

# CONTEMPORARY HEGELIAN SCHOLARSHIP: ON ROBERT STERN'S HOLISTIC READING OF HEGEL

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## Abstract

This article depicts the guidelines of Professor Robert Stern's interpretation of Hegelian Metaphysics by emphasizing in its characteristic holistic reading: the prominent claim is that only a reading of such character does justice to Hegel's own views on metaphysics and his entire philosophical approach and provides important connections with contemporary philosophical issues. The proposal is that some key fundamental topics of Hegelian scholarship will emerge with a clarified understanding after this reading: the concept of Truth and absolute knowledge are reassessed by showing the necessary connection of Epistemology and Metaphysics in Hegel. Hegelian Metaphysics, accordingly, appears ultimately as the principle for a reading of Hegel's entire philosophy and illuminates its nature of general metaphysical inquiry.

*Keywords:* Absolute Idealism, Hegel Scholarship, Hegel, Metaphysics.

## Resumen

Este artículo presenta la interpretación de la Metafísica Hegeliana del Profesor Robert Stern por medio de un énfasis en su lectura holística característica: la tesis fundamental es que este tipo de lectura hace justicia a las propias ideas de Hegel sobre su obra y provee importantes conexiones con la filosofía contemporánea. La propuesta particular del autor es que algunos de los tópicos fundamentales de la interpretación hegeliana

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emergen con un entendimiento clarificado dada dicha lectura: el concepto de verdad y conocimiento absoluto son reevaluados tras ser mostrada la conexión necesaria entre epistemología y metafísica en el pensamiento de Hegel. La metafísica hegeliana, en consecuencia, aparece como el principio último para una lectura de la filosofía de Hegel en su totalidad e ilumina la naturaleza de la investigación metafísica en general.

*Palabras clave:* Idealismo absoluto, interpretación hegeliana, Hegel, metafísica.

Trying to trace and present the work of a scholar succinctly is not an easy task, one comes across the rather daunting chore of identifying what makes a reading characteristic and in some sense what makes a real difference amongst the many points that are object of general agreement or disagreement. However, other cases of such an interpretation are not so complicated, inasmuch as the interpretation of a thesis stands out to the reader, especially when a leading principle guides the reading and, as it were, sheds light filling the gaps where a natural course of thinking might follow from the principle.

In these lines, I set a task to take on into the scholarship of a contemporary living author: Robert Stern, from whom, I have to say, I became familiarised with a reading of Hegel and, not less importantly, had the pleasure of learn personally with. None the less, I am certainly aware that Stern's interpretation clashes with other contemporary points of view, as for example, in how to interpret Hegel. To that extent, thus, I would like to present what I believe it is his peculiar perspective: Indeed, he is focused on a holistic view of Hegel's metaphysics that reads off the works of Hegel in an interesting continuity without which, might not be properly understood. The following sections of this essay, therefore, are going to be a synchronic reconstruction of his thought attending to what I believe is his leading hermeneutical thesis: the doctrine of concrete universals, along with his holism, enable us to understand Hegel in a better way than other approaches and, thus, sheds light on the systematic nature of Hegelian Metaphysics. I will also try to dialogue with these proposals by offering some objections and suggestions that are attached to a serious consideration of Stern's reading.

Robert Stern wholeheartedly opposes a partial view and rather emphasizes the unity of Hegelian thought. In the first section of this study I take on in the crucial aspect of that claim of unity; thus, in

the second section that unity will be seized against the Kantian view, where I also explain what are the relationships between the two great thinkers. The third section provides some ideas about Truth that derive from the proposed understanding of Hegel's thought. The fourth section accounts for Hegel's unified thought and from there explains why there is no actual dichotomy between Realism and Idealism in his system, but an interesting solution to the central problem of philosophy and metaphysics. From there I offer, as a conclusion, some doors that Stern's reading opens towards a reassessment of Hegel's thought facing contemporary analytical philosophy. The conclusion that I draw out of this systematic presentation and reading illustrates how Hegel's revival in contemporary philosophy needs to be pushed forward and continued in order not only to get Hegel's thought right, but some contemporary philosophical problems properly addressed. This piece of writing is not mainly aim to present a systematic critical stance, but it will highlight which points are potentially and effectively contentious. Reading Stern attentively helps to notice that some disagreeing approaches can be selective in an unhealthy way: some pick up on aspects of the Hegelian system that do not make entire sense detached from the core of his holistic thinking.

## **1. The State of Hegelian Scholarship with regards to Hegel's Metaphysics**

As a contemporary Hegelian scholar, Markus Gabriel (2013), has rightly pointed out, there is an ongoing enthusiasm in Hegel's idea that aims to seriously approach Hegel's ideas: two big groups are prominent; some scholars concern about Hegel's idea of recognition, such as Axel Honneth (1995, 2010) and Charles Taylor (1975). The other prominent movement of the Hegelian Scholarship is the one that relates him with contemporary analytic philosophy, that discussion will be the aim of this article. Indeed, the focus of these lines is the relation between Hegel and contemporary analytic philosophy by a particular stress in the metaphysical concerns that are involved in this love/hate relationship.

It could be said that the alleged relationship has two broad views: a pessimistic and an optimistic one. On the one hand philosophers like Richard Bernstein (1977), report that there is an explosion of interest that treats Hegel as a valuable aid to philosophy and especially to the problems that torn the analytic tradition. Bernstein thinks that there

is a tendency of convergence that started with a revival of Kant that ultimately precludes a Hegelian revolution. Bernstein thinks that one clear sign of the revival is the recognition that the criterion for scientific theories cannot be extracted from isolated contexts of those sciences alone. Bernstein also emphasizes that the revival of the theory of action and embodiment point out to the philosopher who showed the utmost passion for the understanding of the subjective, i.e., Hegel. On the other hand there is the pessimistic view mainly championed by authors like Sebastian Gardner (2007, 19), who believes that the outlook of analytic philosophy is fundamentally naturalistic, whereas Hegelianism is not. Indeed, for Gardner there is a fundamental opposition of naturalism understood as the total dependence of our possible knowledge in the surrounding environment with idealism, or the view that spirit is above and all across nature.

