

# The Absolute Plasticity of Hegel's Absolutes

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**Abstract:** In this paper I argue that Hegel's three Absolutes (Absolute Knowing, Absolute Idea, and Absolute Spirit) are best characterised by what Catherine Malabou calls "plasticity". Rather than being synonymous with a divine God, or substance monism, Hegel's Absolutes instead refer to a dialectical process that is dynamic and ever shifting.

**Keywords:** Absolute, Absolute Idea, Absolute Knowing, Absolute Spirit Dialectic, Hegel's Secret, Catherine Malabou, Hegel, Metaphysics.

The history of Hegelianism—and the interpretation of Hegel's philosophy—is a history of divisions, deviations, revivals, and revisions.<sup>1</sup> There is perhaps no better example of the stakes of Hegelianism today than the controversial status of the Absolute. Slavoj Žižek characterises the aversion that Hegelian commentators seem to have towards the concept of the Absolute, pointing out that Hegel's metaphysical conceptions of the Absolute are so ridiculous and frightening, that even Hegelian commentators are afraid of close proximity to it.<sup>2</sup> Rather than dismiss Hegel's conception of the Absolute as a product of a metaphysical absolute idealist onto-theology, or revise Hegel's philosophy to accord with contemporary philosophical trends, I argue that insofar as Hegel's Absolutes are concrete universals, they are best understood to be *plastic* in the sense advanced by Catherine Malabou.<sup>3</sup> It is their plasticity that effectively constitutes the radical dynamism of the dialectic that makes up the kernel within the Hegelian mystical shell. Malabou defines Hegelian plasticity as 'a capacity to receive form and a capacity to produce form.'<sup>4</sup> The concept of plasticity is 'the point around

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1 I am here referring to everything from the Right and Left instantiations of Hegelianism immediately following Hegel's death in 1831 to the Frankfurt School adoption of Hegel's dialectics, through to the Hegel revival of the 1960s and 70s, and the contemporary revisionist anti-metaphysical and anti-systematic interpretations of Hegel's philosophy. For a history of Young Hegelianism see Breckman 1999. For a survey of the metaphysical v.s. anti-metaphysical readings of Hegel see Brooks 2007.

2 As Žižek says: 'When siding with Hegel, even the most favorable commentators refuse to step over the line into accepting Absolute Knowledge... among partisans of Hegel, their relationship to the Hegelian system is always one of "Of course, but still ... " - of course Hegel affirmed the fundamentally antagonistic character of effectivity, the de-centering of the subject, etc., but still ... ; this fissure is finally canceled through the self-mediation of the Absolute Idea that heals all wounds. The position of Absolute Knowledge, of the final reconciliation, plays the role of the Hegelian Thing. It is the monster that is both frightening and ridiculous, from which one would do best to keep one's distance.' See Žižek 2014a, p. 1-2. Žižek offers a reading of Hegel's Absolute Knowing as Lacan's *le passe*, or 'the pass,' and the image of Hegel as monstrous serves as the Lacanian Real of his critics.

3 Malabou 2005.

4 Ibid., p. 9.

which all the transformations of Hegelian thought revolve, the centre of its metamorphosis.<sup>5</sup> Plasticity is the Hegelian dialectical process. To argue that Hegel's three Absolutes are plastic is to argue that they possess a capacity to give and receive form—a form that is absolute, that is to say, without limitation. The Absolutes are plastic because each one articulates the dialectical movement through an immanent, rational deduction. Logically (but also always ontologically), the *only* entity or term that is absolute, or unlimited (i.e., opposed to the relative), is relativity itself. Each of Hegel's three Absolutes (Knowing, Idea, and Spirit) retroactively engenders a dialectical dynamic movement that is best characterized as plastic. While Malabou herself develops the concept of plasticity in her work on Hegel, her analysis of the plastic nature of Hegel's Absolutes are focused on the concept of the temporality and the problem of the future in (and of) the Hegelian system.<sup>6</sup> Malabou provides a detailed analysis of the plasticity of Hegel's Absolute Spirit, and while she does discuss the plasticity of Absolute Knowing and the Idea, she does not explicitly develop *how* their plastic nature unfolds in the same detailed exposition she provides for Absolute Spirit.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, my aim in this paper is to supplement Malabou by developing the inherent plasticity of Absolute Knowing, and the Idea. I restrict my discussion to Absolute Knowing, the Idea, and provide a brief reiteration of the plasticity of Absolute Spirit. I submit that this reaffirmation of Malabou's central thesis regarding the radical plasticity of Hegel's three Absolutes is necessary, given the all-too prevalent misconception surrounding the term "absolute".

Hegel's Absolutes, rather than describe a divine entity or object called "the absolute," designate the dialectical self-movement of the concept, its plastic unfolding. As John W. Burbidge says: 'Hegel's philosophy is more an affirmation of relativism than of absolutism, though a relativism that is able to learn from its past mistakes and grow.'<sup>8</sup> Within the Anglo-American reception of Hegel's philosophy, scholars have attempted to ignore, or outright dismiss the metaphysical aspect of Hegel's system.<sup>9</sup> Contrary to these rejections, we should insist on what

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5 Ibid., p. 13.

6The concept of plasticity, for Malabou, inevitably leads to a treatment of temporality. As Malabou says 'Self-determination is thus the relation of substance to that which happens. Following this line of thought we understand the "future" in the philosophy of Hegel as the relation which subjectivity maintains with the accidental.' Ibid., p. 12.

7 Ibid., p. 135-142.

8 Burbidge 1997, p. 31-32.

9 For example, in an interview with *3:AM Magazine*, Frederick C. Beiser takes a historical

Adorno says in his *Three Studies on Hegel*. Adorno, remarking on what is dead or alive in Hegel's thought, points out that 'the converse question is not even raised: what the present means in the face of Hegel.'<sup>10</sup> Just because the majority of us today are supposedly unwilling to accept Hegel's metaphysical position is not a sufficient reason for relegating Hegel's Absolutes to a bygone era.

