The *Science of Logic* is a formidably difficult text. The foolhardy reader who dares to approach it is soon left with no other resource than to abandon herself to the engulfing Hegelian waters, or to pass by, and go set up philosophical camp elsewhere. For Hegel’s Logic is a discourse that seems to be speaking only about itself and its own logical delirium. In order to grasp something of Hegel’s philosophy, it seems that a more feasible approach might be to consider some part of it where it is drawn away from its soliloquy by its object: art (with Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetic*), the State (with Hegel’s *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*), history (with Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*). Here at least, there remains some external authority that imposes on philosophical categories the test of their relation to the way things are. On this terrain, i.e. the domain of what Hegel calls the “Philosophy of Spirit,” Hegel’s teachings continue to haunt our own times by the questions they put at the forefront: the development of human consciousness and its relation to what is external to it; the production of symbolic systems; the State, law, civil society.

However, approaching Hegel through his exoteric teachings is a way of skirting Hegel’s project as he defined it. Hegel’s claim to “bring philosophy . . . to the goal where it can set aside the title ‘love of knowing’ and be actual knowing,” his claim to bring philosophy to its completion and end, find in his own eyes their meaning and justification only through the *Science of Logic*. Thus the *Science of Logic* is for Hegel’s system what the three *Critiques* together are for Kant’s.
How to enter the *Science of Logic*

And yet it looks very much as if Hegel had deliberately shut off all access to what constitutes the center of his system. His Logic appears to defy any attempt at analysis. Its object is pure thought, that is, a thought that is no longer dependent on any object external to it, or even, as in Kant, on sensible intuition. A thought that, in thinking its object, thinks only itself, that is, the categories in which it thinks any object. A thought whose movement cannot be broken down into its elements, nor stopped. For example: the starting point of the *Science of Logic* is Being. However, this starting point is not really one, for the thought of being is an empty thought; thinking simply “being” is thinking nothing, the void; but to think that “being” has no content, or being is nothing, is to be hurled into the flow of determinations in which something is thought: to becoming (see *GW* 11, 43; *S*. 5, 82–83; *L*. 82–83). In this game that thought plays with itself, where each determination derives its content only from the one into which it disappears – and then, with the Doctrine of Essence, from the one into which it casts its light, “scheint” (*GW* 11, 248–249; *S*. 6, 23; *L*. 398) – it turns out that “the True is thus the Bacchanalian revel in which no member is not drunk” (*Phenomenology of Spirit*: *GW* 9, 35; *S*. 3, 46; *Phen.* 27). How does one go about analyzing such an orgy?

Might one at least hope for an explanation of what the genesis of this process is? What history, what tentative experiments, led thought to settle into this mode? One would be out of luck: for Hegel, the exposition of such a genesis presupposes its end, i.e. it requires that one already be established in the logical element that one wishes to generate. Of course Hegel indicates that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* might be an introduction to the *Science of Logic*.

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, I have exhibited consciousness in its progression, from the first immediate opposition of itself and the object, to absolute knowing. This path goes through all the forms of the relation of consciousness to the object, and has the concept of science for its result. Thus this concept (apart from the fact that it emerges within logic itself) needs no justification here, because it has received it there. (*GW* 11, 20; *S*. 5, 42; *L*. 48)

Indeed, only at the conclusion of the voyage of consciousness described in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* can the separation between subject and object be overcome, thus opening the way to absolute knowing and
therefore to the Science of Logic. Could this, then, actually be the genetic story we need in order to settle into what Hegel calls the point of view of science? Not really. For according to Hegel, the progression of the Phenomenology of Spirit itself is comprehensible only for someone who already knows that the fantasy of separation from its object with which consciousness struggles is just this: a fantasy.\textsuperscript{3} When consciousness finally reaches the term of its voyage, then this truth that drove it all along comes to light: thought only ever thinks itself. The consciousness that believes it confronts reality in single combat is only the foam of the wave of thinking that underlies it, in which what is thought is nothing but thought itself.

Consequently, if the Phenomenology is, in a sense, an introduction to the Science of Logic – insofar as it sets out the necessary progression of consciousness towards absolute knowing – it is also true to say that it presupposes the Logic, that is, it presupposes, in its very mode of exposition, the knowledge of the necessary process which unfolds as it were “behind the back” of consciousness.

Thus Hegel writes:

Consciousness is spirit as concrete knowing, and indeed a knowing which is engrossed in externality; but the progression 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. (\textit{GW} 11, 8; \textit{S}. 5, 17; \textit{L}. 28)

We are thus back where we began: we must have already taken up the point of view of the Science of Logic in order not only to talk about it, but even to understand how and why we should strive to reach it.\textsuperscript{4}

Some sympathetic readers have concluded that there is no point in trying to outsmart Hegel’s Logic by questioning its theoretical presuppositions: it has none besides those it constructs in its own movement. It is equally pointless to attempt to submit it to criticism: one cannot speak of it without speaking it, failing which one is confronted, by those who do speak it, with the inadequacy of one’s point of view, a point of view incapable of grasping the internal necessity of the movement of the concept. And one is granted the ironic honor of in fact belonging in this movement as one of its moments. Thus, the Science of Logic anticipates all possible objections. This is how Gérard Lebrun describes the fortress Hegel has made of his Logic:
[Hegel’s] dialectic will not furnish any information about given contents. One should therefore beware of raising objections to it based on representations. In place of a hasty doctrinal critique, therefore, one will substitute a patient reading. […] If Hegel’s philosophy has broken all ties with representation, it is no longer a doctrine. And if it is no longer a doctrine, there is nothing to object to it. It is only to a doctrine that one can legitimately make objections. As for a discourse, one can only adopt it, stroll through it or go elsewhere. One makes no objections to a discourse, no more than to a path or a landscape.

Yet to defend Hegel’s project by thus invoking its radical singularity is hardly satisfactory. True, the novelty of Hegel’s position in philosophy lies in large part in the very status Hegel assigns to philosophical discourse. He proclaims that philosophy does not have an object outside itself about which its theories are developed. Thus philosophy is radically foreign to representational thinking. The Science of Logic, as the first part of Hegel’s system of philosophy, is supposed to expound and justify precisely this point: it expounds the movement of thinking within which any object at all (whether it belongs to nature or to “spirit”) is thought. Still, a philosophy to which nothing can be objected is of little interest. The surest way to rob Hegel’s philosophy of its bite is to make of it a grandiose but self-contained enterprise. The fact that Hegel himself did a lot to contribute to this unfortunate result is of little solace.

Now I suggest that it is possible to get out of the Hegelian circle, by relating it back to its antecedents in the history of philosophy. The idea that philosophy is less defined by what it talks about than by the type of discourse it inaugurates is not completely new. It has its ancestor in Kant’s philosophy. Kant is the first to have focused his attention on the mode of thinking that elaborates metaphysical concepts and thus determines their content. He criticizes metaphysics not so much for forming the ideas of the soul, the world, and God, as for the erroneous view that these ideas might have an object distinct from them or be anything beyond the expression of peculiar demands of reason. Or as Hegel might say: Kant criticizes the erroneous view according to which these ideas are representational, i.e. according to which they define objects that actually exist outside these ideas, which must thus be evaluated as to their truth by their adequacy to those objects. In the same way, Hegel claims for himself the merit of having broken with all representational modes of thinking in order to settle in the standpoint of what he calls “the Concept,” where thought becomes conscious of its identity with itself in each and everyone of the contents it thinks.
Bringing Kant and Hegel together in this way may seem paradoxical. After all, is not Hegel’s opposition to Kant especially vocal when it comes to Kant’s Ideas of reason and Kant’s view that these Ideas can have only a regulative role in cognition? However, one should be careful in assessing the import of this disagreement. It does not concern the nature of the Ideas of rationalist metaphysics. On the contrary, Hegel recognizes Kant’s merit for having shown that Ideas have no other content than the systematic unity reason brings to the operations of the understanding: that they have therefore no relation to any object given in sensible intuition. However, far from concluding, as Kant does, that they have neither objectivity nor truth, Hegel maintains that they have the highest degree of truth.

Would one ever have thought that philosophy would deny truth to intelligible essences because they lack the spatial and temporal material of sensibility? (GW 12, 23; S. 6, 262; L. 590)

One might then suggest the following: Hegel pushes to its limits a critique of representation that Kant had only just begun. Kant revolutionized philosophy by affirming that thought does not model itself on its object, but rather, the object of thought models itself on thought. In natural science, what is given in sensibility becomes an object of knowledge only by conforming to the categories of the understanding. In special metaphysics (rational psychology, cosmology, and theology), in which no sensible given provides a content to thought, Ideas have no other content than that of being the expression of reason’s demand for systematicity. Hegel follows upon Kant’s footsteps and maintains that thought is to itself its own object. He continues Kant’s Copernican Revolution, but only to deprive it of all relevance: strictly speaking, once we have reached the standpoint of the Science of Logic, the respective priority of thought and its object is not even an issue any more.

The Kantian ancestry of his project in the Science of Logic is explicitly affirmed by Hegel:

Critical Philosophy, had, it is true, already turned metaphysics into Logic . . . (GW 11, 22; S. 5, 45; L. 51)

Former metaphysics […] incurred the just reproach of having employed [the pure forms of thought] uncritically, without a preliminary investigation as to whether and how they were capable of being determinations of the thing-in-itself, to use the Kantian expression, or, to put it better, determinations of what is rational. –Objective Logic thus is the true critique [die wahrhafte Kritik] of these forms . . . (GW 11, 32; S. 5, 62; L. 64)
Critical philosophy has turned metaphysics into logic. Instead of an ontology or science of being as such, its ambition is to offer an inventory of the concepts a priori in which being is thought (A246–247/B303). And instead of rational doctrines of the soul, the world, and God, critical philosophy offers a logic of illusion, i.e. an exposition of the phantoms produced by reason when its inferences are not checked by their relation to some object given in sensibility. Now Hegel intends his own Logic – and particularly his Objective Logic, as we shall see – to finish what Kant’s *Critique* was unable to finish for fear of becoming dialectical, i.e. for fear of the contradictions into which reason might fall. He intends his Logic to expound the content and import of the concepts of metaphysics, that is, of the a priori concepts of reason. One therefore cannot affirm too strongly the relation between Hegel’s project in the *Science of Logic* and Kant’s project in the three *Critiques* (and, first of all, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*), whatever appearances one may find to the contrary.

An example of such contrary appearance is the fact that the *Science of Logic* seems to undermine Kant’s enterprise at its very core. It opens with a lament of the loss of metaphysics and speculative reason. Kantian philosophy is held responsible for this loss. The exoteric doctrine of Kantian Philosophy – *that the understanding ought not to go beyond experience*, else the cognitive capacity would be *theoretical reason*, which by itself would generate nothing but *fantasies* [Hirngespinsten] – this doctrine has provided justification, on the side of science [von der Seite der Wissenschaft], for renouncing speculative thought. In support of this popular doctrine came the cry of modern pedagogy, this misery of our times that directs attention to immediate need, according to which, just as for cognition experience is the primary factor, so for skill in public and private life any theoretical insight is harmful, and exercise and practical training in general are what is essential, and what alone is required. Science and common sense [gemeiner Menschenverstand] thus cooperating to bring about the downfall of metaphysics, it seemed that what was produced was the strange spectacle of a cultured nation [ein gebildetes Volk] having no metaphysics – like a temple otherwise richly ornamented, but without a holy of holies. (GW I, 5–6; S. 5, 13–14; L. 25)

But rehabilitating metaphysics and speculative reason does not mean for Hegel returning to pre-Kantian philosophy, to a pre-critical metaphysics. Hegel himself is sufficiently explicit on the impossibility of such a return, for example in this footnote to the General Division of the *Science of Logic*.
It is to be remembered that the reason I frequently refer to Kantian philosophy in this work (which might, to many, seem superfluous), is that however one may otherwise and also in the present work, consider its more precise determination as well as the particular parts of its exposition, it constitutes the basis and the starting point of recent German philosophy. This merit remains unblemished by whatever faults may be found in it. Another reason reference must often be made to it in the objective logic is that it enters into important, more determinate aspects of the logical, whereas later philosophical expositions have paid little attention to it, or else have displayed only a crude – not unavenged – contempt for it. (GW 11, 31 n.; S. 5, 59 n.; L. 61 n.)

I am of course not the first to offer an interpretation of Hegel’s philosophy as the end point of a path opened by Kant’s Copernican Revolution. Richard Kroner, for instance, presented Hegel’s philosophy as the ultimate outcome of successive attempts to resolve the contradictions left open by transcendental idealism. For his part, Jean Hyppolite noted:

Transcendental logic is already the seed of Hegel’s speculative logic, which no longer recognizes the limits of the thing-in-itself. This logic of being replaces the old metaphysics that opened out upon the transcendent world. Hegel does not return to the prior dogmatism; he extends transcendental logic into dialectical logic.

However, this way of approaching Hegel’s master work is far from being completely explored. It is not only in its project, but also in the minute details of its categories, that Hegel’s Logic is literally nourished by Hegel’s discussion of transcendental philosophy. Its relation to Kant’s philosophy is certainly not the only source of intelligibility for Hegel’s Logic. But it is the most important, and Hegel’s other philosophical references seem to me, at least in the Logic, to be conditioned by it. It is particularly significant in this respect that the Doctrine of the Concept (the third book of the Science of Logic) should open with a long discussion of Kant’s transcendental logic. The reason for this, I want to suggest, is that Hegel’s Logic is developed from beginning to end as a transformation – in the most literal sense – of transcendental logic.

In a famous letter to Schelling, Hegel wrote:

In my scientific education, which began with the most elementary needs of man, I necessarily became oriented towards science, and the ideal of my youth necessarily became a form of reflection, transforming itself into a system.
As Bernard Bourgeois shows, “becoming a form of reflection” means for Hegel assimilating the heritage of Kantian philosophy, and more specifically of the first Critique. It is through this assimilation that Hegel’s project becomes specifically and explicitly philosophical (rather than being a more directly practical project of religious, social or political reform). All the categories in which “the ideal of his youth” was expressed (very roughly: the thought of a totality that might integrate in itself all differences, especially in the realm of human interactions) are reformulated in this light.

