

Aristotelian Priority, Metaphysical Definitions of God and Hegel on Pure Thought as Absolute

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Abstract

This paper advances a philosophical interpretation of Hegel's *Logic* as defending a metaphysics, which includes an absolute, itself comparable to God in other systems of metaphysics of interest to Hegel, including Aristotle's and Spinoza's. Two problems are raised which can seem to block the prospects for such a metaphysically inflationary interpretation. The key to resolving these problems is consideration of the kinds of metaphysical priority that Hegel sees in Aristotle. This allows us to build a philosophical model of Hegel's absolute, and to demonstrate how the model fits the argument of Hegel's *Logic*. Application of this model provides a philosophical explanation of the senses in which Hegel's metaphysics is idealist; he argues that thought is absolute and comparable to God in other systems of metaphysics: thought is both self-determining and metaphysically prior to being.

Hegel's *Science of Logic* focuses on 'logical determinations', and the Encyclopaedia version explains that these 'can be regarded as the definitions of the absolute, as *metaphysical definitions of God*' (EL: §85).¹ Such formulations are not unusual; the self-standing *Logic* compares its topic to 'the logical course of God's self-determination as being' (WL: 627/12:129).² Hegel sees 'definitions of the absolute' or 'of God' in many other metaphysicians, emphasizing cases including Spinoza's *Ethics* and Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.³ Given passages like the above, I think an interpretation of Hegel would be the better, all else equal, if it can make sense of the *Logic* as a defence of an absolute that is *comparable* to these other cases.⁴

By 'comparable', I mean neither total agreement nor the sense in which any two things are comparable in some respect. Rather, I mean two specific respects. The first concerns the relation of the absolute to the non-absolute: the absolute has metaphysical *priority*; the non-absolute metaphysically *depends* on the absolute, in some Hegelian sense to be determined, and without reciprocation. Spinoza is

comparable: the modes depend, in Spinoza's sense of being 'in' and 'conceived through', God or the one substance (e.g., E1P15D), without God reciprocally depending on the modes.⁵

The second respect concerns the relation of the absolute to itself: The absolute will be, in some Hegelian sense to be specified, *self-determining*. I think that Hegel sees something comparable in Aristotle, in interpreting the *Metaphysics* as defending an 'absolute' or God 'whose essence is pure activity' (*VGP*: 2:143/158). Spinoza's specific sense of the comparable point is that God is supposed to be 'the cause of itself' (e.g., E1P7D). (Hegel's will be, we will see, a metaphysics built around *self-determination*, rather than *priority*, but does include the latter.)⁶

Some may expect that trying to make philosophical sense of Hegel's conclusions and arguments, in the spirit above, requires giving a deflationary interpretation—either a non-metaphysical interpretation, or a metaphysical interpretation that does not include an absolute that is self-determining and metaphysically prior. Indeed, much recent work—Stern (1990, 2009) is in an important case—approaches Hegel via Aristotle, as I will here, with deflationary aims.⁷ My aim in this small paper is not any final reckoning of costs and benefits of other approaches, let alone the interpretation of interpreters that this would require. My aim is to show the possibility of a surprising path toward a *non*-deflationary reading, recognizing Hegel's metaphysical absolute and its self-determination and priority, which brings significant benefits and without incurring the costs that might be expected.

I should add before beginning that, in orienting via passages about 'God' or the absolute, I have not the remotest interest in partisan defence (or attack on) religion. The *Logic* forbids arguments from revealed religion. Here I take the metaphysics to be independently interesting, and pursue it as such.

Further, I will argue from some *specific* claims, of *Hegel's*, about Aristotle, selected for their usefulness in solving philosophical and interpretive problems. I neither argue for my own reading of Aristotle, nor ask how best to grasp the whole of Hegel's interpretation of Aristotle.⁸

I. Two basic problems about Hegel

There are, admittedly, problems that seem to block the direction I would like to take towards a philosophical explanation of Hegel's absolute and the two senses of comparability. But once we articulate these, we can see that they are not special problems given my aims, but problems for interpreters generally. They are:

1. The problem about the meaning or content of Hegel's desired conclusions. Hegel makes claims about an absolute. But Hegel makes two other commitments that seem doomed to be philosophically incompatible with this:

1.A. The first facet of this problem concerns Hegel's *anti-dualism*. To begin with an example, some philosophers would distinguish *thought* from *being*; they might then hold one metaphysically prior to the other, and hold it to be absolute. Hegel's view is a kind of metaphysical idealism, so it would be unsurprising for his metaphysics to fall closer to holding thought to be absolute, and metaphysically prior to being. The problem, however, is understanding what this could mean, given that the anti-dualist Hegel claims that being is not ultimately distinct from thought, that there is a unity between them, etc.⁹

Insofar as the point applies to any supposed dualism between some X and Y, anti-dualism seems to undercut the distinction and so push to a deflationary denial that anything is metaphysically prior to anything else, and so that anything is absolute. And it is no solution to just appeal at the end of the day, without further explanation, to opaque, Hegelian-seeming formulations like: X is Y, but X is also not Y.

The problem for me here is that my aim of making sense of the metaphysical priority of absolute over non-absolute, in Hegel, can seem destined to pay a cost in conflicting with Hegel's anti-dualism. But this is a problem for *everyone*, because anyone who takes anti-dualism as reason for a deflationary reading seems equally destined to pay a cost relative to Hegel's claims about metaphysical definitions of God or an absolute. What I argue below is that there is a non-deflationary reading that pays no cost here, but instead solves the problem, explaining the compatibility of anti-dualism and the metaphysical priority of an absolute over the non-absolute.

