

Politics of the Absolute: Hegel and Object Oriented Ontology (Excerpt)

La política del absoluto: Hegel y la ontología orientada al objeto (extracto)

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Abstract

Within the last fifteen years there has been somewhat of a mini-renaissance of the philosophical concept of *the absolute* found in Quentin Meillassoux's 2008 work *After Finitude*¹ but also found in the Speculative Realism movement in general². In this paper I will start by briefly describing the various mutations of this absolute in contemporary philosophy. I will then suggest some political implications associated with these notions of the absolute and then move onto an analysis of the absolute 'whole' (Hegel et'al) and the absolute (non-relative) independence of the discrete unit or individual object in the work of Graham Harman.

Keywords: The Absolute, Totality, G.W.F Hegel. Graham Harman. Quentin Meillassoux. Ray Brassier. Iain Hamilton Grant, Speculative Realism, Absolute Idealism, Objective Idealism, Dialectics.

Resumen

En los últimos quince años ha habido una especie de mini-renacimiento del concepto filosófico del absoluto que se encuentra en la obra de Quentin Meillassoux de 2008 *Después de la Finitud*, pero que también se encuentra en el movimiento del Realismo Especulativo en general. En este artículo comenzaré describiendo brevemente las diversas mutaciones de este absoluto en la filosofía contemporánea. A continuación, sugeriré algunas implicaciones políticas asociadas a estas nociones de lo absoluto y luego pasaré a analizar el "todo" absoluto (Hegel et'al) y la independencia absoluta (no relativa) de la unidad discreta o del objeto individual en la obra de Graham Harman.

Palabras clave: El Absoluto, Totalidad, G.W.F Hegel. Graham Harman. Quentin Meillassoux. Ray Brassier. Iain Hamilton Grant, Realismo especulativo, Idealismo absoluto, Idealismo objetivo, Dialéctica.

¹ Meillassoux, Quentin, *After Finitude: An Essay On the Necessity of Contingency*. Continuum (reprint 2009).

² Inaugurated in 2007 at a conference at Goldsmiths College, London, England.

Introduction

The general presuppositions and first principles that are formulated regarding the possible existence of an absolute *has been* a philosophical discourse of yesteryear. That is until only recently, when speculative materialist Quentin Meillassoux openly advocated a thinking of the absolute in terms of ‘an absolute necessity of contingency’¹ and an absolute ‘great outdoors’ regarding an escape from what he terms ‘correlationism’ (and ‘subjectalism’ respectively). There is an almost paradoxical flavour regarding this position, and its should be further analysed²; if one instantiates an absolute knowledge, whereby its content is at the same time *indifferent* to the human subject (mind-independent realism), then how can this even be deemed ‘knowledge’ in any normative sense as it does not refer to the history of knowledge we have formulated, such as a human ‘space of reasons’³, evolutionary knowledge, or knowledge as ‘transcendentally’ guaranteed (Kant/Hegel)? If this knowledge becomes untethered to us (absolutely) then- without sounding overtly philanthropic - how can this help us? In Meillassoux’s project, it seems that we are left ‘knowing’ only the ‘facticity’ of a thing (that it ‘is’) and that this facticity is mathematically formalizable/formulatable, yet the realm of phenomenological description, moral and teleological considerations, or *a priori* necessity - has nothing to do with this ‘realist’ fact and can only be subsequently offered up to us as broken idols which comfort us in a time of disappointment or denial; *we have nothing to do with knowledge*⁴.

In-fact, the ‘speculative realist’ movement in general has a plethora of implicit references to (what the twentieth century continental tradition had disregarded as the ‘dogma’ of) the absolute, such as Ray Brassier’s affirmation of the power of truth⁵ and rationality against the auspices of relativism, and Iain Hamilton Grant’s

¹ Meillassoux, Quentin, *After Finitude: An Essay On the Necessity of Contingency*. Continuum (reprint 2009). Pg 34.

² How can one reconcile absolute knowledge with human thought (or ‘intellectual intuition’) when the absolute is in excess of the human?

³ A pragmatist theory of meaning (Sellars etc.).

⁴ For instance, knowledge is not *co-constituted* through the standard, phenomenological methods of subject-object found in both Kant and later Hegel. Neither is it a property of subjective ideation, mind or metal context (Berkeley), nor the demarcation of various linguistic instantiations.

