges it in a negative way on the ground of the difference between pure duty and reality,

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<sup>43</sup> For a discussion of the history of the beautiful soul's idea see the interesting volume (with a contemporary approach) by R. E. Norton, *The Beautiful Soul: Aesthetic Morality in the Eighteenth Century*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca/London 1995. In regards to the shape of the beautiful soul in Hegel with a reference to the cultural context of his epoch see D. O. Dahlstrom, *Die "Schöne Seele" bei Schiller und Hegel*, «Hegel-Jahrbuch» (1991), pp. 147-56. For a commentary of the section, see L. Lugarini, *Hegel e l'esperienza dell'anima bella*, «Giornale di Metafisica» 2 (1980), pp. 37-68; J. Schmidt, "Geist", "Religion" und "absolutes Wissen", Kohlhammer, Stuttgart/Berlin/Köln 1997; P. Vinci, *Coscienza infelice e anima bella: commentario alla Fenomenologia dello spirito di Hegel*, Guerini, Milano 1999.

<sup>44</sup> *PhG*, p. 352 (§ 655).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 354 (§ 658).

and at the same time it judges as hypocrite, because such acting consciousness still expresses its action as duty. Since the beautiful soul does not enter in any in relation to reality, the beautiful soul, that has now become a judging consciousness, limits itself to judge the acting consciousness. Both consciousnesses, however, will reveal themselves as hypocrite, because each of them – in its own way – violates the identity between reality and the content of its utterance: eventually, the acting consciousness gets to confession, but its reciprocity expectations will be disappointed because the beautiful soul remains firm in its conviction. Its awareness of its own inner contradiction, that it cannot admit before the acting consciousness, leads it to an extreme pain:

[The beautiful soul] is disordered to the point of madness, wastes itself in yearning and pines away in consumption”. Thereby it does in fact surrender the *being for self* which it so stubbornly clings<sup>46</sup>.

The following moment (“the breaking of the hard heart, and the raising of it to universality”<sup>47</sup>) is in fact the beautiful soul’s reproduction of the movement carried out by the acting consciousness when it has confessed the difference between the content of its utterance and its concrete acting. The beautiful soul recognizes its own difference and concedes its *forgiveness* to the acting consciousness: this act coincides with the renounce to its unreality, and allows it to judge as good the consciousness it first judged as evil. The judging consciousness and the acting consciousness, therefore, recognize one another, and it is through this mutual recognition that absolute spirit is finally attained. More precisely, absolute knowing *is* such recognition:

[Absolute spirit] enters into existence only at that point where its pure knowledge about itself is the antithesis and alternation<sup>48</sup>.

I will now try to show how the structures presented in morality, and especially in the movement of the beautiful shape, become essential in the chapter

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 360 (§ 668).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem* (§ 669).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 361 (§ 371).

on absolute knowing, precisely in the moment in which Hegel is about to introduce the discussion of its nature.

### *3.2 The Beautiful Soul as the Form of the Concept*

In this section I will examine Hegel's resumption of the shape of the beautiful soul in the chapter on absolute knowing, and I will analyze in detail the implications of its structure for the attainment of the scientific standpoint<sup>49</sup>. Of particular significance, as it has now become clear, will be the question relating to the alienation of the beautiful soul in action and its realization into the realm of being.

As I mentioned in the *Introduction*, Hegel's chapter on absolute knowing can be subdivided in different parts. It starts with a reference to religion and its inadequacy, and proceeds with a recapitulation of the stages that preceded it in the course of the phenomenological path; these stages are here considered from the perspective of the object's knowledge (*das Wissen des Dinges*), and the first characterization to moral self-consciousness is given in this sense. Hegel, indeed, claims that the thing must not be known only in its immediacy: it is also necessary to know its essence, its *self*. This element of the thing's knowledge, Hegel claims, is provided precisely by moral self-consciousness, which understands its knowing as what is absolutely essential. As already mentioned above, Hegel conceives absolute knowing as the unifications of the two reconciliations that spirit already achieved in morality and in religion, although in different and still insufficient ways. The role of morality's reconciliation, however, is for Hegel a prominent one, since it constitutes the one that includes both sides within itself:

The unification belongs to this other aspect which, in the contrast of the two sides, is the aspect of reflection into self, and therefore the one that contains both its own self

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<sup>49</sup> A stimulating contribution to the discussion of the relationship between absolute knowing and moral self-consciousness is the one by P. Vinci, *Sapere assoluto e riconoscimento: dalla comunità allo spirito agente*, cit., whose interpretation of the issue constitutes a constant point of reference for my reading.



and its opposite, and not only *implicitly* or in a universal sense, but *explicitly* or in a developed and differentiated way<sup>50</sup>.

In the contrast between the two reconciliations provided by religion and morality, claims Hegel, the latter constitutes the side of the reflection into itself, or, as he claimed shortly above, the reconciliation in the form of being for itself. This means that morality, as it will become clear also through the following chapter of the present study, provides the side of reconciliation from the point of view of the *form*, that is, it provides the essential conceptual structure of reconciliation (the one fully reached in absolute knowing) that then will have to be completed by the side of the content, but that – by itself – has already reached the fundamental acquisition, that is, the capacity to include within itself both itself and its own opposite, and at the same time includes both in a unity that is not an abstract one, or only ideal, but that concretely develops. In which way, we might ask, does this development take place? As we have seen in the course of the present chapter, moral self-consciousness is forced from the beginning to “fight” with its own assertion of pure duty as everything that has value and subsistence, and with the subsequent opposition to the dimension of reality, of which, however, it is aware. What enables to establish a relationship between these two apparently distinct and mutually isolated dimensions is *action*: even though, indeed, consciousness’s attempt to realize the pure duty in the concrete reality produces an infinite sequence of contradictions and distortions, action results precisely as the medium between the dimension of universality and the dimension of reality by enabling the singularization of the duty’s abstract content.

Action is the first implicit *sundering* of the simple unity of the concept and the return out of this dividedness<sup>51</sup>.

The significance of the section of morality for absolute knowing is, clearly, a basically epistemic one, and not only practical (but we will see that also this side of the issue is a significant component of such knowing). Action, indeed, is especially important for the *conceptual* structure it is able to exemplify, before we

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<sup>50</sup> *PhG*, p. 425 (§ 795).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 424 (§ 793).

consider its ethical implications. In this introductory part of the Absolute Knowing chapter Hegel wants to lay the foundations for the account of its nature: these lines, therefore, aim at showing – on the ground of the stages previously traversed by consciousness – what the necessary components to its attainment are. If we express the significance of action in terms of “the concept”, in other words, it needs to be essentially explained by referring to the fact that it is what negates the immediacy of the in itself (what in the context of moral self-consciousness is pure duty, and in the context of knowledge is the abstract universality, the first moment of the concept) and at the same time constitutes the returning from, and the reconciliation of, that separation. The outcome of this process is represented, in morality, by *forgiveness*: in terms of the concept, this act precisely corresponds to the renunciation to the abstractness of pure universality and the realization of such universality not in actuality, but through actuality, because – as I will try to show – it seems more correct to claim that Hegel’s concept *emerges* from actuality as its comprehension, rather than claiming that actuality merely constitutes the field in which it “applies”.

The most significant role of the Morality section with respect to absolute knowing is, however, the one of the beautiful soul. According to Hegel the concept has already manifested, *before* the actual attainment of absolute knowing, in that particular shape of consciousness that is the beautiful soul. This statement must be completed, however, with some qualifications. The beautiful soul, indeed, does not represent the concept in a full positive sense, but it points at it precisely by virtue of what it lacks:

The “beautiful soul” is its own knowledge of itself in its pure, transparent unity – the self-consciousness that knows this pure knowledge of *pure inwardness* as spirit. [...]. Since this concept holds itself firmly opposed to its realization, it is the one-sided shape which we saw vanish into thin air, but also positively externalize itself and move onward. Through this realization, this objectless self-consciousness ceases to cling to the *determinateness* of the concept against its *fulfillment*; its self-consciousness gains the form of universality and what remains to it is its true concept, or the concept that has attained its realization; it is the knowing of pure knowledge, not as an abstract *essence* as duty is, but of knowledge as an essential being which is *this* knowledge, *this* pure self-consciousness which is, therefore, at the same time a genuine *object*, for the concept is the self that is for itself<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 426 (§ 795).

This long passage condenses the fundamental contribution provided by the beautiful soul for the attainment of absolute knowing. This shape, because of its isolation and withdrawal into itself, is what vanishes into the vacuity of its inactivity, and at the same time it is the shape that is able to understand the necessity to exteriorize its otherwise abstract content and displays the capacity to develop in that direction, even though it does not fully accomplish such development. In this way it plays an essential role, by virtue of which the concept “accepts”, as it were, to be fulfilled by the content (this will happen, as we will see in the next chapter, with religion). The most important determination that can be found in these lines, however, is the one precisely relating to the nature of the concept: the *true concept*, Hegel argues, is the concept that has actualized itself and is one with its actualization. In the same way *true knowing* is the knowing that has understood that its knowing must not be abstract, detached from the concreteness of reality, but must determine and realize itself: the universal, in other words, must be known in its singularization, and at the same time according to the concept. It seems, therefore, that absolute knowing is prefigured, in Hegel’s perspective, as a knowing of what is actual from the point of view of the universal.

The second essential element that emerges from Hegel’s resume of the morality section in the concluding chapter of the *Phenomenology* is constituted by *the self*. It is now clear, as I see it, that the section we are analyzing provides absolute knowing with two essential components: the first one, as I have shown, is the form of the concept, the necessity to renounce the pureness and abstraction of the being in itself, to realize the concept and to comprehend it together with its externalization. The second component is connected to the first one, and is the side of the subject: it is clear, indeed, that the most essential role in the morality section is played by subjectivity, which is what actually *moves* through the process described by Hegel in “the moral worldview”, the “*Verstellung*”, and “conscience”. The presence of a concrete subject, and not only of a concrete object, will be essential for the structure of absolute knowing:

In the prior shape [of the spirit that acts] the form is that of the self itself, for it contains the self-assured spirit that *acts*; the self accomplishes the life of absolute

spirit. This shape is, as we have seen, that simple concept which, however, surrenders its eternal *essence*, it *is there*, or it acts<sup>53</sup>.

The conferring of the form of the self to the absolute content reached by consciousness in religion will lead to absolute knowing. The determination of knowing, in these lines, is given together with the determination of spirit, whose *life* is said to be accomplished by the *self*: spirit, in other words, exists only insofar as a (many) self(s), a (many) subject(s) exists, in which such existence is realized, both through action and the comprehension of its experience in the form of thought.

In the following chapter I will try to show how the side complementary to this one develops, that is, the comprehension of the content on the one hand, but the inadequacy of the self's role, which in religion – differently from what happens in morality – does not understand itself as the author of its own knowing.

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem* (§ 796).

## Chapter Two

### *The Role of Religion in the Attainment of the Absolute Standpoint*

#### *1. Absolute Knowing and Religion*

In the previous chapter I have analyzed Hegel's discussion of morality, and especially of the shape of the beautiful soul, in the chapter on absolute knowing. Such knowing, as the concluding and culminating shape of the *Phenomenology*, constitutes the perfect reconciliation between consciousness and self-consciousness, or, in other words, between being and thought. In the following chapter I will offer a detailed account of the nature of such reconciliation, and of the way in which the knowing relation is structured in absolute knowing: for now, I will only provide some anticipation in order to make it easier to follow the present discussion. Throughout the path described in the *Phenomenology*, consciousness has been characterized by the opposition to its own object: in other words, it considered the object of its knowing as something other than, and alien to, itself. Such object is consciousness's very experience and its knowing is therefore a knowing of its experience, a comprehension of the traversed path and of the inadequate forms of knowing that marked it. absolute knowing is the stage at which consciousness eventually understands that its knowing and its object constitute a unity.

As we have already seen, the reconciliation produced by absolute knowing is the outcome of the unification between two previously attained reconciliations, the first of which is constituted by morality. In the preceding chapter I have tried to identify the essential features of the first reconciliation, and I have shown how the shape of the beautiful soul provides the form of the concept, which, however, still lacks the side of its concrete realization, that is, the content. The latter side is provided by religion<sup>1</sup>: in the present chapter, therefore, I will try to identify the essential features of this reconciliation. In order to do it, I will follow the same

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<sup>1</sup> Whereas, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, morality constitutes the reconciliation in the form of "being *in itself*", religion constitutes the reconciliation in the form of "being for self". See *PhG*, p. 425 (§ 794).

method as in the preceding chapter: starting from Hegel's statements on religion in the opening of the *Phenomenology's* concluding chapter, I will resume the discussion of religion in the relevant chapter of Hegel's work and try to identify its specific nature; my aim is to illustrate what is the specific contribution offered by religion with respect to absolute knowing. In the last section I will clarify the inadequacies that still need to be overcome in order to reach the fullness of such knowing.

Religious consciousness plays a significant role in Hegel's definition of the essence of absolute knowing. The last chapter of the *Phenomenology*, indeed, starts precisely with a remark on the limits of religious consciousness, which leads to the explanation of the task that still needs to be completed in order to supersede these limits and attain to absolute knowing:

The spirit of revealed religion has not yet surmounted its consciousness as such, or what is the same, its actual self-consciousness is not the object of its consciousness; spirit itself as a whole, and the self-differentiated moments within it, fall within the sphere of representation and in the form of objectivity. The *content* of this representation is absolute spirit; and all that now remains to be done is to supersede this mere form, or rather, since this belongs to *consciousness as such*, its truth must already have yielded itself in the shape of consciousness<sup>2</sup>.

First of all, it is necessary to observe that not every form of religion, but only the highest stage of its development, that is, revealed religion, reaches the reconciliation Hegel discusses in relation to absolute knowing. Not every stage of religion's development, in fact, is adequate to this comparison, since – as we will see – religious consciousness can reach very different degrees of unity between god and spirit, from the projection of divine powers onto nature that we find in the Zoroastrian religion of light to the unity of human being and god in the beautiful religion of the Greeks. Only one form of religion, i.e., the absolute form of revealed religion, attains to the highest unity between consciousness, that in the case of religion is the understanding of the divine essence, and self-consciousness, that is, spirit's self-understanding.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 422 (§ 788). For a detailed discussion of the role of religion in the attainment of absolute knowing see J. C. Flay, *Religion and the Absolute Standpoint*, «Thought» 56 (1981), pp. 316-27; G. Rinaldi, *Religion and Absolute Knowing*, in W. Schmied-Kowarzik, H. Eidam, *Anfänge bei Hegel*, Kassel University Press, Kassel 2008, pp. 131-64.

Revealed religion *does* in fact achieve the absolute content, as I will show in section 3 of the present chapter, but it still suffers from a lack, which prevents it to supersede the split between consciousness and self-consciousness. Religious consciousness, even in its highest stage, is stuck in the oppositional structure characterizing consciousness in its inadequate manifestations, and it cannot therefore fully overcome the opposition to, and fundamental separation from, its object, which is still regarded as something different from consciousness and as placed in a dimension that is always a “*beyond*” (*Jenseits*), i.e. not fully accessible to the knowing subject.

In this perspective, the limitation and inadequacy of religious consciousness, considering Hegel’s statement in the quote above, must be referred to two major interconnected but distinct causes. The first one is that which is usually and most broadly recognized as the distinctive element of religion, but it needs to be completed by, and connected to, a structural cause, which constitutes the second and most substantial one.

First of all, then, religion comprehends its object through representation (*Vorstellung*). This is usually referred to as the fundamental deficiency of religion, which is unable to understand its content in conceptual terms and can only understand it by somehow *depicting* it, mainly through the narration of a story that should work like a metaphor, thus conveying more complex conceptual contents through the use of images<sup>3</sup>. In this way, on the one hand, it looks like the only difference between absolute knowing and religion had only to do with the means, or the *language* through which an otherwise identical content is comprehended and communicated; on the other hand, the task to be accomplished in order to supersede religion and attain to absolute knowing would simply be that of *turning* those images into concepts, as if this essential transformation could be regarded as merely relating to the external appearance of the same content.

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<sup>3</sup> Providing an account of the commentators that share such perspective is a hard task, since this is the dominant tendency; see for example L. Dupré, *Religion as Representation*, in J. O’Malley et al. (eds.), *The Legacy of Hegel*, Nijhoff, The Hague 1973, pp. 137-43. It is difficult, rather, to find exceptions to such tendency. One of them, however, is F. Menegoni, *Die offenbare Religion*, in K. Vieweg u. W. Welsch (hg.), *Hegels Phänomenologie des Geistes. Ein kooperativer Kommentar zu einem Schlüsselwerk der Moderne*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 2008, pp. 562-77.

Religion, according to this interpretive tendency, would end up being something like “philosophy for dummies”, like a children’s fairy tale telling a very complicated story in simple terms. The role of representation is certainly a central one, but if it is not referred to the basic *conceptual* structure of religious consciousness, it will reduce to a trivial question. On the contrary, the decisive issue about religion’s inadequacy seems to be a substantial one, and concerns what Hegel calls “the *form* of objectivity (*Gegenständlichkeit*)”, which is the second element characterizing religious consciousness’s understanding of spirit and the moments pertaining to it. Apparently, also the expression “form of objectivity” might be interpreted as if the limitation suffered by religious consciousness merely concerned an aspect relating to an *external* form, to the *clothing* of religion’s content – namely the absolute content. Rather than a merely *formal* issue, then, this is a crucial point: the *form* of religion is indeed precisely what determines its difference from absolute knowing and pertains to the content much more than one might expect – and one must also consider that, according to Hegel, these two terms might not be expected to conflict in a radical and irreconcilable way. Rather, the relationship and increasingly greater unification between form and content will be the thread of the path leading to absolute knowing. If we were to interpret Hegel’s argument as referring to the “external” aspect of religion, we would read it this way: the content being equal, the move that (religious) consciousness would need to make in order to attain to absolute knowing would only consist of a change in form (*Aufheben dieser bloßen Form*, sublation of this mere form). Such form, according to Hegel, is the form pertaining to consciousness as such, and its truth is said to have already emerged through consciousness’s path, in the different *Gestaltungen* (configurations) it has acquired. As I will show much more detail in the course of the present chapter, the *form of objectivity*, according to Hegel, has to do with the essential *structure* of religious consciousness: the unity of consciousness and self-consciousness, that is, the unity of human and divine nature, is reached. But such unity is considered as reached in an *other* than consciousness itself, and it is precisely for this reason that this unity is not a real one, because spirit does not realize that its consciousness of itself is actually identical with its consciousness of the divine.



In what follows, Hegel provides a more detailed explanation of the reconciliation performed by moral consciousness:

This notion fulfilled itself on one side in the self-assured spirit that *acted*, and on the other, in religion: in religion it won for consciousness the absolute content *as content* or, in the form of *representation*, the form of otherness for consciousness; on the other hand, in the prior shape the form is that of the self itself, for it contains the self-assured spirit that *acts*<sup>4</sup>.

These lines provide a further, substantial reference to the relationship between form and content that emphasizes the significance of such relation and show that it has nothing to do with a merely formal issue. According to this passage, religion has attained to the absolute content as *content*, but *not as form*. Form, therefore, clearly plays an essential role for the definition of religious consciousness and its knowing relation. We must now clarify with its task is and how it performs it. Starting with a hypothesis that I will develop in Chapter three, we might assume that the form is conceived by Hegel as the logical structure that determines the way something *is* and *appears* in reality. It is already clear that spirit, in religion, has reached the absolute content, but only as content, that is, as an *object*, and therefore as opposed to itself as something different from, or other than, itself. The unity of human and divine nature, i.e. the unity of subject and object, of thought and being, of self-consciousness and consciousness, is understood as *embodied* in a subject that is not spirit itself, or – to put it better – is not understood as being spirit itself. If considered under this perspective, the problem of representation and its limits can be *reduced*, as it were, to a consequence of the more fundamental problem regarding spirit's understanding of itself and its development. Representation, in a sense, might be regarded as a secondary manifestation or as an *epiphenomenon* of the basic relationship between spirit and its object.

The reconciliation performed by religion, as we have seen at the beginning of the present chapter, has the form of *being for itself*, i.e. the form of being other than itself with respect to the concept, that constitutes the unifying term of reconciliation in which everything is embraced and comprehended. In the

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 426 (§ 796).

previous chapter morality has emerged as providing absolute knowing with the side of the form of the concept, and as such as the reconciliation in the form of being in itself, since it understands the absolute essence in its pureness, but it is not able to concretely realize such essence in the dimension of actuality, and preserves it within itself. Religious consciousness, on the contrary, understands the absolute essence as completely realized in the dimension of actuality, but it is a dimension it cannot gain access to, because it is conceived as totally external to the self.

Thus, what in religion was *content* or a form for presenting an *other*, is here the Self's own *act*; the concept requires the *content* to be the Self's own *act*. For this notion is, as we see, the knowledge of the self's act within itself as all essentiality and all existence, the knowledge of this subject as substance and of the substance as this knowledge of its act<sup>5</sup>.

The reconciliation with what is other than itself, as we have seen, is *only* the *content* of religion, namely the object of the representation of a content which, in turn, is other than itself: reconciliation is thus reached in god, but not in the self. If religion had also the *form* of reconciliation, it would include the standpoint of the subject within itself. The form of reconciliation, in this perspective, is the capacity to reach a unification with what is other than itself: but in religion this is only the content, which remains out of the reconciliation itself.

Absolute knowing, as the highest and most complete form of reconciliation, will include both its form and its content. Whereas in religion, therefore, reconciliation is reached in god and remains something which human consciousness does not take part to, in absolute knowing the subject must be fully and actively involved in the accomplishment of reconciliation. In morality, as we have seen, the self plays a crucial role: reconciliation is the *activity* of the self, and the content coincides with its activity, that is, with spirit's experience as understood by spirit itself.

In order to fully understand the nature of religion and of its role in the process leading to absolute knowing, I will now examine Hegel's discussion of religion as it takes place in Chapter seven of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. I do not

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 427 (§ 797).

mean to provide an exhaustive account of this fundamental moment in spirit's development, for this is beyond the scope of this study and would require a specific and detailed analysis, that is, another study. What I wish to do, instead, is to go through Hegel's chapter and try to identify the features of this shape that are relevant to the object of the present study, that is, to clarify the way in which it contributes and the means it provides for the attainment of the absolute standpoint.

## 2. Religion in the Phenomenology

### 2.1 The Concept of Religion

The self-knowing spirit is, in religion, immediately its own pure self-consciousness. Those forms of it which have been considered, viz. the true spirit, the self alienated spirit, and the spirit that is certain of itself, together constitute spirit in its *consciousness* which, confronting its *world*, does not recognize itself therein. [...]. True, [spirit] has '*shape*' or the form of being, in that it is the *object* of its consciousness; but because in religion consciousness is posited essentially in the determination of *self-consciousness*, the shape is perfectly transparent to itself; and the reality it contains is shut up in it and superseded in it in just the same way as when we speak of 'all reality'; it is universal reality as *thought*<sup>6</sup>.

According to Hegel's first definition, religion is the shape in which spirit knows itself in its own, pure self-consciousness<sup>7</sup>. As Hegel writes in these lines, the preceding shapes acquired by spirit along the path of the knowledge of itself, which are unified under the name "spirit in its consciousness" – thereby emphasizing the inadequacy that characterizes them – are still opposed to the world they are in relation to. This is because they are not able to reach the stage

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 364 (§ 677).

<sup>7</sup> The literature on Hegel's conception of religion is extremely rich. See for example F. Biasutti, *Absolutezza e soggettività. L'idea di religione in Hegel*, Verifiche, Trento 1979; J. Burbidge, *Hegel on Logic and Religion*, SUNY Press, Albany 1992; Th.S. Hoffmann, *Präsenzformen der Religion in der Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in Id., (hg.), *Hegel als Schlüsseldenker der modernen Welt. Beiträge zur Deutung der "Phänomenologie des Geistes" aus Anlaß ihres 200-Jahr-Jubiläum*, «Hegel-Studien», Beiheft 50, Meiner, Hamburg 2009, pp. 308-24; W. Jaeschke, *Die Religionsphilosophie Hegels*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1983; D.P. Jamros, *The Human Shape of God: Religion in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, Paragon House, New York 1994; P.J. Kain, *Hegel and the Other: A Study of the Phenomenology of Spirit*, SUNY Press, Albany 2005; J. Schmidt, "Geist", "Religion" und "absolutes Wissen", Kohlhammer, Stuttgart/Berlin/Köln 1997; K. Vieweg, *Religion und absolutes Wissen. Der Übergang von der Vorstellung zum Begriff*, in *Hegels Phänomenologie des Geistes. Ein kooperativer Kommentar*, op. cit., pp. 581-600;

characterized by recognition, that is, to find themselves in their object, to see that the object they are dealing with is actually consciousness itself. In religion, spirit has become the *object* of its own consciousness: it understands itself through it, and attains to the corresponding shape (*Gestalt*), or “the form of being”. This means that it becomes conscious of itself and its development, and gives concrete existence and configuration (*Gestalt*) to such self-consciousness: religion, according to this definition, is spirit’s self-consciousness, the way in which spirit realizes that it is identical with all the steps it has gone through along its path. Here, Hegel makes clear that assuming a shape, even at this stage of spirit’s development, does not affect the accomplishment of that self-consciousness in religion: furthermore, as I will try to show in the present chapter and the following ones, this aspect relating to the externalization of spirit’s form seems to acquire an increasing significance in the last chapters of the *Phenomenology*. And since religion is a form of self-consciousness (more precisely, the most developed form of self-consciousness up until now), this shape that spirit acquires is “perfectly transparent to itself”: this means that the *Gestalt* (shape) of religion is adequate to the content it expresses, and allows consciousness to recognize itself in it, or that consciousness comprehends itself and its history in and through religion: this is why this shape can be said to include *all* reality, that is, because in it religion becomes conscious of its own history and of its entire previous experience. As Lauer points out, indeed, spirit here not only reaches consciousness of the absolute being as such (this already happened more than once along the path), but rather and most importantly it becomes aware that “absolute being in and for itself” is “the self-consciousness of spirit”<sup>8</sup>.

It might seem that, at this stage of the development, that religion has attained to the highest reconciliation and that the path of consciousness has therefore come to an end, since all opposition seem to be overcome and the whole of spirit’s experience is comprehended in a perfect shape. An essential limitation, however, still characterizes the essence of religion: as I have mentioned above, such limitation has been often explained in terms of the structure of representation

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<sup>8</sup> See Q. Lauer, *A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, Fordham University Press, New York 1993, p. 259.

as an inadequate “medium” for the “expression” of the content of spirit’s self-understanding. The real issue, however, concerns the *form* (i.e., the very structure) of religious consciousness and its relation to its content, and derives from the fact that it lacks “the form of free otherness (*die Form des freien Anderssein*)”<sup>9</sup>. This means that religious consciousness is not free towards otherness, as it becomes clear by recalling Hegel’s definition of the reconciliation attained in religion as the reconciliation in the form of being for itself, or, in other words, in the other than itself. The consequence of the lack explained above is that spirit’s existence is still different from its self-consciousness, that is, that its comprehension and therefore the authentic reality of spirit, do not find their proper place in religion. The actuality of spirit, as it presents itself in its true essence, and therefore as self-understanding, does not correspond to the “version” religion provides of it, precisely because it is placed in another essence.

The overcoming of such gap between spirit’s self-understanding and the pertaining shape is accomplished when the two sides become identical with each other<sup>10</sup>, a goal that is only reached in absolute knowing.

As Hegel writes,

If its shape is to express spirit itself, it must be nothing else than spirit, and spirit must appear to itself, or be in actuality, what it is in its essence. Only by so doing would that also be obtained which may seem to be the demand for the opposite, viz. that the *object* of its consciousness have at the same time the form of free actuality; but only spirit that is object to itself as absolute spirit is conscious of itself as a free actuality to the extent that it is and remains conscious of itself therein<sup>11</sup>.

A crucial point in Hegel’s account of the last moments of the *Phenomenology* emerges here, namely his emphasis on the concepts of *shape*, appearance, expression and externalization, which especially in the discussion of absolute knowing play a decisive role with respect to spirit’s need to externalize the attained reconciliation between consciousness and self-consciousness in a shape adequate to its essence. Hegel argues that the shape of spirit, in order to express it in its fullness, must be identical with it, and this is why religion is still

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<sup>9</sup> *PhG*, p. 364 (§ 678).

<sup>10</sup> See *Ibid.*, pp. 364-65 (§ 678).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

inadequate: its shape differs from its own content, its own essence. Spirit must appear, or exist in concrete actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) as it is in its essence. So, it is necessary for spirit to appear to itself, that is, to its self-consciousness: appearance, externalization, the acquisition of a shape constitute an essential part of the reconciliation, which in turn would be incomplete if it was attained and experienced only in the inwardness of spirit: on the contrary, it must be concretely lived and practiced. The outcome of this process of externalization is that spirit, by becoming the object of its own consciousness, acquires the form of free actuality, which is precisely what religion lacks: namely, the capacity to realize itself in a “material” that is other than itself and, nevertheless, to find itself even in that otherness, which therefore can be granted free existence because spirit does not *fear* to lose itself in it, and does not need to deprive it of its value (as we have seen in morality, where external reality is considered as void of every significance).

Representation, in this context, thwarts the free manifestation of the content by *clothing* it (Hegel uses precisely the German term “Kleid” – clothing – to refer to the product and result of representation):

In this representation [*Vorstellung*], reality does not receive its perfect due, viz. to be not merely a guise but an independent free existence; and, conversely, because it lacks perfection within itself it is a specific *shape* which does not attain to what it ought to show forth, viz. spirit that is conscious of itself<sup>12</sup>.

Differently from what one might believe, the issue does not lie in the nature of the shape itself, for as we have seen, spirit must acquire a shape: rather, it has to do with the process of attaining to a shape that is able to *exhibit* spirit's self-consciousness in an adequate manner. In other words, the shape of spirit (*Geistsgestalt*) must reflect the true nature of spirit's self-consciousness by letting it appear in a way that does not include elements of a non-reconciled otherness. It is not by chance that Hegel, in these pages, addresses the nature of the shape itself. On the contrary, the context in which these considerations are placed gives them special significance: precisely at the end of consciousness's path, indeed, it becomes crucial to clarify that the result of such path cannot be an

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<sup>12</sup> Ibidem.

*absolute* one in the sense that it is detached from actuality, but rather, that it belongs to the very essence of absolute spirit to manifest itself in *actuality*.

Spirit descends from its universality to individuality through determination. The determination, or middle term, is consciousness, self-consciousness and so on. But *individuality* is constituted by the shapes assumed by these moments. These, therefore, exhibit spirit in its individuality or *actuality*, and are distinguished from one another in time, though in such a way that the later moment retains within it the preceding ones<sup>13</sup>.

Leaving aside the role of time for the moment<sup>14</sup>, I will now focus on the role of the different shapes as constituting the individuality of spirit: the goal of this *shaping* activity is precisely the *exhibition* of spirit in its *Wirklichkeit* (actuality), starting from the more inadequate forms of its manifestations, and passing through the different stages of its development. When absolute knowing is reached, its essence and its appearance, as I will show in what follows, will coincide in the perfect shape.

As Quentin Lauer has observed,

The Hegelian concept, then, the “form” in which true knowing takes place, is the complete identification of the “appearing” of the object and the “thinking” of the subject; Aristotle’s ‘mind’ which ‘becomes’ what it knows, because the “form” of both (mind and concept) is the same, has been given dynamic vitality in Hegel’s “concept”<sup>15</sup>.

What Lauer emphasizes in this passage is the further element that contributes to the understanding of the present discussion: that is, the dynamic vitality, the movement of life (the life of the concept), which determines the peculiarity of Hegel’s concept and its logical development, in such a way that it includes the relationship with the other than itself and the concrete embodiment of its essence.

The development of religion, according to Hegel, is

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 365 (§ 679). Concerning the relationship between moments and shapes in the *Phenomenology*, see F. Chiereghin, *La Fenomenologia dello spirito di Hegel. Introduzione alla lettura*, Carocci, Roma 1997, pp. 47-51.

<sup>14</sup> Its specific role of time in absolute knowing and the latter’s relation to history will be the object of Chapter four of the present study.

<sup>15</sup> Q. Lauer, *A Reading of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, op. cit., p. 297.

The movement away from its immediacy towards the attainment of the *knowledge* of what it is *in itself* or immediately, the movement in which, finally, the 'shape' in which it appears for its consciousness will perfectly identical with its essence, and it will behold itself as it is<sup>16</sup>.

What characterizes religion, however, is precisely the opposite, that is, the difference between content (spirit's self-consciousness) and shape (the appearance of the content for consciousness):

This being (...) is filled with spirit and is known by itself to be all truth and reality. Such *filling* is not identical with its *shape*, spirit *qua* essence is not identical with its consciousness. Spirit is actual as absolute spirit only when (...) the extremes into which, as consciousness, it parts itself are explicitly for each other in the shape of spirit<sup>17</sup>.