1.B. *Thoroughgoing mediation*: Hegel holds that everything is 'mediated', so that nothing is entirely 'immediate'. Hegel applies this commitment within epistemology, as noted above, to rule out the above philosophical appeal to supposedly purely *immediate* forms of knowledge, not mediated by any need of justification.¹⁰ And he applies it in metaphysics, making everything metaphysically mediated, dependent or conditioned in some respect—even *the absolute*. Here are some cases of that application: First, consider Hegel's formulation in terms of his idea of a 'true infinity': 'finitude' is mediated, and non-absolute (*WL*: 124/21:142); but the 'true infinite' is *also* mediated, specifically by the finite: '[T]he infinite is only as the transcending of the finite' (*WL*: 116/21:133). Second, Hegel famously argues that metaphysical systems trying to make their absolute into something purely immediate end up with an absolute so indeterminate as to amount to nothing (*EL*: §86–87). Third, in criticizing Spinoza's metaphysics, Hegel says that 'the absolute cannot be a first, an immediate', but is a 'result' (*WL*: 473/11.376).

The problem, then, is this: if everything is on a metaphysical par in this respect of dependence or mediation, then this again seems to push in the deflationary direction, making it hard to see how anything in Hegel's metaphysics could be distinguished in being absolute, and especially absolute in the two senses of comparability.

Some think that a view they take to be holist, and deflationary, leaves no problem here. They see Hegel as holding that each thing depends on its wider context, and so on until, but only until, we reach the comprehensive whole of everything, at which point questions about what this whole depends on, or is explained by, become meaningless, leaving it absolute in not being dependent.¹¹ I think this remains problematic: First, this seems merely a *default* sense of absoluteness; something is absolute not because of anything about *it* but because of the *lack* of something somewhere else to condition it—as opposed to Hegel’s above-noted self-determination of the absolute. Second, *and regardless of that problem*, this kind of metaphysics is not really in keeping with Hegel’s *thoroughgoing mediation*, because it still denies that the absolute/whole is dependent. Hegel holds that *everything* is mediated, even the absolute, the infinite, etc. This seems to push toward ‘holism’, as I will use the term, in the specific sense that dependence is exhausted by everything—including *both whole and parts*—being equally mutually dependent. And that brings us back to the problem: If everything is equally dependent, then how then could anything be absolute? Or, if there is an absolute, then how could everything be metaphysically dependent?

2. Even if we can in the end make philosophical sense of the meaning of Hegel’s desired conclusions, the second problem is that there appears to be good reason to think he cannot possibly give a philosophical argument for them.

To begin with, note that Hegel sees Parmenides and Spinoza as resting the weight of their arguments on the principle that *nothing comes from nothing*. Spinoza takes himself to follow Descartes in thinking of this as a demand that everything requires a cause or a reason.¹² For concision and clarity, I follow contemporary usage in using Leibniz’s name, ‘principle of sufficient reason’, or just ‘PSR’, noting that neither Hegel nor Spinoza uses this terminology.¹³ Sometimes the PSR is expressed in the form: *there are no brute facts*, or *nothing is brute*. In any case, the problem arises because there is much in Hegel that seems to require him to deny this principle, for example:

First, Hegel’s metaphysics includes what I call *incomplete explicables*. For example, in nature there is supposed to be series of levels extending from the *less* completely explicable, for example mechanical phenomena, to the relatively more completely explicable, in the case of life.¹⁴ But any degree of lack of completeness of explicability would seem to violate the PSR, or mean that there is in such phenomena something that lacks any reason, comes from nothing, etc.

Second, Hegel argues that the PSR *forces* Spinoza toward a conclusion that Hegel rejects. More specifically, the principle supporting Spinoza’s monism would (Hegel argues) also rule out a cause or reason for the existence of anything either finite or determinate, forcing Spinoza to eliminate the latter. God would then be a ‘dark, shapeless abyss, as it were, that swallows up into itself every determinate content’ (*EL*: §151Z). This contributes to Hegel’s conclusion that ‘Spinozism is a

deficient philosophy' (WL: 472/11:376). Crucially, it is the principle itself that forces the direction Hegel resists:

Ex nihilo, nihil fit [...] nothing comes from nothing [...] Those who zealously hold firm to the proposition [...] are unaware that in so doing they are subscribing to the abstract pantheism of the Eleatics and essentially also to that of Spinoza. (WL: 61/5:85)

This seems to be a clear rejection of the principle.

Another way to see the problem is to note the way in which attempts to locate arguments in Hegel's metaphysics seem to commit him to the PSR. For example, Beiser sees Hegel as arguing that the Hegelian absolute is a condition of the possibility of knowledge or experience. But if we have no PSR, then it would be at least as reasonable, rather than positing an absolute, to just say that knowledge and experience are among those things not completely explicable—so that they could just *be*, in a brute fashion, requiring no ground or condition to explain their possibility.¹⁵

Similarly, Inwood sees Hegel as arguing against a metaphysics of forces, because this is supposed to leave an explanatory gap between forces and the phenomena to be explained (1983: 63). But if we have no PSR, then it would seem to be at least as reasonable, instead of heading in the direction of any Hegelian absolute, to make do with a metaphysics of forces and hold that forces just do have certain brute effects.

Inwood is an interesting case because he sees Hegel as equivocal about the principle required by the argument (as Inwood reads it): as 'believing, or at least half-believing, that everything had to be just as it is and that it could be shown why it is so' (1983: 64). And perhaps half-belief in a needed *premise* is why Inwood elsewhere sees Hegel as half-believing his own *conclusion* about an absolute (as Inwood reads this): Hegel 'believed, or at any rate half-believed, that the world was a product of pure thought, that God or reason was in the world, and so on' (1983: 1).