The above pessimistic and optimistic stances report opposite considerations of the value of a revival of Hegelianism in contemporary philosophical issues. If we look at the actual revival of Hegelianism in philosophy, there seems to be a common aspect in these two views: an avoidance of touching the metaphysical basis of Hegelianism. I will claim below that this avoidance is the root of many problems of the contemporary scholarship. Indeed, if one looks to prominent contemporary Hegelians such as the so-called Pittsburg Hegelians: Robert Brandom and John McDowell; it seems as though their intents are to rescue the unstained methodological elements of Hegel that do not seem overly derivative of his Metaphysics, which has to be avoided. Perhaps a more optimistic branch of new Hegelianism has reacted against the purely methodological interpretation, and thus we have the important works of Robert Pippin (1989), Terry Pinkard (1994), Kenneth Westphal (2013), Stephen Houlgate (2005), Paul Redding (2007), amongst others.

What seems to be needed is a Hegelian *Aufgehoben* or superation of the seemingly conflicting situation, and though the above-mentioned authors try to underlie the importance of a full view of Hegel it seems that only a clarification of Hegel's holistic metaphysics can fully provide a satisfactory resolution. In this context readings such as Stern's appear relevant: my thesis is that it will be seen that contemporary philosophy profits of an optimistic view of Hegel that is not purely methodological, and this is a result of the clarification of what the metaphysics of his Absolute Idealism really means.

## 2. Holism and the Unity of Hegel's Work: How is Hegelian Metaphysics Possible?

Hegel's metaphysical thought is vastly underrated. However, he conceived himself as a metaphysician, and that is why it does not make sense to try to save Hegel from his detractors by avoid his metaphysical claims. Of course, it has to be said, Hegel had a predecessor that changed in an entire ways and protocols of doing metaphysics: Kant. Hegel took on Kant's challenge and offered an account of metaphysics facing Kant's concerns, and, moreover, he affirms that metaphysics is unavoidable because we "cannot escape making metaphysical assumptions in everything we believe, in how we act, and in how we live our lives and relate to the things around us" (Stern, 2009, 4). People like Newton considered themselves free from these kinds of claims though, inasmuch they could formulate natural sciences detached from metaphysics they can be considered neutral. To this alleged neutrality, Hegel responds:

It is true that Newton expressly warned physics to beware of metaphysics; but to his honour, let it be said that he did not conduct himself in accordance with this warning at all. Only the animals are true blue physicist by this standard, since they do not think; whereas humans, in contrast, are thinking beings, and born metaphysicians (*EL*, §98Z, 156).

The sole use of the verb 'to be' supposes a metaphysical stance (*EL*, §3, 27); we cannot get away without metaphysical commitments even if we claim for a basic concept of 'experience' as the empiricist did. The *Phenomenology of Spirit* is "designed to reveal the deep metaphysical assumptions..." (Stern, 2009, 6). Hegel went further than Kant though, he did not restrain himself to the claim that metaphysics is 'investigating our concepts' nor he blatantly ignored the fact that we need to take Kant's challenge to traditional metaphysics seriously. Interpreters like Robert Pippin seem inclined to consider Hegel as a refined Kantian. As opposed to them, Stern expresses that "Hegel came to find his way out of the Kantian problematic, in a way that in a sense does indeed enable him to return to the traditional metaphysical project investigating 'being qua being', but not by simply reverting to something pre-Kantian, because

on the one hand he answers and addresses Kant's concerns, and, on the other hand, learns something from them. We can therefore explain the clear admiration Hegel expresses for rationalistic metaphysics, while at the same time recognizing the need for this tradition to acknowledge the impact of Kant's critical philosophy must have on the way in which that tradition is to be continued" (Stern, 2009, 10).

Amongst the different arguments against the Kantian approach to metaphysics, a powerful objection can be found in this claim: Kant's criticisms to the Antinomies of reason affects special metaphysics (or what is traditionally labeled as *Metaphysica Specialis*), not the general point of *Metaphysica Generalis*, which is the matter of the question of an inquiry in the *being qua being*. And then again, if we find a better approach for *Metaphysica Generalis*, the antinomies against reason might happen to cling into the wrong foundation and, therefore, they could be reformulated. Hegel's approach, however, is a holistic one. His stance unifies the seemingly opposed sides of metaphysical thinking, and thus reckons that an especial metaphysics needs to be understood in such a way that guarantees the unity and universality demanded for a general metaphysics. Indeed, the role that universals play in Hegelian Metaphysics is crucial, especially because the unity given by the concrete universal enables a milestone for general metaphysics:

Now, the categories of the notion, which are said to constitute a unity in this way, are precisely those that have been identified as being central to Hegel's metaphysics: 'the notion as such contains the moments of universality, as the free equality with itself and its determinateness –of particularity, the determinateness, in which the universal continues serenely equal to itself, and individuality, as the reflexion-in-itself of the determinateness of universality and particularity, which negative unity has determinateness in and for itself and at the same time is identical with itself or the universal' (*EL*, s.163, 226). The categories of universal and individual therefore enter Hegel's *Logic* as the highest determinations in his philosophical ontology, and most closely represent the rational forms of thought. As such, Hegel's metaphysical system is founded on these categories, and in what follows I will

argue that it is from his treatment of these categories that his account of the object, as the exemplification of a substance-universal, is derived... (Stern, 1990, 59).

