HEGEL'S METAMETAPHYSICAL ANTIREALISM

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Abstract: This essay defends a reading of Hegel as a metametaphysical antirealist. Metametaphysical antirealism is a denial that metaphysics has as its subject matter answers to theoretical questions about the mind-independent world. Hence, on this view, metaphysical questions are not, in principle, knowledge transcendent. I hold that Hegel presents a version of metametaphysical antirealism in the *Science of Logic* because he pursues his project by *suspending reference* to all supposed objects of metaphysical theory as practiced before him. Hegel introduces reference in his theory only by the self-reference of thought to itself in the *Doctrine of the Concept*. I motivate the relevance of Hegel's approach to metaphysics by comparing it to Kit Fine's (2017) concept of "naïve metaphysics." I argue that Hegel's theory results from a comprehensively naïve metaphysics.

1. Introduction

Contemporary metaphysicians tend to regard their subject, with renewed boldness, as a *theoretical* enterprise. A characteristic feature of a theory in the relevant sense is that it marks out some entity or domain in advance as its subject matter. A theory has to aim to get something *right*. Accordingly, metaphysical theory is supposed to have a certain domain for its investigation as well. These days, it is often described as something like "the nature of reality" or "the structure of reality."[1] Metaphysicians who accept this characterization of their subject matter, even those who take their contribution to be largely a priori, take metaphysics to be *science-like* in its attempt to generate hypotheses

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[1] It would be a longer historical task to show why these terms are by no means interchangeable with the understanding of "being" that motivated the relevant Greek philosophical concern. See, for example, the important work of Kahn (2009), which emphasizes the connection of being and truth (i.e., what *is* is what is the case). If one thinks that "being" (as it motivated the emergence of metaphysics or in Hegel's use of "*Sein*") just *means* "reality" or "the world" then it will be harder to see how what follows could stand in continuity with the early aims of the subject.

and make abductive inferences about what the target domain – reality and its structure – is really like.[2]

I will say that this popular conception involves a *realist* metametaphysics. Standardly, a (first-order) metaphysical realist is someone who accepts that reality has a determinate nature, knowledge of which can in principle outrun our best conception of it. Let us say that a *meta*metaphysical realist (MMRist) is someone who thinks that metaphysics is a discipline which has its aim to provide an account of the nature of reality considered in this way. This is standard, contemporary metametaphysics. A defining feature of metametaphysical realisms is that they give us a term for what I'll call the *unit of account* – that is, they give an undefined term that picks out some object, class of objects, or domain that we hope to 'get right' in metaphysical theorizing. In other words, some term marks out the *target* of the metaphysical theory.[3] As suggested above, "reality in general" or "the structure of reality" often play that role in contemporary work. Importantly, MMRists regard their topic as ideally knowledge transcendent. It is possible, in principle, that even the best metaphysical theory is massively mistaken about the unit of account.

I believe a fruitful way to consider the way Hegel conducts metaphysics – in doing what he calls "Logic"[4] – is as involving a rejection of this realist and theoretical

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[2] For an argument that the "abductive" form is standard for metaphysics, as well as a critique of this approach to metaphysics from a Kantian point of view, see Stang 2023.

[3] A more sophisticated description of this position can be given in model-theoretic terms. See, for example, Button (2013). Basically, the realist is committed to a model domain which is isomorphic to her set of theoretical claims.

[4] In this paper, I will use a capitalized "Logic" to refer to the kind of *project* that occurs within the book*s* like *The Science of Logic* and the *Encyclopedia Logic*. I take this to be a different term than "logic," which I would only use to refer to a discipline that treats the basic modes of inference, etc. There is some

conception of metaphysics. For some time, a debate raged about *whether* Hegel was a metaphysician. It is clear, however, that Hegel envisioned his Logic as a radically revisionary approach to metaphysics: as requiring a new *meta*metaphysics.[5] In this paper I will argue that Hegel's Logic involves an *anti*realist metametaphysics,[6] akin to some contemporary forms of deflationary metaphysics. To be sure, Hegel is not a first-order metaphysical antirealist. That is, he does not regard all of reality as mind- or knowledge-dependent. Instead, metametaphysical antirealism (MMAR), as I'll define it here, is a denial that the subject matter of metaphysics is even ideally knowledge-transcendent. For MMAR, metaphysics is *essentially tractable*.[7] This is because MMARists

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consideration of logic within Logic, but the two are not identical. Hegel's works are cited first in the *Theorie-Werkausgabe* volume (Hegel 1970), followed by the English translation.

[5] Hegel often speaks of Logic as *replacing* metaphysics. See, e.g., *WL* I: 61/42. Though I would not hang a substantive argument on this description, I would also note that it is not easy to see how this description is compatible with Hegel's merely having a different metaphysical theory. Some who offered a new interpretation of quantum mechanics, or even a new 'theory of everything', would not typically claim that they are *replacing* physics.

[6] As will become clear, the relevant notion of anti-realism I am considering is the one inspired by Michael Dummett (1978; 1982), according to which the anti-realist about domain D is not necessarily one who denies the reality of D, but one who thinks that D is not in principle knowledge transcendent. Important for the account below, Dummett writes that this kind of realism "embodies an appeal to the notion of reference as an indispensable notion of the semantic theory" (1982: 57).

[7] I should add here that MMAR makes metaphysics tractable *independently* of a first-order metaphysical view. This will be important when considering Hegel. For I would classify an approach like Stephen Houlgate's (see section 3 below) as MMRist because I suppose he would see Hegelian metaphysics as epistemically tractable *for first-order metaphysical reasons*. That is, metaphysics becomes epistemically tractable *because* of Hegelian idealism, according to which there is some unity between thought and "being" that makes it possible. If "being" turns out to be (or contain) a structure of thought, it is not because it is thus necessarily or by definition. For Houlgate, we must insist on a sense of "being" which is not reducible to how being is "for thought." This becomes especially clear in Houlgate's dissatisfaction with Robert Pippin's view. See Houlgate (2021: 132).

deny that metaphysics has the task of describing or theorizing about some given

domain or unit of account, which it could do more or less accurately.[8]

In this essay, I will argue that Hegel is an MMARist,[9] not because of a substantive

idealistic thesis on his part (i.e., the 'identity-in-difference of thought and being'), but

because of the way he carries out metaphysics. I will argue that Hegel thinks that an

adequately critical metaphysics must *suspend reference* to any supposed unit of account.