This is the case, first of all, of the category of the Absolute, which plays a prominent role in Hegel’s philosophy as well as in the philosophy of all other German Idealists. I intend to show that the intent Hegel proclaims in the Preface to the Phenomenology of Spirit, that of “grasping and expressing the True, not as substance, but just as much as subject,” provides its meaning to the Hegelian category of the Absolute, in virtue of the equation: the True = the Absolute = the transformation of Kant’s notion of truth. We must keep this equation in mind in order to understand any polemic pitting Hegel against Kant, and in particular that through which Hegel takes his place in the long cohort of dissatisfied heirs: the challenge against Kant’s notion of the thing in itself.

The problem of the thing in itself is considered by all post-Kantians to be the cross of Kant’s “Copernicanism.” For, against the fundamental inspiration of Kant’s Copernican Revolution, which places the source of the objectivity of cognitions in the subject of cognition, the thing in itself seems to reintroduce a pole irreducible to transcendental subjectivity. The entire history of post-Kantianism can be read as an attempt to resolve this contradiction. Hegel is no exception. He too attacks the notion of an unknowable thing in itself. This is what allowed the Marxist tradition to make a “good” objectivist of Hegel (meaning a defender of the objective validity of cognition), contrary to the “bad” agnostic, Kant. Now here as elsewhere, Hegel does not return to a pre-Kantian view. He does not affirm that we can know something that is in itself external to thought. Quite the contrary, his position is developed on the terrain staked out by Kant: that of a thought that finds the conditions of its objectivity within itself. But Hegel occupies this terrain in order to oppose Kant’s view by demonstrating the inanity of the very notion of an unknowable thing in itself.

This problem of the thing in itself offers a good example of the twist Hegel gives to the transcendental enterprise, a twist that leads him to his own dialectical logic. So we will start with this problem, in
the hope that it will help us better define the singularity of Hegel’s endeavor.

Kant, Hegel and the thing in itself

Hegel uses Kant’s theory of objectivity to bolster his criticism of Kant’s notion of the thing in itself. Kant’s philosophy, in Hegel’s eyes, has the merit of having made the “transcendental unity of self-consciousness,” or unity of the “I think,” the source of the objective validity of representations. This view, which belongs “among the most profound and correct insights to be found in the Critique of reason” (GW 12, 17; S. 6, 254; L. 384), is at the core of Kant’s Transcendental Deduction of the Categories. Because there are objects of cognition at all only by virtue of their conformity to the categories (as the forms of the unity of consciousness that makes possible the representation of objects), the categories are a priori applicable to all objects of cognition.

An object, however, is that in the concept of which the manifold of a given intuition is united. Now, however, all unification of representations requires unity of consciousness in the synthesis of them. Consequently the unity of consciousness is that which alone constitutes the relation of representations to an object, thus their objective validity, and it is that on which . . . the very possibility of the understanding rests.15

We have here the justification of the whole transcendental enterprise: because the object of cognition, even though its “matter” (“that which corresponds to sensation,” cf. A20/B34) is empirical, exists as an object of cognition only insofar as it is constituted by thought, it is possible to expound a system of a priori representations of objects. This is transcendental cognition, of which the Critique provides the outline (cf. B23–24).

Kant specifies: transcendental cognition is a cognition that concerns itself with concepts a priori insofar as they relate a priori to objects. Therefore what is transcendental is not the concept itself, but the reflection on its origin and its relation to an object. For example,

[. . .] neither space nor any geometrical determination of it a priori is a transcendental representation, but only the cognition that these representations are not of empirical origin at all and the possibility that they can nevertheless be related a priori to objects of experience can be called transcendental. (A56/B81)
Space and time are called transcendental representations only insofar as one explains how, although they are a priori forms of intuition, they make possible the sensible intuition of any empirical object. The deduction of the categories is transcendental insofar as it explains how these categories are the a priori forms by virtue of which alone the appearances (Erscheinungen) become objects of cognition, phenomena (Phaenomena). The unity of apperception is transcendental insofar as it is the unity of an activity of synthesis which alone makes possible the unity of the manifold of the intuition under the categories, and thus the transformation of this manifold into an object of cognition.

At this point, the crucial notion of Kant’s theory of objectivity comes into play: that of the transcendental object = X. This is the mere thought of an object, by virtue of which the categories are more than mere forms of thought: concepts of an object corresponding to what is given in sensibility. For example, the category of substance is more than the mere thought of the logical subject in a proposition. It is a concept of an object given in sensibility, which is determined in such a way that it is known to be “in itself subject” with respect to its empirically given essential or accidental properties (A147/B186). How this determination of the object comes about does not concern us here. What does matter is that according to Kant, it is by virtue of the thought of the relation of all manifold of sensible intuition to a transcendental object = X, that the unity of apperception brings about that determination, as well as all other determination under the categories, and thus generates the representation of an empirical object, a phenomenon (which is of course distinct from the transcendental object, but whose empirical determination is made possible by the thought of a transcendental object).

[The transcendental object] signifies […] a something = X, of which we know nothing at all nor can know anything in general (in accordance with the current constitution of our understanding), but is rather something that can serve only as a correlate of the unity of apperception for the unity of the manifold in sensible intuition, by means of which the understanding unifies that manifold in the concept of an object. (A250)

The concept of a transcendental object is thus, in a way, the epitome of Kant’s Copernican Revolution: far from thought having to model itself on its object, it is the object which models itself on thought, to the point where there is no object of cognition except by virtue of the unity granted to the empirical given by transcendental apperception,
projecting a transcendental object as what demands the unity and consistency of its representation (without itself being the empirical object of its representations).

But we can go further, and say that with the transcendental object we are already beyond Kant’s Copernican Revolution. For what does this revolution consist in, as Kant presents it in the second preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*? First in the assertion that the object of the senses models itself on our power of intuition, and second in the assertion that the representation thus obtained (the intuition) models itself on our concepts. In both cases, what is being described is a relation between two distinct elements: an undetermined given (the object) and the form on which it must model itself (which belongs to the knowing subject) (cf. Bvii). But with the transcendental object, we have a quite different relation between subject and object. The transcendental object is nothing other than the unity projected by thought, as the shadow of an object. The relation of the unity of apperception to the transcendental object is a relation that is internal to thought, and which must encompass within its circle the two steps of the “Copernican Revolution” described by Kant in the second Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Instead of an external relation between two elements among which we must determine which models itself on which, with the relation of the unity of apperception to the transcendental object we now have a relation of thought to itself, i.e. the constitution by thought of the unity of its object. This is the aspect of Kant’s doctrine that most inspires Hegel, as shown by the citation given earlier.¹⁷

But in leaving behind the Copernican Revolution, such an interpretation leaves behind the fundamental problem of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: the relation of the a priori to the a posteriori, of the understanding to experience, of spontaneity to receptivity. There would be neither transcendental idealism nor transcendental logic if the a priori forms of thought did not constitute an object whose matter they cannot provide. The transcendental object is the farthest that thought can go on its own, and this is not very far: the mere form of an object, the projection of an object, itself also “transcendental” inasmuch as it is by virtue of its being projected by thought that the appearances (*Erscheinungen*, undetermined objects of empirical intuition) can be represented as determinate objects (*Phaenomena*, objects thought under concepts).

However, at the precise point where, with the transcendental object, we might fall into the illusion that thought is not dependent on a content that is given, Kant’s warning appears: we do not have knowledge of
the thing in itself. The transcendental object is one pole of Kant’s theory of objectivity, the one by which the constitutive role of thought is most strongly affirmed. The thing in itself is the other pole, the one by which that constitutive role is recalled to its limits, and the external relation between the thinking subject and the object of thought is maintained, a relation in the context of which alone the Copernican Revolution can be defined. The two poles are complementary to one another, for the transcendental object itself has a negative function, that of recalling the understanding to its limits: it is because the transcendental object is only the transcendental object (the mere thought of an object = X, making possible the representation of any empirical object) that we do not have knowledge of the Thing in itself.

The thing in itself is what thought necessarily relates to receptivity, as the non-sensible ground of sensible representations.

[] follows naturally from the concept of an appearance in general that something must correspond to it which is not in itself appearance, for appearance can be nothing for itself and outside of our kind of representation; thus, if there is not to be a constant circle, the word “appearance” must already indicate a relation to something the immediate representation of which is, to be sure, sensible, but which in itself […] must be something, i.e., an object independent of sensibility. (A251–252)

The thing in itself is what affects sensibility, and what the latter nevertheless prevents us from cognizing, since it presents the thing in itself only according to the a priori forms of sensibility, space and time. But the thing in itself is also, on the other hand, what might be the object of a non-sensible intuition, i.e. what an intuition that did not depend on sensibility would present (cf. A252).

We can now see how the thought of the transcendental object can be the beginning of the illusion that we have knowledge of things in themselves. Through the thought of the transcendental object, categories are more than mere logical functions, they are concepts of an object. To forget that these concepts can acquire determinate content only through their relation to sensible intuition is to suppose that the understanding has access on its own to an actually existing object: that it at least approximates an intuitive intellect.

By denying that we can even imagine what an intuitive intellect might be, Kant limits the understanding and asserts its dependence on receptivity (sensibility). But at the same time he forcefully affirms the active role of the understanding, its role in synthesis of what is given to
sensibility. For if the understanding does not have access to an object whose unity is already constituted outside itself, but only to the fleeting manifold of what is given in sensible intuition, then it is incumbent upon it to make of this manifold the unity of an object that can be known. However, because this unity is that of a manifold that is given, the understanding cannot attain complete determination of it. This is the bitter experience reason makes in the Cosmological Antinomies expounded in the Transcendental Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, when, seeking “the unconditioned for the series of conditions” of an appearance, reason runs up against the fact that it cannot attain the ultimate ground of the series of conditions. The series can be known only element by element, according to forms of sensibility that are fundamentally heterogeneous to reason and understanding. To suppose that a complete determination of the series could be attained is again to encounter the mirage of the thing in itself. For this would mean that the understanding could finally reach cognition of an object completely determined by concepts according to the categories. Reason, says Kant, can give itself this complete determination as a task. But it is impossible to attain it. To claim the contrary, far from extending the power of the understanding, is only to throw it into hopeless contradictions.\(^\text{18}\)

The thing in itself thus has a twofold character. As Jules Vuillemin notes, it is on the one hand,

the ideal totality of the determinations sketched out by the spontaneous movement of knowledge: it is a regulative idea.

On the other hand,

the definition of sensation as affection by the thing in itself refers the concrete epistemic determination back to the thing in itself understood quite differently, as the real, albeit unknowable, source of reality.\(^\text{19}\)

As we have just seen, there is a systematic connection between these two characters of the thing in itself in Kant’s critical philosophy. It remains nonetheless that this dual character of the Thing in itself, which mirrors the duality of spontaneity and receptivity in our cognitive capacities, raises difficult problems. As Vuillemin shows, this duality again and again threatens to introduce, in place of the constitutive role of transcendental subjectivity, an Absolute as the real source of knowledge and moral legislation. According to Vuillemin, the history of post-Kantian philosophy is the history of successive – and repeatedly
unsuccessful—attempts to reaffirm the constitutive role of the cognitive subject, and to eliminate the mirage of the Absolute.\(^{20}\)

Now, what makes Hegel’s position peculiar is that he wants both to restore the unconditioned— the Absolute—as the privileged concern of philosophy, and to give a completely new dimension to constitutive subjectivity. This twofold aspect of Hegel’s endeavor is present in Hegel’s critique of Kant’s notion of a thing-in-itself. In considering this critique, I shall focus on two main aspects: Hegel’s critique of the role Kant assigns to receptivity in cognition, and Hegel’s critique of Kant’s inconsistencies with respect to the notion of truth.

Kant’s thing in itself is first criticized in that it is bound up with a misguided conception of the role of receptivity in cognition. More precisely, what Hegel criticizes is the very duality of terms: appearance/thing in itself, which expresses the dependence of the concept with respect to receptivity.

According to Hegel, Kant has the merit of having seen in the concept not the mere representation of an object, but a production of thought, of the “unity of self-consciousness.”

But Kant, says Hegel, falls back into the element of representation by maintaining the dependence of concept on sensation and intuition. However, Hegel objects, intuition and sensation do not constitute the content of the concept. It is absurd to think that they can remain a component in the object of cognition when this object is thought. As we might say today: to define water as \(H_2O\), or gold as the element of atomic number 79, is to move away from any sensible intuition of the object—even, and especially, if these definitions then allow us to return to sensible intuition and explain its characteristics. In the same way, Hegel does not deny the importance of sensible intuition as a starting point of cognition. But, he says, we must not confuse the origin and the truth of the thought process: if sensible intuition is the condition of all cognition, it is destined to be absorbed or digested in the concept which is its ground. For the concept can provide the reason or ground both for itself and for sensible intuition (cf. GW 12, 21–22; S. 6, 259–260; L. 588–589).\(^{21}\)

If this is correct, then it is not true that we know only appearances. Appearances—\(Erscheinungen\)—as Kant defines them, are not all there is to the object of knowledge; even less are they all there is to the content of thought in general. It is just as misguided to limit cognition to appearances as to claim cognition of a thing-in-itself independent of thought. What is present to thought is no more a mere appearance than
it is a thing-in-itself, purportedly independent of the forms of thought. The very distinction between appearance and thing-in-itself is therefore deprived of meaning. Or rather, it has meaning only for a thought whose standpoint restricts it to appearance; a thought which, remaining dependent on sensible intuition, and at the same time being conscious of the dependence of sensible intuition on the receptivity of the finite subject, opposes to the cognition of the appearances the cognition of the thing as it is in itself. Such an opposition describes the situation of common consciousness, which receives its object by way of sensible intuitions. It senses that beyond sensible impressions there exists the true object that consciousness does not know. Even from a standpoint more sophisticated than that of mere common consciousness, it is inevitable that such an opposition should be presupposed. For all cognition involves the consciousness of the inadequacy of its concepts to completely determine the object that it has given itself to determine. Hegel takes this to be just as much a necessary stage of consciousness, in the Phenomenology of Spirit, as it is a necessary stage of thought, in the Science of Logic.

But this means that behind the false “problem of the thing in itself” lurks another: the problem of how to define truth, which is the second aspect of Hegel’s critique of the thing in itself I mentioned above. The first aspect was Hegel’s criticism of the role Kant assigns to receptivity in cognition. The second is Hegel’s questioning of Kant’s notion of truth, which launches Hegel’s own view. The thing in itself, Hegel claims, is a timorous thinker’s answer to the consciousness that knowledge of appearances cannot be true.

