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Positing – What Kant Had Ignored

Hegel's relation to his predecessors and especially to Kant and transcendental logic has long been a source of debate. Did Hegel truly follow Kant or was he returning to the pre-critical metaphysics? In the light of this debate, it feels quite remarkable that almost no one has commented on the point that Hegel himself emphasizes as differentiating his philosophy both from earlier metaphysics and Kant's critical philosophy and thus providing a sort of third alternative. The point I am referring to occurs in Hegel's *Science of Logic*, in two different places in the account of *Dasein*,¹ in which Hegel points the need to differentiate two phases in the exposition of the concept. In the first phase, things are something only in themselves (*an sich*) or according to an external reflection, while in the second phase things have also been posited (*gesetzt*). Hegel also maintained that metaphysical philosophy, which here also includes critical philosophy, was interested only in what things were in themselves. Hegel's own dialectical outlook, on the other hand, maintained the difference between the two standpoints and thus emphasized the aspect of positing.

The aim of this text is thus to expound the notion of positing in Hegel's philosophy and in this manner clarify its relation to both metaphysics and Kant's philosophy. I shall begin by discussing the various meanings positing has had, especially in the works of Hegel's predecessors such as Kant and Fichte. From this historical perspective, I shall then proceed to discuss positing in Hegel, its various kinds and some examples of it.

1 Positing in the History of Philosophy

The German term *setzen* has been used as a translation of Latin *ponere*, a term that was especially used in logical contexts to indicate the affirmation of something. For instance, Christian Wolff notes² in reference to a hypothetical proposition of the form „if A then B“, that if we posit proposition A, we also posit the proposition B. Thus, the name of one of the most famous inferences, Modus Ponendo Ponens, refers to the fact that in this inference we affirm something (*ponens*), by affirming something else (*ponendo*).

Following this tradition, Kant, in his pre-critical work on the existence of God,³ *Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund zu einer Demonstration des Daseins Gottes*, identifies Latin *Position* with German *Setzung*. What is more striking is that he also identifies this „position“ with *Sein* or being, both when it is understood as the copula combining two terms in a judgment and also when used to indicate *Dasein* or existence. Kant also describes the former as positing something in a logical respect, while the latter is the positing of a thing in and for itself (*eine Sache an und für sich selbst*). What is even more striking is that Kant intends this identification as an explanation of what existence means. As he himself notes, this is actually explaining the relatively clear concept of existence through a much murkier notion of positing.⁴ Behind Kant's explanation is probably his wish to explicate that existence is not a predicate, as insisted in the traditional ontological proof of God's existence, but something similar to the copula in a judgment: the copula is not a

1 G. W. F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* 21, Hamburg 1985, 97 and 110.

2 Christian Wolff, *Philosophia rationalis sive logica*, Frankfurt 1732, 330 (§ 407).

3 Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*. (Akademie Ausgabe) I.2, Berlin 1912, 73.

4 Ibid. 74.

concept, but rather connects concepts, just as existence is not a property of a thing, but something true of a thing with its properties.

What is important in this context is Kant's close relating of positing and existence – existence is position, that is, a result of positing, whatever that is. This correlation is maintained even in the critical period, and once again in Kant's criticism of the traditional proofs of God's existence. Here Kant begins with the example of a triangle: if a triangle is posited, its three angles must also exist, but we could as well not posit triangles at all.⁵ Similarly, if God is posited, he must be almighty, but if the existence of God is denied altogether, we cannot know anything about his properties. What Kant adds in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is one clear criterion as to when something is posited or exists: if something is connected to my perceptions through empirical laws, we can say that it exists.⁶ Kant does preclude the possibility that there might be other types of existence, he merely points out that perceptions are the only way we can justify existence assumptions.

