

ONTOLOGY AND FUNCTIONALISM IN HEGEL'S *PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT*

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Abstract: *The paper starts by describing the distinction between substantialist thought and functionalist thought. According to philosophical functionalism the object of the human knowledge is always a result of an inner construction, and not a passive reflection of the outer world. The Critique of Pure Reason was the first modern materialization of this new philosophical program. One of the most important results of the Kantian criticism was the reconstruction of the concept of ontology. The possibility of ontology, according to its new concept, was given by the idea of identity between the possibility of reality, pertaining to the human thinking and knowledge, and that what we call “reality”. The entire German Idealism took over this new concept of ontology. The specific of the Hegelian undertaking in the Phenomenology of Spirit was that this identity is not posited at the beginning, but is described in its development for consciousness. The study tries to show that this undertaking is a functionalistic one because here reality, as an object of consciousness, receives its specific configuration on the ground of the logical unity of the moments belonging to each form of consciousness and to their totality.*

Keywords: *ontology, function, science, phenomenon.*

According to Aristotle, whose ontological conception has dominated the western thought until the end of the Middle Ages, our concepts reflect real substances, those substances which are effectively *in re*. Between knowledge and reality there was no insurmountable wall. This understanding of knowledge has made that the ancient and medieval science has had mainly a qualitative character, unlike the modern science, which had a quantitative one. Ancient and medieval science tends to grasp the inherent substance of things and not the relations between them. Even more, mathematics, for us the science of these relations, was considered by Aristotle an obstacle on the way of such a grasping. But, on the other hand, as states (Cassirer 1910, 15), in mathematics and geometry we deal with a different type of concept building. Mathematical concepts do not reflect outer realities, numbers and geometric forms cannot be considered such reflections. On the contrary, in mathematics we encounter a real *Setzung*, a creation of concepts. And the same thing happens in the entire modern science of nature. This science, which separates itself only with difficulty from the substantial conception of the philosophical tradition, founds its theoretical undertaking on certain conceptual constructions, by means of which it can investigate reality afterwards. On account of these fundamental concepts elaborated by scientists, one makes a *selection* within the multitude of the aspects of reality. We find such a selection in every science. This selection takes place even on the level of our common perception. Hence, we encounter the reality only while starting from a previous concept about the thing that we shall encounter (Cassirer 1910, 225). This is the modern *functional* model of knowledge, a model in which reality is given to us according to the concepts which are already possessed by us.

This change from the antique and medieval paradigm of substantialism to the modern functionalism takes place also with regard to the understanding of the human

subjectivity. If in the case of the ancient way of understanding this subjectivity, the human self, is interpreted starting from the world – which is understood as a cosmic order, as a world which is in the same time a “creation of God”, where natural things are in harmony with each other and have a finality (even if not always understandable by the human being). The human self is thought here as a “substance” (after the model of the external things), an entity, which, therefore, is conceived as coming in this world and going out of it, without changing its essence. In the case of the second way of thinking, we have an interpretation of this self on the ground of an inner principle, which is the self-certainty (Taylor 1975, 6). Even if now this self remains also in correlation with the interpretation of the outer world, an interpretation whose fundament is given now not by the Aristotelian science, but by the modern one, the Galilean science of nature, due to the new content of this science the self is seen no more as a reflection of the macrocosm, but as a principle of unity, a principle of construction. Modern science no longer works with analogies or final causes, but with principles and deductions, with experiments and laws. The self and the human consciousness are conceived starting from the model of this science, as generative principles. As one knows, the intention of this science, and in general that of the entire modern knowledge, is to dominate nature (knowledge is power, for the modern thinkers), a nature, which is no more perceived as a seat of a “cosmic order”, but as a seat of processes which have no universal logic, i.e. no universal *ontological meaning*.

This new sensibility from which modern science has emerged appeared at the end of the Middle Ages, when, in the “quarrel of the universals”, nominalism defeats realism. According to this nominalism, man and human intellect cannot understand the reasons of divine will. If in the past the human intellect was interpreted as participating to the divine one, now in the centre of theology stays the representation of the divine omnipotence, which replaces the representation of the divine love. The consequence of this shift is that God, in his omnipotence, cannot be thought as being limited, be this limitation even his love. Therefore one cannot give any rational reason for the fact that the natural things are as they are and not different, since God can transform them anytime and can create them differently. Our knowledge cannot be furthermore a knowledge of the substance of reality, of that what lies at its ground, but it is only a knowledge of the way in which this reality appears to us, of its *phenomenal character*.

