The Greatest Mistake: A Case for the Failure of Hegel's Idealism

What is a great mistake?

Nietzsche once said that a great error is worth more than a multitude of trivial truths. A truly great mistake is one that we can learn from, where we gain new understanding from explaining why it is an error, where we are either forced to make explicit our previously vague intuitions, or forced to acknowledge properly counterintuitive results. Hegel understood this point well, as his analysis of the logical and historical development of human thought shows, for he takes each moment within this development to be a position that, while showing itself to be inconsistent, passes over into a more detailed position that incorporates its truth.

It is my opinion that Hegel may have made the greatest such error in the history of philosophy to date, and this means that understanding why it is an error is of the utmost importance. To do this, it is necessary to examine the nature of Hegel's position, which he calls Absolute Idealism.

What is Absolute Idealism?

The essence of Absolute Idealism is the thesis of the identity of subject and object, which we will simply call the identity thesis. It's very important to understand what this doesn't mean. It is not to be understood along the lines of the maxim of Berkeley's subjective idealism: esse est percipi. It is not the case for Hegel that each individual object is identical with an individual subject that thinks it, or some state of that subject. Instead, the thesis can be interpreted in three different ways. This is indicated by the fact that there are three distinct formulations of it: as the unity of subject and object, as the unity of thought and Being, and as the unity of subject and substance. Respectively, these correspond to idealism as method (Absolute Knowing), idealism as system (Absolute Idea), and idealism as reality (Absolute Spirit).

Absolute Idea names the identity of the general structures of subjects and objects, which are named thought and Being, respectively. Absolute Spirit names the identity of subject and substance, or Absolute Idea as instantiated in a singular structure, which is the correlate of both the Aristotelian and the Spinozan conceptions of God. This lets us explain precisely why Heidegger takes Hegel's thought to represent the ultimate form of what he called onto-theology. Absolute Idea is the structure of beings as such, and it is a form of beingness (Seiendheit) insofar as it thinks Being as a genus. Absolute Spirit is the structure of beings as a whole (or world) insofar as it is the immanent ground of their existence in the self-externalisation of Absolute Idea. Hegel thus thinks what Heidegger
calls Being – the unified structure of beings as such and as a whole – in terms of beings themselves, namely, in terms of subjects in general, and a highest subject, respectively. This explicitly violates Heidegger’s principle of the ontological difference.

However, I’m principally interested in the identity thesis in its form as method – as Absolute Knowing, or what Hegel will call the concept of Science – and the role it plays in Hegel’s attempt to elaborate Idealism as system, or to describe the structure of the Absolute Idea. This is the project of his masterwork, the Science of Logic. If the identity thesis provides the form of Absolute Idealism, then the Science of Logic unpacks its content.

Specifically, I’m interested in the way that the identity thesis functions as a presupposition of the Logic, and how this relates to Hegel’s famous claim that the Logic is presuppositionless. This claim is true in a limited fashion, insofar as the identity thesis does not function as a premise in the argument that makes up the Logic. However, we can distinguish two distinct senses in which it functions as a methodological presupposition: as determining the procedure which the argument follows, and as determining the way in which the results of the argument should be interpreted.

To explain this it’s necessary to say a little bit about the Logic. I’m going to presume a little bit of familiarity with the work, as I’ll focus on the structure of the argument rather than it’s content. The crucial point is that the argument is stratified. To show this I will distinguish at least four separate levels at which it operates:-

**The Basic Dialectic:** This is the Logic viewed as a serial progression of various categories, starting with the category of Being, and transitioning through Nothing, Becoming, and the various other categories up to the final category of Absolute Idea.

**The Division of Books:** This is the threefold separation of the Logic into the Doctrine of Being, the Doctrine of Essence, and the Doctrine of the Concept, which each display a distinctive internal structure which differentiates them from the others.

**The Division of Volumes:** This is the twofold separation of the Logic into the Objective Logic, which includes both Being and Essence, and the Subjective Logic, which includes the Concept.

**The Overall Dialectic:** This is the Logic viewed as the complete explication of the implicit content of the concept of Being in its systematic form as Absolute Idea, which contains the totality of the previous moments of the Logic and their relations. This is to view the argument as a whole as a single inference, or the self-overcoming of the concept of Being.
There are various intermediary levels here that we won’t go into. The important point is
that the transitions between categories at the lower levels essentially make explicit the
content of the categories at the higher levels. On this basis, we can see that the identity
thesis does not form an explicit premise at any point of the argument, but is ultimately
derived by the complete transition from Being to Absolute Idea, which demonstrates the
identity of object and subject, or Being and thought. However, this is not a justification of
the identity thesis, but merely its transition from an implicit condition to an explicit
principle of the system itself. To take it as a justification would be to fall into a vicious
circle, as Hegel himself understood all too well.