⁵ Ray Brassier states “I am a nihilist because I still believe in truth” in an online interview here; <https://xylem.aegean.gr/~modestos/mo.blog/i-am-a-nihilist-because-i-still-believe-in-truth/>

interest in Schelling's absolute metaphysics of nature. However, it is Graham Harman's characterisation of the 'object' - as a non-relational entity or unity - that will interest us in this essay, precisely because it signals a turn from the absolute (non-relative), autonomous 'whole' (Hegel) to the absolute autonomous independence of the individual *object* (or possibly even the 'in-itself' of the object). We will assume that this shift in contemporary philosophical readings of the absolute seeps into the collective unconscious, subconscious and conscious (intentional) activities of political theory and praxis, and, of course, such metaphysical formulations are not without political implications.

Considering the notion of a metaphysical absolute, Meillassoux reminds us that the absolutization of Being only implies the absolutisation of thinking or knowledge when Being is turned into a *sufficient* ground, origin or trajectory (Hegel), something that Meillassoux quickly disqualifies (it just so happens that Meillassoux feels ambitious enough to attempt reaching this absolute with a *rationalist* rhetoric traditionally tied to such a legacy). That the contemporary absolute is now associated with the non-conceptual, with 'hyper-chaos', and with the necessity of contingency (as well as being offered-up as a blanket term for any absolute 'blindspot', 'gap', 'whole' or 'not-all' in Lacan and Zizek's work), shows that we are some way off the trajectory of Hegel's absolute idealist axiom. But in speculative realism a strange inversion appears; it seems that we can 'know' this *failure* of absolute knowledge (and its inequation with identity). Meillassoux can 'absolutely' know the 'unreason' driving the facticity of every 'thing' (i.e that it is absolutely true that anything can change from one moment to the next; the abolition of the principle of sufficient reason). Graham Harman can also be seen to participate in this inversion of *absolute non-knowing* by suggesting that there is indeed a 'real object' or 'essence' *behind* the encyclopaedia of everyday objects we utilise as *dasein* ('being-in-the-world'), however, it is our *non-knowledge* of the 'real' object (or indirect access/allure of it) which we must uphold instead of 'undermining' or 'overmining' the object into a set of knowable traits. This is what leads Terrence Blake and others to label Harman's philosophy as a 'negative theology'⁶.

It seems that we are left at this crossroads in contemporary continental philosophy; if we wish to posit an absolute which is sophisticated and post-critical enough to endure, then we must set aside the possibility that *knowledge* can be tethered to this new, alien absolute. Yet the *positing* of such an absolute is paradoxically accessed through a *type* of thought (or where thought reaches its other, a resist-

⁶ See <https://terenceblake.wordpress.com/2021/10/13/graham-harmans-the-third-table/> or <https://itself.blog/2011/02/08/ooo-a-negative-theology-of-the-object/>

ance, a ‘withdrawal’) which *appears* to be a new manoeuvre beyond Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy⁷. Or, alternatively put, knowledge of the absolute is secured if we accept that what this knowledge is *of* cannot be converted into anything even vaguely resembling the principle of sufficient reason, transcendental (Kantian/Hegelian) identity, or some underlying substance/form. Meillassoux in-fact makes the same point through his distinction between ‘metaphysical’ and ‘speculative’ thinking; the former is the argument for an absolutely necessary *entity* (God, Reason, Mind, Nature, ‘World’ etc.), the latter being the argument for the absolutely necessary *possibility* underpinning any one particular entity (or that an entity might *not* ‘be’ in alternative scenarios). In Meillassoux’s own words; “we must uncover an absolute necessity that does not reinstate any form of absolutely necessary entity”⁸. Harman manages to create a similar manoeuvre by reversing the known-unknown (Meillassoux) into an unknown-known by affirming the positive non-contradiction found in Kant’s deduction of the existence of ‘noumena’ (or the ‘in-itself’) distinct from phenomena whilst simultaneously suggesting that we can never fully account for noumenal entities; the complicit form of sensual/phenomenal ‘translation’ that stymies any direct encounter with the noumenal is turned into a kind of universal science, epistemology and ontology by designating all ‘objects’ as possessing this primary strife between noumenal and phenomenal modes of existence.

Objective

There are at least four convictions in the following contents of this paper; 1) that a mini-renaissance of the absolute has begun and indeed is upon us. 2) that this ‘new’ speculative characterisation of the absolute, as *knowing an unknown* (Meillassoux) or *not knowing a known* (Harman) might be compatible with some strands of Hegelian dialectical thinking. 3) that the characterisation of the absolute as independent, non-relational unit (Harman), and the characterisation of the absolute as encompassing, relational ‘whole’ (Hegel for example) has political consequences which have always existed as such antagonisms in the history of philosophy but may be more prescient at present considering this renaissance of absolute (speculative) metaphysical thinking. 4) that such polarising descriptions of the absolute

⁷ Hegel’s dialectical and antinomial thinking comes to mind here but instead of thoughts ‘other’ or ‘opposite’ being *speculatively* ‘reconciled’ or ‘sublated’ by a supplementary mode of *identity*, we have a *speculative* form of philosophising which outstretches any *identity* capable of integrating thinking and being into a transparent relation that can account for itself *causa sui*.