We will review the aspects of that substance universal in another section, but the categories presented start to shape what the unity and holism involved in the system are, as it were, hinges to give enough flexibility in the interaction of especial and general Hegelian Metaphysics. Thus far, the metaphysics of the Hegelian appears to be about categories: but the Kantian approach seems to offer a set of categories too: the distinctions as to how these categories affect reality as such and not only our conditions of knowledge are, then, crucial for understanding the difference between the two systems. Stern does not tell us this directly, but his response might be found in how he accounts for how Hegel and Kant understand the unity of the objects.

### 3. The Unity of the Object and Universality: Hegel contra Kant

Opposing approaches that aim to domesticate Hegel and make him less inclined to metaphysics, in the traditional sense, and closer to contemporary antirealism, Stern wants to defend that Hegel is a metaphysical thinker. Furthermore, Stern tells us that Hegel cannot be properly understood from a framework that omits metaphysics. Now, this metaphysics is not only a particular metaphysical view over a particular topic for, as we said, it is a holism. Hegel's metaphysical approach is an all-encompassing account or general metaphysics. Because of that, he labeled it as *Absolute*. Hegel indeed took on board Kant's critique of metaphysics, but proposed an interesting and different solution to the problem of transcendental theorizing, he did not ignore Kant nor followed him; he rather adopted a critical position to Kant's approach, and nonetheless, still developed many of Kant's insights.

Hegel thought that metaphysics in its general sense was unavoidable; because we cannot escape from making metaphysical assumptions in everything we believe or act. Even for people who defend an exclusive attachment to common sense allegedly alien to metaphysical commitments, it would be impossible, according to Hegel, being detached from the very abstract category of *being*. The same applies for the idea of 'experience'; it cannot be separated from the conditions of the abstract category of *being*. Otherwise, it would not make sense to speak about *being* as a *thing*, as for make sense we need to use the abstract

category again, accept that events and relations take place, etc. Hegel identified the metaphysical categories as “thought determinations”, and the first thing to leap to our attention here is that both thought and reality are intrinsically related. In further sections I shall explain how reality and thought have continuity in logic, but for the moment let us take on the initial claim that metaphysics is about categories.

As for the process in which Hegel developed his system, Stern thinks that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is meant, in Hegel's mind, to address the recognition that by “simply taking our categories for granted, we have found ourselves faced with a range of difficulties within our view of ourselves and the world, which require us to think more carefully about these categories if they are to be resolved”. The *Phenomenology of Spirit* explores exhaustively all the different levels in which these categories must be resolved dialectically: from theories of reality to accounts of consciousness.<sup>1</sup> However, there is a popular Kantian objection to the previous accounts of metaphysics. Kantians think that metaphysics is addressed to unwrap not the ‘fundamental features of the world’ but only the shape of reality *as we see it*, i.e., in relation with our conceptual scheme, because there is always a possibility of being skeptic about the correspondence between representations and reality, given that our senses might deceive us and our hypotheses are fallible. In a way, the Kantian approach plausibly get us better off out of Humean skepticism, but at the cost of relying only in the categories of the subject as transcendently determined. Hegel, however, spotted on a difficulty in all this reasoning: it seems that it is taking for granted that our knowledge builds on sense and certainty, i.e., upon the impressions of our senses towards generalization, excluding without justification the case that we might rather obtain knowledge by a different process.

Hegel also criticized the Kantian approach because thinking about the object and its determinations is not anything alien to the object (or, at least, it has not to be so). If we regarded so, we would have made the essential nature of things an alien and incognizable further thing-in-itself. Knowledge, therefore, lapses into opinion inevitably (*SL*, 45-46).

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<sup>1</sup> I believe that the famous reflection on the master/bondsman alienated consciousness must be understood in that context of metaphysical inquiry, rather than in the context of a social theory. However, in other places like the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel develops a social account of Freedom, but never divorced from the system, as should be remembered.

Now this will seem a sort of regress to pre-Kantian metaphysics but Stern's view is that Hegel rather answers and addresses Kant's concerns and learns something from them (2009, 10). The way Stern thinks Hegel did undertake on those points is:

- (1) Kant worries that the struggle to get consensus in metaphysics has only ended in discouraging lessons from history. But discouraging lessons of the past are not enough to heap the metaphysician, as long as can actually encourage to carry out better metaphysics. This is very clear for Hegel's philosophy, the way he understands history is certainly gradual, and the kind of objection presented here could be understood even as a confirmation of the progressive increase of the Idea, i.e., of the ever-growing awareness that Logic and Nature are reconciled in the knowing activity of the Mind.
- (2) Kant worries, furthermore, that even in spite of not existing a unified consensus, there are some metaphysical questions that just lead to *aporias*, antinomies and paralogisms that cannot be superseded. But the same concern might be turned to any inquiry of the Kantian project, because takes use of the very fundamental criteria that Hegel recognizes as metaphysical. The antinomies are not enough evidence that metaphysics is a lost cause, Hegel takes on this with two answers: (a) we need to diagnose why the mind works in such a way that for some metaphysical problems we come across answers that seem to be equal in the different inquiries, and (b) even if those questions turn out to compromise special topics in metaphysics, it does not really mean that we should shun metaphysics altogether, i.e., we do not need to get rid of *Metaphysica Generalis* (the metaphysical inquiry as such) because some topics of *Metaphysica Specialis* (some particular inquiries in metaphysics) are problematic.
- (3) Kant proposes transcendentalism as a way of dealing carefully and cautiously with the problem of knowledge, but there is a problem in the bottom line of the theory of transcendental idealism: it assumes an unsurpassable division between the framework of phenomena and to what *Noumena* (or the incognizable aspect of things-in-themselves), and this is certainly a

metaphysical position that cries for clarification. The problem concerns why we have to prove that it is the case that there is an aspect so hidden and inaccessible? For if we cannot inquire into the incognizable we cannot even theorize about it as a limit: as if we are taking for granted a division in the object that we could not possibly even make sense of. Hegel recognized that there is an inescapability of metaphysics even in the intentional avoidance of it.