We can now characterise the two functions of the identity thesis as implicit methodological
presuppositions of the system in more detail.

In its function as a deductive procedure, it determines the dialectical structure of the
Logic. It constitutes a non-intentional form of thought in which we do not use pre-
individuated concepts to form fixed propositions about particular objects, but instead
think the content of concepts directly, allowing them to immanently transform themselves
into other concepts by way of what Hegel calls speculative propositions. The Logic uses
this method in order to carry out an immanent deduction of the structure of thought itself,
by beginning with the most minimal content that can be thought — indeterminate immediacy — which is named Being insofar as it is the one concept that applies to all
objects, or, as Heidegger correctly notes, the highest genus of beings. The procedure of
the Logic is then to systematically explicate what is explicit in this content, and thus the
structure of conceptual thought as such. The result of this is that the Logic does not start
with a complete method, but systematically explicates its own process of explication as it
goes.

In its function as interpretational schema, it determines the system produced as both a
logic and a metaphysics. The identity thesis guarantees that an immanent deduction of the
logical categories of thought is simultaneously an immanent deduction of the
metaphysics categories of Being. This schema is made explicit within the Subjective
Logic, where the category of Being becomes explicit as a concept, and the transition to
Absolute Idea makes explicit the identity of Being with its concept. This is the point at
which the logic is determined as theology, insofar as it is here that the externalisation of
Absolute Idea in its form as Absolute Spirit is demonstrated.

On this basis, we can see that in order for the Logic to be justified — in both the form of its
reasoning and the content of its conclusions — then the identity thesis must be
independently validated. If the Science of Logic corresponds to Kant’s metaphysical
deduction of the categories, then the Phenomenology of Spirit corresponds to the
transcendental deduction of their validity.

Why is Hegel an Absolute Idealist?

The argument of the *Phenomenology* is motivated by responding both to skepticism, and the transcendental response to skepticism. The transcendental response, which is exemplified by Kant's response to Humean skepticism, promises to show that knowledge is possible by analysing the structure of knowledge, in the form of the conditions of the possibility of knowledge. For Hegel, this begs the question insofar as it presupposes some kind of knowledge about knowledge that itself is unsecured. I'm going to call this the problem of transcendental method.

Hegel tries to sidestep this problem, and thereby secure a form of unconditioned or absolute knowledge, by returning to the most extreme form of skepticism – Pyrrhonian skepticism. The problem posed by Pyrrhonian skepticism can be described in two ways. It is originally posed by Sextus Empiricus as the problem of the criterion, which asks how we can find a criterion for choosing between a proposition and its negation that does not itself require a criterion to be justified. However, it's most clear formulation is Agrippa's trilemma, which asks how it is possible to justify any proposition (in contrast to its negation) without either: a) merely asserting its truth (bare assertion), b) appealing to another proposition that itself must be justified (recess), or c) justifying it by appeal to itself (circularity).

Hegel uses this to clarify the problem of transcendental method. He takes it that, in trying to describe its structure conceived as conditions of possibility, the transcendental philosopher implicitly assumes that knowledge is possible, and this is precisely what the Pyrrhonian skeptic denies. Hegel's response is then to describe the structure of knowledge as it appears, thereby bracketing the question of whether this structure actually makes knowledge possible. The crucial insight that enables him to do this is that the Pyrrhonian skeptic must explicitly pose the problem of the criterion, and that this involves describing the structure of justification in order to show its impossibility. In essence, if the skeptic is permitted to describe the apparent structure of knowledge in order to undermine it, then so is Hegel. He does this by providing what he calls the concept of Natural Consciousness.

Before explaining the structure of Natural Consciousness, it's important to understand the role it is supposed to play in his justification of the identity thesis. The crucial point is that the concept of Natural Consciousness is the concept of the non-identity of subject and object. The *Phenomenology* justifies the *Logic* by showing how our ordinary understanding of knowledge, or knowledge as it appears to us, contradicts itself and thus transforms itself into its negation, or the standpoint of Science. It thus shows how
knowledge as it is ordinarily understood is indeed impossible. However, insofar as the argument of Pyrrhonian skepticism is dependent upon this ordinary understanding, it is also a refutation of skepticism. This justifies the characterisation of Science as Absolute Knowing.