This first move unbinds metaphysics from what the MMRist needs to make

metaphysics theoretical. Hegelian metaphysics (or Logic) is a systematic form of purely

conceptual determination. This metaphysics is *essentially* tractable because its concepts

are essentially determined by their place in that system, not by a reference outside it.

This amounts to an anti-realism because there is no theoretical or pre-theoretical term

available (whether "being" or "the absolute") which can mark out the target that

Hegelian metaphysics is beholden to describe.[10]

Though a position like the one I am attributing to Hegel is not novel in itself, my

goal in this essay is partly to provide a new way of justifying it, but also to show where

a position like the one I offer fits in the contemporary scene. I begin, in section 2, by

outlining a challenge that Kit Fine has posed to traditional metaphysics, one that

resonates with Hegel's own complaints. I suggest a good way to think of Hegel is as

doing what Fine calls "naïve metaphysics." In section 3, I sketch an account of *suspended*

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[8] Trade in a preferred epistemic adverb for "accurately." In rejecting Hegel's metaphysics as
"theoretical," I am indebted to Werner's (2020, section 2) account.

[9] There are examples of MMARs besides Hegel. Consider, for example, P.F. Strawson's project of
descriptive metaphysics, R.G. Collingwood's idea that metaphysics concerns ultimate historical
presuppositions, or Thomasson's (2015) neo-Carnapian idea that existence claims are mainly settled by
the analysis of concepts. In all these cases, metaphysics is not even ideally knowledge transcendent.

[10] See notes 17 and 18 below for important caveats.

reference which I believe is needed to fund a project like Fine's; I offer some textual evidence that Hegel accepts the same demand. In section 4, I show that Hegel moves from suspended reference to self-reference in the *Doctrine of the Concept*. This move shows how Hegel can re-establish a domain of application for the concepts of the Objective Logic on the basis of logical forms. Ultimately, no concept of the Logic is tied to a referent outside those established within the Logic itself. The Logic is not even ideally knowledge transcendent. It is an antirealist project.

2. Fine on "Naïve" Metaphysics

In an interesting and programmatic paper, Kit Fine (2017) outlines a challenge to standard approaches within metaphysics and a plea for what he calls "naïve metaphysics." Fine is as a staunch an MMRist as one could hope for. He opens the paper by announcing: "Metaphysics has two central concerns. One is with the nature of things, with what they are like; and the other is with reality, with what there is" (98). One of Fine's own characteristic contributions to metaontology is to distinguish the question of ontology from one concerning existence to one of reality.[11] For Fine (2009: 158), existence questions can often be answered somewhat trivially, so long as we adopt some form of Quinean criterion. So, the question of whether there are ('exist') numbers, can be answered by the simple observation that there is a number between 3 and 5. The real interest of the ontologist, for Fine, is deciding what to include in reality. That is, Fine (2017: 100) takes "in reality" to be a kind of operator, and his interest is to settle what belongs as an instance of 'in reality: φ'. The question of existence does not settle

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[11] See especially his 2001 and 2009.

the question of reality because even after knowing that there are numbers, we still need to know how to 'place' them within our picture of the world. More technically speaking, the existence of numbers does not settle how they are "grounded."[12] Ontological questions, properly speaking, concern these more foundational inquiries into reality. Hence, Fine describes this latter kind of inquiry as *foundational* metaphysics.

However, though Fine understands foundational metaphysics as an important part of metaphysics, he takes it to be secondary (methodologically) to the other metaphysical concern he mentions in the quotation above: this is the concern about the *nature* of things. On the traditional view, according to Fine, we must first know *whether* numbers or space-time exist before we ask the question concerning the *nature* of numbers or space-time (i.e., whether numbers are abstract or concrete, or whether space-time is substantival or relational, etc.). Fine argues that prior to foundational metaphysics, which is concerned with the placement of facts and objects in reality, there is another project, which comes first: "The rest of metaphysics — which before we called 'metaphysics proper' —we might now call *naive* or *pre-critical* metaphysics. It is that branch of metaphysics which is *not* concerned with questions of reality" (2017: 101). Fine characterizes the subject matter of naïve metaphysics as "appearances," though this can be misleading. Let us take an example. Suppose we are considering the Buddhist doctrine of the no-self (*anatta*).[13] This doctrine denies, in Fine's terms, that there are selves 'in reality'. It is a piece of what he calls foundational metaphysics. But this foundational metaphysics is not possible before a question concerning the "nature" of selves is considered, which is, importantly, *also* a doctrine that the Buddhist

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[12] On the relation between grounding and the "in reality" operator, see Fine 2001, section 5.

[13] For a useful recent discussion of this issue, see Siderits 2022, chs. 2, 3.

metaphysician needs to answer – despite, importantly, denying that this is the nature of anything real. The Buddhist metaphysician must offer some account of what selves or egos are *supposed to be*, namely, a completion of the schema:

To be a self is to be a …

This would be a piece of naïve metaphysics, an account of the "appearances" of the self, as a complement to the foundational metaphysics which denies the reality of any such self. Fine thus writes that the naïve metaphysician "brackets" the reality of her object (2017: 103). Somewhat counterintuitively, it is possible on Fine's view to think that something (like the self, or numbers) has a nature without being real.