⁸ Meillassoux, Quentin, *After Finitude: An Essay On the Necessity of Contingency*. Continuum (reprint 2009). Pg 34.

may in-fact be seen as *dialectically* formulated and hence less prone to the absolutization of either side (i.e leftism as fundamentally open and relational, rightism as fundamentally closed and consolidational). This paper will achieve this by sketching out some lines of commonality between Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) and G.W.F Hegel's theory of the (dialectical) object in his most accessible work *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (*The Phenomenology*).

Hegel's metaphysics has a somewhat non-dualist character to it, a character that J.N. Findlay encapsulates in his foreword to *The Phenomenology* as a "concern always with the *Begriffe* or universal notional shapes that are evinced in fact and history, and with the ways in which *these* align themselves and lead on to one another, and can in fact ultimately be regarded as distinguishable facets of a single all-inclusive universal or concept"⁹. This would seem miles away from Harman's metaphysical model for several reasons; Harman's model of 'real objects' (as opposed to 'sensual ones') cannot be absolutely and universally 'overmined' into a series of 'Notions' (however extra-phenomenal/logical these 'Notions' may be). The equation of the object with knowledge is but *one* way in which the irreducibility/inexhaustibility of the object is subsequently *translated* into a set of knowable traits, and this always follows a *reduction* of the object in some way or another for Harman. In the same way, a 'real object' cannot be reduced (or conflated) with the 'sensual object' or the many "swirling adumbrations" and "accidents" which Harman equates to the sensual 'surface play' of objects, a surface of accidents that Hegel would designate as necessary and quasi-teleological (in that every objects "successive phases bring out what is logically implicit in its earlier phases"¹⁰). In other words, for Hegel, contingency - in and around the object - is always formulated retrospectively as a necessary aspect or condition of its existence, just as the many seemingly fortuitous moments of the French Revolution may appear as intrinsic to its main cause when studied after the fact, in history for example. This point also brings us to another contrast in both respective philosophies; that Harman equates time as sensual¹¹ (i.e as the relational aspect of reality) which is not only counter to Hegel's crucial decision to claim that 'phenomenal time' ("the many moving shapes of consciousness") is intrinsically linked to the movement of logical operations (that logic is in-fact expressed and even sublated qua *the phenomenal as its highest form*), but also counter to the intrinsic continuity between logical and phenomena-logical progression (or simply 'becoming').

⁹ Findlay, J.N. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Oxford University Press. Foreword to *The Phenomenology*, vii. 1977.

¹⁰ Ibid vii.

¹¹ See Harman, G. (2016b) *Subspatial and Subtemporal*, in Amir, M. and Sela, R. *Extraterritorialities in Occupied Worlds*. New York: Punctum Books.

However, it is the aim of this paper to reveal some similarities between these two philosophers' initially incompatible views on reality. For example, does the notion of 'preservation' (or the movement from implicit to explicit knowledge) in Hegel's dialectic suggest something more radical than the historical and teleological position that 'everything is preserved as it undergoes sublation'? Does this notion of preservation not function on a more ontological basis; that a "unity of negation" or a "unity of contradiction" can be preserved beyond the phenomenal movements of knowing and experience? In other words, can we maintain a difference between 'object' and 'knowledge' which does not contradict the presupposition that absolute knowledge - to be absolute - must take along the object and subject with it simultaneously (as a mutual sublation)?

There are at least four ways of doing this with Hegel. For example, we can emphasise 1) Hegel's own *buffering* process between implicit and explicit knowledge. 2) We can emphasise the Hegelian notion of 'utility' in relation to the necessary reason why an object must remain an object somewhat independent of its knowledge. 3) We can allow the object to have a *contradictory* capacity (essence as contradiction) which is hereby characterised as irreconcilable with human thought 4) We can distinguish between a fourfold of complementary yet distinct unities which are here seen as chronologically/historically constituted; Spirit, substance/object, subject, and unity of perception, which all avoid being conflated by the last unity (of perception) conventionally associated with absolute knowledge by Hegel. Please note; due to word limit, only a section of this paper (the first three bullet points) can be presented here.

1 : The Buffering of Implicit to Explicit Knowledge

In Willem DeVries little book entitled *Hegel's Theory of Mental Activity*, he describes Hegelian Spirit as follows;

"Spirit is thought to be a pure, self-generating activity. Rather than being thought of as a particular kind of thing with specific properties and interactions with other things, spirit has to be thought of as a particular pattern of activity, a special kind of organisation which interactions among things can exhibit. Spirit cannot be adequately grasped through categories or concepts abstracted from finite things, much less from sensible things, because it is not a thing or even like a thing".¹²

¹² DeVries, Willem, *Hegel's Theory of Mental Activity*, Cornell University Press, 1988.