In religion, therefore, spirit is aware that what it *knows* is the absolute, but it does not realize that it *is* the absolute itself, that is, that what it knows in the absolute and as the absolute is actually its own understanding of itself, which it projects onto the divine figure and the conception of its nature.

## *2.2 The Forms of Religion*

Hegel distinguishes three main forms of religion according to the kind of relation that they establish with the divine content or, more specifically, to the specific degree of unity between consciousness and self-consciousness that they display. Accordingly, every shape of religious consciousness expresses spirit's self-understanding in a different form, which represents the specific mediation it realizes with the content of its consciousness. In the first stage, which is natural religion, god is revealed in the immediacy of nature, in this form there is no "intervention" of spirit on nature in order to make it a medium for the manifestation of the divine, that is rather conceived as immediately present in natural existences and phenomena. In the religion of art, the second stage in religion's development, naturalness is superseded and god emerges thanks to the work of subjectivity, which "produces" divine presence in the work of art. In

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<sup>16</sup> *PhG*, p. 366 (§ 680).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 368 (§ 682).



revealed religion, eventually, the divine is fully manifested in human spirit. The development going from the lowest form of religion to the highest one consists of a spiritualization of the divine's conception, which is gradually emancipated from immediate naturalness and recognized as spirit's self-consciousness: in this process, the representation of god progressively resembles human spirit.

For since spirit lives in the difference of its consciousness and its self-consciousness, the aim of the movement is to supersede this cardinal distinction and to give the form of self-consciousness to the "shape" that is the object of consciousness<sup>18</sup>.

The movement, as we can see in this passage, is clearly directed towards the conferring of a "form" to a "shape": more specifically, since spirit's existence is determined by the opposition and distinction of consciousness and self-consciousness, the aim of spirit in religion's development is to supersede that opposition and to configure the object of consciousness according to the form of self-consciousness, or, in other words, to understand the object as itself, to supersede the opposition between itself and its other. In what follows, I will briefly examine Hegel's account of the different forms of religion, in order to clarify the structure of religion and to explain the process developing through the different manifestations of spirit's understanding of the absolute, until the absolute understanding of the absolute, i.e. absolute knowing, is reached.

Spirit, insofar as it becomes conscious of itself in religion, understands itself as an object and therefore externalizes itself by developing its self-understanding in a concrete shape. As Hegel writes,

In its consciousness there is an antithesis, and in consequence the *specific character* (*Bestimmtheit*) of the 'shape' in which it appears to itself and knows itself<sup>19</sup>.

Again, he is stressing the aspect of the opposition between consciousness and self-consciousness, but he also adds some details to the characterization of *Gestalt* (shape), as regards specifically its role in the Religion chapter. The consequence of consciousness's oppositional structure in religion is the *Bestimmtheit* (being determined) of the shape, a term that can be explained in

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 369 (§ 684).

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem.

terms of the acquisition of a particular configuration, where this configuration is characterized by *finitude*: such finitude derives, as I have suggested above, from the fact that the shape does not fully *reflect* the actual content of self-consciousness, because it places that content in a subject that is different from self-consciousness itself. This is precisely what makes the shape inadequate, and spirit will have to supersede such inadequacy by finding a shape that makes the content of self-consciousness and its appearance coincide. The difference between consciousness and self-consciousness and the following finitude, however, will not be superseded even when the *self*, i.e. the subject, will be introduced in the shapes of religion, and the divine will be represented as a self-consciousness itself. The complete identity between consciousness and self-consciousness, and therefore the perfect shape, will be only attained in absolute knowing:

What is *thought of* [*das Vorgestellte*], ceases to be something [merely] thought of, something alien to the self's knowledge, only when the self has produced it, and therefore beholds the determination of the object as its *own*, consequently beholds itself in the object<sup>20</sup>.

The first shape of natural religion is the Persian religion of light. Spirit, at this level, understands itself in the form of immediacy: for this reason, this particular religion is associated with the determination pertaining to immediate consciousness or sense-certainty. As Hegel points out, however, this self-consciousness is not immediate in the same way as the first shapes of consciousness, because it is permeated by spiritual content:

Spirit beholds itself in the form of *being*, though not of the non-spiritual being that is filled with the contingent determinations of sensation, the being that belongs to sense-certainty; on the contrary, it is being that is filled with spirit<sup>21</sup>.

Spirit, thus, grasps itself immediately as an *object*, an object that permeates all reality, the whole realm of objectivity. In particular, it appears to itself as light. The interesting fact about this shape is that Hegel defines it as the “shape of shapelessness”: light is actually no shape, but an immaterial element that only

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<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 371 (§ 686).

diffuses on things, and that spirit simply identifies with the divine essence. Something similar happens in Hegel's discussion of this religion in the context of his *Lectures on Aesthetics*; in the first manifestation of symbolic art, which in Hegel's aesthetics corresponds to the first moment of natural religion, the peculiar and partly paradoxical character of the religion of light is the symbol's absence: the identification of light and spiritual content is indeed immediate, and thus it does not result from the creation of a "structure" by means of which that identification is expressed; light is rather seen as the direct manifestation of the divine essence.<sup>22</sup> As Hegel observes, indeed, this shape is the "pure [...] essential light" that embraces and pervades all things and "preserves itself in its formless substantiality"<sup>23</sup>. The absolute of this form of religion, therefore, is such that it immediately contains all reality in itself, and does not assume any configuration representing its essence: it just remains pure, abstract essence.

The concretization of this essence is spread in the whole substance of existence, and "shapes itself to the forms of nature". This simple thought, however, lacks any consistence and intelligibility in the forms in which it is embodied. This means that spirit, in the religion of light, does not develop an actual understanding of the absolute, but reduces to lose itself in the contemplation of the natural sublimity.

In the religion of light the divine is conceived as *gestaltloses Wesen* (shapeless essence) and therefore represents simplicity. On the contrary, in the following form of religion the self-conscious spirit determines its understanding of the spiritual content as a multiplicity – precisely the opposite of the preceding determinateness: in the Indian pantheism, in this sense, all natural existences are permeated by the divine essence, that is, are sacred. Whereas the preceding form of religion was associated to the immediate consciousness, and therefore to sense-

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<sup>22</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, in *Werke*, Theorie-Werkausgabe in Zwanzig Bände, auf der Grundlage der Werke von 1832-45 neu edierte Ausgabe, Redaktion von E. Moldenhauer und K. M. Michel, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt a.M. 1970-71, Bd. 13, pp. 418-30 (*Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, transl. by T.M. Knox, Clarendon Press, Oxford/New York 1998, pp. 323-31). As regards the peculiar non-symbolic character displayed by the first form of symbolic art see F. Chiereghin, *La funzione dell'inconscio ne 'Lo spirito vero' della 'Fenomenologia dello spirito' e le dinamiche dell'inconscio nel 'simbolismo inconscio' delle 'Lezioni sull'estetica' di Hegel*, «Verifiche» 35 (2006), n. 3-4, pp. 133-198.

<sup>23</sup> *PhG*, p. 371 (§ 686).

certainty, this form of religion is associated to the spiritual *Wahrnehmung* (perception), that is, to the perception of single independent existences, in which spirit “falls apart”<sup>24</sup>. Such existences are first unguilty forms that belong to the vegetal realm (the religion of flowers), and then assume an animal and vicious form. The animal forms, determined this way, end up establishing a conflicting relationship with each other. Spirit, on the ground of this self-destructing relation among the different animal forms, comes to conceive itself in a different way: what remains when the externality of being for itself (that is, of the multiplicity of these single and separated existences) is negated is for Hegel the *form* of the object, which is produced by the self. Spirit, therefore, realizes that it plays an active role as regards the subsistence of such existences, but it is still unable to understand itself as capable of producing such existences by itself, and therefore only thinks of itself as working upon an already existing material. In this way the ground for the religion of the artificer, that is, the Egyptian religion, is laid. Spirit, in this form of religion, *is* the artificer, and produces the artifacts in which it puts itself and the comprehension of itself. Such self-comprehension, however, is still characterized by an instinctive acting of which it is still unaware. What spirit does not realize, indeed, is precisely that what it is producing is precisely itself. The first form of this religion is the one in which spirit produces obelisks and pyramids: it is a still immediate form, associated by Hegel to the understanding, and therefore not yet filled by spirit.

On account of the merely *abstract* intelligibility of the form, the significant of the work is not in the work itself, is not the spiritual self. Thus either the works receive spirit into them only as an alien, departed spirit [...] or they have an external relation to spirit as something which is itself there externally and not as spirit<sup>25</sup>.

In the second form of the religion of the artificer spirit gets to a more developed representation of itself, and produces what Hegel defines as “free architecture” (the temple, for example), that is an architecture that is not aimed at the production of something *useful* or *necessary*, but simply aims at the representation of spirit’s self-comprehension. In this manifestation of spirit the

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 372 (§ 689).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 373 (§ 692).

soul (i.e., the content of spirit's self-comprehension) is clothed with the body (i.e., the external form, the shape through which such content is represented) and not simply associated to it. The relationship between the content and its configuration becomes, in this religious form, more intimate, although it still displays an opposition between the two elements:

Its further efforts must aim at getting rid of this division of soul and body: to clothe and to give shape to soul in its own self, and to endow body with soul. The two aspects, in being brought closer to each other, retain the specific character of spirit as ideally conceived and as its enveloping husk; spirit's unity with itself contains the antithesis of individuality and universality<sup>26</sup>.

In this production the self-comprehension of spirit is still limited by the fact that in its own activity it does not recognize its content, which it knows, on the contrary, only in the outcome of such activity, i.e. the work, which is a *thing*. The relationship between spiritual content and external configuration, that – as I mentioned above – is assessed by Hegel on the ground of the degree of the external configuration's spiritualization, is therefore still overbalanced on the side of the sensuous material. A further approach to the side of spirit is operated by the third moment of such religion, that in which spirit's production identifies the natural existence and the self-conscious shape. The sphinx exemplifies the nature of this relationship:

This ambiguous being which is a riddle to itself, the conscious wrestling with the non-conscious, the simple inner with the multiform outer, the darkness of thought mating with the clarity of utterance, these break out into the language of a profound, but scarcely intelligible wisdom<sup>27</sup>.

With such production, spirit is not an artificer anymore, but an *artist* proper, for it explicitly and consciously represents itself, that is, its understanding of itself, in what its free creativity produces.

In this way, the second form of religion, namely the religion of art, is reached. This form of religion is associated by Hegel with the ethical spirit, in which the single individuals recognize as their own essence the substance of its

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 373-74 (§ 693)

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 375 (p. 697)

individualization. At this stage of religion's development, spirit has reached a self-conscious production, in which it represents itself in a completely aware manner. This self-comprehension of spirit, and therefore the divine essence, is represented as the singularity of a concrete individual. In the first modality in which this relationship is expressed, the work of art is individual in a way that is initially only immediate and therefore *abstract*. The divine essence, at this stage, manifests itself in the temple and in the statue: the difference from the preceding forms emerges from the fact that the subject of artistic creation is no longer the artificer, who limited its activity to the imitation of nature and to the attribution of spiritual contents to the forms that he naturally found, but the *artist*, who emancipates the spiritual content from the natural form and is able to confer spirit's own living essence to the abstract forms produced by the understanding. This work, however, still lacks the moment of self-consciousness, that – as we have seen – is essential to the completeness of spirit's development. There is still, in other words, a difference between the work and the creative subjectivity. It is therefore necessary for the absolute content to find an adequate element for its manifestation, that is, an element able to overcome the lack of consciousness pertaining to the sensuous material in which it has been placed until this moment. Spirit, in this sense, gradually proceeds towards a configuration of the content that increasingly resembles, in its own nature, the content itself. The following element through which content is represented is therefore language, which constitutes a fully peculiar *medium*: on the one hand it works with a sensuous material (even though its materiality is the most impalpable one); on the other hand, however, the subjective activity configuring the spiritual content establishes a relationship of identity with that material, since that material itself constitutes the elaboration of the spiritual content. In this second moment of the religion of art language assumes the form of the oracle, a first stage which is still in its inwardness, and then the form of worship, in which consciousness reaches the awareness of its relationship with the divine essence that, in turn, shows itself as a self-consciousness. In this stage we can observe a greater proximity between the divine essence and spirit: starting from this relationship the stage of the living work of art and of the spiritual work of art is then attained. In the latter spirit

reaches the highest form of reconciliation, since it expresses itself (once again) through language, which constitutes the privileged medium for the comprehension and expression of the spiritual content, precisely because it is placed between the pureness of the content and the sensuousness of the material. In the epic poetry, which proposes a conflict between human beings and gods, starting from which human beings start to emerge as the actual subjects, until the singularity of the self appropriates the absolute essence in comedy, where everything sacred is ridiculed and deprived of its value. In this concluding moment of the religion of art's development, spirit reaches an essential stage: self-consciousness recognizes itself in all of its manifestations, and overcomes every residual opposition to the essence insofar as it thinks of itself as capable of appropriating everything objective by virtue of its self-certainty.

As Franco Chiereghin has observed, this path – the fundamental moments of which I have outlined in this section – plays an essential role for the achievement of the complete manifestation of the absolute and therefore in the transition from the form of the substance to the form of the subject<sup>28</sup>.

### *3. Revealed Religion and Absolute Knowing*

Through the religion of art spirit accomplishes a decisive result:

Spirit has advanced from the form of *substance* to assume that of *subject*, for it *produces* its shape, thus making explicit in it the act, or the self-consciousness<sup>29</sup>.

As we have seen, in natural religion spirit understood the absolute content as a substance that was completely *other* than itself; through the religion of art, spirit eventually comes to the active production of its own self-consciousness's shape: it therefore confers to the content of its awareness a peculiar shape, which is not merely *found* in the immediacy of what is present to experience, but is rather the outcome of a subjective act that consists, on the one side, of

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<sup>28</sup> F. Chiereghin, *La Fenomenologia dello spirito di Hegel. Introduzione alla lettura*, p. 147.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 400 (§ 748).

understanding itself, and on the other side of giving expression to such understanding. The statue, in this sense, was the exemplification of this process and its limitation: it was, in fact, the first form in which the divine essence was given human shape, but at the same time it possessed the *merely external* shape of the self, whereas the inner and lively self was left out, or, more specifically, they were just *conferred* from the outside. The cult attains to the unity of the two sides, and in the last step the extreme side of this dialectic between the self and the “other” is reached:

The essence, the substance, for which the self was an accident, has sunk to the level of a predicate; and in *this self-consciousness* over against which there is nothing in the form of essence, spirit has lost its *consciousness*<sup>30</sup>.

According to the proposition that expresses this stage of spirit's process, “the self is absolute being”, which previously constituted the expression of the non-religious spirit. Revealed religion, i.e. the absolute religion, emerges as the result of unification between this proposition and its opposite:

Here [...] the result achieved is the union and permeation of the two natures in which both are, with equal value, *essential* and at the same time only *moments*; so that spirit is simultaneously *consciousness* of itself as its *objective* substance, and simple *self-consciousness* communing with itself<sup>31</sup>.

But how does this unification takes place? What does it mean that the divine and the human nature are permeated? What kind of *form*, specifically, does this unification assume? In the following pages I will try to explain the nature of revealed religion in order to understand the structure of its reconciliation and why, in the chapter on absolute knowing, Hegel defines it as the “reconciliation in the form of being for itself”.

In absolute religion, the unification of substance and self-consciousness is attained through a movement of exteriorization: substance exteriorizes (*entäußert*) itself and becomes self-consciousness, which in turn exteriorizes itself and becomes a *thing*, thereby making itself “a universal self”<sup>32</sup>. The substance, that

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 400-1 (§ 749).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 403 (§ 755).



previously was merely abstract, takes now the shape of self-consciousness, *descends* on reality. Self-consciousness knows this identity of substance and self-consciousness, and therefore comes to the awareness that substance itself is spirit in its universality.

Spirit, as a consequence, acquires the form of objectivity:

If, therefore, this meaning of the objective is not to be mere imagination, it must possess *intrinsic* being, must *originally* appear in consciousness as stemming from the concept and must come forth in its necessity. [...]. This concept which, as immediate, has also the shape of immediacy for its consciousness, has, *in the second place*, given itself the shape of implicit self-consciousness, i.e. [...] externalizes itself and becomes the 'I' for consciousness<sup>33</sup>.

Hegel is talking about that which might be designated as the most significant feature of revealed religion not only by itself, but also as regards absolute knowing, i.e. *incarnation*, the being in itself of spirit that gives itself the shape of self-consciousness. This, according to Hegel, corresponds to the fact that "the actual world-spirit has attained to this knowledge of itself"<sup>34</sup>. These two determinations, understood together, provide an important clarification as regards the nature of revealed religion. On the one hand, indeed, Hegel claims that spirit's self-comprehension is now incarnated in the shape of self-consciousness, that is, it is represented as concretely existing in a human being. In this sense, the shape in which such self-comprehension expresses itself corresponds to the *subject* that has developed such self-comprehension. On the other hand, Hegel underlines an aspect that will become essential in the next chapters of the present work, that is, the fact that the subject he is talking about is the actual world-spirit. This means that the spirit expressing its self-comprehension in revealed religion is a historically determined spirit, which lives its experience through a specific path (i.e., the object of the phenomenological narrative) and comes to understand such experience and the way it has lived it. What comes to expression in religion, therefore, is not an abstract content, but a rich and concrete content that is elaborated through it. As we will see, religion itself, in turn, will become the content and the object of spirit's elaboration absolute knowing.

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 404 (§ 757).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*.

What is essential as regards incarnation is that spirit's self-comprehension becomes available to perception in the shape of a particular self-consciousness:

The believer is immediately certain of spirit, *sees, feels, and hears* this divinity. Thus self-consciousness is not imagination, but is *actual* in the believer. Consciousness, then, does not start from *its* inner life, from thought, and unite *within itself* the thought of god with existence; on the contrary, it starts from an existence that is immediately present and recognizes god therein<sup>35</sup>.

In this way, consciousness only needs to perceive this immediate presence to know god in it, and it knows god in its immediate presence, as a sensible presence, as a self-consciousness. The incarnation of the divine essence in the human shape of self-consciousness is the simple and at the same time the most central content of revealed religion, namely Christian religion, in which the divine essence is understood as spirit, or – what is the same – “this religion is the consciousness of the divine being that it is spirit”. In these lines Hegel provides a definition of what “spirit” means: spirit is the knowledge of itself in its externalization [*Entäußerung*], or the essence, the movement of which coincides with the capacity to remain identical with itself in its otherness. That is, spirit is the capacity of becoming *other* (realizing itself in actuality), knowing itself in this other, and being aware of its identity with this other. This is the identity of substance and subject, the goal announced in the *Preface*<sup>36</sup>, which will be fully reached only in absolute knowing: in what follows, I will try to show why the unity attained by religion is not yet inadequate.

Consequently, in this religion the divine being is *revealed*. Its being revealed obviously consists in this, that what it is, is known. But it is known precisely in its being known as spirit, as a being that is essentially a *self-conscious being*. For there is something hidden from consciousness in its object if the object is for consciousness an ‘*other*’ or something *alien*, and if it does not know it as *its own self*. This concealment ceases when the absolute being *qua* spirit is the object of consciousness; for then the object has the form of *self* in its relation to consciousness, i.e. consciousness knows itself immediately in the object, or is manifest to itself in the object<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 404-5 (§ 758).

<sup>36</sup> “In my view, which can be justified only by the exposition of the system itself, everything turns on grasping and expressing the true, not only as *substance*, but equally as *subject*”, *Ibid.*, p. 18 (§ 17).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 405 (§ 759).

Divine essence, in absolute religion, is revealed: its nature is known, its being and its manifestation are recognized as *its* being and *its* manifestation. The concept of revelation plays a pivotal role both in religion and absolute knowing, and an appropriate account of its function and significance is necessary in order to understand the two last shapes of the phenomenological path. Revelation, as it has been pointed out, “is connected, on the one hand, to representation and thus to the determinations of sensuous perception, on the other hand to the truth and freedom that must constitute the heart of conceptual knowledge”<sup>38</sup>. In the case of religious consciousness, revelation can be seen as a process of manifestation of the divine in the human, or as a process of unification between the representation of the divine being and self-consciousness. Now, in absolute religion, this process is completed, because there is no difference anymore between the divine and the human; and whereas in consciousness there is something *hidden* insofar as its object is regarded as *other* than itself and therefore not recognized by spirit as its own self, in revealed religion nothing is concealed anymore: spirit and the absolute are now identified and made the object of consciousness. It is worth noting, for our purposes, that Hegel emphasizes here that the object has “the form of *self* in its relation to consciousness”; this means, as he explains it, that consciousness knows itself in the object immediately or – conversely – that consciousness is revealed to itself in the object.

So, what we are dealing with is the fulfillment of consciousness’s self-knowing process, which is performed through a dynamics of *recognition*. This peculiar dynamics takes place through a double movement: the first one highlights the givenness of an object in which consciousness comes to recognize itself; in this movement consciousness simply relates to an externally present content. The second one highlights consciousness’s process of manifestation in this object; in this movement, therefore, it seems that consciousness itself *produces* an object which it fills with the content of its self-understanding. These different processes may give rise to opposite interpretations of the role and status of religion in the *Phenomenology*, respectively insisting on the active or the passive aspect of

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<sup>38</sup> F. Menegoni, *Il concetto di rivelazione nella «Fenomenologia dello spirito» di Hegel*, «Verifiche» 30 (2001), pp. 199-226, here p. 208 (Italian, my translation).

consciousness in the development of religious experience. In these lines I will not express a “preference” for one of these two positions, since I believe that none of them – if considered one-sidedly – is really close to Hegel’s own idea, which is best expressed by the sentence I have quoted above: “The object has the form of *self* in its relation to consciousness”<sup>39</sup>. In the original German text there is actually no reference to the *form* of self; although the meaning of sentence does not change substantially, Hegel literally writes that “the object is *as a self* in its relation to consciousness”. Hegel’s idea is much more radical than having the form of a self, as we can see: the object for consciousness is *as a self* (self-consciousness), it is *as a subject*. We can therefore conclude that the two movements we analyzed are actually one and the same movement, by virtue of which consciousness knows itself in another self and, at the same time, it expresses its self-understanding in the other self.

Revelation, in this sense, takes place in the same *locus* of the reconciliation between consciousness and self-consciousness, and these two central concepts confer religion a peculiar status:

This – to be in accordance with its concept that which is revealed – this is, then, the true shape of spirit [*die wahre Gestalt des Geistes*], and this its shape, the concept, is likewise alone its essence and its substance<sup>40</sup>.

This passage illuminates one of the central concepts of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, namely the concept of *Gestalt* (shape), that assumes even further significance in the concluding chapters, because it undergoes a peculiar development when the path consciousness comes close to its conclusion and the concept is attained. Consciousness, in its phenomenological path, has assumed many different shapes and has progressively recognized each of them as an inadequate manifestation of its knowledge insofar as it understood its object as different as opposed to itself. In religion, then, it is said to eventually acquire its true shape: this happens because its revelation, or the shape in this peculiar kind of relationship with its content, is *in accordance with its concept*. In other words, revealed religion seems to be the culminating shape of this path, since it

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<sup>39</sup> “So ist er als *Selbst* in seinem Verhältnisse zu ihm”, *PhG*, p. 405 (§ 759).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. p. 406 (§ 759).

reconciles the concept and its appearance in the realm of actuality, thereby overcoming the limitation of moral self-consciousness, that – as we have seen – lacked the capacity to realize itself concretely. Moreover, in religion the concept and the shape are identified: the shape is *informed* by the concept, which constitutes its heart, its essence and substance. The human and the divine nature, in this sense, are “the same”, and consciousness knows this identity by knowing the shape in which it manifests itself.

Here, therefore, consciousness – or the mode in which essence is for consciousness itself, i.e. its shape – is, in fact, identical with its self-consciousness. This shape is itself self-consciousness; it is thus at the same time an object in the mode of immediate being, and this being, likewise immediately, has the significance of pure thought, of absolute being<sup>41</sup>.

Human consciousness gains access to the knowledge of the divine essence in an immediate way, because the shape acquired by such essence is an “object in the mode of immediate being” that can be seen and heard as a self-consciousness. Precisely through the objectification of the absolute essence the concept reaches its perfection (*Vollendung*): not only is essence not separated from existence anymore, but it attains to a full expression and revelation in existence itself, a dimension characterized by immediacy. One might think that such immediate dimension is not the adequate one for the manifestation of something that is defined as absolute, and therefore – according to its etymological and traditional meaning – allegedly detached and independent from anything other than itself. But Hegel, on the contrary, regards the capacity to reveal itself in what is other than itself precisely as the distinctive character of that is free, and absolute.

The absolute being which exists as an actual self-consciousness seems to have come down from its eternal simplicity, but by this *coming down* it has in fact attained for the first time to its own highest essence. [...]. The revealed which has come forth wholly on to the *surface* is precisely therein the most *profound*<sup>42</sup>.

It is worth noting that Hegel designates immediacy, or the expression of the divine essence on “the surface” as the most profound and complete mode of

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem* (§ 760).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*.

being. If divine being did not come to the surface, it would in fact remain in the pure abstraction of its intangibility, thereby falling into the same abstraction that characterized moral consciousness. Revelation is therefore a necessary step, or, more precisely, *the* necessary step that essence needs to fulfill in order to reach its highest existence. A question might be raised at this point: if revelation is a step required by the nature of the concept, is it really a free act of the eternal essence, or is such essence somehow *forced* to reveal itself, thereby negating its absoluteness? Divinity, indeed, attains to its highest essence *only* by exteriorizing itself, by becoming a self-consciousness in human shape, that is, by becoming an object for sensuous perception. This process actually finds its meaning in the nature of spirit itself, which must manifest itself in its other, encounter its other and find itself in it. The absolute essence, therefore, has the (logical) necessity to exteriorize itself in order to complete its development.

A more explicit account of this process can be found in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*:

As we have seen, “revealing” refers to the primal division (*Urteil*) of infinite subjectivity or infinite form; it means determining oneself to be for another. This revealing or self-manifesting belongs to the essence of spirit itself. *A spirit that is not revelatory is not spirit*. It is said that god has created the world and has revealed himself. This is spoken of as something he did once, that will not happen again, and as being the sort of event that may either occur or not occur: god could have revealed himself, he could have created the world, or not; his doing so is one of his capricious, contingent characteristics, so to speak, and does not belong to the concept of god himself. But it is the essence of god as spirit *to be for an other*, i.e. to reveal himself<sup>43</sup>.

Revelation is first defined as a judgment: Hegel sees in the German word *Urteil* the meaning of an original separation (*Ur-teil*). Accordingly, revelation is

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<sup>43</sup> “>Offenbaren< heißt, wie wir gesehen haben, dies Urteil der unendlichen Subjektivität oder der unendlichen Form; >Offenbaren< heißt, sich bestimmen, zu sein für ein Anderes; dies Offenbaren, sich Manifestieren, gehört zum Wesen des Geistes selbst. Ein Geist, der nicht offenbar ist, ist nicht Geist. Man sagt: «Gott hat die Welt erschaffen, hat sich geoffenbart» - so spricht man dies als einmal geschehene Tat aus, die nicht wieder geschieht, als so eine Bestimmung, die sein kann oder nicht; Gott hätte sich offenbaren können, die Welt erschaffen können oder auch nicht; es ist eine gleichsam willkürliche, zufällige Bestimmung, die nicht zum Begriff Gottes selbst gehört. Aber Gott ist als Geist wesentliches dies, für ein Anderes zu sein, d. h. sich zuoffenbaren.“ G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, hg. Von Walter Jaeschke, Teil 3. *Die vollendete Religion*, Meiner, Hamburg 1995, p. 105 (*Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. Vol. III, *The Consummate Religion*, ed. by P.G. Hodgson, University of California Press, Berkeley 1985, p. 170). For a detailed analysis of the concept of revelation, see F. Menegoni *Il concetto di rivelazione nella “Fenomenologia dello spirito” di Hegel*, cit.

conceived as the separation of infinite form, or infinite subjectivity: the concept manifests itself when it separates itself from its own (abstract) infinity and abstractness, and gives to itself a concrete existence, thereby determining itself and becoming for an other, i.e. for a consciousness. Furthermore, this is not an arbitrary choice of spirit, not an isolated event in its history – as Hegel points out referring to God’s creation of the world – but it is an essential feature of its own nature: revelation is a necessary condition for spirit to be spirit, it is exactly what defines it as such. If spirit did not reveal itself, it would not be spirit, simply, and this of course applies to god, as he is spirit or, more precisely, spirit’s representation of itself. In this revelation god appears as it is: essence and existence are unified in the shape he assumes in incarnation. This existence, however, is still insufficient to spirit’s development, since it allows spirit to know the essence as spirit (i.e., as itself) “*only* when absolute being is beheld as an *immediate* self-consciousness” (§ 761). Jesus Christ, this immediate self-consciousness, is actually an immediate presence, which is only *given* to human spirit, something that appears to human self-consciousness but which is not produced and understood by spirit itself.

Spirit, in the immediacy of self-consciousness, is *this individual* self-consciousness, and so in an antithesis to the universal self-consciousness. It is an exclusive one or unity which has the still unresolved form of a sensuous ‘other’ for the consciousness for which it is immediately present. This ‘other’ does not as yet know spirit as its own, i.e. spirit as an individual self is not yet equally the universal self, the self of everyone. In other words, the shape has not as yet the form of the concept, i.e. of the universal self, of the self that in its immediate actuality is at the same time a superseded self, viz. thought, universality, without losing its actuality in this universality<sup>44</sup>.

This long passage presents in a first, very dense synopsis, the elements constituting the inadequacy of the reconciliation attained by religious consciousness. First of all, such reconciliation is embodied in a singular self-consciousness (Jesus), and not by self-consciousness as such. It stands, therefore, in opposition to *universal* self-consciousness, and maintains to a certain degree the oppositional structure of consciousness, which is supposed to be superseded in the final stages of the phenomenological path. The reconciliation attained by

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<sup>44</sup> *PhG*, p. 407 (§ 762).

religious self-consciousness, indeed, is limited to *one* individual, to *one* instance of human spirit, that does not become conscious of itself as being universal spirit, a universal subject, and therefore as being the essence of *every* subject, of *every* instance of the universal spirit. If we consider this issue from the perspective of spirit, we can express it by saying that spirit, even in absolute religion, reaches the understanding of itself, but projects it onto an other, single being and therefore does not recognize itself in it, but regards it as still other, different from itself. In the religion of art, for example, spirit also reflects itself in the human shape, but this happens in an external way, since the statue is an immediately present self-consciousness which, nevertheless, lacks real subjectivity: the artist has to *add* subjectivity (the content) to the statue in order to recognize herself therein. Jesus is an immediately present self-consciousness as well, but in revealed religion his shape is understood as immediately representing the unity between human and divine essence and he is a real subject, the bearer of human self-understanding. We get here to the core of what renders makes religion still inadequate: the self-consciousness in which spirit's self-understanding is represented has the "form of a sensuous other" for consciousness. Self-consciousness, in other words, does not yet understands that it *is* the absolute, that the absolute is *its* universalized *subjectivity*, but still regards the absolute as something different, external, opposed to itself<sup>45</sup>. In this sense, in the chapter on absolute knowing, Hegel writes that religion is the reconciliation in the form of being for itself: because the structure in which such reconciliation is attained is a structure of externalization and opposition, by virtue of which the absolute content is still understood by consciousness as different from itself.

Consequently, according to Hegel, "the shape has not as yet the form of the notion", meaning by this that the shape, which is produced by self-consciousness in religion, is still inadequate because it still has to acquire the structure of consciousness, thereby configuring itself not as a particular self anymore, but as a universal self, a "self that in its immediate actuality is at the same time a superseded self, viz. thought, universality, without losing its actuality in this

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<sup>45</sup> I am referring here to Feuerbach's interpretation of religion as expressed in *The Essence of Christianity*, transl. by G. Eliot, Harper & Row, New York 1957.



universality”. This determination reminds of a similar determination of the subject in the context of the absolute knowing chapter. I will examine it in detail later, but for now it will suffice to note that the self, according to what Hegel states in these lines, must be a self which is at the same time a universal and an actual one, a self which is superseded in its immediacy but not placed, as a consequence, in an abstract dimension that would deprive it of its concrete reality. When Christ brings to completion its sensuous existence through his death, “his ‘being’ passes over into ‘having been’”<sup>46</sup> and removes himself from the immediate intuition of consciousness. Through his resurrection, consciousness thus raises itself to spiritual consciousness and relates to him as spirit. This is the stage of community, in which the unity of divine and human is known spiritually, but still, according to Hegel, this knowledge of the absolute has the form of otherness, this time in a temporal and spatial sense, which makes this kind of mediation once again inadequate. Thought, in the community, is only present in a basic modality, because its mediation is only in the form of recollection: the sensuous immediacy, indeed, is not really superseded, but it is only *saved* from the loss due to its passing away and is kept in the same form in which it presented itself:

It is merely raised into the realm of representation, for this is the synthetic combination of sensuous immediacy and its universality or thought. [...] This form of representation constitutes the specific mode in which spirit, in this community, becomes aware of itself. This form is not yet spirit’s self-consciousness that has advanced to its concept *qua* concept. The mediation is still incomplete<sup>47</sup>.