I think we should take the *seeming* half-beliefs as problems, seeking philosophical explanation of a wholehearted conclusion (problem 1), and the principle (2) on which it rests. If we do not solve these basic problems, then Hegel will seem almost everywhere ambivalent or even 'schizophrenic'.¹⁶ Even if we try to ignore the *Logic* and/or the absolute, and look to Hegel on natural science, or human history, for example—the familiar problems there, pushing us in seemingly incompatible inflationary and deflationary directions, can now be seen as reflections of the underlying problems above. We should not see the problems as reason to give up trying to make sense of Hegel's absolute and the two senses of comparability. They are problems for Hegel interpreters more generally. The big question is

what interpretive response has the best combination of costs and benefits. In the rest of this paper I argue that there is a surprising path forwards, focused on the self-determination and metaphysical priority of the absolute, that has surprising benefits relative to the problems.

II. Priority with reciprocal dependence à la Aristotle

Our problems extend, then, to even understanding Hegel's conclusions, regardless of the argument for them. Here it can help to begin with a kind of combination view that Hegel adopts and sees in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. I should note that Hegel's adoption of the positions discussed in this section is approximate, because it will be qualified by his idealism; I will not continue to state the need for qualification, but return to it.

I begin with the combination in the specific case of the relation of a substantial form to a hylomorphic compound; here I think it can be understood, also by non-Hegelians, how the former might be metaphysically both prior and yet also dependent.

In what sense *prior*? Hegel thinks that the form 'human being', for example, *makes* a particular human being what she is, and the reverse is not the case. Hegel's statements of this position incorporate much else that is less important at this moment: his treatment of Aristotle's substantial form as *universal*, contrasting to individuals of that form;¹⁷ and his idealist terminology, to be discussed later, labelling the form/universal also as 'concept' (*Begriff*). But for now the point is just the kind of priority involved in substantial forms (however further conceived). Hegel says:

[...] the *nature*, the specific *essence* [...] is the *concept* of the thing, the *universal which is present in it* just as there is present in each human being, although universally unique, a specific *principle* that makes him human [...] there is no saying what such an individual could still be if this foundation were removed from him [...] The indispensable foundation, the concept, the universal [...] (*WL*: 16–17/21:15)

The priority is clear: form/universal/concept makes the individual what it is, and not vice versa. This is not *just* Hegel; it is a familiar option, at the very least, to see this priority in Aristotle. Proponents might look to passages like this:

[...] why is this individual thing, or this body in this state, a man?
[...] what we seek is the cause, i.e. the form, by reason of which the matter is some definite thing; and this is the substance of the thing [...] (*Metaphysics*: 1041b)

On the other hand, Hegel also sees in Aristotle, and adopts, a sense in which such a substantial form is nonetheless *dependent* or *mediated*. Here the specific dependence is that the form/universal/concept ‘exists’ only as the ‘nature’ of individuals, and not something that could exist itself without individuals. Hegel says:

The *animal as such* cannot be shown, only a specific animal can.
The animal does not exist [existiert nicht] but is instead the universal nature of individual animals [...] (EL: §24Z1)

The language mirrors Aristotle’s familiar criticisms of the more Platonist view: ‘they say there is a man-in-himself and a horse-in-itself and health-in-itself, with no further qualification’ (*Metaphysics*: 997b). This is, again, not *just* Hegel; it is a familiar option, at least, to associate such dependence with Aristotle, and with Hegel as well.¹⁸

But how could priority and dependence fit together coherently? To answer, we need to specify the two different ways of thinking about dependence and priority. I do so in a manner influenced by recent work on Aristotle, and marked with terminology from Schelling’s reading of Hegel. I will call this a distinction between issues concerning *what* something is and issues concerning *that* it is.¹⁹ To begin with the latter, one way in which Aristotle thinks about priority is to consider as prior things ‘which can be without other things, while the others cannot be without them—a distinction which Plato used’ (*Metaphysics*: 1019a). Or: *that* there are X’s depends on *that* there are Y’s, and not vice-versa. I will borrow from Beere’s formulations of the idea in Aristotle (2008), but pry apart the dependence from the associated priority. So:

Y that-depends on X iff Y could not be if X were not.

If the dependence is not reciprocated, we have something prior:

X is that-prior to Y iff Y that-depends on X, and not *vice versa*.

What we have in Hegel on the dependence of substantial form, above, is the claim that substantial form that-depends on individuals of the form.

To handle Hegel’s priority of form, we need to highlight a different way of thinking about dependence and priority. Again I am drawing on recent work on Aristotle, some of it noting a connection to accounts of ontological dependence in contemporary metaphysics, as in Kit Fine.²⁰ The point can be formulated in terms of dependence between *essences*, but to match the above I would say this:

Y what-depends on X iff what it is to be Y depends on what it is to be X.

X is what-prior to Y iff Y what-depends on X, and not vice versa.

The priority claim in Hegel, above, is this: a substantial form is what-prior to individuals of that form.

The idea here is *not* an overall picture of reciprocity or holism. The overall picture is not what-priority going one way balanced against that-priority going the other way.²¹ Maybe that picture would be coherent *if* one thought of a relation superficially similar to what-priority, but implicitly or explicitly *specific* to relations between mental representations (one being such that it cannot be understood except in terms of another), or judgements or sentences (one being such that its meaning depends on other judgements in a space of reasons in the sense of justifications)—thus allowing this relation to be innocent of implications about worldly existences and any worldly dependencies. But that would take as basic from the start, building on, a form of dualism—*world* vs. *mind*, or *causality* vs. *normativity* (or vs. a supposedly purely epistemic account of *explanation*, etc.). Hegel would not work from dualism-dependent conceptions, nor associate this with Aristotle. The key to escaping the familiar deflationary path is that the what-priority Hegel sees in Aristotle and adopts is metaphysical, and applies not only to the metaphysics of mind, nature, and relations between them—it applies also to metaphysics prior to any such distinctions. And this metaphysical what-priority is not compatible with reverse that-priority.²² Take our example: if a particular human *only* is what it is given the form of human being, then it is also the case that, if the form were not, then this human being would not be. Thus: ‘The indispensable foundation, the concept, the universal’ (*WL*: 16–17/21:15). In general, if X is what-prior to Y, then Y that-depends on X, ruling out that-priority of Y.