What is truth? Kant grants as “trivial” the traditional definition, which Hegel deems “of great, indeed of supreme value” (GW 12, 26; S. 6, 266; L. 593): truth is the agreement of cognition with its object (see A58/B82). But according to this very definition, says Hegel, cognition of appearances cannot be true. For in this case, cognition is the concept, and its object is the appearance (Erscheinung), the “undetermined object of a sensible intuition.” Obviously they do not agree: how could a concept and a sensible image agree? If Kant had taken his own definition of truth seriously instead of simply granting it as trivial, he would have found it unacceptable to limit knowledge to appearances. His own definition of truth would have committed him to asking the question: how can one give this definition a content that escapes the inevitable paradoxes of all representational thought (a thought plagued with the
impossible task of matching two elements as heterogeneous to one another as a concept and a sensible image, or a concept and an object that is not thought? There can be agreement only between two elements that are homogeneous to one another: between thought and thought, between cognition as thought and object as an object that is thought. In other words, for cognition of an object to be said true, the object itself must be transformed into an object that is thought. Then one can question the agreement of the concept and its object.

This is what Hegel attempts to do when he analyzes a proposition such as “the singular is a universal”: it immediately appears that such a proposition lacks the agreement of the concept (the universal) and its object (the singular), unless one arrives at a universal, a concept, able to account for all the determinations of the singular object, and conversely one arrives at a singular object able to be thought entirely in conceptual terms. In other words, what is needed is a way to achieve complete homogeneity between *definiens* and *definiendum*. This progression is precisely what the whole Logic is about, especially in its third book.

This is why Hegel scornfully rejects Kant’s avowed powerlessness to provide a universal criterion of truth on the pretext that it should be valid “without any distinction among objects” whereas truth concerns precisely the object (A58/B83). When he refers truth to the *object*, Kant forgets what he was talking about, says Hegel. Initially Kant had defined truth by the agreement of knowledge with the object. For this agreement, there is a universal criterion, which is this agreement itself: the agreement of cognition (the concept) with the object as an object that is thought (*GW* 12, 26; S. 6, 266; L. 593).

This conception of truth, Hegel maintains, definitively eliminates the problem raised by the distinction between appearance and thing it itself. For the question: “can we know the thing in itself?” disappears and leaves place to another: “can we attain truth, that is, the agreement of thought with itself?” Hegel thinks he provides an answer to this question with the absolute Idea, expounded in the final chapter of the *Science of Logic*. In the absolute Idea, what is thought is the identity of any object with thought itself. Not, as a dogmatic metaphysics would jump to conclude, because any object external to thought nevertheless bears the forms of rationality. But because at the end of the journey recounted in the *Science of Logic*, thought makes the totality of its own operations its object, and in these operations the contingency of what was merely given has been fully absorbed and re-elaborated.
The Idea, as unity of the subjective and objective Idea, is the concept of the Idea – a concept whose object [Gegenstand] is the Idea as such, and for which the objective [Objekt] is Idea. [...] This unity is consequently the absolute and all truth, the Idea which thinks itself – and here at least as a thinking or Logical Idea. (GW 20, 228; S. 8, 388; E.L. §236, 292)

This, therefore, is where the definition of truth can cease being a pious wish and instead, acquire content: when thought reflects on itself. Not, as in being, to find itself confronted with incomplete and contingent determinations. Not, as in essence, to run up against the incompleteness of its own operations. It must have proceeded through the moments of Subjectivity, where conceptualized unity deploys its forms (this is Section 1 of the Doctrine of the Concept); and of Objectivity, where it proves its capacity to take up any object (Section 2 of the Doctrine of the Concept); the Idea of knowing must have found its own ground in Life (Section 3, Chapter 1 of the Doctrine of the Concept) and deployed its theoretical and practical moments (Section 3, Chapter 2), before the thought of the whole, in the absolute Idea, can become completely adequate to the whole that is thought. Then there is conformity between subject and object, between thinking thought and thought that is thought.

Here, the reader who refuses to be fooled will ask for the scene to be played again, in order to detect by what sleight of the hand the disappearance of the thing in itself has been obtained.

We have seen that the thing in itself is linked for Kant to the irreducible contribution of receptivity in cognition, and to the resulting impossibility of establishing a complete synthesis of the object of cognition. We have seen that Hegel’s critique of the thing in itself goes along with his critique of receptivity as an unavoidable component of all cognition. We have seen that this last critique is itself only an aspect of a more fundamental thesis: thought knows only determinations that are themselves thought. For this reason, the very notion of a thing in itself, if it means the thing as it exists independently of thought, is an empty, and even an absurd, notion. The only possible meaning of the thing in itself is therefore: the truth, which thought gives itself as a norm and which it recognizes it cannot attain. It remains thus to ask what truth is, and what an object of thought that corresponds to this definition can be. It is in this way that the problem of the thing in itself disappears into that of truth. The negative concern born by Kant’s warning concerning the thing in itself (to cut short the pretensions of dogmatic
metaphysics) cedes the floor to a positive concern: to make the notion of truth the starting point and the end, in other words the norm, of any philosophical project.

I hope to have shown that Hegel’s preoccupation does not take him back to a pre-Kantian view, to what Kant called dogmatic metaphysics. I still need to justify what I maintained at the beginning: Hegel prolongs Kant’s “Copernican Revolution,” but at the same time he strips it of any *raison d’être*, by making its protagonists disappear.

**Absolute, Concept, Reflection**

In the work already cited, Jules Vuillemin characterizes the opposition between Kantian and Hegelian philosophy, between transcendental and dialectical methods, in the following way:

While the latter [the dialectical method] pushes the consequence of Copernicanism to the point of introducing negativity and death in the Absolute, the former [the transcendental method] remains hesitant with respect to the relations between the Absolute and the finite.\(^{25}\)

This is an apt way to characterize the twist Hegel imposes on the transcendental enterprise. We have seen above how Vuillemin can say that Kant “hesitates between the Absolute and the finite.”\(^{26}\) How can he also say that, as a response to Kant’s hesitation, “Hegel introduces negativity and death in the Absolute”? The answer, I suggest, is that Hegel transforms the very notion of the Absolute: for him the Absolute is not the thing in itself, but truth, i.e. the agreement between the act of thinking and what it purports to think; the agreement of the Concept and its object. The Absolute is not that impossible and literally unthinkable substance supposed to be independent of the (subjectively relative) categories in which the thinking subject thinks it. It is the fully accomplished and self-conscious agreement, reflected as such, of the categories and the object that is thought in them.

This is why, as an echo to the already mentioned characterization of the Absolute “not as substance, but as subject”\(^{27}\) we find the following two characterizations of the Absolute. The Absolute is a result: it is the result of the complete movement of thought, at the end of which thought is capable of reflecting the object as its own product and to reflect itself in this object. The Absolute is subject: it is by the movement of the subject, the unity of the “I think” as constitutive of its object, that the Absolute is constituted as agreement of the subject and the object.
But if Hegel thus profoundly transforms the notion of the Absolute, he also transforms that of the subject. “I think” is not the thought of a finite subject. It expresses the unity of a process that has its own necessity over and above the particular individual circumstances of empirical subjects.

Here again, Kant had taken the most important step in distinguishing the transcendental unity of apperception from the mere empirical unity of representations.

Kant distinguishes [the transcendental unity of apperception] from the subjective unity of consciousness, the unity of representation whereby I am conscious of a manifold as either simultaneous or successive, this being dependent on empirical conditions. On the contrary, the principles of the objective determination of representations must be derived, he says, solely from the principle of the transcendental unity of apperception. (GW 12, 18; S. 6, 254–255; L. 584. Cf. Kant, B139–140)

The notion of a “transcendental unity of apperception” is not a psychological or empirical notion. Rather, what it describes is the unifying activity, whatever its empirical realization may be, that makes it possible for all representations to be, eventually, accompanied by the proposition “I think.” In other words, for Kant all cognition, and more generally, all thought, is grounded on a unifying project expressed in the mere proposition “I think.” This project is not that of a particular, empirically determined individual subject, but is engrained in the very nature of thought.

But if the transcendental unity of apperception defines the fundamental structure of thought, as a project that is to be defined over and above the particular psychological features of empirical subjects, we might as well free it from any compromise with the latter, and give an independent characterization of this unity: this is what Hegel does in calling Kant’s “I think” the concept, and expounding the latter as the unifying principle that organizes the whole Science of Logic. Thus a view already present in Kant is developed in full force: if thought is a teleologically oriented process, its telos is not assigned to it by individual empirical subjects. In other words, the subject “I” of the proposition “I think” is not an individual, personal one.

This best explains Hegel’s odd use of “I” in the third person.

Now I is first this pure self-related unity, and is so not immediately, but only insofar as it makes abstraction from all determinateness and content, and returns into the freedom the unlimited equality with itself. (GW 12, 17; S. 6, 253; L. 583)
But, Hegel asks, as long as transcendental unity of apperception, or the unity of thought expressed by “I” in “I think,” remains conditioned by sensible intuition, how can one actually think that one has gone beyond the empirical unity of representations? How can one thus escape psychological idealism?

Kantian philosophy did not go beyond the psychological reflex of the concept [bei dem psychologischen Reflexe des Begriffs stehengeblieben ist], and returned again to the assertion that the concept is permanently conditioned by a manifold of intuition. It declared the cognitions of the understanding, and experience, to have mere appearances for their content not because the categories themselves are only finite, but by reason of a psychological idealism, namely because they are only determinations that are derived from self-consciousness. (GW 12, 22–23; S. 6, 261; L. 589)

Locking up the subject in the empirical realm means subordinating the concept to the empirical subject. Categories are thus returned to the status of properties of the subject of knowledge, which uses them to order its sensory impressions.

Hegel establishes the opposite relation between subject and concept. For him, subjectivity is nothing but the movement of the concept. His explanation, strikingly, is as follows. On the one hand, I is the concept itself; this is I as universality, which is what the passage quoted above referred to: “Now I is first this pure self-related unity [. . .]. It is thus universality [. . .].” However, on the other hand, I exists in the concrete form of the individual subject – this is the aspect of its singularity.

Second, I is self-related negativity is no less immediately individuality, absolute determinateness, which opposes itself to what is other and excludes it: individual personality. (GW 6, 17; S. 6, 253; L. 583)

This transformation of Kant’s “I” is the key to Hegel “concept.”

In the preceding pages, I used the term “concept” as if it meant the same for Hegel and for Kant. If I am right in what I just suggested, clearly it does not. However, in the Introduction to the Doctrine of the Concept (“On the Concept in General”), which inspired the analysis I just proposed, Hegel himself moves constantly from the Kantian meaning of “concept” (whether referring to empirical concepts or to a priori concepts, namely the categories) to the meaning of “concept” at work in the Science of Logic. We now have some of what we need to understand the transformation that takes place in this repeated shift. In the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories, Kant characterizes a concept
as the “consciousness of the unity of the synthesis [of a manifold of intuition]” (A103). This characterization is especially true of the pure concepts of the understanding, or categories:

The concepts that give this pure synthesis [of the manifold by means of the imagination] unity, and that consist solely in the representation of this necessary synthetic unity, are the third thing necessary for cognition of an object that comes before us, and they depend on the understanding. (A79/B104)

How does Hegel’s concept relate to Kant’s concepts, and especially to the pure concepts of the understanding? First, Hegel’s concept, like Kant’s concepts, has a unifying function. Second, however, in the Science of Logic this function operates not on sensible intuitions, nor even on their synthesis carried out by the imagination, but on thought-determinations. There is always already a mediation by thought, that is, by the concept, of what is to be unified. And third, the unifying function is itself subject; it does not have to be placed in a subject, be it even a “transcendental” subject. It is subject, i.e. it is what is active in the constitution of cognitions, and more generally in all thought process.

What remains essential, then, is the fact that both Hegel and Kant characterize the concept as having a unifying function. This is what allows Hegel to consider Kant’s characterization of concepts as homogeneous to his own, even while he criticizes it. More precisely, Hegel can consider Kant’s conception as a precursor of his own, a precursor still immersed in the phenomenological illusion according to which cognition is an external relation between a consciousness and its object. Or as Hegel would put it: Kant remains within the standpoint of an external reflection. He does not reach the standpoint of an immanent reflection of the content of thought itself.

It is now time to say more about this notion of “reflection.” Reflection is one of the core notions in Hegel’s Logic. Dieter Henrich goes so far as to characterize Hegel’s entire Logic as a “logic of reflection.” According to Henrich, the chapter on Reflection in the Doctrine of Essence provides the principle of the entire progression of the Science of Logic:

This chapter is significant for several reasons, but above all for its relation to the problem of the method (zum Methodenproblem) of the Logic. For the concepts at the center of the final argumentation on method find their true place not here, but in the chapter on the determinations of reflection. 

28
Pierre-Jean Labarrière and Gwendolyn Jarczyk agree, writing in the presentation of their translation of Being, Book 1 of the *Science of Logic*:

The movement of essence, in which is expressed [...] the ontological structure of all that is, is called by Hegel “the movement of reflection.” And he defines its stages (positing reflection, external reflection, determining reflection) as that through which the different moments of any dialectical process become known. At the center of the work, this chapter thus clarifies what Hegel means when he talks of the “self-movement of the content”; as such, it gives us a key to understanding the whole chain of determinations of the concept, as well as the chain of determinations expounded in the first book, Being [...].

It is a somewhat daunting task to try to explain a notion that is both so central to the Logic, and so revealing of the transformations undergone by Hegel’s philosophical project. At the risk of gross simplifications, I shall nevertheless try to show how the interpretation of Hegel’s Logic I am proposing illuminates the central role played in it by reflection.

In the evolution of Hegel’s thought, reflection was at first the foil against which a thought trying to grasp totality and abolish all differences within it, defined itself. Then it became a necessary step on the path to speculative reason. And finally, according to comments I just cited, reflection became the most fundamental characterization of Hegel’s method, i.e. the very method of speculative reason. Let me quickly rehearse each of these three stages in Hegel’s thought.

In Hegel’s early writings, reflection has an exclusively negative connotation. It was the method of the understanding, which remains external to its object and frames it in formal determinations that destroy its unity. As Bernard Bourgeois indicates:

Reflection, this stepping back that puts being at a distance and allows thought to turn to it [...] is a process of objectification, opposition, and separation, so that reflecting the youthful ideal, that is, the unity of all differences, is to destroy it.