Stern's opinion on these Kantian worries on doing Hegelian Metaphysics is that:

*In the end*, therefore, on this view Hegel is indeed seen as giving us an ontology rather than a 'mere Analytic of pure understanding', but in a way that still respects the fundamentally Kantian proviso that the former can only proceed via the latter (2009, 19).

The point of Hegel's version of the "transcendental turn" is to set away from the distinction between the structure of being and the structure of intelligibility. If one wants to take that structure seriously, turns out that the lack of *universality* of the Kantian synthetic a priori is amended by considering that realism about universals ultimately provides a better way of handling with the modal knowledge that Kant wanted to take as central, because if we take science seriously, that will "take us beyond Kant's 'metaphysics of experience' in turn" (Stern, 2009, 27).

Thus far, I presented a clear-cut distinction between *Metaphysica Generalis* and *Metaphysica Specialis*. Although Stern does not explicitly tell us this, the metaphysics that Hegel developed was actually involved with both kinds of metaphysical inquiry. Hegelian Metaphysics, hence, it is especially based in the idea of Absolute knowledge. In this sense related with the knowledge of universals and specific relations and items. But if that aspect of knowledge is pervasive to all reality, as in the science of logic is presented, turns out that it is also a study in the classical sense of general metaphysics, and inquiry into the *being qua being*. There is a normative aspect for all metaphysics coming out of the norms of inquiry, in a way that what Hegel's calls *Logic* turns out to be crucial to understand Nature and Mind. Hegelian Metaphysics is a holistic understanding of all metaphysical inquiries based in the

norms of thought, these have to be of the nature of *Absolute Knowledge*. Therefore, even the special aspects of that metaphysics are necessary for every inquiry into any kind of reality. In a section below it will be seen why Hegel picked up into the particular characteristics of the 'syllogism of necessity'. The syllogism of necessity is the one that properly accounts for the norms of inquiry.

Thus, after facing the classical scruples against metaphysics, Hegelian Metaphysics is not only possible, turns out to be a necessary exercise, given that the conception of *being* qua *being* pervades all possible knowledge.

For these reasons, if we want a better understanding and an effective way of evaluating the different interpretations of Hegel, Stern's interpretation should outstand, as it deploys new readings of Hegel's work as unified, as opposed to other contemporary scholars such as Stephen Houlgate and Terry Pinkard, who analyze Hegel's philosophy systematically (and brilliantly) explaining each of Hegel's works independently. These scholars are necessary but limited references if one wants to inquire into the big picture: why Hegel recognized his own philosophical project as being metaphysical.

Stern's reading thus sheds light in the interpretation of the famous Hegelian dictum of the *Doppelsatz* ("double-sentence"). We find the original wording of that double-dictum in this way:

What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational. This conviction is shared by every ingenuous consciousness as well as by philosophy, and the latter takes it as its point of departure in considering both the spiritual and the natural universe (GPR, 24–25; EPR, 20).

The *Doppelsatz* has been interpreted mainly in two ways: one of them, the classical reading, blatantly adopts the idea that Hegel expresses in this dictum coming from the *Philosophy of Right* nothing else but a justification of the political state of affairs of the Prussian state of the time, fawning the current establishment. Later on, a more progressive reading of the *Doppelsatz* has been around, one that expresses the difference between "actual" and "existent". Thus, the meaning of 'real' should not be understood as the current 'existent' state of affairs, but what is meant to be 'actualized' under the rational *Bestimmung*. Stern avows for neither of the two readings particularly, as he believes a neutral stance is better.

I personally think that Stern's position is a version of the progressive reading: one without a normative emphasis though, i.e., it shows that the philosophy of Right is committed with a rational sort of inquiry. The dictum is not meant to spell out the core of what it is said to be rational, and therefore, it is an example of objective thinking, but not of absolute thinking, as being absolute will mean being normative.

This is usually read in normative terms, as either saying that the political world as it exists is good (as on conservative readings of Hegel), or that will become good when fully 'actualized' and hence reformed (as on progressive readings). By contrast to both accounts, I argue that the *Doppelsatz* is rather a slogan intended to capture Hegel's commitment to a philosophical approach based on reason, as the proper method to be used in the sort of political inquiry conducted in the main text to which this is a preface; the *Doppelsatz* itself, therefore, is normatively neutral (2009, 35).

As established above, one central concept for Hegelian Metaphysics is *Absolute Knowledge*. It is understandable that unfamiliar readers might face this kind of concept with a pinch of salt; cautiously avoiding what they believe is an excess of philosophical whish for comprehension. Now, if we understand Hegel's philosophy from a holistic point of view and not from the point of view of our conceptual acquaintances with the concept of "absolute"; we do not have to understand "absolute" as a closed and complete knowledge of every aspect of an item, but a knowledge that permits to understand the universal application of the concept that norms over the use of the concept in all cases when we think about it. A clear advantage of this approach is that nothing lies beyond thought: there is no thing we can think of and this item being at the same time unthinkable. This has a liberating effect against a traditional interpretation of Kantian things-in-themselves, which are ultimately unthinkable. These items block inquiry. Hence, when we know something by its essence, i.e., by what makes it ultimate to knowledge and indefeasible as a belief, we are engaging in an absolute aspect of the knowledge. Knowledge can be, therefore, "absolute" in the sense of ultimate and rational:

Hegel is offering a picture of idealism here not as mentalistic, but as holistic. On this account, Hegel claims that finite entities do not have 'veritable, ultimate, absolute being' because they are dependent on other entities for their existence in the way that parts are dependent on other parts within a whole; and idealism consists in recognizing this relatedness between things, in a way that ordinary consciousness fails to do (2009, 59).