It follows that, in the substantial form case, we now have no that-priority at all; rather, the form human being, on the one hand, and particular human beings, on the other, are reciprocally that-dependent. That is compatible with this being overall a case of metaphysical priority of form, namely, its what-priority.

As a general pattern:

1. X is what-prior to Y.
2. X and Y are reciprocally that-dependent.

Here the reciprocity is subordinate to what is overall a case of metaphysical priority, namely here the what-priority of form.

Although not a case of what-priority, there is an otherwise matching case made explicit in Aristotle. And this is very frequently cited in contemporary metaphysics, with non-Hegelians treating it as comprehensible (e.g., Schaffer 2009: 375). The idea is this: ‘there being a man reciprocates as to implication of existence with the true statement about it’ (*Categories*: 14b). This reciprocal that-dependence is compatible with a metaphysical priority on one side:

whereas the true statement is in no way the cause of the actual thing's existence, the actual thing does seem in some way the cause of the statement's being true. (*Categories*: 14b)

But coming back specifically to what-priority, Hegel sees this in Aristotle far beyond the case of substantial forms in relation to individuals. The case Hegel thinks most important is Aristotle's 'priority in substance' of actuality (*energeia*) over potentiality (*dynamis*).²³ The key for Hegel is this: *energeia* is

[...] prior in substance; firstly, because the things that are posterior in becoming are prior in form and in substance, e.g. man is prior to boy and human being to seed [...] Secondly, because everything that comes to be moves towards a principle, i.e. an end [...] (*Metaphysics*: 1050a)

Beere argues that this cannot be (in my terms) that-priority, but must be what-priority:

There is priority in being because the sprout and the acorn are directed towards becoming and then *being* different from the way they are—namely being full-fledged oak trees—whereas an oak tree is not [...] For this reason, there is a non-reciprocal dependence among their essences. What it is to be an oak tree sprout depends on what it is to be an oak tree, but not *vice versa*. (2008: 437)

And I do think that Hegel sees such what-priority of developed stages in Aristotle, and adopts it. For example, *what* is a seed? '[T]he seed which is the plant, in itself, is this, to develop itself' (*EL*: §124Z). Hegel calls this kind of case 'development' (*Entwicklung*), and thinks it so important that it plays a role distinguishing the third part of the *Logic* (*EL*: §161). But the case of *energeia*, and the relations between what- and that-priority here, are more complex and less familiar, both in Aristotle and Hegel's interpretation; these require a separate study. So here I mention only the what-priority Hegel sees in such cases of development.

With respect to the whole of the general pattern noted above, it is easier to see another case of this in the position Hegel adopts and attributes to Aristotle concerning whole organisms in relation to their parts or 'members': The whole organism is metaphysically prior, because it is what-prior. From this Hegel takes a that-dependence of part on whole to follow: if the part's being *what* it is depends on the whole, then *that* there is such a part also depends on there being the whole:

The individual members of the body are what they are only by means of their unity and in relation to it. Thus, for example, a

hand that is severed from the body, is a hand only in name, but not in reality, as Aristotle already noted. (*EL*: §216Z)

Note: the idea is not that the hand would be the same, without the whole body, and we would use a different word (actually, here, we would not); form is part of the metaphysics, and without the whole body, there would be no hand. This is compatible with the recognition of that-dependence the other way as well: it cannot be the case that there is a whole organism unless it is the case that there are its parts.²⁴ So we have another case in which we can understand the coherence of the general pattern: reciprocity of that-dependence, subordinated to what is overall the metaphysical priority of one side, namely, what-priority.

III. A model for Hegel's absolute and resolutions of the problems

We can now frame a proposal, namely, that Hegel extends the general pattern, above, throughout metaphysics, and all the way to his own version of a metaphysical definition of the absolute or God. This will later require a slight qualification. And it may be, more than Hegel admits, at odds with the account of God in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.²⁵ Still, it allows an initial model of Hegel's absolute, giving reason to think our initial problems to be solvable—so that we can then turn below to fill in details of Hegel's specifically idealist metaphysics, in which the absolute is *thought*, itself prior to *being*.

Consider the two respects of comparability with God in other metaphysical systems, with which I began, the first being *priority*. Application of the general pattern above suggests that Hegel's absolute is supposed to be metaphysically prior in the same sense that he himself sees a substantial form as prior: the absolute would be what-prior, so that everything non-absolute will depend, for its being what it is, on the absolute, and not *vice versa*.

The second respect was *self-determination*. This is where we need to *extend* the model, beyond the case of any old substantial form, all the way to something *absolute*. But the natural extension is clear: if the absolute is specifically *what*-prior to non-absolute, then the corresponding sense of self-determination would be that the absolute makes itself *what* it is. I will put this by saying that the absolute is 'what-self-determining'. So the general pattern above is extended to a model of the absolute:

1. The absolute is what-self-determining
2. The absolute is what-prior to everything non-absolute
3. The absolute and the non-absolute are reciprocally that-dependent

A new concern opens up here, to be sure, concerning (1): Analogies with organisms and substantial forms are no longer as helpful here, insofar as they do not

seem to be examples of absolute what-self-determination. So the problem is: how can we make the idea of what-self-determination comprehensible, and in a way non-Hegelians might possibly understand? I try to answer in terms of Hegel's idealism in the *Logic*, below.