It is worth mentioning that Fine explicitly rejects the idea that naïve metaphysics amounts to a form of inquiry only about the structure of thought or our "conceptual scheme" (110). He writes:

> If I say that ordinary material things are enduring individuals or that they are not real, then I am saying something about the nature of ordinary material things and not about the structure of our thought. This is how we naturally expresses ourselves and I do not see that anything is to be gained by expressing ourselves in any other way. (ibid.)

Later in the paper, I will consider whether this attitude can be maintained. As we will see, it is certainly true that the naïve metaphysician need not speak *about* the concept <material things> when she inquires after 'their' nature. However, for our purposes, what is most significant in Fine's account of naïve metaphysics is how he makes that part of the discipline he calls naïve *essentially tractable*. Though one can imagine the skeptic about numbers doing well or poorly in describing the "nature" of numbers, the success of her naïve inquiry will not be determined by the "real" nature of numbers, which may not exist, according to the skeptic. Because her naïve metaphysics is not attempting to *match* (to put it crudely) some pre-given real nature of numbers, it is hard to see how her project is subject to catastrophic failure, rather than say the corrigibility

involved in the adequate clarification of a concept. In what follows, I will argue that Hegel extends to the *whole* of metaphysics the tractability Fine grants to naïve metaphysics as only its first part.

3. Reference Suspended

When Kant realized that metaphysical disputes had gone nowhere for centuries, he considered whether the cognitive faculties that we must rely on to determinate apparently demonstrative principles about things *qua* things were up to the task (see A vii-x; B xiv-xviii). This is not Hegel's approach. Hegel also wants to explain the nature and limitations of metaphysics, but he claims, like Fine, that a prior step is needed, one even more basic than the one Kant carried out. In this respect, Hegel is equally severe in his challenge to both Kant and Kant's "pre-critical" predecessors. Neither considered the forms of thought involved in metaphysical claims prior to evaluating these claims. Hegel's description of both the friends and critics of metaphysics is remarkable in its agreement with Fine's plea for naïve metaphysics. He writes that pre-critical metaphysics neglected "to consider these forms [of thought] <u>free of those substrata</u>, originally drawn from the imagination,[14] as the soul, the world, and God" (*WL* I: 61/42), and that

> therefore [metaphysics] incurred the just reproach that it employed the pure forms of thought *uncritically*, without previously investigating whether and how they could be the determinations of the thing-in-itself, to use Kant's expression – or more precisely, the rational. (61/42)

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[14] Though Hegel refers here to the way these substrata are drawn from the imagination, as the passage continues, Hegel emphasizes that "pure forms of thought" were also used without criticism. Though it is certainly problematic to draw from imagination-based notions in metaphysics, Hegel is not limiting the problem to that. Thanks to Robb Dunphy for a challenge on this point.

Hegel then describes his own project in his Objective Logic[15]:

> The objective logic is therefore the true critique of such determinations – a critique that considers them, not according to the abstract form of the *a priori* as contrasted with the *a posteriori*, but in themselves according to their particular content. (21/42)

Hegel's suggestion here is that the "determinations" of metaphysics should be considered *prior* ("previously") to their application to certain substrata, and to consider instead whether they are appropriate to what is "rational." As he puts it elsewhere,

> *Being there* [Dasein], for instance, is a predicate of this kind like in the proposition, "God is there" [Gott hat Dasein]; or *finitude* and *infinity*, in the question whether the world is finite or infinite; or *simple* and *composite*, in the proposition, "The soul is *simple*"; or, again, "The thing is *one*, a *whole*," etc.— There was no investigation of whether predicates of this kind are something true in and for themselves, nor of whether the form of the judgment could be the form of truth. (*EL* § 28R, 94/66)

All the concepts that are used as predicates in judgments about transcendent entities must admit an investigation on their own account. It was this task that even Kant (according to Hegel) did not pursue. Hegel writes of Kant: "the material of the senses, the manifoldness of intuition, was too strong for [Kant] to be able to wrest himself away from it and turn to a consideration of the concept and the categories *in and for themselves*, and to a speculative form of philosophizing" (*WL* II: 267/524). This might seem unjust to Kant. For surely Kant offers an account of what categories are *in and for themselves*, namely, determinations of all objects of experience, as grounded in the table of judgments. But Hegel's worry is that Kant moves too quickly to consider how the categories might be applied, by beings like us, rather than the pure content of those categories.

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[15] It is important to note that there is a prima facie reason to restrict the "critical" dimension of Hegel's project to the Objective Logic, the *Doctrines* of *Being* and *Essence*. See section 4 below. See Theunissen (1980) for a work that emphasizes this dimension.

According to Hegel, a consideration of the content of metaphysical concepts must be pursued before substantive "foundational" questions are answered. As Mark Alznauer puts it in a recent paper,

> The importance of the *Logic* in Hegel's philosophy stems from his contention that our most basic concepts must prove to be true in this sense *before* they can be legitimately employed in philosophical reasoning about the fundamental structure of reality as a whole. (Alznauer 2023: 124)[16]

Hegel makes a related point clearly in a letter to his friend Niethammer in 1812, the year the first Book of the *Science of Logic* was published. He writes that the concepts of the Logic "are independent of metaphysical system; they occur in transcendental idealism as well as in dogmatism; the former calls them determinations of *entium*, the latter [determinations] of the understanding" (W 4: 407). According to this passage, the Logic (or at least the Objective Logic) does not yet determine whether its concepts belong in a transcendentally idealistic or a dogmatically realistic metaphysical system. That is striking indeed. But this is simply a consequence of considering the determinations "in and for themselves." Much akin to Fine's account of naïve metaphysics, this approach implies a *neutrality* concerning the reality of what Hegel discusses.

In the remainder of this section, I want to explore what kind of semantic interpretation of the concepts of the Logic a reading like this one requires. My suggestion is that, instead of treating the debate about Hegel's Logic in terms of the metaphysical/non-metaphysical opposition, we should ask which (if any) of its concepts are presumed to be *referential*. Hegel is explicit that his account does not rely on certain given "substrata" like God, the soul, and the world as a whole.[17] However, it

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[16] See also Lau 2016: 32.