What kind of beliefs seem to be the content of the Absolute Knowledge it is not only a matter of epistemology, i.e., it is not only a matter to express our conceptual conditions about concepts, as a transcendental idealist might suggest, but how reality is in itself. Therefore, I propose (accordingly with Stern) that Hegel elaborates a whole doctrine of *Logic* as the norms that thought imposes both to our minds and to reality as cognoscible. The *Science of Logic* deals with this issue by talking about the different ways in which the syllogism unveils that normative aspect for thinking about reality. Hegel does a surprising remark about the value of the syllogism in the *Science of Logic*:

Thus the syllogism is the completely posited Notion; it is therefore the *rational*. The understanding is regarded as the faculty of the *determinate* Notion which is held fast *in isolation* by abstraction and the form of universality. But in reason the *determinate* Notions are posited in their *totality* and *unity*. Therefore, not only is the syllogism rational, but *everything rational is a syllogism* (SL, 664).

Let us collect the above thoughts here: Stern's position is introduced as reconstructing a Hegelian Metaphysics; this certainly involves departing from a top-down perspective: from General Metaphysics to Special Metaphysics. Now, I highlighted that such approach comes in handy for the reader of Hegel when we think about the Kantian objections to metaphysics. However, there is also a Hegelian route of understanding the process from the Special Metaphysics to the General Metaphysics, and this one accounts for the unity of our knowledge of the object. This holism, as said, is positively present in all the Hegelian texts, but the specific treatment of the *Science of Logic* represents the most detailed account of this effort. Different conceptions of the object

are at stake here: the pluralistic view, adopted by the Kantians, finds a complex manifold of intuitions and data that needs to be synthesized; whereas the Hegelian stance is rather that there is a fundamental unity in the object, and that unity is testified in the irreducible substance-kind that is needed for knowledge. On this regard, as it turns, Hegel adopts an Aristotelian point of view, accepting the unity of things *in re*:

Hegel argues that unity is *inherent* in the object as the embodiment of an irreducible substance-kind; the object is therefore not brought into being by any synthesizing subject (1990, 114).

Throughout the *Science of Logic*, the notion of *syllogism* demonstrates how any inquiry into the unity of the object can be conceived logically, unless it is not one in need of further synthesis. That conception involves problems about the structure of the different syllogisms. In the *Science of Logic* Hegel provides different cases of his particular interpretation of the syllogism, departing from the inadequate structures towards the adequate ones.

In order to understand Hegel's account of reason and the syllogism, it is first necessary to have grasped his conception of understanding and judgment. As has already been shown, according to Hegel the judgment form breaks up the notion into separate determinations, and so distinguishes the three moments of universal, particular, and individual (1990, 65).

The first inadequate syllogism is the qualitative syllogism, in which the moments of individual (I), particular (P) and universal (U) are connected in a causal and external fashion: I-P-U. A Second figure is: (P-I-U), and the Third possible figure is: (I-U-P). They all fail to mirror an adequate account of knowledge in one respect: knowledge needs to start by the identification of what the thing is, i.e., framing a being in the context of what is its essence, and essence is a universal for that being, Hegel says:

This universality of things is not something subjective and belonging to us; it is, rather, the noumenon as opposed to the transient phenomenon, the truth, objectivity, and actual being of the things themselves.

It resembles the platonic ideas, which do not have their being somewhere in the beyond, but which exist in individual things as substantial genera (*EN* §246Z, I, 200).

Only when the object is treated as the exemplification of a substance-universal can a fully coherent type of syllogism be reached. The form that fulfills Hegel's claim belongs to the syllogism of necessity and it goes U-P-I, the form of the syllogism is only workable if the concept in question is a self-determining universal.

Hegel's treatment of the syllogism, like his account of the judgment that preceded it, must be understood against the background of his conception of the universal as a substance-kind. For, just as he criticizes those judgments as inadequate which fail to express the universal substance-form which constitutes the 'soul of the subject', so in his treatment of the syllogism he claims that the argument must be based on a proposition which states the universal essence of the individual. In tracing the collapse of various types of syllogism, therefore, he is in fact offering an argument must be based on a proposition which states the universal essence of the individual (1990, 65).

What Hegel makes of the Kantian approach then? Bob Stern tells us that: "...given the holistic conception of the structure of the object, Hegel treats the *realization* of the object in a different way. That is, rather than seeing it as the result of an activity of synthesis by the transcendental subject, he views the unity of the individual (as we have seen) as being derived from its manifestation of some universal substance-kind: and it is just this realist account of universals that distinguishes his absolute idealism from Kant's merely subjective idealism" (1990, 109) and, moreover, "In his own accounts of his relation to Kant, Hegel insists that whereas the former adopted a merely subjective idealism, his own philosophy is an *absolute idealism*" (1990, 110). There are many contemporary approaches to Hegel that aim to start off with some sort of renewed view of the Kantian schematism. This could be the case for McDowell and his idea of the 'space of reasons' as a metaphysically

neutral reading of Hegel. However, Stern complaints that these views suffer of forgetting this crucial point:

As a result Hegel adopts a metaphysical picture which enables him to argue that the object forms an intrinsically unified individual: because the individual is of such and such a kind (a man, a dog, a canary) it cannot be reduced to a plurality of more basic property universals, while it is the universal that confers this substantiality upon it. In this way, Hegel replaces Kant's 'bundle' model of the object with a more holistic picture, which treats the individual as a unity, in so far as it exemplifies a substance-kind. It is this ontology of substance which lies behind his rejection of the latter's doctrine of synthesis (Stern, 1992, 41).