But we do not need more about self-determination to see why we should expect the initial problems, from above, to be solvable. One facet of the first problem concerned *thoroughgoing mediation*. But our model allows the absolute to be mediated (in being that-dependent); we have already seen that it is comprehensible—even to non-Hegelians—to say that some X is mediated, in this sense, while claiming that the overall metaphysical picture is that on which X is metaphysically prior, namely, what-prior. So mediation is no bar to making sense of the metaphysical priority of the absolute.

The other facet concerned Hegel's *anti-dualism*, his denying, for example, a dualism between being and thought (e.g., *WL*: 49/21:45). But consider the what-priority of oak tree to sprout. The seed grows gradually, without jumping any gulf. Here non-Hegelians—philosophers working on Aristotle, for example, and drawing on contemporary metaphysics—appear at least to understand the claim that X can be metaphysically prior to Y, even while Y is not utterly distinct from X, but indeed its essence depends on X.

The second problem was that Hegel appeared doomed when it comes to arguing for his absolute, because such an argument would need the PSR, and yet Hegel seems to contradict that in recognizing incomplete explicables (e.g., *EL*: §248A), and in criticizing Spinoza and acosmism (*WL*: 61/5:85). But the pattern above suggests this need not be a problem: Hegel can defend a PSR (or, if you prefer, a PSR analogue) limited to issues related to *what-dependence*. And Hegel could argue against a more general PSR, and in particular any PSR that would apply to all issues, distinct from those above, concerning *that-dependence*. He can argue against principles like: *Nothing is brute*. But defend something like: *Nothing is brutally what it is*.

It should be easy to see at least an initial sense of why the latter is just what is useful, relative to trying to prove that there must be something absolute in the sense of being what-self-determining, and what-prior to everything else.

The next step is to connect this model with the details of Hegel's specifically idealist metaphysics, where the absolute is specifically a kind of *thought*, prior to *being*. One way to try this would be to look at Hegel's comparisons between his idealism and Aristotle on God, pure actuality (*energeia*), and thought thinking itself (*EL*: §236Z, §577). But this would require a separate study, because these issues in Aristotle are difficult and less familiar, and Hegel greatly complicates matters by interpreting Aristotle on God in a less familiar and radical manner.²⁶ So here I set that path aside and turn to the broad outlines of the argument for idealism in the *Logic*. There is no space here to defend each step, consider interpretive

options for each step, or even mention each step in the *Logic*. The point is rather to highlight some of what specifically would follow from the application of the model above, and show that the way is clear to make sense of Hegel's idealism specifically as an account of the self-determination and metaphysical priority of an absolute, and in a manner that solves the problems above.

IV. Application to the outlines of the *Logic*

Prior to the beginning of the *Logic* proper, Hegel takes himself to have established the need for metaphysics, in which pure thought will abstract from sense perception and intuition.²⁷ The structure will be this: First (in the doctrine of being) Hegel argues for contradictions in any attempt at a metaphysics of immediacy. That is to say, he argues that metaphysics must rather build around the resource of some mediation or dependence relation between one thing and another (e.g., grounding), or around the mediation of something by itself, or self-determination. Then (in the doctrine of essence) Hegel argues for contradictions in any attempt at a metaphysics built *just* on a mediation or dependence relation between one thing and another.²⁸ So (in the doctrine of the concept) Hegel draws the conclusion that metaphysics must be built around self-determination, and builds just this.

Being: The *Logic* begins with the argument that metaphysics at the start has reason to prefer to all others one specific metaphysical view, namely, Parmenides's monism. The reason for this preference is that the lack of assumptions, as from sense perception—for example, that there are *red* things—privileges the theory of what is as just *pure being*, which immediately is (*EL*: §86). But Hegel further argues, in the first application of the dialectical method, that drawing the Parmenidean conclusion for these reasons—even if the best first step—in fact reveals a contradiction, providing otherwise inaccessible reason to revise this metaphysics. In particular, we are trying to draw the conclusion that *what is* is pure being, but the form of this claim initially justified leaves being so indeterminate as to supposedly be nothing at all (*EL*: §87). Overall the first few resulting transitions are supposed to provide reason to conclude that the object of metaphysics must include *determinacy*, bringing us to 'determinate being' (*Dasein*).

The remaining question in 'Being' is whether sense can be made of determinacy within the constraints of the focus on immediacy. Hegel argues the negative: Determinacy inevitably raises problems concerning mediation, and (importantly for our purposes) specifically concerning what-dependence. For example, we can try to preserve immediacy by thinking a 'something' (*Etwas*) as determinate insofar as immediately distinguished by a *quality*. Then we are thinking *what is* as perishable: 'Something is what it is by virtue of its quality and when it loses its quality it stops being what it is' (*EL*: §90Z). For this kind of 'something', then, 'finitude

and alterability belong to its being' (*EL*: §92). But then it is what it is only in virtue of, and so in a way dependent on, not yet having ceased to be, or not crossing the 'limit' between it and the 'other' that would be if it were not: 'something is what it is only in its limit' and 'this something is what it is through it' (*WL*: 99–100/21:114–15). Hegel argues that a regress of what-dependence of merely finite somethings would follow, *ad infinitum* (*EL*: §93).

Application of the model above suggests that what is going here is that Hegel is defending and beginning to apply the limited PSR from above, according to which *nothing is, in brute terms, what it is*: He argues that metaphysics must include things that are determinately *what* they are. The simplest attempts to make sense of such determinacy require what-dependence. And if we take something finite, in a sense requiring what-dependence on something else—and even if we add an unending regress of finites—we still would require something further on which to be what-dependent. So metaphysics will ultimately have to include something 'infinite' in the relevant sense. But within the limits of the doctrine of being, Hegel argues that we give only inadequate accounts of a 'bad or negative infinity', thought only as *not* finite, or *not* dependent, bringing us back to immediate being, with its supposed empty indeterminacy; we can here only think that there 'ought to be' the infinite of things being determinately what they are (*EL*: §94).