Regarding what Hegel describes as the movement from implicit to explicit knowledge (or content), there appears to be the possibility of both a non-anthropocentric and anthropocentric reading of Spirit, especially if we consider - as does DeVries - Spirit as not exclusively mental. In one sense we have a sort of topology whereby this “self-generating activity” of Spirit simultaneously actualises and organises objects. It is this ‘doubling’¹³ - of existing as a particular determination - and of existing as an element subsequently organised into a whole (even perhaps a *moving* whole), that acts as Spirit’s own immanent mechanism in which it gauges both particular and whole in its own transcendently constituted (albeit quasi-pantheistic) manner. If we are to affirm a theory of inhuman logical progression, with some form of collective prehension (Whitehead/Harman) or autopoietic nature, then it is precisely this - between the implicit and quasi-contingent embodiment of the becoming of nature on the one hand, and the subsequent self-arrangement of explicit, quasi-necessary *particulars* into *kinds* through object-object means or through some underlying ideational animism, cause, purpose or means.

This already allows us to judge - albeit in a kind of process-philosophical way - a distinction or buffering between the self-movement of implicit to explicit reality and even reminds us of Harman’s polypsychism; that an object’s capacity for prehension depends on what relations it comes into contact with (relations of organisation, synthesis, sublation etc.). It also presupposes that the movement from implicit to explicit content is a capacity *exhibited in the object* (Spirit as an *initially* mind-independent activity) with the caveat that the object only “exhibits” this activity (cannot be reducible to it), as well as process philosophy suggesting to us that no implicit content is *ever fully* made explicit (there is no final identity where this movement stops or is terminated). Regarding Hegel, there is much argument as to whether there is indeed a final stage to realities realisation (the Idea, or the fulfilment of an Absolute Science) or whether, as J.N. Findlay states, there is “no pronouncement as to what pathway to Science would be taken by men of the future, nor as to what pathway to Science would be taken in other thinkable world-situations”¹⁴.

Regarding the object, this movement of Spirit would seem to suggest that an object can *preserve* some of its earlier stages and ‘lower’ formations (‘sub’-lation) whilst other determinations may ensue. Even the Hegelian notion of the essential *contradiction of the object* - which we will look at in depth in Part 3 - suggests that the objects ‘identity’ is still *oscillating* between this movement; from implicit to explicit (or from the immanent determination of the particular, to its transcenden-

¹³ Hegel. G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford University Press, 1977, Pg 17.

¹⁴ Hegel. G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford University Press, 1977, Pg vi.

tal reorganisation into a universality, whereby the *object expresses the whole* and not merely “the great influence” of external contingencies that Hegel pejoratively finds initially in Nature).

Regarding process philosophy, this movement from implicit to explicit in Hegel runs even deeper in his initial analysis of Being and Non-Being in the *Science of Logic*¹⁵. In a section entitled *The Opposition of Being and Nothing in Ordinary Thinking*, the Being of Spirit is already a form of *determination* which requires Non-Being (or Nothing), for “in non-being the relation to being is contained: both being and its negation are enunciated in a single term ... as it is in *becoming*”¹⁶. Even if one does not wish to permit this rhetoric, one should still try to use dialectical notions to break Being out of its self-identical tautology. To try and situate Being *in that which it is not* seems to hold more potential and scope philosophically, just as situating hot in relation to cold, or birth in relation to death etc. In J.N.Findlay’s words;

“(T)he breakdown of a notion as achieving the opposite of what it claims to achieve, the above-mentioned passage from Being to Nothing is a good example. Pure Being is a would-be concrete notion, but it does nothing to substantiate its claim. What it sets before us, *an object that is and no more*, and which is without definite character, is also indistinguishable from the absence of an object which it claims to exclude”.¹⁷

In other words, the ostensibly self-identical object is dealing - both subjectively and objectively (implicitly and explicitly qua concepts and less explicit sublations) with its lack of identity, absence, non-being or nothingness. This *determination* of Being would seem to compliment the notion that there is a difference between what is being determined and the product of the determination itself (implicit and explicit) regarding both the object and its content and perhaps even between the real object and its subsequent sensual translation (Harman).

