

**HEGEL'S CRITIQUE OF MODERN PRESUPPOSITION AND PLATO'S
APORETIC MOMENT**

by

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A Thesis submitted to the

School of Graduate Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Philosophy

Memorial University of Newfoundland

October, 2020

St. John's

Newfoundland and Labrador

Abstract

This thesis explores the implications of Hegel's remark in §31 of *Encyclopedia Logic* that the Greeks thought freely while moderns are bound to presuppositions. Plato is today generally regarded as the originator of the *a priori*, yet Hegel's reading of Plato exempts him from what he sees as a distinctly modern tendency towards presupposition. Hegel sees Platonic presuppositions as self-mediating and ultimately self-canceling in the flow of thought. Modern philosophy, by contrast, aims to establish an unshakable first principle external to and exempt from thoughtful reflection. This radical disjunction between Greek and modern philosophy can be best seen in Plato's aporetic moment. Plato opted to allow the bewilderment of aporia at the same crucial juncture of thought where we moderns buttress our challenged definitions upon an *a priori* presupposition. This aporetic moment arises when thought, still stuck in its first moment of abstraction, realizes that it cannot rigorously define crucial philosophical concepts. In the aporia Plato exposes the pretensions of those who believe that the good can be defined. Hegel likewise critiques the overreach of the modern understanding (*Verstand*) in attempting to directly predicate the highest philosophical concepts. This thesis draws out each thinker's descriptions of the circumstances and presuppositions surrounding the aporetic moment and closely correlates them, ultimately showing why Hegel regarded Greek thought as so radically misunderstood by his contemporaries. Looking at the movement of his thought and not its static conclusions, Hegel reads Plato as a dialectical antidote to the hubris of recurring modern sophistry.

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1. Introduction

As concerns thinking freely, Greek philosophy thought freely, but not scholasticism, since the latter likewise took up its content as something given and, indeed, given by the Church. – We moderns, through our entire way of education [*unsere ganze Bildung*], have been initiated into representations [*Vorstellungen*] [of things], which it is exceptionally difficult to overcome because these representations possess the deepest content [*den tiefsten Inhalt*]. Regarding the ancient philosophers we must imagine human beings who stand entirely within sensory perception and have no other presupposition than the heaven above and the earth around them, since mythological representations had been discarded. In this factual environment, thought is free and withdrawn into itself, free from anything material, purely with itself. This kind of being purely with itself [*reine Beisichsein*] is inherent in free thought, sailing off into the free, open space where there is nothing below or above us, and where we stand in solitude alone with ourselves.¹

The evocative image of the Greek mind setting off into the world in full self-possession expresses the profound influence of ancient thought upon Hegel's system. Whatever philosophical advances we moderns have achieved, we fall short of the Greeks because we limit ourselves by beginning to philosophize from a set of preconditions foreign to thought itself. Modern philosophy proceeds from an unphilosophical dependence upon what remains external to thoughtful consideration. While the Greek mind strode forward to meet the world on its own terms, the modern mind tethers itself to an *a priori* foundation, a starting point which grounds all subsequent thought while being itself exempt from thoughtful consideration. The modern takes an immediate self-evidence to be the cornerstone of all truth, while the Greek did not seek such an unspoiled beginning, celebrating the mediating process of thought as the sovereignty of the mind.

¹ G.W.F Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline, Part 1: Science of Logic*, trans. by Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), §31, 71.

To 21st century readers, Hegel's wide generalizations about world-historical philosophical epochs seem vulnerable to obvious skeptical rejoinders. Well-known elements of Platonic philosophy seem to directly contradict each point of Hegel's characterization of ancient thought. Plato compares sensory experience to being trapped inside a prison² or an oyster shell,³ derives the immortality of the soul from the *a priori* existence of innate ideas,⁴ and often provides mythic representations of his ideas.⁵ Plato's doctrine of recollected ideas has generally been read as the source of the very presuppositional attitude Hegel critiques. Martin Heidegger neatly summarized how the tradition has received Plato as establishing presuppositions (*Voraus-setzungen*) set in advance (*im Vor-aus*) of philosophical thought when he termed him "the discoverer of the *a priori*."⁶

The dissonance between Hegel's comments in *EL* and the general reception of Plato discloses a crucial intersection between Hegel's interpretation of the history of philosophy and his understanding of what constitutes a presupposition restrictive of the free development of thought. In Hegel's reading, it is we moderns who are guilty of anachronism in our abstract representational reading of Platonic philosophy, emphasizing

² Unless otherwise indicated, translations of Plato are from *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. by John Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997). *Republic* 517b.

³ *Phaedrus* 250c.

⁴ *Phaedo* 73cff.

⁵ As just one example, the seer Diotima reveals the nature of platonic love, personified as Eros, to Socrates. *Symposium* 210a–212b.

⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1982), §22, 326.

certain conclusions as “Platonic” while losing the truth of the whole — the free, self-contained movement of philosophical thought. Tracing the dialogues through the immanent development Lawrence Bruce-Robertson terms “the journey to truth”,⁷ Hegel reads Plato without presupposing in advance any “Platonic” conclusions. The *a priori* is not, as it were, posited *a priori*, but arrived at through this journey. Just as no part of Hegel’s system can be considered apart from the self-mediated development of the whole of thought, Plato’s recollected forms are not immediate representations of externalized ideas, but the motion of thought intensively realizing itself through the process of the philosophical education portrayed in the dialogues.⁸

Hegel sees the development of thought as occurring through three stages which he presents in the *Encyclopedia Logic* as the three sides of the logical domain: 1.) the abstract side or that of the understanding 2.) the dialectical or negatively rational side 3.) the speculative or positively rational side. The understanding is the first moment of thought which presumes its objects to have an abstract, self-sufficient identity, “distinguished and fixed as such [*für sich*] in this their isolation.”⁹ The overreaching predominance of this first method obscures our ability to distinguish these moments of

⁷ Lawrence Bruce-Robertson, “The Platonic Dimension in Hegel’s System,” in *Hegel and Ancient Philosophy: A Re-Examination*, ed. by Glenn Alexander Magee (New York: Routledge, 2018), 76.

⁸ Hegel accounts for the Platonic doctrine of recollection as part of this process of development. “When it is said in the Platonic philosophy that we *recollect* the ideas, this means that the ideas are undeveloped [*an sich*] in human beings and not (as the Sophists maintained) something foreign to human beings that comes to them from the outside. Yet through this construal of knowing as *recollection* the development of what is *undeveloped* in human beings is not ruled out, and this development is nothing but mediation.” *EL* §67, 117.

⁹ *EL* §79, 126.

thought while maintaining their unity. It attempts to separate and distinguish these moments as fully separable and distinguishable, but each of them are in fact “*moments of every properly logical content.*”¹⁰ Competent in the rigorous representational modeling of external objects but unable to give a reflexive account of thought itself, the understanding is always dependent upon the other moments of thought, just as they are equally dependent on the finite clarity of the understanding.

The modern fall into presupposition emerges from the premature attempt of the understanding to assert itself as independent. In his historical reflections in the preliminary conceptions (*EL* §26-§78), Hegel indicates how the history of Western philosophy since Descartes has been characterized by the dominance of the understanding, in which thought proceeds from the consciousness of an externalized object. In setting up a beginning for philosophy, the understanding proceeds from an external first principle, a truth not proceeding from the intensive development of thought, but true as given in some immediately self-evident sense. The abstract first principles of metaphysics (*EL* §26-§36), the reductive materialism of empiricism (*EL* §37-§39), the subject-object dualism of critical philosophy (*EL* §40-§60) and the direct appeal to immediate intellectual intuition (*EL* §61-§78) all posit some presupposition of thought which precludes it from developing on its own account. Moreover, the proponents of these modern doctrines have fallen into these presuppositions despite their adherence to the modern goal of establishing philosophy as an independent science. Each begins by

¹⁰ *EL* §79, 125.

critiquing the presuppositions of its forebearers as arbitrary and dogmatic, only to be shown as equally so by its philosophical successor.

Hegel's logic aims to end this tragicomic cycle by foregrounding the overreach of the understanding in each of these failed attempts at free thought as the critical preparation for establishing a philosophical system that is self-mediating and presuppositionless.¹¹ In the course of modern thought, the understanding rightly attempts to eliminate its own presuppositions, but it can only replace one set of insufficient abstractions for another. It expresses an undeveloped universal which, being abstracted away as only for itself (*für sich*), is in fact indistinguishable from the isolated particulars it subsumes.

The understanding's activity generally consists in imparting the form of universality to its contents. More precisely, the universal posited by the understanding is an abstract universal which, as such, is maintained in opposition to the particular and by that very fact is determined at the same time to be itself a particular in turn.¹²

This failure to grasp the true universal should be quite familiar to readers of Plato's early aporetic dialogues. Unable to find a general definition suitable to the concepts they are investigating (piety in *Euthyphro*, courage in *Laches*, beauty in *Hippias Major*), Socrates and his interlocutors end their investigation without a definitive solution. Plato marks the

¹¹ As Miles Hentrup has argued, Hegel's logic in fact requires some form of presupposition, as he does not aim to eliminate any sense of priority from his system. He indeed begins his logic from a definite starting point, the doctrine of being. But such beginnings are only warranted insofar as they cancel and eliminate themselves in the fuller development of the philosophical idea, partaking of "the self-mediating structure of absolute reality." This sort of presupposition is not held over and against the rest of the system as an "external methodological requirement." Miles Hentrup, "Hegel's Logic as Presuppositionless Science", *Idealistic Studies* 49, no.2 (2019): 146.

¹² *EL* §80, 126.

boundary of the understanding with an unceremonious perplexity, abruptly ending the naïve search for the universal by methods only capable of determining the particular. Aporetic moments in the early dialogues thus have a close affinity with Hegel's critique of modern presupposition as arising from the overextension the understanding — it is precisely because Plato affirms and embraces the aporetic moment as a genuinely philosophical moment that he properly limits the role of the understanding.

1.1 General outline

In the second chapter I will describe the content and form of thought in this first aporetic moment of thought for Plato and Hegel. Hegel sees the understanding (*Verstand*) as an abstracting form of thought which takes given representations (*Vorstellungen*) for its content. In Plato, this picture is somewhat more complicated. There is no distinctly Platonic or Socratic content and form of thought which ends in aporia, as Socrates to some extent mirrors the presuppositions of his interlocutors in the early dialogues. Socrates begins by engaging with the familiar content of Greek life, the common, obvious viewpoint of the proverbial man on the street, his *doxa*. Proceeding from this external content, thought reasons from given first principles, *hypotheses*, in a deductive mathematical form of reasoning, *dianoia*.

In the third chapter I will show how the aporetic moment arises when the understanding attempts to abstract a definition for fundamental concepts of the human and the divine (the good, the soul, God, etc.). Hegel critiques his modern predecessors for attempting to define the spiritual, the content of *Geist*, as if it could be reduced to a representation comprehensible through a predicating judgement. Socrates likewise

encourages his interlocutors to express their knowledge of ethical terms in rigorous definitions. These definitions do not stand up under the cross-examination of Socratic dialectic.

In the fourth chapter I will describe the aftermath of the failure of these attempts to directly define the absolute. Hegel describes the history of modern philosophy as a series of presuppositions each attempting to rectify the narrow dogmatism of the prior presupposition. By contrast, Plato lets the aporetic moment stand as a moment of genuine perplexity, transitioning into a second dialectical moment of thought. The aporia of the early dialogues demands that we move past the artificial solidity of *doxa* and reassess our representational presuppositions alongside the movement of thought.

In the fifth chapter I will integrate the voices of the two thinkers by considering a Hegelian response to the Euthyphro dilemma in which the causal presuppositions of the understanding give way to an appreciation of conceptual reciprocity.

Each chapter begins with the Hegelian account of the topic at hand followed by the Platonic account. The Platonic account will occasionally borrow language from the Hegelian account due to the greater unified simplicity of the Hegelian terms, which Hegel correlated to Platonic terms in his discussions of Plato. I will be working primarily from the *Encyclopedia Logic* in discussing Hegel, as it provides his most mature critique of the understanding while also outlining its historical preeminence in modern philosophy. While Hegel does discuss Plato in *EL*, I will also be heavily relying on his comments in *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. *Phenomenology of Mind* supplies occasional illustrative examples. Finally, while the aporetic moment belongs most distinctly to the

early Platonic dialogues, it extends into the late dialogue *Theaetetus*. While *dianoia*, the abstract understanding, is operative throughout the early dialogues, it is best described in the divided line analogy of *Republic*.

2. The content and form of thought in the aporetic moment

2.1. *Vorstellung* and *doxa*

2.1.1. *Vorstellung*

It is true to the spirit of Hegel's logic to begin not with form, but with content. Hegel aims to circumvent the protracted disputes over epistemic method and justification — the forms of thought — which have dominated a scientifically influenced philosophy since the early modern period. These controversies concerning method have neglected to direct their critical attention towards the content of thought, which is taken as an immediately given representation (*Vorstellung*) of the external sensuous world, an inner mental image generated by a subject which abstracts and models its objects. The blind assumption of a representational content is fundamental presupposition of which the modern is guilty. As philosophy followed the natural sciences in the early modern period, it grew to regard its content as obvious and unworthy of critical reflection. As botanists study plants, philosophers dispute mental images. Yet the content of philosophy, the content of thought itself, is not at all self-evident. *EL* begins with the observation that philosophy, unique among the sciences, has no given content. Thought must begin with a representation, an immediate starting point external to thought itself, yet reflective, genuinely philosophical thought reflects upon and reconsiders this content.