### The Plasticity of Absolute Knowing

One ever-persistent caricature of Hegel surrounds the notion of the Absolute. The Hegelian system has traditionally been understood to be an all-encompassing, totalising absolute idealism where everything is consumed in its wake (i.e., the frightening monster). This representation of Hegel is founded on a certain image of his systematic philosophy, whereby the role of the term "absolute" plays a constitutive role. It is crucial to remember that there are three Hegelian Absolutes, not one Absolute. Despite this fact, the misconception remains. As Burbidge has notes 'there are some commentators who assume that, whenever Hegel talks about absolute idea, or absolute spirit, or indeed absolute knowledge, he is really using different terms to describe that single entity known as "the Absolute."<sup>11</sup> Frank Ruda has more recently reasserted this point, saying that 'absolute knowing is not an objective knowledge of something or of the absolute. Neither is it the knowledge of an object that may be called the absolute, which is a traditional misreading of Hegel.'<sup>12</sup> A traditional misreading, that is still very much pervasive and dominant. So why do commentators and critics alike refer to "the Absolute" if Hegel does not conceive of such a thing? There is textual evidence that supports the existence of Hegel using the term "Absolute". The most famous example is from the Preface to the *Phenomenology*

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interpretative approach to Hegel's Absolute: 'No one nowadays talks about the absolute, not even people with firm and deep religious convictions. The whole Hegelian project has no resonance for us, as it once had for the Germans in the 1820s and the British and Americans around the 1880s. This is not to say Hegel is unimportant, or that we should not take his philosophy seriously. We should take him very seriously, but that is essentially for historical reasons. Hegel remains of great importance to understand ourselves, but essentially because we have all grown out of a reaction against Hegel. This is to say, then, that Hegel is still important for us for essentially negative reasons, i.e., to show us what we are not. Feuerbach wrote in his *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*: "Hegel's philosophy is the last great attempt to rescue lost and fading Christianity through philosophy..." I think that this is absolutely accurate. The more we come to terms with it, the more we can see the degree of Hegel's relevance for us. I think that for most of us nowadays, who have accepted life in a secular age, Hegel's project is obsolete. Christianity was still central to the life and worldview of my old supervisor, Charles Taylor, and that is why he went back to Hegel. But as a secular pagan Hegel's project has no resonance at all for me' See Beiser, 2012.

10 Adorno, 1993, p. 1.

11 Burbidge 1997, p. 24.

12 Ruda 2016, p. 125.

of *Spirit*, where Hegel says ‘of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a *result*.’<sup>13</sup> However, as Burbidge points out Hegel ‘is starting from the presuppositions of his audience, most of whom were inspired by Schelling. He is playing on their assumptions that there is an absolute, and that philosophy, by reaching the point of indifference and undifferentiation, can come to know it as it is.’ Hegel uses the term “absolute”, then, sparingly, in very specific contexts in his texts, and ‘in none of these cases, then, is there any evidence that Hegel wants to appropriate the noun ‘absolute’ to capture the ultimate focus of his own philosophy.’<sup>14</sup> The instances where Hegel *does* use “the absolute” as a noun is with reference to the philosophies of Spinoza and Schelling, and also when he lectures on religion.<sup>15</sup> In his *The Difference between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy*, Hegel refers to “the absolute” while discussing and criticizing both Schelling’s and Fichte’s respective philosophies.<sup>16</sup> And in the *Phenomenology*, it is of course in reference to Schelling’s conception of the organic Absolute that swallows up all differences where ‘everything is the same,’ that the it is in Schelling’s understanding of the Absolute that is the ‘night in which, as the saying goes, all cows are black.’<sup>17</sup>

If Hegel does not use “the absolute” as a noun when discussing his three Absolutes, then how are we to understand his use of this elusive term? Hegel adopts Kant’s definition. Kant uses the term “the absolute” not as a noun, but rather as an adjective, and Hegel adopts this sense of the term.<sup>18</sup> In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant defines the “absolute” as that which is without limitations or restrictions.<sup>19</sup> This drastically changes our understanding of Hegel’s three Absolutes, as Burbidge makes clear: Absolute Knowing becomes ‘a knowing that is effective without limitation’; the Absolute Idea becomes ‘an idea that is valid in all respects’; and Absolute Spirit becomes ‘spirit that permeates every

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13 Hegel 1977b, §20 p. 11.

14 Burbidge 2007, p. 72.

15 In his 1827 lectures of religion, Hegel says ‘God is the absolute substance...God is *spirit*, *absolute spirit*.’ See Hegel 2006, p. 117-118.

16 Hegel 1977a, p. 89.

17 Hegel, 1977b, §16, p. 9.

18 I owe this insight to Burbidge. See Burbidge 2007, p. 73.

19 Kant says ‘Sometimes used to indicate the something is valid in every relation (unlimitedly) (e.g., absolute dominion); and in this meaning absolutely possible would signify what is possible in all respects in every relation, which is again the most that I can say about the possibility of a thing...it is in this extended meaning that I will make use of the word absolute, opposing it to what is merely comparative, or valid in some particular respect.’ See Kant 2009, A324/B381-A326/B383.

relation.’<sup>20</sup> Hegel’s use of the Absolute as an adjective renders it ‘opposite of the relative.’<sup>21</sup>

Following Kant, Hegel understands the “absolute” as that without any conditions. But how does Hegel understand the term “knowing”? In the German original, Hegel typically employs two different words that have been translated as “knowledge” or “knowing,” namely *Wissen* and *Erkenntnis*. *Wissen* denotes “to know;” as a verbal noun (i.e., *das Wissen*) it means “knowing” or “learning”.<sup>22</sup> *Erkenntnis* comes from the verb *Erkennen* that denotes “to know again, to recognise, to realise, or to come to know again”. *Kenntnis*, a noun, roughly means “cognise,” or “awareness of” something. With respect to Hegel, what is *erkannt* (i.e., known, understood, systematically cognised) is contrasted with *bekannt* (i.e., that which is familiar, or well-known). The closing chapter of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* is titled “*Das absolute Wissen*” (i.e., Absolute Knowing), and not “*das absolute Erkenntnis*”. Hegel’s distinction is important because far from being simply linguistically different, the preference of *Wissen* over *Erkenntnis* has philosophical significance. As Michael Inwood notes *Wissen* ‘was originally a past tense, meaning “to have been perceived,’ this is important because ‘*Wissen* can be immediate, involving, unlike *Erkennen*, no process of coming to know.’<sup>23</sup> For Hegel, the ‘distinction between knowing and cognition is something entirely familiar to educated thinking.’<sup>24</sup> The example Hegel provides is that between the knowledge of God and the cognition of God: ‘though we *know* that God is, *cognition* of him is beyond us.’<sup>25</sup> Indeed, to cognise something (*Kenntnis*) presupposes an object that appears to be external to the knowing conscious subject. We cannot cognise God for God is not an object to be cognised, like a sugar cube. Rather, we know (*Wissen*) that God has being.

If *Erkennen* designates the (re)cognising of what has already been encountered, or “seen”, then it is a different sort of knowledge than what constitutes the Hegelian Absolute Knowing. To illustrate the conceptual difference between Hegel’s use of *Erkenntnis* and *Wissen* it is productive for us to consider a paragraph from the Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Commenting on whether or not cognition

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20 Burbidge 2007, p. 73.