I’ll now turn to describing the structure of Natural Consciousness in its opposition to Science. Hegel’s definition is extraordinarily simple. It has two basic features:-

1) Consciousness relates itself to its object, or takes its object to be a certain way. What this means, is that it expresses a proposition about its object.

2) Consciousness distinguishes between this proposition and the object as it is in itself. In essence, consciousness allows for the possibility that this proposition is false.

These then have two implications:-

3) Because consciousness itself makes the distinction between its claim and the object it is about, the object cannot be truly in-itself, but must be for-consciousness. This means that consciousness must have a concept of its object in order to individuate it.

4) However, consciousness cannot be aware that the object is for-it without ceasing to be consciousness, and thus must suppress this fact. This means that consciousness cannot recognise that the concept of the object is dependent upon it without undermining the possibility of falsity.

This describes the form of intentional thought, in which we think about particular objects using fixed propositions composed of pre-individuated concepts, as opposed to Science as the form of non-intentional thought, in which we think the content of concepts directly. This not only describes the deductive procedure that we follow in ordinary discourse, but it equally determines the specific dialectical method of the Phenomenology.

The Phenomenology proceeds by a method of exhaustion. It does this by showing that each possible form of Natural Consciousness ultimately contradicts itself, thereby
transforming itself into another possible form, until we have exhausted all possible forms. It
thus demonstrates that if knowledge is conceived as Natural Consciousness, then it is
impossible. This progressive exhaustion of possibilities is stratified in much the way that
the dialectic of the Logic is stratified. As before, I will distinguish between at least four
separate levels:-

The Basic Dialectic: This is the Phenomenology viewed as a serial progression of various
things consciousness purports to know about its object. This is a series of propositions,
each of which produces the next by contradicting itself. There is a series of such
propositions within each form of consciousness, beginning with the sequence in Sense
Certainty: ‘This is here and now’, ‘This is here and now for me’, etc., and ending in the
identity thesis.

The Division of Forms: This is the separation of sequences of purported knowings into
forms of consciousness, such as Sense Certainty, Perception, Understanding, Self-
Consciousness, etc. and ending in Absolute Knowing. Each of these corresponds to a
general way of understanding its object that each purported knowing shares, or a concept
of the object (as described in point (3)).

The Division of Sections: This is the organisation of sequences of forms of consciousness
into more general categories, such as Consciousness, Self-Consciousness and Reason.
Each of these corresponds to a more general concept of its object, to which its subforms
correspond as species.

The Overall Dialectic: This is the Phenomenology viewed as the justification of the Logic,
or the transformation of the concept of Natural Consciousness into the concept of Science.

This structure lets us see the way in which the Phenomenology is still a dialectic, albeit it
one that consists in propositions that are purportedly absolute, rather than speculative
propositions that are explicitly transitional. Each form of consciousness is a concept
whose content is thought immanently by the method of exhaustion. These form a
hierarchy of genus and species that correspond to the various higher level ways of
dividing the dialectic. The concept of Natural Consciousness is the highest genus, with
each level beneath it divided into mutually exclusive species. The dialectical method of
exhaustion thus consists in traversing the hierarchy in a double movement. One moves
between the genera within a given level by unpacking their internal contradictions, and one does this by exhausting all of their species in a similar manner. The inferences between propositions at the lowest level thus immanently constitutes movements between concepts at the higher levels.

What this means is that the *Phenomenology* is a **logic of consciousness** first, a **teleological history of consciousness** second, and it is at no point anything like an introspective psychology.

**Where does Hegel go wrong?**

Hegel's great mistake is to be found in the way in which he sets up the argument of the *Phenomenology*, rather than in any particular part of the dialectics of the *Phenomenology* and the *Logic*. It consists in the fact that his response to the problem of transcendental method is fundamentally inadequate. To understand this it's necessary to see how it is that Hegel’s concept of Natural Consciousness is supposed to improve upon the Pyrrhonian skeptic’s minimal description of the structure of justification.

All the Pyrrhonian needs in order to articulate the Agrippan trilemma is an account of **assertions**, the **propositions** these assertions express, the relations of **incompatibility** between these propositions, and the relations of **consequence** that enable them to justify each other. Hegel's response to this is essentially that it is **insufficient** to capture the appearance of knowledge. His concept of Natural Consciousness replaces this with an analysis of the **internal structure** of propositions in terms of **objects** and **concepts**. The rest of the Pyrrhonian model is **implicit** within this simple structure, insofar as it follows from the interactions between the **possibility of falsity** and the **conceptual suppression**. Indeed, one can look at the first three sections of the dialectic (*Sense Certainty, Perception*, and *Understanding*) as making these features **explicit** (subject/predicate structure, incompatibility relations between predicates, and consequence relations, respectively).