[17] It is striking that Hegel includes God on the list of substrata his account does not depend on, while elsewhere stating that God is the object of all philosophy (see, e.g., *EL* § 1). Could God in fact be what all

is often thought that Hegel's Logic *is* an account that can be translated in realistic terms, as an account of *Being* or *the structure of reality* or *the nature of things*.[18] This implies that we can "assign" the accounts of the Logic to referents, however vaguely or indeterminately. To take a prominent example, it seems necessary to say that on Stephen Houlgate's reading of the *Logic* "being" (*Sein*) stands for the ultimate referent of Hegel's metaphysics. To be sure, the word "being" has for Houlgate a fully indeterminate sense at the outset of the Logic. But Houlgate insists that the determinations that develop in the Logic as thought determinations coincide with those of "being" taken in a richer sense: equivalent to "the world" or what is "out there" (see 2021: 109). This is also why, it seems to me, Houlgate can frequently use "being" to stand in for the Kantian "thing in itself" (cf. 2021: 115). For Houlgate, Hegel's Logic concerns "being" in some emphatic sense: a sense opposed to mere thinking, for example. Houlgate writes: "The impression created by such passages [sc. in which Hegel seems to say the *Logic* is just about thinking] is, however, contradicted by others

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of Hegelian philosophy *refers* to, its 'unit of account'? In my view, for Hegel, the word "God" simply stands in for the concept <truth> and provides no additional content. Hence, it cannot be that "God" is any kind of anchoring reference for the Logic. As he writes in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, "For this reason it can be useful, e.g., to avoid the name *God*, since this word is not immediately at the same time a concept, but rather a proper name, the steady repose of the underlying subject; whereas e.g., Being or the One, singularity, the subject, etc., themselves immediately indicate concepts as well" (*PhG* 62/¶66, slightly modified). See also *EL* § 31R. Thanks to Robb Dunphy for raising this concern, which of course requires a fuller discussion than I can give here.

    [18] A similar result would obtain if one understood "the Absolute" in referential terms. I take this to be true of Moss's (2020) account. I would note that, linguistically, one either could interpret "das Absolute" as carrying reference as a singular term, or like "the good," as a substantival use of a predicate. A theory of "the good" is typically a theory of *what is good*, not a theory of an object (the with possible exception of someone like Plato). Just so, it is linguistically permissible to take an account of 'the absolute' to be an account of 'what is absolute' (without any reference attached in advance), rather than a singular reference to an entity or the entity of all entities.

in which Hegel makes it clear that logic is, indeed, concerned with unambiguous *being*" (2021: 110–11).[19] Houlgate thus takes there to be an "unambiguous" use of "being" in which it *contrasts* with mere thought and marks out the target domain for the Logic as a whole.[20] The progress of the Logic is a progressive development in our understanding of being, something we 'get right' in an increasingly determinate way.[21]

A realist reading does not require one to select a single term like "being" as its referent or unit of account. Other recent readers are happy to adopt contemporary terms and speak of the structure of reality, or something similar.[22] But: if Hegel's Logic is a realist metaphysical project, then either (1) some concept or concepts of Hegel's Logic must be offered which bear a referential reading; or (2) some additional concept must be supplied that suitably describes the referent(s) of Hegel's Logic. By contrast, I argue that the concepts of Hegel's Logic (the Objective Logic, in particular) must be understood as involving what I will call *suspended* reference.[23]

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[19] See also Dunphy 2023: 5; McNulty 2023: 92–93.

[20] Sometimes Houlgate distances his view from a referential one, by denying that the Logic "presuppose[s] a given, determinate reality and proceed to tell us *about* that reality" (2021: 114). In my view, the fact that the Logic, on Houlgate's view, does not begin methodologically by assuming a "given, determinate reality" at the outset, does not show that his account is non-referential. For Houlgate's view requires that, however the concepts are determined in the course of the Logic, the determinations of the Logic *are* determinations of a given reality (even nature). The whole emphasis on "being" in contrast to mere thought seems to demand a referential reading of the former term.

[21] Cf. Werner's (2020) argument that such a "Modification View" of the Logic requires a view of it as theoretical cognition, which should be inappropriate to it as a strictly philosophical method.

[22] According to Bowman, the metaphysical "thesis" that Hegel is adopts is that "mind and reality as a whole are of essentially the same structure" (2013: 5). This requires us, I believe, to take "reality as a whole" as the referent of Hegelian metaphysics.

[23] A similar understanding is also suggested by Nuzzo (2010: 67).

My view that reference can be suspended is not a claim that reference is a dispensable notion for understanding linguistic meaning.[24] In ordinary contexts, it seems right to assume that the meaning of terms is given according to what can be called a *bare referential* semantics. I have in mind accounts according to which reference can function in the absence of theory or description. Accordingly, bare reference permits disquotational formulae of the following (apparently trivial) kind:

"Fido" refers to Fido

"water" refers to water (or H_2O)

These formulae are not entirely trivial, because they depend on the right-hand use of the expressions themselves to be *using* a term as having a default referential meaning.[25] That is, "Fido" on the right-hand side is standing in for *Fido the dog*, "directly" as it were. The idea here is that the *meaning* of bare referential terms is determined by the things they refer to. This, at least, is the dominant "Millian" conception of names, as handed down more recently from Donnellan, Kripke, and Putnam.

But do schemata for bare reference carry over to philosophical terms?[26] Can we say, for example (and by default), that

"being" refers to being,

or

"substance" refers to (the) substance?

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[24] Strictly speaking, I will suspend judgment on that issue. Alternative views (such as Brandom 1994 or Pietroski 2018) that deny that reference plays any explanatory role in meaning are compelling, but not relevant to my argument here.

[25] See Button 2013: 11–12.

[26] It seems that many have taken this lesson from the "direct reference revolution." See, e.g., Williamson 2007, esp. ch. 4, for a prominent example.