21 Ibid.

22 Inwood 1999, p. 154.

23 Ibid., p. 155.

24 Hegel 2007, §445A, p. 175

25 Ibid.

is to be understood as either an instrument or a medium to grasp the Absolute, Hegel contends that this presupposes a distinction between the Absolute and cognition, a presupposition that is erroneous. Hegel distinguishes between *Wissenschaft* and *Erkennen*: ‘one may set this aside on the grounds that there is a type of cognition [*Erkennen*] which, though it does not cognize the Absolute as Science [*Wissen*] aims to, is still true, and that cognition in general, though it be incapable of grasping the Absolute, is still capable of grasping other kinds of truth.’<sup>26</sup> Hegel explains, however, that the distinction between “absolute truth” and “some other kind of truth” is a fiction, for if there *were* another kind of truth besides absolute truth (i.e., unlimited), then the truth that is allegedly absolute would turn out to be limited and therefore not absolute at all. This would be because for there simple reason that some other sort of truth exists that is extraneous to absolute truth, that is somehow “outside” of this absolute. Absolute truth would be limited. Hegel’s point here is that the gulf between cognition and absolute truth is nothing but a semblance—a semblance that is unavoidable. It is unavoidable because ‘the way to Science is itself already *Science*, and hence, in virtue of its content, is Science of the *experience of consciousness*.’<sup>27</sup> Or to reiterate: the way to Absolute Knowing (*das absolute Wissen*) is through the experience of natural consciousness, that is to say, its experience of cognition (*Kenntnis/Erkenntnis*). We see here that Absolute Knowing is not the knowledge of some object or entity called “the Absolute,” if it were the knowledge of an entity it would be “*das absolute Erkenntnis*” rather than “*das absolute Wissen*.” Malabou repeats this crucial point when she says that ‘the absolute never occupies the place of referent. It could never be “*what we are talking about*”.’<sup>28</sup> Hegel’s preference of “*Wissen*” over “*Erkenntnis*” is not accidental. Absolute Knowing is *both Wissen and Erkenntnis*. That is to say, Absolute Knowing is both the (re)-cognition of the phenomenal experience of natural consciousness *and* it is the very end result of this process; a result which sublates (*aufheben*), that is, it simultaneously cancels and preserves its previous moments or terms (in this case, its previous shapes of consciousness).

How can Absolute Knowing be both *Wissen* and *Erkenntnis*? In the Preface to the *Phenomenology* Hegel asserts that not only is the truth the whole, but also that ‘the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development.’ He goes on to clarify that ‘of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a *result*, that only in

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26 Hegel, 1977b, §75, p. 47-8.

27 *Ibid.*, §88, p. 56.

28 Malabou 2005, p. 182.

the *end* is it what it truly is; and that precisely in this consists its nature, viz. to be actual, subject, the spontaneous becoming of itself.’<sup>29</sup> How can Hegel speak of Absolute Knowing as an end product without conceiving of it as an object, as an entity? Hegel repeats the same argument with a clarification on the logic of the self-repelling or self-recoiling (what Hegel calls “*absoluter Gegenstoß*”) nature of spirit.

What is *last* is seen to be that which is *first*; the *end* is the *purpose*; and when we discover it to be that purpose, indeed the absolute purpose, we recognize the product as the immediate first mover. This progression towards a result is thus at the same time a returning into itself, a repelling that is in itself its own self-repelling. It is what was described above as the true nature of spirit, i.e., of the active final purpose that creates itself. If spirit were immediate being without effective activity, it would not be spirit, indeed it would not even be life. And if it were not purpose and purposive activity, then spirit would not discover in its product that its activity consists wholly in its own merging with itself, a mediation that mediates its own determination in immediacy.<sup>30</sup>

Hegel is of course not arguing that the end product (i.e., Absolute Knowing) is something that we presuppose or something which we assume at the outset. On the contrary, recall that ‘the truth is the Whole,’ and that the “Whole” in this context is the journey of the experience of consciousness through its cognition of phenomena, struggle for recognition, culture, morality, ethical community, religion, and so on. The end product can only be discovered to be the purpose of this journey once the end has been reached. Therefore, it is only at the end that we are able to ‘recognise the product as the immediate first mover’. The language of “repelling” and “self-repelling (or recoiling)” is important here. If the truth is indeed the Whole, then this Whole, as a product of the progression towards it, is only recognised as that which it is (i.e., truth) at the very end. The nature of spirit (and this is constitutive of Absolute Knowing) is not only the progression towards a determinate end, but also a repelling that is a repelling of itself. As a concrete universal, Absolute Knowing contains within itself all of its particular instantiations. However we must be careful here. It is incorrect to think that the particular is external or alien to the universal, or that the particular is located “outside” the universal. What makes concrete universality truly concrete (as opposed to abstract) is that any designated

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29 Hegel 1977b, §20, p. 11.

30 Hegel 2009, p. 11. Žižek discusses Hegel’s Absolute Recoil in Žižek 2014b.

otherness to this universal is an other only in appearance. When Hegel says that the ‘whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development’ he is effectively describing the self-repelling nature of spirit. The end result, Absolute Knowing, is not an object of cognition (recall that Absolute Knowing is not a referent to a term called “absolute”), but a dynamic process, a becoming. A becoming that only becomes what it already always was through a process of self-repelling movement. Spirit is a progression but ‘at the same time a returning into itself’, but this return only materialises (or registers) as a result through a retroactive process. This is what Hegel means when he says above that the true nature of spirit is ‘the active final purpose *that creates itself*’. The “final purpose” (i.e., Absolute Knowing) is the result of its own activity, its own immanent dialectical movement.<sup>31</sup> Absolute Knowing emerges from a process of self-alienation—but throughout its spiritual development, this *self*-alienation is experienced first as *alienation*—that is, as continuous encounters with Otherness. This otherness is generated from the internal contradictions inherent in the experience of consciousness. Or that we can only discover that the repelling is actually a *self*-repelling once spirit has returned to itself, that is, at the end. This is Hegel’s entire point when he evokes the language of repelling and self-repelling in the passage above. When Hegel says that the movement towards Absolute Knowing is ‘a repelling that is *in itself* its own self-repelling’, we have to remember that for Hegel, the term “in itself” (*an sich*) is used to denote something that is merely potential, implicit, or when something is considered separately from other things or terms. That is to say, when it is unreflective. So, the progression towards the end result (i.e., Absolute Knowing) is a progression that is also a repelling, but a repelling that is implicitly (in itself) a self-repelling. Or rather: it may first *seem as though* what gets repelled or opposed to consciousness is its external Other, but this “Other” is nothing but itself (hence the language of “return to itself”). As Hegel says ‘it usually seems to be the case, on the contrary, that our experience of the untruth of our first notion comes by way of a second object which we come upon by chance and externally,’ however ‘the new object shows itself to have come

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 31 Žižek is right therefore when he says: ‘The Absolute is the “result of itself”, the outcome of its own activity. What this means is that, in the strict sense of the term, there is no Absolute which externalizes or particularizes itself and then unites itself with its alienated Otherness: the Absolute emerges out of this process of alienation; that is, as the result of its own activity, the Absolute “is” nothing but its “return to itself”. The notion of an Absolute which externalizes itself and then reconciles itself with its Otherness presupposes the Absolute as given in advance, prior to the process of its becoming; it posits as the starting point of the process what is effectively its result.’ See Žižek 2012, p. 291.

about through a *reversal of consciousness itself*.<sup>32</sup> In short, only when the movement of spirit culminates in Absolute Knowing, does consciousness retroactively discover that its perpetual encounters with an alienated “other” was in fact a, encounter with itself: a self-alienation.<sup>33</sup> Žižek is thus correct when he claims that ‘there is no Self which precedes alienation: the Self emerges only through its alienation, alienation is its constitutive feature.’<sup>34</sup> The dialectical movement of spirit progresses towards, and creates itself as a result through (self)-repelling.