On the other hand, even if we designate this movement of implicit to explicit as strictly *subjective*; as the production of explicit Notions that correspond and exist within both mental and physical reality, Hegel is quick to remind us that “this substance, as Subject .. is in truth actual only in so far as it is the movement of positing itself, or is the mediating of its self-othering with itself”¹⁸. Hegel continues; “only this *self-restoring* sameness, or this reflection in otherness within itself - not an *original* or *immediate* unity as such - is the True”. Not only is this ‘self-restoration’ a

¹⁵ Becoming Remark 1: The Opposition of Being and Nothing in Ordinary Thinking. *Science of Logic*.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Findlay, J.N. *Ascent to the Absolute*. Routledge. 2019 edition. Pg 134.

¹⁸ Hegel. G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford University Press, 1977, Preface, pg 10.

process vulnerable to buffering, it also requires that it take on *form* to be *actual*; one must follow the “whole of the developed form” for Spirit, Substance, Essence, or consciousness to be “conceived and expressed as an actuality”. One almost forgets in Hegel’s phenomenology that the subject is a form/ object of knowledge itself and Hegel states that even “the individual certainly cannot by the nature of the case comprehend his own substance more easily”¹⁹. Lastly, we must always remember that with Hegel we have an absolute *phenomenology* (an absolute intersubjectivity) and the intentionality directing us toward the ‘outside’ is *negative*. In Bart Zantvoort’s words “for Hegel, the existence of thinking is the being-outside-of-itself of the object as much as that of the subject”²⁰. This movement of otherness does not even allow the ‘Subject’ to be a *substantial identity* which can equate contingency with the necessity of a self-identical *mind*. In other words, this buffering is inherent to the act of ostensibly subjective thought and activity in the first place.

What seems to cause most controversy in Hegel’s oeuvre is his argument for the *commensuration* of the subject-ive and object-ive in his objective idealism; that both subjective and objective processes tend towards the highest form of (completed) reality, which culminates in self-consciousness’s appropriation (or assimilation) of substance as the ‘for itself’ of *Subjective* consciousness (or “substance as subject”). The entire history of sublations, the epic progression of the syllogism, has “had the patience to pass through these shapes over the long passage of time, and to take upon itself the enormous labour of world-history, in which it embodied in each shape as much of its entire content as that shape was capable of holding”²¹ and since “all this has already been implicitly accomplished; the content is already the actuality reduced to a possibility, its immediacy overcome, and the embodied shape reduced to abbreviated, simple determinations of thought”, then thought truly takes the reins and becomes the quintessence of the ever-complex structure (or criteria) of reality. In J.N.Findlay’s words;

“(T)he thinking ego is ..connected ... with the category of categories used in the synthetic constitution of objects by the understanding, and, at the end of the Phenomenology, the conceptualization of all objects, and their subjection to universals, is not seen as different from the imposition on them of the form of self”²².

However, note that, although reality itself is shifting towards the ‘evolved’, universal categories found in human consciousness; a cognitive and determinative

¹⁹ Hegel. G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford University Press, 1977, Pg 17.

²⁰ Zantvoort, Bart, *Hegel or Meillassoux: The necessity of contingency and the auto-stabilization of chaos* (forthcoming 2023).

²¹ Ibid pg 17.

²² Findlay, J.N. Hegel. G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Foreword. Oxford University Press, 1977, Pg xi

mechanism which can organise many objects and concepts into an inter-relational and universal space, *the immediacy of reality* (or more aptly Nature) *lingers*. What is this *immediacy* that is entirely open to further sublations/Notions yet cannot be fully abolished as explicit content? In other words, what is this *raw material* that is commensurate with both objective recognition (sublation/syllogism) and subjective recognition (determinate ‘Notions’) yet is only ever *converted* through such circumstances and never formulated as anything other, independent or autonomous from this process²³ In-fact, it is in one sense preserved; as a *residue*, or as the dialectical opposite of what is not *overdetermined* into *content*. Not only is there much reality untouched by explicit content (qua the unresolved process of Spirit and its own internal attempts to *resolve its nothingness as part of the identity of exhibited objects*), the question has only ever been *subsequently* to do with the reconciliation of *human* consciousness with world consciousness; before this we must allow each organism and object to contribute and participate in what Hegel called ‘objective spirit’ or objective reality (if you allow me such terms). J.N.Findlay implies this when he states; (F)or Hegel, the spiritual, the ideal, the self-conscious which is the ultimate meaning of everything, does not lie at the beginnings of thought and being, but rather at their end”²⁴.