Philosophy lacks the advantage from which the other sciences benefit, namely the ability to *presuppose* both its *objects* as immediately endorsed by representation of them and an acknowledged *method* of knowing, which would determine its

starting-point and progression. [...] consciousness produces for itself *representations* of objects prior to generating *concepts* [*Begriffe*] of them. What is more, only by passing *through* the process of representing and by turning *towards* it, does thinking spirit progress to knowing by way of thinking [*denkendes Erkennen*] and to comprehending [*Begreifen*] [...] The difficulty of making a *beginning*, however, arises at once, since a beginning is *something immediate* and as such makes a presupposition, or rather it is itself just that.¹³

Representations are not to be eliminated from thought, but rather are to be seen in reflection (*Nachdenken*) as a necessary entry point into discourse, a beginning which is not a self-sufficient given and vanishes upon mediation. The foundationalist attempts to dogmatically posit presuppositions which seem arbitrary and insufficient upon further reflective examination. An abstract representation, nothing more than a starting point, assumes the role of the fully developed concrete concept. A raw content has been taken for a finished product; a bare outline has been tasked with fleshing out and animating the living body; what is first and immediate has been taken as what must be final and complete. The German language brings out more directly the close relationship between presupposition and representational content — a representation is immediately placed before (*Vor-stellung*) consciousness, which in turn naively sets it ahead (*Voraus-setzung*) as a presupposition. What the foundationalist takes as the necessary foundational principles of thought only arise from an empty recursive circularity, taking the true as that to which we were first introduced (*vorgestellt*).¹⁴

Consciousness (*Bewußtsein*) takes an external object which it opposes to its own subjective being. This modern presupposition of subject/object opposition in

¹³ *EL* §1, 28.

¹⁴ *Vorstellung* can mean “introduction” as well as “representation” in German.

consciousness further underlies our dependence on a representational content.

Objectification freezes the content of thought in an immediacy in which a certain form is presupposed as inherent in the content.

In any one of these forms [above, “feeling, intuition, image”], or as a mixture of several of them, the content is the *object* of consciousness. In this objectification, it so happens that the determinacies of these forms convert themselves into part of the content, such that with each of these forms a specific object seems to arise, and, what is in itself the same, can take on the look of a different content.¹⁵

Consciousness imbues its objects with a determining form, a form implied in their very objectification. This presupposed unity of objectified form and content is taken as an immediately given representation. Not yet internally reflective self-consciousness, consciousness understands thought to be an empty vessel before which is placed (*vorgestellt*) a content with a form supposed in advance (*vorausgesetzt*). All objects of inquiry are a *something* to be clarified as an immediate and definite object. Where a fully developed concept emerges in and through mental activity, a representation presents itself to consciousness as something complete on its own account, as if no formal activity of thought need be introduced. Consciousness takes representations to immediately reflect reality as a “mirror of nature.”¹⁶ It takes propositions as if they were brute facts, models as if they were realities.

If a representation is an unprocessed unity of form and content, it is natural that they are basic currency of social discourse. Since the representation is a transferrable object, a self-contained unit external to consciousness, social convention plays a pivotal

¹⁵ *EL* §3, 30.

¹⁶ This is the phrase coined by Richard Rorty in his critique of 20th century representationalism.

role in molding representations. When consciousness demands an intelligible content, it only demands what it is already well-known (*geläufig*) and self-evident (*von selbst verstehen*).¹⁷ Philosophy is precisely the process of unpacking these representations by thinking them over (*Nachdenken*). In Hegel's example, thinking over a representation is analogous to learning the art of shoemaking after starting from nothing more than the mental image of the final product. Unlike the wearer of the shoe, the shoemaker does not immediately accept shoe as a given, obvious unity of form and content, but rather actively participates in its formation. The philosopher is more like this shoemaker than like the consumer of the shoe. The shoemaker, like any trained expert, is immanently involved in their discipline and does not take its content as a prefabricated object.¹⁸

Hegel describes a wide range of phenomenal content as representational, including feelings, intuitions, and images. Representations thus conflate an immediate sensuous engagement with the world with thought, which is always a mediation irreducible to such concrete expression. A representational content attempts to present the universal in concrete immediacy, but in so attempting to make the abstract immediately comprehensible, it only succeeds in producing a still more abstract content. As will be further discussed below, a definition is one attempt to give a concrete representation of the universal. Representational definitions present only an abstract formality of an initial mental presentation, a *Vorstellung* wholly inadequate to the concrete object of definition. Hegel describes the inadequacy of such apparently concrete definitions in his discussion

¹⁷ *EL* §3, 31.

¹⁸ *EL* §5, 32.

of the understanding's misplaced confidence in mathematical definitions as a self-evident content,

At this point, it should also be noted that in philosophy we are not at all concerned merely with correct definitions, much less with merely plausible definitions, i.e. definitions whose correctness is immediately obvious to representational consciousness. When quantity is taken up directly from representation without being mediated by thinking, it easily happens that quantity is overestimated with respect to its scope and even raised to an absolute category. This is indeed the case when only those sciences whose objects can be submitted to a mathematical calculus are recognized as *exact* sciences. Our knowing would indeed be in bad shape, if, renouncing exact knowledge, we generally had to be satisfied merely with a vague representation of such objects as freedom, law, the ethical life, even God himself, merely because they cannot be measured and calculated or expressed in a mathematical formula.¹⁹

Just as in the presentation of sense certainty at the outset of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, what seems to be most concrete turns out to be, upon reflection, the most abstract and empty. Definitions give the initial impression of ensuring that we work with concrete terms, but meaningful philosophical concepts only become hopelessly abstract and indeterminate when reduced to a definitional representation. In the representational education of modernity, we demand that truth be made accessible to mathematics for it to qualify as definite and tangible, and yet a mathematical rendering is still a further abstraction from the concrete concept. While representation takes many forms, its basic and most directly etymological sense arises from its re-presentation of the concrete whole through an abstract model, often but not necessarily mathematical.

¹⁹ *EL*, §99, 158.

2.1.2. *Doxa*

Plato's Socrates introduces a reflective principle in opposition to the sophists, who are ready and eager to justify the conventional representations (*doxai*) of Greek society. Socrates differentiates his approach to teaching from that of the sophists, though both "believe in education as the key to all social and political problems."²⁰ The sophists understand education as instruction in an external object of knowledge, a representational *doxa*, capable of direct transfer from student to pupil. Socrates challenges this model of education in representations with the doctrine of recollection in *Meno*, as he demonstrates that learning is not merely an imposition of content from outside of mind, but rather the development of a potential already within it.²¹ Socrates does not educate in passively received *doxai*, but in concepts which both stimulate and require the active participation of his pupils.

Plato makes this critique of the sophists most directly in Book 7 of *Republic*. While true education turns the soul towards the good, sophistic education mechanically "put[s] knowledge into souls that lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes."²² Hegel quotes this passage from Plato in *LHP* and then outlines where this sophistic approach to education can be observed in modernity,

The idea that knowledge comes entirely from without is in modern times found in empirical philosophies of a quite abstract and rude kind, which maintain that everything that man knows of the divine nature comes as a matter of education and habituation, and that mind is thus a quite indeterminate potentiality merely. Carried to an extreme, this is the doctrine of revelation in which everything is

²⁰ G.B. Kerferd, *The sophistic movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1981), 138.

²¹ *Meno* 82ff.

²² *Republic* 518b-c.

given from without. In the Protestant religion we do not find this rude idea [*diese rohe Vorstellung*] in its abstract form, for the witness of the spirit is an essential part of faith, i.e. faith demands that the individual subjective spirit shall on its own account accept and set forth the determination which comes to it in the form of something given from without.²³

While the subjective principle of inner development (an idea originating in Plato himself) has moderated the most extreme doctrines of an external given, representation nonetheless persists as the primary philosophical content of moderns. The disagreement between Plato and the sophists about the nature of education as coming from within or from without is thus, for modern readers, an extreme case that clarifies what is today disputed with more nuance. Hegel alleges that moderns ground external representations on abstract foundations, mediating mental content through a general formal principle. The sophists, by contrast, lack any principle of mental determination whatsoever; whatever is in mind is what has been implanted there. Plato's critique of the sophists is thus a critique of representationalism in its most pure, naïve form.

Doxa has often been translated as "opinion" in English translations of Greek philosophy, but recent scholarship has demonstrated how this translation is inaccurate and misleading, and likely proceeds from an overly epistemological reading of Plato. The conflict between *epistēmē* and *doxa* has long been seen as a conflict between exact and inexact forms of knowledge, between "science" and "opinion". Yet while Plato certainly sees *epistēmē* as a more developed form of knowledge than *doxa*, this development should not be conceived solely in terms of the modern epistemic concern for the accuracy

²³ While Plato does not name names, Hegel identifies the sophists as the source of this doctrine. *LHP* II, 45.

and validity of propositions. As Sean Kirkland has pointed out, *doxa* is simply the nominal form of the verb *dokeō*, which can mean to opine, but has a still earlier meaning of “to seem, to appear”, denoting the activity of an external phenomenon which makes an impression upon the mind.²⁴ *Doxa* unifies a given external content with a loosely presupposed, merely opined subjective principle of thought, resulting in a premature unity of form and content correlating very closely with the Hegelian sense of a representation. *Doxa* so conceived also arises primarily from social prejudice, which filters everything that appears through the conventional beliefs of the polis. In Kirkland’s phenomenological rendering, *doxai* inevitably reflect the Heideggerian “world”,

If I have a *doxa* about virtue, then, this is not an always potentially misfiring attempt to reach out and lay hold of ‘what virtue is.’ Rather, it is in the first instance an appearance of ‘what virtue is’ that have received from the outside, from the world. Indeed, we must recognize here the absence of precisely that radical separation which holds apart our modern binaries, ‘inside-outside’ and ‘subject-object,’ for what is ‘on the inside,’ opinion, is originally understood as always already connected to and revealing of, to some extent, what is ‘on the outside,’ and it is named accordingly.²⁵

While Kirkland sees the dissolution of internal and external distinctions in *doxa* as tending towards a phenomenological reading of the early dialogues, Hegel would find

²⁴ “*Doxa* is a noun derived from the verb *dokein*, for which the Greek lexicon gives two equally common and interestingly opposed meanings. *Dokein*, in the active voice, means ‘to expect, think, suppose, imagine; to have an opinion, opine.’ However, the verb can also mean, still in the active voice, ‘to seem, appear: to appear to be something.’ Thus, *dokein* has a unique double valence— either the subject or the object in the epistemological relation can serve as the grammatical subject of this verb in the active voice. In the relation of the world to human experience or thought, *dokein* names both the subject’s action toward the object (‘ think, suppose, imagine that “x”’) and no less the object’s self-presentation to the subject (“x” seems, appears to me’). Even more crucial, the latter meaning seems to be the more original of the two, for we find that the verb *dokein* is linked to the deponent verb *dechesthai*, as its iterative form, indicating repetition. *Dechesthai* means with respect to things, ‘to take, accept, receive,’ and with respect to people, ‘to welcome.’” Sean D. Kirkland, *The Ontology of Socratic Questioning in Plato's Early Dialogues* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 24-25.

²⁵ Kirkland, 25.

this reading to be too immediately accepting of the unity of inner mental assessment and outer phenomenal content presented in a representation, which must be broken down in reflective thought. Nonetheless, Kirkland's non-epistemological interpretation shows how *doxa*, the initial content examined in the Socratic dialogues, is the Greek precursor of modern *Vorstellungen*. In the first instance, thought begins unable to distinguish between what is given and what arises from its own activity. It proceeds from the immediate, unconsidered, socially determined *doxai* which Plato overturned in his critique of the sophists.

The method of questioning Socrates employs in dismantling *doxai* is well-known and will be addressed further below, but what is less obvious is how the sophistic sense of education is an education in the representational content of *doxa*. In the later dialogue *Theaetetus*, Plato, perhaps now more deeply understanding the sophistic method, has Socrates give a sympathetic account of Protagoras' views on education even as he critiques his thesis that perception (*aisthēsis*) is knowledge. It is worth noting how this thesis requires that knowledge come into the knower from an external source; Socratic self-knowledge, the soul's knowledge of itself as a spiritual content, would be an impossibility on a purely perceptual account. As is also repeatedly shown in the early dialogues, one cannot have knowledge of nonsensible objects, like moral virtues, from perceptions.

Moreover, it is not clear how one can be educated in perceptions, which seem to be self-evident and not mediated by any principle of thought or training, and thus require no education. Perception is an immediate, incontestable experience, yet Protagoras

nevertheless insists that the human being should be subject to the mediating, improving process of education. These apparently incompatible views are only coherent when we realize that Protagoras has a radically externalized sense of education. In contrast with the Socratic attempt to draw out (*e-ducere*) the inner knowledge of his pupils, the sophistic teacher replaces uneducated representational *doxai* with better ones. As the learner only receives external representations, it makes as little sense to praise or blame him for his wisdom as it would to praise or blame health or sickness.²⁶ Thinking is not sovereign, and so it does not fall to each individual to care for state of his own soul, the precept which Socrates advances as his fundamental ethical teaching.²⁷

Socrates, expositing Protagoras' views, shows how his sophistic doctrine of education treats the activity of learning how to think as nothing more than passively receiving better impressions. *Doxai* are objectified and transferred to students like medical drugs, administered by a teacher who understands them to be the better *doxai* for the health of the learner.

