

Phenomenology of Spirit: Substance as Subject

In the *Phenomenology's* "Preface" Hegel makes some quick, dense, and seemingly unintelligible equations of certain terms. In §22, 37, and 54 of the Miller translation Hegel makes a boggling rundown of conceptual equivalences that to the uninitiated must appear as utterly unintelligible.

Hegel basically ends up making this astonishing chain of equivalencies:

Reason=purpose= self-movement =Subject=Negativity=Being-for-self =
Self=Immediacy=Becoming=Concept= Actuality=Substance=Being-in-itself

In §22, Hegel says *Reason is purposive activity*, and that *purpose* is what is both unmoved and is *self-moving*, and this is *Subjectivity*. Not only that, but this power of self-movement is *negativity*, and this negativity is the *self*. This actually *isn't that* unintelligible if one merely slows down.

That Reason is purpose is not a crazy idea; indeed, when you ask for the *reason* for something, you are usually asking for the *purpose* for which it is. Purpose being self-moving is also not strange, for purpose in a sense seems to be self-realizing in that something purposive begins with its purpose in potential and ends with its purpose actualized. That Hegel calls this self-movement *Subjectivity*, however, is definitely something that won't find much traction in the section; we are told of it, and Hegel swiftly races onward. It isn't an absurd notion, however, when we think of it in a *very broad sense*; our subjectivity as we understand it in regular life is fundamentally tied to our own self-movement as free agents to do whatever it is that we want to do; hence, that self-movement is in some basic sense Subjectivity is understandable. That self-movement is *negativity* is definitely strange if one is not thinking of *negation* and instead thinks of negativity in the sense of negative and positive, but with negation in mind it's quite clear why this equivalence is made: that which moves itself must somehow be negating its state of being to change it. Negativity as the self-movement of purpose as a whole, Hegel tells us, is just what the *self* is. "The self is the sameness and simplicity that relates itself to itself." Because *purpose* relates itself both as its beginning and end, and negativity likewise negates whatever it produces and in that sense also relates to itself, this equivalence is formally intelligible even if we have little clue what Hegel really means in these concepts.

In §37, Hegel brings *all* of what he states in §22 to continue the chain of conceptual connections.

He elaborates an addition to negativity; it is now the distinction between the I and the Substance it investigates. In this section, Hegel elaborates on the meaning of *Substance as Subject*. The negativity which separates the I and Substance is the very

power that is the I and the animating soul of Substance—this negativity constitutive of substance, though Hegel does not mention it, is at its most basic *determinateness*, the being of something by not being another something. Substance is “in disparity with itself,” shows negativity active within it, and negativity is constitutive of Substance’s very being; this is how Hegel cashes out the original enigmatic claim. Substance is Subject because it has negativity, i.e. it has the very same self-moving power as the I.

When it has shown this completely, Spirit has made its existence identical with its essence ; it has itself for its object just as it is, and the abstract element of immediacy, and of the separation of knowing and truth, is overcome. Being is then absolutely mediated ; it is a substantial content which is just as immediately the property of the ‘I’, it is self-like or the Notion.

To skip a bit ahead in the *Phenomenology*, Spirit in the end shall find nothing but itself in its objects of investigation. The reason is already clear in one sense, first because Spirit too is negativity and the I; secondly—and this shall be shown in the next section—because Spirit is thought and its knowledge of objects is their very Notion; and lastly, because as Hegel intends to show beyond the *Phenomenology* in his actual philosophy, the entire system of knowledge is one absolute system united and moved by negativity.

Lastly, in §54 Hegel brings forth for a moment the concepts of *identity* and *thought*.

The subsistence or substance of anything that exists is its self-identity ; for a failure of self-identity would be its dissolution. Self-identity, however, is pure abstraction ; but this is *thinking*.

Self-identity is the locus of being that keeps substance together. Self-identity is also pure abstraction in a literal sense: it rips substance away from any connections and determinations, and as Hegel has already told us earlier in the *Preface*, abstraction is thought. Being, he goes on, *is thought*. This is meant literally and not in any metaphorical way. Being really is thought for it is a concept of abstraction, yet it is a “thought” that certainly applies to existent beings despite its poverty of meaning. Here Hegel makes a claim that this is the solution to the problem of how Being and thought are one, a claim I’m not sure he keeps quite in this sense in his later system.

Now, since the subsistence of an existent thing is a self-identity or pure abstraction, it is the abstraction of itself from itself, or it is itself its lack of self-identity and its dissolution—its own inwardness and withdrawal into itself—its own becoming.

Here Hegel pulls a fast one on the reader, alluding to something he develops in the future *Science of Logic*, with becoming. Becoming is *vanishing*, and since self-identity

in abstraction is its own dissolution, its own vanishing, the power of negativity appears freely from it. *Substance's self-identity is its own negativity, its own subjectivity.*

Substance, having Become, then attains to its own *self-determination* in accord with its own free self-movement and development via its negativity, a power which allows it to go beyond itself and link to what is different yet freely inherent to it. Thus, Substance constantly dissolves its boundaries—goes beyond itself—only to return to itself freely. This movement broadly maps the path of Spirit which goes beyond itself only to find itself.

Some of the equivalencies aside, it goes to show that Hegel really had something interesting to say in all these seemingly bizarre terms and phrases, however, he was unable to explain them due to the constraints of a *Preface*, and well... one should wonder what he was thinking when he decided it was a good idea to just throw them out considering the ignorance his readers suffer through no fault of their own on this part.