

# Elisa Magrì on Alfredo Ferrarin's "Il pensare e l'io. Hegel e la critica di Kant"

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By Elisa Magrì

Hegelian readers are familiar with Hegel's enthusiasm for Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, especially with his letters where he speaks of Kant's philosophy as foreshadowing a new revolution.<sup>[1]</sup> Alfredo Ferrarin's latest book on Hegel, *Il pensare e l'io. Hegel e la critica di Kant (Thinking and the I. Hegel and the Critique of Kant)* takes very seriously Hegel's appraisal of Kant and, more than this, Hegel's own philosophical revolution. Ferrarin clearly shows that Hegel's project is in many ways indebted to Kant precisely where Hegel did not acknowledge it, and yet Hegel's philosophical revolution is unprecedented in other respects that call for further attention. Ferrarin explores the problem of thinking and its relation to the 'I' starting with questions that apparently have little significance for Hegel: What is thinking? Is thinking the same as having thoughts? Does thought depend on an 'I' in order to be objective? Is the 'I' in Hegel equivalent to subjectivity?

These and other questions, as I said, may sound alien to a Hegelian reader, accustomed to Hegel's appeal to pure thought in his monumental *Science of Logic*, or to Hegel's vehement criticisms of Kant's 'I think', which Hegel charged with psychologism. To be sure, the *Science of Logic* is the work that most discourages any attempt of addressing the dimensions of thinking and the 'I' *per se*. It is not only Hegel's cautioning, but even more so, the way scholarly debates usually address Hegel's logic by ruling out any discussion about thought. Ferrarin not only shows that Hegel's view of thinking deserves further exploration even in works like the *Science of Logic*, but he also provides a rich and thought-provoking challenge that any Hegelian reader should take very seriously.

The book is fascinating and enjoyable for at least two reasons. Those who are familiar with Ferrarin's style and writing know already that his interpretation of philosophical texts is always scrupulous, accurate, and careful. Yet the book does not read as another scholarly essay on Hegel, but rather as a philosophical journey where the reader does not only get a chance to deepen her

understanding of Hegel, but along the way also encounters references to other thinkers and authors (Kant, Husserl, Freud, Descartes, Rousseau, Pascal, Stendhal to name a few) that enrich the argument and open up new perspectives and occasions for reflection.

On a deeper level, the book challenges the reader constantly. The challenge is to never be content with what Hegel claims. Whether and how thinking can be explored in itself without any need of a thinking 'I', this is something that Hegel must be able to justify and we readers are not supposed to let him get away with his repeated criticisms of Kant. This is, in my view, the most important lesson of Ferrarin's book, and I would like here to take up the invitation and critically tackle the problem of the self in Hegel in light of Ferrarin's stimulating reflections. Before doing so, however, let me briefly summarise a few key points of Ferrarin's argument for those who have not read the book yet.

### **Hegel's Philosophical Revolution**

On Ferrarin's view, Hegel's originality consists in inverting the ordinary view of thinking according to which thinking is just a form of mental activity among others. He argues that, for Hegel, thinking is objective and spontaneous, and its relation to the 'I' is not modelled upon either construction or transcendental productivity. By articulating and bringing to light these aspects, Ferrarin shows that Hegel's view of thinking entails a radical reconsideration of the thinking subject itself. Far from being conceived as an external pole or as the mere bearer of the process of thinking, the 'I' represents for Hegel an objective form whose inner structure and development is inseparable from thought, and yet, for Hegel, there can be thought without an 'I'. To illustrate his argument, Ferrarin starts with a few common theses on thinking that are generally held in modern philosophy since Descartes and Kant. According to this view, thinking is always about something, whether it is a mental content or a notion that counts as an abbreviation for an object in the world. This is a necessarily simplified version that helps focus on a peculiar ontological trait of thinking: if thinking is sharply distinguished from the object and considered in itself, then—in Hegelian terms—thinking and reality are two opposite terms. Normally, we would not speak of mind and world in these terms, and yet, by holding that thinking is a mental process among others and by taking the former as separated from the latter, we do usually assume that to be a thinker is to be a subject that thinks about something external in the world.