The repelling and self-repelling nature of spirit is salient to the argument about the plasticity of Hegel’s Absolutes because it captures the extent to which each of Hegel’s three Absolutes function as concrete universals. With Absolute Knowing, Hegel is not ‘talking about *what* is known,’ but rather ‘*how* we know.’<sup>35</sup> At every stage and at each moment of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel demonstrates that consciousness attempts to make a claim to knowing the truth absolutely. Consciousness tries to obtain what it thinks is unmediated knowledge of truth through our five senses, but as the chapter on sense certainty illustrates, this certainty is crushed, and consciousness moves to adopt a new method at ascertaining true knowledge (from sense certainty it moves to perception). This process is repeated throughout each and every stage of the *Phenomenology*, and at each stage, consciousness is absolutely convinced in the validity of its knowledge of its experience. The experience of natural consciousness becomes for it ‘the way of despair’ because of these failures. ‘Absolute knowing,’ Burbidge concludes, ‘is not the prerogative of Hegel. It is, rather, central to all confident knowledge claims, whenever and wherever they occur. And all of them turn out to be relative.’<sup>36</sup> But if all preceding attempts to grasp the truth have failed, what guarantees are there that Absolute Knowing will not also fail?<sup>37</sup>

The chapter on Absolute Knowing is not only a summation of all the previous stages of the *Phenomenology*, but it is also an integration of the two preceding chapters, namely the chapter on the ‘Beautiful Soul’ and ‘Revealed Religion’.<sup>38</sup> It is through the integration, or unity, of

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 32 Hegel 1977b, §87, p. 55.

33 Its repelling a self-repelling. It is only with Absolute Knowing that what was once thought to be merely in itself, turns out to be in-and-for-itself.

34 Žižek 2016, p. 37.

35 Burbidge 2007, p. 49.

36 Ibid., 74.

37 As Burbidge asks ‘Why does it not also collapse into despair’? See Ibid.

38 Hegel spends the first several paragraphs of the Absolute Knowing chapter reviewing the entire

these two preceding chapters that demonstrate how, for Hegel, Absolute Knowing does not give way to relative knowledge like all of the previous attempts. Both religion and the beautiful soul are ways in which the unity of self-consciousness and the external world is achieved. To put it rather simplistically, the difference between the two is that in Christianity, this reconciliation occurs as a being-in-itself (i.e., only implicitly), and in the beautiful soul it occurs as a being-for-itself (i.e., explicitly). These two moments have to be unified as a being-in-and-for-itself. Let us examine, briefly, how and why this occurs. We must remember that the 'beautiful soul' emerges from the failed attempts of the conscience self to construct an objective moral world which accords with its own self. It is through our willing to put our moral convictions into actions that the moral subject tries to reconcile itself with the external world. Yet there is an inherent discrepancy between our inward moral intentions and their actualisation in the world. Rarely does the actual world correspond to our intended actions. Things go awry, things go wrong. Our actions do not turn out as we intended. The moral conscientious subject retreats into itself and relishes in own moral convictions all the while scorning the impurity of the actual outside world. This conscience self 'is in its own self divine worship, for its action is the contemplation of its own activity.'<sup>39</sup> But this contemplative, pure conscience self is entirely empty because it is always assured of its own moral validity without having to contend with *what* it is right about. This beautiful soul, says Hegel, 'lives in dread of besmirching the splendour of its inner being by action and an existence; and, in order to preserve the purity of its heart, it flees from contact with the actual world, and persists in its self-willed impotence.'<sup>40</sup> However, the beautiful soul cannot simply dwell in its own purity. The beautiful soul must act in order to test out the validity of its ideals. For it is only through action that it can come to know the truth of its convictions. Yet as soon as the beautiful soul actualises its will through action, its intentions are distorted. They become distorted because we intended something universal (i.e., the good), but our intention and our action is something particular (e.g., it is *my* intention and *my* action). Our intention and action is an abstract universal. That our intentions inevitably fall short of our universal convictions to the good as such is what produces our fallibility. The beautiful soul is driven to recognise and therefore reconciles itself with others who judge its hypocrisy. The beautiful soul provides us with a process whereby a once absolute claim to knowledge is proved to be

progression of the book. See Hegel 1977b, §788-798, p.479-485.

39 Ibid. §655, p. 397.

40 Ibid., §657, p. 400.

relative.<sup>41</sup>The beautiful soul moves through the moments of 'action, condemnation, confession, and reconciliation.'<sup>42</sup>

What the section on 'Revealed Religion' contributes is the unification of this reconciliation in narrative form. The defective element in religious narration is its representational form (*Vorstellung*, or "picture-thinking" in the Miller translation). The Christian Trinity (i.e., Father, Son, Holy Spirit) captures the necessary content, as Hegel says 'it won for consciousness the absolute content as *content* or, in the form of *picture-thinking*, the form of otherness for consciousness.'<sup>43</sup>That is to say, religion has the proper content (i.e., the absolute as that without restriction) but the wrong form. Revealed Religion presents us with a movement whereby a pure, infinite entity, God, acts to create a world, but its creation, as a finite world, is impure and evil. God becomes mortal (Christ) in order to reshape the evil world by accepting responsibility for his creation. For this God is put to death, crucified on the cross. The God of the absolute beyond, the transcendent Christian God is shown to be immanent by becoming mortal. That is to say the identification of God with the world engenders a new universal possibility.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, the community of believers that worshipped this God realise their fault in the latter's death and give in to despair. This also opens up new universal possibilities.<sup>45</sup> Finally, these two openings are shown to be actually one and the same dynamic process, the same movement. As Burbidge points out 'in both cases, what is important is not a particular state, not even the final state of reconciliation, but a process-the action of the self, the life of spirit as community. It is the whole story of beautiful soul, the whole story of revealed religion that come together. For they embody the same, structured dynamic.'<sup>46</sup>

In the Christianity the truth of this dynamic process is only a being-in-itself, and not yet for-itself. That is to say, religion has the absolute for

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41 As Burbidge says 'Tale of discovery where a knowing that is valid without restriction has to come to terms with its failure and thus moves on to a new stage where the previous absolute must be reconciled with conflicting conditions and restrictions, says Hegel, is self-knowing that is of itself and on its own account (*für sich*). In fact, this experience is simply the awareness, at a more encompassing level, of the process of experience and learning that has marked each stage of the phenomenological odyssey. The fact that Hegel's summary recounts the whole story makes it clear that he is interested, not in a simple, reconciled result, but in the action of the self, the full spiritual dynamic as the epitome of what absolute knowing involves.' See Burbidge 1997, p. 29.