But soon after, Hegel comes to maintain that reflection, understood in the way just stated – as stepping back from the object in which thought was at first immediately immersed – is a necessary moment of thought, even, and especially, when the goal is to realize the ideal of a thought completely identical to its object, a thought that does not impoverish or destroy the unity of its object. Thus in *The Difference between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy*, Hegel distinguishes the principle of speculation – the identity of subject and object – from reflection and
its arguments (*räsonierende Reflexion*), which only think “finitude and opposition.” But at the same time, he makes reflection an instrument for attaining the Absolute. For it is insofar as reflection, which divides and separates, becomes conscious of its own incompleteness that it can take itself beyond itself, towards speculation and the thought of totality. Consciousness of the separation and the loss it represents must have appeared in order for progress towards the Absolute to occur.

The form the need for philosophy would assume, if it were to be expressed as a presupposition, allows for a transition from the need of philosophy to the *instrument of philosophizing* to *reflection* as Reason. (*GW 4*, 16; *S. 2*, 25; *Diff.*, 94; Hegel’s emphases)

From being a mere obstacle, reflection thus becomes an indispensable instrument for philosophical thinking.

However, it is only with the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that the full originality of Hegel’s conception of reflection develops. It is with the *Phenomenology* that the difference between external – Kantian, according to Hegel – and Hegel’s “absolute reflection” is clearly defined. The progression of the *Phenomenology* can be read as a methodical regression from the phenomenological appearance to the movement of thought that underpins the appearance. It shows successively that the reflection of consciousness on its object is the reflection of consciousness on itself and its own rational forms, and that these rational forms are not those of individual consciousness, but of Spirit, a *We* whose knowledge culminates in absolute knowing.

This movement is essential to understanding in what sense reflection is henceforth for Hegel “absolute reflection” or “infinite relation to itself “ (*GW 11*, 257; *S. 6*, 35; *L.* 408). It is because he first showed that consciousness, in reflecting on its own object, only ever reflects its own modes of determination – which, moreover, are not its own, but “ours” – that Hegel can then affirm that reflection is the reflection in itself of a determinate content. There is a reflection of content in itself because the latter always already bears the unity of thought: not of a thought *on* content, but *in* content, the content that it alone constitutes.

But what, then, is this reflection? We can see how one can call the relation of a consciousness to its object, or to itself, “reflection.” What meaning can we ascribe to the “reflection of content in itself”?

Here we must again return to what was explained earlier concerning the True, the Absolute, and the Concept. In absolute knowing – the kind of thinking at work in the Logic – we still have a subject and an
object. But the subject is not individual consciousness, but the concept itself as a unifying function in thought. The object is any determination that is thought by virtue of this unifying function. There is reflection insofar as the unifying function goes beyond the achieved unity towards further determinations and further unity of those determinations. What drives this movement along is what one might call the inadequacy of the true to itself, of the unifying function and the imperfectly unified determinations, of the concept and being. That is why reflection is the reflection of content in itself: the content is a content that is thought, the provisional manifestation of the unity of the unifying function and what it determines.

This interpretation seems to me to be corroborated by numerous striking statements in the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. For example:

[The True] is the process of its own becoming, the circle that presupposes its end as its goal, having its end also as its beginning; and only by being worked out to its end, is it actual. (GW 9, 18; S. 3, 23; Phen. 10)

The true is at the start of the process of thinking, one might say as its regulative idea. But it is also the accomplishment of this process, when the agreement of the subject and the object is actually brought about. This is why the true is only “actual” by “being worked out to its end.”

We can thus measure the extent of the transformation the term “reflection” undergoes when Hegel writes:

Reason is, therefore, misunderstood when reflection is excluded from the True, and is not grasped as a positive moment of the Absolute. (GW 9, 19–20; S. 3, 25; Phen. 11–12)

Reflection is “a positive moment of the Absolute” in that, by the confrontation that occurs within it between the subject and the object (i.e. between “I” expressing the unity of the process of thinking, and the contents thus thought), the Absolute constitutes itself as the totality of the determinations of a thought conscious of itself. In other words, the dimension of alterity and the discrete concatenation of determinations subsists in reflection. But this alterity is the alterity of thought within itself, and the concatenation of determinations is guided by an immanent unifying ground.

Reflection thus appears from that point on as the method par excellence of philosophy, as indicated by this passage from the last chapter of the *Science of Logic*, The Absolute Idea:
[In the circle of science], each individual member, being inspired by the method, is reflection in itself which, in returning to the beginning, is at the same time the beginning of a new member. (GW 12, 252; S. 6, 571–572; L. 842)

This “return to the beginning” is the return to truth as a goal, by virtue of which, like Antaeus touching the earth, each individual thought finds itself pushed beyond itself. In the absolute Idea, it is the whole Logic that has come back to its beginning. But at the same time, the result is, contrary to the beginning, completely determined, because it is pure concept that has itself for object and which, insofar as it, having itself as object, runs through the totality of its determinations, builds itself into the totality of its reality, the system of science. (GW 12, 252–253; S. 6, 572; L. 843)

Reflection therefore appears to be the engine that moves the Logic forward in its entirety. And yet, reflection also holds a particular, determinate place in it, since Essence is defined as “reflection within itself” (GW 11, 244; S. 6, 17; L. 393), and the three moments of “Reflection” are defined in Section 1, Chapter 1, of the Doctrine of Essence (GW 11, 249–257; S. 6, 24–35; L. 399–408). Interestingly, the situation is the same with the term “dialectic.” Sometimes dialectic is presented as a specific moment of the method – for example, in the Preliminary Concept of the Encyclopedia Logic.32 Sometimes it is the method as a whole – for instance in the chapter on the absolute Idea (see GW 12, 244–245; S. 6, 560–561; L. 832–834). Dieter Henrich offers the following explanation: reflection is the method of the Logic as a whole; but it is in the Doctrine of Essence, and more specifically in the chapter on reflection, that it becomes itself an object of investigation, and that its structure is therefore clarified.33

In Being (expounded in Part 1, Book 1 of the Science of Logic), the concept and its aim of the true are only implicit; the determinations of the object are received as immediate, and the mediation of their mutations by the movement of the concept is masked. This is why they “pass” into one another, without an explicit unifying principle. In reflection, or Essence (expounded in Part 1, Book 2) the role of the unity of the concept in pushing forward the movement of determinations is made explicit, although the concept does not yet manifest its capacity to produce from itself all determinations. This is why, according to the definition in the form of a retraction that Hegel gives of the cognition of essence,
this cognition [. . .] starts from another, from being, and has a preliminary path to tread, that of going beyond being, or rather of penetrating into it. (GW 11, 241; S. 6, 13; L. 389; my emphasis)

In contrast, in the concept (expounded in Part 2 of the Science of Logic), each determination is produced from the unity of thought, and reflection is now a development (Entwicklung) of the concept rather than the “shining into another” that it is in essence. And finally, although in the chapter on the absolute Idea, as we have seen, Hegel characterizes reflection as the method of Logic as a whole, in this same chapter reflection is often restricted to being a progression of thought grounded on the exteriority of particular determinations with respect to the concept, and is thus opposed to “true cognition” (GW12, 239; S. 6, 553; L. 827). We can understand why. Reflection is the back-and-forth movement between the unifying function of thought and the objective determinations that resist unity. The resistance of these determinations is what provides the impetus for the movement of reflection, insofar as it is what pushes thought ceaselessly to shape anew the forms of unity in which the objects of thought can be framed. With the concept, the unifying ground that determined subliminally all previous attempts at unified thought is made explicit. From then on, in confronting the alterity in which the object is presented, it is always itself as an object that thought comes up against. Each determination is presented as a development of the concept, and this is why, in a sense, reflection is overcome. In another sense, however, the back-and-forth movement of reflection is still there, but it is internalized in the concept. Whether the concept actually overcomes the differences that predominate in essence is a key question for any evaluation of Hegel’s claims in the Science of Logic. Indeed, on the answer to this question might well depend the credibility of the entire Hegelian system.

But this is not the question I have addressed in this chapter. The provisional conclusion I would like to draw from the few clarifications I tried to bring to Hegel’s notion of reflection does not reach that far. But it is nonetheless fundamental for the comprehension of Hegel’s enterprise.

“Reflection as a positive moment of the Absolute” or reflection of the content in itself, is every bit as disastrous for pre-Kantian metaphysics as was Kant’s Transcendental Analytic of Pure Reason. For, as Jean Hyp-polite puts it, it means “the disappearance of the ontological secret.” To look for the essence of appearance, Hegel maintains in Chapter 1 of the Doctrine of Essence (The Essentialities, or Determinations of
Reflection), is not to look for some rational principle beyond things as they appear, but to look, within appearance itself, for the movement of thought by which the determinations of things that a non-critical thought takes to be ontological (or in Kant’s words, transcendentally real) are constituted. It is to look for determinations brought about by the activity of thinking, where a non-critical thought was unable to recognize a being that is thought.

Again, as Hyppolite writes,

> It is true that the form is the identity of being or self, that identity that the classical rationalists put at the apex of ontology, but this identity is also contradiction, diremption [...].

It is “contradiction, diremption,” precisely because it is not an identity *given in being* between rational forms and particular, sensible existence, but rather the production, by a ceaseless confrontation between the imperfect unity of thought and the multiple determinations of being, of the thought of being, or being *as thought*.

Concluding remarks

There are therefore many places where Hegel can be called to account for the philosophy at work in the *Science of Logic*. We can do him the courtesy of considering his philosophy *debatable*. I provisionally propose, as a summary of what was just said, three elements for evaluating Hegel’s project and its implementation.

“I posit in the self-movement of the concept that by which science exists …” (*GW* 9, 48; *S.* 3, 65; *Phen.* 44). This statement, which could serve as an epigraph to the *Science of Logic*, evokes echoes for the contemporary reader whose importance is far from exhausted. “It is not a philosophy of consciousness, but a philosophy of the concept which can give a doctrine of science,” wrote Jean Cavaillé. And the first pages of his book, *Sur la Logique et la théorie de la science* (*On Logic and the Theory of Science*), contain a critique of Kant’s transcendental philosophy that is strangely reminiscent of Hegel. Here are some examples:

Here one of the main difficulties of Kantianism appears: the supposition of a totally empirical given [*un empirique total*] that, being radically heterogeneous to the concept, does not allow itself to be unified by it. If experience is the singularity of an instant, no synthesis of imagination can integrate it into the unity of consciousness. [...]. In other words, a negative position of the empirical, even if only to eliminate it, is unacceptable.
Further along, Cavaillès explicitly refers to Hegel:

The notion of matter is a limit notion, in itself devoid of meaning. This is what Hegel noticed. “A matter (or content) without its concept is an extra-conceptual, and therefore without essence.”\(^{37}\)

And on the last page, this characterization of consciousness, strikingly close to the one we saw in the Introduction to the Doctrine of Concept:

There is not a consciousness generating its products, or simply immanent to them, but consciousness is always in the immediacy of the idea, lost in it and losing itself with it, and relating to other consciousnesses (what one might call other moments of consciousness) through the internal relations of the ideas to which consciousnesses belong.\(^{38}\)

Hyppolite remarks that despite obvious analogies, the conception of science offered by Cavaillès differs from Hegel’s, at least in that for Cavaillès there is no “immanence of the self in the content.” Hyppolite concludes that strictly speaking, Cavaillès is closer to Spinoza than to Hegel.\(^{39}\) Whatever the case may be on this point, it is significant that Cavaillès, who opposed on the one hand what he called “philosophy of consciousness,” and on the other hand the logical positivism of the Vienna circle,\(^{40}\) should in so doing find common grounds with Hegel. It seems to me that it is in this general direction, rather than that of a dialectical ontology (whatever this expression might mean) that we should seek the most lasting influence of Hegel’s dialectic on Marx’s method.

There is, however, also a more fundamental reason for being cautious when emphasizing the similarities between Cavaillès’ view and Hegel’s. Hegel, unlike Cavaillès or even Marx, does not offer an epistemology (of mathematics for Cavaillès, of social and historical sciences for Marx), but a revolution in metaphysics. The science he is talking about in the sentence cited above (“I posit in the self-movement of the concept that by which science exists”) is philosophy itself, taking over the place of the old metaphysics. Here again Hegel’s Kantian ancestry is evident. Kant’s Transcendental Analytic is only the prelude to a new metaphysics (metaphysics of nature, metaphysics of morals), just as for Hegel the Logic is a metaphysics as logic, that is, a system of the rational forms in which being is thought. Hegel’s project is even less epistemological than is Kant’s. Hegel’s goal is not modestly to follow the development of particular sciences. Nor is it, whatever illusions his system may have encouraged in this regard, to ground particular sciences. Rather, it is to call upon particular sciences to demonstrate the part they take in the
existence of reason, in order to bring reason into its proper domain, which is that of philosophy as an unprecedented kind of metaphysics. One could add: Hegel proposes so little to ground scientific discourses that on the contrary, his purpose is to dissolve their claim to objective validity, and thus to open the space for speculative philosophy.

What, therefore, is the Logic? It is not a dogmatic ontology. And yet, it is the systematic exposition of all that can be said about being. Better yet, this discourse is not presented as that of a subjective consciousness on being, but as that of being itself. That is to say, Hegel’s claim is that there is an objective validity and an inescapable necessity of everything that is said in the Logic about being. For what is said is such that it exhausts all possibilities of postulating that there still remains something unsaid. Such, at least, is Hegel’s ambition (you who claim to lay out an ontology, you do not say more than I; on the contrary, you say much less).

One may, as Gérard Lebrun does, interpret Hegel’s Concept as a “pure work of language on itself.” But this characterization appears to miss the kind of necessity that carries forward Hegel’s Logic. For what is this “work of language”? It consists in the fact that what is said is again and again found to be inadequate to the goal which the movement of the concept strives to achieve. There is, in the Logic, an intentionality of the concept — a striving towards its own agreement with its object — which one may perhaps grasp only by relating it back to Kant’s transcendental apperception. The Logic does not only present the dissolution of meanings one took to be “well known,” it also presents a stubborn striving towards the agreement of the concept and its object, of the true and itself (as we shall see: the true concept of a true object). This is the standard against which Hegel’s Logic must be judged.
In presenting the section on “Ground,” I shall develop the three following points. First, I will show how on the ruins of dogmatic metaphysics after Kantian critical philosophy, Hegel rebuilds a metaphysics of being as being thought, whose corner-stone is his explanation of “ground.” Second, I will show how, with the different figures of “ground,” a totality of thought-determinations is progressively constituted. This constitution, like any process of reflection in the Doctrine of Essence, goes through a moment of dogmatic metaphysics, a moment of empiricism and critical (transcendental) philosophy, and a moment of dialectical logic. These different moments introduce a surprising degree of flexibility into the constitution of the totality. They lead us to examine the relation between ground and concept in Hegel’s system. Third and finally, I propose to show how Hegel’s rejection of the Kantian problem of the thing in itself is confirmed by a new definition of the “unconditioned.”