Before Hegel can move us through the varying sequences of his Phenomenology, he must *retrospectively* account for this “immediacy”²⁵ of being, this “alien other ...which abstract reason does not yet contain”²⁶ before it has been colonised by the universality of consciousness reached in the full integrations of all syllogisms. Interestingly enough, regarding Harman’s philosophy, we have an inverse interpretation; while Hegel see’s only “unthinking” observation of “tasting, smelling, feeling, hearing and seeing”²⁷ in the initial Nature that man is observing (as its ‘bare immediacy’), what Harman would initially separate from this primary human relation would be the ‘real object’ itself. In other words, where Hegel’s ‘Nature’ independent of mind is a realm of incomplete *sensuousness* (for the very reason that Hegel insists that mind must be integrated into Nature as its complete realisation), Harman would comfortably place a menagerie of various real objects (as well as their subsequent object-object sensual interactions might I add) as existing and subsisting beyond Hegel’s immediate realm. Yet Hegel does not denounce any

²³ But of course Hegel would suggest that the ‘other’ is immanently contributing to this process.

²⁴ Findlay, J.N. *Ascent to the Absolute*. Routledge. 2019 edition. Pg 132.

²⁵ Hegel. G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford University Press, 1977, Pg 146.

²⁶ Hegel. G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford University Press, 1977, Pg 146.

²⁷ Ibid pg 147.

realism of mind independent objects as we soon come to realise in his now famous chapter in *The Phenomenology* entitled *Sense-Certainty: Or The 'This' And 'Meaning'* where he says that;

“(T)he object is: it is what is true, or it is the essence. It is, regardless of whether it is known or not: and it remains, even if it is not known, whereas there is no knowledge if the object is not there”²⁸.

What is emerging in this account is the moment where determinate notions are ventriloquised (or assimilated) by the human rational subject, yet what is initially (or “immediately”) given - in the analysis of Nature - are empty concepts and empty objects. But this does not disqualify the object from being “True” or “real”, just that our understanding of natural objects - and the speculative enterprise of conceiving of objects as *understanding themselves* (‘for itself’), have not been hitherto developed through human understanding as a progressive ingredient of universal understanding itself (consciousness as an objective science). There is a radical claim hidden behind this argument; that the logical development and self-reflexive nature of human thought bestowed upon us is both the key to resolving the *absolute identity* of objects in nature (essence as contradiction) but also that this form of cognition *completes* or *enhances* the reality of such entities from the radical viewpoint of an objective reality which is trying to identify itself *through* human thought (human thought being a development of the universal progression of the syllogism that existed in a half-state before humans existed).

But it is worth emphasising here that the desired commensuration (or reconciliation) - between subject and object - in the act of knowing - does not abolish these two poles (these “two thises”) although both “move into their opposite”²⁹. Rather, subject and object are restored but as two determinations of the same Notion (absolute knowledge or identity). This allows Hegel (and subsequently ourselves) to uphold a kind of dialectical movement whilst not advocating wholeheartedly a process philosophy which would put subject and object under the whims of a boundless aperiodon or flux. There is an Hegelian dialectic here which *maintains* both the reality of object-object interactions (before definitive realisation and appropriation into the realm of universal Notions qua human cognition) and also the more traditional subject-object distinction, for the very same reason. We have explained this maintenance in terms of Hegel’s buffered movement from implicit to explicit stages of realisation and how this links to the possibility of simultaneously upholding an object -oriented realism that is

²⁸ Hegel. G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford University Press, 1977, Pg 59.

²⁹ Ibid.

akin to Hegel's initial comments on the "true" object "regardless of whether it is known or not" whilst respecting the *explicitation* of the object (into determinate particulars and universals) as a knowledge of the object. The more ambitious question here is not only whether the *knowledge of the object* is *universally* valid (as a science) but whether such knowledge - emerging as real structures of ideation in reality - changes how the world identifies this object - giving knowledge a universal footing in a more ontological and speculative fashion. Regarding the maintenance of the distinction between subject and object (and implicit and explicit knowledge), there also exists a metaphysics of necessity and teleology, exemplified in Hegel's writings on *utility*, that defends this division.

2: Hegelian Utility

The notion of Hegelian utility is connected to our first numbered point regarding the movement from implicit to explicit, yet it argues that the *maintenance* of the distinction itself is an *absolute* one. For example, in J.N. Findlay's foreword to Hegel's phenomenology he writes;

"The notional integration thus indicated ends, according to Hegel, in Absolute Knowledge or the Absolute Idea, the test of whose absoluteness consists simply in the fact that nothing further remains to be taken care of. Even the contingencies and looseness of connection that obtain in the world are such as the sort of system we are constructing does and must involve"³⁰.

