Existential(s)-- Hegel’s Critique of the In-Itself: Notes Towards an Immanent and Relational Ontology

ABSTRACT

Through a close reading of Hegel’s analysis of the category of existence and his critique of Kant’s thing-in-itself, this paper extracts a concept of being and entities as dynamic and ongoing relations with other entities that rejects any atomistic account of beings independent of one another. In its portrayal of entity as a dynamic interrelationship with the world, Hegel’s account of the existent is seen to resonate deeply with Deleuze’s account of individuation and constructive interactionism. Epistemically this thesis carries the consequence that knowledges too result from dynamic interactions of knowers with the world, such that subjects cannot be said to “represent” a world as it is in itself, but rather where knowledge itself is situated and the result of practical engagement. Ontologically this thesis shows that beings are processes and events, always existing within a field of relations, rather than static substances. In terms of contemporary debates, such a thesis undermines any position that treats one term as dominating the others as the ground of everything else, whether we speak of DNA determining the phenotype, language defining being, or essences modeling copies.

In the paper that follows my aim is to examine a specific moment in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Science of Logic* as providing fruitful ground for developing a dynamic and relational ontology where beings or entities are to be conceived as interactive processes with their surrounding world rather than isolated objects “in themselves”. Such an ontology, I believe, is essential to ecological thought, how we pose epistemological questions, and has profound consequences for ethical and political thought. At the outset it is important to note that it is not my ambition here to bear fidelity to Hegel in the form of a textual commentary that aims to articulate what Hegel “really meant”. Rather, in the fashion of pastiche, I am picking up a particular moment in Hegel’s thought to develop it conceptually in ways that may or may not accord well with Hegel’s own conception of his philosophy.

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Science of Logic* Hegel develops a substantial critique of Kant’s “thing-in-itself”. It will be recalled that for Kant we can only ever know
phenomena or appearances, and that the thing-in-itself, the thing as it exists independent of our cognition, is forever beyond the scope of knowledge. In critiquing Kant’s conception of the thing-in-itself, Hegel’s strategy is to show how this notion is itself a product of the understanding or our own cognition and that thus there is nothing but appearances. In the course of developing this critique, Hegel proposes a conception of beings, entities, or objects that ironically resonates profoundly with Deleuze’s account of individuation as developed in *Difference and Repetition*¹ and with a position in the biological and social sciences known as constructive interactionism.²

In the case of his theory of individuation, Deleuze shows how individual entities are the result of a process of individuation in relation to a pre-individual milieu or environment, such that there are no primitive and isolated atomistic individuals. In a word, individual beings are results or products of ongoing processes. In the case of constructive interactionism, we are to conceive entities as ongoing communications with an environment, such that we cannot speak, for example, of unilateral determination of something like DNA functioning as a model of what an entity will be.³ Hegel’s account of the existent or entity provides a very general skeleton of such an interactive, processual ontology.

More intriguingly yet, Hegel’s account of essence rejects all transcendence in favor of appearances. For Hegel there is not one thing, essence, and another thing, appearance such that essences are transcendent to beings like Plato’s forms, or are unchanging and invariant like Aristotle’s essences. Rather, it is appearance all the way down and there is no further fact “beyond” the appearances that is hidden and that must be discovered or uncovered. Hegel will

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³ Alberto Toscano brilliantly explores the relationship between Deleuze and Simondon’s account of individuation and Oyama’s constructive interactionism in the *Theatre of Production: Philosophy and Individuation Between Kant and Deleuze*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
say, “Essence must appear.” The real surprise is that the mediation of essence is a reference to another appearance, not a distinct ontological entity to be contrasted with existence. Indeed, in the *Science of Logic*, Hegel argues that essence is relation. Thus, as Hyppolite recounts, “The great joke, Hegel wrote in a personal note, is that things are what they are. There is no reason to go beyond them.”