Here, I would like to point out that in my view, what Ferrarin calls the ordinary view of thought is not just a variation of the well-known Myth of the Given. For Sellars, the Myth of the Given involves the epistemic status of perceptual knowledge, considered in terms of independence and efficacy in relation to

cognitive knowledge. The myth addressed by Ferrarin touches upon the very possibility that something—whether perceptual or cognitive—can be accounted for independently of what makes them ontologically discernible and different in the first place. In other words, Ferrarin asks whether our knowledge of thinking is sufficient enough to let us ponder about its normative status and various configurations. Before undertaking any investigation of this kind, and consequently before siding with any definite view of knowledge, we need first to interrogate our uses of reason as well as of the 'I'. In a sense, Ferrarin's investigation is a preliminary, ontological, and genetic interrogation regarding the consistency of any possible space of reasons.

I stress the adjective 'ontological' because, despite what it may sound like *prima facie*, Ferrarin does not seek to re-read Hegel through the lenses of contemporary phenomenology either. The questions that he raises in relation to thinking are no more indebted to Husserl than to Kant. By questioning the dimension of thinking and its relation to the 'I' in Hegel, Ferrarin shows that thinking can be investigated as a process in itself without resorting either to Husserl's intentionality or to Kant's transcendental schematism. The extraordinary inversion introduced by Hegel consists precisely in conceptualising our familiarity with self, thinking, and thoughts in a wider framework wherein thought can never be isolated from what it is about. This is because thought determines the entire available conceptual space (e.g. mathematics, nature, imagination, language, etc.), and yet it does not depend on any thinking mind in order to be objective. While Ferrarin argues that this strategy inherits a central motif of Kant's philosophy, i.e. the idea that reason is essentially life and force, he also uncovers, among other aspects, two important and original tenets of Hegel's philosophy: (a) the many senses of the notion of subject, and (b) Hegel's original appraisal of spontaneity.

#### (a) The subject is said in many ways

Ferrarin elucidates the different meanings of 'I', consciousness, and self-consciousness in Hegel's philosophy, drawing on illuminating contrasts to Husserl, Freud, and Kant. The crucial aspect of Hegel's account of the 'I' that Ferrarin brings to light is the irreducibility of the 'I' to consciousness or to any form of subjective experience. Indeed, in a Hegelian framework, it is possible *to be* a subject of experience *without knowing it* (e.g. the squirrel). Yet the squirrel represents the objective reality of reason, as a realised purpose that seeks to actualise itself. This is what Ferrarin calls the reality of the Concept, that is the fact that objective universality, which is investigated *per se* in the *Science of Logic* under the label of the Concept (*Begriff*), permeates concrete reality independently of its being known by any conscious mind. In this sense, however, the squirrel does not develop the same 'I' that characterises human subjectivity,

for only the latter undertakes the exploration and conscious acknowledgment of universality, thereby developing an 'I'—in Ferrarin's words: "The 'I' is something that you have to earn" (p. 107).

The impact of this thesis is twofold. On the one hand, Ferrarin shows that Hegel holds a stratified view of subjectivity just as Husserl and Freud after him. This stratification indicates that the subject of experience is not a given datum, but it must be developed through different forms of consciousness and self-consciousness. These are all rooted in a more fundamental immersion into the subject's bodiliness and affective sphere, which is mostly unconscious. In this way, Ferrarin shows that it is possible to retrace in Hegel the Husserlian aspiration to articulate and give voice to passive experience. Here, passive is not to be taken as a synonym of inertia or as a privative state in contrast to more active and conscious states. Like Husserl, Hegel acknowledges the status of receptivity as an intrinsic operative capacity that permeates sensation and perception. On the other hand, however, Hegel argues that the awakening of the 'I', that is, the genesis of an actual form of self-reference, wherein the 'I' becomes subject, is not restricted to human subjectivity. Quite the contrary, individual self-consciousness represents one form among others of the manifestation of what Hegel calls the logical element, i.e. the force and life of reason, that takes up various meanings depending on whether it is at work in nature, in Spirit, or in the logic.

This view has a significant impact particularly on the logic. Ferrarin draws attention to the fact that the true subject of the logic is *das Logische*, a puzzling expression to which Hegel refers multiple times in the *Science of the Logic*. Ferrarin argues that the logical element, as the instinct and soul of objective thought, is not a sheer metaphor, but the actual drive of the logic that becomes a subject in the form of the Concept (*Begriff*). Here, Ferrarin takes his original former research on Hegel and Aristotle to the next level, as it were. Not only does Aristotle's view of *energeia* find its proper actualisation in the movement of the logic, Hegel also radicalises Aristotle's view of passivity in order to make intelligible the concept as the unconscious power that sustains the movement of the logic and underpins the notion of the 'I' (I shall say more on this below).