The close correlation between positing and existence continues and is developed further in the works of Fichte. Just consider how he justifies the beginning of the first exposition of his *Wissenschaftslehre*. Fichte begins from the statement $A = A$ and notes that in this statement a connection is posited between the existence of A and this same existence – If A is, then it is. Furthermore, he notes that this statement can also be read as saying that if A is posited, then A is posited. Continuing with this same line of thought, Fichte remarks that this connection is posited in and by *Ich*, or the Ego. Indeed, the Ego posits not just this connection, but also itself: I am, because I posit myself. This self-positing, on the other hand, is an activity of the Ego.⁷ While the notion of positing has become in Fichte, if possible, even murkier than in Kant, it is clearly characterized as an activity, which accounts for the existence of something.

2 The Meaning of Positing and its Subspecies

Kant had originally imbued a quite innocent technical term with a reference to existence. If Hegel is following Kant, he then appears to be criticizing earlier metaphysicians and even Kant for not taking existence into consideration – a rather bold accusation when one considers that Kant himself had pointed out that metaphysical considerations could not by themselves reach existence. Yet, if Hegel is following Fichte with the idea of positing as an existence-conferring activity, Hegel's criticism becomes easier to comprehend. To be sure, Kant did note metaphysicians' problems with existence, but he still failed to give precise instructions as to how one could get to the required existence – he merely suggested that this had something to do with perceptions, which human beings luckily happened to have. Hegel's task in the *Logic* would then be to show how the reference to existence would be possible for any thinker, no matter whether she perceives in a manner similar to that of humans. Yet the question remains: did Hegel think of positing as an existence-conferring activity?

To gain a clearer view of the topic, I shall present some examples of how Hegel uses the concept of positing. We may begin at the place where Hegel distinguishes between being in itself and being posited.⁸ This distinction is properly introduced in contrast to a distinction between being in itself and being for another (*Sein für Anderes*): while being posited is also being for another, it also contains an explicit reference to a return of that which is not in itself to that which is in itself. Hegel also notes that the former distinction is properly introduced in the second book

5 Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*. (Akademie Ausgabe) I.3, Berlin 1911, 398.

6 Ibid. 402.

7 J. G. Fichte, *Gesamtausgabe* I.2, Stuttgart, Bad Cannstatt 1965, 256–257.

8 G. W. F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* 21, Hamburg 1985, 109.

of the *Science of Logic*, that is, the book on essence or objective reflection. Furthermore, he exemplifies this distinction through pairs of concepts such as ground and consequence or cause and effect: ground posits that which it grounds, while cause brings forth its effect.

These examples suggest that positing has something to do with causal notions: both causing and bringing forth are identical with positing or they are types of positing. Further evidence is found when we look at how Hegel describes causal concepts: effect is described as being posited and even posited as having been posited, in contrast to the cause, which is described as being originative in its relation to the effect.⁹ This suggests that the relation between cause and effect is a subspecies of positing – positing something as posited. Thus, positing involves or at least it can involve making changes to a pre-existing thing or even creating something completely new, that is, making something exist that did not exist before.

Yet, it seems that the active changing and creating of things is not the only kind of positing there is. In addition to positing, Hegel often speaks of supposing or „pre-positing“ (*voraussetzen*), which Hegel confirms to be a species of positing, although he also appears to contrast supposing with positing as such. Supposing is positing that destroys itself while the supposed positing occurs,¹⁰ in other words, it posits something as not posited, that is, it resembles activity, at the end of which we recognize that the apparent end of the activity was not a product of activity at all. In other words, supposing does not mean outright creating, but merely finding something pre-existent.

For Hegel, then, positing thus appears to mean an activity that either creates or discovers something. In both cases, positing has something to do with existence: it assures that something exists, either by finding or making relevant objects. I shall use the technical term construction to account for both types of positing.

I am sure the word construction might raise some eyebrows: after all, doesn't Hegel himself speak vehemently against construction as a method of philosophy? I shall tackle the question, firstly, by pointing out that I have borrowed the term from modern constructivism and especially constructive logic, in which constructions are just activities by which the existence of something falling under a concept is assured: for instance, we might speak of constructing a number satisfying certain conditions.

Secondly, I would argue that Hegel himself was not so negative towards constructions as is sometimes suggested. Indeed, in a lecture series Hegel described his own logical method as construction.¹¹ Hegel was more concerned with blind construction, which was a mere senseless change of things, following an external purpose of proving something.¹² What Hegel appears to advocate, then, is a union of the two separate activities: construction that also constitutes proof and proof that is also construction construction, in other words, a demonstration of what happens through construction.