So then indeed, in education [*paideia*], the aim is to effect a change from a worse condition into a better. And just as the doctor brings about such changes by drugs [*pharmakois*], the sophist does so by his words [*logois*]. And he does not change someone imagining falsity [*pseudē doxazonta*] into someone later thinking the truth [*alēthē doxazonta*]. For it is not possible to receive a representation [*doxasai*] of things that are not or indeed of anything other than what one feels at once [*paschē*] — for these things are always true.²⁸

²⁶ *Theaetetus* 167a.

²⁷ “For I go around doing nothing but persuading both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul.” *Apology* 30a-b.

²⁸ This is my own translation which aims at bringing out the sense of external, immediate sense of *doxa*. *Theaetetus* 167a-b.

The doctrine is confusing because it relies on the conflation of the two senses of *doxa* Kirkland has noted — the generally accepted sense of *doxa* as an inexact judgement or opinion and the passive, phenomenal sense of receiving an external content. The sophist does not profoundly impact the judgements of his students in the sense of changing their thinking, does not bring them to turn from true *doxai* to false — this would be a Socratic education which provides for the self-mediation of the soul. When the sophists influence *doxai*, they aim to do so in the second, phenomenal sense of the word — to administer different impressions the learner who will receive them as a new content. In this overlooked second sense of the word, *doxazein* is the passive reception of an already complete content. *Doxazein* is ultimately *paschein*, a feeling pass-ively effected from an external source. These feelings are always true, as truth and falsity could only pertain to the judgements of an active mind which assesses this pure phenomenal content by its own independent formal principle.

And yet education aims to turn the soul from a worse condition to a better, a task for which the incontestable content of our immediate experience is clearly insufficient. The instruction of the sophistic teacher turns the soul towards better things through words (*logois*), understood as drugs (*pharmaka*). The student receives a better representation containing the immanent formal principle of a better judgement. These educative representations would be better in a moral and political sense, tending towards civic virtue, as this is the chief concern of Protagoras, who holds that the art of the sophists is

necessary for the maintenance of a civil, democratic state.²⁹ Protagoras deems the wise man to be one who, by supplanting inferior *logoi* with better, “works a change and makes good things appear and be [*phainesthai te kai einai*] for him.”³⁰ Education changes what appears as good to the student, who in turn makes different judgements about the good, which, in turn, brings about the good in the world. It is a *pharmakon* which accomplishes the fantastic feat of actively bringing about a better society through its passive reception in the soul of the student.

While this account of education seems mechanistic and neglectful of inner life, it is a clear account of how a certain form of education can discourage the independence of the mind and replicate the given content of social prejudice. Just as modern philosophers rely on presuppositions to support a representational content, the sophists depended upon the presuppositions of Greek society to evaluate *doxai* as better or worse. Protagoras, regarded by Plato as the most sincere of the sophists, styled himself as the champion and teacher of conventional Greek public life, and he proclaims that city to be just in which a better convention (*nomos*) maintains itself.³¹ The great wealth of many sophists was won by appealing to the orthodoxy of common Greek political and moral assessments in such a way that would be persuasive to juries. Yet this form of sophistic presupposition is not a presupposition in the modern sense, as the sophists, unlike moderns, did not claim to be

²⁹ The myth of how Zeus distributed the political virtues to humanity because it lacked the means for animal survival. *Protagoras* 320d-323a

³⁰ *Theaetetus* 166d.

³¹ *Theaetetus* 167c.

able to demonstrate the absolute necessity of their way of thought. The “in itself” is a discovery of Platonic philosophy, and the sophists were perfectly content with assessing representations as being better “for self” or “for the polis.” Hegel remarks that the sophists did not engage in thinking (*Denken*) so much as in reasoning (*räsonierend*),³² and reasoning does not fall into presupposition because it simply does not attempt to ground itself, but always proceeds from an external given. The sophists recognized the caprice involved in their representational mode of education and exulted in their almost magical ability to change, in a single act of speech, the impressions and judgements of an audience. The content appropriate to their reasoning is nonetheless inappropriate for absolute science (*epistēmē*), an insufficiency critiqued in Plato but obscured by centuries of focus on his disagreement with the sophists as a conflict about epistemic method and not psychic content.

2.1.3. Summation

While the correlation between *Vorstellung* and *doxa* is subject to the inherent difficulties in comparing ideas from two different periods of intellectual history, they share the following characteristics crucial to their role as the content of thought in the aporetic moment:

1. They are an abstracted perceptual content given over to consciousness as external and prior to its own subjective thought.

³² “The statement that the Sophists thereby fell into one-sided principles rests upon the fact that in Greek culture the time had not yet come when, out of thinking consciousness itself, the ultimate principles had become manifested, and thus there was something firm to rest upon, as is the case with us in modern times. Because, on the one hand, the need of subjective freedom existed merely to give effect to that which man himself perceives and finds present in his reason (thus laws, religious ideas, only in so far as I recognize them through my thought), on the other hand, no fixed principle had so far been found in thought; thought was rather reasoning [*so war das Denken mehr räsonierend*], and what remained indeterminate could thus only be fulfilled through self-will.” *LHP* I, 365.

2. As self-contained (*für sich*) objects implicitly containing their formal principle, they are presented directly to thought in their immediacy, not requiring any further mediation in thought.
3. As self-contained objects implicitly containing their formal principle, they represent the concrete whole as a limited abstraction immediately accessible to consciousness.
4. As limited abstractions from the concrete whole, they can be expressed through definitional propositions, mental images or models, and generalized conventional judgements.
5. Spuriously concrete, they only mark the starting point of independent thought. If not further developed, they implicate thought in an inescapable dependence on external presuppositions.

2.2. *Verstand and dianoia*

2.2.1. *Verstand*

Hegel says of the understanding in *EL*,

Thinking as understanding does not budge beyond the firm determinateness [*Bestimmtheit*] [of what is entertained] and its distinctness [*Unterschiedenheit*] over against others. A limited abstraction of this sort counts for it as self-standing and [as having] being [*als für sich bestehend und seiend*].³³

Through the understanding, the abstract determinations contained within a representation yield a content that is definite (*bestimmt*) and differentiated (*unterschieden*), standing for itself (*für sich bestehend*) as coherent and independent. The representational content is shown to obey the classical logic of non-contradiction. Yet non-contradiction alone is not sufficient even for the understanding. Hegel notes that the excluded middle is a principle already familiar to the Greek authors of sophistic paradoxes, whose riddles rested on the common-sensical presumption “that one of opposites is true, the other false; that a

³³ *EL* §80, 126.

statement is either true or not true; that an object cannot have two opposite predicates.”³⁴

To consider a brief example: Every man must be either known or unknown to us. If he wears a mask, he must be unknown. But what if he is in fact our father? Do not know our father if he wears a mask?³⁵ Left to its own resources, non-contradiction finds paradoxes in every equivocal use of language. For representations to remain coherent they must also be universal and thus fully abstracted away from the local paradoxes of sophists. Hegel sees non-contradiction and universality as principles of thought arising together in the Platonic dialogues.³⁶ Thought resolves the ambiguity in representations in order to establish the paradigmatic genus abstracted from any particular sense datum.

Yet this abstract universal stands in tension with the full expression of its concrete particulars, as it has only made explicit and rationalized the presuppositions inherent in the initial representation. As the content is not free to determine itself in any way contradictory to these representational presuppositions, this universal stands in a one-sided opposition to its particulars insofar as they are not fully determined by the abstraction of the understanding. When the understanding attempts to think the universal, it only thinks of the universal *qua* representational particular — the particular representation recast as in its abstract identity. Thought remains dependent on the given

³⁴ *LHP* I, 459. See also Richard Dien Winfield, “On Contradiction,” in *Hegel and Ancient Philosophy: A Re-Examination*, ed. by Glenn Alexander Magee (New York: Routledge, 2018), 147-160.

³⁵ This is a restatement of the masked man paradox of Eubulides, who guides Hegel’s discussion in the above passage of *LHP*.

³⁶ Hegel continues, “[The principle of the excluded middle] stands in close connection with the principle of Socrates and Plato (supra, pp. 455, 456), ‘The true is the universal;’ which is abstractly the identity of understanding, according to which what is said to be true cannot contradict itself.” *LHP* I, 459.

representation for its content, failing to achieve the self-developed independence of thought necessary to think the true universal. As noted above,³⁷ the understanding proceeds like the interlocutors in the Socratic dialogues, mistaking the universal for a more abstracted representation of the particular.

As the understanding attempts to universalize through abstraction, it takes the abstracted representation as the representation in its final, absolute form. This abstraction aims at a true philosophical content, but Hegel sees this method as merely reductive and bound to end in the irresolvable dualism between form and content characteristic of modern thought. While speculative thought moves towards the concrete universal, the true infinity immanent within the manifold of particulars, the understanding substitutes an immediate abstraction for a fully developed concept. This error is as prevalent as it is pernicious. As the understanding dominates modern thought, the substitution of the abstract for the concrete universal is widely accepted. Even in everyday speech the abstract is widely conflated with the universal,³⁸ saddling thought with the “perverted presupposition [*verkehrte Voraussetzung*]” of its own activity as a merely formal analysis of representations.³⁹ This formal analysis takes the fixed abstract identity of

³⁷ *EL* §80, 126.

³⁸ “Even the word ‘*absolute*’ has itself frequently no further meaning than that of ‘*abstract*’; thus, *absolute* space, *absolute* time means nothing further than abstract space and abstract time.” *EL* §115, 178.

³⁹ “All those reproaches so frequently made against thinking, namely, from the standpoint of sentiment and immediate intuition, reproaches of one-sidedness, rigidity, emptiness, and so forth are grounded in the perverted presupposition that the activity of thinking is only that of abstractly positing identity, and it is formal logic itself that confirms this presupposition by setting up the allegedly highest law of thinking, illumined in the above section. If thinking were nothing more than that abstract identity, then it would have to be declared the most superfluous and most boring business.” *EL* §115, 179.

determinations as unquestionably true, immediate and obvious in a tautological sense and exclusive of any inner difference within the determination itself.

Formal identity or identity of the understanding is this identity insofar as one fastens on it and abstracts from the difference. Or the *abstraction* is rather the positing of this formal identity, the transformation of something in itself concrete into this form of simplicity – be it that a part of the manifold on hand in what is concrete is *omitted* (through so-called *analysing*) and only *one* of the manifold parts is taken up or that, with the omission of its diversity, the manifold determinations are *pulled together* [*zusammengezogen*] into *one*.⁴⁰

The manifold, the true infinity, is brusquely reduced to an insufficient unity, the immediately comprehensible object of representational content. If the human being contains an infinite manifold of determinations, the understanding must (whatever the specifics of its formal operations) define it through one single simple determination — a determining predicate like “rational animal.” Yet the very distinction of this predicate from its subject undermines abstract identity’s presumption of equating the identical.⁴¹ Besides all the other infinitely determinable qualities of the human being, the opposite, negative predicate may equally obtain. The human being, as the only animal capable of rationality, is also the only irrational animal. The empty form of one-sided determination erases the rich, concrete content it intends to represent. While Hegel is not the first to offer such a critique of thought,⁴² he contextualizes this insufficiency as a limitation of

⁴⁰ *EL* §115, 177.

⁴¹ “The *form of the sentence* [*Form des Satzes*] already contradicts it itself since a sentence also promises a difference between subject and predicate, but this sentence does not accomplish what its form requires.” *EL* §115, 178.

⁴² Hegel echoes the critical philosophy, for which the categories unify the phenomena but, as mediated in consciousness, do not describe the *Ding an sich*.

just one moment of thought, of the understanding, which takes as absolute the immediate formal equivalencies of abstract identity.

A genealogy of the understanding

Hegel provides a comprehensive narrative about the history of medieval and modern philosophy in which the understanding comes to dominate philosophy. This genealogy sharply differentiates the dependent thought of modernity from the free thought of antiquity. The understanding becomes the default and exclusive mode of philosophizing in the middle ages, when thought was taken to be entirely dependent on an external content — the revealed truth of Catholic doctrine. Petrarch, emerging from this medieval world, shows the clear relationship between Christianity and modern philosophical foundationalism when he describes the Christian religion as “the highest stronghold of truth to which all must be referred; an unshakeable foundation [*immobili fundamento*] of true literature upon which human effort may safely build.”⁴³

With this presupposition of a Christian foundation, thought now becomes the circular justification of presupposed doctrine, an education in representations which deeply distorted Western philosophy’s ability to distinguish between a given content and the formal principle of thought. Thought was asked to justify the presuppositions of theology, the study of the absolute, through the finite, sensuous content of the understanding. A non-sensuous, spiritual content was taken as a fully determinable object, resulting in theological representations which wantonly packaged sensuous

⁴³ *ad quod velut ad summam veri arcem referenda sunt omnia; cui tanquam uni literarum verarum immobili fundamento, tuto superedificat humanus labor.* Petrarch, *Familiarum Rerum* 6.2.4.

content with theological speculation. This confusion resulted in confused, self-defeating approach to philosophy which furnished satirical material for humanist reformers.