In predictable Hegelian lingo, Findlay is saying that the surface contingencies, accidents and errors that necessarily distinguish objects from other objects and their environments, and the various "loosely connected" trajectories of determination that do or do not find themselves purposively integrated into a world, *are themselves necessary* upon reflection. This is the dialectic of utility itself; the necessity of a primary object *that utilises*, to a secondary object that becomes utilised, both interdependent in a sense yet both uncovering a *lack* in the movement/operation itself; that something necessitates or *requires* utility in the first place. For Hegel, this postulation of dialectical utility - *preserves* both accident and essence, contingency and necessity and the non-purposive and purposive - as part of the Absolute Ideas design; it's very specific chain of events, which have presented us with our present-day reality (all eventual paths lead to the Absolute Idea but this is our -actual and irreversible - one) . It would then be - in a sense - the necessity of contingency,

³⁰ Hegel. G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford University Press, 1977, Pg x (Foreword).

the purposiveness of non-purposiveness etc. (the *identity* of both identity and difference) that is truly characteristic of Hegel's absolute.

In this sense a kind of utility of essence and accident, implicit (real) and explicit (ideal), is maintained (as necessary) and an *analysis of their distinctions* can be carried out (as a phenomenology for example - whether Husserlian, Heideggerian or Harmanian). This theory also allows *object to be distinct from content* in the sense that the 'object' that Hegel describes as "what is true ... regardless of whether it is known or not" necessarily has to preserve or remain as *both* implicit and explicit movements of Spirit (Hegel's theory of utility) ; as both non-conceptual and conceptual (but both logical for Hegel). This is in-fact what Hegel says; "there is no knowledge if the object is not there"³¹. This is, of course , also aided by our earlier reflections on the *becoming explicit* of objects through Hegel's Spirit; that which can never totalise itself as identity and hence total content.

Not only is Hegel's notion of *utility* being mobilised here to uphold the *ontological necessity of distinctions* which are more accepting to Graham Harman's own philosophy, we also begin to see some common ground between the two; is Harman's 'real object' that which forever remains implicit, that which (without appearing too anthropomorphic/panpsychic) *refuses* the operation of explicitation? In Hegel's words "the explication of the notion in the sphere of being does two things: it brings out the totality of being, and it abolishes the immediacy of being, or the form of being as such"³². Both of these desired results of explicitation are to be categorically refused by Harman; 1) the individual object does not engage in an holistic or equipmental totality of being. 2) the immediate existence of the real object should not be reduced or converted into the "abolition of immediacy" (in other words, Hegel is saying that the explicit notion shows that *everything must be mediated*, and hence the immediate is abolished, but this is opposed to Harman's affirmation of the non-mediated aspect of real objects; the conversion of immediacy into *mediation* might be viewed as a reduction of the immediate into *the sensual* for Harman). Although Hegel encourages explicitation as the realisation of the Absolute Idea, it seems that Hegel simultaneously upholds the distinction of subject and object, and implicit and explicit content, because such a process (or passage) must be continually instantiated for the dialectic to exist. One may wish to go even further and suggest that the *limit* presupposed in the distinction between subject/object and implicit/explicit, is itself a limit that absolute knowledge *knows* and restores in itself.

³¹ Hegel. G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford University Press, 1977, Pg 59.

³² *Part One of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences: The Logic*. First Subdivision. VII. BEING. Pg 84.

3: Essence as Contradiction

The Hegelian integration of *nothing* into the objects identity, as a “movement into its opposite”, a “contradiction”, a “negative unity”, or a process of sublating nothing into “an aspect of Being”, also provides a similar function to the previous attempts at maintaining the distinction between object and subject (or object and human knowledge) because it provides a *determination* that in-fact *limits* both the object and subject as an actual *tension* between Being and Nothing (Becoming). Being, qua Becoming, tries to integrate Nothingness or Non-Being into itself, only partially succeeding by *exhibiting* some form of nothingness as a dialectical aspect or movement of Being but never disclosing *nothingness itself* (nothing is always converted into *something*) . Hegel sometimes characterises this nothingness as an aspect of circular finitude; “finite things, in their indifferent variety, are therefore just this: to be contradictory, internally fractured and bound to return to their ground”³³ as a movement (and return) to their opposite side of Being (Non-Being) and the negativity that makes up part of their identity. However, there are some Hegel interpreters, like myself, who view nothingness as a negation which can never be fully sublated or integrated into the teleological system of Hegel³⁴ (the impossibility of Being’s sublation of Nothingness) and hence this leaves us with a spectre of nothingness which cannot be transferred into explicit knowledge; which is in-fact a speculative problem for knowledge in a similar way that Brassier see’s the problem of extinction for any horizon of thought;

“[T]he earth will be incinerated by the sun 4 billion years hence; all the stars in the universe will stop shining in 100 trillion years; and eventually, one trillion, trillion, trillion years from now, all matter in the cosmos will disintegrate.”³⁵

Nothingness indeed finds its place within Hegel’s system in several ways but its association with movement, the operation of determinate negation, and the object as a ‘negative unity’, are all ways of circumscribing nothingness into *utility*; as a nothingness which is never just nothing but maintains the distinctions of subject-object operations, or a nothingness which discloses the finitude of things (and their teleological “Ends” in Hegel’s case), or a nothingness which haunts the object like a spectre and encourages the ‘fuller’ realisation of identity as the *reconciliation* of these two opposites etc. This is very similar to the way that Hegel utilises *exteriority* - as something concomitant or complicit with internal self-consciousness and

³³ Hegel. G.W.F. *The Science of Logic*, Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pg 384

³⁴ As opposed to those who see Nothingness as solely the development or reconciliation of the Being of the Object with its Other.