#### (b) Spontaneity does not come without costs

Becoming a subject is a spontaneous movement. Ferrarin argues that, while spontaneity is normally associated with the notion of independence from any external constraints, in Hegel it is strictly connected to a logic of reification. If thought pervades every aspect of reality, in each of its manifestations it gives itself concrete existence, in other words it reifies itself. Only in this way does thought get to recognise and know itself. The logic of reification is then crucial to

deal with the apparent circularity of thought in relation to both logic and reality. Thought needs a medium in order to articulate itself, but each time it is transposed into a different reality it opens up a new space where its objectification becomes an object of knowledge. In this regard, it is the *Science of Logic* that helps clarify in what sense thought can be the first in itself, while in reality we come to know it last. If the Concept is the first in itself for philosophy—for philosophy seeks reasons and finds them in the articulation of the logical form of the Concept—truth depends on the fact that reason is known, hence it requires reason's objectified products. Thus, reification involves both the dynamic of the Concept in the *Science of Logic* as well as the manifestation of thought in reality. Reification is not the same as alienation though, and indeed Ferrarin argues that the alienation of thought in nature and Spirit does not equate to a deprivation of thought itself. An example of this is the actualisation of thought in the realm of shared praxis and social life, but another one, which Ferrarin discusses more extensively, is language.

In this way, Ferrarin shows that Hegel does have an account of spontaneity, but it radically changes Kant's original breakthrough. For Hegel, reason, far from being a transcendental condition of possibility that grounds every possible cognition undertaken by the self, *becomes* the 'I'. In this respect, Ferrarin shows that Hegel transforms Kant's notions of the 'I think' and consciousness but also that he attributes to Kant a wrong picture of the 'I'. For Kant, reason, the 'I think', and consciousness are three different and distinct moments, whereas Hegel's interpretation tends to conflate them by putting them on the same level. This and other misunderstandings of Kant's philosophy on Hegel's part are stressed by Ferrarin in order to show that, on the one hand, Hegel's reading of Kant must be taken *cum grano salis*, as Hegel fails to give justice to Kant's view of the 'I'.

On the other hand, however, Ferrarin argues that precisely the theory of the 'I think' that Hegel strongly criticises is the aspect of Kant's philosophy that mostly survives, in a new and original form, in Hegel's. According to Ferrarin, what Kant called schematism represents in Hegel the self-objectification of the Concept. Aside from the most evident differences that Ferrarin carefully acknowledges (e.g. for Hegel, the subject is not reason in the form of the 'I think', but objective thinking), Hegel inherits the problem of the schematism precisely in his view of the dialectic of the Concept, which has different, unconscious and stratified moments so that thought appears in reality—i.e. the Concept is exhibited in intuition through concrete and real manifestations—across different dimensions, including language, history, and customs. Thus, for Hegel, the relation between essence and phenomena concerns the fact that essence is active and manifests itself through the phenomenon, whereas for Kant such difference can never be circumvented or modified.

## On Owning Oneself: The Significance of Self-Reference for Hegel

In my view, Ferrarin addresses a fundamental and pivotal aspect of Hegel's project, that is, the transformation of Kant's notion of schematism. However, as Ferrarin shows, given that the subject undergoing such transformation is not an 'I think', but the logical element itself, the latter appears involved outside the *Science of Logic* in a way that does not come without complications. First of all, it is important to stress that the logical element, the Concept, and the 'I' are not the same, and yet they tend to overlap. The logical element represents reason in its effort to know itself (p. 86), and like the Concept, it animates every reality. However, the 'I' is also reason, taken as the coincidence between thinking and thought (p. 106). As Ferrarin says, the 'I' can take up different senses depending on whether it appears to us in the form of Spirit (hence, as a particular self) or in the logic. With regard to the logic, the 'I' is the Concept (p. 109). We are then confronted with the following Hegelian puzzle:

- The logical element (*das Logische*) and the Concept are trans-logical (they animate concrete reality, including nature and Spirit).
- The 'I' is the Concept in the Logic.
- The 'I' is the subjective self in Spirit's domain, but the Concept that is actualised in objective essences (e.g. the ellipse in Kepler's laws) and that animates living organisms (e.g. the squirrel) does not amount to an 'I'.