We might thus redefine Hegel's characterization of the peculiarity of his own philosophy as an interest in construction – one must not just theorize on what exists, like metaphysicians, and not even merely disparage philosophy for its incapacity to find existence on its own, like Kant, but actually find methods of constructing something existent, that is, methods of finding and creating things. The only question, then, is what sort of methods of construction Hegel uses.

⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* 11, Hamburg 1978, 397.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 251.

¹¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen: Ausgewählte Nachschriften und Manuskripte* 11, Hamburg 1992, 195.

¹² G. W. F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* 12, Hamburg 1981, 225.

3 An Example of Positing in Hegel's Logic

I shall exemplify Hegel's use of positing or construction by a move from One to Many, which Hegel also calls repulsion. We can be quite certain that this repulsion has something to do with positing, as Hegel himself describes it positing of many Ones through a single One¹³ – repulsion is a process, in which many entities are constructed with the help of a single entity. Indeed, Hegel calls this positing repulsion in itself, distinguishing it from external repulsion, characterized by prepositing instead of positing. We might express this difference by saying that repulsion in itself literally creates new entities out of a single given entity, while external repulsion just finds entities that already exist. It is then quite understandable why Hegel introduces external repulsion after repulsion in itself – it is quite easy to *find* multiple entities, when one has already *created* a number of entities.

We should thus begin with any example of the category of One, that is, with any unitary object. It should be completely indifferent what further properties the chosen object should have, or indeed, if it has any properties beyond being one. This state of the object merely being without any properties or characteristics can then be posited as belonging to this one object, that is, we can assume that the object has the quality of being empty or without any further characteristics.¹⁴

Now, Hegel continues, the one object and its quality of emptiness are both what he calls *Dasein*. In other words, both what is one and its emptiness *are* in some sense and they are both determined by being distinguishable from one another. Yet, in some sense the emptiness of the one object, from which the one object differs, is itself similar to the one object, that is, it is itself one object. This means that we have now many examples of one object: the original object and its quality of being empty.¹⁵

What appears to be a crucial move in this „repulsive process“ is the positing of emptiness: we no longer consider it just as something we can say about the object, but as a true entity that can be itself described and distinguished from the object. As a proof, this process would be rather problematic – the existence of a new object would be based on a completely unjustified assumption of the existence of an ontologically unclear abstract entity called „emptiness“. This seems similarly uncritical as the behaviour of set theoreticians who without further ado base the whole number system to the notion of sets containing other sets having other sets as their members – they fail in the same way to ask whether sets are entities in any sense.

The problem is removed when we remember that the Hegelian notion of positing also includes processes that are closer to creating and changing. Indeed, Hegel explicitly distinguishes this „repulsion in itself“ from a process in which we just discover previously given multiple objects. This suggests that „repulsion in itself“ is truly meant to add new objects to our ontology. This might not appear so preposterous when we remember that the new object in this case is an abstraction like emptiness. What Hegel appears to be saying is that the question of the existence of such abstractions is ontologically undetermined and perhaps even dependent on the subject, somewhat like numbers are dependent on the subject according to constructivist mathematicians.

13 G. W. F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* 21, Hamburg 1985, 156.

14 *Ibid.* 152.

15 *Ibid.* 155.

4 Hegel's Philosophy as Practice instead of Theory

What Hegel seems to suggest in his account of the process of repulsion is that we can accept the existence of abstract entities like emptiness, and that this acceptance is not based on any deduction, but on our own process of thought. I could argue that this move is not restricted to this particular place in Hegel's Logic, but occurs repeatedly in important transitions. Indeed, I could go to the very beginning of Logic and note how Hegel explicitly says that such an abstraction like nothingness is – and to make matters clearer, Hegel clarifies that he is taking „being“ here in its existential meaning. Furthermore, making this assumption of the existence of nothingness is described as becoming – things change, because there has been added a new entity to those we knew earlier.¹⁶

Such abstractions then provide a sort of reliable source of experience. Sense experience is variable and we appear to have no control what or even whether we will hear, see etc. Indeed, Kant had called human sensibility merely receptive, although it is our only source of existence. What Hegel wants to point out is a realm of entities under our spontaneous control – a realm of things we have completely created by ourselves. One might ask, whether this solution is just a cheap trick – after all, such fictions dependent on human spontaneity appear to be less than existent. This criticism fails to see the point of Hegel's Logic, which is at least to exemplify categories and thus give them meaning that can be ascertained beyond passive sensation, in the very activity of thinking.

