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## The singularity of the concept in Hegel.

An attempt to reconstruct Hegelian reasoning

An interpretation is based on a text and must make sense. It takes both. If we focus too much on the texts, we lose the thread of the argument. If we rely too much on the argument, we no longer talk about the text. Here, I shall take the risk of leaning more toward reconstruction by proposing 10 theses. I do this for a contingent reason and for an essential one. The contingent reason is the lack of time. That's why I declare from the outset that I agree with three authors on specific points. I agree with Lebrun that Hegel does not intend to propose a new philosophy but to reconstruct philosophical concepts.\* I agree with Fulda that Hegel's logic is not an ontology.\* I agree with Berto that it is a semantics.\* The essential reason is that Hegel does not clarify his methodological presuppositions.

There is an explanation for this. Hegel claims to begin without presuppositions. But, in fact, he begins by clearing the ground of all the prejudices that encumber it. This is the task of the *Phenomenology*.\* We must begin with it in order to become able to "freely resolve" to examine the determinations of thought for themselves.\* But this work already uses the method of the *Logic* to which it is supposed to introduce us.\* This is why its methodological presuppositions remain unclear.

If we try to summarize the result of the *Phenomenology*, we could say it suggests that one cannot think the subject and the object without each other, because the reduction of the subject to the object or *vice versa* lead to absurdities.\* This implies that *opposites must be included in the same framework*. My first thesis generalizes this idea:

*1/ Semantics is governed by opposition. Therefore, for a term to have a determined meaning, it is necessary (a) either that this term is contained in an opposition, (b) or that this term contains an opposition.*

In one case, the opposition is *external* to the term to which it gives meaning. The term in question is an opposite, it is therefore unilateral or abstract. In the *Phenomenology*, this is the case of the subject and the object: they are assumed to be independent and turn out to be opposites, deriving their meaning from each other.\* In the other case, the opposition is *internal* to the term in question. This term forms a "whole" and is "concrete." We can also say that it is "real": for Hegel, the category of "reality" designates an independent "whole" composed of "moments"

that are not independent.\* In the *Phenomenology*, this is the case of “Absolute Knowing,” which “suppresses” the subject/object opposition.

Let us consider here, following a suggestion by Jean-Paul Dumont, the analysis of substance as a “whole” (*synolon*) of matter and form, in Aristotle.\* Form and matter have their meaning by contrast with each other. Not substance. Substance is not defined by opposition to something else but by an opposition that it contains, even if, for Aristotle, the importance of its terms is not the same, because substance is defined more by form than by matter.\* I think that Hegel extends this structure to everything that is conceivable. Hence my second thesis:

*2/ A term is called “particular” if it has a meaning only in opposition to an opposite term, and “universal” if it has a meaning independently of an opposite term. According to thesis 1, the universal must necessarily contain an opposition, otherwise it will have no meaning. When this necessity is taken into account in its definition, the universal is designated as “singular”.*

If “particular” denotes a term that has meaning only in opposition to an opposing term, the particular can never be missing. In the case where a term is contained in an opposition, both opposites are determined as particular, regardless of our intention when we use them. In the case where a term contains an opposition, both opposites contained in it are determined as particular, but this very term, their framework, is universal.

Therefore, there must be *two meanings of the universal*, a false and a true one. According to the first, the universal is supposed to be foreign to any form of opposition. According to the second, it has no opposite, but contains an opposition. Hegel designates the universal in the first case as “abstract” and in the second as “concrete.” In the exposition of the concept in the *Logic*, the “universal” *tout court* designates the abstract or false universal, and the concrete or true universal is designated as “singular.”\* Why? This is the subject of our fourth thesis, which must be preceded by the following one:

*3/ “Abstract universal” is a contradictory expression used to criticize the claim of an opposite to be universal.*

The abstract universal appears to have no meaning since it is supposed not to be an opposite and not to contain an opposition. But it does. *Not having* a meaning has a meaning as opposed to *having* a meaning. These two opposing expressions therefore designate two *particular* terms. To say that the abstract universal has no meaning is to say that it does, and that this meaning, contrary to our intention, is not universal but particular.

*The abstract universal is particular, contrary to what it is supposed to be.\** “Abstract universal” is a contradictory expression. To characterize a term in this way is therefore to criticize it.