The mediation performed by the community, or the unification of being and thought that takes place in it, is of such a kind that it persists in the unreconciled opposition of a “here” and a “beyond”.

Hegel makes it clear that the content, in religion, is the true one: what is still lacking is the internal relation between its moments, that are still conceived as being in an external relation to one another. The step that consciousness must complete in order to overcome such inadequacy consists in acting so that its true content also possesses the *true shape*, and in order to acquire such shape

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<sup>46</sup> *PhG*, p. 407 (§ 763).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 408 (§ 764-5)

consciousness must “raise its intuition of absolute substance into the concept”<sup>48</sup>, whereas the intuition constitutes a defective modality of knowledge of the absolute content insofar as such content has been implicitly understood, but it is not yet developed in the adequate form and as such known by consciousness.

Absolute spirit is the content, and is thus in the shape of its *truth*. But its truth is [...] to become an actual self, to reflect itself into itself and to be subject<sup>49</sup>.

From a similar point of view, the unity that is required here is that between object – absolute spirit – and subject: absolute spirit must become subject.

The issue of representation surfaces in different moments of the Religion chapter, and plays a central role within it. Even though, as I have already mentioned, I believe that it can be ascribed a central role only insofar as it exemplifies the dynamics of opposition between subject and object – rather than in its constituting a “pictorial” version of conceptual knowledge – it is necessary to devote some attention to its function.

The representation of the religious community is not this speculative thinking; it has the content, but without its necessity, and instead of the form of the concept it brings into the realm of pure consciousness the natural relationships of father and son. Since this consciousness, even in its thinking, remains at the level of representation, absolute being is indeed revealed to it, but the moments of this being, on account of this [empirically] synthetic presentation, partly themselves fall asunder [...]. The object is revealed to it by something alien, and it does not recognize itself in this thought of spirit, does not recognize the nature of pure self-consciousness<sup>50</sup>.

Representational thinking, which is distinctive of the community, differs from conceptual thinking – required in order to attain to absolute knowing – insofar as its content is not understood according to the necessity of the concept in its pureness, but according to the immediacy of a sensuous mediation, which is not founded in the concept. Consequently, consciousness that understands the absolute content in representative form can only intuit the nature of essence in its revelation, for exactly because of this form the moments of the concept – instead of being comprehended in their constitutive unity – are separated from one

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem* (§ 765).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem* (§ 766).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 410-11 (§ 771).

another in the narrative activity of religious representation. Moreover, and I think this is the key point of the issue, the content is not only understood in an inadequate manner, but is given from the outside, it is not the outcome of the autonomous activity of consciousness: the result is that consciousness cannot recognize itself in it, for it is seen as something *alien (fremd)* to it.

In the representation of Christian religion, thus, “the divine being takes on human nature. Here it is already *asserted* that *in themselves* the two are not separate”<sup>51</sup>. This immediate form is superseded when the mediator, Christ, dies and therefore leaves its mundane existence:

The immediately preceding element of representation is, therefore, here explicitly set aside, or it has returned into the self, into its concept; what was in the former merely in the element of being has become a subject<sup>52</sup>.

The overcoming of the representative form begins when the naturalness is superseded, and there remains only the conceptual aspect, i.e. – in this case – its being a self-consciousness.

On the other side, the *universal* has become self-consciousness, just because of this, and the pure or non-actual spirit of mere thinking has become *actual*. The death of the mediator is the death not only of his *natural* aspect or of his particular being for self, not only of the already dead husk stripped of its essential being, but also of the *abstraction* of the divine being<sup>53</sup>.

The death and resurrection of Christ, as I have already mentioned, assume a central significance in the overcoming of the inadequacy of religious consciousness’s knowledge, insofar as they not only involve the superseding of naturalness, but also of the abstractness in which the divine essence is conceived. The result of this movement is the attainment of a form of self-consciousness which is, at the same time, simple and universal. But still, precisely in the moment in which the community acts like bearer of this new awareness, it is inevitably caught in a new inadequacy, since it relies on representation:

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 411 (§ 772).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 419 (§ 785).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*.

This unity of essence and the self having been *implicitly* achieved, consciousness, too, still has this *representation* of its reconciliation, but as a representation. [...]. Its own reconciliation therefore enters its consciousness as something *distant*, as something in the distant *future*, just as the reconciliation which the other *self* achieved appears as something in the distant *past*<sup>54</sup>.

In the community, therefore – as we have seen previously – the reconciliation is understood in the form of representation: but precisely because representation is the modality of consciousness maintaining an opposition to its object and is not able to achieve the identity with it, such reconciliation is regarded, alternatively, either as something in the past, which happened once in the course of spirit's process due to the action of the divine mediator, or as something projected in the future, which remains a *sollen* (ought to), something that remains to be fulfilled. The aspect concerning the *time* of revelation has been discussed by Catherine Malabou, who observes that “The time of revelation is a *specific time*”, whereas the time of absolute knowing, as we will see in Chapter four, is placed on the complicated boundary between the historicity of spirit's experience and its non-temporal comprehension<sup>55</sup>. This relationship with time will become central with respect to the attainment of absolute knowing, whose nature will be defined by temporality in an essential way.

As we have noted in the course of this analysis, religious consciousness, and especially the consciousness of Christian religion, comes to understand the absolute content and brings to the extreme development the unity of this absolute content – in the shape of the divine essence – and of the human essence. However, precisely because this unification occurs in a specific self-consciousness, and not in every human being, i.e. in a “universal being”, it is still incomplete, for it is realized in an element that is other to consciousness itself.

But although in this [revealed religion], spirit has indeed attained its true shape, yet the shape itself and the representation are still the unvanquished aspect from which spirit must pass over into the concept, in order wholly to resolve therein the form of objectivity, in the concept which equally embraces within itself its opposite. It is then that spirit has grasped the concept of itself, just as we now have first grasped it; and its shape or the element of its existence, being the concept, is spirit itself<sup>56</sup>.

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 420-21 (§ 787).

<sup>55</sup> C. Malabou, *The Future of Hegel. Plasticity, Temporality, Dialectic*, Routledge, London/New York 2005, p. 125.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 368 (§ 683).

Once more we can observe that, in a fundamental definition of the nature and limits of a consciousness's stage, Hegel refers to the concept of *Gestalt* (shape): it is the manifestation of consciousness that, in this case, is the *true* shape, and still the shape itself seems to be the element that offers the greatest resistance to the reconciliation of consciousness and self-consciousness. In particular, the form of objectivity is that which, in the concept, will finally find its solution: insofar as the object (as *Gegen-stand*) is something that stands opposed to consciousness, the former is opposed to the content of its experience and knowledge, but once the concept is achieved, this form is *aufgehoben* in it, since it is able to comprehend its opposite in a higher unity. At this stage, spirit has understood its own concept, and the shape coincides with spirit itself.

Accordingly, the following step for consciousness, as Hegel points out in the conclusion of the Religion chapter, consists in the conferring to the immediate presence, or to the concretization of spirit's self-consciousness, the "shape of spirit [*Geistesgestalt*]". As I will show in the following chapter, this determination is essential in order to understand the nature of absolute knowing. I will therefore proceed to a detailed examination of this concept and try to illuminate the central role it plays in the concluding chapter of the *Phenomenology*.



## Chapter Three

### *Absolute Knowing as the Shape of Concept*

#### *Introduction*

In chapters One and Two I have tried to highlight the role played by *Gewissen* and religion as crucial stages in the achievement of the absolute standpoint, given that Hegel defines the latter as constituted by the unification of the reconciliations previously attained by these two shapes in the path of consciousness. As it has become gradually evident, the main contribution of the morality section is to be found in the centrality of the subject and its *action*, which is conceived as the concrete realization of the subject's inwardness in the dimension of *Dasein* (being there, existence). The beautiful soul, as I have shown, reaches the universal structure (the *form*) of the concept, but still needs to fulfill it through the concrete content, which is provided precisely by action. What is needed, then, is to reach a form of knowledge in which universality and the activity of the subject (the *self*) are reconciled. The main contribution of the religion chapter, on the other hand, is the attainment of the absolute content, that is, the understanding of the identity between the universal standpoint and the subject. Still, this identity is not realized by the human subject (i.e., by consciousness), but is incarnated in a single figure that is regarded as "other" than the subject itself, thus perpetuating the opposition between consciousness and its object.

In the present chapter I will offer a close reading of the last chapter of the *Phenomenology* as a whole: my aim is to provide a consistent framework relating the fundamental issues that emerge in the course of Hegel's exposition. What I would like to show is that, despite the difficulty of the text and the well-known conditions under which it was written, Hegel's conception of absolute knowing is not only a coherently structured theory about the nature of science and the result of spirit's self-comprehension, but also provides a comprehensive account of subjectivity (as both knowing and acting), and time (specifically regarding the structure of *Wissenschaft* and the relationship between the *Phenomenology* and the system).

I will articulate my reading of the Absolute Knowing chapter by referring to a pair of terms that I consider very useful for identifying and understanding the central features of this last shape in the phenomenological path. Moreover, I believe that these two terms, namely *Form* (form) and *Gestalt* (shape), together with other relevant determinations that I will extrapolate and highlight in the course of my analysis, constitute the conceptual ground upon which this chapter is built and can be usefully read. Using the concepts of *Form* and *Gestalt* enables a reading that effectively distinguishes between the aspects of absolute knowledge's conceptual structure and its concrete actualization, showing how they relate (and finally coincide) in the development of Hegel's text.

The function of the concept of *Gestalt* is well-known and its use in the *Phenomenology* is broadly recognized in the commentaries and literature in general, both as regards the *Phenomenology* as a whole and the chapter on absolute knowing. This does not apply, however, to the concept of *Form* and the peculiar relationship unfolding between the two concepts. Rather, it is often the case that the distinction between the two terms is underestimated; as a consequence, they end up being considered nothing more than different terms for (more or less) the same thing<sup>1</sup>. This appears quite evidently in the translations of the book, which sometimes do not even distinguish them. Still, there are some good reasons for this disregard. The first one is to be found in the fact that Hegel himself does not provide a clear account of his use of the terms, but this is no great novelty for the Hegel reader; it will suffice, in this regard, to think about the many different uses of the term 'concept' throughout the *corpus*<sup>2</sup>. The second one is that there is apparently no technical and consistent use of the terms *Form* and *Gestalt* in Hegel's texts, except for a couple of works, such as the *Aesthetics*,

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<sup>1</sup> It is not uncommon, indeed, to encounter examples of such overlooking, even among the most competent scholars. Kenneth Westphal, for example, translates *Gestalt* with "form" (of consciousness) and limits himself to point out in a footnote that "other contributors [to the same volume] translate Hegel's term 'Gestalt' differently, e.g. by 'shape' or 'figure'". See K. R. Westphal, *Hegel's Phenomenological Method*, in Id. (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden/Oxford 2009, pp. 1-36, here esp. pp. 3 and 30. See also Id., *Hegel's Epistemological Realism. A Study of the Aim and Method of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, Kluwer, Dordrecht 1989, pp. 92-93. Such confusing use of the terms is observed by Harris as well: see *Hegel's Ladder*, vol. I, *The Pilgrimage of Reason*, p. 205.

<sup>2</sup> One might argue that it is possible - and necessary - to provide a unified and well-connected account (or *story*) of a concept in a philosopher's thought, and I am sympathetic to this idea. Ermanno Bencivenga, for example, especially argues in favor of the need for a unified account of the thought of a single thinker as opposed to the widespread tendency to periodization. See *Hegel's Dialectical Logic*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, pp. 92-94.



where we can find a clear distinction. *Form*, in that context, is used to refer to the *forms of art*, the historical-artistic categories that describe the fundamental modalities of the relation between spiritual development and artistic expression in general. Hegel's *Aesthetics*, in this sense, is structured according to three forms of art, namely the symbolic, the classical and the romantic forms of art. *Form*, therefore, is a concept relating to the logical structure of art, whereas *Gestalt* is used to define the concrete, specific manifestations pertaining to the different forms of art<sup>3</sup>.

The otherwise dominating lack of attention regarding the distinction of the two terms is justified, on the one hand, insofar as both translate the same Latin word (*forma*), *Form* preserving the Latinate origin, *Gestalt* being the German version of it. In a certain sense, therefore, they are synonyms reflecting different meanings of a same word<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, however, since we do have two different words, it is possible to distinguish two semantic fields (or, maybe better, *conceptual* fields) with sufficient clarity and accuracy relying (a) on the words' origin and development, and (b) on their actual occurrences in Hegel's text on absolute knowing.

According to the goals I have set myself, the present chapter will be articulated in two main parts: in the first one I will provide an examination of the two terms by looking at their etymology. In this way, I will try to show that in the origin of the words themselves it is possible to track down, at least in its potentiality, their peculiar speculative significance. I am not aiming at a scientific etymological inquiry regarding these words, nor at a complete reconstruction of the concepts' history: both objectives would be beyond the scope of this study. Rather, my aim here is to offer some useful suggestions in order to structure an interpretive hypothesis which, in what follows, will be only discussed in theoretical terms. The same holds for my discussion of Aristotle's and Aquinas' theories of form: I do not mean to provide a strong historical-philosophical background for Hegel's use of the concept of form and shape, but to show how

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<sup>3</sup> See G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, in *Werke*, Theorie-Werkausgabe in 20 Bände, auf der Grundlage der Werke von 1832-45 neu edierte Ausgabe, Redaktion von E. Moldenhauer und K. M. Michel, Frankfurt a.M. 1970-71, B.de 13-15 (*Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, transl. by T.M. Knox, Clarendon Press, Oxford/New York 1998).

<sup>4</sup> As regards the English language, for example, these are the first meanings of "form" listed by the Oxford Dictionary: "the visible shape or configuration of something", "a particular way in which a thing exists or appears", "a type or variety of something".

the traditional philosophical understanding of the concept of form, especially in an author like Aristotle, tends to ascribe to the concept of form the same specific function that can be found in the different context of Hegel's discussion of absolute knowing. Starting from these premises I will then proceed, in the second part, to read the concluding chapter of the *Phenomenology* precisely in light of the concepts of *Form* and *Gestalt*. Their relationship, as I will show, unfolds throughout the text and allows to see its coherent structure by identifying and explaining the meaning of the central passages of Hegel's exposition.

The chapter on absolute knowing, according to the main themes that gradually emerge, can be subdivided as follows: (a) the definition of absolute knowing by means of its difference from religion; (b) the recapitulation of the two previously attained reconciliations (conscience and revealed religion); (c) the determination of the conceptual structure of knowing; (d) the subject of absolute knowing; (e) the existence (*Dasein*) of absolute knowing and its *incarnation* in science; (f) the relation to time and the necessity of exteriorization; (g) the outcome of the process as reached through *Erinnerung*; h) the transition to the developed system.

### *1. Form and Gestalt*

As I have just observed, *Form* has a clear Latinate origin, whereas *Gestalt* has a Germanic root. According to one of the most popular accounts, *Form* is derived from the Greek μορφή through a transposition of consonants<sup>5</sup>. The Greek μορφή, in turn, seems to be connected with the Sanskrit root *dhar*, which means «to hold», «to hold up», «to contain». *Gestalt* (shape) is derived from an old form of past participle of the verb *stellen*, which means “to place”, “to posit”. In their *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm provided a useful summary of the different meanings of this term in the German language. They report two major meanings, in which the two origins of the term (the second one being

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<sup>5</sup> See W. Meyer-Lubke, *Romanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, C. Winter Universitätsverlag, Heidelberg 1968; the same account is supported by J. and W. Grimm in their *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, München 1991, Bd. 3, pp. 1897-99, in which they also refer to a possible second option, namely the origin of *Form* from the Latin *ferre* (and consequently from the Greek φορέω/φέρω). See also J. Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Francke Verlag, Tübingen-Basel 1994.

traceable in the Latin *figura*<sup>6</sup>) seem to merge: 1) «die Art, wie etwas gestaltet, gestellt, beschaffen ist, wie es damit steht» (the way something is set up, by virtue of which it is in a certain way), «Beschaffenheit», «Zustand» (condition, state); 2) «die Art, wie etwas aussieht, das aussehen, das äuszere» (the way something appears, the appearance, the exteriority)<sup>7</sup>.

This reconstruction of the derivation of the two terms, although only outlined, allows us to articulate a more accurate distinction of their meanings by combining the results of the etymological investigation with some further considerations. First, *Gestalt* seems to identify the way something *appears*, more precisely the way in which something is set up, its condition, its state. We are not dealing, therefore, with the quality that pertains to a thing as it is in itself, in its essence, but rather with a quality pertaining to the *Aussehen* of that thing, its appearance, its exteriority. This is precisely the meaning that the term *Gestalt* is assigned in the phenomenological context, where the *Gestalten* are the modes, or – more specifically – the concrete, particular, historically determined existences that spirit gives itself in its own appearing, in its own manifestation<sup>8</sup>:

Spirit descends from its universality to individuality through determination. The determination, or middle term, is consciousness, self-consciousness and so on. But *individuality* is constituted by the shapes assumed by these moments. These, therefore, exhibit spirit in its individuality or *actuality* [*Wirklichkeit*], and are distinguished from one another in *time*, though in such a way that the later moment retains within it the preceding one<sup>9</sup>.

The phenomenological shape constitutes the last moment of the syllogism upon which the entire systematic structure of the work is grounded, and is defined in relation to spirit's universality and the different moments which constitutes its determination (consciousness, self-consciousness, reason and spirit); the shape,

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<sup>6</sup> Given the nature of this chapter, I do not regard an extensive discussion of the Latinate term *figura* as appropriate; however, it seems interesting to stress that the word is placed in a semantic field close to the one relevant for the German term *Gestalt*: *figura*, in fact, belongs to the “family” of *tingo*, *figulus*, *effigies* ecc. and is etimologically connected to the Greek τεῖχος, τοῖχος (“wall”) and to the ancient German *Teig*: it derives from the Indo-European \*dheigh (the asterisk indicates that the root has been reconstructed, not actually attested), which means “to run one’s hand over something”, “to touch”, “to knead”, through the form \*dhi-n-gh. The verb *ingere* means “to mold”, “to shape”. See M. Cortelazzo, P. Zolli, *Dizionario etimologico della lingua italiana*, Zanichelli, Bologna 1979, and O. Pianigiani, *Dizionario etimologico della lingua italiana*, a cura di D. Meldi, Melita, La Spezia 1990.

<sup>7</sup> Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, Bd. 5, pp. 4178-90.

<sup>8</sup> The Greek verb φαίνομαι, from which the term “phenomenology” is clearly derived, means precisely to appear, to be manifest.

<sup>9</sup> *PhG*, p. 366 (§ 679).

specifically, represents the singularized determination of the moments<sup>10</sup>, that is, their realization in actuality [*Wirklichkeit*]. The articulation of the different shapes through the phenomenological path, as Hegel highlights, occurs in *time*<sup>11</sup>, but also – and mainly – according to a process that is essentially *logical*: each shape, once its inadequacy has emerged, gives rise to the following one, in which it is comprehended and preserved (i.e., *aufgehoben*).

As regards the concept of *Form*, I will now outline the general traits of its meaning, which will progressively emerge in a clearer way through the analysis of Hegel's text. The relevant semantic field, as it has already been anticipated, is the one relating to the “holding” and “holding up”. Differently from the concept of *Gestalt*, therefore, *Form* does not seem to concern the appearance of something, but rather its very subsisting, and specifically what that thing needs in order to be what it is. Such “support”, in an ontological sense, is constituted by its essence, that is, something internal to the thing itself, that does not concern its exteriority, even though it can reflect (and actually *does* reflect) itself in it – as we will see in what follows – in different ways.

The “ontological weight” of form is thus clearly greater than the one of shape, because it determines the very being of a thing: in this peculiar sense, the concept of form has such a rich history that it might be identified with the history of philosophy (or metaphysics) itself<sup>12</sup>. For this reason it is hard to outline even a barely adequate *status quaestionis*. A couple of hints, however, are in order, insofar as it seems appropriate to refer to the classical conception of form. In this perspective, as I anticipated above, I will restrict myself to a brief outline of Aristotle's theory of form – since his thought represents an essential reference point for Hegel – especially as it is discussed in the *Metaphysics*<sup>13</sup>. Here Aristotle

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<sup>10</sup> On the relation among the different levels of determination in the *Phenomenology*, insofar as it is articulated also according to the relationship between *Form* and *Gestalt*, I will say more later. As regards specifically the relation between the moments and shapes of the *Phenomenology* see F. Chiereghin, *La Fenomenologia dello spirito di Hegel. Introduzione alla lettura*, Carocci, Roma 1998, esp. pp. 47-51. See also H. Schmitz, *Der Gestaltbegriff in Hegels «Phänomenologie des Geistes» und seine geistesgeschichtliche Bedeutung*, in *Gestaltprobleme der Dichtung. Festschrift für Günther Müller*, Bouvier, Bonn 1957, pp. 315-334.

<sup>11</sup> The role of time, in its relation to spirit's shapes and specifically to absolute knowing as the last shape of spirit, will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

<sup>12</sup> See P. Rohs, *Form und Grund*, «Hegel-Studien», Beiheft 6, Hamburg 1969, esp. pp. 11-121.

<sup>13</sup> My aim here is neither the articulation of an extensive comparison between the two authors about the concept of form – an operation which, by the way, would require a specific study and which has already been carried out by authoritative scholars – nor an exhaustive account of the topic: I would simply like to suggest some elements that can function as stimuli for the

deals with substance, that is regarded as the first meaning of being, and is understood according to four major meanings: essence, universal, *genus* and *substratum*, namely “that of which other things are predicated, while it is itself not predicated of anything else”<sup>14</sup>. The nature of *substratum*, therefore, is said to be “in one sense matter [...], in another, shape<sup>15</sup>, and in a third sense, the compound of these”. Aristotle will then assign priority to the form over the matter: not only, indeed, “form is prior to the matter and more real”, but “it will be prior to the compound also for the same reason”<sup>16</sup>.

Substance, therefore, has as its most fundamental meaning that of *form*: not only does it satisfy all the requirements of substantiality (for it is a subject of predication, separable and individual), but it constitutes in itself the cause of substantiality for the compound of matter and form, since it is the cause of its being what it is or, in other words, its formal cause, its essence<sup>17</sup>. Given this metaphysical stance, the soul is regarded as the instance of substance, and more specifically the instance of form *par excellence*, for according to the well-known definition that can be found in *De Anima*, it constitutes “the form of a natural body having life potentially within it. But substance is actuality, and thus soul is the actuality of a body as above characterized”<sup>18</sup>. In books VIII and IX of the *Metaphysics*, indeed, substance (and therefore form) is identified with *act* (ἐντελέχεια or ἐντελέχεια): among the different meanings of *act*, then, the first is the one defined by Aristotle as actuality (ἐντελέχεια). In this sense the soul is the

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understanding and focus of the issue at stake in this chapter. For an outline of Aristotle’s role for the development of Hegel’s philosophy and Hegel’s reception of his metaphysics, see K Düsing, *Hegel und die Geschichte der Philosophie. Ontologie und Dialektik in Antike und Neuzeit*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1983, esp. pp. 111-32. For a comprehensive examination of the relation between the two philosophers see, for example, A. Ferrarin, *Hegel and Aristotle*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001.

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. by J. Barnes, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1984, vol. 2, VII, 3, 1028 b 35-36 (in what follows, the *Metaphysics* will be quoted with the standard abbreviation *Metaph.*, followed by the book, chapter, page and lines numbers). Since substance is the first meaning of being, the science of being will be, mainly, science of substance. See E. Berti, *La Metafisica di Aristotele: «onto-teologia» o «filosofia prima»?*, in Id., *Nuovi studi aristotelici. II. Fisica, antropologia e metafisica*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2005, pp. 395-420, here p. 413.

<sup>15</sup> The Greek Μορφή, here, is translated with “shape” (apparently with no reason, except for the one I was discussing above, namely the lack of awareness about the distinction between the two concepts). The next occurrences, however, are translated as “form”.

<sup>16</sup> *Metaph.* VII, 3, 1029 a 1-10.

<sup>17</sup> See E. Berti, *Il concetto di «sostanza prima» nel libro Z della Metafisica*, in Id., *Aristotele dalla dialettica alla filosofia prima, con saggi integrativi*, Bompiani, Milano 2004, pp. 529-49, here esp. p. 415.

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *De anima*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 1, II, 1, 412 a 20-25.

form of the body, and therefore what enables the body to be, its inner principle of internal organization. It seems therefore correct to say that the subsistence of the thing, and therefore its act, is possible only insofar as the thing has *form*, whereas potentiality is nothing but its *capacity* of being<sup>19</sup>.

The discussion of the relationship between form and matter in *De anima* is particularly interesting: “We say that substance is one kind of what is, and that is in several senses: in the sense of matter or that which in itself is not a this, and in the sense of form or essence, which is *that precisely in virtue of which a thing is called a this*, and thirdly in the sense of that which is a compound of both. Now matter is potentiality, form actuality”<sup>20</sup>. This same account, according to which form is what confers determination – and therefore actuality – to the thing, can be found later in Aquinas, who explicitly holds that «*forma dat esse materiae*» (form gives being to matter)<sup>21</sup>: form is what enables matter to be, and there is no matter without form, whereas it is possible, vice versa, to talk about forms without matter («*impossibile est esse materiam sine aliqua forma; tamen non est impossibile esse aliquam formam sine materia, forma enim in eo quod est forma non habet dependentiam ad materiam*»)<sup>22</sup>. As we will see, this point does not apply to Hegel’s philosophy, for he does not conceive of an independent form: a more complex, namely a circular relationship of form and matter (or form and content, form and shape) will emerge from our reading of the Absolute Knowing chapter. It will become clear, indeed, that forms, considered as the logical, eternal structures emerging from the concrete movement of the phenomenological *Gestalten* (shapes), cannot be thought and justified regardless of, and before, the concrete unfolding and understanding of the experience of consciousness. The only alternative would be the Platonic way of conceiving forms as eternal and isolated “models”.

Starting from this brief and inevitably rough outline of the Aristotelian/Tomistic account of form we can draw a suggestion for what will follow. We can anticipate that Hegel ascribes an equally central value to the concept of form (we just need to consider, for example, the definition of logic as

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<sup>19</sup> See *Metaph.*, IX, 6, 1048 a 30-1: «Actuality means the existence of a thing».

<sup>20</sup> *De Anima*, II, 1 412 a 5-10 (italics mine).

<sup>21</sup> Aquinas, *De Ente et Essentia*, in *Opera Omnia*, Iussu Leonis XIII P. M. Edita, Tomus XLIII, Editori di San Tommaso, Roma 1976, Ch. 4, 46-50.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

*Wissenschaft der absoluten Form*, i.e. science of the absolute form), and this becomes especially clear in the chapter on absolute knowing. What I would like to suggest with my reading is that this conception of form acquires a wholly peculiar nuance in relation to the concept of *Gestalt* in the chapter on absolute knowing, thereby giving rise to a specific development of the “compound” constituted by form and the peculiar matter which, in the *Phenomenology*, is the shape, and which will culminate in their dynamic identity in absolute knowing.

## *2. The Form as the Differentiating Feature of Religion and Absolute Knowing*

As we have already seen at the beginning of this study, the discussion of absolute knowing in the final chapter of the *Phenomenology* starts with a definition which proceeds by way of absolute knowing’s differentiation from religion, that is, the object of the preceding chapter of the *Phenomenology*. Hegel maintains that religious consciousness attains to the absolute content, but still suffers from an essential defectiveness, which prevents it from superseding the opposition between consciousness and self-consciousness. More specifically, in its religious experience consciousness is stuck precisely in its *consciousness* modality: in other words, it has not yet achieved the identity between the knowledge about itself and the knowledge of what is other than itself: for the object of that knowledge it is still something different from itself, is still an object characterized by otherness. The specific reason for this defectiveness is explained in the following passage:

Spirit itself as a whole, and the self-differentiated moments within it, fall within the sphere of representation and in the form of objectivity. The *content* of this representation is absolute spirit; and all that now remains to be done is to supersede this mere form, or rather, since this belongs to *consciousness as such*, its truth must already have yielded itself in the shape of consciousness<sup>23</sup>.

Already in these first lines we can trace a significant use of the concept of *Form* that enables us to focus on some important implications. First of all, Hegel argues that spirit, in the religious dimension, is understood through representation

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<sup>23</sup> *PhG*, p. 422 (§ 788).

and in the form of objectivity<sup>24</sup>. The limit of religious consciousness seems to consist in a formal issue, and precisely in the *form* by means of which consciousness relates to its own content – the absolute content, in this specific context – as an objectivity regarded as other than itself. The content being equal, the transition that consciousness must carry out in order to reach the dimension of absolute knowing seems to emerge as a change in form, or in Hegel words, as an “Aufheben dieser bloßen Form”, the superseding of “this mere form”. At a first look it might seem that we are dealing with a form that is conceived, as it were, as an accidental and totally indifferent clothing. But it seems naïve to think that a concept playing such a significant role can be underestimated to such an extent, and even more if we consider that the transition we are dealing with is the really crucial transition, the one leading to the culmination of the phenomenological path and to the “true shape in which truth exists”<sup>25</sup>, which, in the *Preface*, has been announced as the goal of the work: in other words, it is the transition leading to science, to the identity of being and thought and the unfolding of such result in the concrete development of science, that is, the full system.

But let us go back to the passage we were analyzing: certainly those few lines are not enough for us to see a detailed determination of the meaning that Hegel attributes to the concept of form in the Chapter on absolute knowing, but it is certainly possible to recognize in form what differentiates religion – that is, the moment in which consciousness and self-consciousness are not yet fully reconciled, because consciousness understands the absolute content as an object and therefore as something *other* than itself – and absolute knowing – where such reconciliation, on the contrary, is *happening*, and is *actual*. Immediately afterwards Hegel argues that such form specifically pertains to consciousness as such, and that its *truth* must have already emerged along the phenomenological

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<sup>24</sup> For a deeper analysis of this determination, see Chapter Two of this study. As it has already been observed in that chapter, most interpretations of the transition from religion to absolute knowing (and from religion to philosophy, if one takes into account Hegel's mature system as presented in the three editions of the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*) emphasize almost exclusively the limits and lacks of representation, highlighting philosophy's need to supersede the representational form of religion in order to achieve the conceptual form (as if it were a merely *formal* issue). This interpretive stance, however, runs the risk of disregarding the significance of what Hegel says about such transition, and consequently of failing to fully understand the nature of absolute knowing (and thus, of philosophy itself). This applies especially to the text we are considering and the reading I am trying to develop. See F. Menegoni, *Die offenbare Religion*.

<sup>25</sup> *PhG*, p. 11 (§ 5). This passage from the *Preface* will be fully discussed in the course of the present chapter.



path: in accordance with this statement, and in order to review the path through which consciousness has reached the stage in which it is capable of being “with itself in *its* otherness as such”<sup>26</sup>, Hegel devotes the first, dense pages of the chapter to a long summary of the stages preceding absolute knowing.

As I have already suggested in the Introduction, the fact that such an extensive part of the chapter is devoted to the recapitulation of the major steps of consciousness along the phenomenological path has led several commentators to reduce the role of absolute knowing to the simple (and consequently unessential) gathering together of those stages, as a mere “summary”. On the contrary, there is a specifically theoretical reason for Hegel’s ground for this review. Insofar as absolute knowing constitutes the culminating point of the phenomenological path, indeed, it must first be considered and understood as the fulfillment of the preceding stages. It is precisely by taking the perspective of absolute knowing, namely the perspective of the “we”/“for us”, that we can embrace the comprehensive path covered by consciousness and grasp its moments as moments of the object’s knowledge.

It is from one side a shape of consciousness as such, and from the other side a number of such shapes which *we* bring together, in which the totality of the moments of the object and of the relation of consciousness to it can be indicated only as resolved into its moments<sup>27</sup>.

By reviewing some of the fundamental stations in the phenomenological path, Hegel aims to show the way in which the reconciliation between self-consciousness and consciousness has been already realized both in the spirit certain of itself, and in the context of religion<sup>28</sup>.

The first one constitutes reconciliation in the form of *being in itself* [*in der Form des Ansichseins*], whereas the second one attains to reconciliation in the form of being for itself [*in der Form des Fürsichseins*]<sup>29</sup>. The meaning of the form of reconciliation provided by religion in relation to the one provided by conscience (*Gewissen*) is then further explained in this passage:

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 422 (§ 788).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 423 (§ 789).

<sup>28</sup> For a discussion of these previous forms of reconciliation and their limits, see Chapters 1 and 2 of the present work.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 425 (§ 794).

This concept fulfilled itself on one side in the self-assured spirit that *acted*, and on the other, in religion: in religion it won for consciousness the absolute content *as content* or, in the form of *representation*, the form of otherness for consciousness; on the other hand, in the prior shape the form is that of the self itself, for it contains the self-assured spirit that *acts*; the self accomplishes the life of absolute spirit<sup>30</sup>.