42 Ibid.

43 Hegel 1977b, §796, p. 484.

44 Ibid., §780-781, p. 473.

45 Ibid., §784, p. 475.

46 Burbidge 1997, p. 30.

its content, but not its form. Christianity simply (re)presents the inner truth is a mystical shell. The for-itself is brought about by the beautiful soul: it is only with the beautiful soul's act that the essential structure of this dynamic process can be grasped from within as a self-certain moment. As Hegel says 'what in religion was *content* or a form for presenting an *other* [i.e., an absolute, infinite God], is here the Self's own act.'<sup>47</sup> That is to say, Christianity reveals in its representational form the truth of the absolute content: that the encounter with Otherness is in fact not an alien "other" at all—however it does so defectively, in fairy-tale stories, in picture-thinking. It is only with the beautiful soul's *act* that we obtain the proper form, a form constitutive of a knowing subject. In paragraph §798 of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel says: 'this last shape of Spirit—the Spirit which *at the same time gives its complete and true content the form of the Self and thereby realizes its Concept [Begriff] as remaining in its Concept in this realization—this is absolute knowing; it is Spirit that knows itself in the shape of Spirit, or a comprehensive knowing.*'<sup>48</sup> Spirit that 'knows itself in the shape of Spirit' is what Hegel refers to as "absolute knowing". The true content has finally been given its proper form: that of the self. Once again, here we find the language of "form" and "content": terms that are constitutive of the plastic nature of spirit and of Hegel's Absolutes. The form of the Self that Absolute Knowing engenders is of course the form of the beautiful soul; its content is the content of religion. Or as Hegel puts it 'truth is the *content*, which in religion is still not identical with its certainty. But this identity is now a fact, in that the content has received the shape of the Self.'<sup>49</sup> So what does this content actually consist of? Hegel says that the movement and moments of self-conscious knowing have 'show themselves to be such that this knowing is a pure *being-for-self* of self-consciousness; it is "I", that is *this* and no other "I", and which is no less immediately a *mediated* or superseded *universal* "I".'<sup>50</sup> The content is the "I" that 'communes with itself in its otherness,' and it is only at this point that 'that the content is *comprehended*.'<sup>51</sup> Hegel concludes that what this amount to is that 'this content is nothing else than the very movement just spoken of; for the content is Spirit that traverses its own self and does so *for itself* as Spirit

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47 Ibid., §797, p. 485.

48 Ibid., §798, p. 485. I have modified Miller translation of *Begriff* as "Notion" to the more appropriate "Concept" to keep in line with the standards of contemporary Hegelian scholarship.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., §799, p. 486.

51 Ibid.

by the fact that it has the "shape" of the Concept in its objectivity.<sup>52</sup> We have to take Hegel seriously here: the content of Absolute Knowing is nothing but the movement, or process of the Self's attempt to grasp or know something true, its failure by virtue of an encounter with what at first seems to an "other," and a recognition that this other is nothing but its own self-sameness. Or to put it logically: Absolute Knowing is the knowing of the identity of identity and difference. The difference between form and content collapses into Absolute Knowing because Spirit has finally assumed the "shape" of its concept, that is, the form of its content. The promise of the Preface has been fulfilled here: the truth has been grasped both as Subject (i.e., the Self's act taken from the beautiful soul) and as Substance (i.e., the absolute substantial being represented in the Christian religion).<sup>53</sup> This movement occurs in both the beautiful soul and revealed religion. The religious edicts and the beautiful soul amount to the same dynamic, plastic process. They both exhibit one and the same moments: conviction, action, failure, recognition of this failure, self-correction in light of the preceding failure, and a new attempt. It is this what 'makes absolute knowing absolute is that it recognizes that it is a self-correcting process: any claim to knowledge without restriction will have within itself the means of falsifying itself. It will turn out to be relative.'<sup>54</sup> Absolute Knowing, then, turns out to be the absolute relativity of all claims to true knowledge. Absolute Knowing is not the knowing of an object, but a kind of knowing that knows that the only absolute (i.e., unlimited), universal type of knowing is the absolute relativism of all forms of knowing. Absolute Knowing's claim is that all form of knowing is relative. It is a concrete universal because its claim to universality includes within it its particularities.

What makes Hegel's Absolute Knowing *plastic*, in the sense articulated by Malabou (i.e., capacity to receive and produce form) is now evident. First, plastic Absolute Knowing has a capacity to receive form. How? By acknowledging and including within itself the dynamic learning process that phenomenal consciousness struggles through. We have to remember that Hegel's Absolute Knowing does not *posit* any content of its own right, but rather takes on all the previous and past content that consciousness has experienced. But Absolute Knowing's claim to absoluteness is not to be understood, as an exhaustive claim to know all there is to know. On the contrary, as we have seen,

.....  
52 Ibid. I have once again translated *Begriff* as "Concept", rather than retain Miller's "Notion".

53 Ibid., §17, p. 10.

54 Burbidge 1997, p. 31.

the importance for Hegel is not so much the content of all previous moments in the *Phenomenology*, but the dynamic process, a dialectical movement—a movement that proceeds immanently through the internal contradictions in consciousness itself it attempts to acquire truth. So, paradoxically, Absolute Knowing receives form through acknowledging the incorporating all past content because it is only by recognising the dialectical, dynamic process inherent in this content, a process that in fact produces and engenders the content as *content*, that it is able to know the concrete universality, the *plasticity*, of all claims of knowledge. To borrow a phrase from Jay Lampert, Absolute Knowing ‘never posits content, since content is not its content; it formalizes contents, negatively by limiting each, affirmatively by including each.’<sup>55</sup>

What about the capacity to produce form? To answer this we have to banish all conceptions of the Absolute Knowing chapter as serving as some sort of definitive end. The *Phenomenology* itself does physically end with this final chapter, but we must remember that for Hegel the *Phenomenology of Spirit* served a strictly propaedeutic function. It was written largely as an exposition to elevate natural consciousness to the level of philosophical Science proper: the *Encyclopedia*. Absolute Knowing is therefore at one an end result of the self-movement of spirit, and the beginning of Science as such, starting with the *Science of Logic*. Even conceptually, Absolute Knowing designates these two aspects: an end and a beginning. Absolute Knowing knows the absoluteness of relativity, of the limitations inherent in any and all claims to epistemological truth, and it is this knowing that enables it to serve both as an end (i.e., a result, a product of a process), and at the same time a new beginning, an openness to new claims of knowing. In this respect, then Absolute Knowing can be said to produce form because of its radical openness to the contingent. The form that it produces will necessarily turn out to be relative: it is the same self-correcting dynamic process discussed above because the means of its relative nature is intrinsic to itself. ‘Contingency is the systematic condition for the development of the only kind of absolute knowing that will not in its turn become relative.’<sup>56</sup>

Hegel’s Absolute Knowing is not a knowledge claim about an object called “the Absolute” nor is it a claim about exhaustively knowing all there is to know. Rather, knowing absolutely means knowing without limitation. The only knowledge claim that is truly without any conditions or limits, and therefore a concrete universal, is the claim that all

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55 Lampert 2015, p. 91.