Another consequence of this perspective is the rejection of the Aristotelian finality: modern scientists do not accept that natural things evolve by being moved by an inner force, which we have to assume, in order that we can understand reality. For them, all natural processes have an accidental (that is, phenomenal) character, which – as far as we can establish through experience a certain way of their manifestation – we can reproduce and manipulate for our purposes. This is one of the theological reasons which have led to the modern scientific revolution.

The thinker who has developed in the modernity a functionalistic conception on the human self is Im. Kant. One knows that the Kantian philosophy distinguishes between the thing in itself and the phenomenon, and that due to this distinction the concept of knowledge with which Kant operates is one which is valid only for phenomena: we know the phenomena, says Kant, but not also the thing in itself. Our knowledge presupposes a matter of knowledge (sensations) and a form of knowledge (concepts). In the most general meaning, the conceptual activity is seen by Kant as an ordering activity, whose object is the “manifold” of intuitions. But this ordering activity presupposes a criterion, an instrument of operating which makes that the undetermined manifold of intuitions can be arranged in representations, namely it can build a *unity*; certainly, our representations do not appear chaotically in our consciousness. The “meaning” of our

representations is the concept, and this is actually a *function*, i. e. the result of the activity of bringing a multitude of representation under one common representation:

„All intuitions, writes Kant, being sensuous, depend on affections, concepts on functions. By this function, I therefore mean the unity of the act of arranging different representations under one common representation.” (Kant 2, 1881, 60)

This concept of knowledge excludes therefore the idea of a simple mirroring of nature, it excludes the understanding of knowledge as an activity of reflecting the outside of human being in his inner consciousness. Human knowledge is not a result of reflecting, but a *construction*. However, it is not an arbitrary construction.

Without any doubt, in the discourse of the *Critique of Pure Reason* mathematical science of nature occupies a privileged place. This thing has its good reasons. Comparing the metaphysics with other disciplines which pretends to offer a knowledge of reality, Kant observes that in metaphysics we have to do with a disagreement between the authors, while in the sciences, on the contrary, we encounter an agreement of researchers who work in that sciences. Being himself a great admirer of metaphysics, Kant's intention is actually to discover what makes possible this agreement in the science, in order to apply subsequently that condition of possibility also in the case of metaphysics. This agreement means that all scientific sentences are “universal” (i. e. they are admitted by all the members of scientific community) and “necessary” (i. e. their admission as being true is the result of a rational constraint, which nobody can elude). The Kantian construction starts therefore indeed from the *fact* of the Newtonian science, associated, of course, with mathematics and logic that have encountered no major transformations along their history. According to Kant, knowledge becomes a true knowledge only when it succeeds “to enter on the secure path of a science” (Kant 1, 1881, 369). But such disciplines were in his time only the Newtonian physics, mathematics, and logic. Their scientific character consisted in their deductive character. This deductive character is explained by Kant as being grounded in a transcendental structure of the human intellect.

The fact that logic has not encountered any major modifications from the antiquity on made Kant believe that the supreme functions of the intellect – functions which were identified by him with the categories – are given by the types of judgements that were discovered already by Aristotle. The reason for this is that in these judgements we have to do with a synthesis of several representations under a common one. Kant affirms that there is an unchanging structure of knowledge, a pure and universal reason, which is present in all human beings. The self-knowledge of this reason is accomplished not directly, but through its activity: reason discovers itself in its true identity on the one hand on account of its errors, and on the other hand on account of the sciences that are developed by it during the history. Only by reflecting on these sciences the reason understands about itself that it is an a priori faculty, which possesses certain “innate” principles. These principles permit the reason to unite (to synthesize) all contents that come from outside, all that is given through sensibility. Only because there exists such “innate” or a priori principles, which determine the synthesis of the manifold of intuition, can we explain, affirms Kant, the possibility of the scientific predictions: these predictions are in fact exactly the recognizing of the synthesis which is permanently operated by the intellect and imagination, only on an unconscious level. All scientific judgements express explicitly the (earlier) unknown (i. e. unconscious) operations of the human spirit. And the discovery of „the secure path of a science”, namely of these operations of the human spirit, is accomplished in the course of the history, i. e. by

means of attempts, successes and failures, as it happens with all human actions. The historicity of man is in this sense an important component of the Kantian philosophy.