Hegel’s problem is that it is possible to level the charge of insufficiency that he directs at Pyrrhonian skepticism against his own account of the appearance of knowledge. We are thus faced with a renewed form of the problem of the criterion, namely, how do we choose between competing accounts of the appearance of knowledge, or accounts of the **ordinary structure of justification**. This is nothing other than the problem of transcendental method.

In essence, even if Hegel does not presuppose that knowledge is possible, he does not have an account of *what it would be* for an account of the appearance of knowledge to be
sufficient. This is perfectly consistent with the idea that Hegel’s concept of Natural Consciousness describes necessary features of the structure of knowledge. We simply need a deductive procedure that is capable of deriving it, and whatever other features of the structure of knowledge are necessary. This is just to ask after the proper method of transcendental philosophy.

I thus think that Hegel’s failure to justify the Logic is the greatest mistake in the history of philosophy for two reasons. On the one hand, it demonstrates that if we are to deal with the problem of skepticism, we must become transcendental philosophers. This is to say that it demonstrates the necessity of transcendental philosophy. On the other hand, it lets us clearly pose the problem of transcendental method, or the question of what transcendental philosophy is: how do we immanently describe the structure of ordinary discourse?

There are a number of further things that can be said about this more determinate formulation of the problem of transcendental method. It would be correct to point out that it is very close to Hegel’s own project, insofar as Hegel takes the Logic to completely explicate the conceptual structure of all forms of thought, including the ordinary form of thought found in Natural Consciousness. However, it would be an error to think that it is just restating Hegel’s own problem, because Hegel takes the form of thought through which the structure of the ordinary form is deduced (Science) to be completely opposed to this ordinary form (Natural Consciousness). For him, Science and Natural Consciousness are mutually exclusive species of the genus of thought, which is only properly explicated by the Logic. By contrast, my approach takes ordinary thought (Natural Consciousness, or Discourse), to be the genus, and the special form of thought that explicates it (Science, or Transcendental Discourse) to be a species of it.

It might also be objected that this criticism of Hegel fails to take into account the circular nature of the exposition of the Logic. In moving from Being to Absolute Idea, the Logic constitutes the return of Being into itself as Absolute Idea. What was originally implicit in the content of the concept of Being is thereby made explicit. This is equally the case with the Logic’s own method, which is merely implicit at the beginning, but becomes fully explicit at the end. This is not a vicious circle of justification, but a virtuous circle of explication. However, we can see that not only does the inadequate justification of the concept of Natural Consciousness in the Phenomenology undermine the justification of the Logic as such, but it brings into question the method of the Phenomenology itself, insofar as the latter is already implicitly dialectical in a way that is neither explicated, nor justified until the Logic. This reintroduces an element of viciousness into the circle that Hegel’s philosophy traces.
Transcendental philosophy can avoid this residual viciousness, while retaining only the virtuous elements of Hegel’s explicative approach. It can do this because, given that transcendental discourse is a species of discourse in general, the immanent deduction of the structure of discourse will at the same time be a description of the general structure of this deduction itself. The two challenges for this approach are to show that the genus of discourse immanently differentiates itself into various species, including transcendental discourse, and to find an explanatory primitive that cannot be rejected, in order to foreclose its method to justificatory regress and circularity. Its virtuous circle would then consist in explicating the implicit content of this primitive, and on this basis explicating its own method of explication.

To conclude, it’s interesting to look at the structure of my argument in terms that Hegel himself would find familiar: as a dialectical triad of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Transcendental philosophy in its original form is here the thesis. It is a systematic attempt to respond to the problems of skepticism which, as Hegel points out, is vitiated by a peculiar kind of regress. Hegel’s development of Absolute Idealism out of this criticism is then the antithesis of this original thesis. The oppositional character of the two can be seen in the opposition of Natural Consciousness and Science. My criticisms of Hegel’s positions then pave way for a synthesis of these two positions, which is not a return to naïve transcendentalism, or the standpoint of the abstract understanding in distinction from reason, but rather an attempt to reincorporate the truth in Hegel’s ideas within a more adequate framework. It is essentially an attempt to collapse the abstract opposition between transcendental philosophy and immanent dialectic by collapsing the abstract opposition between Natural Consciousness and Science.

All of this is still preliminary though. Precisely what the method of transcendental philosophy is, and how we leverage Hegel’s own insights within it, is the topic of a different paper.