This is a striking claim that immediately brings Lacan’s discussion of *objet a* in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* to mind. There Lacan recounts the story of two artists named Zeuxis and Pharrhosios, locked in competition with each other to see who is the better artist. Lacan remarks that,

In the classical tale of Zeuxis and Parrhosios, Zeuxis has the advantage of having made grapes that attracted the birds. The stress is placed not in the fact that the grapes were in any way perfect grapes, but on the fact that even the eye of the birds was taken in by them. This is proved by the fact that his friend Parrhosios triumphs over him for having painted on the wall a veil, a veil so lifelike that Zeuxis, turning towards him said, *Well, and now show us what you have painted behind it.* By this he showed that what was at issue was certainly deceiving the eye (*tromper l’œil*). A triumph of the gaze over the eye.

The lesson to be drawn from this little parable is that the *cause* of desire-- not the object desired -- is precisely this enigma of what is behind the veil or curtain. As Lacan will recount elsewhere in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, we can be naked precisely because we wear clothing. “Doesn’t she know she’s naked under those clothes!” What we have here is the logic of the secret or crypt. Analysis comes to an end when *objet a* falls away and the analysand no longer attributes a secret knowledge to the analyst. Similarly, it can be said that metaphysics too needs to undergo

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analysis insofar as all too often it posits a true reality behind appearances in precisely the same way that Zeuxis believes there is something behind the veil painted on the wall.

Metaphysics thus has its veils. These veils can be the inaccessible transcendent beyond of God or the Infinite revealed in experiences of the sublime, perhaps, that can never be reached, or essences beyond appearances, or Kant’s thing-in-itself that can never be known, the Levinasian Other that exceeds all intentions, and so on. In each case, appearances are thought as analogous to clothing that hangs on the true reality. Philosophy, since its inception in Thales, has been a-theistic in the precise sense that it has been premised on a militant rejection of these fetishes, instead approaching the world immanently and explaining the world in terms of itself. Even the God of Descartes or Spinoza is a shining moment in the history of a-theism, a rendering immanent of what superstition posits as being a transcendent beyond that can never be reached. Kant represents a regression with regard to his antinomies and his limitation of knowledge to make room for faith. Of course, this project of a purely immanent philosophy has only ever imperfectly been realized and the mystics and peddlers of the fetish always return with new beyonds, but philosophy marches on and explodes the fetish.

It is in relation to this project that Hegel’s critique of the Kantian thing-in-itself is of particular interest. David Gray Carlson does a nice job recounting this critique in A Commentary to Hegel’s Science of Logic. There Carlson writes that,

According to Hegel, both Being-in-itself and Being-for-other are intrinsically bound up with one another. This portends that the inner is outer. The in-itself as isolated, however, is Kant’s noumenal thing-in-itself, of which Hegel is a sharp critic. “[T]he proposition that we do not know what things are in themselves,” Hegel complains, “ranked as a profound piece of wisdom” (SL, 121). Things are “in themselves” if all Being-for-other is purged. We perceive in a given thing only its being-for-other, “the indeterminate, affirmative community of something with its other” (SL, 126). Therefore, Kant insisted, we can have no idea what the thing-in-itself is. Hegel strongly disagrees.
Things are called “in themselves” in so far as abstraction is made from all being-for-other, which means simply, in so far as they are thought devoid of all determination, as nothings, in this sense, it is of course impossible to know what the thing in itself is. For the question: what? Demands that determinations be assigned; but since the things of which they are to be assigned are at the same time supposed to be things in themselves, which means, in effect, to be without any determination, the question is made thoughtlessly impossible to answer, or else only an absurd answer is given. (SL, 121)

The thing-in-itself is absolute, and furthermore, it is one. That is, once appearance is abolished, there is but one thing-in-itself in its indeterminancy-- not many: “What is in these things in themselves, therefore we know quite well; they are as such nothing but truthless, empty abstractions” (SL, 121). In contrast, Hegel’s analysis has shown the thing-in-itself is concrete. It is the same as being-for-other.7