If, according to Kant, philosophy, as a science, meant the self-knowledge of reason – philosophy being able to become a science as far as it succeeded to offer an exact and complete description of the human transcendental reason –, later, at Fichte, the science of philosophy receives a new meaning: certainly, we deal here further on with a self-knowledge of “reason”, but now this reason is no more the human and finite one, but the infinite reason, which takes the activity form of the “I”. At Fichte we encounter a “transcendental deduction”, which exposes, as by Kant, the way in which the fundamental structures of empirical consciousness derive, are deduced, or have at their ground the manifestation of the *I*. This *I* of Fichte is a pure activity, which lacks at the beginning of any reflection and thus of any object. Only when the *I* is splitting itself, when the *I* puts from itself a *Non-I* in front of him, in order to retreat in itself and thus to disclose the *Non-I*, only then the object appears as an object of the consciousness. All movements, through which the *I*, as an absolute activity, comes to the empirical, common consciousness, were described by Fichte in the theory that he has called *The science of knowledge, Die Wissenschaftslehre*.

One of the criticism brought to Fichte is that the original identity between the empirical *I* and the absolute *I* (an identity which was also present at Kant, as an identity between empirical consciousness and transcendental apperception), represents a theoretical, pure constructive presupposition, therefore having only a subjective character (in this sense, essentially opposed to science).

The idea that philosophy must have the form of the science is thus a dominant idea of this epoch. But which was to be the object of this science, was, in a certain sense, an open problem. In the Kantian project of the metaphysics as science, the ontology, as far as it was the discipline where were given the conditions of the possibility of nature in general, was itself a science. And that, because, in the form of an “Analytic”, it studied only the human thought (intellect), whose domain was a restricted one and which therefore can be known “once for all”. The post-Kantian idealism takes over the ideal of this new type of ontology – and *this* type of ontology is meant by the thinkers of this epoch when they speak about the philosophy as a *Wissenschaft*. In his *Wissenschaft der Logik* Hegel also has set up an ontology, but also in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which is and will to be an “introduction” to the *Wissenschaft*, i.e to the ontology.

The object of Hegelian *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is, unlike the “subjective” and “assuring” idealist approach of Fichte, to describe the road which leads from empirical consciousness to universal Spirit and thus to “scientifically” (that is undoubtedly) certify the identity between these two. Empirical consciousness is unable to immediately discover this identity, it cannot understand this identity through its simple affirmation, but has to go through all the configurations of consciousness, in order to understand how this identity appears. Only later, in *Wissenschaft der Logik*, this identity was considered as being known and being able to be developed as ontology.

Thus Hegel does not return to the pre-Kantian metaphysical tradition. The idea of the evolution of consciousness raises the problem of the history. The history cannot be anymore a simple succession of events, which take place because of accidental causes, but it becomes a series of necessary events having an inner finality. The causality can be accepted only in the (Newtonian) science of nature, where one can distinguish between a cause and an effect, which are completely independent from each other. Actually, this is the fundamental principle of modern mechanical conception, which founds modern physics: objects are material objects (from this reason, modern science is closely related to the materialistic conception), i. e. they have no spontaneity and are completely inert. They can only *react*. When such a causal conception regarding consciousness is

abandoned, in other words, when consciousness is no more conceived as a *think* and the relation of consciousness to reality is no longer a relation between two things – a relation which presupposes a causal acting and reacting – then the inner evolution of consciousness becomes a finalistic development, where the contents of each stage of consciousness are permanently a purpose of an earlier development, they emerge from this evolution and are no more a local and causal product of some events with which they are no more connected. That is the reason why Hegel insists so much on the concept of “purpose” (Germ. *Zweck*), and is constraint in a certain measure to take over the finalistic conception of Aristotle. However, this finalism is not completely a biological one, because Hegel no longer thinks in a substantialist manner, as Aristotle. Substantialism admits the existence of certain substances of reality, of certain *objective* essences, whereas for Hegel, as for the entire German Idealism, no longer exists such an objectivity. To say solely that Hegel transfers the biological finalism from the sphere of reality into the sphere of consciousness, is, certainly, true, but it remains an “abstract” truth, because it does not explain the possibility of this transfer and does not clarify which are the reasons that permit or rather constrain Hegel to make such a transfer. When we try to answer at these questions we come to a deadlock. And this, because when we try to explain this transfer, as a simple methodological transfer from an objective reality into a subjective one, we fail, and our failure is determined by the fact that we further on conceive consciousness as a substance, i.e. as a thing which exists in a given environment, even if we do not realize that we use substantialist terms in our thought. The concept of substance implies the idea of multiplicity, of plurality of substances, a substance having from this point of view always a *real* exteriority. But at the beginning of the XIX century consciousness can no longer be interpreted in this way: after Kant and Fichte, consciousness cannot be understood as having such an exterior environment, because, if one admits this presupposition, one arrives again at the contradictions which the post-Kantian thinkers have emphasized regarding Kantian conception about the thing in itself. Thus, the substantialism of consciousness must be abandoned. In fact, Kant has already abandoned this substantialism in his *Critique of pure reason*. There he founds the entire thought and pure reason on the concept of *function*. But this concept of function does not permit in the field of its values exterior elements, as the sensations are understood as being results of an influence coming from the thing in itself. The concept of function, as Kant uses it, as an act of bringing a “manifold” of representations under a common one, is actually equivalent to the mathematical concept of function, where a given variable receives, due to a certain function, different values. When at Kant several representations are brought under a common one, they all receive, actually, the content of that common representation, they becomes “moments” of the realization of that function. Thus, all representations belonging to the consciousness must be thought of in fact as being *exclusively* values posed by the intellect, that is by the transcendental apperception. Certainly, Kant goes not so far in this direction, but Fichte does. Here we encounter a system which is grounded in a single principle, i. e. in a single function, the *I*. Here there is no rest that would not belong to the functional field of the spirit.