This is the case with subsumption. When we think of the universal as that which *subsumes* the particular, we are, in fact, thinking of a particular. Let’s take an example. “Being” subsumes everything, it is a category of maximum extension. But extension is inversely proportional to intension. Therefore, “being” is without content and can only have meaning in opposition to a content. Therefore, it is a particular. The universal that subsumes the particular is an abstract universal. Hegel says that “being” is “determined as indeterminate”\* and that it is the most “abstract” category, not the most universal one.

The “concrete” universal is not opposed to anything else, but it has a determinate meaning, because it contains an opposition. What form does this opposition take? In an opposition, the meaning of one side must be the negation of the meaning of the other. If one has a determination, the other will have the determination of not having this determination. It will be determined as indeterminate. It will therefore be an abstract universal like “being”. In short, the concrete universal contains the opposition of the abstract universal and the particular. In other words, *the singular contains the opposition of the universal and the particular.\**

The problem is that a singular is *not* a concept. On the other hand, if a concept can express a singular, then we *can* say this concept is “singular.” Hence the fourth thesis:

*4/ The “singular concept” accounts for realities outside the semantic field, that is to say what is studied by the Philosophy of the Real (the natural and human world) and which does not belong to the Logic.*

According to Aristotle, knowledge concerns the “singular,” because what truly is, the *ousia*, is singular. But our concepts are general.\* They can distinguish a set of substances, not one substance. They are universal or particular, not singular. In fact, Aristotle assumes that a *singular* concept would *subsume* a singular thing, which is impossible. No concept subsumes just *one* thing.

On the other hand, he thinks of substance as a whole of matter and form. A singular *is* therefore conceivable other than by subsumption, if it contains an opposition. Why not call *this* a “singular concept”? I think this is precisely what Hegel does.

For Hegel, it seems that the true and false definitions of the “concept” separate on this precise point, when he states: “Here is where the false start is made that makes abstraction stray away from the way of the concept, abandoning the truth. Its higher and highest universal to which it

riser is only a surface that becomes progressively more void of content; the singularity which it despises is the depth in which the concept grasps itself and where it is posited as a concept.”<sup>1</sup> The singular is “despised” when we demand in vain to subsume it under a concept. It is honored when we detect an opposition there, because we can then conceive of it. We then attribute to it a structure that is that of the concept. We can say that the concept is then “posited as a concept.”

It is wrong to “despise” the singular, which is supposed to be too small to be of interest to the concept, as Parmenides points out to Socrates according to Plato.\* Adorno is wrong to believe that Hegel despises the non-conceptual.\* Rather, I assume that he is criticizing a definition of the concept that forces us to consider the singular inaccessible and that he defines the concept as the process of conceptual analysis of the singular.

Since semantics is the domain governed by opposition, the universal is abstract when it fails to extract itself from this domain. It is concrete when it allows us to think of real things, which are not opposites, by analyzing them in opposing terms. We have access to reality if we distinguish in it by thought opposing aspects, which have a meaning one in opposition to the other, and one of which (abstract universal) falsely claims to be the whole. From a hegelian point of view, we can explain why Aristotle considers that form is closer than matter to the definition of the singular as a whole. Form is this opposite which claims to be the whole although it is an opposite. His corrected version will be the *definition* of the individual. These remarks lead us to the fifth thesis.

*5/ One of the opposites contained in the meaning of a term is always the same meaning, but in its unilateral form, which is open to criticism because it is an opposite instead of containing the opposition. A term therefore has two meanings, (a) as opposed to another term, (b) as not opposed to this term but containing it. The passage from one to the other therefore modifies the meaning of the term.*

There is one instance where Hegel distinguishes between the two meanings of the same term: the logical reconstruction of the meaning of “infinite.” The “true” or “good” infinite is distinct from the “false” or “bad” infinite, as he calls them. They don’t have “the same meaning,” he says.\* Indeed, the false one is the infinite opposed to the finite, whereas the true infinite contains the opposition of the false infinite and the finite. The false infinite is false because it claims to encompass everything, but it does not encompass the finite, since it defines itself in opposition to it, as its negation. Consequently, it is finite.\* *It is finite because it is not*

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1. *Logik*, W6, 296-297; GW12, 49; transl. di Giovanni.

