

Hegel and Aquinas on Self-Knowledge and Historicity

by Michael Baur

The Hegelian and the Thomistic accounts of self-knowledge are solidly Aristotelian in their origins and motivations. In their conclusions and consequences, however, the two accounts exhibit significant differences. Hegel argues that genuine self-knowledge is necessarily social and historical, while Aquinas says nothing about history or society in his account of self-knowledge. The aim of this paper is not to decide the issue concerning historicity in favor of either Hegel or Aquinas. The aim here is rather to address a prior question: what are the systematic and philosophical reasons for the difference between the two thinkers? In order to articulate this difference between the two, we might begin by considering an underlying similarity: their common Aristotelian background.

I

According to a fundamental Aristotelian principle, nothing is intelligible except insofar as it is in act. The intellect is in act only insofar as it is actually understanding something, and so when it is not actually understanding something, the intellect itself is not actually intelligible. It follows from this that the intellect cannot know itself by virtue of itself alone, or by an act of direct introspection. Such direct self-understanding would be possible only if the intellect were already intelligible by virtue of itself, apart from its being actualized in the knowing of an object other than itself. For Aristotle, then, the intellect can come to know itself only through its understanding of some object other than itself.

Another Aristotelian principle complicates matters: the knowing and the known are one. The intellect can come to know itself only through its understanding of some object other than itself; but in this self-understanding through the other, the intellect does not find itself as an object to be known alongside the other object being known. For such a duality of objects would violate the Aristotelian principle that the intelligible in act is one with the intelligent in act. If, in knowing itself through the

other, the intellect knew the other as one object and itself as another object, then there would not be an identity of the intelligible and the intelligent. Finally, the intellect's knowledge of itself through its knowledge of the other cannot even be based on its memory of itself in knowing the other: for memory of self would be possible only if the intellect were at some earlier point first accessible to itself as an object within experience: however, this possibility has already been ruled out by what has been said above.

How, then, does the intellect come to know itself through knowing an object other than itself? Since the intellect cannot know itself directly (that is, as an object alongside the other object which it is knowing), it would seem that there must be some kind of intrinsic but non-empirical reflexivity or self-relatedness which grounds the intellect's understanding of itself through the other. This self-relatedness is non-empirical insofar as the self's knowledge of itself cannot resemble the relation of the intellect to the objects which it knows directly within experience. For the reasons noted above, the intellect cannot be related to itself in the same way that it is related to the objects which it knows within experience.

Following Aristotle, both Hegel and Aquinas argue that we must stop thinking of the intellect's intrinsic self-reflexivity in terms of the kind of empirical relatedness which characterizes the intellect's relation to the objects which it knows within experience. Both Hegel and Aquinas argue that the intellect's intrinsic self-reflexivity does not consist in some kind of inwardly directed consciousness; accordingly, the intellect's own intrinsic self-reflexivity is not immediately apparent to the intellect in its knowledge of objects other than itself. At first, objects may appear to be simply given to an undifferentiated and passive intellect. The intellect's intrinsic and non-empirical self-reflexivity can be articulated only on the basis of a "transcendental deduction" (Kant, Fichte, Hegel) or a "reasoned conclusion" (Aquinas) which presupposes one's prior knowledge of objects other than oneself. The following observations will seek to explain why Hegel's account of the intellect's self-reflexivity must appeal to intersubjectivity and history, while Aquinas' does not.

II

In order to get to Hegel, we must first go through Kant and Fichte. Kant had argued that the rational self cannot know itself directly as an object within experience; instead, the rational self is the non-experienced condition of the possibility of all knowledge of objects within experience. According to Fichte, Kant was right to argue that the self cannot be known as an object within experience; but Kant was wrong to argue that the rational self cannot know itself as it is in itself. For Fichte, Kant was led to claim the unknowability of the self in itself, only because Kant remained committed to an unexamined presupposition