Since Hegel's views are in question, I won't begin with him, but with philosophers whose interpretation is perhaps not so contentious (at least in this respect). Consider what would happen if we adopted the schema for bare reference while considering Zeno's discussion of motion. In that case, we would say:

"motion" refers to motion.

Or, in reading Hume's discussion in "On Miracles" we would say:

"miracles" refers to miracles.

No great familiarity with these authors is required to see that something has gone wrong with these formulae. What is it? *At least when a speaker is discussing a concept whose legitimacy or instantiation is in question, we cannot assume that bare reference holds sway.* We cannot "disquote" the concepts used under these conditions; to do so would seem to imply that a contribution to the meaning of the terms is made by the things they are about; but there are (by hypothesis, and at least possibly) no such things. Further, this principle does not seem to be limited to philosophers who are skeptical of the existence of the referent.[27] If I *respond* to Zeno and Hume, I will be picking up the meaning of the terms as they have laid them down. Even if I believe in miracles or motion, I cannot help myself to the (supposed) bare referents of those terms in the premises of my response without begging the question.[28]

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[27] Still, it may be no accident that skeptical philosophers (broadly speaking) offer the most relevant examples. My account implies that Hegel's Logic performs an analogous function to skepticism, perhaps in line with his suggestion that the resolve to think purely amounts to a "completed skepticism" (*EL* § 78). See Dunphy 2023 (esp. ch. 5) for discussion (though Dunphy may well not accept my construal).

[28] Brandom (1994: 545–47; 589) offers a useful way of describing this dynamic in terms of the use of scare quotes, which plays an important role in his account.

If we wanted to consider more appropriate formulae to represent the semantics of "motion" and "miracles" for our skeptical philosophers, we might better say:

"motion" means *to be in motion*

or

"miracle" means *to be a miracle*.

These formulae allow that, though Hume and Zeno must have some clear view about what it would *take* to be a miracle or motion, the *sense* of those terms, they cannot be said to have clear views *about* miracles or motion, if those nouns are used referentially.[29] Hence, I will say that Hume and Zeno *use* "miracle" and "motion" (they do not just *mention* the terms), but they use them under *suspended reference*.[30] I will use slanted brackets around a term ('/…/') to indicate suspended reference. Thus, when Hume (2007: 83) says of miracles, for example, that they are violations of the laws of nature, we can represent this as:

a /miracle/ is a /violation of the laws of nature/

since one can affirm this statement without thinking *either* the subject or the predicate is instantiated: we are left with something like mere "sense," as long as that is not understood to be determined by reference.

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[29] Note that even if one wanted to say that *all* meaning involves reference in some broader sense, one could still not depict all meaning disquotationally. For example, one might well say "miracle" refers to *the essence of being a miracle*; but, if one does not believe in miracles, one still can't say that "miracles" refers to miracles. Likewise, one could well say "'phlogiston'" refers to phlogiston," but this could not tell us what "phlogiston" *means* if we are not supposing phlogiston exists. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this point.

[30] A similar view is held by Correia (2017) when it comes to "real definitions" of the form *to be F is to be G* (e.g., to be human is to be a rational animal). Marconi (1980: 67–68]), following Fulda, suggests that a large amount of the argument of Hegel's texts could be reconstructed using sentences of just this form.

I should add that it is important to distinguish *this* kind of bracketing from one that is standard in referring to concepts. Notice that

a /miracle/ is a concept

is not supposed to be true with this use of brackets. A miracle is supposed to be something that happens, not a concept. By contrast, the statement

<miracle> is a concept

should be true, but it requires *second-order* reference to the thought about /miracles/. This will be important, for we will see that Hegel's Logic cannot be rendered wholly in second-order terms. It is not only about concepts; it must use them.

What is crucial to note about the notion of suspended reference is that it involves an *indifference* to reference – it does not assume an object picked or planned out for the terms – not an *antipathy* to reference. That is, in suspending reference we do not claim that some term does *not* refer, but that its meaning is not being determined with the presupposition of reference. Relevantly for our concerns, it is not that we insist that Hegelian concepts *lack* reference in every use, it is that Hegelian Logic is necessary before the referents of any such concepts could be assigned.[31]

Let us consider the Logic then. If we think the concepts of the Logic using bare referential semantics, we will have no choice but to suppose that Hegel's terms carry with them *some* indefinite referents, whether they bear the names that Hegel uses ("being", "actuality", "absolute," etc.) or names that we could give them ("structure of reality", etc.). While it is difficult to provide a definitive reason to reject this

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[31] Such a claim has been advocated in different ways by Hartmann (1974), Marconi (1980), Berto (2007), Nuzzo (2010), and McCumber (2014), among others.

understanding of the Logic,[32] by showing that a common use of philosophical concepts involves suspending their reference, we have at least found another option. On this reading, we have instead formulae like this:

"being" means /to be/

"actuality" means /to be actual/

"the absolute" means /what is absolute/

And this is because the use of the terms "being", "actuality", and "absolute" would be read without the assumption that they are *intended* to pick out referents; we are left with their sense alone. This would lead to a reading of first-order Hegelian statements as follows:

/being/ is in fact /nothing/.[33]

/actuality/ is the unity of /essence/ and /existence/.[34]

/the absolute/ is /the absolute form/.[35]

The importance of this alternative reading of the Logic is that it converts statements of apparently fundamental metaphysics (in Fine's terms) to statements of naïve metaphysics. Moreover, statements of naïve metaphysics have not been assigned referents either theoretically or pre-theoretically. Hence, on this view, it is difficult (if

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[32] I, for one, take the opening movements of the Logic to amount to a *reductio* of any referential reading. For let (Hegel's) "being" refer to being. Then, suppose it is shown (as Hegel attempts) that being and *nothing* are the same. It follows that "being" refers to nothing. Therefore, "being" is non-referential. Cf. Nuzzo (2010: 67–68; 71).