Hegel's argument here is that religion owns *the absolute content as content*, but not as its *form*: it seems, therefore, that the role of form is not as negligible as it could be suggested by the initial attribution of the adjective *bloß*<sup>31</sup>, but rather that it constitutes an essential condition for the process leading to absolute knowing, a condition determining the fullness (or, conversely, the incompleteness) of the reconciliation between self-consciousness and consciousness. The content of religion, as we have seen in Chapter One, is the absolute content, that is, the identity between spirit and the absolute essence. Such content, however, is present in religion only as such (and as a passive, given representation) that it does not reach the point in which it constitutes, for religious consciousness, the very structure of its relationship to content. But what does it mean to have the absolute content "as form"? If that content is the identity between the absolute essence and (consciousness as) spirit, then this means that, when consciousness acquires that form, it will become aware of that identity, and of the fact that its subjectivity can be the bearer of that identity and unfold it in its knowledge, that it will then understand to be identical with truth, on the ground of the path it will have accomplished.

It is precisely that form, therefore, that constitutes the condition for absolute knowing, the condition for the reconciliation Hegel talks about throughout the last chapter (and later I will devote my full attention to the understanding of what, concretely, is reconciled in absolute knowing and what is that is "seen" in the space it opens up). For the moment, let us follow Hegel's discussion in *his own* terms, so that later we will be able to "translate" it in terms that can make the meaning of the last station of the *Phenomenology* fully clear.

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 426 (§ 796).

<sup>31</sup> Harris cautions the reader against a deflationary reading of this change of form: "Hegel always maintained that religion and philosophy were the knowledge of the *same* 'content' in different 'forms'. But those who think that the change of 'form' leaves the truth of 'religion' effectively untouched, are deceiving themselves either about what Hegel meant, or else about their (not properly Hegelian) relation to the *faith* of the religious tradition from which Hegel's language is derived". *Hegel's Ladder*, vol. II, *The Odyssey of Spirit*, pp. 710-11.

The reconciliation attained in religion, Hegel tells us, is merely in the form of being for itself: this refers to the fact that, as we previously noted, the religious reconciliation takes place in the element of what is other than itself. In other words, it is not realized *in spirit* itself, but projected onto an external existence. In the acting spirit, instead, the *form* is constituted by the *self* itself, and it is precisely this aspect, together with the content offered by religion, that builds the standpoint of absolute knowing, which finds in the subjectivity of spirit, comprehending itself through and in itself (and not *through* or *in* an other), the key of its own establishing. The crucial function of this point will emerge soon: the fact that the form is “the self itself” constitutes the formal condition (in the fullest meaning of the term, according to which it identifies the essence, the substance) of possibility for the existence of absolute knowing, which results from the spiritual unity of these two moments, namely the being in itself and the being for itself of reconciliation. The form of absolute knowing, therefore, is to be determined as the identity of consciousness and self-consciousness, or of the understanding that spirit develops about the object of its knowing, and the one it develops about itself, whose *fulcrum* is constituted by the self, and specifically by the self as acting, or its capacity to exteriorize its own content (namely, the awareness of that identity).

In the last passage I have quoted, moreover, there is an important reference to the *life* of absolute spirit, which – as Hegel tells us – is accomplished by the self. It is crucial not to overlook the significance of this claim, for in my view it constitutes a key aspect in the characterization of absolute knowing and of the role the subject assumes therein. Whereas, on the one side, it is clear that absolute knowing cannot be the outcome of an individual development, but encloses in itself a path that is carried out by spirit in its comprehensiveness<sup>32</sup>, on the other side it is equally clear, according to what Hegel is claiming in this passage, that it is in a subject, in a concrete individuality that absolute knowing actualizes itself, it is in one *consciousness* that absolute spirit must necessarily be *embodied*. Any other interpretive stance, in my judgment, inevitably leads to an *abstract* conception of absolute knowing, detached from its content and from one of the two key sides by which it is composed, namely the *Tun des Selbst* (activity of the

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<sup>32</sup> I will say more about the characterization of spirit in what follows.

self), whose outcome would be nothing but a renewed beautiful soul, or a knowledge that can only be projected onto an external entity, as in religion, thereby annulling the result of the previously attained reconciliations. Absolute knowing, rather, needs to be understood as simultaneously *known* and *lived* universality. As we noticed above, additionally, the self is the *form* of such knowing, whose standpoint is reached precisely when the content is given the structure of subjectivity: I will focus on this structure in the next sections of the present chapter.

But let us go back to the analysis of the text and to the role of the concept of form in the determination of absolute knowing. In the following passage, Hegel adds some details for the understanding the relationship between form and content in the attainment of such standpoint:

What in religion was *content* or a form for presenting an *other*, is here the *self's* own *act*; the concept requires the *content* to be the *self's* own *act*. For this concept is, as we see, the knowledge of the self's act within itself as all essentiality and all existence, the knowledge of this subject as substance and of the substance as this knowledge of its act<sup>33</sup>.

What in absolute knowing is the activity of the self, in religion was merely a content; in other words, the reconciliation with what is *other* than itself was merely the object of the representation of a "thing" which, in turn, was other than itself. Reconciliation was conceived as reached in God, but not in the self. In absolute knowing reconciliation becomes the *act* of the self, of consciousness, and the content finally coincides with its act<sup>34</sup>. It is important to notice that this condition is a specific demand of the *concept*: in the concept, as we know, both the side of the *Ansich*, viz. the universal content, and the side of the *Fürsich*, viz.

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<sup>33</sup> *PhG*, p. 427 (§ 797). Lu De Vos is explicit in arguing that absolute knowing is the dimension of the reconciliation between form and content, and Gabriella Baptist considers the pair form-content one of the logic-systematic tools (together with the sets: in itself/for itself, being/essence/concept, consciousness/self consciousness/reason or spirit) through which Hegel articulates this part of the chapter. See L. De Vos, *Absolute Knowing in the Phenomenology*, in A. Wylleman (ed.), *Hegel on the Ethical Life, Religion and Philosophy*, Leuven University Press, Leuven/Dordrecht 1989, pp. 231-270, here p. 240; G. Baptist, *Das absolute Wissen. Zeit, Geschichte, Wissenschaft*, in D. Köhler u. O. Pöggeler (hg.), *G.W.F. Hegel. Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 2006, pp. pp. 245-61, here p. 248.

<sup>34</sup> In other words, the content, namely the identity of consciousness and self-consciousness, is carried out by the self itself, and not only *contemplated* in an other, which acts for us (Jesus, for instance). As Harris points out, «it is the "object" of manifest religion that has now to be turned over into the "subject" of "absolute knowing"». See *Hegel's Ladder*, vol. II, *The Odyssey of Spirit*, p. 714.

the universality's negation through exteriorization, are reconciled, and this moment gives rise to the greatest richness and comprehensiveness of the content. By attaining this stance, in which the absolute content is the result of the self's act, the goal announced in the *Preface* is eventually reached: knowing has as its object the subject conceived as substance. This means that the subject's determinations now coincide with the object's determinations and conversely, because knowing has substance as its object insofar as substance is the knowledge of the subject's act. It is only in this way that the concept is actualized, and maintained, in its own form: that is, in its own essential structure – the one described above. Previously, in the course of the phenomenological path, this form did emerge, but merely “in the form of a *shape of consciousness*”<sup>35</sup>: in particular, as we saw in Chapter One, the shape of the beautiful soul was the bearer of the concept's form, but it was spirit's “knowledge of itself in its pure, transparent unity” which held itself “firmly opposed to its realization”<sup>36</sup>. This opposition is precisely consciousness' characteristic way of relating to its object, and precisely what is being superseded in absolute knowing. What is crucial now is to understand the specific way in which this opposition is superseded. In other words, since knowledge can hardly be conceived regardless of an object, we need to understand what this absolute form of knowledge looks like and how the overcoming of the difference between subject and object can take place. And it is precisely at this stage of his exposition that Hegel offers the first explicit determination of the essence of absolute knowing, thereby giving the first hints of the answers we are looking for. We need to unpack them in order to start understanding what he is talking about.

### *3. The Nature of Absolute Knowing: Its Status*

This last shape of spirit – the spirit which at the same time gives its complete and true content the form of the self and thereby realizes its concept as remaining in its concept in this realization – this is absolute knowing; it is spirit that knows itself in the shape of spirit, or a *conceptual knowing*<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> *PhG*, p. 427 (§ 797).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 427 (§ 798).

In these lines (which are always and at all points quoted in the commentaries), in a brief and at the same time very dense way, Hegel offers a determination of the nature of absolute knowing that is extremely rich in implications concerning several of the major issues we have to deal with: more specifically, it allows us to formulate and structure – if not perhaps to start clarifying – the questions concerning the concept of absolute knowing, its subject and its realization [*Realisierung*].

First of all, Hegel defines absolute knowing as the “last shape of spirit”. Therefore, absolute knowing is *one* of the modalities through which spirit reveals itself along this path, *one* of the configurations acquired by the relationship that consciousness establishes with the content of its knowledge. As we already know, in the preceding shapes this knowledge was inadequate to varying degrees, for – even in different ways – it kept itself in an opposing relationship with its own content. Absolute knowing is the last, culminating shape of the phenomenological path, since it accomplishes and fulfills the goal of the entire path by superseding the opposition characterizing consciousness’s approach to its object. This determination of absolute knowing, however, raises a decisive question concerning its *status*: in fact it is, on the one hand, a *shape*, and therefore it is part of the phenomenological path in the fullest sense. As we have seen at the beginning of this chapter, the shape constitutes a singularized, concrete determination of a more general moment in spirit’s manifestation process. On the other hand, however, absolute knowing entails the overcoming of consciousness’s perspective, which characterized and defined this path until this moment, and the attainment of a different perspective, namely the absolute one. How then should absolute knowing be understood? The risk implicit in considering it as a shape is that of being unable to emancipate knowing from the finiteness and opposition which we saw as defining of the shapes of consciousness throughout the *Phenomenology*, and therefore of being unable to grasp its specificity and significance. But what is absolute knowing, if it is not a shape? The risk, in case we choose this option, is that of leaving its nature undetermined or, even worse, of ending up understanding it as an abstract and isolated knowing.

Absolute knowing, therefore, is placed in a transition point that makes it hard to understand its nature in a clear manner, for it constitutes the goal and simultaneously the transcending of the same process. Still, it is of crucial

significance to try to clear up this question, because the comprehensive interpretation of absolute knowing is at stake, and the consequences following from the adoption of one or the other interpretive option are manifold and crucial. In the literature we can find different readings of this issue with different nuances. Harris, for example, in his analysis of the *Preface to the Phenomenology*<sup>38</sup>, claims that “the word *Gestalt* is used to emphasize the *concreteness* of this ‘pure form’ of science” and that it is “an occasion for a polemic against ‘formalism’ in philosophy generally”. He thus acknowledges that absolute knowing must have a *Gestalt*, because it has a conscious content: Hegel’s critique of formalism, in this sense, as a tendency to apply an abstract, external principle to a content which is somehow “found” and external to knowing itself, realizes itself in the statement of the need for knowing, in order to be really absolute, to establish a substantial relationship with its content; such a relationship, moreover, must be mutual, one in which content and “form” unfold in an integrated manner, by permeating one another. The outcome of this reciprocal relationship can be nothing but a concrete knowing, which does not remain in the ivory tower of abstraction and isolation, but rather acquires for itself a concrete way of existence, giving therefore to itself a shape and a *Dasein* (being there, existence). Still, Harris recognizes the same ambiguity which we previously referred to, namely the fact that on the one hand knowing must have a shape, and at the same time, on the other hand, the attainment of the goal coincides with the transcending of shape as such, since it gives rise to a pure conceptual knowing, or science, defined as “*pure form* that evolves into a system of pure forms”, which is “separated from the process of its appearance”<sup>39</sup>. Absolute knowing, according to Harris, constitutes the stage in which our reconciliation with the inadequacy of the preceding forms of knowledge (the different *Gestalten* - shapes) takes place, but at the same time it is “the transcending of ‘shape’ altogether”<sup>40</sup>. First of all, I think that the first part of this definition cannot be fully shared: I will devote more space to a detailed

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<sup>38</sup> This is the passage he analyzes: “The self-moving concrete shape makes itself into a simple determinateness; in so doing it raises itself to logical form, and exists in its essentiality; its concrete existence is just this movement, and is directly a logical existence. It is for this reason unnecessary to clothe the content in an external formalism; the content is in its very nature the transition to such formalism, but a formalism which ceases to be external, since the form is the innate development of the concrete content itself” (*PhG*, pp. 40-41; § 56).

<sup>39</sup> H. S. Harris, *Hegel’s Ladder*, vol. I, *The Pilgrimage of Reason*, p. 40.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

explanation of my disagreement in the final section of this chapter, but for now it is enough to hint at the fact that the reconciliation reached in absolute knowing should be conceived as the *inclusion* of all the preceding and inadequate forms of knowledge in spirit's path and their comprehension as necessary stages that led to the end, in which, however, they are not abandoned or canceled, but understood as integrated *moments* of the comprehensive identity of spirit. Precisely for this reason, therefore, the standpoint that is reached in the conclusive stage of the phenomenological path cannot be thought of as such that it abandons (or even supersedes) its shape – this would amount to abandon its own existence – if one does not want to end up conceiving it as a relapse into that very formalism which, as Harris himself reminds us, Hegel sharply criticizes. And relapsing into formalism would mean reaching a knowledge that is *nowhere*, if not in the abstruse mind of some philosophers, and which would forget (something that, as we will see, the *Phenomenology* does not allow for) the very soil from which it has arisen, and of which it constitutes the conceptual understanding and the rational account.

Another major commentator, who devoted great attention to the reflection on the concept of shape, is Franco Chiereghin, who reminds us that the systematic *locus* in which Hegel elaborated the concept of shape is the *Naturphilosophie*, starting from the Jena years and up to the Berlin period. As specifically regards the shape in the phenomenological context, Chiereghin defines it as “the characteristic ‘place’ within which a determined form of consciousness’s relationship to the object realizes itself”<sup>41</sup>. Concerning absolute knowing in particular, he defines it as the perfect shape compared to all the preceding ones, since it supersedes the difference of knowing and truth, and at the same time he recognizes that it is *still* a shape, because the simplicity of the concept, in absolute knowing, is unfolded in the moments which constitute it, even though in a reconciled unity. Also in this reading, however, the difficulty pertaining to the status of absolute knowing emerges, for it is placed in the transition point between the succession of the inadequate shapes that characterized the *Phenomenology* up until now, and the access to the system of science as fully developed and complete. Chiereghin openly refers to the need for science to enter “the ambiguity of appearance”, in

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<sup>41</sup> F. Chiereghin, *Dialettica dell'assoluto e ontologia della soggettività in Hegel: dall'ideale giovanile alla Fenomenologia dello spirito*, Pubblicazioni di Verifiche, Trento 1980, p. 291.



order not to get entangled in the contradiction of “having to *become* what it claims to *be*”. The solution, here, is that precisely because absolute knowing is the reconciliation of every contradiction, it has to vanish as a shape so that it can give rise to the *actual* emergence of science: the sacrifice which Hegel refers to in the concluding sections of the chapter, that I will discuss later, according to this perspective is the sacrifice of absolute knowing itself, which sublates itself as a shape in order to become science.

As we can see, therefore, two significant commentators converge on the necessity of dispensing with the shape of absolute knowing in order to reach the dimension of the pure conceptual forms, whose horizon will be opened up by the logic. But still, there are several aspects of this question that are worth being emphasized and that enable a different interpretive stance: first of all, even at a purely textual level, it is easy to see that the Hegelian text of the *Phenomenology*'s last chapter constantly and consistently refers to absolute knowing in terms of a shape, even though with varying qualifications that I will analyze soon, when I will address the issue relating to the subject of absolute knowing.

Secondly, there is a passage in the *Preface* that not only from a textual point of view, but mostly from the point of view of its philosophical content, is decisive for this question. Hegel maintains here that:

The *true shape in which truth exists* can only be the scientific system of such truth<sup>42</sup>.

The true shape of truth is scientific – or what is the same thing [...], truth has only the concept as the element of its *existence*<sup>43</sup>.

Two major aspects are highlighted by these passages: first, Hegel is talking about truth and science, and is claiming that the former can exist – that is, concretely access the sphere of *Dasein* (being there, existence), in which it becomes available to human beings – only insofar as it acquires the shape of a scientific system. Science, therefore, can be understood as the shape of truth, as the external, tangible configuration that truth, the outcome of the phenomenological path, has to acquire in order to be grasped and shared. In this sense, then, I do not regard as necessary – rather, I think it is confusing and not

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<sup>42</sup> “Die *wahre Gestalt, in welcher die Wahrheit existiert*, kann allein das wissenschaftliche System derselben sein”, *PhG*, p. 11 (§ 5), italics mine.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12 (§ 6).

totally consistent with the spirit of Hegel's text – the claim that absolute knowing shall be superseded as a shape in order for science to emerge, where science is understood as the *Logic* and the unfolded system. It does, rather, precisely constitute the basic structure, the perspective, the standpoint starting from which it is possible for science to “happen”. This perspective is further supported by the second evident aspect in both passages, namely the fact that Hegel, to refer to science and its shape, uses the phrase “true shape”: we are not simply dealing, hence, with a shape (*whatever* shape), but with *the true* shape (*die wahre Gestalt*). I believe it is appropriate to pay attention to what might seem to be a detail, but actually constitutes the key to an adequate understanding of the role of the very concept of shape in the context of the *Phenomenology*: the shape, indeed, must not be conceived on the basis of the inadequacy of knowledge it displays, or in other words, I believe it is not correct to ascribe to the shape as such, regardless of the traits that characterize it, the inadequacy of the oppositional structure of consciousness to its object<sup>44</sup>. The shape, in fact, as Chiereghin himself writes, is the “the characteristic ‘place’ within which a determined form of consciousness’s relationship to the object realizes itself”. But then, precisely because in the shape *one* determined form of that epistemic relationship is displayed, its significance depends on the modality according to which the relationship it realizes and configures is structured, or we might say, schematized. If the relationship between consciousness and object is still an oppositional one, then the shape in which that modality will be embodied will be a finite, limited, inadequate, *untrue* one. But if, as it is the case for absolute knowing, consciousness and object, being and thought, consciousness and self-consciousness are reconciled, and the oppositions are *aufgehoben*, then the shape in which that relationship will reflect and realize itself will be a non-finite, adequate, non-limited, *true* one: it will be *the true shape of truth*.

My view is thus that absolute knowing is a fully-fledged shape, and that it remains such: rather, it is necessary to insist, as Hegel actually does throughout the whole chapter (and I will highlight it in detail later), on the necessity of its full development and unfolding. This is what Hyppolite seems to suggest when he states that in the *Phenomenology* absolute knowing is not reducible to the

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<sup>44</sup> The question regarding this allegedly fixed structure of consciousness will be discussed in the next section.

foundation of a speculative logic, but also the opening of a new phase in the history of world spirit.<sup>45</sup> This hint to history gives a cue for an essential issue in the dimension of absolute knowing and in the definition of the concept of shape: absolute knowing, as a *shape* and all the more so, *has* a history and *is* in history. But I will address this point specifically in the next chapter. For now it will suffice to note that the necessity to avoid “reducing” the significance of absolute knowing to the construction of the system, understood essentially as logic: Hegel clearly had much more in mind as regards the aspect of the very existence of spirit, as however emerges in a very perspicuous manner from many of his statements in the *Preface* about the readiness of his epoch’s spirit for a new science and a new awareness.

#### *4. The Nature of Absolute Knowing: Its Subject*

Catherine Malabou, the author of a very stimulating interpretation of Hegel’s thought, adds a further, significant determination for our understanding of the concept of *Gestalt* by quoting Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity*: “Figure (*Gestalt*) belongs to personality. Figure is the effective reality of personality”<sup>46</sup>. What this comment suggests, even if in a different context, namely in that of Hegel’s conception of God and religion, is the central role that the subject plays in *Gestalt*. Since in the shape a determined modality of the knowing relationship between consciousness and its object is realized, the presence of a subject seems to be necessarily implied by it. And this is another essential, and at the same time considerably problematic, aspect of the more general issue regarding the status of absolute knowing. Who is the subject of this knowing? Is it still consciousness – given the problems arising from its oppositional structure – the one which attains to the absolute standpoint, or an *other*, “new” subject emerging exactly at the culminating point of the path, or – again – a subject that might emerge as an outcome of a fundamental *change* in the consciousness’s relation to its object? A first suggestion for the structuring of this problem comes

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<sup>45</sup> J. Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, transl. by S. Cherniak and J. Heckman, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1974, p. 582.

<sup>46</sup> C. Malabou, *The Future of Hegel. Temporality, Plasticity and Dialectic*, op. cit., p. 125. L. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, op. cit., p. 148.

from a passage I have already quoted, according to which absolute knowing is “spirit that knows itself in the shape of spirit (*Geistesgestalt*)”<sup>47</sup>: after the form of the self, Hegel now addresses the aspect relating to the shape of spirit. What does this mean?

The question regarding the subject of absolute knowing is of crucial significance. It is closely connected to the question regarding the status of absolute knowing as a shape, which I have discussed above, and in some way the solution I will propose for this issue will be consistent with, and connected to, the solution I have proposed for that issue. Not only is it important to provide an answer to the question about the subject of absolute knowing, but the very *asking* of this question somehow reveals a stance that I will strongly defend: it is necessary, in fact, to raise this problem if one wants to avoid every sort of “metaphysical” or “mystical” reading of absolute knowing, that is, what I am trying to stay away from in my reading of this topic, since Hegel’s text (and especially *this* text by Hegel) can well encourage – if one does not linger over its nodes, trying to loosen them in a coherent and theoretically defensible manner – a de-personalizing reading concerning its subject and a mysticizing one concerning its overall nature. I hope I will be able to show clearly enough, in the present chapter and in the next one, that Hegel is extremely far from such perspectives. First of all I think it is appropriate and useful to keep in mind Hegel’s definition of the *Phenomenology*, in order to clarify who is the intended subject of this path, and consequently to deal with the question of the presumed subject-change at its end.

As we know, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* has undergone turbulent vicissitudes, one of which is the issue regarding its title(s)<sup>48</sup>. Hegel gave two different titles to his work, the first of which was *Wissenschaft der Erfahrung des Bewußtseins* (*Science of the Experience of Consciousness*). This was then replaced by the second one, namely the title with which we actually know this book, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (*Phenomenology of Spirit*). The relationship of these two titles, in my opinion, allows to draw some interesting suggestions for the issue with which we are presently concerned with. The first one refers to the

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<sup>47</sup> *PhG*, p. 427 (§ 798).

<sup>48</sup> For a discussion of the question see for example F. Nicolin, *Zum Titelproblem der Phänomenologie des Geistes*, «Hegel-Studien» 4 (1967), pp. 113-23.

experience of consciousness, and therefore seems to refer more specifically to the process leading consciousness, through the different forms of its relation to its object, namely the world, and therefore through the different forms of its knowledge, which in turn is revealed as inadequate, because it keeps suffering from the non-assimilation, so to speak, of the object by consciousness: consciousness, indeed, understands the object as external to, and other than, itself, and is not capable of understanding it, rather, as part of itself and to understand itself as part of its object. This process gradually leads consciousness to emancipate itself from that oppositional relationship and to reach forms of knowledge progressively more adequate, until it attains to absolute knowing, in which the opposition is finally reconciled.

The second title, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, does not conflict with the first one, but emphasizes a different point of view on the same process: that is, the process formerly described as the consciousness's process through different forms of knowledge, is now considered from the point of view of spirit.

The Greek verb φαίνομαι, from which the term *Phänomenologie* derives, means "to manifest itself, to come to appearance". The phenomenology of spirit, therefore, is the path through which spirit gradually comes to manifestation: parallel to the process by virtue of which consciousness frees itself from the opposition, thus, we have the process of spirit's emergence, but we might say, more appropriately, that we are talking about one and the same process<sup>49</sup>. I believe that the analysis of these two titles, even though it has only been outlined (and not for historical purposes), can offer important suggestions for our reflections on the subject of absolute knowing.

We have started our discussion on the status of absolute knowing from this passage, which will also constitute the basis for what will follow concerning the subject:

This last shape of spirit – the spirit which at the same time gives its complete and true content the form of the self and thereby realizes its concept as remaining in its

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<sup>49</sup> This is the position expressed by Martin Heidegger on the question regarding the two titles of the *Phenomenology*: "The work represents the absolute whole of experience which knowledge must undergo with itself and in which knowledge becomes manifest to itself as spirit, as absolute knowledge, which fundamentally undergoes the experience". M. Heidegger, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1994, p. 26 (the whole issue is discussed at pp. 17-26).

concept in this realization – this is absolute knowing; it is spirit that knows itself in the shape of spirit, or a *conceptual knowing*<sup>50</sup>.

In absolute knowing, which is the last shape of spirit, spirit confers to its content, that was already *vollständig* (complete) and *wahr* (true) in religion, the form of the self. When Hegel talks about the self, the object of that reference is – clearly enough – the *Gewissen's* self; the gain of that section has already been shown, in Chapter One of the present work, and can be summarized in the *active* role of subjectivity. If, indeed, the content presented by religion is already the absolute content, what it still lacks is precisely the embodiment of that content in human subjectivity, namely in a subject which is no more only *one* unique and unrepeatably historical figure, but potentially every figure attaining to the absolute awareness reached at the end of the phenomenological path, whose features will be analyzed in detail at the end of this chapter.

The specific role Hegel ascribes to the self in this context is that of realizing its concept and, in such realization, to remain in its concept. This dynamic is precisely what, for Hegel, constitutes absolute knowing, in which the role played by moral consciousness becomes clear once more. What happens here, therefore, can be summarized as follows: absolute knowing consists in the reconciliation between consciousness and self-consciousness, and such identity is what constitutes the *concept* of absolute knowing. This concept, however, in order to be complete, must be realized, that is, concretized in the dimension of existence. The absoluteness of knowing, in this sense, coincides with the capability of remaining itself, and therefore of being faithful to its concept as it has been defined, even in its concrete realization. The further determination added by Hegel is that absolute knowing is “spirit that knows itself in the shape of spirit (*Geistesgestalt*)”. I regard this characterization of absolute knowing as decisive: Hegel offers here an essential determination regarding the subject of absolute knowing, at the same time clarifying what it consists of or, in other words, what is the object of such knowledge. The subject of absolute knowing, as it seems to clearly emerge from this passage, is spirit, and its object, in the same way, is spirit. We are thus dealing with a process of spirit's self-knowledge, in which spirit, at the end of a determined path of experiences – such as the one described by Hegel through the

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<sup>50</sup> *PhG*, p. 427 (§ 798).

different stages of the *Phenomenology* – traces that experience and is capable of seeing it as not separated from, and opposed to itself, anymore, but as an integral part of its own identity. But what about consciousness? Isn't this the *science of the experience of consciousness*? If the knowing relationship is no more one of opposition, but the recognition of an identity, can consciousness – as it was previously defined precisely on the ground of that opposition – still be the subject of this new awareness? It is undeniable that in absolute knowing we are dealing with the result of a decisive change, and what we need to understand is whether this change is a *replacement* with another subject or the *development* of the “old” subject.

In the literature we find different interpretative stances about this issue. Stephen Houlgate, for example, claims that absolute knowing is “the form of consciousness that is liberated from ‘the opposition of consciousness itself’ and so comes to be *thought*, rather than consciousness as such. But such thought, or absolute knowing, is nevertheless that which consciousness comes to be”. The subject of absolute knowing, therefore, seems to be still consciousness, qualified as a “refined and educated form of consciousness”<sup>51</sup>: Houlgate’s solution, thus, is apparently to avoid recurring to a “new” subject for a form of knowing that sharply differs from the previous forms, such as absolute knowing, and to regard the subject of absolute knowing as a development of the preceding form of consciousness, namely as not opposed to its object anymore. However, he then states that “absolute knowing retains the awareness of being that is characteristic of consciousness, but eliminates the corresponding ‘*relation of consciousness to the object*’. It thus ceases to be consciousness in the strict sense of the term and becomes thought”, and adds that “consciousness and self-consciousness are reconciled [...] in so far as each ceases being what it is by itself and is transformed into an aspect of a new unity: thought”<sup>52</sup>. This stance, as a consequence, starts from the acknowledgment of the identity (even in difference) of consciousness through its experiences, where the difference is a development towards an always more *refined* form of consciousness which overcomes the opposition to its object, but ends up admitting that the new form of consciousness,

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<sup>51</sup> S. Houlgate, *Absolute Knowing Revisited*, «The Owl of Minerva» 30 (1998), n. 1, pp. 51-68, here pp. 57-58.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59

insofar as it is freed from that opposition, is not actual consciousness anymore. As a consequence, it seems that consciousness cannot be defined otherwise than as a constitutive and essential oppositional relation – not simply as a relation, then – with its object.

A radically different position, in this sense, is held by Joseph Flay, who analyzes Hegel's conception of consciousness starting from the passage in the *Preface* where consciousness is defined as the "immediate existence of spirit", which includes two moments, namely "knowing" and "the objectivity negative to, and other than, knowing"<sup>53</sup>. On the ground of this definition of consciousness, Flay claims that it must not be understood as a "state of being" or as a subject "isolated from the rest of what is", but as *Bewußt-sein*, being-conscious, and thus essentially as an activity, the being in a knowing relation with an object. Consciousness is the relation as such, the relation between a knowing and an object. Flay thus suggests a dynamic reading of consciousness which allows, once applied specifically to absolute knowing, to propose a solution to the question of the subject. If consciousness is not understood as a state or a permanent condition, but as an activity, then it is possible to avoid a crystallizing understanding of consciousness in terms of the opposition to its object: it will be a *relational* activity, and it will still be the subject of absolute knowing. The change in perspective it realizes, thus, must not be understood as an "exhausting" or overcoming of consciousness, but as a change in the modality of its relation to the content of its knowledge. And this new modality of relation to its own content will be the one by virtue of which that content will be seen by consciousness as reconciled with (and within) itself, and thus constituted by the same conceptual determinations which constitute itself. In the same perspective, Leo Lugarini offers an incisive formulation: according to him, the standpoint of absolute knowing can be described as the perspective of "consciousness developed into spirit"<sup>54</sup>, and therefore into that state in which it includes within itself all the stages that led it to the conclusive moment of its path, comprehending them as necessary and integrated components of its own identity.

If we look back at our initial considerations on the two titles of the *Phenomenology*, their connection with the problem we are dealing with becomes

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<sup>53</sup> *PhG*, p. 32 (§ 36).

<sup>54</sup> See L. Lugarini, *Hegel dal mondo storico alla filosofia*, Guerini, Milano 2000, pp. 173-75.



fully clear: it is consciousness that constitutes the subject of the phenomenological path, but since it is a relation, as such it can acquire different modalities in the unfolding of its activity (precisely as the shape is susceptible to different configurations), and in absolute knowing it reaches a relation with its object by virtue of which such object – its knowledge of the world – is not opposed to the knowledge it has of itself anymore –namely its self-consciousness.

### *5. The Nature of Absolute Knowing: Its Existence*

We have now reached a point at which the considerations expressed about the status of absolute knowing and about its subject can be integrated in a single point in Hegel's text:

Truth is not only *in itself* completely identical with certainty, but it also has the shape of self-certainty, or it is in its existence in the form of self-knowledge. Truth is the *content*, which in religion is still not identical with its certainty. But this identity is now a fact, in that the content has received the shape of the self<sup>55</sup>.

Absolute knowing is the place in which truth (the content of religion) is reconciled with certainty, with the point of view of the individual subject which constitutes the gain of the *Gewissen* section, but that was “lost” in religion in favor of the projection of that reconciliation onto an *other* subject. Such reconciliation, Hegel claims, is now reached not only *in itself*, namely in its conceptual determination, but also obtains the *shape* of self-certainty. Absolute knowing, it is now undoubtedly clear, is thus a shape, and more specifically the shape in which the absolute content, truth, comes to manifestation in the concrete dimension of existence, in particular in the shape of self-certainty: this means that truth *appears* in the concreteness of an individual subject.

In my view, Hegel gives here an essential determination, which constitutes the third component in a sequence we can retrieve in the passages we analyzed above: in the first moment absolute knowing is defined referring to the “form of the self”, by which Hegel means the conceptual determination of such knowing. In a second moment, then, he refers to the “shape of spirit (*Geistesgestalt*)”, by

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<sup>55</sup> *PhG*, p. 427 (§ 798).

which he points specifically to the aspect of its concrete, “collective” realization. The “shape of the self”, as the last determination in this sequence, constitutes the final goal of the development within absolute knowing itself: the unification of consciousness and self-consciousness, that spirit as comprehensive entity reaches as self-comprehension and identification of itself with the path it completed through its experience – the one described in the *Phenomenology*, of course – must now necessarily acquire its specific shape, understood as the singularization of a more general determination; in other words, it must embody in an *active* individual subject. The logical determination must embody itself<sup>56</sup>.