concerning the self: "if the self is knowable, then it would have to be known in terms of the categories which are applied to all objects which we know within experience." Because of this presumption, Kant had to conclude that the self can be known only as an appearance, but not as it is in itself. Against Kant, Fichte argues that it is essentially misleading even to begin asking *whether or not* the rational self can be known according to the categories which are applied within experience. For such a question presupposes that the rational self is something which can already exist apart from its activity. After all, the categories of the understanding can only be "applied" to something which is partly inert and in some sense already "there." As Fichte will try to show, the rational self is nothing passive or inert at all but is a pure activity which posits both itself and its object through the pure activity which it is. For Fichte, it is not only wrong to conceive of the rational self as a substance within experience (as Kant had already demonstrated); it is also wrong to think of the rational self even in terms of the most minimal sense of "substance," as something which can have being apart from activity (a presumption which led Kant to deny the knowability of the self as it is in itself).

We can illustrate Fichte's development of Kant's thought by turning to the notion of consciousness as "apperceptive." Kant had shown that the rational self's openness or receptivity to knowable objects is rooted in its nature as apperceptive. "Transcendental apperception" pertains to an *apriori* self-relatedness which makes possible the self's receptivity to any object. For example, the rational self is receptive to empirical objects because it is already related to itself non-empirically insofar as it "gives" to itself the *apriori* forms of sensibility and categories of understanding. Beyond Kant, Fichte wants to argue that transcendental apperception (or the self's *apriori* self-relatedness) cannot be rooted in any kind of passivity or receptivity whatsoever. After all, transcendental apperception pertains to the *apriori* self-relatedness which explains the rational self's receptivity to any object whatsoever. Transcendental apperception cannot be *explained* in terms of any kind of receptivity, for it is receptivity in general that apperception is supposed to explain in the first place. Accordingly, Fichte argues that the apperceptive nature of consciousness must be understood in terms of pure activity.

Because apperceptive consciousness must be purely active in its self-relatedness, Fichte refers to it as a "pure self-positing." It is worth noting that this self-positing cannot be conceived as an activity which the self performs *upon* itself; for any such activity *upon* oneself presupposes a pre-existing self which is already "there" to be acted upon. For Fichte, the pure "self-positing" denoted by apperception must be unprecedented by any form of existing; for any existence which could precede this self-positing would have to be inactive to some degree. The self exists only as a purely active self-positing: "*To posit oneself and to be are, as applied to the self, perfectly identical.*"¹ Since the self-positing, rational

self is pure activity, it cannot be conceived as anything "subsistent" at all; for subsistence implies the existence of something in which activity inheres:

The intellect ... is only active and absolute, never passive; it is not passive because it is postulated to be first and highest, preceded by nothing which could account for a passivity therein. For the same reason, it has no *being* proper, no subsistence, for this is the result of an interaction and there is nothing either present or assumed with which the intellect could be set to interact. The intellect, for idealism, is an *act*, and absolutely nothing more; we should not even call it an *active* something.... (SK, 21)

Fichte often refers to this purely active, self-positing, apperceptive consciousness as "self-consciousness"; however, one should take care to realize that the term "self-consciousness" is not meant to connote anything such as self-awareness or self-presence. After all, Fichte's original "self-consciousness" *cannot* presuppose anything as "present" for consciousness; Fichte's "self-consciousness" is simply the *apriori* self-relatedness which first of all makes possible anything like a "presence" for consciousness.

Here, Fichte is simply spelling out what he takes to be implicit in Kant's account of knowledge. For Kant, the knowing subject is nothing other than the *synthesizing activity* which makes possible our knowledge of objects. Against Kant, Fichte wants to argue that a fully consistent account of knowing must hold that the knowing subject is pure activity. For if the knowing subject were passive or inert in any way, then it would already be present apart from the activity of knowing; the knowing subject would have existence apart from activity. If this were the case, however, then the knowing subject (like any other pre-existing object) would have to be known through the categories of the understanding which would be applied to it. This is tantamount to saying that the knowing subject would not be known as it really is in itself—which is a self-contradictory claim.