[33] See *WL* I: 82/59.

[34] See *WL* II: 186/465.

[35] See *WL* II: 194/471.

not impossible), intuitively, to say what the statements of Hegelian Logic are getting 'right' or 'wrong'.[36]

This reading of the Logic is supported, I believe, by Hegel's remarks at the opening of this section. These passages suggest the conviction that the pure concepts of the Logic, concepts which coincide with the historically significant concepts of metaphysics, are constructed without regard to their reference, and thus with their reference suspended.[37] This includes concepts that might normally be thought as *subject* terms and thus, perhaps, as referential: namely, concepts like <being>, <things>, and <actuality>. This is important, for a referential reading of the Logic should decide on at least *one* of these terms as the unit of account for the rest of the Logic.[38] But the reader of Hegel will find that *every* candidate for such a term is itself subject to critique, a critique that cannot assume the identity of a term's referent. That is, Hegel's Logic is a *comprehensive* attempt at what Fine calls naïve metaphysics, a metaphysics that considers the "natures" of its determinations, before any consideration of their reality.[39]

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[36] Presumably, the supposition of reference is *required* to permit such a judgment: we can say only that phlogiston theory is wrong because "phlogiston" is *supposed* to refer to something.

[37] A similar suggestion was made by Findlay (1974), who spoke of interpreting the determinations of the Logic in "brackets." See Marconi (1980: 37–38) for discussion.

[38] Thus does Friedrike Schick criticize Guido Kreis's (2015) suggestion that we could take the domain of Hegelian Logic to be something like "all objects," taking the domain to be one of unrestricted quantification. Schick notes, "Thus, *Etwas*, *das Ding*, *das Einzelne*, etc. belong in the theory of categories without opening up the field of an unspecified 'all'; on the contrary, their specific content would be lost if we replaced them each with 'all'" (2017: 171).

[39] This account of the Logic may seem vulnerable to an objection James Kreines (2015, 13–15; 140–44) has developed against readings of Hegel like this one. What he calls the "swimming argument" is Hegel's repeated objection (see, e.g., *EL* § 10R) to a procedure which would begin to approach problems of metaphysics by first considering the possibility of attaining such metaphysical knowledge (i.e., learning to swim before swimming). Accordingly, Kreines says that accounts of the Logic that begin with "semantics" (or epistemology) are guilty of precisely the error that Hegel warns against. In my view,

It is the comprehensiveness of Hegel's naïve metaphysics that accounts for his divergence from Fine. Above I suggested that Fine is an MMRist, whereas Hegel is an MMARist, despite the fact that both philosophers recommend a method of suspending reference. However, for Fine, naïve metaphysics subserves foundational metaphysics. The point of describing the "nature" of the objects of metaphysics is eventually to bring us to "reality, with what there is" (2017: 98). Ultimately, the neutral natures that are determined in naïve metaphysics can be determined to be grounded in reality or not. One could ask, however: what of this concept <reality> that Fine (quite understandably) makes undefined use of? Can we determine the "nature" of reality with the same "brackets" as we are encouraged to use with the other, more specific concepts of metaphysics? As far as I can tell, Fine uses a concept like <reality> or <in reality> as an exception to his recommended brackets. This term (or something similar) can thus do the significant work of *tying down* the concepts of metaphysics to their ultimate referent. Making an exception for <reality> offers a concept that marks out an undefined domain or unit of account. This permits one to continue defining metaphysics as a theoretical discipline after all. What makes Hegel's approach, as I understand it, so unique is that he sees that making such an exception is arbitrary. Once naïve metaphysics is off the ground, there is no natural stopping point. Our venture into "foundational" metaphysics is blocked.

Hegel's argument has a narrower target: it is a challenge to the examination of cognitive faculties before doing metaphysics. And the reason for that is a specific one. To examine one cognitive faculty, we must rely on *some* other cognitive faculty which is not being examined at the time. Accordingly, the critical project, construed as an examination of faculties, can never be complete, unless it rests dogmatically on some unexamined faculty. My account would be vulnerable to an analogous critique only if I tried to give a *theory* of the meaning of concepts independently of concepts themselves. But my account does not depend on such a theory. Cf. Lau 2016: 33.

4. From Substance to Self-Reference: The Subjective Logic as Foundation

However, even if the foregoing account is correct, the procedure of the Logic so described could seem to be pointless. If these contents do not touch the ground referentially, then they are not really 'about' anything. They require no model to make them true, and so they make no claims.

In a sense, I agree. Reference cannot be suspended without reserve. However, I believe Hegel breaks with suspended reference not for the sake of a founding concept of a metaphysical theory ("Being" or "the absolute"), but for the sake of *self*-reference, specifically thought's reference to itself.[40] This movement from suspended reference to self-reference is the transition from an Objective Logic, which critically examines the concepts of former metaphysics, to a Subjective Logic that finds the basis for these concepts in the form and structure of thought itself, or what Hegel calls "the Concept" (*der Begriff*). The domain of the Concept is not held in brackets. For when the content of a thought is thought itself, there can be no difference between the concept and its reference: the concept is *transparent*.[41] It seems plausible that concepts whose contents are established by thought's self-reference are fully transparent; their reference is

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[40] Here I seem to differ from Nuzzo (2010: 70), who suggests that *all* concepts of the Logic are self-referential in this way.

[41] I use "transparent" in the sense introduced by Fine in another paper: "The concepts of metaphysics are also distinguished by their transparency. Roughly speaking, a concept is transparent if there is no significant gap between the concept and what it is a concept of." He then writes that, for example, there is "*no* significant gap between the concept *identity* and the identity relation of which it is a concept" (2012: 9).

established 'for free' as one might say.[42] This stands in contrast to the Objective Logic. It is appropriate in the context of the Objective Logic to say something like

/things/ are /grounds/,[43]

but *not* appropriate to say something like

/things/ is a concept.