Hegel’s ground and Kant’s transcendental unity
of apperception

It is with “ground” that Hegel leads us from his criticism of the illusory independence of the determinations of being to the exposition of the productivity proper to essence. The border between these two aspects of essence as “reflection in itself” is of course porous. Hegel’s examination of identity, difference, and contradiction already showed that it is through reflection that the determinations of being are presented. Nevertheless, if those “determinations of reflection” were considered in isolation from their completion in the determination of “ground,” the outcome of the examination could be only negative, they could lead to nothing more than skepticism. The identity of each “something”
dissolves into its difference from all the others, and this dissolution leads to the result that no “something” is what it is through itself alone: it is only the seeming that results from a process of comparison and opposition. Its being is its non-being, it is contradiction: “all things are in themselves contradictory.” Indeed, Hegel emphasizes the proximity between the “negatively dialectic” that is the reflection of essence, and skepticism.

The dialectical moment is the proper self-sublating [das eigene Sichaufheben] of such finite determinations, and their transition into their opposites.

(1) The dialectical moment [das Dialektische], when the understanding takes it separately, especially as presented in concepts of Science [in wissenschaftlichen Begriffen aufgezeigt], becomes skepticism; it contains mere negation as the result of the dialectical moment. (GW 20, 119; S. 8, 172; E. L. §81, 115–116)

But the result of the dialectic cannot be only negative, precisely by virtue of what was said of essence and of the nature of essential determinations. Essence has from the start been defined as the unified process of thought that posits being. Only if they were received passively would the determinations of being simply disappear. Then their collapse would leave nothing. But transcendental philosophy revealed that no determination, however immediate, is truly immediate. It belongs to the unity of the process of thought that constituted it. This is expressed, in Hegel’s Logic of Essence, by the collapse of being into reflection and the exposition of the determinations of reflection. The latter would lead to mere skepticism, to the suicide of thought, only if one forgot what made them possible: the revelation of the reflexive unity that constitutes all finite determination and tells its “truth” – its “truth” is not its conformity to the thing in itself, but its role and function in this unified process.

This is why Hegel is quick to specify that the skepticism to which he relates his dialectic is not the modern skepticism of Hume, but the antique skepticism of Sextus Empiricus.

One should not confuse with the noble skepticism of Antiquity, the modern skepticism . . . , which partly preceded the critical philosophy and partly sprang out of it. This recent skepticism consisted solely in denying the truth and certainty of the supersensible, and in pointing to the sensible [das Sinnliche] and what is present in immediate sensations as that to which we have to hold ourselves. (S. 8, 176; E. L. §81 a, 119)
For Hume, the sole source of cognitions is sensible impressions, and imaginative synthesis itself is only the associative result of the repetition of joint impressions. If the latter cannot provide access to anything beyond the senses, to any thought of universal validity, then nothing can. The result of Hume’s examination of the nature and powers of sensible cognition is purely negative. For Hegel, on the contrary, just as for Kant, our having thoughts that go beyond what is provided by the senses is an uncontroversial fact. If no examination of sensible cognition can account for such thoughts, then this just shows that they are produced elsewhere and in another way that needs to be accounted for. As we have seen repeatedly, however, according to Hegel Kant does not hold consistently to this “profound and correct” point of view. More than in Kant, Hegel sees in the ancient skeptics a fully developed criticism of sensible determinations. It is not my purpose to examine whether this view of ancient skepticism is correct or not. What concerns me is Hegel’s view according to which the “determinations of reflection,” in which the nullity of sensible determinations finds its logical expression, necessarily lead to “ground.” What is this “result” of contradiction which is at the same time the true starting point for the reclaiming of the determinations of being by reflection, or essence?

Ground is

one of the determinations of reflection of essence; but it is the last, or rather it is that determination which consists in being sublated determination.

(GW 11, 291; S. 6, 80; L. 444)

Ground is still a determination of reflection: it belongs to this first part of the doctrine of essence, “essence as reflection in itself,” where Hegel expounds the figures of thought by which any determination of being is sublated into the realm of reflection. But at the same time, “ground” is already no longer a mere determination of reflection. In “ground,” what is in play is the cancellation of reflection and its return to what is always already there, the multiplicity of presented determinations which constitutes the other pole of thought, the pole of resistance to the unifying goal of the act of thinking.

Ground is the unity of thought that stabilizes the constant flux of determinations present in the moment of “difference.” As such, it is also the source of the objectivity of determinations, i.e. of their relation to an object, their unity in an object. The source of the unity of determinations is also the source of the unity of objects. But to relate determinations to objects is to revert to what is “real,” to that in which
determinations exist. Significantly, the chapter on Ground opens the way to the section entitled “The Appearance” (Erscheinung) which begins with a chapter dedicated to “the thing and its properties” (see GW 11, 323, 327; S. 6, 124, 129; L. 479, 484). “Ground” is the determination of reflection that makes it possible to think the unity of the thing in the multiplicity of its properties.

Reflection is pure mediation in general, ground is real mediation of essence with itself. (GW 11, 292; S. 6, 81; L. 445)

“Pure mediation” is this “movement from nothing to nothing” in which positing reflection consisted, which denied the autonomy of being to reveal in its determinations a pure reflection of essence, or reflection, within itself. “Real mediation” is the return to being, the affirmation that the determinations of being are indeed the determinations of something, that they have a firm support, and that this support can be thought. In “pure mediation,”

because opposition as yet has no self-subsistence, neither is essence, that which casts its light into the seeming, something positive, nor is the other in which it casts its light a negative. Both are substrates properly only of imagination; they are not yet such that they relate to themselves [sie sind noch nicht sich auf sich selbst beziehende]. (GW 11, 292; S. 6, 81; L. 445)

This “imagination” as the sole context for reflection and its “seeming” cannot but recall Hume. If there were no return to ground as the source of the unity of determinations, reflection would be nothing but Hume’s imagination. But there is a return to ground, and this return was already foreshadowed in the previous determinations of reflection. In fact, already in the exposition of “difference” we were told that “ground” was at work in all the other determinations of reflection.

Difference is the whole and its own moment, just as identity too is its whole and its moment. – This is to be considered as the essential nature of reflection and as the determinate, original ground [bestimmter Urgrund] of every activity and self-movement. (GW 11, 266; S. 6, 47; L. 417; Hegel’s emphases) ¹

With this characterization of ground, we see once again both Hegel’s proximity to Kant, and his distancing himself from Kant. The proximity: Hegel’s “ground,” like his “concept,” is the heir to Kant’s transcendental unity of apperception in the Critique of Pure Reason. The distance: Kant’s transcendental unity of apperception belongs primarily in a theory of
knowledge. Hegel’s “ground,” in contrast, is a metaphysical notion (albeit of a peculiar kind), characterizing a structure of being internalized to reflection. Hegel expounds this structure more specifically in the three parts of the section on “Determinate Ground”: “Formal Ground,” “Real Ground,” and “Complete Ground” (see GW 11, 302–314; S. 6, 96–112; L. 456–469).

The proximity between Kant’s and Hegel’s understanding of “ground” is attested, I suggest, by some striking passages from Kant’s Transcendental Deduction of the Categories, in the Critique of Pure Reason. Here it is not only the reference to Kant that illuminates Hegel’s thought. It is also Hegel’s notion of ground that retrospectively throws light on Kant’s text, by extracting it from the strictly epistemological context in which, following the neo-Kantians, we tend to confine it. By epistemological context I mean a problematic in which what is in question is the method of knowledge (e.g. the familiar question of the relation between theory and experience), rather than the nature of being and its determinations. Reading Kant in light of Hegel’s questions, however, delineates the second problem behind the first.

Kant writes:

[Spontaneity] is now the ground of a threefold synthesis, which is necessarily found in all cognition [. . .]. (A97)

Regarding the synthesis of reproduction in the imagination:

There must therefore be something that itself makes possible this reproduction of the appearances by being the a priori ground of a necessary synthetic unity of them. (A101)

Regarding the synthesis of recognition in the concept:

Every necessity has a transcendental condition as its ground. A transcendental ground must therefore be found for the unity of the consciousness in the synthesis of the manifold of all our intuitions, hence also of the concepts of objects in general, consequently also of all objects of experience, without which it would be impossible to think of any object for our intuitions [. . .]. (A106)

Finally, the ground of the three syntheses – the synthesis of apprehension in the intuition, the synthesis of reproduction in the imagination, the synthesis of recognition in the concept – is again defined in the following way:
[P]ure intuition (with regard to it as representation, time, the form of inner intuition) grounds the totality of perception a priori; the pure synthesis of the imagination grounds association a priori; and pure apperception, i.e., the thoroughgoing identity of oneself in all possible representations, grounds empirical consciousness a priori.

Now if we wish to follow the inner ground of this connection of representations up to that point in which they must all come together in order first to obtain unity of cognition for a possible experience, then we must begin with pure apperception. (A 115–116; my emphasis)

In the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant does not go through the detailed exposition of the threefold synthesis. The new version of the Transcendental Deduction makes it all the clearer that transcendental apperception is the sole ground for any connection between representations and thus for their objective validity.

When I make the empirical intuition of a house into a perception through apprehension of its manifold, I have as a ground [my emphasis] the necessary unity [Kant’s emphasis] of space and of outer sensible intuition in general, and I as it were draw its shape in agreement with this synthetic unity of the manifold in space. This very same synthetic unity, however, if I abstract from the form of space, has its seat in the understanding, and is the category of the synthesis of the homogeneous in intuition in general . . . (B 162)

Since all possible perception depends on the synthesis of apprehension, but the latter itself, this empirical synthesis, depends on the transcendental one, thus on the categories, all possible perceptions, hence everything that can ever reach empirical consciousness, i.e. all appearances of nature, as far as their combination is concerned, stand under the categories, on which nature (considered merely as nature in general) depends, as the original ground [my emphasis] of its necessary lawfulness (as *natura formaliter spectata*). (B 164–165)

I quoted these passages at some length because they help us see the extent to which the theme of *ground* is present in them. If we remember the praises Hegel heaped on Kant’s Transcendental Deduction of the Categories, particularly in the Introduction to the Doctrine of the Concept, the comparison becomes even more significant. Now, Kant’s main idea is the following. There would be no unity in our representations unless unity was brought to them by the spontaneity of thought. But the very same function that introduces in our representations the unity that allows them to be representations of objects, is the source
of the unity of appearances (empirical objects) under laws. Although the exposition of the “threefold synthesis” in the first edition makes the exposition of this point more confused and ponderous, it has the advantage of emphasizing even more the degree to which all representations of object are dependent on this spontaneity: not only the concept of the object, or its determinate cognition, but the very perception of the object and its properties, and even the consciousness of the sensation that makes this perception possible, have as their “ground” a function of the spontaneity of thought. This is why the forms of this spontaneity (the categories) are a priori true of the objects thus represented.

The same thing happens with Hegel’s “ground.” But there is an important difference. The “ground” Kant is talking about is a ground in cognition. Kant is particularly explicit in the exposition of the “threefold synthesis”: synthesis in the intuition, synthesis in the imagination, synthesis in the concept. We never lose sight of the cognitive capacities. Of course as we just saw, in the B edition the Transcendental Deduction concludes with a statement about appearances:

All appearances of nature [...] stand under the categories, on which nature (considered merely as nature in general) depends, as the original ground of its necessary lawfulness [...] (B165)

Nevertheless, throughout the Deduction the emphasis is not placed on the world or on nature, but on the structure of experience. In contrast, what Hegel is talking about is the world. It is in the world that he wants to expound the unity of things, as appearances. From a principle of experience, “ground” becomes a principle of being, or a principle that reveals the labor of reflection that was always already at work in the determinations of being and then drove in the Logic, their being superseded into determinations of reflection. This is how transcendental apperception, which for Kant is constitutive of the unity of the object, is redefined by Hegel as the unity of the ground and the grounded.

The determinateness of essence as ground thus becomes twofold, that of ground and that of the grounded. It is, first, essence as ground, determined as essence over against positedness, determined, that is, as non-posedness. Second, it is the grounded, the immediate, which however is not in and for itself; it is positedness as positedness. (GW 11, 294; S. 6, 84; L. 447; Hegel’s emphases)

“Ground,” as the unity of essence or reflection, should not be sought elsewhere than in that which it grounds: the unity of ground and the
grounded, i.e. the world as a world that is thought, and the developed form that this unity takes. This is why Hegel immediately presents “ground” as the dialectical unity of essence and form, then of form and matter, and finally of form and content (see GW 11, 294–302; S. 6, 84–96; L. 447–456). Each pair of determinations expresses under a particular aspect the immanence of ground in that which it grounds, or of thought in the world-as-thought. I shall not consider the details of these first developments on ground. More directly relevant to my point are the next developments, on determinate ground, in which Hegel expounds the more specific forms taken by the introduction of the unity of reflection into the exteriority of the real. This is where what I announced above is sketched out: the complex constitution of a totality of thought-determinations. Figures of thought that will be important to the later developments of the Doctrine of Essence are elaborated: “formal ground” will later be echoed in “law” and “force,” and then in “formal actuality”; “real ground” will later be echoed in “causality”; complete ground will be echoed in “reciprocal action.” These are only a few examples of the ways in which the structure of “determinate ground” becomes the structure of the whole development of “Appearance” and then “Actuality.”

In sum, “ground” structures the whole Doctrine of Essence, just as “syllogism” will structure the Doctrine of the Concept. Interestingly, however, “determinate ground” offers a less triumphant picture of what thought can generate from its own resources than do Hegel’s “concept” and “syllogism,” expounded in the Subjective Logic. Indeed, “ground” seems to challenge in advance familiar charges against Hegel, by providing its own criticism of any claim to an a priori genesis of the unpredictable multiplicity of objective determinations from the unity of thought. In what follows I shall say a few preliminary words about this striking situation before considering the detailed structure of “determinate ground.”

Determinate ground: a self-criticism of Hegelian speculation?