The outcome of such unification will certainly not consist of a confused amalgam of the two preceding dimensions, but will have to include both in a higher unity: absolute knowing will therefore need both the element of the *in itself*, i.e. of the essence, and the element of the *for itself*, i.e. of its exteriorization. The significance of the concepts of *Form* (form) and *Gestalt* (shape) and their capability of accounting for the fundamental passages in Hegel's discussion of absolute knowing, therefore, seems to be fully confirmed. And it seems appropriate to claim that, when Hegel speaks of the *form* of absolute knowing, he is specifically referring to its inner conceptual structure (constituted by the identity of certainty and truth, by the unity of the in itself and for itself of reconciliation), whereas, when he speaks of the shape of absolute knowing, he is emphasizing the determinate aspect of the existence of absolute knowing, the exteriorization of that conceptual structure in the concrete element of existence, without which absolute knowing would be nothing but “the lifeless solitude”<sup>57</sup> or, more precisely, without which it would not be at all.

The reference to the concept of life, which comes out more than once in the Absolute Knowing chapter, and also represents a central issue in the entire Hegelian speculation, seems to stress importantly, again, the dimension of the

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<sup>56</sup> Malabou makes of this point, namely of the embodiment of spirit and of its self-comprehension through the notion of *plasticity*, one of the central themes of her interpretation of Hegel's thought. She appropriately quotes a passage from the *Reason* chapter: “The singular individual is the transition of the category from its concept to an *external* reality, the pure schema which is both consciousness, and [...] the pointing to an ‘other’” (*PhG*, p. 135; § 236). She then adds that “being schematizes itself, and the unification of the concept with empirical existence cannot be explained by anything external to the system. [...]. Plasticity [...] is revealed as the concept capable of accounting for the incarnation, or the incorporation, of spirit”. See *The Future of Hegel*, op. cit., p. 18.

<sup>57</sup> “Das leblose Einsame”, *PhG*, p. 434 (§ 808).

existence of absolute knowing, of its *Dasein*, as central: without it, the conceptual organization of what spirit finds in its reality not only would have no ground, but probably would make no sense at all. In a passage from the *Preface* Hegel confirms this reading and, additionally, seems to reverse the priority of form and shape: whereas from a logical standpoint the *Form* has priority over the *Gestalt*, it seems that on the level of actuality the hierarchy is ordered in the opposite sense, and that the *Form* is nothing but a sort of transformation undergone by the content itself.

It is, obviously, a very peculiar transformation:

The self-moving concrete shape makes itself into a simple determinateness; in so doing it raises itself to logical form, and exists in its essentiality; its concrete existence is just this movement, and is directly a logical existence. It is for this reason unnecessary to clothe the content in an external formalism; the content is in its very nature the transition into such formalism, but a formalism which ceases to be external, since the form is the innate development of the concrete content itself<sup>58</sup>.

Hegel describes here the movement of the shapes constituting the phenomenological path, a movement by virtue of which they are led to transcend their determinate value and to acquire “logical existence”<sup>59</sup>; in my view, this is precisely the movement operating in absolute knowing, that is, the movement through which consciousness realizes that the content of its knowing corresponds to the essence of things; such awareness, then – with the conclusion of the phenomenological path –, marks the transition to logic: consciousness realizes that the conceptual content of its past shapes applies beyond the limited existence of those shapes, since it constitutes the nature of truth, the realm of the logical essences.

Back to absolute knowing and the role of existence in its determination, I consider the following passage as pivotal regarding what I am trying to show:

As a result, that which is the very essence, viz. the *concept*, has become the element of existence, or has become the *form of objectivity* for consciousness. Spirit,

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41 (§ 56). As regards the relation of form and content especially concerning their discussion in the *Logic*, see P. Rohs, *Form und Grund*, cit., esp. pp. 181-95.

<sup>59</sup> The opposite movement is that, by virtue of which “to each abstract moment of science corresponds a shape of manifest spirit as such”. See *PhG*, p. 432 (§ 805). I will examine the relation between phenomenological shapes and logical forms in the next chapter.

*manifesting or appearing in consciousness in this element, or what is the same thing, produced in it by consciousness, is science*<sup>60</sup>.

By proceeding with the reading of Hegel's text by means of the key *Form-Gestalt*, we can see how this passage provides a good example of the central meaning attributed by Hegel to the concept of *Gestalt* and a further determination of his conception of absolute knowing.

Science, i.e. absolute knowing, according to Hegel is the essence, or the concept, which manifests itself as the element of *Dasein*, thereby acquiring an existence adequate to its conceptual nature or, in other words, a *Gestalt* (shape) adequate to its *Form*. A further determination presented in this passage is the one according to which essence acquires the form of objectivity for consciousness. This particular expression needs some further analysis: the change in consciousness's perspective is in fact clarified by the correspondent change in the object's nature. We have seen that consciousness is defined as the relation with an object, and that such relation gradually develops until consciousness overcomes the opposition to the object of its knowing. Now, as it reaches the completion of its path, also its object undergoes a change: it is no more a simple object, as such *set against (ob-jectum)* consciousness. What Hegel refers to now is the form of objectivity. What does that mean? First of all, we can observe the use of the term *form* in this phrase, which, as we said, refers to the conceptual structure of something: we are not concerned with a mere *given* anymore, thus, but with the *form of objectivity*. Hegel's use of the term *objectivity*, and not of the term *object*, moreover, can be considered as an interesting suggestion: the addition of a suffix like *-keit*, in the German language, has the function of constructing a substantive starting from an adjective, a verb or another substantive, and a word ending with *-keit* (or *-schaft*, etc.), implies a process of abstraction from the determinate content originally referred to by that adjective, verb or substantive. So, for example, *Neuigkeit* derives from the adjective *neu* (new), and denotes the quality of being new. In the same way, *Ähnlichkeit* derives from the adjective *ähnlich*

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<sup>60</sup> "Dadurch ist dasjenige zum Elemente des Daseins, oder zur *Form der Gegenständigkeit* für das Bewußtsein geworden, was das Wesen selbst ist; nämlich der *Begriff*. Der Geist in diesem Elemente dem Bewußtseins *erscheinend*, oder was hier dasselbe ist, darin von ihm hervorgebracht, *ist die Wissenschaft*", *Ibid.*, pp. 427-28 (§ 798). As a mirror image, an already quoted (and well-known) passage from the *Preface* comes to mind: "The true shape of truth is scientific – or what is the same thing [...], truth has only the concept as the element of its *existence*" (*Ibid.*, p. 12; § 6).

(similar), and denotes the quality of being similar, just as *Freundschaft* derives from the substantive *Freund* (friend), and means “friendship”, “that what makes two persons be friends”, which constitutes an abstraction from the actual relationship definable as such that subsists between two particular human beings. In this sense, *Gegenständlichkeit* represents an abstraction from the determinate object, since it refers to the conceptual quality of being in a relation to consciousness. The expression “form of objectivity”, therefore, can be understood as pointing to the fact that in science the concept is the object of consciousness, but in a special way, by virtue of which it is not *other* than consciousness anymore, but since it is comprehended and at the same time produced by it, it is something to which consciousness relates in an identity/difference relation. In this way, by resuming the previous discussion on the subject of absolute knowing, we might say that what dramatically changes in absolute knowing is not consciousness, but rather its object. I will get back to this point in the concluding pages of the present chapter.

We can now continue the reading of the passage, and see that absolute knowing is further defined as spirit that manifests itself in consciousness in the element of existence: this manifestation process coincides with the process through which consciousness produces spirit in the element of existence<sup>61</sup>. Hegel stresses here in the most powerful way the centrality of consciousness’s role: science is defined precisely in relation to its existence, and such existence needs a “spectator”, which at the same time is its “author”<sup>62</sup>. Consciousness, in fact. And it is precisely for this reason, in my view, that it can be argued that science, for Hegel, constitutes *the shape of the concept*: it is, indeed, the appearance of the concept itself, the concrete modality in which the conceptual structures, or thought determinations, which at the same time constitute reality, in turn acquire actual and spiritual existence: actual existence, on the one hand, because they are *embodied* in an existent knowing that becomes an object for consciousness: spiritual existence, on the other hand, because they are grasped in the appropriate shape. Especially this aspect of being a *Gestalt*, namely the being an object for

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<sup>61</sup> “The Hegelian ‘concept’, then, the ‘form’ in which true knowing takes place, is the complete identification of the ‘appearing’ of the ‘object’ and the ‘thinking’ of the subject; Aristotle’s ‘mind’ which ‘becomes’ what it knows, because the ‘form’ of both (mind and its object) is the same, has been given dynamic vitality in Hegel’s ‘concept’”, Q. Lauer, *A Reading of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, Fordham University Press, New York 1993, p. 297.

<sup>62</sup> See Bencivenga’s discussion of consciousness, *Hegel’s Dialectical Logic*, pp. 56-59.

consciousness, is what confers science, as the result of the phenomenological path, its peculiar status. As we discussed this issue, we came to the conclusion that absolute knowing – which is science – is an actual *Gestalt*, and therefore its subject is consciousness at the culminating point of its development, where it overcomes its oppositional relation to its object.

This reading can be confirmed, in my view, by a couple of passages that show the essential significance of the concept of shape not only in the context of the inadequate manifestations of consciousness's knowing, characterized as they are by opposition to, and separation from, its object, but also from the standpoint of science, of the fulfilled knowing which has attained to the identity of being and thought. First of all, a well-known passage from the *Preface* comes to mind: this passage has been mostly read in relation to the demand for philosophy's scientific nature, but the description of such scientific nature of philosophical knowing in terms of the true shape philosophy ought to acquire plays an equally significant role. More specifically, science is *the only* shape in which truth can come to existence:

The true shape in which truth exists can only be the scientific system of such truth. To help bring philosophy closer to the form of science, to the goal where it can lay aside the title 'love of knowing' and be *actual* knowing – that is what I have set myself to do. The inner necessity that knowing should be science lies in its nature, and only the systematic exposition of philosophy itself provides it. But the *external* necessity [...] is the same as the inner, or in other words it lies in the shape in which time sets forth the sequential existence of its moments<sup>63</sup>.

The goal Hegel sets for himself with the *Phenomenology*, therefore, is that of contributing to the process by virtue of which philosophy makes its shape

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<sup>63</sup> *PhG*, p. 11 (§ 5). The appropriateness of reading the *Preface* and the Absolute Knowing chapter together – not only because they were written in temporal sequence, but also and foremost for systematic reasons – is stressed, among others, by D.P. Verene, which in a recent book on the *Phenomenology of Spirit* argues that “the *Preface* is Hegel's phenomenology of philosophy; it treats the various forms of philosophizing and delineates their defects. In a sense the *Preface* is the completion of the section on absolute knowing. The book itself is a circle, the form Hegel attributes to the system as a whole”. In the *Preface*, in fact, Hegel addresses in detail the nature of science, by talking about the historical need for the emergence of a new knowing and a new philosophy and then introducing its features, the tools and the path leading to it. Verene's talk about a “phenomenology of philosophy” refers precisely to Hegel's examination and critique of the inadequate forms of philosophy of his time. The *Preface*, in this perspective, also provides us with more context-related details for the understanding of Hegel's idea of absolute knowing. See *Hegel's Absolute. An Introduction to Reading the Phenomenology of Spirit*, State University of New York Press, Albany 2007, p. 1. Q. Lauer shares this approach: he starts reading the *Phenomenology* from the *Introduction* and concludes his book with a chapter on the *Preface*, which follows the one on absolute knowing. See *A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, cit.

gradually closer to the form of science (and thus its concrete existence gradually closer to its conceptual determination. In the culmination of this process philosophy eventually abandons that which was its (mere) *desire* to know, and embraces actual, *wirklich* knowing, thereby attaining to the identity of inner necessity (form) and external necessity, or the realization of its inwardness in the shape, that is the temporal existence of its moments. Hegel introduces the relation between knowing and its historical dimension: the term *Gestalt* also identifies the specific historical manifestation of knowing in a specific time. The same meaning can be found in *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*:

The true peculiarity of a philosophy lies in the interesting individuality which is the organic *shape* that reason has built for itself out of *the material of a peculiar age*. The particular speculative reason [of a later time] finds in it spirit of its spirit, flesh of its flesh<sup>64</sup>.

The historical dimension, which these lines refer to, is clearly essential to the determination of science, and this element will emerge with all its significance in the following pages of the absolute knowing chapter<sup>65</sup>.

The nature, moments and movement of this knowing have, then, shown themselves to be such that this knowing is a pure *being-for-self* of self-consciousness; it is 'I' that is *this* 'I' and no other 'I', and which is no less immediately a *mediated* or superseded *universal* 'I'<sup>66</sup>.

Here, Hegel offers a definition of absolute knowing in different terms, namely as the pure being for self of self-consciousness. The meaning of this expression might look obscure, but we can try to see how Hegel defines the "being for-self" in another context:

This *in-itself* is abstract universality, in which the nature of the divine life *to be for itself*, and so too the self-movement of form, are altogether left out of account. If the form is declared to be the same as the essence, then it is *ipso facto* a mistake to

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<sup>64</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Differenz des Fichte'schen und Schelling'schen Systems der Philosophie*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 4 (Jenaer Kritische Schriften), hg. von H. Buchner u. O. Pöggeler, Meiner, Hamburg 1968, pp. 5-92, here p. 12 (*The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, transl. by H. S. Harris and W. Cerf, SUNY Press, Albany 1977, p. 88, emphasis added).

<sup>65</sup> A central element in Hegel's conception of absolute knowing makes its appearance here, but the role of the temporal dimension of absolute knowing deserves an extensive discussion. This will be the object of the next chapter.

<sup>66</sup> *PhG*, p. 428 (§ 799).

suppose that cognition can be satisfied with the *in-itself* or the essence, but can get along without the form – that the absolute principle or absolute intuition makes the working-out of the former, or the development of the latter, superfluous. Just because the form is as essential to the essence as the essence is to itself, the divine essence is not to be conceived and expressed merely as essence, i.e. as immediate substance or pure self-contemplation of the divine, but likewise as *form*, and in the whole wealth of the developed form. Only then is it conceived and expressed as an actuality<sup>67</sup>.

This long passage enlightens the significance that Hegel attributes to the concrete development of form: he defines the “*for itself*” as the “self-movement of form (*Selbstbewegung der Form*)”, by virtue of which the empty abstraction of the concept is filled with concreteness and richness in details. This movement is a troubled process, but nevertheless it does not imply a loss for the pureness of the concept:

The true sacrifice of being-for-self is solely that in which it surrenders itself as completely as in death, yet in this renunciation no less preserves itself<sup>68</sup>.

The power of the concept (or spirit) to preserve itself even in the most complete renunciation or in being in what is other than itself is the conceptual determination of freedom, and of consciousness insofar as it reaches absolute knowing. As a contrast we can remember the definition of abstract freedom in the shape of Stoicism:

Freedom in thought has only *pure thought* as its truth, a truth lacking the fullness of life. Hence freedom in thought, too, is only the concept of freedom, not the living reality of freedom itself. For the essence of that freedom, is at first only thinking in general, the form as such<sup>69</sup>.

Again, Hegel refers here to the need for truth to be completed by the richness of life that, as we saw above, plays a key role in the realization of knowing and its truth. Freedom, if it is only in its *concept* (or form), is not complete, but remains an *abstract*, mere concept.

If we go back to the first quote on absolute knowing, we can notice that the pure being for-self of self-consciousness is then defined in relation to its subject,

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19 (§ 19). Although Hegel is talking about the absolute in terms of the divine figure, I won't consider this aspect, since I agree with Harris' view that “scientifically there is no need to use the name ‘God’ at all”. See *Hegel's Ladder*, vol. II, *The Odyssey of Spirit*, p. 710.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275 (§ 507).

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118 (§ 200).



which is in turn described as the “‘I’, that is *this* and no other ‘I’, and which is no less immediately a *mediated* or superseded *universal* ‘I’”<sup>70</sup>. Our preceding claim, according to which absolute knowing needs to be embodied in a subject (the “form of the self”), is confirmed here: the subject of absolute knowing is at the same time a singular, distinct I (a “this” as in the chapter on Sense Certainty) and a universal I. Furthermore, the fact that Hegel focuses on the nature of the subject precisely after having insisted on the element of existence, which is necessary for the concept, gives us a further reason in support of the necessity of embodiment for absolute knowing, which is historically determined in a way I will clarify in the next chapter<sup>71</sup>.

In the following pages of the chapter, Hegel will present and discuss the issues relating to the historical dimension of spirit and to science conceived as the conceptual grasping of that history:

It is only when the ‘I’ communes with itself in its otherness that the content is *comprehended*. [...]. The content is spirit that traverses its own self and does so *for itself* as spirit by the fact that it has the shape of the concept in its objectivity<sup>72</sup>.

The determinations of absolute knowing which were presented above are now examined from the point of view of the content, and in what will follow from the point of view of science’s *Dasein* (being there, existence). As regards the content, Hegel argues that conceptual understanding is possible only insofar as the subject recognizes itself *in its otherness* (and we find again the determination of freedom we have discussed above): the content is indeed nothing but spirit that traverses itself (Hegel uses precisely the verb *durchlaufen*, i.e., “to run through”), which develops historically and understands its own development, or, in other

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 428 (§ 799). Notice that this is the first time Hegel explicitly talks about the subject of absolute knowing in the last chapter of the *Phenomenology*.

<sup>71</sup> W. Jaeschke insists on the historical dimension of absolute knowing in his essay *Das absolute Wissen*, «Hegel-Jahrbuch» (2001), pp. 286-95, then published in a larger version in A. Arndt, E. Müller (hg.), *Hegels Phänomenologie des Geistes heute*, Akademie Verlag 2004, pp. 194-214. R. B. Pippin, in line with Jaeschke’s reading, emphasizes that “only as historical can consciousness be given ‘the form of free actuality’, and so be understood as spirit”. Spirit’s unavoidable exteriorization shows in fact how the Hegelian concept is not understood as such that a previously determined content is submitted to an “external experiential test”, and this represents, in his view, “the most important lesson of the *Phenomenology*”, which is not grasped by those who believe that Hegel’s work presents an independent theory of categories. See R. B. Pippin, *The “Logic of Experience” as “Absolute Knowledge” in Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, in *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit. A Critical Guide*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2008, pp. 210-27, here pp. 217-19 and 227.

<sup>72</sup> *PhG*, p. 428 (§ 799).

words, the concept that gives itself the shape of objectivity, for which Hegel uses again the term *Gegenständlichkeit*. We find here, once more, the concept of *shape*; Hegel's phrase states precisely that the content has "the shape of the concept in its objectivity": the content assumes therefore a way of existence, an appearance that corresponds to the structure – that is, the form – of the concept. It is clear, now, that a specific process is going on, namely the one by virtue of which, once the form has been reached, spirit tries to find for itself an existence gradually more adequate to that form, until it attains to science, the shape in which it is perfectly adequate to the concept. This process has a specific, fundamental temporal/historical dimension: before I analyze it in depth in the next chapter, I will try to outline the conclusions of the analysis that has been carried out throughout this chapter.

### *Concluding remarks*

In the course of this chapter I have tried to provide, through the analysis of the first part of Hegel's chapter on absolute knowing, some useful suggestion to start understanding (even though we are just halfway along the path) the essence of absolute knowing, what it means, and of what the last stage of consciousness in the phenomenological path consists.

The path I followed has been guided by two key concepts, *Form* (form) and *Gestalt* (shape): although they are not explicitly recognized by Hegel as such, it has gradually become clear that they structure the whole discussion on the nature of absolute knowing. The form, as I have shown, refers to the inner conceptual determination, and can be identified with what Hegel calls the "in itself". The shape, differently, constitutes the form's exteriorization in the dimension of concreteness, and can be identified with what Hegel calls the "for itself". By analyzing these two concepts, therefore, I have shown how the attainment of the absolute standpoint is realized both from the point of view of its form, that is from the point of view of its conceptual determination, and from the point of view its shape, that is, from the point of view of its concrete realization. As regards its conceptual determination we have seen that it is first defined as the unification of the two reconciliations previously presented by Hegel, respectively in the section

on *Gewissen* at the end of the Spirit chapter and in the Religion chapter, which have been analyzed in the first two chapters of this study. The first reconciliation, in particular, highlighted the centrality of the self's role, which represents the subject in which absolute knowing has to be mainly understood. This subject, however, was characterized by the difficulty of relating to the dimension of the concrete action, of mediating with the dimension of existence (that is, the for-itself). The gain of the *Gewissen* section is precisely the subject's capacity of tackling it. In the Religion chapter, instead, the absolute content emerged, especially insofar as it is understood by revealed religion as incarnation of spirit's truth. These two sides are eventually unified in absolute knowing, which is defined, in the first instance, as the identity of consciousness and self-consciousness. But what does this phrase specifically mean? In the development of this chapter I have mainly followed Hegel's language, in order to try, first, to account for the complex structure of the chapter and clarify the nature of absolute knowing. Although its determination is still incomplete, since I interrupted the analysis around the first half of the chapter, I believe that a couple of clarifications are in order. In absolute knowing, in my view, what happens is that spirit, at the end of the path it has carried out and that has been described in the unfolding of the *Phenomenology*, eventually *recognizes* all the stages of that path as constitutive parts of its own identity: if, in fact, in each inadequate stage of its development it still regarded its experience as something alien to itself, something which was not completely included in its path, now it has overcome that extraneousness.

Spirit has recognized itself also in the defectiveness of its preceding stages, it has understood and integrated it in what we can define as an encompassing self-comprehension. The nature of the identity relationship between consciousness and self-consciousness (or being and thought, or subject and object), however, needs some further consideration. This relation, clearly, cannot be reduced to a simple, immediate identity, neither as an external connection established between two entities which are otherwise conceived as irreducibly *other* to one another. There are different views on the nature of this relation, according to some of which absolute knowing should be understood referring to the model of the unity-in-difference. Robert Williams, for instance, regards the love relation (and the living organism, considered according the kinds of relation that characterize it, namely

internal and external relations) as a potentially useful model in order to “extract” some central features of the relationship between being and thought in absolute knowing: such model, in fact, enables to conceive of a relation in which each term preserves its difference, allowing therefore for a distinction between the knowing act and the object of that act. Stephen Houlgate maintains that the love relation shall not be understood as the recognition of an absolute difference, but rather as an *identification* of oneself with the other, which enables thought to emancipate itself from a framework based on the subject-object relation, whereas according to Simon Lumsden the love-relation model suffers from important limits, and that it is only “the *beginning* of the recognition of the conscious subject’s relation with spirit and thought determinations: that its identity is intimately tied to and constituted through the whole” (italics mine). Joseph Flay, differently, argues for the ontological priority of the relation itself (which includes both the relation and the *relata*): this allows him both to preserve the difference between being and thought and to avoid the claim of a simple identity between the two terms; according to his reading, thought determinations belong to the subject-object relation itself<sup>73</sup>.

As specifically regards the shape of absolute knowing, through the discussion of its status I have shown that it can be rightfully considered as a shape in the phenomenological path. It is true, indeed, that it represents, at the same time, the transition to the system proper, but still this does not imply that absolute knowing must lose its essential relation to the dimension of experience and existence, which, as I will show more extensively in the next chapter, for Hegel constitute the indispensable ground for every form of knowledge. More specifically, as *Geistesgestalt* (shape of spirit) absolute knowing shows itself as the concrete knowing that spirit has about itself, as the scientific standpoint which represents the attained awareness of the identity between itself and its object (which is spirit, at any rate, even in its relation to external objectivity). For the same reason the discussion of the question regarding the subject of absolute knowing has led me to conclude that absolute knowing maintains consciousness (raised to spirit) as its subject, because it does not represent the detachment from

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<sup>73</sup> See R. Williams, *Towards a Non-Foundational Absolute Knowing*, «The Owl of Minerva», 30 (1998), pp. 83-101, S. Houlgate, *Absolute Knowing Revisited*, op. cit., S. Lumsden, *Absolute Knowing*, «The Owl of Minerva», 30 (1998), pp. 3-32, and J. Flay, *Absolute Knowing and Absolute Other*, op. cit.

any objectivity, but the attainment of an objectivity (the “form of objectivity”) which is not conceived as alien to the knowing subject anymore. Such knowing, therefore, is essentially an activity of the subject (*eigenes Tun des Selbst*), in which spirit’s self-comprehension incarnates itself. It might seem that in this way absolute knowing is again abandoned to the singularity of an accidental, particular subject, but this is not the case: rather, the alternative options leave not much play. On the one hand, they run the risk of relapsing into the isolation of the beautiful soul, and thus in the inactivity of a standpoint that reaches the absolute content but does not “dirty its hands” with the reality of concrete existence, and on the other hand, instead, they run the risk of relapsing into the defectiveness of religion, and therefore to project the outcome of the unification that has been reached by spirit onto an essence that is perfect, but isolated from the life of spirit. As Hegel himself claims, besides, “the self accomplishes the life of absolute spirit”<sup>74</sup>. And this self is precisely the one in which the complex relation between the absoluteness of the reached standpoint and the simultaneous need for exteriorization comes to light in the most evident way: it is in this sense that it becomes necessary, both for Hegel and for the reader, to face the issue regarding the role of temporality in absolute knowing, a key issue involving the complex dialectic of eternity and historicity, two dimensions that cannot be dispensed with in Hegel’s system, without at any rate losing a determining aspect for its significance. I will concern myself with such issues in the following chapter.

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<sup>74</sup> *PhG*, p. 426 (§ 796).



## Chapter Four

### *Absolute Knowing: Beyond Time, in History*

#### *Introduction*

In the present chapter, I will proceed to the exploration of a fourth reading path through the text on absolute knowing, which concludes the *Phenomenology*. After the discussion of the role of *Gewissen* and religious consciousness in the first two chapters, and after the presentation of my interpretation of absolute knowing's nature and structure, based on the concepts of *Form* and *Gestalt*, in the third chapter, I will now focus on the role of time and history both in the development of the concept of absolute knowing – the kind of knowing characterizing the scientific standpoint – and in the actual unfolding of the latter in the context of reality<sup>1</sup>.

Besides the need to offer a consistent reading of Hegel's conception of time and history, I believe that an adequate understanding of the role and status of temporality in absolute knowing is necessary in order to complete our grasp of its conceptual structure and the implications that Hegel's idea of absolute knowing has concerning his conception of philosophy as such and its relation to human, spiritual life. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is twofold: on the one hand my aim is to reach an adequate understanding of time's status in the context of absolute knowing; and on the other hand, it is to provide an answer to the question why spirit, once the absolute standpoint has been reached, must still reveal itself in and through time and cannot just quietly remain in its pureness and absoluteness.

After a couple of brief introductory notes on the role of time and history in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as a whole, I will proceed to the actual discussion of the topic by presenting three major Hegelian passages on time and its relation

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<sup>1</sup> This specific aspect does not constitute an explicit topic in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: I will deal with it, nonetheless, insofar as the work lays the ground for the unfolding of the absolute standpoint in the fully developed system.

with the development of spirit and its self-comprehension, which, at a first glance, might appear to patently conflict with one another. In order to understand how these different statements can be comprehended, I will proceed to the analysis of the second part of the Absolute Knowing chapter, the one in which this issue comes most specifically into light and the relation between spirit, time and history is explicitly thematized. I will try to show that these passages are only *apparently* contradictory, and to lay the ground for a consistent reconstruction of the essence and role of time in absolute knowing, and its relation to spirit's historical and spiritual development.

With the same goal, in the second section of the chapter I will focus my attention on the activity of *Erinnerung*<sup>2</sup>, which plays a crucial role as regards the last steps in the process of the absolute standpoint's attainment. More specifically, I will show that *Erinnerung* constitutes the activity allowing spirit to reach universality and to achieve the conceptual dimension precisely through an elaboration of temporality. My discussion of the role played by *Erinnerung* in the context of absolute knowing will include the examination of other texts in which Hegel addresses this topic, albeit in a different context. I will refer to the Jena system drafts and the Berlin *Encyclopedia*, where *Erinnerung* is discussed within the context of the analysis of the intelligence's activities in the section *Psychology* of the *Philosophy of Spirit*. Although these texts pertain to very different systematic parts and historical moments of Hegel production<sup>3</sup>, I believe there is a deep conceptual relation among them, and reading together the *Phenomenology* and the texts on psychology will show that Hegel's conception of *Erinnerung* is consistent with his use of this concept in different contexts and periods.

I will eventually conclude the present chapter drawing the consequences of my analyses, and showing how the apparent contradictions with which it had been

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<sup>2</sup> This German term is usually translated as "recollection". This translation (as it is also the case for other languages), however, does not fully account for the richness of meaning conveyed by "Erinnerung", which points both to the inwardization and preservation of a content and to the activity of remembering that content, thus to the capacity to recover that content. From now on, therefore, I will only use the German term.

<sup>3</sup> These sources, in my opinion, can be considered as complementary for the understanding of the concept of *Erinnerung*, and their comparison can be very fruitful for the issue we want to discuss: this operation, of course, must be done taking into proper account the specificity of these texts and the different contexts they refer to.



opened actually constitute the components of a coherent, although complex, conception of temporality, which leads to conceive of absolute knowing as placed in a wholly peculiar temporal dimension and to shed light on its nature in a decisive way.

### *1. The Role of History in the Phenomenology as a Whole*

Before we start the discussion of time and history as regards absolute knowing, it might be useful to give some background concerning the debate on the role of time and history in the *Phenomenology*.

Throughout the *Phenomenology*, conceptual development – that is, the development of consciousness in relation to its object – is often referred to, or placed in, a historically determined context. The very concept of *Gestalt* (shape), in this sense, includes the need to determine and contextualize the conceptual content. As we have seen in the preceding chapter, indeed, the shape constitutes the singularization and embodiment of a conceptual determination of the relationship between consciousness and its object, and therefore it is not surprising that such embodiment can include (but not always does so) reference to a specific instance of spirit's history. That does not justify, however, the claim that Hegel's thought is characterized by a fundamental historicism. This has been, in fact, one of the major points for criticism towards his philosophy, which has been reduced to the proud announcement of a finally achieved culmination in world spirit's development, allegedly a linear and homogeneous development starting from a naïve and inadequate antiquity and attaining to a modernity finally enjoying truth (or, better, to Hegel as the incarnation of world spirit's greatest achievement). It is undeniable that the *Phenomenology* is very different from a work grounded only upon purely conceptual content and logical consistency: rather, it has been often defined as a narrative based on concepts. The dialectical process, which is a purely theoretical one and is not characterized by the simple inference of a concept from another, but in Hegel's terms by the movement of the concepts themselves, in fact can be associated to a narrative process.

As it has been observed,

Narrative [...] is usually processful, temporalizing and totalizing, as is Hegelian dialectic. In fact, Hegel's *Phenomenology of spirit*, the paradigm of dialectical thought in modern times, not without reason has been characterized as a *Bildungsroman*<sup>4</sup>.

In this context I cannot address this question in detail, but I consider it as a useful suggestion in order to shed some light on the relation between temporality, history and the conceptual development presented in the *Phenomenology*. I do not agree with the view that this development follows what might be defined in terms of a *chronology of spirit*, but it is equally clear to me that the work has a substantial relation to the historical embodiment of spirit's developmental process. In fact, the *Phenomenology* is rich in historical references, especially in the last and most extensive chapters (even though we can easily find historical references in several shapes throughout the path, e.g. the Unhappy Consciousness, identified with the religious consciousness of the Middle Age), such as the Spirit chapter, whose unfolding goes through the Greek world, the Enlightenment and Hegel's epoch. The Religion chapter, in the same way, displays a sequence of religious forms that are organized not only according to conceptual criterion, relating to the way in which the absolute content is conceived and represented in the different religions, but also according to a temporal articulation.

The interpretive stances regarding the issue of history's role in the *Phenomenology* are fundamentally of two kinds. History can be regarded either as a superfluous component of Hegel's discussion of the possible forms of consciousness, which is conceived as essentially theoretical, or as a fundamental component of that discussion. According to the latter view, that has been maintained by authors like Lukács and others close or belonging to the Left Hegelian current of thought, the project underlying the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is

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<sup>4</sup> Th. R. Flynn, D. Judovitz (eds.), *Dialectic and Narrative*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1993, p. xii. A narrative account of the whole of Hegel's philosophy (starting from his idea of what a "concept" is, in contrast with Aristotle's logic) has been given by E. Bencivenga in his *Hegel's Dialectical Logic*, op. cit.

that of providing an account of spirit's history, and is structured accordingly<sup>5</sup>. According to the former view, which is maintained by authors like Solomon or Pöggeler, "the *Phenomenology* is not a book about history, and its structure is not historical"<sup>6</sup>. The tendency to lead one of these positions to their extremes has characterized both of them, either with a total disregard of history's role in the work, or with an overestimation of that role. To the latter tendency belongs, for example, Michael Forster, who fundamentally agrees with Lukács' position. He distinguishes two kinds of historicism: according to the first one, human thought is essentially contextualized in historical development and therefore it "undergoes fundamental changes during the course of history"<sup>7</sup>; the second kind of historicism claims the existence of a "general law of development" in history and believes that it can be described as a teleological process oriented towards the attainment of some final purpose. Hegel's *Phenomenology*, according to him, is a mixture of the two kinds of historicism. However, he eventually end up reading the whole book as a historical account of spirit's development. Furthermore, he does not address Hegel's conception of time and history in a comprehensive manner, but only observes that their status is a very equivocal one, and thus – in my view, at least – his stance lacks the clarification of the theoretical ground of the matter, which would give it a stronger background. The result of his approach is that the chapters "Consciousness" through "Reason" can be interpreted as "a chronological history of consciousness from ancient times up to the modern age", whereas the fact that the chapters "Religion" and "Absolute Knowing" are "designed to give a chronological history of men's representation of God or the Absolute in art and religion (the *Religion* chapter) and eventually Hegel's own philosophy (the *Absolute Knowing* chapter) is quite obvious and uncontroversial"<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> See for example G. Lukács, *The Young Hegel*, MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1976, esp. pp. 470-72.