56 Burbidge 2007, p. 79.

knowledge claims are relative. It is this absolute relativism of Hegel that makes Absolute Knowing universal. Hegel’s Absolute Knowing, as an unrestricting kind of knowing, is plastic precisely because, as a concrete universality, it has the capacity to both receive and produce form. This is exactly what Hegel means when in the Preface he asserts that ‘everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only a *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*.’<sup>57</sup> Therefore, Hegel’s emphasis that the truth must be grasped/conceived and at the same time expressed as both substance and subject conveys the plastic doublet of the reception and production of form in Absolute Knowing. As Malabou herself notes Hegel’s subject-substance thesis is the very core of the plastic nature of the dialectic. ‘The process of self-determination is the unfolding of the *substance-subject*,’ and ‘self-determination is the movement through which substance affirms itself at once *subject* and *predicate* of itself.’<sup>58</sup> The expression of revelation of Absolute Knowing as a plastic knowing is precisely its capacity and ability to receive and produce (or express) form. This is the truth that is *grasped/received* and *expressed/produced* both as substance and subject, in all its plastic glory. In Malabou’s own words: ‘it is not *stasis* but *metamorphosis* that characterises Absolute Knowledge.’<sup>59</sup>

### The Plasticity of the Absolute Idea

So far we have seen how Hegel’s Absolute Knowing amounts to knowing the absolute relativity of all claims of knowledge. It is this universal relativism that makes Hegel’s Absolute Knowing plastic. But what about Hegel’s other two Absolutes: the Idea and Spirit? Hegel’s Kantian understanding of “absolute” as that without restrictions or limitations renders the Absolute Idea as an idea without conditions or limits, an idea that can be said to be universally valid. The Absolute Idea is *not* an idea about some object or being called the “absolute,” the Absolute Idea names a process of dialectical becoming, a movement. Before we discuss the Absolute Idea, we have to first understand what Hegel’s *Logic* consists of, its subject matter, and its relation to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In short, we need to appreciate the relationship between Absolute Knowing and logical (but also ontological) thinking.

For Hegel, the movement of the *Phenomenology* and the *Logic* are homologous in that they both produce a comprehensive account of themselves as results of a dialectical movement: ‘logic...cannot say what

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57 Ibid., §17, p. 10.

58 Malabou 2005, p. 11.

59 Ibid., p. 134.

it is in advance, rather does this knowledge of itself only emerge as the final result and completion of its whole movement.<sup>60</sup> Yet this movement, this immanent deductive development, is plastic: 'the presentation of no subject matter can be in and for itself as strictly and immanently plastic as is that of thought in its necessary development.'<sup>61</sup> In the Introduction to *The Science of Logic* Hegel says that 'in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* I have presented consciousness as it progresses from the first immediate opposition of itself and the subject matter [*Gegenstand*] to absolute knowledge [*das absolute Wissen*]. This path traverses all the forms of the *relation of consciousness to the object* and its result is the *concept of science*.'<sup>62</sup> Absolute Knowing as the result of the movement of the *Phenomenology* is the very deduction of the concept of pure science, 'the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is nothing other than that deduction.'<sup>63</sup> In a certain sense, the *Phenomenology* serves as a necessary, philosophical preamble to the beginning of Hegel's philosophical system.<sup>64</sup> The difference between the sensuous content of the *Phenomenology* and the content of logic is that the former examines the dialectical unfolding movement immanent to sensuous experience while the latter examines the dialectical unfolding movement immanent to abstract thought.<sup>65</sup> Hegel is quick to claim that logical thinking is not a type of thinking *about* something else an entity or object external to thought-determinations (i.e., it is not an application of categories onto things, people, the world, objects, etc.). Logical thinking is thought thinking *itself*.<sup>66</sup> The content of logical thought is therefore the Concept [*Begriff*], insofar as logical

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60 Hegel 2010b, p. 23.

61 Ibid., p. 19.

62 Ibid., p. 28.

63 Ibid., p. 29. Hegel goes on to clarify that 'Absolute knowledge is the *truth* of all modes of consciousness because, as the course of the *Phenomenology* brought out, it is only in absolute knowledge that the separation of the *subject matter* from the *certainty of itself* is completely resolved: truth as become equal to certainty and this certainty to truth.'

64 In the Doctrine of Being, Hegel says 'logic has for its presupposition the science of spirit in its appearance, a science which contains the necessity, and therefore demonstrates the truth, of the standpoint which is pure knowledge and of its mediation.' Ibid., p. 47.

65 Hegel says 'In this science of spirit in its appearance [*Phenomenology*] the beginning is made from empirical, *sensuous* consciousness, and it is this consciousness which is *immediate* knowledge in the strict sense; there, in this science, is where its nature is discussed [...] but in logic the presupposition is what has proved itself to be the result of that preceding consideration, namely the idea as pure knowledge. *Logic* is the *pure science*, that is, pure knowledge in the full compass of its development.' See Ibid.

66 As Hegel says 'Logic has nothing to do with a thought *about* something which stands outside by itself as the base of thought; nor does it have to do with forms meant to provide mere *markings* of the truth; rather, the necessary forms of thinking, and its specific determinations, are the content and the ultimate truth itself.' Ibid.

thinking concerns the determinations of the categories of thought (i.e., thought-determinations).<sup>67</sup> To this extent, the entire *Science of Logic* is concerned with the conceptual development of logical thinking, that is to say, the three Books of Hegel's logic (e.g., Doctrine of Being, Doctrine of Essence, and Doctrine of the Concept) are divisions within the concept as such.<sup>68</sup>

What is the relation between the concept and the Absolute Idea? Hegel's answer is that the absolute idea is the unity of the concept with objectivity. Hegel uses the term "objectivity" (*Objektivität*) to refer to the set of thought-determinations, or categories, concerned with the "otherness" of subjectivity, with categories that are ostensibly non-mediated and self-constricted. That is to say "objectivity" refers to that which is beyond, or "outside" thought itself. Hegel treats these categories within "The Subjective Logic" because rather than simply describe the thought-determinations about objects themselves, the section on "objectivity" attempts to capture, as Burbidge points out, 'the way we think about objects,' that is to say 'we are now explicitly including the activity of thinking in the process of describing objectivity.'<sup>69</sup>