Because the rational self is purely active, it follows that even the givenness of objects which appear to be "outside" of the self must ultimately be explained on the basis of the original self-relatedness of consciousness: "... out of the activity of this intellect we must deduce *specific* presentations: of a world, of a material, spatially located world existing without our aid, etc., which notoriously occur in consciousness" (SK, 21) At first, however, the self does not know itself as a purely active self-relatedness; at first, it sees itself as simply and passively related to objects which are given to it from "outside." Since the self is pure activity, it must first of all *overlook* itself as pure activity; in other words, the self *cannot* know itself immediately, by an act of direct self-awareness or self-presence, because such simple presence to self is contrary

to the very essence of the self, which is pure activity. Although the self is not and cannot be immediately present to itself within experience, however, it can articulate its own essence through a "transcendental deduction."

By virtue of a transcendental deduction, the self can show how "external objects" could not even be "given" to the self, unless the self were purely active and self-related in its positing of itself and the objects. The self's apparently passive and immediate relatedness to objects other than itself thus turns out to be a mediated relation of the self to itself. Since the self is not immediately given to itself, it can come to know itself only by first knowing the other *as if* it were simply and purely other. In other words, the self comes to know itself in its freedom and activity, only by first confronting an apparently alien object, and then by cancelling the object in its immediate givenness and otherness. The supposedly independent object can be shown to have independence only *for* consciousness. In the words of Hegel, the truth of consciousness is self-consciousness, and the truth of self-consciousness (at this stage) is desire (since desire cancels, or consumes, the object).

Hegel's critical appropriation and development of Fichte's thought is articulated in the chapter on "Self-consciousness" in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. There Hegel tries to show that Fichte had only incompletely explained the freedom and activity of self-consciousness in its relation to its apparent other. For Hegel, the self can know itself as a fully free and active self-consciousness, only if it genuinely respects the other in its otherness; and Fichte had failed to reach the level of such respect. Furthermore, Hegel argues, genuine respect for the otherness of the object is possible only if the other of self-consciousness is not simply an inert object which can be cancelled according to the paradigm of desire (that is, consumption). The genuine other of self-consciousness must be an other which can preserve itself in the face of the negative force of desire; this other can only be another self-consciousness. With this, Hegel tries to show how a genuinely transcendental account of self-knowledge must make room for intersubjectivity, society, and history. I shall try to explain briefly how this is so.

Hegel agrees with Fichte that the self cannot know itself immediately and directly within experience, but only comes to self-knowledge by way of a detour through the objects and by way of its own cancellation of the objects in their immediate appearance as simply "other":

... self-consciousness is thus certain of itself only by superseding this other that presents itself to self-consciousness as an independent life; self-consciousness is Desire. Certain of the nothingness of this other, it explicitly affirms that this nothingness is *for it* the truth of the other; it destroys the inde-

pendent object and thereby gives itself certainty of itself as a *true* certainty.²

This alone is not enough for Hegel. Even from within the Fichtean paradigm (the paradigm of consumption), one can see that the complete annihilation or cancellation of the object (which was at first posited unconsciously by the self) can only lead to an endless process of creating and uncreating, a perpetual striving.

Against Fichte, Hegel wants to show that the freedom of self-consciousness is *undermined* by the complete annihilation of the other in its otherness; for self-consciousness *is* self-consciousness only through its encounter with the object as its *own* other. In completely annihilating its object, however, self-consciousness no longer *has* an object; thus in completely annihilating the object, self-consciousness makes itself dependent upon the emergence of some other object—which must at first appear as something entirely external. Thus Hegel writes:

... self-certainty comes from superseding this other: in order that this supersession can take place, there must be this other. Thus self-consciousness, by its negative relation to the object, is unable to supersede it; it is really because of that relation that it produces the object again, and the desire as well. (*PS*, 109)

According to Hegel, if self-consciousness were really caught in this cycle of first confronting the object as simply external, and then completely annihilating the object, then self-consciousness would never come to know itself as the self-related activity which posited the object in the first place.