*finite*. The true infinite is true because it has no opposite. It includes within itself the infinite in its finite form, as well as the finite opposed to the one-sided meaning of the infinite. *It is infinite because it is also finite.*

If we replace “infinite” with “universal” and “finite” with “particular,” we have the general case. Opposites are finite because they are particular. The one that claims not to be finite, and therefore particular, is just like the other, because it is an opposite. True infinity is the universal that contains this opposition. It has a different meaning: it is “singular.” The singular contains the opposition of the universal and the particular because a term has the meaning of being “universal” only if it is the whole of itself in abstract form and of the particular. So far, the singular is just the coherent form of the universal, i.e. of a concept in general.

Hegel states that “the identity of identity and non-identity” is the “simplest” definition of the “absolute.”\* This can be understood in a strictly analogous way. That which does not derive its meaning from an opposition to which it belongs is not semantically relative to something else but “absolute.” This absoluteness is due to the fact that this meaning contains its opposition to its opposite. In this way, its existence does not depend on a meaning that is foreign to it. Identity opposed to difference is relative. Identity which contains within itself both identity and difference is absolute. It is a coherent version of identity.

However, if the true infinite, the concrete universal, or second-order identity do not have the same meaning as, respectively, the false infinite, the abstract universal, or the identity opposed to difference, why do we say that they are the whole and *their own moment*? What is the link between the two. It is *the intention*. False infinite, abstract universal, first-order identity are supposed not to have an opposite, but they do.

On the other hand, why do we say that second-order identity, mediated by difference, is a singular? This is again a question of *intention*. The concept must enable us to know reality, which appears in the form of singular beings (cf. the beginning of the *Phenomenology*).\* A concept that gives access to the real may thus be called “singular.”

My sixth thesis concerns this aspect of the concept:

*6/ Instead of being reduced to the conceptual, the real is conceived, if it is reconstructed as containing the opposition of two particular terms, one of which claims to be universal. The real is conceived as the relation to itself of this latter term through (its opposition to) the other, that is to say as the modified meaning of the universal opposed to the particular.*

For sure, this is not the usual sense of “universal”. But the singular also changes meaning. It must be something that *relates to itself*. Thus, not every piece of the world is a singular. That which contains its opposite

relates to itself by means of the opposite: it is the whole and its own moment. Reality can only be understood if it can be reconstructed in this way. A set of things is a singular if it is self-related. An animal judges everything from the point of view of its self-conservation: it relates to itself in everything.\* A human *knows* things, she examines everything from *its own* point of view: she is par excellence the whole and its own moment, since she allows the opposite to possess the same structure. The real is not always living or thinking, but that which lives and that which thinks is more conceivable than the rest, because it is *more singular*.

According to Hegel, the dialectic of infinity leads to the category of “being-for-itself.” In Aristotle, *kath’ hauto*, the origin of the German expression *für sich*,\* designates the names of substance insofar as they do not “need anything other than themselves in order to be able to be said what they are said.”<sup>2</sup> For-itself is that which is self-related. Its immediate form is the atom or the monad,\* which is not defined by opposition. Similarly, the concrete universal is “singular” because it expresses self-relation. A *kath’ hekaston* is each time a whole (*hekastos* means “each”) and is therefore not defined by opposition.

We understand why Hegel asserts that “life, mind, God, as well as the pure concept are [...] beyond the grasp of abstraction, for abstraction keeps singularity away from its products, and singularity is the principle of individuality and personality. And so it comes to nothing but universalities void of life, mind, [...] and content”.<sup>3</sup> If one thinks in terms of external opposition, she does not have access to the content of reality, which is non-opposed, even more so if it is living or thinking.

The infinite relates to itself as true infinite by means of the sphere of the finite, which is characterized by the opposition of the false infinite and the finite. Similarly, the universal relates to itself as singular through the sphere of the particular, which is characterized by the opposition of the universal and the particular. The singular is the “return to itself” of the universal.\* The total term relates to individuality as self-relation.

We can say that the singular is a meaning that is the whole and its own moment. A question then arises. Is only the infinite, the universal, identity the whole and its own moment? Can’t we say the same thing about the finite, the particular, and difference?

The following two theses attempt to answer this.

*7/ Opposites contain each other semantically. An opposite is defined as the negation of its opposite. It therefore contains the meaning of the opposite. This is valid on both sides, symmetrically. But neither of these*

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2. A.-M. Dillens, *A la naissance du discours ontologique*. Etude de la notion de καθ’ αὐτὸ dans l’œuvre d’Aristote, Ousia, Bruxelles 1982, p. 55.