<sup>6</sup> R.C. Solomon, *In the Spirit of Hegel: A Study of G.W.F. Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford University Press, New York 1983, p. 221 (also quoted in M. Forster, *Hegel's Idea of a Phenomenology of Spirit*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago/London 1998, p. 292). See also O. Pöggeler, *Hegels Idee einer Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Alber, München 1993, pp. 248 and 264.

<sup>7</sup> M. Forster, *Hegel's Idea of a Phenomenology of Spirit*, op. cit., 292.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 299 and 456.

Clearly, my purpose here is not to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the role of time and history in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, but only to try illuminating the specific role they play in absolute knowing. I do not believe that this chapter can be interpreted as a “chronological history” of Hegel’s philosophy, nor that it can be conceived regardless of history itself (but this would be impossible, given Hegel’s explicit references to the historical and temporal dimension of spirit). A right reading, in my view, will be the one unifying the conceptual aspect of absolute knowing with spirit’s historical givenness and development. In order to give such an account, however, it will be necessary to clarify Hegel’s conception of time and history – as it is exemplified in this specific text – in a substantive manner: without such clarification, in my view, every discussion of the topic will be incomplete.

## *2. Time in Absolute Knowing*

### *2.1 The Implicit Temporal Dimension in the Absolute Knowing Chapter*

In the chapter Hegel devotes to absolute knowing, he does not explicitly thematize the role of time and history until the second half of the text; the first part of the chapter, as we have seen in the chapters One to Three of the present study, focuses on the steps that both precede and prepare absolute knowing, and on the discussion of its features and nature; temporal references, however, are abundant from the beginning and throughout the course of the chapter. The very passages and transitions which, in the first half of the text, are analyzed from a purely conceptual point of view, often come with temporal references or with characterizations that, in some way, point to a developmental process that, clearly, cannot be exclusively described as a logical one. In the previous chapter, where I have analyzed and discussed this portion of Hegel’s text, I have not addressed this essential aspect in detail because I did not want to anticipate a theme requiring an extensive and focused treatment. I will now attempt to show that a temporal articulation of the contents is present here as well. At the beginning of the chapter, for example, Hegel determines the nature of religion in these terms:

The spirit of the revealed religion has *not yet* surmounted its consciousness as such<sup>9</sup>.

And:

The *content* of this representation is absolute spirit; and all that now remains to be done is to supersede this mere form, or rather, since this belongs to *consciousness as such*, its truth must *already* have yielded itself in the shape of consciousness<sup>10</sup>.

A different kind of reference to the concrete development of consciousness is included in Hegel's discussion of the concrete processuality of knowing. As Hegel adds, in fact, knowing as it is the object of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is not to be understood as a pure conceptual knowing and therefore "reduced" to a pure conceptual grasping of the object; the moments of the concept, rather, must be understood in the concrete shapes in which they are individualized.

This knowing is to be indicated only in its process of coming-to-be, or in the moments of that aspect of it which belongs to consciousness as such, the moments of the concept proper or of pure knowing in the form of shapes of consciousness<sup>11</sup>.

In a further passage, shortly afterwards, Hegel refers to absolute knowing as a moment in which we gather together the shapes that have followed one another throughout the whole phenomenological path and understand them as necessary steps in the development of spirit; these shapes, according to their logical structure, now constitute the moments of the concept, according to which knowing – from the achieved absolute standpoint – unfolds.

For this aspect of the apprehension of the object [...] we have only to *recall* [*erinnern*] the *earlier shapes* [*die frühern Gestalten*] of consciousness *already* [*schon*] encountered<sup>12</sup>.

As Hegel, then, proceeds to consider the role of the two reconciliations spirit attained before reaching their unification in absolute knowing, i.e. the role of moral and religious consciousness, the use of temporal determinations becomes pervasive:

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<sup>9</sup> *PhG*, p. 422 (§ 788), emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, last emphasis added.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 423 (§ 789).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem* (§ 790), emphases added.

[The two preceding modes of reconciliation] at first fall apart. In the order in which the shapes of consciousness came before us, consciousness reached the individual moments of those shapes and their unification *long before* [*längst*] ever religion gave its object the shape of actual self-consciousness. The unification of the two sides has *not yet* [*noch nicht*] been exhibited; it is this that closes the series of the shapes of spirit<sup>13</sup>.

Again, in the differentiation of absolute knowing from religion, Hegel uses terms and verbal tenses that clearly refer to a *past* moment, compared to the *present* moment, that, as we will see, defines the *time* of absolute knowing.

Thus, what in religion was *content* or a form for presenting an *other*, is *here* [*here*] the *self's* own *act*<sup>14</sup>.

These brief references, according to what I have already stated in the previous section, certainly do not aim at showing that the path described by Hegel in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* constitute a sort of *chronicle* of spirit's experience, in which each shape is identified with a historically determined moment that follows (and precedes) other equally determined moments. This would be a quite naïve reading of the sequence of the phenomenological shapes, which – it is worth reminding – identify specific modalities of the knowing relation consciousness entertains with its object (even though they are often embodied in a historical reality). It would be equally misleading, however, to ignore Hegel's clear references to the temporal dimension of spirit's development which, as we will see, takes place in a way that is essentially related both to its historical development and to the relation spirit establishes with time itself.

## *2.2 The Explicit Temporal Dimension in the Chapter on Absolute Knowing*

As I already mentioned at the beginning of the previous section, Hegel explicitly addresses the nature of time and history, as well as their role in absolute

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 425 (§ 794), emphases added.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 427 (§ 797), emphases modified. In this passage the German “hier” does not only have a spatial meaning, but also a temporal one; more specifically, it designates a precise, determined *moment* in the flow of time. It might be also translated as “at this point” or “at that time” in case it refers to a past moment.

knowing, only in the second half of the chapter on absolute knowing. When dealing with this part of the chapter, however, one will run up against determinations of time that seem to conflict with one another and cause hard problems to the effort to understand and to reconstruct in a consistent way Hegel's theory of temporality in relation to absolute knowing. The passages showing this apparent contradictoriness are, more specifically, two. To these passage I will then add a complication constituted by a third statement on the relationship between spirit and time passage that can be found in the Religion chapter, where Hegel offers one of the few explicit definitions of what *time* is.

But as regards the *existence* of this concept, science does not appear in time and in the actual world before spirit has attained to this consciousness about itself. As spirit that knows what it is, it does not exist before, and nowhere at all, till after the completion of its work [...] <sup>15</sup>.

Time is the concept itself that *is there* and which presents itself to consciousness as empty intuition; for this reason, spirit necessarily appears in time, and it appears just so long as it has not *grasped* its pure concept, i.e. has not annulled time. It is the outer, intuited pure self which is *not grasped* by the self, the merely intuited concept; when this latter grasps itself it sets aside its time-form, comprehends this intuiting, and is a comprehended and comprehending intuiting. Time, therefore, appears as the destiny and necessity of spirit that is not yet complete within itself, the necessity to enrich the share which self-consciousness has in consciousness, to set in motion the *immediacy of the in itself*, which is the form in which the substance is present in consciousness; or conversely, to realize and reveal what is at first only *inward* (the in-itself being taken as what is *inward*), i.e. to vindicate it for spirit's certainty of itself <sup>16</sup>.

Only the totality of spirit is in time, and the "shapes", which are "shapes" of the totality of *spirit*, display themselves in a temporal succession; for only the whole has true actuality and therefore the form of pure freedom in face of an "other", a form which expresses itself as time <sup>17</sup>.

As it is clear, Hegel presents us with three *orders* of consideration that considerably differ from one another, and appear to be hardly reconcilable. In the first passage, Hegel makes a statement regarding the *appearance of science* in time, placing such appearance in a dimension characterized as "time" and "actuality", and in the moment that follows the completion of a certain path, that is, the path of spirit's attainment of self-awareness. In the second passage, on the

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 428 (§ 800).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 429 (§ 801).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 365 (§ 679).

contrary, Hegel seems to state with equal clarity that time is precisely the dimension characterizing the *inadequacy* of spirit's self-understanding; more specifically, time constitutes a sort of prison in which spirit is forced to stay until it reaches the completion of its development. Finally, in the passage from the Religion chapter, time is defined as the *form of freedom* in face of an other – thus, freedom *par excellence* – and as the dimension in which only spirit in its wholeness is able to subsist.

Already at a first, superficial glance, these three orders of consideration let sense all the complexity characterizing the relation of spirit, and of the knowledge it has of itself, with time. My aim – starting on the one hand from the idea (a Hegelian idea, in fact) that the emergence of a contradiction, or an obstacle to understanding, is nothing but an opportunity and matter for a *deeper* understanding, and on the other hand from the persuasion that an author, until “proven guilty”, must be considered as coherent with himself<sup>18</sup> – is to reconstruct a comprehensive and consistent reading of Hegel's concept of time and history in relation to absolute knowing, understood as *science* that realizes itself in the concreteness of actuality. I will thus proceed, in what follows, to the interpretation of the second part of Hegel's chapter on absolute knowing, and I will assume as a guide the demand to understand it especially from this point of view (i.e., the actualization of knowing), which emerges – in my view – as playing an essential role in the fully identification of this knowing's nature. I will start, therefore, from the point at which the analysis has been interrupted at the end of the previous chapter, and precisely with the first of the quoted passages on time:

But as regards the existence of this concept, science does not appear in time and in the actual world before spirit has attained to this consciousness about itself<sup>19</sup>.

Even though, as we have seen, the temporal and historical dimension is present in the whole chapter, Hegel starts addressing it explicitly only in this second half of the text. In fact he announces his will, at this point of his exposition, to deal with the aspect concerning the existence (*Dasein*) of the

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<sup>18</sup> In regards to this point, I follow Bencivenga's idea of consistency as discussed in *Hegel's Dialectical Logic*, op. cit., pp. 92-94.

<sup>19</sup> *PhG*, p. 428 (§ 800).



concept, and further characterizes this aspect as defined by *time* and actuality (*Wirklichkeit*). The existence of the concept and therefore the appearing of absolute knowing, that as we will see will constitute an essential side of its completeness and absoluteness, takes place in a dimension defined by a temporal articulation (Hegel will be more explicit a little bit further in the text) and by actuality. But what does it mean to be “in actuality”? If we turn our attention on the *Preface* – that, as I already mentioned before, can be illuminating for a full comprehension of the Absolute Knowing chapter – we find a useful definition of actuality. Hegel writes, indeed, that the actual is what constitutes the content, that is, the element and the object of philosophy, and as such it is opposed to what is unreal on the one side, and abstract on the other side.

The actual [is] that which posits itself and is alive within itself – existence within its own concept<sup>20</sup>.

This determination of what “actual” means provides us with a suggestion decisive to understand what kind of existence Hegel attributes to science: the existence that characterizes science is the one that is in its own concept, that is, *true* existence, where by “true” is meant the object corresponding to its own concept. Existence as such, on the contrary, for Hegel is something abstract, as a simple and immediate “being there”. It is clear, therefore, that Hegel is talking about a wholly peculiar existence, peculiar only to what has reached the identity with its own concept, i.e. its truth; it is a comprehended and aware existence, the existence peculiar to science. On this ground we can assume that also the relation with time will not be the one characterizing the common existence of objects that, in their immediacy, follow one another without any apparently meaningful connection.

Science, therefore, can appear in time and actuality only once that spirit has reached that awareness of itself, the nature of which Hegel has described in the preceding pages, and that constitutes the definitional character of absolute knowing: as we have seen in the previous chapter, indeed, absolute knowing is the culminating point of spirit’s path, at the end of which spirit understands its

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34 (§ 800).

identity with its own path, that is, with its own experience and all the steps that have made up the course of its development. In this sense time appears as the dimension in which spirit attains to the full awareness of itself and consequently as the only in which absolute knowing, i.e. science, can manifest itself.

As spirit that knows what it is, it does not exist before, and nowhere at all, till after the completion of its work of compelling its imperfect “shape” to procure for its consciousness the “shape” of its essence, and in this way to equate its *self-consciousness* with its *consciousness*<sup>21</sup>.

Once again, Hegel defines absolute knowing as the identity of consciousness and self-consciousness. Such identity emerges as the result of an activity of spirit, or, more specifically, of a work by virtue of which spirit leads its imperfect shape to assume the shape of its essence. This passage further supports our idea that absolute knowing is essentially a shape, precisely as the preceding steps of the *Phenomenology*: the difference between those preceding steps and absolute knowing must be identified in the *kind of shape* that the latter is, namely a perfect shape, the one *reflecting* the essence of absolute knowing, that is, the appropriate one for the conceptual structure characterizing this concluding and culminating step of consciousness's path, that is, precisely that identity of consciousness and self-consciousness. Only *after* the completion of this work, and thus only at the end of a process that clearly is a historical process can spirit be actually and properly said to exist.

A further point that is worth noticing, in my view, is the one relating to the *appearance* of science: science constitutes, as it should be clear by now, a manifestation of spirit – it is a *shape* of spirit, in fact – as there has been before. That science, as described in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is significantly characterized as *appearing*, has induced several commentators to claim that the final goal of the *Phenomenology* does not coincide with actual science – which is usually identified with the kind of knowing displayed in the *Logic*<sup>22</sup>. Michael Forster, in turn, claims that “to say that the *Phenomenology* presents an

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 428 (§ 800).

<sup>22</sup> Among those commentators, as I have already mentioned in the *Introduction* to the present study, W. Maker makes strong claims about the nature of absolute knowing in relation to science “proper”. See *Hegel's 'Phenomenology' as Introduction to Science*, cit.

‘appearance’ of science [...] is to say that the shapes of consciousness which it treats as its subject matter and even the standpoint of the work itself express the same content as science but in a form which includes the imperfection of nonscientific perspectives”<sup>23</sup>.

I agree that the shapes of consciousness presented by Hegel throughout the *Phenomenology* are forms of inadequate knowing, as they are stuck in an oppositional relationship with their object. But I reject the claim that the standpoint of the work itself is an “appearance” of science, thereby identifying “appearance” and “untruth”. That something appears does not imply its being false: rather, it means that it comes to manifestation, and manifestation can assume different modes. Absolute knowing is a shape and appears as such: it is, however, a *qualitatively* different manifestation from the many that preceded it, insofar as it marks an essential *caesura* in respect to the relation spirit entertains with itself and its object (a caesura that is meant as a comprehension of the substantial *identity* between itself and its own object, and therefore as a *radical* and *dramatic* change compared to all the preceding phases).

Spirit that is in and for itself and differentiated into its moments is a knowing that is for itself, a comprehension in general that, as such, substance has not yet reached, i.e. substance is not in its own self an absolute knowing<sup>24</sup>.

Spirit that has achieved the completeness of its development (i.e., as in and for itself), is not yet absolute knowing as long as its moments are still differentiated, distinct, that is to say not *comprehended* in a unitary whole integrating them with one another. Considered in the different moments that constitute it, in fact, spirit is still, only, *for itself*, dissolved in them; in order to gain absoluteness, on the contrary, spirit must attain to what, in terms of Hegel’s technical language, is the unity of the in itself and for itself, in other words it must return into itself, become conscious not of the object as differentiated in those single moments anymore, but of its experience as a *coherent* whole. This demand on unity is central, in my view, as regards absolute knowing: the substance of

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<sup>23</sup> M. Forster, *Hegel’s Idea of a Phenomenology of Spirit*, op. cit., p. 262.

<sup>24</sup> *PhG*, p. 428 (§ 800).

which Hegel talks in this context, therefore, is the concreteness of the content comprehended as a whole.

Now, in actuality, the substance that knows exists earlier than its form or its concept-determined “shape”. For substance is the as yet undeveloped *in itself*, or the ground and concept in its still unmoved simplicity, and therefore the *inwardness* or the self of the spirit that does not yet *exist*. What is there, exists as the still undeveloped simple or immediate, or as the object of the *representative* consciousness in general<sup>25</sup>.

Hegel claims here that in actuality – and thus in the dimension that, as we have seen above, is characterized as the unity of concept and existence – the “substance that knows” (*die wissende Substanz*) exists earlier than the form or the conceptual shape of itself. Since, as it has been already observed, the shape constitutes the determination and singularization of a conceptual form, what emerges in this passage is the priority, on the level of actuality, of spirit’s knowledge of itself in its inwardness over its concrete realization, or the development and existence of this knowing. Existence, for now, is still limited to what constitutes the object of representation. Hegel emphasizes, in these lines, the necessity of the existence of knowing in its perfect shape not only in its concept and therefore in its inwardness, but also and precisely on the level of concreteness, in order to complete the process. Both the pure immediacy of the concept and the undeveloped immediacy of what simply *exists* without becoming the object of a conceptual comprehension, but remains at the level of an object that is distinct from, and opposed to, consciousness’s knowing activity, constitute insufficient sides if regarded as mutually isolated. The actual knowledge, therefore, is only that which unifies the two sides, the *in itself* of consciousness and the *for itself* of what exists, in which the latter is brought back, in the context of consciousness’s experience, in the *in itself* of consciousness. More explicitly, this is the movement by virtue of which knowledge proceeds from an “abstract” understanding of the conceptual moments, which appears as a “meager” knowledge compared to substance and its understanding, to the actualization of that understanding through its application to the content that has been constituted by its own experience: the concreteness of objectivity, this way, is “absorbed” by

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 428 (§ 801).

knowledge, that thereby appropriates it through the understanding and conceptualization it develops with respect to it. Such conceptualization, however, does not coincide – as it should be clear at this stage – with abstraction, but with the unification between experiential content and conceptual determinations (moments), where the conceptual determinations are, as it were, “extracted” and elaborated starting from the experiential content.

Hegel is describing, in these pages, two different movements that pertain to the concreteness of knowing: on the one hand, the movement by virtue of which, starting from the multiplicity and variety of consciousness’s experience, the conceptual understanding of its moments is reached, and on the other hand the movement by virtue of which knowing, once reached that conceptual understanding, must necessarily concretize itself, that is, apply and realize itself in the dimension of actuality, that is now the object of a new way of looking at it, which is founded on the identity of being and thought that absolute knowing has reached.

Cognition, because it is the spiritual consciousness for which what *is in itself* only *is*, insofar as it is a *being for* the self and a being of the *self* or concept, has for this reason at first only a meager object, in contrast with which substance and the consciousness of this substance are richer. The disclosure or revelation which substance has in this consciousness is in fact concealment, for substance is still *self-less being* and what is disclosed to it is only the certainty of itself<sup>26</sup>.

Hegel now summarizes the path he has developed in the previous pages of the chapter, in which he recapitulated the phenomenological stages that preceded the attainment of the absolute standpoint, and compares the latter with the preceding stages. In particular, he observes that the object of knowledge is, in a first moment, a meager one: such object is the concept. With respect to the substance of experience, as it presents itself to consciousness, such object appears to be less detailed, less rich in concrete determinations. The apparent richness (“disclosure”) of substance, towards which the knowing activity of consciousness is directed, however, is unmasked as “concealment”: the actual determinations, in fact, are hidden in it. The experience of consciousness, in other words, appears to be manifest in its immediacy, but actually its deep meaning – namely its being

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

connected with the other experiences and its belonging as a whole to spirit – can only be the outcome of a long process, a process that is long like the life of spirit itself. As we will see, indeed, it is a process that never ends, but can be said to be completed only in relation to a determined cycle of spirit's experiences.

The second of the two movements that I have identified in the last passage quoted is operating here, namely the movement by virtue of which knowing, starting from the abstractness of the pure moments of the concept, appropriates the concreteness of existence. Self-consciousness enriches its content by subtracting to consciousness, and therefore to the knowledge of the object, “the entire structure of the essentialities of substance”<sup>27</sup>: in other words, self-consciousness appropriates the determinations of the object, first considered as merely pertaining to the object and extraneous – in various degrees – to itself, and brings them back into itself, therefore recognizing itself in its experience, recognizing itself as the author of the knowing activity previously actuated: self-consciousness sees in the object the fruit of its work, that is, it sees in the actuality in which it is immersed the result of its own activity. The negative relation to objectivity, that such movement implies, eventually acquires, in this perspective, a positive value, since it gives back to content its true essence, and thereby presents it again to consciousness in its truth: this is, hence, a positive movement in the fullest sense of the term, because it confers to what exists its true essence. This holds both for the epistemological aspect, and for the one specifically connected to the construction of the world from a cultural, social and political point of view as it is described in the *Phenomenology* and especially in its last chapters.

From the point of view of the *logic* of the phenomenological development, then, Hegel clarifies what the priority of the two elements is. If we consider the concept that knows itself as such, the *moments* become objects of its knowing earlier than the totality of experience as conceptually understood. If, rather, we consider consciousness, then, experience, not yet understood as a whole but in its immediacy, comes earlier than the moments.

We now reach, following Hegel's text, the second of the passages that explicitly thematize time and its relation to absolute knowing. This is, by the way,

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 429 (§ 801).

one of the most discussed points regarding this topic, for it presents a controversial conception of temporality, this way constituting one of the major cruxes of Hegel's text on absolute knowing. For the sake of clarity, I will break it down into parts, that I will then analyze separately in detail.

Time is the concept itself that *is there* and which presents itself to consciousness as empty intuition; for this reason, spirit necessarily appears in time, and it appears just so long as it has not *grasped* its pure concept, i.e. has not annulled time<sup>28</sup>.

First of all, time is here defined as the *Dasein* ("being there") of the concept, and therefore as the most elementary form of its manifestation. In relation to consciousness, furthermore, it constitutes an empty intuition, void of any content, which reminds Kant's determination of time as *a priori* form of sense structuring the experiential content. For Hegel, this refers to the activity of consciousness that organizes its experience in a temporal sense: consciousness, as it has been observed, is in fact "originary temporalizing activity", and as such it constitutes an "enigma to itself", because it is not able to make its own activity the object of its knowledge and understanding<sup>29</sup>. According to Hegel, then, spirit appears in time only until it reaches the understanding of its own concept, that is, the understanding of the identity of itself and the object of its knowing, which constitutes the gain and the defining element of absolute knowing. This seems to contradict what has been previously claimed by Hegel, namely that time constitutes the dimension in which science realizes itself. It seems, in fact, that time represents both the dimension of spirit's inadequacy, and of its development's incompleteness, and the dimension in which it is manifest in the fullness of such development. Hegel's more radical statement, according to which spirit, insofar as it grasps its concept, "annuls" time, sharpens the difficulty of this passage. It is necessary to keep in mind that we are not dealing with an *Aufhebung* (superseding), but with a *Tilgung* (annulment). One might object that Hegel's dialectical *method* itself does not allow, according to its own structure, an authentic annulment: rather, what is possible is the negation of an immediacy and its integration in the dialectical process. At the same time, however, it is difficult

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem* (for all the following passages, until new reference).

<sup>29</sup> F. Chiereghin, *Dialettica dell'assoluto e ontologia della soggettività in Hegel*, p. 443.

to believe that Hegel “let out”, “by mistake”, a term in the place of another, and least of all in such a problematic point and concerning a spiritual movement. It is true that the *Phenomenology*'s text, and especially its last parts, have been written in a rush, but I believe one has to trust the author and try, first of all, to understand the possible reason and meaning of such a terminological choice, however controversial and problematic it can be. The term used, in fact, seem to refer to a radical activity, almost a violent one, eliminating the context in which the experience of spirit has been situated until this moment, and establishing a new dimension for science. This new dimension, however, if time was actually and wholly canceled, would end up being completely separated from the concreteness of the temporal flow. One of the goals of the present chapter is precisely that of understanding if this is the case, that is, if the one outline above really corresponds to Hegel's concept of science and of the dimension in which it explicates itself. The implications, from this point of view, are crucial in particular as regards the status of philosophical knowing in Hegel and its relationship with actuality, with the *Wirklichkeit*.

Before I proceed to the next part of this section in Hegel's text, I will make a brief digression on the interpretations of this passage that scholars have developed. This is useful, in my view, insofar as this is one of the most commented passages of the whole chapter: the purpose of this digression it to offer some stimulating suggestions for the interpretation of this passage. My criterion for the choice of the authors is, therefore, only a thematic one, not a historical one. Michael Murray, for example, has devoted an interesting article to the role of time in the *Phenomenology*, in which he mainly (and rightly) focuses on the concluding chapter of the work. Starting from the consideration that all of Hegel's texts on time are ambiguous and allow different or even opposite readings, he develops a convincing account of Hegel's conception of time and, especially, of the passage we are now dealing with, that he places “among those hermeneutically ambivalent ones that seem to assert both the identity of time with the concept and the abolition of time”<sup>30</sup>. According to Murray, the path described

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<sup>30</sup> M. Murray, *Time in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, «The Review of Metaphysics» 34 (1981), n. 4, pp. 682-705, p. 701.



in the *Phenomenology* is the one in which spirit tries to overcome its inadequacy, that is, the condition in which the self is understood as something external, and time is understood as a succession in which the experience of the self takes place. Spirit cannot understand its identity with the object until it gains an active approach to its experience and, therefore, to its understanding of time. This way, the Kantian account of time as merely subjective form, which disregards the nature of time as the object of spirit's comprehension, emerges as fundamentally inadequate. The abolition of time, in Murray's view, is thus the abolition of the simply external time, conceived as a sequence. Harris, in turn, interpreting Hegel's definition of time as "the concept itself, that *is there*", claims that in this sense time is the way in which the concept (as "the incarnated unity of God and Man in the community") is simply given as "an object of experience". According to him, however, the *Tilgung* (annulment) of time only takes place in the "imagined 'eternity' of religion and in the logic of understanding", and therefore represents an inadequate relationship between spirit and time. This relationship acquires the adequate configuration when time is properly sublated, and that means to comprehend time and eternity together "as the *Gegensätze*, the opposed moments, of the self-knowing concept that is the 'true infinite'"<sup>31</sup>. Franco Chiereghin, in turn, claims that absolute knowing is the only dimension within which it is possible to develop a comprehension of time, for the concept of spirit has finally reached the full understanding of its conceptual structure. Where the opposition of consciousness is still present, on the contrary, consciousness is "immersed" in time and is unable to raise itself to the understanding of time. When the opposition is sublated, then, absolute knowing appears as *thinking of time*: this is possible because it does not fear its other anymore, and therefore assumes the form of time – that is, the capacity of remaining itself even in what is other than itself<sup>32</sup>. Catherine Malabou, on this point, does not really take into account Hegel's use of the term *Tilgung* (annulment), but only comments the passage we are dealing with in terms of an *Aufhebung* (supersession). She starts from Heidegger's sharp critique of Hegel's concept of time in *Being and Time*,

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<sup>31</sup> H. S. Harris, *Hegel's Ladder*, vol. II, *The Odyssey of Spirit*, p. 730.

<sup>32</sup> F. Chiereghin, *La Fenomenologia dello spirito di Hegel: introduzione alla lettura*, Carocci, Roma 1998, pp. 162-63.

and argues that the *Aufhebung* of time does not apply to time as such in order to affirm a mastery of the self over itself and the attainment of a indifferent present, as Heidegger claimed, but only to time as externally conceived<sup>33</sup>.

Back to Hegel's text, we can now proceed to the next part:

[Time] is the *outer*, intuited pure self which is *not grasped* by the self, the merely intuited concept; when this latter grasps itself it sets aside its time-form, comprehends this intuiting, and is a comprehended and comprehending intuiting.

In this second part of the passage we are examining time is defined as the concept insofar as it is only intuited, and not the object of a conceptual comprehension, that is, of *begreifen*. This determination follows the preceding one, according to which time was the concept in its *Dasein* (being there): an equally elementary mode of apprehension, therefore, follows an elementary mode of presence. In the same moment in which such mode is overcome and a higher form of knowledge is achieved, by virtue of which the concept understands itself, time – or, more precisely, the “time-form” (*Zeitform*) – is superseded; in this case Hegel uses the verb *aufheben* (to supersede), and therefore refers, technically, to the dialectical process through which an inadequate form is sublated and at the same time preserved in a higher unity with what is other than itself, with its opposite. For now, thus, we can notice that, according to what Hegel writes, time as such is canceled, while the time-form of the concept is superseded; even though this formulation is still somehow obscure, it is certainly possible to say that that temporal form, as the object of *Aufhebung*, will present itself at another level, in a different form, but will be certainly retrieved. It must still be clarified, however, what the difference between time as such and the form of time is: this will be possible at the end of our reading path. For now, let us proceed with the analysis of Hegel's text: this will allow us to enrich our account with new elements that will contribute, eventually, to the constitution of an overall interpretation of the issue and to see what Hegel might mean by *Zeitform* (time's form).

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<sup>33</sup> C. Malabou, *The Future of Hegel*, op. cit. pp. 127-28.

The provisional result, thus, is that the concept, once the temporal form has been superseded, is an intuiting which is both the object of a *begreifen*, that is, conceptual comprehension, and the subject of such activity. What does this all mean? Time, as we have seen, is the external, intuited self that is not yet understood by the self, by spirit. This understanding of itself by spirit, however, is precisely what constitutes the nature of absolute knowing: absolute knowing's nature, then, might be also expressed in terms of a comprehension of time insofar as it constitutes the external and merely intuited self, the still immediate self-comprehension that is isolated in its moments (or, in the phenomenological language, in its shapes), the dimension in which the experience of consciousness is given as a simple sequence, characterized by externality, of different and apparently disconnected phases. What is at stake, therefore, in the relation of time with the concept, is the relationship between consciousness and its object: consciousness, indeed, knows its object precisely by means of intuition, as placed in time, and consequently as constituted according external connections. Conceptual knowledge, on the contrary, knows its object according to internal and necessary connections that constitute it and that are provided, in fact, only by the concept. It is in this sense, probably, that the *Aufhebung* (superseding) of the temporal form can be interpreted: when spirit understands its intuition it turns the temporal, external connections that characterized it in its immediacy, in internal and necessary connections, thus in conceptual connections<sup>34</sup>.

The experience of consciousness, therefore, in absolute knowing is subtracted to its temporal and immediate dimension, and made the object of a conceptual comprehension, according to the structure we have discussed in the preceding chapter. In this sense,

Time, therefore, appears as the destiny and necessity of spirit that is not yet complete within itself, the necessity to enrich the share which self-consciousness has in consciousness, to set in motion the *immediacy of the in itself*, which is the form in which the substance is present in consciousness; or conversely, to realize and reveal what is at first only *inward* (the in itself being taken as what is *inward*), i.e. to vindicate it for spirit's certainty of itself.

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<sup>34</sup> These considerations regard the *Zeitform* (time-form) Hegel talks about. As regards the annulment of time, that constitutes the most controversial aspect of this passage, I will address it in detail in what follows and especially in the concluding considerations of the present chapter.

The third definition of time, presented by Hegel in this long passage drawn from § 801, is particularly pregnant: time constitutes, indeed, the destiny and the necessity of spirit that has not yet concluded the process of its experience's rationalization and conceptualization.

“Destiny” seems to suggest that spirit is condemned, as it were, to the temporal sphere insofar as it is not capable to understand itself, where the being condemned clearly refers to a condition in which spirit is not an active knowing agent, it is not the “master” of its own experience and therefore of itself, but it is passive and subject to the flow of its experiences.

“Necessity”, in a different sense, is that by virtue of which self-consciousness must gradually appropriate the object (that is, again, of its experience), which initially was considered as *other* with respect to itself. At the same time, this process corresponds to the movement by virtue of which what is only *inward* must necessarily find a concrete realization or, in other words, it must become the object of that same experience as knowing of itself.

For this reason it must be said that nothing is *known* that is not in *experience*, or, as it is also expressed, that is not *felt to be true*, not given as an *inwardly revealed* eternal verity, as something sacred that is *believed*, or whatever other expressions have been used. For experience is just this, that the content – which is spirit – is *in itself* substance, and therefore an *object of consciousness*. But this substance which is spirit is the process in which spirit *becomes* what it is in *itself*; and it is only as this process of reflecting itself into itself that it is in itself truly *spirit*<sup>35</sup>.