In the Remark that closes his general introduction to “Ground,” Hegel distinguishes his notion of ground (Grund) from that which is at work in Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason (Satz des zureichenden Grundes). He insists that the latter, not the former, has a teleological connotation. Teleology, Hegel adds, belongs to the Doctrine of Concept, not to the Doctrine of Essence (see GW 11, 293; S. 6, 83; L. 446–447). Now, a familiar criticism commonly formulated against Hegel’s philosophy
of history is precisely its teleological character: the end of history is supposed to be anticipated by the immanent purposiveness of the Idea and all historical processes are supposed to be nothing but the self-unfolding of the Idea. The Remark just cited certainly does not suffice to make Hegel’s view of “ground” a critique of the teleological, “expressive totality” that recent critiques of Hegel see at work in his philosophy of history, especially since Hegel’s “ground” is itself destined to find its “truth” in the concept. Nevertheless, “ground” does seem to present, within the Logic, a notion of totality significantly different from the one that will unfold with the development of Hegel’s “concept.” As we shall see, Hegel’s exposition of the moments of “determinate ground,” more particularly the moments of “formal ground” and “complete ground,” could have provided later critiques of Hegelian speculation with the blueprint for the arguments they mounted against Hegel. Hegel’s exposition of “formal ground” strangely foreshadows Marx’s critique of Hegel’s “hypostases,” and Hegel’s exposition of complete ground offers a definition of ground as a totality of relations, or “relation of relations” oddly close to the “efficacy of a structure on its elements” defined by Louis Althusser against what he calls Hegel’s “expressive essence.” These comparisons would be more illuminating if we examined Hegel’s “concept,” expounded in Part 2 of the Science of Logic in as much detail as we are going to examine “ground.” Only then could we come to a sufficiently informed evaluation of the role played in Hegel’s system by the surprising developments of “determinate ground.” More particularly, only then could we determine what remains of these developments after Hegel’s “concept” is expounded in its own right. Instead I shall be able to offer only hypothetical and partial conclusions at the end of my examination of Hegel’s “ground.” I hope at least that they will be a first step towards an interpretation of the relation between “essence” (in Hegel’s Doctrine of Essence”) and “concept” (in Hegel’s “Subjective Logic, or the Doctrine of the Concept”).

Let me first recall the place and meaning of Hegel’s “determinate ground.”

“Determinate ground” comes after the exposition of “absolute ground,” i.e. the exposition of the pairs of concepts in which what is thought is the immanence of the ground in that which it “grounds,” i.e. in all determinations of things. However, just as reflection presupposes something in which it unfolds its determinations – which it reflects and in which it reflects itself – so ground presupposes a content for which
it is the ground. “Determinate ground” is the exposition of this medi-
ation of ground and a content in which it is expounded or in which it
is at work. Unsurprisingly, in this relation of ground to what it grounds
we will find again the three moments of reflection (positing, external,
determining). They are present in the guise of formal ground, real
ground, and complete ground.

Formal ground.  Formal ground belongs to an overly hasty reflection
which, transforming the empirical given into thought-determination,
ends up thinking nothing at all. A typical example is the familiar “dor-
mitive virtue of opium.” In ordinary life, says Hegel, this kind of expla-
nation is held in derision. But we are not sufficiently aware that many
so-called scientific explanations come down in the final analysis to this
kind of explanation.

For instance, the ground of the movement of the planets around the sun
is said to be the attractive force of the earth and sun with respect to one
another. As regards content, this expresses nothing other than what is
contained in the phenomenon, namely the relation of these bodies to
one another, only in the form of a determination reflected into itself, in
the form of force. \(GW\,11,\,304;\,S.\,6,\,98;\,L.\,458\)

Formal ground amounts to noting an empirical regularity and raising it
to the dignity of an explanatory principle, which moreover is presented
as an entity in its own right (here a “force”).

Hegel gives another example:

If a crystalline form is explained by saying that it has its ground in the
particular arrangement into which the molecules enter with respect to one
another, then the existing crystallization is this arrangement itself
which is given as the ground. \(GW\,11,\,304;\,S.\,6,\,99;\,L.\,459\)

This example shows what Hegel takes to be the tautological character
of such explanations: the empirical description of the phenomenon
is transformed into a pseudo-explanation by being reformulated as a
general idea. There follows a paradoxical reversal, in which what one
claims to be ground is in fact grounded – by that which it was supposed
to ground.

The ground, on the one hand, is ground as the reflection into itself of the
content-determination of the existence which it grounds; on the other
hand it is the posited. It is that from which the phenomenon is to be
understood; but conversely, it is the ground that is inferred from the
phenomenon and the former is understood from the latter. The main business of this reflection consists, namely, in finding the ground from the phenomenon, that is, converting the immediate phenomenon into the form of reflected being; the ground, instead of being in and for itself and self-standing, is on the contrary what is posited and derived. (GW 11, 305; S. 6, 100; L. 459)

Far from overcoming empirical dispersion, cognition according to formal ground is imprisoned in what is empirical. The supposedly rigorous exposition of the logical developments of the general representation cannot mask the fact that it is in fact guided by mere empirical data.

Uncertainty [as to what is ground, what is grounded] is increased, especially if the exposition is not rigorously consistent, but is more honest, by the fact that one comes across traces and circumstances of the phenomenon which point to a content that is more manifold and diverse than what is merely contained in the principles. Confusion finally becomes even greater when determinations which are reflected and merely hypothetical are mingled with immediate determinations of the phenomenon itself, and the former are enunciated as though they belonged to immediate experience. (GW 11, 306; S. 6, 101; L. 460)

Interestingly, the criticism of the notion of attractive force present in the first text cited above echoes a criticism that was formulated by Newton himself.

“To tell us,” he proclaimed in his scientific testament at the end of his Optics, “that every Species of Things is endow’d with an occult specific quality [like gravity] by which it acts and produces manifest effects, is to tell us nothing.”

If Hegel’s statements about astronomy are not always felicitous, in the present case at least he is not to be faulted. In any event, what is of interest to us here is the demonstration in the service of which Hegel calls upon this example. Formal ground is, according to Hegel, an abstract generalization of what is empirically given, the phenomenon. Thinking according to formal ground paradoxically reverses the relation of grounding and grounded: a regularity that is inductively derived is presented as the ground of that from which it is inductively derived.

Hegel’s criticism becomes clearer when Hegel indicates that his main charge against this mode of explanation is the confusion it introduces between what is an empirically given object and what is a construction
of thought. For example, in thinking according to formal ground one is led to take centrifugal force, ether, an isolated light ray, electrical or magnetic matter, and so on, for empirically real entities, whereas they are only abstract representations of such entities: one mistakes such representations for “things or relations which . . . are given in perception” (GW 11, 306; S. 6, 101; L. 460–461; Hegel’s emphasis). An extreme case of such confusion was already denounced in the chapter “Force and the Understanding” in the Phenomenology of Spirit under the title “the Inverted World” (cf. GW 9, 95–98; S. 3, 126–130; Phen. 96–99), and there already Hegel denounced the reversal of the relation of grounding and grounded that is carried by such a confusion.\(^8\)

Now interestingly, the theme of “reversal” is at the core of what will later be Feuerbach’s criticism of Hegel’s “speculative essence”: the latter rests, according to Feuerbach, on a reversal of the relation between empirical reality and thought, where what is in fact a predicate becomes the fiction of a subject, and conversely what is subject is fictionally presented as predicate. Via Feuerbach, the same criticism is found in Marx, with a terminology that is even closer to Hegel’s criticism of formal ground. Not only does Marx reproach Hegel for having transformed into the illusion of an actually existing entity what is actually nothing but an abstraction from empirical reality, but moreover Marx shows, as Hegel did with respect to formal ground, that the empirical given takes its revenge by showing through at every step of the speculative exposition. This is a recurring theme in Marx’s Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right:

> Family and civil society are the presuppositions of the state; they are the really active things; but in speculative philosophy it is reversed. The Idea is made subject, and the real subjects – civil society, family, circumstances, caprice, etc. – become unreal, and take on the different meaning of objective moments of the Idea.\(^9\)

The result is that in Hegel’s exposition,

> The development always proceeds from the predicate (of the predicate) or mystified predicate, the “real subject” or the empirical subject transformed into a predicate; and thus one gains no content, only the form of the old content changes.\(^10\)

Indeed, the development is based in each case on wholly empirical grounds [. . .].\(^11\)
To pursue this comparison further we would need to examine Feuerbach’s and Marx’s criticisms of Hegel’s system as a whole. Nevertheless, within the limits of the present study it is interesting to note the proximity between the explicitly empiricist inspiration of Feuerbach and the young Marx (advocating the return to the empirical object and the refusal of a priori claims), and Hegel’s criticism of formal ground.\(^\text{12}\)

However, if there is an empiricist inspiration in the Logic, it has a transition function, as an alarm clock waking us up from dogmatic slumbers. It is no sooner formulated than taken up again in a transcendental problematic: for Hegel, the result of the dead-ends of formal ground is what we might call a return to what is empirically real, to the recognition of a multiplicity of determinations for which one cannot arbitrarily posit a principle of unity: this is the transition to “real ground.”

**Real ground** Here it will help to return for a moment to the general explanation of Hegel’s notion of “ground.” In comparing it with Kant’s transcendental apperception, I characterized ground as the unity of thought that constitutes all objectivity; we saw that with ground, the dissolution of the independent determinations of being, the characterization of identity and difference as determinations of reflection, and the characterization of contradiction have their final outcome in the inscription of all the determinations of being into the unity of thought. Ground is the principle of unity in an object, the principle of the unity of the determinations of being in general. A principle not in the form of a merely subjective rule, but realized as an objective determination. The chapter on “determinate ground” expounds the different forms taken by the reflection of this principle of unity.

This reminder will perhaps help us explain the import of the critique of formal ground and understand how “real ground” and “complete ground” follow from it. Formal ground is the illusory objectification of the unity of appearances into an occult quality (for instance, a force). With real ground, we do not give up on such a unity; what we are dealing with is still “ground,” as defined above. But “real ground” is an attempt to construct this unity while doing justice to the difference, or diversity, of the real determinations. I will not try to detail all of Hegel’s transitions, but propose only to show how the unifying perspective that governs the process of “real ground” requires that it be superseded in order to move towards the determination of “complete ground.” In this last moment Hegel propounds an interesting characterization of a totality of thought-determinations.
Let us first consider “real ground.” At this stage, the inexhaustible richness of the empirical determinations with respect to the unity of the ground is acknowledged. So the “ground” becomes only what is “essential,” with respect to which other determinations are “inessential.” However, difficulties arise again when one asks about the relation between the “essential determination” and all the others. For example: why is this determination, rather than any other, “essential,” bearing the unity of the whole? How can one explain the fact that it bears this phenomenal unity, and not another? How can one explain the conjunction, in the reality it “grounds,” of determinations which are clearly connected to it, and of others which are inessential and contingent with respect to it? Thus it is the relation between ground – essential determination – and grounded, which in turn needs to be grounded. In other words, the unifying goal cannot be satisfied with the characterization of one or more particular, partial determinations as the “ground” of the whole.\(^\text{13}\)

One of Hegel’s examples, clearly borrowed from Kant, is that of the relation between nature and the world.

If it is said of nature that it is the ground of the world, then what is called nature is, on the one hand, one with the world, and the world is nothing but nature itself. But they are also different, so that nature is rather the essence of the world identical with itself, and indeterminate, or at least determinate only in those general differences which are laws; and before nature can be the world, a multiplicity of determinations must be externally added to it. But these do not have their ground in nature as such. On the contrary, nature is indifferent to them, and with respect to it they are contingent. (\textit{GW} 11, 309–310; S. 6, 106; \textit{L}. 464)

Recall that in concluding the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories, Kant warned that the categories make possible an a priori knowledge of the laws of a “nature in general,” but do not suffice to provide the particular, empirical laws of appearances. Only experience can provide the latter (A95–97). We find a similar idea here. But Hegel expresses it not in the form of a relation between a priori determinations and empirical determinations, but in the form of a relation between “essential” and “inessential” determinations. Why is a system of laws that in no way grounds particular empirical determinations nevertheless defined as “essential” determination, grounding the unity of the world? The unity of the laws and the empirical multiplicity is not grounded in the laws themselves. In fact, says Hegel, real ground is guilty of the same formalism as formal ground. For it only “grounds” what is identical to itself
(a system of regularities among appearances, that does not capture all the empirical determinations of appearances).

An echo of this grievance is found again in the chapter on “the law of appearance” (GW 11, 342; S. 6, 150; L. 500). The law appears to be a mere generalization of what is empirically given, the abstract representation of the most “constant” aspects of empirical reality. It does not ground the unity it expresses, for example the unity of spatial and temporal determinations in the law of free fall. It merely describes it. It is powerless to ground itself and just as powerless to ground its own relation to the reality for which it is the “essential” determination (GW 11, 345–347; S. 6, 154–156; L. 504–505). Does this mean that we must give up “real ground”? No, but real ground itself needs to be “grounded.” Just as the self-criticism of “formal ground” led to “real ground,” so the self-criticism of “real ground” leads to “complete ground.”

Complete ground Complete ground is a “relation of relations.” It grounds the “real” relation – “real ground” – in a universal relation which must be thought in order for the real ground to be thought as well.

Hegel’s point is that the essential determination (defined in “real ground”) does not suffice to ground its own unity with that for which it is essential. No deductive procedure makes it possible to progress from the laws of nature to the empirical determinations of nature. And yet, the laws of nature are thought to be the “ground” of the world. How is such a grounding relation possible? It is possible only insofar as the relation between laws and the world is not grounded in the laws, but in this relation itself. The relation between laws and the world must be thought in order for the laws themselves to be thought. It can even be said that the laws are laws only insofar as their relation to the world is thought. This relation between real ground and the universal reflection of this ground is reflected by “complete ground.”

Complete ground is thus the grounding of real ground (the relation of laws and the world) in the reflection of real ground (a reflection according to which there is a necessary grounding connection between the laws and the world). In other words, the relation is grounded in the reflection of this same relation. This puts us back into the framework of formal ground. “Complete ground” is thus a ground unifying “formal ground” and “real ground.” It takes into account “real ground” insofar as a multiplicity of real determinations is thought in it, together with the predominance of “essential” real determinations over those which are
“inessential.” But it is also “formal” in that this relation between “essential” and “inessential” determinations is in turn “grounded” – in its own reflection. The reflection of unity “grounds” unity. This is strange: are we now accepting a tautology that was criticized and dismissed in the exposition of formal ground?

