

Scepsis and Scepticism

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Hegel's philosophy aims at responding to the questions raised by modern scepticism concerning the accessibility of the external world, of other minds, and of one's own mind. A key-role in Hegel's argumentative strategy against modern scepticism is played here by Hegel's theory of recognition. According to Hegel, the capacity of self-reference is not an ordinary, spontaneous property of the subject; instead, to be able to make reference to myself, to be able to recognize myself, I have to be able to recognize myself in the other and to be recognized by the other; that is, I have to learn, in a mutual process, to mirror myself in the other with whom I interact — to know myself and intuit myself in him. As such, recognition mediates the constitution of individual self-consciousness and intersubjectivity: self-knowledge is not logically independent of the awareness of other minds. At the same time, recognition institutes the possibility of objective reference to the world: in fact, according to the argumentation we find in the first three sections of the Phenomenology of Spirit, I can refer myself to the objects I interact with — be conscious of them — only insofar as I am capable of self-reference — only as a self-conscious subject; but I can be self-conscious only through the recognitive mediation of other self-consciousnesses.

In this way, in Hegel the theory of recognition furnishes a unitary response to the threefold sceptical issue of the accessibility of the external world, of other minds, and of one's own mind: the evolution of the capacity of recognition institutes unitarily the possibility of self-reference, reference to others and objective reference. The reference to a common world of public objects is thus possible only thanks to the mediation of recognitive capacities that are naturally possessed and socially articulated, which make possible the triangulation between self, world and others. This is possible to the extent that the theory of recognition is the guiding thread of a critique of the modern theory of knowledge and, at the same time, the point of

departure for an alternative approach. From this point, knowledge does not proceed from the subjective to the objective, as in the Cartesian formulation that gave rise to modern scepticism: knowledge of self, of other minds and of the external world are holistically connected and intersubjectively structured by means of the cognitive capacities of recognition.

Hegel's strategy against modern skepticism consists, on the one hand, at least with respect to the Cartesian tradition, in a sort of Aristotelian naturalization of the questions of epistemology and philosophy of the mind, to the extent that the question regarding subjectivity and the problem of the external world is posed — with a recovery of the value of Aristotle's position in the Physics — on the basis of the evolutionary-natural level of life and of the primary relations that come about first of all in an affective-corporeal dimension and that develops itself as a kind of second nature through the historical institutions of Bildung. On the other hand, this pragmatic-vitalistic approach is connoted in a strictly relational-interactive sense, in the sense that the world of objects and of other subjects is given primarily as the term of an interaction/mediation, rather than as an immediate given of consciousness. Self-consciousness, as is already clear in the fragment Die Liebe (1797), is not an originary structure but is grounded in life — as is also the case in the Phenomenology of Spirit: life is the first object of self-consciousness, insofar as self-consciousness is nothing other than life that becomes conscious of itself, whose first level of self-relation is corporeal and institutes itself through the affective interaction proper to the primary relations of care.

To that effect, it is in the Die Liebe fragment (Hegel, 1907, pp. 378-382) that the sceptical questions of the external world and of other minds appears for the first time in Hegel's work: Hegel — against the backdrop of a confrontation with Jacobi — attacks the absolutization of that subjectivity which, in modernity, was theoretically formulated by Descartes: such subjectivity withdraws from the ensemble of 'life' relations (absolutizes an opposite), constituting itself as a totality with respect to which all otherness is 'external world' [Außenwelt], res extensa devoid of life, whose existence for the subject can be guaranteed only by the intervention of God. Thus Hegel sketches a genealogy of the question of modern scepticism, which he imputes to a precise epistemological approach. But his response to the sceptics' puzzle does not follow the Jacobian road of a recourse to the intuitive immediacy of the world and other