Essence: The next attempt is a metaphysics built from a mediation or determination relation between two things; Hegel will argue that such a metaphysics cannot succeed in its own terms—which is to say, without instead building on *self*-determination.

Here is an example of an argument that I have stressed as paradigmatic of 'essence' (Kreines 2004, 2015). At one point Hegel considers 'ground' as a way of one thing depending on or being determined by another. He takes as an example some observed phenomena, like the movement of bodies, being such that it does not determine, cause or explain itself—and having a 'ground' in forces. But restricted to doing without a metaphysics of self-determination, we meet a dilemma. If forces are not distinct from the explanandum, then (within the restriction) a force is just a non-explanatory re-description of the explanandum (see the section on 'formal ground'; *WL*: 397ff./11:302). If forces are distinct, then (within this restriction) they would be yet more things needing a ground in something else, if any grounding was required in the first place (see the section on 'real ground'; *WL*: 402ff./11:307). Either way, the reason we posited grounds is not satisfied: 'this method of explaining from grounds does not satisfy its own expectations, that it itself demands something quite different from such grounds' (*WL*: 402/6:102). What *is* demanded—Hegel is arguing throughout 'essence'—is some form of metaphysical self-determination (i.e., the 'concept'), since this problem generalizes to forms of dependence of one thing on another.²⁹

By the end of ‘essence’, Hegel is completing a *reductio* against any PSR that would encompass any sense of that-dependence distinct from what-dependence. We might have wanted to demand that, just for any X *that* is, there be some Y that is independently, and is the reason *that* X is. Such a principle would seem to require a reason why there is something rather than nothing. But the principle would demand an absolute. One possibility would then be immediate being as ultimate reason, the absolute ‘of the Eleatics’, or God as ‘the *real* in all reality, the *supremely real*’ (EL: §86). ‘Being’ argues that this turns out too indeterminate to make possible an answer to any determinate why question. The alternative would be a *causa sui*: just as a cause is responsible for the existence of its effect, this would be something that causes its own existence, and the existence of everything else as well. ‘Essence’ argues that it is incoherent to take a causal relation between things and try to build or derive a self-caused absolute (EL: §153ff.). Either way, then, a PSR applying to that-dependence forces incoherence.

Concept: The doctrine of the concept turns toward self-determination (EL: §163A). Hegel initially compares the way a substantial form of a plant would explain the directed series of growing stages in the development of the plant (EL: §§161–67Z). But the *Logic*’s concluding account is more self-reflective. Hegel finds in the ‘method’ of the *Logic* the demonstration that *thought itself* is self-determining: The *Logic* starts with just the *concept*, as Hegel says, of *pure thought of what is*. And just this alone is supposed to determine a specific beginning point for thought, namely, Parmenides’s pure being. And just this first step is supposed to force, in the dialectic, further revisions in metaphysics, pushing toward ‘determinate being’, beyond to ‘essence’ and ‘ground’, and to idealism. In sum, just the concept of thought itself fills in a series of determinate contents of thought—it generates a specific, directed ordering or structure of thought. One concept—the concept of thought itself, rather than the concept of human being, for example—is uniquely self-determining. Hegel consequently calls this not any old concept, or *a* concept, but *the* concept. Hegel says of the method of the *Logic*:

[...] what is to be considered as method here is only the movement of the *concept itself* [...] its movement is the *universal absolute activity*, the self-determining and self-realizing movement. (WL: 737/12:238).

For us it is crucial that the sense of self-determination is specifically *what*-self-determination. So when talking about the structure of the *Logic* at its start, Hegel says that this structure is yet to be demonstrated, or derived from thought itself, saying that ‘in philosophy, demonstrating [*beweisen*] is equivalent to showing how the object makes itself—through and out of itself—into what it is’ (EL: §83Z).

Opponents will have ideas about what to challenge here: They can argue against the case that there is a uniquely privileged starting point for such pure thought, and/

or they can challenge later arguments that difficulties internal to one form of thought require a transition to the next. But that the points at which to challenge are clear suggests that the *meaning* of the claim that thought is self-determining is not entirely lost in Hegel-esque formulations that seem at odds with themselves to any opponent; the meaning is clear enough to see how to object.

One might also worry that self-determining thought, in the above sense, cannot be an absolute that is metaphysically prior to the non-absolute. The issue here is whether we can explain the meaning of such a priority claim. Applying the model above, the point will be that the self-determination of thought or ‘the concept’ is responsible for everything else being *what* it is. In other words: ‘[...] the concept is what is truly first and the things are what they are, thanks to the activity of the concept dwelling in them and revealing itself in them’ (*EL*: §163Z). Hegel sometimes puts the point—as where he is discussing the ‘method’ of the *Logic* as ‘self-determining and self-realizing movement’—by saying that ‘the *concept* is *all*’ (*WL*: 737/12:238). And that might seem to suggest that everything real is absolutely self-determining; in other words: there would be only the absolute. But this would leave too little distance between Hegel and the ‘acosmism’ he complains about when discussing Spinoza. Hegel’s point allows that there are some things that are non-absolute or finite. It is just that, to *be* finite is to be an incomplete form of the infinite—of the self-determination of thought. Or, in more detail, what it is to be a finite thing is to partially possess within itself a concept that determines itself, and yet to fail in some way and to some degree to have this ‘completely’:

Finite things are finite because, and to the extent that, they do not possess the reality of their concept completely within them but are in need of other things for it. (*WL*: 672/6:465)

This what-priority of thought will also play a large role outside the *Logic*, in the *Realphilosophie*. Here the topics are things aside from the thought that is, strictly speaking, the object of the *Logic*. All of them are supposed to depend, for their being what they are, on the self-determination of pure thought. Among the natural phenomena, *life* is supposed to be closest to the complete self-determination of thought. But take even lifeless matter: what it *is* is supposed to be such as to require understanding in terms of a system rotating around a centre of gravity, which is itself a specific way of being partially but incompletely self-determining. In the *Philosophy of Spirit*, something similar applies to minds; the short story is that to be a mind is to be, to a degree greater than anything natural, self-determining.³⁰

It is now time for the qualifications I mentioned, along the way, concerning the approach to Hegel via Aristotelian priority. First, my interpretation of Aristotle on substantial forms might have seemed to suggest that Hegel holds that, where an individual human is what she is in virtue of the substantial form of human being, this form is something ultimate in the sense that the what-dependence comes to an

end here. We can now see that this is not Hegel's view; his idealism holds that all what-dependence terminates with the self-determination of absolute thought. Further, my beginning with what-priority might have seemed to suggest building a metaphysics from a basic resource of a dependence relation between distinct things. But 'ssence' argues that this cannot succeed; the importance of what-priority, for us, was that this leads us to what-self-determination, which retrospectively turns out to be the real resource from which Hegel's metaphysics is built. There *are* dependence relations, but they are such that one cannot understand them without thinking of that which is depended upon as (to some degree) self-determining.

In any case, we can now finish applying the model, from above. Since absolute thought is what-prior to everything else, nothing else can be unless there is this self-determining structure of thought—all is also that-dependent on thought. But the model includes *reciprocal* that-dependence. So the idea is that the object of the *Logic*—the self-determination of pure thought—is also that-dependent on its realizations covered in the *Realphilosophie*. This is part of what Hegel means, for example, in characterizing the *Logic* as concerned with a 'realm of shadows', which cannot be without some kind of 'sensuous concretion' (*WL*: 37/5:55).

Note something unusual about the resulting metaphysical idealism. In particular, there is nothing here like the claim that everything real must be 'in' any mind or minds. Those forms of idealism claim a that-priority of mind or minds: a Berkeleyan idea, for example, cannot exist unless there is a mind that it is 'in', and the reverse does not hold. But this is no part of Hegel, whose claim is that the absolute—thought—is what-prior to the non-absolute, but reciprocally that-dependent. So neither thought nor anything else exists independently of nature, and should be held responsible for the fact *that* nature exists. It is in this sense that we can understand why Hegel thinks that the right sort of metaphysical idealism will also be realist (*WL*: 124/21:143).

Granted, all this raises many further questions. But it has not been my aim to answer all questions. What I have tried to do is to work my way far enough to demonstrate solutions to the specific problems raised above. These might initially have *appeared* to clearly block the way to philosophical explanation of a metaphysical absolute in Hegel, with the two senses of comparability. But they do not.

We have the *priority* of Hegel's absolute: the absolute, or thought, is metaphysically prior in just the sense that Hegel thinks Aristotle holds substantial form to be prior: thought is *what*-prior to everything else. And we are not left, in interpreting Hegel on *self-determination*, with just saying that Hegel accepts and rejects the same claim, in some way that non-Hegelians would not understand to be a coherent philosophical view at all. Hegel's claim is just that thought makes itself *what* it is. For Hegel argues that the endeavour of pure thought privileges a first theory of what is—Parmenides's—and this and each further step uncover contradictions that force

thought farther through a series of determinate theories, in the direction of Hegel's conclusions. Thought is supposed to give itself this directed structure.

Furthermore, Hegel's commitment to *thoroughgoing mediation* is neither reason to try to deny that he endorses this kind of metaphysical absolute, nor to conclude that we can only express his view by saying that he both endorses this and denies such an absolute. For this is simply compatible, just in the manner that Hegel also clearly sees an Aristotelian metaphysical priority of substantial form as compatible with the dependence of form; for Hegel, absolute thought is reciprocally that-dependent with its non-absolute realizations.

Nor is Hegel's *anti-dualism* reason to deny that he endorses the metaphysical priority of an absolute. We have compared the metaphysical priority of developed oak over sprout. Hegel's claim is that there is a gradual scale of realizations of absolute thought, without any break or discontinuity. All realizations of absolute thought are approximations, and *what* they are is fixed by a degree and a manner of approximation. They all *are* absolute thought, even where everything non-absolute also falls short, leaving enough distance for the priority claim.

Note how these points combine: The absolute is dependent, in being that-dependent. Is that not some mitigation of its absoluteness? No, insofar as what it depends on are forms of itself. Compare Hegel's formulation concerning the dependence of the absolute or (here) the 'infinite': 'The sole question is [...] how to combine that the infinite starts precisely from an other and yet in doing so starts only from itself' (DG: 157/17:435).

Finally, with respect to the second problem, we cannot rule out, in advance of closer engagement with the details, prospects for Hegel's defence of his metaphysical idealism by argument: he is not in the position of needing and yet contradicting one and the same PSR. What Hegel defends is a restricted version of the PSR. Not: *nothing is brute*. But rather: *nothing is, in brute terms, what it is*. This is just what is needed by someone arguing that there must be an absolute that (i) makes itself what it is, and (ii) is what-prior to everything else. Hegel argues against any PSR that would encompass distinct issues concerning that-dependence, or suggest the need (in this sense) of an explanation of why there is something, rather than nothing. In other words, Hegel is free to try to argue that this last demand is mistaken or illegitimate. To recognize him as doing so is not to give a deflationary reading of his philosophy—to read it as either non-metaphysical, or else as a purely holist metaphysics. The way is free to try to argue, using the limited PSR he defends, for the self-determination and metaphysical priority of absolute thought.³¹

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Notes

¹ Abbreviations used:

EL = Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic*, trans. T. F. Geraets, H. S. Harris and W. A. Suchting (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991).