The complication brought to light by Ferrarin is that, while the Concept, which is essentially a form of self-reference (p. 108), manifests itself in nature and Spirit, only Spirit develops an 'I' in the form of a knowing self. How is it then possible that the Concept is not co-extensive with the 'I' in all its forms? And what is the coherence and purpose of the logical movement, given that the same instinct that animates both the logic and reality, i.e. *das Logische*, produces different senses of subjectivity? If the 'I' varies depending on the context and dimension in which it appears, are we not led back to a form of relativism that fails to justify one of the most important dimensions of reason?

Ferrarin's answer, in this respect, is clear and straightforward. He does justice to the fact that, for Hegel, reason has different manifestations, but it essentially strives to achieve self-knowledge, and this goal can be attained only through Spirit. Thus, in Ferrarin's reading, the animal, while being permeated by the Concept, is not an 'I' because it does not know it as the Concept. By contrast, the ellipse, which represents the formal structure of the world, is an objective form of intelligibility, wherein the Concept is available only implicitly and not as an instinct as in the case of the squirrel. Thus, Ferrarin emphasises the genetic dimension

of the 'I' as well as the epistemological posteriority of the Concept in order to vindicate the stratified form of subjectivity, on the one hand, and the presuppositionless character of objective thought, on the other hand.

However, if the Concept is pervasive throughout reality, then in its logical form we must find at stake a process that must be able to work through different dimensions. In order to appear in reality across different dimensions, the Concept must be able to accompany both the 'I' and the non-'I', as it were. This should account for the lack of identity between the Concept and its different manifestations. In this respect, an essential element must be found, in my view, in the logical form of self-reference that is distinctive of the Concept in the *Science of Logic*. What is exactly self-reference? Normally, it is a function of identification that provides various kinds of information about the subject (e.g. self-location, bodily states etc.). Like Kant, Hegel maintains that self-reference does not provide any kind of knowledge, for it is a function that operates without any need of conscious control or reflection, and it basically establishes the connection between the self and itself. Self-reference is at work in any conscious experience we may have, but even more so in our unreflective and habitual acts, as well as in all the conceptually organised systems (e.g. the organic body) that are not constrained by external agents or wanting in any respect in order to be self-sufficient. In other words, self-reference is the Hegelian answer to Kant's apperception. But, unlike Kant, for Hegel self-reference is not restricted to human subjectivity.

It seems to me that Hegel alters Kant's model not only because he stresses that Spirit needs to appropriate, hence to know, the logical element and its manifestations, but also and perhaps more importantly because Hegel alters the sense of owning oneself in the first place. For Kant, apperception indicates the form of the subject that is coextensive with its experiences. For Hegel, instead, self-reference is coextensive with the domain of reality, and in this sense self-reference indicates that the self is essentially open to change and alteration. Yet this does not make the self a plastic and malleable form either, for it needs to be permanent and consistent throughout its various modifications. In order to spell out this aspect, it is essential that we look briefly at the logical form of self-reference.

In the *Science of the Logic* Hegel emphasises that the self-reference of the Concept is not a sheer operation of individuation or indication, otherwise the Concept would have appeared much earlier in the development of the logic, for instance in the categories of *Something* and *Being-for-itself* in the Doctrine of Being. Nor it is determinate negation, otherwise the dialectic of contradiction in the Doctrine of Essence would have already deduced the form of the Concept.

Like all the categories in the Objective Logic, the Concept is generated following out the logic of negation. However, the Concept is ultimately characterised by the following features that make it entirely self-subsistent and self-determining unlike any other preceding category:

- Self-negation (i.e. negativity is self-reflected and not projected onto something else as in the Doctrine of Essence).
- Determinate alterity (i.e. the dynamic of self-reflection does not take place recursively as in the Doctrine of Being: it presupposes oneself and the other as two distinct elements that bring about the dialectic within the same).
- Continuity (i.e. the dialectic established through the Concept becomes the principle that enables further development and evolution while containing in itself the systematic organisation of the categories that have preceded it).