³⁵ Brassier, Ray, *Nihil Unbound*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pg 49.

essence; the Hegelian characterisation of subjectivity as “a being-for-self which is for itself only through another”, which can never define itself purely in self-relation to an ‘ego’ but rather through its interaction with the external world, where it becomes aware of its self-consciousness through its relationship with others. Just as subject and object are *retained* in their *utility* whilst simultaneously offering up a newer development of knowledge and a newer more refined topology of object and subject inter-relations, internal and external are also retained as necessary meta-categories, whilst the two are sublated as a movement (or oscillation) of interior and exterior ensconced and given justification through the absolute. “Self-consciousness exists *in and for itself* when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged”³⁶. However, this “acknowledgement” *through* otherness/exteriority in-fact converts the acknowledgement of exteriority (found in the contradistinction of the ‘for us’) into an *interiority* as soon as it acknowledges ‘otherness’ as ‘for itself’. Although Hegel believes that this subsequent, sublatory identity always trumps the external or other it encounters (the *identity of identity* and difference), it becomes harder to affirm the initial distinctions of subject/object in the first place through the ostensible success of absolute sublation, and this is possibly why so many contemporary Hegel scholars dismiss the totalisation of the dialectical process (Adorno and Zizek come to mind).

Although we must affirm a non-translatable aspect in Harman’s ‘real object’, the arena of Harman’s objects exist - albeit in a non-totalisable way - in a very similar manner to Hegel’s objects; they constantly negotiate their internal integrity (or self-determination) with external relations³⁷, in other words, they are constantly complicit within the tension between the existence of immediate implicit being (the object as immediately real and lacking larger structures of relations) and the mediated, explicit translation that either Harmanian polypsychism³⁸ or Hegelian dialectical process (or Spirit) exhibits. For Hegel, this is achieved simply through the passage of time; the preservation of instances which simultaneously progress past such instances (implicit to explicit). Both philosophers also utilise *the sensual* as an operation of explicitation; whilst Hegel views the sensual as a motivating/purposeful criteria of ‘givenness’ available to all objects that participate in one’s own explicitation/reflection (inviting such to be a “moving shape of consciousness” which

³⁶ Hegel, G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Lordship and Bongabe, pg 111.

³⁷ The following passage from Harman is eerily Hegelian; “The relation between an object and its own real qualities (we called this essence) is a relation produced by outside entities”. Harman, Graham, *The Quadruple Object*. Zero Books; Illustrated edition. 2011. Pg 106/7

³⁸ By using Harman’s neologism ‘polypsychism’ I mean the process whereby a (‘dormant’) object comes to participate in larger contexts of objects through its “mode” of relating and prehending other objects, which will

leads to the upper echelons of the 'Idea'), Harman allows the 'sensual' to be the fundamental bridge between the confrontation of two 'real' objects; 'prehension' being the sensual translation that ensues between them. We can also establish the opinion that both Hegel and Harman convert (or translate) both nothingness, otherness and alterity into Identity in some way or another. For example, Harman suggests that space - and therefore the spatial aspect of the object - is "both relation and non-relation"³⁹, which posits non-relation as having an existence, just as Hegel posits nothingness as having an existence within Spirit and its many "exhibited" objects. Furthermore, if Hegel can be seen to sublimate differences into identity, such as a new developed unity of differences (which he exemplifies through his musing on the series of dialectical stages of flowers and plants), Harman can equally be seen to make difference and alterity a surface phenomena found *on the interior of the object*; as the way the object *translates difference* into an internal, sensual component of itself. This is how Harman safeguards the non-changing and even non-temporal aspect of the real withdrawn object; by displacing movement into a purely relational and hence sensual capacity that rarely affects the dormant interior (or non-relational aspect) of both objects participating in any confrontation⁴⁰.

subsequently produces possibilities of "fission" and "fusion" enhancing the explicit identity of the objects involved in such a process.

³⁹ Harman, Graham, 'The Road to Objects', *SubStance*, pg. 171-179

⁴⁰ The remainder of this excerpt can be found published in Charles' new book on Hegel & Speculative Realism published by Palgrave 2023

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