It ought to be said though, that Stern deems Hegel as following the spirit, albeit not the letter, of Kant's philosophy. Hegel is not a pre-critical philosopher, and yet he tries to:

Complement the abstract universalism of the latter with a more socially situated and historically realistic conception of the subject; whilst in epistemology and metaphysics Hegel is no longer seen as impervious to Kant's modernizing project, but rather trying to save that project from certain debilitating *aporiai*, in a way that will make it safe against skeptical objections (Stern, 2009, 245).

According to Stern Hegel's metaphysics regards the holistic structure of concrete objects as central, they cannot be considered atomistic entities, and the objects hold a unity that is not "analyzable into a plurality of self-subsistent and externally related parts" (Stern, 1990, 7). Hegel's logic, hence, contains his account of categories of universal, particular and individual:

In Kant's case the object is constructed in the following way: just as experience has a fundamentally atomistic structure with a relational unity imposed by the synthesizing activity of the subject, so too does the object. We have therefore seen how Kant's pluralistic

account of the object as a product of synthesis evolves (Stern, 1990, 21).

The Holistic structure of the object is rendered in the account of universals. Indeed, universals inform the object as well as the subject because they *are* the logical (rational) aspect of things. I believe that Universals are instantiated in different ways, as the medieval philosopher Duns Scotus, following Aristotle, understood: in the mind as universals and in the thing as instantiations of a common nature. Stern converges with that tradition of unity through universals when he says:

Hegel is making the essentially Aristotelian point, that the species-universal is a predicate in the category of substance, which tells us *what* the subject is. As such, he holds, it is paradoxical to separate the subject from the predicate, or to think of them in a merely external relation; instead, the universal must be thought of as inseparable from the individual (Stern, 1990, 64).

Stern explores different approaches Hegel carried out about his holistic view: in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in the *Science of Logic* and in the *Philosophy of Nature*. Hegel argues that idealism is capable of grasping the substance-universal that underlies the plurality given to us by the senses. Therefore, Hegel's argument transcends the empiricist reduction along with the atomistic account of reality. The account developed by Hegel appears as a sequence across nature, logic and spirit:

We can therefore summarize Hegel's position by saying that for him, to think rationally is to set aside the distinctions imposed on things by the understanding, and to see the various determinations of reality as dialectically interrelated (Stern, 2009, 58).

The reader can appreciate what follows: the object appears to be properly grasped. Stern's account, though, seems to be crying out for a more detailed treatment of the individuation of objects, this seems to be not fully explained nor treated in Hegel either. Some questions arise, then: is it necessary to recognize a principle of individuation or several? If so, which one will that be? Stern speaks about the "concrete universal": Is that "concretion" of the universal the instantiation of the universal? These questions seem to me thus still open. In my interpretation, the

point of absolute knowledge is that the concretion and individual aspects of things are not dismissed, but embraced. Hegel only shifted the emphasis and priority of universality and thus also provides criteria for individuation and particularity.

#### **4. Truth and Correctness: Hegel's Account of Truth**

One of the typically misunderstood topical issues of Hegel's philosophy is his theory of truth. Indeed, he has been lined in almost every stance on truth: as a correspondentist, a coherentist, a defender of the identity theory etc. It is a complicated issue, but a truly interesting one indeed. Many of the classical misunderstandings of his interpreters stem out of what it is believed to be his theory of truth. However, it seems clear to me that many of the classical criticisms of Hegel's account of truth are inaccurate and scarcely use direct references of Hegel's works. In like suspicion against uncritical dismissals of Hegel's ideas on truth, the contemporary scholarship has critically assessed what Hegel's theory is really about. I am relying here in the works of Robert Stern, Terry Pinkard, Stephen Houlgate and others. Thence, I will briefly present what is his theory of truth is really about and how it is of great philosophical interest.

Hegel advanced ideas on truth by redefining the concept of truth and distinguishing it from correction. Let us lean for the moment in a distinction from Heidegger that might help us to understand what Hegel's theory of truth is about: Heidegger distinguished between propositional and material truth. Propositional truth is the accordance of statements, judgments and propositions with the way things are in concrete cases. States of affairs, facts or whatsoever other concrete contents are considered as truth-values. This relationship, nonetheless, is one of correction. In the case of correction we are presented with a relationship across statements and the contents that make them part of a true proposition, these are singular cases of truth bearing and truth-making. Singular cases, however, are not the whole story for truth: for grasping truth means the process of achieving knowledge of a thing with respect to its essence. The aspect of truth as a state of consistency between something as it is and how rationally it should be is what generates absolute knowledge. Absolute knowledge, as said above, renders thinking forward like cases possible. Hegel's remarks on truth are mainly about what Heidegger called material truth: material truth

is concerned in how far an object can be said to be true, in the sense of conforming to its 'concept' (*Begriff*), where by this he means its nature or essence (Stern, 2009, 78):

Truth is understood first to mean that I *know* how something *is*. But this is truth only in relation to consciousness; it is formal truth, mere correctness. In contrast with this, truth in the deeper sense means that objectivity is identical with the Concept (*Begriff*) (*EL*, s.213Z).