To simplify, while the categories in the Doctrine of Being and in the Doctrine of Essence lack self-subsistence because they require something else to be justified, the Concept is deduced at the end of the Doctrine of Essence as the logical form that does not need anything else to be justified aside from its own self-reflective dialectic. This is, indeed, in Ferrarin's words, the spontaneity of the Concept. However, it is because the logical form of spontaneity consists in self-reference that the Concept appears across different dimensions, including the ellipse and the animal. The Concept is not an empty form that can be filled with any content because it is a function of self-reference that enables consistency and continuity by making the subject open to change and transformation. What differentiates self-reference from self-consciousness and self-knowledge is that the former is a minimal form of self, so to speak. It is not a subjective self in the sense of self-consciousness and self-knowledge, for it lacks personality and cognition. Still without self-reference we would not be able to speak of either consciousness or individuality, for the former underpins the crucial logical form from which any organized and self-sufficient entity emerges. Thus, although the Concept is not co-extensive with the 'I' in all its different manifestations, both the Concept and the 'I' are rooted in this minimal form of subjectivity.

Why is self-reference so relevant to Hegel? The structure of self-reference consists in finding alterity in self-identity. To have a self, for Hegel, means to inhabit a dimension that is open to alteration and change. To be self-identical throughout the changes brought about by the various relations with the other (e.g. environment, other bodies, bodiliness as such, other selves, history, society, language, etc.) is a universal characteristic that the logic calls the Concept or formal universality, which is open to evolution and transformation. Thus, as for Kant, for Hegel apperception means to have a sense of oneself that is not rooted

in personal consciousness. Unlike Kant, however, Hegel does not ground apperception in a process of temporalisation or in the schematisation of sensibility. On Hegel's view, apperception is the fact that any individuality, whether organic or inorganic, is not an isolated entity placed in a vacuum, but a self-subsistent and articulated totality that interacts with an entire system of necessary possibilities. Hence, the Concept is the logical form of apperception in that it acts as principle of possible determinations (i.e. as principle of freedom).

In this sense, in the deduction of the Concept in the *Science of Logic*, and particularly in the shift occurring from reciprocity to the Concept, an alternative model of self-affection can be found that does not require any temporalisation as in Kant's schematism, and that explains why only the Concept enables the dialectic between activity and passivity that generates subjectivity. While this process does not lead to any metaphysical monism, it is however remarkable that such a dialectic of spontaneity and reification, or activity and passivity, needs to subsist in order to enable further evolution. It is precisely in relation to such subsistence that I would like to take it one step further and say that Hegel differentiates not only between having the Concept (albeit implicitly) and knowing it, but also between owning oneself and knowing and acting on the basis of it. For Hegel, to own oneself does not amount to knowing or remembering, but to possess an implicit or minimal form of subjectivity that enables one to be affected in different modalities in nature, history, and spirit. In this respect, it is striking that Ferrarin draws attention to the relation between spontaneity and second nature. Habit, memory, second nature, are all features of the spontaneity of the Concept. Yet Ferrarin denies that the Concept might enable a form of speculative memory (p. 131), although he also admits that in the *Science of Logic* each concept is the memory of its becoming (p. 132).

But while it is true that the Concept is not the subject of any remembering, it is also true that memory does not amount to subjective remembering either. For memory is, like habit, a second nature that the Concept gives itself in the logic in order to own its own spontaneity and bring it forward. And without a definite structure that guarantees permanence and continuity, the very form of self-reference could not emerge. The problem here is that the self-reference of the Concept must be able to preserve its logical movement in a way that is not accounted for by previous categories. In this sense, it appears that the Concept gives itself a second nature in the logic, thereby enabling the articulated development that leads to the idea.

In light of these considerations, it appears even more clearly that Ferrarin's book offers us an important vantage point, which is not only that of re-reading Hegel in light of the concepts of thought and the 'I'. Ferrarin allows us to appreciate the

importance of Hegel's logic as a crucial, non-formal and non-abstract form of thought, without which the very richness and complexity of both nature and Spirit would be seriously undermined. Ferrarin's book demonstrates that, in order to elaborate on the different forms of thought, we have to untangle the knots that constellate logic, Spirit, and nature. Thus, in opening up this new discussion, Ferrarin invites us to explore not what is dead, but what has been forgotten, despite being more than lively and stimulating, in Hegel's philosophy.

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### Notes:

[1] Hegel to Schelling, 16 April 1795: "From the Kantian system and its highest completion I expect a revolution in Germany. It will proceed from principles that are present and that only need to be elaborated generally and applied to all hitherto existing knowledge" (Hegel, *The Letters*, trans. and ed. C. Butler & C. Seiler [Bloomington: Indiana University Press], p. 35).↩



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