For the determination that states what /things/ are does not include the properties of the *concept* <things>. By contrast,

<things> is a universal

is a statement that can be made about the concept or thought <things>, but not (as far as I can see) about /things/. Importantly, this difference helps to show that the reference of the concept <universal> is not suspended but fixed by thought's self-reference. For "reference" to the universal can be accomplished *proactively*, simply by thinking itself, not by theorizing about something outside of thinking.

The *Doctrine of the Concept* is, accordingly, a doctrine that makes its object *explicitly* the forms of thought. By itself, this might seem to be of little metaphysical (or metametaphysical) interest. Indeed, perhaps it could be said of any logic that it can establish its own concepts though thought's self-reference and thus transparently. But Hegel goes further than this. He makes numerous statements to the effect that, though

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[42] This point is well made by Moss (2020), though it is embedded in a reading of the Logic that is (by my lights) otherwise MMRist (i.e., it is an account of what "the One" or "the Absolute" is, understood referentially). See also his 2023, where the notion of self-predication is discussed at length. I should note that my use of "self-reference" is not formal self-predication (i.e., the universal is universal); I mean more generally the reference of thought to itself.

[43] See *EL* § 124.

the Subjective Logic is developed as a result of the Objective Logic, the Subjective Logic is in fact the foundation or ground of the whole Logic.[44] What does this mean?

It is worth looking at an important concept as a representative example of this relation between the two Logics. In the closing chapters of the Objective Logic, a central concept is <substantiality>, which Hegel often explicitly ties to Spinoza.[45] At the end of the Objective Logic, Hegel describes a development within the concept of <substantiality>, such that it breaks down into three moments: passive substance, causal substance, and the identity between them. We need not tarry over the complex details. But if we were to take this account as a realistic metaphysical theory, it may look like <substance> is being used referentially, thus committing Hegel to propositions of the form:

The substance is divided into the passive and active substance,

where "the substance" has the important role of fixing a reference for the statement. Understood in this way, however Hegel further develops the concept <substance> or <substantiality> in his Logic, he looks to be committed to there being substance "in reality."

Taken in our brackets, however, no such commitment has yet been made, and the term "substance" takes up no ontological space. That is,

/substance/ is divided into /passive substance/ and /active substance/

does not say anything about the world, for it identifies nothing for the statement to be about (which could be everything, nothing, or something in between). But this

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[44] See, e.g., *WL* II: 245/508; 263/522; *EL* 307–8.

[45] Hegel is explicit that he has in view in this chapter a Spinozian (though possibly also Schellingian) theory of substance here (cf. *WL* II: 195–98/472–74). Accordingly, I will sometimes waver between the language of "substantiality" and "substance."

observation is only the first step, which does not require any special addition to the use of suspended reference.

However, Hegel tells us that something new occurs with the transition to the Concept Logic, to the stage in the Logic where the form of thought is directly considered. Sometimes this transition is described negatively, as if something destructive occurs in it. Thus, Hegel says that the reality of substance has "vanished" in the transition to the Concept (*WL* II: 263/522) and, indeed, Hegel suggests that the very transition to the Concept Logic amounts to a "refutation" of Spinozism. Something about <substance> seems to be lost. But he also assigns a positive role to the Concept in the transition. He writes: "The relation of substantiality, considered simply *on its own*, leads to its opposite: it passes over into the *concept*" (250/512). He says that in the transition to the Concept, "This infinite immanent reflection … is the *consummation of substance*. But this consummation is <u>no longer the *substance* itself</u> but is something higher, the *concept*, the *subject*" (248–49/511, underlined).

It is fair to say that merely treating the concept of <substance> or <substantiality> in brackets cannot easily amount to a refutation of a metaphysical theory like Spinozism, except perhaps by showing that the concept has some internal flaw. While it seems likely that Hegel wants to do this as well, he specifically cites the *transition* to the Concept as the point of refutation, rather than the account of <substantiality> itself. In my view, the refutation consists in showing that the concepts of former metaphysics like <substantiality>, which are putatively rich in significance, *reduce* to logical concepts (concepts proper to the Concept Logic), which are given by acts of thought's own self-reference. That is, the "transition" of <substance> to <Concept> is a revelation that <substance> is nothing *but* a moment of the Concept.

Though this reduction of metaphysical concepts to logical ones should hold in many, if not all cases, the case of <substance> or <substantiality> is particularly important. In the Concept Logic, Hegel suggests that the real "object" of a theory of substance is thought's own property of *universality*. In the transition to the Concept Logic, Hegel first identifies thought's universality with what the Objective Logic refers to as "passive substance" (*WL* II: 240/505). But Hegel returns to the concept of <substantiality> within the Subjective Logic, in his discussion of the "Judgment of Necessity," and the categorical judgment more specifically. A categorical judgment, for Hegel, comes to expression when the subject term of a judgment is not a singular entity ('Socrates' or 'this human'), nor even a collection of singular entities ('all humans'), but when a universal term stands for the whole kind (*Gattung*), namely, in statements like 'the human being is rational,' where it is presumed that "the human being" refers generically to the kind. Such a judgment says that "what belongs to all the singulars of a genus belong to the genus by nature" (334/575). Hegel thus sees the categorical judgment as involving a different *form* of universality than that of mere sets or classes. He writes,

> The determination to which universality has advanced <u>is</u>, as we have seen, the *universality that is in and for itself* or *the objective universality* that <u>in the sphere of Essence corresponds to substantiality</u>. It is distinguished from the latter because it belongs to [the sphere of] the *Concept* and for this reason is not only the *inner* but also the *posited* necessity of its determinations [...]. (335/575, slightly modified, underlined)

So what *is* "substantiality"? On my reading, Hegel's account of /substantiality/ in the Objective Logic is simply unattached, a floating conceptual determination. What Hegel says *here*, in the Subjective Logic, is that we can now attach that determination to its actual basis. The actual basis is not some object we could theorize about, i.e., "the

substance." The actual basis of <substance> is the form of universality expressed in thoughts of a special kind.