On the ground of the two movements described above – that is, the movement going from the concreteness of experience to conceptual movements, and the opposite one – Hegel can now claim that experience constitutes the non-transcendable foundation of every form of knowing, the basis starting from which and upon which every possible knowing is built. He then provides two different characterizations of what he means by “experience”: in the first one, experience is defined in relation to the content of representation, and in particular of religious representation (all examples refer to the sphere of faith and religious feeling); in the second one, experience is defined, in specific phenomenological terms, as the

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<sup>35</sup> *PhG*, p. 429 (§ 802).

object of consciousness, where such object is spirit itself in the different modalities through which it knows itself. We can also find, in these lines, a definition of what Hegel means by spirit in this context: spirit is indeed described as the coming to be what it is in itself, and as a becoming that reflects itself into itself. Spirit, therefore, identifies with the very development through which it lives its own spirit's life, that is, a continuing movement and actualization of what is only implicit in it, and as reflection into itself. The complete actualization of spirit, its truth, is reached precisely through that reflecting movement, in which – starting from the completed experience – it returns into itself and proceeds to its comprehension. This is the movement that leads to carry out that turning of the substance into subject that has been referred to as the ultimate goal of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and whose full meaning manifests itself only with the attainment of absolute knowing<sup>36</sup>.

Until spirit has completed itself in *itself*, until it has completed itself as world-spirit, it cannot reach its consummation as *self-conscious* spirit. Therefore, the content of religion proclaims earlier in time than does science, what *spirit is*, but only science is its true knowledge of itself<sup>37</sup>.

Hegel resumes here, making it more explicit and concise, what he has claimed above: spirit, in order to gain the completeness of its development and therefore in order to become spirit conscious of itself, must complete itself as *world spirit*. This is the first, clear reference to the intrinsic historicity of spirit. Although, indeed, this dimension was left implicit along the entire argumentative path of this chapter, it now starts acquiring a clear role precisely at the level of the explanation of experience's meaning that lays at the ground of absolute knowing, and starts being openly thematized.

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<sup>36</sup> It is worth recalling the whole passage I am referring to, that can be found in the *Preface*, and seems to remind in a very precise way what Hegel is talking about in these pages of the work's concluding chapter: "Everything turns on grasping and expressing the true, not only as *substance*, but equally as subject. At the same time, it is to be observed that substantiality embraces the universal, or the *immediacy of knowledge* itself, as well as that universal, or the *immediacy of knowledge* itself, as well as that which is *being* or *immediacy for knowledge*" (*Ibid.*, p. 18; § 17). Also the following part of the *Preface* is specular to the discussion of absolute knowing in these pages, especially regarding the completeness of the development that is reached only at the end of it, the circularity of this process, the necessity of exteriorization, and the relation with the negative in order to attain to the truth.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 429-30 (§ 802).

Spirit, therefore, is world-spirit, it is spirit that embodies itself in a concrete actuality, that unfolds in a historical, and therefore necessarily human becoming, since “only human beings have history”. When we talk about “human”, however, we must not run the risk of confusing Hegel’s spirit with the accidentality of the single, historical experiences: spirit, rather, is the comprehension that spirit itself, as the fruit of the totality of its experiences, develops regarding itself. In this sense Hegel can claim that, *in time*, spirit has reached this awareness in religion earlier than in science, which, however, is the true knowing of spirit, for the reasons that have been already broadly discussed, and that here are effectively summarized in the distinction between “expressing” what spirit is – the religion’s way – and possessing a *true knowing* about it.

The movement of carrying forward the form of its self-knowledge [*die Form seines Wissens hervorzutreiben*] is the labor which it [spirit] accomplishes as actual history [*wirkliche Geschichte*]<sup>38</sup>.

Consistently with what we have seen above regarding time and the *Aufhebung* (supersession) of the form of time as an establishing of conceptual connections that substitute the purely external temporal connections, the actual historical process is described by Hegel in terms of a movement in the course of which spirit develops the *form* of its self-knowledge: the outcome of this movement, therefore, is the production of the form, the essence, the conceptual structure that constitutes absolute knowing. The movement, fundamentally, is that through which spirit *draws* (this is the translation that most reflects the German word used by Hegel) from itself the awareness of its identity with the preceding stages of its development, with its necessary exteriorization. This important passage also emphasizes, in a clear manner, the essential aspect of the historicity of spirit, in its first inadequate and then gradually more adequate configurations. A remark and a question, at this point, are in order: if spirit is essentially history, and is understood in terms of the *comprehension of an experience* (that in turn is given in a historical flow) and not as a mere sequence of events, spirit’s knowing is then conceived as a knowing of that historical experience, and therefore as the

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 430 (§ 803).

awareness that spirit is able to gain retrospectively, regarding itself and its own history, when it “stops” and “observe” it. In a certain sense, we might say remaining faithful to what Hegel claims, such awareness is possible only at the completion of a phase, of a cycle of experiences that spirit has gone through and that, somehow, constitute a whole which can be made the object of the activity of comprehension and rationalization described above. Walter Jaeschke, in his essay on absolute knowing, has especially focused on the side of absolute knowing’s historicity. As regards this specific point he claims that absolute knowing has as its necessary premise world history and the history of philosophy, whose comprehension it constitutes. That absolute knowing must be considered from a historical point of view does not mean to see it as a relative knowing in the sense that it could have been other than what it is: it means, rather, to recognize it as a peculiar manifestation of spirit that, as such, is necessarily given in time<sup>39</sup>. Harris, instead, provokingly claims that “the discursive process of the *Logic* itself can only be ‘absolute’ in a relative sense. *Dasein*, even the *Dasein* of the concept, is not ‘eternal’ in the Platonic sense; for that would take us back to the old intuitive sense of eternity which has been sublated. The Hegelian logic itself is an organon of historical knowledge”<sup>40</sup>.

But what happens *after* that moment, that is, after the comprehension of spirit’s experience has been reached and structured from the point of view of absolute knowing? Is absolute knowing once and for all, or – given that we have understood it as the understanding of a historical process – does it appears in different moments? Can we say that spirit still has an experience, and a comprehension of it? A positive answer to this last question seems to be natural: spirit is in fact a continuous movement, the flow of events never stops and spirit goes through vicissitudes that are always new, but also sharply different from the ones spirit has already gone through. If it was not like this, in fact, spirit would have no life anymore. And, on the other hand, history after Hegel has shown in the most evident way that things are exactly in this way. But what happens, then, to absolute knowing? Does its absoluteness consists of the fact that it is always

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<sup>39</sup> See W. Jaeschke, *Das absolute Wissen*.

<sup>40</sup> H. S. Harris, *Hegel’s Ladder*, vol. II, *The Odyssey of Spirit*, op. cit., p. 740.

valid, regardless of the changes in the historical and experiential scene of spirit? The answer to this question is less natural than the preceding one: since absolute knowing is defined in terms of the comprehension of a specific path completed by spirit, one can legitimately raise the problem of the “applicability” of such knowing to different forms of experience, that are not included in the path through which it has been constituted.

We will see, in what follows, that the relation with time is essential to clarify this question: for now I will limit myself to suggest that, at least, absolute knowing must be “open”, that is, capable to receive and integrate within itself the comprehension of new events and new phases spirit goes through. This stance, in my view, is only possible if one is not persuaded that history *does* end with Hegel, as much as art, philosophy or whatever form of spirit’s manifestation. I do not think it is necessary to argue against this thesis, unless by stressing that what can be said to end with Hegel or after Hegel is only a *specific* way of conceiving of art, of doing philosophy, of thinking of the state and considering history. With Hegel’s epoch, in this sense, modernity and the specific way in which it has comprehended itself, comes to an end, but certainly not the movement of spirit and therefore its manifestations, i.e. art, philosophy, state, history etc.

Let us go back, now, to Hegel’s text: after having defined history in terms of the work through which spirit produces the form of its knowing, Hegel gathers together, once again, some of the moments preceding absolute knowing; this time, however, he first reminds the nature of spirit’s self-comprehension in the form of religion, and then summarizes in an extreme way, reducing them to a purely conceptual level, the essential moments of the history of thought that have preceded the standpoint of absolute knowing, i.e. Hegel’s philosophy, that constitutes, if not the culmination, at least the conclusion of this sequence (a provisional one, of course, since other forms of spirit’s self-comprehension have appeared after that). The reading key Hegel uses to traverse, even though very briefly, the major stages in the history of philosophy, is constituted by the relation between self-consciousness and substance, or substance and subject (to use the terms in which the issue has been discussed in the *Preface* and resumed in this last chapter of the *Phenomenology*). Hegel’s thought, and especially the goal that the



*Phenomenology* has set itself, is no more, as it was in the past philosophies, the unity of thought and extension, but “the unity of thought and time”, defined as the essence that must be grasped by philosophy<sup>41</sup>. This passage lets emerge in an explicit way the essential role played by time in the work as a whole and, in particular, in its concluding sections: time it what must be made the object of that conceptual comprehension that in absolute knowing identifies the subject and its experience. It is thus even more crucial to clearly identify the status of temporality in relation to knowing, both from the point of view of its emergence and from the point of view of its unfolding. And the crucial role of temporality unavoidably refers to the fundamental role of subjectivity constituting spirit and its knowing:

Spirit is *this movement* of the self which empties itself of itself and sinks itself into its substance, and also, as subject, has gone out of that substance into itself, making the substance into an object and a content at the same time as it cancels this difference between objectivity and content<sup>42</sup>.

The path that the subject – as spirit – has gone through in order to gain the knowledge about itself is here extremely, but very effectively summarized: it is a movement that leads the subject to exteriorize itself, to actualize itself in the other than itself, that is, in the substance of its experience, and to return into itself from there by making substance the object of its knowledge, thereby sublating the difference between itself and the substance. The aspect of exteriorization, of the concrete existence and actualization of spirit in substance is essential for Hegel, since – as we have seen – the alternative to this *effort* of subjectivity is the isolation of the moral consciousness, that remains closed in itself and in its abstract assertion of the universal.

The ‘I’ has neither to cling to itself in the *form* of *self-consciousness* as against the form of substantiality and objectivity, as if it were afraid of the externalization of itself: the power of spirit lies rather in remaining the selfsame spirit in its externalization<sup>43</sup>.

By using terms with a psychological echo (*Angst*, fear), Hegel in these lines reasserts the need, for the I, not to remain trapped in the form of self-

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<sup>41</sup> *PhG*, p. 430 (§ 803).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, p. 431 (§ 804).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*.

consciousness, namely in the reflection into itself, but to come out of itself and to find the courage – just to continue using the terminology Hegel is using here – to actualize itself in objectivity in order to put its power to the test, the one that allows him to “remain the selfsame spirit” in its externalization; this does not mean that spirit remains untouched by its own experience, as if it was wholly insignificant, but rather that spirit is capable to maintain its identity – which, still, is the result of an activity of self-knowledge and integration of its experiences in the sense of its own identity – in front of the variety and multiplicity of its *existence*. To remain in its own inwardness recoiling from the otherness is precisely what – albeit preserving spirit, at least apparently, from a complete disruption – maintains it in the empty abstraction of the *in itself*. Absolute knowing constitutes the attainment of the point in which spirit has returned into itself from the immersion in substance, and has developed a comprehension of it in terms that are no more experiential, phenomenal, and therefore bound to the *shape* in which its relation to objectivity was previously singularized, that was still opposed to consciousness. Now, the element in which spirit knows itself is a different one, namely the concept:

In this knowing, then, spirit has concluded the movement in which it has shaped itself, insofar as this shaping was burdened with the difference of consciousness [i.e. of the latter from its object], a difference now overcome. Spirit has won the pure element of its existence, the concept.

Spirit, therefore, having won the concept, displays its existence and movement in this ether of its life and is *science*. In this, the moments of its movement no longer exhibit themselves as specific *shapes of consciousness*, but – since consciousness's difference has returned into the self – as *specific concepts* and as their organic self-grounded movement<sup>44</sup>.

Here, in the first of the two quoted passages, one might raise the problem of the alleged closure of every possible experience of spirit after the attainment of absolute knowing: Hegel, in fact, talks about a conclusion of the movement, which might lead to think about the *end*, somehow, of a path. It is, actually, an end, but certainly not an end in the sense that after that path there will not be other experiences: as I have suggested above, what comes to an end with the absolute

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 431-32 (§ 805).

knowing described by Hegel is a *cycle* of experiences that constitutes the history of spirit until that moment, until that specific historical epoch and from that specific observation point, and absolute knowing represents a standing point that the awareness achieved by spirit has been able to establish, and that is necessary in order for philosophical knowledge to be capable to unfold its comprehension of actuality, on the ground of the perspective that has been acquired. The most interesting position on the issue, in my view, is the one expressed by Ermanno Bencivenga in his book on *Hegel's Dialectical Logic*: he devotes an entire chapter to the so-called question of the “end of history”, at the beginning of which he considers how all of Hegel’s books and lectures usually end with a “strong suggestion of finality”<sup>45</sup>. According to him, there are two senses in which one might say that a Hegelian account on a subject matter could be said to be the ultimate one. According to the first, all the experiences of spirit have been proven as necessary and integrated in a unitary and well connected narrative. According to the second, Hegel’s philosophy (and its different thematic branches) is the last one, that is, no other narrative of the same kind will ever be presented because spirit has reached the last stage of its experience, after which nothing really *new* will happen. For Bencivenga, this view “not only is not – it *cannot* be what Hegel means. Spirit is infinitely creative [...]. Spirit will continue to grow beyond whatever story Hegel (or anyone) tells; and it will continue to do so in ways no story *now* can fathom”<sup>46</sup>.

In absolute knowing the very difference between *Form* and *Gestalt*, upon which the previous movement was grounded, seems to be superseded: the moments of spirit’s experience do not have the *appearance* of determined and particular shapes of consciousness in its inadequacy, but manifest themselves as *bestimmte Begriffe* (specific concepts) that acquire objectivity, and the subsistence of which is now granted insofar as it is founded upon the *form of the concept*. The concept, indeed, unifies within itself both the “objective form of truth” and the form of “the knowing self”; it is said here that the activity of shaping is

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<sup>45</sup> E. Bencivenga, *Hegel's Dialectical Logic*, p. 66. On p. 67 he observes that Hegel’s presumed view about the end of history “has given rise to all sorts of charges and ironies, stigmatizing its (apparent) absurd arrogance, complacent optimism, and sheer gullibility”.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

concluded, but this holds only insofar as the shape was bound to the opposition of consciousness to its object. In fact, the shape continues to be necessary (albeit as “pure shape”) precisely because science has an inward necessity to exteriorize the form of the pure concept (the “objective form”): it contains the “passage of the concept into *consciousness*”<sup>47</sup>. Such passage is significantly characterized as a *sacrifice* through which spirit exteriorizes itself in nature and history:

Yet this externalization is still incomplete [...]. The self-knowing spirit knows not only itself but also the negative of itself, or its limit: to know one's limit is to know how to sacrifice oneself. This sacrifice is the externalization in which spirit displays the process of its becoming spirit in the form of *free contingent happening*, intuiting its pure self as time outside of it, and equally its being as space<sup>48</sup>.

This passage constitutes an essential transition point in the chapter on absolute knowing; more precisely, it marks the transition to the concluding part of the chapter itself, which brings to the fore the role of history, of which we find here a second determination (after that, as we have seen above, it had been identified with the process through which spirit reaches the form of its knowing about itself) as the dimension in which spirit intuits itself and its pure self as time. I will now deal, in detail, with this determination and the activity of spirit pertaining to it.

### *3. History and “Erinnerung” in Absolute Knowing*

History and time, therefore, are connected in an essential way, as clearly results from the passage with which we have concluded the previous section. Let us now see more closely how this connection unfolds, and how it is related to spirit's activity of self-understanding.

The other side of its becoming [of spirit], *history*, is a *conscious*, *self-mediating* process – spirit emptied out into time<sup>49</sup>.

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, and p. 432 (§ 806).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 433 (§ 807).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem* (§ 808).

Spirit that realizes itself in time, in actuality, is history. History is identified with the becoming of spirit, therefore with the succession of its manifestations and experiences; it is not, however, identified with such experiences as considered in their immediacy, but as they are the object of spirit's knowledge [*das wissende ... Werden*, the knowing becoming] and mediation.

The movement operating here, from this point of view, is a slow movement, in which different spirits follow one another, different images slowly move, precisely because each of them must become the object of understanding by the self, which must appropriate the substance of its own experience before it can access the following one. The activity that enables such movement, and that constitutes – in a meaningful way as regards the relation of absolute knowing with history – the central element for the achievement of such knowing, is a particular activity, in which the internalization and preservation of experience beyond temporal immediacy unify themselves.

As its [spirit's] fulfillment consists in perfectly *knowing* what *it is*, in knowing its substance, this knowing is its *withdrawal into itself* in which it abandons its outer existence and gives its existential shape over to recollection<sup>50</sup>.

The completeness of spirit's development coincides with the knowledge it has of itself and its *substance*, that is, of its existence and experience. The knowledge of itself is reached through the internalization of such existence and experience, by virtue of which it is able to detach itself from its existence and treasure it, as it were, by placing it in a different dimension from the one in which it was immediately given in the first moment: such dimension is the one of recollection, *Erinnerung*, upon which and its role the whole concluding part of the Absolute Knowing chapter and, with it, of the whole *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is built. I emphasize this last aspect because, in my view, it can constitute an important stimulus for reflection regarding the relation of the work with what will come afterwards, and especially with the system. I will not address this relation extensively in the present context, but it seems interesting to stress that, where the transition to the system takes place, this happens through the recollection and

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*.

internalization of spirit's past experience insofar as it has given access to the "specific concepts", and therefore to the collection of concepts constituting science.

The activity of *Erinnerung* requires a detailed analysis: its role, in fact, is a crucial one, and it is much more interesting if we consider that, in what Hegel writes in this context, we can find strong similarities to what – albeit in a very different context – Hegel will write in the different versions he will give of his system (starting from the Jena system drafts, very close to the writing of the *Phenomenology*, until the different editions of the *Encyclopedia*).

Thus absorbed in itself, it [spirit] is sunk in the night of self-consciousness; but in that night its vanished outer existence is preserved, and this transformed existence – the former one, but now reborn of the spirit's knowledge – is the new existence, a new world and a new shape of spirit<sup>51</sup>.

The process operating here is a process by virtue of which the experiential content of spirit is preserved in its inwardness, and this way it is *aufgehoben* (sublated): this means that experience is not given to spirit in its *present* immediacy anymore, but it is at the same time preserved in its inwardness, and more precisely in its knowing, whose horizon constitutes an entire *new world*: that is, the world as it appears insofar as it has been mediated by the spirit's knowing activity.

It seems natural to refer to the discussion of *Erinnerung* in the system drafts of the Jena period, shortly prior or contemporary to the writing of the *Phenomenology*. It is worth reminding that the context of Hegel's considerations to this respect is, in this case, quite different from the phenomenological one: they can be found, in fact, in the context of the discussion of intelligence's activity, and thus of what Hegel will define, in its mature system, "finite" spirit. In other words, the activity described here is that of spirit in its singularity, the single human subject, and in the unfolding of its knowing activities. In the 1803/04 drafts, Hegel talks about the intuition of the immediate data, as placed in space and time. Initially, the relation of the subject (here defined as "consciousness") with the data is characterized by a substantial passivity, but it gradually "extracts"

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*.

the object of its knowledge from the immediate space and time in which it is placed, and starts showing an active role in its own ability to *recall* the intuitions it has had “in another time and place”, an ability defined as an “active reproduction”<sup>52</sup>.

In the text of the 1805/06 *Lectures*, the discussion is preserved in a more complete form, and there is a passage in which we can find clear echoes with the passage previously quoted from the *Phenomenology*. The process Hegel is talking about is the one by virtue of which the sensation, starting from its initial immediacy, is gradually appropriated through its *idealization* by the knowing subject:

This image [...] is stored in the spirit's *treasury*, in its *night*. The image is *unconscious*, i.e., it is not displayed as an object for representation. The human being is this night, this empty nothing which contains everything in its simplicity [...]. This [is] the night, the interior of [human] nature, existing here – pure self<sup>53</sup>.

Clearly, we are not dealing here with an activity that is identical to the one at work in the concluding pages of the *Phenomenology*: we are here at a much more elementary level in the knowing process that spirit carries out towards actuality and itself. However, the *structure* of the activity is very similar: as well as the shapes that have followed one another in the course of the phenomenological path are preserved in the night of self-consciousness, as long as spirit is focused on its inwardness, intelligence in the same way preserves the images of the externally intuited objects in its *night*; this term appears both in the *Phenomenology* and in the texts of the Jena lectures. The reference is to the *unconscious*, that constitutes the dimension in which the legacy of spirit's experience, or of intelligence's experience in this last case, is preserved until the knowing subject becomes *active* in its relationship with that content, that is, until the subject will avail itself of that content in order to build itself, with those images, a *new world*: “new” compared to the one that faces it immediately.

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<sup>52</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Jenaer Systementwürfe I, Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 6, p. 285 (my translation).

<sup>53</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Jenaer Systementwürfe III, Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 8, pp. 186-87 (*Hegel and the Human Spirit*, a translation of the Jena lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit (1805/06) with commentary, by L. Rauch; Wayne State University Press, Detroit 1983; also available online at <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/index.htm>)

This crucial passage is made possible, as it has been mentioned before, to what Hegel defines in terms of an appropriation process:

The object has thereby received form in general, the determination of being mine. And in being looked at again, its being no longer has this pure signification of being [as such], but of [being] *mine*: e.g., it is familiar to me, or I remind myself of it<sup>54</sup>.

*Erinnerung* is here named for the first time in an explicit way. If we focus our attention, however, on the Berlin *Encyclopedia* (1830), which regarding this point does not differ significantly from the Heidelberg edition (1817), we will find a larger discussion of the *Erinnerung*'s role, that constitutes an interesting opportunity of comparison with the corresponding discussion in the *Phenomenology*.

For the sake of greater clarity, I will go through the stages that precede *Erinnerung*, namely sensation (*Gefühl* or *Empfindung*) and intuition (*Anschauung*).

According to Hegel's discussion of the theoretical spirit, intuition is the first moment in which the activity of intelligence expresses itself, and as such it is, in the first moment, characterized by a certain passivity in the relation to its object. This is the stage of sensation, in which the knowing subject is merely affected by the object: when Hegel talks about what is "found" or "given" for intelligence, the reference is precisely to sensation. However, when sensation becomes the object of attention (*Aufmerksamkeit*), intelligence already starts emancipating itself from the situation of initial passivity. Attention is, to this respect, a crucial moment: it constitutes, in fact, the first negation of immediacy that characterizes the being of the object for the subject, and in this sense it is the first form of the self-determination of intelligence, which autonomously decides to focus on a specific object.

To pay attention to a sensation, indeed, means to make a choice among all the present sensations, and Hegel attributes importance to this moment to such an extent that he claims that without attention "nothing is for spirit"<sup>55</sup>: without the

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188 (<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/index.htm>).

<sup>55</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse (1830)*, in *Werke*, Theorie-Werkausgabe in Zwanzig Bände, auf der Grundlage der Werke von 1832-45 neu



moment of attention, as Peperzak has effectively stressed, the subject would end up “losing itself” in the infinite multiplicity of the sensations that assail it<sup>56</sup>. It is interesting to note that already at this quite elementary level of the intelligence’s activity its freedom comes to manifestation: the whole process of the theoretical spirit, in fact, is founded upon the dialectic of activity and passivity, being conditioned and freedom. The same dialectic has been previously expressed in terms of an opposition between what is simply found and what is produced by intelligence, or between the independent existence of the object and its existence *in* the subject as its possession: such contradiction, at the end of the process, will be sublated by thought. Back to the issue of attention, we can say that spirit, at this stage, acquires a double awareness: on the one hand, it recognizes the object as *its own*, namely as the object of its own consideration and knowledge, as such not completely extraneous anymore, but on the other hand that object is still “the other than itself”<sup>57</sup>, namely its negative, what has an independent existence and thus, to a large degree, is still extraneous to spirit. This sense of extraneousness will be present until the moment in which spirit will reach the culmination of its knowing process, in which the object will be a full possession of intelligence, where by “possession” I mean *product* of intelligence, the fruit and outcome of its own activity. Separation and possession are the two essential determinations pertaining the object that constitute, at this stage of the intuition, a still immediate, undetermined unity.

The third and last moment of this first stage of knowledge is that of the *eigentliche Anschauung* (intuition proper), which has as its result a unity, an unrelated whole of determinations”, a single isolated object. Intuition is the moment mediating the objectivity of sensation with the subjectivity of attention, but in which the first side tends to prevail. Here, in fact, there is not yet the awareness, by intelligence, that the intuition is *its own*. When such awareness is

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edierte Ausgabe, Redaktion von E. Moldenhauer und K. M. Michel, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt a.M. 1970, Bd. 10, § 448 (*Hegel's Philosophy of Mind*, transl. by W. Wallace and A. V. Miller, with revisions and commentary by M. Inwood, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2007). In what follows, references to the *Encyclopedia* will be given with the abbreviation *Enz. C*, followed by the section number.

<sup>56</sup> A. Peperzak, *Vom Gefühl zur Erinnerung. Versuch einer strukturellen Analyse*, «Hegel-Studien», Beiheft 19, pp. 159-81, here p. 168.

<sup>57</sup> *Enz. C*, § 448.

acquired, the transition to representation is completed. In the *Vorstellung* (representation), therefore, the side of the intuition's possession by intelligence is finally given: the intuition, previously, was its own anyway, but now it is also *known* as being its own, or – in other words – intelligence is aware of its very activity through its products.

In the addition to § 450 Hegel explains the difference between intuition and representation in terms of an overcoming that is also characterized as a *temporal* one: the intuition becomes something *past* when the stage of representation is achieved, and this is the sense in which one can say “I *have* seen this”. This expression indicates on the one hand, through the tense, the intuition's past character, but on the other hand “have”, the auxiliary verb of “to see” in the present perfect, also indicates a present which is, precisely, the present in which I possess the fruit of that intuition, even though in a different form from the original one, that is, the form given by the representation. The intelligence's representative activity develops in three moments, the first of which is, precisely, *Erinnerung*:

Intelligence, in first recollecting the intuition, puts the *content of feeling* in its inwardness, in its *own space* and its *own time*. In this way the content is an *image*, liberated from its initial immediacy and abstract individuality in contrast to other things, as received into the universality of the I in general<sup>58</sup>.

When intuition is recollected, thus, it is appropriated by intelligence, and this is exactly the point at which the transition to representation – that I have mentioned shortly above – is placed: this is an essential moment for intelligence because, by recollecting its past intuition, for the first time it cuts off every connection to the immediacy of the present intuition. The aspect of greatest freedom characterizing the knowing activity at this stage becomes clear when Hegel claims that the content of intuition is placed by intelligence “*in its own space*” and “*its own time*”: space and time are turned into inward space and time, that are ideal ones, established by the knowing subjectivity and therefore different from the ones that characterized intuition in its immediacy.

When an intuition is appropriated by intelligence, its particular determinations are overcome, we might say *transfigured*, turned into

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<sup>58</sup> Enz. C, § 452.

determinations posited by the subject, and what previously was an intuition now becomes an *image (Bild)*, that is produced by the “universality of the I”. What emerges from this activity is a first universalization or generalization of the intuitional data, the formation of some sort of “models” that do not have the specific determinateness of the initial intuition, and therefore in some way the same sensuous “richness”, but that make the subject independent from the immediate presence of the object, whose presence was indispensable, on the contrary, in sensation and intuition. Together with the subject’s freedom from the sensuous immediacy, with *Erinnerung* the datum of intuition acquires *duration*: it resists time, which swallows and lets disappear everything intelligence does not “decide” to hold through the representative activity<sup>59</sup>, and is preserved in the “nocturnal pit in which is stored a world of infinitely many images and representations, yet without being in consciousness”<sup>60</sup>.

The very well-known expression of the *nächtliche Schacht* (nocturnal pit) refers to the supply of images that the subject, through the twofold activity of internalization and recollection (that is, *Er-innerung*), creates: what stands out, in particular, and has attracted the interest of many scholars, is the unconscious character of this supply<sup>61</sup>. In the first moment, Hegel claims, the I cannot willingly evoke these images, that is, it does not have yet any mastery on them (or it has it

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<sup>59</sup> See *Ibid.*, § 452, *Addition*: «Everything that happens acquires *duration* for us only when it is taken up into representational intelligence, whereas occurrences not regarded by the intelligence as worth taking up in this way become something entirely past. However, what is represented gains this immortality only at the cost of the *clarity* and *freshness* of the immediate individuality, the all round determinacy, of what is intuited; the intuition is obscured and blurred, when it becomes an image». The loss of specificity of the sensuous datum, on the other hand, is necessary for the sake of universalization, the result of which is by definition a datum – in this case an image – which transcends the single intuitions of which it is an image.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, § 453, *Remark*.

<sup>61</sup> One of the most interesting studies to this respect is the one by J. Mills, *Hegel on the Unconscious Abyss: Implications for Psychoanalysis*, “The Owl of Minerva” 28 (1996), n. 1, pp. 59-75. The author stresses the way in which the unconscious constitutes the ground both for the insane states of mind and for the normal cognitive activity, thereby identifying it with the place in which spirit itself finds its origin, and in this perspective finds a correspondence between the “nocturnal pit” of images described by Hegel and the psychoanalytic reconstruction of the unconscious. The essential question discussed by the author regards, however, a possible “excess” of the unconscious, and therefore of imagination, over spirit, a sort of resistance to conscious thought which recalls the topic issues addressed by Derrida in the essay *Le puits et la pyramide*, in *Marges de la philosophie*, Editions de Minuit, Paris 1972 (*The Pit and the Pyramid*, in *Margins of Philosophy*, transl. by A. Bass, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1982, pp. 69-108). As regards the question regarding the unconscious, see also A. Masullo, *Das Unbewusste in Hegels Philosophie des subjektiven Geistes*, «Hegel-Studien», Beiheft 19, pp. 27-63.

only in a merely formal fashion), but it still needs an intuition, a sensuously present intuition, which can evoke those images.

*Erinnerung* in the proper sense, in fact, is this *relationship* between the image inwardly preserved by the subject and the present intuition: this is the “*subsumption* of the immediate individual intuition under what is universal in form, under the *representation* which is the same content”<sup>62</sup>. Hegel refers here to a “universal in form”, namely to the image insofar as it includes in itself the properties that are common to a succession of intuitions having the same content: once the image is given, it is possible for intelligence to *classify* other intuition by comparing them with it. The “new” intuitions that present themselves to the subject can be recognized by intelligence as belonging to a specific “class” identified by that image, and the image, in turn, is verified by way of comparison with the intuition<sup>63</sup>. In this way, a relation of reciprocal verification between the image and the intuition is established. The third moment of *Erinnerung* is thus reached, and it is characterized by the emerging of images from the intelligence’s nocturnal pit, and by the capacity of intelligence itself to recall the images regardless of the external stimulus constituted by the present intuition. This way, according to Hegel, intelligence gets to representation proper, “since what is internal now also comprises the determination of being able to be *presented* before the intelligence, of having reality in intelligence”<sup>64</sup>.

This reference to Hegel’s *Psychology* allows us to highlight the way in which *Erinnerung* is always attributed the essential function of enabling the universalization of experience, which constitutes its preservation and, at the same time, the rise to a spiritually more complex form, thereby realizing the transition, in the case of *Psychology*, to the freedom (and therefore spontaneity) of thought, and in the case of the *Phenomenology* to the absolute concept and therefore to science.

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<sup>62</sup> *Enz. C*, § 454.

<sup>63</sup> According to A. Ferrarin, the question regarding the attainment of universality remains undetermined: that is, it seems that the way in which, in *Erinnerung*, an intuition becomes universal as an image and the specific difference between an intuition and an image, remain unclear. See *Hegel and Aristotle*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, p. 297. See also J.A. Bates, *Hegel's Theory of Imagination*, SUNY Press, Albany 2004, p. 85.

<sup>64</sup> *Enz. C*, § 454.

We can now go back to the phenomenological account of *Erinnerung*, and to see more closely what its contribution is:

Recollection, the *inwardizing*, of that experience, has preserved it and is the inner being, and in fact the higher form of the substance. So although this spirit starts afresh and apparently from its own resources to bring itself to maturity, it is nonetheless on a higher level than that it starts.

The *goal*, absolute knowing, or spirit that knows itself as spirit, has for its path the recollection of the spirits as they are in themselves and as they accomplish the organization of their realm. Their preservation, regarded from the side of their free existence appearing in the form of contingency, is history; but regarded from the side of their [philosophically] comprehended organization, it is the science of knowing in the sphere of appearance: the two together, comprehended history, form alike the inwardizing and the Calvary of absolute spirit<sup>65</sup>.

In absolute knowing, through the inwardizing of spirit's previous existence, *Erinnerung* produces the "new shape of spirit", that is, the shape of spirit which – on the strength of the legacy constituted by the history of the spirits that preceded it, and moving from what is certainly a starting point, but also and at the same time a "higher level" – can venture into the mission that awaits it. Such mission is the attainment and unfolding of what Hegel defines in terms of a conceptually comprehended history, that is the result of the unification of history – namely, the existence of spirit that is given in the form of accidentality – and conceptual organization – the conceptual comprehension deriving precisely from the recollection and rationalization of its previous experience.