Hegel agrees with Fichte that the self comes to know itself only in cancelling the object in its immediate appearance as something simply other than consciousness; but this cancellation of the object in its immediate appearance (as something simply other than consciousness) cannot be a *complete* annihilation of the object as something independent. Accordingly, what is needed is an object whose being and independence are not exhausted by its immediate appearance to consciousness; what is needed is an object whose being is constituted by an *internal* self-relation (like consciousness itself); what is needed is another self-consciousness:

On account of the independence of the object, therefore, self-consciousness can achieve satisfaction only when the object itself effects the negation within itself; and it must carry out this negation of itself in itself, for it is *in itself* the negative, and must be *for* the other what it *is*. Since the object is in its own self negation, and in being so is at the same time independent, it is consciousness.... But this universal inde-

pendent nature in which negation is present as absolute negation, is the genus as such, or the genus as *self-consciousness*. *Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness.* (PS, 109-10)

Self-consciousness cannot know itself as genuinely active and free if it remains in the form of desire which completely cancels the object. Self-consciousness knows itself in its free activity only insofar as it can cancel the object in its immediate appearance as something entirely other but nevertheless preserve the object as something independent of itself as simple desire. The other in the face of which self-consciousness comes to know itself must be an other which maintains itself in the face of the negative activity of consciousness. This kind of other can only be another self-consciousness. The knowing subject can achieve adequate self-knowledge only by encountering another subjectivity. Furthermore, since the subjectivity of others is embodied and manifest only in social and historical institutions, self-knowledge, for Hegel, necessarily involves an intersubjective and historical dimension. Thus Hegel has provided a transcendental (that is, non-empirical) argument to show that the self-conscious self comes to know itself as such only through another self-consciousness—and hence only through society and history.

III

Like Hegel, Aquinas offers a non-naturalistic account of knowing which has its ultimate roots in Aristotle. Following Aristotle, Aquinas argues that nothing moves from a state of potentiality to a state of actuality except by virtue of some prior actuality; this prior actuality must be the same in kind as that actuality which comes to be. Since there must be a fundamental commensurability between recipient and what is received, intellectual knowledge cannot be caused in us by material objects alone. Our intellectual knowledge has an essentially immaterial manner of being, and thus cannot be caused immediately and directly by the material beings which are the intellect's proper objects. Because of this, Aquinas argues that two kinds of mediation must take place:

It is not in the nature of the intellect to receive knowledge from sensible things immediately, but by means of sensitive powers, since it is necessary for there to be a certain fittingness between recipient and received. Species, however, existing in the senses have a certain agreement both with the intellect in so far as they are without matter, and with material things in so far as they have the conditions of matter. Whence sense fittingly receives from material things and the

intellect from the senses. The intellect, however, does not receive immediately from material things.³

The first mediation, then, involves the senses: the senses exist in material organs and can thus be affected by material objects. Sense knowledge is particular, and thus it comes with the conditions of matter, but it is immaterial in so far as it is also a kind of knowledge. As immaterial, sense knowledge approaches the mode of being which characterizes intellectual knowledge.

Sense knowledge alone cannot suffice, however, for the kind of knowledge which we have through the intellect. Sense knowledge, which is particular, must be transformed into intellectual knowledge, which is universal. Accordingly, there is required a second kind of mediation; this mediation takes place by way of the intelligible species. According to Aquinas, the intelligible species is produced by the agent intellect's activity of abstraction from the phantasm; as a "product" of the agent intellect's act of abstraction, the intelligible species is "that through which" knowledge takes place. (In *I Sent.*, 36.2.1.ad3.)

The species, for Aquinas, is not the object of knowledge, but is the medium by which the intellect knows the essence of the thing:

For it is established that the medium by which a stone is understood is its species in the soul, which is not the very essence of the stone. But, by means of the likeness of the stone, [the intellect] is brought to know the very essence of the stone, because the object of the intellect is a 'what', that is, the essence or quiddity of the thing. (In *IV Sent.*, 49.2.7ad6.)

Furthermore, the species is a *transparent* medium which does not direct attention to itself, but leads the intellect to the object which it knows. For this reason, Aquinas can maintain that there are not two things known by the intellect (medium and object), but only one. There is a fundamental unity between the species which informs the cognitive power and the thing from which the species originates:

... that in which something is seen is the principle of knowing [*ratio cognoscendi*] that which is seen in it. The principle of knowing, moreover, is the form of the thing insofar as it is known, because through it actual knowledge happens. Whence just as from matter and form one being is made, so the principle of knowing and the thing known are one known [*cognitum*]. (In *III Sent.* 14.1.4.)