Material truth is more about a process than about a concrete content. In the same sense it is more about the universals than the particulars:

...In the philosophical sense, on the contrary, 'truth', expressed abstractly and in general, means the agreement of content with itself (*EL*, s.24Z, 60).

One thought behind this line of reasoning is that the grasp of a particular truth makes a judgment correct, but the grasp on the universality of a concept enables us to understand it with absolute knowledge, and therefore in a normative sense, Hegel tells us:

These objects are 'true' when they are what they *ought* to be, i.e., the same as what is sometimes called the 'bad'. A bad man is one who is 'untrue', i.e., one who does not behave in accord with his concept or his vocation (*Bestimmung*). But without any identity at all between Concept and reality nothing can subsist. Even what is bad and untrue can only *be* because its reality conforms to some extent with its Concept. Precisely for this reason, what is thoroughly bad or contrary disintegrates inwardly. It is by virtue of the Concept alone that things in the world have their own standing –or, to use the language of religious representation, things are what they are only because of the divine and hence creative thought that dwells within them (*EL*, s. 213Z, 288).

Let us consider briefly one of the words in the above paragraph: 'inwardly'. If something is not in truth, i.e., in accord with its essence/

Concept disintegrates 'inwardly'. The meaning of the opposite of that disintegration is that basic agreement with something with its own Concept/vocation is what gives the property of being inwardly comprised. Inwardness is, thus, a way of manifestation of the truth with respect to absolute knowledge. Hegel, then, provides us with an account of material truth, and all that he says about correctness is restrained to the normal conditions of knowledge.

## 5. Hegel on Absolute Idealism and Conceptual Realism

One of the very frequently adopted dichotomies in philosophical thought is an apparent dilemma between Idealism and Realism. We have been told that here, more than anywhere else; we are forced to accept an exclusive disjunction. If we go to the roots of that dichotomy we realize that accepting it generates an either/or type dilemma because creates two opposite interpretations of reality, on the one hand it has been accepted that realism affirms the materiality of the world and phenomena and, on the other hand, that idealism recognizes nature as build up by the mind. I believe that a careful examination clarifies this apparent dilemma and dissolves it. Such is the case for Hegel. In Hegel's mind there is no opposition between Idealism and Realism because he holds an Absolute Idealism that is possible only due to Conceptual Realism. Let me explain this claim by depicting Stern's points about the dissolution of the false dichotomy at play. Firstly, we need to consider the question of whether idealism is an epistemological point of view or rather an ontological position, Bob Stern says:

It turns out, then, that idealism for Hegel is primarily an ontological position, which holds that the things of ordinary experience are ideal in the sense that they have no being in their own right, and so lack the self-sufficiency and self-subsistence required to be fully real (Stern, 2009, 60).

Thus, the issues seems to be that in Hegel's mind idealism is an ontological position because first and foremost is concerned with the universes in which the concept of experience can range. Hegel explains that the level of *Sense and Certainty*, i.e., the empirical point of view, is insufficient to explain knowledge that relies in the Concept (*Begriff*). He then enables a full understanding of reality as a whole by liberating it

from basic empiricism. Let me try to put an example here: if we want to offer an account of how we can call 'dogs' to those four-legged animals which such and such properties, it is only because the individuals are particularized versions of general features that we associate with the concept 'dog'. This means that, regardless whether the concept in turn was formed by distinct experiences, the unification of those experiences is the only thing that enables us to recognize future dogs still. In that sense the point of view of the empiricist is rather limited, because does not fully explains the unified concept, it only explains that different experiences happen to be grouped together under a concept. As we said before, the syllogism of necessity enables us to give a sensible story on these cases, because things are instantiations, by means of particularizations, of universals. Conceptual Realism is the recognition and acceptance of the reality of the universality of some concepts, the ones that render absolute knowledge possible. Yet, it is not entirely clear why Hegel wants to call his system 'Idealism', and furthermore, his claim that "every genuine philosophy is idealism":

That this context is important to understanding Hegel's conception of idealism is equally clear in the equivalent discussion in the *Encyclopaedia Logic*, where again Hegel's striking claim that 'every genuine philosophy is idealism' is made in the course of his discussion of the connection between the finite and the infinite. (Stern, 2009, 63-64).

Let us consider the above point for a moment; Stern provides us of another further distinction: we need to make sense of the connection between finite and infinite. I will not explain the details of all the problems related with that distinction and related connections, but I will flag up that universals seem to be unlimited in the way that they have no limit for their instantiation. When universals are particularized, though, the individuals that hold them are all and the only things for which we recognize them. In other words, there are no universals not *in re*, i.e., there are no universals knowable to us but in their instantiations, so the finite enables the access to the infinite. Why every genuine philosophy should make sense of that distinction and connection, according to Hegel? I believe that Hegel wants us to understand that only by a reconciliation of this fundamental opposition *Logic* get us in place to be able to develop knowledge. A genuine philosophy is the one that

provides answers to the fundamental questions about the problems of reality. All these answers are going to be expressed in concepts or ideas, and they are the means of the reconciliation between the opposites: only through ideas we can make sense of the problematic character of reality. A world not mediated by concepts, then is not intelligible. In addition, the aim of Hegel's metaphysics is to get us "at home in the world", i.e., to launch us to discover genuine knowledge in our inquiries, therefore, every genuine philosophy is an Idealism. Idealism is the acceptance of the necessary mediation of concepts. The abovementioned dichotomy starts to dissolve with the distinctions in which Hegel presented the convergence between Idealism and Realism. By the emergence of the appropriate relation between Realism and Idealism the dichotomy is overcome:

We have thus found two (related) senses in which Hegel is an idealist, and one in which he is a realist, and shown how these positions are compatible: he is an idealist in his special sense, of holding that the 'finite is ideal', and (therefore) an idealist in the more classical (anti-nominalist) sense of holding that taken as mere finite individuals, things in the world cannot provide a satisfactory terminus for explanation, but only when they are seen to exemplify 'universals, ideal entities' (in the manner of Thales' water onwards) which are not given in immediate experience, but only in '[reflective] thinking upon phenomena'. Hegel's idealism, in other words, amounts to a form of conceptual realism, understood as 'the belief that concepts are part of the structure of reality' (Stern, 2009, 76).