3. *Logik*, W3, 297; GW12, 49 ; transl. di Giovanni modified.

*inclusions of the opposite accounts for the relationship between a determination of thought and the opposition it contains.*

The forms of the concept, universal, particular, singular, are related as subject and predicate in judgment. According to Blanché, Aristotle prefers *inherence* when the subject is a substance and *subsumption* when it is a concept. This is understandable. The attribute is an accident of the singular substance; it is *inherent* to it. A particular concept is a case of a more extended concept; it is *subsumed* by it.\* We find this distinction in Hegel too. In the *Judgments of Existence*, which determine a being, the predicate is “inherent” in the latter. In the *Judgments of Reflection*, which account for the relation of predicates, one predicate is “subsumed” under the other: “the judgments of existence can [...] be defined as *judgments of inherence*, [...] the judgments of reflection are [...] *judgments of subsumption*.”<sup>4</sup> The intension of concepts refers rather to inherence, their extension to subsumption.<sup>5</sup> But Hegel does not endorse either of them.

In inherence, the subject includes the predicate; in subsumption, the predicate includes the subject. The *Judgment of Necessity* and the *Judgment of the Concept*, which must be in accordance with the structure of the concept, will therefore be neither judgments of inherence nor judgments of subsumption. What is then the true relationship between the singular or concrete universal and its moments? We know its structure: the fact of being the whole and its own moment. Hence the eighth thesis:

*8/ The structure “to be the whole and its own moment” has two distinct meanings. (a) Each of the opposing meanings refers to the other as that without which it would not exist as this determined meaning, in order to negate it. It is itself because it is not the other. (b) The meaning that contains an opposition does not need an opposing meaning. In it, its own meaning, in a unilateral form, and the opposing meaning are opposed. It is itself insofar as it is (also) the other.*

Here, the *semantic modification* takes on its full importance.

The meaning of the whole differs from that of the two opposites with which one intends to say the same thing as it, because, henceforth, *it is itself insofar as it is the other*. In doing so, the meaning of the opposite with which one intended to say the whole has been modified. Before this modification, the *other* opposite reigned over the opposition. In the external opposition, the term that expresses what it means for a term to be an opposite is not defective. In the finite/infinite opposition, both were defined as finite, just as difference and identity were different things, and

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4. *Logik*, W6, 328; GW12, 72; transl. di Giovanni.

5. *Propädeutik*, W4, 139, §5.

the universal opposed to the particular was particular. The particular *was itself because it was not the other*, and thus *it reduced the other to itself*.

This sheds light on the disappearance of symmetry in case (b). Case (a) expresses the fact that the universal and the particular are particular. *Before the production of the new meaning of the term which claims to account for the two opposites, it was the other term which accounted for both of them*. But, in doing so, it made universal impossible. Bernard Bourgeois has shown that one can reconstruct in detail Hegel's argument in a text as obscure as his article on *Natural Right* by opposing the identity of identity and difference to the difference of identity and difference.\*

If the infinite is non-finite, we are condemned to move from one to the other indefinitely.\* It is tautological to say that identity and difference are different. If the universal is non-particular, it abstracts from all content and thus cannot account for any content.

Case (a) is therefore contained within case (b), because, between the two opposing terms, *only the one who denies the opposition can include it, even at the cost of modifying its meaning*. Hence our ninth thesis:

*9/ The opposition of the universal and the particular defines the two terms as particular and as the negation of each other. The particular expresses the opposition universal/particular, which defines both terms as particular. To define the universal as something other than a particular, it must therefore be defined not as the negation of the particular, but as the negation of the opposition universal/particular.*

We can reformulate our distinction as follows: What belongs to an opposition is the whole and its own moment insofar as it contains the meaning opposite to its own. This applies to each of the opposites. What contains an opposition is the whole and its own moment insofar as it is the whole *of the preceding opposition*. This applies only to *the opposite that negates the opposition*. This term no longer has the same meaning, because it is a whole and not an opposite. This whole is the negation of the relationship of mutual negation insofar as does not submit to it.