subjects; rather, it takes the form of an intersubjective theory of the constitution of self-consciousness, in which we find the first nucleus of his theory of recognition, not yet indicated with the Fichtian term of Anerkennung. Hegel shows that, in the cycle of development of 'life' [Leben], self-consciousness — which comes to light in the affective experiences of care that have sustained the development of human identity ever since infancy — becomes such only as life's 'duplication of itself' [Verdoppelung seiner selbst]. The self-reference of self-consciousness is not the originary viewpoint with respect to which the world and the subjects that inhabit it have to be recovered as external beings: if that were so, the world and the subjects that inhabit it would be lost for ever. On the contrary, self-consciousness can begin to refer itself to itself and to the world only through the interaction, situated in a 'life' dimension, with another self-consciousness that specularly performs the same movement (theory of the recognition of 'opposites'). In the other, as its 'opposite,' the individual self-consciousness, which as such is nothing other than life that refers itself to itself, sees its own image as reflected in a mirror, and it is precisely by recovering this image of itself which it finds in the other that the individual self-consciousness can take itself for an object. The change of paradigm announced in the Frankfurt writings is justified in the first writings from Jena — 1801-1802 — through an immanent critique of the epistemology of Cartesian origin that gave rise to modern epistemological scepticism. As emerges from the attack on Reinhold in the Differenzschrift of 1801, Hegel takes a stand against the 'foundationalist' approach that claims to rest all empirical knowledge on a Grund, an ultimate self-justifying foundation. In his Skeptizismus-Aufsatz of 1802 Hegel identifies the qualifying traits of that approach, which in the final analysis are the basis also of that modern scepticism whose ultimate and exhausted form is represented by the Aenesidemus (1792) of Gottlob Ernst Schulze. In the Skeptizismus-Aufsatzⁱ — as will emerge subsequently, also in the 'Sense-certainty' chapter of the Phenomenology of Spirit — Hegel sees this foundationalist approach as a result of the 'subjective dogmatism of the facts of consciousness,' that is, of the assumption of an absolute dualism between subject and object combined with the myth that there is a form of immediate and unquestionable givenness which would concern private states of the subject, namely, the so-called 'facts of consciousness.'ⁱⁱ The claim to found empirical cognition on a mythicized givenness to which the subject would have privileged

access provokes the backlash of modern scepticism, since at this point access to the external object that gives rise to a subject's internal givens — whether it be the world or other subjects — can be gained only directly and hypothetically.

The attack on foundationalism (understood as a presupposition of modern scepticism) also regards its specific conception of epistemic justification. Foundationalism is bound up with a linear model of justification which holds that empirical cognition has the structure of a pyramid where the justification is linearly and unidirectionally transmitted, starting from a first principle which, self-justifying, itself has no need of justification and which therefore functions as the foundation of all knowledge — that which Hegel in the Differenzschrift calls 'foundational demonstrative procedure' [Forderung eines Grundes] (Diff, GW4, p. 65). Thus the 'foundational demonstrative procedure' is according to Hegel the argumentative form on which modern scepticism is based. To combat any attempt at grounding on the basis of a principle, Hegel explicitly makes use of the second series of tropes of ancient scepticism, the so-called Agrippan tropes, which claim to show that no foundational attempt can escape the inevitable trilemma of infinite regress in its justification, of the arbitrary assumption of a first principle that arrests the chain of regress, or of circularity. In this way Hegel dissolves the assumptions of the argumentative form of modern scepticism through the recourse to ancient scepticism and its argumentative forms (its tropes): modern scepticism is in reality a form of foundationalist dogmatism; the real sceptical question that philosophy has to deal with is the one posed by the tropes of Agrippaⁱⁱⁱ, namely, the problem of epistemic justification. In this regard Hegel — in the Differenzschrift, and again, later, in the Phenomenology of Spirit— gives a positive sense to the trope of the circle^{iv} and proposes an holistic solution to the problem of justification.^v In philosophy it is not the beginning that transmits justification to what follows; no, there can be justification only within the totality of the system of propositions that mutually sustain one another dialectically-antinomically, triggering a circularity in which it is the result that justifies the beginning.