Additional examples of *quaestiones* of this kind are given by those who ridiculed such dialectic, for instance by Erasmus in his *Encomium moriae*: “Could there be several sonships (*filiationes*) in Christ? Is the proposition possible that God the Father hates the Son? Might God not have also taken the form of a woman, or have passed into the devil? Might He not also have appeared in the form of an ass or of a pumpkin? In what manner would the pumpkin have preached and wrought miracles, and how would it have been crucified?” Thus were intellectual determinations combined and distinguished in a manner altogether without sense or thought. The main point is that the Scholastics were like barbarians in their way of handling divine things and bringing them into sensuous determinations and relations. They thus introduced a completely sensuous rigidity and these altogether external and senseless forms into the purely spiritual, thus bringing it to a lower and unspiritual level [...] This barbarous use of the understanding is utterly irrational; it is like putting a golden necklace on a sow.⁴⁴

Having reduced the absolute to a comically sensuous representation, the understanding can only operate in the detached abstraction of scholastic disputation. The technique and form of argument compensates for its lack of determinate content, as in Anselm’s famous proof of God, which proves that God exists, but only God conceived in the most general abstraction, as “the greatest possible being.” The unassailable formal rigor of the proof obscures the complete lack of determinate content in the concept of God so proved.

It is worth appreciating the habits of thought which arose in this time because modern philosophy continues to fall into the same pattern of presupposition established when the scholastics set philosophy on the course of presupposing and justifying theological content. The early modern metaphysics which began with Descartes sought a new secular presupposition from which to proceed, and it found this in the thinking

⁴⁴ *LHP* III, 89-90.

consciousness of subjectivity itself, the understanding which determines sensual representations through abstract predication. While this foundational status of the understanding as a first principle allowed for the development of natural science, it quickly confronted the fact that its one-sided predications were entirely insufficient to objects outside of natural science.

The old metaphysics was thus interested in knowing whether predicates of the kind mentioned could be attributed to objects. However, these predicates are limited determinations of the understanding that express only a barrier and not what is true. – In this context it also needs to be specifically noted how its way of proceeding consisted in *attributing* [*beigelegt*] predicates to the object to be known, such as God, for instance. This, however, represents an external reflection about the object since the determinations (the predicates) are ready-made [*fertig*] in my representation and attributed to the object in an external manner only.⁴⁵

The understanding externalizes itself from its object and presupposes the final product of knowledge as a one-sided predication of an external object. It does not think the object so much as label it through the resolution of predicates presupposed to be in a mutually exclusive opposition to each other. Even if a content such as the soul shows itself to contain contradictory predicates, to be at once one and many, the understanding must follow the scholastic method of one-sidedly resolving the confusion and determining its object as exclusively one or the other. Artificially reducing the object to an insufficient predicate, the understanding remains an external spectator who only appends its own presupposed predicates to the object of thought, laying them at its side (*bei-legen*).

However much the spirit of Enlightenment has substituted the secular presupposition of a transcendental subjective consciousness for that of religious dogma,

⁴⁵ *EL* §28, 69.

the same shortcomings of the understanding persist. While the medieval paradoxes of a predicable God are today less disputed, consciousness, the seat of the understanding, remains a mystery to itself, irreducible to the propositional and empirical methodologies of analytic philosophy, the heir to this method. When the understanding turns reflexively inward towards the content of *Geist*, towards emotion and thought, it can only reduce itself to something unrecognizably insufficient. Nonetheless, the understanding succeeds in clarifying the generality of representations into definite propositions. It is a proper starting point for thought since philosophy requires that “each thought be grasped in its full precision and that one is not content with vagueness and indeterminacy.”⁴⁶ But when the understanding attempts to think entirely independently, without any sensitivity to the content it considers, it falls into the paradoxes which inevitably arise from empty abstraction. This is the confusion of thought’s first attempt to come into clarity, as “it is the way of youth to relish abstractions, whereas a person with the experience of life does not indulge in the abstract *either-or*, clinging instead to what is concrete.”⁴⁷

2.2.2. *Dianoia*

The Platonic correlative to the understanding is not neatly captured in any single term. *Doxa* can equally function as a representational content and as the formal judgement of the understanding, as seen above. Yet representations can take the form of uneducated opinions, as in the usual translation of *doxa*, as well as definite propositions derived from a more sophisticated understanding. While Hegel sees philosophy as a

⁴⁶ *EL* §80, 128.

⁴⁷ *EL* §80, 128.

science (*Wissenschaft*) and so critiques modern representationalism for its insufficiency in achieving its aim of establishing philosophy as a self-grounding science, Plato's Socrates does not presume such systematic aims of his interlocutors and so speaks with the uneducated and educated alike. Nonetheless, Plato does mark out where and how a direct and immediate *doxa* gives way to a formally rigorous method of thought. Hegel locates the moment where Plato begins to consider thought as science in the divided line analogy of Book 6 of *Republic*. *Dianoia* marks the transition between the visible and intelligible realms, a deductive, geometric thought which does not reason to first principles but takes them as given axioms. The content of thought in *dianoia* is representational, as proceeds from what had previously been the fleeting imitations of ideal beings in the first half of the divided line (*tois tote mimētheisin*), the part concerned with *doxa*, and takes them as stable, transcendental mental images (*hōs eikōsin*).⁴⁸ Though *dianoia* is still dependent upon a representational model, it does not direct itself (*dianooumenoi*) towards the sensory objects from which the image arises, not toward the diagonal drawn, but the ideal diagonal, the diagonal itself (*diametrou autēs*).⁴⁹

As in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, thought now recognizes the untruth of what it had previously taken as absolute. The representational images of geometrical truth supersede sensory appearances, which earlier "were thought to be clear and to be valued as such." From this standpoint, thought may now reason deductively from the images, presupposing their representational content as its starting point, but it cannot reason

⁴⁸ *Republic* 510b.

⁴⁹ *Republic* 510d.

upward towards a self-grounding first principle,⁵⁰ towards the independent, presuppositionless thought Hegel found in the mature, speculative moments of Greek thought. Correlating *dianoia* with *Verstand*, Hegel opposes *dianoia* to dialectic in *LHP*. This opposition between the first moment of *dianoia* and the second moment of dialectic corresponds to the same opposition between the first and second moments of his own system.⁵¹ While extensively quoting from Socrates' exposition of *dianoia* in *Republic* 509-511, Hegel gives the following description of its role within in Platonic thought,

Thus, according to Plato, this is certainly the place where real knowledge begins, because we have nothing further to do with the sensuous as such; at the same time this is not the true knowledge which considers the spiritual universal on its own account, but the arguing and reasoning knowledge that forms universal laws and particular kinds or species out of what is sensuous.⁵²

Just like *Verstand*, *dianoia* builds universal laws by abstracting from the sensuous, removing the abstract universal from the particular while neglecting to approach the universal as a content *sui generis*. This is the universal which stands as an indemonstrable presupposition over and against its particulars, attempting to function as the true universal, necessary and inherent to thought. But it remains in fact only an arbitrary particular. The Platonic association of *dianoia* with geometry further clarifies this point. A set of geometrical axioms seems like the set of necessary universal statements, and yet

⁵⁰ "This, then, is the kind of thing that, on the one hand, I said is intelligible [*noēton*], and, on the other, is such that the soul is forced to use hypotheses in the investigation of it, not travelling up to a first principle, since it cannot reach beyond its hypotheses, but using as images those very things of which images were made in the section below, and which, by comparison to their images, were thought to be clear and to be valued as such." *Republic* 511a.

⁵¹ "What we have thus to deal with in the dialectic of Plato is the pure thought of reason, from which he very clearly distinguishes the understanding (*dianoia*)." *LHP* II, 53.

⁵² *LHP* II, 47.

there are many valid sets of geometric axioms. However universally applicable these abstractions may be, they still reside one-sidedly in the free caprice of conscious subjectivity and offer no natural starting point for thought.

Plato shows *dianoia*'s insufficiency in establishing a first principle, as it attempts to give an account that depends on a first hypothesis of which no account can be given — its accounts must be either groundless or based on some other ground outside itself.⁵³ *Dialektikē* raises *dianoia* out of its vicious circle of presupposition and thus positions it as an intermediary moment in the movement of Platonic thought toward the light of the form of the good. *Dianoia* is “clearer than opinion [*doxēs*], darker than knowledge [*epistēmēs*].”⁵⁴ Dialectic facilitates this movement of thought from *doxa* and *noēsis*. *Doxa* has a sensual content which depends upon a concrete mental image, and so it is subdivided with the visual imagination (*eikasia*) as the first moment and belief (*pistis*) as its second. As *dianoia* resolves sensuous content into abstract essence, it is the first moment in *noesis*, but as it cannot justify its hypotheses, it is not yet self-grounding *epistēmē*.⁵⁵

R.G. Tanner further demonstrates how *dianoia*, as the understanding, takes a representational content. In *Meno* Plato associates the geometrical reasoning of *dianoia*

⁵³ “And as for the rest, I mean geometry and the subjects that follow it, we described them as to some extent grasping what is, for we saw that, while they do dream about what is, they are unable to command a waking view of it as long as they make use of hypotheses that they leave untouched and that they cannot give any account of. What mechanism could possibly turn any agreement into knowledge when it begins with something unknown and puts together the conclusion and the steps in between from what is unknown? None.” *Republic* 533b-c.

⁵⁴ *Republic* 533d.

⁵⁵ *Republic* 533e-534a.

with *anamnēsis*, as geometrical knowledge is a mental content which already exists within the soul of the learner. Geometrical reasoning, *dianoia*, makes explicit an already implicit content whose recollection is equally an abstraction from immediate present experience. The understanding recollects experiences already within the soul as representations. *Anamnēsis* involves the abstracting operation of the understanding in re-presenting what has already past in the present. Tanner finds support for this reading of *anamnēsis* as a clarifying recollection performed through the understanding in *Phaedrus*. The divine mind sees what is “visible only to intelligence [*theatē nō*],” as it is nourished by the faculties of the intelligible section of the divided line, *dianoia* and *epistēmē*.⁵⁶ As the soul undergoes the cycle of metempsychosis, it is the philosopher’s *dianoia* which recollects the memory of the heavenly forms and supplies it the wings necessary to reach the heavenly forms.

But a soul that never saw the truth cannot take a human shape, since a human being must understand speech in terms of general forms [*kat’ēidos*], proceeding to bring many perceptions together into a reasoned unity [*aisthēseōn eis hen logismō*]. That process is the recollection [*anamnēsis*] of the things our soul saw when it was traveling with god, when it disregarded the things we now call real and lifted up its head to what is truly real instead. For just this reason it is fair that only a philosopher’s mind [*hē tou philosophou dianoia*] grows wings, since its memory always keeps it as close as possible to those realities by being close to which the gods are divine.⁵⁷

As in *Meno*, the geometrical knowledge of *dianoia* enables a recollection of the forms. *Dianoia* is a distinctly human form of reasoning whose general form (*eidos*) depends on gathering perceptions into a single account. While this seems to suggest that *dianoia*

⁵⁶ *Phaedrus* 247c-d.

⁵⁷ *Phaedrus* 249c-d.

independently constructs the *eidos* from a raw sensual content, the form of the *eidos* is already implanted in the soul's memory, an implicit formal principle waiting to be brought to clarity by a gathering abstraction.

From this psychological model in *Phaedrus* and from the association of *anamnēsis* and geometrical reasoning in *Meno*, Tanner concludes that the *hypotheseis* taken as axiomatic by *dianoia* in section B of the divided line in *Republic* are “mental images implanted in the memory” whose recollection [*anamnēsis*] “is stimulated by the perception of similar objects occurring in the world of sense.”⁵⁸ *Dianoia* abstracts a general geometrical rule from a sensuous content which it gathers into a representation of mental images already presupposed in the philosopher's memory. This internalized mental image is only a recollection of the forms but it is nonetheless a greater nourishment for the soul than the purely external “nourishment of *doxa* [*trophē doxastē*],”⁵⁹ immediate sensory representations undetermined by any process of thought. It is at this point that pure thought begins.

2.2.3. Summation

While the correlation between *Verstand* and *dianoia* is subject to the inherent difficulties in comparing ideas from two different periods of intellectual history, they share the following characteristics crucial to their role as the form of thought in the aporetic moment:

1. They essentialize and abstract the representational contents described in 2.1 as models reducible to universal formulae.

⁵⁸ R. G. Tanner, "ΔΙΑΝΟΙΑ and Plato's Cave," *The Classical Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1970): 84.

⁵⁹ *Phaedrus* 248b.

2. They apply classical logic (the abstract self-equivalence of formal identity) to these contents in order to describe them through rigorous propositions.
3. Despite their exhaustive precision in abstracting representational content, they are unable to give an account of their first principles, which must be accepted as axioms or hypotheses.
4. Despite their capacity to clarify representational content, they are unable to resolve content which does not lend themselves to such a one-sided rendering, i.e. the good, the human psyche, thought itself.
5. The abstract universal which results from this process of thought one-sidedly erases opposing determinations which the second moment of reflective thought will dialectically recover.

3. The premature attempt to define the absolute

Through the content and form described above, thought naively attempts to define the higher concepts of God, the soul, and the ethical order — concepts which belong to Hegel's *Geist* and to the Socratic practice of philosophy as improving the soul through knowing the good.

3.1. Abstract finite predicates of *Geist*

The philosophical understanding strives to emulate the natural sciences in establishing definitions for its most fundamental concepts. These definitions describe the abstracted particulars which define a given concept as a universal class. But while birds may be determined as “flighted” or “flightless” without any problematic reduction in the content of the abstract representation, philosophy does not aim at defining its concepts through their particular qualities. It aims at articulating the concrete universal which holds mutually contradictory predicates at once. Philosophy's intended content, the content of *Geist* — thought, history and society, the divine — are movements irreducible to fixed predication other than through a hopelessly one-sided reduction which distorts as much as it clarifies.