The function creates its own field of meanings. These meanings (concepts) cannot be thought of as a result of a passive mirroring of an outer reality, but are the results of an inner and immanent process of generation. And they cannot be thought of as being such a reflecting because of the inner logical unity of the field. In other words, if they would be only reflections of an outer reality, we could not have the inner unity and necessity of our knowledge, that is we could not speak of an *a priori* content of our sciences, but only of an *a posteriori* one.

As far as the field of the values of the function “grows” from itself (from within), the function may be actually compared with a biological process – that is the reason why

later H. Rombach have described the structures which are grounded on functions as “life” (Rombach, 1971, 85). But the growing in the case of knowledge and of the contents of consciousness is in no way a biological one, because this growing is a growing in “meanings”, produces senses and concepts. That is the type of growing that we see at work in the Hegelian phenomenology. All forms, all “configurations” (*Gestalten*) of consciousness are actually generative centres. Around them the entire activity of consciousness on that stage develops. Besides, these forms are, as totalities, each of them, a result of such a generation, as far as they are values which realizes the universal function, i. e. the universal Spirit.

Thus we see that an absolute idealism can be built only as a functionalism. And that, because – as the Hegelian model shows impressively – the idealism means not only that reality is “in itself” something “ideal”, “spiritual”, or a “representation” (even if all these predicates are true). The very essence of the Hegelian absolute idealism means that the contents of the world do not chaotically lie next to each other, but they are bound together in an inner *necessary* order, an order designated by Hegel as a “rational” one. And the necessity of these contents emerges, in a functional way, from the fact that they receive a meaning. Because, in the case of functionalism, is not important how things are generated, but how these (real or ideal) things emerge as *meaningful* things. Thus, the German Idealism (but we may say that our sentence counts also for the entire epoch, if we think about Humboldt’s idea that every language has a particular *Weltanschauung*, or at Herder’s interpretation of language as a totality, whose components express all this totality) represents a movement of thought which stresses that reality must not be understood only in its “substance” (in the sense that this reality is something ideal, perhaps a representation, or, on the contrary, a matter or sensation), but it must be thought of especially in its inner articulation, which is first of all a product of the reason. This articulation of the field of meanings is a process which emerges from itself and to which we cannot attribute any external causes. Therefore we see Hegel permanently being interested in the meanings, in the logical content, in the “Concept”, and not in the inner dynamic of the reality, in the forces which move the reality and in its Urge. This interest shows up in the case of Schopenhauer, who therefore arrives not by accident to an irrationalism. Later on, Max Scheler, because he admits an ontological duality formed by Spirit and Urge (in fact separating that what Hegel has called “universal Spirit” in two aspects: the sphere of meanings, the Spirit, and the domain of that what brings about the transformation of reality, the Urge). In the case of Scheler, this Urge has an ontological reality, which is totally *independent from the human consciousness* (due to this conception Scheler leaves the phenomenological approach and exposes himself, with good reason, to the criticism of M. Heidegger). This Urge does not produce meanings, it is a blind force, as Schopenhauer’s Will (which also does not create meanings, being on this ground opposed to Hegelian Reason). Hegel does not explain a phenomenon, a fact, in the sense that it is caused by another phenomenon, but he explains it in the sense that it is a *logical* consequence of the former phenomenon, their connection being a logical and not a causal one.

“Consciousness, writes Hegel, is spirit as a concrete knowing, a knowing too, in which externality is involved; but the development of this object, like the development of all natural and spiritual life, rests solely on the nature of the pure essentialities which constitute the content of logic.” (Hegel 1969, § 10)

Therefore the entire history and reality are for Hegel logical and rational, which means that the human being can understand them. And only this understanding leads to an immanent purpose. By describing reality as being rational, Hegel exposes himself

thus to all sorts of criticisms. But these criticisms do not understand the inner ground of the Hegelian assertion, because they understand the Reason in the meaning of a moral desideratum, e. g. of the Good. But the main content of the Hegelian Reason is not a moral one, but a logical and ontological one.