We will say that the second meaning of the structure "being the whole and its own moment" designates the *framework* in which the mutual negation of opposites takes place. This explains the passage from one category to the next. The conceptual framework of an opposition is its determination, but this determination has a meaning if it is opposed to another one, and so forth. For example, the conceptual framework of the opposition of just and unjust is justice, which is the higher form of just, insofar as it is not defined in opposition to unjust, but accounts for both just and unjust. This framework is also one side of a higher opposition, which is part of a higher framework. For Hegel, justice as "abstract right"

is opposed to “morality,” an opposition inserted into the framework of *ethos* (*Sittlichkeit*),\* inside which an action can be “just” or “moral.”\*

This brings us to our tenth thesis:

10/ *A private person is a particular, because they are opposed to other private persons. A citizen is a singular, because they are the same as other citizens.*

My final thesis attempts to apply our framework to another triad, the one internal to *ethicity*: family, civil society, the state. Civil society, a modern sphere dedicated to the “principle of particularity,”\* is opposed to family. In a family, particular interests are subordinated to the common interest. In civil society, the subsumption is reversed: the common is at the service of the particular. The two inverse subsumptions take place in the state, which is itself free of their opposition.

Family embodies a unilateral submission to the general interest. There are no individuals within it, just as there are none in a despotic state or in Plato’s *Republic*,\* which is like an extended family, as Aristotle already notes.\* The individual is the “dissolution” of the family,\* civil society is the “dissolution” of ethical life,\* the natural form of which is family. In civil society, there are private persons, bearers of particular interests. This is the “individual” that the family lacks. He is a *particulier*, as they say in French. Family and civil society are in conflict, and the state is the whole where the conflict of solidarity and egoism takes place. If we now turn to our reconstruction, we can say that the state is the return of the family to itself in a form that is no longer unilateral and has not the same meaning.

It is the whole and its own moment, this moment is the family, which is itself the whole and its own moment, but not in the same way, because the family *is not* its other (civil society), whereas the State *is* its other (it contains families and the civil society). Family is an abstract universal, a particular. The state is a concrete universal, a singular. But in what sense?

The fact that the state, and not civil society, is the locus of the singular, may surprise us, since, as Hegel emphasizes, the individual, in the natural sense of a bearer of needs, appears as such in civil society.\* This makes sense when we take into account the fact that, for him, the same person is both a private person and a citizen.\* As a bearer of particular interests, I am opposed to others. As a singular, I am not part of an opposition. As a *bourgeois*, I am a *particular*. As a *citoyen*, I am a *singular*.

A similar surprise is provoked by the fact that, for Hegel, Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, is the moment of the particular, while the Spirit of the community is the moment of the singular.\* A characteristic common to believers and citizens is likely to shed light on this strange assertion. Members of the Church are ready to suffer martyrdom to bear

witness to the Spirit. Members of the state are ready to sacrifice their particular interest and their life—the entirety of their individuality—out of “patriotism,” a term defined as “the political *disposition*”<sup>6</sup> and maybe borrowed from the French Revolution

This doesn’t mean that the singular should mortify themselves like the “unhappy” early Christians.\* They are not opposed to the particular. But not to be opposed to it is to be *free* from it. They need not repress it. They should just be ready to do without it. To be able to sacrifice oneself as a bearer of particular interests is what Hegel calls the “ethical” aspect of war.\* At the same time, it is the “revolutionary” moment of his thought, the absence of which Marx deplores in Feuerbach (1st thesis).

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In conclusion, let me suggest why self-sacrifice is important for the concept of singularity. The state is no natural unity, no kinship unites its members, but it is neither the result of a social contract. For Hegel, if this were the case, the state would be reduced to a tool in the hands of private interest.\* In a family, the natural union of love reigns. Contracts dominate civil society. It is ruled by convention, not by nature. If the state is not natural like a family nor conventional like a society of private persons, what is it? It is historical. A historical deed demands that I can place my freedom above my life. In doing this, for example during a revolution, I behave as a singular.

Hegel says a constitution is not to be seen as something we can do and undo, *ein Gemachtes*.<sup>7</sup> Is he thus “extending the concept of *physei* to [...] *thesei*,” i.e. is he naturalizing something that is a convention, as Adorno accuses him to do?<sup>8</sup> No. He has in view the concept of *history*. In the *Philosophy of Right*, “history” as a concept is the full meaning of the concept of “state.” It is the production of a free political community. The members of such a community are more than just individuals. They are singulars.

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6. *PhR*, §268.

7. *PhR*, §273A, W7, 439.

8. *Negative Dialektik*, GS6, 350; transl. E.B. Ashton, *Negative Dialectics*, Routledge, London 1973, p. 356.