#### *4. Beyond Time, in History*

Now that we have seen how the discussion of time and history presented by Hegel in the second part of the chapter on absolute knowing develops, we can return to consider the problem we started with in order to try understanding in which way, on the ground of the analyses we have carried out in the meantime, it can be clarified.

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<sup>65</sup> *PhG*, p. 433 (§ 808).

I have started this investigation of the topic by presenting three apparently conflicting passages on the nature of time; I have discussed the first two, but I have left aside the third one, the discussion of which I will now introduce in order to add the previously announced complication that, however, will allow to actually clarify the framework I have created.

To summarize, the positions expressed by Hegel on time are the following ones: (a) time is the dimension in which spirit appears when it attains to the awareness of itself, and in which, therefore, it appears as science; (b) time is the dimension in which spirit appears as long as its development is not completed, and spirit annuls it when it grasps its own concept; (c) time is the dimension in which only spirit in its totality can appear: it is, in fact, the form of pure freedom in face of an other<sup>66</sup>.

In a very Hegelian sense, (a), (b), and (c) are all true. The path that spirit carries out in its experience, and of which the *Phenomenology* constitutes the narrative from a scientific standpoint, is a path which essentially happens in time, that – as we have seen – is the element in which a content must *necessarily* be given in order for it to be the object of knowledge, but also the element in which a content is *naturally* offered to consciousness. When spirit becomes aware of its experience, in the sense that it knows it, it appropriates it and makes it an integral part of its own identity, it cancels that temporal determination: it cancels it, however, only insofar as that determination merely allowed for the establishment of external connections within the content of that experience, for its organization worked in terms of a “before” and an “after”, but not on the ground of conceptual and therefore necessary and intrinsic determinations.

Spirit cannot gain any access to this accidental mode of the content when the experience is over, and therefore it is *that* time that is canceled, also because, as Hegel claims in different contexts<sup>67</sup>, time is that flow by virtue of which

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<sup>66</sup> “Only the totality of spirit is in time, and the “shapes”, which are “shapes” of the totality of *spirit*, display themselves in a temporal succession; for only the whole has true actuality and therefore the form of pure freedom in face of an “other”, a form which expresses itself as time”. *Ibid.*, p. 365 (§ 679).

<sup>67</sup> I am referring to the different versions of his philosophy of nature. See for example *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse (1830)*, in *Werke*, Theorie-Werkausgabe in 20 Bände, auf der Grundlage der *Werke* von 1832-45 neu edierte Ausgabe, Redaktion von E. Moldenhauer und K. M. Michel, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt a.M. 1970, Bd. 9

everything goes by, it is the immediate and natural “version” of negativity, whose authentic version is constituted by the properly spiritual negativity, which solely is able to reveal the finitude of experience – conceived as constituted by reciprocally isolated moments – and to attain to a higher dimension in which only the totality of experience has actual subsistence. And this is the meaning according to which science can appear in time, thereby appropriating it conclusively, or rather: spirit emancipates itself from the form of time in whose immediacy it has been initially bridled, and therefore becomes *free* to appear in time, because time constitutes the “form” of its externalization, in which it sacrifices itself (it sacrifices its absoluteness) by trying itself: only this way it is free, that is, by remaining by itself in its externalization.

[Spirit] is *time*, which is for itself, and [it is] the freedom of time as well – this pure subject that is free of its content but also *master* of it, unlike space and time which are selfless<sup>68</sup>.

Spirit, therefore, seems to have two sides: the first one, i.e. the “natural” one, which represents the immediacy and lack of freedom in which objectivity is for the subject, the second one, i.e. the “spiritual” one, which represents the manifestation of spirit’s freedom (“the form of pure freedom in face of an other”), thanks to the activity of which objectivity has become its possession and at the same time its product, because it is such that it has been eventually comprehended. In this sense, time is transfigured by spirit, and it is history, conceptually comprehended history, the mode of time in which spirit is able to appear because, once that it has completed its development, it is able to remain by itself even in the otherness and externality constituted by time. It is still to be clarified, however, how *the time of absolute knowing* must be understood. As we already noticed, the first definition of such knowing is given by Hegel by way of comparison with religion, and it is this point that is worth recalling, in my opinion, in order to clarify this issue. In religion, as we have seen, spirit still conceives the unification between subject and object as external to itself: in other

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(*Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature*, transl. by A. V. Miller, with forward by J. N. Findlay, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1970, §§ 257-259).

<sup>68</sup> *Jenaer Systementwürfe* III, p. 186 (p. 70).

words spirit, in its religious experience, does not yet understand itself as the author of its self-understanding, and projects that understanding onto an external objectivity. The distance that in this way is generated between spirit and its self-comprehension has also a *temporal* character: unification, indeed, is regarded by consciousness as already happened in a faraway *past*, or as a *future* promise. What distinguishes absolute knowing from religion, thus, regards not only the theoretical structure of the subject-object relation, but also the relation with temporality: absolute knowing is situated in the *present*, a very “concentrated” present. It is essential, in this respect, to avoid falling back into a conception of the present as immediate givenness. The present, on the contrary, must be regarded as the dimension in which knowing *is*: knowing neither has been, nor will be, if considered from the viewpoint Hegel is talking from. It just *is*, it is *present*. In this respect, and starting from the passage we have analyzed and defined as (c), according to which the whole of spirit is in time, Murray observes that one of the essential components for its understanding is to be identified in the (traditional) statement of the “standpoint of eternity or *nunc stans* of absolute presence, as thought outside of time altogether”<sup>69</sup>.

Absolute knowing, as we have seen, is the comprehension of a cycle of spirit’s experiences from the observation point (the only possible one) constituted by the moment in which that specific cycle is concluded. Immediately after that moment the experience of spirit will continue following its own course, clearly, because spirit is never ending movement and development, and, precisely as life, it would die if it ceased moving and developing. Absolute knowing, therefore, is situated in what, with a term that appears to be still connected with the immediate and natural dimension, and requires a sort of conceptual effort, can be defined as an instant, an almost imperceptible point in which spirit’s self-understanding is accomplished, and the new epoch still has to begin. But in that instant, absolute knowing gives rise to a collection of “specific concepts” that extend their grasp beyond that determined moment, and that – as a result of the *Erinnerung*’s

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<sup>69</sup> M. Murray, *Time in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, cit., p. 692. See also Bencivenga, *Hegel's Dialectical Logic*, p. 82: “In that culminating, absolute state, spirit will be absolved not only from the externality of time, but also from its successiveness: the eternal now will be a purely rational, *synchronic* vision”.



activity – will become the legacy of spirit, a legacy that is precious (absolute, we might say) also for the comprehension of the experiences that will follow that instants; as Bencivenga effectively stresses, “Hegel is located at the threshold of the future: after everything there is but before everything there isn’t (yet) – in a sort of future perfect in which the auxiliary “I will” always applies to a content perceived as past”<sup>70</sup>.

Absolute knowing, therefore, cannot be regarded, since it is absolute, as such that it remains unchanged in a sort of sacred eternity, but as a knowing that, on the strength of the awareness generated by its past experiences, will be able to face the *history* expecting it by remaining, at the same time, open to new events, which will in turn need to be understood, and once mediated by spirit’s internalizing activity, will probably give rise to further, new specific concepts to be integrated into the legacy that is already in spirit’s possession. This cannot happen if knowing does not sacrifice itself, realizing itself in time and actuality. Once it has reached its absoluteness, knowing must continue being in time, and therefore traversing its experience, because time constitutes the dimension of experience, that is, what confers it its richness, its life, the *concreteness* which only makes science complete but, most importantly, what only makes its object<sup>71</sup>. This point finally illuminates the difference between time as what is cancelled by spirit when it grasps its own concept, and the form of time as what is superseded by spirit when it grasps that concept: the result of the *Aufhebung* (supersession) of the form of time – that is, its conceptual structure as emancipated by the immediacy and the external connections that characterize it in the givenness of experience – seems to coincide precisely with the *shape* in which spirit, even when the absolute standpoint has been reached, still has to individualize itself in order to maintain its essential connection with its experience, as the source and substance of all its knowing.

This is, in fact, what the last passages of the chapter seem to allude to:

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<sup>70</sup> E. Bencivenga, *Hegel’s Dialectical Logic*, p. 71.

<sup>71</sup> As Chiereghin notes, “Logic, that is the non-temporal knowing of the idea or (what is the same) of being insofar as it has made itself completely transparent to thought, is intrinsically destined to history and therefore has time not as an accidental, but as the necessary dimension of its manifestation”. See *Tempo e storia. Aristotele, Hegel, Heidegger*, Il Poligrafo, Padova 2000, p. 77.

[The goal] is the revelation of the depth of spirit, and this is the absolute concept. This revelation is, therefore, the raising-up of its depth, or its *extension*, the negativity of this withdrawn 'I', a negativity which is its externalizations or its own substance; and this revelation is also the concept's time, in that this externalization is in its own self externalized, and just as it is in its extension, so it is equally in its depth, in the self<sup>72</sup>.

This dense passage seems to encompass, emphasize and, as it were, “project forward” the central themes we have seen as characterizing the notion of absolute knowing, as they have emerged from the reading of the chapter based on the relationship between the concept of *Form* and the concept of *Gestalt* (shape). The introduction of the concept of revelation constitutes the focal point starting from which the last lines of the text unfold. The topics of the concept, negativity, externalization, time and reconciliation between “in itself” and “for itself” are here collected and extremely concentrated in order to reconstruct, in a great synthesis, the conceptual content of absolute knowing. The revelation of the depth coincides, according to Hegel, with the absoluteness of the concept itself: the concept, indeed, in order to be really complete, must not remain isolated in the reassuring depth of its being in itself. Rather, it must negate it. And to negate this depth means, on the one hand, to confer extension to the concept, and therefore extension in a subject, on the other hand to posit in time, a time by virtue of which exteriorization exteriorizes itself within itself, and at the same time remains by itself, in other words: in the self, and therefore in that subject that – as I have shown in the previous chapters – is the source of the form of knowing. The words Hegel has written in the core of this chapter resonate here, namely his definition of absolute knowing as the last shape of spirit, in which spirit gives to its content the form of the self, thereby realizing its concept and remaining by its concept even in that exteriorization. The concept's necessity to acquire concrete existence in the context of actuality, that is, in the dimension defined by space and time, its necessity to be incarnated in a living subject comes again into focus. This necessity of the concept coincides with the need to be science, to acquire that perfect modality of existence in which the difference between form – understood as the conceptual structure – and shape – its appearing, its coming to manifestation – has been sublated, or the external configuration acquired by the

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<sup>72</sup> *PhG*, p. 433 (§ 808).

concept simply reflects its own authentic and inner nature. And science, according to the last definition Hegel gives, is the unity of history and of the science of knowing in its appearance: it is “comprehended history”. Without such perspective, absolute spirit would be “lifeless solitude” (*das leblose Einsame*)<sup>73</sup>.

From the chalice of this realm of spirits  
Foams forth for him his own infinitude<sup>74</sup>.

The last lines of the Absolute Knowing chapter, and thus of the whole *Phenomenology*, as it is well known, are Hegel’s adaptation of a poem by Friedrich Schiller, the meaning of which Hegel does not clarify, but leaves open to interpretation.

It seems that Hegel, with these lines, wants to put in images what he has claimed before, as in an extreme synthesis. The chalice he refers to, in my view, is the legacy constituted by spirit’s past experiences, which build a realm from which the very infinity of spirit originates: such infinity, in a very Hegelian sense, originates precisely from something which, in its immediacy, is opposed to it, that is, the past experience, although it has been shown as insufficient and inadequate, in its unity with spirit’s conceptual power, that recollect it and comprehends it in a consistent whole. The role of this *Erinnerung* seem to be emphasized, once more, by these lines: the infinity “foams” from the chalice in the same way in which the result of *Erinnerung* (that is, the determined concepts constituting science) foams from the fluidity and richness of experience.

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 434 (§ 808).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

## *Conclusions*

Throughout the course of this study I have analyzed the question of absolute knowing from different points of view, “breaking it down”, as it were, in its constitutive elements. The text of the last chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, as I observed in the *Introduction*, is indeed a very complicated one, it is brief but at the same time extremely dense, and requires an accurate *unpacking* in order for all the possible reading levels of reading and determination to emerge, as well as the conceptual structure that underlies them, the modalities in which such structure realizes itself, the relation with the work as a whole. My aim in these concluding remarks is an operation of an opposite kind: that is, once the threads of the complex interlacement of Hegel’s argument have been loosened and identified, it is necessary to *reassemble* them in a unitary framework in order to regain the overall sense and meaning of this essential moment in Hegel’s philosophy.

The questions that have guided me in the course of this work have been fundamentally of two kinds: in the first place I have asked myself what the essence of absolute knowing is, *what it is*, in other words, both in itself and in relation to the *Phenomenology* as a whole. In the second place, then, I have asked myself what, precisely, the absoluteness of absolute knowing consists of, what precisely the attribution of that character implies.

Does it perhaps imply, once for all, the acquisition of an established and fixed knowing? The attainment of the capacity to cast a powerful and piercing look on reality, a look that is able to *read* it in an unmistakably right, and objectively valid way, such as the one that natural sciences, for example, can offer? The elimination, as a consequence, of any doubt, and the simple necessity, from this moment on, to “apply” the content of that knowledge to the system of science that Hegel subsequently developed? Moreover: is it perhaps an abstract knowing, characterized by an almost *ethereal* essence? What can a knowing defined as absolute be?

On the ground of the path carried out in the four chapters composing this work, and of the elements which emerged from it, I believe it is possible, at this point, to try answering these questions. I will then proceed by outlining and summarizing the path, and then by making my conclusions fully explicit.

First of all, in the first chapter, I have analyzed the section of the *Phenomenology* that is devoted to morality. By following the development of moral self-consciousness I have emphasized some of the characters that will then be decisive in order to structure the concept of absolute knowing. In particular, the emerging of self-consciousness constitutes one of the major gains of that section, both as a conceptual structure, and insofar as it brings to the fore the role of subjectivity.

Self-consciousness plays a central role, indeed, insofar as it constitutes the structure in which the self identifies itself with the absolute essence, which in turn finds its ground and subsistence in the former. However, as Hegel's narrative of moral self-consciousness's vicissitudes clearly brings out, the fact that conscience is focused on itself as pure knowledge and pure will, as the exclusive source of every determination, leads to consciousness's abstraction and isolation, the devastating consequences of which Hegel shows in the section on *Verstellung*: the outcome of the tendency to separate the universal from the dimension of actuality, from the concreteness of what is in the dimension of being, emerges here in its full dramatic nature. This aspect becomes especially evident in *Gewissen*, conscience, whose task is precisely the one of guaranteeing the connection with the dimension of actuality through *action*, which plays a central role as regards Hegel's conception of absolute knowing. The beautiful soul, the last shape of the chapter, is representative – to the extreme – of the universal's tendency to isolate itself and to close up in itself: what it lacks, as I have tried to show in the course of the first chapter, is the development, the capacity of facing (“the power to endure”) being, and therefore the capacity and the courage of alienating itself, of concretizing its essence in the realm of existence, thereby running the risk of losing itself in it and contaminating its pureness: we have seen, however, that what awaits conscience if it will be able to remain by itself even in the fullest otherness, is precisely absolute knowing.

Moral consciousness, therefore, contributes in an essential way to the constitution of the absolute knowing's structure by providing the side of the *form of the concept*, which still lacks, however, the fulfillment, the side of the content.

In the second chapter, thus, I have tried to show how the side of the content, or the side of the *shape*, is precisely what constitutes the gain of the second last chapter of the *Phenomenology*, devoted to religion. Revealed religion has constituted the central point of interest of this chapter, since this form of religion, according to Hegel, represents the modality of religious consciousness that is closest to absolute knowing; more specifically, it attains to the absolute content, thereby constituting one of the two forms of reconciliation between consciousness and self-consciousness that precede the final one, accomplished by absolute knowing. The absolute content, as it becomes clear from Hegel's text and the examination that has been carried out, consists of the awareness of the identity between consciousness and self-consciousness, between spirit's knowing about itself and spirit's knowing about its object. Such awareness incarnates itself, in the *offenbare Religion*, in a human and at the same time divine shape, namely Jesus: on the one hand, through this shape the absolute content is given to consciousness as the representation of an external object, whereas, on the other hand, it is consciousness itself that projects its comprehension of reality and of itself onto such shape.

Starting from the analysis of the concept of representation, which constitutes one of the conceptual nodes of Hegel's conception of religion, it has emerged that it – somehow ironically – represents, “stands for”, refers to what is the intrinsic limit of religion, manifesting it in the exteriority. As we saw, the limit of religious consciousness is that it is not able to recognize itself as the author of reconciliation, but projects the identity of object and subject of its knowledge onto an entity that is *other*, different from itself, in which reconciliation has been already accomplished, and which promises a future reconciliation. Consciousness, in religion, persists in the state in which it regards its object as *other* than itself, as *incarnated*, indeed, in another being. The role of the concept of revelation, in this sense, has been shown to be central both from a theological and from a theoretical point of view: more specifically, in the course of the chapter I have focused on the

second aspect and especially on its relation to the concept and spirit, for which it constitutes a fundamental demand (that was the outcome of the first chapter), namely the intimate necessity, for what is universal, to determine itself, giving a concrete configuration to itself. However, such concrete configuration is not adequate if it persists in its condition of extraneousness to consciousness, or, in other words, if it is not consciousness itself that makes itself the author of that configuration. Whereas at the end of the first chapter I showed how the “form of the concept” needs to give itself a shape, *vice versa* at the end of the second chapter the result has been the necessity, for the shape, to have the form of the concept, that is to be the outcome of an activity of the subject.

It is precisely from the merging of these elements into one conceptual knot that, at the end of the phenomenological path, emerges absolute knowing, in which the content's universality and the activity of the self are no longer opposed, but find their unification and reconciliation in a single shape.

In the third chapter, after having acquired these elements, I have thus focused on Hegel's discussion of absolute knowing proper. The conceptual tool I have regarded as an appropriate reference in order to analyze Hegel's text is the pair constituted by the concepts of *Form* and *Gestalt*, which, as it has become clear, structure the text in an essential manner and allow, once their function and significance have been recognized, to identify the key points and the central themes.

Absolute knowing, according to one of the first definitions given by Hegel in the last chapter of the *Phenomenology*, is the shape in which spirit confers to the absolute content (attained in religion) the form of the self (result of the *Gewissen*); by giving its concept, in this way, a concrete configuration, and thereby remaining by itself even in this “external” configuration, it reaches the culmination of its development. The analysis of this culminating moment in the phenomenological path through the concepts of *Form* and *Gestalt* has led me to address, first of all, the issue regarding the status of absolute knowing: the outcome of the reflections on this point has allowed to recognize that absolute knowing constitutes a shape in the full sense of the term in the context of that path. It does not imply, in fact, any abandoning of the modality of *incarnation* of

a modality of consciousness's relation to its content, such as the shapes succeeding one another in the different moments of the *Phenomenology*, but it is a very peculiar way of being a shape. As I have shown, absolute knowing is a *shape of spirit* (*Geistesgestalt*): this determination, which is essential to the understanding of the significance Hegel attributes to it, has led to the discussion regarding the subject of that knowing. It might indeed appear obscure, at the end of the phenomenological path and the transition to the system that this end represents, by *whom* this transition is carried out and *who* is the author of the developed system. At a first glance it might seem that consciousness cannot be the "adequate" subject: it might seem, indeed, that the limit it has displayed in the course of its experience, namely its tendency to persist in a condition by virtue of which it considers its object as other than itself, must be and remain constitutive of its nature: that this condition, in other words, be not subject to development and evolution, but be the mode of being of consciousness as such, established and fixed once for all. We have seen, however, that consciousness – as the relation of a knowing subject to an object – can present itself in various modes, and modulate its relation to the object of its knowledge, i.e. of its own experience in different ways. In absolute knowing, as we have seen, the relation that consciousness establishes with the object of its knowledge is an identity relation, in which separation and opposition between consciousness and self-consciousness are superseded, and still this does not imply a flattening of a dimension on the other or a loss of specificity by each of them. It is, rather, an "identity-in-difference" relation or "unity-in-difference" relation, which can be explained referring to different models (in the third chapter I have talked about the models of life and of the love relation, for instance), which however can only function as, indeed, models.

The perspective of absolute knowing requires, in fact, to be understood in its specificity, since it constitutes an *unicum* in the horizon of spirit's activity, the culmination of its development, which any other activity or expression cannot be equaled to.

From the analyses carried out in the third chapter, therefore, a clearer view of what is absolute knowing has been reached: it represents the conclusive



moment of a set of experiences gone through by consciousness, in every one of which – even to different degrees – it was not able to recognize itself, thereby finding itself with inadequate forms of knowing, characterized by the fact that it conceived such experiences as extraneous to its identity. Gradually, consciousness has developed a broader comprehension of them, eventually attaining to the awareness that all the constitutive moments of its experience have been phases necessary to its development. This awareness led consciousness to identify itself with its self-consciousness, that is, to understand that its knowing of the world (the “object” of its knowing) is precisely what constitutes its knowing of itself, because that world is constituted, in turn, by consciousness itself, which is its author. This is the sense in which I have been able to show that the final subject of absolute knowing is spirit, as the dimension emerging precisely from this embracing comprehension of all forms of knowing, acting and social organization that “the human” as such has produced. This does not mean that spirit can be simply identified with everything “human”: I believe, rather, it can be regarded as what emerges from the self-comprehension of the human, mediated and reflective relation with its manifestations.

In the fourth chapter I have focused on the second part of Hegel’s chapter on absolute knowing, in which the determinations regarding the relation of this knowing to time and history, and to the relation with the logic and system, are analyzed. First of all, we have seen how in Hegel’s presentation of the first set of issues there are apparent contradictions. According to Hegel, science – that is, the standpoint that absolute knowing allows to acquire – appears *in time* and *actuality* only after spirit has completed a determinate path, the one through which it comes to identify its consciousness with its self-consciousness. This aspect is essential, because if it is appropriately taken into account, then science cannot be regarded as a disincarnated knowing, i.e. as a pre-established knowing that can be “applied” externally to whatever matter. It is, rather, a mode of relating to its matter it addresses each time, which emerges from a specific experience, and therefore has an essentially *historic* character. Science is the result of a history, and as such it must be understood. This determination, as we have seen, seems to conflict with the well-known determination of time as the destiny and necessity of

spirit, insofar as it is not yet fully complete, i.e. in terms of a dimension that is bound to immediacy, and that is necessarily superseded once the concept grasps itself. A further determination of time has been drawn from the chapter on religion, in which it is defined as the form of pure freedom towards an other.

As I have tried to show, these three dimensions of time find a consistent account in the chapter on absolute knowing itself, giving rise to a complex and deep conception of temporality. In the first place, time has resulted as the necessary dimension spirit has to go through and traverse in order to reach the knowing of itself: it identifies with the context of spirit's concrete experience, apart from which, Hegel claims, nothing can be known. In the second place, time is also the dimension which has to be eliminated in order to access pure knowing, where this pure knowing, at any rate, cannot be understood as an actual annulment of time, but as its conceptual comprehension, that is, as the conceptual comprehension that spirit develops of its experience, thereby coming to master it.

Finally we have seen that time, as history, is both the result of time's comprehension, and the dimension in which absolute knowing as science must immerse itself, *sacrificing* its pureness, in order to fully unfold the richness of the standpoint it bears, by turning to its actuality and comprehending it. This properly constitutes the context in which the system develops in regards to the philosophy of spirit (whereas the philosophy of nature constitutes the exteriorization of absolute knowing in the dimension of space). The examination of the role of *Erinnerung* conducted in the conclusive part of the chapter has then allowed to show how the relation with the system is specifically structured. The recollection and inwardizing of the shapes that have followed one another along the phenomenological path are, in fact, the activities by virtue of which spirit accesses the standpoint of science, insofar as they enable spirit to preserve its experience and "extract" from it what in it is beyond time and the particularity in which such experience was placed.

The outcome of this process can be found in the logical forms, which constitute the moments of science. It is important, in my opinion, to recall some of the implications of this movement as regards the relation between the *Phenomenology*, and its shapes in particular as absolute knowing is reached, and

the *Logic* as that part of the system in which the method of science, and the whole of the categories structuring both thought and being, are deduced and presented.

If “nothing is *known* that is not in *experience*”<sup>1</sup>, it is clear that the logical categories themselves are the fruit of an elaboration of experience, and precisely of that particular experience that is described and narrated in the *Phenomenology*, and eventually comprehended in absolute knowing. Subsequently, as regards the unfolding of the system in its completeness, and therefore Hegel’s *Realphilosophie*, the concepts will show themselves to be able to grasp actuality precisely because they constitute the fruit of the elaboration and deep comprehension of that actuality – even if at a different stage of the knowing relation with it.

This is the path we have followed in the course of this work. The results of the reflections and analyses I have carried out in it have allowed to understand in which way and starting from what kind of demands absolute knowing develops, how it is structured, what kind of path it concludes, who is the subject that is concerned with it, and how it relates to time. However, the questions I have started with in addressing this path, are, in part, still without an answer.

On the one hand, in fact, I have clarified what absolute knowing is in Hegel’s language, but on the other hand it might be useful to understand what makes it absolute, expressing this understanding – insofar as it is possible – in non-Hegelian terms, or, better: in terms that are *less* Hegelian, and *more* suitable to account for the significance of the conception of absolute knowing also beyond the “restricted” field of the study of, and reflection about, Hegel’s philosophy. By this I do not mean that reading Hegel for the sake of reading Hegel is a trivial operation, or an operation of questionable value. However, to do philosophy, in my opinion, means to ask questions, and reading an author without forgetting those questions, but *traversing* his texts in order to find some answers (or to formulate the questions in a better way), is the best service that can be done to a powerful thought such as Hegel’s, and to philosophy as such, which – again, in a

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<sup>1</sup> *PhG*, p. 429 (§ 802).

Hegelian way – is nothing but “its own time comprehended in thoughts”<sup>2</sup>: and it is in Hegel, I believe, that we can look for the tools we need to understand our time, at the same time recognizing the necessity to proceed beyond.

I believe that Hegel’s conception of absolute knowing is rich in implications from many points of view, which I will try to highlight in what follows. What Hegel defines as *absolute Wissen*, in fact, can be defined as a “flash”<sup>3</sup>, as an *instant* in which the overall comprehension that spirit acquires of itself and its path is condensed. In that instant, in other words, spirit acquires a peculiar way of looking at its *past* experience, which enables it to make sense of all the moments constituting it, by placing each of them in what can be defined as the *narrative* it develops of itself, the consistent framework within which it builds the sense of its own identity starting with its *life*, its actions, the preceding forms of its knowing and self-comprehending. I refer to an “instant” because absolute knowing is not reached once for all, it does not mark the closing and therefore the definitive conclusion of spirit’s process of self-comprehension, but it is a determinate moment, which situates itself at the end of a cycle of experiences of spirit itself, and from which it is able to look retrospectively at those experiences, throwing light on them, and recognizing them as necessary to its own emerging.

In the “flash” that is absolute knowing, spirit reaches the awareness that what it knows is its own experience, and therefore the object of its knowing is at the same time the result of its own activity: this is the identity of being and thought, consciousness and self-consciousness, which we have talked about a great deal throughout the course of this study. And it is precisely the awareness of such identity that constitutes the “standpoint of science”: starting from that, in

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<sup>2</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, hg. von K. Grotzsch u. E. Weisser-Lohmann, Bd. 14, Meiner, Hamburg 2009, p. 15 (*Elements of the Philosophy of Rights*, transl. by H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991, p. 21).

<sup>3</sup> As regards this forceful expression, and the overall inspiration for this interpretation, I am deeply indebted to Ermanno Bencivenga. On this point, and especially on the relation of the individual to such experience, he writes: “As my vision becomes less offuscated, my individual, finite consciousness might receive a flash of universal, infinitely detailed ‘story’ of spirit – and *receiving that flash* amounts to *identifying* with such a story, seeing myself as *spirit*, seeing spirit as constituted precisely by infinitely many flashes like that. [...]. But I can also focus on the flash experience itself, and then I will realize that there is nothing limited about that: that the flash is the instantaneous accessing of spirit by spirit – and that spirit *just is* that instantaneous accessing of itself”. *Hegel’s Dialectical Logic*, op. cit., p. 83.

fact, spirit is able to look at the actuality that stands over against itself and understand it according to the conceptual constellation it has extracted from the universalization and abstraction of its experiences, that is the whole of the logical forms it has drawn from all the shapes in which its experience has been incarnated. Those forms, as we have seen in the fourth chapter, have ultra-temporal validity, in the sense that – although they have emerged from the concreteness of what is in space and time – they transcend those dimensions and have value and meaning, but above all, conceptual *grip*, on the totality of spirit's manifestations. The plot of concepts that is presented in the *Science of Logic*, therefore, is the heritage that spirit has built starting from the specificity of the events and vicissitudes it has traversed, but that has validity beyond them, and may be well and effectively applied in the process of comprehension of its new events and vicissitudes. It is here, in my opinion, that the meaning of the absoluteness of knowing can be traced: not, therefore, in its being completely independent from everything, as one might think referring to the original meaning of this term (*ab-solutus*, as it is widely known, means “untied from”, independent, not conditioned). Attributing this class of meanings to the outcome of the phenomenological path in a one-sided way, would mean to fall in an abstraction similar to the ones that have already been overcome: as Hegel claimed regarding the beautiful soul, for instance, when he wrote that it lacks “the power to make itself into a thing, and to endure being”<sup>4</sup>.

Absolute knowing is not an isolated knowing, confined in an ivory tower, from which it smugly observes, as it were, finite events which, after all, do not concern it and which, however, it is able to understand and confer some kind of dignity to. Absolute knowing is absolute precisely because it is the knowing of the spirit that has had the power to make itself into a thing and to endure being, that has traversed its “life” exposing itself to the risk of losing itself, and which however has been able to remain by itself. From this extreme concreteness knowing has emerged and has emancipated itself, and for an instant, an instant that has the character of eternity belonging to science when it shows to be able to throw light on actuality, it is no more immersed in the uninterrupted flow of

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<sup>4</sup> *PhG*, p. 354 (§ 658).

history and of the events that take place in it, but it abstracts itself from them, becomes independent and is able to look at itself and *its own history* as an organic, consistent, meaningful whole. I insist on the necessity to regard absolute knowing as an instant precisely because that flow never stops: what does this mean? Hegel's (alleged) conception of the "end of history" (or of the "end of art", just to give another example), has been the object of long debates, and actually, as it has been observed, when reading Hegel one can often gain a sense of "finality"<sup>5</sup>: one has, in fact, the impression that she is reading the last, ultimate "bulletin" of spirit, the final and conclusive considerations, as if Hegel was saying everything that could be said about all reality, as if nothing more could happen that was suitable to change in a barely meaningful manner our interpretive framework, our reading of the social, political, artistic, religious, philosophical reality. Or, better, as if nothing more could happen at all. This, of course, seem to make no sense for a number of reasons, and not only does it seem implausible: it also seems that Hegel's philosophy presents itself *violently* as the last possible and meaningful comprehension of what is human, and that it does not leave any space for novelty, for a different way in which "things" can go.

I am fully convinced, on the contrary, that precisely the conception of absolute knowing as a "flash" is what enables to look at Hegel as that thinker of freedom who, in the Tübingen *Stift*, planted a tree to celebrate it. Spirit never "ends", and its history can never be exhausted. Hegel certainly represents an extremely significant moment, and probably in some sense he marks some kind of conclusion, in the history of spirit: he himself, *his* absolute knowing, are placed at the end of a cycle of spirit's history, and offer – from that point of light – the comprehension of the history of spirit *in that instant*. That comprehension provides us with a set of eternal categories, where "eternal" stands, as we have seen, for "being outside of time", always *present*; still, those categories are useful to understand our time. However, precisely because those categories are the fruit of a specific time's comprehension, and because our time has changed and new, unexpected, surprising (and also dramatic) events presented themselves on the stage of spirit's history, events which in turn require to be integrated in that grand

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<sup>5</sup> E. Bencivenga, *Hegel's Dialectical Logic*, p. 66.

*narrative* spirit makes about itself, for which those categories are no more sufficient, a new “flash” is required.

Absolute knowing, therefore, is not acquired once and for all, but it is itself a historical gain, as essentially historical is the nature of spirit: and this does not imply a trivial historicism on the ground of which one can consider an age of spirit “better” or “more developed” compared to an other, but only that the new experience requires new categories, which will be elaborated precisely starting from it, and will be integrated with the ones previously developed.

In this sense, certainly, Hegel and his comprehension of modernity “close” an epoch. Everything that comes, and has come afterwards, still requires to be comprehended: with the help of the already available tools, and with the development of the new tools that will be required.

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