Even if the Hegelian discourse is full of biological terms, as “*instinct of Reason*”, “*Purpose*” (*Zweck*), “*Form*” (*Gestalt*) or even “*Cunning of Reason*”, terms that try to explain the *factual* appearance of the New, the action of the universal Spirit is not a material one, an action which brings about from outside the historical events, but remains a logical action, that is to say it brings them about from inside. Therefore the Hegelian *meta-physics* (i. e. the place where one would expect to see the universal Spirit “in action”, independently from the “physical” things, on whom it acts) is called, so paradoxically, *The science of logic*.

The logical dimension of the Hegelian project can be seen in the fact that the process, as Hegel understands it, has a purpose which exists beforehand and it remains present during the entire development. Its presence has not only an orientative character (which would orient from within the movement of this process), but is precisely the function from which the logical content of each stage emerges and which becomes manifest at the end, when the entire logical field of these meanings becomes actual and can thus be known. However, if we do not interpret the Hegelian development in the logical context, but in the sense of something real, objective, the Hegelian project would be only a return to the pre-Kantian stage of philosophy, where one could talk, without any inner critical limitation, about what lies beyond the human reason, i. e. about that what is transcendent in rapport to the human reason.

From this point of view one can understand why the series of the forms of the consciousness is not a *deductive series* in the classical meaning, but it is, paradoxically in rapport with such an understanding, an examining of that what is happened and was thought of in the course of the human history, of the development of the “universal individual” (Hegel 1977, 16) as Hegel says in the *Preface* to his *Phenomenology*. During this examination, the different stages are not only registered, but are actually *endowed with meaning*, are described as sequences of a subjacent sense. What was a real history becomes a history of consciousness, i. e. an *unfolding of meanings* which the “bearers” of these meanings (to use a term from the philosophy of Max Scheler) only “illustrate”. They become “moments”, as Hegel says:

“In this way, writes Hegel, the arrangement of the ‘shapes’ which have hitherto appeared differs from the way they appeared in their own order. On this point we shall briefly observe at the beginning what is necessary. In the series we considered, each moment, exploring its own depths, formed itself into a totality within its own peculiar principle; and cognition was the depth, or the Spirit, wherein the moments which have no other subsistence of their own possessed their substance. But this substance is now manifest; it is the depth of Spirit that is certain of itself, which does not allow the principle of each individual moment to become isolated and to make itself a totality within itself; on the contrary, gathering and holding together all these moments within itself, it advances within this total wealth of its actual Spirit, and all its particular moments take and receive in common into themselves the like determinateness of the whole.” (Hegel 1977, 414).

Those concrete bearers, which illustrate the “moments”, do not have for Hegel any reality, the concrete things lacking of reality, as Hegel point out in the chapter about the *Sense-Certainty* of his *Phenomenology*: the reality belong only to *the universal* (*das Allgemeine*), which expresses itself through them:

“In this respect, writes Hegel, we can tell those who assert the truth and certainty of the reality of sense-objects that they should go back to the most elementary school of wisdom, viz. the ancient Eleusinian Mysteries of Ceres and Bacchus, and that they have still to learn the secret meaning of the eating of bread and the drinking of wine. For he who is initiated into these Mysteries not only comes to doubt the being of sensuous things, but to despair of it; in part he brings about the nothingness of such things himself in his dealings with them, and in part he see them reduce themselves to nothingness. Even the animals are not shut out from this wisdom but, on the contrary, show themselves to be most profoundly initiated into it; for they do not just stand idly in front of sensuous things as if these possessed intrinsic being, but, despairing of their reality, and completely assured of their nothingness, they fall to without ceremony and eat them up. And all Nature, like the animals, celebrates these open Mysteries which teach the truth about sensuous things.” (Hegel 1977, 65)

This series has also a circular character:

“Through this movement the pure thoughts become *Notions*, and are only now what they are in truth, self-movements, circles, spiritual essences, which is what their substance is.” (Hegel 1977, 20)

This circularity means precisely the generation from a common centre of all meanings belonging to the semantic field. However, the functional circularity is manifest also in the Hegelian procedure of formulating a thesis whose truth cannot be seen from the beginning, but only after the unfolding of the entire project. The thesis is here the very principle of selection, which confers a meaning to a totality, it synthesizes it on the ground of a function (in the Kantian sense of the term).

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