Once again, the principle of knowledge (that is, the species as actuating medium) does not have to be known explicitly in the act of knowledge itself. In fact, this principle *cannot* be known immediately and directly

in the act of knowledge; for the principle and the known are one. The principle can be known explicitly only by way of a reasoned argument, insofar as the knower turns from the thing which is known to the principle of knowing itself. (In *IV Sent.*, 49.2.7ad10). If Aquinas held that the species were known directly as an object of the intellect, then he would be involved in an infinite regress; for one could then reasonably ask: by what medium is the species known as an object, and by what medium is that medium known, and so on *ad infinitum*.

For Aquinas, the intellect knows the object only by means of the species; and the necessary mediating role of the species is known by way of a "reasoned conclusion," based on the fact that one knows the object.⁴ With this, Aquinas is suggesting a kind of self-relatedness similar to that affirmed by Fichte and Hegel. According to Aquinas, the intellect does not know itself as an object which is immediately and directly available within experience, but only by virtue of some kind of self-relatedness within the intellect itself; this is the relatedness of the intellect to its own "product," namely the intelligible species. The intellect, however, may at first *seem* to be passively, directly, and immediately related to the objects which it knows. It *must* appear this way at first, since the self-relatedness by which the intellect knows objects other than itself is nothing like a simple self-presence or self-awareness within experience. As we saw earlier, the intellect *cannot* be immediately self-present as an object within experience; for this would imply—contrary to good Aristotelian thinking—that the intellect could be known by a direct act of self-introspection, apart from the intellect's knowing of objects other than itself. As Aquinas has shown, the relation of the intellect to the intelligible species is a relation which holds *within* the intellect itself; however, this relation is not directly knowable as something immediately present to the intellect itself. The intelligible species is a transparent medium by which the intellect first of all knows the object outside of it. Thus the intellect can come to know its own knowing, only by returning back to itself "out of" the object; it does this by virtue of a "reasoned conclusion," or "transcendental deduction."

With this, we can see a certain openness to historicity in Aquinas' thought. The species, for Aquinas, is the product of the agent intellect's activity of abstraction from the phantasm. This abstraction, however, does not occur as a fully conscious process. If the abstraction were a fully conscious process, then the intelligible species would be known by the intellect as the explicit and direct object of its knowledge. As we have seen, however, the intelligible species is a transparent medium which does *not* call attention to itself in directing the knower to the object. How is the intelligible species produced by the agent intellect in abstraction? The presence of the agent intellect and of a phantasm are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for the act of abstraction, and thus understanding. There is yet another necessary condition. As Aristotle suggests in the *Metaphysics*, an improperly aligned phantasm within the sensitive capacity will prevent the act of understanding from

taking place. The further necessary condition for abstraction and production of the intelligible species is the proper alignment of elements within the phantasm. Thus Aristotle writes: "If, then, the line parallel to the side had been already drawn, the theorem would have been evident to anyone as soon as he saw the figure."⁶

Naturally, what constitutes a properly aligned phantasm will vary according to each individual's particular sensory capacities and past experience. We have already seen that the production of the intelligible species by the agent intellect does not take place as a fully conscious and deliberate process; accordingly, the alignment of elements within the phantasm does not take place as a fully conscious process. The proper alignment of elements within the phantasm depends, to a very large extent, on the *unselfconscious* operation of the individual's sensitive faculties (including the cogitative sense). These sensitive faculties, in turn, are subject to development and refinement through previous experience, training, and habituation. For Aquinas, then, there is a sense in which our knowledge of objects and of ourselves depends upon the unselfconscious movement of our own historicity; but this Thomistic sense of historicity is still very different from the Hegelian sense.

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1. J. G. Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*, ed. and trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 99; hereinafter cited intertextually as *SK* along with page references.

2. *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 109; hereinafter cited intertextually as *PS* along with page references.

3. In *IV Sent.* 50.1.1.; all passages from St. Thomas Aquinas are taken from *Opera Omnia* in 50 volumes (Rome: Leonine Commission, 1882-).

4. (*Summa Theologiae*, 1.85.2.)

5. *Metaphysics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, edited by Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1051a-26.