Furthermore, although the positions of our thought are not real in the sense of being sensible, they do have a sensible appearance. All thinking happens in words, Hegel emphasizes,¹⁷ that is, all positions of thought can be expressed through language. Words, on the other hand, can be expressed with such sensible entities as sounds and inscriptions. These are not just signs for thoughts, but also something that thinking entities, like humans, can freely produce – that is, something that we can posit in a stronger sense than abstract thoughts.

Hegel's terminology of positing thus emphasizes the essentially active nature of human thought, capable of affecting both itself and its surroundings. When Hegel then disparages both metaphysicians and Kantian of forgetting „being posited“, he is thinking of their ignorance of human activities as capable of affecting things, which are then not just in themselves or independent of human influence. In effect, this is also the answer to the question haunting current Hegel-scholarship: is Hegel involved in pre-Kantian metaphysics or is he rather continuing Kantian efforts to overcome metaphysics? My suggestion is that Hegel's solution was far more radical, because he denied a common presupposition of both metaphysicians and Kantians – the presupposition that the most important task of philosophy is the theoretical problem of knowing what things are like, when instead what is essential is the practical problem of how they can be changed.

I shall explain this stance further by referring to Hegel's account of incomplete synthetic cognition, useful especially in geometry.¹⁸ Strikingly, here Hegel also uses the notions of construction and proving, but now as clearly separate steps of one method. The method begins with construction, that is, in the geometric case, one draws lines and thus reveals new points. This drawing is not done for its own sake, but serves another purpose: constructions are made just because certain proofs require the mediation of points, lines and figures not explicitly drawn at the outset. Constructions are thus changes, but they have only an external meaning. Proofs, on the contrary,

¹⁶ Ibid. 69.

¹⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* 20, Hamburg 1992, 460 (§ 462) and *Vorlesungen: Ausgewählte Nachschriften und Manuskripte* 13, Hamburg 1994, 219.

¹⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* 12, Hamburg 1981, 224–225.

have an intrinsic meaning, but they are lacking in change, or they just subjectively move from one aspect of the diagram to another, leaving the situation pictured in the diagram as it was.

Hegel's own method should then combine the aspects that are separated in the imperfect method of cognition, that is, the construction is itself the proof, or as we might put it figuratively, the proof of the pudding is in the baking. In other words, we start by constructing something. Hegel does point out that this construction should be as natural as possible and our own activity should be as slight as possible – we should just let potentialities implicit in the original starting point develop in the most natural manner. Still, some change must happen or something new must come about, and the whole meaning of the method lies in these changes. In other words, by constructing something we have just proved that what was constructed is possible. We can construct multiplicities from unities, and thus we know that multiplicity is a possibility; we can also construct unities from multiplicities, thus we also know that unity is a possibility.

We might still wonder whether this is metaphysics. In a sense it is: what we construct in Hegelian logic are examples of possible structures things could have, even if the emphasis is on the methods of construction instead of what has been constructed. Yet, these constructions can never surpass the limits of possible experience: once you have constructed it, you are already experiencing it. In this sense Hegel's logic is quite Kantian. Then again, Hegel is even more radical than Kant, who still accepted that we could at least think about what lies beyond experience. In Hegelian parlance this would still be concentrating on being-in-itself and ignoring how what is in itself can be posited. In other words, Hegel's emphasis on positing is not just a note on methodology, but a remark on the limits of meaningful philosophical discussion: it is only meaningful to discuss what we can construct, that is, discover or make ourselves.

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