The Absolute Idea emerges as the unity of theoretical idea and practical idea. In his discussion of cognition in *The Science of Logic*, Hegel argues that there are two forms of cognition: theoretical cognition and practical cognition. Both of these cases involve a process whereby subjectivity (i.e, the concept) and objectivity are made to be in unity with one another. The theoretical idea is "cognition as such," whereas the practical idea is the cognitive impulse to transform objectivity through action. The theoretical idea attempts to recreate within thought itself the truth of the objective world, but remains one-sided insofar as it simply constructs a subjective *theory* (i.e., idea of the true). The objective world remains unchanged.<sup>70</sup> The practical idea seeks to unite the concept with objectivity by engaging in a process to make the world into an *ought* (i.e., the idea of the good). The action of the practical idea is an attempt to realize or actualize a notion of the good by transforming objectivity. Subjectivity already has its content (i.e., the self-determining

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67 In the *Encyclopedia Logic*, Hegel says that 'Philosophy replaces representations with *thoughts* and *categories*, but more specifically with *concepts*. Representations may generally be regarded as *metaphors* of thoughts and concepts.' Hegel 2010a, §3, p. 30-31.

68 As Hegel himself says 'One must thus be reminded, first and foremost, that presupposed here is that the *division* must be connected with the concept, or rather must lie in the concept itself.' Hegel 2010b, p. 38.

69 Ibid., p. 96.

70 Ibid., p. 697.

concept), but is confronted with an objectivity (externality) that does not conform to it. So there is a discrepancy here.<sup>71</sup> However, the practical idea remains one-sided insofar as it privileges action (as opposed to theory). The theoretical idea has united the concept with objectivity, but on the side of subjectivity. The practical idea unites the concept and objectivity, but does so with respect to the side of action/objectivity. Neither the theoretical idea nor the practical idea is able to truly unite the concept and objectivity. The Absolute Idea integrates the theoretical drive for truth with the practical drive to achieve the good. Not only do the two aspects complement each other, but each 'on its own shows up the limitations of the other.'<sup>72</sup> What Hegel calls the Absolute Idea, is a reciprocal relationship that is complete in itself. 'When theory and practice continually check and reinforce each other we have a way of integrating concept and actuality that is valid in all respect,' because it is a self-correcting, dynamic process. When this dynamic is taken as a single thought, it involves a method that emerges through the immanent deduction of the *Logic* in its entirety. With the Absolute Idea 'the form determination is its own completed totality, the pure content.'<sup>73</sup> As with Absolute Knowing discussed in the *Phenomenology*, the Absolute Idea is absolute, that is to say, it is unrestricted because it describes the absolute relativity of all forms of logical thinking. In §237 of the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel says 'this content is the system of the *logical*. Nothing remains here of the idea, as *form*, but the *method* of this content—the determinate knowledge [*Wissen*] of the validity of its moments.'<sup>74</sup> That is to say, the content of the Absolute Idea turns out to be the dialectical dynamic movement, the immanent generative process of thought thinking itself. It is the 'rational articulation of the dynamic that is present universally in all things.' The dialectical movement that Hegel describes as "method" emerges only with the onset of the Absolute Idea, it is not externally assumed or presupposed and then applied to the content of logical thinking, quite the contrary, the method Hegel discusses in the closing pages of *The Science of Logic* only reveals itself in its totality and universality through the immanent movement of the *Logic* itself. The dialectical movement, or method, is not transcendental. It does not describe criteria or the conditions under which a certain process becomes possible, such as Kant's transcendental categories.

.....  
71 Ibid., p. 729-734.

72 Burbidge 2006, p. 103.

73 Hegel 2010b, p. 736.

74 Hegel 2010a, §237, p. 300.

The dialectically movement is only comprehended to be what it is retrospectively, and it is this retrospection which the Absolute Idea articulates. The moments of this dialectical, or speculative method are: a) a posited, immediate beginning; b) a transition or negation into the negative aspect of the first moment or term, it's 'other'; c) a negation of this 'other' that re-joins the first moment as unity through a negation of negation; d) the emergence of a decidedly new term through the immanent, contradictory process of the preceding moments.<sup>75</sup> For example, the opening dialectic in the *Logic* starts with an immediate term (Being), which is shown to be its other (Nothing), the truth of both, their unity is a third moment (Becoming). However, this third moment, this becoming, emerges as a new beginning, what Hegel calls determined being or existence (*Dasein*).<sup>76</sup> It is this dynamic movement that constitutes the Absolute Idea; the Idea does not so much engender its own specific content but rather expresses the very relativity of all particular, logical content whatsoever, and *this* is its concrete universality as such.

Similar to Hegel's Absolute Knowing in the *Phenomenology*, the Absolute Idea of *The Science of Logic* is not an idea *about* an entity, object, or divine substance designated "The Absolute". It is rather the logical dynamic self-movement of the concept, a movement that subsists as an ontological concrete universal. The Idea is absolute because it is the absolute relativity of all thought-determinations. The plasticity of the Absolute Idea is its concrete universality: the dynamic logical movement of the concept as it unfolds itself through itself. If Hegel's plasticity is the capacity to both receive and produce form, then the Absolute Idea can be said to receive and produce a form that is identical with its content. The difference between content and form collapses with the Absolute Idea because its content *is* its form, that is to say the content (i.e., logical categories expounded upon in *The Science of Logic*) emerge *through* an immanent dynamic dialectical movement. This movement is plastic, as Malabou herself points out, because 'as it unfolds, it makes links between the opposing moments of total immobility (the "fixed") and vacuity ("dissolution"), and then links both in the vitality of the whole, a whole which, reconciling these two extremes, is itself the union of *resistance* (*Widerstand*) and fluidity (*Flüssigkeit*).'<sup>77</sup>

.....  
75 I am here summarizing, quite crudely, Hegel's detailed exposition of the dialectical movement outlined in the section on the Absolute Idea. See Hegel 2010b, p. 736-753.