Indeed we are accepting it, because now the tautology is inseparable from a heterology. Formal ground is inseparable from real ground. The reflected relation exists only in the context of the real relation, in *this* particular real relation. It is not the “essential determination” that grounds the relation. Rather, the relation in which the totality of the determinations of a thing is thought is what grounds the “essential determination” and its relation to “inessential determinations.” The unity must be thought before the respective roles of the determinations can be thought. No determination bears “in itself” the fact that it is essential, or that it bears the unity of all the others. This is why complete ground is at once a tautological reflection of real ground, and anything but a hypostasis (in the sense denounced by Marx). It does not instate a new reality as a ground for the first. “Complete ground” does not exist outside real ground, but is a progress in thinking real ground (by grounding the unity, i.e. reciprocal determination, of “essential” and “inessential” determinations).

This way of presenting “complete ground” seems to me to be quite close to a conception of totality that has recently been introduced in opposition to the Hegelian notion of totality: the definition proposed by Louis Althusser of a “whole structured with a dominance.” By introducing this expression, Althusser means to challenge Hegel’s conception of totality and argue for the superiority of Marx’s conception. Let me briefly recall Althusser’s argument.

According to Althusser, the analysis of social structures forced Marx to pose a question that had never been asked before: how does one account for the efficacy of a structure on its elements? Hegel, says Althusser, had attempted to answer this question. But his answer, like Leibniz’s, is flawed because of the conception these authors have of totality. While Hegel’s totality is defined as the Idea, a single principle positing its own differences by self-generation, the totality whose efficacy Marx tries to define is a complex totality of different structures, in which one structured whole of determinations (e.g. the totality of economic determinations, or “infrastructure”) may play a dominant role in the constitution of all other structural components of the complex whole.
If the whole is posed as structured, i.e., as possessing a type of unity quite different from the type of unity of the spiritual whole, [...] not only does it become impossible to think the determination of the elements by the structure in the categories of analytical and transitive causality, it also becomes impossible to think it in the category of the global expressive causality of a universal inner essence immanent in its phenomenon. The proposal to think the determination of the elements of a whole by the structure of the whole posed an absolutely new problem in the most theoretically embarrassing circumstances, for there were no philosophical concepts available for its resolution.\textsuperscript{15}

To define the whole as a structure organizing its elements as well as organizing other subordinate structures that have their own independent organizing efficacy, has one important consequence: these elements or subordinate structures cannot simply be “deduced” from the whole, as the particular is supposed to be deduced from the self-positing Hegelian Idea. They have their relatively autonomous development, their own existence, and yet an existence organized within this structure, a structure which itself has no existence except through them. The result is a kind of reciprocal efficacy that Althusser attempted to define by the concept of overdetermination. According to Althusser, overdetermination is \textit{par excellence} that which opposes Marx’s dialectic to Hegel’s.

But if my analysis of complete ground is accurate, it turns out that contrary to Althusser’s claim, Hegel’s “complete ground” presents a conception of totality that fully grants the autonomy and unequal development of real determinations. For “complete ground” characterizes the respective efficacy of each real determination as defined not in itself, but in virtue of its relation to all the others. There is thus no doubt in my eyes that Marx could find in Hegel the inspiration for a conception of totality such as that defined by Althusser. This point is made all the more relevant by the fact that during the period in which Marx wrote \textit{Capital}, both he and Engels were busy (re)reading Hegel’s \textit{Science of Logic}, and, particularly, the Doctrine of Essence.\textsuperscript{16}

One might reply that in characterizing Marx’s conception of totality as opposed to Hegel’s, Althusser does not challenge Hegel’s view of essence or ground in the Doctrine of Essence, but rather his view of concept and the Idea in the Doctrine of the Concept, which structures Hegel’s philosophy of right and philosophy of history. What do we care about Hegel’s view of “ground,” if it is destined to be superseded by “concept” and “Idea”? This raises the question: what role does “ground” play in Hegel’s system? Is it supposed to provide a model or method for
knowledge? Is it supposed to define a structure of reality? Is it supposed to do both? Similarly, what role does “concept” play? How and why must ground find its “truth” in the concept?

In the first chapter of this book, I characterized Hegel’s concept as a descendant of Kant’s unity of apperception, realized in contents of thought. The concept is implicit in being and becomes explicit in essence, where it is nevertheless distinct from the particular contents of being. In the concept, the unity of essence and being is realized, the unity of thought manifests its capacity to produce all content of thought. In the current chapter, I have also characterized ground as the unity of apperception. This is because it is itself the concept, but insofar as the latter is still distinct from its contents. It is the concept because it makes explicit the unity of thought at work in any “real” determination, and even more so in any unified “thing.” But it is separate from its contents since, as we just saw, the reflection of the unity of the thing or complex of things remains to be conquered and remains, up to complete ground, unsatisfying. Even complete ground itself is, on the one hand, real ground, on the other, the reflection of this real ground in its relation to what it grounds. The separation has not yet been overcome. Should one consider, then, that with “ground” Hegel is proposing a structure of reality and therefore outlining a method of knowledge of that reality “superior” to that which is at work in being, but still “inferior” to the one the concept will expound? What was just explained would tend rather to show that, more than a progression, the transition from being to essence, and above all to ground, is a regression towards that which was always already there in what is (thought).

This is why Hegel is so fond of the term “erinnern” by which he defines essence. Essence is the “sich erinnern” of being. The interiorization of being towards that which determines it implicitly, and the recollection of that which presided over its constitution. Hegel thus gives his own idiosyncratic meaning to Plato’s “reminiscence.” And yet this regression is also a progression. It is a progression of philosophical knowledge, made possible by a progression of knowledge in general. The exposition of “ground” is made possible by the fact that the dynamic unity of thought surfaces in the modern forms of knowledge.

Here again a comparison of Hegel’s view with Kant’s Copernican Revolution will be useful. In citing Galileo and Torricelli in the Preface to the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant makes of the “Copernican Revolution” that grounds his philosophy a moment of the self-reflection of reason made possible by its own realizations, its own accomplishment
in knowledge. It was always true that “reason has insight only into what it itself produces.” If we grant Kant’s thesis in this Preface, reason in Aristotle’s mode of cognition is just as responsible for what it knows as it is in Galileo’s or Newton’s. But with Galileo this “essence” comes to the surface in the methods of cognition themselves, reason’s concepts are an explicit component in the characterization of its object. This is why, according to Kant, together with the law of falling bodies, we owe Galileo the fact that “a light dawned on all those who study nature”: the activity of reason in the very determinations of the objects it knows was revealed. Progress in science opens the way to a revolution in philosophy (cf. BXII–XIII).

We find this same twofold dimension in Hegel’s exposition of ground. But while in Kant the discovery of the unity of reason is fixed in a system of categories, Hegel’s position is more flexible: his intention is to show that the unity of thought is implicitly at work in all thought of being, and that it becomes explicit in any attempt to ground the unity of the object. The various moments of ground are there to show that it is indeed unity of thought which is at work whenever the (implicit or explicit) use of the principle of sufficient reason “brings a thing back to its ground.” The error of philosophical or scientific thought is then to try to fix this unity in one thing. The “return” to complete ground is the return to the thought that “ground” is nothing beyond the “relation of relations” in which a completely determinate content is unified. This system of relations cannot be fixed in a pseudo-entity that is distinct from that determinate content. The unity, as a unity of thought, is present in “formal ground,” then in the grounding of “real ground” in “complete ground.” Throughout this process, what is expounded in Hegel’s “ground” is not a particular method for cognition. Rather, what is expounded is Hegel’s thesis according to which, whatever the method adopted at a particular stage in cognition, and whatever the degree of explicit consciousness that accompanies this method, cognition is caught in the system of grounds just defined. “Complete ground” is not a ground of cognition. It is a ground of being as absolute knowing reveals it.

Here, then, are a few tentative conclusions.

There is in Hegel a conception of totality analogous to that which Althusser attributes to Marx. But in Hegel, this conception is not a principle of cognition. It is a new kind of metaphysical principle. This principle is destined to being superseded by the concept. For just as essence is the “truth” of being in that the determinations of being
disappear unless they are recognized as pervaded by the movement of reflection, and thus essence, so the concept is the “truth” of essence, and consequently of ground, because there was no determination of essence but through the implicit presence of the concept. But the concept will not be a principle of cognition any more than ground is. Hegel proposes to show how what we call cognition is only a recollection of a thought unity whose self-determination can be expounded as soon as the movement of essence has demonstrated its identity through all content of thought. What Hegel is recommending is a full-fledged exit from the cave, a conversion from being to essence and from essence to concept. But this conversion does not change anything to finite cognitions, which, for their part, can go on their merry way, so to speak.

Fine, one will say. But if Althusser’s opposition between Marx and Hegel rests on nothing but a misunderstanding, why mention it? Well, it is not uninteresting to find out that a category structuring the Doctrine of Essence in its entirety (that of “ground,” and more specifically “determinate ground”) should find its homologue in a supposedly materialist dialectical method. Marx’s materialism means the restoration of the irreducibility of matter to thought. Now, if I am right, in the Doctrine of Essence Hegel takes the resistance of matter to be an active element in the constitution of the figures of thought. This is why the two main features of the Doctrine of Essence are the incessant resurgence of contradiction and the incompleteness of totality. This explains why a “negative dialectic” like Adorno’s, which attempts to rethink Hegel’s project by refusing to close the concept upon itself, seems in many ways to play Hegel’s Doctrine of Essence against the Doctrine of the Concept. More generally, it is always tempting to mitigate Hegel’s “concept” by thinking it in terms of ground, which reintroduces a separation between the concept and what it “grounds.” This is what Bernard Bourgeois noted in concluding his presentation of the Encyclopedia Logic.

Hegel’s philosophy presents itself clearly as a philosophy of the concept, the unity of itself and its other, and this is why the Logic, the genesis of the meaning of being as concept, is, in Hegelianism, the founding science of all the philosophical sciences. The Logic, which in truth is the concept, is the ground for the real. Or rather, since ground is an abstract determination of essence, which reveals itself to be in truth the concept, we should say that the logical is only the ground for the real in
that this ground is in itself the concept. But precisely, this temptation to
explain the concrete (rational) category of the concept by the abstract
category (stemming from the understanding) of ground [...] perhaps
expresses the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of grasping as concept
the relation of the logical and the real, of thought and being. We are
reaching here [...] a major problem – perhaps the problem – posed by
Hegelianism.¹⁹

Now of course, according to Hegel it is strictly speaking not possible
to oppose the perspective of ground to that of the concept. For it is
already a misinterpretation to understand ground from a perspective
of separation between ground and the grounded. Ground is nothing
outside that which it grounds, and what it grounds is nothing inde-
pendently of ground: such is the unity of ground and conditions, which
leads to Hegel’s definition of the absolutely unconditioned, to which I now
turn.²⁰

Ground, conditions, absolutely unconditioned

“Complete ground” presented us with a reflection that was at once positing and presupposing. Ground posits being as a unity of determinations.
This means that ground constitutes this real unity at the same time
as the latter is “superseded,” since it exists only through the ground
that posits it. This is the side of “positing” reflection. But on the other
hand, reflection is “positing” only insofar as it is “presupposing.” What
is “posited” must have already been there, presupposed, in order to be
reflected. “Complete ground” presupposes real determinations, and
reflects the relation between these determinations as posited by itself.
Thus “ground” is the side of unity (in thought). “Condition” is the side
of real determinations, of empirical multiplicity. Each of these two sides
is, with respect to the other, relatively independent, i.e. relatively uncon-
ditioned. First, the condition is relatively independent with respect to the
ground for which it is the condition.

Posited as condition, determinate being [das Dasein] has the determina-
tion [...] of losing its indifferent immediacy and becoming the moment
of something else. Through its immediacy it is indifferent to this relation;
but, in so far as it enters into this relation, it constitutes the in itself of the
ground, and is for the latter the unconditioned. (GW 11, 315; S. 6, 114;
L. 470)
Likewise, ground is relatively independent with respect to the condition, and unconditioned by it:

[Ground] is the empty movement of reflection, because reflection has the immediacy outside it as its presupposition. But it is the whole form and the self-subsistent mediating process; for the condition is not its ground. Insofar as this mediating process, as a positing, is related to itself, it is from this side also an immediate and unconditioned; of course it presupposes itself, but as a positing that is externalized or superseded . . . (GW 11, 315; S. 6, 114; L. 471)

In reading these lines, one cannot but think of the relation between concept and intuition in Kant. But here what is at stake is the relation between two dimensions of being as it emerges from the analysis of “ground”: being is at once this indeterminate immediacy of being-there, and the unity that constitutes it into determinate being. Each is unconditioned with respect to the other, for the other finds it before itself. But each is only relatively unconditioned, for each is only through the other. On the other hand, what is absolutely unconditioned is the unity of the two sides. Being is there only through the unity of ground, ground is there only through the being it grounds, and nothing else is there; there is nothing else to think.

The two sides of the whole, condition and ground, are therefore one essential unity, equally as content and as form. They spontaneously pass over into one another or, since they are reflections, they posit themselves as superseded, relate themselves to this their negation, and reciprocally presuppose one another. But at the same time this is only a single reflection of both and therefore their presupposing is also only one; or rather this reciprocal presupposing becomes presupposing of their one identity as their subsistence and substrate. This identity of their common content and unity of form is the truly unconditioned, the very thing [die Sache an sich selbst]. (GW 11, 318; S. 6, 117–118; L. 473–474)

Clearly this Sache an sich selbst, the thing itself, the very thing, takes the place of Kant’s Ding an sich, the unknown and unknowable thing in itself. I pointed out earlier that for Hegel, the Kantian “problem” of the thing in itself disguises another: that of truth. For the real question is, what is the truth of the appearance? Hegel is now telling us that the truth of the appearance is that it is a synthesis of a thought unity and a multiplicity. And this synthesis is possible only because unity and multiplicity are constituted by one and the same thought process. This is the “very thing,” the true unconditioned. What is “truly unconditioned”
is that there is being, and that being only *appears* – *erscheint* – as the unity of determinations constituted by the thought process through which it appears.