The understanding became especially concerned with definitions in the work of early modern, pre-critical rationalists.⁶⁰ No longer captive to religious representations, the thinking mind could appropriate the scholastic habit of determining the spiritual universal through an abstract, particular property. Proceeding from the self-certainty of thought as established in the Cartesian *cogito*, these definitions would no longer be dependent upon the authority of a catechism but rather arise through thought's own activity. Ultimately, this moment in the history of thought is characterized by its naïve confidence in a one-sided resolution of metaphysical disputation in direct predication, as it presupposed that the highest objects of knowledge must be either finite or infinite, either simple or composite.⁶¹

The judgement arises as the determination of the representation, in which the initial representation, the representation given in its pure immediacy, forms the subject, whose predicate arises from a further determination of the understanding.

This is expressed by every sentence insofar as in it what the subject is, i.e. the initial representation, is supposed to be indicated first by the *predicate* (i.e. in philosophy by means of the thought-determination) [...] In the sentence 'God is eternal etc.' we start with the representation of God, but what he *is*, is not yet *known* [*gewußt*] [...] The form of the sentence, or, more precisely, of the judgment is in any case unsuitable to express that which is concrete and speculative – and the true is concrete. A judgment is one-sided on account of its form and to that extent false.⁶²

⁶⁰ Namely Descartes and Leibniz. Spinoza may be regarded in a similar vein though Hegel regards his notion of the self-caused cause as a significant advancement. See 4.1. for more discussion about Hegel's general grouping of early modern thinkers.

⁶¹ "Predicates such as these are, for example, existence, as in the sentence 'God possesses existence'; finitude or infinity, as in the question whether the world is finite or infinite; simple or composite, as in the sentence 'the soul is simple'; also 'the thing is one, a whole', and so on. – There was no investigation as to whether such predicates are something true in and of themselves, nor whether the form of judgment is capable of being the form of truth." *EL* §28, 68.

⁶² *EL* §31, 71.

This passage well summarizes how the understanding develops a representational content. A representation is first given externally, as a fact of experience. This immediate representational content, taken in advance of any determination, also entails a presupposition — the understanding presupposes that the representation can be determined through the judgement. This presupposition can be maintained only if the content remains external and objectified, if it presents itself to consciousness only as an unknown “*something*”. The understanding then arrives at an exclusive and necessary determination, the essence represented in a definition. The definition arises as the judgement of the understanding which synthesizes the received representation with a predicate abstracted as essential.

But this predicate is only an abstracted finite particular, insufficient to describe any content that is not presented as an immediate external object, which includes the entire speculative content of philosophy. The attempt to admit contradictory predicates by taking God as both finite and infinite, or the human being as rational and irrational, undermines the meta-presupposition of the understanding that all content can be rendered intelligible to the laws of classical logic. The representation, presented as an immediacy, must resolve into an immediate unity, even if one-sided and insufficient.⁶³ Taking the particular for the concrete, the understanding rigidly fixates on a single determination

⁶³ “Predicates such as these represent in and of themselves a *limited* content and show themselves to be inadequate to the *fullness of the representation* (of God, nature, spirit, and so forth) and in no way exhaustive. Moreover, by virtue of being predicates of *one* subject, they are bound up with one another and yet they are diverse on account of their content. As a result, they are taken up *in opposition to one another from the outside* [*gegeneinander von außen*].” *EL* §29, 70.

because the alternative is to be lost in the bad infinity of endless particulars given equal weight as determinations of the absolute.⁶⁴ The defining predicate must be maintained as an infinite particular *qua* universal lest the object dissolve into infinite particularity *qua* multiplicity.

3.1.1. Analogy to the attempt to understand force in the *Phenomenology*

An analogous tension between the one universal predicate and the many other determinations can be observed in the dialectic of natural consciousness in Chapter 3 of Hegel's *Phenomenology*. Consciousness has passed through the immediacy of sense-certainty and perception and now attempts to unify the multiplicity of properties taken up in an object into a single, universal unit — what is, for natural consciousness, a defining essence. But as consciousness has not yet reflected into itself and become self-consciousness, it takes this unit in a purely external fashion, unable to take the unconditioned universal property “as something which is not objective — which is the *inner* (unperceived) being of things.”⁶⁵ The object has only been attributed an external unity without consciousness recognizing the interiority of this unity — the reflection of the object into itself which becomes manifest to consciousness in the phenomenon of force, the supersensible reality whose outward manifestations reflect an unseen immanent unity. This inner reflection of the universal is the movement towards the concrete

⁶⁴ Hegel draws a connection between this form of bad infinity and the multiplicity of avatars of God in eastern religion (presumably Hinduism). “The Orientals sought to overcome the first defect, in the determination of God, for instance, by means of the many names they attributed to him. At the same time, however, there were supposed to be infinitely many of those names.” *EL* §29, 70.

⁶⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. by J.B. Baillie (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 185.

universal, which, as an object of consciousness, remains divided in the dialectic between the endless multiplicity of its elements and their unity.

Since, however, this unconditioned universal is an object for consciousness, the distinction of form and content makes its appearance within it: and, in the shape of content, the moments have the aspect in which they were first presented – that of being on one side a universal medium of many substantial elements, and, on the other, a unit reflected into self, where their substantial independence is overthrown and done away with.⁶⁶

It is the special nature of force which demands that consciousness overcome this opposition. The genus of force is inseparable from its many expressions. For natural consciousness, thinking about force requires that the apparently external reality of the world be fully inverted (*verkehrt*). The apparent abstractions from concrete experience are, upon this inversion, the unified, inner substance itself. This reckoning with force initiates the transition from consciousness to self-consciousness, from an outer awareness of external finite properties to an inner awareness of the concrete universal. This is the pivot in natural consciousness as it overturns the understanding,

When we thus keep both moments in this immediate unity, it is Understanding [*Verstand*], to which the conception of force belongs, that is, properly speaking, the principle which carries the different moments qua different. For *per se* they are not to be different; the distinction consequently exists only in thought [i.e. the thought of the understanding] [...] Hence for force to be what it truly is, it has to be completely set free from thought, and put forward as the substantial reality of these differences, that is, first the substance qua the entire force remaining essentially self-contained [*an und für sich*], and then its differences as substantial entities, or as moments subsisting each on its own account.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ *PM*, 182.

⁶⁷ *PM*, 183-184.

Force, seen only in its expressions, marks the limit of the understanding's ability to conceptualize the natural world through abstract representations. Force is the natural analogy to the true concrete universal. It is immanently integrated as one only through its many expressions, which are not examples of force but constitute force itself. The distinction between genus and species, between outer class and inner content, has been overturned. A science capable of reckoning with force and the still more inwardly self-contained phenomena of *Geist* recognizes the unity of the inner, living movement of the object and its outer expressions.

3.2. The Socratic search for definitions of ethical truth

The Socratic dialogues showcase Socrates urging his interlocutors to offer a definition for political and moral concepts. He seeks their defining essence, what they are purely upon their own account, *auto kath' auto*.⁶⁸ To take three representative examples of these Socratic dialogues, piety (*to eusebes/to hosion*) is the object of inquiry in *Euthyphro*, friendship (*philia*) in *Lysis*, and temperance (*sōphrosynē*) in *Charmides*. These dialogues are famously aporetic, as each attempt at definition fails, and yet the Socratic search for definition *auto kath' auto* continues in the middle and later dialogues. The protracted thought experiments in *Republic* originate in the question of defining justice (*to dikaion*), while *Theaetetus* is a more mature aporetic attempt to define knowledge (*epistēmē*).

⁶⁸ Glaucon, echoing the common refrain of Socrates, wants a definition of justice "itself according to itself [*auto kath' auto*]." "But I'm not yet satisfied by the argument on either side. I want to know what justice and injustice are and what power each itself [*auto kath' auto*] has when it's by itself in the soul. I want to leave out of account their rewards and what comes from each of them." *Republic* 358b.

Socrates' search for definitions has a clear immediate moral relevance.

Throughout the Platonic corpus, Socrates aims at the moral improvement of the youth of Athens by disputing the moral vocabulary passively received from cultural authorities as the *doxai* social moral convention. Clarifying these representations is the inescapable first step towards ethical inquiry. Without a proper definition, moral desiderata cannot be obtained,⁶⁹ nor can their presence or absence in oneself be detected,⁷⁰ nor can their benefits be ascertained.⁷¹ As Aristotle makes clear in the following passage from *Metaphysics*, Socrates inaugurated the search for definitions as part of his wider inquiry into ethical conduct.

Socrates occupied himself with the ethical virtues, seeking for the first time to define these as a whole [*horizesthai katholou*] (for, of all the students of natural science, Democritus grasped only little of the subject and, in his way, defined “the warm” and “the cold.” And the Pythagoreans, for their part, defined some few things, whose account they bound up with numbers, such things as what is “opportunity” and “justice” and “marriage”)? and indeed he properly [*eulogōs*] sought [*ezētei*] the defining essence, i.e. what something is [*to ti esti*]. For he sought to reason through the syllogism [*sylogizesthai*], and indeed the origin [*archē*] of the syllogism is the defining essence [*to ti esti*]. [...] For two innovations are rightly attributed to Socrates, inductive logic and defining as a

⁶⁹ “Then isn’t it necessary for us to start out knowing what virtue [*aretē*] is? Because if we are not absolutely certain what it is, how are we going to advise anyone as to the best method of obtaining it?” *Laches* 190b-c.

⁷⁰ “But good heavens, Socrates, I don’t know whether I have it [*sōphrosynē*] or whether I don’t—because how would I know the nature of a thing when neither you nor Critias is able to discover it, as you say?” *Charmides* 176a-b.

⁷¹ Socrates admits that he himself has been led astray from the search for definition in the opening of *Republic*. “Before finding the answer to our first inquiry about what justice is, I let that go and turned to investigate whether it is a kind of vice and ignorance or a kind of wisdom and virtue. Then an argument came up about injustice being more profitable than justice, and I couldn’t refrain from abandoning the previous one and following up on that. Hence the result of the discussion, as far as I’m concerned, is that I know nothing, for when I don’t know what justice is, I’ll hardly know whether it is a kind of virtue or not, or whether a person who has it is happy or unhappy.” *Republic* 354b-c.

whole [*to horizesthai katholou*], and these both concern the starting point of knowledge [*peri archēn epistēmēs*].⁷²

Socrates' search for universal definitions is closely related to his making human affairs the subject of theoretical life.⁷³ As the parenthetical remark suggests, the content of natural science and mathematics neither required nor allowed such a definition of the whole. The physicists did not define the whole but, in the same reductive methodology of modern natural science, described only the properties of warmth and coldness. Somewhat more eccentrically, the Pythagoreans, taking quantity as the fundamental ontological reality, attempted to define human concepts through number. Socrates' concern for human affairs led him to define on the whole (*horizesthai katholou*) in the proper way (*eulogōs*). Attempting to define virtue, courage, and political life demanded thinking *katholou*, thinking on the whole.

I have deliberately avoided translating *katholou* as “universally” or “in universal terms” as there is a philosophically significant etymological distinction between the Greek and the Latin derivatives. While the adverbial form *katholou* appears in Aristotle, the same idea is elsewhere expressed as the prepositional phrase *kath' holou*, “in accordance with the whole”, with *holos* being the root of and having the same meaning as English “whole.” Socrates seeks a definition adequate to the whole, one appropriate to the manifold of content considered in human conduct. The Latinate “universal”, on the

⁷² Translation is my own. *Metaphysics* 13.178b19-30.

⁷³ Kirkland, who also cites this passage, also comments on the connection between moral improvement and universal definition, “Broadly speaking, this has been taken as an adequate and perfectly manifest description of the Socratic aim of self-knowledge—we search for knowledge of ourselves with Socrates insofar as we seek definitions of the ethical universals that concern how we should live our lives.” Kirkland, 5.

hand, stresses not the concrete wholeness of the content but the abstract unity of their representation. It is the whole *unus-versus*, “turned into one” — rendered into a unity, a definition which, following Hegel’s critique of the definitions of the understanding, represents the whole as an abstract particular. While this account of Socratic thinking as *katholou* perhaps depends upon the Aristotelian development of the syllogism, it should be noted that neither Plato nor Aristotle defines the universal as the numerical “one”, a term which would confirm the representational tendency of definition through an abstracted particular. The search for the definitions is a search for the object on its own terms, *auto kath’ auto*, which must be in accordance with the whole, *katholou*.

But precisely because Socrates intends the concrete universal he will not find a the representational definition adequate. Modern scholarship regards the aporia as a fundamental paradox of the dialogues, as the early Socrates at once proclaims the fundamental importance of knowledge while undermining the propositions of his interlocutors, however apparently reasonable.⁷⁴ A reading of the text informed by Hegel’s critique of the understanding suggests that Socrates is only demonstrating the futility of the philosophical method presupposed in seeking definitions. The search for a defining predicate first hypothesizes the *doxa* of the object of inquiry (justice, piety, etc.)