WL = Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969).

VGP = *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and F. H. Simson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

DG = *Lectures on the Proofs for the Existence of God*, trans. P. C. Hodgson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

References to Hegel's original German are by (volume: page in that edition) and are to:

Gesammelte Werke (Hamburg: Meiner, 1968), and:

Werke in zwanzig Bände, eds. E. Moldenhauer and K. Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970–1).

E = Spinoza, 'Ethics', trans. E. Curley, in E. Curley (ed.), *A Spinoza Reader*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). Cited by part (I–V), proposition (P), definition (D), scholium (S) and corollary (C).

SSW = Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. K. F. A. Schelling (Stuttgart: Cotta, [1856–61]).

² My topic encompasses both versions, which differ in other respects but not, in my view, on points discussed here.

³ References to Aristotle are cited from *The Complete Works of Aristotle* (1984).

⁴ I have here on some points moved farther in this inflationary metaphysical direction than I had in my (2015).

⁵ I will come to passages on Hegelian priority below. Note that we cannot read Hegel as eliminating everything but an absolute, leaving no priority over anything; he criticizes this view, calling it 'acosmism' in discussions of Spinoza (discussed below). It is true that Hegel's metaphysics is not built on the resource of priority; see the following paragraph.

⁶ Attempts to build metaphysics on the priority of one thing over another fail in 'essence'; ultimately metaphysics must be built not from that but from, in the final part of the *Logic*, an account of self-determination or 'das Wirkende seiner selbst' (*EL*: §163A).

⁷ Stern reads Hegel as replacing the concerns of *metaphysica specialis*, preferring 'non-extravagant' metaphysics or ontology, which is supposed to elude Kant's critique of metaphysics, rather than exceeding its limits and arguing for such a challenge to it (2009, ch. 1). Pippin (2018) is about much else as well, but shares these deflationary points: 'the intelligibility conditions of ordinary objects' as Aristotle's topic, compatible with Kant's critique (2018: 94), and Hegel's 'model' in which something else 'takes the place' of questions of special metaphysics, including about God (2018: 124).

⁸ Addressing that different question would require dealing with the vast literature on it; for orientation, see Kern (1971), Düsing (1986: 97ff) and Ferrarin (2001).

⁹ E.g., '[...] subjective and objective, or also of thought and being, of concept and reality [...] are now in their truth, that is, in their unity [...]' (*WL*: 49/21:45).

¹⁰ This is at least part of the point in the criticism of the philosophies of immediacy at §§61–78.

¹¹ See Stern's own view (2009: 30–34), and similarly McTaggart's (1901: 256).

¹² See Spinoza (1985: 244 and 246) for Spinoza's "A7" and "A11" in context of his exposition of Descartes. On Spinoza's argument for his God as employing the PSR throughout, see especially Garrett (1979).

¹³ Spinoza does not use it; Hegel does use Leibniz's terminology, but for something he thinks more specific to Leibniz, e.g., *EL*: §121Z.

¹⁴ E.g., *EL*: §248R. And on this see my (2015).

¹⁵ Beiser (2005: 170–71). Cf. Horstmann (2006: 27–28). Note that Beiser sees the resulting problem here, treating it as about necessity, and powerfully arguing that familiar attempts to solve it fail (2006: 76–79).

¹⁶ Comparable tensions often show up in interpretations of the relation between 'essence' and 'the concept' in the *Logic*, e.g., Theunissen sees the former as more critical and the latter as 'schizophrenic' in relation to special metaphysics (1980: 61); cf. Longuenesse (2007: xviii).

¹⁷ The issues are complex, especially given *Metaphysics* Z.13, but Hegel's position is not unusual; see Cohen on those holding 'there is only one substantial form for all the particulars belonging to the same species' (2008: 208).

¹⁸ E.g., 'forms of perceptible objects [...] cannot exist without being enmattered, hence not without some hylomorphic compound existing' (Malink 2013: 354). And others note the combination view in Hegel, including again Stern (1990, 2009).

¹⁹ In Schelling (*SW*: II: 3: 60/130); on this in Schelling see García (2016).

²⁰ Here again I am influenced by Beere, in a passage cited below (2008: 437), also by Peramatzis's contrast between his 'PIE' vs. 'PIB' (2011).

²¹ I would resist putting the point in terms from Beiser, as an 'ancient Aristotelian distinction between what is first in order of explanation and what is first in order of being' (2005: 56).

²² Here there is a contrast with Brandom's similar seeming notion: 'Sense dependence does not entail reference dependence' (2001: 79). I note another contrast concerning idealism at the end of this article.

²³ Hegel on the centrality of this: *VGP*: 19:154/3:138.

²⁴ There are some issues about whether the dependence holds merely of parts of certain kinds, rather than tokens; but I do not think this makes a difference here.

²⁵ See the following footnote.

²⁶ Düsing (1986: 124ff.) argues that this is misinterpretation; for further consideration see also Ferrarin (2001) and García (2016).

²⁷ See e.g., *EL*: §38A. I defend Hegel's position that those who think to reject and avoid this kind of metaphysics in fact draw on presuppositions about it in Kreines (2015).

²⁸ See Pinkard (1988: 55ff.) on 'essence' as about explanatory relations.

²⁹ I think there is a compatible more general account of ‘essence’ in Knappik (2016: 8).

³⁰ I give an account of this scale from lesser to greater completeness in Kreines (2015).

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