76 Ibid., p. 59-83.

77 Malabou 2005, p. 12.

## The Plasticity of Absolute Spirit

As stated in the introduction above, this section on Hegel's Absolute Spirit will be rather brief given that Malabou herself devotes considerable analysis of its plastic nature in her work. In Hegel's *Philosophy of Mind*,<sup>78</sup> Absolute Spirit of course constitutes the culmination of the *Encyclopedia* system. As we have seen, Hegel adopts Kant's definition of the term "absolute" as that without limitation. To this effect, a spirit that is absolute is a spirit that permeates through everything.<sup>79</sup>

Spirit is an immanent, necessary unfolding movement that philosophy can only properly grasp and comprehend. Absolute Spirit is announced the moment where spirit is finally able to fully grasp and comprehend itself by recognizing the immanent necessary movement of its own unfolding through World Spirit. Thinking spirit is able to 'grasp its concrete universality,' says Hegel, 'and ascends to *awareness of the absolute spirit*, as the eternally actual truth.'<sup>80</sup>

The three moments within Absolute Spirit—art, religion, and philosophy—constitutes Absolute Spirit's full actualization. Art at this juncture provides the immediate configuration which is 'the concrete *intuition* and representation of the *implicitly* absolute mind as *ideal*.'<sup>81</sup> That is to say, what the fine arts offer is an intuition into the absoluteness of spirit, the spirit that weaves through history. Art does this through concrete, singular formations such as poetry, painting, sculpture, and theatre. However, Hegel maintains that this is insufficient to fully grasp Absolute Spirit in its totality because 'in such individuality of shaping the absolute mind [*Geist*] cannot be explicated.'<sup>82</sup> It is due to the inadequacy of the fine arts that we pass onto the second moment of Absolute Spirit, what Hegel also refers to in the *Philosophy of Mind* as 'Revealed Religion'. Hegel's treatment of religion in the *Encyclopedia* is a more condensed discussion of the same Triadic structure he covers in the *Phenomenology*. Since we have already seen how in Hegel's

78 The German word for "mind" and "spirit" are the same: *Geist*. Hegel, it goes without saying, is fully aware of this fact and exploits it mercilessly.

79 Hegel articulates the absolute permeation constitutive of spirit in *The Philosophy of Mind* when he says: 'That in the course of the spirit (and spirit is a spirit that does not just hover over history as over waters, but weaves in it and is the sole moving force) freedom, i.e., the development determined by the concept of spirit, is the determinant and only its own concept is the spirit's final aim, i.e., truth, since the spirit is consciousness, or in other words that *reason* is in history, will at least be a plausible belief, but it is also a cognitive insight of philosophy.' See Hegel 2007, §549, Remark, p. 249.

80 Ibid., §552, p. 250.

81 Ibid., §556, p.259.

82 Ibid., §559, p. 260.

*Phenomenology of Spirit*, the chapter on 'Revealed Religion' expresses the true absolute content of the dialectical movement, albeit in a representational (or in picture-thinking) form. This second moment of Absolute Spirit lacks the true *form*.<sup>83</sup> It is only with the emergence of philosophy that we are able to have a proper cognition of the content and form of Absolute Spirit. For Hegel, philosophy is the final moment of Absolute Spirit, it is *the very movement of spirit* which 'finds itself already accomplished, when at the conclusion it grasps its own concept, i.e., only *looks back* on its knowledge.'<sup>84</sup>

Philosophy is the '*self-thinking* [Absolute] Idea,' and it is in this respect that 'science has returned to its beginning, and the logical is its *result* as the *spiritual*.'<sup>85</sup> At this point, Hegel introduces a discussion of the three syllogisms that 'retrospectively explain the entire speculative cycle of the *Encyclopedia* as a whole: Logic, Nature, Spirit.'<sup>86</sup> Rather than provide a detailed treatment of the syllogism and the inherent plasticity (something that Malabou herself does excellently), I will instead briefly sketch out how the dynamic, dialectical process emerges in Absolute Spirit.<sup>87</sup>

The three syllogisms that Hegel discusses in the closing paragraphs of his *Philosophy of Mind* essentially articulation a tripartite process of mediation. The first syllogism demonstrates how we begin with the logic, move to nature, and end with mind (or spirit). The second syllogism is the sublation (*Aufhebung*) of the first, in that here it is mind/spirit which reflects on its presupposition (i.e., nature), and determines logical principles. The final and third syllogism, the logical Idea as pure thought serves as a middle that 'divides into *mind* and *nature*.'<sup>88</sup> These two contradictory and opposite moments of the third syllogism are unified within the logical Idea. As Hegel says, 'it is the concept, the nature of the subject-matter, that moves onwards and develops, and this movement is equally the activity of cognition.'<sup>89</sup> It is with the third syllogism that we finally have the dynamic, dialectical process of Absolute Spirit. Nature

83 Burbidge points out that the section devoted to religion in *The Philosophy of Mind* 'reproduces the same structure and moments that we have already discovered in the corresponding chapter in the *Phenomenology*.' See Burbidge 1997, p. 32.

84 Hegel 2007, §573, p. 267.

85 Ibid., §574, p. 275.

86 Malabou 2005, p. 135.

87 Malabou 2005, p. 135 -142.

88 Hegel 2007, §575;§576;§577, p. 276.

89 Ibid., §577, p. 276.

and Mind, two opposites are reconciled, out of which a new absolute form emerges: Absolute Spirit.<sup>90</sup> This dynamic process is the very same process that we saw develop in Absolute Knowing, and the Absolute Idea. With Absolute Spirit, this process involves not only logic, and nature, but also the emergence of humans and our ability to rationally conceptualize and comprehend this very movement through philosophy. Absolute Spirit can be said to be plastic, then, because not only does it receive all the previous forms and shapes of spirit, but effectively produces this dynamic process by circulating back to logic. Absolute Spirit, like Absolute Knowing and the Absolute Idea, does not name an entity called “the absolute”. Absolute Spirit refers to a continuous dynamic movement that engenders ‘principled actions, reflective judgment, and mutual recognition. While any particular action and judgment will turn out to be relative, the dynamic itself turns out to be absolute and without condition. It is the structure of self-conscious life wherever and whenever it occurs.’<sup>91</sup> Once again, the only absolute thing is the absolute relativity of all things.

### Hegel’s Secret:

In 1865, the British Idealist J. H. Stirling wrote a book entitled *The Secret of Hegel*, where he submits the argument that the secret of Hegel is that ‘the universe is but a materialization, externalization, of the thoughts of God.’<sup>92</sup> While there is certainly a religious dimension in Hegel’s philosophy (as we have seen, Hegel makes use of Christian theology), it is not quite correct to maintain that Hegel constructs a conception of the universe from the ‘thoughts of God’. Hegel’s three Absolutes, as I (and many other Hegel commentators) have argued function as adjectives and not as nouns: they signify a dialectical movement. Hegel’s Absolutes are absolutely plastic in that they are without restrictions and without limitations, and receive and produce form. Far from being a mystical and mysterious aporia, a secret infinite enigma that forever remains unapproachable yet inescapable, Hegel’s Absolutes turn out to be not so mystifying at all. They name no object. They signify no entity. Hegel’s three Absolutes, like the man behind the curtain at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*, turn out to be not what they at first appeared. In the final analysis, then, the secret of the Absolute this and only this: there is no Absolute. Hegel’s secret is that there is no secret.

.....  
90 Malabou provides a detailed analysis of the third syllogism. See Malabou 2005, p. 155-166.

91 Burbidge 1997, p. 33.

92 Stirling 1865, p. 85.

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