I hope I will be forgiven this lengthy quotation for it beautifully articulates Hegel’s critique of the Kantian thing-in-itself. The point here is that the very idea of the thing-in-itself contains an internal contradiction insofar as it calls us to think a thing without determination, yet the very nature of a thing is to contain determinations. In the Phenomenology, Hegel shows that the distinction between the unknowable thing-in-itself as conceived by Kant and appearance is itself a distinction of the understanding, and therefore a product of thought.8 It is nothing but the ego’s reflection of itself into an other. That is, the thing-in-itself is identical to the ego, as a substrate divested of all concrete properties or qualities, a pure void as Hegel puts it, and therefore a phantasm of thought much like Zeuxis asking what is behind the veil.

It seems to me that Hegel’s argument here applies to a wide variety of skepticisms common to thought today. Thus, for example, there are versions of linguistic philosophy that argue that we are unable to know reality as it is in itself beyond language. In making this claim, these linguistic philosophies unwittingly reveal their Kantian commitments. Social constructivist thinkers such as Niklas Luhmann claim that we can only ever know the world as a function of

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Our distinctions (which are not in the things themselves), and never the world as it is in itself. Other, perhaps vulgar forms of cognitive psychology and neuropsychology, will claim that we can only ever know the world as we perceive it, not as it is.

Hegel’s entire point is that there is no world as it is, but rather there are only these inter-relationships between being-in-itself and being-for-other. That is, being-in-itself only discovers what it is in relation to being-for-other, for it is being-for-other that evokes the properties of being-in-itself. For instance, iron only reveals its oxidation properties in relation to oxygen. Why should it be any different with mind and world?

The epistemological question is thus poorly posed, abstractly posed, stupidly posed, so long as we think of it as a question of how an independent mind (a mind-in-itself) can know an independent object as it-itself is (a being-in-itself). It is in these interrelations that both the properties of the subject and the properties of the object come-to-be. Hegel’s conception of the in-itself will thus be one of becoming or coming-to-be, not of identity. As Hegel puts it in an important Zusatzen from *The Encyclopedia Logic*,

If we are to understand by “cognition” the apprehending of an object in its concrete determinancy, then the assertion that the “thing-in-itself” is beyond cognition must be admitted to correct, since the thing-in-itself is nothing but the completely abstract and indeterminate thing in general. But, with the same right that we speak of the “thing-in-itself,” we could also speak of “quality-in-itself,” “quantity-in-itself,” and similarly of all the other categories, and this would be understood to mean that these categories in their abstract immediacy, i.e., *apart from their developmental and inner determinancy* (my italics). So we must consider the fixating of the thing as the only “in-itself” to be a whim of the understanding. But we also have the habit of applying the term “in-itself” to the content both of the natural and of the spiritual world. Hence we speak, for example, of electricity “in-itself” or a plant “in-itself,” and similarly of man or the State “in-itself,” and by the “in-itself” of these objects we understand what they rightly and properly are.

The situation here is no different than it is in respect to the thing-in-itself generally; that situation is, more precisely, that if we halt at objects as they are merely in-themselves, then we do not apprehend them in their truth, but in the one-sided form of mere abstraction. Thus, for instance, “man-in-himself” is the child, whose task is not to remain in this abstract and undeveloped [state of being] “in itself,” but to become *for-himself*. 
namely a free and rational essence. Similarly, the state-in-itself is still undeveloped, patriarchal State, in which the various political functions implied by the concept of the State have not yet become “constitutionalised” in a way that is adequate to its concept. In the same sense the germ, too, can be regarded as the plant-in-itself. We can see from these examples that all who suppose that what things are in-themselves, or the thing-in-itself in general, is something that is inaccessible to our cognition are very much mistaken. Everything is initially “in-itself,” but this is not the end of the matter, and just as the germ, which is the plant-in-itself, is simply the activity of self-development, so the thing generally also progresses beyond its mere in-itself (understood as abstract reflection-into-itself) to reveal itself to be also reflection-into-another, and as a result it has properties.\textsuperscript{9}