There is though, an opposite point of view that needs to be confronted. Hegel observed, for example, that Jacobi's philosophy was a case of a philosophy that only accepts material things. Jacobi adopted an empiricist prejudice. This is a case of Nominalism, and nominalism is the opposite of both Idealism and Realism in Stern's reading of Hegel.

Nominalism is problematic because shadows reality by uncritically rejecting everything that goes beyond individuals in experience. Nominalism is the doctrine that holds that reality comprises only individuals, along with the denial that there are real laws operating in reality. The nominalist rejection of the general is based in an

interpretation of the capacities of experience as only capable of grasping individuals in particular elements of experience that are reduced to particular data given by our senses. According to the nominalist viewpoint, the perception of generality cannot take place as immediate: it is always mediated by sets of particular elements of experience. The nominalist believes that a complete account of reality can be formulated by enumerating individuals and their traits without the use of laws, general concepts or abstract objects, taking those objects as real. Hegel believed that nominalism renders some aspects of reality problematic without a real reason, particularly because excludes the primary character of the pervasiveness of universals. The thought is, in brief, that there is no way to avoid the rational potential cognoscibility of the world, in pain that if we do so, there is no way of give rational sense of that and not blocking our metaphysics by a metaphysical unjustified prejudice. The metaphysical constitution of the world makes the world absolute for the mind, i.e., makes the world an ultimate accessible reality to be at home in:

Hegel therefore arrives at an *absolute* or *objective* idealism, according to which the world is indeed informed and constituted by concepts (and in this sense fully rational), but by concepts that structure the object in a way that frees both from any dependence on the constituting activity of the mind (Stern, 1990, 114).

However, the third syllogism mentioned above, by its emphasis in universals, provides a specific difference between absolute and subjective idealism: "For Hegel it is not Mind that brings together Idea and Nature, but ultimately Idea that makes possible the unity of Nature and Mind. (1990, 118), there is no ultimate antithesis between Nature and Mind, as long as they share in the movement of the Idea:

That is why here (Mind) still lacks the *determinate* knowledge of the rationality of the object. To attain this, Mind must liberate the intrinsically rational object from the form of contingency, singleness, and externality (Zufälligkeit, Einzelheit und Äußerlichkeit) which at first clings to it, and thereby free *itself* from the connection which for it is an Other. It is on the path of this liberation that mind continues to be finite. For so

long as it has not yet reached its goal, it does not yet know itself as absolutely identical to its object, but finds itself limited by it (*EM*, §441Z, 182).

The shift from subjective to absolute idealism, thence, is only possible when Hegel liberates the object from the synthesizing activity of the transcendental subject. That is thus grounded on the case that Logic, and not Mind constitutes the ultimate mediator for his absolute idealism. Hegel's insistence in the Absolute Spirit does not contradict what Stern proposes, as long as the mediation of Absolute Spirit between Mind and Nature is not taken as *constitutive*:

...Hegel states clearly that the role of Spirit as mediator is *not* to determine or structure Nature through the Idea *itself*, but merely to *recognize* or *discern* (*erkennen*) this structure as it *already exists* in Nature. For, as Hegel stated in the first syllogism, Nature is "*in itself* the Idea": the task of the Spirit as mediator is to make this implicit structure *explicit*, and thereby enable nature to mediate between itself and Logic (1990, 117).

What seems to follow from Stern's interpretation is that unlike Kant's idealism, Hegel's system tries to discover what is already determined ontologically in the Idea, and Mind only brings the idea to the presence of an inquirer, so she can acquire absolute knowledge. I will give closure to this presentation of a holistic interpretation by advancing a claim that it is not explicit in Stern and seems to me of profound relevance for a rounded-up holistic interpretation: Hegel's absolute idealism is a thesis of what nowadays has been come to be called meta-metaphysics. Let me explain myself on this: when Hegel presents his Absolute Idealism the idea is that the alleged absolute knowledge is a commitment with the overall intelligibility of reality, a kind of intelligibility that ought to exclude entities beyond cognition or aspects of the world that are out of rational inquiry. To use McDowell's famous metaphor, the space of reasons is unbounded, and thus the philosophical and metaphysical importance of Absolute Idealism is an honest commitment and consistency with reality that will not allow reasons that are outside the space of reasons: a structural commitment that turns out to be both idealistic and naturalistic, giving us an ultimate response about the

boundaries of philosophy to one of the conundrums of contemporary philosophy in the analytical tradition.

## Conclusion

I have introduced a range of topics that might help to understand the big picture of an engaging and vibrant process of interpretation of Hegel's works. Many of these discussions are generally drafted away, but they will suffice to offer some guidelines for a broader understanding of how Stern's reading is prompting a renewed interest on Hegel's insights and their actuality. The reconstruction of this interpretation gravitates around a holistic reading: this reading helps to understand how Hegel gave unity to the object and answered Kantian worries about metaphysics, clarifies what Absolute idealism and absolute knowledge are really about, permits a renewed understanding of the concept of universals and those paramount concepts of truth and correction.

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