⁷⁴ Kirkland presents Gregory Vlastos’ standard reading of the Socrates of the early dialogues as problematically paradoxical, containing an untenable tension between moral commitment and a purely negative epistemological program. “Indeed, Vlastos insists that everything be viewed in the obscuring light of what he elsewhere refers to as ‘the paradox of Socrates.’ That central paradox is as follows. Socrates is, on the one hand, committed to the search for ethical knowledge, and he insists that only in the possession of such knowledge are we able to live well as human beings[...] And yet, on the other hand, in both word and deed, Socrates consistently seems to undermine the very possibility of this knowledge. Throughout the early dialogues, he declares in both general and specific terms that even after a lifetime of exemplary searching he knows nothing.” Kirkland, xvi.

and then sees this hypothesis fall into self-contradiction. The *doxa* is clarified through the judgement in accordance with the formula *to ti esti*, the “what something is.” When this definition fails, the understanding hypothesizes and tests a new predicate. The final aporia is not just a defeat of the particular definitions but of the entire method of thought which has led to this aporetic moment. *Dianoia* is insufficient for the objects of moral consideration Socrates hopes to define. Knowledge of human affairs is preeminently a knowledge of the whole, the immediate definition of which must, like the scholastic and early modern definitions of God, remain one-sided.

The aporetic moment should turn the reading of Socrates as a naïve rationalist on its head. The aporia arises because Socrates coyly adopts the naïve starting point of thought in order to show its limitations. It is not the Socratic, but the *sophistic* method of reasoning which comprehends the truth as turning upon mere definitions. Plato indeed reports that the proper definition of terms was known as an area of interest for the sophist Prodicus, who offers a course on the subject.⁷⁵ Sophistic argumentation attempted to win its cases in the law courts on purely terminological grounds, making the stronger argument the weaker by an otherwise implausible chain of deduction from an immediately given definition.

The sophist is in this respect quite similar to the mathematician, who also begins reasoning from an axiomatic definition. In *Theaetetus*, Theaetetus is presented as a prodigy in geometry under the tutelage of the famed mathematician Theodorus. These

⁷⁵ *Cratylus* 384a-c.

Socratic interlocuters are trained in a more rigorous, mathematical *dianoia*, and yet they are still closely associated with the sophists, with Socrates even referring to the decidedly unmathematical Protagoras as Theodorus' teacher.⁷⁶ The aporetic moment is common to discourse with sophists and mathematicians, as the dialogue still ends with them unable to reach a suitable definition of *epistēmē*. As the association of *dianoia* with geometry suggests, mathematical reasoning and sophistic argument are more alike than unlike, as they are both unable to reach a definition for knowledge because they take their method and content as self-evident. As Andy German argues, the “universally alleged clarity of mathematics” allows its practitioners to avoid dialectical reflection, so that “sophistry finds an unwitting ally in mathematicians, of all people.”⁷⁷ Constituting the third segment of the divided line in *Republic*, mathematical *dianoia* does not fall into the same rhetorical manipulation as sophistry, yet, as the purely external operation of consciousness, does not comprehend itself, does not achieve the “form of self-knowledge that transmutes mathematical sciences into dialectic.”⁷⁸

Richard Robinson's seminal work on the early dialogues critiques the Socratic search for definitions in the language of analytic philosophy. Socrates posits “what is X” as the starting point of inquiry, following the mathematical form of reasoning which

⁷⁶ *Theaetetus* 179a.

⁷⁷ Andy German, “Mathematical Self-Ignorance and Sophistry,” in *Knowledge and Ignorance of Self in Platonic Philosophy*, ed. by James Ambury and Andy German (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 162.

⁷⁸ German, 165.

demands that terms be defined at the outset of any investigation. But for the question “what is X?” to be coherent, four assumptions must hold:

- 1.) “X” is univocal
- 2.) “X” has an essence
- 3.) a realist assumption about the ontological status of this essence
- 4.) “X” must not be a primary but have a structure which can be articulated⁷⁹

These are essentially the assumptions underlying the understanding, which presumes as its content univocal, external objects which can be universalized by articulating their essential structure. The external objects of natural scientific and mathematical research largely match these criteria, to which ethical conduct is crudely assimilated. This objectification is further emphasized in the use of the Greek definite article *to* in the expression of the ethical idea under consideration, as in *Euthyphro* we seek to define a hypostatized *to hostion*, “the pious.” Yet the search for ethical definitions is not the search an object, but for the human being, who may be “a beast more complicated and savage than Typhon.”⁸⁰

4. Socratic aporia contra modern presupposition

The attempt to define the universal through a definitional predicate fails in both antiquity and modernity, but the reaction to this failure is very different. Plato accepts aporia as a clearing away of presuppositions, while moderns replace failed presuppositions with an equally representational standpoint of thought towards its object.

⁷⁹ Richard Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1941), 60.

⁸⁰ *Phaedrus* 230a.

4.1. Hegel's critique of presupposition in modern dualistic consciousness

In *EL* §§26-78, Hegel presents a brief history of philosophy in order to demonstrate the persistence of presuppositions in modern thought, which begins with the presupposition of a Cartesian ego. His logic will be distinguished as a return to presuppositionless “free Greek thought” against this historical background. This section of the thesis is only intended to develop Hegel's positioning of his own project against a wide tendency toward presupposition he discerns in modern philosophy. It does not attempt to directly engage thinkers Hegel himself often leaves nameless.⁸¹ Moreover, it does not attempt to tell the full story of Hegel's engagement with modern philosophy, which has, in other respects, made significant advancements over the Greeks, particularly in the development of the principle of subjectivity. It intends only to follow Hegel's reading of modern philosophy in the preliminary conceptions of *EL*, where the shortcomings of modern thought are presented as a dialectical stimulus to the development of a presuppositionless logic.

4.1.1. Rationalist metaphysics (§26-§36)

In Hegel's understanding of philosophy as developed in history, the insufficient predicates of the absolute first developed in medieval scholasticism constituted an aporia which has set modern philosophy down a path of presupposition. The early moderns were not in a position to concede their own ignorance of God and the soul; philosophy now

⁸¹ “Metaphysics,” for instance, remains a generalization about early moderns like Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz whose insights were taken up by Wolff and generically disseminated to Hegel and other students of the German academy. For our purposes, we may understand it broadly as the set of presuppositions belonging to pre-critical modern philosophy.

existed in a social context when aporia was not an option, as the Christian religion educated in non-negotiable representations, in creeds and dogmas. One no longer had the Greek freedom to remain eclectic or undecided about the gods.

Early modern philosophy asserted its independence by replacing religious representations with representations derived from thought itself. Cartesian rationalism takes the activity of the thinking mind as the only presupposition upon which all further philosophizing rests. The *cogito* entrenched the presumption that thought, as the only form of being beyond all skepticism, must always be ontologically prior to its object. This naively metaphysical anticipation of Kantian transcendental subjectivity is still fully confident that thought can reach an objective standpoint without any self-critical account of its limitations. Thus these metaphysicians set out to directly understand the absolute as an object of thought like any other, so that it is “presupposed in general that knowledge of the absolute could take place by attributing predicates to it.”⁸² This presupposition of metaphysics is the inverse of that which will later arise in critical philosophy, as it is characterized by the “naïve belief in general that thinking grasps the *in-itself* of things.”⁸³

This form of metaphysics began in the wider secular spirit of modernity, as it aimed to replace the presuppositions of Church dogma by presupposing only reason, and indeed demonstrating that *res cogitans* alone was immune to doubt. Such a presupposition emerged as the reaction against an external religious authority, setting up the presupposition of the mind’s own sovereignty in its place. Hegel recognizes this as a

⁸² *EL*, §28, 68.

⁸³ *EL*, §28, 68.

distinctively modern presupposition, and the section on rationalist metaphysics in *EL* ends with an explicit disavowal of interpretations of Plato and Aristotle which read them in this post-Cartesian spirit of thought as a first principle.⁸⁴ Lacking a dualism of subjects and objects, Greek thought was incapable of positing consciousness as a first principle.⁸⁵ The presuppositions involved in this sort of metaphysics are only possible to a medieval or modern mind deeply tutored in thought as the objectification of external representations.

4.1.2. Empiricism (§37-§39)

Empiricism will now aim to clear away the inadequate presupposition of *res cogitans* as the starting point of all philosophy. David Hume demonstrates that the formal laws of thought taken as valid in rationalist metaphysics do not find any evidentiary basis in the external world, the material world of *res extensa* separate from thought. Induction, causality, and moral laws only arise from habit. Contraposed against the free flow of experience, the abstract laws of rationalist metaphysics suddenly seem just as presumptuous and arbitrary as medieval dogma. Knowing metaphysics to be inadequate, the empiricists sought a “*concrete content*”, a counter to the tyranny of empty formulae,

⁸⁴ “Plato is not this kind of metaphysician, and Aristotle even less so, although it is usually believed that the opposite is the case.” *EL* §36, 78.

⁸⁵ Hegel emphasizes that we must read Plato without a modern sense of subject/object dualism. “The case is similar with regard to questions regarding the limits of knowledge, the opposition between subjectivity and objectivity which had not yet come up in Plato’s age. The independence of the “I” within itself and its explicit existence was foreign to him; man had not yet gone back within himself, had not yet set himself forth as explicit. The subject was indeed the individual as free, but as yet he knew himself only as in unity with his Being.” *LHP* I, 48-49.

“a firm foothold against the possibility of being able to prove everything on the plane of, and by the method of, finite determinations.”⁸⁶

But all empiricism has done is presuppose material content over and above any formal principle by which it is apprehended. It is equally as blind to its own presumptions, as it depends upon the system of abstract finite determination of the material world already established in metaphysics. “Presupposing and applying the forms of syllogistic inference,” empiricism in fact “uses those [i.e. metaphysics’] categories and their relationships in a completely uncritical and unconscious fashion.”⁸⁷ Empiricism takes analysis as the concrete operation of the mind, the type of thinking which breaks down the whole into its tangible component parts. And yet it presupposes analysis as the *only* operation of the mind and the *only* form of access to the object of thought. It accepts the division between thought and its object and suggests that thought must break down its object, an already-formed representation, by a rigorous reductive method. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*, and “we are back with the presupposition of the old metaphysics, namely that the truth of things is to be found in thought.”⁸⁸

Empiricism does, however, exclusively concern itself with “the sensory content of nature and of finite spirit.”⁸⁹ Why should Hegel then claim it was only the Greeks who are free from any non-sensory presupposition? The distinction is subtle but crucial. While

⁸⁶ *EL* §37, 78.

⁸⁷ *EL* §38, 79.

⁸⁸ *EL* §38, 81.

⁸⁹ *EL* §38, 81.

the Greeks “stand entirely within sense perception [*ganz in sinnlicher Anschauung stehen*],”⁹⁰ they are not theoretically constrained by it. While Aristotle’s credentials as a realist have never been in doubt, he does not regard sense perception as actual thought. Pure content without form, *aisthēsis* “is common to all, easy, and has nothing to do with wisdom.”⁹¹ As in the progression of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, standing entirely within sense perception at the outset need not and should not imply that one holds on to sense perception as an ultimate principle even as one encounters its limitations. The most glaring limitation of empiricism is that the mind which posits an empirical standard is itself entirely unaccounted for by this standard, a fact still lamented in the “hard problem of consciousness” in contemporary analytic philosophy of mind. All mental content, including empirical content, is always immanently involved with its formal principle. If empiricism attempts to take only the material as its content, it has already engaged in an abstraction, as matter itself “cannot be perceived as such.”⁹² The mind can only recognize and differentiate mind from matter insofar as it has conceded some concept of mind, however inchoate.

The difference between Greek *aisthēsis* and modern empiricism ultimately goes back to modernity’s restrictive representational understanding of sensory perception. Aristotle sees *aisthēsis* as a bare content which can develop into the knowledge of *technē*, *epistēmē*, and *sophia*. Modern empiricism, on the other hand, does not allow for this

⁹⁰ *EL*, §31, 71.

⁹¹ *Metaphysics* 982a. Aristotle, *Metaphysics, Volume I: Books 1-9*, trans. by Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933).

⁹² *EL* §38, 81.

evolution of the form of thought to meet an increasingly complex content. To take sense experience as a presupposition is to assume that experience must be divisible into concrete, atomic facts, a presupposition which in fact ends up denying much of the content of experience. The representation of the Cartesian “clear and distinct” is held over and against the wider verdict of the senses. The external world also contains indeterminate quantum states, interdependent ecologies, and forces which act through matter even while being in themselves essentially immaterial. Modern reductive empiricism is not Greek *aisthēsis*, a neutral soil from which many diverse flowers of wisdom may blossom, but a school in which the chemistry teacher, competent as she may be in her own domain, has been told to design and implement the entire curriculum by the principles of her science.

4.1.3. The critical philosophy (§40-§60)

Rational metaphysics and empiricism were externally focused on the object of thought, whether that object might be an abstract essence or a concrete particular. With Kant’s critical philosophy, thought itself is critiqued as containing unexamined presuppositions. Kant will point out that our access to any such content is mediated by subjectivity itself, which is not and cannot be the epistemically neutral operator presupposed in these earlier moments in modern thought. As with each movement in this history, critical philosophy’s greatest accomplishment is to make visible the presuppositions of what came before. Critical philosophy showed that empiricism presupposed a consciousness capable of analytic thought, yet it had little to nothing to say about the subjectivity which contained such thoughts. Empiricism only negatively denied

any claim put forth about subjectivity as unjustified and incoherent, as in Hume's famous definition of the self as a "bundle of impressions." On the other side, rationalist metaphysics persisted in fixing inadequate one-sided predicates to the subjective human soul, echoing a dogma of medieval origin. The contrary qualities of the soul could not be admitted to the fixed determination of the understanding, with the result that the soul is rigidly designated as simple and immutable despite also containing internal difference, "at the same time distinguishing itself from itself within itself."⁹³ Kant's rigorous demonstration of the inadequacy of the understanding to contemplate objects of pure reason fully clears away these one-sided predicates of the soul. Hegel regards this overthrow of this persistent scholastic doctrine as a "great result" which freed up philosophy to give a genuine account of subjectivity.⁹⁴

The presupposition of an object of thought accessible to finite determination falls away, and in Kant's antinomies reason (*Vernunft*) recognizes the understanding (*Verstand*) as yielding contradictory accounts. Qua pure reason, the understanding does not achieve the definite determination it upholds as the basis of all cognition. In the antinomies, the world can be demonstrated to be either finite or infinite, either wholly simple or composite. The "either-or" of the understanding has met its limitation. Philosophy now has a perspective from which to recognize and critique the understanding's reliance upon finite determinations. Hegel regards this development as

⁹³ *EL* §47, 93.