Hegel’s use of the language of “reflection-into-itself” and “reflection-into-another” is unfortunate as it implies that these processes of emergence are restricted to cognition. However, what he is here referring to is relationships among beings in the emergence of qualities or things. This becomes clear in his analysis of the category of Existence in the Doctrine of Essence portion of the \textit{Encyclopedia Logic}. Hegel begins by pointing out that,

\begin{quote}
Existence is the immediate unity of inward reflection and reflection-into-another. Therefore, it is the indeterminate multitude of existent as inwardly reflected, which are at the same time, and just as much, shining-into-another, or relational, and they form a \textit{world} of interdependence and of an infinite connectedness of grounds with what is grounded. The grounds are themselves existences, and the existents are also in many ways ground as well as grounded.\textsuperscript{10}
\end{quote}

Reflection-into-itself thus refers to the internal potentials of things, whereas reflection-into-another refers to the manner in which these potentials are evoked, summoned, or “brought forth” in relation to others. Returning to the example of rusted iron, the iron only actualizes the potential of rust by “reflecting-into-another” or by relating to oxygen. Hegel clarifies this point in another \textit{Zusatzen}, when he writes that,

\begin{quote}
The term “existence” (derived from \textit{existere}) points to a state of emergence, an existence is being that has emerged from the ground and become reestablished through the sublation of mediation. As sublated being, essence has proved in the first place to be shining within itself, and the determinations of this shining are identity, difference, and ground. Ground is the unity of identity and difference, and as such it is at the same time
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{9} \textit{Encyclopedia Logic}, 194. \hfill \textsuperscript{10} \textit{Ibid.}, pg. 192.
the distinguishing of itself from itself. But what is distinct from the ground is not mere
difference anymore than the ground itself is abstract identity. The ground is self-
sublating and what it sublates itself toward, the result of its negation, is existence.
Existence, therefore, which is what has emerged from the ground, contains the latter
within itself, and the ground does not remain behind existence (my italics); instead, it is
precisely this process of self-sublation and translation into existence.11

Elsewhere Hegel argues that it belongs to ground to erase itself. Returning to my previous
example of rusted iron, this simply means that the specific interrelation among existents that
produce this property disappears in the result. We are left only with the quality of rust and not
the dynamic processes through which the quality was produced. However, Hegel’s point is that
if we wish to understand the being of the existent at all, we must understand its “reflection-into-
another” or the concrete interrelationships with other existents in the world. In short, Hegel’s
conception of essence is not that of an abstract and unchanging form common to a plurality of
diverse instances (what all particular dogs share in common, for instance), but rather is a theory
of individuation conceived in terms of the concrete contextual embeddedness of existents and the
manner in which this situation actualizes these potentialities.

Here Hegel shows, very suprisingly, a tremendous proximity to Deleuze’s account of
individuation. Indeed, later in the Doctrine of Essence, Hegel will discuss these
interrelationships in terms of relations of force, thereby foreshadowing Deleuze’s discussion of
force in relation to Nietzsche in his brilliant Nietzsche & Philosophy. There is thus nothing

behind or beyond the thing, but rather thing, as Hegel will go on to show, is a negative unity of
these properties evoked or summoned in and through dynamic and ongoing interrelations among
things. The question of epistemology now becomes a question of immanent ontology, and that
of how actualities are evoked in and through interactions in webs of related existents, producing
this specific state of affairs here; for just as there is no existent in-itself but rather the existent is

11 Ibid., pg. 193.
always only in relation, there is no subject in-itself but rather the subject is always related to a
world which evokes certain traits in it and which it, in turn, evokes traits of the world in its
practical dealings. To overcome abstraction is to think these interrelations in their historical and
present contextualities. Things become events and emergences insofar as they are ongoing
processes, rather than static substances. But perhaps most importantly, any approach that would
hierarchialize one element of these interconnections such as signs, power, economy language,
history, social system, technology, nature, brain, DNA, etc., is here undermined insofar as each
of these moments only discovers what it is in being reflected-into-its-others.