To understand this rather unexpected “absolutely unconditioned” it is perhaps helpful to remember again Kant’s Antinomy of Pure Reason, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant explains the root of the fourth Antinomy (which discusses the existence of an absolutely necessary being) in the following way:

> [A]n odd contrast shows itself in this antinomy: namely, that the same ground of proof from which the thesis of the existence of an original being was inferred, is used also in the antithesis to prove its non-existence, and indeed with equal rigor. First it is said There is a necessary being because the whole past time includes within itself the series of all conditions, and thus with it also the unconditioned [. . .]. Then it is said There is no necessary being just because the whole of time that has elapsed includes within itself the series of all conditions (which therefore, taken all together, are once again conditioned). The cause is this. The first argument looks only to the absolute totality of the series of conditions, each determined by another in time, and from this it gets something unconditioned and necessary. The second argument, on the contrary, takes into consideration the contingency of everything determined in the time-series (because before each [member] a time must precede, in which its condition must once again be determined conditionally), and this completely gets rid of everything unconditioned and all absolute necessity. (A459/B487)

Thesis and antithesis rest on the same argument for they are only two different ways of defining one and the same thing, the “series of all conditions.” Moreover, these two different ways have one and the same ground of proof, which is reason’s demand of the unconditioned. This demand is expressed on the one hand by the a priori affirmation of the completion of the series of conditions: the *totality* of the series is posited as the *condition* of the series itself. On the other, the demand for the unconditioned is expressed in the rule that commands not to arbitrarily close the empirical search for the conditions: the inexhaustible *empirical series* is posited as the *condition* of its own totalization.

It is on purpose that I have just presented this antinomy in terms that are in fact Hegel’s: totality, which Hegel calls ground, is the condition of the empirical series, which Hegel calls condition. Conversely, the empirical series is the condition of totality: ground and condition condition each other mutually. Finally, rational unity is the ground of
both sides of the antinomy. Hegel would say: ground is itself the unity of ground and conditions. We have here, therefore, the anatomy of Hegel’s notion of the unconditioned. The Hegelian unconditioned is not, as one might too hastily think, the expression of Hegel’s unilateral adoption of the thesis of the Kantian Antinomies in the name of a triumphant rationalism. Rather, Hegel’s “unconditioned” is the very structure within which the antimony appears, about which both sides of the antinomy are true. In other words, what is absolutely unconditioned is the unity of the empirical series of conditions – which, as Hegel expressly indicates, exceeds the unity of ground (GW 11, 319–320; S. 6, 119–120; L. 475) – and of this same series as ground, that is, as totality. And the unity of these two sides is not the expression of the timorous transaction of a regulative reason, it is the very thing, die Sache selbst. For nothing is thought but this being that is ordered, by virtue of being thought, in the unity of an I think that reveals itself progressively in its determinations. So although it is true, on the one hand, that the conditions are, as empirical existence, Dasein, open to an infinite regress, it is also true, on the other hand, that the world and things in the world are thought as a completed unity. The same function prevails on both sides and the same thing is thought under the two guises. It is no use having admitted that our world is constituted by the unity of the I think if one is not able to recognize, in the paradoxes created by the constitution of this world, “the very thing” and if one needs the hypostasis of a thing in itself in order to admit that the world is necessarily thought as a whole, just as all things, whatever they may be, are defined as a unity of determinations: it is this unity that defines them as things (Sachen).

Such is the meaning of the statement that closes ground, and with it Section 1 of the Doctrine of Essence:

When all the conditions of a thing are present, it enters into existence. (GW 11, 321; S. 6, 122; L. 477)

This statement is not the description of a temporal becoming. Rather, it is the description of the “reminiscence” that confers its status to the thing as a unity of empirical determinations. Indeed Hegel continues:

When all the conditions of the thing are present, that is, when the totality of the thing is posited as the groundless immediate, then this scattered multiplicity internalizes itself [sich erinnert] in itself. – The whole thing
must be present in its conditions, or all the conditions belong to its existence, for all of them constitute the reflection [...]. (GW 11, 321; S. 6, 122; L. 477)

And finally:

accordingly this emergence is the tautological movement of the thing towards itself [...]. (Ibid.)

Nothing is more immobile than the universal movement of the Logic: it only reveals that which is as an always already thought. The thing exists because the empirical multiplicity that constitutes it is thought as a whole, and this whole comes out of the same reflection that already allowed the thought of the empirical multiplicity itself. All subsequent progression will only increase the degree of self-equality of the unity that is thought. This is why ground can hardly be opposed to concept. What is thought, from one to the other, is the same “ontology.”
4. These three terms refer respectively, in the contexts mentioned above, to what is apparently external to thought, and to which thought nevertheless always relates (see *GW* 11, 43; *S*. 5, 82; *L*. 81. *GW* 11, 380; *S*. 6, 200; *L*. 529. *GW* 12, 127; *S*. 6, 402; *L*. 705). The progression of the Logic gradually reveals that this apparent exteriority is always itself immanent to the unity of thought.
7. See Kant, *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, AA4. 260: “I freely admit that the remembrance of David Hume was the very thing that many years ago first interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave a completely different direction to my researches in the field of speculative philosophy.”
8. Admittedly, neither of these two alternatives strictly corresponds to Kant’s position. I will come back to this point in Chapter 1.
9. This will be explained in what follows, especially below, Chapter 5.

1 Transcendental logic and dialectical logic: from Kant to Hegel, a critique of all dogmatic metaphysics

3. But a fantasy, as we well know (and as Hegel is one of the first to have taught us), possesses a formidable degree of reality. This point will come up again in what follows.
4. On the twofold character of the *Phenomenology*, at once an introduction to, and a part of, the system, see Pierre-Jean Labarrière, *Structures et mouvement dialectique dans la Phénoménologie de l’Esprit* de Hegel (Paris: Aubier 1968), ch. 1. On the importance of the logical structure of the *Phenomenology*, see Johannes Heinrichs, *Die Logik der Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1974).
6. On the regulative use of the Ideas of reason according to Kant, see A642/B670. For Hegel’s criticism of this limitation of the role of the reason, see GW 12, 23; S. 6, 261–262; L. 589–590.

7. The logic we are talking about here is of course not formal logic, which “abstracts […] from all content of cognition, i.e. from any relation of it to the object, and considers only the logical form in the relation of cognitions to one another” (A55/B79), but transcendental logic, which contains “the rules of the pure thinking of an object” (A55/B80). Hegel considers his own Objective Logic (the first and second books of the Science of Logic) as the direct descendant of Kant’s transcendental logic (see GW 11, 31; S. 5, 59; L. 62).


12. GW 9, 18; S. 3, 23; Phen. 10.


15. B137, quoted by Hegel in the Introduction to the Doctrine of the Concept: GW 12, 18; S. 6, 254; L. 584. The first two emphases are Kant’s, all others are Hegel’s.

16. Kant distinguishes appearances, Erscheinungen, “the undetermined object(s) of an empirical intuition” and phaenomena, “appearances [Erscheinungen], to the extent that as objects they are thought in accordance with the unity of the categories” (A248/B305). However, in most of the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant does not hold fast to this terminological difference, and calls Erscheinung the appearance determined under the categories.


20. L’Héritage kantien, ch. 4, §11 (“The Displacement of Concepts in the Fichte Interpretation”), ch. 6, §6 (“The Displacement of Concepts in the Neo-Kantian Interpretation”), ch. 8, §23 (“The Displacement of Concepts in the Heideggerian Interpretation”). “The Absolute” here can be understood as “the thing as it truly is,” i.e. the thing in itself.

21. In Chapter 3, I shall take a closer look at the relation Hegel establishes between “condition” (Bedingung) and “ground” (Grund).

22. On ambiguity of this term, see above, p. 220, n.16.

24. The agreement of thought with itself is the only way the agreement of thought with its object can be achieved. There is a case to be made (which Hegel does make, as we shall see) for the idea that Kant works his way towards such a conception of truth when he speaks of a “transcendental truth, which precedes all empirical truth and makes it possible” (A146/B185). I would therefore not oppose Hegel’s and Kant’s conceptions of truth as radically as Gérard Lebrun does. Lebrun is mistaken, I think, both in taking Kantian philosophy to be just another case of representational metaphysics (La Patience du concept, p. 378), and in projecting Hegel’s philosophy towards a modern problematic of the dissolution of philosophical problems as mere symptoms of language games.


27. See above, p. 17.


34. See above, pp. 33–34.

35. Hyppolite, Logic and Existence, p. 91.


37. Ibid., p. 5. The quotations marks seem to indicate that this is a citation from Hegel, but I have not found the exact source. Cavaillès wrote this essay while in jail for his activities in the French resistance in 1942. He had no access to books. He escaped, was later arrested again and was executed by the Gestapo in 1944. His important work in the philosophy of mathematics remained unfinished.

38. Ibid., p. 78. Cf. Hegel, GW 12, 17; S. 6, 253; L. 27. And see above, pp. 28–29.

2 Twists and turns of Hegel’s contradiction

2. See Chapter 1, p. 29.
3. Hegel’s Lectures on the History of Philosophy, trans. E. S. Haldane, 3 vols. (New York: The Humanities Press, 1955), 1, pp. 292–293; S. 18, 337 (these lectures have not yet been published in the Gesammelte Werke). Since the Haldane translation is very defective, citations from the Lectures on the History of Philosophy will all be my own translations. See also Lebrun, La Patience du concept, p. 282.
4. By “traditional logic” is to be understood the logic of Aristotelian inspiration reformulated in terms of a logic of ideas by the Logique ou l’art de penser of Pierre Arnauld and Antoine Nicole (known as “the Port-Royal Logic”), which dominated German logic text-books, including Kant’s own. Kant’s Logic, a compendium of Kant’s lectures put together under Kant’s supervision by his student Jäsche, was published in 1804. See The Jäsche Logic, in Kant’s Lectures on Logic, trans. J. Michael Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
5. How accurate or well documented Kant’s view of Leibniz is, is not my concern here. My hope is only to help our understanding of Hegel’s “determinations of reflection” by pointing out their parentage with, and distinction from, the “concepts of reflection” Kant expounds in the Amphiboly of Concepts of Reflection in support of his polemic against rational metaphysics.
6. For this distinction in Kant, see B146–147.
7. Cf. above, p. 46.
8. Here I am referring of course to the contradictions reason inevitably falls into, according to Kant, when attempting to determine as an object “the totality of conditions for a given conditioned” i.e. the concept of a world-whole. These contradictions are expounded in the Antinomies of Pure Reason: see A405/B432-A460-B488. On the relation between Hegel’s notion of contradiction and Kant’s Antinomies of Pure Reason, see pp. 75–77.
10. Cf. GW 11, 245; S. 6, 18; L. 394: “Essence is superseded being [Das Wesen is das aufgehobene Sein]” (Hegel’s emphasis). “Aufheben,” and its cognates, connotes the idea of something that is negated at one level only to be maintained in a higher, more inclusive mode of thinking. The whole realm of being is thus “superseded” in essence.
11. Cf. above, pp. 41–42.
13. “Positing reflection” and “external reflection” have corresponding figures of thought in the first two “Attitudes of Thought to Objectivity,” described in the Preliminary Concept of the Encyclopedia Logic. These attitudes are, for
38. Colletti, Marxism and Hegel, p. 102.

39. In these pages from the Introduction to the Doctrine of the Concept, Hegel discusses Kant’s view of the relation between concepts and intuitions in cognition, and cites Kant’s well-known sentence: “Intuitions without concepts are blind, concepts without intuition are empty.” He notes that Kant’s view of the relation between sensibility and understanding belongs to a psychology of cognition, and adds that in the Phenomenology of Spirit, which is a doctrine of consciousness, he too (Hegel) has presented sense-certainty and perception as preceding and preparing understanding. But these distinctions, he says, do not belong in the Science of Logic.

40. Is it completely absurd to compare this “exposition of God” to what Nelson Goodman writes: “Without presuming to instruct the Gods or other world-makers, or attempting any comprehensive or systematic survey, I want to illustrate and comment on some of the processes that go into world-making” (Ways of World-Making [Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1979], p. 7). Goodman would certainly not have approved of this comparison. And it is true that Hegel, for his part, does want, if not to instruct God, at least to undertake “a systematic survey” of world-making. In drawing this parallel between Hegel and Goodman, I mean to emphasize once again that Hegel’s Science of Logic is first and foremost an attack on the metaphysics of Kant’s rationalist predecessors.

3 Ground against concept

5. See GW 12, 90–126; S. 6, 351–402; L. 664–704. On the meaning and role of syllogism in the Doctrine of the Concept, see below, Chapter 6, pp. 214–216.
6. I borrow the expression “relation of relations” from Labarri`ere and Jarczyk: see below, n. 14. On Althusser’s criticism, see pp. 100–104 and n. 15.
not make the comparison I am proposing here between this chapter of the Phenomenology and “formal ground” in the Logic.


10. Ibid., p. 35.

11. Ibid., p. 36. These texts are cited by Della Volpe, Logic, pp. 120–123.

12. We could take even further the suggestion of an empiricist inspiration of Hegel’s criticism of formal ground. When Della Volpe, in yet another expression of his anger at Hegel, cites John Dewey against Hegelian hypostasis, one cannot but note the proximity between Dewey’s formulations and Hegel’s own, among which those I quoted above. See Della Volpe, Logic, pp. 122–123, n. 117. Among other passages from Dewey, Della Volpe cites the following: “The essential error of the rationalist tradition in logical theory consists in taking the consistency of the constituents of the conceptual contents (which form the predicate) as a final criterion of truth or assertability. Subject-matter which, in its logical form, is a means for performing experimental activities to modify prior existences, is mistaken to be final and complete in itself. Thereby an inherent ontological status is imputed to it” (John Dewey, Logic: The Theory of Inquiry [New York: H. Holt and Company, 1938], p. 132). This could be straight out of Hegel’s criticism of formal ground. It remains that the empiricist inspiration is only a moment in Hegel’s Logic, a moment that is superseded as soon as it is formulated. We therefore need to understand how and why it is never formulated without already being superseded.


16. Cf., for example, Engels’ letter to F. A. Lange of 29 March 1865, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Selected Correspondence, trans. I. Lasker, ed. S. Ryazanskaya, 2nd rev. edn (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965): “The absurdities of detail in Hegel’s philosophy of nature I grant you readily enough, but his real philosophy of nature is to be found in the second part of his Logic, in the Doctrine of Essence, the true kernel of the whole theory. [...] I am of course no longer a Hegelian, but I still have a great feeling of devotion and piety towards the colossal old chap.”

17. See Plato, Meno, 81a–82a.

18. Cf., for example, Theodor W. Adorno, Negative Dialectics, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), p. 5: “Contradiction is nonidentity under the aspect of identity; the dialectical primacy of the principle of contradiction makes the thought of unity the measure of heterogeneity. As the heterogeneous collides with its limit it exceeds itself.” Or p. 146: “The antithesis of thought to whatever is heterogeneous to thought is reproduced in thought itself, as its immanent contradiction.”