⁹⁴ *EL* §47, 93.

“*essential* and *necessary* ... one of the most important and profound advances in the philosophy of recent times.”⁹⁵

Yet while Kant arrives at only four antinomies, Hegel sees these antinomies as immanent in every operation of the understanding. Kant restricted himself from realizing the deeper truth of the understanding’s insufficiency and so went on to relocate its presuppositions in the categories of transcendental subjectivity. He “presupposed the table of categories and in so doing ... place[d] the determination of an object under an otherwise ready-made *schema*, instead of deriving them from the concept.”⁹⁶ The principle of subjectivity relies upon an *a priori* schema and so thought withdraws into an inescapable dualism. As *Vernunft* determined in the antinomies, the categories of the understanding will never be sufficient for the determination of an unconditioned object of thought, i.e. the content of metaphysics. Limited by a presupposed formal principle, Kantian subjectivity “would have nothing but the categories at its disposal. Insofar as it wants to use them for this purpose, it soars over [*überfliegend*] objects (it becomes transcendent).”⁹⁷ The representational principle at work in metaphysics and empiricism only becomes formal and transcendental. The categories always mediate our sensory engagement with experience. Empiricism mistook presupposition-laden representations for sense experience, but Kant leaves subjectively mediated *Vorstellungen* as the only possible content of philosophical thought. The presupposition of the representational

⁹⁵ *EL* §48, 93.

⁹⁶ *EL* §48, 94.

⁹⁷ *EL* §46, 91.

understanding is more deeply reaffirmed even as it is more explicitly recognized than ever before.

4.1.4. Immediate knowledge (§61-§78)

The idealist response to Kant takes subjectivity's recognition of its own mediation as the incorrect presupposition in Kantian philosophy. Hegel reads the philosophies of figures like Jacobi, Fichte, and Schelling as correcting this presupposition by holding that knowledge is wholly unmediated, im-mediate (*un-mittelbar*), and thus unplagued by the dualism of Kantian philosophy. In the spirit of *Sturm und Drang*, they asserted that "*the truth is for the spirit*" so that "knowing [*Wissen*], believing [*Glauben*], thinking, [and] intuiting" are equally and at once "presupposed as familiar [*bekannt vorausgesetzt*]." ⁹⁸ While belief is opposed to knowing in ordinary use, as the former is immediate and the latter mediated, immediate knowledge dissolves this distinction. Belief is "specified as immediate knowing and thus recognized at once as also a kind of knowing [*Wissen*]." ⁹⁹

This equation of *Glauben* and *Wissen* produces a content scarcely different from the empty determinations of metaphysics and empiricism, which also foreswore all mediation. The believer, which is to say, the immediate knower, apprehends the object of his cognition as if this apprehension did not require any process whatsoever, as if the content of such belief and knowledge were always familiar in advance (*voraus*). Despite the Christian intentions of most of these thinkers, their knowledge of God only reaches

⁹⁸ *EL* §63, 111.

⁹⁹ *EL* §63, 111-112.

the “dry *abstractum* of immediate knowing, a completely formal determination.”¹⁰⁰ But immediate knowledge need not necessarily reach for such an exalted object. It is also the default philosophy of humankind insofar as it is untheoretical and takes the immediate consciousness of common sense (*Gemeinsinn*) as the truth.¹⁰¹

Immediacy takes us back to the beginning of modern philosophy, as Hegel interprets Descartes’ attempt to find a single foundational point for all inquiry as an attempt to escape theological mediation. Like all systems of immediacy, however, Descartes’ philosophy is based on a mediating presupposition. In settling his doubt only after arriving at the truth of mental activity, Descartes sets out in advance that consciousness must be clear and distinct while external being must be fleeting and transitory.¹⁰² Consciousness only seems so clear and distinct to Descartes insofar as it is recognized in its immediacy. Yet this immediacy does not necessarily imply any determinate content for the consciousness it implies. The *cogito* is not a fully developed syllogism, as Descartes concedes, but a “*simple intuition* of consciousness” apparently fortified against all skeptical doubt.¹⁰³ This self-knowledge is abstractly deduced from the barest form of self-recognition. It can only achieve a shallow certainty by forestalling the critical inquiry into the content of subjectivity by asserting the formal identity of the first-person pronoun.

¹⁰⁰ *EL* §63, 113.

¹⁰¹ *EL* §63, 113.

¹⁰² *EL* §76-77, 123-4.

¹⁰³ *EL* §64, 114-115.

Descartes is indeed the originator of this entire chain of presuppositions and subsequent reactions, and so it is proper that the reaction against the dualistic mediation of Kantian subjectivity is a romantic reincarnation of the immediate Cartesian subject. From the beginning of modern philosophy, this immediate Cartesian consciousness has been behind every presupposition, however much it may have been qualified as rationally intelligible (metaphysics), scientifically adequate (empiricism), transcendently self-limiting (critical philosophy), or immediately self-evident (various forms of immediacy). The return to immediacy is a return to Descartes which finally brings out the two fundamental presuppositions underlying each of these systems: the presupposition of an internal consciousness opposed to external objects and the presupposition of an opposition between self-standing (*selbständig*) forms of mediation and immediacy.¹⁰⁴ Hegel aims to overcome this pattern in the history of philosophy by demoting the understanding to a moment of the whole movement of thought, just as the aporia is the moment which ends the naïve search for defining predicates in Plato.

4.2. Aporia as the insufficiency of definition

Having undertaken the exceptional task of dismantling conventional opinion, Socrates, with an ironic modesty, excuses himself from offering any further definitions. His refusal to positively claim knowledge sets him apart from the many who falsely claim knowledge but have none upon examination.¹⁰⁵ Socrates seems like a skeptic in this

¹⁰⁴ *EL* §78, 125.

¹⁰⁵ *Apology* 23a-b.

aporetic moment, an interpretation of the dialogues championed by Cicero and the skeptical Hellenistic New Academy, who denied even the positive knowledge of one's own ignorance which Socrates left himself and so withheld assent from all propositions.¹⁰⁶ Taking the aporetic moment in isolation as the final verdict of a primarily skeptical Platonic philosophy places the apparent epistemological stance of the early dialogues in sharp tension with their ethical purpose. This seeming difficulty is overcome if the *aporia* is taken not as a conclusion, but as a moment of thought characterized by the presupposition of ethical content as directly predicable, a moment followed by a concrete deepening of thought in philosophical dialectic. Socrates clearly has not given up on the ethical altogether, but only on approaching it as an object capable of definite predication, as a representation easily wielded as self-evident in the rhetorical sphere of public life.

Plato marks Socratic *aporia* by highlighting its irony, softening its edges and indicating that the failure to find a definition proceeds only from the obtuse abstraction of the entire enterprise. Socrates and his interlocutors are no less convinced of the existence and crucial importance of these ethical ideas even after they have been fully dismantled. These dialogues sometimes even conclude with Socrates affirming the importance of the ethical notion he has just demonstrated is unknown to both him and his interlocutor! Though Charmides, Critias, and Socrates are unable to define *sōphrosynē* or discern its benefits, Socrates concludes by encouraging the young Charmides to nonetheless regard himself as happy insofar as he has this virtue, even if it is indiscernible through *logos*,

So see whether you do have it [*sōphrosynē*] and are in no need of the charm—because if you do have it, my advice to you would rather be to regard me as a

¹⁰⁶ *Academica* 1.44-46.

babbler, incapable of finding out anything whatsoever by means of argument [*logō*], and yourself as being exactly as happy as you are temperate [*sōphronesteros*].¹⁰⁷

Aporia does not invalidate the virtue itself so much as the conceit of one who aims to definitively discourse and pontificate upon the virtue with magisterial authority. Having subtly adopted posture of the sophist, Socrates has reduced him to a harmless old babbler, called on the bluff of presenting hard and fast definitions of *doxai* as genuine ideas. True ethical life remains unimpacted by the limitations of *logos*, an idea echoed by an equally self-effacing Socrates at the conclusion of *Lysis*.

Now we've done it, Lysis and Menexenus—made fools of ourselves, I, an old man, and you as well. These people here will go away saying that we are friends of one another—for I count myself in with you—but what a friend is we have not yet been able to find out.¹⁰⁸

With the discourse on *philia* ending in aporia, the failure of abstract definition is brought into comic contrast with the interlocutors' concrete friendship. The aporia does not point toward the skeptical abyss, but towards the failure of an abstracted form of moral reasoning.

4.2.1. Hegel's account of Socratic method and aporia

In *LHP*, Hegel presents the Socratic method as an early moment of thought which aims at the development of the concrete idea even as it ends in aporia. Even as Socrates and his interlocutors seek the definition of an external object, the method of Socratic

¹⁰⁷ *Charmides* 176a.

¹⁰⁸ *Lysis* 223b.

cross-examination transforms the immediate consciousness of external, conventional *doxai* into a reflective self-consciousness appropriate to the concrete universal.

By going to the work-places of tailors and shoemakers, and entering into discourse with them, as also with youths and old men, Sophists, statesmen, and citizens of all kinds, he in the first place took their interests as his topic — whether these were household interests, the education of children, or the interests of knowledge or of truth. Then he led them on from a definite case to think of the universal, and of truths and beauties which had absolute value, since in every case, from the individual's own thoughts, he derived the conviction and consciousness of that which is the definite right.¹⁰⁹

Even as Socrates and his interlocutors attempt to hunt down the good as if it were an alien content presented as ready-made to consciousness, the dialectical give and take of the dialogues undermines this conceit. The interlocutors themselves become just as much the object of inquiry as the pious and the just. As in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, consciousness must turn inward and become self-consciousness to comprehend the concrete universal. Achieving this universalized self-consciousness by demonstrating the falsity of representational consciousness, the purpose of the aporia is to “inspire men with distrust towards their presuppositions, after faith had become wavering and they were driven to seek that which is, in themselves.”¹¹⁰ Socrates only demands that *doxai* manifest the self-evident simplicity they are claimed to have. Yet the fully examined representation can no longer maintain its presupposed self-consistency. “To become concrete [...] [ideas] should be explained [...] and understood that what they really are, is unknown.”¹¹¹ Hegel concludes his comments on the Socratic method by quoting Meno's

¹⁰⁹ *LHP* I, 397-398.

¹¹⁰ *LHP* I, 398.

¹¹¹ *LHP* I, 400

sense of astonishment in the face of Socratic perplexity, which leaves him numb like the sting of a ray.¹¹² Philosophy must begin in this shocking way, realizing what is obvious to be utterly confounding, “must begin with a puzzle [*Verwirrung*] in order to bring about reflection [*Nachdenken*]; everything must be doubted, all presuppositions [*Voraussetzungen*] given up, to reach the truth as created through the Notion.”¹¹³

4.2.2. Aporia in *Theaetetus*

Hegel maintains that each of the moments of thought are not fully separable, but contain each other as “*moments of every properly logical content.*”¹¹⁴ In tracing Plato’s thought as similarly constituted by moments, it is worth noting that the aporia is not confined to the early dialogues as a formal dramatic device introducing the character Socrates. *Theaetetus* is generally regarded to have been written after the middle period in which Plato moves past the pure aporia of the early dialogues and now presents the theory of forms, and yet in *Theaetetus* the aporetic form of the Socratic dialogues returns. This more mature aporia helps us comprehend the positive meaning of the aporia beyond its concluding comedic irony as presented in the early dialogues.

The relative maturity of this aporia can be seen in two respects. First, Socrates and his interlocutors attempt to define *epistēmē*, knowledge, rather than a particular virtue. While the earlier aporiae have all resulted from the presumption that a certain predication of X constitutes *epistēmē* of X, Socrates and his interlocutors now attempt to define

¹¹² *Meno* 80a-b.

¹¹³ *LHP* I, 406.

¹¹⁴ *EL* §79, 125.

epistēmē itself. What has failed in the case of the particular virtues will certainly fail to offer a more general account of knowledge and end in perplexity. Yet in attempting to find a meta-definition of *epistēmē* the dialogue implicitly comments on the meaning of the *aporiae* in the earlier dialogues.

This oblique commentary on the meaning of the *aporia* is the second unique feature of the final *aporia* in *Theaetetus*. Socrates reframes the aporetic moment in terms of the art of intellectual midwifery he had introduced as his own at the state of the dialogue, stating that Theaetetus will henceforth give birth to better ideas even if the ones discussed were not adequate.¹¹⁵ This is the aporetic moment revisited by a mature Plato who has, however reluctantly, now introduced some positive theories. The *aporia* does not forebode the end of philosophy, but its beginning. Theaetetus has been given an education in the untruth of what is allegedly self-evident and taught the positive meaning of inquiring into what seems incapable of further articulation — an education in reflective self-consciousness. Hegel thus presents Socratic midwifery as the pivot towards reflection on the concrete universal.