This solution, which in the final analysis exploits, positively, the sceptical trope of the circle, is understood by Hegel as a full and proper rational integration of true — i.e. ancient — scepticism: a full and proper integration of the argumentative forms of ancient scepticism in the argumentative form of

philosophy. Holism confutes modern but not ancient scepticism, insofar as the process of development of the holistic system is nothing other than ‘scepticism that comes to maturation,’ according to the formula that will be employed in the Phenomenology of Spirit; i.e., a form of metaepistemological scepticism that shows how every epistemic justification is fallible and destined to dissolve. Ancient scepticism, whose principle of equipollence/antinomy — for which every proposition has an equipollent one that opposes it — had already been taken up by Hegel in his Frankfurt period as the principle of philosophy, is declared to be united with true philosophy, as its negative moment. For Hegel, however, the antinomy is essentially the recognition [Anerkennung] of the relatedness of opposites (Diff, GW4, p. 51);^{vi} thus in philosophy, as the self-knowledge of reason, reason knows itself as having an essentially recognitive structure. At this level ancient scepticism plays a constructive role in the definition of the Hegelian theory of rationality: thus Hegel systematically develops his youthful intuition, going back to his years in Tübingen, that reason, like love, essentially consists in recognizing oneself in every rational being (GW1, p. 101).

The critique of foundationalism is linked to a critique of the corresponding representationalistic theory of perception, with respect to which Hegel delineates an alternative model. The attack upon the dogmatism of the ‘facts of consciousness’ that Hegel had brought into focus in his Skeptizismus-Aufsatz is in the Jena lessons of 1803-04 and 1805-06 aimed at the specular phenomena of epistemological idealism and empiricism. In the Realphilosophie of 1803-04 and 1805-06 Hegel develops an alternative to that representationalistic conception of perception that is proper to modern foundationalism. This theory views perception as merely receptive, consisting in the passive reception of inner perceptive facts that present themselves as immediate and unquestionable, while the veridicality of their objective reference can only be established indirectly — which accounts for the scepticism of the external world and of other minds. Hegel, on the contrary, formulates a pragmatic and interactional conception of perception — further developed in the ‘Perception’ and ‘Understanding’ chapters of the Phenomenology of Spirit— showing, for example in relation to seeing, that perception is always linked to action and motory activity, i.e., that it has an active character, which implies an active discriminating, distinguishing, recognizing (see the ‘Intelligence’ chapter of the Realphilosophie of

1805-06). In this way the infallibility of the immediate facts of consciousness is lost, but at the same time the relation to the world is assured, since that distinction between direct access (to internal facts) and indirect access (to the external world), which caused the sceptics' problem, is dissolved.

The next argumentative step in the attack upon modern scepticism goes beyond the critique of the immediatistic theory of perception and knowledge and calls into question also the theory of subjectivity that is linked to it. Here we find that theoretical connection which links the question of scepticism to that of self-consciousness and intersubjectivity in Hegel's texts. Moreover, also in the Phenomenology of Spirit the refutation of foundationalism and of the passivistic theory of perception in the 'Consciousness' section will be followed by the critique of the self-centric theory of self-consciousness. The Jena Realphilosophie, in fact, contains — starting with 'Fragment 18' of 1803-04 (*JS I*, GW6, pp. 273-279) — a radical critique of the self-reflective conception of the identity of self-consciousness, understood as a result of the objectivizing self-reference of an isolated 'I': in this way Hegel attacks Kantian apperception in the element that links it to the Cartesian cogito and, at the same time, confronts the Fichtian problem of a noncircular explanation of self-consciousness.

The immediatistic theory of perception is linked in modernity to a proprioceptive conception of the subject as having an epistemologically privileged relation with its own inner contents. This approach persists even when, most notably in post-Kantian philosophy, the notion of subject is desubstantialized and rethought in terms of 'self-consciousness' [Selbstbewußtsein], i.e., in terms of a subject that is such not insofar as it consists in some type of substance, but rather insofar as it refers to itself with an act of self-reflection. Also in the case of the post-Kantian theory of reflective self-consciousness it is assumed that there is a form of privileged relation of the subject with an immediate content of its internal perception, where this cognitive content is now the subject itself qua immediate object of its own knowledge: this relation to self as object is private and originary with respect to any type of relation to other objects (external world, other self-consciousnesses). Hence the Fichtian puzzle of circularity to which Dieter Henrich has paid such close attention (see Henrich, 1967 and 1970): if self-consciousness consists in the act

with which it turns back to itself as to the object of its cognition, how can such self-consciousness recognize itself in the object it has before it without presupposing a knowledge of itself?