Hence, on this reading, what Hegel presents here is not a *mere* correspondence between a stage of the Objective Logic and the Subjective Logic,[46] but a relation of *dependence*. Hegel is giving the grounds or explanation of the concept of <substantiality> *within* a certain form of judgment.[47] That is, <substantiality> makes explicit the relation of rationality to a human being in a statement like:

The human being is (substantially) rational,

so that it could be paraphrased thus:

The substantiality of the human being is her rationality,

which merely forms the adverb into a noun. This does not, of course, make /substantiality/ a linguistic or logical entity, because the rationality of human beings is not itself a linguistic or logical entity. But it does show that the unique concept of <substantiality> has its basis in distinctions of logical form or content.

A few pages later, Hegel says that the *same* kind of dependence relation could be found for *all* the other relational determinations of the Objective Logic as well. He writes:

> Just as substantiality is in the categorical judgment in the form of the concept, so is the connection of causality in the hypothetical judgment. This and the other relations all [*sämtlich*] stand under it [sc. the form of the Concept], but they are here no longer as *independent sides*, but rather in this relation essentially only as moments of one and the same identity. (*WL* II: 338/577, translation modified)

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[46] That there is *at least* a correspondence between the stages of the Objective and Subjective Logics is clear from the names of the various judgements and syllogisms, which roughly follows the order of the Objective Logic.

[47] Substance and substantiality return also in the syllogism of necessity; see *WL* II: 392/618.

Put in the terms we have been using here, Hegel shows that the concepts whose contents were given under suspended reference can be "placed" within forms which are established via *self*-reference, via thought's reference to its own form. This is because this form is not an *empty* form, but a form with content in its own right. As this example shows, thought's form contains various kinds of universality: the universality expressed in a categorical judgment is not the universality of a judgment about a class or set. The metaphysical concept of <substantiality> is rooted in a specific kind of universality. And so on for other such concepts. In other words, as Hegel provides a deduction of certain logical forms, namely, forms of judgment and syllogism, he insists that these forms each have an "objective significance" (*objektive Bedeutung*) (307/554). This means, in my view, that the forms of judgment and syllogism each express the content of a concept of the Objective Logic.[48] The concepts of metaphysics are nothing but expressions of richly logical concepts, and thus concepts that can be established without referring to anything outside thought's own activity.

Does this mean that concepts of the Objective Logic, as grounded in the Subjective Logic, have no "non-logical" reference, i.e., that they cannot be used to make claims about the world? This is not at all implied by the above. Consider the example of the human being's rationality as her "substantially." That this could be an instance of substantiality, on my view, is determined solely by the supposed relation between rationality and the "genus" of a human being (which is, of course, not proven within the Logic, but taken as a plausible example from outside). The interest in this relation, for Hegel, is precisely the logical form of universality present therein. In other words, it

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[48] A more detailed treatment of this issue has recently been given in Wolf 2021.

is precisely because the case seems to exemplify the logical form that it is an example of <substantiality>; it is not an example of a logical form because it is an instance of <substantiality> (as if we had an independent criterion for that). In this way, the logical forms themselves play a guiding role in determining *which* worldly entities could fall under metaphysical concepts. Accordingly, these metaphysical concepts *do* have non-logical referents. This is why Hegel can use terms like "essence" or "substance" when describing things like the state.[49] But what makes Hegel's account non-theoretical and anti-realist is that these referents can only be decided on the basis of concepts that have a transparent and non-theoretical basis. The non-logical referents of all metaphysical concepts are determined by concepts which are based only in thought's self-reference. Hence, there is no transition *out* of "naïve metaphysics" to foundational metaphysics, except in a foundational metaphysics determined solely by the form of conceptuality.

4. Conclusion

Consider, then, a *comprehensive* version of the kind of metaphysics that has been just laid out. In such a doctrine:

(1) all its concepts are defined under suspended reference

(2) any reference is first established by self-reference to logical forms

(3) the non-logical reference of its concepts is fixed by their role in logical forms

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[49] See, e.g., W 7: Preface; § 144; § 144A; § 146. A good question here, raised by an anonymous reviewer, is whether the Hegelian *Realphilosophie* (including the philosophy of nature and of right) also involves suspended reference. I am inclined to say *yes*, at least in the sense that to determine (e.g.) *which* political arrangement should count as a rational state is a question that has to be answered "prior" to investigation of actual (and so-called) "states." There may be an overlap between the *concept* of the state and the actual existing ones, but the concept of the state is not determined by what is common to the class of things called "states."

I consider such a doctrine an *antirealist* metametaphysics, because there is no "unit of account" that could be presented independently of the theory and that could be used to specify what the theory is about. In my view, this is precisely what Hegelians attempt to do when they say that Hegel offers an account of the "structure of reality" or "being," meant in a rich, even if indeterminate, sense. Even if these theories tell us that, for deep philosophical reasons, thought and being are the same or are in a relation of identity-in-difference, they present Hegel's Logic as a theory about that thought-being nexus, one which may well (for all Hegel's efforts) fail miserably to be correct.

Though no philosophy is incorrigible, it is more difficult to see how the kind of metaphysical doctrine I have presented as Hegel's could be wrong in the same way as that. For even the terms that we would want to use to mark out the domain of the theory, the subject terms like <being>, <thing>, and <substance>, appear *within* the theory, not (if I am correct) as theories of being, things, and substances (taken *de re* and referentially), but as determinations of contents under suspended reference. There may be philosophical reasons to determine the contents differently, perhaps, but not because they are failing to measure up to referents. The naïve metaphysician in general has reasons to be careful in the way the "natures" she treats are determined, but she has no reason to fear she might fail altogether. No theoretical enterprise is safe from such failure. But if a metaphysics is *comprehensively* naïve, then its truth is self-determined. Or: "truth has become equal to certainty and this certainty to truth" (*WL* I: 43/29).[50]

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