This concrete, as it is in natural consciousness without thinking of it, or universality immersed in matter, [Socrates] analyzed, so that through the separation of the concrete, he brought the universal contained therein to consciousness as universal [...] The child, the uncultured man, lives in concrete individual ideas, but to the man who grows and educates himself, because he thereby goes back into himself as thinking, reflection becomes reflection on the universal and the permanent establishment of the same; and a freedom—formerly that of moving in concrete ideas—is now that of so doing in abstractions and in thoughts.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ *Theaetetus* 210b-d.

¹¹⁶ *LHP* I, 402-403.

The concrete universal is already immanent in the tapestry of human experience on display in the agora, in the discourse of eager youths, pious frauds, and bumbling old men. The aporia is not a dead end but the wonder (*to thaumazein*) that is the beginning of philosophy.¹¹⁷ Socrates holds up a mirror to humanity, the mirror of thought replacing the mirror of nature.

4.3. Plato's moving aporia, modernity's static presupposition

The etymology of aporia further confirms the fluid movement of Platonic thought. Moving up the divided line to the geometric abstraction of *dianoia*, thought appears prepared to surpass its dependence on outer images and define ethical concepts — the pious, the just, the good itself. However, in accordance with two pre-philosophical definitions of aporia, *dianoia*'s attempt to define the absolute ends up stuck in unpassable (*a-poros*) paradoxes which it is without resource (*a-poros*) to resolve.¹¹⁸ The aporetic moment is the moment when thought has been left unequipped to reach the goal it intends. While this limitation frustrates Socrates' interlocutors, Plato can only recognize this limitation as a limitation by having surpassed it.¹¹⁹ As Hegel comments on the *a priori* limitation of thought in established in Kantian philosophy, "something can be

¹¹⁷ *Theaetetus* 155d.

¹¹⁸ Liddell, Scott, Jones *Ancient Greek Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford University Press, 1925), s.v. "ἄπορος."

¹¹⁹ Bruce-Robertson takes the Platonic aporia to be resolved by separating aporetic human knowing from divine knowing, whereas Hegel sees the resolution of the aporia in a "divine" self-consciousness. See his conclusion, 81-82. While not stated as explicitly as in Hegel, the later, more speculative moments of Platonic thought arise from a deepened self-consciousness. Plato knows his limitations because he has also, however implicitly, gone past them.

known [*gewußt*], even felt to be a *barrier*, a lack only insofar as one has at the same time gone *beyond* it.”¹²⁰

This extension of thought beyond its apparent limitations is also implicit in Socratic irony. The elenchus is only ironic to the extent that Socrates already has moved beyond the naïve attempt to predicate the absolute and now engages in a reflective form of thought which anticipates and accepts the aporetic moment. The aporia does not arise from *dianoia* itself, which uncritically accepts certain hypotheses as given and so does not recognize its own constraints. The sophists and mathematicians never arrived at an impassable *aporia* through their own efforts. Only from the dialectical encounter of Socratic questioning challenged their *doxai* and disclosed their limitations. Thought has been shown to be limited, but only by another form of thought.

Hegel’s description of the self-contained freedom of Greek philosophy (with which I began this thesis)¹²¹ emerges mostly clearly in this seamless transition between naïve definition and reflective dialectic in the Platonic dialogues. Unable to recognize the understanding and its representational content as only the starting point of thought, the modern does not allow the movement of thought to fully develop itself. Instead of moving past representationalism, philosophy since Descartes has attempted to escape the aporetic moment by moving backward, by establishing *a priori* foundations which one-sidedly settle the paradoxes wrought by the pure understanding. Thought must leap

¹²⁰ *EL* §60, 107.

¹²¹ “This kind of being purely with itself [*reine Beisichsein*] is inherent in free thought, sailing off into the free, open space where there is nothing below or above us, and where we stand in solitude alone with ourselves.” *EL* §31, 71.

forward over the chasm of aporia to secure its self-mediated independence, but modernity has only retreated.

5. The Euthyphro dilemma

While Hegel's presuppositional attitude can be traced through the history of modern philosophy, Plato's aporia is direct and dramatic. It remains to integrate the two by considering how Hegel would account for a specific aporetic moment in the Platonic dialogues.

The Euthyphro dilemma supplies an aporia appropriate for a Hegelian reconsideration. In *Euthyphro*, Socrates asks the young priest Euthyphro to provide a definition of piety. Self-righteously prosecuting his own father for murder, Euthyphro first defines piety as doing exactly what he himself is doing, prosecuting the wrongdoer.¹²² Socrates replies that Euthyphro, clearly blinded by his own conceit, has only offered his own action as one "of many holy things [*tōn pollōn hosiōn*]." Socrates rather seeks the "form itself that makes all pious actions pious [*auto to eidos hō panta ta hōsia hōsia*]" so that he may judge actions by using this form "as a model [*paradeigmati*]." ¹²³ Euthyphro offers the concrete particular when Socrates seeks the abstract model, the universal representation against which each individual instance can be judged. This use of *eidos* predates the middle theory of forms and belongs more to *dianoia* than to *epistēmē*. Thought has not reflected upon itself and so requires it an abstract *paradeigma* by which to judge the particular case against the general formula.

¹²² *Euthyphro* 5e-6a.

¹²³ *Euthyphro* 6d-e.

After some further jostling with Socrates, Euthyphro then shifts the definition of piety to include not just the one pious deed he is performing, but whatever the all gods love.¹²⁴ While this definition moves beyond the single case to the general rule, the general rule is problematically circular. It does not conform to the syntax of the judgement, as the predicate god-loved (*theophilēs*) does not determine why the pious is pious but only describes a secondary effect (*pathos*) of the pious.¹²⁵ In dismantling this definition, Socrates opposes the primary cause of X being X, that because of which (*dioti*) something is what it is, against what something is only because it is externally affected to be so, a passive attribute. Seeking the universal determination as one from among the many, logic arranges these qualities as primary and secondary. The defining qualities are primary and causally necessary while the other qualities are only secondary and derivative. Being loved by the gods cannot be what makes the pious the pious. This state of being god-loved is only a secondary quality as it arises from an external reaction to a concept that must already exist on its own account. Socrates lays out several analogous cases and then proceeds to generalize,

Is what I want to say clear, Euthyphro? I want to say this, namely, that if anything is being changed or is being affected in any way, it is not being changed [*gignetai*] because it is something changed [*hoti gignomenon*], but rather it is something changed [*gignomenon*] because it is being changed [*hoti gignetai*] nor is it being affected [*paschei*] because it is something affected [*hoti paschon*], but it is something affected [*paschon*] because it is being affected [*hoti paschei*].¹²⁶

¹²⁴ *Euthyphro* 9d-e.

¹²⁵ *Euthyphro* 11a-b.

¹²⁶ *Euthyphro* 10b-c.

Passive states of being are not primary but relative to those affecting them. A proper definition must be inherent in the term defined and not dependent on the activity of an external factor. With every definition hanging upon other definitions, which in turn depend on others and circle back to the original definition, thought would become the endless equation of empty tautologies.

This hollow circularity is the fullest expression of the abstract identity Hegel critiques as the basic presupposition the understanding, which equates subjects and predicates as complete in themselves, abstracting away their development in thought. Though the definition seems to posit a bare equivalence between the term defined and the definition, the term defined must be in some sense prior to the definition. Socrates here emphasizes that the concept must give rise to the definition and not vice versa. But while the understanding is rightly dissatisfied with circular definitions, it only attempts to overcome circularity through static identity. The flabbergasted Euthyphro says as much in response to the Euthyphro dilemma, lamenting that “whatever proposition we put forward goes around and refuses to stay put where we establish it.”¹²⁷ Taking the defining predicate as identical with the subject, the understanding aims at identity but can only frustrate the movement of thought in futile circularity.

5.1. A Hegelian reciprocal response

The understanding renders the subject as the prior cause of the defining predicate. In a slight variation on Richard Robinson’s “What is X?” formula, Socrates here seeks to know “What is the Y because of which (*hoti*) X is X?”. As Socrates’ argument by

¹²⁷ *Euthyphro* 11b.

analogy in *Euthyphro* shows, no passive state can define the active concept — to do so is to only define the concept in terms of another external concept and not in itself. The problem of definition is thus analogous to the problem of the causality, in which the term defined must be the cause of its own defining predicate. In this interpretation of what it means for a definition to be *auto kath' auto*, piety alone can give rise to its own definition. Piety cannot be piety only because of some external activity, like the love of the gods. To the understanding, the abstract universal *paradeigma* is that which causes the many particulars to exist in a certain determinable way. Yet the presupposition of such a cause distorts thought when it considers the whole, as a chain of causes must culminate in some final cause — God to the medieval theologian, autonomous subjectivity to the Kantian philosopher, the empirically discernable properties of matter to the natural scientist. However diverse these philosophies may be, they each are ready to dogmatically present a final cause to fulfill the understanding's need for causal explanations.¹²⁸

But Hegel shows that cause and effect is not the absolute relationship it is presupposed to be. Where Socrates here seeks the X that is because of Y, the Y can equally be shown to be because of the X. Even for the sensuous understanding cause and

¹²⁸ “To the same degree that the understanding is accustomed to resisting [the idea of] substantiality, it is, by contrast, at home with causality, i.e. the relationship of cause and effect. If construing a content in a necessary fashion is what matters, then reflection at the level of the understanding makes it its business to reduce that content to the relationship of causality above all. Now this relationship, to be sure, pertains to necessity, but it is only the one side in the process of necessity which is just as much this, to sublate the mediation contained in causality and demonstrate itself to be a simple relation-to-itself. If one does not move beyond causality as such, then one does not have it as it truly is, but instead as a finite causality, and the finitude of this relation then consists in the fact that cause and effect are firmly maintained in their difference.” *EL* §153, 227.

effect cannot be maintained in abstract opposition. “Even in a *finite* cause and its representation, this identity in regard to the content is at hand; the rain, the cause, and the wetness, the effect, are one and the same concretely existing water.”¹²⁹ Causality shows itself to be a one-sided relationship which sublates itself into reciprocity, “eliminating the distinction between the determiner and the determined,” the priority of the term over its definition which gives rise to the Euthyphro dilemma. Richard Dien Winfield sees this as a crucial moment in Hegel’s logic in which “the logic of foundationalism eliminates itself, giving way to the logic of self-determination, where determiner and determined are one and the same.”¹³⁰

The problematic circularity of abstract definition gives way to an intensively mediated relation between two mutually implicative terms. The Euthyphro dilemma arises when the understanding attempts to define a concept which is inherently relational. Hegel describes piety as arising through the interplay of self and other in the dialectic of unhappy consciousness in the *Phenomenology*. *Andacht* directs thought towards the holy other (*denkt an*) as the unhappy consciousness attempts to negate itself in the egoless ritual of religious observation.¹³¹ Piety is an attitude of reverence to an exalted other, whether divine or familial, and so represents a difficult case for who will not permit any trace of the other in an *auto kath’ auto* definition.

¹²⁹ *EL* §153, 226.

¹³⁰ Winfield, 156.

¹³¹ “Its thinking as such is no more than the discordant clang of ringing bells, or a cloud of warm incense, a kind of thinking in terms of music.” *PM*, 257-258.

The dispute over piety in Euthyphro's case arises from the competing claims of the divine and the paternal; a more dialectically direct Socrates could have presented Euthyphro with a counter-definition of piety as doing whatever one's parents love. When the problem is reframed as the problem of defining the "in-itself" of concepts which necessarily implicate a relational other, the dilemma can be expanded to other relationships as well. Do friends love the same things because they are friends or are they friends because they love the same things? Are the popular celebrated because they are desirable or are they desirable because they are popular? Do experts speak authoritatively because of the respect owed them or are they owed respect because they speak so authoritatively? The understanding takes personal qualities as existing prior to and separate from personal relationships. It stands to reason that friends are friends because they share the same interests, and yet people grow in their interests by having friends. It stands to reason that the popular are popular because they are desirable, and yet people are seen in their most desirable aspect because of their popularity. It stands to reason that experts are owed respect because they speak authoritatively, and yet they may speak authoritatively only insofar as they enjoy audiences who recognize them as experts.

In the contemplation of *Geist*, self-consciousness inverts the logical priority expected by the understanding. Presupposition gives way to a logic whose elements are reciprocal and dynamically two-sided. In piety we subordinate ourselves in an external devotion, but one that always mirrors inner conviction. Remembering the Platonic injunction to self-knowledge, we may further object to Euthyphro that the god-loved is indiscernible to whomever does not already love as a god loves — in the full self-

awareness that loving and being loved is not an abstract attribute, but the substantial reciprocity which each recognizes, reflects, and rejuvenates the other.

6. Conclusion

In this thesis I have shown the close correlation between Hegel's critique of the understanding and Plato's aporetic moment. In Hegel, the understanding attempts to abstract a generalized model from an externally given, objectified representation. In the early Platonic dialogues, Socrates interrogates the conventional ethical views of his interlocutors by encouraging his students to express them in generalized formulae. The modern philosophy of the understanding, alongside Socrates' interlocutors, attempts to rigorously define ethical, social, and religious concepts. These attempts fail because the abstract form of thought is inadequate to the concrete content of human life. There is a critical divergence in the ancient and modern responses to this failure. Hegel reads the history of modern philosophy as only doubling down on the understanding by grounding it on various presuppositions. This leaves modern thought unfree and tethered down to *a priori* assumptions. In Plato, by contrast, the aporetic moment marks the end of a geometric philosophy of definitions and the start of the reflective dialectical moment Hegel hopes to reintroduce to modern thought.

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