The Hegelian critique of the modern epistemology of the subject had thus to be extended — due to an intimate argumentative connection — also to this self-centric and ultimately solipsistic conception of self-consciousness. The critique of the immediatistic theory of perception had to find its necessary complement in a critique of the theory of the subject and of monological self-consciousness, which shows how also the reflective self-relation of the conscious subject is nothing immediate, but rather is itself something mediated. The theory of intersubjective recognition between self-consciousnesses will be the instrument through which Hegel intends to critique and to overcome such formulations. For Hegel, in fact, epistemic self-consciousness not only cannot preexist itself without falling into a vicious circle (Fichte's solution, self-position), but it cannot preexist its relation with other self-consciousnesses either: while an isolated self-consciousness has no criterion by which it can identify with itself as with the object it has before it, a relational self-consciousness constitutes itself precisely through the mediation of a public criterion that makes its self-identification, hence its self-knowledge, possible. This is the solution of the paradox, a solution that functions with the same logic we find in Wittgenstein's arguments on private language (Wittgenstein, 1953, §§ 188, 213, 239, 258, 265, 289)^{vii}: for Hegel an isolated self-consciousness would have no criterion by which it could identify with itself as with the object it has before it; a self-consciousness has a criterion of self-recognition only if it is relational and constitutes itself through the mediation of a public criterion. Thus the epistemic accessibility of other minds is not to be considered derived with respect to the accessibility of the first person, as the formulation of the sceptics' problem presupposed. And thus the theory of recognition is in agreement with the critique of foundationalism, to the extent that it itself consists in a critique of the claim to posit subjectivity — in the diverse forms of the cogito, of Kantian apperception, of Reinhold's consciousness, or Fichte's self-positing 'I' — as the ultimate ground of knowing: a claim that is at the origin of that peculiar form of scepticism presented by epistemological idealism and modern solipsism. Thus it was the confrontation with scepticism that drove

Hegel to reconstruct reason on all levels — i.e., in its logical, epistemological and practico-moral structures — in terms of pragmatic relatedness grounded in recognition.

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ⁱ ‘This scepticism [...] is directed against the common sense and common consciousness that hold fast the given, the fact, the finite (whether this finite be called phenomenon or concept)’ (Scept, GW4, p. 215, my translation).

ⁱⁱ Such an attack on the dogmatism of the facts of consciousness anticipates that which Wilfrid Sellars named in his seminal Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind (1956) the 'myth of the given' (see Sellars, 1997).

ⁱⁱⁱ For an interpretation of the whole intellectual enterprise of German Idealism as an attempt to answer to Agrippa's trilemma by means of a form of monistic holism see Franks, 2007.

^{iv} On the subject of circularity in Hegel's epistemology see in particular Rockmore, 1986.

^v ‘As objective totality knowing is grounded all the more, the more that it is more formed, and its parts are only grounded simultaneously with this whole of cognitions’ (Diff, GW4, p. 82, my translation).

^{vi} The debate on the epistemological relevance of Hegel's philosophy was initiated by Hans Friedrich Fulda (see Fulda, 1965). On this debate, and his relation to the problem of epistemological scepticism, see at least Forster, 1989; Westphal, 1989; Varnier, 1990; Fulda et. al., 1996; Heidemann, 2007. On scepticism in the young Hegel see in particular Vieweg, 1999; Westphal 1998; Testa, 2002 and 2010.

^{vii} For a wittgensteinian interpretation of the self-consciousness chapter of the Phenomenology of Spirit see Pinkard, 1994, pp. 53-62.